

DAVID WILES

EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP:
THE USES OF ANTIGONE*



It is generally agreed that today in Greece there is a crisis of citizenship. The financial crash has pushed this crisis of citizenship to the front of everyone's attention. I do not want to speak about this topic as though from a position of cultural superiority, because British politicians speak constantly about a 'broken Britain' and a crisis in the family, which relates to problems of drugs, alcoholism, and mental health that are far less acute in Greece. In Greece the institution of the family is very strong, and that strength is related to the weakness of citizenship. Corrupt politicians may be men determined to do what matters most to them ethically, which is to help their families. A sense of citizenship is not the same as a sense of nation. Greece is more patriotic than Britain, and at the time of the Olympics the Greeks came together as a single family to ensure that, despite institutional failures, the event would be a success, and the great Greek extended family would offer appropriate hospitality to its thousands of international guests.

So what is this crisis of citizenship? Most obviously, it is mistrust of government, at both the national and civic level. The individual does not feel that he or she is any part of that abstract and oppressive thing called 'the state'. The mistrust of politicians is a circular, self-perpetuating process. If people are not trusted, then they do not risk betraying expectations, and idealists refuse to enter politics because they know they will never be trusted and supported. The failure of politicians is not just the failure of 'them', it is the failure of a system that involves everyone.

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There is no point in *my* paying taxes if *my* money goes to the state, which is other, and not to the community, of which I feel myself a member. On a broader level, the crisis of citizenship involves a lack of care for strangers. But again there is a paradox. Greece has wonderful traditions of hospitality, which makes it for me always a pleasure to come to this country. Someone who very generously gives more than he can afford to the *xénos* who comes to his house may have no hesitation in throwing rubbish out of his car window, polluting the streets for strangers whom he cannot see.

If this is the crisis, what exactly is ‘citizenship’? I learn from *To Vima* that on March 4th Mr Pampoúkis lectured fellow cabinet ministers on their duty not to receive expensive gifts.¹ To educate them about their moral obligations, he apparently drew upon Thucydides, on Plato, and on Cicero’s treatise *De Officiis*, ‘On Duties’. It is interesting that he did not cite dramatic authors, but dramatic texts are often enigmatic, and I shall come back to this point. It is also interesting that the Greek minister turned from Plato to a Roman authority in order to explain the nature of public morality. But there is a reason for this. There is no ancient Greek equivalent to the Latin term *civitas*, the moral abstraction which translates into the English word ‘citizenship’.² Plato was interested in the citizen as member of a *polis*, and the *polis* was a face-to-face society. He famously pronounced that 5040 was the appropriate number of citizens for a *polis*. In Cicero’s Rome there were nearly a million citizens, so his world was much more like our world. Cicero’s home town of Arpinium lay a long way from the centre of the state in Rome, so he had to face the problem that we face, the problem of living in a state too big to be comprehended by face-to-face relationships. Applying the lessons of ancient Greece to modern Greece is not a straightforward matter.

So what is *civitas* or ‘citizenship’? The question has been much debated by political philosophers, and it is too big for me to go into now. I am currently completing a book on ‘theatre and citizenship’ in which I

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1. Article by Nikos Chasapopoulos, 7 March 2010. I am grateful to Angeliki Varakis-Martin for this reference.
 2. There is also no term in modern Greek which catches the broad ethical loading of the English word, and this was inevitably a problem for people listening to my lecture through simultaneous translation.

look into the matter more deeply. Let me say very briefly that the debate about citizenship is related to the debate about freedom. Freedom can be either negative or positive. Negative freedom means that the citizen is an individual vested with a set of rights. It is his or her right that no-one will interfere with his or her freedom — to say what one wants, to worship as one wants and so forth. Citizen rights are a version of human rights, and they become more complicated when they extend further, into rights to own all the property one wants, to enjoy the types of sex that one wants, to receive the healthcare that one wants, and so forth. Such freedoms may encroach on the negative freedoms of other citizens. Positive freedom, on the other hand, means the freedom of the citizen to shape the life of the community as an active participant. In a globalized world where we are subject to manipulation by media and multinational companies, it seems to many to be a priority to recover the notion of the active, participatory citizen. For philosophers who take this view, ancient Athens usually sits in the background as a model for participatory citizenship. There is a distinction, however, between those like Jürgen Habermas who see citizenship as a function of civil society, and those like Hannah Arendt who see it as a function of political society. Habermas looks back to the eighteenth century, when there was a world of educated public debate, outside the political domain and gathered around institutions like the theatre, where citizens generated an informed public opinion that impacted on politicians, while Arendt looks directly at Athens, and the idea that citizens should participate in the decision-making that shapes their communal lives. The danger with this communitarian view is that citizenship may slide into nationalism, so that the social bond becomes an ethnic bond, what Aeschylus refers to as the bond of blood (*Eumenides* 606-8). The ideal of citizenship seems so important today in Britain, France and the USA because these countries have been forced to recognise themselves as multicultural societies, where the bond of blood is meaningless. Cicero's Rome was a successful multiethnic society — think only of Plautus the Oscan, Terence the African.

