CITIZENSHIP AND EDUCATION

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Abstract This paper surveys three sources of conflict about citizenship and education in contemporary normative political theory: the extent to which rival conceptions of citizenship differ in the ends they prescribe for civic education; disagreement about the educational processes needed to yield accepted civic educational ends and how some of those processes might best be institutionalized via schooling; and disagreement about how liberal legitimacy constrains state action undertaken for the sake of democratic education.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of citizenship and the education suited to its realization have traditionally figured among the basic questions of normative political theory. Their neglect during the middle decades of the twentieth century was merely a consequence of the marginalization of ethics and political philosophy in general throughout the English-speaking academic world. Yet the revival of normative theory spurred by the publication of Rawls’s A Theory of Justice did not immediately restore questions about civic identity and its cultural formation to their customary place near the core of the subject (Rawls 1971). To be sure, Part III of Rawls’s treatise sketched an argument that the cultivation of a sense of justice in both the family and the wider associational life of a well-ordered society might anchor the stability of that society over time. But in the decade after its publication, that particular argument was largely overlooked in the voluminous literature that A Theory of Justice spawned. The derivation of Rawls’s conception of justice as fairness was the focus of academic attention, along with the development of rival, mainly liberal interpretations of distributive justice and the comparison of these with Rawls’s.

Whatever else it achieved, the re-emergence of communitarianism in the 1980s helped to expose the limitations of the fixation on principles of distributive justice that then beset liberal theory. MacIntyre (1981) assailed the liberal tradition for discounting the substantive social ties on which a coherent moral life partly depended; Sandel (1982) claimed that justice as fairness presupposed a socially deracinated conception of the self—the so-called “unencumbered self”—and was representative of liberalism as a whole in this regard; and Walzer (1983) defended
a style of thinking about justice that forfeited the heady abstractions of Rawls for a particularized interest in people’s shared understandings of goods proper to different social spheres and the shifting contingencies of their memberships in such spheres. At the same time, some feminist scholarship questioned the primacy of justice in liberal theory by posing an alternative “ethic of care” as the basis for a common morality (Gilligan 1982, 1987). The currency of these communitarian and feminist arguments in the 1980s revealed the need to think about the character and capabilities of citizens in a free society, how that character and those capabilities might be learned and taught inside and outside civic roles, and how institutions might be designed to protect them against erosion. Liberals were prompt to respond to that challenge, and questions about citizenship, civil society, the family, and education were once again brought to the foreground of normative debate (e.g., Galston 1991, Macedo 1990, Okin 1989).

Developments in democratic theory around the same time also conspired to give a new salience to citizenship and its educational preconditions. The “deliberative turn” in democratic theory that began to gather momentum in the late 1980s entailed a view of citizen participation as a distinctive moral engagement directed toward the common good (Bessette 1994, Cohen 1989, Gutmann 1993, Manin 1987). Regardless of where different theorists located the optimal balance between representative and direct participatory institutions, that view required fresh thought about the educational processes that would equip citizens to manage the responsibilities of deliberative citizenship. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most important book on education in democratic theory in the past two decades was written by one of the most influential deliberative theorists (Gutmann 1987).

In the decade that followed, three important intellectual sources enriched and complicated the discourse on citizenship and education. First, Putnam’s hugely influential research on the relationship between “social capital” and the effectiveness of democratic institutions revived interest in the empirical study of citizen identity and its sustaining sources in the cultural infrastructure of democracies (Putnam 1995, 2000). Second, normative theory at last fully registered the significance of the identity politics that had altered the political landscape in many societies since the 1960s (Kymlicka 1995, Parekh 2000, Young 1990). If citizenship had to be construed in many instances as “multicultural” or as adapted to what Rawls called the “permanent fact of pluralism,” then our understanding of citizenship and the educational practices that supported it had to be revised accordingly. Civic education could no longer be understood as wedded to the ideal of the culturally homogeneous nation-state (Reich 2002). Third, the quickening pace of cultural and economic globalization was taken by many to signal the necessity for new civic ideals, international in reach, that would be better adapted to the realities of politics in an increasingly interdependent world. Such ideals would serve as a bulwark against the hatred and violence that ethnic and religious nationalism had triggered in some of the most terrible events of the late twentieth century.

In this essay, I survey three durable sources of conflict about citizenship and education in contemporary theory: the extent to which rival conceptions of
citizenship differ in the ends they prescribe for civic education; disagreement about the educational processes needed to yield accepted civic educational ends and how some of those processes might best be institutionalized via schooling; and disagreement about how liberal legitimacy constrains state action undertaken for the sake of democratic education. My focus throughout is on normative theory. I largely ignore empirical investigation of the relationship between civic information, civic instruction in schools, and civic participation. This has been very recently and ably surveyed in this journal (Galston 2001).

THE ENDS OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Self-Interest and Citizenship

A normative conception of citizenship fulfills two complementary tasks. First, it specifies the rights that properly belong to citizens and the conditions under which those rights are permissibly bestowed or denied (Marshall 1964). The rights of citizenship must include some level of guaranteed educational provision. This is one of the few points of consensus in contemporary discourse on distributive justice; all but the most outré libertarians endorse it, despite much disagreement about whether strictly equal educational opportunity is required, and if so, how the requirement should be interpreted (Brighouse 2000, Roemer 1998). I return briefly to the issue of education as a social right in the penultimate section. But my main interest here is in the second task of citizenship theory.

