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Multicultural Citizenship by Will Kymlicka
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The Rigors of Citizenship

Bernard Murchland

The driving forces of modern society—whether economic, technological or nationalistic—do not encourage a very strong sense of citizenship. It is a notion that is either taken for granted, systematically devalued or simply ignored. But we are beginning to realize that this weak sense of citizenship may be at the root of many of our social pathologies. Social theory is increasingly making a noticeable and not insignificant effort to include citizenship theory. The volumes here under review testify to the fruitfulness and indeed energy of this effort. They range widely and do not present a unified picture.

Let me attempt to establish some focus by first looking at Michael Ignatieff’s “The Myth of Citizenship” in Ronald Beiner’s well-conceived volume of essays. The word “myth” in the title has, as Ignatieff tells us, both a noble and an ironic meaning: noble because it refers us to the constituting truths of origins, foundations, ideals; and ironic because the modern temper looks upon such truths with a good deal of skepticism. Ignatieff argues that our understanding of citizenship is caught between these two poles. On the one hand is the “noble” version articulated by Aristotle and the civic republican tradition according to which we realize our true natures through deliberation and action with...
our fellow citizens in the public realm. In the liberal tradition initiated by Hobbes and Locke such a high-minded view of citizenship is considered unrealistic. The realistic position takes human nature to be “a bundle of passions and interests” best satisfied in the private as opposed to the public sphere. Ignatieff examines these two conflicting images—citizenship as noble myth and as fanciful lie—together with their accompanying political paradigms: the republican and the liberal.

This sets the problem nicely, and not only the problem of citizenship but as well the problem of modern society more generally, a problem Ignatieff defines as “the tension between the republican discourse on citizenship and the liberal political theory of market man. The one defends a political, the other an economic definition of man, the one an active-participatory conception of freedom, the other a passive, acquisitive definition of freedom; the one speaks of society as a polis; the other of society as a market-based association of competitive individuals. The tension between man the citizen and economic man divides our spirits and loyalties to this day. We live as market men, we wish we lived as citizens” (p. 54).

This is a clear, although somewhat polarized, statement of the parameters of many of our current political debates. Ignatieff tries to find a middle ground between these extremes. He proposes a kind of cross-pollination in order “to criticize the reality of contemporary citizenship from the standpoint of myth and to criticize the myth from the standpoint of reality.” He thus sets himself a veritable juggler’s act and proves to be a skilled juggler although not as skilled as one might hope. Ignatieff proceeds by limning the principal characteristics of each tradition. The republican paradigm was property-based and patriarchal; antibureaucratic in relying on a rotation of offices to administer public affairs; anti-imperialistic in opposing a professional army and the temptation to empire building; and anti-ritualistic in its opposition to any show of pomp that would raise leaders above the people. Cincinnatus is a much invoked hero of this tradition: the man of simple tastes and independent mind who leaves his plough to defend the city then returns to his unassuming ways. Some might think of George Washington in this context.

The liberal tradition reverses the primacy of the public over the private. Thinkers like Adam Smith and David Hume claimed
that the private, that is, economic activity, was "the essential realm of life." Hume famously said that given a choice between a despotism under the rule of law which would protect property and his economic freedoms and a democracy that gave him citizenship but no economic rights, he would choose the former. In the liberal paradigm politics fades to secondary status and the ideal of rights-bearing individuals comes to the fore. The state is ancillary to the pursuits of private interests and the virtue of citizenship yields in importance to the efficacy of checking and balancing agencies.

