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Education and citizenship in diverse societies

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Abstract

The question of the state's role in the control of sponsorship of education is addressed in the light of liberal political principles designed to keep peace and enforce toleration in culturally diverse societies. Some contemporary, self-described liberal philosophers argue for a much more substantial educational role for the state than liberal principles will really allow. Brian Barry's argument for that role assumes that the state can prescribe answers to controversial questions regarding the truth and the good life in which a truly liberal state would take no interest. Stephen Macedo is more accommodating to religious diversity than Barry, but his argument fails because of his rashly optimistic view of the state's effectiveness in promoting civic virtue and the possibility of reconciling that role with fundamental liberal values. Liberal regimes do not depend on civic education, even under conditions of diversity. Their life-blood is toleration and dissent rather than the widespread diffusion of civic virtue. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Unable to draw the rule of their faith from themselves alone, women cannot set limits of certainty and reason to their faith; they let themselves be carried away by countless external influences, and thus they are always beneath or beyond the true. Always extreme, they are all libertines or fanatics; there are none who know how to join wisdom with piety. The source of this evil is not only in the extravagant character of their sex but in the ill-regulated authority of ours. (Rousseau, 1979, p. 377)

It must, however, be admitted that some legislators have taken care to do something that shows much wisdom: they have given fathers a large measure of authority over their children. Nothing gives greater relief to the judicial authorities, nothing does more to keep young people out of the courts, and

nothing, finally, is more conducive to tranquillity throughout the state, since good citizens are always produced more by custom than by law. Of all forms of power it is the one that is misused least; it is the holiest kind of judicial authority; it is the only one which does not depend on conventions established by society, and indeed precedes them—Usbek to Rhedi. (Montesquieu, 1993, pp. 229–300)

Of the issues that bring state and subject into conflict, none is more fundamental than education. It is no surprise that treatises on education are among the greatest works of political philosophy, reflecting on the nature of society and the state. The question of who should have authority to inculcate beliefs, no less than the content of those beliefs, has exercised political thinkers because it bears directly on the matter of strength and the stability—indeed the legitimacy—of the state. But it exercises the minds of individuals, and of parents in particular, because it is their beliefs, and the beliefs and values of their offspring, which hang in the balance. The state's immediate interest is in preserving its authority; the subjects,' in enjoying their liberty to think and act as they please.¹ In disputes over what balance should be struck, of course, all judge in favor of their own cause.

In diverse societies this conflict often arises in the form of contention over the schooling of children from religious, linguistic, or cultural minorities. In Malaysia, a significant minority of Chinese children attend Chinese language schools, and the status and curricula of these schools are invariably the subject of government criticism. This is as much a reflection of the ethnic politics of the country as it is of varying views of the education of children. In Britain the existence of Muslim schools has prompted demands for equal funding with other religious schools, since Catholic, Anglican, and Jewish schools commonly receive state aid. In the United States such landmark cases as *Yoder v. Wisconsin* and *Mozert v. Hawkins* point to the persistence of demands from parents for the freedom to withdraw from state-crafted education, or for the right to exemption from participation in aspects of the state-mandated curriculum.

In the liberal political tradition there is a strong presumption in favor of tolerating dissenting views, or ways of life and, consequently, of accepting religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Nonetheless, many writers who describe themselves as liberal have serious reservations about allowing minorities to be exempt from the requirements of state-mandated education—provided, of course, that the education mandated is a liberal education. Such writers as John Rawls, Stephen Macedo, Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, and William Galston are wary of allowing parents the freedom to educate their children in schools or homes which do not inculcate liberal standards of critical thinking, and prepare them for democratic citizenship. Others, like Brian Barry, are even more adamant that the liberal state should play a forceful role in ensuring that every child is offered a liberal education (Barry, 2001). At the same time, however, there are liberal writers, like Jeff Spinner-Halev, who think that

¹This is not to say that the subject has no interest in stable authority; nor that the state would not best protect its own interests by respecting and upholding the liberty of its subjects. It is only to point out that each has its own immediate (and ultimate) interest. This point is best recognized by de Spinoza, 1951, esp. ch.20.

a liberal state should accommodate far more educational preferences than some of these others would allow (Spinner-Halev, 2000).