The second task is to prescribe the ideals and virtues that citizens should develop and the duties they must discharge in order to secure the justice and stability of the polity to which they belong. These ideals, virtues, and duties encompass the proper ends of civic education, and therefore, different conceptions of citizenship entail different prescriptions regarding those ends.

On this account, the role of citizen is assumed to be instrumental to the stability and justice of the society. Disagreement about the criteria for a stably just regime commonly yields disagreement about the substantive responsibilities or virtues of citizens. But agreement about the former is certainly no guarantee of consensus on the latter. Justice and stability in this context are properties of institutions, whereas citizen duties and virtues are the business of individual political agents. What specific set of duties or family of virtues will best promote the political institutions we should want in particular historical circumstances is by no means clear.

One intuitive possibility is to imagine a correspondence between the valued properties of political institutions and the valued traits of citizens—for example, in Rawls’s well-ordered society, as in Plato’s republic, the stably just character of institutions is mirrored in the reliably just character of the citizenry. Another is to imagine political institutions that operate as an invisible hand, producing valued collective outcomes by exploiting individual traits that entail no intention to contribute to such outcomes. In this vein, one still lively tradition in democratic theory argues that citizens will act politically—if they act politically at all—on the
basis of narrow self-interest, and the genius of democratic institutional design is to channel self-interest in ways that predictably contribute to regime stability. The theory is often couched as if it had no normative ambitions, though these creep in when the merits of its tough-minded common sense are touted as an alternative to the effete idealism of morally ambitious democratic philosophy (e.g., Posner 2003, Schumpeter 1967).

There are some necessary half-truths in the ideal—or perhaps we should call it an “anti-ideal”—of self-interested citizenship. Marshalling many different motives, including self-interest, to support the norms of liberal democracy is prudent statecraft. Racial discrimination in the workplace, say, is easier to combat when it is seen as bad for business and not merely an affront to human dignity. Conversely, compliance with liberal democratic norms is inevitably at risk if it is seen as requiring relentless and costly self-sacrifice. Learning to think of the society in which liberal democratic norms prevail as hospitable to the pursuit of one’s own good is an important facilitating condition of their internalization. Furthermore, the familiar postulate of universal self-interest, and its attendant skepticism about the self-proclaimed virtue of elites, have often served important ends by alerting the politically preyed-upon to the true intentions of their predators (Holmes 1995, p. 65). Something at least akin to that postulate and its skepticism is surely necessary to any education that does not leave future citizens acutely vulnerable to oppression. Most important of all, appreciating the dignity each of us must claim as a free and equal citizen with others involves an affirmation of legitimate self-interest, and therefore, that affirmation is integral to the sense of entitlement that just societies will promote among their citizens (Hampton 1997).

But none of this implies that moral sources of citizenship are unnecessary. Secure, free institutions depend on citizens’ willingness to accommodate others’ interests. Such accommodation would be severely compromised by selective compliance and free-riding if the institutions were widely valued only as means of advancing private ends. The history of self-styled liberal democracies includes many examples of groups excluded from the benefits of equal citizenship, and the persistence of exclusion is typically explained, in part at least, by the advantages exclusion creates for privileged groups (Smith 1997). To suggest that the enlightened self-interest of the privileged could always be invoked to motivate them to give up their unjust advantages is simply preposterous. Of course, that point cannot carry weight against proponents of self-interested citizenship for whom talk of justice is deemed to be largely bereft of cognitive content, a form of rhetoric in which individual preference (i.e., self-interest) typically disguises itself as something more high-minded. But even if we settled for the ideal of a merely stable rather than a stably just democracy, the proposal that self-interest could generate the necessary regime support, as Christiano (1995, pp. 131–59) has shown, is probably incoherent.

Agreeing that citizenship cannot be adequate when it is animated solely by self-interest obviously does little by itself to bring us to consensus on the ends of civic education. For one thing, disagreement about the distributive (and retributive)
principles that distinguish a just society will produce some differences in what we
count as developing justice as a personal virtue, given that the personal virtue is
instrumentally related to the realization of a just society. Nevertheless, conflict
about principles of justice in the real world of any culturally entrenched liberal
democracy occurs against a background of shared public morality, which cannot
be repudiated without perpetrating the civic analogue to religious heresy. Libert-
arians and democratic socialists may belong within the sphere of respectable
contention but theocrats or devotees of discrimination against particular classes of
citizens do not. (Who counts as theocratic or discriminatory is of course a matter
of respectable contention. False charges of heresy are always a grave evil in the
eyes of the seriously devout.) Therefore, a civic education worth its name will steel
the spirit against the pull of liberal democratic heresy—it will be antiracist and
antidiscriminatory, among other things. What it does beyond that consensual core
is fraught with controversy. Two questions that loom especially large in recent
literature are the role of autonomy in civic virtue and the comparative merits of a
patriotic as opposed to a cosmopolitan sensibility.

Autonomy and Civic Virtue

By personal autonomy I mean the skills and inclination to choose on the basis of
critical thought about the right and the good. The ideal of personal autonomy has
been integral to the liberal tradition since the Enlightenment. The communitarian
critique of the “unencumbered self” that Sandel (1982) made famous in Liberalism
and the Limits of Justice was in part an indictment of personal autonomy, and the
exaltation of diversity in the identity politics and multiculturalism of the following
decade challenged the universality of autonomy from a different angle. So why
believe that autonomy is necessary to citizenship?

