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Civic Education in Europe: Some General Principles

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Civic Education in Europe: Some General Principles¹

I. Civic Education

Civic education can be a special discipline in school, sometimes a part of social studies, sometimes independent. In civic education students are expected to learn about their own society and about other societies, how the individual is related to society, what it means to be a citizen, the rights and responsibilities of each one of us in a modern state. Civic education aims to develop those capacities of pupils that are useful for individuals in a modern society, such as the capacity to form and express his own opinions, to evaluate the contribution and performance of public figures like politicians and officials and the ability to come to a rational conclusion about what is right or wrong in many, if not in most circumstances that people are likely to find themselves and the ability for critical thought. There are other senses of civic education to be found in the literature but they are no concern of mine here.²

1 This essay draws on work I have been doing for some time. My friend and colleague, Professor Kristján Kristjánsson, has read the manuscript and made useful comments. Just as my co-senior fellow at the Center for European Integration Studies in Bonn, Dr. Astrid Ertel-Vieth, has improved the text in a number of ways.

2 Sometimes civic education is thought to be the result of general schooling without any specific school discipline dealing with the problems of political education. Richard Pring, 1999, in "Political Education: relevance of the humanities", *Oxford Review of Education*, 25, pp. 1-2, argues against a special discipline in schools and thinks that the humanities serve the purposes of political education better. Often it is not made clear at all which sense we are talking about. The notion of civic education here described is similar in some respects to the democratic educational conception of citizenship

Civic education is only one part of the whole school program and has to compete for time with other school disciplines. But it is certainly an important part of any school program. It comes along with reading, arithmetic, natural science, languages, social science and sport. Usually civic education is not considered the most important part of the curriculum but some elements of it are to be found in most curricula in the school systems of Europe as far as I know. I do not want to delineate an ideal form or ideal content of civic education in Europe based on comparison between various types of curricula to be found. I have examined only a few of them in detail and have only sketchy knowledge of others. But I plan to do look into some of the problems that inevitably arise when planning and discussing civic education. These problems do not arise in vacua but only on the basis of a social and political background that we take for granted.

II. Social Background

If we look at the European states, at least those of them that form Western Europe, what are the most prominent features of them, what are those characteristics that have come through in this century and shape our lives to an extent we all too rarely think about? I want to mention three, there are more, but this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. The first is representative democracy, the second is the free market and the third is the welfare state. Representative democracy is a method to come to a conclusion about political questions in accordance with the rule of the majority. It is not the citizens themselves that decide how to solve problems and answer questions but their representatives. The citizens decide who their representatives are at a regular interval in a secret ballot. The representatives are usually grouped together in parties that compete for the votes of the citizens at the time of elections. The key question for the voters is whom they trust to come to reasonable conclusions about issues and problems during the period until the next election. A part of the European

education Tomas Englund describes in "Educational Conceptions and Citizenship Education", in S.J. Ball and S. Larsson (eds.), *The Struggle for Democratic Education: Equality and Participation in Sweden*, New York, pp. 32-66. See esp. 48-54.

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representative democracy is that the individuals have rights the Government cannot infringe. The free market was the second feature. The free market has developed over the last two centuries gradually and tentatively. Early in this century it was not as obvious as it seems to be now that our economy should be arranged according to the ideas of a free market. In the years between the two world wars the free market had to deal with enormous problems after the fall on Wall Street in 1929. At the time many enlightened people had good reason to believe that a planned economy might be a better organization of our economic life than a free one. I take it to be a well established fact now that a free economy is a much more successful way of organizing economic life than other ways that have been tried and tested. There may be all sorts of problems with free market globalisation which has become such a prominent feature of the modern economy, there might have to be built into it all sorts of restraints that are not there now, but it does not change the fact that it is a free economy which is the paradigm. The third feature is the welfare state. There are basically three components to the modern welfare state. They are social security, a national health system and a national school system. The welfare system is there to take care basically of two important needs: The need to be reasonably equipped to live a life in a modern society for which the school system caters and the need to be secure against the misfortune of seriously ill health, old age or to be out of a job.

