

History Teaching, Democracy and Citizenship

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It is I think timely that we are focusing on issues of democracy, citizenship and community, for these are concepts which are under threat in so many parts of the world today. The former Yugoslavia is a maelstrom of rampant nationalism and bigoted religion; the Middle East still seethes with terrorism; the Northern Ireland peace process is constantly challenged by the extremists on both sides; the race riots we have had this Summer in Luton and Bradford show that our multi-cultural society is still riven by suspicion and outright hostility. It is also significant that the recent review of our national curriculum (the Dearing Report of December 1994) which has led to a slimming down of content and a simplification of the assessment procedures, gives the impression that the cross curricular themes which were to be such a feature of the 1988 curriculum have been quietly pushed to one side. Multicultural education, European awareness and citizenship (to mention but three of the cross curricular dimensions) have been left to wither on the vine; there is no talk now about the study of history equipping 'young people to benefit from the rights, and exercise the responsibilities of citizens in a representative democracy' (National Curriculum Working Group , 1990).

The reasons for this are not hard to find. Educational reform (which has been the hallmark of the last decade in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and the language with which it is articulated have increasingly been cast in the imagery of the market place, of commercial transaction, of industrial production. Education is 'delivered' to 'clients' in predetermined 'packages'. 'Targets' determine the rate and quantity of production; quality and outcome are assessed against strict criteria. League tables, published in the national press, measure comparative performance of schools - a performance which is spoken of in atomistic terms of competences, skills and discrete pieces of knowledge. Educationists (and particularly those in government) are asking less about the educational journey our young people are travelling on and whether it is worthwhile; they are becoming obsessed with 'arriving' (but where? For what purpose?), with 'training for competence' (was there ever a more damning, half-hearted word!), with vocational relevance. The more education is defined, and is broken down into its component parts, the more we lose sight of the whole, of the bright field which the Welsh poet R S Thomas depicts in one of his later poems.

The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
 to illuminate a small field
 for a while, and gone my way
 and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
 of great price, the one field that had
 the treasure in it. I realize now
 that I must give all that I have
 to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
 an imagined past. It is the turning
 aside like Moses to the miracle
 of the lit bush, to a brightness
 that seemed as transitory as your youth
 once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Later Poems, R S Thomas, London: Macmillan, 1984

Is my view, then, a nostalgic hark back to a world where vocational training was not part of the school's concern and liberal education with history at its core reigned supreme? It's well to remember that liberal education tended to despise the world of commerce and industry and could be highly elitist in its attitude. How the staff and students of the selective grammar school, its sights firmly fixed on the universities and higher education, despised the lowly secondary modern school with its emphasis on the practical curriculum! And how disastrously wrong Wilson and the Labour Government of 1964 were, when in promoting the all-ability comprehensive school, claimed that there would now be 'grammar school education for all'.

Schools of course must involve themselves with the world of work, with education for industrial and economic understanding; they are not oases cut off from the realities of outside life. But neither must they lose sight of the greater moral imperatives that should underwrite the whole enterprise. That is why I am glad to have the opportunity in this paper to focus on the issues of democracy, citizenship and community and the ways in which such extraordinarily fluid and highly debatable concepts be incorporated into the history curriculum and cashed out in terms of classroom practice.

First, what might the features of citizenship be - or to put it another way, how might we recognise an effective citizen if we were to meet him or her? McLaughlin (1992), drawing on Derek Heater's work, points to four attributes of the citizen. A citizen has *identity*, exhibits certain *virtues*, is *politically involved*, and claims certain *social prerequisites*. You will immediately say that this is to beg more questions than to answer them; for each attribute can be defined in minimalist or maximalist terms. Take for example, identity. A minimalist interpretation would merely emphasise the formal, legal, juridical status conferred on a man or woman within the constitutional framework of a given community. He or she can vote, serve on a jury, have access to the law courts, carry a passport; the citizen has the duty to pay taxes. A maximal view, on the other hand, goes far beyond these rights and duties. There will be a grander notion of community which embraces the dynamic, multi-faceted nature of the country in which the citizen lives; that a shared constitution allows for a range of social and cultural ways of life within the rule of law and that identity involves obligations and responsibilities as well as rights. The Swann Committee's report of 1985 (Department of Education and Science *Education For All*, London, HMSO, 1985) which focused on the role of education in a multi-cultural society, emphasised that the rights and obligations of all communities towards each other would be defined, respected and protected with education playing a key role. The reality is that many non white groups feel that the title of 'citizen' has a hollow ring. They do not feel full citizens; they do not feel an accepted or respected part of the British nation.

Secondly, what of the virtues of the citizen? We could see these merely as those of loyalty, patriotism and responsibility within the framework of the constitution, involving the citizen in modest local involvement - a narrowly nationalist view of citizenship. The minimalist view is summed up in the following words:

'It is education which must shape their minds in the national mould till they are patriotic by inclination - by instinct - by necessity',

words which might have been spoken by Joseph Goebbels, but were written by Jean Jacques Rousseau.

