



AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

The Quest for Inclusion

JUDITH N. SHKLAR

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INTRODUCTION

THERE is no notion more central in politics than citizenship, and none more variable in history, or contested in theory. In America it has in principle always been democratic, but only in principle. From the first the most radical claims for freedom and political equality were played out in counterpoint to chattel slavery, the most extreme form of servitude, the consequences of which still haunt us. The equality of political rights, which is the first mark of American citizenship, was proclaimed in the accepted presence of its absolute denial. Its second mark, the overt rejection of hereditary privileges, was no easier to achieve in practice, and for the same reason. Slavery is an inherited condition. In these essays I shall try to show, however briefly, the enormous impact that not merely the institution of black chattel slavery but servitude as an integral part of a modern popular representative republic, dedicated to "the blessings of liberty," has had on the way Americans think about citizenship.

The dignity of work and of personal achievement, and the contempt for aristocratic idleness, have since Colonial times been an important part of American civic self-identification. The opportunity to work and to be paid an earned reward for one's labor was a social

right, because it was a primary source of public respect. It was seen as such, however, not only because it was a defiant cultural and moral departure from the corrupt European past, but also because paid labor separated the free man from the slave. The value of political rights was enhanced for the same reason. The ballot has always been a certificate of full membership in society, and its value depends primarily on its capacity to confer a minimum of social dignity.

Under these conditions citizenship in America has never been just a matter of agency and empowerment, but also of social standing as well. I shun the word *status* because it has acquired a pejorative meaning; I shall speak of the standing of citizens instead. To be sure, standing is a vague notion, implying a sense of one's place in a hierarchical society, but most Americans appear to have a clear enough idea of what it means, and their relative social place, defined by income, occupation, and education, is of some importance to them. They also know that their concern for their social standing is not entirely compatible with their acknowledged democratic creed. Often they tend to resolve the conflict between conduct and ideology by assuring themselves that really there is less exclusiveness and status-consciousness than there used to be in the past.¹ Nevertheless, standing as a place in one of the higher or lower social strata and the egalitarian demand for "respect" are not easily reconciled. The claim that citizens of a democracy are entitled to respect unless they forfeit it by their own unacceptable

actions is not a triviality. On the contrary, it is a deeply cherished belief, and to see just how important it has always been, one has to listen to those Americans who have been deprived of it through no fault of their own.

The significance of the two great emblems of public standing, the vote and the opportunity to earn, seems clearest to these excluded men and women. They have regarded voting and earning not just as the ability to promote their interests and to make money but as the attributes of an American citizen. And people who are not granted these marks of civic dignity feel dishonored, not just powerless and poor. They are also scorned by their fellow-citizens. The struggle for citizenship in America has, therefore, been overwhelmingly a demand for inclusion in the polity, an effort to break down excluding barriers to recognition, rather than an aspiration to civic participation as a deeply involving activity.

I do not intend to imply that citizenship as standing is the only meaning that the very idea of citizenship has in American history. Quite the contrary. The word *citizenship* has at least four quite distinct though related meanings, and what I have called standing is only one of these. Three equally significant meanings are citizenship as nationality, as active participation or "good" citizenship, and finally, ideal republican citizenship. These other ways of considering citizenship are so important that I want to make sure I do not give the impression of having ignored or neglected them.

In any modern state and especially in an immigrant

society, citizenship must always refer primarily to nationality. Citizenship as nationality is the legal recognition, both domestic and international, that a person is a member, native-born or naturalized, of a state. Such citizenship is not trivial. To be a stateless individual is one of the most dreadful political fates that can befall anyone in the modern world. And the possession of an American passport particularly is profoundly valued, especially by naturalized citizens. Few indeed are the new American citizens who have chosen to throw their naturalization papers away.

American citizenship as nationality has its own history of exclusions and inclusions, in which xenophobia, racism, religious bigotry, and fear of alien conspiracies have played their part. In the years before the Civil War the civic position of alien residents of the United States was, moreover, dependent upon the conflicting interests of the various states and of the federal government. Its history has, therefore, been extremely complicated. For instance, at one time Midwestern states were so starved for labor that they offered any alien white male the vote immediately upon declaring his intention eventually to become a citizen. At the same time the citizens of New England were contemplating ways and means to exclude their Irish neighbors from full citizenship.² The history of immigration and naturalization policies is not, however, my subject. It has its own ups and downs, but it is not the same as that of the exclusion of native-born Americans from citizenship. The two histories have their

parallels, since both involve inclusion and exclusion, but there is a vast difference between discriminatory immigration laws and the enslavement of a people.

