



What If Good Citizens Etiquette Requires Silencing Political Conversation in Everyday Life? Notes from the Field

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If politics is an everyday affair, political conversation has to be an everyday affair. Americans need a genre for political conversation that corresponds to our "personalized" form of citizenship. But what we have instead is an image of political conversation that disconnects it from everyday life, makes political conversation seem to be a rare, scary activity that should happen only in special circumstances, that will disrupt meetings and rip friends apart and intimidate neighbors and evacuate meetings of healthy community volunteers and ruin good jokes and not do any good. So, my question is how to imagine a kind of everyday, casual political conversation that won't seem like a downer, that won't seem out of place everywhere.

Drawing on two ethnographic projects, I want to explore the qualities of different kinds of settings that might invoke the kind of conversation that would draw out responsible rights-bearing citizenship, situations that could evoke the kinds of interactions that might bring out the truly radical nature of this old liberal ideal. As Chantal Mouffe says (1994, e.g.), the problem isn't with the liberal ideal of privacy, free exchange of ideas, and individualism; the problem is that the promise of liberal democracy has never been fulfilled.

For the rights-bearing citizen, being a good citizen is, as Michael Schudson says, something that happens a little bit all day long, in small pieces, rather than only once every four years, or rather than only in voluntary associations that meet after dinner after a long day of non-citizenship. This doesn't mean citizens just sit around and talk politics all day, or become immobilized in a swamp of self-doubt as they put everything up for questioning and moral scrutiny. But it does mean that moral and political questions should freely flow

into conversation in a range of contexts, all day long, even though it's not the main topic most of the time. This kind of citizenship is very personal, it is about the whole person, who carries citizenship around with him or herself all day, instead of becoming a citizen only in special situations. As Schudson says, "'the political,' carried on the wings of rights, has now diffused into everyday life" (8) Later, I'll ask whether this kind of everyday citizenship and the language of rights should be collapsed into one another, but for now, I'll focus on the everyday-ness of the kind of citizenship Schudson is describing..

To grasp this concept of the everyday rights-bearing citizen requires

1. redefining what "politics" is; and
2. reconsidering where to look for good citizenship, for the kinds of conversational etiquette and relationships that might be amenable to this newly expanded definition of politics--are voluntary associations still the best places to look?

First, I want to draw up a little diagram of the possibilities for political conversation that Michael Schudson's book describes. He says we need all of the different strands of citizenship; so, second, I'll use some evidence from my book *Avoiding Politics* to show how these different strands of American political culture interrelate and become incompatible in some typical voluntary associations. Third, I argue that there are two different faces to the rights-bearing citizen, that come out in different situations, and I invite us to imagine situations that might evoke the kind of good rights-bearing citizenship that Schudson has in mind. The kinds of conversations I want to explore are conversations outside of family contexts about child raising, to see how they might blend the different strengths of different models of citizenship, and to see how they might evoke rights-bearing

citizenship. Perhaps the "frontstage" public setting isn't the only or best place to search for the voice of the good rights-bearing citizen.

Finally, I ask why we should care about this personalized, everyday political conversation, asking how the quality of conversation in everyday life is, itself, something that matters for society as a whole. Is it just an esthetic, or psychological, good, to have good conversation about important issues? Does this everyday citizenship matter for policy making? If not, or if the connection is only very attenuated and indirect, or if the connection works only through the legal system, then is such conversation irrelevant for social change? I think that it is not just esthetically or psychologically important, even though it does not directly matter for policy making or political organizing or even for changing laws about rights. It matters because citizens who do not pay attention to their everyday affairs cannot be good citizens, no matter how eagerly they join up and get involved in voluntary associations. To be a good citizen in a world that is crowded with institutions, you need more than just joining groups that meet up after dinner; you need to be a "mindful," active critic of the institutions in which you live--not just the state, not just the workplace, but all institutions. And conversation about that can happen inside institutions and out; it does not need to happen only in specially set-aside public spaces.

This kind of citizenship and activism may not be entirely new, but is a new challenge to most of our theories of civil society and participatory democracy: The "rights-bearing citizen" resembles Alberto Melucci's "inner planet," Paul Heelas' "detraditionalization," Anthony Giddens' "life politics," Zygmunt Bauman's "postmodern ethics," Paul Lichterman's "personalized politics," Paul Barry Clarke's "deep citizenship," Durkheim's "cult of the individual," and of course, the whole feminist

movement's idea that "the personal is political." These all differ in important ways, but all share an image of the mindful, personally responsible, individualized citizen, who brings a kind of inner public sphere to bear on all issues. In this paper, I want to theorize this kind of citizenship into democratic theory, and theorize both this concept of everyday citizenship and democratic theory by applying them to the specific example of childraising and the conversations that surround it.

Genres of Citizenship

As Schudson says, each period, each type of citizenship, has its important, good features, including the contemporary period: the loyalist has a general solidarity for all other citizens; the partisan has passionate attachment to a group, loves to argue, and may even have an analysis that the party offers; the knowledgeable citizen weighs evidence; the rights-bearing citizen pays attention to politics all day long, and takes politics personally. Genres of political speech from earlier eras of good citizenship would not always be harmonious with everyday, rights-bearing citizenship. The colonial period loyalist would be too unquestioning or obsequious; the party-politics era partisan would be too combative; the knowledgeable citizen would be too coldly detached and boring for anyone to want to converse with; and the rights-bearing citizen might lapse into selfishness, or might be too detached from any group to cultivate feelings of warmth or group loyalty.

- Can voluntary associations have conversations that simultaneously produce
1. solidarity with society as a whole, rituals that draw out all people's common citizenship or humanity, that cause you to focus on the common good, no matter how imperfect--all-for-one-and-one-for-all solidarity of the sort the colonial period offered;

2. group power, passionate affiliation with people you agree with, debate that brings out differences and disagreements and helps participants clarify their ideas--power, affiliation and argument of the sort that party era politics created;
3. a fair distribution of reasoned ideas and information--dispassionate weighing of information of the sort the informed citizen would need in order to vote well;
4. a sense of individual dignity and everyday political awareness, to make sure that individuals of all groups do get equal rights--respect for the individual *personne humaine* of the sort the rights-era offers.

