

'Seeing Like a Citizen': Re-claiming Citizenship in a Neoliberal World¹

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Introduction

In this chapter, I will argue that neoliberalism and globalization are radically reshaping the terrain of citizenship in a way that particularly challenges our understandings of how citizenship is constructed and the sites in which it is claimed. I suggest that dominant approaches to citizenship as shaped in the neoliberal model are producing 'thin' versions of the concept, in which citizens are treated as residuals to other categories, be they the market, the state, 'democracy', or even 'civil society'.

Reversing the telescope – looking at citizenship through the perspective of citizens as actors in the development process – gives us a very different view. Rather than understanding citizens as products shaped by other forces – e.g. as consumers, users, voters or beneficiaries – we gain an image of citizens who are actively engaging to claim their rights and to assert their voice, but not necessarily in the ways or spaces ascribed to them by the dominant institutions. Rather than seeing citizenship along a single dimension of relations to the state or market, we see a more multidimensional view – one that grows from action and identities in multiple spheres, not only in relationship to the state or the market alone.

Such an approach has important consequences for how we understand civil society and the specific role of NGOs as civil society actors. The idea that civil society 'speaks for' citizens and protects their interests in relationship to states and markets has long held sway in development discourse and practice. A 'citizen-centred' approach challenges such a view, arguing that civil society is only one of the arenas through which citizens express their identities and claim their rights, and that civil society organizations do not necessarily represent 'the citizens'. This approach argues that NGOs should go beyond a view of citizens as their 'beneficiaries' to one which recognizes citizens as rights-bearing actors who engage constantly with states, markets and civil society itself. Their role becomes less one of speaking *for* citizens and more one of working *with* citizens to deepen state-society relationships, and to support the construction of new understandings of citizenship and the deepening of rights themselves.

The Changing Terrain of Citizenship in a Neoliberal World

Though to do so risks great oversimplification, I will briefly argue that a citizen-centred approach can be seen in contrast to four other approaches, each of which are undergirded by broad tenets of neoliberalism: a) a neoliberal market-based approach; b) a narrow state reform approach; c) a 'thin' democracy approach and d) a 'thin' civil society approach which focuses largely on NGOs as deliverers of services, and as professional mediators between the state, market and citizen in the development process. Each of these approaches focuses on getting particular institutional forms of development right, with the assumption that if this is done, stylized views of citizenship will follow. In each, 'citizens' are treated as a residual category, who act and respond as a by-product of other forces of development, framing citizens as consumers, users and choosers, voters, or beneficiaries, not as rights-bearing actors in and of themselves (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000).

The market approach to citizenship

A neoliberal market approach argues for transforming the category of citizen in relationship to the state by focusing on citizens as consumers in the global market. As Dagnino observes in the book on *Inclusive Citizenship*:

neo-liberal discourses establish an alluring connection between citizenship and market. To be a citizen comes to mean individual integration into the market as consumer and producer. This seems to be the basic principle implicit in a vast number of projects to enable people to 'acquire citizenship', that is to say, learning how to initiate micro-enterprises, how to become qualified for the few jobs still on offer, and so on. In a context where the state progressively withdraws from its role as guarantor of rights, the market is offered as a surrogate arena of citizenship. (Dagnino, 2005, p159)

Similarly, Munck argues neoliberalism seeks to convert the citizen into a consumer, in which 'the complex and empowering vision of citizenship in its classic democratic presentation was reduced, in the era of neoliberalism, to the power of the credit card and the pleasures of the shopping mall' (Munck, 2005, pp65–66). Through such an approach, citizens theoretically exercise power through market choice – yet, clearly, such a route is limited if we are concerned with poor people who, by definition, lack market or consumptive power.

Throughout the Citizenship DRC's (Development Research Centre) work, we have seen examples of the ways in which the rise of market forces have altered and changed the citizenship terrain, thus challenging many assumptions about traditional patterns of authority and ways in which rights are protected. In Bangladesh, Kabeer describes how neoliberalism has led NGOs to a focus on 'market participation as the route to empowerment', and contrasts a more rights-based approach taken by the NGO Nijera Kori (Kabeer, 2003, p2). Work by Robins (2005b) shows how approaches by the NHS in the

UK which treat persons with HIV-AIDS as consumer citizens actually served to de-politicize notions of citizenship and to 'kill activism'. In Mexico, the work by Páez and Robles (2006, p81) demonstrates how 'the neoliberal development model's privileging of market forces has accelerated environmental destruction and the erosion of traditional institutions' and in so doing has altered the balances of power between citizens and the state.

