

CITIZENSHIP, DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: A CONVERSATION WITH MARIA OLSON

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Young People's Civic Engagement in Times of Accountability? On the Importance of Maintaining Openness about Young People's Civic Engagement in Education," in M. Olson (ed.), *Theme: Citizenship Education under Liberal Democracy. Utbildning & Demokrati* [Education & Democracy] 21(1), 29–55, 2012.

Michael Peters: Maria can you tell us something of your educational background and upbringing in Sweden and how you became interested in the question of citizenship.

Maria Olson: My educational background includes a Bachelor's degree in psychology and philosophy at Stockholm University, and a Master's degree in religious science at Uppsala University. My doctoral degree is in pedagogic practices, with a minor in political science, at Linköping University, Sweden. I was raised in Lugnås, a small village with only 2000 inhabitants. Lugnås, which means 'quite ridge' in Swedish, is located in the mid south of Sweden. The area is marked out by its relatively flat landscape and farmland. When I was nine years old my family moved to Mariestad, a city nearby. Mariestad is an industrial city that basically lives of producing refrigerators and toilet paper. Located on the coast of Sweden's largest lake its humble beauty is evident.

As concerns the question of citizenship I find it enthralling as it often denotes collectively nurtured politico-ideological desires for a better world. These desires do not seem to be weakened by the notion that we are facing the present and future situation in society in a way that is riven with severe problems. To provide an example, we may turn to the present situation in Europe, where some people become expelled from the place where they live their lives for being considered not to embody a 'proper' citizenship. I think that this political, or betterly, governmental meagerness in present times calls for deepened investigation.

Put briefly, I think that the question of citizenship is intimately related to the very idea of humanity, or human-ness. As education is one of the most critical public bodies in modern times in providing for these processes, my interest in citizenship is closely linked to education and its alleged and assigned commitments. Could you fall in here, Michael, and tell us something about the question of citizenship and its relation to education from your point of view?

Michael Peters: Thanks for information on your background. To evade your question for the moment what occurs to me is that Swedish intellectuals seem to feel a strong responsibility for producing conditions for a better world not only in conflict studies but across the board. Is this a reflection of Swedish cosmopolitanism? Is there a tradition of civic humanism in Sweden that is optimistic about world citizenship? It also occurs to me (and here I

come closer to your question of me) that citizenship is very much a European concept. (If there are multiple concepts bound up with space-time is there commonality? This comparative question seems very important to me and one I raise but do not expect you to answer!) Education and subjectification – producing citizens – seems very much to me also tied to place/space and issue concerning national cultures. I wonder whether I can get you to speculate about the European trajectory of the concept and its place/bounds and the extent to which this might affect questions of historical ontology (becoming) in the world-becoming sense.

Maria Olson: Thanks for reminding me of the ever-actual notion that every word, thought and deed is always an act of in(ter)vention *from* somewhere, it is place-bound. This is often forgotten, I think, in the mistaken belief that the speaker or thinker herself is located in an assumed outside the scene of analyses. Or that she, with the words of Spivak, occupies the very center of the scene. In your question Sweden comes into question as a place in the notion that Swedish intellectuals tend to nurture an ambition of ‘bettering’ the world. If I allow myself to speculate on this spontaneously, as I haven’t really thought of this question before, I would say that if this is the case, it can be seen as part of concrete historical events in Sweden.

I think that the very consolidation of Sweden as a nation-state and the imaginary of ‘Swedishness’ are intimately entwined with a particular notion of trans-national humanness that comes into being in socio-liberal registers. Taking on the history of the 1900s in Sweden it is marked out by a strong confidence in the art of social engineering. The Swedish confidence in social engineering was established in the 40s, and enforced in the 60s and 70s by the time of the Swedish Prime Minister and Social democrat Olof Palme. To put it bluntly this belief denotes a whole-hearted belief in that the world can be a better place to live in if we arrange it well through reforms, hard work, and each and every one’s duty to serve our fellow men and society, together with deliberate socio-political principles and a robust political will. Classical speeches of Palme, materialized in the book *Politics Is Willing*, in 1964, reflect this conviction. The confidence in social engineering is linked to a certain creed; that of internationalism. This creed involves helping your fellow men wherever they were located, and regardless of what circumstances they live under.

