Active Citizenship: An Empirical Investigation

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Research Problem: Interrogating the theoretical concept of Active citizenship

Citizenship has become a central concept in sociology and political studies since the seminal discussion by Marshall, (1950). Citizenship is concerned with questions of what it means to be a member of society, how identities and loyalties are constructed, our rights and our obligations and duties.

The development of citizen rights can involve the bestowal of rights, from above, to citizens who perform their duties and receive their rights passively. But it can also involve the empowerment of individuals to shape their rights and obligations through participation in society as active, rather than passive citizens (Turner, 2001; Touraine, 2000). In other words active citizens are, to some extent at least, agents of their life chances and the development of society as a whole. For Beck (2000), a new category of work, which he calls ‘civil labour’, opens up new understandings of participation in civil society. It involves work in civil society, and in cultural, family and political activities. It is voluntary and self-organised, in the sense that what should be done, and how it should be done, are in the hands of those who actually do it (Beck, 2000: 127). Civil labour is evident in the work of third sector organisations. This opens up thinking about different ways in which citizenship entitlements might be organised. Engagement in third sector organisations, potentially provides a fundamentally important path to citizenship entitlement, one which allows people to participate successfully and take responsibility for their own destiny (Turner, 2001:4). Beck’s approach is also consistent with Walzer’s civil society argument in which he identifies the work of civil society as an alternative avenue of citizenship, albeit a less “heroic” one (Walzer, 1995).

Research Question: What is missing in these discussions of active citizenship is empirical research which investigates critically the types and expressions of active citizenship in third sector organisations. This study reports evidence relating to the underlying research questions: how do third sector organisations facilitate active citizenship; what kinds of active citizenship are practised in these organisations. The research was concerned to find out to what extent active citizenship within the organisations studied reflected a concern for social change, the active defence of threatened values or the maintenance of the status quo. It was also interested in whether active citizenship was local or national or had a wider international scope.

Methodology: The empirical data for this project was drawn from eleven towns in 6 countries. The countries are Australia, England, Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and Sweden. Within each of the six countries, the study attempted to survey third sector organisations within one major regional centre and one small village. For each town a database of organisations was constructed from local informal and formal sources. From this database third sector organisations were purposively selected as sites for our quantitative and qualitative research to ensure that different areas of thematic focus were covered. For the quantitative research, 1610 respondents were surveyed. For the qualitative research, approximately five organisations in each town were chosen for interview.

Results: Two major, and apparently contradictory themes emerged from the data. On the one hand, citizens were actively engaged usually in several, organisations. They were well informed about local and global issues, and believed that good citizens are those who work to make the world a better place. They were concerned with issues of disadvantage and social justice, and work towards ameliorating these issues. On the other hand, citizens avoided active engagement in the political process. They preferred to work collaboratively with government and to work at the local level, often within charity or welfare organisations. The first theme provides a theme of active engagement, proactively working for a better world. The second provides a theme of social maintenance of the status quo. The two themes are unpacked and then integrated.
While citizens preferred to avoid political confrontation, they were willing to become politically involved when necessary, usually to defend against the loss of a local and valued service. Over 85% of respondents believed it was important to fight against such loss, and indeed a sizeable minority (38%) had done so. There is consistent evidence of both proactivity and associationism. Consistent with Walzer’s argument, much of the work of citizens is at the local level. This work is almost always placed in terms of practical and immediate needs of a particular disadvantaged group. Many of the case study organisations, for example, were concerned with practical assistance for people with a disability or programs for youth. In response to a questionnaire scenario concerning refugees, the dominant response was to “Work with local community organisations to discover how to best assist”.

Being a member of a local community based organisation provides an ‘ideal’ avenue for active citizenship. So for example important reasons cited by the respondents for joining their organisation included to help those in need (44%), to change the world for the better (31%) and as an avenue for activism (32%). But it was also important to respondents that the organisation had a welcoming atmosphere (30%) and provided an opportunity to meet different people (34%).

Clearly, there is no one way of being an active citizen, and despite the consistent trends identified above, there were also significant variations in the way people responded. In general, smaller towns are more likely to want to act locally and support local institutions.

The empirical findings are discussed in relation to the literature, notably Turner (2001), Beck (2000) and Touraine (2000).

References