The state approach

Neoliberal approaches also carry with them projects to reform the state, seen as redesigning institutions and streamlining bureaucracies in order to increase their efficiency and effectiveness. Alongside this approach, a narrow, technocratic approach to governance emphasizes rules and procedures, downplaying the importance of power and politics, and weakening the focus on the state as a protector of the rights of citizens. In this view, citizens are often called upon to play a conflicting role both as providers of services, and also as 'users' and clients of the state, who through the expression of their voices can help to make it more accountable and transparent.

The cases studies from the Citizenship DRC illustrate time and again how as the state is being reconfigured, it is also weakened as the arbiter of rights or even as the deliverer of basic services, thus challenging liberal, state-based assumptions about where and how rights and citizenship can be realized. For instance, in work examining the right to water in South Africa, Lyla Mehta (2006) examines the conflicts between market-based frameworks in which citizens are expected to gain rights as consumers through implied contracts with private water utilities rather than through rights-based frameworks, where rights are mediated by the state. Other work also challenges the idea civil society participation by itself can serve as an effective means to hold the state accountable. Simply creating new spaces for institutionalized participation with the state does not necessarily alter power relations, and may in fact reinforce the status quo (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). Newell and Wheeler challenge 'technocratic framings of accountability, arguing that they 'generate a kind of naivety that reform processes can generate pro-poor change without challenging power inequities' (Newell and Wheeler, 2006, p22).

The 'thin democracy' approach

Neoliberal forms of the state also carry with them notions about democracy and how it is to be constructed. Rather than seeing democracy in its 'thicker' and 'deeper forms' in which citizens mobilize and struggle to express their voice and claim their interests (Fung and Wright, 2003; Gaventa, 2006), 'the new democracy is thin and anaemic, it is restricted and delegative at best' (Munck, 2005, p66). Democracy in this view focuses not on struggles of citizens, but on a uniform set of institutional designed approaches to elections, representation and the rule of law (Carothers, 1999). In such a weaker view, citizens are seen largely as voters, who express their consent from time to time, but leave governance to the elected rulers and informed elites.

Even where states are 'democratic', they may not play the role expected by liberal theory as the protector of rights. As Naila Kabeer (2005, p181) writes on Bangladesh, though the Constitution and state policy are all committed to upholding and supporting

a broad array of human and social rights, 'the reality however bears little relation to these constitutional provisions. It is characterized instead by corruption and clientelism. The state does not merely fail to protect the rights of citizens, it actively contributes to their violation'. In Brazil, Wheeler shows how the failure of the state to deliver to poor *favelas* strips citizens of their self-respect. 'Dignity is everything for a citizen,' she quotes one woman, 'and we have no dignity. We are treated like cattle in the clinics, on the buses and in the shops. Only in rich neighbourhoods are people treated with dignity' (Wheeler, 2005, p109). Other work in Nigeria and India shows the power of social exclusion drawing from ethnic identity or caste to create and reinforce citizenship as a form of 'exclusion' rather than its more 'inclusive forms' (Abah and Okwori, 2005; Pant, 2005).

The narrow civil society approach

While each of the above approaches reduces citizens to consumers, users or voters, some theories argue that it is through a robust civil society that a deeper notion of citizenship can be realized. Civil society becomes both the vehicle and the arena through which citizens mobilize and organize for their rights. However, a number of other writers argue that civil society also risks being captured by the same neoliberal forces which it is meant to confront. As Dagnino (2005, p158) points out:

In recent years ... this concept [*participación ciudadana* or citizen participation] has been appropriated and reinterpreted by the state as part of its strategy for the implementation of neo-liberal structural adjustment. There is thus a perverse confluence between, on the one hand, participation as part of a project constructed around the extension of citizenship and the deepening of democracy, and on the other hand, participation associated with the project of a reconfiguration of the state that requires the shrinking of its social responsibilities and its progressive exemption from the role of guarantor of rights. The perversity of this confluence reflects the fact that, although pointing in opposite and even antagonistic directions, both projects require an *active, proactive civil society*.

