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## Citizenship and Young People's Role in Public Life

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*Young* people play many roles in public life. They are activists and entrepreneurs, officeholders and voters, taxpayers and consumers, advocates and beneficiaries. They are also, first and foremost, citizens.

In its narrowest, most technical sense, *citizenship* is something that we are born with. In its richest sense, it is something we can work our entire lives toward making real.

Many of our public roles happen to us. We become taxpayers when we get our first jobs. We are customers when we stand in line at the DMV. But some of our public roles require a little more effort. In order to be voters, we must register and get ourselves to the polls on election day. To be informed voters, we have to learn about the candidates and the issues. If we want to become advocates, we have to know and care about an issue and organize to make government respond.

Clearly, *citizenship* has multiple, contested definitions. Most people would define it legalistically: people born or naturalized in the United States are American citizens. *Citizenship* in this sense conveys a set of rights: the right to vote, the right to a public education; the right to equal protection under the law. In return, it asks that citizens follow the laws, pay their taxes, and cast their ballots. Understood in this way, *citizenship* offers us important freedoms and protections. However, it puts government at the center of public life, and--as polls and voting statistics show--we, the people, are not terribly happy with our government. This definition of *citizenship* also raises particular questions and concerns for people of color in our country. For Native Americans, it may symbolize a status imposed by force. For Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans, it brings up questions of legality and documentation. For African Americans, it brings to mind over four hundred years of struggle.

*Citizenship* can also be thought of in terms of patriotism: a belief that America is the greatest nation on earth and that we, as American citizens, share a common set of values unique in the world. *Citizenship* in this sense can be a powerful tool that brings us together in times of crisis and reminds us of our common destiny. However, it can just as easily exclude. Given our history, not everyone is proud to be an American. Given the future, nationalism may not be the best way to protect our livelihoods--or the life of our planet.

For these reasons and others, *citizenship* is not often discussed outside of civics classes, or even in them for that matter. Being a citizen is not an identity that many Americans strongly claim in their everyday lives. However, I would argue that a vital, dynamic practice of *citizenship* is our best hope for creating the kind of world in which we want to live. In the current movement for "new *citizenship*" and civic renewal, *young* people need to be front and center.

### SERVICE AND CITIZENSHIP

One way that *young* people are making a difference in our country today is through service. Over the past decade, youth service has exploded. *Young* people from kindergarten through college and beyond are volunteering in record numbers.(FN1) in and out of school, individually and in groups, participating in projects as diverse as the *young* people themselves. For a growing number of schools, service has become a graduation requirement. In many others service is being structured into classroom activities and after-school programs. Proponents of youth service and service learning contend that volunteer experiences help *young* people meet a whole range of educational, social, and personal goals. As Benjamin R. Barber and Richard M. Battastoni explain, service can mean, and accomplish, many things:

To some it means charity, serving others from the goodness of one's heart. To some it means personal growth and the improvement of character: through serving others I can become a better person. To some it means a private fix to public problems: we can meet social challenges one by one and one on one.... To some it is a matter of gratitude: I serve to give something back to the community that nurtured and educated me.... And to some service means taking *citizenship* seriously: learning to take responsibility for the local and national communities from which my rights and liberties arise.(FN2)

Still, service does not necessarily constitute civic education and practice. That definition depends upon what the service is, how it is structured, and how *citizenship* is defined.

One approach to service and *citizenship*--the "civics" approach--stems from the understanding that *citizenship* means participating in and influencing the actions of government. From this perspective, service for *citizenship* would include such things as registering people to vote, volunteering on a campaign, or organizing a rally in support of or against a certain policy. All of these activities are necessary and important to the functioning of our democracy. However, this civics-oriented approach to service and *citizenship* limits the citizen's role to that of aide or claimant, not central actor. I would argue that we need a more powerful understanding of service and *citizenship* to effectively meet the challenges we face.

