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What is the Idea of Active Citizenship?

The idea of active citizenship can, on a theoretical level, be described as that which defines and demarcates the affiliation of the individual and the group to a political community. This affiliation has two different aspects. One of them concerns the relationship between citizens and the rights and obligations assigned to them by political institutions, whereas the other concerns public relationships in which citizens try to clarify and solve common affairs.

   The idea of an active citizenship dates back to ancient Greece and its philosopher, Aristotle, who was the first to develop a theory on citizenship. Following Aristotle's idea, citizenship during the years 500 to 400 BC was practised in the city government in Athens, then called Polis. Greek citizenship was primarily based on the fact that each citizen had an obligation towards the city government. It was considered a moral duty to be an active citizen who took part in political life. If one were to be respected as both a citizen and a human being, one would be morally obliged to take an active part in general matters concerning Polis. The idea of citizenship was therefore closely linked to the individual citizen and his rights and duties to take an active part in the political community. Even though the notion of citizenship was based more on obligations towards the city government itself than on the rights of the individual citizen, these obligations did not take the form of legal orders, but were considered rather as an option for the citizen to serve his community and thus gain the respect that came along with it.

    The institutions of the city government offered a great number of opportunities for the citizens to practise citizenship based on the rule that all citizens should govern and be governed. Citizenship as a concept had a considerable impact on society, partly because it was rooted in the moral concepts of the individual, and partly because it constituted an identity in relation to the community. A good citizen was a person who served the city

government through military commitments and an active participation in political life. Only then came the moral considerations towards family and others.

There was a redrafting of the idea of citizenship during the 19th century. The beginning of the industrial revolution, together with the growth of market economy, caused major social changes which, in turn, created a marked contrast between the absolute monarchy of the time and the new progressive trend of citizenship. This eventually led, among other things, to the French revolution in 1789.

The French revolution meant that the king's supremacy was replaced by the supremacy of the people. The king was no longer God's representative on earth as he had been under absolute monarchy. Consequently, the state took on another function. No longer incumbent on it to protect the sovereign monarch and the supremacy of the church, the state could now contribute towards developing and regulating the market economy, thus becoming increasingly powerful and sovereign, as it developed from a territorial to a national state. The latter made it possible to develop a real state of law while it concurrently offered the citizen a state-free environment for individual and collective action.

On the philosophical level, the period was marked by the Enlightenment which contributed to the development of new values such as freedom, tolerance, pluralism, individual rights, as well as promoting the idea of secularisation, in other words the separation of religion and politics. The people themselves gained priority over religion. Hence, the power of the church was considerably reduced. The independence of a state gaining increasing power, and the settling of national borders, meant that citizens became aware of their affiliation to a nation and of the conditions attached to such an affiliation. This encouraged their struggle for achieving further rights. In particular, the new social movements were active in the struggle to gain the same rights as the ruling class. The concept of citizenship in terms of a united claim for increasing the rights of the citizen became a central theme in the revolutionary process.

It has to be noted that, in contrast to the republican tradition, active participation is not a goal in itself to the liberalistic understanding of citizenship. Rather, it focuses on strengthening the citizen's individual rights, and makes sure that all citizens are given equal treatment. The citizen is viewed as a member of society who can express his own opinion by

voting and paying taxes. No further contribution to political decisions is expected from the citizen, and neither is he expected to consider himself as being part of the political community. In a liberalistic citizenship, the status of citizens depends solely on the subjective rights they exercise over the state itself and over the other citizens. As holders of subjective rights, they enjoy protection from the state as long as they obey the law. In the liberalistic way of thinking, subjective rights are those rights that guarantee tolerance for one's own rights.

The Difference between the Republican and the Liberalistic Idea of Citizenship

There is a fundamental difference between the republican and the liberalistic understanding of the idea of citizenship. The goal of the republicans is to establish well-functioning political communities in which the citizen is morally obliged to participate, whereas the goal of liberal citizenship is to give the citizen a number of rights (personal as well as political) in order to ensure his autonomy vis-à-vis the control of the state. By contrast, the republican tradition views active participation as a precondition for the proper functioning of democracy , and it considers its citizens as belonging to a larger political community which gives them, in turn, a personal and social identity. This notion of citizenship contributes to the awareness of their mutual dependence and to the fact that they are, as citizens, part of a common practice which, when executed, makes them what they would like to be, namely politically responsible subjects in a community of free and equal citizens. Where the liberalistic tradition emphasizes the citizen's possibility to influence the decision-makers through polling, the republican tradition emphasizes collective self-determination and the principle of the people's supremacy. The liberalists value human rights more than the right to participate in a politically responsible community. The republicans, on the other hand, value the right to participate in politics which, among other things, leads them to make laws of their own free will, rather than focusing on the "apolitical" liberties of human rights.

