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Young people and changing identities/citizenship in Europe: Citizens 'R' Us?

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Citizenship and identity

Many contemporary writers have recognised the link between citizenship and national identity (Habermas, 1992, Delgado-Moreira, 1997, Colley, 1999). This link, however, is problematic since it can prevent a clear understanding of the nature of citizens' rights. For Linda Colley, it is useful to distinguish between citizenship and identity.... citizenship is 'political and functional' whereas identity is 'more ancestral and visceral' (Colley, 1999:4)

Moreover the concept of citizenship is not itself fixed, as Beck argues. Using Gallie's original formulation of 'essentially contested concepts' which are ideas that 'inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper use on the part of users', Beck argues that 'citizenship is pre-eminently a concept of this kind' (Gallie in Beck, 1998:102-103). Finally in this context, although Delgado-Moreira notes that 'citizenship seems a well-defined concept', in doing 'qualitative research...clear words (such as citizenship and identity) in reality comprise a complex network of behaviour, emotions and history' (Delgado-Moreira: 1). As section 2 (below) indicates there is a very real conflation between these two concepts.

However it remains the case that for most people any sense of being a citizen is closely bound up with being connected to a particular territory and political culture, that is being a member of a nation state. The key point that these writers stress is that just because of this link it does not necessarily mean that one national identity or political culture has to be privileged over another. In fact the notion of citizens' rights is based on universalistic notions of rights that reach over and beyond nation-state boundaries. It may be that there can be some kind of harmonious co-existence between the 'political-functional' and the 'ancestral-visceral'.

The context of this debate has taken place within an increasingly globalised political and economic context. This affects not only the traditional citizen-nation state link, but also raises questions about exactly what kind of citizenship will be able to develop that will allow people to think and feel that they are part of and can influence the decision-making process at a supranational level, for example in the European Union.

The EU and citizenship - Maastricht and Amsterdam

Once it is established that citizens' rights are based on universal notions which go beyond the nation state level, for citizens living in the European Union the focus is on the nature of those rights. Article 8 of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) as amended by Articles 17 - 22 of the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) established a new category of European Citizen. These rights are not very extensive but include perhaps the most important right; namely the ability to stand as a candidate and vote at local and European elections in whatever member state a citizen is resident.

Very recent European history should guard against too much optimism on this score, nevertheless writers like Habermas, despite recognising the very limited extent of citizens' rights as promoted by the European Union are cautiously optimistic. In trying to answer the question as to whether a European citizenship can come into being, Habermas uses the examples of multicultural societies such as the United States and Switzerland to demonstrate that 'a political culture in the seedbed of which constitutional principles are rooted by no means has to be based on all citizens sharing the same language or the same ethnic and cultural origins' (Habermas 1992:7). 'In a future Federal Republic of European States, each national tradition will have to relate to other cultures and traditions, and be connected with the overlapping consensus of a common, supranational shared political culture of the European Community. Particularist anchoring of this sort would in no way impair the universalist meaning of popular sovereignty and human rights' (Habermas 1992:7).

Meehan (1993), like Habermas, takes a guardedly optimistic view that the EU has been and is engaged in a process in which there is a slow but steady accretion of citizenship rights. Aron (1974) took the opposite view, arguing that it was not possible to envisage a European citizenship.

The main elements of Aron's argument are first, that national and Community authorities provide a group of rights that are of a different order from one another. Secondly, European citizenship would entail the transfer of legal and political powers from national to EC level (in a similar fashion to the transfer of Scottish and English citizenship to a single British citizenship with the 1707 Act of Union). Thirdly, citizens can insist that a nation state respect their rights because the states can demand that citizens fulfil their duties to defend the state, but no multinational polity has the same authority. Finally, Aron argues that when he was writing in the early 1970s, there was no popular demand for a European federation, which could take responsibility for legal political rights and economic regulation, and which could demand the duties of citizens.

