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Books for review should be sent to:

Mediations  
Department of English (MC 162)  
601 South Morgan Street  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
Chicago IL 60607-7120 USA

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### Editor's Note

In this dossier, the second in the new series of *Mediations*, we offer a collection of interventions that critically situate South Africa's long transition within a protracted post-apartheid moment. At bottom, this translates into both subjecting to critique and, at the same time, displacing the various exceptionalist national narratives that continue to dominate local mainstream political discourse. The expectations and desires first induced by the demise of the apartheid system of institutionalized racial discrimination, as well as those embodied by the emergence of a composite ensemble of post-apartheid social movements, are thus pitched vis-à-vis a political dispensation that has combined the introduction of a non-racial democracy with the full insertion of the "new South Africa" into the globally hegemonic (recent setbacks notwithstanding) neoliberal macroeconomic framework. But if this is the longer temporality that frames our contributors' different angles of observation, *Mediations* readers will also be probably curious about South Africa's more immediate political context — that is, the recent convulsions in South African party politics, which are most visibly manifested in the split from the ANC and the launch of a new centrist political formation, the Congress of the People (COPE), by former president Thabo Mbeki's supporters (minus the leader himself).

Let's start then, briefly, with the current political conjuncture. As we go to (the electronic version of) press, we are witnessing the change of ownership of a state apparatus that, after the defeat of Mbeki's faction at the 2007 Polokwane Congress of the ANC and the recent national elections, is now firmly in the hands of a new political coalition fronted by controversial president Jacob Zuma, and comprising those Left alliance partners that led the charge against the Mbekites at the Polokwane showdown — namely, the South Africa Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African

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Trade Unions (COSATU). Time will tell whether the rite of passage represented by the abrupt termination of Mbeki's mandate a few months before the elections is going to convert into a significant change of political orientation. What we have for now is a developmental state discourse that is as increasingly ubiquitous as it is vague. Beyond that, we are left taking stock of the wild rhetorical shifts of a ruling alliance that has on one hand fought an electoral campaign in the name of discontinuity — blaming the previous president for all the shortcomings of the South African transition and portraying the faction now in power as the harbinger of a new era of economic development and redistribution — while on the other reassuring international investors that the fundamentals of the South African economy are going to be left untouched.

As to the interpretive strategies that these contradictory statements elicit, it seems at least clear that to the extent that they unsettle traditional analyses based on class or Left/Right neat dichotomies, they ask us to revisit these categories through a reading of the underlying systemic dynamics and contradictions: from the potentially explosive crisis of waged employment to the impact of the current global financial crisis on the South African economy. Conversely, as these dynamics constantly produce new kinds of social stratifications, the broader issue of transformative political subjectivity and praxis itself needs to be radically rethought in the light of an ever-changing social composition that is increasingly marked by the numerical decline of permanent, unionized workers, and the emergence of new social agents and life strategies situated outside or at the margins of the so-called formal economy.

We kick off with Patrick Bond's critical analysis of the current political realignment and the discursive strategies that underpin it. Starting with a wealth of socioeconomic data — from the rise of income inequality and unemployment to the shortcomings of cost recovery strategies for service delivery — that measure the failure of post-apartheid economic policies, the article asks whether the current debate that surrounds South Africa's developmental state will turn out to be anything other than an ideological smokescreen behind which to hide the relegitimization of "neoliberal macroeconomic and microdevelopment policies." Using as a case study the plans for a mega-project — the Coega industrial complex and aluminum smelter in the Nelson Mandela Metropole, eventually derailed by the impact of the global economic crisis — Bond unveils the mismatch between the rhetorical gestures of the developmental state promoters and the reality they conceal. Even Marxist categories are not left unscathed by ideological mystification, as illustrated by the "surreal" exchange excerpted from the pages of a recent biography of Mbeki government's finance minister Trevor

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Manuel, where former public enterprise minister Alec Erwin and biographer Pippa Green trundle Marxism onstage to deliver an attack on and to shore up, respectively, a defense of Manuel's neoliberal fiscal policies. Meanwhile, although the combination of independent social and political forces needed to give wings to alternative development strategies is not yet available, it is there that we must continue to look for "durable radical politics in South Africa."

The extravagant, for want of a better adjective, use of Marxist terminology, here in the guise of the French regulation school's version, in the upper echelons of the South African political apparatus also frames Ashwin Desai's narrative of the 2000 Volkswagen strike at Uitenhage, in the Eastern Cape. Turning on its head the analytical approach of this theoretical paradigm, National Union of Metalworkers' economists sought to use it to devise new strategies for the support of capital accumulation through workers' participation and increased productivity. In this context, the strike functions as an index of the modes of containment implemented by the union machinery to manage the transition to a version of industrial democracy that replaced the slogans of people's power and worker control with the embrace of corporatist industrial strategy projects. Zooming in on the "anatomy" of the first post-apartheid strike directed against a trade union, Desai argues that the "provides a window into the quick transition of the union from a militant organization into one that was determined to enter into agreements and police them even if it meant the erosion of gains made through the 1980s." This in turn points to the broader corporatist reorientation of COSATU, South African biggest trade union confederation, to which the National Union of Metalworkers is affiliated. Still, Desai concludes, it is in the renewed opportunity for a combined mass mobilization of community and social movements and radical segments inside the trade union movement and the ANC that lies the possibility of a post-corporatist crossing of the labor/community divide and, thus, a new radicalization of class politics.

The same focus on the transformation of organized labor is shared by Franco Barchiesi's intervention, which analyzes the steadfast numerical decline of full-time, formal jobs, and the consequently diminished capacity of waged labor "to function as a vehicle for inclusion in social citizenship." In this scenario, the ANC's and, most emphatically, COSATU's reassertion of "the normative centrality of wage labor" finds itself increasingly at variance with the life experiences of the majority of South African poor. Looking at the present regime of hybrid social citizenship, in which social hierarchization and stratification are defined in terms of access to often unavailable waged employment, Barchiesi argues that, precisely because of its material absence, waged labor today functions as a disciplining

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mechanism, or Lacanian “‘master signifier’ of social existence” calling into being an “idealized social subject — the patriotic, hard-working, law-abiding, family-responsible, morally frugal, and politically moderate poor.” Conversely, building on the results of his fieldwork focusing on subaltern life strategies and implicitly revisiting familiar positions within contemporary autonomist Marxism, Barchiesi argues that they point to radical innovations with decommodification and redistribution that call for “a choice between liberation *of* and *from* wage labor.”

In the next contribution, Dale McKinley returns to the question of political subjectivity and organization by offering an insider’s view of the current divisions within the South African Left (sections of the paper elaborate arguments presented at the 2008 COSATU National Political Education School entitled “Towards a Socialist Strategy and Left Unity in South Africa.”) The article offers an historical outline of post-apartheid Left politics, which is focalized through the lens of a rearticulation that has seen on the one hand the institutionalization of the traditional Left, and on the other the emergence of social movements and civil society organizations that resist easy ideological and political categorization. In his excursus, McKinley also offers a critical analysis of both the discursive and political strategies of displacement required by the maintenance of a Left rhetoric by political forces such as the SACP and COSATU, which are *de facto* implementing the negotiated program of deracialization of the accumulation path, as well as the issue-based orientation of many social movements and community organizations, which has thus far failed to provide the basis for a political alternative. The crisis of the South African Left is thus seen as the product of a disjunction between rhetoric and practice, whose negative outcomes, from vanguardism to organizational sectarianism and ideological absolutism, have led to so many political cul-de-sacs. The solution to this “strategic impasse” for McKinley is not going to be found in abstract debates on reform and revolution or an elusive workers party, but in overcoming the dichotomy between mass struggle and a socialist strategy that needs to be reimaged anew.

Shifting focus to higher education, Ulrike Kistner argues that far from presenting an indigenous alternative to the many problems faced by African universities — beginning with those generated by the growing commercialization of higher education institutions — the slogan of “Africanization” has become caught up in the same contradictions to which it was supposed to offer a way out. Among the many pitfalls of “Africanization” as it is currently presented, Kistner lists the commodification of indigenous knowledge systems and the restructuring of curricula in the direction of vocational programs at the expense of non-applied sciences and the

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humanities, fully as much as the stifling of critical thinking and public intellectual engagement. Most troublingly, the particular brand of indigeneity that is being introduced in some South African higher education institutions not only promotes a market-friendly version of Africa, but reproduces forms of nationalism that, their promoters’ claims to the contrary notwithstanding, are eclipsing the vision of Pan-Africanism and universalism to which so many progressive African intellectuals had attached their highest political hopes. Hence the “sense of loss in contemplating the present African university in ruins from the perspective of the emancipatory ideals of anti-colonial or decolonizing movements.”

Moving, at last, to the disciplinary concerns that most immediately pertain to this journal, in the next contribution Shane Graham offers a “spatial-materialist” reading of Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View*. This interpretation of a representative work of the author that is currently being canonized as the pre-eminent “postmodern” South African novelist, goes almost entirely against the grain of a critical reception that has for the most part obliterated the material — which is to say, social — realities represented in Vladislavić’s texts. The article thus revises what Graham perceives as a general tendency in contemporary South African literary and cultural criticism to gloss over socio-economic contradictions in favor of a privileged focus on narrowly textual dynamics or, at best, identity politics. To do this, Graham proposes a “grassroots hermeneutics” that illustrates how Vladislavić’s fiction, on the contrary, “is highly attuned to questions of cultural production and identity formation *within* the material conditions, physical spaces, and continuing inequities of South African society.” Central both to Vladislavić’s fiction and Graham’s recent critical writings is the intersection between the ever-changing urban landscape of Johannesburg and the complex modes of map-making and inscription of social memory involved in trying to make sense of this metropolis’s highly mobile social geographies.

Changing literary genres, in the next article Kelwyn Sole examines the cultural politics of contemporary South African poetic production. Contrary to what one might expect, given the limited local market for literature in general and poetry in particular, Sole shows that in fact poetry has found new ways of accessing the South African public sphere, where the figure of the poet is surrounded by a somewhat puzzling aura of reverence. The article has a panoramic quality to it. Sole presents a compilation of excerpts from interviews, commentaries and poems that lets the poets speak for themselves, while critically framing their statements to provide if not the whole picture, at least some of the multifaceted social dimensions of contemporary South African poetry: from a tool of nation building, to a vehicle for social critique

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and speaking the truth to power, to the expression of diverse subcultures and the literary interpellation of a consumerist subjectivity. Among the most intriguing quotations collated by Sole, there are those that display an almost hilarious idealist over-inflation of the role of the poet: from former ANC deputy president Baleka Mbete's opining that the "best compliment you can give me ... is to tell me that I am a poet," to prominent businessman Hermann Mashaba's statement that the entrepreneur is "the poet of the private sector." The article then concludes by asking what are the literary and political values displaced by the current celebrations of "expressive freedom" and "sanitized versions of individual subjectivity and cultural, as well as national, identity."

From there, in the final section we contrapuntally move to a selection of poems and a wide-ranging interview with Lee Sustar on "Africa's Struggles Today" by internationally acclaimed poet Dennis Brutus. One of the driving forces behind the campaign for the desegregation and international boycott of South African sport during the apartheid era, as well as a cultural organizer who played a crucial role in putting African literature on the world map — he was, *inter alia*, instrumental to the formation of the African Literature Association back in 1975 — Brutus is still a pivotal figure in global justice grassroots movements. In these poems, he documents his recent wanderings from his native South Africa to international sites of struggle, such as Seattle, Porto Alegre, and Cuba, where his poetic statements of political belief find renewed global resonance. Following a perceptive suggestion from *Dennis Brutus Reader* co-editor Aisha Karim, the interview and the poems are interleaved rather than separated, so as to underscore the organic continuity between Brutus's various forms of engagement, which resist both aesthetically and conceptually the breaking-up of the realm of literature from that of the political. We hope that in compiling this dossier, which shares the same impulse, we have done justice to his vision.

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Pier Paolo Frassinelli, guest editor  
Johannesburg

### **South Africa's "Developmental State" Distraction**

Patrick Bond

The African National Congress victory in the April 2009 elections was never in doubt, but what is of crucial importance for durable radical politics in South Africa was the prior, dramatic turn-out of the Thabo Mbeki faction of the African National Congress (ANC) by those loyal to Jacob Zuma, first at the Polokwane party conference in December 2007 and then from government in September 2008. Crucial as this is as a marker of ruling party instability, will it or will it not derail South Africa's faux "developmental state"?

Though it typically refers to the East Asian experience combining manufacturing-sector growth and diversification with authoritarian politics, I take this oft-abused phrase to mean — in the South African context — a combination of macroeconomic neoliberalism and unsustainable megaproject development, dressed up with rather tokenistic social welfare policy and rhetorical support for a more coherent industrial policy. Although finance minister Trevor Manuel was listed as fourth-highest ranked politician on the ANC 2009 electoral list, in turn signaling that his neoliberal economic policies would continue under president Zuma, there is nevertheless a potential shift leftwards on micro projects and the industrial side of economic policy. The man most often identified with grandiose, crony-capitalist, multi-billion, and export-oriented projects, Alec Erwin, resigned as public enterprises minister during the September 2008 Zuma political massacre of the leading Mbekites (curiously, Erwin was replaced by an ineffectual Mbekite, former justice minister Brigitte Mabandla, herself mired in various controversies). The former trade union strategist Erwin, who regularly proclaimed that in fact he remained a Marxist, had by then achieved a degree

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of public ridicule as the man most responsible for the Eskom electricity blackouts in early 2008.

To be sure, the rise of more genuine trade unionist and communist influence in the ruling party since 2006 may also shift substantial public resources towards pro-poor not pro-business projects, such as National Health Insurance. Moreover, not only are real interest rates down dramatically from the 1995-2005 double-digit levels (because inflation rose far faster than the nominal interest rate), but Trevor Manuel's February 2009 budget also went sharply into deficit (3.8 percent) after three years of surpluses. Still, we probably are safe in trusting Zuma when he swears to business leaders — such as officials of Merrill Lynch and Citibank, those bastions of sound economic practices — his intent not to relax the existing monetary and fiscal constraints. To illustrate, Zuma himself told one Los Angeles audience in December 2007,

Some have said that if Zuma is in charge of the administration, it will move left because of his support from the trade unions, which are very left, and those from SA Communist Party ... and therefore that the economic policies of the government will change. I had thought this was not a big issue but I am grateful that I have an opportunity to explain and would love to tell you, brothers and sisters, that nothing is going to change.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the trajectory might yet shift if a major push from the left gathers momentum, as the economy continues shrinking in 2009 (the last quarter of 2008 witnessed a spectacular contraction in manufacturing, especially automobiles, and the first negative GDP growth in a decade). If that push runs out of steam and if cooption of key communist leaders into ANC and state leadership continues, as is far more likely, we will instead see a relegitimization of neoliberal macroeconomic and microdevelopment policies, with ongoing megaproject path-dependent waste and corruption. To illustrate, electricity and water are two state services facing worsening conditions of scarcity, which should be redistributed to low-income people for free in greater quantities, yet megaprojects are being built to allow large corporate users and wealthy white people inordinate access.

White elephant megaprojects should all be subjected to critical analysis. Regrettably, although concerns are often raised about both macro policies and micro projects, a fusion of red-green, rural-urban, labor-community, feminist, and anti-racist political forces required to halt these and pose alternative development strategies is not yet available. But several indicators of struggle are, at least, hopeful.

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### Neoliberalism and Its Damage

Consider, first, eight areas of socioeconomic and environmental progress and problems that represent socioeconomic flashpoints in the postapartheid era, resulting from either post-1994 policy or even deeper structural forces dating back decades.

