

RESEARCH · CITIZENSHIP AND PLACE

The Last Ground: Why the Fight for Citizenship Has Moved to Where You Live

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TL;DR

The federal level is captured. The state level is gridlocked. The places where ordinary people once expected to act on their own behalf have been closed off, one by one. What is left is the ground under your feet, and capital knows it.

What capital did to Manhattan in the 1980s, capital is doing to the small towns, working harbors, and rural counties of the South Coast now. The mechanism is the same. The geography is just larger.

This essay is the answer to the question *The Time Problem* left open. AI returns hours to the citizen for the first time in 2,500 years. Where do those hours go? They go to the place under your feet, the war of position Gramsci named, the only fight that has ever actually changed anything.

I. The Quiet Battle

There is a fight happening in your neighborhood right now, and almost no one is naming it.

The federal level is captured. The state level is gridlocked. The places where ordinary people once expected to act on their own behalf have been closed off, one by one, over the last fifty years. What is left is the ground under your feet. The block you live on. The school your kids attend. The park you walk through. The land your home sits on.

This is the last ground. It is also the only ground left where citizens still have power, and capital knows it.

While Washington stays preoccupied with foreign affairs, the fight for local space has become one of the most consequential political struggles inside the country. The empire looks outward. The fight is inward. It is over who gets to stand somewhere and call it theirs.

The fight has not slowed. It has accelerated, and it has moved beyond the major cities into every place ordinary people still live, including small towns and rural counties that thought they were too far from the action to be affected.

II. The Region That Is Not on the Map

I live in a region that does not appear on any official map.

It is called the South Coast. It runs along the coastline where Massachusetts meets Rhode Island, including Westport, Dartmouth, and Fall River on the Massachusetts side, and Tiverton, Little Compton, and parts of Newport County on the Rhode Island side. The people here share a coastline, a fishing economy, a Portuguese American cultural inheritance that gives Fall River and New Bedford the highest concentration of Portuguese ancestry in the United States, a whaling history, and centuries of intermarriage and shared institutions. We are one place. We have always been one place.

The state line was drawn through us by King George II in 1746, in a colonial boundary dispute that split the village of Adamsville in half and sent its grist mill to a different state than the homes of the millers. The line is older than the country. It is also arbitrary. The Wampanoag and Pocasset Pokanoket nations who lived here long before the colonists drew their lines did not recognize it, and their descendants still operate land trusts that cross the border as if it were not there, because functionally it is not.

The Basque region works the same way. The Basque people live across the Pyrenees in both Spain and France. They share a language, a culture, a coastline, a cuisine, an economic identity, and a political consciousness that two national governments have not been able to dissolve. When you ask a Basque person where they are from, they answer Basque before they answer Spanish or French. The state line runs through them. It does not define them.

The South Coast is the American Basque country. It is a region defined by what is shared on the ground, not by what is decided in capitals.

I am not writing about this region from somewhere else. My family has been here for generations on both sides, documented across **thirteen lines and 960 years**, and after a stretch in Los Angeles after college I came back. The argument I am about to make is also a choice I have already made with my life.

III. What Capital Did to the City and Now Does to the Region

The story of the city is well documented.

After the war, American cities lost their industrial base. Factories closed. Workers left. Downtowns hollowed out. Capital looked at the abandoned cores and saw not a problem but an opportunity. Cities became a new field of internal investment. Not for affordable housing. Not for schools. For luxury bedrooms, financial firms, expensive restaurants, opulent private universities. The professional managerial class needed somewhere to live. Cities became where they lived.

What happened to the people already there? They were evicted, or they faced rents they could not afford and left for the suburbs and the periphery. People do not leave their homes by preference. They leave because staying becomes impossible.

The mechanisms were specific. The tax revolts of the late 1970s, beginning in California with Proposition 13 and Massachusetts with Proposition 2½, capped local property taxes that had funded schools, hospitals, parks, and housing. Federal tax law channeled investor capital into real estate through depreciation rules and 1031 exchanges that rewarded turnover over residency. Mortgage securitization moved housing finance onto Wall Street's balance sheet, where a rental property in Fall River became a financial instrument scored against returns in Manhattan. Welfare reform in 1996 finished the federal piece. By the end of the process, three things were true at once. Cities had become more expensive. Public goods had become more scarce. And the people who depended on public goods had been pushed to the periphery.