In matters of public policy, it is difficult to make precise statements about where lines should be drawn, or about what practices should or should not be tolerated, endorsed, or subsidized. Exemptions won often reflect specific historical or political circumstances rather than any general societal commitment to particular principles. Policy-making is a society-specific art—one that must be sensitive to what is feasible. In this essay I want to offer a more general statement about the proper place of education in a culturally diverse society. More particularly, I want to defend a view of the good society that downplays the role of the state in the education of subjects. In this regard I wish to take issue with some of those liberal writers mentioned above, who in the end, are too preoccupied with preserving the interests of the state. In emphasizing the importance of liberal education they end up giving too much attention to the state's interest in preserving a compliant citizenry, and not enough to more fundamental freedoms of minorities to dissent from majority opinion.

The chapter contains three sections. In the first, a brief statement is made concerning what is fundamental to the liberal view of the basis of a good society, of the place of the state within it, and of the reasons why the state has only a limited role to play in the education of subjects. The second section outlines and considers the main reasons offered by two contemporary liberal writers for giving the state a more substantial set of duties. In the third section it is argued that granting a more extensive role to the state neither respects the freedoms which lie at the core of the liberal ideal nor serves the interests of the state.

1. Liberal principles

The feature of society that makes education so contentious an issue is also the feature that gives liberal principles their point. Society, and modern society in particular, is marked by diversity and, thus, disagreement about the proper ends of life (and the best means of pursuing them). In the face of such disagreement, the liberal course is to seek not the elimination of error (and its perpetrators), or a reconciliation of differences, but some form of compromise among contending views. It is a commonplace that the liberal creed arose in Europe during the wars of religion that dominated the 16th century, as philosophers and warring governments alike became more sympathetic to the idea that religious disagreements were better tolerated than contested to death. In philosophical terms religious conflicts were often irresolvable, since the moral stakes were invariably high. To the pious, dissenters or unbelievers placed in danger their own immortal souls, and also the souls of their children. To disregard error was to assert an indifference not only to the self-destructive leanings of misguided dissenting Christians but also to the fates of their innocent children, who would be reared in ignorance of the truth, and denied any chance of salvation. But since warfare did not prove an especially promising solution, the idea of peace and mutual accommodation was attractive enough to gain ground both among governments and among political thinkers.

Liberal constitutionalism thus emerged as a development of an older constitutional tradition that had long seen virtue in keeping rulers in check so that they might be less likely to act tyrannically. The distinctively liberal element of modern constitutionalism was perhaps, first, its explicit emphasis on the principle of liberty, and, second, its expression in the institutions of the rule of law and the separation of powers. The longing for religious liberty came to be presented as a claim for individual liberty, and a rejection of arbitrary government—a government which failed to respect the laws of the land. Implicit in these ideas is an understanding of government not as a sovereign power—for sovereignty represented the principle of absolute and arbitrary government from a constitutional point of view—but as a limited power under the law. In a free society the proper answer to the question of where sovereignty lay was “nowhere;” which was to say that it lay dispersed among different bodies and institutions.

The role of government in this conception of the good society is a very limited one. It was well expressed in the *Declaration of Parliament Assembled at Westminster* (1660), which stated:

There being nothing more essential to the freedom of a state, than that the people should be governed by the laws, and that justice be administered by such only as are accountable for mal-administration, it is hereby further declared that all proceedings touching the lives, liberties and estates of all the free people of this commonwealth, shall be according to the laws of the land, and that the Parliament will not meddle with ordinary administration, or the executive part of the law: it being the principle [sic] part of this, as it hath been of all former Parliaments, to provide for the freedom of the people against arbitrariness in government (quoted in Hayek, 1976, pp. 169–70).

