Plural societies and the possibility of shared citizenship

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PLURAL SOCIETIES AND THE POSSIBILITY OF SHARED CITIZENSHIP

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As we push headlong into the twenty-first century, increasingly stringent demands for citizenship issue forth from governments around the world faced with a formidable assortment of challenges. Shrinking budgets, weakening currencies, and worsening unemployment top the list. Migration and population mobility also continue to reshape and redefine how governments and their citizens understand and respond to the demands of citizenship. Long-established markers of national identity seem anachronistic, as do attempts to restore time-honored ''norms and values'' with a view to promoting social cohesion. In Europe one witnesses a swelling elderly population and correspondingly low birthrate from groups around whose identities shared notions of citizenship were first established. Meanwhile, as this article goes to press, a pall hangs like a dark cloud over the Eurozone and other nations tremble at the thought of partners defaulting on their loans. Structured to benefit some (for example, large corporations and banks) while disadvantaging or excluding many others, the indiscriminate ebb and flow of investment capital threatens further political and economic instability. Hardly anyone is unaffected, though of course some are affected far more than others.

To try and cope with these challenges, alliances are forged and fortified. International cooperation augurs strength in numbers, on the one hand, but an ever-increasing fiscal vulnerability on the other, as trade alliances are forced to wrestle with the present economic uncertainties. Standards of living have risen to unprecedented levels in the last sixty years, though massive inequities in wealth distribution remain and continue to widen. An inverse relation between the number of persons seeking work and the actual number of spaces available is now the norm. Meanwhile, new freedoms are experienced at the same time that increasingly intrusive forms of technology and terrorist threats circumscribe what is permissible. As social and cultural fabrics stretch to the breaking point and political distrust spreads like a virus, a crisis of citizenship looms.

Faced with these challenges, states are exploring ways to elicit civic attachments from their heterogeneous populations, but doing so is proving difficult given that former ways of belonging fail to resonate with a large portion of the citizenry. Modes of belonging pull in conflicting directions and the absence of a shared civic vision in particular is salient. While the reasons for the discordance are complex — there are economic, social, and cultural causes and effects — they certainly are aggravated by the very presence of different cultures, religions, and political views existing side by side without a shared civic vision. In the history of the world this is not new, of course. Minorities have always been pressured to

prove their loyalty to the state and its dominant ideals. But what *is* new is the scale of the challenges governments face in galvanizing peoples with conflicting experiences and visions of citizenship.

WHAT CITIZENSHIP REQUIRES

Beyond the particulars that define legal residency, citizenship arguably consists of shared membership in a political space on the basis of mutual rights and responsibilities broadly understood. This is basically where the agreement ends. Most political theorists who write about citizenship are prepared to defend some variant of Aristotle's view that the citizen ''should be molded to suit the form of government under which he lives'' (*Politics*, 8.1) without endorsing his more demanding conviction that the general aims and purposes of individual lives invariably dovetail with those of the state. Meanwhile, answers to any of the following questions remain largely unsettled, even by those who routinely debate them: How should the elements of citizenship be fostered? Can this be done without violating the state's legitimacy? Are there nonnegotiable dispositions and behaviors that must manifest in the lives of all citizens? Might our voluntary attachments and obligations justifiably trump memberships that we inherit or that others wish to impose on us?

''Thick'' accounts of citizenship describe the reciprocal and informed participation of citizens with their respective political institutions and with each other. Thick accounts may also include the capacity to challenge authority, to reasonably disagree with other points of view, and to dissent on principled grounds from positions sanctioned by the majority. Further, thick accounts normally require that we imaginatively engage with others whose perspectives and experiences are different from our own, and contract with or reform the political institutions to bring about positive change. Some thick accounts, such as that of Stephen Macedo, even maintain that the health of our democracy is to be found in ''its ability to turn people's deepest convictions — including their religious beliefs — in directions that are congruent with the ways of a liberal regime.''[1] The question is whether thick accounts are sufficiently responsive to how most citizens must organize their lives around conflicting priorities.