Is solidarity with society as a whole always in tension with free-ranging debate? Is becoming an pressure group always incompatible with creating the kinds of rituals that lead to solidarity? Is weighing information too boring to be compatible with any of the other forms of citizenship? In other words, is it a zero-zero-zero-sum relationship: ritualized solidarity with the common good up, group power, affiliation and passionate argument down, information down, political effectiveness down?; or solidarity down, affiliation and passionate argument up, information down, political effectiveness down, etc.?

My first set of examples show that citizens themselves assumed that this was the case, for the public forum. They assumed that the only good kind of citizen was the colonial-style solidaristic citizen; if you couldn't be that, you would have to be selfish citizen, who spoke publicly about your own rights without connecting them to other people's rights. So, citizens assumed that the four kinds of citizenship Schudson describes existed in a zero-sum relationship to one another.

But I argue that it doesn't necessarily have to be the case! Let me give a couple of

examples of this seemingly zero-zero-zero-sum relationship that civic group members assumed existed between these different modes of citizenship, and then draw out their implications. The book from which I draw the first two sets of examples is based on 2 1/2 years of p.o. in volunteer, activist and recreational groups. The volunteer groups included an anti-drugs group and group of parents of high school kids called The Parent League, kind of like a PTO. The main activist group was an anti-toxics group that was trying to prevent an incinerator from being approved for its town; and the main recreational group was country-western dance club. All these groups and the others I studied were in a sprawling suburb that housed major toxic chemical plants that routinely had major spills and fires; the schools sports events often had racist name calling sessions--so there were political problems worth discussing there.

I found that good citizens often assumed that the only way they could be good citizens was to avoid talking politics in public, because they thought political conversation might be too discouraging or divisive. The only way they assumed you could be a good citizen was by sounding like a Colonial-era person who equated citizenship with ritualized solidarity. But when citizens did try to become politically active, they could not use that model of citizenship, and then, the only vocabulary to which they had access when speaking in public, frontstage settings was the vocabulary of self-interest, that resembled rights-bearing citizenship but that did not connect personal interests to rights. Only in backstage conversations, behind the scenes, could people talk about their own projects in ways that corresponded to the good sides of the various strands of American political culture that Schudson describes. After quickly running through these examples, I am going to ask if perhaps the "frontstage" public setting isn't the only or best place to search for the

voice of the good rights-bearing citizen, and if not, what that means for democratic theory.

Example #1: Colonial-style Volunteer Groups

Volunteer groups tried hard to ignore other problems they couldn't readily fix without too much discussion; not because they didn't care about the problems, but because they were like good citizens of the Colonial period: they were trying to create a fellow feeling amongst citizens, a feeling of general solidarity. Volunteers assumed that the purpose of speaking in meetings was to encourage each other and other people in the community to think that regular people really can make a difference on issues that are close to home. As one volunteer put it to me, more than once:

“The way to get a volunteer is to say ‘who has a drill bit and can drill 8 holes on Saturday. Maybe you’ll get someone who’s never volunteered and maybe they’ll come again.’”

Information was considered something that people might have unequal access to, as well, so discussing something that might require too much knowledge would be elitist and therefore not good for promoting this fellow feeling

So this goal of creating solidarity meant avoiding talking about issues that might be divisive, that might require debate; and it meant avoiding exposing people's ignorance about politics or their inability to be articulate; and it also meant avoiding noticing everyday politics. In other words, the solidarity-inspiring Colonial era citizen came at the expense of the other kinds of citizens, who could debate and disagree, or who could share information, or who could claim new rights and defend them. For example, there were regular race riots and name calling sessions at high school sports events. But Parent League never directly discussed this problem, and tried hard to avoid discussing it.

Outsiders came to meetings to try to get the group to talk about the issue, but the members would just say, “What do you want us to do about it?” and quickly change the subject to something more important, like fundraising.

But they did care about the issues that they tried to ignore. A member of the Parent League, Cindy, told it to me and another volunteer in this second volunteer’s tiny office, in a community center, after a meeting. This parent, Cindy, said that another Parent League member, Debbie, had told a funny story at a party the night before. Debbie’s family was hosting a family from a rural town, for a big statewide football game:

when they got here, the [rural] parents said “Oh, thank God.” So Debbie said,

“Thank God what? They said, “Thank God you’re not black. We were worried they’d house us with blacks.” So Debbie said that she told her son to invite all his black friends over for a slumber party! Some of the kids from the rural town had never seen a black person before and they were asking them, “What clothes do you wear? What music do you listen to?” Debbie said it was quite a cultural experience.

This parent, Cindy, could triumphantly repeat the story about Debbie’s slumber party in this tiny, closet sized office, but the same sort of public-spirited sentiment could never be expressed frontstage, in a more public forum. This pattern was typical--I have dozens of examples of the same pattern.

So, we have the solidarity producing colonial citizen trying to work in the contemporary forum. In other words, we have the rights-bearing citizen trying to fit into the clothes of the colonist, assuming that talking like Colonists in public was the only morally good way to be good citizens. That meant leaving out of the public arena the idea that claiming and defending new rights is a good thing, and leaving out the idea that these everyday rights are politically and morally good. It meant leaving out the most interesting

questions of all, that arise in this contemporary forum, in which people have claimed rights, in which all members and potential members are supposed to be equals.

Now if the volunteers could have read Michael Schudson's book, and learned that being a rights-bearing citizen can be morally good in its own way, perhaps they would not have limited their forum to questions that can be answered by building the throne for the Homecoming Queen and roasting dogs on the Royal Dog Steamer. They would have connected the process of creating a "feeling of community" to their own and other people's everyday rights without worrying that this would destroy their moral integrity. But perhaps there is something incompatible about rights-bearing citizenship and public speech; perhaps rights-bearing citizenship is something quieter, more intimate, more steady, relentless and inescapable, that loses its political power when broadcast publicly.