In this understanding, it was no part of the purpose of the state to address the matter of the salvation of its subjects, nor for that matter to set out to shape the lives of those persons who lived according to the laws of the land. The government was not there to shape the law, or the views of its subjects, but to execute the administration of the law. In the understanding that developed in Britain, this power was to be kept in check by Parliament; but in the political theory of American constitutionalism this power was further checked by the dispersal of power among states in a federation—as well as by the explicit separation of powers among distinct executive and legislative branches of government. (This was an important development, in part because it arrested the recidivist tendencies of the British model, which returned to the principle of sovereignty via a doctrine of the collective sovereignty of Crown, Lords and Commons—making the House of Commons supreme by the 19th century.) What early American liberal constitutionalism expressed openly was a rejection of any principle of sovereignty, and an appreciation of the fact that within a single polity there might be people who lived under quite different laws.

According to this understanding of liberalism, it is no part of the purpose of the state to educate or shape the character or thinking of its subjects. What liberalism recognizes at once is that individuals, and communities or associations of

individuals, within a state have different goals or purposes; and live by different beliefs. People live by different customs, hold to different ethical standards, and are persuaded by very different accounts of the nature of the universe and of their own place in creation. (They differ even in their understanding of the nature of the state, and of their rights and duties under its authority.) The liberal view of the state is of an umpire, whose task is not to make these subjects alike in their thinking, or even to bring them to a common understanding of the nature of their (supposedly) collective enterprise, but to ensure that their pursuit of their various enterprises is possible in a reasonably peaceful way. Since that state as an umpire should not favor any particular pursuits or world views, it should show no less sympathy to dissenters who happen not to share the beliefs or practices of the majority, or the powerful. Significantly, the liberal state does not suppress political dissent, even when those dissenters express a desire to replace or overturn the liberal state. In this regard, the liberal state is one that is held to a very exacting standard. It must tolerate in its midst those who would work towards its destruction. And it must resist the temptation to turn its fiercest critics into compliant believers in the liberal creed. The last thing a liberal state should offer its subjects is education—even if that should be a liberal education.

2. Arguments for a liberal education

It would not do to suggest that, in the real world, liberal states live up to the principles or the understanding described in the preceding section. States, like all forms of human association, have their own interests, pre-eminent among them an interest in their own preservation. To survive, any state will thus endeavor to convince its subjects of its own legitimacy; and it will invariably make some use of its capacity to direct the education of those subjects to further this end. Nonetheless, this is inconsistent with a liberal understanding of the state, whose intrusion into the education of subjects should be resisted as a matter of principle.

But this view is not one that will find much support among those who consider themselves liberals. For liberals themselves offer a number of arguments for state directed education—even when they concede that the diversity within a liberal state should be protected. Two kinds of arguments are particularly in need of careful consideration. The first is an argument that suggests that individuals have a direct interest in a liberal education, and that it is the role of the state to serve that interest. A particularly robust form of this argument is presented by Brian Barry. The second is an argument that a liberal political order properly understood requires the creation of liberal citizens. This view is defended by Stephen Macedo. These arguments will be considered in turn.

2.1. Brian Barry's defense of state paternalism

A liberal society, according to Brian Barry, cannot be indifferent to the education of children in part because its legal, political and economic system depend upon

there being members of society who are fit to exercise their responsibilities within it. Yet, he adds, liberals are not concerned with childhood only as a preparation for adulthood. Children have interests that they are unable to protect. Liberals see a crucial role for the state here as a protector—as far as lies within its power—of the basic interests of children. While liberalism is rightly dismissive of paternalism with respect to adults, it should quite properly accept the state as the final authority in the matter of the upbringing of children, with the authority of parents over children regarded as a devolved power, whose scope is limited by the legitimate claims of those over whom the power is exercised. Parents may be the best people to entrust with the day to day upbringing of children, but it is the duty of the state to ensure that the welfare of the child is truly being looked after. The state may—must—overrule the religious convictions of parents when the child's welfare is at stake. The public has a legitimate interest in the education of children because citizens are concerned with the future of their society. But “there is also a public stake in education in the form of a paternalistic concern for the best interests of the children themselves—considered both as children and as future adults. The state is conceived of here as a guardian of children's interests, in necessary opposition to the parents' view of those interests” (Barry, 2001, pp. 201–3, 209). The question, of course, is what are the child's interests?

