Citizens and Peoples

The thoughtful Left has put increasing stress on the rights of people as citizens rather than workers. Yet citizenship is difficult to reconcile with the claims of a multicultural society. Barry Hindess argues that our ideas on citizenship need a rethink.

The public discourse of liberal democracy combines elements that stress homogeneity with others that stress diversity. The idea of a dominant national culture, to which immigrants should be assimilated, coexists with a celebration of cultural diversity. In the United States, for example, a dominant image is that of the ‘melting pot’—suggesting that diverse cultural elements will be melted down into a common American substance. But there is also the potent image of the Statue of Liberty—described in the verse attached to its base as “Mother of Exiles”, that is, offering a home for those whose roots are in numerous other communities.

In many respects the relationship between ideas of citizenship and of multiculturalism could be seen as falling into this pattern, with the latter representing an acknowledgment of cultural diversity that goes somewhat beyond the stricter understandings of the former. However, multiculturalism has also been understood in a stronger sense. Canada is often taken as providing a model for the development of multiculturalism, and one of the most revealing definitions appears in the glossary to the 1987 report of the Standing Committee on Multiculturalism of the Canadian Parliament. Multiculturalism is described as: “Recognition of the diverse culture of a plural society based on three principles: we all have an ethnic origin (equality); all our cultures deserve respect (dignity); and cultural pluralism needs official support.” The three principles taken together strongly suggest that the cultures deserving of respect and of public support can be identified in terms of their ethnic origin. This is certainly how multiculturalism has normally been understood. But it is far from clear why cultural diversity should be identified with ethnic diversity in this way.

A second issue raised by this definition is that of public support for minority cultures. Within limits, recognition of
the presence of diverse cultures poses no great problem for the relaxed understandings of citizenship characteristic of liberal-democratic discourse. The active promotion of cultural pluralism by public authorities is, or is often thought to be, another matter entirely. It is a comparatively recent development, dating in most western societies from the 1960s or later. It is also highly contentious—in part because public support for minority cultures has sometimes been thought to conflict with the view that citizens should be treated as equals.

To see why there is a problem here, and why it is a political problem now, it is necessary to consider the relationship between multiculturalism and contemporary western views of citizenship. Multiculturalism is indeed difficult to reconcile with many of the ways in which citizenship is commonly understood. I will argue that our understanding of citizenship should be modified to take account of the inescapable cultural pluralism of most societies in the world today. I will conclude by offering a qualified defence of multiculturalism in terms of a pluralist account of citizenship.

In the tradition of western political thought citizens have normally been regarded as independent—meaning that they are not dependent on others for their legal standing as members of the community. They are not, for example, chattels, indentured servants or minors.

Following the Enlightenment, the rights and obligations associated with citizenship have required certain qualities of the citizen. Those qualities have frequently been understood in universalistic terms: that is, they have been regarded as qualities that are possessed or may be acquired by any normal human individual. However, since communities of citizens invariably inhabit a world of numerous autonomous political units, to be a citizen is always to be a member of one community among others. The community to which a citizen belongs will be a community of citizens (and others), but it will also be identified as a community in other ways. In classical Athenian democracy, for example, Athenian citizens had to be sons of Athenian citizens (and of Athenian mothers from the middle of the 5th cen-

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but not possessing the political rights of citizens. Metics in intellectually respectable case for any such division be divided into legally defined classes or estates. Indeed, temporary western understandings of citizenship have been With some qualifications, the most influential of contemporary western understandings of citizenship have been egalitarianism of the modern sort. Citizenship in ancient Athens and Rome was a matter of a limited set of statuses within a larger and highly differentiated network of statuses. First, citizens were divided into legally defined classes with distinct rights and obligations. Secondly, most adult members of the community could not be citizens, if only because women and slaves were not legally regarded as independent persons. Thirdly, even if we leave to one side inhabitants of subject territories, there were numerous independent persons subject to the laws of the community but not possessing the political rights of citizens. Metics in Athens, for example, were personally free non-citizens who were nevertheless subject to taxation and liable for military service.