Example #2: Activists: rights-talk in public; rights-bearing citizenship in private

Rights-bearing citizenship can be deformed, by the same understanding of the public sphere that volunteers had. Everyone--activists and volunteers alike--wanted to be like a colonist, creating rituals of solidarity with which no one could disagree. But that was not an option for the activists I studied, who were disagreeing with a corporation that wanted to build a toxic incinerator in town. For example, when activists tried to get a permit to march in the annual town parade, the person who was in charge of issuing permits told them that they could come and march but they could not hand out leaflets, because this event was a "family" event, not a political one." Activists, like other citizens in town, assumed that the rights-bearing citizen came at the expense of the solidarity-producing citizen; and if activists couldn't be good citizens the normal, colonial style way, they were thrown to their own devices. Some tried to be information-oriented citizens, but no one

could stand to listen to their dry lists of facts.

Here we have the rights-bearing citizen, but one that does not publicly tie the individual claimant to the broader society. Each individual or local could claim rights publicly, but only privately could activists acknowledge that their own rights should not come at the expense of others--only privately could activists generalize "rights"--talk about "rights" instead of "self-interest. In other words, publicly, the activists did use the kind of "rights-talk" that communitarians criticize. But behind the scenes, they were the kind of moral, "rights-bearing citizens" that Schudson describes. For example, Maryellen said, several times,

People always say "what are you gonna do with all that toxic waste? That's something we should talk about, since it's not just a local issue. We shouldn't just fight off the thing to have some other community that's less organized get stuck with it!"

But publicly, she, like the other activists, could speak only as a "mom" or a "property owner," claiming that she cared only because of her own self-interest in these two areas. As with volunteer groups, activists assumed that public spirited reasoning and deliberation was out of place in the public forum. They assumed that the purpose of speaking in public was to win. This genre for the public expression of citizenship forced them to speak in a way that actually ran counter to their own goals: most of them actually had a much broader social vision in mind, of encouraging general grassroots debate and involvement in politics in an everyday way.

That is, they wanted to encourage people to become the rights-bearing citizens who carry a political self with them wherever they go--they wanted to change the political culture. They didn't just want to win. Speaking as self-interested property owners and

moms undermined their deepest goal. It shut debate down, instead of opening it up. What they were looking for was a forum for creating a quality of conversation and of personhood and a culture, even more than they cared about winning.

But in public settings, they thought they had to sound instrumentally self-interested--in public, they could not connect the two faces of the rights-bearing citizen into one moral whole. In both cases, people could sound like they cared, but only behind the scenes.

Where Does the Rights-Bearing Citizen Pipe Up? Where Does It Sound Best?

I think we have to detach two different faces of the rights-bearing citizen. One face of the rights-bearing citizens is the person who claims rights for him or herself, obviously enough: this is the face of the rights-bearing citizen that we see in public. The other face of the rights-bearing citizen is the person who is citizen-ly all day, by noticing small injustices in everyday affairs, not just the injustices that are perpetrated on him or herself--the person for whom political and social mindfulness has "diffused into everyday life," but not just or always "on the wings of rights." This is the face of the rights-bearing citizen that we see in less public contexts. On the one hand, you can talk about rights without letting it diffuse into everyday life and without connecting your individual rights to anyone else's rights; on the other hand, politics can diffuse into your everyday life without being carried on the wings of rights--politics sometimes enters everyday conversation on other wings.

Part of the rights-bearing citizen enters the public arena, but not the part that morally values rights. The part that attributes moral value to claiming rights stays in private, everyday conversations. Americans assume that people who speak in public contexts--demonstrations, meetings, press conferences--are, just by the very fact they that

are speaking in public, acting self-interestedly. There is, in American culture, no other obvious reason for speaking in public; the public sphere is a “spoiled moral environment” (as Vaclav Havel put it, describing pre-1989 Czechoslovakia) and anyone who enters it must be, according to conventional wisdom, be doing so for immoral reasons. The implicit etiquette for public speech demands that speakers “speak for themselves” and only for themselves. Speaking in terms of self-interest is the only way to enter the public arena; and that talking in terms of rights in public was not moral--they could not figure out how to get from "rights" to “justice” (as Pitkin puts it). If people could understand that there is a moral value to rights-bearing citizenship, the public arena would be transformed. While private life might open up the possibility of developing a rights-bearing citizenship, public life in the U.S. today tends to strip the moral force of “rights” and offer up only the “rights-talking” citizen, of the sort that communitarians criticize.

So: yes, there is a rights-bearing citizen, and yes, our culture does not give it its full moral due, and yes, if it were, it would have to change in tandem with a change in the moral value we place on public speech itself. Instead, people assumed that the only way to be a good citizen is to enact the Colonial-style solidarity producing, uninformative, unopinionated, colonial model--or else the informed, boring one. Citizens assumed that the rights-bearing citizen was not a very moral one, but was the only one allowed to speak in the public arena. As Schudson says, we have to learn to honor the good that the rights-bearing citizen can contribute; we have to attribute moral value to that kind of citizenship. But maybe there is a reason that it is so hard to speak as a morally mindful rights-bearing citizen in public.

Talking politics with children

Perhaps that is the nature of this personalized form of citizenship: It is about everyday life and is difficult to speak about publicly because it is basically about a kind of politics that doesn't happen in public. Public places might not be the best places to look for this kind of speech, since that sort of personalized citizenship is powerful precisely because of its small, everyday, constant application, its slow and steady drip, in all institutions, not just the specifically political or public or even civic. Both because of its topic and because of the personal or legalistic process of social change it demands, such speech might not be most evident in exposed, explosive public arenas.

The question I want to entertain for the rest of this talk is: could this speech and this kind of citizenship be detached from voluntary associations and activist groups? Why should we scholars and citizens care for political reasons about settings that are not in the public arena, but are ones where citizens apply the standards of rights-bearing citizenship? If the rights-bearing citizen can carry politics everywhere, there is no reason to assume that voluntary associations are necessary--so are they? What do voluntary associations add to the lives of rights-bearing citizens?

