

Republicanism, National Identity and Citizenship
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Abstract

The place of national identity and culture in a liberal democracy has been subject to many debates in recent sociopolitical theory. Liberal theorists who are sympathetic to nationalism claim that national identity is indispensable for democratic politics and citizenship. Nationality provides the locus of attachment and belonging among citizens in liberal democracies. Social integration and motivation for political participation of citizens are only possible with the background of a shared national public culture. In this paper, I want to argue that liberal nationalists' arguments on citizenship derive their meaning and power from the historical interplay between republicanism and nationalism which emerged in the eighteenth century. Political values such as solidarity, political participation, and public good, which are central to the tradition of republican citizenship, were adopted by nationalism in modern states. This resulted in defining the nationality as the basis of citizenship and claiming that "if republican citizenship is to succeed, the political community needs to have the cement that a common national identity provides" (Miller, 2008: 147). Contrary to this thesis, this paper aims to reveal the republican origins and content of liberal nationalism, and argue that republican conception of citizenship does not presuppose a shared national identity. This discussion will also provide some light on the question whether and how citizenship can be conceptualized without reference to common national identity in culturally diverse liberal democracies.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, there is a growing need for projects of living together in societies with cultural, religious, social and ethnic diversity. Such conditions require questioning how to promote democracy in modern societies under the conditions of plurality. One dimension of this question is closely linked to the concept of citizenship, the basis of democratic politics. The place of national identity and culture in a liberal democracy has been subject to many debates in recent sociopolitical theory. Liberal theorists who are sympathetic to nationalism claim that national identity is indispensable for democratic politics and citizenship. Nationality provides the locus of attachment and belonging among citizens in liberal democracies. Social integration and motivation for political participation of citizens are only possible with the background of a shared national public culture. In this paper, I want to argue that liberal nationalists' arguments on citizenship derive their meaning and power from the historical interplay between republicanism and nationalism which emerged in the eighteenth century. Political values such as solidarity, political participation, and public good, which are central to the tradition of republican citizenship, were adopted by nationalism in modern states. This resulted in defining the nationality as the basis of citizenship and claiming that "if republican citizenship is to succeed, the political community needs to have the cement that a common national identity provides" (Miller, 2008: 147). Contrary to this thesis, this paper aims to reveal the republican origins and content of liberal nationalism, and argue that republican conception of citizenship does not presuppose a shared national identity. This discussion will also provide some light on the question whether and how citizenship can be conceptualized without reference to common national identity in culturally diverse liberal democracies.

In this paper, I begin with a brief overview of the connections between citizenship, liberalism and republicanism, as they have emerged and materialized in contemporary politics. The discussion leads to the rise of liberal nationalism, and I point out the problems associated with its treatment of cultures and identities in membership. Here, I argue that Arendt's uniquely positioned embracing of republicanism and its critique of liberalism and nationalism provide an interesting framework for interrogating the shortcomings of contemporary citizenship practices and institutions. In conclusion, I suggest what considering Arendt's contributions adds to the theory of citizenship.

Connections of Citizenship, Liberalism and Republicanism

Citizenship, in its basic form, denotes a membership in the political community but also indicates the founding of commonality among such members. Democracy generates the idea that citizens are not only the object of law but also its agents/authors. This requires the citizens' participation and engagement in public matters, to take control of the decisions that will shape the future of community, and even to change the rules of the political order when it is needed. This can be called the democratic ideal of citizenship.

Yet, it is widely accepted in contemporary political theory that there is a decline in the practice and institution of citizenship since the last decade of the twentieth century. The modern paradigm of citizenship which was realized in the nation-state is argued to have lost its power today (Cohen, 1999: 252) and consequently we need a new understanding of citizenship. One of the reasons of this decline is related to the individualist and instrumentalist tendencies of liberal conceptions of citizenship, which have been successful and prevalent in the interpretation of citizenship in the postwar period.

The liberal tradition describes citizenship primarily as a “legal” status. Citizenship implies the legal bond between the individuals and the polity. The autonomy of individuals is the idea at the center of the liberal political philosophy. In this sense, individual freedom and rights, and their protection emerge as the ultimate values to be respected in terms of citizenship. Citizens are defined as rights-bearing subjects, and consequently, citizens’ status is determined primarily by the individual rights. Individuals as citizens are sovereigns in this sense. Individual rights are negative rights that guarantee a domain of freedom of choice within which legal persons are freed from external compulsion. At the same time, individuals require freedom and security to choose and live according to their own conception of good life. That is, citizens enjoy the individual liberties and protection of the state. Individual freedom and rights constitute the grounds of citizenship.