A representative example of the way in which autonomy is connected with the
educational agenda of citizenship is Gutmann & Thompson’s (1996) argument.
“In its civic education deliberative democracy goes further than most other forms
of democracy. It would teach children not only to respect human dignity but to ap-
preciate its role in sustaining political cooperation on terms acceptable to morally
motivated citizens.” That appreciation in turn requires them to “understand the
diverse ways of life of their fellow citizens” (Gutmann & Thompson 1996, p.
66). Because I must seek to cooperate with others politically on terms that make
sense from their moral perspective as well as my own, I must be ready to enter
that perspective imaginatively so as to grasp its distinctive content. Many such
perspectives prosper in liberal democracies, and so the task of reciprocal under-
standing is necessarily onerous. Still, our actions as deliberative citizens must be
grounded in such reciprocity if political cooperation on terms acceptable to us as
(diversely) morally motivated citizens is to be possible at all. This is tantamount
to an imperative to think autonomously inside the role of citizen because I cannot
refuse to consider moral views alien to my own without flouting my responsibili-
ties as a deliberative citizen. Of course, the practice of autonomy inside civic roles
might coincide with its repudiation elsewhere in our lives, but it is far from obvious that autonomy is easily confined to the civic sphere once it has securely taken root there.

Gutmann & Thompson’s (1996) argument is representative in the way it connects moral pluralism as a permanent fact of life in free societies with the need for a widely diffused personal autonomy that enables an appreciative embrace of pluralism. But not all normative theorists who have tried to forge conceptions of citizenship that accommodate pluralism have taken this tack. Galston (1995) has deprecated the “valorization of choice” in autonomy-centered ideals of the liberal state; the protection of deep diversity is the fulcrum of a free society, according to Galston, and that requires a respect for the educational choices of parents who would reject an education for their children that instills autonomy. In a similar vein, Rawls’s move from a comprehensive to a political liberalism requires him to reject the idea that any doctrine of personal autonomy is integral to liberal citizenship:

The liberalisms of Kant and Mill may lead to requirements designed to foster the values of autonomy and individuality as ideals that govern much if not all of life. But political liberalism has a different source and requires far less. It will ask that children’s education include such things as knowledge of their constitutional and civic rights so that, for example, they know that apostasy is not a legal crime, all this to ensure that their continued membership when they come of age is not based simply on ignorance of their basic rights or fear of punishment for offenses that do not exist. Moreover, their education should also prepare them to be fully cooperating members of society and enable them to be self-supporting; it should also encourage the political virtues so that they want to honor the fair terms of social cooperation in their relations with the rest of society. (Rawls 1993, p. 199)

The evident purpose of this passage is to stress how little civic education demands once it is understood according to Rawls’s political liberalism. The example of the child who might grow up thinking that apostasy is illegal underscores that purpose. (Imagine how impoverished and insular a child’s upbringing would have to be for that thought to take root and endure.) Yet, on closer inspection, Rawls’s apparent endorsement of an austere civic minimalism makes no sense, given the logic of his own case for political liberalism. His offhand allusion to virtues that support “the fair terms of social cooperation” has to be understood in the light of his interpretation of how such terms must be discursively constructed, and that interpretation pulls him toward much the same conception of civic education that Gutmann & Thompson (1996) advocate. For Rawls, the idea of fair terms of social cooperation is tied to his political conception of the person. That conception imposes requirements of mutual understanding on a diverse citizenry, requirements that bring autonomy in through the back door of political liberalism (Callan 1997, pp. 39–42). Other liberal theorists who have addressed the issue of education and pluralism have been less diffident than Rawls in accepting the pressure toward

The convergence of political liberalism and deliberative democracy on this point yields a paradoxical conclusion. An education intended to promote robust mutual respect in conditions of deep diversity must substantially limit that diversity by militating against ways of life (including otherwise laudable ways of life) that are repugnant to personal autonomy. That conclusion is apt to be unwelcome to many friends of diversity, who will seek a less homogenizing ideal of social cooperation with concomitantly more inclusive conceptions of citizenship and civic education. Multiculturalists such as Parekh (2000) regard liberal partiality to autonomy as but another example of western ethnocentrism (pp. 109–11).

Morally ambitious ideals of civic concord unite the projects of deliberative democracy and Rawlsian political liberalism, and those ideals generate taxing demands on citizens for mutual understanding and autonomy. To escape the demands, we might forgo the ambitions that generate them. Suppose we retreat to a less expecting citizenship that settles for mutual forbearance rather than mutual respect. After all, I can tolerate others without understanding their moral perspective or thinking for myself. But personal autonomy still has a civic value that derives not from ambitious ideals of civic concord but from prudent fears about the vulnerability to abuse that unequal power always creates for those with the lesser power. Those fears are no less reasonable in the political context of mutual forbearance than under a regime of mutual respect. A widely diffused personal autonomy is a social corrective, perhaps even a necessary corrective to the susceptibility to demagoguery and self-destructive tribalism that afflict mass politics.

**Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism**

Since the inception of the nation-state, political education has been bound up with the project of nation-building, and the inculcation of patriotism has been widely regarded as a primary purpose of mass schooling. But the civic value of patriotism is vulnerable to objections from multiculturalists, who reject it as an instrument of assimilationism, and from cosmopolitans, who see it as a species of arbitrary moral tribalism. The cosmopolitan critique has been most famously developed by Nussbaum (1996), in whose work it derives from the moral premises of Stoicism. But the critique need not depend on premises as controversial as those.

