Civic republicanism and the multicultural city

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‘Greenwich village exemplifies perhaps the most we have been able to achieve: a willingness to live with others, though a denial that this entails a shared fate.’

Richard Sennett, Flesh and Stone 370.

1 Introduction

Two disparate inclinations in contemporary cities have the joint effect of distracting us from our increasing interdependence: on the one hand, people seek to identify with distinctive cultural communities and, on the other, they search for individual independence. In this chapter I address the conditions for equal citizenship in the context of modern cultural diversity. Common citizenship has been proposed as a counter to the fragmenting pressures of modern economies and societies that liberalism has not been able to address adequately. But what common citizenship entails and what it requires of people is variously understood, often in ways that are oppressive to minorities. I argue that the republican conception of citizenship may offer something to dealing with difference in the modern city. On this view, citizenship allows realising freedom and the common good in a political community of those who are interdependent

2 Common citizenship: tolerating, celebrating or retreating from cultural difference?

Theoretical responses to increased cultural diversity have ranged along a spectrum from the dominant liberal approach of tolerating difference in the private sphere while maintaining a neutral or secular public sphere, to the multiculturalist ‘celebration of difference’, often thought to imply ‘recognition’ or establishment of the values and practices of all cultures in public life. The theoretical and practical difficulties which policies associated with the latter approach have encountered have led to a certain ‘retreat’ from multiculturalism of this sort,
less, it must be said, in the direction of a liberal neutrality, than towards a reassertion of the idea of uniform citizenship (Goodhart, 2004; Joppke 2004). There seems to be a new demand for national or cultural commonality among citizens - based, for example, on arguments that it is a precondition for popular support for redistributive welfare measures, or that civil security requires it. In the context of increasing migration, this view has given rise to proposals for more stringent policies on admission and requirements of cultural assimilation as a condition of citizenship, and less willingness to accommodate cultural difference in social and educational policies. If there is a renewed emphasis on the importance of common citizenship, however, there are very diverse views as to its essential basis.

On one hand, certain liberals see agreement on principles of justice, or constitutional arrangements as a sufficient framework for common citizenship (Habermas, 1995; Ingram, 1996). Critics argue that these principles are liable to be too thin to motivate citizens, have to rely on pre-political commitments for support, and thus also become too substantial to be really inclusive. On the other hand more communitarian views (for example, in many post-communist states) ground political unity and policy in a pre-political sense of belonging, whether in terms of ethnicity, culture or history. Such approaches draw on emotional commitments to the nation, or to a particular historical or local embodiment of more universal values such as freedom, that are inherently exclusive.

The assumption that cultural identity is necessary or sufficient to create political solidarity has been criticised as both empirically unfounded and normatively undesirable. (Bader 2001, Abizadeh 2002) In practice, a common sense of ethnicity, culture or history is not enough to guarantee political community or support for redistributive policies. A shared British identity did not prevent widespread toleration and support for cuts in welfare spending Britain under Mrs Thatcher in the 1980s. Similarly, notwithstanding shared ethnicity, tensions exist between citizens of the old East and West Germany. Those who share an identity or a sense of belonging to the nation are not necessarily prepared to support one another or to contribute to the common good. And attempts to impose cultural identity are likely to be both unjust and counterproductive.

The obverse of this is that it may not be cultural difference per se that causes conflict. The experience of Northern Ireland suggests that it does not arise from cultural difference in itself (as cultural differences between Protestant and Catholic, however strongly they may be
experienced, may seem to outsiders to focus on a limited range of aspects of life). On one view, the problem arises not so much from the fact that people are different, but that some differences are made salient, become entrenched and act as a block to communication. As Arendt puts it, then people are ‘isolated in their own experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times’ (Arendt, 1958: 53)

So if common citizenship is not best understood as a matter either of adherence to constitutional principles or of cultural identity, how should it be understood?

