

CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY:  
A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL WALZER

*Talbot Brewer*

*Citizenship: A Lost Ideal?*

In your early book, *Obligations*, you argue that the ideal of citizenship portrays our highest political possibility, the possibility of obeying only laws of our own making. You note, however, that this ideal is often invoked as if it were already realized, and then it becomes the worst sort of ideological mystification. Still you find something redeeming in this ideology. As you put it, "Ideology is the social element in which ideals survive, and this may well be true even when the ideology is perfectly hypocritical. For if hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, then it serves at least to sustain the social recognition of virtue" (213). What sort of political potency do you think the ideal of citizens as self-rulers has today?

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It's not so easy to talk about those ideals and to talk about citizenship in a country where, in the last presidential election, less than half the people bothered to vote, and where rates of political participation in state and local and municipal elections run even lower. The old democratic vision, the Rousseauian vision, of a society of active citizens where people "fly" to the assemblies, where as Rousseau says, they derive a larger proportion of their happiness from their public commitments and activities than from any private concerns—that vision of democratic self-rule just doesn't seem evocative now in an American setting.

And maybe it's worth speculating on the different meanings of "democracy" in a society that is also as committed as we are to liberal and individualistic values and to the pursuit of happiness or the development of private life. It may be that American citizenship is going to involve a fairly low scale of routine political activity interrupted occasionally by upsurges of popular feeling like the civil rights movement of the '60s, and that we can't hope within a liberal and individualistic environment to sustain the upsurges, so the aim should be to keep the routine engagement as high as you can and then to cultivate the opportunities for participatory eruptions on specific issues when those seem urgently necessary or simply properly motivated.

Some people thought that environmentalism and feminism, the new social movements of the '70s and '80s, would produce a sharp increase in participation of the kind we saw in the '60s and the '30s. So far they haven't, but they have sustained themselves above the routine of citizen engagement and so they have also sustained the possibility of a larger-scale engagement on specific sets of issues. But the Rousseauian ideal, I think, is lost to us and I'm not sure that an effort to reproduce it—that is, to get 85% of the people to "fly" to the assemblies and to vote—is at all the right thing to do.

When you get sudden increases in participation that don't arise out of new organizations and movements, then you have a dangerous influx of—I'm not sure what the right word is—of uneducated vot-

ers. The role of parties, movements, and the associations of civil society is to educate and to produce competent citizens. If you don't have organizations of that sort and you get an upsurge of new people who haven't voted before, who haven't participated before, the outcomes are more likely to be ugly than democratically beneficial. I think, for example, of the Nazi vote in the early '30s as the product of lots of new voters, people who hadn't voted before and hadn't worked through the union movement and the Social Democratic party or the Catholic parties, but were raw and open to demagogic appeals. The best protection against demagoguery in democratic life is associational richness, and if you're lacking that, then it's not clear to me that your goal should be very high levels of participation.

**Perhaps our ideal of citizenship is different from Rousseau's ideal—more like citizen as recipient of benefits from the state—and the aspiration to self-rule has dropped out of our picture of what the status of citizen involves. Or, perhaps the public holds on to the aspiration to self-rule, but finds current political practices and structures resistant to their influence or will in a politically de-energizing way. It sounds as if you're favoring the first diagnosis.**

I think both are true, which isn't a very bold statement. Certainly the sense of citizenship as entitlement is now very powerful in American life. But the fact is that we still have a fairly large-scale engagement in the associations of civil society and in various kinds of single-issue political movements and organizations that come out of civil society, right now many of them on the right—anti-abortion, pro-capital punishment, prayer in the schools. These are issues around which people do mobilize, and even someone who disagrees with their goals has to recognize that those mobilizations are acts of engagement. So, the question is: Why isn't there more citizen engagement of that sort across the political spectrum, and particularly—where it used to be so strong—on the left?

The standard response is the one you gave: Well, nobody is giving them something to vote for. That may be true, but it can't be the whole story because there are, in fact, organizers out there, some of them left over from the '60s, some of them newly mobilized by the revivalist leadership of the AFL-CIO; there are organizers in the field, and they are encountering a degree of resistance among people who "objectively"—as we used to say—need to organize themselves. Why that is so is not at all clear to me.