This fundamental contrast between the liberalistic and the republican understanding of the idea of citizenship and its priorities - in other words, the subjective freedom of the right of the citizen as opposed to the right of the democratic citizen to political participation - is still topical today as both these perceptions of citizenship are part of our understanding of the

concept itself. One can also, like Jürgen Habermas, see these concepts as being mutually dependent of each other.

The Idea of Active Citizenship Today and its New Implications

The rapid development in globalisation due to the widespread use of information technology together with the global coupling of the financial and production markets are all factors contributing to the loss of control by nation states on the general conditions of production and hence restricting them in the possibility of maintaining the existing levels of welfare. For the first time in world history, a global market is being established which is regulated by the purchase and sale of goods rather than by military power. A free global market with its advantages and disadvantages will, under all circumstances, demand some kind of regulation of the market economy in order to prevent environmental burdens including the tendency towards a growing inequality between the rich and the poor countries. The coupling of the financial and production markets promotes short-term investments and increases the speed of capital flow, leaving the individual state more vulnerable to economic speculation.

The deterioration of the concept of a nation state has a significant impact on the understanding of the idea of citizenship because the latter has primarily been linked from the the early days of industrialisation to the understanding that nation states themselves are responsible for securing the rights that enforce active citizenship. At present, however, and in line with the hasty development of globalisation, there is an urgent requirement that these rights be not only guaranteed by citizens and their individual nation, but that they also be respected by citizens of all other nations as well.

These rights, from being citizen rights won by a struggle within the framework of a nation state which it subsequently guarantees, have now become universal rights. As such, they are now valid all over the globe:"As world citizen rights". The difficulty in meeting the demand for the expansion of citizen rights from within the nation's framework to the outside is the fact that they would have to be monitored by a supranational regulatory authority with all the power needed to implement such control. Furthermore, the experience gained from the Mohammed crisis – following the drawings published in a Danish newspaper - shows that if

one attempts to make those rights universal one can, in fact, reinforce them as they are not absolute rights. They are rights won by a struggle that can always either be expanded or restricted according to the circumstances. For example, in Denmark freedom of expression with regard to racism is restricted by Danish law, and the fierce demonstrations against Denmark in connection with the publication of the drawings and the subsequent political discussions nationally and internationally, only show how differently the notion of freedom of expression can be interpreted. As individual rights become progressively universal, they will at the same time inevitably come under pressure from, for example, some religious groups who would contest such rights, demanding that they be adapted to their own beliefs.

The development of a global public has already put such rights under pressure. What is said in an English tv-programme or written in a Danish newspaper does not necessarily remain in the national domain, but can very quickly turn into an international affair with consequences for the nation involved. Hence, there will be, under all circumstances, a need to discuss how best to define and ensure personal freedom rights on an international and global level.

Transnational Citizenship

To completely write off nation states and, consequently, the individual nation's guarantee of rights and obligations that an active citizenship is built upon, is probably going too far, but it is a given that nation states must interact with supranational institutions to protect these rights. From a Danish point of view, the EU and the UN will be the most likely institutions with which to interact. Yet, the question arises at the present time on the possibility of developing the practice of citizenship on a supranational level.

The increasing globalisation of world economy contributes to creating a global identity and responsibility. Economic globalisation has caused a political struggle between its opponents and proponents. The struggle becomes apparent when summits and international conferences on economic policy are held. They are met with large demonstrations, occasionally violent, organised by anti-globalisation activists, whereas grassroots and NGOs lobby to gain influence on the political process.

The resistance to globalisation by different groups shows the emergence of a global civil society which in the long run can become a crucial factor for global development. Today one detects a sense of common responsibility within the field of ecology for global development. People's awareness of the limited resources of the earth and the threat of an uncontrolled development of market economy to the fragile ecology balance creates a worldwide commitment to our planet. The increasing number of refugees and immigrants is interrelated with the acute poverty which persists in the developing world. The problem can only be solved by showing global responsibility, thus contributing to create sustainable development in the poor countries of the world.

The development of a global responsibility on both a political and a popular level can become an important element in the new conception of citizenship.

The idea of a global citizenship is also brought into sharp focus as an increasing number of countries elect a democratic government. During the last three decades the number of democracies has, in fact, increased at a rapid rate. The majority of dictatorships in Southern Europe, Asia and Latin America, as well as the totalitarian communist regimes of Eastern Europe, have been replaced by democratic governments. Only Africa and the Arab part of the Muslim world are not part of this democratic development.

Such a process of democratisation is actually interesting because it shows that it is largely the human rights factor which forms the basis for the new democracies. This goes to prove that human rights are becoming universal values. In fact, none of the new democracies are built on new basic values. There is no such thing as a special Asian or Latin American conception of democracy. Instead, there is a general approval of human rights and traditional democratic institutions such as parliament, free elections and independent courts.

Human rights and the European conception of democracy - namely the republican and the liberal conception - are breaking loose from the underlying values of Western societies as they achieve universal status and become universal global values. The conception of democracy and human rights have now become overall political guidelines which many different civilisations throughout the world follow without being subjected to cultural standardisation.