The social engineering, together with the creed of internationalism, was part of a more ample Social democrat nation-building project known as the ‘Swedish model’, or ‘the Swedish Folkhome’. The model was established in the early 1900s when religion – Christianity, more specifically Protestantism – was played down as major unifying reference in Sweden. The process of secularization, together with urbanization and modernization, union movement, women’s movement, religious movement and other popular move-

ments, and also the fear of ending up in a situation like the German, gave rise to the formation of the Swedish welfare state. What is striking, in my point of view, is that this local national process, which was marked out by a striving for each and every one's citizen rights in Marshallian registers, enclosed in itself the seed to its own excess: it built on the notion of an a-territorial, placeless civic humanism where Swedish people were to reach out a helping hand to people in need of it no matter if these people wanted it or not.

If we return to your question about a feasible Swedish civic humanism and the Swedish desire to produce conditions for a 'better world' I think that its relevance could be traced back to this historically settled process. "Swedishness", the scent of the modern 'we' of Sweden as a nation-state, becomes actualized in tandem with the strong belief in social engineering and with the creed of nation-transcending gestures of applied civic humanity on an 'needing world'. Out of this twofold actualization of Swedishness, of a Swedish 'we', which involves a strong belief in planning and in transcendence of national geographical borders, Sweden comes into being as a nation-state, and – at the same time – becomes an example of its own scent, of Swedishness. I think that this could be one way of answering your question of an assumedly Swedish civic humanism that aims at bettering the world. The well-planned reaching-out-a-hand to people who are in need of it not only feeds back on local national processes of internal 'we'-enactment. It also claims the function of setting an example to the world. And in this sense, it could indeed be considered as a matter of Swedish cosmopolitanism.

Michael Peters: This is a great response that attends to the historical contours of humanism and relates it to the Swedish context and you are right in my view in calling out the relationship of place/space to inter-subjectivity and nationality and identity as subjects. The European context as such, while not a single culture and despite its diversity, does share the legacy of humanism or at least that is how I interpret the efforts at European constitution, efforts that at the super state level seem to have avoided an overly Christian statement of European humanism (leaving room for Muslim states), and yet one in the current euro crisis that has also become quickly bureaucratized and driven by concerns of banks. It seems to me that Habermas and Derrida were far too quick to talk of "core" European values and that subjectivities—and cosmopolitan ones included—are at the mercy of politicians, bureaucrats and bankers. No longer market and society but a market society that dictates, determines and regulates new juridical conceptions that define the ground for highlighting one form of European humanism at the expense of others: no longer a social rights-based view but one based on being a consumer-citizen or even investment-citizen increasingly forced to provide for their own health, education, employment in an ever

privatized world. This seems to me a problematic historical shift that decidedly moves away from the European social model much more to a fully privatized society where property rights are paramount. The consequences of education seem enormous. I guess these remarks are differently true for parts on the Mediterranean as opposed to Scandinavia, Germany or Great Britain. I am also aware that European humanism has been given very different treatments by Descartes, Marx and Heidegger who revealed its ideologies so completely. One wonders how seriously we can take the Constitution's statement of fundamental human rights. Would you care to comment?

Maria Olson: I think that you link up beautifully to the present situation in Europe in turning to the historicity of humanism involved in concrete events that have taken, and still take place in relation to the very idea of Europe. In doing so, the current situation of Europe can be depicted in terms of an historically unique stress on economical measures that seem to have converted into a matter of legacy. This legacy, which is laid down in constitutional law, tends to both allude to 'old times' of national values and to a need for private investments of different kinds. This situation, as you say, calls for a civic living that is in accordance with not only with market society but also with a special kind of liberal humanism that is to deal with a societal situation marked out by plurality. Out of this scenery it is hard, I think, to imagine a Europe that nurtures any 'core values' outside its own targets of privatization of society and increased stress on 'old European values'. Its advanced level of bureaucratization, often materialized and performed as a general claim for the strengthening of human rights, undeniably gives birth to alienation.

