Chapter 9

Citizen Engagement and Power Asymmetry in Class Divided Societies: Some Reflections on South Africa

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Various scholars valorise the role of citizen engagement as crucial for public sector communication in democratic societies. Not only is it argued that citizen involvement is vital but benefits such as the ability to solicit feedback and input are advanced. In emphasising the centrality of public sector organisations' interaction with citizens, Piqueiras, Canel and Luoma-aho (2020: 277) present citizen engagement as vital in "involving those who are served ... for a thriving society". Sanders and De Los Monteros (2020: 329) position the incorporation of principles of high-reliability organisations into the public sector as crucial in fostering a "communication culture for the benefit of citizens". Equally, the legitimacy of organisations has been located in their ability to respond to stakeholders' demands (Luoma-aho, Olkkonen & Canel, 2020). Again, at the heart of this disposition is the role of citizen engagement.

At face value, this valorisation may appear to be good, positive and progressive and even seductive to public sector communicators. Thus, various public sector institutions genuinely believe this to be the case – that when properly executed – citizen engagement may positively impact on the lives of ordinary citizens. This is precisely the reason it is deemed a crucial part in the delivery model of public good. However, stripped of all the bells and whistles, it is apparent that the way citizen engagement is implemented, lacks the

ability to play a crucial role in the redistribution of power in society (Arnstein, 1969). To this effect, it becomes part of the tool for negotiating consent with the underclasses, who remain oppressed and marginalised in most democratic capitalist societies. To sell the idea that something is done about their plight, citizen engagement is unleashed with the primary purpose of gaining the consent of the oppressed. When consent is effective, the marginalised become the defenders of the status quo.

In this context, the objective of this chapter is to present a deeper analysis of citizen engagement – as part of the broader citizen participation discourse – in a class-divided capitalist state. The chapter advances the notion that meaningful citizen engagement must contend with the fundamental question of power redistribution. In this regard, the chapter grapples with the question of the extent of the effectiveness of current citizen engagement approaches in addressing power asymmetry in class-divided societies. To respond to this question, broad practices of citizen engagement, as part of the communication regime, are analysed. The conclusion is drawn that while current approaches in South Africa are dominated and premised on theories from the Global North, this work remains pertinent for a progressive developmental state grappling with myriad socio-economic challenges. However, it is incumbent on communicators to connect the current citizen engagement efforts to the broader objective of the developmental state and the revolutionary agenda of the governing party to transfer the wealth of the country into the hands of the people.

Indeed, while the current approaches may be useful tools in temporarily calming down tensions among the classes, these approaches may not be able to deal with deep-seated structural issues underlying the socio-economic challenges faced by the majority. Hence, the subalterns often resort to other methods beyond citizen engagement, such as public strikes and service delivery protests where they break ranks with civil society and negotiate their own communicative power – a creation of a new or parallel public sphere – to

express their own dissatisfaction (Tivaringe & Kirshner, 2021). In the final analysis, public sector communicators would do well to interrogate the inherent contradictions of citizen engagement in the context of participatory democracy.

The chapter begins by unpacking South Africa's background and its position as the world's most unequal society facing a plethora of socio-economic challenges such as high levels of poverty and unemployment (Francis & Webster, 2019) in the context of stagnant economic growth (Radebe, 2020). This is followed by some theoretical approaches, particularly the need to infuse some critical analysis in relation to citizen engagement. To this end, Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation model is instructive, particularly as it locates the fundamental notion of redistribution of power in citizen participation. A gap analysis in the context of some approaches from the South African perspective is discussed. Consequently, the high-level thoughts discussed under the section include the re-grounding of citizen engagement within participatory democracy and citizenship in the context of civil society. A discussion and concluding remarks on the need to re-imagine a new public sphere are presented.

Background: The World's Most Unequal Society

South Africa is ranked as one of the most unequal countries in the world with half the population living below the poverty line and a staggering unemployment rate estimated at 30% (Francis & Webster, 2019). Many indicators such as the Gini Index, a measure of the distribution of income across a population, paint the country as one of the most unequal in the world with a Gini coefficient that is close to 0.70 (Ataguba, 2021). In the past decade, the country has experienced slow economic growth coupled with mounting public debt and the deteriorating state of public finance (Radebe, 2020). The country has also experienced below-forecast tax revenue collection, the rapid rise of debt and the poor performance of state-owned enterprises (Muller, 2019). This has been

exacerbated by the impact of the global outbreak of COVID-19. Hence, Francis and Webster (2019) argue that the inability to meaningfully address the high levels of inequality is due to insufficient attention to the way power reproduces inequality.

