Citizenship, Structural Inequality and The Political Elite

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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 unpreparedness 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 expanding provisions of the Counter-Terrorism Act of 2005, suspicion of Islamic/dissenting minorities, and monitoring are the main arrangements in the educational domain. Don Weenink (2005) discredited the mythology of an egalitarian Dutch society, or fostering these outcomes. C. Wright Mills (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. 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 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 (1956, p. 14) describes the political elite as those with both tremendous social advantage and corresponding political influence.
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 comfortingly 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 a
very 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. 

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 unwittingly 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 wedged 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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Mills examined the American elite in his analysis, focusing on the economic, political and military sectors. While the particularities of his analysis differ from other countries, his observations generally match the situation elsewhere.

References

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