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REVIEW OF
THE WORLD WE WANT: RESTORING CITIZENSHIP IN A FRACTURED AGE

by Mark Kingwell
Rowman & Littlefield, 2001

Mark Kingwell's main purpose in these philosophical-historical-political reflections is to propose new ways of thinking about citizenship. He argues that the traditional models of citizenship based on blood, belief, or law no longer conform to today's political realities. Accordingly, he suggests that "we need . . . a new model of citizenship based on the act of participation itself, not on some quality or thought or right enjoyed by its possessor. This participatory citizenship doesn't simply demand action from existing citizens; it makes action at once the condition and the task of citizenship" (12). In itself, Kingwell's model makes perfect sense and resembles several other recent, fair-minded notions of a participatory public sphere. Also, Kingwell justifies his prescriptions for citizenship with a rich collection of historical analogies and an inspiring series of moral exhortations. But since his overall stance on the ethical and political dimensions of citizenship is so unobjectionable, his justifications leave one wanting more than the primarily philosophical reflections this study offers.

2. At the heart of Kingwell's study are three discussions of exemplary friendships from three disparate historical moments: Socrates and Crito in 399 B.C.E.; Michel Eyquem de Montaigne and Étienne de la Boétie in 1558; and Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno in 1940. Kingwell presents these pairings as "signal confrontations between friends," and he claims they serve as "milestones in an unusually productive and extended conversation about how to live as a citizen" (15). One reason Kingwell leaps across these different historical contexts is his insistence that "[t]he fundamental task for philosophical reflection about citizenship is to continue sorting out what is new from what is not. That means, in turn, accepting the force of the natural in human affairs even as we go on criticizing ideological structures that tend to naturalize what may in fact be subject to change" (xv). Kingwell identifies a progression of pertinent themes that links the three historical moments of his study: "We move from a conflict between moral objectivity and the need to universalize rights; through a burgeoning conception of political virtue based on skepticism and tolerance; to an awareness of the limits of individualism, and the possibilities of hope, under conditions of cultural diversity and global consumer capitalism" (18).

3. Surrounding Kingwell's historical chapters are an introduction titled "The World We Have" and a conclusion titled "The World We Want." In these chapters, Kingwell offers his own reflections and opinions on general issues like the public sphere and social capital; specific political and economic events like the November 1999 anti-globalization protests in Seattle and the dot-com market crash of April 2000;

and key players in recent debates over citizenship and participation such as Robert Putnam, William Bennett, Stephen Carter, and Russell Jacoby. Regarding his own take on these debates, Kingwell singles out three main threats to citizenship which also function to constrict the political realm: consumerist fetishism, cultural separatism, and self-regarding isolation.

4. Each of Kingwell's three middle chapters opens with a narrative reconstruction of the specific historical crisis which precipitates the dilemmas of citizenship that still face us today. For example, he begins "Rights and Duties" with a vivid dramatization of Crito visiting Socrates in prison on the eve of his death and trying to convince him to escape from prison rather than accept an unjust death sentence. In his analysis of what's at stake in Plato's *Crito*, Kingwell focuses on Socrates' insistence that citizens' rights are the flipside of their duties and responsibilities. He argues that Socrates' decision to accept his death sentence on the basis of his lifelong membership in the state exemplifies a notion of citizenship that contrasts with the current idealization of individualism. For Socrates, the notion of an individual identity detached from the state makes no sense. Kingwell puts this anti-individualist argument into historical context by noting that "Thoreau believed civil disobedience was the highest duty of citizenship. Horace thought it was sweet and right to die for one's country. Socrates combines both sentiments: what greater act of citizenship can there be than to die at the hands of one's own country, precisely while engaged in its service as a political critic?" (36).

5. For Kingwell, Socrates illustrates something lost in ideals of citizenship that one-sidedly emphasize individual rights: "In a rush of empty individualism, a paroxysm of blind faith in the transparency of our desires, we have lost sight of the complicated dialogue between ourselves and the world of our making" (47). Here and elsewhere, though, it's unclear who comprises this "we." Critics of the liberal tradition often blame its emphasis on individual rights for a variety of social ills. But what these critics typically fail to engage are arguments—like those made by Thoreau, Emerson, and Mill—that individualism always presupposes a dialogue between the self and the social world, particularly when the assertion of individual rights threatens to cause social harms. Furthermore, the evidence Kingwell offers for his causal claims about individualism's ill effects often amounts to little more than isolated anecdotes or observations of social tendencies. But even if one accepts his point about the amoral emptiness of individualism, the payoff to his discussion of Socrates is rather disappointing. Socrates' acceptance of his death sentence, Kingwell argues, illustrates "that we can never wholly transcend our social contexts, can never fully pass beyond the limits and strictures and distortions of the cultural medium in which we exist" (73). Even for those of us who generally agree with this perspective, Kingwell's broad critique of individualism raises more questions than it answers.

6. Kingwell's chapter on Montaigne, "Virtues and Vices," begins with a moving biographical sketch of the friendship between Montaigne and the jurist/political philosopher Étienne de la Boétie. From there, Kingwell broadens his discussion to the political dimensions of virtue. Using Montaigne's tolerant and humane thought to counter cynical Machiavellian traditions of *realpolitik*, Kingwell suggests which political virtues should be stressed in an age when virtue is seen as primarily private. He argues that the friendship with la Boétie taught Montaigne a "valuable lesson about the relation between knowledge and kindness" (85). In our age, Kingwell points out, the relevant political lesson is something like this: a healthily skeptical disposition combined with an awareness of diversity leads to tolerance. But the social-scientific retort to such philosophical claims would be a hardheaded "Maybe . . . maybe not."

