

# On the Nature of Citizenship

Possibly only in America can one find thinkers who rebel at the idea that humans are *social animals*, successful only when living in moral communities that are defined by common, collective goods; and that children do not grow into good citizens unless they are trained to acquire a combination of nonselfish social morality, community pride, civility, and group loyalties that serve the good of their community and not just themselves. This general idea is accepted by traditional conservative societies as well as by Chinese communes and Soviet schools, and they implement it better, or at least with less intellectual confusion, than do we.

What odd kind of thinking makes us, almost alone among cultures, uneasy with this conception of what is necessary for good citizenship? Many reject the idea that children must be trained to be good persons and good citizens. Whereas medieval societies thought human nature inherently wicked and socialist societies believe it to be limitlessly malleable, Americans seem to think children are naturally good, even naturally civilized,

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Citizenship education should foster group loyalty and "white, middle-class values," especially in black and poor white neighborhoods.

requiring only affectionate stroking and self-esteem to be good persons and good citizens.<sup>1</sup> This is the triumph of sentimentalism over sin and manifests itself as the all-you-need-is-love school of educational thought. Lying deeper is a parody of classic individualism—a kind of individualism gone mad—that would have individual citizens view their relation to their nation as coldly,

warily, and self-interestedly as they do their relation to auto dealers. Reinforcing this hyper-individualism is the assumption of ethical relativism and universal selfishness, powerfully promulgated by American social scientists because it simplifies their methodology and makes their theories look more scientific. Finally, there is hostility and embarrassment at the very idea of teaching loyalty and sacrifice for the common good, partly due, I suspect but cannot prove, to intellectuals' guilt over our history of racism, the idea being that we have no right to ask black victims of racism to be good citizens. This last point will be examined further on.

This collection of mistakes and confusions can combine to make a person reject the idea of citizenship education and retain just the name. "Citizenship education" then becomes critical thinking, political activism, or "inquiry," these all being ways to avoid dealing with the ethical basis of citizenship and concern oneself only with the skills of citizenship. Without the ethical basis—the goals and values of a good citizen—citizenship skills do not begin to constitute citizenship; indeed, without reference to some goal or other they are pointless. By citizenship skills I mean the learned ability to reason critically

about causes and about morality, become well informed and gather relevant facts, communicate well, and organize groups, most of which are necessary conditions for good citizenship.<sup>2</sup> These are equally necessary skills for successful revolutionaries, egoists, spies, and professional criminals. Egoists and criminals may even need to reason about morality, if only to be able to predict what moral people are likely to do. Citizenship can be defined in terms of goals or values that are to be achieved by means of certain requisite skills. Both are essential but my aim here is to discuss only the normative component, that is, the values or goals of the good citizen.

Citizenship is a limited notion; it is not equivalent to the whole of morality, not even the whole of political morality. For example, there are circumstances in which a moral person must be a bad citizen, such as a Soviet in the time of Stalin's purges or a German under Hitler. So too, Americans who think that wrongs that must be righted necessitate revolution or violent civil disobedience are not good citizens although they would (if they were correct) be morally good. People don't know what citizenship is if they think it is simply identical with following truly international and impersonal principles of political morality, any more than they will know what it is if it is identified with a set of skills. People will not understand what it is to be good American, Nigerian, or Soviet citizens.

Citizenship is a form of group loyalty, just as is a sense of special regard and commitment to the good of one's family, neighborhood, work organization, city, and species. These are all group loyalties, forms of group egoism or tribal morality, that are concerned with *one's own* whatever; but we call group loyalty citizenship only when it is directed toward a political unit such as one's city or one's nation, rather than toward, say, one's family or labor union. If citizenship is to be a distinct idea from purely impartial, global morality it usually must be tied to a region: as a citizen I am disposed to work, sacrifice, and restrict my egoism for the good of a geographical and moral community I view as *mine* (and which we collectively view as *ours*). Let me suggest, with the



preceding distinctions in mind, six features of citizenship and its relation to what is not citizenship.