- There was an immediate post-apartheid rise in income inequality which was slightly tempered after 2001 by increased welfare payments but which meant the Gini coefficient soared from below 0.6 in 1994 to 0.72 by 2006 (0.8 if welfare income is excluded).<sup>2</sup>
- The official unemployment rate doubled (from 16 percent in 1994 to around 32 by the early 2000s, falling to 26 percent by the late 2000s— but by counting those who gave up looking for work, the realistic rate is closer to 40 percent) as a result of imported East Asian goods in relatively labor-intensive sectors (clothing, textiles, footwear appliances, and electronics) and capital intensive production techniques elsewhere (especially mining and metals).
- The provision of housing to several million people was marred by the facts that the units produced are far smaller than apartheid "matchboxes," are located further away from jobs and community amenities, are constructed with less durable building materials, come with lower-quality municipal services, and are saddled with higher priced debt if and when credit is available.
- While free water and electricity are now provided to many low-income people, the overall price has risen dramatically since 1994, leading to millions of people facing disconnections each year when they cannot afford the second block of water consumption.
- The degeneration of the health system, combined with AIDS, has caused a dramatic decline in life expectancy, from 65 at the time of liberation to 52 a decade later.<sup>3</sup>
- The education system is still crippled by excessive cost recovery and fiscal austerity, leaving 35 percent of learners dropping out by Grade 5 (worse than neighboring Namibia, Lesotho, and Swaziland) and 48 percent by Grade 12, and, according to the most recent (2001) survey of schools, leaving 27 percent without running water, 43 percent



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without electricity, and 80 percent without libraries and computers.<sup>4</sup>

- Ecological problems have become far worse, according to the government's own commissioned research in the 2006 Environmental Outlook report, which according to the leading state official, "outlined a general decline in the state of the environment."<sup>5</sup>
- High crime was accompanied by an arms race — private security systems, sophisticated alarms, high walls and razor wire, gated communities, road closures, and boom barriers — that left working-class households more vulnerable to robberies, housebreaks, car theft and other petty crime (with increases of more than 1/3 in these categories from 1994-2001 and only slight declines since), as well as epidemic levels of rape and other violent crimes; additional corporate crime (including illicit capital flight) was generally not well policed, or suffered from an apparently organized penetration of the South African Police Service's highest ranks.<sup>6</sup>

The "developmental state" is meant to reverse these processes. However, given the abuse of funding directed at a few major white elephants now under construction, the reversal will last only as long as the artificial construction-sector boom.

- The Coega complex in Nelson Mandela Metropole (the old Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage), where massive amounts of electricity and water could one day be consumed in a new smelter (Alcan and subsequently Rio Tinto have in-principle commitments though by early 2008 these ebbed as electricity shortages became obvious).
- The Lesotho Highlands Water Project mega-dams (Africa's highest), which since 1998 have diverted Lesotho's water out of the Senqu River feeding the Free State water table, into the insatiable Gauteng industrial complex, especially for coal-fired power plant cooling and Johannesburg swimming-pool fill-ups (a third mega-dam is due for approval in 2009).
- The unnecessarily expensive new and refurbished soccer stadiums for the 2010 World Soccer Cup, which by early 2009 were a third over budgeted expenditure.

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- The corruption-ridden R43 billion arms deal, which implicated a wide slice of both Zuma and Mbeki ANC factions starting at the very top.
- Pebble Bed Nuclear Reactors potentially costing hundreds of billions of rands, alongside hundreds of billions more rands spent on coal-fired power plants (notwithstanding South Africa's vast existing contributions to climate change through energy-related CO2 emissions).<sup>7</sup>
- The R20 billion plus Gautrain fast rail network that will link Johannesburg, Pretoria, and the OR Tambo airport, affordable only to elite travelers.

Space constraints permit us to examine only one of these (Coega) in detail below. Instead, fiscal resources could have gone to the base of society in a much more direct way, were it not for the broader neoliberal context. The early 2000s witnessed increasing optimism that the late 1990s emerging markets currency crises — including South Africa — could be overcome, and that the offshore listings of most of the country's largest firms would not adversely affect growth. Indeed, by 2001, the rate of profit for large SA capital was restored from an earlier downturn from the 1970s-90s, to ninth highest among the world's major national economies (far ahead of the US and China), according to one British government study.<sup>8</sup> The reality, though, was that high corporate profits were not a harbinger of sustainable economic development, as a result of persistent deep-rooted contradictions.

- With respect to stability, the value of the Rand in fact crashed (against basket of trading currencies) by more than a quarter in 1996, 1998, 2001, 2006 and 2008, the worst record of any major economy, which in turn reflects how vulnerable South Africa became to international financial markets thanks to steady exchange control liberalization starting in 1995.
- South Africa has witnessed GDP growth during the 2000s, but this does not take into account the depletion of nonrenewable resources — if this factor plus pollution were considered, South Africa would have a net *negative* per person rate of national wealth accumulation (of at least \$2 per year), according to even the World Bank.<sup>9</sup>
- South Africa's economy has become much more oriented to profit

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taking from financial markets than production of real products, in part because of extremely high real interest rates, for from March 1995 (when the financial rand exchange control was relaxed), the after-inflation interest rate rose to a record high for a decade's experience in South African economic history, often reaching double digits (after a recent 3.5 percent spike during the mid-2000s, consumer and housing credit markets are badly strained by serious arrears and defaults).

- The two most successful major sectors from 1994-2004 were communications (12.2 percent growth per year) and finance (7.6 percent) while labor-intensive sectors such as textiles, footwear, and gold mining shrunk by 1-5 percent per year, and overall, manufacturing as a percentage of GDP also declined.
- The government admits that overall employment growth was -0.2 percent per year from 1994-2004 — but -0.2 percent is a vast underestimate of the problem, given that the official definition of employment includes such work as “begging” and “hunting wild animals for food” and “growing own food.”
- The problem of excessive capital intensity in production — too many machines per worker — will probably get worse, for the Industrial Development Corporation (a state agency) forecasts that the sector with the most investment in the period 2006-2010 will be iron and steel, with a massive 24 percent rise in fixed investment per year, but sectoral employment is expected to fall 1.3 percent per year, in spite of — or indeed because of — all the new investment.
- Overall, the problem of “capital strike” — large-scale firms’ failure to invest — continues, as gross fixed capital formation hovered between 15-17 percent from 1994-2004, hardly enough to cover wear-and-tear on equipment.
- Businesses did invest their South African profits, but not mainly in South Africa: dating from the time of political and economic liberalization, most of the largest Johannesburg Stock Exchange firms — Anglo American, DeBeers, Old Mutual, SA Breweries, Liberty Life, Gencor (now the core of BHP Billiton), Didata, Mondi and others — shifted their funding flows and even their primary share listings to overseas stock markets.

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- The outflow of profits and dividends due these firms is one of two crucial reasons South Africa's current account deficit has soared to among the highest in the world (in mid-2008 exceeded only by New Zealand) and is hence a major danger in the event of currency instability, as was Thailand's (around 5 percent) in mid-1997.
- The other cause of the current account deficit is the negative trade balance, which can be blamed upon a vast inflow of imports after trade liberalization and which export growth could not keep up with.
- Another reason for capital strike is South Africa's sustained overproduction problem in existing (highly-monopolized) industry, as manufacturing capacity utilization fell substantially from the mid 80 percent range during the 1970s, to the high 70s percent range during the early 2000s.
- Corporate profits avoided reinvestment in plant, equipment, and factories, and instead sought returns from speculative real estate and the Johannesburg Stock Exchange: there was a 50 percent increase in share prices during the first half of the 2000s, and the property boom which began in 1999 had by 2004 sent house prices up by 200 percent (in comparison to just 60 percent in the US market prior to the burst bubble, according to the International Monetary Fund).

These deep, structural dilemmas have roots not only in postapartheid liberalization, but in long-standing vulnerabilities associated with the apartheid-era economy. Because of liberalization of both trade (August 1994 onwards) and finance (from March 1995), the current account deficit is dangerously high (-10.4 percent expected for 2009) compared to peer economies. By early 2009 *The Economist* magazine judged South Africa the “riskiest” of 17 emerging market economies. The main troubles were the high current account deficit, but also low reserves and high short-term foreign debt repayments (third worst after Korea and Indonesia). Moreover, South Africa's “banks depend on borrowing, often from abroad, to finance domestic lending and so will be squeezed by the global credit crunch. ... The rand, which has already fallen sharply, remains one of the most vulnerable emerging-market currencies.”<sup>10</sup>

One reason, ironically, for low reserves and the threatening current account deficit, is a resurgent profit rate for South African corporations, which in turn is siphoned out via profit and dividend repatriation to the new offshore financial centers. Overall corporate profits are substantially higher relative to employee wages, since the low point of the late 1980s. However, as

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ongoing problem is that manufacturing profits have fallen dramatically since the early 1980s in relation to financial and speculative profits. South Africa's export advantages are in a few areas difficult to maintain (and in some cases subject to dramatic price volatility), such as auto components, swimming pool filters, wines, coal, and base metals. Moreover, low rates of fixed investment persist, especially in the private sector, in part because excess idle capacity in existing plant and equipment. That, in turn, helps explain the very low level of Foreign Direct Investment, contrasting with dangerously high inflows of liquid portfolio capital attracted by South Africa's once-high real interest rate. None of these processes are healthy, and alongside extremely high-price inflation in electricity and food (as well as petrol in the first half of 2008), will generate yet more social unrest, a topic we return to in conclusion.

### Coega and the Underdevelopmental State

Consider in more detail an extreme but revealing case. Over the past decade, the South African government has begun shoveling what could be the country's largest-ever industrial subsidies into the Coega industrial zone complex and port, located about 20 kilometers from Port Elizabeth within the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (NMBM) area. The funding is going not only for Coega's electricity needs, which included the anticipated aluminum smelter and auto sector complex, but also the proposed R40 billion PetroSA refinery. State proponents say Coega represents sound industrial and development policy, but critics consider the project a "corporate welfare" giveaway replete with socially insensitive and eco-destructive features, especially noticeable as renewed attention is being given to climate change.

In his end-of-year 2006 e-zine message, Mbeki highlighted Coega as a prime example of "Milestones during the Age of Hope":

[T]he leading aluminum company, Alcan, entered into an agreement about the supply of electricity that would make it possible for it to construct a huge aluminum smelter at the new Port of Ngqura/Coega. This was indeed another important piece of good news during 2006, given the sustained campaign that some in our country had conducted to present the new Port of Ngqura/Coega as the outstanding symbol of the failure and folly of our democratic government, led by our movement!<sup>11</sup>

Coega, if not the outstanding symbol, is indeed one of several excellent examples of post-apartheid failure and folly, representing a nexus of crony capitalism and negative environmental/climatic effects.<sup>12</sup> The enormous state

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subsidies flowing into the proposed smelter and to other corporate beneficiaries would better be directed to meeting vast unmet social needs in the Eastern Cape.

Replying in late 2006 to a critique I offered in the Durban newspaper *The Mercury*, Coega Development Corporation (CDC) chief executive Ongama Mtimka unwittingly supported the main line of criticism: "Cynthia Carroll's comment that Coega has the best infrastructure she has seen throughout the world affirms the competitiveness of the Coega Industrial Development Zone relative to its global counterparts."<sup>13</sup> A few weeks earlier, Carroll, as president and chief executive of Alcan Primary Metal, had negotiated a cut-price electricity deal for an aluminium smelter on behalf of the vast Canadian metals firm. She was soon thereafter made chief executive officer of Anglo American, showing that the infamous "Minerals Energy Complex" linking South African mining capital, the parastatal Eskom, and the Department of Trade and Industry had internationalized and dropped its purely patriarchal face. The cheap electricity arrangement was widely ridiculed.<sup>14</sup> As *Business Day* columnist Rob Rose put it,

If Coega is the local equivalent of a ghost town, it is one with a peculiar twist: government built it for R7,5bn with no inhabitants, threw open the doors and not even a car guard pitched up. ... Given the energy needs for the smelter, it might be the best thing if it were scrapped. After all, Alcan is being cut a special deal for the massive 1350MW of power it needs, through a bargain price with Eskom under the (bizarrely titled) "development electricity pricing programme." Aluminum smelters are particularly energy intensive, and 1350MW is enough to run a city and equal to nearly 4 percent of South Africa's entire 37,000MW capacity. But Eskom, being Eskom, is keeping the exact price it has given Alcan a secret. Earthlife Africa reasonably says the danger is that Eskom may be subsidizing a project that will create fewer than 1,000 fulltime jobs. ... It is also thought that most of the aluminum produced by Alcan at Coega will be shunted into the export market, rather than being benefited in this country. In the 1950s, aluminum was dubbed "congealed electricity" given the large amount of power needed to produce the metal. Effectively, you could then argue that government is simply allowing Alcan to "export electricity" at a time when we won't exactly be overflowing with spare capacity.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to tailor-made infrastructure, including a R1 billion elite housing estate and a 20-meter deep port, the main attraction of Coega was to be ultra-

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cheap energy. Yet at the same time it was becoming clear that mismanagement of Eskom in the course of its own corporatization had left the company with inadequate investments and regular load-shedding (power supply failures) in early 2008. The US corporation AES was supposed to start building a major private power plant in Port Elizabeth to augment Eskom's supplies, but soon after hopes were raised, retracted its commitment. Eskom's record of sweetheart deals favoring a few huge corporate users included Lakshmi Mittal's steel mills (formerly Iscor), Anglo American's mining operations, and BHP Billiton's smelters.

Alcan, which was in the process of being purchased by Rio Tinto, had signed a quarter-century power supply agreement with Eskom that was estimated to be less than the R0.14 cents per hour that bulk industrial consumers typically pay. South Africa was already the world's cheapest electricity by far. Finally in 2008 it became clear that energy supplies were scarce and the aluminum market began to weaken, so Alcan's employees began to dismantle their operation. Indeed when in mid 2008 the six year commodity boom abruptly ended, the proposed takeover of Rio Tinto by BHP Billiton failed as the Australian firm faced financial crisis.

Until the electricity crisis, Coega's site was anticipated to include the smelter, a vast new port (which opened in late 2008), a container terminal, a petrochemical zone with a massive refinery operated by state-owned PetroSA, and an Industrial Development Zone (IDZ). Public investments of at least R12 billion were planned, including the R2 billion plus tax break for Alcan, in addition to enormous quantities of cheap land, water, and electricity. The new employment anticipated at the port and IDZ would be the most expensive, as measured by capital invested per job, of any in Africa. Whether or not the aluminum and additional manganese smelters are finally built, the environmental costs of the Coega projects in water consumption, air pollution, electricity usage, and marine impacts will be immense. The infrastructure under construction is unprecedented in Africa, and dwarfs any basic-needs development infrastructure that could serve the deprived citizens of Mandela Metropole and across the Eastern Cape.

Hence controversy has surrounded the decision-making process to construct the port and IDZ. Reports of conflicts of interest for key decision-makers cloud the project's governance. Adding to the controversy is the fact that Coega was initially meant to be a way in which European industrial firms involved in arms sales to South Africa could make "offset" investments that would create jobs, so government could justify to the public its corruption-ridden \$6 billion weapons purchase. There are significant social costs as well. Several hundred families were displaced to build Coega's infrastructure, and those in the area will bear the brunt of the environmental

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toll exacted by the project. The opportunity costs of Coega include as many as 10,000 jobs lost in economic sectors which either must close or cannot expand, including the existing salt works, mariculture, fisheries, agriculture, and eco-tourism, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Direct and opportunity costs of the IDZ and harbor<sup>6</sup>

Sector	Income losses (R million/year)	Employment losses (Number of jobs)
Salt production	20	136
Mariculture	116	875
Fisheries	not estimated	not estimated
Agriculture *	510	7 500
Eco-tourism	60	975
Total	706	9 486+

\* Impacts on agricultural production are long term, and therefore of a different nature to the other job losses.

