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Barcelona METROPOLIS — City information and thoughts — ARCHIVE

Citizenship Policies: Hollow Words (Where we are going)

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**Most policies adopted by councils and local authorities only deal
with respecting neighbours or public spaces and ignore the
participative dimension of citizenship.**

Rather than being a cause for joy or reflection, the expression 'citizenship' is today a source of fear and mistrust. Fear, because it is invoked precisely because it is lacking, and mistrust because not all the policies directed at promoting this quality can easily be justified to the citizenry. Thus, instead of starting with an idea of perfect citizenship to be gradually achieved, we only recall the concept of civic responsibility after a particularly loutish celebration of a sporting victory or, on a Monday morning, when we find our doorways and street corners reeking of urine.

Photo: Albert Armengol

Â Â Â Â Â Â Urban living forces us into contact in (the few, small) public spaces. This means that citizenship is more important than ever. But this very context makes it difficult to create and assimilate the basic rules of coexistence, given the individualistic tendencies of our society and the growing diversity of the people who make it up. The problem is compounded by the fact that our society is among the few in which people believe that what is public belongs to no-one, rather than believing that it belongs to everyone. This belief partly explains the abuse of all things public, and the disrespectful behaviour that shelters behind the anonymity of the crowd. At the root of this alienation is the Franco-era socialisation into the idea that nothing exists outside the private lives of each and every individual; at the time this proved useful because it hindered organised opposition to the regime. Another legacy of this time is the rejection among the progressive sectors of teaching 'civic education', because this term coincided with a subject that existed up until the mid-fifties, in which protocol, hygiene, obedience and submission were taught[1]. However, were everything that came before 1978 to be rejected as immoral, we would also be forced to follow suit and rule out civic communication campaigns. Even the Franco regime had to do a volte-face when it came to denying the existence of public space, given the neglect with which the Spaniards treated their surroundings, since this had repercussions on the aesthetics of the tourist enclaves. Hence the launching of the "Keep Spain Tidy" campaign in the mid-sixties - the first social marketing campaign of its kind.

Â Â Â Â Â Â With this as their starting point, local governments have finally become aware of their responsibility for the education of citizens and the position of privilege, so close to the people, they occupy. But they have done so by concentrating almost exclusively on the aspects mentioned above – untidiness, noise and vandalism. Yet citizenship (which we define here as a set of qualities that characterise the 'good citizen') is normative, and can be interpreted in at least two ways. That described above is what I call 'passive citizenship', and involves norms that require us to refrain from harming our fellow citizens and damaging our surroundings, and which require little effort to comply with. Once the values of respect and security are accepted and internalised by the citizens, we can go on to talk about a second type of citizenship, one which requires more effort and commitment to a certain idea of society. In this case, for a citizen to be considered 'civic', he or she must also demonstrate autonomy, responsibility, the ability to understand and behave in the public sphere, a willingness to sacrifice personal interests for the common good, etc. This is known as 'active citizenship'.[2]

Â Â Â Â Â Â The vast majority of citizenship policies adopted by councils and local authorities only cover respecting others or public spaces, ignoring the second, active and participative dimension of citizenship. In other words, though dressed up in a more modern and amiable term ('citizenship'), we almost always find measures that only correspond to 'urbanity' or 'civic education'. It is sad that the starting point should be such a limited conception of this term, when it is evident that there are politically active people in every community – even if only a minority – for whom this limited notion of citizenship is insufficient. Such people might well believe that authority is merely defining citizenship on the basis of its own interests and that it is only interested in curbing behaviour that has an impact on local budgets. Complementing local policies on citizenship with measures that promote community cohesion and participation in public affairs would not only reduce levels of discontentment among the more active population, it would also mean a more honest and complete interpretation of what citizenship means. Furthermore, it would put local citizenship policies here on a par with those being promoted in other European countries, like Belgium, France or the Netherlands, where the qualities of the two forms of citizenship are promoted in a single 'dual-speed' public policy. But, above all, it would

mean looking beyond the limitations of today's problems and laying the foundations for a more democratic citizenry of the future.

