

# What Money Can't Buy: Face-to-Face Cooperation and Local Democratic Life



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Brief visit to Valletta: € 2,500. Maltese Passport (and visa-free travel to the United States and 163 other countries): € 650,000. Partaking in a democratic community built on principles of equality and solidarity: Priceless.

In her article, Ayelet Shachar argues a point similar to the tagline of Master Card's famous advertisement: 'there are certain things money can't buy, for everything else...' Yet, as Peter Spiro remarks, pointing it out in our current circumstances may appear as banal as a TV ad. The hoax in the Master Card ad is that the numbers appearing on screen are not presented as the price tag of the 'priceless' item. Yet the ad also tacitly reminds us that we live in a society where the most 'meaningful' experiences are, in fact, bought and sold all the time; a society where what *really* matters to the beautiful woman may well be the expensive ring's promise of future riches, not the engagement with her fiancé. The campaign exploits our fear that priceless moments would simply not happen if they were not preceded by hefty purchases. Indeed, we daily discover things that, in a democratic society, are not supposed to be for sale, and yet go to the highest bidder. For example, the work of such public servants as soldiers, prison wardens, and government social workers is today frequently given by governments to private contractors. And today, more and more countries are selling citizenship.

But does 'everyone's doing it' make it *right*? I agree with Shachar that it ought not to happen: citizenship should not be for sale. However, I think that she has not chosen the best grounds to argue *why* it shouldn't. In her view, selling passports is wrong for many reasons, but what I take to be the most important are: first, because it undermines community; second, because it lets the economic sphere control the political sphere, and in doing so corrupts the value of citizenship. As to the first, Shachar argues, a person who has enough ready cash to buy citizenship in Malta has no incentives to establish relations of mutual trust and responsibility with other Maltese, so giving them a golden passport weakens a community built on solidarity and collective decision-making. As to the second, says Shachar, selling the privileges of citizenship brings economic inequality into the political sphere, thus

undoing democracy's historic commitment to shield each citizen's political power from the effects of economic inequality. At first sight, these arguments seem overwhelming. Yet further reflection shows that they in fact prove too much. For if they were right, then we ought to forbid what I deem an unobjectionable practice: economic immigration by the poor.

Let's see how this could be so. On Shachar's argument, we object to selling passports, even when it is profitable, because the buyer's character and attitude undermines democratic institutions. A buyer of a golden passport is motivated to be a member for the wrong reasons: she is not seeking citizenship so as to establish relations of mutual trust and responsibility with Maltese. Notice, however, that this is also true of the economic immigrant who jumped the fence and worked illegally in the receiving country in order to pull herself out of poverty. In both cases the immigrant acts primarily according to her own interests, rather than any desire to build relationships of trust and mutual responsibility with her fellows. Both types of immigrants move money according to their transnational personal connections and concerns, both invest according to their personal needs. Both immigrants often bought their way in: either legally or illegally. Both value their new dual-citizenship status highly, and are not willing to forgo the advantages of either one, and both may spend huge amounts of money on immigration attorneys and fees to regularise their immigration status and get citizenship. So Shachar's own criterion, at least as presented, seems to rule out most economic immigration by the poor.

Something seems amiss. A better argument against a golden passport, I think, would use a criterion that would unambiguously imply both that it is wrong to admit rich immigrants simply because they will pay big money, and that it is wrong to deny admission to the poor simply because of their economic hopes. Let's examine some candidates for such a criterion.

*Could it be time?* In Shachar's essay, there is a muted factor that does seem to explain why we should not make ability to pay sufficient for citizenship: Time. Both the rich and the poor immigrants pay for their new membership in one way or another, but the rich can get citizenship *fast*. The world's rich have a degree of mobility that mirrors the speed of capital. They can follow the money, and they profit from their well-heeled hyper-mobility. This, of course, gives them few incentives to build 'long-term relations' and commitments 'expanding beyond their life-span'. So time might seem a good candidate for explaining why purchase shouldn't itself get you citizenship. Yet, as Chris Armstrong argues in his response, one can in a flash make deep commitments that do indeed seem to expand beyond one's life-span.

He reminds us of foreign volunteer soldiers like the Lincoln Brigade, who enter a foreign war to defend a country that is not theirs. It takes them no time to make a deep and seemingly long-lasting commitment. So if we think our criterion needs ultimately to track long-term commitments, then this criterion seems not to work for all cases.

*Could it be the depth of the roots, then?* Here is another way to explain why it is wrong to admit the rich passport-buyer simply because of ability to pay. Let's say that the criterion should be how much and how deeply the would-be immigrant's life and concerns are and will be rooted in the new country. For poor immigrants invest their work and efforts in becoming a part of the new society they join, while it might seem that a rich jetsetter buying a passport need make no such effort. Yet economic investment can be a very deep tie, as Raul Magni Berton argues in his reply. Committing a big sum to a new country can be done in a flash, and indeed, it can be done without even visiting the country in question; but if the investment is serious, it shows commitment and concern for others, and it lays down deep roots. So depth-of-roots cannot adequately distinguish the golden-passport holder from the poor immigrant.

*Could it then be physical presence?* This is the candidate criterion I favour. One of Shachar's concerns is that the rich passport-buyers need hardly ever be present in the new country. Territorial presence is particularly important because it forces individuals to partake in a particular way of doing things. Standing in queues, letting others go through, gather in certain occasions, stay indoors at other times. This type of action is face-to-face, and requires commitment to local institutions and local life. *By being there*, a person must become part of a civic organisation requiring solidarity and trust. And by being present in a democratic action, one can show a commitment to a civic community without having to share ethnic or cultural ties. This way of coming into a civic organisation can be immediate (as in the case of the person who volunteers to defend a country), but it does distinguish between an immigrant who is truly invested in the new country's institutions, from one who has just engaged in a one-time uncommitted monetary transaction. And most importantly, physical presence and face-to-face interactions can explain why citizenship is valuable in itself: it allows us to have relations as political equals, regardless of economic status. If we award passports to those without any likelihood of ever being there, we undermine the relevant connections built on regular interactions and participation in the institutions that organise local life, which is, after all, where equality takes place.

At bottom, what makes the golden passport wrong is that it undermines political equality, not that it puts closed communities in question, or shatters the separations between the spheres of justice. What remains priceless is the active face-to-face partaking and building of democratic institutions on the basis of principles of equality and solidarity: that is what money can't buy.

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