In Barry's account there are three kinds of interest a child has, and which are served by education. The first is an interest in attaining some form of competence so that it can function in the world in which it will grow up—though here a great deal turns on one's assessment of what that world is, and where its boundaries lie. The second is an interest in education, or knowledge, for its own sake, or for the sake of living well. The third is an interest in becoming autonomous (Barry, 2001, pp. 211ff). Barry is all too aware of the complexity involved here, and he subjects all of these ideas to searching critical examination even as he defends them. But in the end, defend them he does, largely on the basis of a version of Millian liberalism. As to the content of the education with which every child should be provided, Barry suggests that there is a threshold test which could straightforwardly be applied in a way which would get around much of the disputation surrounding the question of school or national curricula: the test of truth. It “is essential for all parties to accept that truth should be the controlling value, one that trumps whatever desirable objectives people may have in proposing that children should be taught one thing rather than another” (Barry, 2001, 232). He makes his view of the significance of this clear in his criticism of Amy Gutmann's treatment of the teaching of creationism in schools. Gutmann, he argues, having considered one important reason for prohibiting the teaching of creationism—that creationism is false—fails to draw the conclusion that we can therefore know what belongs in the classroom and what does not. In fact, he argues, creationism is not only false, but also a doctrine that violates the most elementary canons of rational thought. It is “too intellectually corrupting to be taught in any school whether public or private” (Barry, 2001, p. 248).

Barry presents his case as if it were the merest common sense. Children have interests, including an interest in a sound education, and cannot be assured that their parents will ensure that they acquire it. The state, through its various agencies must

ensure that these children do not miss out. It should make sure that children are taught what is useful, what is civilizing, and what will help to make them autonomous persons. It should allow the teaching only of what is true.

Yet Barry's case is anything but convincing. Indeed, it begs every significant question it tackles. Let us leave to one side the issue of whether the state is in fact likely to provide a better education, or better monitor private providers, than would the parents, groups, communities and non-governmental organizations of society. In many modern societies, from the wealthy west to the impoverished south, state education looks like a mixed bag, embracing every conceivable standard—and even some that are inconceivable.² If there is a case for putting the state in control of education, it remains to be made; for it will not do simply to assume that because markets or other social mechanisms produce imperfect outcomes a central authority will produce better ones. But that is not the most serious problem with Barry's argument. The problem is that it presumes that there is an obvious and acceptable answer to questions which are themselves the subject of intractable dispute. When he proposes that children have interests, every creationist would agree; what is disputed is what those interests are. When he proposes that children be taught what is useful, it is hard to see how anyone could argue; but people argue endlessly over what is useful. When he proposes that children be taught so that they become capable of living autonomously and thinking for themselves, even the Amish might agree; but the Amish would see their more worldly fellow Americans living not self-directed lives, but lives shaped by corrupt environments that seduce rather than enlighten.

This general criticism—that Barry's arguments are question-begging—holds even more strongly for his claim that a commitment to the truth should guide educational choices. Who is going to disagree with this? Certainly no creationist is going to assert that he wishes to defend a biblical account of the earth's formation in spite of the fact that it is false. The creationist's objection to evolution is that, as a theory, *it* is false. Now, for my part, I have to admit that I regard the claims of creation science as implausible at best, if not entirely preposterous. But much as I agree with Barry on this, it is hard to see how this settles anything when the truth is in dispute. It would not have been much comfort to the Huguenots had Louis XIV declared that they could raise their children as they pleased provided that they instructed them according to the true faith. Of course, Barry might be all too ready to concede that it is no part of his intention to offer any comfort to creationists, or any other purveyors of falsehoods. If so, his thinking would be of a piece with that of the French Crown in the 16th century (and with much in contemporary liberal argument). There was at that time “a widespread belief that there must needs be some sense in which it is possible for governments to maintain true religion and suppress dangerous error; there was a belief that unity in religion was necessary to national unity and security; there was a sense that toleration of religious differences might lead to a disintegration of moral standards; there was also, of course, a tendency to see dissentients as morally perverse” (Allen, 1961, 77). Barry has not done much more than establish to the satisfaction of like-minded people that the views of some dissentients are