South Africa's poverty and inequality are also racialised. Poverty maintains a strong spatial dimension and is concentrated in the previously disadvantaged areas such as homelands, a reflection of the enduring legacy of apartheid (World Bank Group, 2018). These challenges notwithstanding, South Africa continues to aspire to being a developmental state to address the current levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment while diversifying the economy and reversing the process of deindustrialisation (Edigheji, 2010). Nevertheless, through its constitution, the country has an inbuilt public participation mechanism. As Nyati (2008: 102) posits, the participatory aspect of our constitutional democracy "goes further than regular elections every five years in that it guarantees involvement of each citizen in public life in between elections". Even at local government level, the community participation in, for example, the construction, implementation and evaluation of integrated development planning is guaranteed (Williams, 2006).

Therefore, it is in this context that citizen engagement takes place in South Africa. Taking into account socio-economic challenges, citizen engagement in a resource-constrained context such as South Africa is not a straightforward process, and this, coupled with the lack of citizens' capacity and knowledge of their rights to hold government accountable (Pade-Khene, 2018) makes this problem even more cumbersome. In the context of a developmental state agenda, the government's ability to involve citizens in crucial decisions through citizen engagement (Siebers, 2018) is regarded as pivotal. Thus, citizen engagement is expected to help improve social cohesion, liveability and the safety of communities (Held, 1987; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Horlick-Jones et al., 2007; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

Theoretical Approaches: A Critical Analysis of Citizen Engagement

Citizen engagement and participation is now central in public management, based on the assumption that it is useful for a thriving democratic society to involve recipients of public service. Most of the contemporary literature departs from Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation model whose central thesis is on redistribution of power. Arnstein (1969) perceives citizen participation in relation to citizen power and hence at the centre must be redistribution of power. "It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future" (Arnstein, 1969: 216). At the heart of this engagement and participation is the drive of social reforms by the marginalised through, inter alia, determining the sharing of information, policy direction, resource allocation and the distribution of services and patronage (Arnstein, 1969).

Figure 9 illustrates the eight 'rungs' that describe three general forms of citizen power in democratic decision-making, namely:

- Nonparticipation (no power);
- Degrees of tokenism (counterfeit power); and
- Degrees of citizen power (actual power).

As Arnstein (1969: 216) puts it "... participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo."

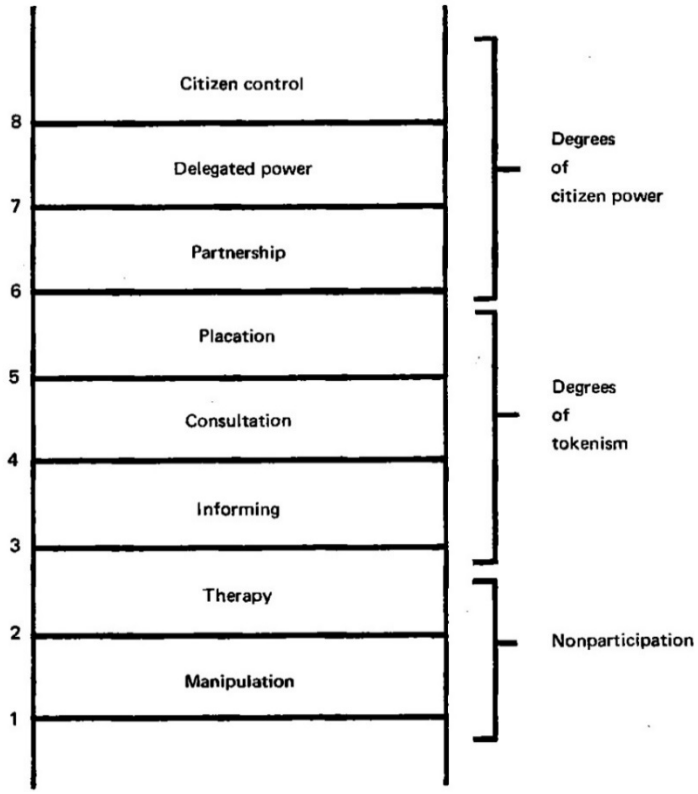

Figure 9: Eight rungs on a ladder of citizen participation (Source: This is the original 1969 illustration of Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation as it appeared in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*.)

