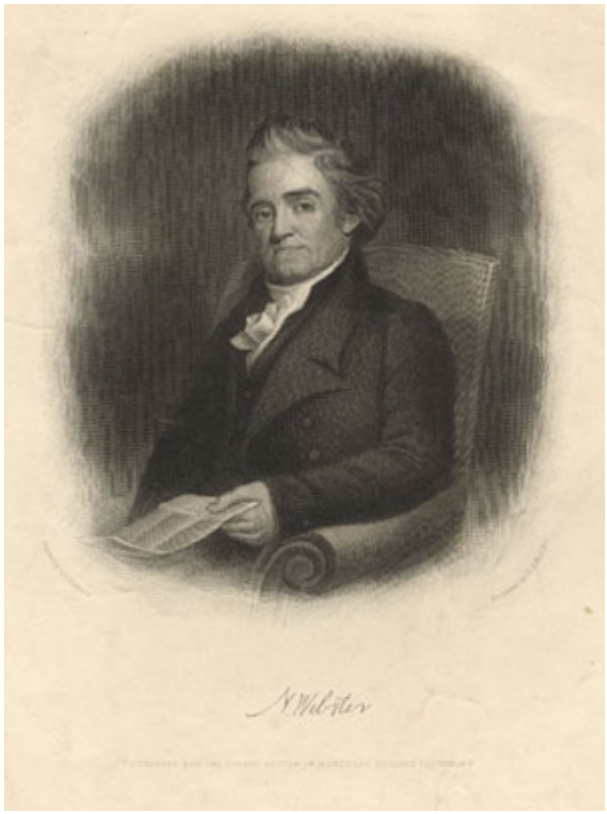
From Hondas to Civics



The pedagogy of national identity in a hybrid age

When I made the decision to teach a new civics elective at my school this spring, I did so believing it would be an iconoclastic act. To be sure, such courses—more typically their close cousin, the AP government curriculum offered by the College Board—are staples of many American high schools. Moreover, the subject of citizenship has been a fruitful focus of recent interdisciplinary scholarship in the work of writers like Stephen Carter, Linda Kerber, and Robert Putnam. So I can't claim much originality for the idea behind the course.

Still, I embarked in the belief that at my progressive school, no less in society at large, the subject of civics retains more than a faintly musty air. People rightly associate it with mastering mechanical facts about the Constitution, as well as none-too-subtle indoctrination. And in a firmly secular milieu in which even the faintest whiff of evangelism is regarded with distaste, if not suspicion, the traditional goals of such courses—inculcating values like patriotism—strike some as antithetical to the project of fostering critical thinkers who question authority, a need that seems at least as pressing in the aftermath of the Iraq War as it did in the countercultural heyday of the Vietnam War. Part of my thinking, frankly, is that among the adolescents I teach, civics is *so* retro that it's on the cusp of getting sexy.

But such marketing considerations were not primary in my decision to offer the course. Actually, much of my motivation came from other classes I've been teaching, like the U.S. history survey. That course, while sequenced chronologically, is also thematically centered on the concept of freedom. So, for example, the first unit is "Freedom and Empire (1492-1763)," "Freedom and Independence (1763-1789)," "Freedom and Slavery (1789-1865)," and so on. Much of the conceptual apparatus is derived from Orlando Patterson's magisterial *Freedom in the Making of the Modern World,* in which we make distinctions such as those between sovereign, civic, and personal freedom; positive and negative freedom; and freedom versus liberty. Yet after teaching this course a few times now, I find myself having difficulty comprehending freedom as anything but a synonym for power—the latter a much more concrete concept and one much less redolent of the positive valences that seem to attach themselves so persistently to the former. Once an exceptionalist out of the old American Studies tradition, I now have a hard time distinguishing between this empire and others, whether they're "empires for liberty" or not.

Yet I've also found myself feeling restless, and even irritated, with the reluctance on the part of some smart students to make any kind of active value judgments at all. I'm pitching in this semester to cover a section of an over-enrolled Nazi Germany elective, one session of which was recently devoted to the subject of propaganda at the time Adolf Hitler became chancellor. These students grasp very quickly the proposition that presenting any kind of information is at least implicitly a form of manipulation. And they were unfazed when I showed them a video on behalf of Barack Obama's candidacy for president and asked if it was propaganda: of course. It's when I asked them to evaluate the difference in content between the Nazi posters and the video clip and to render a *judgment* about the moral *value* of one document versus another that some of them seemed to have trouble. You go to the Ethical *Culture* Fieldston School, I told them, not the Ethical *Relativism* Fieldston School. That these people (many of them Jewish, no less) could hesitate in rendering moral judgments strikes me as a real problem, especially given the reality of people here and abroad willing to make harder, faster, and firmer judgments on the basis of much less information.

N. Webster, by S. F. B. Morse; engraved by H. B. Hall for the Quarto Edition of Websters English Dictionary (c. 1825-1837 [?]). From the American Portrait Prints Collection at the American Antiquarian Society. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Indeed, it will often happen that students in my classes reply to an intentionally ambiguous question by answering, "It depends on where you're coming from." To which I rejoin, "And where *are* you coming from?" After some squirming, I'll usually get an answer. I realize, of course, that my students may not be entirely representative and that there are broad swaths of this

country where people are much more clear about their identity, civic and otherwise, than these kids. But I've been around enough settings, both at the university and high-school level, to know that a vein of passive ignorance slices across many demographic categories. To a great degree, it's a function of their youth: it's only when they leave home for college that they begin to recognize the peculiar contours of their racial, religious, geographic, or other experiences, much less embrace them.

