

Mind bending on European Citizenship – a response

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by Howard Williamson



I have been infected by the 'virus' of European Citizenship for some time! I thought I had been immunised during the 1980s when I caught an antidote to the virus and consigned myself to a UK 'isolation hospital': my enthusiasm for the grand European project was dashed on my very first venture to be involved. During the 1990s, however, I was re-infected and thereby rehabilitated as a European citizen, first through a partnership research project with colleagues from Belgium and Italy and subsequently through a range of activities with both the European Commission and the Council of Europe. Most notably, these included the DGXXII Citizenship study, conducted in 1997 and participation in the Curriculum and Quality Development Group which conceived the ATTE course from which the 'Mind bending' article, to which I now respond, was derived.



At the EU White Paper on youth policy conference in Umea in March 2001, the Swedish Minister for Youth Affairs, Britta Lejon remarked that "if young people do not feel that they are part of European co-operation, democracy throughout the Union is at risk". This political anxiety about the 'democratic deficit' is but one of the primary catalysts for the renewed interest in the idea of citizenship at not only national but also sub-national and super-national levels. Others have expressed interest and concern in the idea of citizenship in relation to the 'participative ideal' around Article 12 of the UN Convention on Children's Rights and in relation to policy concerns about lifelong learning and social inclusion. There is a convenient conflation of the idea of 'citizenship' and that of 'participation' about which I will make a final cautionary observation.

Here the note of caution is similar to that of the authors of the 'Mind bending' text. What does 'citizenship' mean in the modern world? And is there, or can there be, such a thing as a European dimension to citizenship? If so, as the authors rightly argue, how is 'Europe' to be defined? To the majority

of people, 'Europe', whether the EU, the Council of Europe, or something else is distant and amorphous. Two British women participating in a young adult learning course funded by the EU were interviewed for the DGXXII Citizenship study. When asked about the meaning of Europe to them, their response was short and concise: "the money and the beef". This captures a very different reality of Europe to that promoted from its assumed geographical heart, either Brussels or Strasbourg. That response displays a sense of little relevance, limited knowledge and no connection to 'Europe' – all important aspects of citizenship at whatever level it may be advanced.

But let us first put 'Europe' to one side and stay just with the idea of 'citizenship'. Historically, it has been understood to be something about the incremental conferring of legal, political and social rights, though such a process has been very different even within Europe, let alone across the wider world. There is now general academic consensus that citizenship now represents something more – something that is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional, incorporating not only concrete issues concerning rights and responsibilities but also ideas about affiliations and identity. No wonder the authors expressed confusion about its meaning. They are not alone and they would no doubt agree, at least to some extent with David Heater, who has written:

Citizenship as a useful political concept is in danger of being torn asunder and any hope of a coherent civic education left in tatters as a consequence. By a bitter twist of historical fate, the concept which evolved to provide a sense of identity and community, is on the verge of becoming a source of communal dissension. As more and more diverse interests identify particular elements for their doctrinal and practical needs, so the component parts of the citizenship idea are being made to do service for the whole. And under the strain of these centripetal forces, citizenship as a total ideal may be threatened with disintegration. Maybe the attempt we are making... to bundle so much meaning into the term is to unrealistically overload its capacity (Heater 1990: 282)

There is no doubt that 'citizenship' has become a convenient rhetorical device – conjuring up warm feelings and being used for precisely that reason as a preface (or 'postface') to a host of topics just as 'community' and 'enterprise' were before it. Just think of 'citizenship learning', 'sexual citizenship', 'environmental citizenship' and so on. What do any of them really mean? The idea of 'European citizenship' might also be equally cynically dismissed.

Yet there is also no doubt that the idea of citizenship is, as Heater notes, about identity and community and this is where we might slowly get a handle on the idea of European citizenship, in aspirational terms if not to describe or define any prevailing current reality.

Citizenship is essentially about belonging. Citizenship is integrally related to the idea of community. As Tom Hall and myself have written,

Citizenship and community are words that relate to the fundamental human business of living with others. The two words depend on each other. Citizenship has no meaning on its own; you have to be a citizen of something, namely a community. And there are no communities worth the name, which do not afford members a sense of something shared and a common status of belonging (a status which we can call 'citizenship') (Hall and Williamson 1999: 1)

If this assertion is accepted, then there is a possibility for arguing that there is a community called 'Europe', one based perhaps on economy, or geography or values. Whatever it may be, it also brings the possibility of 'citizenship' of that community. But, before we move on to considering what that might entail, I want immediately to agree with the authors that the inclusive dimensions of any citizenship bring with them the likelihood of exclusion of others – physically, symbolically or metaphorically. There has long been a concern, for example, that the stronger the rights of citizenship for members of the EU, the more a sense of 'fortress Europe' will develop: keeping others out. Few of us would dispute some of the more practical aspects of this point. Just look at visa arrangements for mobility and travel. On the other hand, perhaps the community of Europe to which we are seeking to attach the notion of citizenship is of some higher order, to do with values, which have more permeable boundaries.

