

Connected Communities

Living Together: The Temporal Dimension of Civic Health

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Executive Summary

The 'civic health' discourse in contemporary politics presupposes an analogy between the lives of communities and the lives of individuals that is often overlooked. This report examines two prominent philosophical conceptions of the life of an individual - the 'episodic' and the 'narrative' - and considers what they can tell us about the lives of communities.

The report finds that both conceptions obscure what they seek to disclose: the process of living, and sharing, a life. The episodic conception, according to which a life is a sequence of discrete episodes, ignores the fact that there is more to a good life than a succession of happy moments, while the narrative conception, which interprets a life as an unfolding story, tends to prescribe its preferred way of life in such a way as to frustrate the enterprise of actually living.

In order to preserve the 'vitality' of a civic association, it is necessary to assess civic health rather differently: by identifying and promoting the basic form of a meaningful civic life whilst refraining from the effort to specify its content. The story of a healthy civic life must be lived before it can be told.

Researchers and Project Partners

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The question of 'civic health' has become increasingly prominent in recent years.¹ In 2006, the first American 'Civic Health Index' was published, and 2010 saw the publication of an Ipsos/Mori report commissioned by the UK government Department for Communities and Local Government entitled 'Our Nation's Civic Health'. The primary aim of these studies was to formulate a detailed assessment of the quality of civic life across a range of variables:

Civic health is a broad term, encompassing the networks and interactions that help local and national civil society to function well. Individuals, families and communities are integral to the nation's civic health. A strong democracy is also important, supported by good public sector institutions and a healthy third sector. (DCLG, 2010, 8)

The need for an accurate means of diagnosing civic 'disease', and for an effective 'remedy', has assumed new urgency in the wake of the riots that erupted across London and in other English cities in the summer of 2011.

Note the following three features of the prevailing civic health discourse. First, the concept of 'health' involved goes some way beyond a merely medical definition. As the quotation above indicates, it is not just a matter of civic 'survival', but also a question of what it means to function *well*. And that question introduces more expansive concerns of civic 'happiness' or 'flourishing'.

Secondly, the scope of the standard approach to the assessment of civic health is limited in one important respect. The UK report explains that it provides a 'snapshot' image of civic health, an assessment of how citizens relate to each other and to the state in the here and now (DCLG, 2010, 8). It does not directly seek to capture civic health *over time*.

Thirdly, the discourse assumes something like Plato's analogy between the city and the soul. On the face of it, the idea of civic health is mysterious, because cities are not literally subject to health and disease, happiness and unhappiness, at all; they are only so metaphorically, and by analogy with natural organisms. For the ancient Greeks, there was a strong metaphorical association between the polis and physical organisms (Kalimtzis, 2000). It was therefore natural for Socrates to declare in the Republic that 'a moral person will be no different from a moral community' (Plato, 1993, 453b).

¹ Versions of this report were presented at the Institute of Education, the University of Leeds and the Houses of Parliament. I am grateful to each of the audiences for their helpful and challenging comments. See External Links section for details.

But taking this third feature of the discourse seriously reveals a difficulty. The idea that we could provide a meaningful assessment of an individual person's happiness and flourishing on the basis of a 'snapshot' assessment seems wrong. Aristotle famously remarked that if we are to think of human happiness and of human flourishing, then we must think in terms of a *complete lifetime*: 'One swallow does not make a summer; neither does one day. Similarly neither can one day, or a brief space of time, make a man blessed and happy' (Aristotle 1976, 1098a).

In order properly to grasp health and happiness in the soul of an individual, we need to incorporate some notion of temporality. And if soul and city are analogous, as the language of civic health implies, the same may be said of the city. This report will review philosophical and sociological literature on the idea of an individual life in order to explore the idea of civic life and consider how it might deepen our understanding of civic health. It will examine two quite familiar conceptions of civic life and identify some problems with each. The report will conclude with some proposals for a more adequate theory of living together.

The Episodic Conception of Civic Life

We sometimes conceive of our lives 'episodically', as a series of discrete, though interconnected, incidents or episodes (Strawson, 2004). From the episodic perspective, a healthy life is simply an aggregation of healthy snapshots, or happy moments. Perhaps one swallow does not make a summer, but a swallow today, tomorrow and the next day just might.