The boundaries between nation-states never have corresponded to the distinctions of mutual interdependence that are widely thought to be the proper basis for ties of mutual civic obligation. Political boundaries have always had far more to do with brute facts about military conquest and defeat than with anything else. Yet the accelerating integration of the global economy and the (somewhat slower) growth of transnational political and legal institutions make the illusion that nationality has some deep moral import seem ever more preposterous, at least according to some theorists. If nation-states constitute nothing of deep moral consequence, then neither would the patriotic ties they have traditionally cultivated in their efforts to
forge a cohesive national identity. Williams (2003) claims that the interpersonal dependencies that give rise to civic obligation do so by creating "communities of shared fate." Membership is determined there not by national identity but by facts about mutual need and vulnerability that hold regardless of our affinities and antipathies: "Here the idea is not that membership entails a shared identity with any particular content, but comes by virtue of being entangled with others in such a way that one’s future is tied to theirs." According to Williams, globalization has triggered the proliferation of connections of shared fate that cut across the boundaries between national communities, creating new sites for civic engagement that will loom increasingly large in our children’s lives. In a word, the model of citizenship as shared national identity has become "obsolescent" (Williams 2003).

Patriotism can take a great variety of forms and serve many contradictory ends. It could inspire many who fought in the Vietnam War; it could also motivate those who struggled to bring it to an end. It gave emotional fuel to the growth of fascism; it fortified many who gave their lives in the defeat of fascism. And so on. So if a general indictment of patriotism were warranted, it could not merely generalize from the indecent cases. Nevertheless, the bare possibility of an honorable patriotism does not redeem its status as a virtue. Patriotism seems insufficient for civically praiseworthy conduct, even in circumstances when the merely patriotic action is overtly the same as the just and patriotic or compassionate and patriotic action. If some French citizens fought the Nazis because they "loved France" but had no concern whatsoever for the well-being or dignity of the Nazis’ victims, then their behavior was outwardly consistent with political virtue but not indicative of such virtue. Furthermore, if patriotism is not sufficient for political virtue, neither is it necessary. People who resist tyranny out of a sense of justice that is entirely indifferent to where it occurs need not develop a special love of their own country before their resistance to domestic tyranny counts as admirable.

One source of confusion in all this is the fact that we have more than one concept of patriotism. Loyalty to and identification with the nation is not the same as loyalty to and identification with the corresponding state, assuming that the nation in question has its own state. I exhibit my loyalty to the state by obeying its laws and upholding its authority. But loyalty to the nation may inspire me to criticize or to disobey the state. Of course, the two concepts are connected. To identify with the nation as the patriot does is to cherish one’s membership in a trans-generational political community, and for more than two centuries the aspiration to collective self-rule that gives the community its political character has typically been realized through the creation of sovereign states.

A revealing contrast between the two concepts is that the conduct required by nation-centered patriotism is often contestable to a degree that its state-centered counterpart is not. The question of whether my actions are loyal or disloyal to the state usually admits a pretty clear answer. Yet, when one asks how to act appropriately out of loyalty to or love for the nation, the answer is more often elusive and controversial. The question of how one should love an object of love is of prime importance in human life, not least because we typically enjoy rather more discretion in answering that question than in determining the prior matter of
whether we should love in the first place. Nation-centered patriotism is a normatively important concept precisely because it can be exercised in either morally laudable or contemptible ways.

The association of patriotic sentiment with the idea of a just democratic community is a pivotal idea in Part III of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, even though the word patriotism is not to be found in the text. Rawls envisages a process in which the sense of justice arises in children’s lives through ties of affection and loyalty that link the individual to the cross-generational political community that sustains a just regime over time. But Rawls cannot parry the objections of the cosmopolitan antipatriot, for one of the simplifying assumptions of Rawlsian “ideal theory” is that the society envisaged by the theorist is a closed cooperative scheme that people enter only at birth and leave only at death. Whatever associational ties bind them to that scheme can raise no problems about unprincipled partiality toward insiders, nor scruples about the abuse or exploitation of outsiders. Things are plainly different in the real world, where the history of nations is replete with arbitrary exclusions and the most terrible violence is visited upon outsiders in the name of national preservation or glory. So if the idea of a *closed* cooperative scheme is to mark the range of our civic obligations, then, in a world where our mutual dependencies are increasingly dense and elaborate, the entire world is quite properly the arena for our civic virtue.

But the truth about the global reach of the obligations that the best political morality would acknowledge does not tell us much about the appropriate shape of the communities and institutions in which that morality should be enacted and the criteria of membership that govern who belongs in them. Suppose we say that mutual dependency should be the marker of democratic community if it is the fundamental marker of civic obligation. Young (1990) adopts something very close to that view when she endorses the following, superficially appealing criterion of democratic inclusion: “wherever actions affect a plurality of agents... all those agents should participate in deciding the actions and their conditions” (p. 251). Unfortunately, in the increasingly interdependent world that globalization is creating, “the plurality of agents” affected by our actions includes just about everyone. Kukathas’s response to Young’s proposal is on target:

Yet given the state of our interdependence, this would give most of us a right to a say in the affairs of innumerable public and private organizations. Australian farmers would have to have a say in the formulation of US agricultural policy, since the American Export Enhancement Program affects them more directly (and severely) than it does most citizens in the United States. But even within the US it would mean giving business the right to participate in union meetings... In Australia, it would give miners the right to take part in the decision-making processes of the various Aboriginal Land Councils. (Kukathas 1997, pp. 146–47)

This is not to suggest that the makers of US agricultural policy owe nothing to the citizens of other countries or that Aboriginal Land Councils should heed only the interests of their members. That is plainly false precisely because interdependence
creates vulnerabilities and responsibilities that we cannot justly ignore. The point is rather that functioning political associations in which we seek justice for outsiders and insiders alike require other ways of marking boundaries than the promiscuously inclusive idea of interdependence can by itself provide.