Actually, this situation says less about kids than the adults responsible for their educations. Viewed through this lens, it's clear that an emphasis on civic education has waxed and waned over the course of the past two centuries. If one can speak of a golden age in this context, it would have to be the early republic, when books like *The New England Primer* and Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* literally created a civil religion in which Jesus Christ and George Washington were on the same page. Without minimizing the sectarian or sectional tensions that accompanied this highly self-conscious project of nation-building, the William Holmes McGuffeys of this world had little doubt regarding the value of their mission or its ultimate success. We can never know just how the children who were spoon-fed his so-called readers felt about them, but the astonishing durability of these books—some were still being used in the early twentieth century—bespeaks a clarity that we can barely comprehend, let alone embrace.

Indeed, notwithstanding the resolutely upbeat tone of most civics textbooks, a sense of anxiety lurks in the margins of those published in subsequent generations. This anxiety is especially apparent in the Progressive Era. The push for "Americanization" in the decades after 1900 resulted in a huge outpouring of new textbooks, the (sometimes captive) audiences for which ranged from small children to assimilating adults. Produced against a backdrop of surging immigration, they pressed for a normative notion of American identity at a time of often fierce ethnic and religious tribalism.

By midcentury, the civic challenge facing educators seemed more ideological than cultural and the threats more global than parochial. It was during this period that the Pledge of Allegiance (introduced by Francis Bellamy in 1892) received a makeover—the phrase "under God," which now followed "one nation," was also added to U.S. currency—and "the American Way of Life" was juxtaposed implicitly against the alien allure of Nazism and (especially) Communism. Yet the very success of that way of life, premised as it was on consumer capitalism and personal fulfillment (the relationship between the two often maddeningly ambiguous), generated suspicions about the efficacy and even honesty of appeals to patriotic orthodoxy. So did the omissions of that way of life in which a sense of cohesion seemed to rest on irreducible exclusion. In the wake of the civil rights and antiwar movements, the whole notion of civics had become for many a contemptible joke.

This legacy of the '60s has proven surprisingly durable and surfaced immediately in my own civics course. To get the ball rolling, I bought a dozen

or so used textbooks from Amazon.com and distributed them largely at random on the first day of class. Among my favorites: *The Land of Fair Play* (1994), *The Christian Citizen* (1965), and *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1929), which, like a number of these books, was intended for use in a specific state, in this case Oklahoma. I asked the students to leaf through their particular book and analyze its handling of a given topic, comparing the discussion of that topic with the way they've been taught to understand it during in their own childhoods. With instinctive poststructuralist élan, they zeroed right in on the usual suspects. One student, for example, noted the absence of the word "slavery" in the index of his 1918 book. Another was struck by the use of the word "savages" to describe Native Americans in his 1951 text. A third was amused by a 1934 text reporting that "The Nineteenth Amendment, passed in 1920, placed women on an equality with men the country over, so far as suffrage is concerned."

Portrait of General Washington. Frontispiece from The New England Primer, Enlarged (Boston, 1787 [?]). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The challenge for my students was to move from articulating the limits of other worldviews to articulating the contours of their own. Some didn't seem to recognize, for example, that values like diversity and multiculturalism are no less social constructions than older civic virtues like republican motherhood or, for that matter, racial segregation. Or, if they did, they still found it difficult to make a historically contingent case for such commitments, recognizing their limits but affirming their value. Of course, one reason for this is that the very request to do so is asking a lot of a seventeen-year-old, much less someone a multiple of that age. Another is that it would involve recourse to still other values (loyalty, for example) that have been largely absent from much of the discussion in recent decades, for reasons that are certainly understandable but perhaps less certainly defensible.

Meanwhile, the historical sands shift beneath our carbon footprints. One example of this is the generational tide of race. I'm told that, depending on age, somewhere between one-third and one-half of the student body at my school who self-identify as students of color claim a multiracial background. It's far from clear what this means or will mean. And it's worth remembering that we are in any case still talking about a fraction of a fraction, since racial minorities only make up about a quarter of the student body in a school, like many of its kind, of highly manicured diversity. But I do think that some of the metaphors we've been using to replace "melting pot," like "tossed salad" or "gorgeous mosaic," are themselves growing unsatisfactory, suggesting a sense of segmentation at odds with the lived experience of growing numbers of people in the age of Obama, even of those who are not considered "of color"—a phrase that, as a presumably "colorless" person, I much dislike. Here I'm reminded of

a prescient assertion by Frederick Douglass: “I would not be understood as advocating intermarriage between the races. I do not say that what I say *should* come to pass, but what I think likely to come to pass, and what is inevitable.” The day may be coming when being black or Latino will be comparable (though surely not identical) to being Irish or Italian, to name two elements of what used to be known as my own “racial” stock. John Calhoun’s worst nightmare now seems plausible enough, even if, as history teaches us, we should be chaste in our sense of confidence about the future.

Indeed, I’m always mindful that the entire notion of national identity itself may be destined for the ash heap of history. We live in an age of particularism; we live in an age of globalism, of gumbo and Honda. Whether or not the thing called a nation-state can survive such an age is an open question. But as long as there are people who continue to understand themselves in terms of some larger social category, a searching examination of that notion seems like a good idea. Indeed, it’s what I understand the very word education to mean, civic or otherwise. For now, at least, that thing we call the United States of America has possibilities worth talking about—and, yes, even being quizzed about every now and then.

Further Reading:

Important recent books with a strong civic dimension include Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York, 1994); Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Linda Kerber, *No Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York, 1999); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000); Francois Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington, Slavery and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2006); and Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (New York, 2007). My use of the theme of freedom in my U.S. history survey was shaped by Orlando Patterson, *Freedom, Vol. I: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York, 1991). Michael Lind invokes Frederick Douglass in a provocative discussion of racial amalgamation in *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York, 1995).

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edition this summer by Palgrave Macmillan.