



Some Reflections On *The Good Citizen*

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Michael Schudson's The Good Citizen: A History of Civic Life is a very good book. It is one of those rare books that will outlive its moment of birth, in no small measure because it skillfully confronts its readers with a surplus of questions that challenge settled prejudices, break open new pathways for approaching old topics and, ironically, stimulate attempts to address and redress the book's weaknesses. My critical reactions to the book should be understood in this light. They are no doubt the idiosyncratic thoughts of a political thinker deeply interested in the past, present and future of democracy. But I hope that they will be seen as more than this. Charged with deep admiration for the book, my criticisms are directly its offspring -they are something of a small 'gift' back to Michael Schudson for offering an immensely fresh understanding of the old subject of citizenship.

In respect of its bold overview of the history of citizenship within a *national context*, The Good Citizen is comparable to T.H. Marshall's Citizenship and Social Class, an influential book originally based on university lectures delivered in 1949-1950 in Cambridge, England. The comparison with Marshall does not end there. Both books challenge a prevailing dominant historical narrative: while Marshall presented a sustained social democratic critique of laissez-faire orthodoxies, Schudson is concerned to question, for the sake of a sustainable democratic future, the prevailing neo-Progressivist view that democracy requires an active, fully informed citizenry. Both proponents of citizenship also like to analyze long Historical periods, to think in terms of discrete periods dominated by one particular Understanding of citizenship. They do so not only because they want to emphasize, against Karl Marx, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt and other critics of modernity, that the struggle to shape and deploy the political language of citizenship is a defining characteristic of modern societies. Marshall and Schudson also sense the importance of publicly-shared memories in sustaining a culture of citizenship. If being a citizen means participating as an individual within a wider political community that confers certain entitlements (e.g., the right to speak freely, or to vote, or to own property) and requires the performance of certain duties (e.g., to pay taxes, to attend school, to engage in military service), then both Marshall and Schudson suppose, correctly in my view, that citizens need eyes

in the backs of their heads. They both understand that citizenship among the living requires the extension of citizenship to those who permanently remain on the verge of disfranchisement the dead and buried citizens and non-citizens of the past.

Citizenship among the living indeed requires citizenship among the dead. But on this point that history is important in matters of deferring and extending citizenship T. H. Marshall and Michael Schudson part company. Schudson has little affection for either the substantive content or teleological prejudices of Marshall's approach. It narrates the well-known story, in the British context, of the progressive expansion of civil and political rights as a prelude to the coming struggle to define and extend social rights, especially *those of* the working-class, in opposition to the greed, egoism and class inequalities of contemporary (unregulated) capitalism. Marshall's rather Anglo centric argument unwittingly projected onto others a three-stage evolutionary model of citizenship that does not work well in regions like the German states and Scandinavia, where for instance social rights were introduced much earlier, as monarchic or paternalist alternatives to liberalism, socialism and efforts to extend democratic political rights. As well, Marshall sometimes wrote as if the Labour government of Clement Attlee was the culmination of more than two centuries' struggle to defend such rights as *habeas corpus*, freedom of public assembly, the right to vote, and the entitlement to be protected from the vagaries of market competition, through such mechanisms as free state education, universal medical care, and old-age pensions.

Schudson's history of citizenship is altogether less dramatic. Normatively speaking, he wants to defend the principle of the rights-bearing, 'monitorial' citizen and to do so freed from teleological presumption. I emphasize the word "seemingly" because here I come to my first criticism of The Good Citizen: its deep ambivalence about the conceptual status and historical meaning of the various phases of American citizenship that it describes. Schudson writes confidently about three distinct eras of citizenship since the colonists first arrived: the eighteenth century saw 'rule by gentlemen'; the nineteenth century brought "rule by numbers"; while the twentieth century inaugurated 'rule by everyone, and no one'. Sometimes Schudson tells us that

these are discrete periods, 'each with its own virtues and defects' (p.5), each separated from the other by a definite historical rupture. That is why, against Sandel and other communitarians, who are nostalgic for the 1776 Philadelphia model of republican citizenship, he insists that "we require a citizenship fit for our own day" (p. 9). At other moments, Schudson speaks in a rather different, dialectician's tone of the 'coexistence' and cross-fertilization of these eras. "Past models of citizenship", he writes at one point, "have not vanished as newer models became ascendant" (p. 294).

