What is the nature of Citizenship Education?

A critical investigation of

_Active Citizenship_

as an aim of Citizenship Education.

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Introduction (Plan):

Crick tells us (2000; p. 120): “There is a philosophy behind the Report, of course; what scholars call civic republicanism, and also pluralism.” This insight is somewhat troubling. If Crick's version of Citizenship Education, since implemented in the National Curriculum, is based upon one or two particular and controversial political philosophies, then this would seem to disregard alternative political philosophies. Indeed, even exclude them if the reliance on civic republicanism especially were sufficiently dependent.

It is especially curious that liberalism should be implicitly excluded as a basis for the Crick Report, since liberalism is such a prominent political philosophy in both public debate and academic political theory. Does Crick mean to imply that liberals cannot be expected to support Citizenship Education in its present form? Or is Crick's republicanism compatible with liberalism: a republican liberalism, as he came to believe?

This essay investigates whether one aspect of the Citizenship curriculum in particular, Active Citizenship, is compatible with liberal political philosophy. Of all the curriculum, Active Citizenship would appear to pose the greatest problems for liberalism.

Marinetto has written (2003; p. 8): “Encouraging active citizenship promotes a particular type of personal morality and positive forms of life for communities, individuals and governments.” If correct, this state-sponsored encouragement would seem to fly in the face of liberal strictures against state intrusion into the domain of personal freedom within the law. It seeks to promote particular attitudes and behaviours in social life; whereas, for the liberal, individuals and communities ought to be free to order their social lives as they see fit, and according to their own conceptions of social ethics and of the
good life, within certain limits which correspond to individuals' rights and freedoms.

In the essay, I aim to consider whether Active Citizenship, as expressed in the National Curriculum and interpreted by other official documents and by writers on Citizenship Education, does in fact conflict with liberalism.

In the following literature review, I shall therefore undertake two tasks: a survey of how Active Citizenship has been recently established and conceived; and a survey of ideas from liberal political philosophy which bear on the nature of citizenship and the purposes of and limits upon state involvement in education and the development of personal, social and political life.

The major points to consider in the essay will be: whether Active Citizenship in its present form does, as Marinetto’s analysis may be taken to imply, promote a particular conception of the good life; and, whether Active Citizenship as it exists is permissible under a liberal view of the purposes of Citizenship Education.

Finally, it will briefly consider Active Citizenship in light of communitarianism and civic republicanism, and present in conclusion a considered conception of the political implications of Active Citizenship.

**Part One**

One of the aims of the entire National Curriculum (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007) is to produce “responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society”. The Citizenship curriculum (ibid.) is meant to educate and prepare the child for an “effective role in public life”, to “take part in decision-making and different forms of
action” and “to play an active role in the life of their schools, neighbourhoods, communities and wider society as active and global citizens”, as well as to “develop their critical skills, consider a wide range of political, social, ethical and moral problems, and explore opinions and ideas other than their own”. Children are “to become informed, critical, active citizens who have the confidence and conviction to work collaboratively, take action and try to make a difference in their communities and the wider world,” with emphasis in such collaboration and activism laid on “the important role of negotiation and persuasion within a democracy”.

This is a conception of social activism that includes informal politics: social actions occurring largely below the “high” politics of state and governmental institutions, and which directly engage the interests and concerns of children. It promotes interpersonal respect, cooperation and open-mindedness. Active Citizenship has a special role in the Citizenship curriculum. It “underpins” the OCR GCSE specification (OCR, 2006): knitting together children’s development of knowledge and understanding with the interest, skills and confidence to “take action with others to address Citizenship issues in their communities”.

Several writers on Active Citizenship take pains to distinguish what makes citizenship actions undertaken by children properly “active”. Recurrent themes are that the children should be self-motivated, informed, responsible and empowered. Leighton (2010) writes of pupils deciding, planning and carrying out their activities, analysing and evaluating their impacts, and reflecting on the reasons and causes behind why their actions were necessary. Crick wrote that “individuals must be helped and prepared to shape the terms of such engagements [community involvement, voluntary work] by political understanding and action” (quoted in Gearon and Brown, 2003; p. 221) and that Active Citizenship “occurs only when pupils consider political issues” around the roots of
the issues their activities engage with (quoted in Peterson and Knowles, 2007; p. 12). ¹

The Crick Report (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998; p.7) intended for Citizenship Education “to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves.”

