

A NOTE ON WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP?

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There seems some uncertainty what “citizenship” means, or perhaps what kind of activities are those of a citizen. Perhaps this partly theoretical and partly practical note may be helpful. If the theory is grasped, the concept should then be clear and can be freely (that is literally applied with more imagination and freed) to different circumstances and practices. Citizenship by prescription, order, rote, grid or check-list is not, beyond necessary beginnings in schools, true citizenship at all. But this short paper may explain an ambiguity but it is no substitute for reading the two reports. Remember that the 16-19 report specifically built on and assumed a knowledge of the 11-16 report. A change in emphasis is assumed, but on the basis of continuity not a new departure.

The term “citizen” does, however, have two distinct meanings. A citizen can simple be someone who under the laws and practices of a state has both rights and duties, irrespective of the character of that state. But in many states duties can far out-weigh rights, and those rights may not be political at all. To avoid offence to any dictatorial ally, let us say Iraq just as an example. Most of its inhabitants are citizens, and may properly be called good citizens if they obey the laws and keep their noses clean..

But the second sense of being a citizen is what we find in specifically democratic states today when a majority of the inhabitants enjoy the political rights that emerged from a leadership class in the Greek and Roman and early modern city republics: free speech, the election of public officers and the right to combine together, to change things, big and small; or to prevent undesired changes.

It seems elementary that there is a difference between being a good citizen and being an active citizen. One can be a good citizen in an autocratic state. One can also be *only* a good citizen in a democratic state, that is one can obey the law and behave oneself socially (say minimising offence to others) but not work with others on any matters that effect public policy, either at all or minimally – minimally may just be voting (and now a large number of people don’t even do that) or just putting money in a tin or signing a standing order for a voluntary body or pressure group but never attending a meeting. It is this minimalist approach to citizenship that made me, thirty years ago, voice scepticism about an old tradition of citizenship as education as Civics which stressed the primacy of “the rule” of law, without always encouraging discussion about whether some laws work badly or are unjust and how they can be changed.

Civic Education is about the civic virtues and decent behaviour that adults wish to see in young people. But it is also more than this. Since Aristotle it has been accepted as an inherently political concept that raises questions about the sort of society we live in, how it came to take its present form, the strengths and weaknesses of current political structures, and how improvements might be made... Active citizens are as political as they are moral; moral sensibility derives in part from political understanding; political apathy spawns moral apathy.
David Hargreaves, *The Mosaic of Learning* (Demos 1996)

The Theory

Most of us accept that *economic theory* both describes and legitimises a price mechanism, but we can forget that there is equally clear *political theory* that describes and legitimises democratic societies. Just as economics is concerned with price, that in a world of finite resources everything we want is at the cost of something else (sometimes of others), so

political theory is concerned with decision-making and persuasion: an assertion that, except in times of emergency, societies are best governed politically, not autocratically, that is by public persuasion and publicised compromises among competing values and interests.

The cause of the fallacy into which Plato fall is the wrong premises about unity on which he bases his argument. It is true that unity is to come extent needed, both in a household and in a *polis*; but total unity is not. There is a point at which a polis by advancing in unity will cease to be a *polis*... It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that that the *polis*... is an aggregate of many members; and education is therefore the means of making it a community and giving it unity.

Aristotle, *The Politics*

Broadly there are two theories of the modern democratic state, mirrored in popular understanding or behaviour: that the maintenance of free institutions depends on a high level of popular *participation* in public affairs, both as a practical necessity and as a moral and civic duty; or that competitive elections create governments that can modify and uphold a legal order under which individual can lead their lives with as little interference as possible from the state and minimal public obligations (to obey the laws, pay taxes, jury service and vote every few years). Historians and political philosophers call the first, “civic republicanism” and call the second “the liberal theory of the state”. The liberal theorists of the state tend to see liberty as the direct relationship between the individual and state defined by legal rights and mediated by the market. The civic republican theorists see the guarantors of liberty less in such a direct relationships than in the existence of civil society (a term they have revived and popularised), all those semi-autonomous organisations and institutions intermediary and mediating between the individual and the state.