Community and environmental activists have pointed to far better alternatives for employment creation and socioeconomic progress if such resources were used in different ways. In 2001, a civic group, the Mandela Metropole Sustainability Coalition, proposed an alternative economic development scenario to prioritize basic-needs infrastructure investment throughout the Eastern Cape and, at Coega, state-supported eco-tourism and black-owned small-scale agriculture and mariculture.

If plans had not been derailed by the global economic crisis, Coega would quickly have added dramatically to climate change, at a time when South Africa's carbon dioxide emissions are already running approximately 20 times higher than even the United States on a per capita income basis. Ironically, just as the ink was drying on Eskom's electricity giveaway to Alcan, environment minister Martinus van Schalkwyk returned triumphant from the November 2006 climate change treaty renegotiations in Nairobi, claiming that "South Africa achieved most of its key objectives." Those objectives included promoting "Clean Development Mechanism" (CDM) investments as mandated by the Kyoto Protocol's endorsement of carbon trading, which may factor into Coega's finances at some stage. By investing in Third World CDM projects that allegedly reduce emissions, northern polluters can buy the right to continue their emissions at present levels. Because Alcan had promised to use relatively energy-efficient technologies at Coega, the market-oriented United States organization, Environmental Defense, suggested that the project be considered worthy of CDM investments by large international polluters, which would permit these polluters to

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continue present rates of emissions. There are vast problems with the new emissions trading system, and projects such as Coega show why this market should not be expanded in ways that generate new ecological problems without making a dent in overall emissions.<sup>17</sup>

University of Cape Town Environmental Studies Professor Richard Fuggle — one of the country's most respected environmentalists — attacked the expected increase in carbon dioxide emissions due to Coega in his retirement speech, describing van Schalkwyk as a “political lightweight ... unable to press for environmental considerations to take precedence over development.” According to Fuggle, “It is rather pathetic that van Schalkwyk has expounded the virtues of South Africa's 13 small projects to garner carbon credits under the Kyoto Protocol's CDM, but has not expressed dismay at Eskom selling 1,360 megawatts a year of coal-derived electricity to a foreign aluminum company. We already have one of the world's highest rates of carbon emissions per dollar of GDP. Adding the carbon that will be emitted to supply power to this single factory will make us number one on this dubious league table.”<sup>18</sup>

What do Coega backers say to this kind of critique? In 2002, as Trade and Industry minister, Erwin described the analysis above as a “poorly prepared polemic designed to support your obvious opposition to this project. I would not make the above remarks if the document had any real merit. We have held a number of discussions with responsible environmental groups and will work with them very closely.”<sup>19</sup> (Erwin's specific points were considered at length, and rejected, in analysis I coauthored with economist Stephen Hosking.)<sup>20</sup> CDC chief executive Mtimka's reply to this critique, published in *The Mercury*, addressed other considerations, related to corruption allegations:

The argument that “public law and participation processes associated with the port and IDZ development have been unsatisfactory” is factually incorrect and is defamatory with respect to the character of the CDC. All due processes pertaining to the rollout of the project and investments were followed. ... There is no evidence of conflict of interest for key decision-makers which “clouds the project's governance.” This statement is malicious and undermines the integrity of the CDC based on unfounded allegations.<sup>21</sup>

The allegations are indeed serious. They include a conflict of interest of a key decision-maker, Achilles Limbouris, operations manager: Infrastructure Development. Investigations led to his (apparently justified) firing by the CDC just two weeks before Mtimka's article appeared. Limbouris had “been

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in contact with a tenderer, Scribante Construction (Pty) Ltd ... who had tendered for an R85 million construction contract ... [and leaked] sensitive and confidential CDC information ... to the external environment.”<sup>22</sup>

But the problem is apparently far deeper, and involves offsets associated with the notorious arms deal, which permitted offset deals for the German submarine maker Ferrostaal for promised — though never materialized — Coega investments.<sup>23</sup> The Public Service Accountability Monitor became concerned when, according to director Colm Allan, “the Coega Project had effectively collapsed due to the withdrawal of Billiton as its anchor tenant.”<sup>24</sup> What resurrected Coega, according to Allan, was then Defense Minister Joe Modise's “irregular agreement with the German submarine consortium on (13 June 1999) to purchase 3 submarines at a cost of R4.5bn in return for Ferrostaal's promise to construct a steel mill worth R6bn at Coega. ... [Shortly afterwards, upon his retirement] Modise bought shares in and was appointed the chairperson of a company which has been awarded contracts to conduct work on the Coega project.” According to Allan, although Modise passed away soon afterwards, other officials appeared to be milking the project, including Mafika Mkwana (then Transnet deputy managing director), Saki Macozoma (then Transnet managing director), and the chairperson of the CDC board, Moss Ngoasheng: “CDC is a private company which is issuing contracts to be met out of tax-payers' money. Yet, because it is a private company, the financial statements of the CDC cannot be audited by the Auditor General's office. Nor does the CDC have to comply with the strict financial reporting requirements set out in the Public Finance Management Act.”<sup>25</sup>

In opposition to Coega, green activists including Earthlife Africa, Nimble, The Zwartkops Trust, The Valley Bushveld Affected Parties, and citrus farmers all mobilized. However, to alter policy decisions, what is needed is a more sustained campaign — joining environmentalists, labor, community, and other citizens — for *radically new industrial policies* that meet the society's needs, not the world economy's hunger for aluminum. In May 2007, coordinated protests were held against Alcan in Port Elizabeth, Richards Bay and Johannesburg. Earthlife Africa attempted to shed further light on the deals being done at Coega through a Promotion of Access to Information Act request to Eskom about the price of power, conditions of supply, and Alcan's potential to sell on unused electricity. The response, according to Earthlife Africa has been “a complete and utter stonewall in response to legitimate questions concerning South Africa's welfare and long-term energy supply.”<sup>26</sup>

Finally in late 2008, what seemed to represent the last nail in the Coega coffin came from a surprising source: the publication of a hagiographical

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biography of the powerful finance minister, Trevor Manuel, by Pippa Green, the minister's former press secretary. A five page attack on Coega — starting with “You need your head read to think that's a good idea” (a quote from one of Manuel's senior officials) — turns the debate into one of fiscal responsibility (Manuel) versus socialism (Erwin). As public enterprise minister, Erwin tells Green that there was a basic ideological difference in economic theories: “Mine is basically Marxist and Trev's not a Marxist economist. Not because he's opposed to it, just that he's never studied it” (a point Green denies, using Manuel's decontextualised citation of a *Das Kapital* Volume Three quote against excessive state spending). Erwin allegedly is inspired by Bruno Bettelheim's *filiere* value-chain analysis in promoting Coega, hoping for backward/forward linkages for the aluminum.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

The surreal conflict over a South African “developmental state” would not be resolved through Coega's conflicted interests, crony capitalism, corruption, and crazy pseudo-Marxist theories of semi-peripheral capitalism bandied about inside the two most neoliberal economics ministries. Ultimately it was the world capitalist crisis that made the vast aluminum smelter unviable, and yet Zuma's team intends continuing with Coega (without the smelter for now) as well as most other aspects of the “developmental state” project, even including Erwin's massive expansion of nuclear energy.

Writing in 2007, Ben Fine remarked on the impoverished character of SA's development debate, but nevertheless expressed hope:

The government has justified the sudden turn to the developmental state as always having been waiting in the wings once the economy was sufficiently stabilized and secure. In my view, this is a reinvention of the past decade's economic and social policy, a way of excusing the Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy while departing from it. But the rise of the putative developmental state is a rhetorical shift in the government signaling its belief that a job has been half done and conditions are now favorable for more interventionist policies.

Second, of course, the politics of the rise of the developmental state is a matter of appeasing critics of the government's economic and social policies. In particular, there has been the failure to address high and worsening levels of unemployment and impoverishment while black economic empowerment has mainly flourished as a source of elite enrichment. ...

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In short, I would give one cheer for the developmental state for its shift in policy framework, another cheer if it leads to more progressive and interventionist policies in practice, and a third and loudest cheer if it appropriately identifies, challenges and mobilizes the underlying economic and political interests that have precluded such policies in the past.<sup>28</sup>

It is always easy to cheer rhetoric in South Africa, where the tradition of “talking left” while “walking right” corresponds to the Fanonian critique of African nationalism. However, the harsh realities for ordinary South Africans are simply not disguised by the “developmental state” concept. Indeed, what these phenomena represent is a durable neoliberal regime that systematically worsens the plight of its people while adopting policies that benefit foreign-based capital, including the formerly locally-based white business elite. What we have seen from the case of Coega is that this approach is evident in megaproject design and implementation as much as it is in national policies.

Likewise, the only logical reaction — so far only a fraction of what is needed — is sustained social, indigenous, political-economic, and environmental opposition from civil society, given the lack of a left political party opposition to the ANC. South Africa probably has more social protests per person than anywhere in the world. In addition to more than 30,000 formal “gatherings” from 2004 to 2007, of which most were protests (and around 11 percent were “unrest-related” involving acts of violence), there are spontaneous protests not recorded by the police, at a rate estimated by independent researchers in Gauteng Province (between 2004 and 2007) to be more than 50 percent of all “service delivery” protests.<sup>29</sup>

Hence the Polanyian double-movement: excessive market interventions, economic crisis and crony capitalist relationships generating reactions from the trade union and communist center-leftists inside the ruling party's alliance, and dramatic protests by what is sometimes termed the “ultraleft” of independent civic forces outside. The future certainly holds renewed disgust for “developmental state” confusions, but it is not clear in what combination these might generate renewed insurgencies inside the Zuma project, or via the eventual launch of a serious workers' party, or simply in ongoing struggles of daily life against neoliberalism. These are the processes we must keep a close eye on, and offer our solidarity to.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Christelle Terreblanche, "No changes, Zuma vows," *Independent Online*, 9 Dec. 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Hilary Joffe, "Growth has helped richest and poorest," *Business Day*, 5 Mar. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See Pali Lehohla, "State of the World Population," *Statistics South Africa*, 2004 <[http://www.statssa.gov.za/news\\_archive/17sep2004\\_1.asp](http://www.statssa.gov.za/news_archive/17sep2004_1.asp)>, and CNN, "Life expectancy in Africa cut short by AIDS," 18 Mar. 1999, <<http://edition.cnn.hu/HEALTH/9903/18/aids.africa.02/index.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> Salim Vally and C. A. Spreen, "Education Rights, Education Policy and Inequality in South Africa," *International Journal of Educational Development* 26.4 (2006).

<sup>5</sup> "'The State of our environment should remain under a watchful eye' Government release the 2006 Environment Outlook - State of the Environment Report and urges that more work needs to be done," 28 June 2007, *South African Government Information* <<http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2007/07062911151001.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> Ted Leggett, "Is South Africa's Crime Wave a Statistical Illusion?" *SA Crime Quarterly* 1 (July 2002); also available at <[http://www.iss.co.za/index.php?link\\_id=3&slink\\_id=1431&link\\_type=12&slink\\_ty\\_pe=12&tmpl\\_id=3](http://www.iss.co.za/index.php?link_id=3&slink_id=1431&link_type=12&slink_ty_pe=12&tmpl_id=3)>.

<sup>7</sup> A telling investment authorized by Erwin in 2008 was R4 million "to give the image of nuclear power in South Africa a makeover ... Among other things, Freedthinkers is seeking to identify so-called 'nuclear ambassadors' to endorse nuclear power in communities and the business world ... Parallel to the research in public perceptions was the development of a nuclear vocabulary in all eleven official languages. This would 'ensure that public discourse on nuclear related issues is accessible to all South Africans.'" As anti-nuke Pelindaba Working Group coordinator Dominique Gilbert remarked less than two weeks before Erwin resigned, the Freedthinkers contract should be cancelled immediately with funding going to a public consultation process on future energy policy: Civil society organisations and NGOs have repeatedly called for an alternative energy solution to the country's energy crisis in which uranium-fuelled nuclear energy is not involved, "in contrast to Erwin's efforts" to push through what is increasingly looking like his private agenda"; see *SA Press Association*, "R4m for govt nuclear 'research' project," 2 Sept. 2008. However, in spite of a formerly anti-nuclear interim president, Kgalema Motlanthe (ex-secretary of the mineworkers union), the PBMR funding remained in the 2008 budget.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Citron and Richard Walton, "International comparisons of Company Profitability," *UK National Statistics Publication Hub*, Oct. 2002 <[http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/economic\\_trends/ET587\\_Walton.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/economic_trends/ET587_Walton.pdf)>.

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank, *Where is the Wealth of Nations?* (Washington, DC: 2006) 66.

<sup>10</sup> "Economics focus: Domino theory," *The Economist: Electronic Edition*, 26 Feb. 2009

<[http://www.economist.com/research/articlesBySubject/displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=13184631&subjectID=348918&fsrc=nwl](http://www.economist.com/research/articlesBySubject/displayStory.cfm?story_id=13184631&subjectID=348918&fsrc=nwl)>.

<sup>11</sup> Thabo Mbeki, "Letter from the President: 2006— Some Milestones during the Age of Hope!" *ANC Today* 6:50 (Dec. 2006): 22-28.

<sup>12</sup> In addition to a variety of other white elephant projects noted above, we have seen ineffectual neoliberal macroeconomics, micro-neoliberal development disasters, rising unemployment and inequality, an AIDS policy described by many experts as "genocidal," worsened environmental degradation, unprecedented debt-financed consumer materialism, widespread political corruption, real estate and stock market speculation, alliances with imperial powers (e.g. arms sales to the invaders of Iraq), arms sales to repressive regimes, failed multilateral trade and financial reforms, aspirant sub-imperialism (through the New Partnership for Africa's Development), the government's stifling of democracy in Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Burma, and rising state repression at home.

<sup>13</sup> Mtimka Ongama, "Only History will Vindicate Coega," *The Mercury*, 28 Dec. 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Fine and Zav Rustonjee, *South Africa's Political Economy* (Johannesburg: U of the Witwatersrand P, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Rob Rose, "Minister Has a Cheek Threatening Electricity Consumption Fines," *Business Day*, 4 June 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Calculations by Steven Hosking and Patrick Bond, cited in Patrick Bond, *Unsustainable South Africa*, (London: Merlin Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Bond, Rehana Dada and Graham Erion, eds., *Climate Change, Carbon Trading and Civil Society* (Pietermaritzburg: U of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Fuggle, "We are still Indifferent about the State of our Environment," *Cape Times*, 6 Dec. 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Alec Erwin, "Criminal not to Develop Coega," *Eastern Province Herald*, 1 Feb. 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Bond, *Unsustainable South Africa*.

<sup>21</sup> Mtimka, "Only History will Vindicate Coega."

<sup>22</sup> Coega Development Corporation, "Coega Manager Dismissed over Misconduct," press release, Port Elizabeth, 11 Dec. 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Crawford-Browne, *Eye on the Money* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Colm Allan, "Coega, Conflicts of Interest and the Arms Deal," *Public Service Accountability Monitor Report*, Grahamstown, Rhodes U, 24 July 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Allan, "Coega, Conflicts of Interest and the Arms Deal."

<sup>26</sup> Earthlife Africa, "Eskom's Secret Deal with Alcan: Refusal to Release Details," press release, Johannesburg, 20 Feb. 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Pippa Green, *Choice, Not Fate: The Life and Times of Trevor Manuel* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2008) 524-28.

<sup>28</sup> Ben Fine, "Looking for a Developmental State," *Alternatives International* 12 (Sept. 2007) <<http://alternatives-international.net/article1195.html>>.

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<sup>29</sup> Freedom of Expression Institute and University of Johannesburg Centre for Sociological Research, “National Trends around Protest Action,” Feb. 2009, Johannesburg, 13.



