<p style="text-align:center">Subjects and Citizens</p>

<p style="text-align:center">Friends of the Library Lecture
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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, Friends of the Library, thank you for this invitation to share some thoughts on the topic of subjects and citizens post-1994. As we celebrate 20 years of democracy this year, it is an opportune moment to reflect on what progress we have made during the past two decades.

My reflections are shaped by my location in critical historical sociology, and to begin with I have a few preliminary comments.

First, you will agree that any serious reflection on the question of the progress that we have made requires us at the outset to clarify our notions of 'subject' and 'citizen' and, if you like, subjecthood and citizenship. This is because it is these notions that will ultimately guide our interpretations and judgements.

Second, we must recognise that as with notions such as democracy and development, there are what we can describe as 'thick, rich, and multi-faceted and 'thin', limited and narrow notions of citizenship – notions that reduce citizenship to the formal, legal and primarily political dimensions versus those that also encompass wider economic and social dimensions.

Third, the issue of subject and citizen has to be sensitive to the nature of our society: the progress that we have made cannot be broached only at the level of the population in general. It has to also be considered in relation to the social class, 'race' and gender dimensions of our society, the divides of urban and rural, employed and unemployed, and those who wield authority and power within our society and those who are at a distance from such power.

Third, we have to permit that between the poles of 'subject' and 'citizen' there could be a range of conditions, such as semi-subjecthood and semi-citizenship and the like.

For example, if prior to 1994 black South Africans were not formally citizens they were not entirely subjects either. The state of being 'subject' does not mean that black South Africans and subordinate social groups more generally possess no historical agency, that they are not thinking actors.

Fourth, we may also want to recognise that historical development is seldom the relentless triumphant march on *all* fronts of citizenship over subjecthood. Some actions may expand citizen rights in certain areas, while others may create subjecthood in other domains.

So clarity on the terms 'subject' and 'citizen' is vitally important for any discussion on what progress has been achieved over the past 20 years.

Reflections

My reflections are as follows.

1994, without doubt, was politically a revolutionary breakthrough.

From being a racially exclusive capitalist democracy with strong authoritarian characteristics, we became a capitalist democracy in which for the first time almost all inhabitants became citizens.

Critical here was a commendable Constitution, including a Bill of Rights, which held out the promise of an extensive range of rights that did not exist for all or at all prior to 1994.

As a society, as social groups and individuals we, and especially black South Africans, made a significant transition and advance in 1994 from 'subjects' to 'citizens'.

During the past 20 years there have been significant gains and achievements in a wide number of domains. Despite coming under strain and experiencing challenges, the essential institutions of democracy remain intact. We must not lose sight of this

However, a number of post-1994 and contemporary realities, compromise, or have the potential to compromise, the ideal of full and substantive citizenship rights for all that the Constitution promises. Indeed, while formal political rights remain intact, they substantively condemn or could condemn large numbers of people to conditions that are associated with being subjects and subjecthood.

I wish to take six examples.

First, we have the dubious honour of being the most unequal society on earth. During the past 20 years income inequality has increased, as has inequality within 'races'. The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994, while the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994

The divides of 'race', class, gender and geography are still very evident – the vantage point of the Monument provides a graphic illustration. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, crass materialism, tenderpreneurship and unbridled accumulation run rampant. Numerous morbid ills destroy innumerable lives and wreak havoc in our country.

It makes one recall the lines of the great German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht who in 'Parade of the Old New' writes: "I stood on a hill and I saw the Old approaching but it came as the New. It hobbled up on new crutches which no one had ever seen before and stank of new smells of decay which no one had ever smelt before".

So it has to be posed: What does citizenship mean for those who are poor, unemployed, and struggle to survive?

Second, large parts of our schooling system continue to evince problems that compromise the provision of high quality education to children and youth and thwart the realization of their potential.