The aim of the ancients was the sharing of social power among citizens of the same fatherland: this is what they called liberty. The aim of the moderns is the enjoyment of liberty in private pleasures; and they call liberty the guarantees accorded by institutions to these pleasures.

Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns* (1820).

In ordinary discourse one sees the liberal theory as demanding “good citizenship”, invoking “the rule of law”, good behaviour, individual rights and at its best moral virtues of care and concern for others, beginning with neighbours and hopefully reaching out to strangers; but it may stop short of demanding “active citizenship” – combining together effectively to change or resist change. The language of the two recent citizenship reports with their stress on “active citizenship” was that of a revived civic republicanism:¹ participation and discussion of real issues, but often “active *and* good citizenship” was said to recognise the need for a moral basis for the means not just the ends of political activity, and what education (and by implication public policy) should seek to encourage and achieve. But one should be able to presume that the moral basis for good citizenship is there to be built upon and worked into real activities and adult discussion of adult issues after the end of compulsory schooling – give or take the troublesome few unaffected by compulsory education (or in extreme cases turned off by its occasional failures).

¹ The term was not used for fear of popular misunderstanding, indeed. But the term “civic republicanism” is fully compatible with constitutional monarchies as in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, even if less so until very recently perhaps to ourselves.

What can now be built upon

There is now a concern for the enhancement of citizenship through schools, among young people generally, and among and within a hoped for increase in local voluntary and community bodies in the whole population. This was clear in the Secretary of State for Education's remit to the 1997 advisory group who reported as *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (QCA 1998). That remit first set out a new participative agenda for public policy: "To provide advice on effective education for citizenship in schools—to include the nature and practices of participation in democracy; the duties, responsibilities and rights of individuals as citizens; and the values to individuals and society of community activity".

The report itself stated a radical aim on the assumption that, despite our long parliamentary tradition, there has developed what is now often called "a democratic deficit" in society as a whole. In a changing society we have been living on the political traditions of the past. The aim was to create a general "political literacy". The report argues that the benefits for pupils would be an entitlement that will empower them to participate in society effectively as active, informed, critical and responsible citizens; the benefit for schools (and surely colleges too?) an opportunity to coordinate and enhance existing teaching and opportunities across subject areas and in relation to participation both in school and local community life; and the benefit for society "an active and politically-literate citizenry convinced that they can influence government and community affairs at all levels.

We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves. *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools, 1998, para. 1.5*

"Political literacy" was a term invented to mean that someone should have the knowledge, skills and values to be effective in public life. And the report had an implied methodology for teaching and learning: that knowledge of institutions is best gained through discussion of real issues and becoming aware of what institutions are relevant and need to influencing or resolving an issue or problem. It was a deliberate break from how Civics used to be taught, simply as knowledge of structures and legal powers of institutions (easily examinable but dead boring), Now the stress at every level should be on gaining the knowledge as needed, say on a "need to know basis", by confronting real issues.

This has not always been grasped by teachers and lecturers, a few still thinking, whether in error or for shelter from uncertainty, of old Civics, But some have swung to another extreme, perhaps through thinking in a paradigm of "good citizenship" alone and not of "good *and* active". Let me come down to earth with a practical example.

A goodly example

A school was recently visited who were involved in one of the DfES/LSDA 16-19 citizenship development pilot schemes. They said that the pupils in a particular class had planned, as their participation in the community remit, a party for the old people in a near-by residential home. They negotiated with the matron, then purchased provisions and arranged among themselves an entertainment. A fine time was had by all.

Now that was certainly a very nice thing to do, perhaps “good citizenship” but not, in my opinion, by itself “active citizenship”. The party for the old people could well have been a fitting culmination or celebration of a prior process of setting out to discover something of the complicated relations and policies of the personal social services, local authorities, the NHS, government departments, and the voluntary sector. Why were some of the old people there at all and not able to be cared for at home? Then they could have formed some view on how well the arrangements work, what is public policy and perhaps how (as nearly everyone sees the need) could be improved. They might even have made, as citizens, a representation to one or more of the relevant authorities.