Let us return to Greece, and consider why there is a crisis of citizenship. Others are better qualified than I am to explain this. The Greek state has had little time to embed itself, after the long years of Turkish

occupation, then German and Italian occupation, the imposition of a monarchy, the dictatorship of the Colonels, and all too rapidly the new state was caught up in the structures of the European Union. At the same time there was no industrial revolution, generating cities with structures of civic governance to serve as a foundation for national structures. The state appears therefore to be something artificial and imposed, while the family, supported always by the church, has allowed Greece to survive as a resilient cultural entity.

Let us assume, then, that there is a crisis of citizenship (and you may challenge this in the discussion). How can education contribute? Can one teach citizenship? What happens if one sets up classes in *Αγωγή του Πολίτη*? A problem immediately confronts us: who is the teacher? The crisis of citizenship relates to a fundamental mistrust in government, and teachers are agents of government, employees of the state, so we are caught in a circle. Pupils will not believe what they are told by teachers as agents of the state. Problem number two: how to teach *Αγωγή του Πολίτη*? Let us assume that you are teaching about negative freedoms, about citizenship as a set of rights. The pupil responds that he or she has the right to form their own opinion, and will refuse to believe what you say. Let us assume, conversely, that you are teaching about positive freedoms, and the obligation to participate in shaping the life of the community. The pupils will respond that they are sitting passively behind their desks, and so this teaching about active citizenship makes no sense.

In light of these problems, theatre may be useful. Your pupils may well accept your intellectual authority because you have academic qualifications, but they may not accept your moral authority because you are an agent of the state. They are much more likely to accept the moral authority of Sophocles, the great *didáskolos* of the fifth century who is still revered today. And Sophocles uses the dialectical medium of theatre which does not present moral lectures but articulates problems. Turning to Sophocles as a teacher of citizenship is a promising start, but quickly we run into problems. Let us imagine we plan to teach the *Antigone*. Here is the first problem. The pupil values *Antigone* because it is part of her heritage, her birthright, so immediately the teaching which claims to be about citizenship actually asserts the principle of nation. By teaching

this old play, you may be encouraging the pupil to act like Antigone herself, to value something that is dead, to value it because of the blood-bond constituted by the Greek nation, while giving no thought to the political realities of the present.

And now the second problem, the problem of how we read the play. We have all learned to read the play through the eyes of Antigone because for two centuries the romantic movement and the modernist movement have engendered in us an attachment to this individual who resists the state. This week, for example, at home in Oxford, I was as a member of Amnesty International offered a cheap ticket to *Antigone* (in Anouilh's version) because the publicity officer was sure I would like 'this powerful tale from Ancient Greece' about 'a young woman who refuses to compromise'. The figure of Antigone relates to our need for self-expression, our wish to be true to our emotions, to stand up for loving human relationships against the impersonality of the state. Disregarding whatever wise words the teacher may contribute, the pupil's emotional response when reading this play is likely to reinforce his faith in the family and his mistrust of the state.

So what is the alternative? Do you try to lead the pupil back to a Hegelian reading of the play, which strikes a moral balance between the claims of the *oikos* and the claims of the *polis*? It will be difficult to persuade the student to experience the play in these terms, not least because most Greeks have a residual attachment to religion, and God is all too obviously on Antigone's side. By setting up a binary opposition between *oikos* and *polis*, Hegel deflects attention from the basis of Creon's power, and from interrogating the political structure of the state — a much more obvious problem for the fifth-century audience who did not take one man's authority for granted. So we cannot go back to Hegel. A book published in the USA last year, entitled *Tragedy and Citizenship*, tries another approach. I quote: 'The story of this book begins with Haemon and his politics of speaking and listening in the public realm. Using Haemon's example, combined with Aristotle's political thought, I make the case for a democracy centered in active citizenship'.³ Does it help to see through Haemon's eyes citizenship? We could also see

3. D.W.M. Barker, *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2009, 2.

Haemon as a lobbyist, using family networks to try and influence government, spreading unsubstantiated rumours for the sake of his own sexual gratification. Haemon advocates the modern politics of public opinion, where leaders bend before the whims of an ill-informed public rather than act on principle. This model of citizenship is not one that I find appealing.