To incorporate the episodic perspective into our assessments of civic health is relatively straightforward, and is already a feature of some of the existing studies. A healthy civic life on the episodic perspective is simply an aggregation of civically healthy snapshots. To put it a little crudely, we can plot our snapshot assessments of civic health on a graph and identify trends over time.

But the episodic perspective cannot by itself provide a comprehensive account of civic life. We can see this by returning to the level of the individual: most people think that there is more to a happy life than a sustained sequence of happy moments (though compare Strawson, 2004). This anxiety is neatly captured in Solon's maxim that we should call no man happy until he is dead (as reported by Herodotus, 1998, 16).

This is because, as Richard Wollheim writes, 'happiness is not aggregative. It requires perception, like the balance of a painting' (Wollheim, 1984, 164). Just as the acknowledgment that each and every square centimetre of the surface of a painting is beautiful does not entail the conclusion that the painting itself is beautiful, no conclusion about the health and happiness of a life automatically follows from the acknowledgement that each and every episode of that life has been healthy and happy. To think in this way is to neglect the importance of balance, contrast, continuity and discontinuity in our comprehension and evaluation of a life. As Todd May writes, 'a life is not an unrelated

series of actions or projects or states of being. A life has, we might say, a trajectory' (May, 2011; see also Taylor, 1997).

We may by analogy conclude that the episodic conception of civic life similarly underdetermines what we seek to capture. There is more to a healthy civic life than a series of healthy and happy moments. Specifically, we need also some sense of the 'trajectory' of civic life conceived as a whole.

The Narrative Conception of Civic Life

'Man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal', writes Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre, 1985, 216). Instead of comprehending a life as a sequence of discrete episodes, we may alternatively comprehend it as a continuous body of experience, as narrative. What matters on this view is less the aggregation of happy moments and more the overall composition. A key question on the narrative perspective is that of whether the whole presents a coherent and meaningful story.

This view of individual life can also be applied to its civic analogue. Instead of viewing the shared life of a community as a sequence of snapshots, we may instead ask ourselves what sort of narrative it presents. This way of comprehending civic life is commonly deployed in public discourse. For example, the last Labour government pursued an agenda of promoting a sense of 'Britishness' among UK citizens. Attempting to articulate the meaning of Britishness, Gordon Brown described the shared life of the British people as a narrative of the pursuit of liberty, a 'golden thread' running through British history (Brown, 2006).²

A 'healthy' civic narrative is often taken to be one shaped by the harmonious pursuit of common purposes. For example, David Cameron has urged that, in order to overcome the sense of alienation felt by cultural minorities in the UK, it is necessary to encourage all citizens to feel that 'they are part of a shared national endeavour, a positive purpose' (Cameron, 2007; see also Galston, 1991).

While the narrative conception offers a richer view of civic life than its episodic counterpart, we may still doubt its adequacy. We can see its deficiencies more immediately by reverting to the level of the individual. The idea that a healthy life consists in finding a purpose and pursuing it wholeheartedly is familiar enough - it is the mantra of many self-help books and agony aunts. But it seems worryingly confining.

Doubtless some would cherish a life characterised by the single-minded pursuit of a particular goal, but we would be hard-pressed to explain where a person had gone wrong who preferred a life with more space for surprise, uncertainty and ambivalence - a

² The narrative conception of civic life is also a prominent feature of academic debates about political community: see Anderson, 1991; Callan, 1997; Edyvane, 2007; Galston, 1991; Smith, 2003; Taylor, 1989.

life less narratable. Indeed, we may not have a choice in this, for as Zygmunt Bauman argues, in the unstable and rapidly fluctuating conditions of 'liquid modernity', lives too are apt to dissolve: 'liquid life is precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty' (2005, 2).

The same concerns arise at the level of civic life. Unity of purpose and social harmony appeal to some, but for many such a shared life - were it even realisable - would simply be dull. Such people might reasonably contend that a healthy civic life is one of vigorous contest and debate about fundamental public purposes. Indeed, in culturally diverse, multi-faith societies, conflicts of public purpose may well be unavoidable.