The active elements of citizenship are therefore those to do with children's ownership of their actions—children wanting to act, understanding why and thinking through the reasons for and consequences of theirs actions—and their development of the knowledge, understanding and skills to enable them to be deliberate, engaged and effective in public life. The curriculum is certainly not “old rote-learning civics” (Crick, 2000; p. 119).

There are indicators that Active Citizenship is not just about experiential learning, but promotion of a certain culture and certain values to inspire a change in social life. The terms of reference for the advisory group on Citizenship Education included “the value to individuals and society of community activity” (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998; p. 4) and the Crick Report famously aimed for “no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally, for people to think of themselves as active citizens” (ibid. p. 7). Crick wrote that Citizenship Education would “enhance democratic life for us all... beginning in school and radiating out” (quoted in Garratt and Palmer, 2003; p. 9).

Marinetto (2003; p. 8) has expressed this aim explicitly: “Encouraging active citizenship promotes a particular type of personal morality and positive forms of life for

¹ This paper is a draft, but the final copy does not contain this quotation.
communities, individuals and governments.”

Some writers treat Active Citizenship as education in skills for citizenship rather than as engaging children as citizens in directly meaningful and valuable ways. Jensen and Schnack (quoted in Jerome and Martin, 2004; p. 3) write of Active Citizenship: “It is not and cannot be the task of the school to solve the political problems of the world... [Citizenship] activities must be assessed on the basis of... educational criteria. The crucial factor must be what pupils learn from participating in such actions.”

This contrasts with Garratt and Palmer (2003, pp. 5-6): “Effective citizenship presupposes action, which in turn requires the participation of young people in issues that affect their lives and communities.” It enables them to “make a difference within their schools and communities and [demonstrate] that they had an active stake in the decision-making process of issues that affected their lives... Citizenship [is] more than a mere subject[,] it [is] an ethos, a way of thinking and doing”.

Stenton (2004, pp. 62-3) supplies an ambitious interpretation of Active Citizenship that brings education and meaningful activity together: combining “a development process that is about growing confidence, communication, caring, creativity and political awareness, and most of all the motivation to play an active part in [the] community”, with “the idea of young people designing and managing community projects that bring about positive change for themselves and their communities”. Arthur and Wright (2001; p. 86) similarly write: “The ability to think and act on social and political concerns underpins effective citizenship education. Pupils therefore need to develop active, collaborative and cooperative working patterns in their lives focused on real problems in a real community.”
There is a tension in Citizenship Education, and *a fortiori* in Active Citizenship: is it supposed to be educational (experiential learning), or a direct performance of citizenship duties? Are children citizens or merely learners in citizenship studies? It can be both of course, through the gradual development of capability, initiative and responsibility. When we remember additionally the aim of cultural transformation discussed above, Active Citizenship is seen to be a complex of different purposes and processes, the object of various interpretations and intentions: (i) the performance by children of citizenship activities and duties; (ii) learning for citizenship; (iii) an engine of cultural transformation. There is another ambiguity when discussing Active Citizenship over whether one is talking about the curriculum for children or a culture for everybody to participate in. This multifariousness will need to be addressed when we consider whether any form of Active Citizenship is permissible under liberalism.

Lockyer (2003; p. 2) usefully summarises the tensions between liberalism and civic republicanism in the thinking behind the Crick Report, without resolving them. He writes that “many of the tensions and dilemmas found in the Report's proposals arise from the countervailing influence of liberal and civic republican ideas”. He also describes the meeting of the two influences as a “hybrid”, “compromise” and “balance”, as well as “republican liberalism”. Lockyer thus leaves the reader with several distinct characterisations of the ideological relationship. He reports Crick's self-identification as both liberal democrat and civic republican and indicates a debate between the two strands of his thought over “the priority to give civic and public duty in relation to the right to pursue private goods and personal autonomy”.

Continuing with Lockyer's exposition (ibid.), liberalism is “ethically grounded in the protection and promotion of equal individual rights” and “ethically neutral between
competing ways of life” so long as they are “freely chosen”. Political participation is a right, but not an obligation. Civic republicanism, on the other hand, is “grounded on an ethic of civic virtue” according to which our human “potential [is] fulfilled as citizens serving the common good, and identifying with the aims and purposes of... 'civic communities' or nation states”. Note Lockyer's uncertainty here over the object of civic identification: the nation-state or some other communities whose content is left undefined. He goes on however to note the importance for civic republicanism of “sharing in rule”, before mentioning both “active self-government” and the loosely termed “civic duty”.