²On the state's spotty record see West, 1994.

perverse. It is no better an argument now than it was when the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685. Moreover, one has to ask why, if truth is a consideration, any sort of Christian education—or religious education—should be permitted at all. If the claims of creation science are unbelievable, surely the atonement and the idea of transubstantiation, to take just two well-known Christian ideas, are little short of incredible. If there is any reason why Barry would permit schools to teach these ideas, their truth cannot be a part of it.

In the end, Barry's arguments are implausible because they presume the truth of what is in dispute. More than this, he presumes that the state that controls education will be in possession of the truth (and unlikely to be taken in by falsehood). Perhaps that is because he thinks that the question of what authority the state should exercise is a question of what "we"—as right-minded people of good will—should do. But insofar as "we" are liberals, we should really be wary of giving such considerable power to any authority.

2.2. Stephen Macedo's defense of civic education

If Brian Barry defends the idea of a liberal education in the interests of children, Stephen Macedo defends the idea of civic education in the interest of preserving a liberal democratic polity. Unlike Barry, Macedo is more sympathetic to, and even respectful of, the claims of religious minorities, and does not consider the truth or otherwise of their particular convictions to be an especially salient issue. He is perfectly willing, for example, to tolerate a diversity that respects the views of fundamentalist Christians. He is not, however, content to let the question of education be taken entirely out of the hands of the state. The reason is that education is necessary to ensure the creation of liberal citizens who will sustain the regime that is capable of exercising this level of toleration. People may instruct their children in their own faith, and according to their own beliefs; but not at the expense of a civic education. Those who rush, whether from left or right, to embrace multiculturalism forget that liberal citizens do not come into existence naturally. Diversity must be constituted for liberal democratic purposes. We have no reason to apologize for taking reasonable measures to promote the political supremacy of liberal democratic values, or for educating children towards the virtues needed by liberal citizens (Macedo, 1995, p. 68).

According to Macedo (1995), "constitutionalism cannot endure without citizens who are willing to support its fundamental principles and to take part in defining them" (p. 67). Citizens in a liberal democracy not only have rights but also important duties, the most serious of these being the obligation to respect the rights of fellow citizens, whatever their religious convictions. The most significant claim Macedo makes here is that the way for citizens to respect others is by offering them reasons for the (public) decisions taken. "One of the most basic forms of respect that we owe to fellow citizens is to offer them reasons for the way that we seek to shape the terrible coercive powers of the state, reasons that they can share even while disagreeing with us about religion" (Macedo, 1995, pp. 67–68). In this view, citizens have a duty to be active citizens, and it is important that they are taught how to be

good citizens. Crucial to this is a form of civic education that teaches children not only their rights and duties as citizens, as well as public institutions that “teach the importance of critical thinking as a path to political reasonableness and good citizenship.” For Macedo what makes people citizens is not merely the fact that they are members of the same polity but the fact that they “affirm shared political principles” (Macedo, 1995, p. 68).

Macedo is essentially a liberal constitutionalist, as well as a democrat, who defends a “political liberalism” which is, he says, “a form of multiculturalism.” But it is, he maintains, “a *critical* and *politically acute* form of multiculturalism which does not sell short the project of forging a shared political framework.” It is vital, in his view, that a liberal society take active steps to construct and maintain the political structure. This means working to sustain “political and social structures that work to educate individuals and shape communities in ways that are congruent with liberalism” (Macedo, 1995, pp. 71, 79).