1. *Membership in a moral community.* Citizenship implies a sense of belonging to a moral community. A moral community is a group of citizens who share a conception of a common good, together with the social, economic, and political institutions which structure the community. The common good is the flourishing of one's society; it reinforces one's disposition to treat people equally within the moral community because it is a good that is held in common with fellow citizens. A community of people with a common good makes possible common principles of social morality within the community.

2. *Moral education.* When they are children, citizens of any nonsuicidal society are taught basic principles of nonselfish social morality; without such training mutual cooperation and trust is impossible and the existence of a civilized society is impossible. This, together with shared concern for the good of one's society, is what I mean by saying that a civilized society is a moral community. Our democratic society, and any society, has requirements so basic that sophisticated reformers sometimes forget that frighteningly large numbers of people presently do not meet them. We cannot have a society at all unless the vast majority of citizens are reasonably honest, obey the law, pay their way, shun violence aimed

at personal gain, treat other citizens fairly, and in general care about their neighborhoods, cities, and nations. Therefore moral education is part of citizenship education and at this basic level it will not differ significantly anywhere—in the United States, the USSR, or Nigeria.

3. *Citizenship skills.* Effective citizens of a democratic society must be taught appropriate skills, some of them cognitive, some, partly affective. If the people ultimately determine the direction society takes, they must learn their history and the nature and operation of their institutions; learn to reason in ways that are logical, informed, and empathetic; and as school children they should perform public service tasks that acquaint them with old people, poor people, and the handicapped, neighborhood and municipal problems, and the workings of local government.<sup>3</sup> Service activities perhaps are as much moral education as a matter of skills; in any case they create what knowledge and cognitive skills alone cannot create: *habits* of cooperative behavior that simultaneously serve the public good and create a sense that one is part of the community.

4. *The ethics of parts and wholes.* All members of complex societies acquire multiple loyalties. Many are nested: neighborhood within city, city within country, country within world. They often compete with one another, and attempts to adjudicate the competition of loyalties in particular cases can be called "the ethics of parts and wholes." Someone whose *only* group commitment is to the whole of humanity no more can be a good American (Mexican, French) citizen than can someone whose *only* group commitment is to a family or a secret society. Thinking otherwise implies believing that what aims only at the good of the world automatically serves the good of a part of the world, which is no more plausible than claiming that whatever is good for America is good for New York or General Motors. It is equally fallacious to go the other way: what is good for my neighborhood may not be good for my city, what is good for my city may not be good for my country, and what benefits my country need not benefit the world.

5. *Sense of possession.* People who are brought up to view their

community or nation as *their own* will tend to feel pride when it prospers, shame when it declines or is disgraced, and anger or indignation when it is threatened. People are ill-disposed to harm or exploit what they view as their own; hence they will be less likely to be vandals, parasites, criminals, or unconcerned about the quality, aesthetics, and public services of their community. People who have not been caused to view their communities as their own can be called alienated and will be more likely to have opposite tendencies.

6. *Non-absolute commitments.* A citizen puts his/her own ahead of what is not his/her own; thus a Nigerian will feel a greater obligation to protect and work for the good of Nigeria than for the good of America or Peru. But citizen duties are not absolute duties; in appropriate circumstances they can be overridden by wider loyalties (community loyalty by national interest, national loyalty by the good of humanity), sometimes by strong narrower loyalties, and by various kinds of moral considerations. Therefore the notion of group loyalty does not imply "Nigeria (or America, or New York) right or wrong"; good citizenship is not identical with the whole of morality and sometimes a good person is required to be a bad citizen.

Activist reformers will be suspicious of teaching children American ideals of equality and freedom and the accomplishments of which we can be proud. Often more angry than proud, they think that these ideals have failed the poor, blacks, women, and other groups. They fear that teaching what I have called the ethical basis of citizenship will produce unreflective men and women who will tend to perpetuate the status quo, people who are compliant cogs in a system that contains many evils and injustices.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, they may construe the principal function of citizenship education to prepare young people to be reformers. I believe the activist reformers are mistaken; that is, mistaken about the nature of *citizenship* education, not necessarily mistaken about what needs to be reformed. The activist reformers have their virtues, but most of the qualities of a

good citizen are simply different: after we have produced good citizens, then we can expect some of them to become activist reformers. Reminding ourselves of the essentially conserving and group-egoistic aspects of citizenship is not to reject the moral basis of those who dedicate themselves to fighting injustice; it is instead a matter of not allowing the enthusiasms of the reformer to be substituted for the fundamentals of citizenship.