Everyday Citizenship and the Puzzle of the Invisible, Private Public

Perhaps by listening to speech in less public settings we can get a better idea of how rights-bearing citizens do something that no other historical political personages have: they notice moral and political implications everywhere, they carry a political persona to all sorts of places, not just the public arena. If so, perhaps they talk politics in settings that aren't set aside as public places for political deliberation, but are just as powerful for

developing a sense of moral, political commitment and curiosity.

Settings of childraising are good settings for asking this question, since they seem to be the arena of life that is the most personal, private, apolitical, timeless. And that's the point of the ethnographic research project that I have just begun. For these settings, the "politics" one might discuss are definitely not republicans vs. democrats type politics, but are much more about creating a quality of person and qualities of institutions and societies: adults who are gathering together through children--at playgrounds, for example, or in schools--do not necessarily debate foreign policy, but do endlessly puzzle about what makes a good person, and what kind of institutions and societies children need in order to become good people. So, when adults talk about children's moral needs, they spin a strong, expansive web of meaning about persons, institutions, and society as a whole. Similarly, when children discuss "politics," broadly defined, what is interesting about their discussion is more the categories and forms of thought they use, rather than the positions they end up taking. Just the very fact that the groups are talking about society and nature is, itself, part of "being a good citizen" for this model, whether or not participants can entertain changing any policies. I am not asking these little groups to graduate and grow up to become big activist groups. That's not the point--I'm not (unlike most sociologists) asking how instrumentally effective they are. I am asking how they imagine, and talk about, connecting the local to the global, the everyday to the policy.

Other examples of conscious efforts at changing culture include day care providers' intervention in children's games; I heard teachers at a day care say they did not "want" to play "prisoner," ("I could pretend to put you in my pocket instead of taking you prisoner"); did not want to play a shooting game; that a bug in the sandbox should be led safely away

instead of stomped on; and was told by the teacher about a conversation that happened the day before, in which she said that bringing guns to the “Oogosloblins”--a topic the four and five-year-olds spontaneously brought up--would not solve their problems, and more. The institutions that certify day care centers circulate elaborate guidelines regarding teachers’ roles in this sort of play.

How does rights-bearing citizenship play out in such settings? There is much academic debate about whether or not children have “rights,” or should, but all agree that children’s rights would not be the same as adults’, even though children should not be treated as property of their adults caregivers, whose needs and rights can be determined by their adults. But what kind of rights? What can we learn by listening? One right that children in many day care centers are told they have, for example, is put to song: “You have the right, right, right to say ‘no,’” to unwelcome touching from adults. But right after learning that song, the children are physically forced into their uncomfortable snowsuits, mittens, scarfs, hats, boots, and more, often screeching in protest. This is part of what makes childraising such an interesting moment in everyday, rights-bearing citizenship: adults show what rights they consider reasonable and which they consider irrational. This aspect of rights-bearing citizenship is especially obvious in childraising, where people are clearly not talking about Politics in the sense of specific policies, but are--sometimes, anyway--trying to create a certain kind of person, who will carry with her a certain relationship to politics.

This kind of citizenship should complement other, more clearly activist kinds, in order to make these more activist sorts of citizenship more truly just, attentive to the small insults that tend to break movements that are dedicated to “big” policy issues apart, but it is

also a good in itself, a kind of expressive, whole self citizenship that is the necessary complement to instrumental citizenship. If people are rights-bearing citizens, they do not necessarily need to be organizing themselves in ongoing groups with names, in pressure groups, or even in voluntary associations that are organized to do anything other than conduct private life, to carry on private affairs together--playgrounds, child and family-oriented holidays, for example. The groups do not cultivate political policy-making power per se, but just refine attention to the political in the everyday, and to search out and discuss inequalities and injustices and implicit disrespect for people or nature even.

A Worry

But is this vision of social life too disorienting? One worry is that people still have to learn to recognize and define their first-hand problems--if the locus of political activity has changed, there still has to be some place where people learn to recognize their problems. I'm not talking about the question that sociologists love to ask, about how effective groups are; I am just asking about imaginations and where they are cultivated. A problem with detaching political conversation from organized groups, pressure groups, parties that could rebel is that it is unclear how citizens would imagine connecting this kind of chronic, low grade, eternal vigilance to knowledgeable citizenship and action; rights-bearing citizenship is not based on information, not problems that citizens have to read about, but they still have to learn what sources of information to trust in order to know how to interpret their everyday woes.

A critic of this kind of politics would say that we are just advocating teaching children to recycle and pick up litter, without teaching them about the toxic dump next-door

or the corporate policies that make recycling such a waste of time. The critic might argue that it is not enough to challenge injustices through personal practice, through changing face-to-face relationships--setting a good example. The critic might fume, saying that people will not be able to enjoy full individuality in a political and economic system that treats all humans as means to an end; and the critic might point to the disasterous U.S. welfare policies that make it clear how little our society values children and childcare. "How," the critic might ask, finger jabbing, "could you possibly expect such private, leisurely, rights-bearing citizenship to matter, when people are going homeless, when Americans are destroying the planet? This is an emergency!" The problem is that it might be hard to feel calm and generous about matters of life and death, where the problem is overwhelmingly discouraging. We don't have the placid situation that Schudson describes, of parents sitting by the poolside keeping a watchful eye on the kids while carrying on other business and other conversations, teaching by way of action how to be casually good, monitorial citizens. Instead, the toddler just got a horrible sunburn because there wasn't enough ozone in the stratosphere--the adults responded by slathering on sunscreen. And anyway, the pool is crowded only because global warming made it unbearable to be out of the pool---the adults responded by driving to the pool, filling the air with more greenhouse gasses. So, yes, adults are keeping a watchful eye, but it often resolutely avoids connecting the local sunburn and local heat with conditions that could help fix it.

Just to harp yet more on this metaphor: these kinds of politics of everyday life, that connect a sunburn to ozone, and the driving to global warming, are just the kind of politics Michael is talking about--the little, daily decisions that you could critique or could let pass. Of course, for some of these questions, you have little practical choice: it's hard to

live in most American cities without driving some kind of car a lot, for example, and we all contribute more than our share to global warming--but at least we could notice this as a problem and complain about it. And meanwhile, until zoning laws and mass transit systems change, we have to be bad citizens.

