

My Children, Myself: Speaking for Young Citizens Abroad

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VIEWPOINT

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ABSTRACT: Early activism by groups representing American citizens living abroad was motivated by parents' concerns about the citizenship status of children born outside the United States. In this essay I discuss a 1971-2 letter-writing campaign which involved American parents speaking on behalf of the rights of their minor children in a way that facilitated a simultaneous looking forward into the child's future, and looking backward to the parent's origins. Thus parents' representations of the child-citizen positioned them as agents of both nostalgia and futurity within the American family abroad.

KEYWORDS: Americans abroad; children; citizenship; parents; United States.

PROLOGUE: THE BELLEI CASE

*On December 21st, 1962, Aldo Bellei was an American citizen. When he awoke in his home in Italy the following day – his 23rd birthday – he was not. Under the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (also known as the McCarran-Walter Act), children born outside the United States who had one American citizen parent were granted provisional American citizenship, which could be retained only if the child lived in the United States for five consecutive years between the ages of 14 and 28.¹ Mr. Bellei, who had an American mother and Italian father, was born and raised in Italy; his presence in the United States had been limited to five trips to visit American relatives. In order to keep his status as an American citizen, he would have had to take up permanent residence in the U.S. before turning 23; since he did not do so, his citizenship was revoked. In response, Bellei filed suit in a New York District Court, challenging the constitutionality of section 301(b) of the Immigration and Nationality Act. An initial finding for Bellei was overturned in 1971 by the U.S. Supreme Court, which held that “the central fact” of his birth abroad was a reasonable criterion on which to base differential treatment under American citizenship law. (For full details of the case, see *Rogers v. Bellei*, 401 U.S. 815.) Yet while the Court’s finding in *Rogers v. Bellei* affirmed that Congress could choose to impose conditions on the citizenship of children born abroad, legislators soon took a different tack: in 1972, the residency requirement was reduced to 2 consecutive years between the ages of 14 and 28, and in 1978 it was repealed entirely (McWhirter 2007: 31-2).*

INTRODUCTION

In my recent research on the political engagement of Paris-based organizations representing American citizens living abroad, I found that concerns about the cultural identity and political

status of children were crucial in animating early activism (Starkweather 2008). These were the issues that inspired the 1961 formation of the Association of American Wives of Europeans (AAWE), a progenitor of the active network of American citizen interest groups that exists in Europe today. Phyllis Michaux, one of the founders of AAWE, remembers its origins as follows:

We got to talking one day, wondering about the future of our children, wondering whether they would be American citizens or French, or both, and wondering whether there were other American women living in our fairly isolated manner. So, AAWE really began as a question. The question being, how many other American women were married to Frenchmen and what about the American citizenship of their children? (Michaux 1991: 3)

For these women, anxieties about culture and identity prompted by their move abroad was only heightened by their formation of bi-national households: how could one raise a ‘truly American’ child outside the United States, without an American family life to balance immersion in a foreign culture outside the home?²

When AAWE officers learned of the Bellei case in 1969, they saw an opportunity for effective intervention in an area of American policy that struck at the heart of their concerns, and embarked on their first foray (of many) into direct lobbying of the United States government. A central component of AAWE’s strategy was a targeted letter-writing campaign conducted in 1971-1972. In newsletters, direct mailings, and articles and letters to the editor in international English-language newspapers, AAWE reached beyond their own membership to a wider network of American citizens living in Europe. They encouraged mothers and fathers with half-American children born abroad to write to the House Judiciary Committee about how the current law affected their families. At the time, this Committee was engaged in a re-assessment of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and contemplating changes to the residency requirements recently challenged by Aldo Bellei. On viewing 30 of these letters in the Phyllis Michaux Archives at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, I was struck by their (explicit and

implicit) commentary on the relationships between citizenship, national identity, and family. My purpose in this essay is to think through how these documents place the child-citizen, both within the American polity and within their own families, by focusing on what it means for the parent to speak for the child in this instance.

As I began work on this essay, I was acutely aware of the difficulty of drawing on this particular material for a piece in *Children's Geographies*: after all, “giving children a voice,” rather than relying on adults’ representations of childhood, is an important goal in contemporary children’s studies (see, for example, Matthews 2003, in the inaugural editorial of this journal). Yet historical geographies of children are complicated by the fact that it can be difficult, if not impossible, to excavate children’s voices from archives constructed by adults (but see Philo and Smith 2003). More importantly, representations *of* children have much to tell us about the societies, communities and families in which they live. I argue that in this case, the act of speaking on behalf of the citizenship rights of one’s own child can be interpreted as a strategy that emphasizes futurity and the potential of the child as citizen – but at the same time, it positions the child as a connection to the past, whose citizenship status serves as an affirmation of the parent’s own national identity. I will discuss this idea further after a brief description of the tenor of the letters in this archive.

