

Young People, Crime and Citizenship

John Pitts addresses citizenship and youth.

The question of citizenship poses serious problems for government. Firstly, because any discussion of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship must necessarily call into question the legitimacy of the chaotic, and increasingly discrepant, distribution of wealth and opportunity which serves to inhibit both the exercise of rights and the discharge of responsibilities. Indeed, Jock Young (1999) contends that the erosion of the economic underpinnings of citizenship is the motor of the radical changes in both the nature and volume of crime we witness in the 'late modern' era. The deficit in economic citizenship is highly concentrated in terms of ethnicity in the UK, with 40% of African-Caribbeans and 59% of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in the UK located in the poorest fifth of the population (Rowntree Foundation 1995).

Secondly, any discussion of citizenship must raise questions about its boundaries. For example, even before the air war in Kosovo began in 1999, there were over 10,000 Kosovan refugees living in London alone (The Guardian 18/5/99). This movement of the poor and the oppressed, from Eastern Europe and Africa has been discernible in Europe for many years and now it is accelerating. Inevitably these migrants serve to swell the ranks of the poor in the countries they enter.

And, as a result, youth crime will probably increase because of the pressures towards criminality which pertain in the impoverished and transient neighbourhoods in which migrants will, of necessity,

settle. Thus, even if discriminatory treatment within the justice system were to be eradicated, the present over-representation of Black African-Caribbean children and young people, and the growing representation of Asian youngsters in the youth justice system will be augmented by the children of these new migrants.

The size, nature and pace of these changes suggests that if there was ever a need to develop a positive, inclusive, conception of citizenship which embraces the growing band of children and young people currently destined for the social margins, and beyond, it is now. Yet, New Labour's rejoinder is as familiar as it is contentious. A new, more restrictive, Asylum Bill to keep would-be migrants out, and the promise of a revitalised 'community' at home to bind the socially marginal into the 'conscience collective'. But New Labour's new communitarian communities, inspired by Amiti Etzioni, are not political spaces in which the authentic beliefs, desires and grievances of the multiplicity of people who live within them can be articulated. Nor are they sites upon which cultural diversity, including oppositional values, can be celebrated in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. Rather, they are a crucible in which difference is hammered into consensus by 'community leaders' in partnership with the police and the local authority, acting responsibly for the common good. For New Labour 'community' is first and foremost, a homogenising ethical force which will 'restore the moral balance', manufacturing citizenship simply by reinforcing our duties and obligations.

Teaching citizenship

In May 1999 Education Secretary David Blunkett announced that schools were to devote one and a half hours a week to the teaching of citizenship. But citizenship 1990s-style is not really about rights at all; it is about obligations and, specifically, about the obligations of children and young people to their parents, their school

and their 'community'.

It is disciplinary in intent, aiming to generate a more compliant young citizenry for more uncertain times. Being unable, or unwilling, to offer young citizens, as of right, access to educational and vocational opportunities commensurate with their skills and abilities, and wishing to head off the disaffection and dissent this may engender, this new citizenship is largely a reiteration of responsibilities and the consequences of non-conformity.

Real citizenship

Citizenship, 1990s-style, celebrates not the coming of age of the idea but its exhaustion, and the abandonment of the original, and far richer, notion of citizenship, as a symmetrical relationship rooted in legal civil and welfare entitlements and based upon mutual respect and interdependence. Thus, a thoroughgoing form of citizenship for young people would have some or all of the following characteristics.

1. Citizenship is active, it denotes forms of participation in public life which are not limited to the periodic re-election of governments, on the one hand, or a few hours voluntary work on the other. It encompasses an active engagement with, and a concern for, the well-being of one's self, one's peers, one's family and one's neighbours and an effective voice in the institutions which bear upon their lives. This would suggest that a key to engendering a sense of citizenship in school students would be the democratisation of schools, colleges and other relevant public agencies which bear upon the lives of young people through the enfranchisement of students in, their governance.
2. Citizens have a political voice and a political stake. They are governed, but through their participation in local political life they also have a hand, and an interest, in government. As