It is true that these three features are not constant throughout Europe or even throughout Western Europe. They come variously related depending on the history of the particular society we are looking at. But I only want to contend that we would come across these three features in any West European society, we care to look at but not that these three features or the relations between them are invariable. Thus this is the background on which I want to look at civic education.

I assume that the development of civic capacities is a part of moral education. I will not argue for this assumption here but I take it to be fairly plausible. The first thing to notice is that the development of the capacities that constitute civic education is not a natural process but a social one. It is not the case that young people develop these capacities as they grow older.

This seems to me to have the consequence that not only the child or adolescent must put an effort into enhancing these capacities but it is also incumbent on adults to encourage and guide this development. Learning about your own society, your own rights and responsibilities, is a result of interaction with your social surroundings. It is important to remember that not all learning takes place in school. Some of the things we learn about our own relations to other people, our parents, siblings, relatives and friends are not taught at school but in our homes, families and in playing with friends. The question is: Why should we not only trust the family to instil proper civil values and develop them in the young? If we trust the children to learn to speak a language on their own, why on earth should we use schools to teach them about their own society? There are some reasons why this is not going to be enough. First, we should notice that even though children learn their mother tongue without any formal instruction we do not think it is sufficient to leave it at that level. In all European countries it is taken to be one of the most important functions of the school to develop the pupils' facility in their native language, letting them learn about the history of their language and read its literature. Second, and more importantly, there are reasons to think that modern families are not particularly well prepared to mould the civic attitudes of the young. A good family life is a necessary part of forming a well rounded individual, but there are many single parent families in modern societies and a fairly large proportion of children is born out of wedlock. Single parents are not worse parents than married couples but their time is more limited. It is also true that because it is becoming the norm in a modern household that both parents hold full time jobs there is less time to attend to the various needs of the young. The third reason is that various research results indicate that young people in the longer established democracies of Europe are nowadays more susceptible to authoritarian views than before.³ The popularity of extremist and racist organizations seems to have grown. Worries about the attitudes of young people to politics and society are not new. In the sixties and seventies in

3 See Elizabeth Fraser, 1999, "Introduction: the idea of political education." In *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 25, nos. 1-2, p. 6.

British schools students were reported to be uninterested in politics and not to have knowledge of economic problems.

But there are other trends that support the worries about the young. Apathy of voters in various European countries is a cause for concern to take an example. If there is also information about the disinterest of young people in politics this feeds the suspicion that some other values than democratic ones occupy the interest of the young. This leads easily to the idea that the family is not doing its job of informing the young about democratic values, that to settle differences among individuals you must reach a consensus and in a larger group there must be a rule like the rule of the majority that settles some issue and consensus can settle others. That is what the young must understand and they must also understand that this is a bit more complicated as well. It depends on which kind of group we are talking about, what sort of method is appropriate, because in a group of scientists, for example, where there are disagreements about theoretical issues, it would be out of place to use a majority verdict to settle such an issue. There are other values like truth that come into play in science. But in an ordinary group of people who must come to a decision about most issues, a rule like the majority rule is appropriate. Other values also come into play in interactions in a group, values such as fairness to other points of view, sympathetic understanding, respect for other people's rights. All these rights come into play when we interact with people in groups and these are typical, democratic values. It is seriously alarming if the young are not initiated into these values through the traditional institutions of our European democratic societies. It is reasonable to expect the school to play its part in trying to impart these values to the young to enable them to function in a mature democratic society when they grow up.

At this stage we might want to say: why are we worrying about this? Why should we worry about civic education? Should we not allow the young to develop those capacities they like and form their interests and attitudes as they wish? Backing up this question we might say that a properly organized democratic society will be able to take care of itself even though a substantial portion of its members do not think highly of democracy. The social organization ought to be such anyway that the vices of individuals

cancelled out and they should be able to get along only if they rationally considered their own interest.⁴

III. Virtues and Society

There are some complex issues here. Let us start with the last point I mentioned that no private virtues were needed to uphold the organization of society. Compare this to the traffic laws. Now they do not require much from those travelling along the streets: certain skills in driving a car or riding a bicycle, knowing the laws, understanding the signs and a willingness to follow the laws. This is not much. But if these requirements were not fulfilled by the drivers then the traffic would quickly become a chaos. So, to keep the traffic system going certain simple virtues are necessary in travelling in traffic. But this is a very limited conclusion establishing only that some virtue is necessary.