‘AN AMERICAN ABROAD, PERHAPS, BUT AN AMERICAN ALL THE SAME’

The primary goal of these parents’ letters was to persuade legislators that their children were in fact ‘authentic’ and valuable American citizens, and should not be treated differently under U.S. law as a result of the circumstances of their birth. This persuasion took a variety of forms, but most revolved around claims to cultural capital – specifically, the assertion that the child in

question had developed an American identity just as they would have if growing up in the US.

Dolores P. (writing from France in 1971) wrote of her son that:

He has never had any other kind of passport and has never thought of himself as anything but American. An American abroad, perhaps, but an American all the same.

This decoupling of identity from territory was essential to their project. Many parents explained how they fostered their children's American identity, by "bringing [them] up ... in the American way" (Jacqueline B., France, 1972), making sure they spoke English in the home, and encouraging "[familiarity] with American history, traditions and customs" (Helen R., France, 1971). Some argued that this sort of family dynamic was more significant than their children's broader cultural milieu: for example, Charles B. (Germany, 1972) wrote that "culture or heritage is gained more readily through the family" than through experience outside the home, and that therefore geographic distance should not be viewed as determinative of national identity.

The common thread of argument running through all of the letters was that it was indeed possible to raise young Americans while living elsewhere – and that the young people in question were both good children, and good citizens. After providing an accounting of his two sons' prowess in academics and athletics and their involvement in the American military community in Spain, John M. (1972) issued a challenge on their behalf:

I take heated exception to the Nixon administration claims that these boys 'have no meaningful connection with the United States, its culture or heritage.' Rather than debate this question I suggest that the House Commission on Immigration and Naturalization subpoena these boys and question them on 'Americana' comparing them with other average American children of the same age group.

In retrospect, it was this passage that planted the seed for this essay. John M. argues to great rhetorical effect that given the chance, his sons could make believers out of the Committee. Yet those sons, aged 9 and 11, were certainly capable of appending their own patriotic musings,

which would arguably have been all the more effective in a childish scrawl. Why didn't they? Of course, as to the reasoning and actions of John M. and family, I can make no answer. But speaking more generally, it is worth reflecting on the fact that AAWE's letter-writing campaign was conducted by parents, and no children's voices are reflected in the archive. Why were appeals for expanded citizenship rights and demonstrations of American identity made exclusively *on behalf of* these children, when the issue at stake was their own future status – and when, as the letters themselves suggest, the primary objective was to demonstrate their American-ness?

ON SPEAKING FOR THE CHILD-CITIZEN

One might suspect that this was simply a pragmatic response to the political reality that it is generally adult parents, not their minor children, who are empowered to speak as voting constituents. Yet while adults are typically given more credence as political actors, American parents living abroad would not necessarily have been viewed as constituents: unless they maintained a personal residence in the United States, they could not vote in American elections. It was not until the passage of the Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act of 1975 that all American citizens living abroad were entitled to vote in elections for federal representatives. Moreover, I would argue that to attribute parents' authorship to simply a 'children should be seen and not heard' mentality is to gloss over its particular and profound effects. In my interpretation, when these parents acted as the tellers of their children's stories it worked to decenter the subject in such a way that the *potential* of their children-as-citizens was highlighted – while at the same time the performance of the citizen-parent was reaffirmed. In other words, it facilitated both looking forward into the child's future, and looking back to the parent's origins.

In many cases, parents' claims about their children's good citizenship and American identity were clearly not only descriptive, but also aspirational: for example, several parents expressed the hope that their children might someday attend American colleges. Because the policy goal was for children like theirs to retain American citizenship into adulthood, the argument was as much about what the child might become as about characteristics already in evidence. They therefore wrote of both child-as-child and child-as-*potential*. Evidence of American identity and patriotism was meant to suggest future value as citizens. Beyond general assertions of worth, some letter-writers cannily cast their children as uniquely situated to act as competent citizens in an internationalizing world. Harriet F. (France, 1972) took this approach in describing her son:

[He] is majoring in economics and languages planning to eventually work with an American business firm overseas where his command of languages would be a definite asset and where he would represent American interests.