2 Rooting citizenship in interdependence: civic republicanism

The republican approach to citizenship sees it in terms of the ineluctable interdependence of human beings. Accepting common citizenship is a matter of acknowledging this, and engaging with those with whom we are, at least initially, involuntarily interdependent in our subjection to common institutions and authority. The question that politics has to address is what kind of freedom is possible in the light of this interdependence, and how it may be realised. Freedom is understood as a political achievement, rather than a natural possession of individuals. It is inherently fragile, and requires both a strong legal framework to prevent domination and the civic engagement of citizens in supporting the common goods they share alongside their separate and often conflicting interests. Citizenship thus entails responsibilities as well as rights; and what self-governing citizens achieve is the chance to exercise some collective direction over their lives, rather than complete self-sufficiency. Since common interests are easier to overlook, and therefore more vulnerable than individual interests, corruption - that is pursuing individual or sectional interests at the expense of the common good - is identified, along with domination, as the crucial political problem. Freedom requires political equality and two dimensions of engaged, or active citizenship: public spirit, traditionally termed ‘civic virtue’, and political participation in determining what is in the common good.

This tradition took shape in early modern European city-states, but with the development of the sovereign nation-state, by the nineteenth century it was largely sidelined by liberalism, nationalism and socialism. It may be relevant again, if, as many believe, the nation can no
longer unproblematically be the unit of self-government, being both too large for self-government and too small to deal with problems of the global environment and security.

Rather than opposing liberalism’s central value of freedom, republicanism is an older tradition that has contributed to its development in the past, with a distinctive centre of gravity within a cluster of values of liberty, participation in self-government and solidarity. Its emphasis on the political construction of community distinguishes it from the nationalist and communitarian focus on pre-political shared values or identity among citizens. It may also represent a useful corrective to the prevailing account of liberalism with its emphasis on legal rights and safeguards and a narrow account of freedom as the absence of interference. This neo-liberal view sees the principal threat to freedom as coming from government, and freedom as promoted if government activity is reduced to the minimum, by privatising and deregulating, paring down or contracting out public services, and above all, cutting taxation and increasing individual discretionary income. But this is too limited an account; it overlooks threats to freedom that do not come from the state, but from individuals or groups that can exercise arbitrary or unaccountable power: e.g. established elites in religious or cultural communities, corporations who endanger the health of their workers and consumers, and media cartels who control the news available to the public. It also overlooks the economic and social conditions necessary for the exercise of freedom and equal citizenship, and the ways in which, even in the close coexistence of cities, the privileged can displace their costs on others. As Markell puts it, ‘structures of subordination organise the human world in ways that make it possible for certain people to enjoy an imperfect simulation of the invulnerability they desire, leaving others to bear a disproportionate share of the costs and burdens in social life.’ (Markell, 2003: 22)

There has been much discussion of the problem of political apathy, measured in decline in voter turn-out in almost all democracies today. This reflects a widespread feeling of powerlessness and alienation from politics, and a sense that citizenship lacks depth and meaning, that significant questions are either not publicly debated, or that people’s voices are not heard. The republican valuation of participation in politics calls for more opportunities and structured public spaces for ordinary people to contribute to political decisions - not just to express individual or sectional interests more effectively, but to encourage deliberation about the common interests shared by otherwise diverse citizens. As Hannah Pitkin put it, ‘what distinguishes public life is the potential for decisions to be made…actually by the
community collectively, through participatory public action and in the common interest. ...the possibility of a shared collective, deliberate, active intervention in our fate, in what otherwise would be the by-product of private decisions’ (Pitkin, 1981: 344). While it is true, as Madison noted, that ‘the room will not hold all’, critics of such expanded participation as impractical due to numbers or competence overlook the possibilities of multi-level institutions for participation from local and regional to trans-national levels: citizens’ juries, deliberative polling, participatory budgets. The point of this not to make participation compulsory, but to offer more opportunities for people to have a say in things that affect them directly, to take account of the common good, and to elicit more deliberative engagement with other viewpoints when they do participate.