The rapid expansion of the concept of democracy indicates that a global democracy can emerge and in this way create a space for the notion of citizenship. But it will be a different kind of democracy from the one we know from nation states. Unlike a national democracy – which gives all citizens one and the same vote – a global democracy is more likely to consider the relative strength of the different nations and regions. At the moment it is a utopian idea to imagine that the Security Council would be formed by countries with the largest populations.

Citizenship within the Framework of the EU

Another possibility would be to make the EU the primary framework for citizenship. Habermas is one of those theorists who argues that a new citizenship will have to be linked to a supranational unit because there is a tension between the development of a democratic state governed by law and market economy.   The modernisation of market economy follows its own dynamics and has no connection to the attempt to develop a state governed by law. The new mutual economic dependence in Europe thus generates a growing need for co-ordination on the political level. According to Habermas co-ordination alone is not enough to regulate the competitive conditions of the inner market; it will also be necessary to create better possibilities for collective political acts across national borders.

 It will certainly prove inadequate if the democratic process works only within the framework of the nation states as it does today. A common political public for all the EU has to be established ensuring the development of democracy across national borders. Up to now, various duties and responsibilities in the EU have been carried out by European organisations which have developed a close administrative network. Although the new administrative élite is formally committed to its respective government and institutions, it has already outgrown its national relationship and now forms a bureaucracy which is above the democratic process.

Unfortunately, the gap between the citizens' participation and the top-down control is widening in the EU as more resolutions and regulations have come to affect a growing

number of citizens while at the same time they do not have any powerful means of discussing and exerting influence on the decision-making process.

The urgent question is whether a European citizenship which possesses „*a commitment to a European good*",**2** can be shaped.

Habermas does not believe that national democracies will be dissolved when citizenship is linked to the EU, but they will be playing a different role as part of a new and larger unity in Europe.

It is difficult to develop a notion of citizenship on the EU level because a distinctive common identity does not exist and, consequently, loyalty and obligations towards the community will be difficult to achieve. For how does citizenship work without a crucial sense of common identity?

Habermas suggests that supranational citizenship be built on a political level. He thus distinguishes between the political level and the cultural level. The cultural level could be removed just as religion was separated from the state through the secularisation of society after the French Revolution. This would appear to be feasible especially as religion is an important part of the cultural level. Accordingly, the citizen's religious and cultural affiliations should be of no importance for citizenship or democracy. The EU and the state should protect the citizen's religious and cultural freedom, but apart from this, religion and culture should be unimportant to citizenship. Furthermore, Habermas recommends elaborating a European constitution based on human rights, to develop a European political establishment and to promote the creation of a European public.

Even though Habermas proposes to cut off the cultural level from citizenship, the development of European citizenship will still demand that every individual be able to conceive him/herself not only as a German, Swede, Englishman and Dane but as a European as well. The adjustment of a national identity to a European identity is necessary if the idea of a European citizenship is to succeed. Otherwise, the whole idea of a European citizenship would be nonsensical.

Triangular Citizenship

The individual rights of citizenship will be secured both on the national level, on the European level within the framework of the EU, and on a global level in the United Nations. A Dane will be guaranteed social rights on the national level. The EU will guarantee him his rights in relation to the inner market. The UN guarantees his human rights. The solution is to develop a triangular citizenship which works on all three levels. The levels, however, should not be considered as important as the conditions for practising the new understanding, namely the sense of community and loyalty.

National solidarity will undoubtedly continue to have a strong influence on people's identity. Citizens in European countries will still display commitment and loyalty towards their respective countries. Citizenship depends on a common conception of nationality. The new conception may at first be linked up with this level, but people will have to be open to what takes place both in Europe and in global communities. As for Danes, they must learn to relate to citizens in other countries on the basis of a commitment towards these communities.

The development of a sense of responsibility and identity towards both the European level and the global level occurs when citizenship is lifted out of its national context. Even today we see many communities with an identity and self-knowledge which goes further than the national solidarity which they share and live by. There are communities who network across frontiers or ethnic groups, and who, while still keeping a close connection to their native countries, develop a national and global identity. With time, fragmentation of the old concept of citizenship will occur. Although it is still primarily attached to the national level, it is already starting to blend with parts of both the European and global levels.

The obligations and the rights of citizenship are no longer solely guaranteed by the nation state. Today the international community also plays an important role in ensuring citizens their rights. A triangular citizenship can and should contribute to develop a common popular identity in a time of individualism.

Personal and political rights and obligations will still be the basis for the idea or concept of citizenship, but political rights will be limited by legislative power on the supranational level, for example, the EU. Personal rights will not only be guaranteed by the national state but will gradually become universal rights and hence guaranteed by a global institution such

as the UN. Moreover, the development of a triangular citizenship implies a public on both the European level and the global level in order to create contact between citizens across nation states. This public is already now being established through the Internet (weblogs, chatrooms, etc.) and is gaining widespread importance. The continued development of IT-technology will strengthen the political importance of this public.