Citizenship of marginal/subjugated voices

by

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An opening gambit

‘Citizenship’ is a deceitful term, promising much but delivering very little for those outside ‘the city’. Having killed his brother, Cain established the first city. The first city was built on blood and estrangement. According to the biblical narrative, by killing his brother Abel, Cain becomes alienated from the land, human community, God, and himself (Genesis 4:8-14); he then goes on to build the first city (Genesis 4:17). But the story does not stop there. Early followers of Yahweh, the god of liberation, reject and revolt against the Canaanite city-states that subjugate and marginalize them economically, politically, socially, culturally, and religiously; only to witness the betrayal of their own leaders when they later establish Jerusalem as a city-state. The biblical narrative reminds us that the city (and citizenship) is a site of struggle. Jesus will not even stay in the city [of Jerusalem], choosing rather the walk each day to Bethany (Mark 11:11, 15-19, 27-14:11). And when he does decide to stay in the city, he is arrested and killed (Mark 14:12 ff) by those who control the city.

Fortunately, the term ‘citizenship’ acknowledges in itself its corruption, connoting a place for all, but denoting a special place for those in the city.

Explicating ‘citizenship’

Etymology aside, ‘citizenship’ is a problematic concept which requires explication. Can we find other terms that explicate those semantic features of ‘citizenship’ that are important for our context? For example, might we speak, in the context of this conference, of South African public life being partially constituted by the discourses of every community in our country, especially the poor and marginalized? Explicating ‘citizenship’ in this way moves us away from the prevailing individualistic and urban construals of the term. Fresh aphorias appear, but they offer space for fruitful reflection.

Delimiting the religious domain

Perhaps the first aphoria that opens up with my formulation has to do with the focus on discourse. Discourse is itself a slippery term, so we will need to decipher its meaning from its use in particular cases. My use concentrates on discourse as speech acts, but includes a range of other related practices. Having clarified this, somewhat, other questions immediately emerge: Is discourse the primary domain of religion? Is discourse the fundamental practice of religion? And if discourse is the main domain of religious practice, what is the relationship between discourse and praxis? Is discourse itself a form of praxis? More specifically, and anticipating the next section, what are the relationships between the discourse practice of
the church (in my case) and emancipatory praxis?

Privileging the poor and marginalized

Talk of ‘citizenship’, as I have indicated, tends to privilege those in power and those at the center. Some are more equal than others. But if ‘citizenship’ means that South African public life is partially constituted by the discourses of every community in our country, particularly the poor and marginalized, then the poor and marginalized would be privileged. But should such a privileging have epistemological as well as moral force? Do the poor and marginalized know differently or do they know better? Postmodern moves emphasize ‘know differently’, while liberation theologies lean towards ‘know better’.

Discerning the discourses of the dominated

An implicit aphoria in the previous section has to do with whether the poor and marginalized do have a discourse. My comments assume that they do, but this is contested terrain. The ideological domain, the focus of my discussion and the primary domain of religious discourse, can be characterized in a variety of ways. Some would insist on strong notions of ideological hegemony: the poor and marginalized have no significant discourse of their own because they have accommodated themselves to the logic of domination, either actively or pragmatically; theirs is 'a culture of silence' that can only be broken within the praxis of liberation and in dialogue with organic intellectuals.

While such views tend to see power in monolithic and strongly asymmetrical terms, there are those who would argue that power is located in multifarious places along a continuum, ranging from the hegemonic at one end of the continuum to the consciously ideological at the other end. According to this analysis, hegemony and ideology are related along a continuum, with the hegemonic proportion of any dominant ideology being greater or lesser depending on the context and the control of the dominant. Whether the dominated have a discourse depends on where and when one looks: the submerged, the unseen, the unrecognized may under certain conditions be called to awareness; under other conditions, things once perceived and explicitly marked may slip below the level of discourse into the unremarked recesses of the collective unconscious.

There is also another position from which to view domination and resistance and the place of the discourse of the poor and marginalized. A nuanced analysis of domination and resistance that is inherently suspicious of notions of hegemony, argues that theories of hegemony and false consciousness do not take account of ‘the hidden transcript' - the discourse, including speech acts and a whole range of other practices, that subordinate groups create in response to their ordeal of domination - a discourse that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. In this account, subordinate groups are already engaged in forms of resistance and already have a language. The culture of silence is a strategy and not the whole story. What is hidden is hidden for good reason, so any attempt to penetrate the disguise is dangerous. And when dignity and autonomy demand an irruption or an articulation, this must be done in ways determined by the dominated. There does not appear to be a silence to break or a language to create.

Clearly there is much here that requires more careful conceptual clarification.

Recognizing, recovering, arousing subjugated and marginalized discourse

Recognizing that there are (at least, potentially) subjugated and marginalized discourses is the first step in granting them citizenship/subjecthood'. That they are there is significant. But how are the discourses of the
dominated to be recovered? Clearly, as the previous section suggests, the task of recovery is dependent on one's analysis of domination (and resistance). What is the task if their discourses have still to be created, or if their discourses slide in and out of consciousness, or if they are there but hidden? And finally, how can these recovered discourses be brought into the public realm; how can they be aroused?

**Being partially constituted**

Poststructuralist notions of subjectivity provide useful resources for reconsidering questions of identity and discourse, enabling us to move beyond essentialist understandings of identity and discourse to a more dynamic appropriation of these terms. If it is possible for us as individuals, as for example feminist poststructuralists would argue, to transcend the blinders of our own social location by recognizing the differences by which we ourselves are constituted and by actively seeking to be partially constituted by work with different groups, what does this mean at a societal level? Work with groups who have been differently constituted exposes us to some of the forces and factors that have constituted them and so potentially enables us to be partially constituted by them. Recognizing that our becoming selves are always in the process of being constructed and negotiated enables us not only to articulate and claim a particular historical and social identity - to locate ourselves - and to build coalitions from a recognition of the partial knowledges of our own constructed identities, but also offers us ways of becoming other than we are. Is this possible on a national scale? For example, can we as a nation be partially constituted by the subjugated and marginalized discourses of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? What are the possibilities of constructing discourse and identity in such terms for the formation of public policy?

I use the word ‘partial’ deliberately, drawing on its full potential: while the discourse of poor and marginalized voices cannot wholly constitute public policy, can it nevertheless partially constitute public policy in both senses of the term ‘partial’ - to some extent and in a particularly privileged (biased) way?

**Owning public discourse**

The poor and marginalized will only be citizens of South Africa when their discourses partially constitute public policy; only then will they hear their own voices in the national discourse, and only then will they own the public discourse. If public policy does not tear down the walls of the city, then the poor and marginalized will. ‘And as Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down" (Mark 13:1-2).

**Concluding reflections on the church and public policy**

Jesus is not optimistic about the possibility of the temple in Jerusalem providing a place for all the people of Palestine; so the walls will be torn down. If the discourses/theologies of the poor and marginalized hardly play a role in the life of the church in South Africa, what prospect is there of them partially constituting public policy? The presence of a religious voice in the formation of the public policy of our country is not enough; we must ask whose voice is it that is speaking and whose voices are absent. It is absence, I would argue, that characterizes the prophetic calling of the church. There is still work to be done for the prophetic sectors of the church (and synagogue, temple, mosque, etc) while the walls remain that exclude the poor and marginalized from citizenship.
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