Moral education and citizenship education overlap and there is a similarity in how they must be taught; but they are not identical. Moral education, as distinct from mere chatter about "values," includes (a) getting young children to internalize those basic principles of social morality which are necessary for our (and any) society to be reasonably safe and satisfying, the most important examples being honesty, willingness to work, fairness, and the disavowal of criminal violence; and (b) more and more as they get older, teaching young people to reason in a logical, sensitive, and factually informed way about conflicts among the principles they internalized earlier. These are essential components of citizenship education because citizens who lack internalized, thoughtfully applied social morality cannot be good citizens. But citizenship education must also relate specifically to the social unit of whose citizens we are speaking: our aim is to produce good American citizens, not good Soviet, Nigerian, or world citizens.

In moral education, unless children first internalize principles of social morality it will be fruitless to talk to them about exceptions and dilemmas. It is pointless to discuss conflicts of principle with children who have no principles in the first place, and if one begins with moral dilemmas they will think that morality is nothing but dilemmas. So too, citizenship education must begin with information about our nation, government, and ideals, taught so as to provide grounds for developing pride and affection; it should also include field exercises in public service and political participation. If instead we start nine-year-olds with a litany of evils and injustices, they will be likely to learn cynicism and alienation. A teacher may say, "But I teach about problems and injustices because I want to make my country better; if I

did not have concern and affection for it I would not care about reforming it." Precisely. The teacher did not acquire affection for our country by being told that we exterminated Indians, lynched Blacks, and slaughtered Vietnamese. The teacher's concern and affection *survived* this knowledge because of prior training and experience, and the pupils, like the teacher, need to acquire a basis for good citizenship before they are plunged into what is ugly.

Furthermore, teaching citizenship skills without teaching children a sense of belonging to their local and national communities is like teaching moral reasoning without teaching moral principles. By themselves, citizenship skills and moral reasoning will not motivate children to do anything. Good citizenship is no more a purely cognitive matter than is morality, and therefore it is necessary to give children more than skills and method. They must be made to care, feel, and identify in certain ways. This is what it means to *internalize* a principle or attitude and it is only this that can create an inner and direct interest in the good of one's community. Those who intellectualize citizenship education to the point of limiting it to skills and competencies can have no hope of creating citizens who care in the ways mentioned.

Perhaps America's great size, wealth, and past invincibility have created a sense that it needs no special care and protection, that it is a juggernaut that runs on its own energy, its citizens needing more to cope with it than to love and nurture it. Given the difficulties our society faces today, that attitude may be difficult to maintain. For example, rates of crime, vandalism, youthful homicide and suicide, and general lack of commitment to the public good all have climbed appallingly during the past 15 years.<sup>5</sup> What threatens us is lack of good citizenship on the most elemental level. Our society perhaps can get by, barely, if most citizens reason poorly about sophisticated moral and political dilemmas; but it cannot get by with too many citizens who have no social morality or commitments at all, no inhibitions whatever about stealing and violence, and who live for immediate, self-interested gratifications.

The trial by fire of the approach I have advocated surely comes when one asks, "What about poor, black ghetto children? Given their values, needs, and history of racial oppression, are they obliged to acquire white, middle-class, citizenship values?" The only sane answer is yes. The breakdown of basic citizenship, indeed, of civilization itself, is most grievous in our urban slums, the biggest and worst of which are our black slums; yet it is here that educators are most hesitant, are enticed by relativism, riddled with guilt, and, along with teachers in black slums, terrified to do or say anything that will get them called either racists or Uncle Toms. Basic civility, honesty, a work ethic, and the postponement of gratifications are not even recommended by some educators, on the grounds that these are not part of the "value system" of black slum children, are not even the qualities they need to survive in their environment; and if they are recommended, failure of children to satisfy them is often excused or tolerated, for the same kinds of reasons.