Citizenship as nationality is a legal condition; it does not refer to any specific political activity. Good citizenship as political participation, on the other hand, concentrates on political practices, and it applies to the people of a community who are consistently engaged in public affairs. The good democratic citizen is a political agent who takes part regularly in politics locally and nationally, not just on primary and election day. Active citizens keep informed and speak out against public measures that they regard as unjust, unwise, or just too expensive. They also openly support policies that they regard as just and prudent. Although they do not refrain from pursuing their own and their reference group's interests, they try to weigh the claims of other people impartially and listen carefully to their arguments. They are public meeting-goers and joiners of voluntary organizations who discuss and deliberate with others about the policies that will affect them all, and who serve their country not only as taxpayers and occasional soldiers, but by having a considered notion of the public good that they genuinely take to heart. The good citizen is a patriot.

Such active citizenship often shades over into bordering private spheres. The phrase *good citizen* is now very commonly used to refer to people who behave well on the job and in their immediate neighborhood. Whistle-blowing not only on corrupt officials but

on company management, or just being alert to the injustices of daily life, are normally spoken of as acts of good citizenship. University departments, for instance, routinely speak of some of their members as good citizens, by which they mean that they do their share of chores such as sitting on dull committees, teaching elementary courses, and attending meetings rather than just doing what is often called “their own work.” The same is said of people who do their best for their immediate surroundings, through activities like keeping the local playground reasonably clean and safe, attending PTA meetings, and shoveling the snow off their part of the sidewalk in winter. These are in fact what we might well call decent people, because they have a sense of obligation to the social environment that they share immediately with their occupational or local neighbors. It is a use of the word *citizenship* that has no policy implications, but it is an internalized part of a democratic order that relies on the self-direction and responsibility of its citizens rather than on their mere obedience. Whether in private or in public, the good citizen does something to support democratic habits and the constitutional order.

Good citizenship should not be confused with what is usually meant by goodness. We have known since Aristotle that a good citizen is not the same as a good man.³ Good citizens fulfill the demands of their polity, and they are no better and no worse as citizens than the laws that they frame and obey. They support the public good as it is defined by their constitution and its

fundamental ethos. The good person and the good citizen could only be identical in a perfect state, and even then only if we accept the notion that civic virtue, manly rectitude as the term implies, is the best human character. With that exception the possibility of tension between personal morality and citizenship is always possible and even likely, and there are, of course, regimes so terrible that good people are bound to be bad citizens there, but America has never been quite that bad. It was only half a despotism, part free, part slave. Surely the American citizens who performed all their civic obligations under a constitution that sanctioned slavery were not bad citizens; they lived up to the requirements of their half-free society. This was as true of those among them who were serious and consistent abolitionists as of those who, like Lincoln, acted on the belief that abolition would take a long time and who were not ready to risk a war for the sake of a population that they regarded as inferior, though they would fight for the preservation of Union. Neither they nor we are either perfect citizens or good human beings. Many Americans, however, have been and are good enough citizens of the republic as it was, is, and might be.

Historically the trouble has not been that Americans claimed that one had to be morally good to be a citizen. On the contrary, women particularly were said to be good more frequently than men, but they were not fit to be citizens. In this respect the differences between the good person and the good citizen have

been fully understood from the first. What renders any group or individual unfit for citizenship is economic dependence, race, and gender, which are all socially created or hereditary conditions. Such rules would seem to imply a political system that is in no sense democratic or liberal, but it was never that simple, because Americans have lived with extreme contradictions for most of their history by being dedicated to political equality as well as to its complete rejection.

These attitudes to citizenship were evidently deeply entrenched in the institutional and ideological structure of the United States, and they have left their traces amid the many changes of the present century. And indeed citizenship cannot be discussed apart from its political setting, not only because of Aristotle's distinction between good men and good citizens but also because of his equally pertinent observation that citizenship is more changeable than and quite distinct from a person's or a group's physical character.⁴ An oligarchic coup d'état can transform the citizens of a democracy into quite different political animals, for example. In spite of nationalist rhetoric, national character, whatever it may mean, does not define citizenship. The citizens of the Third, Fourth, and Fifth French Republics were not at all like those of the Vichy regime, but they were physically the same Frenchmen, and one need hardly mention the history of German citizenship in the present century to see the point. More important here is the fact that American citizenship has also been transformed in the course of consti-

tutional, institutional, demographic, and international changes, of which the nationalization and expansion of the functions of government and several constitutional amendments are merely the most obvious and fundamental.

