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citizenship, structural inequality and the political elite

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For a long time now, liberal theorists have championed the idea that citizenship is the task of the school. Notwithstanding substantive disagreement among these theorists, all liberal accounts share the same basic faith concerning both the duty and the ability of schools to do what their theories require.

The class that is the ruling material *force of society is at the same time the ruling* intellectual *force.*
Karl Marx

Wherever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interests and its feelings of class superiority.
John Stuart Mill

For a long time now, liberal theorists have championed the idea that citizenship is the task of the school. Notwithstanding substantive disagreement among these theorists, all liberal accounts share the same basic faith concerning both the duty and the ability of schools to do what their theories require. Matthew Clayton's highly idealized philosophical account is representative; he confidently asserts that civic education in schools ought to prepare

"deliberative citizens [to] display a set of skills and virtues related to deliberative interaction: skills related to articulating a position and the reasons for its affirmation; listening skills; the ability charitably to understand the views of others; analytical skills that facilitate a critical assessment of different positions; an appreciation of the benefits of exchanging ideas; and a commitment to reason rather than to employ attractive slogans or rhetoric" (2006, p. 147).

I fully appreciate the motivation behind these theories; they mean to express ideals towards which we ought to aspire. They describe not the schools we *have*, but the schools its authors believe we *need*. Yet, whatever the merits idealized liberal accounts of citizenship education may have in the seminar room, in this essay I argue that they are both unpersuasive and ineffectual. This is the case, because they are insufficiently attentive to the empirical realities, first (a) with respect to how real – versus imaginary – school systems function; and second, (b) with respect to the broader political context in which citizenship education policies are implemented. Because so much is already known about the former, I devote more attention in this essay to the latter.

Let's start with schools. Liberal philosophers like Clayton want to believe that schools ought (and ought implies can) to function as laboratories for citizenship – a society, as it were, in microcosm,

where there is a sense of community, shared responsibility and respectful interaction among persons espousing different points of view, yet ready to listen empathically, engage and reason with one another with a view toward democratic decision-making. It's an inspiring image. The problem is that this liberal faith bears little resemblance to the empirical facts. Indeed it is a faith belied by the conditions of deep structural inequality endemic to most schools, and indeed to entire school systems. It is also belied by the ways in which most schools are designed to promote and reward competition, rule compliance, deference to authority and nationalist loyalty. These problems are further exacerbated by the un-preparedness and unwillingness of most teachers to facilitate 'deliberative interactions' in classrooms of diverse background and opinion, not to mention parents who do not want their child's education 'politicized'.

Of course, this empirical state of affairs does not foreclose possibilities for normative argument, nor does it prevent us from imagining incremental improvements. Besides, normative liberal theorists are well aware that the citizenship education on offer in schools fails miserably to correspond to their prescriptions. Indeed, much of the normative work in this field is motivated by precisely such an awareness. Neither are these same theorists naïve concerning how difficult it is in practice to insulate schools from other social and institutional forces so that they can play a truly liberating role by cultivating, say, the ability to conceive and fair-mindedly evaluate radical alternatives to the existing political order. Accordingly, liberal theorists take *dissent* to be an indispensable ingredient of their civic project. Schools, they argue, must teach students how to exercise this prerogative.

And some of the 'skills necessary for dissent' these scholars have in mind represent respectable, if modest, endeavours; they include a willingness to empathically consider perspectives one does not agree with, or the aim of cultivating the ability to assess the merits of counter-arguments and evidence. That is, dissent in most liberal accounts serves the cognitive function of making alternative viewpoints visible as potentially valid arguments. But dissent in the 'democratic classroom' rarely goes very deep; institutional norms do not permit this. Indeed, within school walls to question the perspectives on offer, or to challenge institutional authority, is generally viewed as misconduct, if not defiance, both punishable behaviours. And to question the status quo as a member of a stigmatized minority group is even to risk speedy expulsion, and in some cases, incarceration. Even student government is rarely permitted to do much more than plan social events, or offer an opinion concerning how to improve the lunch menu or recycling program. In short, the evidence points in the direction of schools *repressing* all but the most token forms of dissent.