So I move forward with some caution to make a case for the idea of citizenship and an argument for the idea of European citizenship within the multiple layers and levels of citizenship which it is suggested are possible today. Tom Hall and I have also argued, and those attached to the ATTE course will be familiar with what follows, that the challenge for promoting a European citizenship amongst young people is:

To develop a sense of space and place in contemporary Europe, the skills required to be active agents for change and development, and the knowledge to make informed choices within this context

This suggestion builds on a simple triangular model of citizenship more generally, which incorporates the affective, the cognitive and the spatial. Few would dispute the need for knowledge and skills (the cognitive) for the exercise of an active citizenship, nor would many dispute that citizenship is 'built' from the local to the global (the spatial). It is contested whether locally grounded citizenship is an absolute prerequisite for other levels of citizenship; as young people become more mobile, a sense of identity with locale or even nation may in fact be less powerful than their affiliation to more supra-national and global issues. But I would argue that it helps, for it is first at the local level that a sense of citizenship is developed. However, what is essential is a sense of attachment and belonging (the affective). And it is patently clear that many young people do not feel attached or engaged to the various 'communities' in which they live. This includes, for many, any European dimension. The reasons are many, but they include a sense of despondency, alienation and – increasingly – the pressure to discharge various 'responsibilities' of citizenship without being able to access the corresponding 'rights' which make up any credible package of citizenship. Tom Hall and I have argued in our short pamphlet on Citizenship and Community that whatever legal or normative aspects of citizenship there may be, it is imperative to start with the lived experience of citizenship if we are to determine exactly how young people feel about their place in the communities in which they live. The story of 'the money and the beef' is always a salutary reminder of this need when we are discussing the European level.

A European citizenship, therefore, is not some stand alone project, detached from other levels of engagement and activity. It builds on and draws from questions of citizenship in other communities occupied by young people. It is framed within the governing concepts of citizenship: the package of rights and responsibilities to which people willingly subscribe if they wish to take their place as citizens. Cogan and Derricourt (2000) conducted an international study of citizenship education and have produced some overarching themes of citizenship:

- Environmental protection
- Human rights
- Respect for the opinion and ideas of others
- Democratic relationships
- Transparency and conflict resolution
- Respect for tradition
- Orientation towards the future

These are, perhaps inevitably, very general themes which may be invoked in many different ways and at many different levels. They are certainly not exclusive to 'Europe', however defined. But they may provide a guiding hand for an idea of European citizenship where intercultural tolerance and understanding, the confronting of racism and xenophobia are responsibilities which need to accompany the various rights of mobility for study, living and employment. They certainly cannot be limited to activity just within nation-states and effective practice at a global



level is elusive. A European project on these fronts is arguably an appropriate framework within which to position the active citizen.

I do, however, want to take issue with the recurrent, almost assumed elision between 'citizenship' and 'active participation'. My challenge to this draws on a colleague with whom I worked briefly in the Czech Republic recently. As a Bhutanese citizen, he was involved in active participation – the organiser of a short seminar on human rights. For these endeavours, he was forced into exile and stripped of citizenship. Some forms of participation may, therefore, transcend citizenship, not go hand in hand with it.

My final observation is to do with the relationship between training and citizenship. The authors say that they favour a Training Course through European Citizenship, on the grounds that this would reflect the dynamic evolution of European citizenship and provide the possibility for critical reflection. This reminded me of a similar argument from a very different context, that of 'enterprise education' in the 1980s. A colleague at the time suggested that there needed to be differentiation between education for, through or about enterprise. The same might be said about training and citizenship: is it for, through, or about? We have tended to reject the idea of basic civics, training for citizenship through simply informing young people about the institutions of governance and political structures, whether at national levels or beyond. On this front, I have counselled caution in approaches to be taken in the UK now that citizenship education is a compulsory feature within the national curriculum in British schools:

Citizenship does not take place somewhere else – so beware those schools that see the moulding of their citizens through good work in their local community while the schools themselves remain authoritarian and anti-democratic. Citizenship practice is learned through practice: through the lived experience of belonging and participating, of listening and speaking, of being valued and included. The rhetorics of active citizenship, lifelong learning and social inclusion will have to be converted into realities which are not compartmentalised moments of 'subject' teaching but are threaded, organisationally and culturally, through the experiences of individual lives (Williamson 2002)

This leaves 'for' and 'through'. And I would ask whether it is possible for us to get a sufficiently strong grasp on what constitutes European citizenship to think concretely about how we might educate or train for it. Thus I end up agreeing with the authors that our realistic option is to train through European citizenship. By drawing on the diverse lived experiences and perspectives of participants, one can start to put shape on both the possibilities and the reservations we have about the concept – as a whole, and in its suggested constituent parts. The 'mind-bending' authors transmit a rather negative, though rightly critical,

perception of European citizenship, maintaining that it is empty of any specific meaning. I would like to turn that allegation around and suggest that it is full of too many general meanings, pinned – as Heater implies – to too many flags of convenience. As a committed European, one who personally feels himself to be, in a general sense, a citizen of Europe, I would welcome others, through debating their experiences and perceived capacity to engage as citizens, to put more shape and form to the idea. We do need more cohesion and a calmer sea but this can only follow from the fragmentation in the 'storm of doubts' to which the authors allude. These issues were hardly a matter for debate less than a decade ago. The ATTEcourse, amongst others, is stimulating this debate and seeking to inject some reality into what, too often, has been vacuous rhetoric. I hope that this contribution, too, provides some more of the former, and not more of the latter.

Cogan, J. and Derricourt, R. (2000), *Citizenship for the 21st Century: An International Perspective on Education*, London: Kogan Page

Hall, T. and Williamson, H. (1999), *Citizenship and Community*, Leicester: Youth Work Press

Heater, D. (1990), *Citizenship: The Civic Ideal in World History, Politics and Education*, London: Longman

Williamson, H. (2002), 'A learning environment', *New Politics Network Bulletin* October, p6

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