A further complexity concerns the kind of citizenship that is envisaged. There are two main models of citizenship, the individualistic, instrumentalist role of the citizen in the liberal tradition of John Locke, or the more communitarian ethical understanding that has arisen from the tradition of Aristotle. In the first model the citizens remain external to the state, in the second citizens are 'integrated into the political community like parts into a whole'. In the first citizens are like private persons, in the second 'citizenship can only be realised as a joint practice of self-determination'. (Habermas 1992:6)

In terms of the development of a European citizenship there remain two key problems. The first concerns the degree to which each member state in the European Union will let go of their absolute right to define who is or who is not a national. Secondly, unless there begins to develop some kind of meaningful cultural pan-EU understanding, any attempts to foster European citizenship will run up against the buffers of national cultural hegemony.

The interviews

This section of the paper examines the concept of citizenship from the perspective of a group of 16-18 year olds. In formulating the stimulus material we followed fairly closely the model of questions in the CiCe outline. The purpose of the interviews was to find out about young people's attitudes towards issues concerning identities and citizenship within

a number of contexts. Four groups of 16 -18 year olds were chosen, making a total of 35 respondents, with an attempt to cover a representative range of social, economic, gender and ethnic backgrounds. Two groups of respondents were 6th Form students from a City Technology College (CTC). These interviews were carried out with all-female and all-male groups. The third group was from a Further Education (FE) College, and the final group was from a Youth Theatre (YT). Most of the respondents' parents, whether they were from a double or single parent household, were employed. The interviews took place in South East London during March 2000, lasted up to 45 minutes in a dedicated environment and were taped. The nature of the research project was outlined to the participants, with a clear guarantee of confidentiality, in order to promote as full and frank a discussion as possible.

The interviews were conducted in an open-ended and semi-structured way, with stimulus material provided in the form of a series of questions. The questions were aimed at directing the respondents towards the relevance of these concepts in the personal and school/college/work environments, as well as at local, national and supranational (EU) levels. (See Appendix 1).

The focus of the research was partly determined by the following eight categories of political literacy¹:

- democracy and autocracy
- co-operation and conflict
- equality and diversity
- fairness, justice, the rule of law, rules, law and human rights
- freedom and order
- individual and community
- power and authority
- rights and responsibilities ,

The responses concerned initially the nature of the respondents' home, college and peer group relationships. From all the respondents, there seemed to be a clear majority who considered that they had input into decision-making in their home environment. The YT group, which included those who were working, not studying, were concerned about the financial arrangements in their home lives. Some of them were happy to be paying rent to their parents, but others resented this situation.

The structure of the CTC environment was the most hierarchical in comparison to the situation of the other two groups. But among the all-female group at the CTC there was a much greater degree of awareness both of the role of the School Council and its potential for influencing decisions, mainly around the provision of food and cleanliness. Both groups, however, recognised the limitations of their ability to affect academic decisions. The all-male group was more negative about the role of the School Council in

¹ 'The Final Report of the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools'. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998.

general, and their ability to change any aspect of their academic life. However both groups were aware of the importance of collective action in achieving change. For example in the words of one of the young men at the CTC:

I found that if you team up a bit you get your views across, because at one point our . teacher didn't turn up to the lessons ... and then we had to speak up and just tell the Head of Department ... now he comes to most of the lessons at least ... but you've got to have other people with you, you can't just be one person.

The issue of influencing changes within their respective contextual hierarchies did not seem to affect the other two groups, because their commitment was more self-generated. Another possible explanation stems from the less intrusive hierarchy, although as members of the FE college and the YT, they have certain duties.

The Further Education group was made up of two people of mixed parentage, two Afro-Caribbean people and one white European person. This group expressed the most forceful notion of belonging to a community defined in terms of their ethnic background. The FE group was also the most concerned about equality on the basis of ethnic origin and social class, expressing views such as,

...black people have been brought down ... when we just wanted to be ourselves ... but it seems that black people have just been oppressed: even though we seem to be free, we're not free.

In relation to issues about inequality at work, one respondent said that:

If there's any problems they go to the loud-looking black people, they target the black workers first.