Meanwhile, there are ''thin'' accounts that remind us that while some lives are defined by politics or political activism, most of us exhibit a less explicitly political version of civic virtue. William Galston avers that ''we cannot rightly assess the importance of politics without acknowledging the limits of politics,'' driving home the point that citizenship admits of many types of expression and not

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1. Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 43.

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only those pertaining to overtly political action.[2] In other words, *civic* virtue does not collapse into *political* virtue. With respect to political virtue, thin accounts normally require only that persons understand their basic rights and adhere to their legal obligations. This is because there are a variety of ways that persons can fulfill the requirements of ''good citizenship.'' To be sure, moments of direct political engagement have their place. But rather than demanding uninterrupted and explicit political forms of civic engagement — something ordinary citizens would find difficult to sustain in any event — advocates of thin citizenship insist upon pluralism and tolerance. Framed as a civic virtue, toleration entails the recognition that persons' lives go better when they are free to pursue those things that matter to them.

The distinction I make between thick and thin accounts is, of course, rather artificial. Neither is monolithic. Both accounts stress the importance of rights and responsibilities; both also value pluralism, social networks, and the need to protect the private sphere. Certainly thick accounts have a narrower scope of permissibility on both fronts, but thin accounts do not ignore basic rules of decency or duties that apply to everyone irrespective of their personal habits or convictions. The private sphere, for instance, is not completely out of bounds for any account of citizenship that takes shared responsibilities or egalitarian concerns seriously. Further, both accounts stress the importance of civic engagement, though thin accounts impose fewer imperatives regarding how it ought to be expressed. As long as a critical mass of concerned citizens consciously reproduces the laws and institutions necessary for the healthy functioning of a democracy, considerable discretion can be left to the private sphere and a range of legitimate nonpolitical pursuits can be tolerated, irrespective of whether or not they promote civic virtue. So the distinction serves mainly to emphasize different understandings, but also the scope of requirement citizenship imposes on us.

Whether citizenship is understood in thick or thin terms, many challenges are associated with reconciling the centralized aims of states with the diverse array of beliefs and practices among society's members. These form a loose collection of memberships out of which the diffuse tapestry of citizenship arises. Call this the *problem of pluralism*. Pluralism describes the condition of multiple value systems inhabiting the same political space. While the fundamentals of differing value systems may not vary, in the details they often do. The pressures of pluralism are nothing new in political theory. How much pluralism can states accommodate and still retain the social cohesion necessary to function as a state? Should states concern themselves with internal cohesion by actively promoting a common nationalist identity? What would those features be? What does recognition of minority groups entail and how far should it go? In aiming to promote equality of treatment, which institutional supports are necessary? Should there be special exemptions from collective responsibility when these conflict with internal group

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2. William A. Galston, *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 65.

interests? Will the institutionalization of group rights help or harm its members? How important are national borders for fostering common citizenship?

We need not settle these questions here; it is sufficient to point out their routine occurrence. The point is simply that many challenges commonly arise within pluralist societies, some of them problematic and others not. Whichever civic dispositions and skills are requisite, we can agree that the acceptance of pluralism does not entail that all forms of belonging are salutary or that individual conscience is always a reliable guide. All societies, liberal democratic ones perhaps especially, host a wide assortment of specific memberships coherently possible in both the private as well as the public domain. I say "coherently possible" because memberships that intentionally or unintentionally aim to *undermine* the possibility of cooperation across difference generally are viewed as undesirable given the threat they pose both to liberty and social cohesion in general and to other forms of belonging in particular. To ignore the importance of cultivating the dispositions and behaviors associated with citizenship — such as respectful engagement — is to court societal fragmentation and anarchy.