The pattern is now repeating in places that thought they were exempt.

Fall River, my region's largest city, lost its textile industry decades ago and spent forty years declining. In the past five years it has begun to attract investment again, and the playbook is recognizable. The MBTA commuter rail will reconnect Fall River to Boston in 2025. The Route 79 reconstruction is opening the waterfront for development. Property prices in the surrounding South Coast towns have risen accordingly. Westport, traditionally a town of farmers and fishermen, is now a destination for second homes. Tiverton's rural character is under pressure from Newport-priced buyers looking for what used to be the cheaper side of Aquidneck Island. Little Compton, one of the last working agricultural towns in southern New England, faces the same forces.

What capital did to Manhattan in the 1980s, capital is doing to the South Coast now. The mechanism is the same. The geography is just larger.

IV. Who Actually Runs the Place

The most uncomfortable observation about local politics is that it does not matter much who you elect to most offices.

Consider the urban example. Three New York mayors across two decades, three different parties. A Democrat, a Republican, an independent. Different politics, different rhetoric, the same fiscal constraints. Each presided over budgets disciplined by capital markets.

Each made policy choices shaped more by bondholders than by voters. The pattern held because cities depend on capital markets to roll over their debt, and capital markets enforce a narrow definition of acceptable mayoral behavior.

The pattern repeats at the regional level in less visible forms. Fall River's mayor cannot escape the bondholders. Westport's select board cannot stop the second-home market. Tiverton's town council cannot reverse the drift of Newport money up the Sakonnet River. The constraint is not the official's politics. The constraint is structural. The official closest to the action has the least power to refuse.

This is why national politics feels broken even when "your" party wins. The party that controls the federal government cannot reverse what is happening in places, because places are governed by officials who are governed by capital flows they did not choose and cannot redirect. The politics that matters is not happening at the level you have been trained to watch.

V. The War of Position

Antonio Gramsci, writing from a Fascist prison in the 1930s, named what is happening in this kind of fight.

He distinguished between the *war of maneuver*, in which a movement assaults the state directly through marches, elections, and federal legislation, and the *war of position*, in which a movement builds counter-power in civil society over years and decades, changing what people accept as common sense (Gramsci, 1971). The war of maneuver is what most people imagine when they imagine politics. The war of position is what actually changes societies.

Movements that win local fights have three things: physical ground, a political base in the surrounding community, and a network that can be activated across neighborhoods. Movements missing any of the three lose.

In New York during the early 2000s, three movements fought for urban ground. Squatters occupied buildings abandoned by commercial landlords and held them through legal resources. Homeless residents occupied lower Manhattan parks. Urban gardeners turned hundreds of vacant lots across all five boroughs into community

gardens. Of the three, the gardeners won most decisively. When the city moved to bulldoze a dozen Lower Manhattan gardens, citywide protests erupted, gardens were physically occupied by activists, and the next administration was forced to negotiate. The squatters held ground temporarily. The homeless were evacuated because they lacked a political base.

The South Coast has its own version of these fights. The Westport Fishermen's Association protects working harbors. The Pocasset Pokanoket Land Trust is rebuilding indigenous land relationships across the line between Massachusetts and Rhode Island, including the Wainer Woods botanical farm in Westport, named for the African-Indigenous family that has owned that land since 1799. The Westport Land Conservation Trust holds thousands of acres in trust against development. Local farms supplying CSA programs in Tiverton, Little Compton, and Westport are direct descendants of the war-of-position model. Each is a small claim that ordinary people have a right to produce the space they live in. The claims accumulate. They build, slowly, a different common sense about what the South Coast is for and who it belongs to.

VI. What Changed in Twenty Years

Three things have changed since the early 2000s, and all three sharpen the argument rather than dull it.

First, the federal level has gotten worse. *Citizens United* opened a flood of dark money. Regulatory agencies have been captured by industries they regulate. Procedural minorities now gridlock legislation by default. The space for action at the federal level was already narrow. It has narrowed further.