A large part of Macedo’s concern in defending this view is to argue against those defenders of multiculturalism who complain that liberal constitutionalism does not present a level playing-field on which all traditions, and in particular all religious traditions, have an equal chance of flourishing. The observation is correct, in his view, but the complaint unfounded. A level playing field is neither desirable nor possible; and even on such a playing field some will lose. This aspect of his argument strikes me as convincing. It is not possible to have a political system in which all ways of life have an equal chance of success. If nothing else, it must be possible for some practices or traditions to wither away as people abandon them for other more attractive opportunities.

What is questionable about Macedo’s view, however, is the emphasis it places on the need for education for citizenship, and to “constitute diversity for liberal democratic purposes” (Macedo, 1995, p. 68). We should be very wary of the idea that an important concern of our social institutions ought to be to shape us in any particular way. This is not to say that social institutions do not create particular types of persons. Different regimes produce different types of subjects. Nor is it to say that that this is a particularly unusual or novel idea. J.S. Mill addressed the question of how to educate citizens for self-government in his *Considerations on Representative Government*. And Rousseau devoted a great deal of thought to how citizens might be created who would suit, and uphold or sustain a modern republic. In the case of women, he was (arguably) concerned not so much to control their natures in their own immediate interest but create beings who would provide suitable companions to the men who would have to take up the duties of citizenship.³ Indeed, for Rousseau the problem of socialization was a serious one which would require the concerted attention of the Great Legislator, one of whose tasks was to create civic man for the republic of the social contract. The problem with this enterprise is, first, that its chances of succeeding are doubtful; and, second, that its consistency with the principles of a free society, or a liberal society, are questionable.

³This is, in my view, the purpose behind Rousseau’s thinking in Book V of *Emile*, dealing with the education of Sophie, or woman.

That education to create a particular type of person is a difficult undertaking is demonstrated most clearly by Rousseau, who was the modern thinker who devoted more effort than anyone to the question of political education. Rousseau found that the situation was hopeless. The best education, whether civic or private, according to Rousseau, as Shklar explains it, “tries to establish a harmony between the self and the environment” (Shklar, 1985, pp. 157–64). The problem, however, is that the citizen, “however much denatured, however conscious of his civic self, has still an individual self, and inner life of his own, and it is bound to assert itself as soon as the vigilant eye of the Legislator is removed” (Shklar, 1985, p. 160). The task of creating citizens is in fact beyond any actual legislator—which is why, in *The Social Contract*, the ideal legislator is superhuman.

The other side of the problem, however, is that any form of education which seeks to cultivate what is particular about the individual, to bring out his or her individuality, would run counter to the aims of civic education. “A cohesive community cannot be built by those who cherish the *moi humain*. That is why civic education and the education of the individual have nothing in common” (Shklar, 1985, p. 160). The position Macedo defends is one that maintains that there is no incompatibility here: a civic education is one which encourages the development of those critical faculties which will allow the individual to take part in the political life of a liberal society. If the lesson drawn from Rousseau’s analysis is right, however, this sort of civic education will be one which runs counter to the inclinations of individual selves, whose “natural” leanings will have been shaped more profoundly by the particular communities from which they have come than they will be by the interventions (direct or indirect) of the state.

Even if it were possible to shape citizens to fit into a liberal democratic society, however, we have to ask whether this is a desirable objective in a liberal society. Macedo has presented an account of a liberal polity as one characterized by a shared commitment to certain political principles, and the virtues that sustain them. But this seems to me to be a mistake. What characterizes a liberal political order is not shared political commitments but institutions which enable people whose moral, religious, cultural, and *political* commitments differ. Liberal political systems notoriously accept within the polity people who would like to see that political system abandoned: anarchists, religious fundamentalists, communists, ethnic nationalists, and fascists among others. In liberal societies such people are free not only to hold to such views but also to proselytize: to argue against democracy and free speech, to discourage people from voting, to run for office on an anti-liberal ticket with the endorsement of an anti-liberal party, and even to write and publish books excoriating liberalism. If this is indeed so, it is hard to see how a liberal society can also be committed to inculcating particular values or virtues in its citizens. It might prohibit activity that prevented others from exercising the liberals rights or freedoms which all would otherwise enjoy. But this would still be a long way from trying to instill liberal values in the citizenry. Liberalism does not run re-education camps.