Whatever these other ways of marking boundaries would be, the cooperative schemes they circumscribe would be open rather than closed. By “open” I do not only mean that one might enter by means other than birth and exit long before death. I also mean that one’s acknowledged civic responsibilities would link one to the lives of others beyond each particular cooperative scheme in which one might be engaged, often through other such schemes, in a thick web of interdependence and reciprocal obligation that is our global fate. The question then is why should not some of these open political communities be nations, with the aspiration to self-rule that in part defines them? And if they are, why should efforts to elicit a nation-centered patriotism among our children not be a proper part of the process of perpetuating the nation? At the root of much of the antipatriotism currently championed under the banner of cosmopolitanism is the assumption that the more one cares about the nation the less one cares about those who are not conationals, and hence that even the most honorable patriotism is but the beginning of a slippery slope that carries us toward the most noxious chauvinism (Nussbaum 1996, pp. 14–15). But this confuses the intensity of love with how one answers the ethical question of how one should love whatever one loves. Anything of value can be loved intensely but badly, and nations are no exception. Suppose our children learn to think of their nation as an open venture of collective self-rule, in which the right and wrong we do together is as much a matter of how we deal with those who are not compatriots as of how we deal with those who are. Then their patriotism will be proof against the temptations of chauvinism. Such patriotism is not an alternative to cosmopolitan morality but its ally.

In developing her idea of communities of shared fate as the arena for a new, cosmopolitan citizenship, the value of nationality, and even the nation state itself, find a place in Williams’s argument. Williams (2003) acknowledges that “the nation state may well continue to be the most relevant site of citizenship for most people for the foreseeable future.” But she insists that this does not require “affective attachment” to the nation as an imagined community. I think she is right if we interpret this as a strictly conceptual point about the nation-state and the attachments of its citizens. But I doubt that what she calls “legitimate” communities of shared fate—i.e., communities in which the use of collective power would be reliably constrained by a norm of reciprocal justification—could develop and be stabilized in the pervasive absence of affective attachment to the community.

There is a chasm between the bare fact of inescapable mutual interdependence and the creation of open political communities in which collective power is grounded in a norm of reciprocal justification. The first is the human condition; the second is an ideal of political legitimacy we inherit from the Enlightenment. Whatever might be said about the ideal, we know that the communities that might embody it would be difficult and fragile creations. Those who would create or
maintain such communities must reckon with the powerful centrifugal pressures exerted by self-interest, tribal antipathy to out-groups, and the irreducible plurality of human values. That the viability of such communities could be secure in circumstances where no one was affectively attached to them is doubtful, to say the least.

One merit of this line of thought is that it might furnish a moral reason to encourage patriotism in children notwithstanding the above-noted fact that patriotism seems neither strictly necessary nor sufficient for individual political virtue. On this account, patriotism functions as a source of cohesion for communities in which citizens strive together to achieve justice and legitimacy. Absent a concern for justice and legitimacy, patriotism would be without moral value, and where the concern for justice and legitimacy is sufficient to secure just and legitimate outcomes, the absence of patriotism need not trouble us in the least. But political education must concern itself with more than what virtue strictly demands of us; it must also seek to establish the general social and psychological conditions in which virtue is likely to prevail. A widely diffused patriotism may well continue to be one such condition, even in the nonideal conditions of an increasingly interdependent world.

CIVIC EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES

Civil Society and Social Capital

Questions about the proper ends of civic education are idle without a plausible account of how they are to be achieved or at least approximated in the real world. Providing such an account is a peculiarly difficult task for liberal—including liberal democratic— theorists because the expansive individual liberties they must respect are not inevitably exercised in ways that contribute to civic educational ends. The central question is aptly posed by Macedo (1996, p. 242): “how do we plan for a citizenry with civic competence while respecting individual freedom?”

The most fashionable contemporary answer appeals to the concept of social capital. According to Putnam (2000, p. 21) social capital “refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” Social capital is a particular way in which (some) social networks are constituted and sustained by the give and take of mutual goodwill and the confident reliance on others’ goodwill that a pattern of mutual benefaction will nourish over time. What Putnam has in mind is evidently not a narrowly egoistic form of reciprocity, though he seems to think that has some role in augmenting social capital. “Even more valuable is generalized reciprocity: I’ll do for you without expecting anything specific back from you in the expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road” (Putnam 2000, p. 21, original italics). Putnam now distinguishes between “inward-looking and outward-looking” and “bridging and bonding” social capital. A group is inward-looking to the extent that it concerns itself with the exclusive good of its own members; it is outward-looking
so far as it seeks to benefit others beyond the group. “Bonding social capital brings together people who are like one another in important respects (ethnicity, age, gender, social class, and so on), whereas bridging social capital brings together people who are unlike one another” (Putnam & Goss 2002, p. 112). Such categories are useful to the extent that they help to identify forms of associational life that might be particularly fecund settings for the growth of civic virtue, and Putnam’s scheme has some interesting affinities with influential contemporary accounts of civic virtue.