Ignatieff sees a "clear contradiction" between the republican and liberal traditions and makes the debate as it emerged in the eighteenth century an occasion to reflect upon our present situation. Thus he writes:

The classical discourse on citizenship, however dated, however disd legitimately its premises may now seem, still retains the power to enable us to pose still valid questions about modern citizenship: what are the conditions of political disinterestedness? what exactly ties our material interests to the interests of our country? do the harried conditions of modern life—our inscription in a narrow division of labor and our restricted leisure—disable our political judgment? If, as we rightly think, we cannot let our politics become the sport of a monied aristocracy, who would fit the criterion of ancient civic-mindedness, how will we approximate to these ancient virtues? Or is the ancient paradigm asking too much of us? (p. 62)

One answer to such questions can be found in the welfare state which Ignatieff calls a "crucial marriage between the liberal and civic ideals. From liberalism came the idea that the state exists to enable individuals to be 'free from'; from the civic tradition came the ideal of 'free to.'" By using common resources to create common entitlements, the formal freedom promised by liberalism was to be undergirded by the real freedom. Thus we have a polity formally neutral on what constitutes the good life, yet committed to providing the collective necessities requisite for the attainment of that good life, however individuals conceive of it" (p. 66).

Ignatieff credits William Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes as the major architects of the kind of social contract represented by the welfare state, a contract that guaranteed a measure of security to the ill, the aged, the homeless and the unemployed.
This pact is now threatened by the mobility and global reach of the emerging postmodern economy. Nor was the hope that giving all members of society a fair shake would improve our civic culture ever justified. As welfare became more and more abundant our civic infrastructure progressively deteriorated. Ignatieff admits that the marriage between “the liberal insistence on freedom and civic insistence on public goods” has failed, indeed it was a mismatch from the beginning. Here we find the principal source of the crisis of citizenship today, and Ignatieff does not have a solution. As a man of the left, he naturally resists the “enormous moral prestige” of the market place. But he is also sensitive to the failures of welfare democracy. He does not want to concede victory to the liberal tradition, upheld today primarily by the neoconservatives. And all in realizing the difficulties of resurrecting some semblance of the civic republican tradition, he nonetheless wants to resurrect it. But his juggling act falls apart when he concludes “those who want a culture to stand for something beyond generalized permissiveness know in the end that that ‘something’ cannot be left to the market or to private morality. It must receive legitimation by the polity, by citizens collectively deciding this is what we stand for” (p. 74). The problem here is no one has the foggiest notion how citizens can “collectively” decide values questions. When has this ever happened? How in societies of scale could it ever happen? And if it did happen what would such values be?

Yet Ignatieff provides a helpful perspective within which to evaluate others who are grappling with issues of citizenship. The tendency in the literature is to begin with an attack on liberalism, but draw back from an outright rejection of it to end with an effort to push the values of the liberal tradition more decisively in the direction of multiculturalism, pluralism, communitarianism, or postmodernism.

Let’s look now at Thomas Bridges’s *Culture of Citizenship: Inventing Postmodern Civic Culture*. The question Bridges wishes to answer is: “How can the Western culture of citizenship, after being interpreted for three hundred years in terms of the universalist metaphysical world view of the Enlightenment, be reinterpreted today as defining merely one particularistic cultural way of life among others, a way of life whose norms are valid only for citizens of contemporary North Atlantic liberal
democracies?” (p. xii) Or again: “The most significant cultural task facing North Atlantic liberal democracies in the 21st century is the invention of a new liberal democratic political culture—one that can succeed in rendering intelligible to citizens the civic ideals of individual freedom and equality, in a language that can affirm unambiguously the particularistic nature of those ideals” (p. 16). Another formulation puts it this way: “Postmodern liberalism must take a teleological turn. It must reinterpret the modernist liberal doctrine of the priority of the right over the good in a way that both gives the notion of moral rightness specific ethical content and, at the same time, makes the affirmation of moral rightness compatible with respect for and the pursuit of particularistic cultural concepts of the good” (p. 62).