7. For Kingwell, Montaigne's life and career exemplify a political disposition that manages to deal with diversity while avoiding the violent side effects of might-makes-right approaches to cultural, religious, and political conflict. He claims that Montaigne was able to circumvent three challenges to the hope that virtue can be political and politics virtuous. He labels the first challenge Aristotelian, which consists of "the temptation to ask too much of citizens, by identifying private and public virtue too closely." The second challenge is Machiavellian, and it consists of "the temptation to hold politics to a perversely negative standard, as in some forms of nasty political realism." The third challenge is Christian, and it

involves "the temptation of aloof moral purity, which simply rules political necessities out of moral court" (97). Kingwell's discussion of Montaigne's philosophical, ethical, and political virtues is vividly and affectionately drawn, and it's a pleasure to read for those of us who admire Montaigne and share Kingwell's hope that knowing his work might make people more tolerant and humane. To be sure, Kingwell is too sophisticated to express such a hope so crudely. But without more detailed empirical or historical evidence that actually illustrates the effectiveness of Montaigne's dispositions in specific kinds of cultural and political conflict, Kingwell's discussion of his political virtues remains a mere expression of hope. It has genuine rhetorical value, but its relevance to current problems of citizenship remains somewhat indeterminate.

8. In his chapter on Benjamin's friendship with Adorno, Kingwell uses Benjamin's work to exemplify how public space has been colonized by the economic forces of neoliberalism and late capitalism. This chapter is titled "Spaces and Dreams," and it focuses on Benjamin's study of the nineteenth-century Paris Arcades. Kingwell contends, "If we want to understand the world we are fast creating, we must, like Benjamin reading the strolling migration of the Parisian flâneurs, study the details—the toys and tools, the pleasures and frustrations—of everyday life in the new global arcades" (161). Kingwell also uses Benjamin's unfinished Arcades Project to take account of the problem of political action left hanging at the end of his Montaigne chapter. He asks, "[H]ow could we ever translate a virtue account of citizenship into action if the social conditions of its realization are either absent or obscured by constant consumerist distractions and the illusion of freedom?" (154).

9. Kingwell celebrates Benjamin's meticulous attention to cultural production and consumption because he believes that detailed awareness of culture is an important way of achieving political consensus in a multicultural age. He notes, "The persistent challenge set political theory by diverse cultures is how to find a degree of political substance that is sufficient . . . to bind citizens, but at the same time sufficiently flexible . . . to allow them to pursue their life projects without undue interference" (166). With respect to this challenge, Kingwell claims that neither Adorno's emphasis on materialist theory, nor the nostalgia for a pre-commercial cultural era, nor Horkheimer and Adorno's elitist cynicism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are appropriate attitudes to take in today's globalized society. The alternative attitude Kingwell uses Benjamin to exemplify, however, remains a vague and programmatic hope: "There is a collective Arcades Project that, like Benjamin's, is forever incomplete; a project of continual resistance in a world where resistance is so often considered futile and money's triumph inevitable" (196-197). In such a world, we should do the following: "Read [our] cultural experience as Benjamin did, savoring the prosaic yet finding the traces of Arcadian desire that point beyond the way things are" (197). This is fine, essayistic sermonizing. But it left me wanting more substantive political theory or sociological analysis.

10. To some extent, Kingwell anticipates disappointments like mine by stressing the unique virtues of reflection. "Reflection as I have been defending it," he writes, ". . . is conceptually distinct from theory. . . . Theory believes it provides answers. Reflection knows that it merely pursues questions, and does that often enough only tentatively or in the midst of perplexity and sadness" (210). Reflection, moreover, is better able to express the kinds of meaning that not only theory but empirical studies cannot provide: "The sociological studies bear out something that philosophical inquiry can see without taking a survey. We are, finally, happier not with more stuff but with more meaning" (218). Kingwell characterizes his own philosophical inquiry as "an attempt to begin a discussion about the nature of citizenship in a world where national identities and institutions may no longer serve—a postnational, even postcultural world" (3). He also aptly points out that his loose, conversational approach matches the character of the three friendships he concentrates on. "A central virtue of the encounters that lie at the heart of this discussion," he argues, "is that they give an engaging particularity—a messiness, a conversational urgency—to what might otherwise be rather tidy and abstract arguments. They also illustrate the very contingency that these thinkers all, in their different ways, try to acknowledge in argument" (22).

11. But this discussion about the dilemmas of citizenship has been under way for a long time now, and from a variety of perspectives. Given this, it's not exactly clear what kind of audience Kingwell's reflections are aimed at. Philosophers would want a more focused, rigorously theoretical argument (e.g. Jürgen Habermas' work). Economists, sociologists, and political scientists would want more empirical evidence demonstrating causal links between individual attitudes and degrees of participation in the public sphere (e.g. Robert Putnam's work). And general, non-academic readers are not likely to seek out books like this. Such considerations notwithstanding, this would be a useful book to assign in undergraduate humanities and social science courses that tackle issues of citizenship and political participation. Ultimately, Kingwell opens up many more questions about these topics than he answers. But he at least provides an engaging attempt to overcome the academic hermeticism of historical studies and the presentist bias of empirical studies.