

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Rethinking Citizenship Education in European Migration Societies Political Strategies - Social Changes - Educational Concepts

Conference Paper

Statement

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Migration – History – Diversity: National Memories and Cultural Identities in Europe

Lisbon, Portugal, April, 26-28, 2007

www.bpb.de/nece

Let me start with an idea of what citizenship is, then proceed with reflections on citizenship education and finally end with some thoughts on how history ties into it, or, to be more precise: how history can mediate between “national memories” and “cultural identities” and thus provide a platform for social integration. For the sake of clarity, I have organised my talk in 10 brief statements.

1. Historically, citizenship has been defined as the result of a continuous expansion of rights. According to Thomas Marshall, a British sociologist writing in the 1940s, citizenship in Europe has seen three waves of expansion: starting with civic rights (f.ex. legal equality, habeas corpus, the right not to be deported), continuing with political rights (voting) and ending with social rights (health care, social security). In the light of recent multiculturalism, we might add a fourth wave: the right to be different and to be protected in one’s being different.
2. My take on citizenship, though, is somewhat different. I will not focus on rights and duties (which I will take for granted), but on active participation, on what we might call participatory democracy. Why that? Because I consider participatory democracy to be one of the great achievements of European and North American History. It is an achievement that was hard to get at, and that was often in danger of being lost or weakened. It had been manipulated by authoritarian regimes that mistook democratic participation for mass mobilisation. It had been subdued in formally democratic regimes with strong paternal authority figures (like de Gaulle’s France and Adenauer’s Germany). But it has seen, by and large, an extraordinary flourishing in recent times. Since the 1960s, Western societies have experienced a remarkable widening of the public sphere and an increasing involvement of citizens in the public sphere (new social movements, “grass-root democracy” etc.).¹

¹ linked to education! Press etc.). – long American tradition (Tocqueville) – involvement of citizens in local politics, school boards, charity/philanthropy etc. – historical role of associations (even in Europe)

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

3. This – third point – has fundamentally changed the notions of politics. No longer can politics be confined to parliament and parties and voting patterns. Politics have been expanded, both in terms of issues that became “politicised” (remember the slogan: “the personal is political”), and in terms of its modes, procedures and personnel. More people have gained access to information and take part in political communication, in school or local communities as much as on the federal, European or even global level. Issues like abortion or rape, education or sexual orientation, the protection of animal species or the introduction of energy saving methods are given wide attention among fellow-citizens. Discussion and debate, negotiation and contestation have acquired a stronger position than ever before, and are less and less influenced by party affiliations. The redefinition of politics thus displays a general trend: they have become less abstract, more tied to personal concerns, and more democratic.
4. Political involvement and participation (in this broader sense) are, to be sure, not mandatory. Western democracies grant their citizens the right to be apolitical (which distinguishes them from totalitarian systems like communism and fascism). But it seems that many people actually want to get involved – not so much in terms of party membership and long-term commitment, but in the shape of short-term, and limited participation (local civic initiatives, students’ projects etc.). Social scientists are not quite sure about the general trend: Some speak of a growing tendency of “bowling alone” and a weakening of social ties and associations², while others highlight the shifting location and timing of politics and are reluctant to discuss it in terms of higher or lesser degrees of overall engagement. Most observers, though, agree that, as such, citizens’ involvement is a good thing: because it places democracy on a broader and deeper scale, it is one of the checks and balances that democratic government depends on, and it commits citizens to their society and state (citizens as agents of politics, rather than recipients of political decisions). The latter point is, of course, crucial for immigrant societies. “Integrating” new citizens ultimately means inviting them to take part in the institutions and practices of the host society, above all in its public sphere.
5. This said, what can societies do to increase citizens’ participation, to encourage and enable it? On a general level, what can they do to ensure that every citizen has the chance and the resources to take part in public debate, association and decision-making? This is, again, not just about rights and entitlement. Rather, it is about the resources that allow people to practice their rights – we might call it the resource-driven approach. What are those “resources”? Very basically, they comprise things like personal safety, physical integrity, food, clothing, shelter, health. Still, it needs more to become an active citizen. Information is another important resource, with education closely linked. Without access to information and knowledge, people cannot communicate with one another. On top of that, they require skills of communication, like polite and civil manners, and basic training in how to conduct a debate, how to listen to one another, how to make an argument and defend it against criticism. These skills depend on a clear set of values: respect for each other, tolerance of other attitudes, abdication of violence. Such values and skills have to be widely propagated - and taught: in the family as much as in schools, at the workplace, in the media and in public institutions (like townhalls, trade unions, or churches).
6. But citizen education should not stop here. Teaching democratic values and practices, implies teaching about their development and appropriation. How did we become democrats? How did we learn democracy, and how could we, at times, forget about it? Democracy, after all, is not a given thing. It had to be invented, popularised, fought for and defended. It did not come easy. Each country had to face a number of challenges in order to establish a political system that granted the rule of law, civic rights, the separation of powers and public participation. Each society had to overcome a great deal of obstacles before it cast itself as a civil society based on mutual respect, solidarity, and an abdication of violence. Each nation had to experience quite a bit of turmoil and stress until it embraced all its members, regardless of sex, race or religion. And, to be sure, those achievements were not there to last. European history has many tales to tell about democracy being curtailed, diminished, abolished, about civil rights being suspended or denied altogether. Within and without Europe, democracy was and still is – and will always be - an imperilled project.