van Gunsteren (1994) suggests, to be a citizen is to assume an 'office' and it therefore incumbent on governments to create structural links, which tie these 'office-holders' into the political process in significant ways. In many areas of France in the 1980s youth councils, comprising children and young people aged 10-18 with the power to call councillors and officers to account on youth matters, were established by local councils. In Bologna, Italy, in the 1990s the local authority operated a 'dual key' system wherein substantial parts of departmental budgets could only be spent if the young people's committee, comprising representative children and young people, turned their key in the lock as well. In this way, consultation and debate with young people, supported by adults, became unavoidable. In these examples, young people were included as a resource whereby local authorities could develop a more sensitive response to their various constituencies, rather than as a problem to be dealt with.

3. If young citizens participate in this way they will learn, as a matter of course, that wielding responsibility also means that, from time to time, they must be prepared to subordinate their own interests to the general good.
4. Citizens must develop a capacity for autonomy, judgement and loyalty (van Gunsteren 1994) and while this may be developed through political participation, it must also be nurtured and supported by teachers, youth workers or youth justice workers and local politicians. This task is made no easier by the fact that these values are in tension with a culture which prizes individualism above collective endeavour and rewards egotism disproportionately.
5. Citizens are not the passive subjects of historical and cultural processes. They are actively involved in shaping their histories and re-shaping their cultures. Michel Foucault observes that the birth of contemporary citizenship, in France in 1789, marked the birth of a new type of 'modern' humanity:

"To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments, it is to make oneself the

object of a complex and difficult elaboration... This modernity does not 'liberate man in his own being'; it compels him to face the task of producing himself" Michel Foucault
This capacity, for self-creation and self renewal, is of course, essential in a society characterised by rapid socio-economic change, ever more complex ethnicities and cultural fusion. But, sadly, positive self re-invention tends to be a characteristic of those who believe that change will offer new opportunities and a better life, and who have the personal and institutional resources to cope with uncertainty. Those who experience change as loss are far more likely to hark back to an often imaginary lost past, and far more willing to try to restore that past by force. Education can equip young people with the knowledge and discernment to enable these processes to occur, but it must be matched by an experience which confirms that what they end up with is worth more than what they have to go through to get it.

6. And this is achieved when citizens are productive because, in contributing to the common wealth through economic activity, they are included in a future-oriented process. Thus it is a central task for 'solidaristic' governments to ensure that the skills and abilities of citizens are used to the full for the common good, as is the case in Sweden's Active Labour Market strategy.
7. Citizens consume. Consumerism is here to stay because it powers modern economies. Moreover, the consumer is a key stakeholder in the productive process and political citizenship consists, in part, in becoming a discerning consumer, able to use the power of consumption to shape the behaviour of powerful producers and retailers. Consumption is particularly important to children and young people whose struggle to establish a plausible social identity, and to feel included, is often predicated upon having access to the same kinds of clothes, sports equipment or music etc. as their peers. To that extent, consumption is social inclusion.
8. Citizens are engaged in a relationship of mutuality, one with another, and it is upon this intricate and infinitely

complex network of mutual obligation that social cohesion and social solidarity is founded. As such, the citizenship of the majority is diminished if the rights and obligations of citizenship are denied to a minority.

9. While the citizen has an obligation to uphold the law, the state has a reciprocal duty to protect the property and person of citizens. Indeed, for the radical right, this is the sole justification for the existence of the state. Within this, the state has a further obligation to ensure, in the name of distributive justice, that no citizen, by dint of their neighbourhood, race, culture, social class, gender or age, is subject to excessive victimisation. At present, there is a profound imbalance between the risks encountered by children and young people, particularly if they are lower class, Black or Asian, and the crime control and community safety strategies which target these risks.

Ultimately, the question of citizenship asks governments whether youth crime can best be accounted for by the erosion of discipline or a failure of solidarity.

John Pitts is Vauxhall Professor of Socio-Legal Studies at the University of Luton. His new book *The New Politics of Youth Crime: Discipline or Solidarity*, will be published by Macmillan in Spring 2001.

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