### **Productivity Pacts, the 2000 Volkswagen Strike, and the Trajectory of COSATU in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

Ashwin Desai

Many of the processes that followed the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990 and the concomitant political negotiations were mirrored in the motor industry. A series of meetings were held between the main union, the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), and the motor industry bosses to plot a pact that would prefigure the corporatist structures envisaged at a national level. The bosses hoped these talks would bring long term labor stability in an industry marked by conflict and strikes, and that this would serve as a springboard for exports and integration into the global markets. NUMSA, while committed to the political negotiations in which the main liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), demanded discipline and stability from its allies, also saw the transition to democracy as a time to advance workers' interests. These interests were seen in terms of restructuring the apartheid workplace and building a high-skill, high-wage economy tied to broadening workplace democracy. NUMSA regarded participation in the restructuring process as a means of "defending workers' interests through democratization of the workplace, gaining access to skills, and improving wages and working conditions."<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses in particular on how the challenges of deepening workplace democracy and the emphasis on international competitiveness played themselves out at Volkswagen South Africa (VWSA) in Uitenhage. It uses the strike of 1999/2000 to discern how these twin challenges had an impact on the way management, organized labor, and the state responded to the worker rebellion. The concluding part of the article uses this case study as a backdrop to reflect on the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (COSATU) contemporary role in the broader political transition in South

Africa.

By 2000, VWSA's export strategy, if measured strictly by numbers of vehicles leaving the country, was showing clear signs of success. However, this "success" was built on a series of measures that progressively eroded gains made by workers on the shop floor in the late 1970s and 80s. Central to these changes was outsourcing, casualization, and a speeding up of the line. As the effects of these changes began to be effected on the shop-floor workers sought the protection of the union. The union machinery however was geared to servicing agreements that at their center called for a commitment to heightened productivity and stability and labor "peace" on the shop floor.

The scene was set for confrontation.

### Disciplining Labor

As the structural crisis of apartheid capitalism became apparent towards the late 1980s, NUMSA, under the direction of its national education officer Alec Erwin, began to investigate alternative strategies for regenerating accumulation and economic growth. The economists brought together by Alec Erwin in the Economic Trends Group, and later the Industrial Strategy Project (ISP), were ostensibly developing a radical and viable agenda in the new international climate of globalization and free-market hegemony.

Casting around for a theoretical paradigm, these economists embraced French regulation theory with its thesis that as particular forms of capitalist accumulation are exhausted, new institutions, norms, and networks enable the process to be renewed on decidedly different terms.<sup>2</sup> They drew liberally but selectively from Marxist political economy in their analysis of the crisis. At the center of regulation theory's contention was that a new paradigm had emerged to displace Fordist mass production and mass consumption relations (which in South Africa were "racial Fordist" because blacks did the production line work while whites did the consumption). The new approach was variously labeled as "flexible specialization" and "post-Fordism." It suggested that forms of capitalist accumulation can be established in South Africa that benefit the workers and increase their standards of living. This meant that NUMSA was able to retain its public commitment to socialism while being an advocate of co-responsibility with business for a restructured post-apartheid economy, based increasingly on exports and corporate-friendly policies such as the heavily subsidized Motor Industry Development Programme.

Regulation theory ultimately became the basis for facilitating capitalist growth thanks to a host of suggestions made by the ISP. In the hands of the

ISP, it was argued that class conflict would hurt the development of an industrial strategy project. Hence social accords, Quality Circles to draw upon shop floor worker insights to speed assembly lines, three-year productivity deals, and East Asian style export models were central to their thinking.<sup>3</sup>

These shifts were facilitated by political developments in South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which led COSATU's strategic association with the United Democratic Front (UDF) to transform into a tighter and more coherent tripartite alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Key personnel overlapped among all three structures. Erwin moved into a central role in the leadership of the ANC in Natal, while John Gomomo and Moses Mayekiso became members of the central committee of the SACP. After 1994, as many as 20 COSATU leaders had become parliamentarians via the ANC electoral slate, although their subsequent roles were unremarkable, aside from winning small concessions in the Labour Relations Act, very modest minimum wages, and mining safety and health improvements. Erwin became Deputy Minister of Finance, and later Minister of Trade and Industry, while Jay Naidoo was the Minister in charge of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) before being transferred to Communications where his main function was the unsuccessful partial privatization of Telkom. This overlap of key figures and the broader alliance between these organizations facilitated the union movement's acceptance of the key assumptions that informed the ANC's economic policy.

Thus, ISP's recommendations advocated international competitiveness, increased productivity, and tariff reductions in accordance with GATT requirements, and in terms of the latter even went beyond them.<sup>4</sup> In the specific case of the auto industry, union organizers and shop stewards had to craft agreements within the parameters of these policies. Moreover, Erwin brought in an ISP-linked economist from the University of Cape Town, Anthony Black, as chief negotiator for NUMSA, and this advocate of lean production and GATT compliance quickly won the confidence of employers.

While some shop stewards and union officials questioned the dominant corporatist strategy, no organized challenge was mounted against the notions of partnership, tariff reductions, and increased productivity. Part of the reason for this was the success of the ANC and the SACP in bringing into their ranks a number of influential NUMSA leaders, many with solid credentials and long experience in the labor movement, who mediated and sold this economic and political strategy within the structures of the union. The effect was to marginalize those organizers and shop stewards in NUMSA who were suspicious of corporatism, and who still wished to retain their independence from the existing political movements and to build a

working-class party. By the late 1990s, even NUMSA's traditional insistence that a workers' party be up for discussion faded away.

This is not to suggest that this shift to corporatism was propelled by a coherent game plan.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the NUMSA/COSATU alliance with the ANC had a significant influence on NUMSA's strategy within the motor industry. The unfolding of political negotiations and the ANC's need to signal its readiness to govern saw also its commitment to ensuring labor stability. But NUMSA did not simply bow down to the ANC, and the 1994 motor industry strike was indicative of its willingness to wage a militant mass struggle. All through this time though, the logic emerging at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) and the Multi-Party Negotiating Forum was also beginning to have an impact on the union movement. As demands for insurrection and people's power became replaced with sunset clauses and the rainbow nation at the political level, so too were worker control and "growth through redistribution" replaced with reconstruction accords and a perceived need for capital and labor partnerships to save the economy from international competition.<sup>6</sup> It is within this context that the move to corporatism started to take place in the motor industry.

Franco Barchiesi has warned that corporatism was not simply introduced by the ANC to control and temper the power of the union movement. Rather, part of the reason for its "smooth" introduction was that it gelled with labor's policies on socio-economic and industrial restructuring that evolved as the negotiated transition unfolded. COSATU's strategy was that it would be able to ensure employment and social security through negotiating the processes of economic liberalization. But one of the crucial shortcomings of COSATU's approach may have been that its program of redistribution and decommodification was bounded by a conservative neoliberal macroeconomic policy.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to argue that the transition had no benefits for COSATU and its affiliates, because the union movement was provided with the space and opportunity to influence the country's political future. But it was also being increasingly drawn into structures that placed labor stability and productivity at the center of its concerns, and these made it difficult to have the impact at the national level in the way that Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster had envisaged. For example, they maintained that one of the major interventions by COSATU during the transition was its contribution to the formulation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP).<sup>8</sup> Following those heady days, however, the progressive content of the RDP was significantly trimmed back, and some have ventured to argue that this reflected a shift to a neoliberal economic orthodoxy on the part of many of the ANC's senior leaders. The assessment was subsequently given credence by the closure of

the RDP headquarters in March 1996, and the centralization of its functions in the office of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki. Moreover, in June 1996 the Cabinet approved a new macroeconomic strategy entitled Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), which closely resembled the neoliberal economic strategies of structural adjustment programs that the IMF and the World Bank imposed on many developing societies. As Azghar Adelzadeh and Vishnu Padayachee maintained in 1994:

An essentially neo-liberal RDP strategy ... may well generate some level of economic growth: should this happen, the existing, mainly white and Indian bourgeoisie will be consolidated and strengthened; the black bourgeoisie will grow rapidly; a black middle class and some members of the black urban working class will become incorporated in the magic circle of insiders; but for the remaining 60-70 percent of our society, this growth path ... will deliver little or nothing for many years to come.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly COSATU, by being tied to an alliance under the leadership of the ANC, was unable to respond adequately to the initial weakening and ultimate erosion of the RDP. But there were also contradictory impulses to the corporatist script. In March 1996 as many as 6,000 Toyota workers went on strike at Prospecton, just outside Durban, in support of their demands for larger incentive bonuses at a time when the company was reporting a 73.5 per cent increase in earnings. This strike was important because it indicated that workers were not satisfied with simple CPI (consumer price index)-linked increases, but rather wanted a share of their company's profits — a point I and Heinrich Bohmke made in the immediate aftermath of the strike:

In press statements issued at the time of the strike, management constantly referred to NUMSA's condemnation of the actions of the militant workers. This was used repeatedly by management in its press statements in an attempt to draw a distinction between the NUMSA head office and the actions of the rank and file. ... The managerial style ... continues to foster divisions among shopstewards and forces recalcitrant ones into submission by appealing to NUMSA head office. Deracialising and democratising the workplace ground to a halt at Toyota. In fact Toyota management, emboldened by the Government of National Unity (GNU) discourse of "competitiveness" and "privileged organised workers" attempted to win back ground lost on the shopfloor during the militancy of the early 1990s.<sup>10</sup>

The strike at VW was going to display many of the characteristics of the earlier one at Toyota.

### Post-1990 Developments

The ownership, management, and supervision of South Africa's automobile industry has since its inception been overwhelmingly white. It was also highly oppressive in that the foremen, armed with powers of hiring, promotion, and dismissal, ruled the shop floor with grim authoritarianism. The denial of political rights to blacks and the racist division of labor within the motor industry created the conditions for adversarial relations. Bloody battles were fought on the shop floor. Judy Maller points, for example, to the 30 industrial actions embarked upon at VWSA between June and September 1989, which included 9 strikes and 15 work stoppages. Unions also refused to accept responsibility for productivity, profitability, or economic growth, and rejected joint projects with management. At the time, especially at VWSA, even when the union did countenance participation in management structures, it was predicated on it being "adversarial," and "always subordinate to the basic conflict on the shop floor."<sup>11</sup>

At Mercedes Benz, the human resource manager Ian Russel complained, "The union did not recognize management's right to manage. We had no structures to institutionalize conflict, no procedures, no recognition agreement."<sup>12</sup> By post-1990 a consensual approach to labor relations based on corporatism emerged.<sup>13</sup> Corporatism in South Africa can be regarded as a system of interest representation whereby influential socioeconomic organizations are given access to, and the possibility of helping to shape, policies decided in state institutions, in exchange for restricting their demands and operating within agreed parameters, as well as supporting the ideology of national unity.

A most significant development in the rise of corporatism was the motor industry strike in 1994, when some 25,000 assembly workers held out for five weeks. A reduction of tariffs on imported cars had been announced by the Minister of Trade and Industry, Trevor Manuel, in the same week that he had met NUMSA's general secretary, Enoch Gondongwana. The latter's initial angry response was quickly replaced by a more reflective position: "Reconstruction and growth are the key issues. Public opinion played a major role. Under the new conditions we have to win in the arena of public opinion as well as on the shop floor."<sup>14</sup>

The Government's role in the strike, as reflected in statements by the Minister of Labor, Tito Mboweni, was to urge the parties to reach a speedy

settlement, and only served to increase the pressure on NUMSA. The employers used the strike to launch a sustained attack on centralized collective bargaining. Harry Gazemdam, the vice-president of the Auto Manufacturers' Employers Organisation (AMEO), called for the immediate introduction of bargaining in the various plants, where relationships should be "collaborative" and "the emphasis would be on productivity, with the results producing benefits. It is at this level that the culture of identifying with Toyota, MBSA, and so on can be developed."<sup>15</sup>

NUMSA's approach had been to jealously guard its national bargaining structures. Arguing that what was needed was a framework for industrial restructuring at a national level, the union was extremely wary of signing agreements in individual plants. By late 1994, however, a significant shift in NUMSA's approach was reflected in a far-reaching concession to plant-level bargaining, albeit with one company. The agreement outlined the following eight strategic objectives to which NUMSA and Volkswagen South Africa had committed themselves: (i) to work towards the continued viability and growth of VWSA; (ii) to increase annual production to over 100,000 units per annum, depending on market demand; (iii) to operate a highly efficient and competitive process; (iv) to reduce costs and improve quality in order to manufacture more affordable and high quality vehicles; (v) to foster organizational and staff flexibility; (vi) to promote the education, training, and development of employees; (vii) to protect employment in terms of this agreement; and (viii) to promote employee participation through co-determination practices.

The agreement did generate some benefits for the union. It set up a joint union-management executive committee that would meet quarterly in order to discuss disclosure of information and other relevant strategic issues. VWSA committed itself to invest about R10 million in basic adult education in 1995, to eliminate one level of management in manufacturing, and to establish smaller and more autonomous work teams, which were to elect their own spokespersons. This concession could have provided the union with greater influence on the shop floor, especially if it was able to use the spokespersons innovatively as a new layer of worker representatives.

But concessions were not a one party matter. NUMSA also made significant concessions, particularly as regards flexibility in the workplace. The agreement allowed for "outsourcing," for workers to be transferred to different parts of the factory, and for their original jobs and/or classifications to be changed.

A milestone in the development of corporatist practices in the industry may be regarded as the 1995 agreement reached between AMEO, NUMSA, and the exclusively white trade union Yster & Staal and Verwante

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Nywerhede-Unie. This was seen by all its signatories as a path-finding accord “designed to change the shape of labour relations in an industry emerging from episodes of serious conflict in recent years,” which “promises to play an influential and precedent-setting role in the wider South African industrial relations context.”<sup>16</sup> It concretized earlier negotiations to improve skill levels of all employees in the industry on an ongoing basis, reduce historic wage disparities among hourly paid workers, and reduce wage spreads within and among companies in the industry. However, while representing substantial gains for workers, this far-reaching agreement committed all parties to promote stability, predictability, and industrial peace. In order to achieve this, the central catalyst for conflict had been removed from the bargaining arena. Annual wage increases linked to the consumer price index have been settled for the next three years. The unions undertook not to make any further claims in respect of substantive wage and benefit on-cost items, either for the industry or any plant, during the lifetime of the agreement. The employers were clear about the gains of linking wage increases to the CPI. It meant “the elimination of unrealistic wage demands ... that have hampered negotiations in the past.”<sup>17</sup>

This agreement was a double-edged sword. On the one hand it guaranteed a CPI-linked wage increase to workers whose real income has been under constant threat. On the other hand, for the union, central bargaining around wage increases brought together worker representatives from all the auto companies, which meant that if there was a breakdown in negotiations NUMSA was able to call on approximately 25,000 workers to join together in any agreed response. It was this mass mobilization that effectively challenged the attempts by employers to foster company consciousness and thereby divide auto workers. The effect of the aforementioned “predictability” created fertile conditions for the demobilization of workers, the fostering of company consciousness, and, ultimately, a drift from centralized bargaining. This was certainly hastened by the management’s commitment to deal with productivity and performance awards at the company level. As an employer press release emphasized:

In line with the objectives of dealing with appropriate issues at appropriate levels — and reducing the extent of centralization in our current bargaining relationship — the employers have secured an agreement in terms of which issues impacting on competitiveness, business efficiency, flexibility and productivity have been devolved to company level to be dealt with at the point of production.<sup>18</sup>

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In the event of any dispute, a mediation-arbitration process required “union parties not to undertake to strike or engage in any other form of industrial action, and the employer parties ... undertake not to lock-out or resort to any unilateral action in conflict with the dispute-resolution provisions of this agreement.”<sup>19</sup>

Clearly the union was now to be a partner in ensuring the agreements were adhered to by workers on the shop floor despite the fact that as Kally Forrest notes:

[T]he union had not succeeded in its aims of democratising the apartheid workplace and augmenting workers’ participation and control at the point of production. Membership, except marginally in auto, had no more power than before the introduction of the three-year programme, and in fact many had experienced a disempowerment because of the confusion around implementation of the programme.<sup>20</sup>

As the decade wore on, the demands of “export agreements” meant more and more gains made in the 1980s by workers were pushed back.