My highlighting of this problem of ambivalence about the status and meaning of the different phases of American citizenship is not an exercise in pedantry. For it has profound implications for the descriptive content of each period so that, for instance, as an alternative to Schudson's modeling, the politics of assent could be seen to have had deep roots within the revolutionary victory against the British empire (as my Tom Paine : A Political Life argues, using rather different categories). Schudson's ambivalence also has muddling implications for his account of the rise of the fourth, 'rights-bearing phase of citizenship. If indeed the historical development of American citizenship is cumulative rather than discontinuous, then it is hard to see how the gentlemanly politics of assent can be combined with both the politics of party affiliation of mass democracy and the private, rational, "informed citizen" model of rule by everyone, and no one. It can't be so combined, of course, which is one reason why Schudson is driven in the opposite direction, to speak of historical rupture and discrete models of citizenship. "We can gain inspiration from the past, but we cannot import it", he writes "None of the older models of authority and of citizenship will suffice. We require a citizenship fit for our own day" (p. 9).

Schudson's ambivalence about the history of citizenship can be described differently. I suggest that he has not made up his mind whether or not he still favors the originally republican image of an undivided, community-spirited polity of rights-bearing, duty-conscious citizens - a family model of citizenship (as Simon Schama once put it) that I believe has been obsolete for at least two centuries, and certainly since the emergence of political system and civil societies with

modern characteristics. Schudson's emphasis on historical continuity implicitly calls into question this neo-republican, familial image of citizenship. It does so because it reveals that the American polity is modern, that it is riven not only with conflicts to do with wealth and party and expertise ('those who know' versus 'those who accept'), but also divided permanently by ongoing disputes about the meaning and significance of citizenship itself. So far, so good. But whenever Schudson emphasizes the discontinuities within the long history of American citizenship, this modernist point seems to fade. There are many problematic passages in the book where it is presumed that a single, dominant shared understanding of citizenship -whether that of the gentleman, party supporter, Progressive, or rights activist -was the propolis of the American political community, that at any point in time it has been bound together by its acceptance of a single definition of citizenship. The more classical understanding of citizenship as family life writ large also curiously surfaces in Schudson's account of the 'monitorial', 'rights-bearing' citizen that he claims has slowly gained ascendancy during the past four decades. What is this new polity of citizens like? Picture parents watching small children at the community pool, he suggests. These parent-citizens are keeping an eye on the scene; they are not gathering information. Although they may look politically inactionary (something C -Wright Mills condemned them for), they are in fact poised for action, if action is required. "The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else", writes Schudson. The simile of the swimming pool is complemented elsewhere in The Good Citizen by references to 'the public'. Once again, the concept of citizenship has an oddly classical republican feel about it. Schudson supposes -here he quietly relies both on Habermas and the Philadelphia of Revolutionaries 1776 -that the contemporary American polity contains a shared public space that is a vital source of common identity of monitorial citizens, exactly because it is open in principle to all of them, regardless of their identity or geographic location.

Reality, alas, is a good deal more complicated than this image of a unified public sphere implies. The image certainly needs to be reconstructed -here I am sketching of my current lines of research for a new book that replies to Jurgen Habermas's Strukturwandel der Obentlichkeit

-to take account of the contemporary structural transformations of public life. Old democracies like the United States are currently living through times in which spatial frameworks of communication are in a state of upheaval. The old hegemony of state-structured and territorially-bound public debate and controversy mediated by radio, television, newspapers and books is rapidly being eroded. In its place there are signs of a developing multiplicity of networked spaces of communication -I call them micropublics, mesopublics and macropublics -which are not tied immediately to territory, and which irreversibly fragment anything resembling a single, spatially-unified public sphere within a nation-state framework. Consequently, the conventional ideal of a unified public sphere and its corresponding vision of a republic of citizens striving to live up to some 'public good' are obsolete. This is not Lippman's point against Dewey. It is rather to say that public life is today undergoing a process of modularization, in the sense that we witness the development of complex mosaics of differently sized, overlapping and connected public spheres -one of whose effects is to require us to revise heavily our understanding of 'the public sphere' and its classical partner terms, such as public opinion, the public good, and the public/private distinction cherished by liberal thinkers like John Rawls.