A second approach to service and *citizenship*, responding in part to the perceived limits of the civics approach, grows out of the communitarian movement. Communitarians view citizens in relation to the communities to which they belong, for example, a neighborhood, a religious faith, or an ethnic group. From this perspective, citizens are bound together by a common set of shared values, which convey upon members a moral obligation to care for one another and work for the common good. The responsibilities of *citizenship* are thus fulfilled not through voting or protesting but through acts of care and concern for those community members most in need and for the community as a whole. As communitarian Robert Bellah

and his coauthors write in the contemporary classic *Habits of the Heart*, "Generosity of spirit is ... the ability to acknowledge an interconnectedness--one's 'debts to society'--that binds one to others whether one wants to accept it or not. It is also the ability to engage in the caring that nurtures that interconnectedness. It is a virtue that everyone should strive for ... a conception of *citizenship* that is still alive in America."(FN3)

Today, *young* people are demonstrating their generosity of spirit in innumerable ways. They are volunteering in hospitals, nursing homes, libraries and museums. They are feeding the homeless and cleaning up playgrounds, riverbeds, and roadways. They are shoveling snow, delivering groceries to senior citizens, tutoring and reading stories to *young* children. These activities make a difference in the lives of individuals and communities. Further, many *young* volunteers are learning from their experiences through critical reflection and are developing a commitment to service that will last beyond their youth.

The communitarian understanding of *citizenship* pushes us to recognize and act on our responsibilities in addition to our rights. Its call to service helps us meet pressing social needs and teaches us about others and ourselves. However, the communitarian focus on what I ought to do for you, or what you ought to do for me, can keep us from seeing what we could accomplish together.

### **CITIZENSHIP AND SERVICE AS PUBLIC WORK**

As explained in the AmeriCorps Member Handbook, "*Citizenship* doesn't only mean getting things done for others. It means working with others--people who may be very different from yourself.... It means bringing Americans together from all different backgrounds in the common work of service."(FN4) *Citizenship* from a public work perspective focuses on common work, as opposed to common values, and on collaboration as opposed to one-directional volunteer-client relationships. I believe that this third approach to understanding and practicing *citizenship* gives us the best chance we have to create the world in which we want to live.

So what is public work? As explained by Harry C. Boyte and James Farr, "Public work is the expenditure of visible efforts by ordinary citizens whose collective labors produce things or create processes of lasting civic value.... It solves common problems and creates common things. It may be paid or voluntary, done in communities, or as part of one's regular job. Public work takes place with an eye to general, other-regarding consequences. It is also work done 'in' public--in places that are visible and open to inspection. And it is cooperative work of 'a' public: a mix of people whose interests, backgrounds, and resources may be quite different."(FN5)

What does youth service look like when approached from a public work perspective? First, it is collaborative. *Young* people not only work together to address a common problem, but they work with adults, as partners. In our society, *young* people are most often the recipients of service, treated as clients at best, problems in themselves at worst. Youth service shouldn't simply turn the tables, putting *young* people in the service provider role and the elderly, younger children, or those less fortunate in the client role. By expecting everyone to contribute and everyone to learn--by expecting everyone to be a citizen--public work challenges these roles.

Second, when service is seen as public work, *young* people have the power (not necessarily absolute power, but genuine power nonetheless) to define the problem they wish to solve and decide on a plan of action. Too often, *young* people are told what problems are important and what can be done about them. In some cases, *young* people are told exactly what they are going to do and how they are going to do it. When *young* people perform service without having had the opportunity to discuss and make decisions about what they are doing and why, without learning about and weighing their different options and choosing what they believe will be most meaningful and will have the greatest lasting impact before they do their service, they lose the opportunity to make it their own. These discussions and decision-making opportunities are not pre-work; they are an integral part of service and *citizenship* understood as public work.

Third, *young* people hold themselves, and are held, accountable for the work they agree to do. This is unlike many other service opportunities, such as those offered by The City Cares network, described in a recent New York Times article: "[They are] devoted to providing varied, flexible, and guilt-free opportunities for *young* professionals to serve their communities.... If someone wakes up on a Saturday morning in a mood to paint an elementary school, all she or he has to do is show up. If he has to head into the office or chooses to play tennis instead, no one calls to harangue him."(FN6) Public work by definition is serious work. It requires a commitment. *Citizenship* understood this way is not a dilettante's activity.

In sum, the public work perspective takes *young* people seriously as contributors to and creators of the public world. It is not the most prevalent model for understanding *citizenship* and service, but there are several striking examples that show its power.

Public Achievement is the youth and *citizenship* project of the Center for Democracy and *Citizenship* (and its predecessor, Project Public Life) at the University of Minnesota. For students at St. Bernard's School in St. Paul, Public Achievement has become an integral part of school life. They organize into teams to work on problems they identify and experience in their school, neighborhood, and broader community. Whether working to build a school playground or to implement a sexual harassment awareness program, the students learn and practice the civic arts of deliberation and debate, negotiation and decision making, strategizing and planning, follow-through and evaluation, with guidance from a college student "coach." At the same time, they also learn a set of concepts that help them think about the civic and political dimensions of their work. What makes this problem a public issue? Who has power to influence this problem? What are that party's interests?