So while toleration and, say, liberty of conscience are default virtues in free societies, neither is a gold standard left unchecked; other goods matter and may prevail over what individual persons, or even majorities, think is best. Certainly, when the *expression* of conscience has damaging social or political consequences, the default position can, indeed should, be challenged. In particular cases certain rights of expression or association may even be revoked, for the basic rights of others cannot be ignored or shoved aside. Here we see the problem of pluralism quite clearly: multiple conceptions of what makes a life go well may sit comfortably alongside one another, or they may not. Much will depend on the substance and expression of those conceptions.

Liberal theorists seem especially preoccupied with memberships that potentially pose a challenge to what is coherently possible under a liberal democratic social contract. Even in the absence of violence, some memberships may also be undesirable (though tolerated) if such forms of belonging discourage their members from considering the needs of others. Call this the *problem of ethnocentrism*. Now, of course, ethnocentrism has its benign varieties. Preferring one's own group to another on the basis of shared interests and experiences is something we all do. Yet when memberships are taken to mean concern for one's own group at the expense of others, we have reason to worry.

There are principled limits to what can and should be tolerated, and these standards can be defended and enforced. Even when certain behaviors are defended on cultural or religious grounds, prohibitions on rape, usury, and honor killings not only aim to delineate basic human decency, but such bans are necessary because these acts violate the norms of citizenship inasmuch as they each involve the usurpation of other citizens' fundamental rights. All *liberal* variants of citizenship will draw a distinction between multiple conceptions of the good life, on the one hand, and clear violations of basic human dignity, on the other.

Citizenship as "Shared Fate"

Keeping the potential harms of ethnocentrism at bay while avoiding untenable thick accounts that downplay the importance of particularity remains a central challenge in citizenship theory. Implausible amalgamations of thick and thin accounts do not move us closer to resolving these tensions. The requirements of citizenship, thick or thin, normally encompass both voluntary and involuntary memberships within nation-states and beyond, for as global citizens our lives are often imperceptibly tangled with dissimilar cultural others. Furthermore, thick or thin, most versions of citizenship are coupled with integration and cohesion as important policy goals. But given the potentially restrictive connotations and requirements of integration (as defined by nation-states), any *shared* notion of citizenship must include the cultivation of dispositions and habits necessary for promoting the good of the community. Of course what that good entails, and how the community should be defined, will in large part depend on the context in which these discussions take place.

Melissa Williams has endeavored to strike a balance between the tensions caused by pluralism in democratic societies by describing citizenship as "shared fate," by which she means that persons "see themselves as enmeshed in relationships which they may or may not have chosen, with individuals who may be very different from themselves."[3] She refers to this realization as shared fate because unlike the various *voluntary* associations we choose, fate describes the copious ways in which our lives are *involuntarily* intertwined with others by virtue of our shared human characteristics and mutual interdependence. The core virtues necessary for "shared fate" are as follows:

- the capacity for enlarged thought,

- the imaginative capacity to see oneself as bound up with others through relations of interdependence as well as through shared history and institutions, and

- the capacity to reshape the shared practices and institutions [of] one's environment through direct participation.

Taken together the first two require that persons realize that others adhere to different customs or habits of thought and that conflicting perspectives need not be cause for alarm. In order for plural societies to function smoothly, but also fairly, there should be some kind of meaningful interaction with persons whose backgrounds, core assumptions, beliefs, or group affiliations one does not share. That, at least, is the ideal and as an ideal it serves an important purpose.

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3. Melissa Williams, "Citizenship as Identity, Citizenship as Shared Fate, and the Functions of Multicultural Education," in *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities,* ed. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 236.

