

Global Citizenship: Thick or Thin

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As Alysha Banerji rightly reports, the world is in an existential global crisis where the problems that confront it—for example, global warming, planetary pandemics, rising sea levels, intensifying inequality—cannot be addressed on a national level alone. The resolution, as Banerji rightly notes, requires global coordination, and she rightly believes that such coordination requires a change in subjectivity or, as she puts it, quoting Appiah, it requires shaping “hearts and minds for our life together on this planet, beginning, of course with the education of the young.”¹ From this she concludes that: “Learning to think and act as citizens of the world is no longer a matter of choice; it is a necessity and moral imperative.”² For her “Cosmopolitan (identity) centers universal humanity over national, racial, ethnic or other affiliations.” In this formulation citizenship is more than just a legal status granting members certain rights. It is also a moral status requiring of them certain responsibilities.

Instead of just identifying as a citizen of a certain country, according to Banerji, people need also to take on a global identity, to identify as global citizens. In this response I want to develop Banerji’s ideas, by making a distinction between *thick* global citizenship, which I believe is the kind of citizenship Banerji seems to have in mind and *thin* global citizenship, which I will argue might be what we might realistically hope for. By thick citizenship I mean the kind of relationship that entails more than simply an abstract identification with an imagined object, although as Banerji rightly notes, nations are imagined communities. Thick citizenship also entails a certain kind of partiality towards the co-members of a community, a partiality that has historical roots and that involves shared aspirations and a network of directed loyalty. It extends both backwards into a past, often idealized, and forward to an aspirational future. It requires what Aristotle called “political friendship” and is marked, not by blind obedience, but by the willingness to undergo personal sacrifice for the good of the whole and to sustain a required level of social cohesion, and by an understanding that others are willing to make similar sacrifices. Thick citizenship

may be likened to a family that shares many of the same experiences and are connected through a mutual network of regard and support.

The problem for establishing any thick citizenship, and especially global citizenship is that mutual recognition is developed and reinforced in many very tangible ways which are hard to establish on a global basis. A shared language, while not essential, is helpful in shaping mutual recognition as is a shared aesthetic tradition—music, dance, cuisine, iconic architecture, literature, —and more subtle signs body posture, hand gestures, voice tone, all have a part to play in constituting such recognition. Thick recognition constitutes a high bar for those who seek to turn students into cosmopolitan citizens.

In citing Benedict Anderson, Banerji seems to place some hope in the possibility that as cosmopolitan citizenship might follow the trajectory of national citizenship and come to fruition through the development of a global imagination, spurred on by education. While this is possible, it is unlikely. For while nations exist in imagination, they do not exist *only* in imagination. Rather, nationhood is constantly being enacted and reenacted and through these enactment loyalties are constantly being affirmed. This process has ramifications for everyday life and the ease of living and cooperating together. While the enactment of my American citizenship is not difficult to envisage, even in seemingly contradictory behavior such as saluting the flag and “taking a knee,” it is more difficult to imagine what the everyday enactment of cosmopolitan citizenship might entail, and how it would lead to thick mutual recognition.

To aim education at developing a thick conception of global citizenship also raises ethical issues. Consider the following quotations from Banerji’s paper.

“Learning to think and act as citizens of the world is no longer a matter of choice; it is a necessity and moral imperative.”

Or:

“Cosmopolitan (identity) centers universal humanity over national, racial, ethnic or other affiliations.”

Or:

“The challenge is to take minds and hearts formed over the long millenia of living in local troops (sic) and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the

global tribe we have become and that means shaping hearts and minds for our life together on this planet, beginning, of course with the education of the young.”

Let's divide this last passage into two parts. First: “The challenge is to take minds and hearts formed over the long millenia of living in local troops (sic) and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become.” There is little to object to in this passage. However, the second part of the passage raises some further questions: “that means shaping hearts and minds for our life together on this planet, beginning, of course with the education of the young.” For many changing hearts and minds is most appropriately left not to educators, but to parents. I do not fully agree with this view, but an overly intrusive education can be problematic and is cause for concern.

For the most part meaning-making begins locally. From a certain, more local perspective, the cosmopolitan looks like an alien—a member of a new, rising and privileged class—working to undermine more familiar, more comfortable, more local identities. This is not always pretty and can set in motion ugly, reactionary movements—for example, “Jews (or Blacks) shall not replace us”—that education needs to find ways to address.

My own approach to the problem that Banerji so accurately recognizes, that is the gap between global problems and a global consciousness able to address, is somewhat more limited. Instead of aiming for thick citizenship, I would be very satisfied with a thinner conception of global citizenship, one more like a team than a family. Members of a team may come together to address a shared problem, but then they may or may not connect on any deep level. Certainly, and where appropriate, connections can be made between and across different communities, as in the “Civic Imagination project” that Banerji describes, they should be encouraged. And certainly, where establishment histories neglect or distort cultural experiences, they should be corrected, as the 1619 project does. But in closing the gap between global problems and the will to address them a thin conception of global citizenship is perhaps sufficient.

Here I agree with Melissa Williams writing twenty years ago in an edited book that Kevin McDonough and I put together. Williams rightly challenges

the idea that meaningful citizenship *must* be grounded in a shared identity, (208) and suggests that what is needed instead is recognition that all humans are tied together by a “community of shared fate.”³ (209). Certainly, the existential problems that compose this fate are even more visible today than they were when our book was published. In my mind, bringing people together to help reshape this fate might well occur without interfering with the ties that bind people together in cultural or national communities. At a minimum, however, what is needed is a sense that the problems that confront us today require both coordinated efforts across national borders and sound judgment in addressing them. Certainly, we may wish for more, but for now that may have to be enough.

REFERENCES

- 1 Anthony Appiah, “Education for Global Citizenship,” *Teachers College Record* (1970) 110, no. 13 (2008): 88.
- 2 Alysha Banerji, “Civic Imagination and Cosmopolitanism,” *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 1 (same issue).
- 3 Melissa S. Williams, “Citizenship as Shared Fate and the Functions of Multicultural Education, in Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg, *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 208-247.