However, what most distinguishes the conceptions of citizenship of the modern west from those of classical antiquity and the early modern period is the radical egalitarianism of the modern sort. Citizenship in ancient Athens and Rome was a matter of a limited set of statuses within a larger and highly differentiated network of statuses. First, citizens were divided into legally defined classes with distinct rights and obligations. Secondly, most adult members of the community could not be citizens, if only because women and slaves were not legally regarded as independent persons. Thirdly, even if we leave to one side inhabitants of subject territories, there were numerous independent persons subject to the laws of the community but not possessing the political rights of citizens. Metics in Athens, for example, were personally free non-citizens who were nevertheless subject to taxation and liable for military service.

With some qualifications, the most influential of contemporary western understandings of citizenship have been egalitarian in all three of these respects. First, citizens are not divided into legally defined classes or estates. Indeed, since the Enlightenment it has been difficult to mount an intellectually respectable case for any such division between citizens—although sterling efforts were once made to defend property qualifications for the franchise. Secondly, almost all members of the community are regarded as legally independent persons, and therefore as citizens—children now being the only significant exceptions. The third issue is more problematic. Although there are significant alien minorities in all societies, the predominant western view seems to be that all permanent residents should normally have the status of citizen. Even those who would restrict citizenship on grounds of descent tend to be egalitarian in this respect. The assumption is that non-citizens may be present in the community but only on a temporary basis. They would normally be expected to move on, or else, if they were eligible, to become citizens.

This egalitarian understanding of citizenship, together with the view that all citizens should share to some degree in a common culture, suggest that citizenship is now considered in the West against the background of a conception of community in which a unified polity is expected to go hand-in-hand with a unified national culture. Exceptions such as Belgium, Canada and the United Kingdom are regarded as anomalous. They are also, for precisely the same reason, regarded as potentially unstable.

I stress this aspect of contemporary western understanding of citizenship partly in order to make explicit what is often taken for granted. But my more serious concern is to bring out how peculiar is this assumption of cultural homogeneity. In fact, the experience of cultural diversity has been the normal human condition throughout recorded history. Wherever there have been states (and this includes all societies in which there have been citizens) they have coexisted with other states or with non-state societies beyond their borders. Political boundaries have always been disputed and subject to change, and those boundaries have always been permeable to a greater or lesser degree. States have always had to live with culturally diverse populations, including significant groups of foreign descent.

The perception of cultural difference is often, of course, a matter of perspective. Much of the diversity that Americans or Australians regard as an important feature of their own societies might also be subsumed within a broader notion of a common culture. However that may be, the modern experience of cultural diversity poses a problem for all western (and non-western) societies. First, the discourse of citizenship normally presupposes a common culture which functions both to sustain citizens' lives together and to distinguish them from citizens of other communities. Secondly, however that common culture might be identified, the community will invariably contain a significant minority who do not share it. The idea that the political community consists, or should normally consist, of those who share a common culture is an illusion. To the extent that that illusion seriously informs political discussion it can also be a dangerous one.

It is important to be clear about the nature of the difficulty here. First, the disjunction between the presumed cultural unity of its citizens and the multicultural reality of a society is a problem largely in consequence of the peculiarly egalitarian character of the contemporary western view of citizenship—with its sources in Enlightenment ideas of natural human equality on the one hand, and the variously idealised Enlightenment and Romantic accounts of the political communities of Athens and Rome on the other.

Secondly, the cultural and ethnic pluralism of national populations in the west is a consequence of the incorporation of distinct societies in a relatively open regime of trade and communication. The pluralism of populations in contemporary societies cannot be explained simply as a legacy of the mingling of populations resulting from wars and empires. It should not be expected to disappear even if the age of empires and of wars were to recede into the past. And this pluralism of populations has shown no signs of withering away during the long postwar peace (even in those societies that do not regard themselves as nations of immigrants). It is this which has been largely responsible for the gradual development of multiculturalism in western Europe, both as a set of governmental practices and as a pressing political issue. Cultural pluralism cannot
be eradicated through education, stricter control of borders or removal of unwanted persons. For the foreseeable future, then, all western communities will continue to be composed of both citizens and persons of several other statuses. While the greater part of the population in most Western societies will continue to be citizens (in contrast, say, to the situation in the Gulf Emirates), there will be significant minorities who are not—and many of the latter will be present illegally. In any liberal society even members of this last group will have rights. Some of them will also fall ill, or suffer from accidents or unemployment, and some will have children—all of which generate demands on the public services provided by the host community.