Second, the technology of local action has improved dramatically. Twenty years ago, organizing a citywide network of community gardens or a regional fishermen's coalition required years of patient face-to-face work. Today the same network can be assembled in months using free tools. Discord, Telegram, Signal, group SMS, Substack. The infrastructure that activists once had to build from scratch is now ambient. A coalition of South Coast farmers, fishermen, conservation trusts, and small-school advocates could be assembled across the line between Massachusetts and Rhode Island in a weekend.

Third, and most consequentially, artificial intelligence has begun to redistribute the cognitive labor that running a local project required. Drafting a community development plan. Analyzing a zoning code. Building a neighborhood website. Modeling traffic impact. Writing grant applications. Summarizing public comment. Translating materials into Portuguese for the Fall River and New Bedford communities. These tasks consumed the time of paid professionals a decade ago. They now compress to hours of work for any neighborhood resident with a consumer AI subscription.

I argued in *The Time Problem* that AI is the first technology in 2,500 years to deliver time-saving directly to the citizen instead of the firm. *The Last Ground* is the answer to the question that paper left open. What should the recovered hours go to? They should go to the place under your feet. They should go to the war of position. They should go to producing common ground that capital cannot enclose.

VII. What This Looks Like in Practice

The practical question is what this means for someone who is not a full-time activist.

It means the most important political work you can do right now is probably within ten miles of where you sleep.

It means joining the zoning board, the school board, the library board, the conservation commission, the planning board, the harbor commission. These are unglamorous bodies that meet in the evening and decide things that materially shape the lives of the people around you. They are also undefended. Most seats are filled by retirees and developers because most working people do not have time to attend the meetings. AI changes this. The hours that AI returns to you can be invested in showing up.

It means defending public goods locally even as they are eroded nationally. The public library. The town beach. The public school. The community garden. The harbor. The town landing. The conservation land. Every one of these is a piece of ground that capital would prefer to convert to private use. Every one is held by the people who show up to defend it.

It means producing new space, not only defending existing space. Community gardens. Maker spaces. Small schools. Cooperative housing. Community-supported fisheries and farms. Each is a small claim that ordinary people can produce the space they live in.

It means recognizing that your region is more real than your state. The South Coast is more real than the line between Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The Basque country is more real than the Pyrenees border. The places where people actually share a life are the places where political work actually moves the world. Organizing across the state line, where the people are already one community, is more powerful than organizing within the state line where they are not.

VIII. The Last Ground

To be a citizen, you need time of your own and ground of your own. Both have been taken. Both can be taken back.

The federal government will not return them. The state government will not return them. The mayor and the select board cannot return them, because they answer to capital flows they did not choose. What is left is the ground under your feet and the people standing on it with you.

This is not a small fight. It is the only fight that has ever actually changed anything. Every right that ordinary people now possess was won locally before it was generalized nationally. The eight-hour day was won in factories before it was won in Congress. Civil rights were won at lunch counters and on buses before they were won at the federal level. The vote was won precinct by precinct. The pattern is consistent. The local is not where citizens fight when they cannot fight anywhere else. The local is where citizens have always actually fought.

The current moment has handed ordinary people two things at once. Time recovered through AI. Networks of coordination that were impossible twenty years ago. The combination is the strongest position citizens have held against capital in a generation.

What capital did to the city, capital is now doing to every place ordinary people still live. The fight has come to your block. The fight has come to your harbor. The fight has come to your farm. The good news is that you are home, and the tools are in your hands, and

the people you need are already there, on both sides of whatever line some king drew through your region three centuries ago.

My grandfather served twenty-four years in the Massachusetts State House and used the seat to help build a community college and a public university that still serve southeastern Massachusetts six decades later. He did not write essays about local power. He passed bills. The work I am describing is the work he was already doing, in a different form, with different tools. What he did from the legislature, ordinary citizens can now do from their kitchen tables.

The empire is preoccupied elsewhere. The struggle for the ground beneath you is happening anyway. It will be won or lost in the next twenty years by the people who notice it.

There is no other ground left.

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The body of work is structured as a quartet of citizenship surveys (time, ground, voice, currency), with [The Periscope](#) as the catalyst essay, [The Map](#) as the compressed survey, [The Absent Presence](#) as the meta-frame, and [Acting in the Cracks](#) as the applied note. The full reading order is at [/the-index](#).

Reader correspondence is welcomed; see [On Correspondence](#).