

**Victòria Camps**

# Forming a Republican citizenry

Man is forced to be a good citizen even if not a morally good person.

I. KANT, *Perpetual Peace*

**This conception of citizenry is characteristic of liberalism, which has it that citizens are individuals who enjoy freedom to devote themselves to their business and pursue their interests, and nothing but respect for current legality should be demanded. When Adam Smith, Kant's peer, formulated the famous theory of the "invisible hand", what he was expressing is an idea very similar to Kant's: one should not preach morality to persons nor expect them to behave according to maxims, since an invisible hand turns private egoism into public benefit.**

The fact is that the liberal conception of the state and of the person today involves a number of shortcomings which have an adverse effect on the operation of democracy and of the welfare state. This is made clear by theories such as communitarianism and republicanism, which are comparable only to the extent that they criticise the liberal conception of the subject understood as a rootless abstract individual, with no identity other than the one conferred by his autonomy. As MacIntyre, one of the theorists of communitarianism, affirmed, the modernist stance means we do not or cannot have a unitary conception of the person enabling us to determine what qualities or virtues he or she should acquire. The idea of an excellence intrinsic to human nature, proper to Aristotelian ethics or medieval Christian thought, disappears with modernity. There is no excellence other than the sort that seeks the fulfilment of individual freedom, guaranteed by fundamental rights, though indeed with one limitation: that one's freedoms should be compatible with others'. This is what positive law attempts to achieve. As Kant said, an "action is right if it can co-exist with everyone's freedom".

One of the results of the liberal political model is the difficulty entailed in forming citizenries by liberal societies. If we exaggerate this a little, we could say that we have a democracy without citizens, or with citizens who are such more in a fundamental, legal sense than through any real commitment to society's general interests which they take on. The "liberty of the moderns" is quite unlike the "liberty of the ancients", as Benjamin Constant pointed out over two centuries ago. The free citizens of ancient times, who were not at all so free, as we must admit, understood that their freedom was a privilege which they enjoyed to be able to devote themselves to the service of the common good and the republic. Today's citizens, who conceive freedom as a universal right, understand that this right enables them to be independent in order to devote themselves to their private interests and to choose the lifestyle most appropriate to their own particular preferences. The ancients were not individualists and modern thought is based on the centrality of the individual as a singular being. The problems of public life are something to be solved by the political class. This is a division of labour, quite probably inevitable, which results in the simultaneous existence of two types of citizenry: active citizens, who are the sort who devote themselves professionally to politics, and passive citizens, all the others who, in the best of cases, vote every four years, pay their taxes and, beyond these obligations, wash their hands of politics.

Citizens' apathy is nothing new. Sociologists such as Max Weber denounced this way back at the beginning of the last century. Citizens' passivity is not a new phenomenon either, but it is definitely one that has been heightening. Nowadays abstention is growing in each new election and hostility and distrust for politics increase day by day. It is true that this style of politics based on party confrontation is not the best way to arouse people's enthusiasm, because it only helps to generate distrust and aversion, but there must surely be more absolute reasons explaining citizens' indifference towards public affairs. One of the explanations put forward for the abstention phenomenon is precisely the welfare enjoyed by the inhabitants of welfare states. What need do such people have to vote if they have plenty of everything that they need to survive?

Apart from this, politics wastes more time on futile questions than it devotes to solving any real issues. This means that it ultimately makes no difference whether one *lot* or the other are in power. Now the ideologies which marked clear differences between the left and right have disappeared, if politics is only management, why not consider this as a profession like any other, and understand politics as something that only has to do with political professionals?

It is not only the party structure which distances politics from the general public as a whole. Another aspect which has helped to mark the separation between both types of citizens is the model of protective social states which, whilst having brought considerable advantages as regards people's well-being and the redistribution of basic goods, has had an unwanted effect consisting in over-dependence on public administrations by citizens, who consider that these bodies are there to solve all their problems. The obligations stemming from recognition of social rights, protection of health, education, accommodation thus become the public authorities' obligations. Citizens are only the receivers of services which the state has the duty to guarantee. One of the neoliberal criticisms of the welfare state is that it discourages the unemployed to such an extent that they prefer to live from benefits rather than seek work. If it is true, as some say, that the greater the employment protection, the higher the



unemployment rate, we should ask ourselves why this is the case. The conception of the citizen as a subject of rights should be corrected some way, adding that —though it is true that citizens are above all subjects of rights— this does not release them from certain obligations and duties, the ones vital for both democracy and the welfare state to progress.

Although citizens' passivity is a longstanding problem, there is another difficulty very closely connected with this, which seems newer —I am referring to people's lack of a public spirit, a contradiction in terms, as the basic attribute of a public citizen should precisely be public-mindedness. For a few years now cities have been showing signs of unrest through the constant manifestations of lack of public spirit, people's lack of sensitivity for coexistence, mutual respect, care for the public sphere. More than one city has been involved in campaigns and programmes intended to inculcate civic attitudes in people. The Spanish parliament has similarly just passed a new education law which enforces the introduction of a new subject with the name of "Education for citizenship" into the curriculum, an idea not invented by us but which stems from a European Union proposal already established in different countries in this part of the world. This endeavour sets out to tackle the shortcoming that I mentioned above: that democracies are incapable of creating citizens. To put this another way, the inhabitants of today's democracies do not appear to succeed in acquiring the moral sensitivity vital to coexist in plural and diverse societies. Civility —the public spirit— would be none other than the minimum ethics essential to live in these societies.

