Paradoxes of Citizenship and Justice in Divided Societies: Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina and South Africa

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Citizenship is usually perceived as “a talisman for a fair and just society”, yet in divided societies, ideals of citizenship can be highly problematic, if not outright paradoxical. Thus, constructs of citizenship are all too often used (or perceived to be used) as tools by governments to control people, rather than protect them, and the applied narratives of citizenship can just as easily disenfranchise as empower certain segments of society. This pervasive distrust and unease has led NGOs, Governmental and International Organisations to focus on civil society, rather than the state, as a conduit for the cultivation of citizenship as a stabilising force. These are the reflections of Dr. Lynn A. Staeheli, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Durham, presented in her talk entitled “Paradoxes of Citizenship and Justice in Divided Societies: Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina and South Africa”. This lecture, hosted by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB), in collaboration with the Graduate Programs in Urban Planning, Policy and Design (MUPP-MUD) at AUB’s Department of Architecture & Design marked the first presentation in the Social Justice and the City lecture series.

Staeheli’s presentation reflected on the findings from over one-hundred interviews with NGOs, donors, and young people carried out in her case-study states: Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina and South Africa. The interviewees were asked about their own perceptions of, and approaches toward citizenship, with a particular emphasis on the application of citizenship training schemes to youth activists. The object of this research, Staeheli explained, was to apply “an urban lens to Social Justice”.

Through a conceptual, socio-linguistic and empirical evaluation and analysis of these interview findings, Staeheli was able to identify four paradoxes that arise when notions of citizenship are applied to divided societies:

1. Can we have Citizenship without reconciliation?

Despite a well-established “triad of democracy, reconciliation and reconstruction” forming the background of conventional post-conflict settlements, many practitioners in divided societies are weary of reflecting on the past. Many are cautious of dwelling on past conflicts on grounds that such memories are still “too raw”, “irrelevant to the future” or, most dangerously, liable to re-enflame those now dormant, but unresolved conflicts and animosities. Nevertheless, Staeheli identified a growing assertiveness of exasperated youths
to address the root causes of past conflicts that now stand as an obstacle to Social Justice and progression.

2. Does Citizenship (and Citizenship advocacy) reside within the realm of the State or the realm of Civil Society?

Though traditional and legal definitions and ideals of “citizenship” tend to refer to a legal relationship/contract between the Citizenry and the State, NGOs have tended to emphasise the importance of Civil Society (rather than the State) as practitioners of citizenship advocacy and cultivation in divided societies. The vast majority of interviewees shared this latter view, with a general consensus that the paralysis of the state in divided societies renders civil society as the only pragmatic conduit through which ideals of citizenship and social justice can be pursued (and the State held accountable). This paradox is further complicated however by the realisation that civil society, in terms of its organisational structures (based around gender, race, sect, age, etc.) is fundamentally unequal, and so potentially a divisive force in the construction of citizenship.

3. Do notions of “Globalised Citizenship” positively or negatively affect the pursuit of Citizenship and Social Justice in divided societies?

Despite its inherent value in promoting human rights (by virtue of personhood), ideals of global citizenship can actually disrupt the construction of citizenship and pursuit of social justice in divided societies. Here Staeheli used the example of Lebanon to advocate that in the case of divided societies, a strict emphasis on national (in this case Lebanese) citizenship is essential in holding the country together – by presenting a unifying identity despite all of society’s other divisions. An emphasis on global citizenship would deny the Lebanese people of this unifying identity. This paradox is further complicated however by the issue of Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, who can now be legally excluded from the rights of the citizenry due to this privilege of national over globalised citizenship.

4. Is there a danger that the training of activists in Citizenship advocacy can have a destabilising rather than stabilising effect on divided societies?

Staeheli’s final paradox draws on the example of revolutionary activists participating in the 2011 Arab uprisings – many of whom were products of citizenship training programs led by local and international NGOs. The conduct of these activists demonstrated the unpredictability of how youth activists will use such training – in these cases actually destabilising and dividing previously stable countries. The values and skills of citizenship and social justice can be taught, yet there is no guarantee how these values and skills will be interpreted and utilised.

In exposing the paradoxes of citizenship, Staehli argued that those paradoxes are not problematic but actually a reflection of everyday tensions between ideals and realities. It is those paradoxes themselves that allow the concept of citizenship to be debated in the public realm in the hope that they become more equitable, closer to their set ideals.