The 1999/2000 strike brought these very issues to the fore.

### The Anatomy of the Strike

Volkswagen South Africa operated a motor manufacturing plant in Uitenhage near Port Elizabeth, employing roughly 6,000 workers. It was a highly unionized environment with about 80 percent of the workforce belonging to NUMSA. The union, an affiliate of COSATU, was the sole collective bargaining agent for waged employees since 1990. The collective agreement provided, among other things, for recognition of 32 shop stewards at the workplace, with some of these positions being full-time, paid for by the company.

In 1998, VWSA was awarded the contract to manufacture the A4 Golfs for export to the United Kingdom and Europe. To meet this contract, production levels at the plant had to be doubled. More from a profit point of view than an operational one, this in turn necessitated certain changes to working conditions. NUMSA was engaged in discussions and it supported the variations, signing an agreement which among a host of new measures bound its employees to changes such as speeding up the line, a holiday corridor, and reduced tea-breaks. In terms of the holiday corridor during the November/December period temporary workers would also be hired. These workers would clearly not be union members. 850 new employees were also

recruited and the terms of the agreement was communicated within the plant. New workers would need to have a school leaving certificate cutting off many older recruits who went through the lack of access to education during apartheid years or disruption of schooling through protests, but who had accumulated skills on the job. It also excluded through these processes workers who would have experienced collective worker struggles through the 1980s.

In March 1999, dissatisfaction within the Volkswagen NUMSA branch about the terms of the variations described above and the manner in which they had been decided began to surface. Bonsile Mkezu, a newly elected shop steward articulated a generalized response: "Improvements which we had gradually won in the apartheid period were taken back. Wages and working conditions are now worse than they were in the apartheid period."<sup>21</sup>

A group of workers, the Concerned VW Workers, raised these concerns during the annual shop-steward elections in April 1999, campaigning against both the changes and the shop-steward committee in place at the time, as the latter was seen to have been instrumental in agreeing to the changes. After the elections, thirteen new shop stewards were elected, most of whom were opposed to the agreement. Conflict between those shop stewards supporting the changes (mainly those who previously held office) and local NUMSA officials on one hand and those shop stewards opposed to the changes (mainly those newly elected) quickly emerged.

On 17 July 1999, NUMSA suspended eight of the new shop stewards and informed Volkswagen that they should return to their former positions on the factory floor. Immediately, hundreds of workers downed tools and marched through the factory, demanding the reinstatement of the suspended shop stewards. On 21 July 1999 NUMSA heeded the demand. However, shortly thereafter, eighteen mainly old shop stewards resigned in protest at the reinstatement of the eight new shop stewards.

Volkswagen wrote to NUMSA claiming the high number of vacancies created difficulties in maintaining discipline and productivity in the workplace. On 6 August 1999, NUMSA responded by saying that new shop-steward elections would shortly be held but that, in the meantime, Volkswagen was not to have dealings with any new, "unofficial representatives" of workers that may present themselves. By September 1999, NUMSA had still taken no steps to hold new elections. The workforce then replaced the eighteen shop stewards who had resigned. Volkswagen duly refused to recognize these nominees who were, by and large, also opposed to the changes in working conditions.

On 22 December 1999, one day before the annual holiday period,

NUMSA informed Volkswagen that the thirteen newly elected shop stewards had all been expelled from the union after what was later revealed to be a deeply flawed union disciplinary process. The expelled shop stewards sought legal advice in January 2000 contesting their expulsion. Tensions within Volkswagen continued to simmer. There were indications that there would be massive disruptions to production when the plant reopened on account of the expulsion of what were turning out to be hugely popular shop stewards, evincing a popular rejection of the Export Order agreement. On 17 January 2000, NUMSA revoked the expulsion but immediately suspended the shop stewards pending another internal disciplinary enquiry. They were required to vacate their offices. On 19 January 2000, NUMSA brought an interdict against the thirteen shop stewards on the grounds that they had not yet vacated their offices and were supposedly interfering in NUMSA organizational matters in the workplace.

The next day, about 3000 workers downed tools demanding the reinstatement of the thirteen suspended shop stewards. It is worth quoting in full the Labour Appeal Court's rendition, based on the evidence tendered at the arbitration, of what happened in a meeting between Volkswagen management and a committee representing the striking workers on 20 January 2000:

An employee delegation of five persons representing the striking employees held a meeting with the [company's] management. The explanation that they gave for the strike was that the striking employees were dissatisfied with the suspension of the shop stewards by the union and wanted the union to lift the suspension. *They also said that the striking employees wanted the company to get the union to lift the suspension or to address their complaint.* The company told the employee delegation that the suspension of the shop stewards was an internal issue within the union in which it could not intervene. It advised that the striking employees as union members should resolve that issue with the union internally. The company's representatives at that meeting also told the employee delegation that the strike was illegal and that those who continued to take part in it faced disciplinary action including dismissal. A memorandum to this effect was handed to each member of the employee delegation. The employee delegation was asked to convey the contents of the memorandum to the striking employees.<sup>22</sup>

Between 21 January and 25 January 2000, various efforts were made by NUMSA to have workers return to work. This culminated in a union

statement carried in newspapers and over radio and TV that workers who did not return to work faced dismissal. On 23 and 24 January 2000, ANC/COSATU/SACP Alliance pamphlets saying the same things were also issued. The majority of striking workers held out against these efforts and Volkswagen then decided to close the plant in its entirety.

On 28 January, members of the management of Volkswagen South Africa, various German executives who had hastily come to South Africa, and NUMSA met. They concluded a collective agreement that, among other things, provided that the union reserved the right to represent workers charged with misconduct during the industrial action should such charges be brought after it had ended and, further, that the company would take disciplinary action against those who did not return to work which “will include dismissal.” NUMSA was informed that should the agreement not be complied with, Volkswagen would issue a final ultimatum. This agreement was published in the local media.

By 31 January 2000 Volkswagen still had an insufficient workforce to begin production. 50,000 notices recording the agreement between NUMSA and Volkswagen were dropped in the Uitenhage area and the usual print and electronic press releases were issued. The notices spelled out the terms of the ultimatum: that should workers not return to work by 3 February 2000 the Company would dismiss them. Many “striking” workers did return on 3 February 2000 but approximately 1,300 did not. They were summarily dismissed.

NUMSA union officials expressed their opposition to the striking workers. For Silumko Nodwangu, a NUMSA official who was to rise to general secretary of the union: “workers used intimidatory tactics which were associated with VW struggles during the 1980s. These kinds of tactics in these times with the new LRA were inappropriate.” For Nodwangu the role of the union was to ensure that workers did not disrupt production or seek to challenge the agreement especially the section under “labour stability and flexibility.”<sup>23</sup>

In this regard the A4 export agreement read: “Both parties confirm that in order to ensure we keep this order and achieve daily schedules, no illegal and unprocedural industrial action can be tolerated and to this end, all employees and management agree to strictly follow all relevant dispute and grievance procedures.”<sup>24</sup> NUMSA and the company signed this agreement on 27 August 1998. The agreement brought to a head an already growing distance between union head office and workers on the shop floor; a position articulated by Peter Rachleff: “NUMSA had agreed to all of these changes without once giving the workers an opportunity to vote them up or down. Not only did the acceptance of these changes by union officials who did

not have to work under them anger the workers, but it also contradicted the VW local’s own traditions of internal democracy.”<sup>25</sup>

COSATU’s alliance partners weighed in against the strikers. The South African Communist Party saw the hand of left-wing opportunism:

The VW dispute is another lesson and warning for the SACP. As has happened in the mining sector (with the so-called “workers’ mouth-piece”), there are opportunistic elements that seek to divide organised workers with pseudo-radical demagoguery. Small cliques seek to manipulate worker concerns for their own individualistic or other sinister reasons. We commend the NUMSA leadership for the manner in which they have settled the current crisis, and we call on workers in all sectors to be vigilant about the dangers of reckless opportunism.<sup>26</sup>

President Thabo Mbeki added to the chorus of condemnation: “Strikes such as the one at Volkswagen cannot be tolerated. Jobs, a better life for our people in the context of a growing economy and our standing in the eyes of the investor community cannot be held hostage by elements pursuing selfish and anti-social purposes. The Government will not waver from this position.”<sup>27</sup>

For the human resources bigwig Brian Smith who had served VW through the militant 1980s, the thirteen shop stewards were people who could not adjust to the onset of democracy, which was about using institutional means to resolve conflict. According to Smith, these older workers were still imbued with the idea of mass struggles and resistance as ways to conduct negotiations.<sup>28</sup> For Smith, the thirteen shop stewards were “the masters of resistance” and he was happy to be rid of them.

The view of older, militant workers as at the core of the strike was echoed by journalist Drew Forrest:

Older members had grown up in the 1980s rhetoric — and this was especially true of auto factories in the Eastern Cape — where there were times when it seemed that workers would wrest control of factories from employers. From this perspective this new era of co-determination with management looked like a sell out.<sup>29</sup>

By now about a thousand of the workers had joined the Oil, Chemical, General and Allied Workers Union (OCGAWU). The dismissed workers had through the strike tried to garner international support. But the German union federation IG Metall saw this as a challenge to co-determination and came

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down on the side of the Volkswagen management and refused to have any dealings with OCGAWU.<sup>30</sup>

The dismissed workers appointed attorneys to represent them in the dismissal dispute and about one year later, Commissioner Floors Brand ruled that while the dismissal had been substantively fair, the company had erred procedurally by not affording them the opportunity to at least state their case before taking this decision. By not giving them some form of a hearing before they were dismissed, the company had fallen foul of its obligations in terms of the LRA. As relief, the Commissioner ordered the company to reinstate the workers, albeit without any back pay. This was to prove a short-lived victory. On appeal the firing of the workers was confirmed and workers were ordered to pay costs.

When OCGAWU sought organizational rights for its hourly paid members, VW management rebuffed them and asserted that they only recognized NUMSA. OCGAWU appealed to The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). However their efforts were stymied when NUMSA and VW management reduced the representative threshold from 40 percent to 30 percent, a change recognized by the CCMA. OCGAWU was effectively barred from the plant.

The strike, essentially post-apartheid's first workers' strike directed against their own union, provides a window into the quick transition of the union from a militant organization into one that was determined to enter into agreements and police them even if it meant the erosion of gains made through the 1980s. It also showed how worker solidarity built during the days of apartheid was now translated into a united stance against militant workers who sought to defend workplace gains won in the 1980s. By 2003, a study into COSATU affiliates argued that they had "increasingly taken responsibility for cutting costs at work in an attempt to achieve international competitiveness for the South African business sector. NUMSA has been a leading proponent of this strategy ...".<sup>31</sup>

### The Forward March of Labor Halted?

The VW strike, among other intra-union conflicts and the effects of the neoliberal transition, has encouraged a growing debate about the power of the union movement as a catalyst for deepening democracy and leading the struggle for a radical transformation of South African society. In focusing on GEAR, the emphasis is almost solely on its neoliberal economic prerequisites. However, equally relevant is that with GEAR came an approach that worked to ensure that criticism from "the people" was stifled and that the role of civil society was to be part of implementing policies made from on

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high. One of the most overt signals of this approach was contained in the speech of Mosiuoa Lekota representing President Thabo Mbeki at the 1999 COSATU Congress that came in the aftermath of mounting criticism of GEAR and the ANC. Lekota asserted that the ANC leadership would not countenance public statements from Alliance partners that disagreed with government policy. Lekota's position was brazen:

The recent trend, on the part of some highly placed comrades, of ascending platforms or by other ways criticising or agitating against policies and actions of the movement, inside and outside Government, smacks of a lack of revolutionary discipline ... . This undisciplined approach has a number of negative consequences: It confuses the mass based support of our movement; it lends itself to exploitation by our opponents and opposition parties; it creates a climate in which agents provocateurs can thrive and advance their counter-revolutionary agendas.<sup>32</sup>

With neoliberalism comes the occluding of the effects of power and politics:

[N]eo-liberal capitalism, in its millennial moment, portends the death of politics by hiding its own ideological underpinnings in the dictates of economic efficiency: in the fetishism of the free market, in the inexorable, expanding "needs" of business, in the imperatives of science and technology. Or, if it does not conduce to the death of politics, it tends to reduce them to the pursuit of pure interest, individual or collective.<sup>33</sup>

The union response to the strike shows how deeply this approach has become inscribed in the body politic of South Africa.

Buhlungu and Webster identify four strategies that have emerged post-1994 at the workplace:

The first of these, "negotiated reconstruction", refers to a strategy of negotiating the terms of a reconstituted workplace order, and may be driven by management or trade unions or both. "Wildcat co-operation" describes a managerial strategy for incorporating black workers by negotiating informally with workers and introducing new management practices, but bypassing or marginalizing trade unions. "Authoritarian restoration" is a managerial strategy for reconstituting an authoritarian workplace order which draws on the dominant strand of South African workplace history, but may introduce new



features and practices as well. A fourth group of workplaces is characterised by stalemate brought about by the lack of any specific strategy, or by failure of an attempted strategy of negotiation or authoritarianism.<sup>34</sup>

What this typology does not countenance is a workplace strategy that drives back gains won during the 1980s and early 90s, authored by management and policed by trade unions whose net effect is to restore managerial prerogative. In this strategy “recalcitrant” shop stewards are marginalized and agreements are concluded with little or no consultation, as in the signing of the A4 agreement.

There were notable changes in NUMSA’s relations with management. This orientation is captured by a NUMSA shop steward at Highveld Steel but is reminiscent of an overall union approach: “We are not there to fight management, we are there to support our families ... . We are part and parcel of management, not officially, but according to our constitution as a union.”<sup>35</sup>

In more general terms, Mondli Hlatwayo has cogently traced the changing role of the union organizer from the 1980s. During the militant unionism of the 1980s,

union organisers were also activists in their own right. The “activist organiser” embodied two roles, that of political activist as well as that of full-time official of the union. As a consequence, working for the union was regarded by many as being part of a commitment to the goals of national liberation and economic emancipation. ... The changing political environment has paved the way for a new type of union official — the business unionists and careerists who treat full-time union employment as a “waiting room” and a stepping stone up the social scale.<sup>36</sup>

In effect, co-determination had mutated into co-management, with the unions as junior partners.

The COSATU strategy of international competitiveness as evidenced at VWSA has proven to have disastrous effects on the union movement. Clearly if a radical challenge to capitalism is to emerge, it

will have to be less about keeping up with or adapting to capitalist change, but rather more about developing the capacity to mobilise more broadly and effectively against the logic of competitiveness and profit in order eventually to get somewhere else, that is, to an egalitarian, cooperative and democratic social order beyond capital-

ism. To run, even twice as fast, on capitalism’s terms will not in fact lead somewhere at all.<sup>37</sup>

The 2008/9 retrenchments at VWSA have shown that despite the sacrifices made by the union movement, it is no guarantee against job losses. Alongside this, as the transition has unfolded, the “legal” spaces much heralded in the early years of democracy have been progressively cut down. Labor law jurisprudence is on a steady rightward slide. At the back of every judge’s mind in collective disputes is “what is the effect of my ruling going to be on investor confidence and thereby GEAR?”

The very base of the union movement has been changing with surveys showing that the majority “of COSATU members (79 percent) are drawn from a new generation of workers.” In this context, David Masondo’s research at BMW reinforces this perception, with one worker pointing out that “Everyone is here to work for himself. I do not care for endless meetings. I’m just here to make money and enjoy life.” Masondo also quotes a shop steward at BMW who was of the opinion that the younger workers “are less political, less hung up about the past. They are more interested in training and their future. Meetings used to be full of political questions. Now they ask about training, career prospects and study leave. They come to work in brand-name clothing. They are more materialistic.”<sup>38</sup> These trends were also discernible at VW.