**Hasn't the mobility of capital and the globalization of the economy objectively reduced the bargaining power of labor workers in this country to a degree where there may be some rational basis for being suspicious of organization as a strategy? Could that be part of an account of demobilization on the left?**

Economists disagree fairly radically about the impact of globalization, and the extent to which it undermines sovereignty and the ability of a single government to shape its own economy. Of course, I would like to believe those economists who say that it's still possible for a political movement in a country as powerful as the United States to shape the economy significantly. I hope they're right. But the most successful strike in the last couple of years was a strike in a non-globalizable industry, that is, UPS. They can't deliver packages in Mexico City. They've got to deliver them in New York. So that was an industry that couldn't threaten to leave, and it did produce the biggest union victory in recent years. Whereas in industries that are more mobile and more globally organized, unions have so far been less successful.

Still, a stronger AFL-CIO would have produced a different NAFTA Treaty, and one which would have served the interests of both the American workers and Mexican workers better than the actual Treaty. So I'm not sure the rationale is gone, but something is gone. I think the factors are, in part, historical and cultural. The old working class was culturally distinct—perhaps less so in the United States than in Europe but here too—in its language, in its dress, in the

cohesiveness of its neighborhoods, in the patterns of self-help, in the religious culture. There was a working class world, and it was the often-unacknowledged foundation of a great deal of political activity. That seems to have disintegrated with the impact of mass culture, of a certain degree of affluence, of geographic even more than social mobility.

### *Reinvigorating Civil Society*

In your recent book, *On Toleration*, you lament the fact that the poorest and politically weakest members of our polity have, as you say, “come to be spoken for and also exploited by a growing company of racial and religious demagogues and tin-horn charismatics” (98-9). I wonder if you could say a bit more about how this has come to be, and what the prospects for improvement might be.

I probably wrote those lines in the aftermath of the so-called Million Man March organized by Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. Since I grew up politically in part with the civil rights movement in this country, and went South a number of times to write about it in 1960, I have a vision of what the mobilization of Americans committed to racial justice ought to be like—in part because I have a sense of what it was like. Now, what caused the collapse of the civil rights movement in the ‘60s? Some people on the right say its success caused its collapse. It achieved much of what it aimed for and so it slowly disappeared, which is the right thing for political movements to do after they have achieved most of what they aimed for. There is a grain of truth, but only a grain of truth, in that. The more visible legal forms of discrimination were eliminated from American life, and we see the beginnings of a black middle class of a different kind than existed before. But in fundamental ways the movement didn’t achieve what it aimed for. It didn’t produce the mobilization among black Americans that it aimed for, or it didn’t sustain that mobilization. It didn’t produce the multiplicity of organizations that were a feature of working class mobilization in the 19th century.

I think there was a clear aim of sustaining a whole organizational structure alongside the churches out of which many of the civil rights leaders came. They wanted better schools, they wanted newspapers of their own, they wanted magazines, they wanted drama societies, they wanted summer camps, they wanted athletic associations—the same kind of richness that social democracy produced for the European working class. They wanted all of that for black Americans and didn't achieve it. And the result was an increasingly radical polarization among black Americans between those who made it into the new middle class, and the larger mass, especially of urban blacks, and the emergence of new patterns of alienation from whites, which only looked like they were being overcome in the '60s movements.

So it's in that context—it's in the context of the decline of cities; of black political leaders taking over cities at the depth of their decline, so that they were without the resources that office is supposed to bring and did bring to successive generations of ethnic immigrant politicians; the rise in crime; the drug culture; the weakening of the hold of the black churches in many communities—all this produced the situation that I described in the quotation with which you began. And I thought that there was an obligation on the part of black intellectuals to talk about what had happened, to acknowledge the failures, to speak out against some of the visible consequences of those failures, like Farrakhan, and to search for ways of redeeming the '60s vision.

