

Interpretation

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- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

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CHARLES T. RUBIN

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

rubin@duq.edu

If memory serves, my favorite teacher as an undergraduate in the early 1970s was planning a new political philosophy course but seeking a small class of motivated students. To discourage the many with a dull title, he was going to name the course “The Making of a Citizen.”

Times change. Although it is not always made explicit, debates over the meaning of citizenship are behind controversies about globalization and immigration, about welfare and the workforce, about voting, law enforcement, and education. It may seem as if to understand the meaning of citizenship all one would have to know is the laws that define it. But Tracy Strong's intelligent and thought-provoking book shows why that will never be enough. The legal definition of citizenship does not in and of itself answer the question about how or when (if ever) law and public policy *should* distinguish between citizens and noncitizens. And then, of course, what the law is at any given moment is subject to critique from the perspective of what it should be.

What guides us though issues like these? Strong's book takes its cue, not entirely wittingly, from Aristotle: ultimately the question of the meaning of citizenship comes down to the nature of the regime. In eleven chapters, Strong takes a pretty deep historical dive into the various and conflicting views of what it has meant to “be an American,” from colonial times to the present. What is the “American way of life”? Strong seeks to show that we are the nation we are in large measure owing to two ongoing historical phenomena: disagreements over answers to the question of what it means to be a

citizen, and within that framework the still unfinished “project” to fulfill the promises of our foundational principles.

To his credit, Strong does not hesitate to go back to the religious ideals that informed the early settlement of North America. Periodically he even suggests their ongoing relevance, at least in some form or another; “origins are...centrally important” (36). In his first two chapters on colonial America and the founding period he lays out the underlying dynamic of citizenship that will inform the remainder of the book. On one hand, in these early days it was defined both by natural qualities (e.g., being a male) and conventional qualities (church membership). But from the beginning there were debates about what qualities were relevant, and why.

Thus, for example, while in the early, religiously founded colonies there was general agreement that citizenship criteria were based on a quest to create an exemplary virtuous polity, there were no illusions about the difficulty of achieving that goal, and some disagreement (e.g., between John Winthrop and Roger Williams) about the role government should play in encouraging virtue. “These arguments set a stage that in one way or another will continue for much of American history” (33).

In the revolutionary and founding period, Strong suggests in his second chapter, the meaning of citizenship shifts. Freedom, and the fear of being “reduced to mere and only subjects” (46) or indeed slaves, comes to the fore, as does the new science of politics. Citizenship remains confined to white males, despite the principles articulated in the Declaration, but church membership is being replaced with property ownership. Property ownership was thought to mean one could maintain a certain independence, which in turn allowed for a larger concern for the public good, as it meant that one was not subject to the economic interests of others. From here we get to Madison’s commercial republic and the general idea that citizenship requires self-sufficiency. The role of any substantive meaning of virtue as a criterion of or even goal for citizenship is already on the decline. (That Strong takes up Paine but not the Anti-Federalists, who were not quite so quick to give up on virtue, foreshadows a selectivity in his treatment of the historical debates that will become increasingly problematic as the argument of the book develops.)

Chapter 3 takes up the period between the founding and the Civil War, discussing intertwined themes of religious revival, the temperance movement, early feminism, and slavery advocates and critics. The case for slavery, as Strong outlines it, accepted the definition of citizenship as self-sufficiency

and simply denied that slaves were capable of it, requiring the paternalistic care of their masters. This line of thought allowed the development of a moral critique of northern capitalism, where workers were equally lacking in self-sufficiency but left entirely to their own devices. Abolitionists, on the other hand, saw no reason why former slaves would be incapable of the self-government and self-control that they took to be the basis for citizenship.

Chapter 4 focuses on Lincoln's complex understanding of the relationship between the human equality enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and citizenship in a constitutional regime based on compromise with respect to those principles. Strong argues that Lincoln believed that equality implied a government that was not tyrannical, and that was based on consent and self-ownership. Thus, to be a citizen means to be able to enjoy the fruits of one's labor and to be self-governing. But, Strong says, Lincoln did not believe that within the framework of the Constitution these qualities made suffrage a necessary consequence of citizenship—that states could legitimately require certain conventional qualities beyond natural equality.

