Introduction

Debates on responsible citizenship are as old as democracy itself. In every generation, people have fretted about whether citizens are able and willing to enact their citizenship in responsible ways. Some worry about the apparent decline of public-spiritedness amongst citizens, others that even public-spirited citizens lack meaningful opportunities to exercise their citizenship. Typically, the solution is to propose reforms (educational, social, economic or political) that will instil a greater sense of civic virtue amongst citizens or provide them greater spaces in which to be active and responsible.

In this paper, I offer a different tack. Rather than starting with a static list of the desired virtues or sites of responsible citizenship, I suggest we should instead think about the dynamic and relational process of citizenisation. Building relations of democratic citizenship is a historical and social project. It requires a commitment by society to reorder social relationships on the basis of fundamental political values of freedom and democracy. To promote responsible citizenship in a meaningful and durable way, we need to better understand the nature of this social project of citizenisation, and why it is so often fragile and incomplete.

The traditional debate on responsible citizenship

Debates on responsible citizenship typically start from the assumption that the formal/legal status of citizenship is relatively unproblematic – we all know who citizens are – and the key question is how to ensure that people are able and willing to enact their citizenship in responsible ways. There is a perennial debate about responsible citizenship in this sense, which often takes the form of:

- Devising a list of the relevant traits and dispositions of active and responsible citizens and their corresponding vices (selfishness, indifference, apathy, intolerance, dogmatism, short-sightedness)
- Identifying the ‘seedbeds’ of responsible citizenship so defined – i.e. asking what role different institutions such as schools, media, churches, families, workplaces and NGOs play in fostering these dispositions
- Identifying the ‘sites’ of responsible citizenship (political parties, media, NGOs, local community associations, unions)
- Speculating about whether these seedbeds and sites of responsible citizenship are still functioning effectively. Some critics worry that the seedbeds are being eroded or corrupted and need to be renewed, others worry that the sites are narrowing, or are systematically biased against particular groups, and need to be rebuilt

This conceptual framework underpins much contemporary academic research, public policy initiatives and NGO activity. A major focus of this work today concerns issues of ethnic and religious diversity in general, and migration in particular, which is seen as putting stress on the traditional supports of responsible citizenship. Citizenship is thought to be promoted by, amongst other things, strengthening citizenship education in schools, providing citizenship classes to immigrants, imposing new citizenship tests for naturalisation and holding citizenship ceremonies (Joppke, 2007). As this list makes clear, the focus of much of this anxiety is immigrants, their perceived lack of integration and the impact of their ‘otherness’ on the dispositions of responsible citizenship.

The claim that immigration erodes social capital and civic virtue is empirically controversial. I want to set aside the empirical debates, however, and instead raise a deeper question about whether the traditional framework of dispositions, seedbeds and sites is the right way to think about responsible citizenship in the first place. Whether, indeed, it is adequate to the task of ‘respecting and understanding’ the diversity (to use Commonwealth terms) of the persons, social groups and contexts involved.

Citizenisation: An alternative framework

The traditional way of framing the debate is too narrow and overly static. Reducing citizenship to a set of traits and sites misses the dynamic and relational quality of democratic citizenship. We should instead think in terms of citizenisation, understood as both a historic process and a social project to create relations of democratic citizenship.

Consider the case of ethnic diversity. Historically, relations between ethnic groups have often been defined in illiberal...
and undemocratic ways – including relations of coloniser and colonised; settler and indigenous; racialised and unmarked; civilised and backward; master and slave; and so on. The task for all liberal democracies has been to turn this catalogue of uncivil relations into relationships of liberal-democratic citizenship, both in terms of the vertical relationship between the members of minorities and the state, and the horizontal relationships amongst the members of different groups. This is the origin of the models of ‘multicultural citizenship’ that we have begun to see in several Commonwealth democracies.

We can see similar historical dynamics in other spheres, whether in relation to gender, sexual orientation, the treatment of the mentally ill, children or people with disabilities. In all of these cases, we can see efforts to replace earlier uncivil relations of domination, coercion, paternalism and intolerance with newer relations of democratic citizenship. As such, citizenisation means more than simply granting individuals the formal status of ‘citizen’ since this can be done in a unilateral and paternalistic way. Consider the case of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. They were granted legal citizenship in 1960, but this was without their consultation. The process of citizenisation arguably began not in 1960 but in the 1970s when, in response to Aboriginal political mobilisation, the Canadian Government abandoned its assimilationist approach and decided instead to enter into good-faith negotiations over land claims and self-government.

Citizenisation in this sense is both fragile and incomplete. Instances of the ‘securitisation’ of Muslims are examples of a retreat from citizenisation since a dialogue has been replaced with distrust, coercion and raison d’état (Cesari, 2009). The treatment of the poor is also always vulnerable to retreat from citizenisation to force and paternalism (Geutzkow, 2010). Indeed, some commentators worry that larger social and economic trends are making it more difficult to sustain social projects of citizenisation.