The Good Citizen, unfortunately, doesn't engage in this kind of rethinking of what it means to be a citizen. Its classical bias also seems to hamper its efforts to provide more detailed accounts of the material preconditions of monitorial citizenship. Although there are many useful hints, there is a definite lack of clarity in The Good Citizen about the institutional rules, procedures and practices necessary for rights-bearing monitorial citizenship to flourish. I shall say little here about my dissatisfaction with Schudson's rethinking of the image of the informed citizen. I think that it isn't philosophically bold enough. Following Bernard Berelson and others he correctly highlights the mismatch between what much democratic theory seems to call for in the concept of an informed citizen and the well-documented low level of information that most citizens have in actually existing democracies. But nagging questions remain. What exactly is meant by this unexamined concept of *information*? Do we live in worlds where facts are true or

false, clearly distinguishable from interpretations, and independent of the larger frames and scenarios in *which they* are embedded? Isn't spin ubiquitous in complex states and civil societies like the United States?

But let me return to the institutional preconditions of monitorial citizenship. Two weaknesses in Schudson's account spring to mind -both prompted, I should again emphasize, by Schudson's otherwise powerfully thought-provoking argument. One weakness is the problem of violence, which hardly rates a mention in The Good Citizen. Citizens fight wars and (in the American case) they are entitled to bear arms. The history of the ideal of citizenship has a deep elective affinity with the theme of violence. For our classical Greek ancestors, war was what took place beyond the public realm of the polis. Violence and citizenship were considered opposites: the former consists of treating others as pieces on a chessboard (as Aristotle observed), whereas the latter consists of non-violently ruling and being ruled within a political community of speaking and interacting subjects making judgements, about how best to live their lives. A twist was given to this distinction in the classical Roman republican principle that citizens must not rely on standing armies which can rob citizens of their powers. The famous song composed in the garrison at Strasbourg and originally called *Chant de guerre de l'arm& A Rhin* harbors this sentiment: 'Aux armes, citoyens! Formez vos bataillons! Marchons!Marchons! Qu'un sang impur Abreuve nos sillons!'. So did the Second amendment agree in the early days of the new American republic "A well regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

Exactly what this eighteenth-century citizen's right means for Schudson's defense of the monitorial citizen is unclear. Are monitorial citizens entitled to bear arms? Should they be required as citizens to fight wars in far-off regions? If so, under what circumstances? These questions are difficult. But (as I argue elsewhere in Reflections on Violence) they are quite unavoidable: the persistent gun-related violence and incivility within the interstices of American civil society and, after the War, the role of global policeman thrust onto the shoulders of the United States and its citizens, together mean that the subject of violence cannot be made to

disappear in any present-day or future discussion of citizenship.

My second example of the need for greater clarity about the institutional preconditions of monitorial citizenship concerns the subject of markets. Market-driven processes of commodity production and exchange have often been judged antithetical to the ideals of citizenship. It is said that labor time robs citizens of the free time that citizenship requires. The uneven accumulation of wealth and income through market competition disadvantages the less well-off and the culture of markets is said to stimulate the growth of egoism and the fetishism of commodities. Schudson reacts hesitantly to such criticisms. There are signs of democratic ambivalence in The Good Citizen. Schudson, like Marshall before him, sometimes draws upon the originally Greek contrast between the satisfaction of material needs in the *oikos* and the political freedom and equality won within the polis by reminding us that prosperity is not the same as a being a citizen. At other times he is less certain. There are even market-friendly passages. “The market has expanded in useful ways and serves needs that associational life once catered for”, he remarks when reviewing the recent work of Robert Putnam.

If the future of citizenship critically depends upon successfully tackling the property question, then the benefits and self-paralyzing limits of markets need to be analyzed. Francis Fukuyama's The Great Disruption attempts to do just this. So too does Edward Luttwak's Turbocapitalism, whose argument provides a stimulating (if depressing) counterpoint to that of Schudson. A new form of capitalism turbocapitalism -is spreading fast throughout Europe, Asia and the rest of the world, says Luttwak-The new turbocapitalism is unhindered by government regulation and burdensome taxation. It is unchecked by effective trade unions or philanthropic concerns for employees. And -Luttwak argues -it is liberated from powerful legal systems and stringent Calvinist morals that still, luckily, remain characteristic of the United States.

According to Luttwak, the winners in the new turbocapitalism -the architects and acrobats of techno-organizational change -become definitely richer. The losers, the majority, become relatively or absolutely poorer, and are forced by downsizing to take traditional jobs from the underclass, more and more of whom end up in prison he concludes that a new spectre is

haunting capitalism : If General Motors fires you, Microsoft will not hire you; instead you'll be working in poorly paid "services".

If Luttwak is right, then hard times are coming for monitorial citizenship.