But what about the view that rational consideration of self-interest is the only thing called for to prop up the social fabric. "We educate rational shoppers but not good people or virtuous citizens" as one American theorist once put it when discussing the role of civic education.⁵ I want to point out that reason is certainly a value and a virtue. This is no value or virtue free view. It is only a single virtue view.

But this seems to me an implausible view. There are certain virtues that are required from the individuals to keep the system in place. These virtues are, for example fairness, respect for others, tolerance and courage. It seems to me that these virtues cannot be reduced to reason pure and simple. The basic idea is that virtues are not a result of thinking or reasoning in grown or mature individuals. But they are the result of a long development of habits that may originally be difficult for the young but as time goes by these practices become their second nature. It seems to be close to

4 See Galston, 1991, *Liberal Purposes. Goods, Virtues and Diversity in the Liberal State*. Cambridge, pp. 214-215.

5 Amy Gutmann, 1989, "Undemocratic Education". In N.L. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and The Moral Life*. Cambridge Mass. p. 74. This quotation should not be taken to indicate Gutmann's own views.

impossible to start developing these practices in the adult population if they have not already been implanted there, even though the adults could be persuaded that these were desirable practices. That seems to me a potent reason against the idea that only rational self-interest is sufficient for a democratic organization of society. It also seems a good reason for making the young accept these virtues. If they are to be ingrained in our way of life as a stable part, we must aim at the young. Another reason for rejecting the single virtue view is that the virtues required are other-regarding, it is a necessary feature of them that under some circumstances we ought to give more weight to the interests of others than to our self-interests. If our self-interest conflicts with the interests of another then the self-interest must give way.

Let me illustrate the point that virtues of individuals are required by society with one example. Growing up in an ordinary family we learn a lot of things. One of them is the value of consensus, another is the value of restraint. It is very important for us to learn that we cannot gratify our desires instantly when we feel them, we must learn that there is a time and place for them depending on the needs of other family members, the resources available and the opinions of our parents about what is appropriate. Learning this is one of the key ingredients in the capacity to be responsible for your own life in a modern society. Taking responsibility for your own life is the virtue of independence and autonomy. Independence is one of the most important virtues for successful living in a modern European society. It is necessary for everyone to be able to manage their own money responsibly. Dealing with independence, is also highly desirable to reach a conclusion about politics. Good judgment about what has been done and what can be done is essential in coming to a reasonable view of the performance of politicians and a political party. Independence of judgment is just as necessary as independence of action. Independence is also desirable for welfare. As it is highly desirable to have the welfare system to take care of any misfortune that is not in our power to plan, it is

also highly desirable to form the citizens in such a way that they avoid using welfare unless it is absolutely necessary.⁶

This was the first part of the answer to the question I posed above. The question was: Should we allow the young to form their own opinions in their own way even though they might be authoritarian views as I mentioned, even racist ones? There is a limit to what is possible in directing the views of the young but some things ought to be done and this can be seen from what can be done about racism and authoritarianism. But we should not allow the young to develop their racist and authoritarian views for two reasons. First, views such as racism are wrong. Second, they harm the social fabric in a sense that they undermine some of the virtues necessary for the functioning of society such as the virtue of tolerance. But we might want to say that the young will automatically come to the right views just if they are left to find out for themselves what is right and what is wrong. This is the view of the natural goodness of children or young people which has been influential in forming our views about what children are capable of and what they would do if left to fend for themselves. I believe this view to be wrong. I take it to be fairly obvious that children are neither good nor bad and what they do can be either good or bad depending on the intention and consequences of what they do. Children cannot be responsible for what they do or believe, because they are not mature enough to realize what their views involve and what their beliefs mean and what consequences their actions can possibly have. That is why parents have the responsibility to educate their children, form them in ways that are responsible and can lead to them to become fully responsible citizens. So we must take a look at the parents and the school. It seems to me that schools have now a greater role to play than before in forming the attitudes of the young because of the changing nature of the family.