Liberalism envisages an instrumental reading of politics and freedom. Public and private spheres are kept distinct, and citizens are under no obligation to participate in the public arena if they have no inclination to do so. In liberal political philosophy, “the function of the political realm is to render service to individual interests and purposes, to protect citizens in the exercise of their rights, and to leave them unhindered in the pursuit of whatever individual and collective interests and purposes they might have” (Oldfield, 1998: 76). So, citizens live a private life. Citizenship constitutes the outer frame of individuals’ lives whose interests are in the private sphere. They engage in the political arena only to pursue their own private interests. Consequently, the political space becomes an area where self-interests of different individuals and groups encounter and compete with each other. In this sense, liberal understandings of citizenship and politics undermine the public good, the community values and political participation while the forces of the market become more and more effective in politics.

Yet, such societal conditions are not without critique. The liberal conception of citizenship is criticized for its individualism and promoting instrumental reason. More importantly, the growing autonomy of individuals and the disinterest of citizens in public matters threatens and weakens the democratic ideal of citizenship which gains meaning in the public participation of citizens in political will-formation and decision-making processes. As Taylor stressed, liberalism’s lack of concern for public matters and common good also causes the fragmentation of society into atomized and isolated individuals (Taylor, 2003). Such fragmentation reaches significance in the contemporary world when, increasingly, members of the community start to have difficulty in identifying with the society in which they live. The waning of the common sources of meaning which function to bond citizens together and enable them to determine a common goal appears as a serious obstacle to democratic citizenship in modern societies.

As a result of the challenges to the liberal conception of citizenship, there is renewed interest in republican citizenship and politics which can be considered historically as the counter idea of the liberal view. The republican conception represents a different view of the relationship between individuals and the community from that upheld in liberalism. Miller effectively demonstrated this in stating, “The republican conception of citizenship conceives the citizen as someone who plays an active role in shaping the future direction of his or her society through political debate and decision-making. A citizen identifies with the political community to which he or she belongs, and is committed to promoting its common good through active participation in its political life” (Miller, 2000: 53).

One response to the challenges of liberal citizenship in political theory has been the liberal

nationalist approach. Liberal nationalism is an attempt to mediate between the values of liberalism and nationalism through debating the place of national culture and identity in modern societies to cover the shortcomings of the liberal conception of citizenship. Liberal nationalist theorists, such as David Miller, advocate for a republican account of citizenship in which the principle of national identity plays the role to bring citizens together (Miller, 2000: 1). Liberal nationalists argue that nationality provides the locus of attachment and belonging among citizens in liberal democracies and this makes it indispensable for any attempt to encourage democratic citizenship and values. Miller states that “if republican citizenship, which in the contemporary world must take the form of democratic citizenship, is to succeed, the political community needs to have the cement that a common national identity provides” (Miller, 2008: 147). In this way, the liberal nationalist approach presupposes an essential connection between democracy and nation.

In this paper I want to challenge the argument of liberal nationalism that for republican politics and citizenship to succeed in contemporary societies, the political community needs the belonging and loyalty that nationality provides. I believe this argument derives its meaning and power from the historical interplay between republicanism and nationalism which emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution in the eighteenth century. Political values such as political participation, solidarity and public good, which are central to the tradition of republican citizenship, were adopted by nationalism at the birth of the modern nation-states which resulted in the equation of citizenship with nationality. As opposed to liberal nationalist argument, I want to claim that in order to flourish republican political values and freedom, we need to distinguish between republicanism and nationalism. This decoupling of republicanism and nationalism requires us to remember both the history and the original premises of the republican political tradition.

To ground my critique of liberal nationalism, I will focus on Hannah Arendt's account of republicanism which can also be seen as a response to the shortcomings of liberal citizenship. However, Arendt's political theory presents a radically different reading of republicanism with its awareness of the dangers of nationalism. The devastating experiences of the twentieth century of organizing politics around national lines and its capacity to turn into totalitarian regimes makes nationalism a political evil to avoid for Arendt.