So where do we find the citizen in *Antigone*? There is always the Guard, the ordinary human being. But the Guard, like the modern schoolteacher, is an employee of the state, which puts him in a very difficult position.

The answer to me is obvious. We have to look for the citizen in the chorus. From the perspective of theatre history, we know that the chorus *were* citizens, unlike many of the actors. Dancing in the chorus was part of learning to be a citizen. Surrendering to the rhythm of the dance, the dancer learned to experience himself as part of a larger entity, becoming part of the same physical and mental organism as fourteen other young Athenian males. The same relationship of trust was required as in warfare. The intensity of that relationship must have been at least commensurate with familial relationships. But that of course was the fifth century, and today we encounter the *Antigone* as a text, which makes our relationship to the play completely different. We do not have the music and the choreography which were once an essential part of Sophocles' artistic creation. In school, as in a professional theatre environment, the pupil is likely to meet the play in translation, and that translation is likely to simplify and clarify the complex rhythms, images and semantic ambiguities of the original, so the choral ode becomes not a focus for profound meditation, but a tiresome statement of banalities. The impact of fifteen bodies on the stage, listening as well as speaking, is far greater than the impact of a single set of words. As readers we tend to be addicted to narrative, and the chorus is an unwelcome interruption of our pleasure.

To find the citizen within the text we have therefore to undertake a choro-centric reading – but that is not an easy skill to learn or teach. Every choral stasimon has a story or stories embedded in it, awaiting excavation, like the myth of Cleopatra walled up in her cave in the fourth stasimon. And the chorus like any other character undergoes a journey, pulled emotionally in different directions, finally telling Creon what he

must do. The real complexity of the chorus lies in its relationship to the audience. When the chorus in the fifth stasimon call on Dionysus to come to Thebes as leader of the dance, there is a convergence with the cultic aspect of the festival, when tragic choruses dance before the Athenians. The chorus in this passage sing of Dionysus coming to heal the diseased city with cathartic foot (*καθαροσίω ποδί* — 1144), and it is easy to forget when we read Aristotle's account of catharsis that catharsis was effected by the feet of the dancer. It is not easy to explain these things in the classroom.

So let us go back to first principles. What are we trying to do as educators? You may say that we are teaching pupils to think. That is not so easy to accomplish. You could set pupils an essay on the topic: 'Who is right: Antigone or Creon?' That is not really teaching them to think, it is telling them that you the teacher discern a Hegelian balance between two moral polarities. You may set the essay: 'Why does Antigone defy Creon?' Again this question appears to demand thought but is actually telling the pupil what to think, namely that it is appropriate for him or her to identify with the figure of Antigone. There is thinking of a kind here, but closed thinking. Let us turn back to Sophocles, the teacher we respect most, and see what he says about thinking. In the final lines of *Antigone* the chorus say that the principle of human happiness is *to phroneín*; boastful words have their price in blows, but in old age *τὸ φρονεῖν ἐδίδαξαν*. The very last word of the play thus tells how the play has brought about an education. The play teaches *to phroneín*, which we might translate as 'thought', but that word is scarcely adequate; 'sense' is closer. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is an applied form of wisdom, appropriate for changing the world, but in the older language of tragedy the action of our psycho-physical *φρένες* embraces both thoughts and feelings.

And so we come to the crux of the educational problem. If we want Sophocles to be our teacher, then we must listen to him. If we want to learn from antiquity about the teaching of citizenship, then we must consider how citizenship was taught in antiquity. Citizenship was a practice, a way of life, and it was absorbed into the body as much as the mind. Plato set dance at the centre of the educational process, because that is how human beings learned to be in harmony with other people, with the *polis*, and thus with themselves. If we are serious about teaching citizen-

ship through the *Antigone*, then we must clearly engage with that play through practice. If citizenship is conceived as something active, then learning must likewise be active. If citizenship is about participating in the building of society, then education must involve participation in the building of embodied understanding, *to phroneîn*.

This is the task that I want to investigate in my workshop this afternoon. I have not come with answers, but I want to explore with some of you ways in which you might move forward in helping your pupils become both performers and citizens, performing their citizenship. I shall end now with a quotation from my favourite theoretician, Hannah Arendt, who likens acting in the theatre to active citizenship. ‘Performing artists’, she writes, ‘need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men [by which she means ‘citizens’] need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work’, and both depend upon others for the performance itself... The Greek polis once was precisely that ‘form of government’ which provided men with a space of appearances where they could act, with a kind of theatre where freedom could appear.’⁴

4. ‘Freedom and Politics’ in *On Liberty*, ed. David Miller, Oxford 1991, 65.