In the neoliberal discourses we have seen a depoliticized view of citizen participation emerge in which civic engagement is seen as the involvement of the civil society sector, through more professionalized organizations and associations such as NGOs, who enter new consultative spaces to speak for the citizens themselves. Such an approach, Thelda Skocpol (2003, p11) warns, leads to the emergence of 'diminished democracy', in which public involvement has lost its link to political life. Similarly, Crenson and Ginsberg (2002, pxx) warn of the 'downsizing of democracy', in which collective citizen action has given way to narrow interest groups, and in which citizens are treated like customers, who communicate to elites through opinion polls and electronic market research processes. The arena of civil society becomes the arena of professionalized organizations and activists who also, in the name of effectiveness, assume the right to speak for citizens who are reduced to the role of 'beneficiaries' of the NGOs rather than active citizens in their own right.

Reversing the Telescope: Seeing Like a Citizen

While perhaps portrayed in a stereotyped way, each of the above approaches constructs and uses the concept of citizenship as a residual to other approaches. For the market approach, the assumption is that if one can get the market right, the benefits will follow for the citizen as consumer. If one can get the institutions of the state right, then citizens can also play a role in holding it accountable and delivering its services. If democracy can be designed and spread effectively, then citizens can play a role as voters and watchdogs of those in power. If NGOs and civil society sector can grow and become more professional, they can help communicate the messages for its beneficiaries to market, state and elected leaders.

Alternatively, the 'seeing like a citizen' approach taken by the Citizenship DRC reverses the telescope on the other dominant approaches. Rather than focusing on institutional designs as a starting point, it starts with the perceptions of citizens themselves and asks how they interact and view the institutions from which they are expected to benefit. In doing so, the actor-oriented view taken by the DRC suggests a picture of citizenship, participation and accountability that goes beyond citizenship as a residual, or as a product of legal status or institutional design alone.²

Such an approach to citizenship builds upon and reinforces a number of traditions and debates which attempt to stand counter to the dominant approach. Picking up themes and debates from emergent 'rights-based' approaches to development, it focuses on issues of inclusion, participation through organized collective action and the development of democratic institutions which have obligations to protect and promote rights. Building on debates about the multiple forms of citizenship, especially from Latin America, citizenship is seen as an important arena of contestation, which is fully attained not only through the exercise of political and civic rights, but also through social rights, which in turn may be gained through participatory processes and struggles (Dagnino, 2005; Avritzer, 2002). In such a view, citizen participation itself may be seen as a social right, which enables the capacity to claim other rights (Gaventa, 2002).

Such an actor-based approach also re-politicizes our understandings of participation, moving it from that of 'beneficiaries' of the development process to one of rights-bearing citizens. Interacting with debates in the literature on deepening democracy, this approach focuses on the process through which citizens exercise ever-deepening power over decisions which affect their lives, and in which democracy is extended 'from a democracy of voters to a democracy of citizens' (UNDP, 2004). As David Beetham argues:

the core idea of democracy is that of popular rule or popular control over collective decision-making. Its *starting point is with the citizen rather with the institutions of government*. Its defining principles are that all citizens are entitled to a say in public affairs, both through the associations of civil society and through participation in government; and that this entitlement should be available in terms of equality of all. Control by citizens over their collective affairs, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control, are the key democratic principles. (1999, p3, emphasis added)

In this view, 'thicker' and more participatory forms of citizenship move beyond passive engagement as voters, beneficiaries or consumers. Citizens are seen as the 'makers and shapers' of policies not only the 'users and choosers' of development or as the 'clients' of other actors (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001).

Citizenship as a Process of Construction

By taking such a view, research across each of the working groups of the DRC offers a dramatically different view from those of the dominant approaches to how citizenship is constructed.

First, while acknowledging the colonial and often exclusionary origins of the concept of citizenship, case studies from the DRC give a view of citizenship-in-practice which is far more robust than that portrayed and constructed in its more neoliberal forms. Citizens are engaging on key issues that affect their lives, and in ways that challenge traditional notions of passivity or disengagement. Case studies from contexts as diverse as Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, India and Bangladesh signal common impulses at the grassroots for values of justice, recognition, self-determination and horizontal solidarity, which offer potential for building more vibrant forms of citizenship, and for realization of fundamental rights (Kabeer, 2005).

However, while citizens are acting to claim their rights and assert their voice, it is not always done in relationship to the state. Rather, the DRC's work argues for understanding citizenship in a more multidimensional way, in which citizens may express their voice and demands not only in the political realm, but also in relationship to other social, ethnic and religious identities and in other social, economic, household, global, or local spheres.