**Respect and understanding**

If citizenisation is about more than the formal status of citizenship, what more or what else does it involve? Tully (2001) says that citizenship involves a commitment to allowing all those affected by common rules to help determine such rules (*quod omnes tangit – what touches all must be agreed to by all*). But this in turn rests on a deeper set of values. Citizenship, I would argue, is premised on values such as autonomy, agency, consent, trust,
participation, authenticity and self-determination. Part of what it is to engage people as democratic citizens is to treat them in ways that affirm and respect these values. Citizenisation assumes that citizens have a subjective good that they are able to express and that our shared rules must be responsive to those expressions, and that we trust each other to negotiate those shared rules in ways that respect one another’s autonomy and identity, and to co-operate in good faith.

It should be clear, I hope, how this alternative framework offers a different perspective. It starts by identifying inherited patterns of social relationships – in particular, those social relationships that have historically been defined on the basis of values other than democratic consent and autonomy – and then asking what sorts of measures would remedy that historic failing. The familiar language about the seedbeds and sites of citizenship misses the historic and relational aspects of the challenge. With gender or racial inequalities, for instance, the problem is not (or not only) that a group of citizens is unable or unwilling to exercise their citizenship. The problem, rather, is that we have inherited a society in which certain relationships have not been defined along the lines of citizenship at all.

If we think of citizenisation as a process, not a static list of traits or sites, then we need to ask in what contexts can relationships of citizenship be established, amongst which individuals or groups? The idea of citizenisation encourages us to expand our sense of the possibilities, including our assumptions about who in our societies are deemed incapable of entering into relations of citizenship. The historic presumption that, for example, children, adolescents or disabled people can only be ruled by force and paternalism has inhibited academic research, public debate and legal innovation.

**Development and diversity**

Similarly, we can also ask about citizenisation beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. The traditional debate on responsible citizenship presupposes a certain degree of ‘boundedness’. Citizens are defined as the long-term members of a bounded political community and it is relations amongst these members that have, to date, been subject to (incomplete, fragile) processes of citizenisation. But we clearly have politically relevant relationships with people beyond our borders, as well as with temporary residents within our borders (such as tourists, business visitors, temporary asylum-seekers or migrant workers) who are not formal citizens. The very existence of the Commonwealth attests to both these kinds of relative unboudedness. Given that so many of our decisions affect the well-being of people outside our borders, and given that seemingly temporary residents may end up spending long periods of time within our borders (consider seasonal farm workers), we may have an obligation to ‘citizenise’ some of these relationships as well. The details will vary from case to case: what matters is not a static list of rights or formal status so much as the realities of consent, autonomy, self-determination and recognition – or their absence.

So the idea of citizenisation opens up new possibilities in terms of the range of actors and relationships that we consider as subject to citizenship values, within and beyond the nation-state.

It is particularly relevant for addressing issues of diversity. I mentioned earlier that citizenisation presupposes some idea of boundedness, which traditionally has been understood in terms of the nation-state, defined as the possession of a single nation or people. To take the example of Canada again, this model of one people or nation has always been a poor fit due to the persistence of distinct national identities amongst French-Canadians/Québécois and Aboriginal peoples, compounded by the extraordinary diversity arising from recent waves of immigration. Insofar as citizenisation is a social project to reorder older relations of hierarchy and exclusion, it operates in Canada at multiple levels, both across long-standing national divisions (e.g. between English and French, or between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals) and also within each national project (e.g. relations between old-stock Québécois and immigrant communities). We have unresolved issues relating to Canada’s origins as a settler state on indigenous lands; to English and French; and to immigrant-origin racialised ethnic groups. And all of these unresolved issues interact.

For example, the federal multiculturalism policies adopted to help citizenise relations with ethno-racial minorities are seen by some as undermining the policies needed to citizenise relations with Quebec or with Aboriginal peoples. I believe this perception is misguided, but it is an issue that can only be resolved by understanding it as the intersection of multiple citizenisation projects. The challenge of deep diversity is not just a matter of needing new traits or sites of citizenship: rather, the challenge is that it calls forth multiple citizenisation projects whose interaction is unpredictable.

**The economic dimension of citizenship**

Finally, consider the impact of neoliberalism on the prospects for citizenisation. Starting in the 1980s, we have lived through an era of dramatic changes in the global political economy, with the expansion of global trade and free trade agreements, the deregulation of financial markets, the weakening of trade unions and ‘flexibilisation’ of labour markets, and the privatisation of industries and pensions.