In sum, this commentator has done more to show us the confusion between two ideologies in the Crick Report, than to clarify and separate them, or to show how their co-influence is coherent. The sense of confusion is only heightened by the Crick Report itself, where the ideas of the then Lord Chancellor are reported (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998; p. 61): “Our goal is to create a nation of able, informed and empowered citizens who, on the one hand, know, understand and can enforce their rights; and, on the other hand, recognise that the path to greatest personal fulfilment lies through active involvement in strengthening our society.” If one of the central planks of liberalism is the freedom from government promotion of a particular conception of what the good life consists in for citizens, then citizens dedicated to the first half of the Lord Chancellor's statement ought to take exception to the state's imposition and sponsorship of the second half, wherein is stated that the government's goal is for citizens to “recognise” a certain form of the good life. It is difficult to see how liberalism and civic republicanism can be coherently combined.

Crick (2003; p. 23) accepted that “active adult citizenship... cannot be made universal by persuasion, nor compulsory by law”. He also asserted that “[o]nly a few
would maintain that the good life for all or most consists in the avoidance of public concerns." This argument in favour of promoting active citizenship is rather limited on several points. The pride of the liberal lies precisely in not imposing the lifestyle of the majority on the minority, no matter how “few” are the latter. And the truth of Crick's minimalist statement does not preclude the existence of many people who value active public life to some extent, but not necessarily as a primary activity of their existence, with priority over other concerns.

Heater (1999; p. 166) describes a liberal (in the political sense) education as combining personal development and preparation for membership in a liberal-democratic society. “The liberal democratic state needs democratically educated pupils in [two] senses: to be educated, in Rousseau's words 'in the bosom of equality', and to an understanding and appreciation of democratic processes involved in being a citizen”. It is unclear however what the “bosom of equality” implies, since children are patently not equal citizens in any existing or likely state.

We have seen that the literature on the recent ideological influences on citizenship education in the UK does not provide much light on how Active Citizenship might be acceptable to both civic republicans and liberals. The combination of the two political philosophies is highly problematic, and it is hard to see how liberal concerns can be accommodated.

Part Two

Active Citizenship has been associated far more with civic republicanism, communitarianism and “Big Society”-style ideas of reinvigorated community activism and service-provision, than with liberalism. Crick (2003; p. vii) explicitly identified Active
Citizenship and civic republicanism with each other, in referring to “civic republicanism (or the duty of active citizenship)”. What then are advocates of liberalism to make of Active Citizenship? Is there a connection that is merely downplayed, or is there a conflict?

Active Citizenship as it presently exists is complex. It involves more than the right of participation in formal political processes like elections, which liberals might initially or indeed on reflection consider to be the sum total of citizenship. It can be interpreted as the development of “action competence”: making children “able and ready to participate... [able to] argue, reflect critically and relate [their] opinions and actions to a values framework” (Arthur and Wright (2001); p.89). On this view, Active Citizenship looks politically neutral, an education in a set of skills. But it can be seen more like a manner of social living, a way of life, a set of dispositions towards other people and collaboration with them, in which children are to be educated and involved, and which the state seeks to promote. The liberal must consider very carefully whether this is the sort of citizenship education that the state may properly encourage and inculcate.

Although the contents of the Active Citizenship curriculum will seem worthy, proper, even virtuous, to many people, we must not forget that such agreement cannot be taken for granted in a pluralistic, liberal society. The latter permits its members to hold and live according to any conception of the good life that they may prefer, within the bounds of the same rights of other people. Some of these tolerated lifestyles seem to contradict Active Citizenship.

Consider the National Curriculum (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2007)) requirement for children to “develop their critical skills, consider a wide range of political, social, ethical and moral problems, and explore opinions and ideas other than their own”.

How would this sit with an adherent of a sect that believes its own faith and moral code to contain perfect truth, that doubt is sinful, that competing faiths and claims are to be scorned and rejected out of hand, and that various outside groups are inveterate sinners, their opinions and manners to be regarded with contempt? Such a worldview is entirely permissible within a liberal society, so long as individual rights are respected.

If such a sect seems outlandish, consider the Apostle Paul’s discussion of outsiders to his faith in his letter to the Romans (1:18-32, New King James Version): “[T]he wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness… God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.”