Case studies, for instance, show the articulation of citizenship in struggles for the right to have a recognized identity by migrant populations in both India (Pant, 2005) and the United States (Ansley, 2005); for a sense of place and sense of belonging in Kenya (Nyamu-Musembi, 2006) and Brazil (Wheeler, 2005); in the workplace struggles 'for dignity and daily bread' (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2006) and in terms of biological citizenship, or control over one's own health (Robins, 2005a). The work also points to the fact that citizenship is expressed not only in vertical relations to the state, but in horizontal, social relations as well; and that in everyday practice, citizenship is not a singular identity, but an ensemble of identities, affiliations and forms of action. Just as participatory approaches to understanding of poverty over the last decade have led to a more multidimensional understanding of what poverty entails, so too do the empirical investigations of rights and citizenship call for more robust understandings of these concepts, and argue for dimensions of citizenship which go beyond the nation state-based understanding alone.

Much of the empirical work from the DRC thus supports recent trends in citizenship studies which suggest that citizenship must be understood in social as well as in political spheres, and expressed in non-state as well as state arenas. In this sense, like the concept of democracy, citizenship may have 'thick' and 'thin' versions:

So-called 'thick' citizenship' which gives people real power over their lives is desirable, but 'thin' citizenship (in terms of formal legal and political entitlements) is better than no citizenship at all. The right to self-rule is important and central to citizenship: but it becomes absurd and paradoxical when placed in the context of the state. This is why the case for an inclusive citizenship makes it essential that we look beyond the state ... (Hoffman, 2004, p13)

In the 'thick' view of citizenship, a sense of citizenship is deeply related to a sense of personhood and identity. As Kabeer (2003, p1) writes, 'how people define themselves, and are defined by others, is relevant to citizenship as practice because of its implications for their capacity to act as citizens'. Yet, as she goes on to write 'while individual agency may be a central aspect of claiming rights and observing duties, history tells us it has been the collective struggles of those who have been denied citizenship status that have driven processes of transformation towards more inclusive definitions and practices' (Kabeer, 2003). Such struggles for inclusive citizenship often begin with demands for recognition and dignity and around concrete issues and immediate needs in the social and community sphere, not in the first instance with struggles for greater political voice in state-based processes. Such engagement is not always by invitation, nor inspired by liberal or even neoliberal concepts of what a citizen ought to do or be. Rather, it springs from impulses for social justice, for desires for recognition and dignity, and from the need to confront concrete social needs and issues that affect everyday life (Kabeer, 2005).

While such action for social inclusion may begin outside the state sphere, there are political consequences: it is through engagement for recognition on local issues that broader awareness, skills and networks are acquired, and through which social citizenship is converted to political engagement. Through acting and mobilizing on key issues and identities, citizens learn and acquire new identities as political actors; they become conscious of their rights, and their right to have rights. They build the alliances and solidarities which allow them to exercise power.

For instance, in South Africa Robins (2005b, p5) writes about how the 'extremity of "near death" experiences of full-blown AIDS, and the profound stigma and "social death" associated with the later stages of the disease ... can produce the conditions for AIDS survivors' commitment to "new Life", social activism and "responsibilized" citizenship'. In sharp contrast to the biomedical interventions which treat HIV/AIDS patients as clients to be protected through anonymity, the activist discourses associated with the movement known as Treatment Action Campaign served to revitalize 'isolated and stigmatized AIDS sufferers' as social activists, aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Similarly, in Bangladesh, Shireen Huq (2005, p168) writes that in relationship to the work of Naripokko, 'our experience of discrimination as women led us to demand fair treatment and respect for our dignity as human beings, and only thereafter to claim our rights and entitlements as *citizens*'. In this sense, political citizenship is constructed *through* engagement, not the other way around. That is, one does not create citizens who then act; rather action creates the sense and practice of citizenship itself. From this perspective citizenship is constructed from below, not given from above. It is claimed, not bestowed.

Implications for NGOs and Development Practices

Such an approach has implications for broader debates that are relevant to development policy, as well as to how NGOs may act to achieve their goals.