Despite almost universal formal participation in schooling, our schools have significant problems related to drop-outs, retention, progression and successful completion. As has been noted, 'the simple reality is that enrolment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not imply learning' (Sayed, 2007:8).

There are some 2.8 million or over 40% of people between the ages of 18-24 that are neither in education or training, nor in employment. This is not only 'an educational problem, but constitutes a social and economic disaster' (Cloete, 2009:43).

Education besides having an intrinsic significance is, as Martha Nussbaum (2006) argues, intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the cultivation of humanity. It facilitates the defence, assertion and pursuit of citizen and human rights and active democratic participation.

Our schools by and large fail to develop the critical capacities that are essential for functioning as democratic citizens, not to mention the basic literacies that citizens require to function effectively in a complex and changing society.

With respect to the issue of 'subjects' and 'citizens', what are the consequences of the educational failures of our schooling for millions of South Africans; and what does this means for the kind and quality of citizenship that can be exercised by those that have been failed by our schools?

Third, patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the potential of girls and women and the contribution they can make to society and development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in our country. To what extent are women able to fully realize the promised fruits of citizenship?

Fourth, it must also be asked whether our universities are contributing to forging critical and democratic citizenship through their social purposes of knowledge production, learning-teaching and community engagement. Is there also adequate proactive engagement by universities to contribute to the intellectual and cultural development of a critical citizenry?

Our responsibility is to produce graduates who are not only capable professionals, but also intellectuals and "a critical, creative and compassionate citizenry" (O' Connell, 2006). Yet, increasingly the trend is to approach higher education and investments in universities from the perspective largely of the promotion of economic growth and the preparation of students as skilled professionals for the labour market and economy.

Such a narrow and instrumental approach to higher education, which reduces its value to its efficacy for economic growth, and calls that universities should prioritise 'skills' denude higher education of its much wider social value and critically necessary citizenship functions.

Fifth, in *South Africa Pushed to the Limit*, Hein Marais warns of the danger of the "recourse to rousing affirmations of identity and entitlement" and to populist discourses of 'authenticity' – "who is a *real* South African, who is a *real* African, who is *black*, what is a *man*, what is the role of *women*". These utterances, Marais argues, are accompanied by ever more "narrow and exacting" interpretations of culture and tradition (Marais, 2011).

Marais' comments put into perspective the crass utterances of Jimmy Manyi on 'race'; the repugnant tabloid chatter of Kuli Roberts on so-called Coloureds, and minister Trevor Manuel's outburst that Manyi has "the same mind that operated under apartheid", and does not appreciate that his "utterances are both unconstitutional and morally reprehensible".

Given the apartheid legacy, there can be no quarrel with redress and social equity for economically and socially disadvantaged poor, black and women South Africans. Judge Albie Sachs rightly notes that pervasive inequities "cannot be wished away by invoking constitutional idealism" (Sachs, 2006:x).

Still, we find ourselves in the grip of a *profound paradox*: the use of '*race*' to promote redress and to advance social equity. In the words of Judge Sachs, we are making "conscious use of racial distinctions in order to create a non-racial society" (2006:ix).

Such an approach has many dangers. For one, employing solely 'race' for redress purposes may benefit only or primarily the black political and economic elites, and simply reproduce existing class inequalities. The ascendancy of politically-connected elites into business tycoons makes no difference to eliminating or diminishing the massive inequalities in our society.

For another, as the late Neville Alexander warned, using 'race' to advance redress and social equity could ossify racial categorisations and ensure that we continue to construct identities primarily along the lines of 'race' (Alexander, 2007). Surely our goal as well as our strategies should be to *erode* and *dissolve* racial categorisations and permit our identities to be rich, multiple, fluid and dynamic rather than frozen along 'race' lines.

Issues of 'race', culture, identity, language and many kinds of hurt remain to be confronted. We will only be truly free and equals when we begin to tackle the issue of 'difference' with sensitivity, honesty and courage, and begin to respect and embrace diversity in all its rich and myriad forms. We shy away from open and honest engagement with these difficult, complex and emotive issues at our own peril.

