

From Subject to Citizen: How far have we come?

Reflection on how far we have come requires us to clarify our notions of 'subject' and 'citizen' and subjecthood and citizenship.

First, as with notions such as democracy and development, there are 'thick' and 'thin', 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.

Second, the question of movement from subject to citizen has to be sensitive to the nature of our society: 'how far we have come' 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, between the poles of 'subject' and 'citizen' there are a range of conditions such as semi-subjecthood and semi-citizenship and the like.

Finally, historical development is hardly ever 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 discussion of how far we have progressed in South Africa.

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'.

Still, a number of current realities compromise our Constitution and the promise of a substantive citizenship that the Constitution holds out.

Indeed, they condemn many of our people, black and white, women and men, young and not so young to conditions that are more associated with being subjects and subjecthood.

We have the dubious honour of being the most unequal society on earth.

During the past sixteen 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 from 2.0% to 1.7%. Conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%.

At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20%. 43% of our fellow citizens continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year.

The divides of 'race', class, gender and geography are still very evident. 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. What, then, does citizenship mean for those who are poor, unemployed, and struggle to survive?

Large parts of our schooling system continue to compromise the provision of high quality education to children and youth and thwart the realization of their potential. Our schools have major problems of drop outs, retention, progression and successful completion. 'The simple reality is that enrolment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not imply learning'.

10% of our secondary school produce 60% of the students who are eligible to attend university, and 20% of these schools produce 80% of the students.

Almost 2.8 million or 41.6% of people between the ages of 18-24 are neither in education nor in training or employment. This is not only 'an educational problem, but constitutes a social and economic disaster'.

Yet education is strongly connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, to the cultivation of a humane society, and the defence, assertion and pursuit of citizen and human rights and active democratic participation.

Our schools by and large fail dismally 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.

What are the consequences of the educational failures of our schooling and what does this mean for the kind and quality of citizenship that can be exercised by those that have been failed by our schools?

Of course, it must also be asked whether our universities are contributing to forging critical and democratic citizenship through their purposes of producing knowledge, learning-teaching and community engagement.

Our responsibility is to produce graduates who are not only capable professionals, but also intellectuals and critical citizens.

Yet, the trend is to approach higher education largely in terms of promoting economic growth and preparing students as skilled workers. Is there adequate engagement by our universities to support intellectual and cultural development of a critical citizenry?

But do not our shortcomings have their roots in our apartheid past? Perhaps!

What, then, about laws and policies being enacted 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.

In some quarters it is argued that democracy and meaningful citizenship is impossible without particular levels of economic development. This suggests that we have to wait for economic development to ensure democracy and meaningful citizenship. I don't accept this.

On the final page of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Tatamkulu 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'.

He adds: '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'.

'The truth is that' in 2010:

- We are citizens, but our citizenship is 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 and must continue to be struggled for
- 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.

Saleem Badat is Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University. This is an edited version of an address at the National Arts Festival Thinkfest panel on 'From Subject to Citizen: How far have we come?'