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COMMENTARY

A Republican-Liberal's Perspective

Those who think of themselves as republican or civic liberals, as I do, will surely be of two minds about Seyla Benhabib's "Dismantling the Leviathan: Citizen and State in a Global World" [Spring 2001]. In some respects, Professor Benhabib's thoughtful essay is quite congenial to republican liberalism. She insists on the importance of human rights, for instance, and she looks for ways to expand political participation. Her indictment of "civic republicanism," however, requires a republican-liberal response.

There are three problems with Benhabib's argument, the first being that her criticism of civic republicanism is misdirected. Her target is "civic republicans like Michael Walzer," who "conflate the boundaries of the ethical community, which is inherently culture-bound, with those of the *democratic polity, which is not culture-bound in the same manner and to the same degree*" (her emphasis). If this statement accurately reflects Walzer's views, then he was surely right to protest, in his response to Benhabib's essay, that he is no civic republican. From Aristotle and Cicero to Hannah Arendt and Michael Sandel, republicans have sought to promote the civic virtues of the public-spirited citizen. They believe that the members of the *res publica* ought to be self-governing participants in public affairs, and, following Cicero, their conception of "public" is of a group of people united under law. Hence the old definition of a republic as "an empire of laws, not of men." In principle, then, republicans have no reason to insist that citizens must share ties of blood, ethnicity, or culture, and

they can be quite happy with the “constitutional patriotism” that Habermas has endorsed and Benhabib apparently accepts.

There is a difference, though, between principle and practice. This difference points to the second problem with Benhabib’s criticism of civic republicanism. Republicans acknowledge that civic virtues require cultivation and reinforcement. If the members of a polity are to take the part of public-spirited citizens, there must be some sense in which they understand themselves as part of a public—that is, as people engaged in a common, if not all-embracing, enterprise. Cultural considerations surely play a part here—through a common language, civic education, and shared traditions—as they foster feelings of attachment and solidarity. Civic republicans will join Benhabib by resisting, in principle, the conflation of cultural with political integration, but they will think that it is neither easy nor prudent, in practice, to draw a sharp distinction between culture and politics. Political integration is primary, however, and cultural considerations are important to the republican only insofar as they promote the sense that one is part of a public.

The third problem concerns Benhabib’s policy recommendations, which call for “porous borders” and limited voting rights for noncitizens. Her reasons for extending “democratic participation rights . . . at the local and regional state levels” to noncitizens are neither clear nor compelling. Her point, presumably, is that noncitizens have a stake in decisions made at these levels, so they should have a say in them. But they will also have a stake—and possibly a greater one—in decisions made at higher levels. Why, then, should noncitizens not have a vote at the national or state level? The answer, I suppose, is that decisions at the upper levels are too important; voting in local and regional elections is a low-risk way in which noncitizens may try their civic wings before becoming full-fledged citizens. That answer, however, runs counter to the presumption that people should have a vote whenever they have a stake in the outcome. It also betrays a failure to appreciate the importance of local or regional decisions, which are sometimes more salient to the people they affect, as the “Nimby” syndrome attests, than national-level decisions.

I also worry that Benhabib’s recommendations may be self-defeating. That is, their effect may well be to dilute and discourage

citizenship, and thus run counter to Benhabib's aim of "making erstwhile strangers and foreigners into *partners in a community of democratic interpretation and articulation*" (her emphasis). Benhabib will agree, I think, that citizenship has an ethical as well as a legal dimension—that one may be a citizen, in the legal sense, without being a "good" or "real" or "true" citizen. That much seems implied by her desire to help foreigners become "*partners in a community.*" When she writes, however, of "political globalization," "transnational political membership," and voting rights for people who may be "unwilling . . . to change their citizenship of origin," she hints at a kind of free-floating, cosmopolitan citizenship that is unlikely to encourage the public-spirited attitude one expects of *partners in a community*. Despite her cautious statements about the need for "minimum residency, language, employment, and family status requirements," the picture emerges of a world in which political exit and entrance are so easy that citizens, in the legal sense, will have little reason to exercise voice within or demonstrate loyalty to their supposed communities.

That is why republican liberals must hesitate, at least, to endorse Professor Benhabib's recommendations. Yet they are closer to her position, in their republicanism as much as in their liberalism, than she recognizes. Republican liberals do not want to see people consigned to "permanent alienage" or denied the opportunity to become partners in a democratic community any more than does Benhabib. Whether her transnational means will accomplish this shared civic end is the point at issue.

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