Mark Kingwell’s latest publication, *The World We Want: Virtue, Vice, and the Good Citizen*, serves to elaborate his views on justice and civility presented in his earlier work, *A Civil Tongue*. These notions are connected with values of friendship, activism, duty, and reason; all are ingredients in Kingwell’s master-recipe for *citizenship* in what he sees as a post-nationalist world. The author assembles ideas from past lectures, articles, conference workshops, and colloquia to amass a grand scheme for civil society. He delivers an argument for a new kind of citizenship that is not based on old definitions involving belonging through blood, beliefs, and law, but rather on political action and duty to fellow world-citizens.

There are three historical time-frames that Kingwell draws on for the elements of nationhood. First, Kingwell looks to Ancient Greece and evaluates Socrates’ values of belonging and duty to a public sphere which led up to his eventual choice of death over exile. The second era Kingwell underlines is Renaissance France: specifically, the nature of a friendship between Montaigne and de la Boétie, exemplary of the essence of civil duty and loyalty. Finally, the author discusses World War II Europe, where Kingwell uses the case study of Walter Benjamin to understand the importance of critical thought as a form of belonging for a man who was stateless and a member only of the “republic of letters … when membership mattered a great deal” (p. 140). For these three individuals, the virtue of critical thought and the ability to voice it in public spaces (as well as through the written word) was the single most valuable right in life. As such, these case studies provide an excellent argument for the centrality of media in civil society. However, Kingwell also warns that it is through the misuse of media (as a commodity and an agent of consumerism) and a resulting false sense of freedom that our understanding and valuation of citizenship is corroded; indeed, culture begins to break down along with the individual. Action and duty are replaced by empty complacency and a bad habit of coasting on consumerist comfort: “The evil of banality is cultural as well as political, and indeed the two forms are related. What is evil about mass culture is not simply its immense reach and apparently unopposable force, but its relentless downward drag on the rich possibilities of media and performance” (p. 62).

In lyrical prose, Kingwell begins by outlining the three dominant nuclei of past views of citizenship. He maintains that these forms of citizenship are not sufficient for the needs of today, and argues for a political nucleus for citizenship. This political drive behind civic belonging is perpetuated by *action* and *participation*—it is this which he explores throughout his book: what makes people participate. With this question in mind, Kingwell examines friendship, duty, expression, justice, politeness, humanity, and even history itself. Just as these characteristics create community and culture, they also, by extension, create political participation. It is with the help of his three chosen case studies and the particular time frames that surround them that Kingwell has the opportunity to assess the above-mentioned variables in greater detail.

First let us return to the nuclei of the three past views of citizenship. These, according to Kingwell, were blood, religion, and jurisprudence:

The oldest models of civic belonging are forms of virtual racism, tribal fear given a political formulation. Later they were based on adherence to a body of civic and, usually, religious nostrums: they were fluently ideological, but no less exclusive. More lately still, democratic states have adopted a model of citizenship based on neither blood nor conviction but on procedural exercise and access to a body of rights—a constitutional notion of belonging, in other words, that matched the open-ended and liberal ideals of the emerging capitalist West. None of these three historical models—
the models based in blood, belief, or law—has been complete in its attempted domination of the political realm. (p. 12)

This political realm is not sharply defined for Kingwell. It is not merely the traditional definition of political in which citizens take an interest in who is representing them, and vote accordingly. The political is inextricably tied in with other realms such as culture and community. In terms of citizenship, Kingwell is clear in his description of this link: “An action-oriented conception of citizenship is, first and foremost, engaged with other people in the creation of shared social spaces and in the discourse that such spaces make possible. Through participation and conversation, we reproduce our social meanings through time: that is what culture is” (p. 172). In this quote, the notion of public sphere is what combines the spheres of culture and politics: public expression of the essence of being human, and a sense that this expression is contributing to the greater good of the civil society.

In the last section of the book, Kingwell combines all of the ingredients that the previous chapters had measured out so carefully before his reader. He concludes with a grand, optimistic, and visionary plea for the adoption of his transnational goal: perhaps not an immediate change of direction, but at least a shifting of mental gears to accommodate new responsibilities we should face as citizens.