It is not my intention to suggest that there are many people of similar views in the UK today, although there may be; but such a view would be entirely compatible with and tolerable under a liberal state. It may be a distasteful worldview, but the liberal is committed to not allowing her mere distaste to influence public policy.

A follower of Paul, as he expressed himself in the passage quoted, might well feel it to be entirely improper to expect her to develop critical skills, when truth comes to her by faith, or to explore the opinions of others whom she considers degenerates, liars and
sinners “deserving of death”. She may furthermore find abhorrent the notion of cooperating with such people as if they belonged to the same community, worthy of “negotiation and persuasion” rather than being shunned or preached at. Yet, by promoting particular patterns of social life, these are the kinds of actions that Active Citizenship requires of children and hopes to inculcate for adult life. *Prima facie*, this seems to pit Active Citizenship against liberalism.

A different problem lies in the promotion through Active Citizenship of an ethics that values political and social engagement and activity. This is often described as an Aristotelian ethic, as Aristotle held political activity to be a necessary part of the fullest, best way of life. This is a version of civic republicanism. A liberal state should not sponsor or require particular conceptions of the good life that may not be held by all members of society. For example, political activity might hold no interest for somebody. They would prefer to hike through the wilderness than to agitate and negotiate, speak out and take political action.

This person might legitimately ask why the state should sponsor and inculcate a politically-engaged lifestyle, but not their alternative pleasure in the contemplation of wild nature. If schools must have Active Citizenship, then why not compulsory hiking and camping? Or any other lifestyle or pleasure that might make life worth living for somebody? To impose Active Citizenship on children, to promote and fund the political lifestyle, is to put one particular way of life in a special place denied to alternative conceptions of the good life. On this second ground too, Active Citizenship would seem to be illiberal. (We shall consider below an objection to this, on the ground that Active Citizenship is a form of the right, not of the good life.)
By requiring a certain manner of social life, and by promoting a specific conception of the good life, Active Citizenship appears to contradict core liberal political values. A number of objections may be set against these initial appearances, however. A first objection is that since children and young people are minors, not full citizens, the liberal prohibition on the state promoting specific conceptions of the good does not apply in schools. A second objection is that Active Citizenship is not in fact a conception of the good life, but something else: a conception of the right, a framework of justice within which conceptions of the good may be freely pursued; more like the principles of liberal democracy, of freedom and equality, applied beyond the limited scope of formal politics.

The first objection argues that children, not being full citizens, are not possessed of the fullest right to freedom from the state-sponsored promotion of particular modes of life, aside from education for their formal political status. Were this exclusion to be permitted, however, it would make an absurdity of liberalism itself. For childhood and education are prime sites of the formation of our characters. If the liberal state were allowed to promote lifestyles only to children in school, and not to adults, then it would nonetheless be enabled to go far in moulding people well beyond the limits of formal rights and political status. If the liberal state may not mould citizens, then it makes no sense to allow it to mould those people who will soon become full citizens. Indeed, such a permission would allow the moulding of people at the more impressionable stage of life, then deny the same once character has become more fixed. In the case of liberal education, therefore, children must have the same right as adults to protection against the state's promotion of its preferred version of the good life.

The second objection argues that Active Citizenship is not a conception of the good life at all, but rather a properly liberal conception of the right: of rights, justice, equality, etc.,
yet one operating in the informal sphere beyond the state. It is highly problematic, however, to accept the existence of such informal right. If Active Citizenship were part of the right, then why not make it obligatory for adults, in the same way that respect for human rights or payment of taxes is obligatory? Something like this could be done, for example by instituting a form of national citizen service.

How is one to distinguish a conception of the good from a conception of the right? The right, for a liberal, is what pertains essentially to one’s status as a free and equal citizen, or full member of the society. It is what the liberal feels secure in enforcing through the institutions of formal politics, because freedom and equality are her core political values. Enforced service could be argued for on this basis, for instance as an obligation based on equality, with every citizen at some stage of their life taking time to provide assistance to the disadvantaged; a kind of tax in kind on one’s time and effort. The enforceable and the appropriately formal in politics exhaust political obligations for the liberal. What could be central to freedom and equality and yet remain optional? In other words, if Active Citizenship were part of liberal obligation, then it ought to be compulsory. There can be no place for optional obligations. What is not required and enforced is optional and free, and what is free is not part of the right. And what is not part of the right, the liberal cannot in good conscience permit the state to inculcate.