Bridges’s main argument against liberalism is that it is unnatural: it requires people to act according to universal norms despite the fact that they are rooted in particularistic ethnic, class and religious communities. Philosophers like Locke and Kant, the charge continues, laid foundations for liberalism that are “audience independent” and resorted to concealed rhetorical devices to make their theory acceptable. The task now is to revise liberalism in light of a new theory and a more persuasive rhetoric. Bridges finds in John Rawls a guide in this undertaking because he successfully addresses the intelligibility problem (by rejecting foundationalism) and provides rhetorical motivation for citizen identity. Not so much the Rawls of A Theory of Justice (1971), which is after all a work of theory, as the Rawls of Political Liberalism (1985) which begins with the moral intuitions of individuals embedded in specific cultures and histories. The later work is less an enterprise of metaphysics than of politics as such. Rawls “in effect reinterpreted his philosophical project as a project belonging to the cognitive realm of rhetoric”—the realm of pistis (belief) rather than episteme (theory).

Bridges rightly points out that Rawls does not go all the way down the rhetorical or teleological road. Much of the liberal modernist remains in his writing; we still hear the voice of the “Kantian constructivist.” But he points the way to a new understanding of citizenship and above all asks the right question: “How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided
by reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?" Bridges himself, of course, goes much further in the direction of a radical revision of liberalism. He proposes a "detotalization of politics" which involves a kind of communitarianism according to which "civic identity exists only as a modification of communitarian identity. The secondary moral language associated with civic moral ideals is parasitic upon the primary moral language associated with communitarian moral ideals. The secondary moral language presupposes and remains dependent upon the primary" (p. 89).

The idea here is that we are all, so to speak, born communitarians and only after a difficult labor are we initiated into a "countervailing" civic culture. Bridges finds further help in classical philosophies for his revisionist undertaking. For example, he says:

Socrates invented a form of civic education that enabled him to embody dramatically the normative standpoint of republican citizenship. In his rhetorical posture of an inquirer whose only knowledge was his ignorance of the answers to the questions he asked, Socrates was able to express both love and complete loyalty to a particularistic community—family, friends, city—while at the same time acknowledging that the particularistic moral vocabulary employed by that community does not define criteria for moral judgment that can claim universal scope. (p. 137)

Bridges is clear about the difficulties of inculcating citizenship. It is difficult to live with different others. It is much easier to live in monocultural communities of shared values. Even if the intrinsic value of citizenship can be shown, that it is required by a sense of moral agency or seen as a necessary part of our conception of the good (and Bridges does a credible job of showing that this is the case) the motivational questions remain: why would anyone want to become a citizen? How can we be persuaded to do so? Bridges's answer is: civic education that creates in us a narrative imagination. It is a good answer but not very well developed by Bridges. By the time he gets to a distinction between "practices of life narrational de-centering and life-narrational equalization" one feels the vapors of postmodernist jargon drifting in.

Will Kymlicka—who (with Wayne Norman) has a good survey of recent citizenship theory in the Beiner volume—is
primarily interested in squaring liberalism with strong multiculturalism in his meticulously argued *Multicultural Citizenship*. We have somehow come to think that minority rights conflict with liberal principles, Kymlicka says, that the liberal commitment to universal rights is at odds with "group-specific rights." He shows that history contradicts this impression. In the nineteenth century, liberalism was much more accommodating of minority rights. Lord Acton, for example, believed that multinational and polyethnic divisions within a society would be a check against state power. In point of fact, Kymlicka tells us, the individual freedoms promoted by liberalism are "tied to membership in one's national group and group-specific rights can promote equality between the minority and the majority" (p. 69). The premise of his argument is that the strength of the liberal defense of individual liberties depends on the prior existence of a substratum of diverse cultures within a society which share common territory, traditions, and language. America is the classic illustration of a country built upon polyethnic immigration held together by a common culture, primarily the English language and certain implacable economic imperatives. As the saying goes, you can do anything in America—speak any language, follow any religion—so long as you do it privately. In other words, the nature of freedom as defined by liberalism entails Kymlicka's case for multiculturalism.