### THE NEED FOR A PUBLIC ETHICS

Both apathy and indifference to politics and the lack of public spiritedness vouch for people's scanty commitment to society or the city. This is an aspect on which both the aforementioned



communitarianism and republicanism particularly insist, with certain major differences. Communitarianist philosophers concentrate more on the need to recover the community sense in order to achieve social cohesion and people's commitment to the community. The defenders of republicanism, on the other hand, rely on the idea of educating people in the "civic virtues", that is, inculcating the minimum but universal morals that any democratic society requires. I must confess that my own sympathies are closer

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to the republican thinkers than to communitarianism. I am an advocate of open societies, of the *res publica*, rather than communities seeking the foundation of the possible virtues that people should cultivate precisely in the communitarian identity. I do not agree with this. I do not think that national, religious or local bonds are valid to justify civic virtues. These are simply deduced from the belief in the value of democracy and the welfare state. Neither one nor the other can

work without the people who enjoy their benefits getting involved in both values and cooperating to help implement these smoothly through their attitudes and way of being. One of the republican ideals is expressed in the formula *libertas est civitas*. Binding liberty with civil coexistence does not require any more specific identities than the one conferred by democratic citizenship, that is, the conviction that being a good citizen is knowing how to practice freedom in everyone's benefit.

However, practising freedom in everyone's benefit does not involve only not impinging on other people's liberty but also having to contribute more positively to the common good by making use of individual freedom. This is the idea that leads me to finding something lacking in the Kantian thought quoted at the beginning of this article. If we want there to be good citizens, we cannot avoid cultivating public ethics or civic virtues. Legal coercion is unfortunately necessary, but not sufficient.

I thus reject MacIntyre's thesis as given in *After Virtue*, an excellent book nevertheless, because I do not believe that the age we are living in is unable to inculcate any kind of virtue that is not rooted in a particular and specific identity. I like the Aristotelian concept of "virtue" (even with all the word's anachronistic connotations) because it expresses very well how personal virtue should be understood. In the Aristotelian definition, the virtuous person is one who is willing to behave in patterns that are consistent with the one that democracy needs. Even while it is true, as MacIntyre says, that we cannot have a unitary conception of the person bearing in mind the plurality of our world, we can indeed require everyone to live according to democratic ideals and human rights. Laws for improving and overcoming everyday discriminations and lack of public-mindedness will be little use if people do not develop habits and attitudes of non-discrimination, of solidarity, of respect, of understanding for different ways of being.

To give stronger support to the idea I am putting forward, it would be useful to bear in mind a phenomenon proper to liberal societies —the growing deregulation, not only as

regards economy, but as regards other spheres such as ethics. Freedom recognised as a fundamental right requires setting a limit to legal prohibitions. Many of what were offences in more repressive times than now, the crime of opinion, for example, have ceased to be such. One of the recognised traits of liberalism is that the criminal code is abridged and the punishments for behaviour are restricted to really scandalous and intolerable cases. This does not however imply that only what is legally forbidden is incorrect. There is a whole world of things that we can do better or worse, but which are not explicitly regulated, nor should they be indeed. One particularly characteristic field in which this can be seen is communication. It is very hard and highly dangerous to regulate the freedom of expression and there are very few limitations to this freedom, which does not mean that communication cannot be more or less democratic, more or less consistent with constitutional values and with the recognition of fundamental rights, more or less compatible with the purposes of education.

Jürgen Habermas could be seen as one of the philosophers committed to the recovery of republicanism, above all when he bemoans present-day societies' loss of what he calls "a major normative intuition". Habermas said that we tend to take for granted the creation of a solidaristic rational will in people, this will furthermore be vital to coexist in peace, but nevertheless something that cannot be legally demanded. This will is thus taken for granted but is not real. To put this another way, the social state, which is finding it so hard to remain sustainable, cannot rely on the solidaristic and cooperative will of the people who are beneficiaries of this, nor does democracy have the citizens' participation that it needs to offset its fragility. These shortcomings make one more ready to think of a new republicanism—a republicanism which takes us back to Cicero and Machiavelli, who develop the ideal of the "good man" as the cornerstone of the republic. This reference to the virtuous man does not mean we are seeking to introduce any stifling and retrograde moralism, but simply expressing the need to foster citizens' virtuous behaviour.

What is being demanded is that citizens should act *as such*. According to Machiavelli, only behaviour according to virtue will enable a *vivere civile e libero* in which there is no place for corruption, because corruption, in all its facets, comes about when public interest disappears from people's vital viewpoint and when they pursue only private or corporative interests. In this case they display a lack of self-control that prevents them from considering anything other than their own private interests. With these people, however, it is not possible to form or sustain a genuine republic, which requires people who are free, but at the same time who cooperate in the cause of the common good. This is furthermore a form of practising freedom which is not learned automatically, but which has to be taught.

What the new republicanism finds lacking is a citizenry that assumes its civic duties—a citizenry, not merely a set of subjects depending on public subsidies or dominated by clientelism stemming from a model of social state that has been distorted. The malfunctions seen in our democracies do not stem only from structural deficiencies, but also ethical or moral shortcomings. If the horizon of a "well-ordered society" as John Rawls said, is marked by a feeling of justice, one should clearly understand what we wish to understand by justice. As far as I am concerned, I have not found any better definition than "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs"—a definition which relies on everyone's contributions, those of both institutions and citizens ■