Nor is every kind of community membership amenable to liberal strictures on, for instance, equality. Consider a community where only the elders take decisions affecting the whole group. In effect, young people, however equal they may be as legal citizens of the state, are not equal “citizens” of their community. Just because free and equal citizenship is proper for the liberal state, does not mean it is proper for membership of every community existing within this framework. It is the liberal right of communities to
order their own arrangements as they see fit that is threatened by state promotion of Active Citizenship beyond the confines of formal politics.

The core liberal values of the right, freedom and equality, do not imply Active Citizenship. One can be free in the liberal sense without taking part either in ruling or community organising. One can be an equal citizen so long as one has no fewer rights and freedoms than others.

It might be suggested that a liberal might support an instrumental form of Active Citizenship: a republican duty to participate in public affairs because civic participation is necessary to the preservation of justice in a liberal state. This essay is not the place to appraise such a grand and necessarily empirical claim. I shall state only that such a minimal requirement of active citizenship, in a sense regretfully supported by the liberal, for whom it is a necessary evil, is quite far from the enthusiasm with which Active Citizenship has been promoted.

So Active Citizenship is not liberal. However, I do not believe that it is truly communitarian or civic-republican either. Although I do not have space to go into detailed analysis, I would like to finish this essay by suggesting why I believe this, and by indicating what I find to be the most adequate conception of the political implications of Active Citizenship.

Active Citizenship as it presently exists is not really communitarian because it does not represent the culture of any particular community. It is too thin and too critical to be so. Communitarianism assumes a common culture, background, loyalty, set of values in the community; Active Citizenship starts from the reality of pluralism of all of these in the
contemporary UK. The latter adopts a critical stance towards one's own beliefs and values, but there are communities in the UK, including religious sects, who do not take such a stance towards theirs. Active Citizenship is more about strengthening social activity in a country where community has weakened and become plural, where each neighbourhood is ethically diverse, than about realising the values of a particular community. Reading Etzioni (1995), widely recognised as a principal communitarian thinker, does not remind one of Active Citizenship: “Education includes the reinforcement of values gained at home and the introduction of values to those children whose parents neglected their character formation and moral upbringing” (p. 248). He preaches moral education rather than citizenship education. Etzioni’s moralisation of society would proceed on the basis of a particularistic and thick moral code, one where values appropriate in wider society are the same as those taught within the family, one neglectful of the reality of pluralism or the necessity for a critical and open-minded stance: “Moral commitment requires helping young people feel more strongly about those values they already have (or acquire in schools)” (pp. 97-8). The kinds of communal activity that he seeks to promote are not democratic but particularistic, such as “ethnic clubs and associations” (p. 248). He wants greater local volunteerism and political participation, indeed, but does not describe the sort of injection of democratic values and processes into ordinary social life that distinguishes Active Citizenship.

Active Citizenship is probably most compatible, of the three alternative political philosophies here discussed, with civic republicanism. And yet, it does not feel civic-republican. It is compatible, yes, but animated by a different spirit. There is nothing in the civic-republican tradition that makes it distinctively engaged by the political processes of informal politics, of ordinary social life, of community involvement.
In reading Heater (1999) on the civic-republican conception of citizenship, one finds a heavily statist tradition. This runs from Athens—“famed for the ready participation of her citizens in governmental and judicial functions”—and Sparta—“renowned for the selfless devotion of her citizen-soldiers” (p. 45)—through Aristotle’s definition of the citizen—one who “share[s] in the civic life of ruling and being ruled in turn” (ibid.)—and Cicero’s interest in the virtues of the “ruling class” (p. 47), to Rousseau’s investigations on “[h]ow... men [can] subject themselves to government... while... retaining their freedom” (p. 50). Heater himself indicates in a summary table that the dual purpose of civic republicanism is freedom and the “republican state” (p. 52).

The tradition is all about the state and ruling, participation in the formal politics of the city or nation. There is nothing in it especially concerned with sub-state citizenship, even if such a contemporary interpretation has been placed on it: there is something new and different in it. Even when Heater’s discussion turns to more modern exponents of the tradition, where local communities rather than the over-arching state are mentioned as sites for active, participatory, virtuous republican citizenship, this is expressed through quoting Arendt, who wrote of Jefferson’s republicanism that “no one could be called either happy or free without participating... in public power” (p. 70). Heater himself criticises the tradition for making of citizenship a minority, elite activity and for its “narrow definition of public participation [which] excludes the whole broad range of civic society activities, such as pressure groups, trade unions [sic], charities” which he characterises as “quasi-political” (pp. 73-4). These are the sorts of organisations where Active Citizenship can be practised; if anything, even these are more formal than we would expect of much that would pass for community involvement.