6 See W. A. Galston, 1991, *Liberal Purposes. Goods, Virtues and Diversity in the Liberal State*. Cambridge. Galston argues for the view that the liberal state ought not to be neutral about the good life throughout the whole book but in chapter 10, pp. 213-237, he argues for a specific set of virtues required by the liberal state. There are three categories: general virtues, virtues of the liberal economy and the virtues of liberal politics. His views are similar to some of the things I say.

IV. Parents and School

So what should we say about the parents and the school? Should they not be worried about increasing incidence of racist and authoritarian views among the young? Should they only attempt to educate rational shoppers but not virtuous citizens⁷ and good people? Let us assume for the moment that the will of the parents and the will of the teachers or educational authorities are identical. What are the obligations of parents and teachers to children? The obligations are various but if we want to capture their nature in one phrase, it is only to do what is in the children's best interest. How should we describe children's best interest? There may not be many things that are in every child's interest. But all things that fall under that description must fulfill the criterion that they aid the development of the full capacities of the child as a human, social being. Those things that hamper the child's development of its capacities are not in its best interest.⁸ If this is true then it is incumbent on parents and teachers to instill attitudes and views that at the minimum do not hinder the child in developing its capacities to the full. Preferably they should assist it in its full development, direct it on the way to the full maturity of its abilities and talents. I think that false views can be a major hindrance for the development of a child's talents. It seems to me that it does not matter what these false views are about, those who have the child's interests at heart have an obligation to correct them. It does not matter whether these views are on arithmetic or the status of other human beings. They should be corrected by those who are obliged to do so. This obligation does not only

7 The notion of citizens and citizenship deserves discussion. Michael Walzer distinguishes between passive and active citizenship. The civic education argued for here includes elements of both although the passive form is more dominant. See his *Obligations. Essays on Disobedience, War and Citizenship*. Cambridge Mass., pp. 203-228, esp. 205-211.

8 This is a limited description of the child's best interests. It is a contested notion. Parents might argue that it is in the child's best interest to believe in the superiority of certain races or that it is in its best interest to believe literally everything that is in the Bible and disbelieve everything that contradicted it. See E. Callan, 1997, *Creating Citizens. Political Education and Liberal Democracy*. Oxford, p. 141. As I do not want to explore this issue here I only want to assume the limited conception of a child's best interests that includes those minimal features that enable children to function in a modern society. This approaches what Callan calls education as an antidote to filial servility, pp.152-161, esp. 157. But ultimately the best interests of the child must depend on a theory of human nature. I believe such theory to be possible and that it can be justified.

cover views and opinions but extends also to attitudes. By attitudes I mean for example the readiness to accept that you may be wrong, that it is not reasonable to take things for granted of which you do not have good evidence. The truth about the human being is that it is unreasonable to expect everyone to have good evidence for every view they adopt. But it is a reasonable expectation that they should be ready to look at the evidence and dispute, discuss and accept it as the case may be. It is important to instill in the young respect for evidence, argument and truth. In the context of civic education the truth about various social and political matters is and will be contested but this does not mean that anybody can form their views about them as he wishes. They must be prepared to consider and attempt to understand the views of others. This seems to me to lead to the conclusion that parents and teachers should try to mould children into good people and virtuous citizens.

There are two obvious objections to this. One is: It may be that parents should try to assist their children to develop their capacities to the full but this should not be the responsibility of teachers. They represent the state and it should not be their function or obligation to form virtuous people and good citizens. Then they would be deeply influencing the pupil's notions of the good. But the state cannot and should not have a view about the good, that is the sole responsibility of individuals and the state should not try to influence it. This is a view that any liberal might express and also those of more conservative leanings who believed that values were the sole responsibility of the family and the state should not try to interfere with that. The second is: many of the issues that are confronted under the rubric of civic education are contested and it is reasonable to expect parents in any school to hold different and often contradictory opinions about some of them. Should the school be teaching such a subject? Does it have any academic authority similar to the one the natural sciences have for example?