And that's the point!

To a father who asked how he might best bring up his son, [the answer is given]...'By making him the citizen of a state with good laws [emphasis in the original translation]...'When he is the citizen of a good state, the individual first gains his just rights Hegel, 269).

But in the meantime, we still do actually bring up actual sons, in bad states, where not only the laws are bad but the realm of customary, everyday morality (Sittlichkeit) is not so great, either. How DO adults try to teach children to be good citizens in a bad state? It cannot be a completely futile enterprise, or there would be no reason to raise children one way over any other way; there would be no use doing anything until after the revolution. Oddly, here the radical structuralist critic (who perhaps loves Noam Chomsky) and Hegel would agree on the impossibility of being a good citizen in a bad state.

But we still (at least some of us, sometimes) try really hard. That is the charm of the human species, that we keep trying. And we try especially hard, and most poignantly, when we are attempting to set good examples to our offspring. A defense against the finger-jabbing critic might say that becoming overwhelmed with despair and bitterness about the state of the world won't lead to activism or good citizenship, either. And what holds for children holds for adults as well. We cannot just "face the facts," and expect that to lead to good citizenship, because it could just as easily lead to despair. Perhaps we have to teach children to be of two minds, whatever the issue is: to recognize the injustice,

the destruction, and still keep going.¹ This is something teachers do all the time.

For example, in a fourth grade current events class, I heard many disturbing facts, with little buffer. Whereas the Current Events classes of the past relied on Cold War enemies for a comforting plot line, the current rendition offers little comfort. My Weekly Reader, the preeminent news publication for children during most of the middle of this century, offered an ongoing celebration of progress and America, against the communist enemy. In contrast, Newcurrents, one of the most popular contemporary current events curricula, is resolutely neutral about American superiority, and tries hard cover stories around the globe, not just Europe and the U.S; whether there is any coherent narrative at all is something I continue to investigate. It struck me as rightly overwhelming, and in my observations of a fourth grade classroom, I heard the teacher and the two substitutes who came over the course of the semester add even more rightly overwhelming questions. For example,

Mr. Mueller, a typically liberal, but not “leftist” fourth grade teacher, standing in front of the class before beginning the lesson, the day NATO started bombing Bosnia (it wasn’t in Newcurrents yet, because it had just happened): I had a really philosophical discussion with Ben before class. He wanted to know why we should bomb Bosnia. We said that like a big brother--but when the big brother goes away, the problems are still there. We likened it to capital punishment--getting even.

Matthew, a student: But the Serbians should be taught a lesson for trying to beat up on a little country.

Mr. Mueller: Yes, but what are you gonna do? You can’t spank them. That’s what I’m saying--that’s why it was such a philosophical discussion, because it’s hard to answer. I don’t have any clear cut answers. [he looks over to me as he says this--something he almost never does. From the soft plaid couch in the far corner of the room, I say, “Who does?”]

¹ The connection to political action and policy-making was a problem with 1950’s and 60’s studies of political socialization, as well (Conover 1988): These studies showed how Americans **told** children to be good citizens, but never made it clear how, if at all, the “beliefs” they inculcated in children ever mattered for the children’s future political participation or for future policy-making. If you tell children how to be good citizens but there are no situations in which they can exercise that goodness, then maybe the main thing you’ve taught them is how to be hypocrites, or how to feel powerless.

Mr. Mueller: No one does. No one does. There are no easy answers. [pause]. You could try economic sanctions--Keep away what they really need. Do you think we got involved in the middle east because they've got oil or because they don't?

kids: they do.

Mr. Mueller: Think of all the things we use oil for.

Matthew: Cars, [and]...

Mr. Mueller: The U.S. has 5% of the world's population and consumes more than 30% of the world's resources. Something's not right there. Now that's a philosophical statement on my part.

Am I just reinventing what the pluralists of the 1950's and 60's found, when they turned their attention to political socialization: that parents in liberal democracies teach children to balance their unease, disagreement, horror over current policies with a generous, calm sense of tolerance, that keeps them unruffled despite their disagreement? The fuming critic and the pluralist would agree that the one thing that cannot happen is an end to the discussion between citizens; people have to recognize problems and still keep going; they have to face the facts and still come out the other end; they have to communicate with people with whom they disagree. That was the pluralist goal: a style of citizenship that values discussion but accepts disagreement; but in contrast to the pluralists, I am asking how people make that style possible in a society that is not very good, where the problems seem more overwhelming than the pluralists imagined. And I am asking about a kind of citizenship that they didn't imagine: this everyday, persistent but casual attention to the rights of bugs in the sandbox. Mid-century political scientists did not ask whether playing cowboys and Indians meant anything, but just quizzed children about political concepts.

Unlike the pluralist researchers of political socialization of the 50's and 60's, who assumed that adults knew what was good and were secure in their opinions and positions, I

leave open the possibility that adults are overwhelmed, confused, in need of solace themselves, feeling urgently the problem of raising good children in bad states with bad customs. For example, in a conference of environmental educators, several speakers were, themselves, overwhelmed by their knowledge of environmental problems. One speaker, for example, said in a shaking voice,

We generate four pounds of trash a day per person curbside, that's what we see, but there's 120 lbs/day that we don't see... 27 lbs of stone and cement a day, 19 lbs of coal, 11 lbs of wood, 1 lb of natural gas (with non-individual consumption), 3 acres of light bulbs/day [this exposition of facts continued for a long time]... We in the First World consume 80% of the world resources, but only 20% of the world's population is in first world. In the U.S., we consume 30% of world resources, but only 4.7% of the world's population is in the U.S.

Her conclusion was that this is a spiritual problem:

Who's responsible? Corporations? We're looking for something outside of ourselves, but it's a crisis of mind and spirit. We're trying to blame the systems that we have created.... We're talking about not only the invisible costs to the environment but real people. It's one of my missions in life to get to people that it's not just about materiality, but sort of the spirituality of that materiality. We consume stuff that has people's lives in them.

