

Review: The Citizen Myth

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THE CITIZEN MYTH

Civic republicanism for a multicultural era.

John Brenkman

Virile Greeks mill about the marketplace readying the arguments that will shape the destiny of their polis. Florentine gentlemen renew their efforts at self-government while puzzling over the ancient authority of Aristotle and Cicero and reading divine revelation and grace in Charles VIII's military expedition to Italy. Farmers, tradesmen, and merchants gather in New England town meetings to levy taxes and repair local roads. Stylish slaveowners and homespun patriots rub elbows, contemplating themselves as equals, as they sign their names to a Declaration of Independence, a Preamble to the Constitution, or a Bill of Rights.

Such are the primal scenes of democratic citizenship that dot the history of Western political thought. Do they convey a meaningful legacy to the democratic imagination? Or are they simple anachronisms, silly or pernicious depending on the occasions in which they are evoked?

Does the exclusion from citizenship—of women, of slaves, servants, workers, of strangers and aliens—which was

built into each of these fabled polities indelibly strain the very values and institutions they embodied? Can the tradition of civic republicanism or civic humanism really speak to the problems of democracy in an era where the *demos* is multiracial, multilingual, multicultural?

Citizenship, strongly conceived, is a resurgent ideal among many contemporary political theorists and social critics. Benjamin R. Barber, author of *Strong Democracy*, sets out in *An Aristocracy of Everyone* to establish the intellectual foundations for a renewal of civic education. The book culminates in a call for schools and universities to integrate mandatory community service into the curriculum. Forcefully rejecting the idea that community service should give the privileged a way to help the underprivileged or merely provide poorer students a means of working off their loans, Barber outlines a program geared to help all students “learn the meaning of social interdependence and become empowered through acquiring the democratic arts.”

Students' projects of community service would be integrated into courses of

Discussed in this essay

An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America, Benjamin R. Barber, New York: Ballantine Books



study, so that the critical discussion of political traditions and social institutions could go hand in hand with the practical involvement in the community. Barber also suggests that students should have a far greater role in the governance of educational institutions themselves.

The goal is to counteract the tendency of modern democracies to weaken civic ideals of responsibility and self-government. American democracy has had to adapt itself to capitalism and to universal suffrage. Capitalism centers self-fulfillment and freedom in the private pursuit of economic gain rather than in the public pursuit of the common good. Thus began what Richard Sennett called *The Fall of Public Man*. Second, as the franchise was extended, the diversity and sheer mass of the citizenry changed the face of citizenship itself. Barber laments how the ideal of a life devoted to com-

munal debate and decision has shrunk down to the reality of occasional trips to the voting booth.

The civic ideal, Barber argues, is not dead. It remains vital to what he calls the American story, that is, the founding principles of American democracy and their persistence and power throughout the nation's history. An education to citizenship should give young people a training in civic responsibility, and it should inculcate what it means to be an American. Being an American is anchored in "common rights rather than common identity."

Barber is acutely aware that multiculturalism, as a fact of American society and as an emergent ideology and pedagogy, is in tension with the goal of educating the universal citizen. And it is in grappling with multiculturalism and democracy that his project unravels.

"Relocation" camp in California where Japanese Americans were interned during World War II.

Archive Photos

Barber's two pivotal chapters are devoted to what he dubs the "radical excesses" and "conservative excesses" in the multiculturalism debate, positioning him to aim, in the classical spirit, for the moderate, reasonable golden mean. His exemplary conservative is Allan Bloom, to whom he devotes an insightful, crit-

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ical reading that links Bloom's defense of Eurocentric elitism to its intellectual origins in the political philosophy of Leo Strauss and to its political origins as the delayed stress syndrome of academics traumatized by the student movement of the '60s.

The "radical excesses," however, get no such serious treatment. Barber's exemplary radical is Molefi Kete Asante. What can it mean to seek a middle position between Bloom's variety of Eurocentrism and Asante's version of Afrocentrism? Worse yet, the position Asante supposedly exemplifies is the "radical," "postmodern" "hyperskepticism" and "fatal nihilism" inspired by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault! This inchoate blend of Afrocentrism, Derrida, Foucault, and race/gender/class analysis—four pretty thoroughly incompatible approaches to culture and power—reveals the deeper flaw in Barber's stance. For he fails to register any of the actual complexity of multiculturalism in this society or the pressure it is exerting

on our political traditions and institutions. None of the writers and artists, or organizations and movements, or collective memories and binding symbols of any actual social group figures in his analysis.