In response to the question on the definition of a citizen, many respondents related the rights of a citizen in terms of belonging to a nation. There also appeared to be a very similar understanding throughout the groups on the definition of a citizen. One of the most important things at a very basic level, is a notion of participation. Along with the idea of political or social participation, there was also the feeling that an individual should work, as that implied their fuller participation as a citizen. Despite this recognition of the importance of participation as a key element of being a citizen, most respondents revealed a lack of knowledge about how to participate.

For some people, however, particularly in the FE group, there seemed to be a clear recognition of structural obstacles to participation, rather than a general ignorance of the processes,

The government don't have any power whatsoever, the people like BP, the big corporations have power...IBM, obviously Microsoft them type of things ... so they're the people with the power, we as a mass don't control anything ... they control what we buy, what we wear, what we eat, what we watch they control that, we don't control it because they give us what we watch.

Furthermore, within this same group, another respondent saw being citizen as:

a word on a passport, you live in a country, you've got a right to be here but does it actually mean that you have a say in how the country is run? We're citizens, this is our country, we live here, I've got a right to be here, yet that does not necessarily mean that my views are going to get heard, or that I can change anything.

In order to elicit further responses, prompting was required in the form of a supplementary question, which asked whether they thought there were any specific rights that came with being a citizen. Four main rights were mentioned:

- right to work
- get into other countries
- safe conduct around Europe
- right to vote (but universal ignorance of EU citizens' voting rights).

A further line of questioning asked the groups what being European citizens meant to them. There was a degree of diversity in the response, but overall the groups were negative towards the idea. An exclusive British, sometimes English identity, was claimed against the idea of a European identity. Linked to the widespread ignorance of EU citizen rights, and to the confusion between nationality and citizenship, there was also a general hostility towards the whole issue of European integration which was noticeable by most of the young men at the CTC and some of the YT. A more reflective response came from the young women at the CTC, and there was a certain degree of ambivalence from the FE students. Many of the responses, however, seemed to reflect the influence of popular media stereotyping of issues concerned with the European Union.

There was a common confusion between citizenship and nationality. The YT group was the most forceful in terms of explaining citizenship in terms of nationality. In order to avoid this kind of confusion, Delgado-Moreira (1997:1) suggests that instead of general questions, stimulus should be more specific, for example:

Q1: Would you relocate to another European country, if you were offered a position?

Q2: What is your opinion about the right to vote and being elected in local elections, that has been granted to citizens of an EU member state, while residing in the territory of any other member state?

One of the most significant findings concerns the difficulty and complexity that most respondents expressed concerning their national identity. The idea of being solely British seemed to correspond to being a white person. Other respondents from mixed parentage or other ethnic backgrounds needed to reflect at some length on the various sources of their identity.

The question of ethnic identity also arose when dealing with national identity, for example:

A: *Myself I consider myself Afro-European but that category doesn't exist so I'm British*

Q: Would you like it to exist?

A: *Yes. I know that there are quite a lot of people who would consider themselves that way, but they have to choose between one side of the family or other.*

These expressions of hybrid and multiple identities reinforce the difficulty of trying to disentangle citizenship from nationality. The responses we received persuaded us that in

any future research it may be useful to consider the points raised by Delgado-Moreira concerning the type of questions that need to be asked, to solicit a more focused response to the vexed issue of citizenship.

The necessity of further research is clear within the context of a European Union, which despite current harsh immigration controls, will nevertheless face the stark reality of needing millions more workers from outside its borders to compensate for the dramatic drop in the birth rate. If these new workers and their families are to be accommodated according to any democratic principles, then they need to be guaranteed the same citizens' rights as their European counterparts, based on universalistic notions that do not depend on their being nationals of an EU member state.

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Appendix

CiCe Interviews:

Group

Institution:

Context of interview:

Date of Interview:

Initial and Age of person:

Parental Occupations:

Siblings and ages:

Education level and Subjects:

Questions:

What is it like to be a young person in your country today?

at home

at school

with friends

in this country

Who has the power / control / decisions – You or others?

Do you think you can change things?

Are you listened to?

What do you think a citizen is?

How would you define your nationality?