On the other hand, virtue in the citizen might be seen in a much wider and pro-active sense where local horizons are broadened and national issues are placed alongside more universal considerations of social justice. As William

Jennings Bryan was to declare at the National Democratic Convention, Chicago, 1896:

'The humblest citizen of all the land, when clad in the armor of a righteous cause, is stronger than all the hosts of error'.

Thirdly, the political involvement of the citizen can range from a minimal involvement in local and national elections to a more fully participatory role in the nature and running of the state.

As for the social prerequisites of the citizen, these can be seen merely as the granting of the formal legal status or in terms of egalitarianism being an essential prerequisite: that citizenship necessarily involves the four essential freedoms which Franklin Delano Roosevelt referred to in January 1941 - freedom of speech and expression, to worship, from want and from fear.

How we define citizenship - whether we look at it in a minimalist and static way or in a maximalist and dynamic manner - will of course depend on our view of the state. Do we want people to be socialised unreflectingly into the political and social *status quo* or are we more concerned with citizenship within a liberal, democratic tradition which embraces not only the notion of rights and obligations within the law but also ideas of debate and questioning, of justice for all, of righting social wrongs? Do we have a view of citizenship, which though it takes proper pride in its own state, looks beyond narrow nationalism and begins to conceive of multiple citizenships and of a world fraternity?

Clearly, my strong inclination is to the latter, maximalist view; and I want to spent a little time looking at the relationship of such a view to the issues of the curriculum and teaching, with particular reference to teaching and learning of history. I could of course use as my guide the advice given in a government pamphlet entitled *Education for Citizenship* which appeared in 1990. The government agency which produced it, the National Curriculum Council, is now defunct and I will refer to the document only briefly. It is in my view typical of so much of the curriculum documentation with which we have been deluged in the last few years - glossy and expensive (the cost of implementing the National Curriculum has cost todate £500,000 million pounds), packed with tips but lacking any clear philosophical underpinning - a rag-bag of odds and ends. It is essentially post modern in its conception - the ultimate oxymoron from a government whose former leader, Margaret

Thatcher, declared that there is no such thing as society. Let me turn, therefore, to my own concerns.

My first contention is an obvious, though not particularly fashionable one. Citizens must have knowledge - they must know things. What must they know? E D Hirsch in his book *Cultural Literacy* (1987) is under no doubt that there is a corpus of basic knowledge citizens must have at their fingertips if they are to operate in society and he lists five thousand of such facts. I am not unsympathetic with this view; we tend to take certain things for granted - as common points of reference between people operating within a common culture. For example, I was somewhat taken aback some time ago when sitting next to a young man on 5 November when he enquired of me why bonfires had been lit and fireworks set off that evening. Certainly from my comparative work in Japanese and English history classrooms we have found that in England we are not very good at teaching an essential historical framework in comparison with the Japanese; and without such a framework it is difficult for effective discussion, analysis and opinion to take place.

You may still ask, quite properly: 'But of what facts should such a framework consist?' It is I think entirely reasonable that there should be a minimalist framework within which schools should operate - and as far as the history syllabus is concerned I would support the notion that the core should be British history; the actual content of that framework should be left to the professionals, the historians and history educators.

Facts, however, only become knowledge when the mind begins to work around them, as the British philosopher and mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead declared. Our citizens are not in preparation for the TV quiz show 'Mastermind'. They must debate, question and explore ideas and acquire new knowledge to fuel their enquiries; they must be creative with ideas, based on sound evidence. Within the subject of history what wonderful opportunities we have for doing this! I've done work with 14 and 15 year olds on Rudolf Hoess who was commandant of Auschwitz from 1942 - 1944 - work which has raised issues about racism and its relationship to such concepts as power, propaganda, obedience, conformity and responsibility. I introduce the topic by telling them about the affidavit of the builder Hermann Graebe who worked in the Ukraine and used at the Nuremberg trials in 1945. The story (no, its no story in the sense of a fantasy, I tell the students; this is for real) tells of the mass execution that Graebe witnessed at Dubno in 1943. Rounding a bend in the road in his lorry, he sees a group of naked people, old and

young, standing silently in front of a freshly dug mound of earth - a small child who is sobbing is being comforted by a mother, a babe in arms is being chucked under the chin. Graebe goes round the bank of earth and comes across an open grave. The executioner sits on the edge, his legs dangling, smoking a cigarette. He gets up, motions the next batch of victims, directs them down the steps cut in the pit - before gunning them down.

'This', I repeat, 'Is no imaginary account but one based on sworn evidence. How is it that men and women from a civilised society could engage in such activities?' Perhaps a study of Rudolph Hoess can shed some light on the issue. The students and I work on two documents: part of the testimony that Hoess gave at the Nuremberg trials (he was tried and executed later in Poland) and an extract from his autobiography which he wrote while awaiting trial in Poland. We spend time reading the first document and deciding on the words or phrases we might use to describe Hoess on the basis of the coldly clinical evidence he gave at Nuremberg (an activity which is best done individually or in pairs - I find it counterproductive to read through the document as a class). Let me quote a few lines:

'The camp commandant at Treblinka used monoxide gas and I did not think his methods were very efficient. I used cyclon B. It took three to fifteen minutes to kill the people. We knew the people were dead because their screaming had stopped. Another improvement we made over Treblinka was building our gas chambers to accommodate 2,000 people at a time'.