Some of us may think we have already attained this capacity. We travel, partner with others from different ethnic and religious traditions, follow in our spare time the cultural and political developments around the world, and engage with neighbors and colleagues whose experiences are, at times, rather different from our own. (Academics are particularly susceptible to the belief that we are enlightened cosmopolitans.) It is debatable, however, whether many of us actually leave the web of relations that define and circumscribe our professional and social networks. Our selection of friends, choice of residence, and preferences in how we raise our children, too, are very telling. Consciously or not, most of us gravitate toward others very much like ourselves. Sociologists refer to this as the *homophily principle.*

Now, the absence of regular contact with others who occupy different social or cultural positions certainly challenges our capacity for enlarged thought. But while our ability to identify with what others actually feel, think, and experience — the elements of empathy — is at times overwhelming and difficult, this does not prevent us from trying. We hear firsthand accounts from others; we immigrate or encounter the immigrant; we vicariously enter into another's life through media, novels, and film. Unable to lead anyone's life but our own, we rely upon an empathic imagination to provide us with counterexamples of a life we *might* have lived. But here empathy is simply another way of saying a *capacity for enlarged thought.*

A capacity for enlarged thought also means that we learn the importance of listening to others and hearing what they have to say with a view to arriving at a deeper and more complex understanding of the situation or issue being discussed. Further, in theory the ''open-mindedness'' such encounters encourage will help to avert dogmatic thinking and simplistic solutions and will also likely facilitate more cooperation with others with whom one may not agree. All of this captures what Williams surely means by the ability to see oneself as *bound up with others through relations of interdependence.* After all, our lives are not as disconnected from others as we may think, no matter how different their political views, religious beliefs, or cultural practices may seem.

Finally, the capacity to reshape the shared practices and institutions *through direct participation* means that whatever our differences with others may be, at the end of the day we must have ways of communicating with each other as well as the willingness to submit (but also appeal) to the same laws and institutions, both for settling disputes as well as advancing the good of the community by forging new paths of social cooperation. Social cooperation is but another way of expressing the substance of citizenship.

Given its importance, most political theorists argue that citizenship cannot be left to chance. Specific civic virtues must be cultivated. Amy Gutmann, for instance, writes that these should include ''the ability to articulate and the courage to stand up for one's publicly defensible convictions, the ability to deliberate with others and therefore to be open-minded about the politically relevant issues,

and the ability to evaluate the performance of officeholders.''[4] Writers such as Gutmann look to the contribution that schools can make. Citizenship is to begin with the basics — literacy and numeracy — and expand outward to knowledge of basic rights and political institutions, and a minimum threshold of respect for others with whom one does not agree. It will inculcate knowledge of constitutional rights and freedoms as well as an awareness of the obligations we have toward others on the basis of our shared citizenship if not our common humanity. *Legitimate* civic education will refrain from inculcating uncritical loyalty to the state; it will accommodate both plurality and dissent.[5]

But civic education need not occur in a school, its parameters need not be secular, and its substance will not remain abstract for very long. Indeed, even persons who extol the virtues of the nation-state or who wax nostalgic about a glorious past — its common ideals, shared norms and values — are far more likely to attach themselves to some *specific* understanding of what those shared elements entail. We may feel ourselves to be proud Scots or Japanese, but except in moments of profound national crisis (for example, economic collapse, natural disasters, and the like), these identifications for most remain rather abstract. Absent an intentional cultivation of, say, patriotic sentiment, the tug of civic concern on our other priorities will likely remain relatively weak. This is because many of our noncivic attachments typically capture our more immediate concerns, and these more often than not fundamentally define who we are and what we care about.

Challenges to Citizenship Theory

Ideals are to be applauded first and foremost when they encompass the interests of those affected by them and, second, when they actually serve to improve and guide practice. But a number of challenges confront citizenship theory, irrespective of the packaging in which it is wrapped. One such challenge is the role the democratic state should play. While states can structure our relations with one another in ways tilted toward justice, states pursue policies that generally endeavor to retain the power of those who govern. The issue of state legitimacy, therefore, must be carefully examined, particularly when states have their own self-serving agendas to push. School systems must also be examined more critically. Public (state) schools are routinely described and defended by liberals as if they were uniquely commissioned to successfully cultivate in their students the knowledge, capacities, and skills necessary for meaningful engagement with others across substantive difference. Yet state schools are typically much too preoccupied with other instrumental aims, and it is doubtful whether fostering critical thinking and engaged citizenship count among their priorities.

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4. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 298.