Ideally the philosophical 'ought' could conceivably supplant the empirical 'is', except that the goal of dissent, within the liberal paradigm, appears to be that we supplement fundamental disagreement with rational deliberation, rather than replace it with the demand to make a decision on political grounds, that is, on the basis of power. Curiously, rational deliberation is also meant to work in tandem with deference to authority and rule compliance. Indeed, it is interesting to observe how liberal defenders of citizenship education go out of their way to underscore the importance of cultivating dispositions necessary for obeying laws and reproducing the current political arrangements. And these political arrangements within schools encourage uncritical loyalty to the nation-state, colluding with profit-seeking corporations keen to influence the purchasing behaviour of young people. They also are arrangements according to which under the provisions of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act of 2015, children in the UK are encouraged to be on the lookout for signs of radicalism in their classmates, and to report suspicious thoughts, words, and actions to authorities. Elsewhere, in many urban and suburban American high schools, armed police roam the halls, and surveillance cameras are everywhere, all with the purpose of ensuring the proper

social order in which students might learn the lessons of citizenship.

Meanwhile, and moving now to the broader political context, these political arrangements also correspond to a reality in Europe where the rhetoric of citizenship is ubiquitous, yet where the ethnocentric attitudes behind this rhetoric – and concomitant policies – ceaselessly drive home to millions the idea that they are not welcome. One need not point to any of the dozens of openly nationalist and xenophobic populist parties; it will suffice to consider the existing rhetoric and policies of *mainstream* political parties whose ideas of citizenship are inextricably tied to ever stricter requirements for proving that one is a 'good citizen'. These mainstream parties are run by well-established political elites, who for a long time now have seized upon citizenship discourse as a tool to shore up support from their base. In doing so, they share with their populist cousins the same proclivity for a Manichean logic that separates the 'good citizen' from the 'deplorables', or in the words of Sarkozy, the 'scum' (*racaille*). And would that it were merely political rhetoric; some countries have already amended their constitutions or adopted new legislation in order to more expeditiously deport some of their own citizens[1]; border fences have been erected in central Europe; apartheid conditions for the Roma, and purges of their settlements, continues unabated; and Amnesty International has recently exposed the EU's complicity with the inhuman treatment of black migrants in Libya.

It might therefore be instructive to consider just who it is that the populists are revolting against. After all, it is not populists who have written economic and education policy for more than a century. Academic and political elites have done that, and will continue to do so. I therefore submit that we ought to consider the role the elite has played in fostering these outcomes. C. Wright Mills[2] (1956, p. 14) describes the political elite as those with both tremendous social advantage and corresponding political influence.

"People with advantages are loath to believe that they just happen to be people with advantages. They come readily to define themselves as inherently worthy of what they possess; they come to believe themselves 'naturally' elite [..] In this sense, the idea of the elite as composed of men and women having a finer moral character is an ideology of the elite as a privileged ruling stratum."

In the European context, this ruling elite generally consists of a small but powerful political and academic coterie whose experience and opinions converge to an alarming degree, sharing a very similar elitist cultural and educational background. This background bears directly upon citizenship as used in political discourse and education policy. Indeed, both academic and political elites dictate both the content and scope of 'good citizenship': they decide what citizenship requires, why it is urgent, who needs it most, and why schools ought to be the instrument for purveying it. My own faculty has produced a veritable cottage industry of citizenship education studies the aim of which is ostensibly to delineate and measure approvable behaviours, dispositions and 'competences'. Not only do those who fund, research, measure and monitor citizenship education policy move seamlessly in the same homogenous circles; in some cases, the persons doing the 'measuring' and monitoring are the very same individuals, which demonstrates just how illusory the line separating education research from education policy really is.

Let us look at the Dutch case more closely. In his comprehensive study of upper-class behaviour in the educational domain, Don Weenink (2005) discredited the mythology of an egalitarian Dutch society, or for that matter, an egalitarian school system. He observed that the "Dutch gymnasiums are just as socially exclusive with regard to the origins of their pupils as [the] British private schools

that are associated with social advantage [and] are more socially selective than the *classes préparatoires* [in France]" (pp. 177-8). Add to this the fact that the Dutch school system continues to be one of the most institutionally segregated in Europe, and not merely on the basis of ethnicity, religion or social class. PISA scores also indicate that the differences *between* schools in Europe is nowhere greater than the Netherlands.[3] Moreover, where one attends school in the Netherlands is *causally* related both to the kind of education one receives, as well as to the possibility one has of pursuing both a university degree and careers with influence. It is no trivial matter that nearly all Dutch academics and politicians who focus on citizenship and citizenship education emerge from the 3% of the population who attend the highly selective and elite gymnasium.