At the beginning of *On Toleration*, you write that toleration is “the work of democratic citizens.” But on completing the book, it seemed to me at least that you were calling for something more demanding than toleration. You believe that we ought to use political means self-consciously to reinvigorate a diverse civil society. This involves not merely *toleration* of diverse political voices but an active effort to *promote* associational membership, ethnic and religious affiliation, unions, neighborhood groups, youth centers, charter schools, community arts, and so forth—many of the things

that you just named as original goals of the civil rights movement. I can imagine some critics objecting that this would represent a deep strain on the public political culture, not to mention an abandonment of the liberal ideal of neutrality. What do you think of such worries?

Let's begin with the worry that led to this argument before we get to the worries produced by the argument. Toleration is supposed to be the solution to a problem posed by seemingly irreconcilable differences—religious, cultural, ethnic, whatever. So the original structure of the argument is: “difference requires toleration.” I have, so to speak, been born into a highly successful regime of toleration, within which difference has begun to be blurred, and the argument now takes not the form “difference requires toleration” but “toleration requires difference.” If you're to have a liberal regime of toleration, there have to be diverse groups—with significantly different conceptions of the world, the good life and the good society—to be tolerated. If the regime of toleration is so bland that it blurs all the differences, or if difference comes to name individual idiosyncrasy rather than group culture, then there's nothing to tolerate.

I think the ideal of a liberal regime of toleration, one that makes it possible to live with significant differences and in a single political community, is very attractive. And looking at the decline of difference, and the decline of the organizations—cultural and religious—that have sustained it, I'm led to the proposal that you just described: Maybe we need now consciously to support difference, and to support the organizations that sustain it.

Take, for example, the argument of Robert Putnam's very famous article—every American social scientist dreams of writing an article that becomes that famous—“Bowling Alone,” a description of associational life in the United States. Many of its details are disputed quite fiercely, and it's possible he got some things wrong. But it's a description of associational life accompanied by a series of graphs, and all the graphs have the same straight line moving down from left to right on the page. There are something like 16 graphs and

they all look the same. They describe membership in unions, attendance at meetings of parent-teacher associations, participation in the old fraternal organizations—Kiwanis, Lions, Elks, and those kinds of groups—reading a daily newspaper, voting; and it's the same line. A study of that sort simply documents the anxiety that I was feeling that the kind of associational life that sustains cultural difference and gives it potency is in decline. Now, exactly how radical a decline we can argue about, but it's in decline.

It seemed to me that there were already some precedents for remedies. The public subsidy of the civil/social realm, the public subsidy of associational life, including religious life, in the United States (despite the so-called wall between church and state) is already very well advanced. It provides, in fact, a model for what we should be doing, but doing more extensively and more self-consciously, because there is so much denial in the United States, so much pretending.

When the Republicans came to power in '94 and started cutting the welfare budget, the loudest screams of protests went up from the religious organizations—the Catholic charities, the Jewish federations, and so on—and *The New York Times* ran an extraordinary article with graphs showing the portion of the budget of Catholic charities and of Jewish and Lutheran charities that came from tax money, and the percentages were very high. I think close to 60% of the money Catholic charities spend is tax money, and it comes in all kinds of ways. For example, we have a voucher plan for nursing homes. We've rejected vouchers so far for parochial schools, but we have vouchers for parochial nursing homes. My wife's mother is in a Jewish nursing home near Trenton. The budget must be 60% tax money because people bring in Medicare benefits, and Medicare entitlement is a voucher. You can bring it to a Jewish or a Catholic or a Lutheran nursing home, and it's perfectly all right that a rabbi comes on Saturday, and they celebrate the Jewish holidays, and there's a kosher kitchen. The tax money flows in. I think it does mean you couldn't turn away a non-Jewish applicant, but you don't get many non-Jewish applicants for a nursing home of that kind. So

in effect, we are sponsoring, with federal money, religious welfare organizations.