I will give an answer to the second objection first. For all those working within the social sciences the fact that many of the results and assumptions which must be taken for granted are contested should come as no surprise. This is in no way taken to imply that they are not good and well founded

academic subjects. We should not forget that many results are contested in the natural sciences, especially in areas at the forefront of research. Neither in this case nor in the case of the social sciences this fact is taken to imply that these subjects should not be a part of the school curriculum. In civic education the same seems to apply. It is not as if the suggestion is that we should teach the latest findings in educational research in civic education classes but mostly unexceptional and uncontroversial facts about society, its institutions and individuals and their complex relations. We also try to teach the students to think critically about these facts. So I do not think the second objection can be sustained when examined.

The first objection was that the state was encroaching on a sphere better left to individuals and families. The idea in that objection was that the individual should be left to form his own ideas about the good and the state neither should nor could have any ideas about it. In that sense the state should not form the character of its citizens. I believe that there is a line to be drawn here but it is different from the traditional one and I think it can be argued that schools have a role to play in forming the character of the young.

The argument for this opinion goes something like this. First, we should notice that in most modern societies the state⁹ provides schools, including all European countries. I am talking about the education of the young until they are 16, even 18.

Second, it is unarguable that reading, writing and arithmetic are probably the most important aims of schools anywhere. If schools fail in achieving literacy and numeracy in pupils everyone agrees that the schools are failing. They are not doing what they are supposed to do.

Thirdly, pupils who become literate and numerate are changed irrevocably for the rest of their lives. They cannot get rid of numeracy or literacy and this skill transforms their lives. If a parent objected to his child becoming

⁹ It does not matter what arrangements are used in a particular society. In some primary schools might be supplied by the local authorities, secondary schools by the state. Or if we have a federal state no schools or universities might be supplied by the federal state only by the constituent states. This does not matter for my argument.

literate and numerate in school we would probably think that the parent misunderstood schooling. If the parent objected to the state obliging every child to become numerate and literate I think such objections would carry no force at all. I am not even sure if anyone would be able to take them seriously at all.

Literacy and numeracy are valuable things that inform our notions of the good. I do not think that anyone could seriously entertain the thought that we could do it in a modern society without these two things. Without a doubt, having them is good for those who do, it is in their best interest.

If this argument is correct it shows that the state professes and pursues both, a notion of the good for its citizens. This state of affairs is a reflection of the fact that welfare is one of the most significant features of modern states. I do not want to examine arguments about the appropriateness of welfare in the modern state, it is in fact easy to see how one could argue that welfare should have no place in a libertarian state,¹⁰ but thinking of schools as securing equal opportunities as a matter of justice and social security as securing the individuals against misfortune not in their power to prevent can be developed into significant arguments that welfare ought to be a part of the services of the state. This inevitably has the consequence that the state must profess a notion of the good life. This seems to me to imply both that the state professes this in the present and that it should do it. If this argument is any good, the theory that the state ought to be neutral among conceptions of the good life is false.¹¹

Now the question is how this applies to civic education? Does this influence in any way what should be said about it? It is clear that in civic education one of the things that is being influenced is the students' notion of the good and the good life. But this seems to me not to invalidate any

¹⁰ See R. Nozick, 1974, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. Oxford.

¹¹ See Amy Gutmann, 1989, *idem*, p. 74. This is a conclusion Galston, 1991, argues for but not with these premises. It should be noted that this conclusion is compatible with Stephen Macedo's interpretation of the neutrality of political principles. In his view they are neutral "only in being publicly justified independently of religious and other comprehensive claims." 1995. "Liberal Civic Education". *Ethics*, April, p. 477. This means that any notion of the good argued for on these premises counts as politically neutral. I am not clear if what has been claimed in this essay might count as politically neutral but it is certainly a candidate. This is a different notion from the one I am discussing.

such enterprise. Civic education is in the same boat as literacy and numeracy and there does not seem to be any principled way of drawing a line between civic education and other subjects at school. (We should not be surprised at the fact that education, civic education included, touches the sphere of the good. I would want to suggest that the very notion of education is intimately linked with the notion of the good. Schooling and the system of education are closely related to the notion of the good.)