If cultural competence is an asset in transnational business affairs, an American citizen raised abroad is a potentially good investment. In a similar tactic, Anne P. (the Netherlands, 1972) tried to turn concerns about biculturalism on their head, writing of her children as "not potential handicaps but on the contrary potential assets not only to the United States but to international understanding." Positioning these half-American children living abroad within stories told by adults, to adults, was a way of playing up the element of futurity because it allowed for a more indeterminate subject: the figure of the child, refracted through the telling, was unfixed.

(Compare this to the public figure at the center of the issue, Aldo Bellei – a no-longer-child who had told his own story to U.S. courts, and whose claim to American identity and citizenship was found wanting because of life decisions already made.)

However, as I suggested above, these letters were not all about the future of the child. They also cast attention backward to the American origins of the parent. Some bolstered their case for their children's citizenship rights with appeals to genealogy:

I was born in the United States of parents who were born U.S. citizens as their parents and grandparents were before them. ... I am a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and my son is a member of the Children of the American Revolution. (Helen R., France, 1971)

Extending from such arguments about descent and "birthright" (Katherine J., France, 1972), some parents clearly viewed their children's citizenship status as a reflection on their own. For Helen R., quoted above, it was hard to fathom that the child of a Daughter of the American Revolution could possibly have a child who was not American.³ Therefore, at stake was not only a desire for recognition of the efforts made by American parents abroad to instill cultural capital (as discussed in the previous section), but for affirmation of their very national identity. There were both implicit and explicit indications that letter-writers took the issue of citizenship transmission very personally indeed. Elizabeth G, writing from Germany in 1971, said that she "[would] be extremely disillusioned" if the United States "[did] not accept [her] son as a citizen," while Sylvia M. (France, 1972) argued that continuation of her children's American citizenship was a right that was due to *her*.

Ours is an educated family with many commitments to the American community. My husband has been active in the American Men's Club and in fund raising for the American Library. At present I am the President of the American Women's Group in Paris with close to 500 members. We feel that we have earned the right for our children to bestow their nationality to our grandchildren even if they marry foreigners. (Sylvia M., France, 1972)

Although ostensibly about the citizenship rights of the child born abroad, then, these letters written to the House Judiciary Committee were also very much about the citizenship practices of

the adult American who has chosen to live elsewhere – and who consequently feels anxiety about how they are perceived ‘back home.’

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have told the story of a very small part of the history of political engagement by American citizens living abroad: a letter-writing campaign organized by the Association of American Wives of Europeans (AAWE) in the early 1970s to encourage the United States Congress to lessen restrictions on the transmission of citizenship to children born abroad. After showing how letter-writers sought to decouple national identity and territory in casting their children as fundamentally American, I argued that the act of parents speaking on behalf of young citizens abroad shifted emphasis to the potential of the child, even as it allowed the national identity of the parents themselves to take center stage. Therefore, the letters were as much about these American parents living abroad as they were about their children.

That this campaign involved parents speaking on behalf of their minor children will not be surprising to readers of this journal; indeed, the absence of children’s voices in public discourses pertaining to their own identities and interests is a central concern of contemporary scholarship in children’s geographies. Yet at the same time, by better understanding how and why the child is spoken for, we can better understand the child’s place within communities and families. In this essay, I have provided an early analysis of just one example of parents speaking on behalf of their children; in this instance, I argue, it allowed for the positioning of the child-citizen as a sort of pivot-point within the American family abroad, between the history of the parent’s national origin and the potential of the child’s own future. Chris Jenks (2005, 102-114) has written that while the child in modernity represents futurity, the postmodern child is a site of

nostalgia. Perhaps the children who were the subject of the AAWE's 1971-2 letter-writing campaign occupied the space in-between these models of the child by virtue of the particular historical moment – or perhaps it is better explained by the unique position of these children (and their families) with respect to national citizenship. In either case, this episode offers a compelling reminder of the role of the child and the family in the constitution of American citizenship for those living abroad.

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¹ Some critics of this conditional citizenship policy referred to it a 'Cinderella citizenship' – a metaphor which casts American citizenship as a magical state of privilege, bestowed temporarily on one who will be returned to a drab life of despair once the clock tolls midnight. In reality, effects on individuals must have varied widely: the loss of American citizenship would have been a hardship for some, an irrelevance for others.

² Of course, this was the very cultural anxiety that had prompted the U.S. policy of imposing conditions on the citizenship of children born abroad to *one* American citizen parent, but not on the citizenship of children born abroad to *two* American citizen parents.

³ Daughters of the American Revolution, Sons of the American Revolution, and Children of the American Revolution are organizations which only admit direct descendents of participants in the American Revolutionary War.