Additionally, those working on citizenship education in the academy espouse a politics that aligns very well with that of the conservative ruling coalition. Like their political counterparts, the academic elite occupies a space in which it is likely that they will interact exclusively with others whose native (*autochtoon*) and upper-class backgrounds, whose ostensibly shared ideas about 'Dutch values', and whose faith concerning the importance of citizenship and citizenship education are very similar, however different their opinions on other matters may be. Mills elucidates the significance of this:

"All the structural coincidence of their interests, as well as the intricate, psychological facts of their origins and their education, their careers and their associations make possible the psychological affinities that prevail among them, affinities that make it possible for them to say of one another: He is, of course, one of us" (ibid., p. 283).

And so, if we look, for instance, to the documents from government officials concerning the importance of citizenship education, one cannot gain the impression that the authors have anyone resembling themselves in mind. Citizenship education is for other people's children, for those who still need to demonstrate to the rest of us how well 'integrated' they are. This is how former academic and Minister of Education, Jet Bussemaker articulates the noble aims of citizenship:

"The civic task of schools is to ensure that students are aware of, and understand, the essential values of our democratic constitutional system. These values, such as equal status, freedom of opinion and freedom of religion, apply always, everywhere, and to everyone" (Rijksoverheid, 2015).[4]

The timing of Bussemaker's citizenship directive is not coincidental; it was swiftly drafted in the wake of the Paris shootings in 2015, based on the conviction that citizenship education would be an antidote to radicalization. Echoing Bussemaker's concerns, colleague and Inspector General of Education, Monique Vogelzang, issued a new report stressing the 'urgency' of citizenship education.[5] It surprises no one that the schools serving Muslim children are the intended target.

It is also not coincidental that this 'democratic constitutional system' to which Bussemaker refers is managed by the same elite who, in the months leading up to the May 2017 elections, shamelessly co-opted some of the worst populist rhetoric from the far right. Illustratively, a few months after appearing on national television and casually remarking that Dutch citizens of Turkish background can 'piss off' (*pleur op*) if they feel no emotional attachment to the Netherlands, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte took out a full-page ad in all major Dutch newspapers, which read, in part:

"How can it be that our country is so prosperous and yet so many people behave so poorly? […] I

understand very well that there are people who think: if you so fundamentally reject our country, then just leave. I have this feeling too. Be normal; otherwise just leave […] We shall continue to make it abundantly clear what is normal and what is abnormal in this country. We shall actively defend our values."[6]

Dutch liberal values indeed. Rutte's ethnocentric invocation of 'our values' would simply be emblematic of the usual European tribalism were it not also infused with the insufferable elitism suggestive of his exclusive educational breeding, one in which one's own 'civic virtue' is never questioned, and where 'our values' comes to resemble those things with which folks like Rutte are comfortably familiar. A great many academic and political elites celebrated the electoral victory of Rutte as a defeat of far-right populism, even though his political views are difficult to distinguish from those of his main populist rival, Geert Wilders.

The more general point I am making here is that liberal theories of citizenship offer us little normative guidance, precisely because they generally prescind from this political reality. And when this is the political reality in which citizenship discourse and policy occurs, it is small wonder that citizenship education enjoys unwavering support from academic and political elites who routinely extol the virtues of citizenship, while believing themselves – by virtue of the attitudes and behaviours associated with whiteness and their class position – to already embody these virtues.

'But wait a minute', an exasperated reader will be thinking, 'you are conflating political theory with politics. These majoritarian prejudices offer us no indictment of citizenship education; on the contrary, they provide us with evidence concerning how badly citizenship education is needed! And besides, we too condemn elitism masquerading as citizenship; we too oppose jingoistic patriotism that falsifies history. And most importantly, we too want to avoid conflating politics-as-is with politics-as-it-should-be. After all, that is what motivates us to defend the citizenship theories that we do. Besides, we cannot just leave citizenship to chance; notwithstanding its many imperfections, schools are the only public institution with a sufficiently broad reach that have any chance of fostering the knowledge, skills and dispositions we so desperately need in this uncivil world of ours. Cynicism gets us nowhere.'