4 Civic republicanism and cultural difference

When it comes to dealing with cultural difference, civic republicanism, in emphasising engagement among citizens, has resources to develop a more nuanced approach than either liberal neutrality or multicultural recognition. On this view, it may be argued, the idea of equal citizenship requires two dimensions of recognition, even if it is not possible or desirable to recognise all cultures simultaneously in the sense of celebration or public establishment. The fact that participation in given structures and contexts is relatively easier and more difficult for different kinds of citizens has to be taken into account. So, if there is to be equal citizenship, it is necessary to acknowledge the specificity of different kinds of citizens and the burdens and costs they suffer in existing forms and norms of civic participation, and to offer some compensatory support. Precisely what is required is a matter of deliberation in particular cases, but the sorts of policies supported on these grounds have included child care provisions for parents; access for the disabled; special language rights for minority groups in their interactions with government, education provisions, procedures and funding to increase minority participation in politics; some kinds of special representation; consultation bodies; and exemptions from legal requirements, where these are not strictly universally required. The point is that, on this dimension, the republican solution is concerned to grant recognition to citizens themselves in their identities, rather than of their identities per se.
Equal citizenship also requires that all citizens can have a chance to be heard. This means it is necessary further to *authorise the voices* of those who are different - that is to see them as contributors to the common, overarching public realm, and not just to let them live separately in their own way. Instead of merely tolerating practices, this means giving public space for citizens to voice their deepest concerns, and giving a serious hearing to claims to influence public debates and public culture. It follows from the deliberative nature of politics that republican recognition of citizens requires taking the voices of others seriously as well as allowing them to speak. Ways of giving previously excluded viewpoints institutional authorisation of this kind may involve state-sponsored subsidy for political organisation; guaranteeing representation; or creating specific representative bodies for federal, regional, city or neighbourhood self-government. But, unlike some contemporary models of consultation or consociational government, (which might satisfy the requirements of acknowledgement above) it is not enough for these to remain insulated from the wider political culture, but they need at some level to be integrated into a wider political forum where a broad spectrum of views encounter one another. The other side of this dimension of recognition is that groups cannot claim a right to remain entirely isolated from the rest of society, and to insulate themselves (and their children) entirely from encountering ideas which differ from their fundamental values.

Yet this is not to argue that it is necessary to *establish* publicly, or to set beyond criticism all practices, viewpoints and values according to a third and strongest (in the sense of most demanding) dimension of recognition. To begin with it is often not possible simultaneously to recognise in this sense the values of opposing groups, of, for example, fundamentalist Protestants and gays and lesbians, secularists and religious groups. For gay marriage is either recognised or not; religious education is either supported or left to private initiative. It is in the nature of politics that that, on some issues, only one perspective can be embodied in policy, and we cannot assume that it is possible to achieve consensus among all groups. This is a reflection of the ineluctably agonal nature of politics, where conflict is a reality to be acknowledged. Yet these people must still live together and can create (or fail to create) a common future.

In any case people gain a certain recognition when they are given an open-minded hearing, when their viewpoints are authorised and heard through institutional provisions and esteem initiatives. Those who have had a say in a fair procedure are more likely to identify with the institutions and other participants. The good of a serious hearing for all may be more attainable than the equal recognition of all cultural practices.
Some degree of basic agreement is no doubt a prerequisite for political interaction; but we should not exaggerate the extent of uniformity of beliefs and values necessary for a political community. Functioning modern societies are not commonality-based wholes, but loosely co-ordinated patchworks. Their coherence derives from convergent and common interests, habits and inertia as much as from actively shared values or identity. And over time even conflicts over values appear to have an integrating function (Bader, 2001).