Macedo’s question here, however, is: how would liberal citizens emerge without concerted action to produce and nurture them? After all, they do not come into existence naturally. His answer is that they have to be reared. While he is careful to

insist that this rearing does not need to be done by the state, and may be done better by intermediate associations, that rearing is necessary (Macedo, 1996). There is a certain similarity here between Macedo's position and that of Bernard Mandeville, who tried to account for the origin of morality by tracing it up to the "artifice of politicians"—who sought to educate, and so restrain, human passions for the public good. This was an argument David Hume famously rejected: the idea that politicians could succeed in this was entirely dubious; and Mandeville's theory seemed incapable of accounting plausibly for the diversity and subtlety of moral experience. But could not politicians—or public institutions—work to educate and so at least to nurture a *political* morality? How else could a political morality, or liberal citizens, be made?

It is a mistake to think that they have to be made. Liberal citizens do come into existence "naturally," just as morality does. It would be too strong to say that they will always emerge, regardless of the circumstances—just as it would be too strong to claim that they might readily be created. But they have emerged in all liberal societies, and even in societies where liberal freedoms are only weakly honored or protected.

What is necessary to sustain a liberal political order is not institutions geared up to inculcate liberal virtues or liberal norms of citizenship but the liberal practice of toleration of dissent. Moreover, while it might be useful to have a number among the citizenry who are strongly committed to the principles of liberalism, it is not clear that all, or even a plurality of citizens need to be so committed. Liberal societies seem well capable of operating with a good deal of dissenting opinion, and a great deal of political apathy. Too great a level of indifference to matters of principle might be dangerous since it is important that there be enough interest among the people to object to a tyrannical or dishonest government. But it is not clear that a liberal society cannot get by perfectly well with much of the population taking no interest in politics whatsoever.

In the end, civic education may be a greatly overrated idea. A liberal state has no need of it. The greater danger to the liberal state that ought to be given serious consideration, however, is the danger posed by any suppression of dissenting views, even if only in the mild form of attempting to engineer some kind of political conformity.

3. Conclusion: sustaining the liberal state

If liberalism is primarily about the toleration of dissenting opinions and ways of living, the most important thing for a liberal polity is that it not require conformity from those who wish to dissent. But will this serve the interests of the liberal polity, or simply lead to its destruction? Two kinds of arguments suggest that it will serve liberalism well to tolerate. The first is Spinoza's argument: that the interest of the state in its own preservation is best served by toleration, for subjects are much less likely to direct their hostility against the state if they enjoy freedom from the state's encroachments. The second is Montesquieu's argument: that the best citizens are produced by custom rather than by law—by families rather than by governments.

Nonetheless it would not do to end on too sanguine a note. For both these thinkers had important qualifications to make. Spinoza, for his part, was no less keen to say to the citizens of the state that they should moderate their demands and be careful in the exercise of their liberty if they hoped to preserve their society from a harsh government. Immoderate religious groups in particular threatened to draw the government into severely restricting liberty in the interest of public order. In 16th century England, for example, Thomas More considered it feasible in Utopia for it to be lawful for Everyman to pursue his own religion but feared that in the real world heretics would not simply preach religion but would pursue violence (More, 1967). This was not merely a religious or a moral question: it was a question of public order—particularly since many of the sects were not themselves tolerant. Anabaptists were persecuted less because they were religious dissenters than because they were social revolutionaries. The Huguenots were less of a problem because they were nonconformists in religion than because they were a powerful political party, one part of which held strongly to the theory of political Calvinism—believing that the ruler was obliged to establish and maintain the true Calvinist faith, suppressing by force all heretics and idolaters (Allen, 1961).

As for Montesquieu's view that family and custom are the most important sources of good citizenship, it bears remembering that this insight is presented by the character of Usbek. For all his cosmopolitan wisdom, Usbek in his home is a tyrant with no appreciation of the longing of his wives for freedom. To be wary of public power is not to condone its abuse in private.

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