But in the wake of the Civil War, Strong argues in chapter 5, the Fourteenth Amendment began a fundamental change to the American understanding of citizenship. For it granted to former slaves citizenship (as would also later be the case with women) simply on the basis of their being members of a class defined by the very natural qualities (being black or female) that had once made irrelevant any consideration of conventional qualities by which they might indeed have qualified for citizenship. To clarify the significance of this development, Strong points out the counterfactual possibility that African-Americans who served in the Union Army might thereby have been considered to have *won* their citizenship as individuals, having risked their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor, rather than its having been *granted* to all males as a class.

Here we begin to reach the core of Strong's argument, which turns out to be that the history of conflict over the meaning of citizenship in the United States has increasingly drained the word of any meaning beyond the basic natural quality of birthplace. The inclusion of conventional qualities in the definition of citizenship become rarer and by today these pretty much are confined to age, if we take voting as a signifier of the achievement of full citizenship status. As we have seen and are seeing, in that case any given cutoff will in the eyes of some look (as it in many respects is) merely arbitrary. Why should a well-informed sixteen-year-old be denied the vote when an ignorant eighteen-year-old can exercise that right? Yet note that, even though

naturalized citizens are required to pass a test, nobody is proposing that we test anyone else as a condition of suffrage. Furthermore, it is significant that we seem to take voting (and Strong sometimes falls into this same trap), arguably the easiest of citizen prerogatives, to be the definitive act of a citizen even if other expressions are possible, such as holding office or serving on a jury. (Indeed, were Strong really true to his insight into the importance of citizenship as pointing to an American way of life, there would, in the manner of Martin Diamond, be much more discussion in the book of qualities like being law-abiding, neighborly, charitable, educated, acquisitive, and so forth.) So it certainly supports Strong's point about the erosion of the significance of citizenship when we see arguments today claiming that even the mere natural quality of local birth (or legal "naturalization") should give way to the fact of residence as the condition for voting. To go down this road would mean we approve of suffrage for noncitizens or we extend the notion of citizen to be defined by residence alone. The latter would seem to be the logic of being "a citizen of the world" who might yet have special concern with the affairs of the place in which one happens to live.

The story of how the word was thus drained of meaning, as Strong tells it in the remaining chapters of his book (chaps. 7–11), is both fascinating and frustrating. For he focuses almost solely on the rise and, as he sees it, decline of progressivism in the twentieth century, and his account of the contestations about citizenship turns almost entirely into an account of debates within the Left about how to respond to industrialization and communism. This leads Strong down some paths on which he seems to lose his way with respect to the question of the meaning of the American way of life—for example, a lengthy discussion in chapter 9 of the origins of the Cold War.

Of course, he recognizes that those who opposed progressivism in its various forms existed, but he has almost nothing substantive to say about any components of the alternative vision of citizenship and America that they articulated, increasingly subsuming them merely under the broad category of "anticommunists." For example, FDR's vision of what it means to be an American is discussed at some length, but Herbert Hoover's interestingly Tocquevillian vision gets no attention at all. The various youth-oriented revolutions of the 1960s are detailed, and no mention made of William F. Buckley's or Wilmore Kendall's transformation of American conservatism. While there are allusions to the Trump presidency, it is as if the Reagan Revolution or Bush's "thousand points of light" never happened. Indeed, but for a final, somewhat abstract chapter that discusses how to distinguish the

Trumpist dismissal of “facts” from the similar sounding postmodern version, along with the impact of social media and terrorism on what it means to be a citizen, the book as an intellectual history effectively ends in the early 1970s.

