PROPERTY AND CITIZENSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICAN LAND REFORM

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Although nation states have apparently withered away in the face of global capitalism, national belonging and citizenship continue to occupy a position of importance or have become more significant than ever (J. and J.L. Comaroff 2000; Trouillot 2001). Despite the erosion of state sovereignty, and hence the transformation of what it means to be a citizen within the modern nation state, it remains the case that “most global processes materialise in national territories, largely through national institutional arrangements” (Sassen, cited in J. and J.L. Comaroff 2000: 324). Citizenship is no exception. Paradoxically, transfrontier mobility has augmented the importance of autochthony (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000), and the ever-greater influence of transnational processes has forged increasingly ethnicised ideas about citizenship (Verdery 1998).

Where many anthropologists investigating the changing and contingent nature of citizenship have placed much emphasis on the destiny of migrants or incomers from elsewhere, my concern in this paper is how citizenship is extended or denied to those from within existing national boundaries. How do particular categories of people either gain access to or become excluded from a sense of entitlement to a common national identity, with all it entails? This phenomenon, which we might call ‘internal citizenship’, has received some attention in the scholarly literature. Anthropological studies have shown, in particular, how citizenship is often experienced through, or mediated by, forms of identification other than national/political ones. In the Middle East, for example, kinship loyalties, allegiance to tribal leaders, and religious affiliation play a part in mediating the relationship between the state and its subjects (Longva 2000; Joseph 2000). Even in a society such as the US, where patrimonial and other kinds of ‘primordial loyalties’ might be thought less important, citizenship has been shown to be modelled on the existing gender/race axes of identity which were laid down in an earlier era (Ong 1996).
Much anthropological work, then, has examined the modelling of citizenship, especially in settings where the concept is relatively new, on pre-existing social forms of identification: whether these be lineage, gender, allegiance to tribal-style authorities, or even habituated patterns of behaviour laid down by race. In this paper I explore a case—post-apartheid South Africa—in which the ‘newness’ of citizenship derived not from people’s being unaccustomed to such a concept, but rather from its having been actively denied to people in the past. Mamdani’s claim that the position of Western-style ‘citizen’ in a South African setting was separated from—but partly predicated on—the ‘subject’ status of the African rural population is by now well known (1996). With the dawn of South Africa’s liberation from this system of ‘bifurcated despotism’, it was the aspired-to egalitarian character of citizenship which—as in other post-transition settings, such as post-Independence Mexico (Lomnitz 1999)—eclipsed all its other features. The most immediate symbol of citizenship initially lost and now—along with its egalitarian associations—to be restored, was that of land.

It is not only in South Africa that entitlement to property has acted as a template for the citizen’s rights to gain access to other, broader, forms of entitlement. Although it may seem self-evident that a sense of belonging be built upon the basis of the importance of territory or place, it is often only in situations of extreme flux and under conditions of rapid transition that land comes to be invested with particular significance. One such case has been that of post-socialist Eastern Europe. Here, the threat that communally owned property would be privatised and alienated from common ownership led to a primordialised reconstruction of land as an ‘inalienable possession’. Through “ideas about property, enhanced flows of capital and concepts” had the apparently contradictory effect of tying “interests to particular places” (Verdery 1998: 298).

In South Africa it was the systematic denial of rights in landed property, and their alienation from those who had previously held title to landed property, that imbued it with significance as a symbol for the denial of citizenship. In the planning of apartheid’s ideologues, a system of customary tenure, closely allied to indirect rule, had rendered communally-held land in separate ethnic territories the basis of political dependency upon chiefs for the rural African population (Mamdani 1996: 21–2). It was this system which laid the foundation for the