Many of the most visible struggles for citizenisation – women, homosexuals, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples – have had a trajectory that is intimately bound up with the institutions of the welfare state: representation on government advisory boards, public funding for advocacy, anti-discrimination and
affirmative action policies, and so on. This entire infrastructure of ‘interest intermediation’ connecting citizenisation movements to the state has been weakened in the era of neoliberalism. Indeed, one of the first goals of neoliberal reformers was precisely to attack what they viewed as the inappropriate strings connecting the state to advocacy groups and social movements (James, 2013).

Viewed from within the traditional framework of responsible citizenship, neoliberalism is seen by some as eroding both the traits of good citizenship (e.g. by valorising ‘consumers’ over ‘citizens’, or greed over public interest) and the spaces of citizenship (e.g. by commercialising the media or privatising public goods and public spaces). Neoliberalism is about encouraging and enabling people to be effective actors in global markets, not encouraging and enabling them to be effective citizens in democratic deliberation and self-government (Somers, 2008). Even when neoliberalism seemed to embrace some of the discourses of earlier citizenisation movements – as in the neoliberal embrace of multiculturalism – the similarity in discourse hides different substantive commitments. Neoliberal multiculturalism endorses cultural diversity and transnational bonds insofar as they are market assets, promoting innovation, global economic linkages or entrepreneurship/work ethic, but ignores issues about how to build new relations of democratic citizenship in the face of histories of ethnic and racial hierarchy (Abu-Laban, 2009).

I think there is some truth in this pessimistic reading of the impact of neoliberalism on the prospects for citizenisation. However, we should not ignore the extent to which neoliberalism offers its own conception of citizenship that we need to take seriously. Paradoxically, at the core of this conception of citizenship is precisely the idea of responsibility. Jacob Hacker (2006) defined neoliberalism as a ‘personal responsibility crusade’ in which risks that used to be seen as a matter of collective responsibility (such as unemployment, health, pensions) are said to be a matter of personal responsibility. As Hacker shows, the outcome of this personal responsibility crusade has often been damaging, but the conception of individual responsibility retains broad public appeal. In this context, it is not enough to bemoan the impact of neoliberalism on the virtues and sites of citizenship. The deeper challenge is to explain the role of personal responsibility within our conception of citizenship. We need a more sophisticated account of how to integrate the logic of shared responsibility inherent in citizenisation with the logic of individual responsibility. I believe that reforms aimed at redressing historic relations of hierarchy can often be seen as enabling people to take greater responsibility for their lives and choices.

Conclusion

In sum, framing issues of responsible citizenship in terms of the historic process and social project of citizenisation, rather than as a static list of traits and sites helps to deepen the analysis and bring fresh insights. It helps point us beyond traditional debates about the seedbeds and sites of responsible citizenship to focus on the restructuring of social relationships based on values of democratic consent and autonomy.

There is a role for development actors here. The traditional framework for debating responsible citizenship has largely been monopolised by three disciplines: political science, law and education. This sort of disciplinary ‘ownership’ of citizenship makes sense on the traditional framework: assessing the formal legal status of citizenship engages the discipline of law; assessing whether individuals have the political dispositions and sites needed to enact their formal citizenship engages political science; and, insofar as schools are given a special role to educate people for citizenship, it engages the discipline of education. If we reframe the debate in terms of citizenship, however, we immediately engage a much broader range of disciplines, including history, economics, sociology, psychology, geography, media studies and others. This begins to sound like ‘development’ of the best kind: knowledge, policy and practice that is capable of respecting and understanding human beings: their agency, dignity and diversity.

References


Endnotes

1 Adapted from ‘Responsible Citizenship: a position paper’, originally commissioned by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation (2011). The views expressed here are those of the author.

2 One typical list, adapted from William Galston (1991), includes: i) general virtues: courage; law-abidingness; loyalty; ii) social virtues: independence; open-mindedness; iii) economic virtues: work ethic; capacity to delay self-gratification; adaptability to economic and technological change; and iv) political virtues: capacity to discern and respect the rights of others; willingness to demand only what can be paid for; ability to evaluate the performance of those in office; willingness to engage in public discourse.

3 Immigration has led to a dramatic increase in ethnic and racial diversity across the western democracies, and this is seen by many commentators as putting stress on the traditional supports of responsible citizenship, or as eroding general levels of solidarity and trust in society, even amongst native-born citizens. This is the sobering conclusion of Robert Putnam’s enormously influential studies, which seem to show a consistently negative correlation between levels of ethnic diversity and levels of social capital across the United States (Putnam, 2007).

4 I have argued elsewhere that this ‘new citizenship agenda’ rests on a series of empirical assumptions about the link between immigration, diversity and citizenship that are false, at least in relation to Canada (Kymlicka, 2010; Bloemraad, 2006).

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