If the episodic perspective underdetermines the notion of civic life, then the narrative perspective overdetermines it. It quite literally *pre-scribes* the narrative of society by appeal to a rather dubious account of individual flourishing, and then condemns civic life as meaningless when it fails to conform to its narrative prescription. It ignores the plurality of ways in which people characteristically find meaning in their lives, both individual and shared.

And this points towards a deeper concern about the way in which narrativity is deployed here. The view encourages us to think that the 'healthy' life consists in conformity to a particular narrative. But the requirement to 'live a narrative' is incoherent (Williams, 2009). Lives differ from narratives in the crucial respect that whereas narratives are complete wholes and thus carry with them a certain inevitability from the outset, lives are not.

Martin Hollis suggests that a meaningful life is one that '*creates* the individual whose life it is' (1995, 181), and, consequently, 'it is only rather unusual lives which are correctly characterized as lives led in the pursuit of a specific and constant aim. For most of us, aims change consequent upon earlier decisions' (Mendus, 2002, 150). Hence, actually *living* generates a form of predicament that simply cannot present itself to characters in narratives. In this way, and paradoxically, the narrative conception of life threatens to distract from what Bernard Williams describes as 'the only serious enterprise', which is living itself (1993, 117).

Conclusion

Both episodic and narrative perspectives obscure what they aim to disclose: the process of living, and sharing, a life. The episodic perspective, which is a feature of the DCLG report on civic health, is valuable as far as it goes. But the assessment it provides is necessarily, and perhaps damagingly, incomplete for it elides the pivotal notion of civic life as a continuous body of experience.

The narrative perspective, which has been a feature of the rhetoric of politicians of all stripes, also fails to satisfy. This report has challenged the idea that the inculcation of a pre-fabricated social narrative (like Brown's 'golden thread' of Britishness) can be

justified on the grounds that it is somehow a necessary condition of civic health. If we are really to incorporate the idea of civic life into our understanding of civic health, then we need to accept that the civic domain is unlikely to be the predictable and readily controllable entity that we (and our politicians) may want it to be. For with real life come liveliness, ambiguity and disorder.³

It may be that recognising this is the first step towards a more adequate conception of civic life. Assessments of civic health overreach insofar as they seek to articulate what it means to live 'well'. In order to leave room for civic *vitality*, we need to focus instead on the more basic conditions of living at all. We need to think about the 'basic grammar' of the narrative of a life well-lived (Hampshire, 1973), and concentrate on promoting *that* instead of the full-blown fairytale of a happy civic life. For such things must be lived before they can be told.

Further Research

The report indicates three key areas of further research:

a. The soul-city analogy

The analogy underpins the public discourse of civic health and this report has assumed its validity and sought to explore some of its implications. But further research on the analogy is needed both to examine in detail the manner in which it shapes our thought about community, and to test its validity.

b. Basic grammar

The report concludes with the proposal that the most appropriate way of assessing the quality of civic life is by reference to its conformity to a moral 'grammar' concerning the basic conditions upon which any sort of civic life depends. Further research is needed to clarify the nature and source of those conditions.

c. Fostering a healthy civic life

It is natural to suppose that fostering civic health will involve cultivating respect for the basic grammar of civic life. Further research is needed into both the practical and the ethical dimensions of that enterprise. And this leads especially into the domain of civic education and will require consideration of the role of cultural practices in instilling and transmitting respect for the basic conditions of civic life.

³ For accounts that get somewhat closer to this notion of civic 'liveliness', see Young, 1990, ch.8; S. Hampshire, 1989, 189.

References and external links

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External Links

Edyvane, D. 2011. 'On Civic Health: Community, Narrative and Meaning', discussion paper that forms the basis of this report:

http://leeds.academia.edu/DerekEdyvane/Papers/1045670/On_Civic_Health_Narrative_Community_and_Meaning

Edyvane, D. 2011. 'Britain 2.0? The Union, England and Political Community After 5 May', discussion paper arising from the research project and presented at the Houses of Parliament 25/10/11:

http://leeds.academia.edu/DerekEdyvane/Papers/1091053/Britain_2.0_The_Union_England_and_Political_Community_After_5_May

Edyvane, D. 2011. 'Sharing the Journey', short talk arising from the research project and presented at the University of Manchester 21/6/11:

<http://www.temporalbelongings.org/presentations.html>

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