Liberal Nationalism

Liberal nationalism stands on the premise that liberalism and nationalism do not inherently or theoretically stand in contradiction. Rather, it rests on the claim that “the liberal tradition, with its respect for personal autonomy, reflection, and choice, and the national tradition, with its emphasis on belonging, loyalty, and solidarity, although generally seen as mutually exclusive, can indeed accommodate one another” (Tamir, 1993: 6). However, liberals sympathetic to nationalism argue that nationality is a central component of individual identity for modern subjects and that access to one's national culture is essential for realizing important liberal democratic values such as individual autonomy and social equality (Cronin, 2003: 1). In this sense liberal nationalists criticize liberalism for its lack of concern of community and shared identities of individuals in the society. They advocate for the idea that 'thick' shared identities (such as nationality) play an important role for the individual in the construction of the self.

Nationality has been one of the main components of the modern paradigm of citizenship and it derives its importance from the function it has for the modern nation-states. The idea of nation

served as a source of meaning and solidarity in the modern political community, which is based on an agreement of free and equal individuals. As Cronin says “national identification contributed to the legitimation of the modern state by providing an emotionally compelling answer to the question of who constituted the 'people' from which the secular state claimed to derive its authority” (Cronin, 2003: 3). In this sense, it can be said that national consciousness filled an important gap in the liberal theory of state, namely the task of determining the boundaries of 'demos' or, in other words, the decision of who will be included in and who will be excluded from the political community.

Liberal understanding of citizenship render the political community as founded by an agreement of free and equal individuals. In this context, citizenship is conceptualized foremostly as a legal status. As individuals from different religions, ethnicities come together to form the political community as citizens, they become entitled to certain rights and freedoms which are protected by the state. As such, citizens are primarily rights-bearing subjects. This citizenship as juridical status assumes the bonds between citizens in a society to be mediated mainly through juridical terms. This understanding is criticized as passing over the membership dimension of the citizenship. National identity answers the question “why should I engage politically with this group or people rather than others?” by saying “these are the people you are already bound to by ties of culture and history; these are your people, even though you may not have seen or known many of them as individuals” (Miller, 2000: 142-143).

The idea of nation has also been the source of the legitimacy of the politics of the modern state. Smith reminds us of this, in stating, “The nation was the supreme object of loyalty and the sole criterion of government. There was no legitimate exercise of political power which did not emanate expressly from the nation, for this was the only source of political power and individual freedom” (Smith, 1992: 62). Consequently, the legitimacy of state politics relied on the idea of the nation. The sovereignty of the state was seen as the reflection of the will of the nation and states claimed to be the representatives of this will to possess legitimacy for its actions.

Liberal nationalists argue that there has been a crucial link between democracy and nation. In modern nation-states, democratic politics gains meaning in the form of national sovereignty and self-determination. “Nations are the units within which democratic institutions should operate, and since each member of the nation has something to contribute to its cultural development, political democracy becomes the natural vehicle for national self-determination” (Miller, 2006: 532). In this way liberal nationalism claims that political borders should coincide with national borders. Furthermore, if democracy is to survive, it needs strong feelings and emotions involved in a national tradition.

For liberal nationalists, citizenship has an indispensable relation with membership to the nation. However through the construction of citizenship solely in the confines as membership to the nation, nation-states always had a tendency to violate the egalitarian logic of constitutional democracy by fostering inequality and exclusion vis-a-vis national minorities, immigrants and aliens. Cohen succinctly identifies the significance of this relation: “Because the nation-state equates the citizen with the member of the nation it collapses a political/legal category into a category of identity and perverts the egalitarian logic of the constitutional state by rendering those who are not members of the nation implicitly into second-class citizens” (Cohen, 1999: 253). Cohen highlights the consequences of such exclusionary membership, a problem that has not been reconciled in contemporary political practices.

Indeed, the liberal nationalist's claim that "the practice of citizenship must be confined within the boundaries of national political communities" (Miller, 2000: 81) seems questionable in the contemporary world. For example, the societies that we live in are far from culturally homogeneous. We live in complex societies with diverse cultures, nationalities and forms of life. In this sense, modern societies cannot be held together by a single overarching tradition or culture. Defining the nation in terms of a common culture does not help with the justification and stability of political order. Culturally diverse character of societies puts the source of legitimacy of political rule into question in such a nationalist setting. "When not all citizens share a single national culture, as is often the case, the traditional 'one state, one nation' view threatens to pull the liberal nationalist synthesis apart" (Abizadeh, 2002: 246). Therefore the idea of nation could not realize its functions of legitimacy, and political and social integration anymore.