Liberalism has consistently held that individuals are free to choose their own life plans and their own conceptions of the good. It follows that they are free to choose membership in ethnic or multicultural groups. This is a basic liberal right and does not fly in the face of the common sense observation that the cultural bonds of religion, language, and national origin are very strong for most people. Is this a communitarian position? Kymlicka does not think so because communitarians tend to deny the liberal claim that we are free to choose our own values. For them group values trump individual choices. Kymlicka would characterize his view as liberal and multicultural (or pluralistic) but not communitarian. It is on this basis that he argues for group-specific rights, what he sometimes refers to as "differentiated citizenship" that goes beyond the common right of citizenship. He disagrees with those who say that the right of association can accommodate cultural differences.
Kymlicka offers three arguments for his position. The first is an argument of equality which states simply that “group–specific rights for ethnic and national minorities are needed to ensure that all citizens are treated with genuine equality” (p. 108). This is at bottom an argument of justice and again supported by liberal egalitarian theories like Ronald Dworkin’s which seek to rectify “unchosen inequalities.” Ending apartheid or promoting affirmative action bear out the equality argument. Kymlicka makes special mention of the case of his native Canada where the Anglophone majority has to all intents and purposes accorded distinct society status to the Inuits and Québécois. Should the same status be accorded to, say, Puerto Ricans in the United States? Kymlicka would answer in the affirmative. A second argument is based on historical agreements many of which, as in the case of native Americans, have been either ignored or abrogated. Kymlicka’s third argument for group–differentiated rights rests on the value of cultural diversity. The logic here is that diversity is good; therefore anything that promotes diversity (i.e., group rights) is good (i.e., serves the interests of the larger society). Kymlicka thinks this is the weakest of his arguments because it is based on interest rather than obligation, but combined with arguments of justice it carries considerable force.

Kymlicka deals even–handedly with the many objections that can be raised against his position, particularly the charge that too much group recognition will destabilize society and usher in a kind of neofeudalism. There are, he grants, lots of grey areas and plenty of unresolved problems. Kymlicka proposes no global solutions. Each problem will have to be dealt with on a case–by–case basis. He offers his arguments not as ironclad or uncontroversial but as plausible. On a practical level, many states have already adopted or are in the process of adopting precisely the group–differentiated rights he proposes. He is not advocating radical change so much as clarifying changes that have already taken place and at the same time challenging liberal theorists to take group claims more seriously than they have done in the twentieth century.

Jeff Spinner also examines the relationship between liberalism and cultural identity. His book has a rich empirical focus on four groups: the Amish, Hasidic Jews, African Americans, and French Canadians. Like Kymlicka he believes that we can find in
liberalism the theoretical resources to correct liberalism’s flaws with respect to minorities. In the final analysis liberalism is the best philosophy for both individuals and groups. Spinner makes specific suggestions about how liberalism can adjust to contemporary challenges. For one thing, liberals ought to drop the pose that liberalism is purely procedural and has nothing to say about the good life. It is a “value laden” doctrine that has a lot to say about what constitutes a good life. Nor can liberalism be indifferent to matters of cultural identity on the lame excuse that this is merely a private matter. Another important recommendation is that liberalism ought to abandon its traditional public–private distinction for the more commodious public–private–civil society distinction. Civil society—that is, those institutions and voluntary associations that are not controlled by the state but are nonetheless indispensable for the functioning of the state—would then constitute a middle term between the public and the private. To my mind civil society is the most important concept in our current discussions about citizenship and democracy. Spinner’s relatively brief discussion is complemented by Michael Walzer’s essay “The Civil Society Argument” in Beiner’s book, to which I now turn.