What he presents instead is the narrative that he believes is universally available to every social group in its quest to enter the American polity. Citizenship, the story goes, stems from the democratic rights that are every American's birthright; to be an American is to possess these rights; American history itself has been in essence the process of extending these rights to an ever more inclusive citizenry:

What "rights" meant to the American story was that the chief American protagonist in our native dream was neither the WASP nor the assimilated immigrant nor the hyphenated American, but the citizen. What Americans shared could be captured by neither origins nor kinship nor blood, which produced only an often anarchic and divisive plurality. Rights issued in citizenship and forged a stronger commonality and firmer identity than the individual histories that immigrants were escaping. The right to liberty, the right to self-legislation, the right to be included in a civil polity founded on popular (that-means-me!) sovereignty, all pointed to an idea of the citizen that had an aggressive liberating character, pushing to extend to the very periphery of the universal.

Barber considers this Citizen Myth an enabling fiction. It is the story Americans tell themselves to secure their identity as Americans and give direction to their shared historical existence. He worries

that the future of this illusion, this civil religion, is now jeopardized by multiculturalism and skepticism.

I believe that, on the contrary, the Citizen Myth suffers from its own falsification of our history, particularly of the struggles over citizenship itself and is therefore a questionable instrument for extending community, responsibility, and right. The denial of citizenship and rights has been as integral to the American story as the Bill of Rights, the Emancipation Proclamation, or the Fourteenth Amendment. Moreover, those excluded from citizenship are not simply absent from the polity; their absence in effect shapes the polity. When they then assert their right to inclusion, the polity is often not merely enlarged but transformed. The immigrant paradigm Barber employs is misleading because it imagines the American polis to be an integral space, ideal or real, to which foreigners arrive, shedding their foreignness and accepting citizenship.

The social groups whose artistic and political creativity is defining “multiculturalism” today suggest how transformative inclusiveness can be. Women’s absence from public life anchored the particular separations of public and private that organize the modern polity; as women have extended their political participation, they have likewise displaced and altered the very institutional framework of modern democracy. Gay and lesbian movements challenge deep-seated conceptions of rights, of the sexual meaning of public and private, of the public meaning of sexuality; the controversy over gays and lesbians in the military has touched the nerve of civic re-

publicanism’s oldest ideal of community service.

Barber is hard pressed to interpret these developments because he remains committed to the very idea of society they challenge. “In our constitutional regime, diversity and difference,” Barber believes, “are prudently barred from the public sphere, whose object is precisely to ensure the impartiality of citizenship by a universal personhood of all citizens.” Nothing belies this claim more vividly than the actual history of American citizenship, which has still not transcended its own legacy of origins, kinship, and blood.

While Barber acknowledges and decries racial injustice in America, he fails to acknowledge how thoroughly racism has actually shaped the American polity. The Citizen Myth leaves out the permanent presence of racism in our history. Racism is not merely a tenacious exception to the rule of law and equality, a simple violation of founding principles which is slowly but implacably working itself out in the course of time. What needs to be explained, on the contrary, is how African Americans could have been denied rights and participation for so long, and why their civil rights, when granted, have been so frequently revoked or violated and their civic participation so systematically limited and undercut.

The stakes of historical interpretation in national mythmaking become apparent when Barber tries to account for the Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott* decision of 1857. The Court ruled that all blacks, including those freed from slavery, were excluded from rights of citizenship

because people of African descent were present at the founding of the nation only as property, not as participants (citizens) or as rights bearers (persons), and it ruled that states' rights and whites' property rights in slaves prevented the U.S. government from limiting slavery in new territories and states.

Where does *Dred Scott* stand in the American story of rights and citizenship? "Justice Roger Taney's pro-slavery decision in *Dred Scott* was," according to Barber's assessment, "the last gasp of those trying to stem the tide on which rights were sweeping through history. Taney's problem was how to combat the rights story, whose thrust was emancipatory."

Taney was not in fact gasping at all. The grip of the slaveholding states on American society and its future had actually tightened in the 1850s. As Robert William Fogel has shown in *Without Consent or Contract*, such power permeated American political institutions. Southerners had dominated the presidency from the very beginning; because the Constitution counted slaves as "three-fifths" a person in the census, the slave states gained not only decisive electoral votes but also as many as twenty-five extra seats in the House of Representatives, enough to control the legislative process. Every president pro tem of the Senate since the Constitution was ratified had been a slaveholder. And the majority of justices on the Taney Court were southerners.

The Compromise of 1850 had already permitted the extension of slavery into newly acquired territories, while the Fugitive Slave Law loosed slave hunters on the North and deprived free blacks as

well as escaped slaves of the right to a trial. Taney was riding, not bucking, the tide of history. Moreover, his extension of states' rights was, in the American context, an evocation of republican ideology, which had riveted the communitarian ideal of self-government to the culture of slaveholding from the very be-

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ginning. Taney's judicial ideas dipped deep into the political tradition.

Nor is slavery just a horrible anomaly that marred our constitutional ideals and was then overcome because of them. The interpretation of rights, citizenship, and participation on the part of Congress and the courts is shot through with ambiguities. Ours is a zigzagging history in which republican ideals have not consistently bolstered progressive interpretations of right. Just as the culture of slavery suffused the nation's founding, our political ideals have been fraught with conflict and ambiguity whenever the question of citizenship has arisen.