Those who stridently seek to give ever more "narrow and exacting" answers to the questions of "who is a *real* South African, who is a *real* African, who is *black,* what is a *man*, (and) what is the role of women" could unleash dangerous developments and reduce millions of citizens to subjecthood.

Sixth, there is a tendency to seek to silence critics of government and the state by questioning their credentials to speak publicly and asking about their 'struggle' credentials.

The view that we must satisfy certain conditions before we can express our views as citizens, or that we can only critique if we participated in the anti-apartheid struggle is both wrong and dangerous.

It effectively turns millions of citizens, including all those born after 1994, into subjects and makes a mockery of our Constitution. It is our constitutional *right* as citizens to freely express our views and to critique. Indeed, it is our *obligation* to 'speak truth to power.'

There are many other issues that one can raise in relation to the question of 'subject' and 'citizen' in South Africa. The ones I have raised will suffice.

It could be contended that the problems associated with most of the examples that I have used have their roots in our apartheid past and represent some of the challenges that we face in making an effective transition from subjecthood to meaningful citizenship.

Perhaps! The last two examples, however, have nothing to do with apartheid.

And what about laws and policies that the ANC has been seeking to enact in relation to traditional rural authorities, which make rural people the subjects of unelected traditional leaders?

There are considerable implications for the citizen rights of rural black people, for their participation at local level and for accountability. There are especially major consequences for women and girls, which are already being felt in highly adverse ways.

This exemplifies an issue that I raised at the outset: actions that create or reproduce conditions that simultaneously spawn subjecthood, in this case among rural black people in the previous bantustans, who only recently became citizens.

The issues that I have raised could be construed as questioning the value of being a citizen or of citizenship in the face of the reality of still limited economic and social rights and opportunities for millions of South African citizens. That is not the position I hold.

Certainly, it has been argued in some quarters that democracy and citizen rights and meaningful citizenship is impossible without particular levels of economic development. The late and eminent political theorist Claude Ake noted that many regimes tied

> the issue of democratization to economic development, asserting that the quest for democracy must be considered in the context of Africa's most pressing needs, especially emancipation from 'ignorance, poverty and disease'. The pursuit of democracy will not, it is argued, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. Nor will it give shelter to the homeless. People must be educated and fed before they can appreciate democracy, for there is no choice in ignorance and there are no possibilities for self-fulfilment in extreme poverty (1991: 35)

This suggests that we have to wait for economic development to ensure democracy and meaningful citizenship. I don't accept this.

Can democracy and meaningful citizen rights and active citizenship not impact positively on the process of development, as well as on its nature and trajectory? Ake's views are pertinent:

> Africa's failed development experience suggests that postponing democracy does not promote development; (and) (e)ven if it were true that democracy is competitive with development, it does not follow that people must be more concerned with improving nutrition than casting votes, or more concerned with health than with political participation. The primary issue is not whether it is more important to eat well than to vote, but *who is entitled to decide which is more important* (ibid:35).

Amartya Sen argues much the same point when he speaks of 'freedom as an end and freedom as means', and states that '(o)vercoming the inequalities of power associated with economic privilege is an important aspect of democracy in the full sense of the term' (cited in Motala and Chaka, nd:14;15).

Conclusion

To conclude: in the final chapter of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes:

> The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.
> I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended (1994: 617).

'The truth' on the eve of 20 years of democracy in South Africa is also that:
- We are citizens, but our citizenship is as yet inadequately developed and we are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others'.
- 'Our devotion' in practice to a thick idea of citizenship is debatable; a thick and multi-faceted conception of citizenship has to continue to be struggled for and won
- The idea that 'with freedom (and citizenship) comes responsibilities' has all too quickly been forgotten or has to still be fully grasped in many quarters in South Africa.

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