At the same time union members are mainly in the declining core of permanent full-time employment, while the workers outside of this declining core are largely un-represented. In a “compressed” period of time COSATU has seen its position as a critical social actor facing numerous challenges. As Franco Barchiesi points out, crucial

determinants of this decline are the unions’ subordinate institutionalisation within organs of the state deeply committed to a liberalising macroeconomic agenda, and their deepening social marginalisation due to a growing inability to represent changes in the world of work. In particular, the meaning of wage labour has changed dramatically in the “new South Africa”, in a way that is no longer enabling the old trade unions’ visions of social inclusion, rights and citizenship but it has become a recipe for poverty, vulnerability and despair. In general, South African unions have not been able to respond to this profound disarticulation of the work-citizenship nexus, either in terms of organisational strategies, or the terrain of analysis and ideology.<sup>39</sup>

Frederick Engels writing in the 1880s foresaw the emergence of labor organizations among un-organized workers whose minds were “free from the inherited ‘respectable’ prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated ‘old’ Unionists.”<sup>40</sup> In South Africa rather than new labor organizations we see the emergence of community movements that are acting in ways that are not bounded by visions of building the nation, “The Alliance,” and corporatist scripts. The rise of these often proto-movements, their combativeness in confronting the commodification of basic services, the spontaneity of community uprisings that have exposed the lack of delivery, allied to COSATU’s seeming inability to stem the ANC’s neoliberal turn, and the growing trend of casualization of the work-force, have all contributed to the challenge of the union movement to be the “keepers of the poor.” As Sakhela Buhlungu puts it:

Ninety two percent of COSATU members are in permanent, full time jobs. Not only does this project COSATU members as privileged relative to the growing army of the unemployed and those workers in precarious employment and the informal sector, it also suggests that the federation has failed to make headway in organising beyond the diminishing core workforce in full-time permanent jobs.<sup>41</sup>

But while this kind of analysis is important, it should not be read to signal the end of COSATU’s combativeness. There were counter-tendencies, even if they took the form of protesting then-President Thabo Mbeki’s lack of consultation with the union movement. For example, sentiments have been expressed by COSATU itself that it has been marginalized from the policy-making process by the ANC. In 2006 COSATU wrote it is

like a broken CD that just keeps repeating itself...The Alliance, including COSATU, is generally sidelined from the process of policy formulation and transformation for most of the ten years of governance. Then, six months before elections, without even a Summit to formally endorse the elections strategy of the Manifesto, we get drawn into election task teams that work efficiently to mobilise the base and rally the troops. In the victory celebrations, the public hugging follows. Yet a few months down the line, the reality of being sidelined returns, leading to public disagreements over key policy directions.<sup>42</sup>

In the post-Polokwane period we have seen increasing assertions from COSATU that its push for a more radical macroeconomic program is bearing

fruit. This comes up against statements from the ANC president Jacob Zuma that there will be no change in government policy when it comes to the economy. In commenting on Jacob Zuma’s visit to the United States in late October 2008 with fellow members of the ANC NEC, Simon Barber elegantly summed up the approach to macroeconomic policy:

There would be no veering to the left on economic policy, Zuma and (Matthews) Phosa insisted. On fears that the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party were starting to run the ANC, Zuma said of the alliance partners: “They participate, they do not determine”. The spending priorities Zuma enumerated at every appearance were those outlined in the medium-term budget policy statement Trevor Manuel tabled in Parliament. ... To the extent that these priorities would be more difficult to fund in the current environment, Phosa emphasised that spending would be stretched out rather than fiscal discipline relaxed. The priorities would be met, just not as quickly.<sup>43</sup>

In this context it is easy for the “Left” to read the “Zuma moment” to be the same old politics of COSATU simply supporting the ANC. However, what is occluded in this reading is that the 2009 election campaign brought a number of crucial issues to the surface. Within the union movement the corporatist bargain with capital came under criticism for failing to improve skills, to transform the workplace from old-style authoritarianism, and to create jobs. The macroeconomic project was also harshly criticized, notwithstanding Zuma’s own position. Generally the 2009 elections saw from COSATU and from many ANC branches a radicalization of language as the Alliance sought to distinguish itself from the party of old Mbekites, the Congress of the People (COPE).

It is in the pioneering and inspirational community/social movements, in a seemingly combative union movement that includes a wounded NUMSA — bleeding members through layoffs — and in a limited but significant number of resurgent and vibrant ANC branches that the possibilities lie in building a politics that will challenge the Mbeki ship of neoliberalism, whose logic has become embedded in a myriad of state institutions and organizations and in the agreements that unions so hurriedly signed with the bosses. This implies that demands that bridge the labor/community divide must become the way in which COSATU and the community/social movements organize. The Basic Income Grant (BIG) Campaign is one immediate possibility.

For the first time in South Africa post-1994, there is a possibility of a

sustained mass-based politics emerging that includes segments from inside and outside the Alliance. One of the imponderables in all this is the SACP, which, as it becomes increasingly embedded in Zuma's cabinet, might find the politics of the street less attractive, especially if it challenges the party's leadership sitting as ministers. The other is whether ex-union leaders turned ANC heavyweights like Gwede Mantashe are able, Mbeki-like, to put a lid on dissent in the name now of the cult of Zuma. The demands of such a politics have already been raised in numerous protests that speak of service delivery, increased financial support for the poor, improved public transport and health, and anger at black elites who cash in on a culture of entitlement while preaching to the poor about the dangers of a culture of dependency.

There is a radical class politics emerging on the factory floor, in the public sector, and the community. The challenge is to create the conditions and organizational forms for these struggles to coalesce.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> David Masondo, "Trade Liberalisation and Work Restructuring," *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace*, ed. Karl Von Holdt and Eddie Webster (Scottsville: U of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2005) 157.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen Gelb, ed., *South Africa's Economic Crisis* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> See Avril Joffe, David Kaplan, Raphael Kapilinsky and David Lewis, "Meeting the Global Challenge: A Framework for Industrial Revival in South Africa," *South Africa and the World Economy in the 1990s*, ed. Pauline H. Baker, Alex Boraine and Warren Krafchik (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 1993) 91-126.

<sup>4</sup> Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002* (Pietermaritzburg: U of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2002) 115.

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed arguments on corporatism, see Ashwin Desai and Adam Habib, "Labour Relations in Transition: The Rise of Corporatism in South Africa's Motor Industry," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 35.7 (1997): 495-518.

<sup>6</sup> As part of the broader negotiated settlement between the ANC and the National Party, the sunset clause secured the jobs of public servants for five years.

<sup>7</sup> Franco Barchiesi, "Social Citizenship and the Transformation of Wage Labour in the Making of Post Apartheid South Africa, 1994-2001," diss., U of the Witwatersrand, 2005, 100-03.

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster, "Challenging Transition Theory: The Labour Movement, Radical Reform and the Transition to Democracy in South Africa," *Politics and Society* 23.1 (1995): 75-106.

<sup>9</sup> Asghar Adelzadeh and Vishnu Padayachee, "The RDP White Paper: Reconstruction of a Development Vision," *Transformation* 25 (1994): 16.

<sup>10</sup> Ashwin Desai and Heinrich Bohmke, "Everything Keeps Going Wrong ... Toyota," *South African Labour Bulletin* 20.3 (1996): 55-58.

<sup>11</sup> Judy Maller, *Conflict and Cooperation: Case Studies in Worker Participation* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1992) 123.

<sup>12</sup> Qtd. in Karl Von Holdt, "The Mercedes Benz Strike, a Glimpse into Our Future," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 15.1 (1990): 41.

<sup>13</sup> See Desai and Habib, "Labour Relations."

<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in Ashwin Desai and Karl Von Holdt, "The Auto Industry Strike: Industry Restructuring or Wage Militance?" *South African Labour Bulletin*, 16.5 (1994): 74.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Gazemdam, Vice-President of the Auto Manufacturers' Employers Organisation, personal interview, 23 Sept. 1994.

<sup>16</sup> AMEO, NUMSA, Yster & Staal, and Verwante Nywerhede-Unie, "Joint Press Release," 29 June 1995, 1.

<sup>17</sup> AMEO, "Press Release" 1.

<sup>18</sup> AMEO, "Press Release" 2.

<sup>19</sup> AMEO, NUMSA, and Yster & Staal, and Verwante Nywerhede-Unie, Agreement on a New Industrial Relations Dispensation for the Auto Manufacturing Industry, 1 July 1995 to 30 June 1998, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Kally Forrest, "Out of Time: The National Union of Metalworkers' Pursuit of Power: 1989-1995," *African Studies* 66.2-3 (2007): 379-80.

<sup>21</sup> Qtd. in Peter Rachleff, "The Current Crisis of the South African Labor Movement," paper presented, the North American Labour History Conference, Detroit, 3 Oct. 2000.

<sup>22</sup> B.J. Mseku and Others v. VWSA and Others, Labour Appeal Court (LAC), 2002, paragraph 8 (my emphasis).

<sup>23</sup> Qtd. in Drew Forrest, "What happened at VW?" *South African Labour Bulletin* 24.2 (2000): 16.

<sup>24</sup> A4 Export Agreement, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Rachleff, "The Current Crisis of the South African Labor Movement" 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Newsletter* (SACP, Feb. 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Thablo Mbeki, address, "State of the Nation," Feb. 2000.

<sup>28</sup> See JWPM Cramer, "Social Conflict in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Case Study of the Conflict at VW SA Ltd. between 1999-2000," diss., U of Stellenbosch, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Forrest, "What happened at VW?" 16.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Borlsman, "Volkswagen, Automobile Workers and the Reconfiguration of Trade Union Internationalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa," unpublished paper, 2008.

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<sup>31</sup> Tom Bramble, "Social Movement Unionism Since the Fall of Apartheid: The case of NUMSA on the East Rand," *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa,"* ed. Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 189.

<sup>32</sup> Qtd. in John Saul, *The Next Liberation Struggle: Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, U of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2005) 219.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," *Public Culture* 12.2 (2000): 322.

<sup>34</sup> Sakhela Buhlungu and Eddie Webster, "Work Restructuring and the Future of Labour," *State of the Nation*, ed. Sakhela Buhlungu, John Daniel, Roger Southall, and Jessica Lutchman (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2006) 258-59.

<sup>35</sup> NUMSA shop steward, qtd. in Karl Von Holdt, *Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa* (Scottsville: U of Natal P, 2003) 184.

<sup>36</sup> Mondli Hlatwayo, "From Socialist Politics to Business Unionism," *The State of Social Movements in South Africa 2007*, ed. Oupa Lehulere (Johannesburg: Khanya College Publishing, 2007) 238.

<sup>37</sup> Leo Panitch, "Globalisation and the State," *The Globalisation Reader*, ed. Leo Panitch, Colin Leys, Alan Zeuge, and Martijn Konings, (London: Merlin Press, 2004) 10.

<sup>38</sup> Masondo, "Trade Liberalisation" 167.

<sup>39</sup> Franco Barchiesi, "Classes, Multitudes and the Politics of Community Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Centre for Civil Society Report* 20 (2004): 36.

<sup>40</sup> Qtd. in Eric Hobsbawm, *The Forward March Of Labour Halted?* (London: Verso, 1981) 7.

<sup>41</sup> Sakhela Buhlungu, "Proletarians or Labour Aristocrats? The Changing Social Composition of COSATU Members" in Lehulere, *The State of Social Movements* 243-44.

<sup>42</sup> COSATU, statement, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> *Business Day*, 31 Oct. 2008.

## **Hybrid Social Citizenship and the Normative Centrality of Wage Labor in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

Franco Barchiesi

### **The Declining Wage Labor-Social Inclusion Nexus in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

On November 6, 2006, South Africa's deputy president, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka declared before Parliament that, even in case her government will achieve its official growth targets by the year 2015, it will still fail to create as many formal jobs as initially projected to reduce the country's unemployment rate by half. In the best case scenario, two million jobs will still fall short of official employment goals.<sup>1</sup> Mlambo-Ngcuka's admission came in the wake of a prolonged period of optimism fostered by three years of uninterrupted growth, which for the first time made the achievement of the 6 percent growth rate set as a goal by the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy a realistic possibility. It also followed a recent interventionist shift in economic policy making, heralded by the new Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA). Through ASGISA, which encompasses a set of initiatives ranging from increased social grants for the poor, to infrastructural investment and the targeting of strategic industries, the ANC government aims to correct the neoliberal, market-oriented approach of GEAR, which was primarily aimed at ensuring sound "fundamentals."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, despite the shifting mood in policy debates and public opinion enthusiasms, the employment crisis remains, from a policymaking standpoint, an urgent, unresolved social issue. At the same time, many scholars are raising public awareness of the complex, diversified nature of the problem.<sup>3</sup> The rate of unemployment, presently standing at around 25 percent of the economically active population, does not in itself explain the full extent of

the crisis, or its nature. Nor does the fact that two-thirds of the working-age, able-bodied population aged 18 to 34 have never worked in their lives, or the fact that only one third of the African economically active population is in full-time, formal jobs.<sup>4</sup> More generally, South African society is facing — and this is a reality remarkably impervious to shifts in the economic cycle and in the economic policy discourse — a widespread decline of waged employment as a condition of stable social insertion, citizenship, and the enjoyment of social rights. The most visible impacts of wage labor's decline are deepening labor market inequalities and the expansion of working class poverty, which, encompassing a growing number of workers with formal occupations as well as casual ones, is engulfing urban as well as rural areas.

Recently produced research shows that 44 percent of workers deemed “informal,” without guaranteed jobs and benefits (80 percent of whom do not have a written contract of employment), are in a de facto permanent relation with the same employer, while as many as 16 percent of workers officially registered as “formal” are not.<sup>5</sup> Casual, fixed-term, and subcontracted occupations have come to cover one third of the employed population, as increasing numbers of such workers are hired by formal enterprises.<sup>6</sup> There, they drive older, unionized employees in a race to the bottom that undermines their wages and benefits. Almost 90 percent of informal workers have no company-based retirement coverage, but this also applies to 35 percent of formal employees. Data on unionization, constantly eroded throughout the private sector over the past ten years, see 40 percent of formal workers and less than 10 percent of informal ones belonging to a union, with a national union density rate that from 1996 to 2005 has fallen from 35 percent to 26 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than being confined to unemployment statistics, South Africa's employment crisis mirrors a deepening process of informalization of formerly stable union jobs, bearing witness to a generalized decline of wage labor's capacity to act as a vehicle for social citizenship. South Africa's black urban waged workers are far from being a “privileged” strata of “winners” — as authors like Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass have recently argued, echoing the “urban bias” argument familiar in structurally adjusted Africa.<sup>8</sup> Rather, they have had many of their expectations from the post-apartheid democratic transition sorely frustrated. Their disappointment has clearly underpinned organized labor's opposition to former President Thabo Mbeki, booed by delegates at the September 2006 conference of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the country's largest (and ANC-allied) union federation. Rifts in the labor-ANC alliance dramatically culminated in the December 2007 ANC national conference in Polokwane,

where a grassroots insurgency led to the removal of Mbeki and much of the party's leadership, and the rise of Jacob Zuma, a populist leader supported by COSATU, to the position of party president. Following its “recall” by the ANC few months later, Mbeki had to resign from the presidency of South Africa, while party notables opposed to Zuma staged a historical split from the ANC and the formation of a new centrist party, the Congress of the People (COPE), competing for the symbolic mantle of the liberation movement. Divisions and convulsions in the country's ruling elite have much to do with the malaise emanating from waged employment, which, rather than acting as a vehicle of social transformation, solidarity, and emancipation as promised by labor struggles against apartheid, has confirmed its precarious and vulnerable reality for most black workers. Part of the picture are the levels of strike activity, unprecedented since 1994, which have accompanied the crisis of the ANC, culminating in highly militant industrial actions as the 4-month long security guards' strike in early 2006, which saw the death of 59 people.

The shift heralded by the employment figures quoted above is truly momentous as an indication of the social trends of the South African transition. Not only had black trade unions and workers' struggles acted in the past as decisive factors in the demise of the Apartheid regime and in the rise of the ANC to power in the 1994 elections.<sup>9</sup> In fact, throughout this process the very notion of wage labor was rescued, for the majority of the racially oppressed population, from being a condition characterized by precariousness, forced migrations, legislated racial discrimination, and racist workplace despotism towards providing a vehicle of solidarity, grassroots power, and expectations of decent life and social rights to accompany the new democracy.<sup>10</sup> Vibrant community-union alliances underpinned social movement politics and black township insurgencies during the 1980s, when organized labor articulated broad demands for social citizenship rights based on transcending the shop-floor as the primary locale of workers' identities and struggles. After the fall of the racist regime — and despite their opposition to GEAR and the government's “neoliberal” orientations — most unions, and COSATU in particular, have remained a vital source of support for the ANC in power.

Conversely, the conservative macroeconomic policies adopted by the democratic government have substantially constrained the ability of public institutions to address social and racial inequalities inherited from the past. Within the first five years of GEAR's implementation, tax rates on the undistributed profits of domestic companies have been reduced from 35 percent to 30 percent, while the Secondary Tax on Companies was halved

from 25 percent to 12.5 percent.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, tight deficit-to-GDP ratios have hampered the expansion of public spending. The concentration of economic policymaking in the hands of Mbeki's inner circle, the Reserve Bank, and the government's Treasury department has insulated it from societal contestation, recodifying growth strategies as predominantly technocratic exercises.<sup>12</sup> Resource constraints defined at this level have undercut the corporatist arrangements and tripartite institutions with which, on the other hand, organized labor was given a significant institutional voice in bargaining with representatives from the state and business over industrial relations and social policies.<sup>13</sup>

The uneasy combination of macroeconomic neoliberalism and developmentalist pretensions in the new democracy's social policy underpinned a *hybrid social citizenship regime*, which I have examined elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> There, I addressed some basic questions: what is left of wage labor's emancipatory potential after 15 years of transition? Has waged employment fulfilled its promise of combining political democracy with social citizenship for the vast majority of predominantly African poor? How has the ANC government articulated its policy discourse with the meanings emerged from black workers' insurgency against apartheid? Which kinds of working class practices and strategies have responded to the current combination of political liberation and economic liberalization? The rest of this article will focus on the contradictory location of wage labor in post-apartheid social citizenship arrangements, between a material reality of erosion and decline and a policy discourse that tried to normatively reassert its centrality.

#### **Wage Labor's Normative Centrality in South Africa's "Hybrid" Social Citizenship Regime**

The post-apartheid social citizenship regime displays markedly hybrid features, originated by the intersection of labor market stratification and an uneven and selective social policy model. The combination of neoliberalism and developmentalism that shaped the transition had the effect of stratifying the South African population in three main groups. Each of these groups are constituted through a combination of what in Foucauldian terms can be defined as *episteme* — a modality of knowledge enunciated as policy discourse and moral-behavioral prescription—and *dispositive* — the actual, material practices through which the state intervenes in the administration and orderly reproduction of such groups. The specificity of the epistemic and policy determinants of such groups—i.e., the operation of *governmentality* in each of them — is what defines the hybrid nature of social citizenship in South Africa today.<sup>15</sup> It also provides each social group with ways to

structure its claims according to its position as a target of state knowledge and policies, and according to the resources deployed to that effect. Rather than "smoothing" the social space in the direction of homogenization and universal rights, South Africa's hybrid social citizenship regime defines a striated and hierarchical social space, whose crucial principle of differentiation is provided by each group's relation to waged employment.

First, we have a shrinking minority of permanent, unionized workers with access to a stable wage and social *insurance*, largely in the form of company-based schemes for healthcare and retirement benefits, and employer-subsidized unemployment provisions (the Unemployment Insurance Fund, or UIF), with basically no contributions from the state. Second, a growing share of long-term unemployed, and non-able bodied (youth and the elderly), whose main income depends on social *assistance*, in the form of non-contributory state grants, which are means-tested and linked to specific vulnerabilities and conditions. The two main such grants are a state old-age pension for women aged 65 and above and men aged 60 and above, and a child support grant for caregivers of children aged up to 14. Rapid expansions in social assistance spending and coverage currently see almost one quarter of the South African population receiving a grant of one kind or another. The amount of such grants is, however, quite limited: two thirds of recipients receive only the child support grant, which is approximately US\$20 per month per child, while the poverty line for a family of four is about US\$150 per month. Finally, there is a growing share of able-bodied, working-age intermittently unemployed or casual workers, who mostly do not belong to unions, have no company-funded social insurance, and are not in the age brackets covered by state-funded social assistance. Apart from casual jobs, their main sources of income are, similarly to the long-term jobless, monetary transfers from either employed or grant-receiving family members.<sup>16</sup>

The lack of universalist social policies and state-funded social security programs underpins the hybrid nature of South Africa's social citizenship regime. It also mirrors a radical separation, within the country's system of *social security*, between *social insurance*, relatively generous but linked to stable employment, and *social assistance*, generalized as a safety net for the very poor and the excluded from waged labor, but rather limited in its amount.<sup>17</sup> Social citizenship in the new South Africa, in short, is characterized by a high degree of commodification, intended, borrowing from Gosta Esping-Andersen, as the dependence of social provisions and living standards on individual labor market positions and waged employment, rather than on subsidization from either employers or the state.<sup>18</sup>

In the unions' earlier social expectations, wage labor was supposed to act as a vehicle for social citizenship rights and social solidarity, through interventionist state policies that could create jobs and redistribute resources. For the unions, employment was supposed to build generalized social provisions across society, including non-working populations and phases of life; thereby it was supposed to ultimately *decommodify* the social existence of workers and the poor.<sup>19</sup> What, on the contrary, wage labor has turned out to be — in the current “hybrid” context of wage-based provisions for the minority and limited, targeted assistance for the majority — is a condition for new social hierarchies and inequalities. On the other hand, the position of the formally employed themselves, as well as their wages and benefits, are becoming increasingly embattled as a result of casualization, as evident from the spiraling increase in households' indebtedness and predatory lending, which prominent policymakers — from the Reserve Bank governor, Tito Mboweni, to the Minister of the Treasury, Trevor Manuel — have however regarded as signs of consumerism that accompany the country's alleged, newly-found prosperity.<sup>20</sup>

The hierarchical functions of wage labor in the new democracy are given, on the other hand, official recognition in former President Mbeki's template of the “two economies” as a metaphor that characterizes the country's social predicament.<sup>21</sup> In his view, first articulated in 2003, a *first* “advanced, sophisticated economy, based on skilled labour, which is becoming more globally competitive” coexists with a *second* one, presented in clearly pathological terms as a “mainly informal, marginalized, unskilled economy, populated by the unemployed and those unemployable in the formal sector ... [which] with the enormity of the challenges arising from the social transition ... risks falling further behind, if there is no decisive government intervention”.<sup>22</sup>

The results of the combined operation of global economic forces and state policies are here presented both as a naturalized condition and as a result of purely individual dispositions towards work, enterprise, and competitiveness. Wage labor becomes therefore an objective principle of social stratification, and its enforcement becomes a scientific tool of state policy intervention. In this sense, South Africa constitutes an example of what Anibal Quijano has termed “coloniality of power,” or the persistence in postcolonial societies of modes of governance and discipline based on social hierarchies determined by wage labor positions. For Quijano, in fact, a continuity between colonialism and post-coloniality can be discerned in non-Western societies in the operation of “protected” wage labor as a condition reserved only to the minority for which effective social inclusion and social

citizenship apply, while the majority, faced with the state's abdication of the task of providing universal social rights, has to provide for its own survival within highly exploitive market relations and employment conditions.<sup>23</sup>

Mbeki's metaphor of the “two economies” alerts us to the importance of the policy discourse, of the state's *episteme*, over and above the structural determinants of the condition of the South African working class. Looking at this aspect of South Africa's “social question,” one can realize the limitations of approaches that see South Africa's poor as mere passive victims of global market forces, and their condition as mainly determined by the hegemonic narrative of neoliberalism. The state's knowledge of the country's “social question,” as re-elaborated in Mbeki's “two economies” image, reveals therefore a peculiar paradox: the less actual, material wage labor contributes to decent livelihoods and social rights for the majority, the less it functions as the foundation of a universal, inclusive social citizenship regime, and the more central it is in the government's policy discourse and governmentality.

Starting from the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme and going through various policy documents on social welfare and social security, the ANC government has foreshadowed what can be defined a *wage labor-centered* social policy discourse.<sup>24</sup> In it, job-seeking and individual labor market self-activation are predicated as by far the most important avenue to social inclusion, despite the fact that, as already emphasized, stable waged jobs constitute by now an experiential reality for only a minority of the economically active population. Work ethic and employment preparedness operate at a micropolitical level as institutional injunctions and pedagogical devices to promote virtuous citizenship intended as individual spirit of enterprise, and to admonish against the morally degenerative effects of “dependency” on welfare “handouts.”<sup>25</sup> Indicative of the anti-welfare Malthusianism of the ANC government, and of its impermeability to variations in the economic cycle, is, for example, the ANC's vehement opposition to the introduction of a very modest, universal, not employment-related basic income grant of approximately US\$18 per month. This measure was supported by the government-appointed Taylor committee of inquiry in 2002, just to be lambasted by various government officials that decried its alleged perverse incentives to laziness and work avoidance.<sup>26</sup> As minister of Trade and Industry, Alec Erwin, remarked, the government's problem with such a grant would be “not the money, but the idea.”<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, by refocusing their desire on the prospect of getting a “job” — no longer to be a collective, protected social condition but a reward for individual effort and discipline — the poor are taught to shift towards labor market competition claims that could otherwise be potentially far more



disruptive for the state. One can even argue that, precisely because of its material absence wage labor emerges as a virtual “master-signifier” of social existence, envisaging, in a truly Lacanian sense, an idealized social subject—the patriotic, hard-working, law-abiding, family-responsible, morally frugal, and politically moderate poor. Material social hierarchies, reinforced by the state’s wage-centered social policy, operate to restrain and tame the poor’s potentially unruly desires, a vast repertoire of which, on the other hand, was provided by past black workers’ struggles against apartheid, which were also struggles for decommodified housing, welfare, and healthcare provisions. Seen in this light, post-apartheid South Africa seems to have achieved what had once proved purely utopian for both the African post-colonial state and colonialism in the age of postwar reforms: a “pure” capitalist labor market, regulated by contracts and not coercion, and buttressed by a legitimate state that governs a context of massive poverty and social inequality.

It is important to emphasize how, despite the fact that the ANC government mobilized a pseudo-traditionalist emphasis on “self-help” and community networks among the “poorest of the poor” to support its withdrawal from universal, decommodified social provisions, it actually employed “post-modern” methodologies that have become common stock in debates on “welfare reform” worldwide.<sup>28</sup> Dominant among these are the assumptions that the responsibilities of the public sector have shifted from the promotion of social equality to the encouragement of social “inclusion,” that this latter ultimately is a matter of individual initiative, and that the state’s function is not to provide homogenous standards, but to legislate difference, prioritizing its interventions to specific areas of risk, vulnerability, and stigma. Modulating and segmenting social exclusion are the functions ultimately acquired by social policies whose purported aim remains to facilitate social inclusion.

### Workers’ Strategies and Subaltern Responses

The contradiction between the normative centrality of wage labor in the policy discourse of the new South Africa, and its material collapse as a social reality, however, leaves open a distinct set of political possibilities once the focus of analysis shifts to workers’ strategies and subaltern responses. In this sense, it can be argued that the kind of transition to post-coloniality heralded by post-apartheid South Africa, as combining political liberation and economic liberalization, remains an unfinished project. The African colonial and postcolonial state encountered ultimately insurmountable problems in its attempt to discipline the bodies of the workers and the poor under pseudo-objective categorizations like “formally employed,” “casuals” or

“unemployed.” Frederick Cooper’s important work, for example, has shown how African “casual” workers have lived such a condition not merely as a legally defined second class citizenship or as a modality of disempowerment. Rather, they have valorized casualization and informality as social and political strategies, as ways to avoid permanent insertion in wage labor under oppressive workplace and political conditions, and as forms of defection that enabled them to negotiate the wage relation under more favorable conditions.<sup>29</sup>

The theme of the *refusal of (waged) work*, or the workers’ reluctance to make their citizenship claims depend primarily on wage labor, is recurrent in African labor studies. It also emerges in ethnographic analyses of African workers’ ironic commentaries on wage labor, which see it both as a means of survival and a meaningless activity that, as Hoyt Alverson has argued, “violates the very definition of ‘doing’.”<sup>30</sup> In South Africa, refusal of work was an important, albeit understudied, feature of black worker struggles under apartheid. The 1979 Riekert Commission of Inquiry, for example, lamented that one of the main problems for the country’s productivity crisis, and one of the reasons for the utilization of low-wage migrant labor, was the unwillingness of black townships’ residents to accept factory jobs once they realized their oppressive, exploitative nature.<sup>31</sup> Similar themes are now revived in the government’s official positions averse to increasing social grants as they would discourage recipients from accepting low-wages jobs. More generally, these observations are connected to a broad problem experienced by African colonial and post-colonial states alike: that of having, as Jean-Francois Bayart has put it, a capacity to make people suffer which was not, however, matched by a comparable capacity to make them work.<sup>32</sup>

Between 1999 and 2001 I conducted field research for a book project on wage labor and post-apartheid citizenship, looking at workers in the Gauteng province, the country’s economic core, employed at various manufacturing establishments in the East Rand industrial region, and in the Johannesburg city council. Throughout the 1990s, these sectors have been invested by profound labor market restructuring that saw both a growing employment of casual and temporary workers, and deepening feelings of vulnerability and instability among their long-standing union constituencies. Nonetheless, despite the fact that unstable, casualized employment is categorized as second class social citizenship within official social policy discourse and institutional arrangements, workers’ experiences of casual employment, or of the prospect of losing a stable job did not mechanically reflect a condition of mere domination and disempowerment. Rather, a complex variety of responses and strategies emerged, not necessarily oriented towards an ideal

of permanent employment as a benchmark of virtuous citizenship. Instead of passive acceptance of wage labor discipline as the guidance for individual behavior and claims, workers' strategies and discourse questioned the very boundaries and the rigidity of the nexus between wage labor and social citizenship, which state policy discourse tends to present as unassailable. My research highlighted the complexity of workers' agency in "resignifying" the relations between wage labor and social citizenship. In general, it seemed to me that the greater is the danger permanent workers perceive for their employment stability, due to looming retrenchments or the introduction of "flexible" labor, the more available they are to explore strategies of escape from the wage relation. This is not necessarily in contradiction with the fact that at a consciously political level they continue to demand "job creation" and "job protection" from the government.

Self-entrepreneurship, or the ability to start independent businesses in alternative to factory employment, plays here an important role. The cessation of the employment relation often provides indeed the initial capital to venture in informal sector micro-enterprises. In many cases, and this confirms a theme that has become quite contentious inside COSATU, workers volunteer for retrenchments, lured by the possibility to use their packages or accumulated retirement contributions to embark in informal vending, repair workshops or, in most ambitious cases, buy a vehicle to start a local transport business. In two East Rand companies out of thirteen, such demands have led to direct confrontations between workers and their unions, for which retrenchments imply loss of membership and a weakened collective bargaining position. Even for those who remain in waged employment, double jobs and moonlighting are rampant, either as a practice, or as a concrete plan generally stifled by the lack of starting capital. The self-entrepreneurial myth is often underpinned by religious inspirations, largely drawn from outside mainstream denominations and revealing the penetration of a "born again" Christian discourse that combines individual salvation with acquisitiveness.