“Generalized reciprocity” is both the normative core of social capital and a cardinal civic virtue for deliberative democrats and political liberals. To be sure, normative theorists emphasize the internal connection of reciprocity in public deliberation to the justice and legitimacy of the polity, whereas Putnam stresses its significance as a widely diffused social norm. That is an important difference. Mutual goodwill can obviously thrive in many areas of social cooperation without becoming established as a justificatory norm in politics in anything like the ways that Rawls or Gutmann envisages. Still, the appeal to reciprocity as a justificatory norm is an extension of generalized reciprocity, and without a civil society in which generalized reciprocity has a wide influence, the prospects of that extension being made might be negligible. Similarly, a primary task of civic education will be to encourage the generalization of reciprocity outward toward the boundaries of citizenship, and social capital that is both outward-looking and bridges the most worrying social cleavages in a given society—race and class, say—may be a particularly propitious vehicle for that process. We do know much empirically about the tendency to polarize in “enclave deliberation” within homogeneous social groups—i.e., groups that cannot yield much bridging social capital, in Putnam’s terms (Sunstein 2001, pp. 13–47). So far as democracy needs social conditions that enable principled compromise and accommodation, venues that counteract these polarizing effects are of prime importance. This is not to say that other forms of social capital might not be valuable for specific civic purposes: inward-looking ethnic associations with few bridges to the wider community might still play a critical role in crystallizing the political interests of otherwise marginalized citizens. Judgments about the role of social capital as a vehicle of civic education must be made with a close eye to context, but Putnam’s formal categories may yet be a useful way of bringing many relevant contingencies into focus.

These remarks on the relations between social capital and citizenship are tinged with speculation, and perhaps they must remain so because the empirical study of social capital is fraught with such daunting methodological difficulties (Norris 2002, pp. 140–49). But a deeper concern here is that associational life cannot be construed as just so much raw material for the politics of moral uplift. That concern motivates Rosenblum’s attack on the “transmission belt” model of civil society. First, the dispositions learned in one association do not automatically spill over into others: “It is one thing to say that within face-to-face rotating credit associations ‘social networks allow trust to become transitive and spread: I trust you, because
you trust her and she assures me that she trusts you,’ and quite another thing to show that habits of trust cultivated in one social sphere are exhibited in incongruent groups in other spheres” (Rosenblum 1998, p. 48). Second, the transmission-belt model ignores the fact that a given association can have morally valuable uses that offset rather than reiterate the values learned in others:

The lessons of one affiliation may provide countervailing force for the formative effects of another area of social life. Or they may compensate for the deficits and deprivations suffered outside; membership is a sort of reparation. Or associations may provide an outlet for dispositions unacceptable in other areas. After all, it is simply not the case that labor in an authoritarian workplace produces incorrigibly submissive character, or that observant Roman Catholics are ritualistic, Orthodox Jews legalistic, and followers of charismatic ministers enthusiastic in every domain.

We have overwhelming evidence that individuals exercise capacities for discrimination and moral adaptation all the time, even among seemingly close situations. This includes a refined capacity to resist spillover. Indeed, part of “the discipline of culture” is to discriminate among associations. (Rosenblum 1998, p. 49)

The transmission-belt model of civil society is both psychologically naive and illiberal. It underestimates our capacity to learn civic virtues as a role-specific moral repertoire, and it tempts us to think of civil society as empty or threatening cultural space that must be colonized by the liberal state in order to secure the norms of citizenship. Macedo’s question cannot be answered in these terms.

Still, citizenship is plainly not an entirely discrete social sphere in which wholesome habits and capabilities can thrive regardless of what is learned elsewhere in citizens’ lives. Rosenblum (1998) certainly supposes no such thing: “Liberal democracy is more than a framework prized for its hospitality to pluralism. It embodies political ideals that associational life ideally supports, if only indirectly” (p. 43). That being so, we need to ask about the kinds of social capital different associations are liable to generate and to consider what role the state might plausibly play in fostering those kinds of social capital that are especially promising as supports for civic virtue. That need does not go away just because an automatic transfer of learning would be foolish to expect and a uniform congruity with liberal democratic norms oppressive to demand.

The Civic Purposes of Schooling

If a liberal state has any business in promoting civic educational ends, it will surely be in state-sponsored schools. Yet this topic is especially difficult to address in abstraction from the particularities of liberal democratic societies, where constitutional variation as well as differences in political culture and educational tradition may affect profoundly what the state can feasibly or desirably do to advance civic purposes in schools. For convenience, I concentrate on the United States.
The need to forge a cohesive civic identity among a diverse population was
critical to the inception of the American schooling system, and even now ordinary
Americans continue to value the school’s role in teaching civic skills more highly,
for example, than Europeans do (Hochschild & Scovronick 2002, p. 20). Education
has also had a distinctively important role as the social right that secures access
to “the American dream,” now usually understood in terms of material prosperity
and occupancy of those social roles (which typically have substantial educational
prerequisites) that maximize economic opportunity. In a society that offers little
else in the way of a welfare state, and where poverty is the almost inevitable
fate of the poorly educated, the quality of state-sponsored schooling takes on
a momentous personal importance for parents and children. Parental anxieties
about downward social mobility as well as hopes for its upward counterpart are
apt to crowd out more exalted considerations in policy debate. But the ideology of
American state-sponsored schooling has remained resolutely egalitarian. From the
beginning, only “public” schools would be funded by the state, and these would be
“common” schools in a certain sense. At least at the level of democratic faith,
that remains true today.