With Mouffe this alienation can be articulated in terms of a harsh expulsion of feelings and passions that are being nurtured by the popular and enacted by different popular movements. At the same time, ironically, this alienation seems to be fuelled by 'another' popular, i.e. by popular movements of which xenophobia and oppression of certain peoples are part of the program. Lobbying groups of right-wing political movements, like the ones that we see in the for example the Netherlands, France and Denmark, are vital examples of this fuelling. The question I want to put forth in stressing that Europe and 'the European' is ambivalent in its relationship to ordinary people – to the popular and to popular movements – is what this ambivalence might stand for. This question attunes to your remark, Michael, about the inherent expansive pretention of European humanism to cross borders and boundaries into a robust pluralist cosmopolitan citizenship. My own idea about this question is that it stands for fear. And the citizen-subject that comes into being in the 'juridified' body of humanism in today's Europe is a subject that testifies to this fear. This fear seems to be one that

itself fuels the ongoing juridical constitution of human rights, and further the body of European humanism in juridical and constitutional registers so that the process resembles a situation of *Catch-22*. Hence, the more urging the need for safety and security in the European society, the more juridical and constitutional orders are called upon. But this might take too far away from the theme at stake.

Alluding to the historical shift of Europe that you so adequately bring up – where advanced privatization, consumption and investments are key, and in which human rights are stressed as being almost spirited – I would like to raise another question in relation to this shift that is related to religion. More precisely to Christianity. I would like to challenge the notion that European Protestant Christianity has lost its historical powers (in favor of humanism) in the current, legally driven modern constitution of ‘the human’ in Europe. A constitution that be traced back to the events like the French Revolution. Could we picture this shift in Europe, with its principled notions of democracy and investment-centered ethos, as being ‘cracked’ in the sense that it lacks motivational forces? That is, as being part of cosmo-political era that no longer involves any ethico-political chronicled body needed for nurturing a citizenship held by inner motivation and spirit. That is, a citizenship that, with Critchley, is externally binding but not internally compelling. Referring to the feasible presence of Christianity in this situation it might reside in representing a somewhat attractive but at the same time impossible position for European (liberal) humanism; it cannot be turned to, as it – which Linda Woodhead has described convincingly – represents everything that stands for non-illumination, pre-modernity and non-progress in society. At the same time it is appealing as it denotes the inner motivational force that tends to be missing in European cosmopolitan humanist citizenship, if we are to believe the current political worries about decreasing levels of participation among youth.

Could this shift of Europe be seen as part of an indirect craving for a religiously laden utopia that no longer exists? Or, to turn the argument inside out, could the increasing claims for tolerance and stress on consumerism and the importance of respecting human rights be considered as an outcome of a discreet Christianity that has come to flourish in these ways? A flourishing that invites for speculation about whether, with Caputo ‘the dead of the death of God’ is actualized anew in other ways, in an almost spirited belief in juridical and economical forces than was the case back in the days of hegemonic Christendom. If we take on the idea that today’s Europe is fuelled by popular fear of global threats such as claimed terror-deeds and in need for safety and security, we might ask ourselves if we are facing a situation in Europe in which the formula of being and becoming human is assumed to be secularized but the spirit of the process is not?

Michael Peters: This is an interesting reflection because you remind me that the notion of rights is deeply tied to Christian culture and grew out of it, at least some forms of equality that we now take for granted. This heritage and history cannot be forgotten or wished away no matter how much the constitutional planners want to make room for other religions and cultures. Religious toleration was also fundamental to Europe and laws were passed that permitted religious freedoms even though these were not always observed. The treatment of strangers—a major theme of cosmopolitanism—was advocated in books of the Old Testament: sermons for the toleration of those different from us and less powerful. Various tolerances were issued by the Catholic Church not to discriminate against Jews, and by Islamic rulers in Spain to accept Christians and to allow them the freedom to practice their religion. The emergence of forms of tolerance also was central to the emergence of Protestantism and liberalism as a political ideology. These tolerances were, as you point out, legally sanctioned and juridified. Tolerance is certainly a fundamental principle of liberalism that assumes a neutral state and its defense can be found in Locke, Mill, Hart, and Rawls. Yet there are limits to tolerance (and therefore limits to cosmopolitanism). I am thinking of the historic shift after the end of the Cold War to multiculturalism starting in the 1960s and perhaps coming to an end in Europe in the last few years. I recently issued a call for papers for *Policy Futures in Education* with this description:

Multiculturalism has been the dominant paradigm for the West since the 1960s influencing a range of policies from international development, immigration to democracy promotion. Over the decade or so since 9/11 and against the background of the Iraq War, terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid and London, and a number of other critical incidents, Europe has officially turned away from the doctrine of state multiculturalism. In 2010 Angela Merkel declared that multiculturalism in Germany had ‘failed utterly’ and indicated that it was an illusion to think that German and ‘gastarbeiters’ or guest workers could live happily together. Merkel’s stance was repeated by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2011 who commented that ‘We have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him.’ Merkel’s and Sarkozy’s comments were quickly supported by former prime ministers for Australia and for Spain John Howard and Jose Maria Aznar. On 5th February 2011, the British Prime Minister David Cameron¹ echoed the criticisms of state multiculturalism arguing ‘Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream. We have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to

belong. We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values.’ Cameron’s talk was aimed at Islamic extremism and the process of radicalization while being careful not to lump all Muslims together. He too focused on the need for identity with core liberal values of host societies: ‘we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more active, muscular liberalism.’ Partly as a response, in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, there emerged a call for ‘integration’ and for a ‘community cohesion agenda’ comprised of tougher immigration and deportment laws, citizenship tests, compulsory citizenship education, and new employment policies giving preference to British workers. The combined impact of the Iraq war, the Abu-Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay abuses and the ‘war on terror’ have been highly damaging to Muslim minorities leading to claims of social exclusion, discrimination and abrogation of identity rights. At the same time political Islam is in a state of radical transformation with the events of the Arab Spring and a space of revolutionary protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen that have forced traditional rulers from power with other protests throughout the Arab world. This special issue investigates the end of European multiculturalism against this contemporary political backdrop.

I wonder what your response is to this situation? How is Sweden responding to terrorism and to declarations on the end of multiculturalism? I would really like to publish your work in response to this theme. I see this policy shift as working against the old notion of tolerance based on cordial treatment of the stranger, an ancient notion that motivates cosmopolitan conceptions by scholars like Levinas, Kristeva and Derrida. In the current environment, is this any way that policy makers can square these notions?

Maria Olson: These are indeed important questions that you pull forth. Leaving your question about Sweden aside, I want to try out some general points of a possible end of European multiculturalism. This idea can be given rise to, I think, in terms of an increasingly bewildered notion of the concept of Utopia. The semantic meaning of the Greek work Utopia denotes ‘the place that is not’. But for centuries, which postcolonial thinkers have offered insights into, Europe has come to house Utopia; it has come to both embody and to populate it. As we touched upon earlier in our conversation, this housing of Utopia has taken manifold directions historically, involving both Christian and secular scopes where cosmopolitan notions of tolerance are a vibrant part. Taking on this European housing of Utopia, we could ask to what the current cries for a “more active and muscular” liberalism among European political leaders respond? Could it be that Europe has come to a point where it is no longer clear that the European housing of Utopia will

go on in the future? Or are we just witnessing a repetitious process where Europe and the idea of the European anew, and at the same time differently, seeks another way to house – perhaps an all-encompassing, multicultural – Utopia? Alluding to your call for papers we may ask what beginnings that the end of European multiculturalism offer to us? The overwhelming silence on the ‘war on terror’ and the Arab Spring in Europe as well as in Sweden is calling us to take these questions seriously. Keeping in mind that philosophy, as Nietzsche states, does not exist to make us better human beings, but too make us more thoughtful ones.

Michael Peters: Thank you for such a thoughtful response especially in regard to the Swedish scene. One last question and this time about the direction of your own work and your future projects. Can you say something about the trajectory of your research and where it leads you?

Maria Olson: Taking on my interest in educational theory and philosophy I wish to continue a line of research in which attention is drawn to collective processes of subjectification and other educational outcomes that are intimately related to current events and processes in society. To date this research course has involved different critical and constructive perspectives on democracy, education and citizenship that draw on different post structural thinkers. In continuing this line of research my ambition is to strengthen and contribute to further development of an educational research that aligns philosophical thinking with contemporary global social, political and cultural changes in the world.

NOTE

1. See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pmsspeech-at-munich-security-conference/>

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