Now, if you look closely, you will immediately see that the communities that get the most federal money are the best organized, already the strongest politically in the United States. Black Baptists get some federal money and run some programs, but they get a lot less than white Lutherans, say, because they are politically weaker and have fewer trained professionals who know how to get at the available money. So if you want a vibrant associational life, and one that sustains cultural difference—that means it also has to provide life-cycle services, because that's the crucial way that you sustain cultural difference, from day care centers to nursing homes. They have to be provided in a universal fashion for everybody. But there also has to be a capacity within civil society to provide them in a more particular way. And this has to be subsidized. In a society where all of the communities are dispersed and lack the coercive power to tax—and they also lack, because of their dispersion, the forms of social pressure that once existed within these communities—they have to be helped, and I don't see anything wrong with helping them.

### *Liberal and Communitarian Fears*

I want to talk in general terms about the liberal-communitarian debate in which you've been a key figure for many years. One way to characterize the wellspring of this controversy is as a conflict of intuitions about what is most to be feared. The primary fear of communitarians seems to be that we might lose our capacity for worthy and life-animating convictions in a swamp of consumerism, careerism, television addiction, etc. The primary liberal fear seems to be that our life-animating convictions might be so thoroughly at odds with those of others, and have such a strong grip on us, that we'll be unable to sustain any common life at all, or to find any common ground for political decisions. If we view the debate in this way, it does alter what some have taken to be its fixed points, since it portrays the communitarians as rebels against

an increasingly widely-shared but debased common culture, rather than as champions of a common culture, and it portrays liberals as would-be forgers of a not-yet-established political community, even though this would be a very thin one.

You seem to understand both of these fears and to have an interest in both of these projects. I have a nest of questions here. Do you think that the liberal/communitarian categorizations are useful? Where would you locate yourself in the context of these debates?

I'm sympathetic to both of these anxieties, and I feel them differently in different times and places. The issue, exactly the way you posed it, was best expressed for me by an Israeli friend at a conference in Jerusalem, who said to an American communitarian political theorist (not me but a friend): "For you community is a dream; for us it is a trauma." Living in Israel with ultra-orthodox political parties—not just religious communities but politically mobilized religious communities—I think the vision that you attributed to liberals, the fear of the loss of any kind common culture, is very powerful. And there's another fear that liberals also express, which is also justified, that communities of that kind (I've just spent six months in Jerusalem, so I have a very vivid conception of a mobilized ultra-orthodox hard-core fundamentalist community) are not only a threat to the unity or the civic culture of the country; they are also oppressive to the weakest of their own members, and above all to women. So, many liberal critics of communitarianism are simply supporters of the individual rights that these communities trample on. And increasingly feminist critics of communitarianism are, so to speak, driven to where perhaps they didn't want to be—that is, to a liberal politics—in order to defend women who have no chance to defend themselves in these communities. So those fears are very real.

One of the questions that any communitarian has to address, and many of them don't, is the question: "At what point do you call for state intervention to protect individual rights?" It's a small version of the larger question of intervention in international society, and I

would not want to turn away from that question. I think that at a minimum—maybe we should not stay at the minimum, but at a minimum—you’ve got to preserve the right of exit from these communities. I’m not exactly sure how to do that, but there has to be a way of getting out.

**Would you say further that the way of getting out has to be relatively palatable or not very costly? I take it you don’t think it’s sufficient for apostasy not to be a crime.**

No, that’s not sufficient. Since leaving these communities commonly means a complete break with family and friends, you can’t make it costless. It’ll always be costly, but you have to make sure that there are no civil penalties, no disabilities, no discrimination after the fact of leaving—in all those ways you’ve got to protect the people who break away.

Now the harder questions—we’ve so far avoided these—are the questions of schools. You can protect people who leave, but those are going to be grown-ups or at least adolescents. But what about children? There are some of these communities that teach the boys how to pray and something of the religious culture, but teach the girls nothing at all. So what do you do? Do you refuse to pay for the schools? Do you insist on regulating the schools? Do you enforce a certain curriculum? You can prescribe a curriculum, but if you don’t go in and teach it, it will be taught with a nod and a wink.

In the Israeli case, the religious schools do not teach secular history. They don’t teach anything about democratic government, although these kids are going to grow up to vote. They are taught nothing about democratic values or the right of opposition. That’s where the hardest questions arise, it seems to me, in the degree of control over cultural reproduction that the state is going to exercise, or parents are going to exercise.

