

The crisis of citizenship and the rise of cultural rights

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The crisis of citizenship in democratic countries is a topic that I am accustomed to study and that I have developed in a recent book [1]. A definitive definition of the concept is hazardous as it continuously evolves across the centuries. It is presently caught in the crossfire between two emerging trends: the diversification of the public sphere with the extension of critical analysis, and on the other side the growth of various kinds of cosmopolitanism.

The leading classes became aware progressively of the depreciation of the notion of citizenship and of the need to fill the gap of an ideological perspective and of the necessity of an admitted goal for a large majority of the population throughout the diverse tendencies. In France the idea has been secularism (*laïcité*), meaning that the religious influences must be set aside to maintain an ideal social live. The problem is that these religious influences often stem from the various cultural backgrounds of the local population. This subjective concept is, however, not a concrete goal, unable to bring about a real craze generating an operational response in case of emergency. The only worthy project is democracy, while staying aware of the diversity of identities, political and ideological choices within the Nation-State. Democracy has been confronted with a constant evolution of the concept of the fundamental rights. In his classical work T M. Marshall [2] suggested a historic outline of this evolution. In the 18th century citizenship was based on the recognition of civil rights: freedom of expression, equality before the law, property rights. In the 19th century political rights were added, mainly the different voting rights. The 20th century marked the start of social rights with the welfare state, especially the right to have an education. We are witnessing now the rising power of cultural rights, which could be the hallmark of the 21st century. According to Guy Rocher [3] it means the right for the minorities to the respect of their identity, traditions, language, artistic and historical heritage. This may include the right to have a school education of their language, culture and religion. Contrary to the civil, political and social rights, which were a

contribution to an improvement of the homogeneity of the social conditions, the recognition of cultural rights could possibly lead to social fragmentation. Multiculturalism may be seen as a threat for the cultural identity of a country as defined by its majority.

The problem is relatively simple to tackle when the cultural difference has a geographical location in the democratic countries, following the model of Switzerland, and to some extent the one of Belgium. However, it does not prevent some periods of crisis from happening, for instance when the cultural distinctiveness represents a minority among the general population, as seen for Catalonia, Scotland or Quebec, or, in France, Brittany, Alsace, Basque country. It is nevertheless a case of growing instability in non-democratic environments as shown by the Rohingya problem in Myanmar. The situation is more ambiguous, even in democratic countries, where the minorities are scattered among the population. The level of conflict is correlated with the level of democracy. A tensed situation happens when the cultural gap is associated with a religious character, as in a dictatorial system, like the Uighur collectivity in China. A similar problem is encountered for the Kurds in Turkey, Palestinians in Israel, Indian communities in Brazil, etc.

The core of the “democratic world” is facing a growing intensity of migration, from Latin-Americans leaving to the United States, Arabian populations leaving the Middle East or Africans from the former colonies going to Europe. The cultural contexts of these populations are quite different from those of the host population. The difference of language is important, but the main problem in Europe is, for the Moslem collectivity, the difference of religion, which is the main element of misunderstanding for the European population where the Christian religion is still a cultural reference. The German policy chooses to maintain the status of *foreigner*, and recognizes the right to have a different way of life. France’s policy is mostly an attempt to include these populations in a national community, which brings French authorities to consider all the cultural characteristics as the demonstration of religious concepts, and they prohibit them, based on the secularism policy. The French debate on the wearing of the veil reveals this problem. The veil is considered by some native women from North Africa as an affirmation of their identity, but it may also be perceived as a symbol of submission for women, and the latter explanation is developed by the immigration policy objectors as a sign of an old form of religious attitude, understood as a fierce opposition to secularism. In a post-Marshallian perspective, the cultural rights could therefore be one of the main citizenship problems that the democratic countries will be facing in the 21st century.

References

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