She then sang a song by the group Sweet Honey in the Rock, about imagining who made her shirt and imagining the wretched conditions of that faraway person's life. By undoing commodity fetishism, she became overwhelmed; how could an adult who feels this frighteningly connected, like one exposed nerve that stretches around the world, communicate her settled moral sentiments to children? Note that she was not just individualizing the problem. In contrast to volunteers, civil servants who fully recognize the impossibility of their task still have to keep going. They can't go home. Bureaucrats might not try as hard as volunteers do to avoid expressing such discouraging ideas. In this way, paid civil servants are more like parents than volunteers are--that is: they cannot

easily quit when they hit such breathtaking aporia.

The question is how teach children to keep acting as if the world will keep on going and that they should do what they can--teaching them to filter out any overwhelming anxiety and despair that they actually should feel--should, that is, if they are facing the facts as Informed Citizens should. Usually, radical political activism in the U.S. has been completely rejectionist--throwing up our hands and saying it's all bad and let's uproot it all and start over (Lasch makes this point about American radicalism). But most adults do not want to do that with children; they want to communicate faith; this usually translates into either ignoring politics or teaching them to recycle, to do good deeds on a case-by-case basis, to act like volunteers or Colonial Era citizens, creating solidarity and hope at the expense of other genres of citizenship. Even radical political activists can't think of any way of educating their children other than by bringing them to do work in soup kitchens and raise money for flood victims; the question is what else they or anyone else can do, to avoid deflating children's sense of hope while simultaneously encouraging them to care about the world?

Figuring out how to bring this sense of hope together with a recognition of the need for change means bringing together these strands of American political culture that have so far been kept separate: the solidaristic, communal citizenship of the colonial era; the contentious, passionate citizenship of the party era; the information-based citizenship of the progressive era; and contemporary personalized, rights-bearing citizenship. Colonial citizenship without the others too readily avoids discouragement and debate; partisan politics without the others becomes self-righteous and too separate from fellow citizens (and is too easily controlled by money, if citizens are not already firmly organized in

opinion-forming groups or independently mindful); information is too discouraging without the other two; personalized, rights-bearing citizenship without the other three could be too isolating. The need for all four seems clear when we think about communicating about politics to children, or even in the presence of children.

Another Problem and A Question

If the object of citizenship is everyday “rights” (which Schudson somehow says includes the environment--I’m not sure how, except that it is something one “experiences” everyday, directly, whether one knows it or not), then the locus of participation can change, to more everyday settings that are inside of institutions instead of floating as freely as voluntary associations are. That is, institutions that are not voluntary--schools, workplaces, families--surrounded by a nimbus of conversations that happen in the course of people’s already being already associated with those institutions. The topic of politics has changed, but the locus of change has changed, too.

My second worry is that if we focus too much on the quality of conversation, on the individual's political sensibilities that follow her around wherever she goes, on the kind of communicative action that can happen anywhere people talk--in bed, even--then we might not give enough weight to the other contributions that voluntary associations make to American democracy. But maybe these contributions can happen in ways other than through voluntary associations that meet apart from the daily, less voluntary course of life. So, I want to disentangle these other contributions. The connection to voluntary associations--much less activism--is more of a puzzle for the privatized, personalized politics that Schudson describes (as well as Paul Lichterman, and Joohan Kim, and

Habermas, recently; also, an unnoticed book called Deep Citizenship by David Barry Clarke) than with previous models of political commitment. The problem is more obvious here because other theories of participatory democracy have squarely put good citizenship inside of ongoing, longstanding voluntary associations. Such theorists focus on somewhat disparate goods that come from participation in voluntary associations:

Solidarity and trust (which is unfelicitously named “social capital”): The groups culture a sense of solidarity, familiarity, togetherness (perhaps of the sort the Colonial period offered). Robert Putnam attends to these social bonds apart from quality of conversation--he totally ignores the quality of conversation. Just the very fact of getting out of the house, of not being “narrowly shut up in one’s own circle of friends,” is itself a necessary part of democratic citizenship, the basic solidarity that holds people together whether or not they go on to talk "politics" narrowly defined.

On the one hand, this focus on solidarity means that participants can dare to express critical opinions because they know they are in good company in holding minority opinions (company such as the Party period offered), thus the tyranny of the majority is held back by the strength of the smaller group (Katz 1988; Gamson 1996));

On the other hand, others who focus on the solidarity-building effect of voluntary associations admire them for their ability to bring people into contact with people who are very different from themselves; to broaden their horizons by encountering people who are not already their friends, whether or not they talk politics in those settings (Courtney Bender [1999], for example). This face of participatory democracy looks to voluntary associations to bring people into contact who are not in their own families or

in their own line of work, in a somewhat neutral place where they have to find common ground and learn about the world beyond their immediate experience.

A quality of conversation: Other scholars focus on the possibility that voluntary associations offer situations in which citizens can discuss the issues of the day. For them, the public sphere springs into being whenever such reflective, open-ended, freewheeling discussion happens. Joohan Kim, in a recent review essay in Journal of Communication, focusses on the quality of conversation somewhat apart from the basic animal familiarity that might happen when people simply come into frequent contact with each other. Habermas does the same.

1. A Sense of Power (apart from the question of the group's effectiveness at changing policies): The groups cultivate a sense of power (perhaps of the sort the Party period offered). Regardless of how remote the possibility is of “welding themselves into a powerful political force,” as Terry Eagleton (1985) describes the early British coffeehouses, the possibility is there for voluntary associations; such power is hard to imagine without them. Jean Cohen (1999) argues against Putnam, calling his version of civil society “civil society minus the public sphere.” Cohen focusses on groups' ability to cultivate a sense of public power, to learn from others and to speak their minds. But she doesn't care much about their cultivating bonds. So her civil society would apply only to voluntary associations that were not recreation groups, hobby clubs, Putnam's famous “bowling leagues.” Arendt's “public” would go here, too: the small groups that can suddenly gain power through the bonds that lay between them.

