The Meaning of Citizenship

by Harry C. Boyte

Citizenship is the tough, messy, ongoing work of creating our society together.

Citizenship is a powerful theme that is also fraught with danger. On the one hand it can be thin — a good citizen votes, asks for things from government, elects representatives, and pressures them when they don’t do right or they don’t give up enough. On the other hand there is the notion of citizenship as a community of values — we share a set of values because we’re Americans. And in those terms it’s a language floating outside of environments, which can be easily sentimentalized.

Here, I mean citizenship as effective, public-spirited contribution to public problem solving that begins and is grounded in people’s everyday institutional environments where they live and work, go to school, volunteer, or go to church. That’s the foundation of serious citizenship. And this is an important conception for three reasons.

First is a frankly and unabashedly moral theme: citizenship understood as serious contribution is the way that people help create the world. It is a birthright of human beings to be creators not only in their immediate lives but in the larger world.

I saw the transformative power of that sense of citizenship in the civil rights movement, when I worked with the Citizenship Education Program of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In communities across the south as people came to see themselves as citizens — understood not simply as voters but as serious actors in the world — it transformed their lives. It stayed with me how deeply people were changed as they came to see themselves as citizens in an active, full, robust sense. Kids who hated school, who had all sorts of problems,
would suddenly develop a new sense of their capacity and their dignity. There’s a remarkable play by Ida Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta*, about her own life that was transformed when she was involved in the Freedom School in Mississippi in 1965.

I contrast that with my experience as a counselor in an adolescent treatment center. I was struck as I worked in that treatment program that it had little impact. Kids were shrewd at understanding the different languages of different psychologists, so they could talk about feeling powerless to an Adlerian, or about their sexual identity crisis with their parents to a Freudian psychologist. They knew all sorts of things about private relationships — that was their language. But they had no sense that they could impact the public, larger world in any serious or substantial way. It seems to me we’re robbing our younger generation and our society of a birthright in the extent that we see an erosion of active and robust citizenship.

The second reason is pragmatic. It is increasingly obvious that society is not going to address or solve the problems it faces without citizens — citizens inside and outside of government. We tend to think of people once they go into government as no longer citizens. Now they’re doing things to citizens. We’ve forgotten the old notion of citizen politician or citizen public servant. But the fact is, until we retrieve and rein-vigorate the notion of citizenship as serious, effective, public contribution by ordinary people in everyday environments, the country doesn’t have a chance of addressing the problems we face: crime, drugs, or teenage pregnancy or racial conflict or school reform, developing a healthy economic base or addressing issues of social and economic justice. We can’t do that without citizenship.

Thirdly, citizenship is a critical theme because it speaks to the larger crisis of meaning in the society. This crisis has prompted a variety of eschatological and utopian fantasies, illusions, quick fixes, and rhetoric. They’re often sentimental, or purist, or millennial. But the fact is, citizenship understood as the tough, messy, ongoing work of creating our society together and dealing with our tough problems is how we’re going to get out of this crisis and develop a larger vision of the society as our common creation, our product, our common work, our civic capital.

That’s the challenge. That’s the reason for citizenship. But reclaiming citizenship is also difficult and tough.

In our own analysis, citizenship as I’ve described it — effective involvement that is public-spirited, based on the ongoing work of problem solving, that is not utopian or immaculate but messy, difficult, full of ambiguity — has had a stronger presence in the past. In fact, one of the ironies is that while
we've had heroic and dramatic battles to expand the citizenry and to address terrible injustices about who were historically excluded from the citizenry — African-Americans, women, the poor — we've also seen an erosion of the substance and meaning of citizenship. It's become weaker and thinner.

People from the 1930s and even the 1940s remember the vitality of civic culture in what we call mediating institutions — settings that tied their everyday lives to the larger world and helped them feel that they were contributors to building a society. Places for example like the old west side of St. Paul, the Flats along the Mississippi River, a polyglot, poor community where people came off the trains and settled. A tough neighborhood that didn't have running water — you can't romanticize or be nostalgic about the Flats. Nonetheless, people who grew up in the Flats will describe their work in building not only the community but a stake in the larger world, as citizens. This was connected to an active public life: street corner debates, unions that had storefronts, pot-bellied stoves, and offices where people would gather around; the settlement house where every nationality and ethnicity had its organization and different events; the hardware store that was a center for learning about what was happening in Europe. The work of building the synagogues and the churches, the library, the school, and parks connected people's everyday lives in the Flats to the larger society. People talk about helping create the New Deal: "We helped build the New Deal!" they say. When asked what they mean, they say, "We were involved in the union or the settlement house or the local school, and that work fed the New Deal and Minnesota politics.