To take that position is to advocate moral triage for a large minority of American children. Like army triage officers who set aside the hopeless cases as the wounded come in, the unwitting practitioners of moral triage fail to insist on the same levels of civility, honesty, self-discipline, and hard work that they demand of "more advantaged" children. It is, I am convinced, the most racist thing one can do, for it cripples their minds and character, and their very souls. The slum child is told, in effect, "We are training you to live in your slum, with mores and character befitting your slum, and to live nowhere else." It is no good to say that that is their reality, that their world is one of discrimination, grab-what-you-can, and alienation from white middle-class values; saying this is what constitutes moral triage. What the poorest children of the most crime-ridden black slum need is precisely the training and traits of character that ill adapt them to live that kind of life. And it is wrong, in 1980, to claim that they cannot leave (or change) the slum if they acquire what are foolishly called "white middle-class values." There is nothing "white" or even middle class about good citizenship, honesty, a work ethic, and civic and

national loyalties. They are simply the glue of civilization, and are taught, with little variation, in African countries, socialist countries, and Western free market countries.

American black slums (and to a lesser degree, poor white neighborhoods) contain many ruined people, who help to ruin their communities, and, as black leaders have said for years, threaten the ruination of our whole society. A conserving, "middle-class" citizenship education is especially needed in such communities. It is possible that in the worst, most alienated slums, instilling commitment to the local community must come first; the character traits needed will not be significantly different. And perhaps, in these times, few white teachers will have sufficient moral credit with children and their parents to enable them to do the demanding, limit setting, and modeling that is necessary.

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Citizens are a group of people who share a common good: we can speak of our neighborhood, city, country. People who have been caused to regard a community as their own will be ill-disposed to neglect, vandalize, or prey upon it. A primary aim of citizenship education is to nurture this sense of possession, for a major problem facing contemporary American society is not so much the competition of group commitments as the absence of them. Finally, since a community is constituted by a jointly held idea of a common good, it is expected that individual members be held personally responsible for acts that harm or benefit it. We do not expect foreigners to have a special regard for our so-and-so, therefore we do not criticize or blame them when they express no concern. They are not responsible because they are alien; when we refuse to hold mem-

bers of our own community responsible we alienate them. We say, in effect, that they are not of us. This means that part of what it is for a person to be a citizen of X is that demands are made on him/her, demands which are backed by a readiness to censure and criticize.

It does not follow from what I have said that communities, whether poor slums or wealthy suburbs, must sell out their "values" or lose their identities. By training children to be good citizens of local communities, as well as good citizens of the national community within which the local communities are nested, one accepts diversity of culture and style as a basic good. This diversity is in the tradition of American individualism; what should be rejected is "individualism gone mad"; that is, the individualism that forgets that humans are social animals who live in communities with common, collective goods which each new generation must be brought up to respect and make fit objects of pride.

<sup>1</sup> This view is especially evident in the first edition of *Values and Teaching* by Louis Rath, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney B. Simon (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1966). In an essay review, "Moral Education Without Moral Education" (*Harvard Educational Review*, May 1979), I discuss at some length the need for training in basic social morality.

<sup>2</sup> See: Richard C. Remy, *Handbook of Basic Citizenship Competencies* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1980) for a good discussion of seven basic citizenship competencies.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of service activities by school children is not new. Recent advocates have included Kevin Ryan of The Ohio State University; John Henry Martin in "Reconsidering the Goals of High School Education" (*Educational Leadership*, January 1980); Edward Wynne in *Character* (November 1979), and others.

<sup>4</sup> This concern is eloquently expressed by Roberta Sigel in "The Cost of Active Citizenship—Is it Too High?," a paper presented at a national symposium, Citizenship and Education in Modern Society (Columbus, Ohio, April 1980), sponsored by the Mershon Center of The Ohio State University.

<sup>5</sup> The statistics are readily available from U.S. government sources; some of the most disturbing are summarized and analyzed by Edward Wynne in *Character*, November 1979.

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