Active Citizenship is not really distinctively liberal or communitarian or civic-
republican. Its political implications are quite different: it is really animated by the application of a favoured but thinly defined set of political procedures to the whole of social life; not just to formal politics but to the informal and voluntary social life of local communities. As Crick (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998; p. 7) put it, “a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally”. It is a radical extension of political processes into informal collective life, into not just the laws and formal political institutions but into the very culture, the ethos even, of society. In this sense it is similar to anti-discrimination legislation, which prescribes principles according to which corporations and institutions must treat individuals. Such interventions go beyond formal politics to introduce political norms into non-political interactions. They assert that truly living out our political values requires more than formal equality and rights, it requires living together rightly at a much more involved level. But Active Citizenship goes even further than anti-discrimination legislation, because it goes beyond the formal domain of the law too.

This is something which may be best summed up not as politics but in Kymlicka’s term as “civility” (2003; p. 50), although my expression of it here is wider and more ambitious than his concept. Kymlicka writes that “the obligation to treat people as equal citizens now applies to the most common everyday decisions of individuals” as “citizens must learn to interact in everyday settings on an equal basis with people for whom they might harbour prejudice”. Liberal values have spilled over from the strictly, formally political realm of rights like the franchise, into the whole mass of informal social interactions.

Civility as promoted in Active Citizenship is similar. It involves trying to work with other people to negotiate and achieve local and political aims even when we are not
obliged to by law; taking their beliefs and values seriously into account even when, in our personal freedom, we have the formal right to exclude them from consideration. This is what Active Citizenship seems to me to promote above all and most distinctively: a rich, respectful and civil social life of political debate and action from the most local issue to the global. An enriched social life that is not communitarian but diverse and often divided in opinion, and animated by a civil commitment to reasonable debate and conscientious action. One where democratic values, taking other people's beliefs and values into account, and negotiating over common actions, and other such practices already proper to the formal political sphere, are extended into informal social life.

Barber (quoted in Annette, 2003; p. 143) has summed up well the skills required for this democratic civility: “the literacy required to live in a civil society, the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act deliberately in a pluralist world, the empathy that permits us to hear and thus accommodate others”. We are seeing here, in particular, an extension of democracy into informal politics. If democracy has up until now meant formal equality for all or almost all members of a polity in terms of voting and representation, in the informal sphere of Active Citizenship it is coming to mean taking into account the interests and values of everybody implicated in a social arrangement or action.

Now if, as we have argued above, this concept of a moralised civil society is indeed illiberal, an intrusion on an individual's freedom to do as he wishes within the bounds of the law, if this indeed is a vision of the good and proper life, then even the diehard liberal must concede that as such a conception it is razor-thin, and its conflict with liberalism minimal. There is almost no positive content to Active Citizenship, no fixed moral positions or prescriptions, to the point that Marinetto's (2003; p. 8) interpretation of it as promoting “a
particular type of personal morality and positive forms of life” seems overstated. When we find ourselves in this position, it is tempting to say “well, so much for liberalism”. On the other hand, we must consider the possible advantages of a relatively depoliticised civil society (possibly less civil strife and open conflict) and the possible disadvantages of Active Citizenship if it is not carried out to the maximum of tolerance and open-mindedness (i.e. the possibility of active but closed-minded social action).

We must not forget the advantages of liberalism and the reasons for which it arose. It aims to separate the affairs of government from various conflicts, divisions and controversies that may be ethical or religious, for example. This lessens the consequences of disagreement, aiming to ensure that it does not lead to oppression. It also allows individuals and groups to pursue their varying values in peace and freedom, so that a single society permits plural conceptions of the good life to be realised. To repoliticise civil society could lead to the reawakening of a political dimension to such conflicts.

Active Citizenship has emerged from a confused political background as something quite different from any of the strands of thought that inspired its proponents. It is not really liberal, but it is not civic-republican or communitarian either. It is a vision of a democratically-informed, bustling, diverse social politics of activism and civility, a hybrid of politics and civil society. It is a genuinely novel vision of the good society.
Bibliography


