

Random Thoughts on Education, Citizenship, and National Identity

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The modesty of my title reflects the modesty of my claims to any special knowledge or insight about a complex and frequently confusing topic. However, education, citizenship, and national identity are subjects of concern for each of us, especially those of us involved in civic education, for it presents a critical political problem for all of us. The question, "What does it mean to be a German..., a Czech..., or an American" is a question to which there are different answers. Our conception of the possibilities and proper purposes of civic education will to some considerable degree depend on the answers we give. Today, I wish briefly to consider two issues: national identity and civic education.

The idea of nationalism has been one of the major forces in the development of modern history, and modern conceptions of national identity are clearly related to it. That is, our definition of national identity will clearly depend on our definition of what we mean by the word "nation."

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "nation" as follows: "An aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language or history, as to form a distinct race of people, usually organized as a separate political state, and occupying a definite territory. In early examples, the racial idea is usually stronger than the political..."

The dictionary is a useful place to begin. However, it is interesting to note that even a dictionary as authoritative as the Oxford English Dictionary does not include a definition that is generally accepted and is especially important for our purposes: what we may call the liberal notion of "nation." In his classic work, *The Idea of Nationalism*, Hans Kohn distinguishes two types of nationalism. These "types" correspond to Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. While ideal types are rarely if ever reflected in reality, it is useful to keep them in mind in our attempt to understand the problems of our own countries as well as those of other countries old and new.

The nation-state as it emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in English speaking countries, was a political-territorial entity based on voluntary membership, a *Gesellschaft* to use Tönnies' term. It is not surprising that the political theory of classical liberalism is especially conducive to this notion of the nation and nationality or national identity.

After all, Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, describes the Commonwealth as a political body artificially created by contract and existing in order to further an end agreed to by all: the avoidance of premature and violent death. This is achieved in large part by general acceptance of common meanings attached to concepts such as justice, definitions determined by the Sovereign. While no democrat, Hobbes' theory of the state provides the intellectual foundation for the development of liberal democracy.

It is easy enough to see that in this formulation the foundation and purpose of states differs very little from our understanding of the formation and purpose of corporations. The former are created by a group of people for the purpose of attaining security. The latter are created by people who come together for the purpose of manufacturing and selling cars or refrigerators. I hardly need to emphasize the well-known historical connection between the

development of liberal-democratic ideas, the modern nation-state, and capitalist economies. (Whether it is a necessary connection is another matter about which there is some disagreement.)

The alternative view of the nation was furthered by, among others, Johann Gottfried von Herder. Herder and the German Romantics saw the nation in terms of its prepolitical, prerational foundations emphasized common descent, ancient folk-traditions, and the mother tongue. The result was an ethnic-linguist nationalism, based on the organic view of the state. This view of the state as consisting of members tied together by the instinctive and spontaneous bonds of language and ancestry corresponded to Tonnies' conception of the *Gemeinschaft*, an intimate and instinctive community. One does not join such a community. Indeed, it is not possible to join it because you are either born in it or you are not.

This concept of nationhood depends on ethnic, racial, and linguistic homogeneity in contrast with the liberal idea of nationhood which, in theory at least, can accommodate a large number of racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups. It seems clear that today we are presented with a conflict between these two concepts. It is not my intention to try to offer any observations about or prescriptions for that difficult problem. I would, however, like to make some observations about the role of civic education, education for citizens in a nation based on the principles of liberalism.

In 1790, a Frenchman defined "fatherland" as being "not at all this soil on which we live, these walls which have seen our birth. The true fatherland is that political community where all citizens, protected by the same laws, united by the same interests, enjoy the natural rights of man and participate in the common cause." One hundred and fifty years later, Franklin Roosevelt expressed the same sentiments to his fellow Americans when he said, "The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed is that Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to his country and to our creed of liberty and democracy."

Both Roosevelt and his predecessor in eighteenth century France are suggesting that national identity, rather than a matter of birth, is a matter of sharing certain common beliefs. And these shared beliefs are not about everything. They are about political things: the natural rights of man, liberty, and democracy. Neither in the eighteenth century nor in the twentieth was it assumed that an understanding of the natural rights of man or the creed of liberty and democracy was instinctive. And if understanding was not instinctive, behaving according to these principles was even less so. Consequently, the importance of civic education is a necessary component of this view of nationhood and national identity.

I want now to comment on the role of civic education in developing national identity in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-linguistic nation in terms of the United States. How have we in the United States attempted to forge citizens, sharing common political values, out of a mass of individuals from different backgrounds. I propose to do this simply because it is the history I know best. I wish to emphasize that I am not discussing the United States as a model of such a political community, although it is only fair to say that I think it has been more successful at accommodating a large variety of ethnic, racial, and linguistic groups while protecting their integrity than some recent critics have suggested. While it is not a story of continuous and unqualified success, I think it is worth remembering the words of Gunnar Myrdahl, the great student of America's most important problem--race--who said, "America is continuously struggling for its soul." America's story may be most usefully viewed, in my opinion, as a cautionary tale from which other countries may perhaps learn as they struggle for their souls.

J. Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur asked, "What then is this new American, this new man?" He had emigrated to the American colonies in 1759 and later published his celebrated *Letters From an American Farmer* where he asked the question that has puzzled Americans ever since. He went on to talk about that race called Americans created by the "mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes," a "strange mixture of blood" found in no other country. It is clear that "this strange mixture of blood" did not include African-Americans. None-the-less, he saw a new race created not only by the intermarriage of persons from different national, if not racial, backgrounds, but also by the new political and economic circumstances presented by America.

For better or worse, the notion that Americans were a new race, people who, as John Adams claimed, "Cast off the European skin, never to resume it" prevailed until relatively recently. Its classic expression came, of course with the presentation in 1908 of *The Melting Pot*, written by Israel Zangwill, a writer of Russian Jewish origin. The story concerns a young Russian Jewish composer in New York, named David who wants to write a symphony expressing the vast, harmonious interweaving of races in America. He also hopes to overcome racial barriers and marry Vera, a beautiful Christian girl.

"America," David cries, "is God's crucible, the great melting-pot where all the races are melting and reforming! ..Here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages...and your fifty blood hatreds. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians",-into the Crucible with you all God is making the American."

The climactic scene takes place on the roof of a building in lower Manhattan with the Statue of Liberty in the background. The composer, with Vera, gestures toward the city and says:

There she lies, the great Melting-Pot, listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? Ah, what a stirring and seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, black and yellow.

VERA (softly nestling to him): Jew and Gentile.

DAVID: Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and cross. ...Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. Ah, Vera, what is the Glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labor and look forward! (Far back, like a lonely, guiding star, twinkles over the darkening water the torch of the Statue of Liberty. From below comes up the softened sound of voices and instruments joining in "My Country, 'tis of Thee." The curtain falls slowly.)

It is clear that Zangwill was no more concerned with subtlety than the writers of agitprop in the 1930's and 40's. That didn't dim the enthusiasm of Teddy Roosevelt, who loved it. After the performance, the President told the author's wife, "I'm not a Bernard Shaw man or Ibsen man, Mrs. Zangwill. No, this, is the stuff "

Note that while the composer in the play initially talked of writing a symphony expressive of the harmonious interweaving of the races in America, he finally speaks of the melting-pot where they are melted down and emerge as something new. The possibility that the roaring, seething, bubbling cauldron might not have been altogether agreeable for those hurled into it did not penetrate his enthusiasm for the complete "Americanization" of the newly arrived.

There is now no shortage of critics eager to point out that being melted down and forged into something new was more painful for the Jews, the Irish, the Germans, and all the others,

than enthusiasts of Americanization such as Zangwill were able to contemplate. A writer recently observed that "Americanization was a process of coercive conformity according to which the United States was a melting pot, not a tapestry....the various nationalities were made into Americans as ore is refined into gold. Americanization purified them, eliminating the dross." The American, Crèvecoeur's new man, was conceived narrowly as an Anglo-American, stripped of all his original ethnic, racial, and linguistic characteristics.

Whatever may have been the case in the past, and I think the observations of writers such as these are overstated, we in civic education now take our cue from Tocqueville. In *Democracy in America*, he asked,

How does it happen that in the United States, where the inhabitants have only recently immigrated to the land which they now occupy, and brought neither customs nor traditions with them there; where they met one another for the first time with no previous acquaintance; where, in short, the instinctive love of country can scarcely exist; how does it happen that everyone takes as zealous an interest in the affairs of his township, his country, and the whole state as if they were his own? It is because everyone, in his sphere, takes an active part in the government of society.

Thus, Tocqueville sees the political rights of the Constitution as the instrument for making people Americans. More generally, it is the political values embodied in The Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and other expressions such as Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" which provide the foundation for belonging to America and being an American citizen. These values provide the framework within which Americans can maintain their ethnic, racial, and linguistic identities. It is not necessary that they agree on matters of faith. It is not necessary that they sound alike, look alike or even have the same customs and traditions. It is necessary that they all subscribe to the fundamental political values which have shaped the American experience. These values are not self-evident and living according to them is not necessarily natural. Indeed, many of them are contrary to our nature. The instinct of many, if not most, people is to be fearful of those who are different in some way. The primary task of civic education, it seems to me, is to help students learn that the values of liberal constitutional democracy, and that the acceptance of life with people of different races, ethnicities, and religions is ultimately in the interest of everyone. Arthur Schlesinger has written, "Our task is to combine due appreciation of the splendid diversity of the nation with due emphasis on the great unifying Western ideas of individual freedom, political democracy, and human rights. These are the ideas that define the American nationality. "

In conclusion, permit me to remind you that we Americans are sometimes afflicted with an evangelistic fervor. We are natural born missionaries. In my judgment, however, we must curb these impulses which lead us to want to tell everyone how to do it. To do so is usually based on an excessively optimistic view of how well we have managed the task of being a multi-racial, ethnic, and linguistic community faithful to the precepts of liberal constitutional democracy. It is also to assume that we have a better understanding of other nation's histories and problems than is usually the case, and hence is presumptuous. What we can tell you is how we do it and provide you with a candid account of our successes and failures. We confront many of the same problems in our attempt to craft a national identity for a wildly heterogeneous population, and we are as often as you at a loss to know what to do. Earlier, I suggested that the story of America's search for its soul may perhaps most usefully be viewed as a cautionary tale that will be of some

modest utility to the people of other nations searching for theirs. As we are all in this together, I wish you the best.