In spite of what has been said above, we might want to argue that civic education should be limited to teaching children to deliberate about "politically relevant issues but not about any other domains of life. The political liberal argues that to teach children to deliberate about other domains of life is sectarian precisely because it is not a prerequisite for sharing political sovereignty on fair terms."¹² The idea is that this would not involve the state in forming or seriously informing the children's notion of good while pursuing civic education but limiting it to what is politically relevant. But this distinction does not hold. Firstly, the notion of what is politically relevant is woolly and slippery in the extreme. Secondly, the skills required for deliberating about politics overlap with skills required for autonomy or independence and democratic citizenship.¹² Deliberating about politically relevant matters will inevitably influence the children's notion of the good life and deliberating about democratic citizenship will do so as well and inform their notion of what is important in politics.

V. Limits to The Power of The State

I think we must take it that civic education will influence the pupil's notion of the good. But then the question arises if this is an argument for unlimited powers of the state to form the capacities and ideas of the young. This is not the case. In general the state does not think it has unlimited obligations to everybody when it comes to education. The obligation is to equip children with the requisite skills to ensure a fair and effective cooperation in society, the minimum skills to assess their own lives and enable them to

¹² This is a point Gutmann makes, see 1995, *ibid*, p. 573.

use reasonable views and criteria for arguing and evaluating public policy and the performance of public officials and developing their view of right and wrong. The state's obligation is only to secure a certain minimum of training in civic education to enable effective functioning of the young in a modern society. It seems to me only an instance of the obligation to provide schooling in general which the state undoubtedly has. It certainly is in the interest of society in general that the population is educated up to a certain point. A modern market society requires a skilled population to function as it should. The school system is an effective way of fulfilling that social need. These skills are not just technical skills but also skills in formulating and arguing for ideas and points of view.

One might argue that the considerations raised here about civic education only applied to state schools but not to denominational schools or private schools. To me it seems that this is not the case. All schools educating their students ought to reach the minimum standard argued for here in civic education. They ought to do it because it is in the students' best interests, interpreted here as the ability to avoid filial servility.¹³

To clarify a bit better how far it is justifiable to go in teaching civic education to the young, I want to take two examples. I have assumed until now that the will of the parents and the school or the state is the same. But what if they diverge? What if the parents want the school to teach something that the school does not want to teach or vice versa. Let us take the first example not from the field of civic education but from biology. We shall assume that parents want the school to teach creationism in biology, the view that the living world has not evolved from a primeval soup to developed mammals but was created basically as it is and has remained unchanged. As far as I know, this question has not arisen in Europe but it has recently done so in America just as it did over 70 years ago. The school wants to teach evolution as understood by modern biology. What should be said to parents who expressed a wish like this? I think there are two things to be said. One is, that children ought to be taught what is true, according to the best theory available at each time. The theory of evolution is the only

¹³ See S. Macedo, *ibid.*, p. 486.

competitor in the field and it would be irresponsible by any teacher to use anything else or to indicate that creationism was on the same footing as the theory of evolution. The fact is, namely, that science is "epistemological distinguished", "the most impressively successful of human cognitive enterprises".¹⁴ Two, parents have obligations to their children, to do what is in their best interest. If they insist on their children being taught what is false according to everything we know about a particular subject then they are failing in their obligation for their children.

A fully comparable example from the field of civic education is racism. If parents asked for information about racism to be left out of civic education it seems to me that this would be an unreasonable request that no school could accept. This would be entirely on the same footing as creationism. Racism as a theory about deep biological differences between human groups is palpable nonsense which unfortunately many people still believe and it is to be expected that schools had the obligation to help students to avoid that particular intellectual pitfall. This should help them avoiding racism as actions directed at minorities or people different from themselves.