Because the republican tradition valued commonality and considered rights the special province of citizens, it has frequently followed the path of nativism rather than universalism. Common identity has often displaced common rights. In the 1790s, this attitude took uncom-

promising form in the Federalists' support for the Alien and Sedition Acts. An alien, they argued, should not enjoy the rights spelled out in the Constitution. Rights attached to "membership" in the community which had forged the social contract. The membership approach was countered by a "municipal law" approach, which asserted that constitutional rights belonged to everyone, citizen or not, who comes under the jurisdiction of U.S. law. The municipal law approach ultimately prevailed in the Supreme Court, and it held up through the era of continental expansion as the Constitution was held to apply in the territories.

Race lurked in the background throughout the nineteenth century, especially in legal decisions regarding Native Americans, but it did not come to the fore until the Supreme Court had to decide in the 1890s whether the peoples of such newly acquired or conquered lands as Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Phillipines enjoyed constitutional rights. The nation's imperial ambitions were not designed to extend the polity but to control territory and to exploit the labor and resources of other lands. Some recognized that imperialism corrupted the democratic ethos by promoting subjugation rather than inclusion.

The Supreme Court, according to legal scholar Gerald L. Neuman, came to the aid of the imperialists by retreating to the membership approach to rights after an entire century of the municipal law approach. Even though the Fourteenth Amendment had unambiguously abolished any racial basis for citizenship after the Civil War, Justice Edward Douglass White resurrected a race-based interpre-

tation of political membership in 1901. He invented a distinction between incorporated and unincorporated territories, arguing that the nation needed a means of excluding from potential citizenship "an uncivilized race" that would be "absolutely unfit to receive it." He was referring to Puerto Ricans. In 1922, Chief Justice Taft used the same reasoning to block treating Puerto Rico as an "incorporated" territory, even after its residents had been made U.S. citizens, on the grounds that "communities of a different origin and language from those of our continental people" were unfit for eventual statehood.

It was at that same moment in history that Congress enacted the immigration laws which, first, severely restricted the total number of immigrants and, second, used quotas to ensure that each year's immigrants were in proportion to the nation's preexisting racial and ethnic mix. From the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 until the 1921 quotas, the Congress was determined to keep the United States overwhelmingly white, Protestant, and Northern European in origin. The Supreme Court seldom went against the grain of racism and nativism. The significant exception was *Wong Kim Ark* (1898), in which the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of "equal protection" without regard to race reasserted itself. The Court ruled that Congress could not withhold citizenship from children born in the United States to Chinese aliens.

Less than a generation separates us from racial quotas in immigration policies, which were not repealed until 1965. Race, religion, and ethnicity were woven directly into the legal and institutional fabric of American citizenship for nearly

two centuries. When Barber asserts that “the American story was rooted in principle rather than blood and expressed itself in common rights rather than common identity,” he mistakes one historical thread for the whole cloth. The Citizen Myth fails to illuminate or inspire the *struggle* for common rights, past or present, because it shrinks from recognizing that the American legal, legislative, and political tradition itself has carved out a polity riven with divisions and exclusions. The American story is rooted in division, and our myths cannot hope to unfurl new commonalities without unveiling that divided root.

The legacy of race jurisprudence lives on in our political institutions, habits, and values. Puerto Rico has neither independence nor statehood; its people are still kept from self-determination and genuine political membership.

The legacy of slavery and segregation lives on for African Americans. They bear the brunt of poverty in America, undermining the security and independence that are the hallmark and guarantee of active citizenship. Without equal access to education, to media, and to political office, they are denied the crucial resources that make civic participation effective.

The legacy of legislative fiat also lives on. Nonwhite immigrants have long been denied the sort of supporting institutions and services that an unbiased polity would provide to integrate new members. Generations of Chinese and

Mexican workers have been wanted for their labor and repudiated for their skin and customs. For decades Chinese Americans had to establish community and citizenship in the United States by relying on *Wong Kim Ark* as their one refuge against exclusion, discrimination, anti-miscegenation laws, and divided families.

African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans do not fit the celebrated pattern of immigrants relishing inclusion and new civic freedoms. Rather, they have long lived within the polity but excluded from the polity. From their histories and aspirations, from their new forms of cultural creativity, there is also emerging a new narration of nation. It will undoubtedly include Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in the story, but will not be in their voice. Pieces of that narration—Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which weaves an entire tragic tale of moral quandary, family agony, and collective memory around an experience that would only have happened under the Fugitive Slave Law, or Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, which explores the many broken threads of family, language, and identity that are the living heritage and debris of the Chinese Exclusion Acts and *Wong Kim Ark*—suggest that its voice will be more polyglot, more plural, more tragic, than the triumphant Citizen Myth. It will also, therefore, offer a stronger promise of justice and equality.