First, such an approach means going beyond the state-society binary which has often affected approaches to development. On the one hand, the reconfiguring of the state and changing patterns of authority are themselves pointing to the importance of non-state actors to do what the state once did. For NGOs, this may mean that they play the role of service providers, rather than playing the role of helping citizens claim rights and accountability from the state. In this approach, there is a risk that NGOs simply replicate patterns of dependency: where once citizens may have been clients or subjects of the state, rather than actors and claimants on it, they now become passive beneficiaries of NGOs instead. The relations of power between provider and recipient do not change.

But on the other hand, we have also seen that the social sphere itself is an important arena in which citizenship is expressed and constructed. It is often here, through action on immediate issues in daily life, where citizens build their political skills, identities and self-awareness as actors. In turn, as a sense of citizenship is constructed outside of the state, it can contribute to the emergence of citizens who engage with the state and who claim rights and accountabilities from the state.

This recognition of the ways in which states and societies interact has important consequences for how NGOs who seek to take a rights-based approach go about their work. First, even where they are working on community-based issues or on service delivery projects which do not directly engage with the state, they can approach these as potential learning grounds in which a sense of citizenship and rights are developed and strengthened. Over time, *how* they work with citizens in enabling a sense of rights and agency in these spaces can be as important as *what* they actually do.

Secondly, even as NGOs and civil society organizations help strengthen spaces for the construction and expression of citizenship outside of the state, they can also engage with the state to help protect these spaces and to build a sense of responsiveness to the citizen voices which do emerge. In this sense, the Citizenship DRC has argued that building effective relationships between states and citizens, means 'working on both sides of the equation' (Gaventa, 2004, p27). The in-depth work by Coelho on the health councils in Brazil provides demonstrable empirical evidence on this point. In testing the significance of a) committed public managers, b) civil society activism or c) an appropriate institutional design in building more inclusive health care services, her work confirms the importance of all three acting together (Coelho, 2007).

The case studies in the DRC call also for recognition of the multiple ways in which power and identity serve to mediate between the legal frameworks and institutional procedures which are designed to support the rights of citizens and what actually happens in everyday life. Yet simultaneously, the claims for rights also can serve to challenge and change power. It is through the mobilization and demands of citizenship that rights are made real, new legal rights are created and meanings of citizenship are expanded.

Citizenship in this sense is contextual but also historical – it is created and realized over time, in different ways in different places and points in time. To suggest that citizenship is

gained through practice, and that a fundamental right of participation is the right to create rights, in turn makes both rights and citizenship emergent concepts. If that is the case, to support the realization of rights and citizenship is not only to support the capacities of states and citizens to realize *existing* rights, but also to enable and support the process by which new formulations emerge. Historically, if one had simply applied an agenda of upholding *existing* rather than supporting the struggles for *emergent* rights, then the rights-based agenda would simply have strengthened the status quo (in the case of the US, for instance, a democracy of white, male property owners). Forces from below pressing new rights – such as inclusion of women and minorities in democratic processes – would have been ignored.

Understanding this emergent character of citizenship also has important implications for development practice, as well as for the role of NGOs. First, it suggests that the success of new democratic experiments and assertions of citizenship can only be measured in decades, not in the course of a few years. Struggles for inclusive forms of citizenship do not fit neatly with approaches to development that measure success through indicators of efficiency and performance, delivered within project or budget cycles. Neither will support for the deepening of rights and citizenship from below mesh easily with new aid approaches which focus on budget support, aid harmonization and national ownership – almost by definition emergent demands against exclusion are not likely to be key budget priorities, nationally owned nor harmonious.

Rather, the work of the Citizenship DRC points to the need for approaches that affirm the central role which demands for recognition and rights play in constructing more robust forms of citizenship and more inclusive states over time. Civil society organizations which are deeply rooted in the societies in which they are a part have the potential to contribute to creating stronger citizens, and in turn to strengthen the relationship between citizens and state institutions. To do so, however, means that NGOs must engage *with* citizens, starting with their own identities and local struggles, not simply speak *for* them, or reduce them to beneficiaries in the development process.

Notes

- 1 This title is a play on the title of the very important book by James C. Scott, 'Seeing Like a State' (New Haven: Yale University Press 1998). However, beyond the title, the approach here and that taken by Scott are very different.
- 2 In one of the early working papers which helped to define the Citizenship DRC's work, Celestine Nyamu-Musembi (2002, p1) described this actor-based approach as one in which rights and citizenship are 'shaped through actual struggles informed by people's own understanding of what they are justly entitled to'.

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