² see Putnam who refers to a weakening of social ties and, as a consequence, political activity.

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

7. This is why history matters. If told in a critical, self-reflective way, it can serve as a major educational force reaching out to both old and new citizens. On the one hand, it reminds those whose families and ancestors had, in one way or another, shared the nation's past, (it reminds them) of the problematic aspects of this past – of wrong directions taken, cruel deeds performed, non-democratic practices enacted. It does not conceive of the modern democratic age as a kind of *via triumphalis*, as a one-way-road of glorious success and national pride. Instead, it presents it as a map of diverging boulevards and alleys, including a number of dead-end-streets and no-go-areas. It tells about democracy as an endangered species – and about the reasons why we might and should be inclined to defend it by all means. On the other hand, history also reaches out to new citizens, to immigrants who carry different national memories or cultural identities. It teaches them that their host country's history is not as immaculate, heroic and "superior" as it is often presented. As such, it defies identification, and rather calls for critical distance and reflection – thus making it easier for immigrants to approach and accept it. History can therefore actually bridge the gap between long-term citizens and new immigrant generations. Rather than divide, it can unite.
8. This might come as a surprise. Most of us are used to think of history as a divisive matter. We have read about young Turks in Germany, who refuse to be part of the collective that remembers the Holocaust as the crucial moment of national history. We have heard about Arab or African immigrants to France who feel left out of the historical narrative that reconstructs the benevolent achievements of French civilization. And we wonder about the sense of historical estrangement that might befall African or South American immigrants to Portugal when they are greeted by the *Padrao dos Descobrimentos* celebrating the European quest for discovery and conquest in non-European regions. Immigrants from non-European countries, so the general argument runs, cannot identify with European history, for a couple of reasons: a) Either they are left out of this history, and their personal or collective experiences are excluded; or, b) they are negatively involved in the historical narrative, be it as colonial subjects or as victims of imperialism; or c) they are not prepared to accept the "negative property" (Jean Améry) of the host country, f.ex. the Holocaust as the defining factor of German historical consciousness.
9. This said, what makes me think and argue that history can do better? That it can reach out to immigrants as well and, even more, contribute to their democratic education? Above all, it is the American example. Living in the US, teaching history at a major university, and having kids in American high schools taught me a crucial lesson. Or maybe more than one. America, as we all know, is the classical immigrant society. Unlike most European countries, the US openly embraces its identity as a country of immigrants. Many people have commented on the extraordinary speed and degree to which immigrants absorbed and still absorb the dominant culture. The second generation normally speaks fluent American English, embraces American popular culture including fast food and Hollywood movies. Schools welcome immigrant children with elaborate programs of learning English as a second language and helping their families to adjust to American life and manners. This seems to work perfectly well for the large majority of those who come to this country because they want to do better or want their children to do better. The educational system – diverse as it is – has a great share in this. But now, what does history have to contribute? Let me just mention three things. First: there is definitely a strong focus on democracy and its development in the US. The founding fathers play a huge role – although they are no longer depicted as faultless heroes. The issue of slavery looms large, and so does the fate of America's native population. The history of democracy is presented as a story of attempted exclusion and the constant fight for inclusion. Second: There is an equally strong focus on the history of immigration, its successes and pitfalls. Immigrants are not presented as alien intruders, but as assets of American culture and society. Third, much more attention (compared to Europe) is given to non-American history. Students learn about other continents and world regions as well: about Chinese and Indian civilization, about Africa and South America, and, of course, about Europe. This helps them to recognize and appreciate their own heritage and cultural identity.

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

10. To conclude and slightly modify a slogan from former East Germany: To learn from America helps us to win. It helps us Europeans to win the hearts and minds of new citizens, and it helps us to strengthen our continent as a place of democratic citizenship. History can contribute a lot – if it is taught with a keen eye on diversity rather than homogeneity, and in a spirit of critical appraisal rather than blowing one's own national trumpet.