Thus, while civic republicans believe that citizens need to be committed to the common good they share, citizenship requires, not conformity to a specific model or similarity, but engagement at different levels and between different perspectives and cultures. The public space of such politics could be envisaged as one ‘where people are with others and neither for nor against them’ (Arendt, 1958: 160). The substance of republican politics is based on interdependence rather than commonality, is created in deliberation, not pre-politically, emerges in multiple publics to which all can contribute, and is not definitive, but open to change.

This requires a public realm that fosters interaction, and calls for a civic education - for majority as well as minority citizens - that emphasises interdependence (rather than commonality or difference), that instils what we might call civic self-restraint, and encourages openness to deliberation with others (Honohan 2005). While the need for involvement and communication suggests developing smaller-scale public spaces at local levels, increasing interdependence suggests the need for higher level forums.

Acknowledging a shared fate and future can come to be the basis of a kind of political community. ‘That sense of sharing a common fate may often be enough to motivate support for policies which aim at the common good without there needing to be a deeper sense of belonging together, which a shared national identity would involve’ (Mason, 2000: 134). As Arendt again puts it, the sort of solidarity that we might aspire to is neither love nor tolerance, but a certain kind of respect - a ‘friendship without intimacy or closeness; …a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or achievements which we may esteem’ (Arendt, 1958 218). The republic may be a community of ‘civic solidarity’, that is, an involuntarily instituted, and
relatively distant relation of citizens, marked by equality, diversity, and relative distance, but
growing through reiterated interaction and practices.

The feelings of friendship and solidarity result precisely from the extension of our moral
and political imagination...through the actual confrontation in public life with the point of
view of those who are otherwise strangers to us, but who become known to us through
their public presence as voices we have to take into account.

(Benhabib, 1988, 47)

In rooting citizenship in the interdependence and mutual vulnerability of those who share a
common fate and future, a republican account of citizenship is at least potentially more open
than those based on than common ethnicity or culture, even a liberal nationality which may
evolve over time. All entail a sharper boundary between those who share a nationality and those
who do not.

From a republican perspective, it is justifiable to require immigrants to learn the language of their
adopted country as an essential means of communicating and deliberating with their fellow citizens; but this need not exclude providing education and public services through minority
languages as well. Immigrants may also be expected to be prepared to engage with the citizens of
their adopted country, and to make some adjustment to its ways in a spirit of give and take. But it
is less clear that they should have to adopt ‘British (or Irish) norms of acceptance’ just because
these norms are British, etc. If immigrants should make the attempt to adapt to their adopted
country, it is not so much because they are ‘last in’, but because they need to make their future
together with other citizens, and not just to coexist with them.

5 Civic republicanism and the city

The idea of self-governing citizenship originated first in the city-state. But this assumed a
small, self-sufficient society with face to face interaction between citizens, who, as Aristotle
argues, must know one another in order to be able to bring each other to account. Building a
wall around the Peloponnesian will not create a city. For the Roman republican, Cicero, what
binds the citizens are the many things they share in common:
There are several degrees of fellowship among men. To move from one that is unlimited, next there is a closer one of the same race, tribe and tongue, through which men are bound strongly to one another; more intimate still is that of the same city; citizens have many things in common: temples, porticoes, and roads, laws and legal rights, law courts and political elections, and besides these acquaintances and companionship and those business and commercial transactions that many of them make with many others’

Cicero, *On Duties* I 53

Modern civic republican theory first crystallised in Italian city-states where the classical idea of free self-governing citizens was rearticulated, most notably by Machiavelli. There too common cultural identity could be taken more or less for granted, not only because of the small size of these states, but also because of the narrow definition of citizenship that excluded women and all those outside a tightly drawn circle. Since then liberal-democratic citizenship has become much more extensive, including populations widely dispersed across territories as well as previously excluded categories of people. The locus of self-government has been transferred to the level of the sovereign nation-state. But it has become so by making citizenship weaker and thinner. In most states now, citizens are no longer expected to participate actively by participating beyond voting, or by doing service, military or otherwise, let alone holding office.