In the end, the remedy of liberal nationalism for the lack of public participation and engagement of citizens as to strengthen the national ties and to create a cultural unity among the members of the political community appears to stand on an exclusionary understanding of political space. Liberal nationalists consider the separation of the political and national spheres as a threat to democratic politics. However democracy requires a political community of free and equal citizens regardless of their national or cultural identities. Therefore national politics, even in its liberal national form, instead of fostering democratic values, presents one of the main obstacles to democracy.

Arendtian Republicanism and Political Freedom

Hannah Arendt was one of the first political theorists in the postwar period to develop an account of republicanism that is still influential in contemporary political theory. Her political theory adopts a republican character with its focus on political freedom, plurality, public sphere and political participation. However, while proposing an account of republican politics and citizenship, that is resting on the critique of liberal-individualist understanding, her theory represents an important effort to release republicanism from its ties to nationalist content and ideology.

In this sense, it is important to note that Arendt's republican theory should not be confused with the communitarian critiques of liberalism, as they both pose a challenge to liberalism. Beiner makes an important distinction here: "Though the Arendtian and communitarian critiques of liberalism do overlap in important ways, there is a fundamental respect in which Arendt's criticism liberalism are motivated by a very different set of theoretical concerns that those characteristic of the communitarian critique" (Beiner, 2006: 44). It is significant here that Arendt searches for a non-national form of political association as a basis for citizenship. I believe looking closer into Arendt's critique of liberalism and nationalism respectively would provide some important insights and help to locate her account of republicanism in political theory.

Arendt's Critique of Liberalism

The distinction that Arendt makes between private and public spheres in *The Human Condition* offers us a proper entry point to her review of liberal theory (Arendt, 1998). Drawing on the philosophers of Ancient Greece, Arendt claims that private and public spheres constitute a stark opposition and correspond to the different aspects of human life. They are ruled by different

principles. The private sphere, which involves mainly the activities of production (economy), is determined by necessity. The public sphere, in contrast, establishes the area of politics where citizens, as free and equal, come together and enjoy their freedom. In this distinction, Arendt places politics and freedom exclusively in the public sphere, creating the basis for her critique of liberalist understanding of freedom. For Arendt, the liberalist position of viewing political space as where private individuals pursue their self-interests originates from a crucial misunderstanding of the political. Bringing private interests into the public sphere removes the freedom of citizens and reduces politics to a practice of administration and management. In the modern world, Arendt sees the tendency of politics being submissive to economics, as is carried mainly by the liberal tradition. In other words, liberalism's danger is to render politics instrumental to economics while politics, for Arendt, is an end in itself.

So, Arendt's understanding of freedom as “political freedom”, which means the active participation of citizens in the government, links her theory to republicanism and marks a break with liberal political theory. Arendt makes her conception of freedom very clear in her book *On Revolution*: “For political freedom, generally speaking, means 'to be a participator in the government', or it means nothing” (Arendt, 1990: 218). This challenges the liberal conception of 'negative freedom' which corresponds to the constitutionally based civil rights that protect the individuals from external threats. For Arendt, “it is a fateful error to confuse the constitutionally based guarantee of basic civil rights with the constitution of public freedom” (Wellmer, 2006: 223). Arendt believes that citizens have freedom only when they participate in political decision-making processes concerning public matters. This requires citizens to step out of their private lives and interests, and engage in self-governing practices. Yet, the system of representative democracy in that sense is not sufficient for this kind of activity since it merely asks for citizens to vote on a regular basis and it simultaneously promotes the self-interests of citizens in the political space.

However, Arendt, in her challenge to the liberal tradition, does not undermine individual rights and freedoms that are inscribed in constitutions. Though, she warns us against what she considers the excessive tendencies of modernism such as individualism and domination of instrumental reason in politics, as are clearly embodied in liberalism, she does not undermine the importance of basic civil rights in modern politics. In fact, for Arendt, these rights form the necessary preconditions of political freedom and participation.