Now consider the question of multiculturalism. I began by noting that what is contentious is not the recognition of cultural diversity, but rather the question of whether and in what respects it is legitimate to provide public support for minority cultures. Why should this be an issue? One reason involves a hostility to the minority groups thought likely to benefit from multiculturalism—or rather, a hostility to their effective presence within the host community. What is at stake according to this rejection of multiculturalism is the defence of the community of citizens against what are regarded as alien intrusions. Such claims rest on a conception of community, and of citizenship as the normal form of membership of that community, that has a powerful support in all western societies.

A very different kind of reason why support for minority cultures might be opposed is that it appears to involve the unequal treatment of citizens. It is one thing, the argument might go, to provide members of minority groups with, say, language classes, wheelchair access to public places, and other kinds of assistance in order that they may participate on something like equal terms in the majority community. It is another thing entirely to provide members of particular minorities with additional support to pursue their culturally distinctive version of the good life.

In fact, multiculturalism would seem to conflict first with the contemporary, egalitarian understanding of citizenship according to which there should be no legally privileged estates, and secondly with the liberal view that all individuals equally should be free, within limits, to pursue their various understandings of the good life. The objection in both cases turns on the understanding of minority. If it is understood in an exclusive sense, such that public support of the relevant kind would be provided to members of particular minorities only and not to others, then multiculturalism does indeed conflict with an egalitarian view of the proper relation between government and citizen.

There, however, another possibility. That is to treat the field of eligible minorities as potentially open-ended so that any citizen could be a member of one or more of them. In fact, the idea that citizenship should be understood in this way is implicit in the associative pluralism advocated by Figgis, Cole and Laski—and more recently by Paul Hirst and John Mathews, in this journal and elsewhere. This form of pluralism shares the liberal view that, as far as reasonably possible, individuals should be free to pursue their various understandings of the good life. However, it disputes the atomistic conception of relations between citizen and state that liberals derive from the view.

Briefly, the argument is that most individual purposes can be pursued effectively only in association with other individuals—and that within any reasonably large community there will be a plurality of purposes that individuals might reasonably wish to pursue. A desirable polity, on this view, would be one that actively promoted the development of associations—precisely so that individuals would be free to pursue their version of the good life. The state would, of course, regulate the behaviour of associations, but it would also recognise their autonomy and right to develop in accordance with their own internal decision-making procedures.

Associational pluralism is not without its problems, but it does seem to offer an egalitarian account of citizenship that would not rule out the provision of public support for minority cultures. It is not, however, entirely consistent with multiculturalism as it is understood, for example, in the Canadian report quoted at the beginning of this paper. The cultures treated in multiculturalist discourse as deserving of respect and public support are restricted to those that can be identified in terms of their ethnic origin. In that respect, multiculturalism is essentially backward-looking; it aims to preserve a heritage of cultural differences that have been given by a certain kind of history.

It is this aspect of multiculturalism that appears most problematic from the standpoint of associational pluralism. The primary concern of the latter is to enhance the capacities of individuals—and therefore of the associations to which they might choose to belong—to pursue their common purposes. It is not to preserve cultural relics from the past. In these terms, while it might be legitimate in some cases to provide public support for cultures identified primarily in terms of ethnic origin, there can be no justification for restricting the range of eligible cultures in that way. Associations of Buddhists or gays should be regarded, at least in principle, as no less deserving of support than associations of Italians or Vietnamese. If there is a case to be made for multiculturalism in the societies of the modern west, it is a case that would submerge it within a broader program of support for cultural diversity.

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