The contemporary city cannot be self-sufficient in the way that Aristotle describes; it exists within the nation-state, where citizens are united in imaginary community, and it is less encompassing. It is easier to leave, or to inhabit in a partial way, departing to the suburbs or beyond, living in or making regular passage through only one or a few quarters, or communicating with and looking to another city or country to which one dreams of going home. This can strengthen the illusion of self-sufficiency - that we choose particular spaces and move among like-minded people, living in communities of choice. The modern city is understood as a space of difference, disconnection and anonymity.

Some theorists - both liberal and more radical (e.g. Young, 1990) - have embraced this understanding of the city as the model of modern citizenship, not expecting citizens to be
engaged with one another as people who share a common fate, but only to accept one another
as strangers who must live together.

But the distance between city dwellers can be exaggerated. For example, even in the big city,
as Pettit argues, we are concerned about what others make of us:

‘The anonymity of modern society is often exaggerated. While we may each lack a
name on the street of a big city, that namelessness is quite consistent with being well-
known in a range of the interlocking circles that fill the space of the modern world.
Some of these circles will be small of radius, like the circles of friendship and
workplace and sports associations; others will be of larger compass, like the circles of
the extended family, the professional association or the email network. ‘

Pettit, 1997: 228

Living together in cities calls for more solidarity and active participation of citizens than
liberals have tended to acknowledge - to deal with the many aspects of urban life that are not
easily dealt with by coercive legislation, but need the active civility or solidarity of citizens
who do not know each other personally. Analysis of city life highlights the interdependencies
among those who are different, but whose lives are affected by their vulnerability to one
another, not just from the proximity of neighbours, but from the sharing of a common public
space.

This then calls for many forums to allow different kinds of participation, but also for electoral
areas and representative bodies that transcend particular areas to include the whole of a city
and the interdependent hinterland of extended suburbs (Baubock, 2003).

5 Republicanism and cultural diversity in practice: the Irish experience

We should note that in practice republicans have dealt with cultural diversity in different
ways. Traditionally, the French republican model comes close to liberal neutrality, allowing
diversity in the private sphere while insisting on a neutral public sphere, and constitutes an
ideology with clear implications for economic, social and education policies.
By contrast, since the nineteenth century, Irish republicanism has been associated mainly with national independence and the military means to achieve this, and has not been understood as a neutralist ideology. Indeed for half a century after its independence in 1922, Irish government took a strong communitarian form, influenced by an authoritarian version of Catholicism, which, for example, gave a special constitutional status to the Church, organised education along religious lines, and expressed many Catholic moral doctrines in law. The republicanism of De Valera aimed to realise not a politically determined common good based on deliberative participation, but a pre-politically defined vision of the good for society that was shaped by cultural nationalism and a powerful institutional church.

A gradual process of change has led not so much towards neutralist liberalism or a French-style secular republicanism as towards a pragmatic pluralism with a strong underlying framework of ‘banal’ nationalism (Billig 1995). Thus, though the state had for long great difficulty in supporting non-religious schools, recently it has quite readily sponsored Muslim elementary schools that parallel those of other religions. There have been no controversies over mosque building, but those that have been built have accepted local conditions (and do not sound the muezzin, though Catholic churches and RTE’s public broadcasting stations still ring the Angelus bells). Thus the Republic of Ireland has been marked by a pragmatic, and largely unreflective openness to compromise but with strong assumptions of uniformity. Foreigners who lived in Ireland in the past experienced tolerance combined with an unspoken expectation that they would assimilate or conform in certain areas of behaviour.