(And remember, we're still not talking about the scores of sociologists and political scientists who ignore all of this and just care about how effective groups are at changing policies--we're talking about how membership affects the person and the culture, not treating the legislation as some bottom line that is the only thing that really matters. But of course, we would want that instrumental kind of citizenship to be grounded in a deeper, whole person kind of citizenship, and vice versa).

Various theorists focus on one or another of these faces of voluntary associations, but none treat all three with equal attention. Are these all of a piece, or do they sometimes undermine each other? And are voluntary associations the best places for cultivating all three (or four): both broadened horizons AND familiarity and trust that happens when people who are not all alike come together AND the kind of commonplace, everyday conversation that could happen anywhere, between anyone, AND a sense of power that comes from joining with other people? Ongoing voluntary associations are necessary for some of these, but not all--and when people try to do one, they often see it as existing in a zero-sum relationship with the others, as we heard earlier.

So what do voluntary associations do that rights-bearing citizenship does not do, and vice versa? Is there any unique contribution that rights-bearing citizenship offers to participatory democracy, beyond monitorial citizenship (which does not qualify as "participatory," in my mind, but might sometimes be an okay other kind of citizenship)? How does it matter for democratic participation if a conversation or relationship develops in a voluntary association per se, instead of on the playground, or instead of ongoing discussions at a workplace like a childcare center, between teachers, parents, and children, where communication is all?

These relationships and conversations all do some of what voluntary associations are supposed to do, and some of these situations can do more of what voluntary associations in practice actually do do.

For developing solidarity, such networks of acquaintances can become deep quickly because they take so much time and are about something that is so emotionally intense and so relentless (that is, individuals and the society as a whole cannot just decide that we have grown bored of raising children and go on to the next fad, the next cause celebre).

- These situations do not do much for expanding participants' horizons, not stretching beyond their usual daily rounds. That is precisely the beauty: these are the participants' daily rounds. Now, it so happens that the bureaucratic organizations and workplaces that are charged with raising children tend to be much more diverse in some ways (race and gender) than many voluntary association in fact are; and not much less diverse by class (Verba, Brady and Schlozman show how undiverse participation in voluntary associations tends to be). (Churches and church-based volunteering are probably exceptions to the lack of class diversity in volunteer groups).
- For conversation, these networks of acquaintances and co-workers have the potential of being better than voluntary associations in fact are: if relationships are egalitarian in these convrsations, they can brook more friendly disagreement because there is no risk. These sorts of conversations can be more expansive than voluntary association membership because they are not organized around a specific issue. But

above all, they keep political, moral questions in everyday circulation, instead of sequestering them in the public forum.

- For developing power, it is hard to see how these dispersed networks do anything at all.

If focusing on the qualities of conversation and the voluntary relationships that are grounded in involuntary settings (close friendships in workplaces, e.g.) makes us lose sight of power, and makes us unable to imagine very diverse people coming together, then this might be a fatal flaw. Perhaps we need the vapid “frontstage” conversations that voluntary associations conduct, as described in Avoiding Politics, for no other reason than to have a front behind which to create a “backstage,” between unlike persons who come together drawn by the often empty signifier of the frontstage agenda. If you run the Royal Dog Steamer with people, you are more likely to have good conversations with them than if you do not ever meet them at all, obviously enough.

Is the public transcript all that matters for political and moral life? That must be the case for specifically political discussion that is aimed at policy-making. People cannot fix a problem until they can speak publicly about it. But some problems transcend policy—for example, consumerism (Schor 1997), workaholicism (of the sort Arlie Hochschild describes in The Time Bind), sexism, racism, for example. There are certainly political policies exacerbating these problems, but there are also deep cultural structures animating them, and the solutions to them have to be partly cultural. The rights-bearing, personalized style of citizenship is especially well-equipped to deal with these sorts of problems. No amount of political party-style scheming to overthrow the policies that enforce these problems would work without convincing people on an everyday basis that they matter and

must change.

(For a counter-example, some parents of the victims of high school shootings have sued media producers; others are suing the parents of the murderers, others are working on the gun industry (NY Times, 10/31/99). How do they decide which to do? To me, it seems obvious that this is a case in which changing policies--about guns, in this case--would do the trick, and there are high-profile voluntary associations aimed at changing those laws. This is not a case of a deeply cultural problem: it is a case of a disagreement, and a wealthy lobbying effort: the first face of power, in Gaventa's terminology).

So, for all these reasons, these situations might do some or all of what voluntary associations do. So, what is my worry? I worry that people need the symbolic, collective representation that a named group offers--a formal association instead of just a loose network of interesting conversations, friendships, relationships, familiarity. Without the groupings being named, do they, as Durkheim says, cease to exist? Without their banners and flags on the horizon, can we orient ourselves, or do we find ourselves driving around endlessly in one of those trackless cul-de-sac suburbs, where everyone is equal and interconnected but there are no landmarks? Is there any harm done if the "hidden transcript" (Scott 1991) remains hidden, as long as everyone knows it is there? Perhaps its power consist in being hidden, constant, everyday, so that if we try to make it public and political, it disappears.

This might seem to be a strange argument for me, of all people, to make (having devoted my previous work to asking about the public transcript). Am I just saying that when people have deserted the public sphere, and it has become too colonized by money

and power, that we should look elsewhere for morality and solidarity and political conversation? In one way, that is what I am saying--that if people are not where they should be according to normative theory, we should find them where they are and try to redeem those situations. But more deeply, by honoring this personalized form of citizenship, we might decide to change the normative theory. Schudson points the way.

But genuinely valuing it would help us focus on this social realm without forcing it to become something it is not. That is another reason that the case of child raising is interesting. We tend to think of it as a totally private, indoors activity, and pictures of Betty Friedan's housewife spring to mind. But, in fact, Americans are just as frenetic when they are raising children as they are when they do anything else. Many Americans say they come into contact with people who are unlike themselves more often through their children and their workplaces than through any other arenas (Mutz, 1998). In the case of child raising, this contact is not just physical proximity. Adults constantly talk with one another in groups that are not voluntary associations but are planted inside of specific institutions, like a school, a child-care center, a playgroup, a neighborhood, a museum or zoo. They talk constantly in these settings, to other adults and to the children. Not all or even most of their talk is explicitly moral, and much of it is competitive or bigoted, but that offers a kind of implicit morality, too. So, whatever I find will be interesting for revealing the everyday standards of morality and sociability that adults bring to everyday, mundane questions.

