AUTOCHTHONY, BELONGING AND EXCLUSION
The Pitfalls of a Culturalization of Citizenship

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One of the paradoxes of our times is the upsurge of strong preoccupations with belonging in a world that pretends to be globalizing. Notions of autochthony (litt: born from the soil), cropping up in highly different parts of the globe, play a particular role in this respect, as some sort of primordial and radically exclusionary form of belonging. The term is difficult to reconcile with an increasing emphasis in many parts of the globe on (cultural) integration. Yet it seems to be at the same time a pregnant expression of the culturalization of citizenship: the insistence on cultural aspects rather than juridical or economic criteria for defining who qualifies as a citizen and who does not.

These heavy implications make it interesting to follow the notion of autochthony in its different trajectories in time and space. Already in its the primal locus – classical Athens during its heyday (5th century BC) – the notion was beset by a paradox that would mark it in all its subsequent expressions: a problematic combination of an apparent, basic security (how can one belong more than if one is born from the soil itself?) and a practice of deep uncertainties. Everywhere autochthony tends to be constantly redefined in ever closer circles. It triggers a search for an impossible purity, since the claim to have always been on the spot is redundant in a world that was always deeply marked by migration. Thus, it expresses, often with dramatic force, the tension between the self and the stranger inside that was central to Lolle Nauta's work. In general, culture and history offer quite slippery footholds for defining citizenship.