Further changes have occurred in the context of a reversal from net emigration to net immigration in the 1990s. Initially many immigrants were returning emigrants or had Irish connections, but now a broad range of other cultures are represented, particularly from the new EU states of Eastern Europe and the Baltic; Africa, especially Nigeria; and, on a more temporary basis, students or workers on work-permits from China and the Philippines. The recent and rapid nature of this reversal makes it difficult to give a systematic analysis of the social integration of the new immigrants. In greater Dublin, containing almost half of the Republic’s people, new immigrants have begun to constitute residential and commercial clusters in some inner-city and less expensive housing areas, though without any clear evidence of systematic segregation. The impact of immigrants has been most remarked upon in the transformation of the character of the main Dublin street market and the revitalisation of dwindling Protestant congregations (and some cricket clubs). There has been an increased
incidence of racist behaviour, focused initially on asylum seekers, but increasingly affecting anyone perceived as a foreigner. Even here there is room for ambivalence; when a young Nigerian failed asylum seeker was repatriated, despite his being enrolled for the school Leaving Certificate, a wave of protest by school friends, teachers and the public brought about his return. But many issues of cultural difference that have been contentious elsewhere have yet to arise in public debate. While the refusal of hospital doctors to perform male circumcision became an issue after the death of a baby in a kitchen table operation, whether female circumcision is taking place in Ireland has not become a widely discussed issue. The generally limited reflection on cultural difference was illustrated again when the Somalian musician, Youssou N’Dour was to play in Dublin in a large music venue and pub on the first day of Ramadan; some members of his orchestra objected to playing under these conditions, so it was agreed just at the last moment not to sell alcohol during the performance.

This might seem to suggest that Irish republicanism may offer a way of accommodating cultural and particularly religious difference more easily than a country such as France which has a clearly secularist republican tradition, (and some Jews and Muslims have in the past said that they preferred to live in a country where religion was taken seriously). It is not long since there were three Jewish members of the Dáil (Parliament) in a country with a Jewish population of less than two thousand. But the rise in low-level racism suggests that it could equally well reflect a lack of awareness of cultural difference, which could become more problematical in the future. It should be pointed out that even with its rapid growth to over 17,000, the population of Muslims, for example, is still very small. Many issues have yet to arise.

Finally the conception of citizenship in Ireland has undergone significant changes whose direction is not yet clear. While Irishness has long been understood primarily in ethnic and cultural terms, at another level there was also a certain tacit identification of Irishness with living on the island. Thus, those born in England even to Irish parents, are not popularly considered Irish, even if they return to live in Ireland (unless they represent Ireland in soccer). Likewise, when Mary McAleese first ran for President in 1997, there were those who thought her an unsuitable candidate because born and educated in Northern Ireland (though a Catholic or ‘nationalist’). The Good Friday agreement led to the constitutional guarantee of citizenship to all born on the island, in what was greeted by some as an inclusive gesture. But in 2004, citizenship by *ius soli* was restricted by legislation requiring three years prior parental
residence. The overall effect of this may be to reconstrue Irishness in more ethnic and cultural than the civic terms in which citizens are those who share a common fate.

6 Conclusion

On the republican view outlined here, a political community is composed of people who do not necessarily share a common culture, but who find themselves together. They share a wide range of interrelated interdependencies framed by the political institutions to which they are subject, and have some possibility of collectively shaping their future. This grounds membership in the interdependence and mutual vulnerability of people who share a common fate. This requires not just the toleration of private difference, but political engagement in public space between citizens of different cultures.

Addressing the implications of a civic republican perspective for multicultural cities, three points emerge. First, cultural minorities need to have the basis for equal participation - which may require resources, guaranteed representation, special rights and exemptions - so that they do not have to bear costs greater than other citizens. Second, citizens of different cultures should be able to appear in their identities, and have their voices heard, in order to engage as equals in deliberation with other citizens in the public realm. Finally, there must also be provision for cross-cultural political interaction and engagement. This means that, rather than being composed of fragmented enclaves, the city constitutes a common public space between citizens. The point of ‘thinking about the things that unite us rather than divide us’ is not to reinforce commonality but to promote engagement.

References:


