Invited and Invented Spaces of Participation: Neoliberal Citizenship and Feminists' Expanded Notion of Politics

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This short conceptual piece calls for a careful rethinking of what feminist scholars have articulated as an expanded notion of politics. Rejecting the binary constructs of formal/informal, feminists have demonstrated the significance of community-based activism as an informal arena of politics and citizenship construction æ one in which women and disadvantaged groups are most active and effective. The present essay aims to extend that feminist insight by illuminating the inherent variety in collective actions that grassroots mobilize. The analysis offered warns of the risk arising from the literature's focus on strategies of survival: the likelihood of a bifurcated conceptualization of informal, community-based politics that distinguishes as "legitimate civil society" the grassroots actions and informal politics that build participatory democracy; and dismisses as an "outcast civil society" any otherwise patterned grassroots actions and informal politics, which are rhetorically criminalized as undertakings by "extremists."

To elucidate that point, the essay introduces the interacting and mutually constitutive concepts of "invited" and "invented" spaces of citizenship, and urges recognition of the full range of spaces within the informal arena where citizenship is practiced. "Invited" spaces[1] are defined as the ones occupied by those grassroots and their allied non-governmental organizations that are legitimized by donors and government interventions. "Invented" spaces are those, also occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action, but directly confronting the authorities and the status quo. While the former grassroots actions are geared mostly toward providing the poor with coping mechanisms and propositions to support survival of their informal membership, the grassroots activity of the latter challenges the status quo in the hope of larger societal change and resistance to the dominant power relations.

In this neoliberal moment, when relations between the state and civil society are central to the project of state legitimization, it is particularly important to formulate an inclusive definition of the informal arena of politics. Such a realistic understanding should account for the fluidity of grassroots collective action across both the invited and the invented spaces of citizenship and acknowledge, as well, the significance of the invented spaces of insurgency and resistance.

Feminists' Expanded Notion of Politics

Feminists have been the most vocal critics of a liberal conceptualization of citizenship, as being Eurocentric, seeing citizenship rights as linear and evolutionary (i.e., that political and civil citizenship will bring about social and economic citizenship and rights), and assuming the state to be the institution granting citizenship (e.g., Marshall 1964). Feminists have refuted liberals' claims of universalism and gender blindness, arguing that, to start with, citizenship has been about only men and their rights of citizenship. By not recognizing difference, feminist theorists

have pointed out, the universal claims of a liberal citizenship discourse inherently favor men and those with power (Young 1990; Sandercock 1998a). Feminist scholars have demonstrated that women's exclusion has not been an aberration, but integral to the theory and practice of citizenship and liberal theories of politics (Pateman 1988; Lister 2003:5). Demonstrating the constitutive exclusion of women in these theories and practices has been key to feminists' expanded notion of politics. Asserting that citizenship is dependent on a set of arrangements and practices that are gendered, their analysis thus rejects the assumption that simply the formal inclusion of women will change the structure of citizenship that relies on gendered hierarchies (Durish 2002).

Feminists have, furthermore, highlighted how the binary constructs of public-private spheres feed the construction and legitimation of "needs," associated with the public sphere, versus the delegitimation of "wants," the category associated with the private sphere (Fraser 1987). Such discourse thus de-politicizes what occurs in the private sphere associated with women's activities (Tripp 1998; Yuval-Davis 1997; Lister 1997; McEwan 2000; Sandercock 1998a). By rejecting such dichotomies of public/private and active/passive, feminist theorists have mounted a significant challenge to the conventional formulations of citizenship. They have revealed how the exclusionary conceptualization of political arenas of citizenship, has effectively ignored the political activities and agency of women in grassroots neighborhood and community-based groups, those most readily available to them and where they are most effective (Kaplan 1998; Naples 1998; M. Desai 2002; Jelin 1990; Robnett, 1997; Lister 1997; Staheli and Cope 1994). Feminist studies have brought to light women's political work carried out within the private sphere, through informal networks of household and community, around issues of collective consumption and with respect to the capitalist crisis of reproduction (Miraftab 2004; Bakker 2003; McEwan 2001; Lawson and Klak 1990). Moreover, they have asserted recognition of the unpaid, caring work performed at home as performance of a citizenship responsibility carrying social rights (Lister 2003:3).

In the last decade, not only academic circles, but also development and planning agencies have granted legitimacy to the significance of informal politics and of informal action at the grassroots level. Today most development and planning projects, including the hard-core promoters of neoliberal development programs and policies (e.g., World Bank, USAID), pay special attention to community-based informal politics and grassroots activism. Elsewhere I have discussed how, nevertheless, neoliberal policies depoliticize grassroots participatory discourses (Miraftab 2001). My analysis highlights neoliberalism's seeming contradiction: it erodes women's livelihoods and access to their lack of access to the most essential services, although at the same time it opens up certain public realms of decision-making from which women had been excluded.

The global neoliberal policies of privatization and cost recovery in providing basic services launch simultaneous and contradictory processes of selective inclusion and exclusion for the poor, and in particular for women. In South Africa, for example, state decentralization and the promotion of local governments have brought large proportions of women and disadvantaged

people into the arena of formal politics through local councils. But policies have, simultaneously, evicted a large proportion of poor households from their shelters and have disconnected them from basic services (A. Desai 2002; Desai and Heusden 2003; Bond 2002). This selective opening of some spaces and closing of others raises troubling discordances for feminists and others who support the participatory discourse of liberation and emancipation.

Clarifying the Feminist Insight

Feminists' recognition of the grassroots' informal politics, the main arena of poor women's activism, has usefully expanded the notion of politics and has challenged the binary constructs of formal and informal that recognized only formal politics, dominated by men, as "real" politics. The significance of forms of political action taken by women and disadvantaged population through informal arenas has been made clear (Naples and Desai 2002; Naples 1998; Kaplan 1997; Jelin1990). Similarly, traditional assumptions of what qualifies as practicing citizenship and its political participation have been challenged. In building on these conceptual, theoretical and practical achievements of the feminist critique of liberal citizenship, however, it is important to avoid constructing yet another set of binary relationships — this time within informal politics — that incorporates invidious distinctions among informal collective actions. In particular, grassroots activities that seek coping mechanisms and strategies to survive the adverse effects of the existing social and political hierarchies (predominantly within the invited spaces of citizenship); may be validated in contrast to those that seek forms of resistance to the dominant systems of exploitation and oppression (predominantly within the invented spaces of citizenship).

Transition between Coping and Resistance Mechanisms

Grassroots mobilize within a wide range of spaces of citizenship, making use of what in a specific time and place is effective in presenting demands and gaining results. Such informal practices follow no blueprint, but are situated in their specific contexts. Sometimes they do use formal channels (e.g., courts, laws, local councils); at other times their claims rely on informal and directly oppositional forms (e.g., rallies, demonstrations, and picketing). In addressing hardships, sometimes the grassroots focus on mechanisms of survival or coping strategies; at other times they turn to strategies of resistance, challenging the structural basis for their hardship. It is important to stress the flexibility of grassroots strategies, to help avoid a rigid conceptual barrier between the invented and the invited spaces of citizenship as outlined earlier in this paper.

Those spaces of practicing citizenship are not mutually exclusive. Grassroots collective actions move between them, and at different points in their struggles use different sets of tools, and spaces of mobilization. Furthermore, what distinguishes the two spaces is not necessarily their affiliations with a fixed set of groups, since grassroots mobilizations may move across or occupy both kinds of citizenship spaces. Their distinction lies in the fact that actions taken by the poor within the invited spaces of citizenship, however innovative they may be, aim to cope with

existing systems of hardship and are sanctioned by donors and government interventions. Within the invented spaces, however, grassroots actions are characterized by defiance that directly challenges the status quo: in one space strategies of survival are sought within the existing structural system, and in the other resistance is mounted to bring it down.

To advance their just cause, grassroots may take advantage of both of these spaces of citizenship. But the mainstream media, and the state too, often obscure the wide range of grassroots strategies within the informal arena of politics, so that public discourse recognizes only a limited segment of these spaces of action. Their rigid separation of informal political actions implicitly establishes a bifurcated civil society: an "authentic" one associated with the invited citizenship spaces and an "outcast" and "extremist" one associated with the invented spaces. As binary constructs are known to do, such dichotomist positioning of the different citizenship spaces within the informal arena risks criminalizing the latter by designating the former as the "proper" space for civil society participation.

Nor is the mainstream international development literature innocent in this trend. Its narrow focus on collective action that highlights the coping mechanisms used by the poor, legitimates their actions selectively as civil society's celebrated social capital (Fukuyama 1995; World Bank 1998). But collective actions that resist neoliberal policies have been given less attention by this literature and have often been criminalized by the neoliberal state and the mainstream media. Limiting the recognition of participation in citizenship only to actions within officially sanctioned channels (invited spaces) constitutes yet another state-centered perspective. Just as liberal views assigned the citizenship-granting agency to the state, this perspective assigns to the neoliberal state the agency to grant status as civil society, and defines the spaces where citizenship can be practiced.

Challenges for Feminist Research

The proposition put forth here for future research and articulation is that within the informal arena of politics there is need to sharpen differentiation and recognition of the range of collective actions in which disadvantaged groups engage. It is important to expand our study of informal community-based grassroots activism beyond simply the sanctioned politics of the informal arena as based on a selective definition of legitimate civil society behavior. Grassroots' oppositional practices invent new spaces of citizenship practice and offer a significant force transcending legal civil citizenship to achieve substantive citizenship. They help to "expand the public sphere" (Rose 2000) so that citizens' socio-economic right to a just city and social justice in their lives can be achieved. Further research needs to explore the interconnection and dynamics between different spaces of citizenship, and how and under what conditions the grassroots move between them.

To conclude: this essay hails the feminist project of citizenship for its successful expansion of the notion of citizenship to overcome the rigid separations of what is considered political and

what is not, what is validated as citizen participation and what is not, and where the line between citizens' rights and their obligations is drawn. Questioning the mutually exclusive treatment of the political arenas of formal and informal, of the discourses of citizens' rights and obligations, or of passive and active citizenships, feminists have significantly reformulated the concept of citizenship in theory and in practice. This paper, however, calls for further refinement of the feminist conceptualization of informal politics, by acknowledging the significance of oppositional practices of the poor, taking place in invented spaces of insurgency within the informal political arena. Further examination of these relatively unstudied spaces of citizenship practice should make an important contribution towards an inclusive reformulation of informal politics. That task is particularly important in light of the contemporary neoliberal appropriation of the discourse on civil society.

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[1] I borrow the term invited spaces of citizenship from Cornwall 2002.