Let us now move to an example of civic education where the school wants to teach something but the parents are opposed. The teachers want the children to deliberate about different ways of life and they introduce to them various ways of life based on religion: they try to make the children see how Islam is different from Christianity, how Jewishness is different from both and how different kinds of Christianity form people's lives. They ask them to read a number of texts where they acquire information about the different religions and how they shape the lives of the practitioners of these different faiths. Teaching about different faiths should be an important ingredient in civic education, especially in those European states where many varied religions are to be found. Even in those states where the

¹⁴ See S. Haack, 1998, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. Chicago, p. 94 and 100. It seems to me that neither prejudice nor religious belief that contradict well established scientific theories or facts can have no claim the same status as science. This supports Callan's point about educational minimalism as unsatisfactory. See *ibid*, pp. 170-171. See also Stephen Macedo's discussion of Darwinism and creationism in *ibid*, p. 476. Galston's discussion of science and religion, *ibid*, pp. 111-113, seems to me unsatisfactory because he is not willing to contemplate the special epistemic place that science has.

population is religiously fairly homogeneous, like the Scandinavian countries, such teaching can enrich the students' understanding of the power and influence of religion. We can imagine that devout parents of Islamic or Christian religion might object to this way of teaching about religion and because they wanted their children to inherit their own way of believing they did not want anything to be taught in school to interfere that.

What should the school and the educational authorities do? In the European context it is quite clear that parents have the right to decide on the religion of their children. But does that imply that parents can object to their children being informed about other religions? We must be clear that what is in question here is not any advocacy for religion, an attempt to make children into believers, but an attempt to inform them about religion, educate them in this important area of life. The question seems to boil down to whether we are talking about education required for the minimum of functioning in a particular society. To me it seems very hard, even impossible, to formulate a general principle for all European societies. But an indication is possible at least.

We can start by asking: Is it possible to have too much education and too much knowledge in one area? Can too much knowledge harm a child? Usually we assume that knowledge is good. But as always in education, it is a question of timing if knowledge is good for children. Some knowledge may harm children at a particular stage in their lives. Starting too early to inform children about sexual life can possibly harm them or informing them about narcotics too early can be non-beneficial. Knowledge about other religions at a sensitive time in the development of children can be judged to be harmful by the parents. It is reasonable to expect parents to want to mould the religious faith of their children and I do not think this is in any way problematic in terms of the best interests of the child. But it is not reasonable to expect children to be left alone with their religious convictions in a modern society. They will have to reason and argue about their religious beliefs in the course of their lives. The school is only preparing them for life in a modern society when it informs them about other religions, different faiths. So to me it seems reasonable for parents to

ask for this part of civic education not to come too early but this should not be left out at all.

In general, the main criterion for what to do in civic education is the best interests of the children. If there is a disagreement between parents and school then the question becomes whether one course of action is in the child's best interests but the other not or whether there is reasonable disagreement about two courses of action that are both in the child's interest. If it is the latter then I think the general principle will be that the parents should be allowed to influence what is practised in schools. The form of the parents' influence will vary from one country to another. In Iceland, for example, parents are not legally entitled to decide what goes on in school but they are supposed to be in an advisory position regarding the school curriculum. But through parents associations they have gradually become more influential. The general tendency there seems to be that parents have become more assertive towards the school in all respects.

If the question is about a course of action that cannot be defended in terms of the child's best interests but the parents think it is right, then the state must step in. It has a clear obligation to do so because any child is not just a product of its parents but a future mature person and a citizen. The child cannot and should not be considered as a property of its parents. It has its own interests that must be attended to and respected. Because of this moral status of children the parents have an obligation never to thwart their development and only do what is in the child's best interest. If they do not fulfil that obligation it is justified for the state to step in and see to it that the interests of the child are served.

Civic education is sometimes justified in terms of a particular society wanting to preserve itself. This is natural because civic education should always be responsive to the society where it takes place.¹⁵ The content of civic education will probably never be the same in Greece and Norway. The history of that particular society, facts about its social structure, political system, the distribution of rights and responsibilities, even its myths and dreams are always going to be part of its civic education. In that

respect there is a civic education appropriate for any society despite its political system. But there are also other general parts to civic education which I have discussed in this essay that must be there as well. Within a democratic system civic education has a special place. European democracy puts a special value on the place of the individual within that system. This value closes the possibility of coercing the individual into accepting democracy. The only path open to it is through education and persuasion. That is why civic education is so important in European democracy.