I appreciate the depth of these convictions. But I have argued that this liberal faith requires us to act as though the empirical reality of most schools, indeed most of state-managed school systems, is something it is not. Schools are certainly able to teach young people the basics of electoral systems or the legislative process. They have done that for avery long time now, and they generally do a respectable job. But given what liberal defenders of citizenship education know to be true about schools (for they presumably read the same research I do), it is not cynical to marvel at the cognitive dissonance necessary to imagine that the state school is, or ever will be, a likely place of 'rational deliberation', when all but the most anecdotal evidence points in the opposite direction. Nor is it cynical to observe a problematic relationship between the orientation of academic and political elites and their liberal defences of citizenship education, defences geared – perhaps unwittingly – toward preserving and reproducing institutions from which its defenders stand to benefit most.

Academics are no less disposed to perform this two-sided act as their political counterparts, often supporting 'citizenship education' that aims to support 'critical reflection' or 'openness to others who are different', while simultaneously exhibiting disdain toward those whose opinions they do not like (including those expressed in this essay), and even endorsing educational policies that are exclusionary and nationalistic. Hence, it is again necessary that we ask whether it is reasonable to

believe that citizenship education offered us by academic and political elites will move us closer to some kind of democratic ideal. To my mind, a democratic ideal would concern itself not only with 'obeying laws' and operating through the existing 'formal institutional channels', but also with the dispositions to question authority, critique and resist concentrated power, and even engage in civil disobedience.

My posing these questions does not require that we reduce citizenship to dissent and resistance; of course, citizenship will consist in constructive attempts to improve existing institutional arrangements. But we would be unwise to forget that these are institutional arrangements, again in reference the Dutch context, where the gap between rich and poor is expanding rapidly[7]; where 13% of children live below the poverty line[8]; where the number of homeless is increasing by the day[9]; where youth unemployment in many neighbourhoods approaches 80%[10]; where the inequality between men and women is deteriorating dramatically[11]; where pupils are taught a meritocratic worldview that erases its colonial and slave-trading history[12]; where you can be arrested[13], or cyber-lynched[14], for protesting against institutional racism or insulting the monarchy[15]; where your social class background to a large extent determines whether you have a reasonable chance of receiving a university education[16]; where currently the most urgent issues for the conservative majority include deporting refugees, offering tax breaks to the wealthy, and mandating the singing of a patriotic hymn in schools[17]; where large multinational corporations, which already benefit from some of Europe's most generous tax laws[18], exert far more influence on the political process than ordinary citizens ever could[19]; and, as in most countries, where the state routinely resorts to violence[20] to maintain this state of affairs.

My argument does not entail opposing *political* education; indeed, without some kind of political education, we could hardly expect institutional reform or progress. But political reform and progress generally occurs not because of a coercive, state-directed, curriculum-based citizenship education, but rather in spite of it. We therefore should not expect that citizenship education, as devised by academic and political elites, or as intended for the young pupil in a state-run school, will permit challenges to the institutional status quo. Schools are not designed for this purpose, but rather to inculcate dispositions in pupils to 'abide by the law' and to 'support fundamental political arrangements'. And this is precisely what liberal citizenship theories exhort us to do, which renders them wittingly complicit with the political status quo, even as their defenders disavow this complicity, or brush aside criticisms of their theories as 'misrepresentation' or as demonstrating a failure to appreciate the 'subtlety of their arguments'.

I believe it no coincidence that in the early twenty-first century, citizenship – often wedded to even more problematic notions such as 'integration' – has been put, and very prominently at that, on the national agendas across Europe. While the world obsesses over Trump, the European equivalents continue to gain ground, not only in Poland, Latvia, Slovakia and Hungary, but also in Italy, Denmark, Switzerland, Belgium, Finland and Austria. And as the Dutch case illustrates, mainstream parties push increasingly further right. But whether the ruling political parties are centrist or hard right, citizenship education is the elite's handmaiden. Meanwhile, those whose citizenship is forever being questioned – which is another way of saying those believed to not be 'well-integrated' – are not duped. They see 'European values' for what they are; they know that xenophobes and racists will never have their loyalties or citizenship questioned; they know that the schools, the police, and the judicial system are not designed to promote fairness, but rather to reproduce inequality; they know that the political system works to protect the interests of those who believe themselves to be the very embodiment of 'good citizenship'. In other words, they understand, far better than most

academic and political elites ever could, how the system works.

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