The ladder exposes the social and political cleavages that citizen engagement theories must contend with in the interaction between the subalternised and powerholders. In class-divided societies and bourgeois democracies such as South Africa's, the powerful politicians act as proxies of the ruling capitalist class whose objective is to maintain the status quo that, inter alia, entails class exploitation. Of course, the two dominant social classes, the capitalists and proletarians (Drucker, 1994), are not homogeneous. There are divergent

views, often determined by proximity to the control of the means of production. Nevertheless, within the two dominant classes there is generalisation, with the subalterns regarding the capitalists as monolithic exploiters and the contrary holding that the powerful perceive the downtrodden as ill-informed masses (Arnstein, 1969).

However, citizen engagement encapsulates public institutions' efforts to develop more participatory forms of governance (Reddel & Woolcock, 2004). Thus, the underlying assumption is that public service is likely to improve when citizens are involved through engagements (Piqueiras, Canel & Luoma-aho, 2020). Engagement entails listening to citizens (Marlowe, 2005) since it is believed that this will ultimately improve the reputation of public institutions. As Piqueiras, Canel and Luoma-aho (2020: 277) posit, "new forms of citizen engagement entail undertaking dialogue and real collaboration in the form of coproduction between citizens and authorities". The most recent example of this approach in South Africa was the public hearings held across the country on the land expropriation without compensation Bill (Radebe & Chiumbu, 2022).

Of course, in the digital age, citizen engagement now takes place digitally, the digital divide and access in an unequal country like South Africa notwithstanding. This is additional to the range of platforms being employed to enable public participation, such as the traditional media (television, radio, print media and electronic media) and face-to-face interactions (Vivier, Seabe, Wentzel & Sanchez, 2015). Essentially, citizen engagement ought to be a bottom-up process that is crucial in resolving complex societal problems. This represents a departure from the traditional one-way communication culture entrenched in the public sectors (Bowden, Luoma-aho & Naumann, 2016; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2015 cited in Piqueiras, Canel & Luoma-aho, 2020). As part of participation (Steward, 2009), citizen engagement enables interaction between individuals and groups impacted by the public organisation (Bruce & Shelley, 2010). Hence, it is defined as "the intangible asset which measures the capacity of an

organization to get citizens involved in public administration processes" (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018).

Ma and Wu (2020) employ the concept of "coproducing public services with citizens" to analyse the impact of citizen engagement and found that, for government websites in China, citizens pay more attention to websites at higher administrative levels, which receive more citizen reports, in comparison with lower levels of government. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates some of the positive aspects of citizen engagement. However, the concept is not without its limitations and challenges. For example, Denhardt, Terry, Delacruz & Andonoska (2009: 1268) cite the lack of "democratic culture and civil society, profound poverty, time pressures and demands for immediate results, and the lack of an institutional infrastructure" as being among the barriers to citizen engagement in developing countries. Another issue raised is international aid programmes, which are believed to "thwart citizen engagement efforts" (Denhardt et al., 2009: 1268). This simplistic outlook on the Global South and democracy demonstrates some of the shortcomings in the analysis of citizen engagement in the context of liberal democracy spread by the west to the Global South.

Fundamentally, citizen engagement is premised on the promotion of liberal "democracies" by the Global North where citizenship is a normative term and a buzzword linked to the development rhetoric such as "participation", "accountability", "civil society", "social capital" and "good governance" (Robins, Cornwall & Von Lieres, 2008). As with all institutions and practices of liberal democracies transplanted from the Global North, it is assumed that citizen engagement will foster participatory democracy. Political apathy notwithstanding as reflected in low voter turnout, among others (see Sitto-Kaunda in this volume), South Africa's liberal constitution is embedded in Global North values such as participatory democracy as characterised by the Integrated Development Plans. This approach is purported to involve local government and the community to find the best solutions towards sustainable development. However, for

citizen engagement to be meaningful and impactful, it must consider "everyday experiences in particular social, cultural and historical contexts" (Robins et al., 2008: 1070).

Some current approaches and considerations in South Africa: A gap analysis

While some citizen engagement strategies are executed with the reputation of the relevant entity in mind, many are aimed at attaining the strategic objectives of relevant entities and are thus designed to enhance the credibility of the public entity and improve the citizens' lives. Others are designed to enhance the public's knowledge of the relevant entity and access to services. Public engagement is driven and achieved through existing touchpoints such as *izimbizo* (public meetings), as well as traditional and social media platforms. While communication through these platforms is often accurate and transparent, some engagements are designed as marketing tools for brand positioning.

In some instances, citizen engagement is used as a mechanism to receive and monitor input, suggestions and complaints directly from the citizens. Indeed, in many instances, such as those pertaining to supreme audit institutions and public protectors (ombuds), these inputs are considered as leads – to borrow a marketing term – when auditing or investigations are conducted. However, for this to be realised, the relevant institution must ensure that multi-type, but relatively fixed, engagement methods exist in order to disseminate specific knowledge among citizens and ensure proper understanding and appropriate involvement.

Another crucial aspect pervasive in current practice is the crude categorisation of citizens as stakeholders for engagement as 'specialised' and 'non-specialised' (Mur-Dueñas & Lorés, 2022). Specialised citizens are considered to have some degree of knowledge on the subject at hand. Usually, they possess some form of training or experience in the understanding of the work at hand such as auditing, taxation, and so on, and of the role of good governance in

general, or they may have a good grasp of the political system, principles of democracy and governance in the public sector. Engagement with citizens whose frame of reference enables them to understand and engage with the matter at hand is often differentiated from those classified as 'non-specialised citizens' to whom the technical concepts are abstract. Although specialised citizens are in the minority, they are still prioritised for engagement through professional bodies, business associations and political structures, among others.

Then there is the role of engaging civil society that is utilised as part of citizen engagement. Often couched as citizen education, this form of engagement takes place through existing communication channels such as social media and traditional media, including adverts and advertorials. Often, existing engagement channels such as public lectures are leveraged and expanded through media and social media engagements. Furthermore, opportunities such as brand exhibitions, sponsorships, corporate social investment, branded collateral and many more are used to drive this form of citizen engagement.

While some of these approaches are useful as engagement programmes, they are limited in achieving the essence of participation and redistribution of power (Arnstein, 1969). The following sections present some thoughts for consideration that may reposition citizen engagement as part of the crucial tool of re-imagining and building a better world.

Re-grounding citizen engagement within participatory democracy

In countries in the Global South such as South Africa, where the historical context of the relationship between the people and the state is characterised by "disenfranchisement, authoritarianism and clientelism", continuities of a dichotomous relations formed in the struggle years often persist (Robins et al., 2008: 1071). There are conditions for "dramatic ruptures with the past" to occur to develop a "normative version of the new citizenships" (Robins et

al., 2008: 1071). This includes, inter alia, the redistribution of power, which lies in making people citizens. Of course, citizenship is a nebulous and contested term. It is no longer the domain of national citizens, and as Gaudelli (2009: 69) posits, "is being reconstituted around a constellation of other affiliations, including race/ethnicity, gender, place, ability, and class, to name a few".

Nevertheless, citizenship within this context must be reconstituted and the narrow western definition which often ignores that societies in flux, such as South Africa, have different characteristics should be jettisoned (Haste, 2004). Otherwise, this becomes eurocentrism that seeks to transplant Global North practices to the Global South. This amounts to coloniality of power that, according to Quijano (2007), is part of a global hegemonic model of power that "articulates race and labour, space and people, according to the needs of capital and to the benefit of white European peoples" (cited in Escobar, 2007: 185; Radebe, 2017). Indeed, stable western democracies are largely intact and, even in crises, individual citizens can participate through various ways. There are numerous variables at play in such societies, including skills sets, literacy, and so on, whereas it is the opposite in societies such as South Africa facing various socio-economic challenges. Hence, individual citizens often do not "have any more real power than in a stable state" and are thus "likely to feel more personally affected by the changes and thus potentially more engaged" (Haste, 2004: 416). This nuance is crucial to appreciate when dealing with citizen engagement.