The institution of the public school and the ideal of the common school are
typically conflated. But the distinction between the two matters a lot. Three things
make public schools public: They are more or less wholly funded by the state;
they are open to the children of all who reside within a defined attendance zone
surrounding the school; and they are created and operated through some combi-
nation of state and local political authority. The public school is thus defined by
who pays for its services, who has access to those services, and who determines
their content and delivery. By contrast, the common school is defined by who goes
there and what they learn there. Consider the following passage, extracted from a
decision by the Kansas Supreme Court:

The tendency of the time is, and has been for several years, to abolish all
conditions on account of race, or color. . . and to make all persons absolutely
equal before the law. . . . At the common school, where both sexes and all
kinds of children mingle together, we have the great world in miniature; there
they may learn human nature in all its phases, with all its emotions, passions,
and feelings, its loves and hates, its hopes and fears. . . . But on the other hand,
persons by isolation may become strangers even in their own country; and by
being strangers, will be of but little benefit either to themselves or to society.
(Quoted in Kousser 1991, p. 215)

Unless you have a very good eye for nineteenth-century prose, you might guess
that this was written some years after Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka,
Kansas. In fact, the passage comes from a decision made in 1881 against racial
segregation in Kansas schools, written by Judge Daniel Valentine. The passage
makes clear why I call the common school an ideal, and why I want to distinguish
it from public schooling. Although Valentine professes confidence in the impetus
of American history toward political equality and comity, he is mindful that the
common school as he depicts it is an object of moral aspiration rather than a current achievement. After all, the very circumstances of the case demonstrate that the institutional reality of public schooling in Kansas and the inspiring image of “the great world in miniature” remained remote from each other. Valentine was writing after the legislative and judicial tide had turned decisively against federal efforts to overturn white supremacy in the South. These facts lend some poignancy to his appeal to the “tendency of the times,” an appeal that says much more about his own besieged political faith than any discernible empirical truth.

The ideal to which Valentine appeals joins together two ideas: what might be called the distinctive demographic profile of the common school and its distinctive curriculum. The common school is a place where “children of all kinds” mingle together, transforming it into a demographic microcosm of the diverse society it serves. This “great world in miniature” is also a site for pursuing certain shared educational ends: Children learn to understand each other across the cleavages that divide them and in so doing become civic friends rather than strangers in their own country. Central to American faith in common schooling is the idea that its distinctive demographic profile is necessary to achieve the ends of its distinctive curriculum. Borrowing Putnam’s vocabulary, we might describe it as the vehicle of outward-looking, bridging social capital par excellence.

Public schools are not necessarily wedded to the ideal of common schooling. You might say that they are at least de jure common schools because they are open to all in the geographically defined communities they serve. But even that is false so far as those communities do not themselves constitute microcosms of “the great world” to which Valentine alludes. The pervasiveness of racial and class segregation in urban America makes it inevitable that the neighborhood school is often the racial and socioeconomic enclave in miniature. Invoking the hallowed image of the common school that embraces all future citizens is still a routine rhetorical move in the defense of public education. But our rhetoric deceives us. The evolution of residential patterns in the United States throughout the twentieth century created profound spatial fragmentation along the fissures of race and class, and the trend toward segregation continues (Rae 1999, 2001). The Brown decision did nothing to change that; it merely signified the end of de jure racial segregation. In these circumstances, the neighborhood school is generally the very antithesis of the common school: a mirror to one fragment of a racially and economically disjointed world.

The defense of public education in the United States often assumes at least a rough congruence between the institution of the public school and the ideal of the common school. That is unfortunate because it makes the civic justification of state partiality for public schools seem easier than it really is. Suppose common schools are as potent an instrument of civic virtue as their adherents have argued. Nevertheless, there may not be a great distinction, from a civic viewpoint, between policies that restrict state funding to public schools that are racial and socioeconomic enclaves and policies (such as school vouchers) that would extend support to private schools that are religious enclaves as well. Whether widely available voucher
programs that sponsor access to religious schools would exacerbate racial segregation is not clear, though some controversial evidence suggests that they might even have the opposite effect (Greene 1998). Much research does indicate that public schools can claim no current advantage over religious private schools in the quality of the civic instruction they provide (Niemi & Junn 1998; Campbell 2001).

Promising initiatives have been taken in a few American school districts to steer public schooling toward the common school ideal, and these suggest ideas for reform that might be tried on a larger scale (Century Foundation 2002). But whether these reforms can succeed against traditions of localism and middle-class parents’ anxieties about maintaining competitive educational advantages for their children is uncertain.

If the common school ideal has such uncertain prospects in America, it is all the more important to consider how shared civic educational ends might be prosecuted in schools that remain more or less homogeneous enclaves of one sort or another. Can the distinctive curriculum of the common school be decoupled from its demographic profile? That is an empirical question, and some would argue that a sanguine answer can confidently be given already (Salamone 2000). Yet the demise of the common school tradition cannot be viewed with complacency. There is empirical evidence that Americans badly lack the kind of mutual understanding and civic friendship that the common school ideal was intended to serve. American citizens tend to assume that the common good is transparently clear, so that inclusive deliberation is unnecessary to discern its requirements; that political conflict is a sign of selfish interests impeding that good; and that compromise and accommodation in law making are indicative of unprincipled bargaining and corruption (Hibbing & Thiess-Morse 2002). It is hard to imagine beliefs less conducive to mutual respect and civility in conditions of deepening cultural diversity. Their prevalence can scarcely be explained by the failure of the common school ideal, but their prevalence might make us wary of policy proposals that could make children of different races, religions, and social classes even less likely to learn together as they grow up.