'Are there any aspects of Hoess' character of which we might approve?' I ask. We role play how he might have stood in the dock giving his testimony and the tone of voice he might have used. Had we been allowed, what questions might we have asked him? I suddenly turn to a boy or girl and say: 'You were in command of the bomber squadron which almost totally destroyed Dresden on 13/14 February 1945. How did you feel? 30,000 buildings were flattened, perhaps 400,000 dead or wounded' - and the change of emphasis provokes lively debate about issues of patriotism, responsibility, the just war.

We then turn to Hoess' autobiography. It's an emotional, self justificatory document. It comes as a revelation that Hoes is devoted to his wife and family and wishes he could spend more time playing with his children. He loves animals and is never happier then when he rides through the forest. He was repelled by the mass killings; duty however demanded that he carry out

his superiors' commands without flinching. What words do we now use to describe Hoess?

I remember one particular class in which a boy made the point that the litany of self-pity with which Hoess describes how he had to watch the murder day in, day out, was really a cry for help. 'Each Jew died only once - I died a thousand deaths. I deserve your sympathies as much as the Jews' - a mature and telling point which provoked discussion about the nature of duty and responsibility.

But citizens should be involved, as well as knowledgeable and thoughtful. We must encourage active participation of our future citizens in the community. I was very struck when in Japan in 1993 by the cohesiveness of society and the feeling of security I had when walking the streets at night. Japan has one of the lowest crime rates in the industrialised world (though admittedly the recent Tokyo gas attacks have dented this image). This sense of community is carried over to the schools. The students care for their schools in ways which we find extraordinary. Shoes are taken off on entering the building and slippers donned; the students in both elementary and high schools are responsible for serving the midday meal, clearing up afterwards and, indeed, for cleaning the whole building. Discipline is not an issue; students when not being taught are left largely to their own devices and look after themselves in break times and before and after lessons. We saw little elementary school tots of five or six making their way hand in hand through the horrendous maelstrom of the Tokyo traffic and underground, totally unaccompanied.

Now of course Japan is largely a homogeneous society; they face few or none of the problems of citizenship within a multicultural society such as England is. If I am from a tightly knit Muslim community in the east end of London, where does my sense of belonging and identity lie? The school community may be attempting to impose an alien sense of citizenship.

Work that an English researcher, Maude Blair, is doing on the issues of race, gender and school exclusions, shows how time and again what appears to be a 'culture of defiance' amongst Afro-Caribbean boys, is in fact a social statement: that they find the school's view of community is restrictive and foreign. Something 'white' is being imposed. And many black parents feel alienated too; they are threatened by an institution that as students they had both feared and hated. They now consider themselves to be powerless and unable to cope with white authority. I am convinced that the development of

citizenship through involvement in the range of school activities we value - plays, concerts, sport, expeditions, field trips - as well as the active involvement of students in class and giving of responsibilities to students in the institution, can only be effective if there is a whole school policy which takes place within the community of which the school is part and which it serves - a policy which confers identity, which allows and values a range of involvement and which is accommodating within a broad and flexible framework. A maximalist definition of citizenship such as this will allow its students to blossom and flourish; on the other hand, citizenship which is conceived of in minimalist terms of conformity will be consigning its men and women to limited ends. For as John Stuart Mill reminds us in his essay on liberty:

'A state which dwarfs its men in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes - will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished'.

I have so far concentrated on the students and their perceptions; I want to turn briefly and finally to the school itself as a community and its staff. The work of Michael Rutter(1979) has left us all in no doubt that good schools do make a difference - that is, well run communities, with coherent philosophies and a staff of good teachers. If we focus on the history staff in particular this would mean that they have a shared, maximalist concept of citizenship and a view of history which would emphasise the ways in which historical understanding and discourse is created from debatable sources of evidence; that history essentially is about debate and reinterpretation - what John Slater, Professor of History Education at the University of London Institute of Education has termed the 'doubt factor'. Their syllabus, though stemming from a basic framework of British history, would value the multi-faceted nature of British society through the ages and not merely the activities of the white, upper-class rulers; it would attempt to see both sides of the story when exploring such issues as the British voyagers from the fifteenth century onwards and their encounters with other peoples and cultures. Their teaching methods would emphasise the active involvement of students, valuing and encouraging them to express their understanding of the past through drama, art, modelling, music as well as writing. Above all, our history teachers must love and know their subject; they must be autonomous, knowledgeable, active - essential attributes for those who wish to encourage citizenship in their students.

Of course there are those who will say that this is to cry for the moon; that teachers are so beleaguered by bureaucratic demands that they have no inclination or indeed chance to exhibit such attributes and act as democratic role models for their students. But there is still much talent in the schools and amongst trainee history teachers and a genuine belief in the value of approaching the subject in this open, balanced and questioning manner. Where such ideals persist there is hope; and the technical, rationalist forces and the emphasis on a market driven education system can be balanced by a view which values an open, democratic society of citizens who intelligently and actively participate at all levels.

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