Walzer says that civil society—aptly defined as “the networks through which civility is produced and reproduced”—has been overshadowed and to some extent supplanted by rival ideologies that have dominated our discourse about citizenship. Walzer names four of these ideologies: civic republicanism, socialism, the marketplace, and nationalism. Each of these offers or implies a theory of citizenship that is “importantly wrong” because of ideological rigor. Each of these has sought a unitary answer to the nature of citizenship and in the process “neglected the necessary pluralism of any society.” Civic republicanism, for example, holds that citizenship is our highest calling as human beings, that participation in the political process is the good life. But for how many and for how long is politics such an all-absorbing ideal? Socialism, for its part, narrowly concentrates on economics and subsumes the role of citizens to their productive activity which is essentially antipolitical. The market emphasis on economic freedoms likewise provides little support for the virtues of citizenship. The fourth ideology reduces citizenship to nationality, to the common ties of blood and history.
All of these positions, according to Walzer, are reductionist in seeking an impossible simplicity. They miss "the inevitable conflicts of commitment and loyalty." As citizens we play many roles; we are by turns political activists, economic producers, and patriots; we have ethnic allegiances, favorite sports teams, and pledge membership in a great variety of associations from college fraternities to political parties. The key to citizenship, Walzer says, must be sought in this associational life which is so deeply rooted in our social being. Thus he proposes civil society not as another ideology but as a corrective to all ideologies, a basic framework within which a healthy pluralism can thrive. There is, he says, "no ideal fulfillment and no essential human capacity. We require many settings so that we can live different kinds of good lives." This suggests a kind of low stake citizenship that lacks the ideological drama of, say, Rousseau's state (where one can be forced to be free) or communism (with its built-in historical voice recorder) or the rigors of nationalism (my country right or wrong). It is a prosaic rather than a poetic version of social reality but a sinewy prose based on the grammar of civility. Civil society, for Walzer, is a form of "critical associationalism" that encourages a decentralized state, a diversified economy and a pluralized nationalism that offers different ways "to realize and sustain historical identities."

Two of the books under consideration take us back to the question of civic education raised by Thomas Bridges. Bridges is right to take the motivational question seriously. Why should anyone bother much with citizenship? Educators know the question is not easily answered. Even the relatively low keyed and tolerant conception of citizenship put forth by Michael Walzer requires some form of education. We must look not so much to theory as to curricular changes and actual political practices for answers. David Steiner's goal is "to offer a fresh conception of education which is sensitive to political fundamentals, to the fact that in the United States political authority is ultimately vested in every citizen." His question is: What kind of education is suitable to a citizenry in which is vested ultimate political power? His short and somewhat abstract answer is: "The capacity to create and re-create an identity, to negotiate and renegotiate its components in a social setting, to judge the merits of public choices as they intersect with self-understanding and social needs,
to engage in aesthetic experience and to develop intellectual habits equal to the task of discriminating among inescapably incommensurable demands; these capacities constitute the ends of a democratic education” (p. xiii). His first step is to establish adequate conceptual underpinnings for such a philosophy of education. To this end Steiner examines three historical sources—ancient Athens (particularly the philosophy of the Sophists), Rousseau’s educational philosophy, and, finally, John Dewey—as “an exercise in the recovery and reforging of a vocabulary for democratic education.”

This historical excursus is critically vigorous and provides a number of fresh insights into familiar materials. But most original are the practical curricular changes Steiner infers from his theoretical sources. What he recommends, and it is a bold revision of our normal understanding of the liberal arts, is “to move the traditional formal disciplines (English, mathematics, science, and history) from the core to the periphery of the curriculum. The core, by contrast, should focus on public discourse—on its power to name, to authorize, to legitimize, to valorize, to separate and to collectivize” (p. 200). The four areas of study proposed for the new core are: rhetoric, drama, political economy and “a myriad of disciplines that intersect at the human body.” This is as I said a bold, and indeed quite original, fusion of Protagoras, Rousseau and Dewey. One can readily see how the influence of the Sophists leads to an emphasis on rhetoric, understood by Steiner in a very catholic sense to include everything from advertising and films to political speeches and poetry. The “man is the measure” doctrine of Protagoras is interpreted to mean that in a democracy citizens determine the values by which they wish to live and that there are unbreakable linkages between citizenship, philosophy and education. Man the “measurer” of social values is at once citizen, thinker and learner.

The emphasis on drama is, of course, consistent with Steiner’s re-reading of the Sophists. Philosophy was conceived by them as a performing art (Plato for all his disdain of the Sophists never quite lost this understanding) and the citizen was a player in public space. Drama, as Rousseau thought of it, was “the celebration of the self to its own immediate community.” (There is a

* One can profitably read Mera Flaumenhaft’s The Civic Spectacle in this context. The author explores the moral and political implications of four plays by
good argument here for bringing back speech departments.) We ought not be surprised by the importance of political economy. What Steiner has in mind are the social sciences (including practicums and community projects) that have long held a central, even dominant, place in the high school and college curriculum. We also hear in this suggestion the echo of Dewey’s “schools without walls.”