By learning to think about power as relational and interests as dynamic, the students see how they can work with people very different from themselves, whom they don't know or perhaps don't like, to accomplish a shared goal. In the process, they have changed adult attitudes and their school culture. As St. Bernard's principal explains, "Through Public Achievement, kids

get an opportunity to grow in a way they can't in the classroom. It challenges teachers to think about how they teach: to set up partnerships with their students to create the type of environment they will learn in." For the past seven years, Public Achievement has been a practical experiment that has helped inform, at the same time it has been informed by, the theory of public work.

From Baltimore to Los Angeles, Portland to St. Petersburg, out-of-school youth are constructing and rehabbing much-needed housing for homeless and low-income families. They are literally rebuilding their communities and in the process are building a future for themselves. By participating in Youth-Build, a program that grew out of East Harlem's Youth Action Program of twenty years ago, unemployed *young* people who have dropped out of school have the opportunity to work toward a GED; learn construction trade skills; and develop personal, interpersonal, and leadership skills, all while performing an important, lasting service to their community. *Young* people were instrumental in developing the program and continue to play major decision-making and governing roles in local programs, state coalitions, and the national organization. Participants have equal power with staff in making policy; students make final hiring decisions and design their own curriculum. Participants also play an active role in ensuring that the program continues. They advocate for government funding, organize petition drives, testify before state legislatures and congressional committees, and help raise private funds as well. As one participant explained, "It doesn't get any more serious than this."

In addition to offering an alternative model of service, the *citizenship*-as-public-work model gives us a framework for seeing, in civic terms, work not typically recognized as service.

When Children's Express (CE) reporters interview their peers on growing up homeless for a nationally syndicated column, they are doing public work. CE reporters and editors, ages eight to eighteen, give *young* people a voice and a forum on issues they care about and experience in their own lives. CE's motto is "By kids, for everyone": their articles are published in local newspapers around the country and are geared for the adult audience as well as for younger readers. CE's *young* journalists gain skills and experiences in the process of and as a result of creating a visible product. They collectively define, research, and discuss serious issues, work with and interview a wide diversity of children and adults, and become accountable for work that reflects on them as individuals and as an organization. As a consequence, *young* people come to see themselves as creative and productive: they are making important contributions in the here and now.

CE's influence goes beyond just the *young* people on staff. Adult journalists and experts learn how to work with *young* people. The children who are interviewed get to tell their stories. Adult readers gain insight into the lives of *young* people. The media gain important new perspectives. In this age of media-defined reality, children become recognized members of the community. In the words of a CE alum, "CE helps tell other people that kids can do almost anything, ... it also makes kids think that kids can do things."

Journalism is not the only activity whose civic dimensions are fleshed out when viewed through the lens of public work. *Young* people's entrepreneurial activity, for profit or not, is work that can contribute to a community's economic and social development and therefore be a powerful expression of *citizenship*. The point is that we should all be challenged to find and deepen the public dimensions of our work, whether we are students or teachers, booksellers, computer programmers, lab technicians, or social workers, whether we are thirteen, twenty-five, fifty, or eighty.

#### THE MOVEMENT FOR CIVIC RENEWAL

Clearly, active *citizenship* and involvement in public life are important for everyone, not only for *young* people. This message has led to a broad-based movement for civic renewal and a "new *citizenship*." Editorials calling for renewed commitment to civic participation are appearing across the country as newspapers and other media themselves debate their role in public life. A growing number are experimenting with what is called civic or public journalism: projects designed to not only inform but engage readers in local issues. The civic approach to environmentalism is bringing environmental groups, schools, businesses, civic associations, boating and fishing clubs, and state and federal agencies together to address complex environmental problems in new ways. Citizens *young* and old are monitoring water quality while workers are learning to reduce toxins produced in their workplaces.

Community development is becoming more civic as well. Community residents are taking the lead in organizing, planning, and finding partners in local government agencies, social service nonprofits, and private foundations to implement holistic approaches to community building. A variety of university-based and independent centers, like the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at Northwestern University, and the Study Circles Resource Center, offer seminars, distribute training manuals and guides, undertake action-research projects, and conduct participatory evaluations to support and learn from the work in their fields of interest. Other centers, like the Center for Democracy and *Citizenship* at the University of Minnesota, the Walt Whitman Center at Rutgers University, and the Center for the Study of Civic Values, do similar work on *citizenship* broadly conceived.

