

Media, citizenship and the politics of belonging in contemporary South Africa

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Abstract

Drawing on a wide range of theoretical and empirical studies, the articles in this special issue examine issues of citizenship and belonging in South Africa. Questions of belonging and citizenship are neither novel, nor particular to South Africa – they have been high on the intellectual (and popular) agenda internationally since at least the early 1990s. Yet South Africa's history of artificially separating and defining its citizens in the racial regimes of colonialism and apartheid still reverberates today, as is reflected in the continuing inequalities marred South African society. Post-apartheid governance of redress still requires the use of apartheid categories of 'race', but the terms under which we understand what it means to be South African are much wider, and require continued critical reflection. Using South Africa (and not the global North, as is so often the case) as the focal point for rethinking notions of citizenship and belonging, may urge us to rethink these notions and their meanings within fledgling democracies and societies in transition.

Keywords: citizenship, identity, politics of belonging

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's emergence from several decades of autocratic rule in the early 1990s gave rise to a range of democratic innovations. In the years that followed, experiences during the anti-apartheid struggle shaped practices aimed at creating democratic institutions and processes that could ensure the accountability and responsiveness of the new, democratically elected African National Congress (ANC)-led government. Key among these efforts was the establishment of free and democratic media that would be able to hold government to account and be a voice for a more inclusive citizenry than was the case under apartheid. However, as the meanings and practices of citizenship, rights and belonging continue to be renegotiated, legacies of marginalisation still persist, and new forms of exclusion are created. As a result, approaches aimed at 'deepening democracy' and extending the range and scope of opportunities for citizen participation, have led to a proliferation of 'new democratic spaces' for deliberation – including those in the media. 'Living with difference' is, however, proving to be a thorny issue: How is a balance to be struck between the need to treat people equally (via legality of citizenship), the need to treat people differently (the reality of multicultural nations) and the need to maintain shared values and social cohesion (the South African nation-building project)? Consider, for example, that 20 years after its democratisation, South Africa is in the grips of a crisis of accountability. Shoddy service delivery, increasing government-sanctioned violence against citizens who voice their discontent with this state of affairs, as well as accelerated attacks on journalistic freedom and freedom of expression, foster perceptions of a government that is distant, unaccountable and at war with its citizens.