Through such experiences people learned a number of political and civic skills — how to deal with different kinds of people, the give and take, messy quality of public life, the arts of argument, the process of debate, the interaction across generational lines, ways to figure out power relationships and politics and public policy, ways to be connected to the larger world. That process created a civic capital in the society, a foundation for the Second World War or the trade union movement.

So when we think of the success of the New Deal having built a set of programs that people identify with — like Social Security and workers compensation — it's important to know that government did not do that alone. Government created these in interaction with, and in relationship to, a citizenry who felt they were becoming citizens and had the civil institutions and mechanisms to practice citizenship.

The great dilemma that we face today is that we've largely lost such connecting institutions and settings. Mediating spaces exist but they've largely been professionalized and segmented as much of the middle class has moved to the suburbs. They've become dominated by a kind of narrow expertise. Schools present a dramatic case. Schools at every level increasingly focus on specialization and
This process is also reflected throughout society as we have come increasingly to cede authority to experts. The root of the word amateur is from the Latin *amator* which meant lover, someone who did something for the love of it. But today, amateur is a dismissive word — “that’s just an amateur process, that’s not serious or substantial.” The imagery around the volunteer, the imagery of the heart, shows the problem. It doesn’t mean that volunteers don’t care. But as Tony Massengale has said, citizens are expected to be everything except serious actors. They’re supposed to care, to be nice, to bond, and to be polite and kind, or moralized innocent and righteous. We’ve lost the tough, practical, difficult sense of public work that was once embedded in our institutions.

He meant a particular kind of education that taught the skills of oratory and listening, interaction, thinking, and practical work. In fact, Jefferson was highly critical of an ivy-league kind of insulated college that taught narrow specialization, of academic learning detached from real life. The drive in recent years throughout the educational processes has been to specialize narrowly and to get away from generalist, practical citizenship education. That has meant the increasing separation of schools and educational institutions from the communities in which they’re located. It has also meant the proliferation of narrow disciplinary perspectives in every field.

We don’t have a crisis in government but a crisis in citizenship.

That perspective takes many forms, from talk show democracy where citizens sound off, to Ross Perot. Serious citizenship does not mean that we’re going ever to find somebody in our future who goes to Washington and puts his head under the hood and fixes the machinery of government for us. Citizenship in any substantial form recognizes, as Pogo put it, that we have met the enemy and he is...
us. We have to claim responsibility. We don't have a crisis in government so much as a crisis in citizenship.

We do forums with young people. One of the most dramatic ones I've seen was with a group of hearing impaired teenagers. We asked them what problems they faced in their lives. They had a lot of problems. Not only the normal problems that teenagers talk about — conflict, violence, racial conflict, drugs — but other kids make fun of them; teachers didn't know sign language and it went on and on. Then we said, this is a long list of problems, what are you going to do about it? There was silence. And then one young man said, we can't do anything about these problems; you have to fix them. We said, we're not going to fix your problems, and if you've been told that, it's not true.

That kind of challenge engages young people and their energies; and these kids went on to develop some strategies for action. At the end of the hour, the two social workers who worked with these kids came up and told me that together they'd worked about 30 years with hearing impaired kids, yet never, in that period of time, had they ever heard anybody ask kids what they are going to do about problems they face. These young people — and they're not unique — have swum in an environment of service, of therapeutic care, with the message that somebody else is going to fix their problems. And that's the crisis we face.

Our approach to citizenship education — to how people develop their capacity for effective, public-spirited work in the world, embedded in everyday institutions and having a larger reach — is what we call a conceptual approach. We borrow the notion of a conceptual approach from two traditions. First is the Citizenship Schools of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which were organized around the basic question of what is a citizen. It was a concept, an idea, and I saw people transformed by the power of that idea.

The second tradition comprises the most successful experiences out of community organizing, especially the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) which has associated with it many of the largest community organizations in the country, including groups in San Antonio, Baltimore, East Brooklyn, the colonias region around south Texas, Memphis. The IAF teaches practical concepts that come out of long experience, not abstractions. Their approach differs from most of the organizing and training around the country. The overwhelming tendency in organizing is to teach skills and knowledge: how to chair a meeting, how to deal with the press, how to put together a leaflet, how to do a campaign, how to target your enemy, or identify your allies. The most successful
organizing I've seen, however, is not focused on teaching techniques but on the mapping of concepts that are usable, that come out of experience, and that help people to understand themselves and their environments in a more effective way, with the recognition that they will learn a lot of skills along the way as they learn serious citizenship or politics or organizing.

We've adapted that lesson of a conceptual approach to civic education to many different environments, but especially to service and information environments. Several particular concepts are very useful in these environments, concepts which are connected to aspects of citizenship that are essential to retrieve.