5. Michael S. Merry, ''Patriotism, History and the Legitimate Aims of American Education,'' *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 41, no. 4 (2009): 378–398.

Notwithstanding the emphasis in citizenship theory on rights and responsibilities, the political rhetoric of integration in most liberal democracies is usually tied to state projects bent on assimilating their others.[6] Put differently, while in theory democratic citizenship does not demand a surrender of one's special attachments, in practice many minority groups routinely feel the pressure to prove their loyalty. With policies that alternate between containment, dispersal, and mixing, citizenship more often than not is co-opted by top-down integrationist policies that bracket differences in social status and politically determine what ''good citizenship'' means. Of course, democratic states cannot be sketched with one brush. The problem of pluralism will not carry the same urgency everywhere. The comparatively homogeneous populations of Iceland or South Korea more easily facilitate consensus in contrast to democratic societies such as India, Brazil, and the United States, whose internal heterogeneity makes such consensus forever elusive. While some states adopt a republican approach, downplaying all other civic attachments, others do a better job of managing pluralism by distributing power through coalition building, even when the same coalition partners routinely appear!

The critique runs even deeper than this. Just how ''democratic'' are so-called liberal democracies when corporate-controlled media determines which issues get raised and how (or whether) they will be discussed? Where wealth and social status buy power and influence? How ''democratic'' are liberal democracies when they privately support and prop up tyrannies for geopolitical and economic gain while publicly championing the rhetoric of freedom and equality? Closer to home, rampant political corruption, rising prison populations, spiking unemployment, and shrinking welfare provisions all point away from frothy notions of citizenship on which theorists routinely trade. Widespread distrust and dissent within every liberal democratic state should give us pause.

Educational institutions and the people who staff them lie at the center of these challenges. Challenges can lead to cynicism and despair or to new visions of hope and opportunity. But opportunities for meaningful engagement with substantive cultural, religious, ethnic, and even moral difference are too frequently passed up in favor of a citizenship rhetoric that either glosses over substantive differences, or else alienates and divides rather than inspires and unites. For these and other reasons a variety of alternative expressions of citizenship — including counterstrategies — will appeal to those whom citizenship discourse excludes.

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6. Homi K. Bhabha, ''Liberalism's Sacred Cow,'' in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Susan Moller Okin (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 79–84; Yngve Lithman, ''The Holistic Ambition: Social Cohesion and the Culturalization of Citizenship,'' *Ethnicities* 10, no. 4 (2010): 488–502; Tariq Modood, ''Multiculturalism in the West and Muslim Identity,'' in *Citizenship, Identity and Education in Muslim Communities: Essays on Attachment and Obligation,* ed. Michael S. Merry and Jeffrey Ayala Milligan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 63–84; and Melissa Williams, *Voice, Trust and Memory: Marginalized Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998).

CONTRIBUTIONS

This symposium contains several responses to the possibility of a shared notion of citizenship in plural societies. Such an undertaking naturally entails different conceptualizations and strategies. As we have seen, citizenship would appear to involve our shared fate with others. Predictable formulations not only recommend dialogue across differences; they also stress the importance of a common experience shared by all. Though we aim to address the tensions and conflicts engendered by pluralist societies, the goal is not to devise strategies for avoiding conflict, nor is the aim to paper over the real differences that make pluralist societies both interesting and challenging. What unites these contributions is the shared view that pluralism need not portend discord; indeed, pluralism, including the conflict it engenders, is an indispensable ingredient for constructive change. Yet intelligent attempts to respond to the challenges of plural societies do not easily map onto one approach. Indeed, the strategies entailed by a shared civic vision may vary in the details from one (local) context to another. This, too, is a hallmark of a healthy pluralist society.

The first essay is by Sigal Ben-Porath, who develops the concept of shared fate as a theoretical and practical response to the challenge of pluralism. She argues for shared fate as a viable alternative to current forms of citizenship education, one that develops a significant shared dimension while respecting deep differences within a political community. Through her analysis, she aims to establish shared fate as a productive framework for responding to some contemporary challenges in particular educational contexts, including the resegregation of some schooling systems, linguistic diversity, and patriotic education.