LEGITIMACY AND CIVIC EDUCATION

The rightful limits of state power constrain what the state is permitted to do in pursuing the ends of civic education. The precise identification of those limits will vary among competing normative conceptions of what constitutes a free society. But because any recognizably liberal democratic theory must acknowledge very substantial limits to state power, legitimacy is bound to loom large in any minimally adequate account of the state’s role in civic education.

Brighouse (1998) has argued against any state action intended to promote civic virtue on the grounds that such action will inevitably be directed to ensure the state’s survival rather than its legitimacy, thereby corrupting the processes of belief and preference formation that legitimating consent to political authority presupposes. Brighouse’s argument is perhaps overblown (Callan 2000), but his scruples about
the susceptibility of state-mandated civic education to corruption are well taken. Those scruples have a venerable pedigree in liberal democratic tradition. If any role for the state in determining the content of education will, as John Stuart Mill believed, install a "despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body," then a free people cannot cede any such role to the state [Mill 1976 (1869), p. 129].

Suppose we agree that state power in education is liable to induce a despotism over the mind. Are we to assume that concentrations of power in other institutional settings are necessarily less dangerous? Socialization in families and the associations of civil society will in many instances tend to produce a mental despotism because the inequalities of power they embody lend themselves to abuse. When the combination of ignorance and prejudice that renders future citizens incapable of contributing to serious democratic deliberation is a consequence of what their parents, rather than the state, taught or failed to teach them, it is no less a curtailment of freedom. The point here is not that states can always be trusted not to abuse educational authority; the point is rather that nobody can. The best distribution of educational authority, given either democratic or liberal ends, cannot be determined a priori because there is no a priori truth about the trustworthiness of institutional kinds (Raz 1986, pp. 427–28). But in general there may be strong prima facie reasons to favor a sharing of authority among parents, state, and perhaps the teaching profession in that the partiality of one might counterbalance that of the others (Gutmann 1987, pp. 41–47; Shapiro 1999, pp. 64–109).

Even if some institution or combination of institutions could be trusted completely to promote public virtue, liberal toleration would still require forbearance toward ways of life that go against the grain of such virtue. Toleration is an ideal we rightly invoke in marking the boundaries of basic liberties that are not contingent on whether their bearers are paragons of civic-mindedness or not. This is not the place to rehearse all the moral reasons that shape the practice of toleration. But prominent among them is our determination to minimize the suffering and humiliation we impose on people when we severely disrupt a cherished way of life, even if it falls far short of the high demands of public virtue (Strike 1998, p. 358). To impose those demands, on the assumption that the triumph of public virtue will always justify the costs of coercion, would be to engage in self-defeating civic education by violating the toleration that lies at the core of liberal tradition.

Nevertheless, registering the importance of legitimacy in constraining the state’s educational role is not a sufficient basis for understanding the full range of that role. Consider what we should want from a normative theory of civic education. It should tell us about the limits of what is politically tolerable in matters of children’s teaching and learning. The relevant question here might be this: What forms of (mis)education violate the basic rights of children or inculcate group hatred or other attitudes inimical to the most elementary moral responsibilities of citizenship? This question has been neglected in American educational discourse—including the recent work of normative theorists. A background assumption has been that serious state regulation of education outside the public system is simply not to
be expected [an honorable exception is Reich (2002)]. But a normative theory of
civic education should do more than help us to fix the boundaries of a minimally
adequate education. It should also furnish at least a partial conception of the best
education by prescribing a range of civic virtues as ideal educational ends, as
well as practices conducive to their realization. The two desiderata must not be
confused. One way of bringing out the differences between them is to compare the
roles of individual autonomy in arguments about what is educationally tolerable
and in arguments about what is educationally best.

Arguments about what is tolerable will rightly inform whatever policies the
state enforces in the regulation of all schools, whether they are public or private,
funded or unfunded by government. If autonomy is relevant here, it has to be a
modest conception that pertains to basic conditions of independent or nonservile
agency (Callan 1997, pp. 152–59; Lomasky 1987, pp. 182–87). Otherwise we as-
sume that ways of life inconsistent with some more or less sophisticated ideal of
autonomous development are politically intolerable, and that surely runs counter
to deep intuitions about the limits of legitimate government. On the other hand,
a theory of what educational practices are best, as opposed to merely tolerable,
might appeal to autonomy in a more ambitious way. If, for example, a demanding
ideal of autonomy is implicated in the case for a more deliberative citizenship,
along the lines canvassed by Gutmann and others, then to the extent that the case
succeeds, autonomy in that more onerous sense is integral to the best civic edu-
cation. Arguments about the best education are politically relevant to deliberation
about the less invasive ways in which the state might intervene in the formation of
future citizens—e.g., debate about the terms on which state sponsorship might be
extended to private schools rather than debate about the terms on which they are
to be tolerated. Obviously, much more could be said about this. But the distinction
between the tolerable and the best shows how an exacting conception of the ends
of civic education leaves ample room for respect for liberty and the rightful limits
of government. To the extent that the ends can be prosecuted in a manner tempered
by such respect, liberal worries about self-defeating civic education can be allayed.

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