Furthermore, the public sphere, where citizen engagement occurs, is equally rooted in dominant ideologies that seek to entrench established patterns of power relations. The assumption that "citizenship from below" simply translates to agency for democracy (Robins et al., 2008) is often found wanting. Essentially, citizen participation is informed by concrete material conditions linked to hitherto existing power relations beyond the abstraction of democratic institutions.

Part of the problem with current approaches is their influence by the donor-driven participatory discourse that is biased towards the ideas of the middle class. This is premised on the assumption that people participate due to altruism. The participation of the working class is driven by multiple factors, including desperation to access "services and whatever other resources they can get to improve their lives" (Robins et al., 2008: 1078). This explains the emergence of movements from below such as Operation Dudula, *Abahlali baseMjondolo* and many others with varying ideologies. Therefore, the middle-class utopia "that people struggling to survive would 'participate' simply for the love and virtue of participating" is unrealistic (Robins et al., 2008: 1078).

The subalterns' participation is survivalist. They activate their networks as patronage dependents to gain access to public services required. This may lead to the dangers of corruption but, as Robins et al. (2008: 1079) posit, it "often involves getting to know people who can do you a favour, establishing personal relationships with bureaucrats to 'smooth the way' and to make things possible". Citizen engagements strategies should not be oblivious to this reality. There are tactics employed by the marginalised to engage with power, including through social movements.

In fact, South Africa has a proud history of social movement activism, dating back to the struggle against apartheid (Sinwell, 2010). In the 1990s there was an emergence of 'new' social movements primarily focusing on social and economic justice issues (Chiumbu, 2012) as the country experienced growing inequality. This is essentially the marginalised response to their exclusion, and, through social movements, they reassert welfare politics in a neoliberal context where states pursue "market-based solutions to capitalism's problems of poverty, unemployment and welfare" (Subuddhi, 2005: 9). Nevertheless, social movements are not homogeneous, with some driven by 'emancipatory' or 'liberationist' politics focused on social justice issues (Haste, 2004: 419).

Citizenship and civil society

Citizens and civil society can be best understood in the analysis of the interplay between the state, markets and society (Radebe, 2020). To this effect, the state as an instrument of class rule, can apply forcible coercion to maintain the dominance of the ruling class, preserve existing property relations and keep all other classes in subjection (Draper, 2011). This debunks the notion of the state as "a neutral arbiter of competing interests" when in reality it is "the power and influence of corporate interests over government policy" that reigns supreme (Flew, 2007: 47). Governments are acutely aware of the need to maintain the capitalist arrangements otherwise this can unleash economic chaos that often undermines their legitimacy (Radebe, 2020). Thus, to remain in power they must "secure the profitability and prosperity of the private sector: they are dependent upon the process of capital accumulation which they have for their own sake to maintain" (Held, 2006: 170).

Citizen engagement approaches must contend with this context, intertwined with a civil society perceived differently by various traditions. On the one hand, liberals regard civil society "as a public space between state and individual citizen, comprised of voluntary associations autonomous of the state", while on the other, Marxists perceive it from a class and conflict point of view (Subuddhi, 2005: 2). In class-divided societies, also often layered with race and gender divisions, how the marginalised negotiate power can be best understood from a historical materialist perspective. This is a product of social and economic conditions driven by the developments in relation to the means of production (Marx, 2016).

Nevertheless, civil society enables the poor to reassert their rights as citizens "through forms of collective action, solidaristic networks and popular education" (Robins et al., 2008: 1071). However, civil society organisations are not inherently progressive or possessing of automatic democratising power (Robins et al., 2008). In fact, some are reactionary with anti-democratic tendencies. Civil society

theories are useful in grounding citizen engagement. For example, both liberal and Marxist tradition considers the citizen as "a private individual with a set of private rights – the right to liberty, privacy and property"; class interests are crucial and hence the bourgeoisie as a class often tends to assign citizenship (Subuddhi, 2005: 3). Even public opinion is laden with class interest and thus the communication power rests with those who control the means of production and therein lies their ability to construct hegemony (Radebe, 2020).