      Local citizenship policies in Spain are not only limited as far as content and value are concerned, they are also limited in terms of their form. The repertoire of measures that might accompany a citizenship policy include creating community relationship observatories, local festivals to foment the sense of belonging to a community, rehabilitating rundown neighbourhoods, competitions testing people's knowledge of the town, prizes and awards for exemplary behaviour, citizenship ceremonies, intergenerational activities, educational programmes about local customs and traditions or about the various channels of participation that exist... However, the vast majority of local citizenship policies in Spain take just two forms: informative campaigns – more or less successful and with greater or lesser means, and campaigns about legal responsibilities. By the latter I refer to the by-laws on citizenship and coexistence which have sprouted at an ever faster rate since the 1985 Local Government Law was reformed in 2003, giving municipalities the right to regulate relationships between people and determine the use of local services and facilities.

      This new legal framework partly explains the uniformity in content and form of these by-laws. If we look more closely at the way they are written, the majority seem to have taken advantage of this reform to redraft the content of several different by-laws on pet ownership, cleaning, noise, drinking alcohol in public, etc., and to raise fines to the maximum permitted by law. Very few respond to the spirit of the law, which aimed to promote new and better attitudes to citizenship, or to respond to the challenges that result from the growing complexity of our societies. Even fewer are linked with any wider citizenship plans or projects so that all too often by-laws are the only 'local citizenship policy' in existence. Virtually none include, alongside matters such as cleaning or noise, the promotion of existing measures to encourage participation in the town's political life. Nonetheless, some are so extensive and thorough that they seem to be mini-constitutions, even going so far as to regulate socioeconomic questions such as begging, prostitution and illegal street commerce – though not racist or sexist behaviour – or aspects like the appearance of building façades.

      Among the consequences of this passive and normative approach to citizenship are the following. Firstly, dissatisfaction and suspicions of partiality on the part of those citizens who are active, who sometimes organise to fight against these by-laws, as has happened in Zaragoza, Leganés and Barcelona. Secondly, an opportunity is lost - that of bequeathing to future generations an integrated notion of citizenship based on consensus, rather than one which is short-sighted, as occurs when it grows out of the rejection of a certain kind of behaviour (for example, the *botellón*). Some ways of avoiding this would involve incorporating participative measures after reflecting on the meaning of citizenship, whether the municipality requires special policies to promote this, and how such policies should be drawn up. Citizenship manifestos, documents that set out a decalogue of basic norms on which there is consensus, are a way of promoting agreement and cohesion based on a common definition of citizenship, thereby avoiding the document reflecting only the interests of a small but influential part of the population. This instrument with its deliberative nature is particularly suitable given the dynamic and subjective nature of the concept of the 'ideal citizen'.

      With regard to the form that the policies should take, many towns and cities have come to the conclusion that citizenship campaigns are highly cost-effective. They manage to put this question on the political agenda by using the language of audiovisual communication, currently the most influential and legitimate medium, especially among the young. Actions like labelling new facilities and equipment with their cost, as in Barakaldo, Pamplona and Novelda, start from a restricted idea of citizenship, yet do not offend the more respectful citizens. At the same time, they point out the underlying cause of vandalism - the absence amongst those involved in this behaviour of any notion of the *public*. As for the possibility of developing more active and demanding notions of citizenship, in many municipalities it would only involve building bridges between these 'new' policies of urbanity and the local mechanisms of participation which already exist. In any case, if there really is a local commitment to these values, it would be a good idea to reflect this by taking more than one measure in this regard, and consider the possibility of doing so without resorting to by-laws. In the remainder of cases, it would be enough not to present the measures against antisocial behaviour as being the most innovative aspect of public policy making and ensure that these measures do not treat every citizen as a potential delinquent.

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Notes

1Â Although handbooks on urbanity have existed since the late 18th century, and hence during the Second Republic, the most political version arrived with Franco's *Formación del espíritu nacional*, which continued to be used until 1970.

2Â In 2008, Russell J. Dalton published his work entitled *The Good Citizen*. In this book he distinguished between two types of citizenship, specifically, between civic "duty" and civic "commitment". The different levels of demands and involvement they imply make them analogous to what I call, respectively, passive and active citizenship.

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