

Bridging Unjust Divides: Revisiting Education for Shared Fate Citizenship

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I am grateful for the opportunity to revisit my earlier work on shared fate, and to respond to Sarah DesRoches's careful and generous analysis of the concept, as well as her critical perspective on the benefit of "remembering otherwise" to the education for shared fate citizenship.

DesRoches begins with remembering and sharing stories, and I find that to be a helpfully narrower angle than history in general for thinking about the role of the past in citizenship education. In his book *Stories of Peoplehood*, and even more so in his recent *Political Peoplehood*,¹ Rogers Smith discusses the ways in which our shared and distinct stories allow us to become a nation and to participate in the process of nation-building as individuals and as groups within the nation: "[S]uccessful political actors and movements," he reminds us, "deploy both force and narrative with intertwined economic, political power, and constitutive themes ... " Smith emphasizes the importance of constitutive themes and shared narratives (beyond the recognized centrality of the use of political and economic power for building a people), and convincingly demonstrates that "political actors and societies are likely to succeed over time only if they can sustain sufficient belief in all of their economic, political and constitutive themes ... " ² Educating citizens for a sense of shared fate, one that recognizes differences and builds on them, serves this stability over time, and can be accomplished by weaving stories - including competing stories of the same events or times - to construct a sense of shared nationhood in all its complexity.

DesRoches focuses on the chasm between civic identity and civic values on the one hand, and particular or group identity on the other. Shared fate citizenship education is an attempt to reconcile the two without prioritizing or giving up on either. DesRoches expresses the reasonable concern that in focusing our attention on what we share, this form of citizenship education might gloss over some of what divides us. More specifically, she draws our attention to the concern that such a focus raises, namely, that by averting our eyes from some of the unjust aspects of what divides us, citizenship education stands the risk of failing to teach us how to overcome these forms of injustice. In other words, while shared fate citizenship education might well encourage us to learn about the differences within our society, about diverse beliefs and values and stories, it might still not acknowledge, and thus fail to tackle, disparities within and between different groups.

Note that the focus of DesRoches' analysis is horizontal rather than simply vertical - it draws our attention to the relations among citizens and groups of citizens as a key dimension of civic identity, one that goes well beyond the ties that connect each citizen with the state. As DesRoches states, as citizens we are indeed affected by the same history - and I would add, the same policies and social-political conditions -

but not in the same way. In Canada, many stories of First People are widely known and taught, but of course the effects of colonization differed across ethnic lines; the civil war in the US still has different names and evokes different emotions in some parts of the south than it does in the north, and those too are experienced differently across racial lines; the recent economic recession caused many families to lose their homes, while others stayed secured; some individuals and sectors have even benefitted from the crash. Clearly class and race divides, among many other jagged lines that can be drawn in each society, signify a different reading of shared history and often a different trajectory of values, preferences, and often also opportunities. In many ways, our fates are plural.

Nonetheless, I would like to defend the use of shared fate in the singular form, and to restate the importance of this commitment to shared fate for the political project of nationhood. It is imperative, I agree, that citizenship education avoids glossing over differences, and that it allows students as individuals and especially as members of groups, particularly marginalized groups, to develop an identity that is both unique and tied to the values and stories of others within the same nation. It is as important, however, that citizenship education does not despair of the civic democratic project, and that it thus continually seeks to find commonalities. The commonalities I have in mind need not be those of a beautified history, nor should they be based on a shallow ethos arising from shared stories of an imaginary past, though these stories too may have a place in the process. What I have in mind as the core of the educational project in this area is the effort to create a shared vision, or at the very least a set of overlapping and commensurable visions, of what democracy might look like at its best in this particular nation, with its multiplicity of voices and histories. This vision would include a set of shared projects that are seen as central to this society at this time. Even if there are multiple interpretations of where a political project might lead, it will entail a set of rules and practices, accepted institutions, and a recognition of the viability of some possible trajectories.

To clarify, I am not taking a stand here in the ongoing debate about whether the nation-state in itself still has a legitimate role in our global shared future. I take the current centrality of the nation-state on the world stage as a starting point rather than develop an argument to defend it, and from there I aim to legitimate the political civic project of shared fate, which can be translated into other political contexts (including cosmopolitan, cross-national etc.).

The distinction between what we share and what we do not share often marks the fissures of structural injustice. My aim in talking about shared fate (in the singular) is not to gloss over these differences or to dismiss them as less important than some other, more noble aspect of our shared identity. Rather, it is to point to the need to direct our political and educational attention to the necessarily shared effort to build a common story out of our disparate and sometimes competing experiences. This educational effort can be understood as being built on a temporal duality, in which the study of history and that of citizenship cannot fully overlap. In the study of history, our view of the past often cannot readily be reconciled, especially in contexts of civil strife, conquest, or fates that were not shared in other ways. The

learning of history should not be subjugated to the goals of nation-building, and even if patriotism remains a dimension of this endeavor (and as we recognize that “just teaching the facts” - even if we recognize the variety of relevant facts that can come up - is not a real option), the history lesson can be a space in which complex histories are negotiated and explored. Citizenship education, however, in the diverse sites in which it is pursued in schools, should be seen as the context in which we all work to develop not just the skills but also the dispositions that would enable us to link these fates together into a set of shared political projects. Seeing ourselves as striving for a set of shared goals is a key aspect of sharing a political community.

Developing recognition of the shared project of building bridges over disparate fates, of learning to acknowledge and overcome specific past struggles, which may include civic strife (or worse) as well as present-time structural injustices, is the most significant goal of education for citizenship. It is the key reason why I would rather keep “shared fate” in the singular. Because the recognition of multiple historical perspectives, of varied values and experiences, and of disparate struggles - if it is to be used in support of a democratic future in which the nation-state still has a place - must aim at a shared fate. The varied ways in which we experience, remember, and narrate our history are the starting point for the project of linking these memories together, and of developing a mutually acceptable way to talk about these memories, to honor them, and to build a shared sense of our future upon them. This project is an essential part of the path forward as a political community. Even if it remains aspirational, building on our many histories to work toward a shared future is the essence of the democratic project, and should thus be at the core of education for citizenship.

1. Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Rogers Smith, *Political Peoplehood* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

2. Rogers, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 37.