If these essays have any polemical purpose, it is not only to join those scholars who have belatedly come to recognize the part that slavery has played in our history. Important as that rethinking of our past is, I also want to remind political theorists that citizenship is not a notion that can be discussed intelligibly in a static and empty social space. Whatever the ideological gratifications that the mnemonic evocation of an original and pure citizenry may have, it is unconvincing and ultimately an uninteresting flight from politics if it disregards the history and present actualities of our institutions. Citizenship has changed over the years, and political theorists who ignore the best current history and political science cannot expect to have anything very significant to contribute to our political self-understanding.⁵ They stand in acute danger of theorizing about nothing at all except their own uneasiness in a society they have made very little effort to comprehend. Neither Supreme Court opinions, which at times serve to structure our public debates, nor the writings of other philosophers, however distinguished, can act as a substitute for a genuinely historical and politically informed understanding of what citizenship has been and now is in America.⁶

The reasons for imagining that American citizen-

ship has never altered are curious. It may well be that because America's basic institutions seem to have changed so little since 1787, we often discuss citizenship as if it existed in an institutional deep freeze. The unchanging permanence of the political structure is simply being taken for granted because of its formal continuity, even by those who do remember the significance of the constitutional amendments that followed the Civil War. Moreover, the longevity of the ideology that goes under the entirely appropriate name of "the American Dream" is indeed an extraordinary phenomenon.⁷ Its roots lie far back in the first decades of the last century, and I hope to explore them in these essays. The endurance of much of the original Constitution and of the faith in its promise does not, however, justify the assumption that nothing significant has happened to American citizenship since the eighteenth century. To be sure, like the ancient Romans, we too may find the stability of authority and the gratifying support of tradition in acts of ancestor worship.⁸ Nothing, however, would have mortified the actual founders of the republic more deeply. Every page of *The Federalist Papers* is a call to the people of America to take its fate into its own hands and to fashion its institutions in the light of the best political science of the present, rather than to look timidly to the past. The good citizen of today can do no less.

There has always been in addition to nationality and good citizenship a vision of the ideal citizen that has haunted especially those who have dreams about

mythical Athens or Sparta. Ordinary active or good citizens are certainly not ideal or perfect citizens; they just try to live up to the recognized demands of a representative democracy. Ideal republican patriots are quite different. They have no serious interests apart from public activity; they live in and for the forum. These perfected citizens are sometimes thought to be healthier and more fulfilled than people who are indifferent to politics, but there is little medical proof of such a proposition. Many people might not thrive on uninterrupted political engagement. Since the turn of the century it has, more relevantly, been argued that the best cure for the faults of democratic government is more, not less, democracy. The steady movement toward more direct government by means of referenda, recalls, and initiatives has been based on this assumption, with rather uncertain results.⁹ These opportunities for political expression have not particularly impressed the advocates of truly participatory democracy because they are still ways of voting on measures without intensely experienced deliberative involvement.

In the ideal republic the virtuous citizen would be constantly and directly involved in ruling as well as in being ruled. What is meant by "virtue" is of course not altogether clear, but it is more than the merely active citizen now displays. At the very least, perfect citizens will pursue the public good with single-minded devotion and will do so in a direct rather than in a representative democracy. They are, of course, members of a

republic unlike the United States as it now is, ever has been, or is ever likely to be in any imaginable future. Their function is to act as a critical reflection upon imperfect democracy and the lack of zeal that most of us bring to our public life. One may well doubt their effectiveness.

The great classics of modern political theory have certainly followed Aristotle in emphasizing that it is the constitution that defines good citizenship, not an ideal individual. Even Rousseau, who is the inventor of the modern model of the perfect citizen in the ideal democratic republic, understood this perfectly well. Montesquieu had instructed him no less than many American readers. They all knew that the good citizen of their extended modern republic would not be like the virtuous Romans, who had no personal identity at all apart from their citizenship. Good citizenship simply is not separable from the sort of society in which it functions. The call for perfect republican virtue itself is persuasive only if it is placed within the full context of a perfect democracy, radically different from the modern representative republic.¹⁰ There is very little evidence to show that there are many Americans who contemplate such transformative politics with interest, let alone enthusiasm. The paradox of an ideal democratic citizenship that has no appeal to the people it is supposed to favor is not without irony.

Neither the defense nor the reform of contemporary American citizenship has much to gain from uto-