Various ways and methods have been tried out in civic education. There is no unanimity on the best method or the best way of teaching civic values. There are indications that traditional teaching of facts about societies and social development and rights can produce results.¹⁶ Planned activity in the classroom with children both seeking information and ideas and producing material is another option. A third one is discussion among the children themselves where the teacher can be in charge but not necessarily. But a discussion is best linked to a text the children have read or an idea they have been introduced to. And there are many more ways of teaching civic education. It is to be expected that no method is the right one. Many different kinds of teaching material are needed. It should be pointed out that a European dimension of civic education is important. One purpose of civic education is partly to form the political identity of the young. There have been many developments in the last ten years or so where schools have developed a European dimension in their various activities. I have seen a number of such projects which will hopefully bear fruit when the young students taking part in it grow up. But civic education ought to be a serious matter for European authorities. It is a reasonable possibility to contemplate European guidelines for the construction of curriculum for civic education.

But I want to point out another thing which, strictly speaking, is not a part of civic education as I defined it at the beginning. It is the importance of

15 See Callan, 1997, *ibid.*, p. 90.

16 See E. Fraser, 1999. *Ibid.* pp. 9-10.

learning foreign languages and how that learning can be a major contribution towards forming a European identity. Learning a language is probably the most important and most effective way of entering a foreign culture and with time understanding it. All young people in Europe should be made to understand that their future is multi-lingual so it is in their interest to learn a foreign language. Any young man or woman entering business in the next two or three decades must have mastered at least one if not two foreign languages if she is to function effectively. The language teachers should also be made aware of their responsibility in shaping the understanding of their students of foreign cultures and thereby forming their wider identity.¹⁷

VI. Conclusions

What are the conclusions to be drawn from what I have said? The most important thing is to notice that those features of European societies I mentioned at the beginning are not self-evident social truths that will be realised in every society given certain social and economic background. They have a history and there is sometimes tension between them. But there is no guarantee that these features of our society will be stable in the future.¹⁸ These features require certain virtues to be developed in the future citizens of these societies. I believe that these features are valuable all of them and therefore to be desired by any society. It is justifiable to aim to preserve these features in the future. The best and most effective way to do that is to instil in the young the attitude that these features are desirable, the knowledge and virtues that are necessary, so that they know and understand why we want to sustain this kind of society. These virtues are among others

17 See Astrid Ertelt-Vieh, 1998, "Alles normal! Eine kulturspezifische Erfahrung im Schüleraustausch". In Hans Jürgen Krumm and Paul R. Portmann-Tselikas (Hrsg.), *Theorie und Praxis*, pp. 247-270. Also by the same author, 1999, "Eigen- und Gegenbilder in interkultureller Kommunikation: Ein Fallbeispiel zur prozeßorientierten Symbolanalyse". *Zeitschrift für Fremdsprachenforschung*, 10(1), pp. 97-131.

18 Compare Habermas' remark (1992) "there is no linear connection between the emergence of democratic regimes and capitalist modernization". In "Citizenship and National Identity: some Reflections on the Future of Europe". In *Praxis International*, 12, p.8. As quoted in Callan, *ibid*, p. 222.

independence of judgement and action, tolerance, respect for others and law-abidingness. We should not forget that these are only the minimum necessities. The state should not undertake to fully develop the virtues of the individuals because this ought to be left to the family and ultimately the individuals to decide and do.

Hopefully, I have made clear why civic education should be a serious concern just as any other discipline in our schools and touches on the most serious issues.¹⁹

¹⁹ I hope this essay contributes to the answer of the question: "Können wir den Bildungsbegriff in Europa des 21. Jahrhunderts auf ein gemeinsames Menschenbild bauen, und finden wir zu gemeinsamen Zielen für das Lernen?" See Ludger Kühnhardt, 1998, Einführung. In Andreas Beierwaltes (Hrsg.), Lernen für das neue Europa. Baden-Baden, p 9.

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