Here, I want to highlight that the constitution of a space of public freedom where free and equal citizens act together appears as a priority of Arendt's political thought. Because the spirit of public freedom should be kept alive at all times, the survival and extension of inclusive public spaces are significant matters in her political theory.

Arendt's Critique of Nationalism

One of the best ways to understand Arendt's critique to nationalism is to look at the concept of plurality that is central to her political theory. For Arendt, plurality is the true condition of politics. In this sense her theory stands against all kinds of centralization of political rule. This leads to a harsh criticism of modern sovereignty on her account. Arendt is a postmetaphysical thinker. Therefore she rejects all kinds of metaphysical foundations of politics and authority. Arendt celebrates the transition to modernity as marking an important turning point in the history because it breaks with the power of tradition. In other words, in modern world, the legitimacy of authority is

not grounded in any metaphysical source such as religion or tradition but comes from the political actions of citizens.

However, Arendt realized that the same transition, in the French Revolution, also gave birth to the idea of nation and national sovereignty which placed a paradox in the heart of the modern state. Here, Arendt considers the contradiction between state and nation at the birth of the modern nation-state which would cause the dark times of the twentieth century. The paradox of nation-state comes from this contradiction:

“A people becomes a nation when [it arrives at a historical consciousness of itself]; as such it is attached to the soil which is the product of past labor and where history has left its traces. It represents the ‘milieu’ into which man is born, a closed society to which one belongs by right of birth. The state on the other hand is an open society, ruling over a territory where its power protects and makes the law. As a legal institution, the state knows only citizens no matter of what nationality; its legal order is open to all who happen to live on its territory” (Arendt, 1946: 139).

Here, Arendt shows us how the fusion of the state and nation had been supplemented by the discourse of sovereignty. National sovereignty that is embodied in modern nation-states turned out to be merely another form of metaphysical source to the extent it claimed to represent the will of the nation. “Arendt saw the discourse of sovereignty as the claim to control, rule, and assert jurisdictional supremacy by an undivided, single political instance within a territorial body politic” (Arato/Cohen, 2009: 307). Sovereignty in this sense stands in opposition to the political freedom and plurality in a republic which provides the exercise of political judgment of actors deliberating and acting together. Crucial to Arendt’s position is the notion that “undivided sovereignty brings about the erasure or collapse of the public space necessary for plurality and human diversity” (Smith, 2010: 109).

“[T]he state inherited as its supreme function the protection of all inhabitants in its territory no matter what their nationality, and was supposed to act as a supreme legal institution. The tragedy of the nation-state was that the people’s rising national consciousness interfered with these functions. In the name of the will of the people the state was forced to recognize only ‘nationals’ as citizens, to grant full civil and political rights only to those who belonged to the national community by right of origin and fact of birth. This meant that the state was partly transformed from an instrument of law into an instrument of the nation” (Arendt, 1968: 110).

Between the first two world wars, the desire to build nation-states in Europe generated policies of assimilation and denaturalization which created the tragedy of stateless people and refugees. For Arendt, to organize politics around principles of national belonging and to equate citizenship with national identity has caused the rise of totalitarian regimes. To fight the evils of the nation-state, Arendt finds the solution in taking the nation out of the nation-state. (Beiner, 2006: 55) This explains the importance of the American revolution for Arendt. It was an attempt to found a political community without a nation. Arendt mentions that “the greatest American innovation in politics as such was the consistent abolition of sovereignty within the body politic of the republic, the insight that in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same” (Arendt, 1990: 153). The ‘sovereign’ nation-states’ treatment of national and other minorities revealed the paradoxes of the nation-state system in its clearest form and brought the need for a reconceptualization of citizenship.

Conclusion

Liberal nationalism derives its power from republican premises. However, by equating the political borders with national ones, it creates an exclusionary political space. Although I agree with liberal nationalist arguments on the need to reinvigorate the idea of active citizenry and political participation, the idea of cultural unity based on the principle of nationality is a dangerous one to the extent it presupposes the fragmentation of society in national lines. Instead, in this paper I want to show that Arendt's republicanism, turning back to the historical origins of republican tradition, fosters a more plural and political understanding of citizenship. Having experienced the effects of totalitarian regimes in her lifetime, Arendt is very critical of national politics, leading her to search for a republican account of politics in which citizens are active participants in public affairs without a thick shared (national) identity. Contemporary conceptualizations of citizenship have much to gain in this regard.

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