Such omissions would be unfortunate enough in their own right. They are probably to be accounted for by the loosely applied materialistic epistemology Strong works from. He believes that changing ideas of citizenship are responses to altered material conditions (e.g., the rise of industrial capitalism). It would be hard, perhaps, to account for twentieth-century conservatism (grounded, for example, in a belief that “ideas have consequences”) in these terms as anything but irrelevant atavism. But the absence of conservative voices in Strong’s book is all the stranger given an aspect of his intellectual history that he refuses to confront head on and sometimes conceals: in the twentieth century the various forms of progressivism he discusses are largely *responsible* for draining citizenship of its meaning. If, as he often suggests, the very conditions of life in modern industrialized society undermine the possibility of the self-sufficiency that was once definitive of citizenship, it should also be added that the various strands of progressivism undermined both self-government and self-sufficiency.

For example, he presents FDR as an advocate of “active citizenship” for his effort to have government guarantee the conditions needed for that participation, without giving sufficient attention to how that participation was crucially limited by the vital role of expert authority that the New Deal was predicated on, along with FDR’s notorious notion that old-fashioned politics needed to give way to the age of highly centralized enlightened administration. It is at least arguable, when you put all these points together, that FDR laid out a vision of the citizen that was much closer to that of a subject than a self-sufficient, self-governing citizen. His ongoing influence is such that Strong can apparently cite, without irony, LBJ as advancing an “enhanced notion of citizenship” for Great Society programs that expanded the largess of the national government. Or again, Strong is admirably open about the hidden and revealed role Communists came to play among American progressives, and likewise discusses the challenges of following or breaking away from Moscow’s lines. But he chooses not to develop the antidemocratic tendency of the vital role of Party members as the “vanguard of the proletariat,” at most linking it to a broader trend of the professionalization of political activity, and quoting occasional pious references to early American statesmen as if they are to be taken at face value.

Strong's failure to call progressivism vigorously to account for emptying citizenship of meaning has implications also for the part of his argument that seeks to present America as an ongoing effort to achieve the promises of its foundations. This point works well enough at least for early feminism and for Martin Luther King Jr.'s ideas about civil rights. But it ignores the way in which many progressives, following, for example, Woodrow Wilson, rejected the vision of the Framers, in Wilson's case because it was based on an out-dated "Newtonian" science of politics in a world where scientific truth rested with Darwin. And it is a far cry indeed from *Federalist* 10 to the vision of a "brain trust" of intellectual elites who will "solve" all our political problems.

And was it ever really true, as many claimed, that communism was Americanism for the twentieth century? In carefully limited formulations, Strong acknowledges that communism "was not completely incompatible" with earlier understandings of citizenship and that its relationship to American progressivism was "complex, at times confused, and eventually lost." But he never comes right out and says how Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism were all predicated on a rejection of the "bourgeois rights" that constitute America's founding principles.

The net result of these self-imposed blinders is seen when Strong seems to find it particularly noteworthy that in the Port Huron statement "*There is almost no sense in the document that there is anything to be learned from the American past—a past that I have been trying to set out in this book*" (276, emphasis in the original). Again, on the very next page: "*It is as if the entire history of the ongoing contestations over citizenship, recounted in this book, simply does not exist*" (277, emphasis in the original). By the time Port Huron was written we had had at least half a century of the progressive critique of American history and foundations; the young activists drafting the Port Huron statement were simply reflecting the consequences of that fact. It would be interesting to know Strong's thoughts now that a general ignorance of American history combines with the Left's efforts to yet more thoroughly delegitimize it for standing in the way of today's "woke" values.

Strong's book ends on a somber note. He confesses he does not know how to restore meaning to our notion of citizenship, offering with the greatest of diffidence the possibility of national service. There is of course much to be somber about in the state of our political culture today, and it takes a brave soul to chart a way out of some of our current conditions. But Strong has made the task all the more difficult for himself by the sectarian selectivity of his intellectual history. A more robust account of the debates about

the meaning of the American way of life would paint a far richer picture of debates about our foundational principles, and where we have been since the early twentieth century, and might therefore provide a better sense of where we can reasonably expect to go.