Magali Sarfatti Larsen and Siliva Sigal interviewed women whom they labeled "Durkheimian Moms," because they worried about the degenerating social life surrounding their children. Larsen and Sigal say that instead of dismissing the moms' worries, saying

that their moral and cultural worries are really disguises for class anxieties or distractions from more specifically political worries, that we should take their worries about the decline of the social seriously. People do need a good sociable life; thus the epithet “Durkheimian moms,” that refers to Durkheim’s understanding of social bonds as a deep crucial need in themselves, that cannot just be reduced to some other, more instrumental need (Lichterman and Eliasoph, 1997, make this point as well, in a critique of Nicola Beisel’s book about pornography panics of the 19th century). Larsen and Sigal say that this sort of communal activism about social life itself is becoming more and more important as the state loses--or as people perceive the state as losing--power in relation to global forces. Such activism is a kind of direct action, not necessarily aimed at putting pressure on the state, but at changing the culture, creating a local community that makes their children’s moral education possible. In these contexts, people discuss the problems of raising children in this society; this could spin out to be discussion about creating a good society for children. So, by starting with questions about what kind of social life children need, participants could end up expanding to more specifically political questions. But even if they did not always do that, the conversations they have might still be deeply important for society (Paul Lichterman is working on an ethnographic project that asks about these questions in relation to religion).

Such questions are mostly not specifically political, but are “social.” This, the realm of the social, has always been the special province of women (Karen Hansen, e.g.), who are charged with tying the daily threads of tradition, language, morality, culture, from one generation to the next. Women have done it so it has been devalued and rendered invisible. Ironically, this devaluation has come both from those feminists who think the

royal route to empowerment is through paid work and explicit politics, and anti-feminists who romanticize, privatize and narrow the scope of this social realm, placing it squarely inside of the family (ignoring the fact that families have always been completely intertwined with other institutions--schools, media, medical and legal and religious institutions, commercial institutions, extended families, states, after school organizations).

People are already talking to one another in these informal and formal institutions that surround children--in fact, as abundant research is making clear, they are talking to each other more openly in these seemingly private settings than in more specifically “political” or “community-based” institutions. They are not just passively receiving meanings predigested by TV. So, if political conversation is happening anywhere, these are likely places to look, even if they are not very voluntary or associational.

In fact, these places are most fascinatingly not voluntary, but organized by people who are paid by the state, like teachers and librarians, or by non-profit groups, like United Way, Urban League, and small pre-schools, or by profit-making child care agencies. Let me peel apart one example, as one illustration of a prevalent sort of group that doesn't fit any going definition of civil society: in public library-sponsored story hours for pre-schoolers, parents often debate the politics and morality of the stories. These aren't the after-hours bowling leagues Putnam describes, they are tied more to the intimate, domestic sphere than the civil society Putnam theorizes, they don't have formal membership lists, part of what they do--childcare--is one the most involuntary activities of all, and their leaders are paid by the state. But all that makes them all the more interesting to explore. And librarians endlessly debate the politics of their work, for example, on a email list that posts several messages a day, as well as in conferences and universities. Most of their

debate focuses on what it would mean to teach children to respect each other's cultures, and their heated discussions recognize that too much pain and despair does no one any good, but that leaving out the pain and despair--of the Holocaust, of Native American or African American history, for example--is dishonest and leaves students with no real understanding of the horrors of past or present.

Over and over, these bureaucrats, pre-school teachers, and other caregivers, say "we aim to change the culture, not just to give kids something to do," and "we are trying to create a new culture," that simultaneously encourages "diversity" and "connection" (two very popular words); that invites youth to bear their "civic responsibility," as these civil servants put it. Their efforts at changing the culture are already happening. One example is their attempt to popularize new American holidays: Juneteenth, Kwanzaa, Cinco de Mayo, and Martin Luther King Day. In Snow Prairie, these public celebrations feature literature tables from complex institutions like Headstart, prison rights projects, centers for prevention of child abuse and domestic violence--not exactly the most festive set of pamphleteers, but very complex and institutional.

Volunteer groups often avoid talking about the political questions that might make them feel discouraged and peripheral. In contrast, when these employed people I am fondly calling "cultural bureaucrats" talk about creating a community that will help children become good people, these speakers do not assume that "community" is a primordial "given," and do not assume that the family is the sole fount of all good socialization. Instead, they assume that big, complex institutions have a key role in creating both good community and good children. The surprising paradox here is that often, when speaking about what children need in order to become good, caring, broad-minded citizens,

bureaucrats' discussions often come closer to the ideal of the public sphere than voluntary associations' discussions do. But the situations that invoke such public spirited discussion are far from the voluntary contexts that most theorists would recognize as the public sphere. For example, the librarians email list has very strict rules about when to discuss what topics.

Our understanding of what kinds of situations rightfully induce the kind of conversation that inspires deep citizenship might need to be challenged. There are good reasons that voluntary associations might not always be the best places to look for the kinds of conversations between ordinary citizens that this personalized, rights-bearing citizenship demands. On the other hand, other sorts of groups that are not usually included in definitions of civic life might offer a mode of political conversation that is more amenable with the rights-bearing citizen. But unless society is completely electrified, in a constant state of political, social effervescence, talking politics and society all the time--until everyone is "living in history" instead of just "making life," as Richard Flacks puts it--we will always need a specific arena set aside for politics, as well. The contribution that this concept of rights-bearing or personalized citizenship makes is to highlight the need for a balance between the kinds of public citizenship that voluntary associations offer, and the kind of hidden--but not "private" in the sense of narrow, cut off from moral and social questions or bonds--citizenship that Schudson describes.