This issue is addressed in the Supreme Court case *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, where Justice Burger argues that Amish children ought to be exempted from certain mandatory school requirements, in part because of the distinctiveness of the Amish belief system and the presence in the public schools of an “hydraulic pressure towards conformity” with an alien mass culture. Increasingly, it seems, this is becoming not merely an Amish problem but a general problem: mass culture has a grip on the socialization of our children that significantly infringes on the capacities of parents to shape their children’s conception of the good.

I’m sympathetic to that Supreme Court decision. I think that was an example of judicial wisdom, though possibly not of principle. It may be that they effected a compromise, which is not what courts are supposed to do, on the Dworkin model that distinguishes what courts do from what the legislatures do. But it was a wise decision. One of the things that made it possible is the general Amish withdrawal from political life. It’s much safer to accept the exemption in the case of the Amish because these children are not going to vote in our elections. They’re not going to determine, along with our children, the general fate of the country. If they were, we might be a little more insistent on shaping their education and making sure that they know at least some of the things that we think citizens ought to know.

Now, the general weakness of American cultural communities is partly a consequence of liberal culture, and of social and geographic mobility, and of the nature of immigrant communities cut off from the territorial base that turns out to be very important in sustaining a common culture. The weaknesses of these communities are, I think, a peculiar feature of *American* life. It’s not a universal feature. It’s a particular problem, it seems to me, of immigrant societies and of large-scale states spread across vast distances. This gives rise to the communitarian anxiety about the loss of cultural particularity and the thinness of the common culture.

What young people educated in this world of mass culture, commercial culture—what they're going to be like is unclear to me. I think that the short-term impacts are probably exaggerated. We have good reason to believe in the capacity of families to sustain religious and other particularist cultures over very long periods of time, without the support or even against the pressure of mass media and commercialism. So I just don't know how great the danger is.

But what we see is weakness in cultural communities, high levels of intermarriage, low levels of participation in the core activities of the communities. You may know John Higham's image of the ethnic communities in the United States as having a core and kind of spreading periphery. The core struggles to hold the periphery. The periphery rides free on the work of the core. The core will often sustain, for example, religious services that people on the periphery will use at birth and death and maybe once or twice in between; they count on the core to provide those services, but they're not willing to pay for them. Participation in the core seems to be less than it used to be. More and more people live on the periphery, and the peripheries are spread wide and they overlap with the peripheries from other cores. And there's general confusion about identity.

All that leads me to look for some sort of remedy in the strengthening of associational life—and because of the free-rider problem, in subsidizing the cores. But exactly how great the danger is, and what's really happening out on the peripheries, where the peripheries overlap, I don't know.

### *Post-Modern and Cosmopolitan Selves*

You've used the phrase "the post-modern self" as a place-holder for whatever's happening on the peripheries. And this idea of free ridership surfaces in your discussion of the rise of post-modern selves. You argue that it can be fulfilling for isolated individuals to pick and choose amongst elements of cultures that aren't their own, incorporating bits of cultures into a cosmopolitan identity,

but that cosmopolitanism can only be vibrant where it is free riding. That is, the elements that the cosmopolitan self picks out of traditional cultures would be pallid if the cores weren't holding. So universal cosmopolitanism is not nearly as attractive as isolated cases of cosmopolitanism.

Right. I was once involved in a public debate with a strong defender of cosmopolitanism, who described his own life. He was a cosmopolitan intellectual, born in one place, educated in another, now living in a third, and continuing to visit the three places and celebrating his peripheral engagement in all three—and, it seemed to me, forgetting that his peripheral engagement in all three was dependent, was parasitic, on other people sitting still in each. He could not enjoy his cosmopolitanism without the parochialism of some other people. There's a lot that is very attractive in cosmopolitan intellectual life, but I find it less attractive when it doesn't acknowledge the value of the particularisms that make it possible.

So when it celebrates itself as an exemplar of autonomy and denigrates embeddedness in traditional ways of life as instances of failure to be autonomous or something of that sort, then this is when you find it unpalatable?

Right. I become most communitarian in the face of that version of cosmopolitanism.