Ben-Porath's essay is followed by that of Katariina Holma, who defends a pluralist fallibilism by showing the relation between moral epistemology and moral education, on the one hand, and reason and emotion, on the other. Holma argues that pluralist fallibilism provides two independent reasons for seeking the basis for shared citizenship: first, by showing that there is a broad ethical basis on which to take up and pursue moral projects and, second, by showing that fallibilism gives us reasons to dialogue with others.

Next is Bryan Warnick, who focuses on the notion of autonomy and its relation to one's own cultural tradition. He argues that different types of cultural comparisons are necessary to think critically both within and outside of one's tradition. On the one hand, Warnick claims that some defenders of autonomy underestimate the extent to which one's own tradition can enable one to think critically. Without exterior comparisons, he posits that one will never be able to fully address the question, ''Is my tradition just?'' But he also criticizes a more familiar — and secular — way of defending autonomy. Warnick argues that liberal education in pluralistic societies must perform a delicate balancing act of exposing students to different traditions while at the same time allowing students to see how the tools of their inherited traditions may be put in the service of social criticism.

Bruce Maxwell, David Waddington, Kevin McDonough, Andrée-Anne Cormier, and Marina Schwimmer together examine the possibilities for a more

dialectical conception of citizenship education as expressed through Quebec's model of Interculturalism, which has evolved as an alternative to Canadian Multiculturalism. They argue that with Interculturalism, unlike its well-known precursor, the state largely hands the problem of reinforcing civic attachments over to citizens. Citizenship becomes a shared enterprise. Instead of using the instruments of the state to promote a fixed, a priori, substantive conception of national identity, state intervention is limited to introducing measures aimed at creating social conditions conducive to convergence toward a common political identity: dialogue, respect for differences, and social and economic inclusion. In order to examine some of the challenges Interculturalism must confront, they consider the case of conservative religious schools.

Charlene Tan, in her essay, offers a philosophical analysis of Singapore's vision of shared citizenship from a Confucian perspective. The state's vision, known formally as "Our Shared Values," consists of communitarian values that reflect the ideology of multiculturalism promoted by the state. Underpinning the Shared Values is a pejorative interpretation of "individual rights" and "individual interests" as antithetical to national interests. Rejecting this antithesis, Tan argues that Confucianism recognizes the correlative rights of all human beings that are premised on the inherent right to human dignity, worth, and equality. Furthermore, Confucianism posits that it is in everyone's interest to attain the Confucian ethical ideal of a noble person in society through self-cultivation. The implications arising from a Confucian perspective on the Shared Values, therefore, are that moral education in Singapore should focus more on individual moral development and that the government should provide more avenues for citizens to contribute actively toward the vision of shared citizenship.

Finally, Michael Merry argues in his contribution that civic virtue best describes the dispositions and actions necessary for promoting the common good. However, segregation appears to challenge the good that some communities are capable of experiencing. Yet while some forms of segregation are indeed harmful, he argues that civic virtue is not dependent upon integration; it can and does take place under conditions of segregation — even when the segregation is involuntary. However, Merry makes the case that voluntary forms of separation — those that endeavor to redefine, reclaim, and transform the conditions of segregation — are a more effective way to facilitate civic virtue. He goes on to defend his view against three separate criticisms: ethnocentrism, deliberation, and social stratification.

Each of the authors contributing to this symposium addresses a variety of conflicts, tensions, and challenges that inevitably arise in plural societies owing to the movement of populations, the demands of previously marginalized indigenous groups, and the backlash from embattled majorities such demographic changes and shifts in power incite. Each contribution is unique, yet they are united by a common set of challenges found in all pluralist societies. To that end, each of these contributions considers in its own way the nature of a shared civic vision in pluralist societies with a view to informing educational thought and practice.