First of all, citizenship, if it's going to be serious, needs to be about solving public problems. The concept directly relevant to that is the notion of politics as the activity of all of us, going back to the Greek definition from the word politicos, which means the activity of the citizen. Politics is ubiquitous; it happens in everyday environments. We find that when people learn to see their environments in terms of their political dynamics they can become strategic players. Actors! They stop putting themselves outside of what's happening; they put themselves inside of it. Until they claim that role, they're outsiders. And this does not only happen in relation to government. It's true for office politics, university politics, business politics, or church politics.

The argument that politics is dirty and messy is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's going to be narrow and shorter term so long as most people think of themselves as outside of it. So the notion of politics as our own work is key to our understanding of citizenship.

The notion of a public world as a world of difference, of public work, of public agency, of action, of power, of getting things done, that connects one's own individual life in a particular environment to the larger whole — this is a central concept of citizenship and must be a central concept in our approach to civic education. It cuts across the grain of narrowly specialized education and most current civic education which teaches people to think of themselves in narrow ways, like Immanuel Kant's Cyclops. Kant said the great danger in education is that people will learn to be Cyclops: they'll look straight ahead with a narrow vision, far, but they won't be able to see to the sides. Kant said that was private sense, and that was insanity or idiocy, as the Greeks defined those terms — as having no public life.

The concept of public cuts across the grain of our culture in another way. Our culture has been radically personalized and made intimate, accompanying the rise of expertise. Young people today are supposed to be intimate and bond with everybody. This is the personal development language that people are taught: the language of self-esteem, expressing feelings. Now there are appropriate places and times for talking about feelings, for getting support and nurturance; but it's not appropriate
in a public world, the world of differences and of people you don't know.

Two final concepts I want to mention briefly are *interest* and *power*. Interest is the notion that everybody has a place they're coming from. And everybody else's place is not my place. This is a painful lesson. But the fact is that other people do have self-interests. The concept of self-interest has been narrowed to be seen as selfish. But self-interest is a relational term that comes from the Latin, *inter esse*, to be among or in relationship or in the midst. The notion of everybody having an interest means that everybody has a set of passions that drive them: a history, a rootedness, a story, deep concerns. And this is not only true for individuals, it's also true for communities of reference, like a profession or church or family.

The notion of interest is a critical concept in undercutting the expert-client relationship. The language of expertise reflects the notion that experts or narrowly understood professionals come in from the outside as objective, disinterested, impartial arbiters and fixers. They supposedly don't have any personal stake or role or history around what they're doing. Surfacing the fact that everyone in a setting, a public environment, has interests is essential to altering this narrow idea of a relationship.

It also provides the way that people open up their worlds, to become fluid, dynamic worlds with immense possibilities that are untapped. We have a project with the School of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology, called "Communities — Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol," about teenage alcohol use. I listened last week to several organizers from different counties in Minnesota and Wisconsin who've been applying these concepts of self-interest and power. They told stories out of the interviews they've been doing in their communities. Again and again people recounted the way their images of the communities had been transformed as they did interviews with people finding out who they are, where they come from, what their histories are. The banker wasn't a narrow, straight-laced person; he was trying to start a shelter, and he had been a sociology major in school. Or the person on welfare had all this talent and energy and creativity. The notion of interest not only makes explicit the fact that people come from different places but it is also a window into the creativity, diversity, and richness that's embedded in any setting.

The final concept is power: that power is relational, interactive, dynamic. When you ask most people how they think of power, it's as a zero-sum — some people have it and others don't. That of course, like politics, is a way to marginalize yourself; you just feel moralized and righteous and aggrieved because you don't have power. Yet power first of all comes from different sources — not only from position and control of resources — although those are important sources — but also from expertise. AMA is a form of organized power to its knowledge.

Power is also relational. If you think
about the relationships that are needed to build power, the world looks different. For example, when teenagers, who often think the school principal exists to mess over their lives, come to understand the different kinds of power relationship that exist in a school — and where the principal is coming from, and that they can be in relationship with different kinds of people — the dynamics change. For the first time they realize that there are many ways to do things, that the world is not just out there beyond reach, but that they can work on it.

Power in information environments is a different dynamic than in resource-scarce environments. Resource-scarce settings — for instance, settings in which some people have money and other people don't — lend themselves to a confrontational approach. Conflict and anger and difference are important for changing any environment; but in environments where the hidden power is expertise you can't just say that experts are the enemy and we're innocent. You have to be in relationship and recognize that there are different kinds of power that come out of different experiences, knowledge, and histories. So the concept of a relational, dynamic understanding of power is key to changing environments.

What this amounts to is a retrieval and updating of older American understandings of citizenship — especially that ordinary people can be serious actors in the ongoing creation and problem solving of the public world. That's our challenge.

Harry Boyte is a senior fellow at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and director of the institute's Project Public Life. He is the author of many books on citizen politics, most recently, Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work, with Nancy N. Kari.