Even some aspects of all that (admittedly one of the most complex of national problems, but one that nearly all of us encounter in some capacity) would surely count as learning for active citizenship, but not just the moral motivation and perhaps the feel-good value to the individuals involved (personal development?). A knowledge base as well is needed before the real situation could be understood, and skills of presentation and advocacy were needed if they then had wished to make representations on the basis both of what they found out and what they saw.

Politics is, then, an activity – and this platitude must be brought to life: it is not a thing, like a natural object or a work of art, which could exist if individuals did not continue to work upon it. And it is a *complex activity*: it is not simply the grasping for an ideal, for then the ideals of others may be threatened; but it is not pure self-interest either, simply because the more realistically one construes self-interest the more one is involved in relationships with others, and because, after all, some men in most part, most men in some part, have certain standards of conduct which do not always fit circumstances too exactly. The more one is involved in relationships with others, the more conflicts of interest, or of character and circumstance, will arise. These conflicts, when personal, create the activity we call ‘ethics’ (or else that type of action, as arbitrary as it is irresponsible, called ‘selfish’); and such conflicts, when public, create political activity (or else some type of rule in the selfish interest of a single group).

Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (1963 and 2000)

The *Citizenship for 16-19 Year Olds in Education and Training* report (FEFC & DfEE, 2000) argued that a greater stress on activity in the community was needed for that age group, but made quite clear that there still needed to be a knowledge base (what institutions to work through, with or against etc.) and continuing skills training (information retrieval and advocacy etc.). So activities to be chosen must be of a kind to enhance *both* those dimensions, as well as having some practical effect. As one moves into the adult population, the argument is that for effective citizenship these two dimensions cannot be neglected (whether gained by training or experience) and that the aims of concerted actions must be of some real public importance.

The *Education and Training* Report spoke of “building on the schools’ curriculum”, not abandoning entirely its careful balance of knowledge, skills and participative activities. “Building on” anything implies some familiarity with the foundations. Among the foundations was the idea that “political literacy” was an essential part of citizenship (indeed of education and rounded human being in general): that is having the knowledge and the skills about how to achieve something worthwhile through peaceful action and negotiation, whether on the public stage or in a committee. I have tried to define politics not in the idealist tradition, as a striving to achieve a certain or a preconceived goal, but in the more realistic Aristotelian tradition as the creative conciliation of naturally differing interests, both material and ideal.

Volunteering and Citizenship

That old people's home example should show the difference between learning for effective action and simply doing something that in itself is good but either foolish or evasive to call citizenship. Put it this way. To coincide with the launching of the citizenship order in school, a seven year longitudinal study has been launched by DfES and is being organised by the NFER to try to measure the effect of the new curriculum, or at least to measure changes over the period. One of the indicators is certainly membership by the age of eighteen of voluntary public bodies, but this is no more important or no less relevant than indicators of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The learning process must combine them all.

The problem in both politics and education is to balance one set of policies against an other in such a way that we can carry people with us.
David Blunkett speaking to the Association for Citizenship Teaching, June 2002.

All citizenship must involve at some stage volunteering, but not all volunteering involves citizenship. Cleaning up a field after a rave or a blitz to clean up a local park or young children's playground is admirable, as is giving a party for the old and infirm, but it is not citizenship without a knowledge base (how can such despoliation or neglect be allowed to happen at all?), without a process that enhances skills of discovery and advocacy, or without any attempts to influence local authorities, councillors or the police, whatever, whoever is relevant. Volunteering becomes citizenship when the volunteers are well-briefed on the whole context, given responsibility about how to organise their actions, and debriefed afterwards in the classroom or listened to in a formal meeting about whether they think it could have been done better. Volunteers are free citizens acting together; they should never be canon fodder, however worthy the organisation they work for, however time-tested (or rigid) its procedures.

In a sentence, citizenship has meant, since the time of the Greeks and the Romans, people *acting together* effectively to achieve a reasonably important common purpose.

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