Many of these organizations are working together to further their work and create a national movement around these themes. The Alliance for National Renewal brings together over 180 organizations in the voluntary sector to catalyze broader national efforts along these lines. In addition, there are no fewer than four national commissions exploring strategies to renew civic life, chaired by political leaders such as Pat Schroeder, Lamar Alexander, Sam Nunn, and Bill Bennett.

As this journal amply demonstrates, *young* people are engaged in some of the most innovative civic work to date. We have much to contribute to the national conversation and the national movement. Others can certainly benefit from our experience, and our work can only benefit when we learn from others. In addition, the work we do takes on even greater significance when we see it as part of a larger effort, an effort that is building and rebuilding our country. We can't afford to leave

ourselves out.

So how do we do this? The latest communications technology holds promise as a new avenue for connecting individuals and organizations and for sharing information.

The Civic Practices Network (CPN, <http://www.cpn.org>) makes use of the World Wide Web to make this happen. CPN is an online journal and encyclopedia of tools, stories, best practices, and essays whose goal is to help further active *citizenship*, community empowerment, and civic renewal. CPN is produced in collaboration with many organizations, innovators, and educators from a wide variety of fields, with *young* people playing central roles in its founding and development. Among its affiliates are national and regional youth organizations like Public Allies, Youth Venture, Children's Express, and Who Cares? magazine. Other affiliates, while not youth organizations in and of themselves, have *young* people whose work and writing is contributed to CPN. Undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Brandeis University provide essential production and editorial services for the network.

A wide range of materials--from complete training manuals to specific exercises, from introductory explanations of concepts to in-depth debates--are being downloaded from the CPN Web site and used by *young* people and their older allies in schools and community organizations around the country. By accessing CPN, you will find narratives, manuals, and evaluations from leading service programs like Public Achievement, AmeriCorps, and Active *Citizenship* Today (ACT). There is an entire section of stories, case studies, and essays on youth and education broadly, as well as sections on the environment, communities, health, journalism, and others. You will find maps to help you discover and connect with other civic projects in your area. The affiliates pages help you find organizations you can join, learn from, and collaborate with. The tools section offers explanations and examples of a variety of models and concepts, such as service learning and public work, as well as such techniques and methods as one-on-one interviews and accountability sessions. In the new *citizenship* section, you can read essays by leading theorists, past and present. These pieces, along with the civic perspectives essays that accompany each topic section, provide a wide range of views and the latest theories and analyses to help us better engage one another about the big ideas that underlie our collective work and spirit of purpose. Most importantly, CPN is a resource that we are building together. By contributing stories, case studies, best practices, and evaluations of your work, you help to move our collective work forward.

Together, through all our work, we are building our neighborhoods and our nation. In the process, we are creating powerful roles for *young* people in public life, roles that engages us all as citizens.

Added material

Melissa *Bass* is a founder and managing editor of the Civic Practices Network, and a former coordinator of the Public Achievement initiative. She is currently working toward a doctoral degree in politics at Brandeis University.

Note: For information on contributing material to CPN or on becoming a CPN affiliate, contact the Civic Practices Network, Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University, 60 Turner St., Waltham, MA 02154. Phone: (617) 736-4890. E-mail: [cpn@tiac.net](mailto:cpn@tiac.net). World Wide Web site: <http://www.cpn.org>.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. National surveys indicate that roughly 13.3 million American teenagers ages twelve to seventeen are involved in some form of voluntarism. See Independent Sector, *Volunteering and Giving Among American Teenagers 12 to 17 Years of Age*, 1996. Taking into consideration service by grade school students, college students, and out-of-school *young* adults, the number of *young* people involved in service is actually much higher.

2. Barber, B. R., and Battastoni, R. M. (eds.). *Education for Democracy*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1993, p. vii.

3. Bellah, R., and others. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 194-195.

4. Corporation for National Service. *AmeriCorps Member Handbook*. Draft. Washington, D.C.: Corporation for National Service, 1993.

5. Boyte, H. C., and Farr, J. "The Work of *Citizenship* and the Problem of Service-Learning." In R. Battastoni and W. Hudson (eds.), *Service Learning and Political Science*. Providence, R.I.: Campus Compact, 1997. For a detailed description and analysis of public work, see Boyte, H. C., and Kari, N. N. *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

6. Sack, K. "Volunteering Made Easier for Busy *Young* Workers." *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1995, p. 1.

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