What are we to make of the fourth area of body studies? Students should study, Steiner says, “the ways in which social practices endlessly redecorate, repackage, and replace the body.” What would this involve? In part physiology, sexuality, race relations, sports, and commercial images of the body, “the ways in which contemporary society manages, portrays, satirizes, and celebrates the body.” One can legitimately fear some dangers along this road but we can also appreciate how students might be more creatively connected to religious and historical rituals and develop a healthy eroticism. It occurs to me in passing that Steiner might have benefited in this probe from a thinker like Merleau-Ponty.

I conclude with some reflections on Politics for People by David Mathews, President of the Kettering Foundation, which fittingly rounds out this survey. For citizenship is in the final analysis a practical matter of people deliberating and acting together to improve the civic life of their communities and their society. Mathews shares Steiner’s insight: in a democracy citizenship is not optional. It is the sine qua non condition of effective government at every level. Mathews points out that something interesting is going on in American society, roughly comparable to what went on in former communist countries: there is a vibrant underground politics. It is the kind of politics people do when they do not think they are doing politics; it is the Aeschylus (the Oresteia), Euripides (Bacchae and the Festival of Dionysus), Machiavelli (Mandragola), and Henry V (as interpreted by Shakespeare, Olivier, and Branagh). Flaumenhaft correctly observes that Western politics and Western drama arose at the same time in ancient Athens. The theatre was consciously created not only to entertain but to educate the public about civic issues of justice, family stability, and so forth. The loss of the dramatic dimension in our educational practices says a good deal about our concurrent loss of a sense of strong citizenship.
kind of public building that goes on when citizens band together to solve problems in their communities. Mathews’s preferred term for this exercise of citizenship is deliberative democracy (and sometimes citizen politics) which is well rooted in civil society theory but, more importantly, in the mainstream political practices of America. He writes: “If the question of what turns a collection of people into a public could be answered in just one word, the word would be deliberation. People become a public through the connecting process of deliberation. To deliberate means to weigh carefully both the consequences of various options for action and the views of others” (p. 11).

Mathews illustrates the point with a noble myth of his own according to which the United States was not founded in 1776 or 1787 but on an early Monday morning in October 1633, in Dorchester, Massachusetts. The founder was not George Washington but a much less–known minister by the name of John Maverick. A problem arose when livestock broke through the fences and onto the village green. How to protect the commons? We imagine John Maverick saying to his congregation: “We have a problem. Let’s meet on Monday morning to talk about it.” That, says Mathews, is the quintessential American political speech and the key to the nature of American citizenship. In communities across the country today people are frustrated by the difficulty and the complexity of the problems they face. They feel more and more disconnected from their political institutions which are supposed to control crime, provide education, administer justice, and in other ways tend to our commonweal. In response, citizens are struggling to repossess their government and take a more direct role in solving problems that only they can solve.

The Kettering Foundation is the premier operating foundation in the country with the express civic mission of creating a more engaged public and devising forms of civic education that make citizens the agents of their own empowerment. The basic aims of such an education is to teach citizens how to frame problems in public (and not just private) terms, to engage in deliberation (the kind of exchanges that create a public will), and how to organize and act in politically effective ways. We are at this point seemingly far from the theoretical heights of a volume like Beiner’s. But not really. In good citizenship both theory and practice come together to reflect the civic health of society. Theory
without practice would be in this case an empty academic exercise; practice not informed by theory would lead to the kind of citizen alienation we have become all too familiar with.

Mathews more than the others sheds light on the practical aspects of citizenship. And he gives the most convincing answer to the motivational question: unless we take seriously the office of citizenship we will not have a democracy or even a livable society.