As Kingwell is not only a political and cultural theorist, but also a professor of philosophy and a popular academic, his tone is conversational and informal. He addresses his readers directly and writes as though he is standing in the room, lecturing. The work in general is fluid and coherent, although it is in fact an accumulation of different articles and talks given over the course of a half-dozen years. The cases he presents as evidence for his argument are convincing. However, while I do not dispute Kingwell’s use of his case study of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne as an example of the personal attributes of citizens, I find myself wondering about his claims that the friendship he discussed between Montaigne and de la Boétie is somehow rarer than the substantial, long-standing, platonic friendship-loves that we find in our own lives. Furthermore, while I see the need to discuss the importance of friendship within the context of citizenship, I would not have placed as much emphasis on this element as perhaps on the element of the public sphere, civic duty, and harnessing of media.

This latter element of civil society is an interesting one in Kingwell’s book, and might have been even further elaborated. Kingwell himself sees the primary importance of technology and media within our lives. “Technology no longer arises, as it did for first-generation Marxists, as an issue of the mode of production: the developmental level of the machines used to make goods. Now technology is both more important and less discernible: it has become part of us on a deeper level” (p. 186). Use of media is a “forgotten civil right” (p. 187) which enables us to act out citizenship. He speaks of techno-political issues that are misinterpreted, so that when people speak of better access to hardware they are not aware of the underlying discourse: the need for “greater access to the human software of literacy” (p. 187). Indeed, Kingwell’s three case studies fit beautifully with the theme of the primary importance of media in civil society. This theme is evident in at least two levels in the historical examples given: the individuals in question hold high regard for the media they use (consider Benjamin, who values his text more than his life) just as they deliberate on the dangers and uses that media assume in our lives.

Kingwell’s arguments follow logically and the conclusions drawn from these steps are convincing in many ways. However, I asked myself, what if one were to reverse the order of the steps of Kingwell’s argument? Would the conclusions drawn be as persuasive? This may be an unfair test to impose on any logical work, just as it would be impossible to reverse the order of steps in a scientific experiment and to expect the same result. Nonetheless, I would like to continue along this line because it does present a problem, a small
wrinkle, in a work which, at the end of the day, must be looked at not in stages but in its totality.

The wrinkle lies in the case study of Socrates. If one blends all of the responsibilities of citizenship into one, then citizenship is based on a sense of community—duty to the fellow citizen, friendship, and sense of justice. It follows that without such feelings for other individuals, there is no citizenship. Thus, it is unclear how Kingwell comes to terms with Socrates’ stubborn choice of death over exile. I in no way wish to intimate that Socrates lived out erroneous decisions, but it seems like Kingwell’s logic is questionable when he claims that Benjamin “failed … to complete his life” (p. 196), whereas Socrates’ choice to end his life is viewed as noble and just-minded. While the notion that Socrates felt such a duty to his nation that he was willing to die under its hand is a romantic one, Kingwell himself points out that Socrates left friends and even a wife behind. Perhaps women were not citizens in the civic ideal of Socrates, but it seems amazing to justify leaving a wife who, as a new widow in a patriarchal society, would be disadvantaged by her status; and yet to feel imbued with such a sense of justice and duty to fellow citizens that one feels compelled to walk away from life.

This leads me to another problematic aspect of Kingwell’s book. For all his magnanimous transnational citizenship ideals, Kingwell does not sufficiently explain how it is that a unified politico-cultural citizenship can be achieved in a world with so many cultural and political time zones; there are many different political dialectics in this world, and just as many cultural differences. Under those circumstances, I am not convinced that finding enough common ground from which to use politics as a springboard for citizenship would be as simple as Kingwell suggests. It is clear that Kingwell is working from the assumption that there is a pan-global homogeneity in political thought.

These criticisms aside, Kingwell’s book effectively ties together historical conceptions of citizenship and public sphere, as well as several critical theorists’ stances on communications. It is certainly refreshing to read a positive philosophy that is based on action, an invigorating battle cry, a call to arms. In view of this author’s capacity for rhythmic prose, silent crescendos, and remarkable cadential points, I shall leave him the last word. Aux armes, citoyens.

Nowadays we must be more aware than ever of the things that separate us, that no single picture of citizenship will do. But that otherness itself, and an awareness of how it is tied up with the fate of numerous others, might be precisely the thing that connects us most acutely. (p. 189)

Reference

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