

In conversation with Ivor Chipkin: Is South Africa burning in Paris?



The rampage by angry immigrant youths in Paris in November last year provoked the question: Is there a growing skepticism in the world about the very possibility of contemporary South Africa – a unitary state composed of peoples that have nothing in common except that they live in the same territory?

Is the cosmopolitan project in crisis? In Holland, Dutch authorities seem to be in no mood for multiculturalism. In America, the notion is coming in for increasing criticism as many, including Samuel P Huntington, reflect on what it means to be an American citizen. Was the South African transition the highpoint of a cosmopolitan politics that is fast receding?

Starting in the 1980s, there has been renewed academic interest in the notion of citizenship. In Western Europe and America the challenge to established notions and practices of social democracy, which was the hallmark of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, reanimated discussion about rights and the role of the State.

Monetarist economics, combined with what came to be known as the New Public Management, faced down the postwar consensus that associated citizenship with three categories of rights: civil (equality before the law), political (the right to choose political representatives, run for political office) and social (public education, healthcare, employment, insurance, housing).

At stake was the relevance of T H Marshall's influential, postwar text, *Citizenship and Social Class*, which associated full citizenship with a liberal, democratic welfare state. In Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc further problematised established conceptions of citizenship.

What mattered in this instance was not so much the content of citizenship – the rights to which it referred – but its limits. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the haemorrhaging of Yugoslavia, for example, revived painful questions about the political frontier or border. Who would have what rights in which political community? If the revival of nationalism in Eastern Europe shattered the prospect of cosmopolitanism there, the 'cultural' aspect of citizenship was similarly raised in the wealthy liberal-democracies; this time from the other direction.

As new Eastern European nations sought to tie citizenship to religion, language and culture, 'Western' citizenship was being subjected to 'feminist', 'multicultural' and/or 'postcolonial' critiques. At stake were the internal limits of citizenship.

What do South African citizens really have in common?

After Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, what occupied central stage was the nation and citizenship therein. Nira Yuval-Davis and Ruth Lister demonstrated the exclusionary effects of national citizenship, especially for women. Many looked forward to a citizenship washed of racist and other exclusionary instruments.

In the early 1990s these questions received a boost from the democratic transition in South Africa. The vision of a 'rainbow nation' inspired thinking about a form of citizenship freed of exclusionary baggage. Yet, at the very moment cosmopolitan notions of citizenship seemed to be making headway against the nationalist consensus, concerns were being raised about the limits of tolerance and cultural diversity.

The year of the democratic election in South Africa, 1994, was simultaneously the year of the Rwandan genocide. Bryan Turner, for example, wondered aloud if citizenship did not presuppose a common culture. He asked whether 'postmodernisation', a term he used to describe the fragmentation and differentiation of culture, was not undermining its conditions.

In 1993, Samuel P Huntington warned that 'the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations'.

In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Huntington went on to suggest that democratic citizenship did not only presuppose a common culture, but that it was antagonised by those who had not developed a sense of individualism and a tradition of individual rights and liberties.

Then came the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. These seemed to put paid to a tradition of politics interested in overcoming the exclusionary effects of national citizenship. Reviewing the state of affairs today, Paul Gilroy has remarked: 'Multicultural society seems to have been abandoned at birth. [...] The resurgent imperial power of the United States has made multiculturalism an aspect of the clash of integral and incompatible civilizations, thereby transmitting an additional negative energy into this delicate postcolonial process'.

Much of the contemporary research on citizenship is ill-prepared to meet the challenge of this new conservatism. What is at stake in the rejection of cosmopolitanism, or even internationalism, is the revival of an older term – cultural homogeneity – as the condition of citizenship.

In this regard it is not surprising that the ghost of Carl Schmitt has returned to haunt the

academic scene. Schmitt rejected liberal democracy precisely because he believed that the project of social diversity and political pluralism was a non-starter.

Over and above the straightforward racism of much of the new conservatism, there is, nonetheless, an intuition that deserves being taken seriously. It says that in order to act as a citizen one must be prepared to tolerate different points of view, be able to respect difference and be ready to resolve problems through debate and discussion. The sine qua non of the new conservatism is the idea that the condition of citizenship is a culture in which such ethical values are its substance. It so happens, goes the argument of Huntington and also Roger Scruton, that the culture in question is Western.

It is this sentiment that informs the growing intolerance of multiculturalism, cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism. It is often allied with aggressive assaults on the poor and the working-class, who are today more and more composed of migrants. This is the importance of the South African revolution as a world-historical event. It is more and more the major test of cosmopolitanism in the world.

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