The close relationship between the state and civil society limits avenues for the marginalised because while the state is "an institution of political coercion for the dominant classes", on the other hand, civil society is "the domain of cultural and ideological practices where consent is forged for the governance of the state" (Subuddhi, 2005: 3). It is crucial for citizen engagement theories to appreciate the connection between the state and economy, especially in capitalist economies. This is how engagement as tokenism occurs where the marginalised are placated with 'ground rules' that make it possible for them to express their views while the 'powerholders' retain the right to decide (Arnstein, 1969: 217). Of course, the underclasses have agency and hence civil society is a site of struggle where "power is always matched with a counter-force and therefore always potential for counter-hegemonic movements" (Subuddhi, 2005: 3). Nevertheless, civil society can be co-opted into the state/market matrix.

Indeed, the concept of citizenship itself is value laden as it is linked to nation states and often denotes status and class location. For example, in South Africa during apartheid, black people were denuded of their nationhood and thus citizenship was reserved for whites, and particularly white males. Therefore, citizenship and its concomitant rights "are often the products of power and struggle, based on contested conceptions of rights and justice, between the state and civil society" (Subuddhi, 2005: 6). When dealing with public engagement and participation, such historical background is useful. In this regard, civil society activism may appear

to offer an opportunity to include the marginalised and excluded "whose needs and demands do not find adequate representation in the constitutional arrangements but have become a matter of ideological and political contestation" (Subuddhi, 2005: 7).

Towards a new public sphere

The psychology concept of 'motive engagement', where issues with "moral connotation engage the individual through compassion, anger, or moral outrage" (Haste, 2004: 420), may be useful in theorising citizen engagement. How particular narratives find expression in the public sphere such as "shared narrative, competing narrative, narratives that are taken for granted, narratives that locate, explain, and justify the citizen and the nation" (Haste, 2004: 420), are crucial for public participation.

At the heart of South Africa's problem is the unresolved national question stemming from the history of the country, which was divided into many 'nations' by apartheid. This included bogus nations, the Bantustans, constituted along ethnic lines, with large parts of the country constituted by whites. The African majority were regarded as non-historic nations (Hoffman & Mzala, 1990). Post-apartheid, the country lacks a uniform public sphere, which has resulted in public engagement with citizens located within specific historical groups, whether culturally or from a class perspective. In this context, citizenship is not homogeneous and thus cannot be straitjacketed through various descriptors such as race, gender and class. In this regard, citizen engagement cannot succeed without fully comprehending the essence of culture and environment from which an individual citizen emerges. This entire infrastructure facilitates how messages are processed, consumed and interpreted (Haste, 2004).

Conclusion

This chapter has presented some thoughts on approaches towards theorising and implementing citizen engagement in a

Global South context such as South Africa. Although a useful component of public participation enshrined in the country's Constitution, citizen engagement has limitations when it comes to redistribution of power (Arnstein, 1969). It is this limitation that the chapter argues makes citizen engagement part of negotiating consent to manage and placate the marginalised. On this basis, Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation model has been employed to analyse citizen engagement in the context of "citizen participation," "citizen control", and "maximum feasible involvement of the poor". Fundamentally, the chapter argues that current citizen engagement approaches by the public sector, premised on advancing liberal democracies and their concomitant concepts of 'participation' and 'accountability', are inadequate in unravelling the lived experienced of the subalterns from the Global South.

Among the approaches that the chapter posits may be useful in power redistribution include re-grounding citizen engagement within participatory democracy. To this effect, the chapter has argued that current citizen engagement should eschew Western approaches that ignore or impose western practices on the Global South (Haste, 2004). Essentially, this amounts to coloniality of power where problems of the Global South are articulated and resolution is sought using western theories and lenses (Quijano, 2007). Citizenship and civil society are other elements that the chapter has argued are useful in theorising citizen engagement. Through civil society, the subalterns can reassert their rights as citizens through collaboration and solidarity (Robins et al., 2008). However, in bourgeoisie democracies it is instructive to appreciate the interplay between the state, markets and society (Radebe, 2020) and the role of class.

In order for the subalternised working class to achieve power redistribution objectives through citizen engagement, the chapter argues that a new public sphere must be considered. To this end, the current disjointed public engagements that follow cultural or class form are unsustainable. It is citizen engagement that should foster

new platforms that would unite citizens across race and class lines. This public engagement outcome is unsurprising as current citizen engagement efforts are underpinned by an ideology that is not supportive of a popular uprising from below that will eventually enable the marginalised to confront the conditions that lead to their oppression and exploitation.

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