It would therefore be a mistake to unproblematically read workers' strategies of escape from wage labor under an overarching progressive light, or worse to see in them alternative avenues of collective, left working class politics. In most cases, workers' responses to the crisis of wage labor give way indeed to a working class conservatism nurtured in apocalyptic social imagery. The main polemical target becomes here urban society as such, seen as a place of growing destitution, hardship, and anarchy, where established male breadwinner roles are undermined by the failure of wage labor's promises. In male workers' narratives, the decline of a wage-based social order leads to generalized subversion of social functions, whereby the youth

are ensnared in crime, and women leave the household to seek informal jobs to replace the income lost by their husbands. In some cases, xenophobia surfaces in the form of anti-immigrant resentment. Such a conservative imagery often conjures up views of the rural areas as an ambit where established social hierarchies and roles are immune to the decline of urban waged employment. What can be called resurgent ruralism is evident both among migrant workers and long-term urbanized ones, but is far stronger among male workers than females. Rather than referring to a factual experiential reality, it conveys a nostalgic evocation of a masculine social order rooted in waged employment as the condition for the male breadwinner's respectability, and therefore for his ability to assert household authority along gender and age lines.

Finally, the correspondence between individual entrepreneurial myths and material conditions that follow the loss of stable employment is also highly problematic. In the vast majority of cases, behind the self-entrepreneurial myth is a reality where the financial resources gained through retrenchment are devoted to survival or the satisfaction of basic needs: repaying debts and funding children's education are the two most important expenditures cited in this regard. The permanence of survivalism at the core of workers' responses to the employment crisis, however, confirms the conclusion that in the South African democratic transition wage labor has not fulfilled its promise of social emancipation and rights.

In the final analysis, the crisis of wage labor and of its erstwhile progressive meanings, and the rise of conservative worker responses leave open the question of what alternative avenues are available, or to what extent working class identities are still relevant to emancipatory politics. Over the past decade, a burgeoning body of literature has been produced on South Africa's "new social movements," reflecting a dramatic rise of urban-based community activism against the privatization of municipal utilities and in support of the decommodification of basic social services like housing, healthcare, water, and electricity.<sup>33</sup> Focused largely on the organized expressions and the collective identities of community movements, such scholarly production has not thoroughly examined their social composition yet. Nor has it provided in-depth analyses of the ways in which emerging forms of community politics relate to economic and employment change, or of the role that casual and stably unionized workers play in such movements.

A general impression is that their strongest bases of support are, however, among most vulnerable sectors of the urban society: long-term unemployed, youth and old-age claimants of state social grants. The participation of the factory working class remains limited to specific localities and episodes, and it often involves the creation of splinter unions,

as in the case of chemical workers in Durban and Johannesburg, automotive workers in the Eastern Cape, or metal workers in the East Rand.<sup>34</sup> As a long-standing ANC ally, on the other hand, COSATU prefers to contest the ruling party's neoliberalism through official policy and political channels, and its leadership has generally regarded new social movements with suspicion, accusing them of "counter-revolutionary" adventurism, dogmatic opposition to the government, and divisive sectarianism.<sup>35</sup>

Underlying the current difficulties in the dialogue between labor and community politics, however, are fundamental differences between the unions' continuous attempt to rescue wage labor as a socially emancipatory force — hence COSATU's continued insistence on "job creation" policies as the solution to South Africa's social ills — and the subjective experiences of most community movements' members, in which waged employment has become utterly peripheral. What such divergences seem to indicate is that a left emancipatory project in post-apartheid South Africa increasingly faces a choice between liberation *of* and *from* wage labor. The latter option would involve innovative experimentations with radical decommodification and redistribution, such as the elaboration of claims for forms of universal income independent from labor market positions. The lack of a political and strategic imagination adequate to this task could conversely reinforce opportunities for authoritarian and populist responses to fill the social gaps left open by wage labor's collapse. It would likely facilitate this outcome to have a labor movement stubbornly attached to demands for more "job creation," which risk finding themselves out of touch with a reality where the nexus between wage labor and liberation seems irredeemably compromised.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Hamlyn, "SA Will Fall Short by 2m in 2015 Job Creation Push," *Business Report*, 7 Nov. 2006: 3.

<sup>2</sup> See Alan Hirsch, *Season of Hope: Economic Reform under Mandela and Mbeki* (Pietermaritzburg: U of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> See Andries Du Toit, "'Social Exclusion' Discourse and Chronic Poverty: A South African Case Study," *Development and Change* 35.5 (2004): 987-1010, and Charles Meth, "Ideology and Social Policy: 'Handouts' and the Spectre of 'Dependency,'" *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 56 (2004): 1-30.

<sup>4</sup> Haroon Bhorat and Morné Oosthuizen, "The Post-Apartheid South African Labour Market," working paper, May 1993 (Cape Town: U of Cape Town Development Policy Research Unit, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Devey, Caroline Skinner, and Imraan Valodia, "Definitions, Data and the Informal Economy in South Africa: A Critical Analysis," *The Development Decade?: Economic and Social Change in South Africa, 1994-2004*, ed. Vishnu Padayachee (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2006): 302-23.

<sup>6</sup> Karl von Holdt and Edward Webster, "Work Restructuring and the Crisis of Social Reproduction: A Southern Perspective" *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace: Studies in Transition*, ed. Edward Webster and Karl von Holdt (Pietermaritzburg: U of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2004): 3-40.

<sup>7</sup> John Kane-Berman, ed., *South Africa Survey 2004-05* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Jeremy Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Edward Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), and Gay Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance. Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> See Terence Smith, *Women and Tax in South Africa* (Cape Town: IDASA, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> See William M. Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (Cape Town: Zebra, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See Glenn Adler and Edward Webster, "Towards a Class Compromise in South Africa's 'Double Transition': Bargained Liberalization and the Consolidation of Democracy," *Politics & Society* 27.3 (1999): 347-85.

<sup>14</sup> See Franco Barchiesi, "Social Citizenship and the Transformations of Wage Labour in the Making of Post-Apartheid South Africa, 1994-2001," diss., U of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," trans. Robert Hurley et al., *Power the Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, (New York: New Press, 2001): 201-22.

<sup>16</sup> See Marius P. Olivier, Matthew C. Okpaluba, Nicola Smit, and Mark Thompson, eds., *Social Security Law: General Principles* (Durban: Butterworths, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> See RSA, Republic of South Africa, Taylor Committee, *Transforming the Present – Protecting the Future: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> See COSATU, *COSATU 6th National Congress: 16-19 September 1997, bk. 3, Report from the September Commission* (Johannesburg: Congress of South African Trade Unions, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> See Human Sciences Research Council, *Household Indebtedness in South Africa in 1995 and 2000: Report Prepared by the Employment and Economic Policy Programme of the HSRC for the Micro-Finance Regulatory Council* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 2003), and FinMark, *FinScope South Africa 2006: Survey Highlights Including FSM Model* (Johannesburg: FinMark Trust, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> See Gillian Hart, “Post-Apartheid Developments in Historical and Comparative Perspective,” *The Development Decade?: Economic and Social Change in South Africa, 1994-2004*, ed. Vishnu Padayachee (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006) 13-32.

<sup>22</sup> Thabo Mbeki, “State of the Nation Address,” February 14, 2003, *The Presidency – Republic of South Africa*, 5 Jan. 2008

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<sup>23</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1.3 (2000): 533-80.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, RSA, Republic of South Africa, *White Paper for Social Welfare: Principles, Guidelines, Proposed Policies and Programmes for Developmental Social Welfare in South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> See Ivor Chipkin, “‘Functional’ and ‘Dysfunctional’ Communities: The Making of National Citizens,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29.1 (2003): 63-82.

<sup>26</sup> See Neil Coleman, “Current Debates around BIG: The Political and Socio-economic Context,” *A Basic Income Grant for South Africa*, ed. Guy Standing and Michael Samson (Cape Town: U of Cape Town P, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Qtd. in Hart, “Post-Apartheid Developments” 26.

<sup>28</sup> See Sanford S. Schram, *Welfare Discipline: Discourse, Governance, and Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Hoyt Alverson, *Mind in the Heart of Darkness: Value and Self-Identity among the Tswana of Southern Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1978) 137; see also Joan Comaroff and John Comaroff, “The Madman and the Migrant: Work and Labor in

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<sup>31</sup> RSA, Republic of South Africa, Riekert Commission, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Legislation Affecting the Utilization of Manpower, R.P. 32/1979* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1979).

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Francois Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (New York: Longman, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Ashwin Desai, “We are the Poors”: *Community Struggles in Post-apartheid South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Rachleff, “The Current Crisis of the South African Labour Movement,” *Labour/Le Travail* 47 (2001): 151-70.

<sup>35</sup> See Prishani Naidoo and Ahmed Veriava, “Re-membering Movements: Trade Unions and New Social Movements in Neoliberal South Africa,” *From Local Processes to Global Forces*, Centre for Civil Society Research Reports, vol.1, ed. A. Alexander (Durban: Centre for Civil Society, U of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005).

## **The Crisis of the Left in Contemporary South Africa**

Dale T. McKinley

### **Harsh Realities**

The ideological, political, organizational, and socioeconomic realities of contemporary South Africa do not paint a flattering picture for the left:

- The neoliberal variant of capitalism is not only practically dominant but generally in a phase of ideological triumphalism, despite its recent setbacks;
- The state has rapidly become the “public arm” of a slowly deracializing capitalist ruling class (both bureaucratic and corporate). The African National Congress (ANC), which is in political and administrative possession of the state, is under the effective control of this ruling class and is fully committed to serving its interests. Despite the more recent growth of a crisis of ideological identity and political division, the ANC’s own leadership layers, as well as those of its Alliance partners (the Congress of South African Trade Unions — COSATU — and the South African Communist Party — SACP) have become sub-agents of such class rule;
- The socio-economic position of the majority of people, but particularly that of the formal working class as well as those outside of formal capitalist employment, has worsened;<sup>1</sup>
- Regardless of the growing legitimacy crisis of bourgeois democracy and its electoral system, no mass-based and national politi-

cal/organizational alternative has arisen either in relation to participating within the system of bourgeois electoralism or in creating the conditions for an alternative system of democratic participation and process outside of, and against, bourgeois democratic electoralism;<sup>2</sup>

- Despite their historical centrality to the struggle against apartheid as well as continued presence in both the ANC-led Alliance and independent sociopolitical struggles of the poor and the working class, left forces remain numerically small and politically weak, characterized by organizational sectoralism, disjointed resistance struggles and a lack of ideological confidence.

Besides the ongoing struggles of the organized working class for better living and working conditions, as well as those of new social movements and a wide range of community organizations around socio-economic conditions of existence, the dominant form and content of left struggles since the late 1990s have revolved around issue-oriented social and political struggles such as those that focus on HIV/AIDS, privatization, water, electricity, housing, the environment and so on.<sup>3</sup> While these struggles are, in and of themselves, necessary and important, they contain little in the way of grappling with the demands, and actual forging, of a meaningful strategy of the left that has the potential to change radically the organizational and political face of anti-capitalist politics and struggle in South Africa (and implicitly Southern Africa).

Simply put, left politics in South Africa has become ideologically balkanized, and to a lesser extent, strategically and politically de-classed. To make matters worse, much of the leadership of the left has descended into the age-old morass of personal egotism, power-mongering, and political dishonesty and opportunism.

### Roots of the Crisis

When South Africa's first ever one-person, one-vote elections in 1994 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the ANC, the majority of South Africans understandably celebrated the arrival of a new democracy. After all, the ANC and its liberation-movement allies were now in political control of the state thanks to the votes of those who had, throughout South Africa's modern history, been denied the right of institutionalized democratic participation simply because of their racial categorization.

Accompanying this, however, there still remained a broad-based expectation among the black majority — and also among large sections of the left — that the new ANC state would immediately begin to pursue a more socialist, or at the least radically redistributive, political economy. The basis upon which such an expectation had been built derived from the militant, mass-based political and socioeconomic struggles that had been waged by unions and community organizations (and supported by more radical NGOs) since the mid-1980s, alongside the continued socialist rhetoric of the ANC itself.<sup>4</sup> As South African commentators Richard Ballard, Adam Habib and Imraan Valodia have put it, “As has happened so often in newly liberated countries, the euphoria of political transition led many to expect that the need for adversarial social struggle with the state was over.”<sup>5</sup>

Even if it had been long apparent that the ANC was never going to follow even a proto-socialist developmental path once in power, the bubble was clearly and publicly burst with the ANC state's 1996 unveiling of the neoliberal GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) macroeconomic policy.<sup>6</sup> The organizational groundwork for this rightward ideological shift of the ANC had been laid soon after the ANC's return from exile in early 1990. Instead of supporting and strengthening the plethora of community and civic organizations (along with progressive unions) that had formed the backbone of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, the ANC called on all civic and community structures to fold up and become part of ANC branches or to join the newly launched South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) which, it was announced, would become the “fourth” member of the Tripartite Alliance. Simultaneously, the ANC further formalized its political and organizational alliance with COSATU — and the main left political party, the SACP — by setting up numerous (consultative) Alliance structures and drafting key leadership figures into its electoral list for all levels of government.

Consistent with the sociopolitical thrust of GEAR, the ANC government also set about forming national structures to give institutional form to its corporatist commitments. The National Economic, Development & Labour Council (NEDLAC) was formed, in which “civil society” was represented by a “development chamber” (consisting of chosen non-governmental and community-based organizations), a labor component (consisting of recognized union federations), and a corporate component (consisting of representatives from capital and big business). At the same time, legislation was passed — e.g., the Non-Profit Act of 1997 — and institutions set up like the Directorate of Non-Profit Organisations (which required NGOs and CBOs to register officially with the state), and the National Development

Agency (“to direct financial resources to the sector”).<sup>7</sup> All of this fit comfortably within the ANC government’s push “for a more formalised civil society constituency as part of a developmental model where formally organised groups participate in official structures to claim public resources” and where “the role of such organised groups is constructed along the lines of official government programmes, without space to contest the fundamentals of those programmes.”<sup>8</sup>

To their external discredit, leaderships of both COSATU and the SACP eagerly bought into the ANC “nation building” and “corporatist consensus” sales pitch (rationalized by constant reference to the Stalinist era-inspired theory of the “national democratic revolution”), thus placing the key components of the political left in a classic strategic *cul-de-sac* — in other words, into a situation where the pursuit and advancement of an anti-capitalist struggle is effectively co-determined by capital itself, and by a state already wholly committed to securing the core interests of capital. When, as they did throughout the better part of the 1990s, COSATU and SACP leaders tell the workers and poor that the best (and only) strategic option is to manage better their own exploitation, and hope that somewhere down the road it will lead to “socialism,” the entire meaning of what is “left” is put into question.<sup>9</sup>

The early sanitizing of the traditional and much of the previously organizationally independent left was only further reinforced by the post-1994 crisis of funding that confronted most community organizations and progressive NGOs, which were largely dependent on donor funding. Both domestic and foreign donor funding took a radical turn after the 1994 elections, away from previous commitments to independent grassroots mobilization and struggles, and towards state-directed “developmental” programs — such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) — and state-sponsored social welfare “partnerships” with approved “civil society” organizations. The dual result was a “development agenda” increasingly driven by state and private (i.e., corporate) donor funding and the death of the vast majority of independent, and in many cases anti-capitalist, organizations.<sup>10</sup>

Cumulatively, these developments meant that by the mid-late 1990s the vast majority of what had constituted a previously vibrant and predominately independent South African left, rooted in broad working class politics and struggles and sustaining the hope of millions for an anti-capitalist transformation of South African society, had effectively been neutered. Whether swallowed by the ANC, absorbed into other Tripartite Alliance structures, hobbled by the co-option of key leaders into the state and associated corporatist institutions, or starved of financial resources, the bottom line was the

successful containment of the political and organizational terrain for active and militant resistance to the ANC’s creeping neoliberalism, elite deal-making and wholesale acceptance of the institutionalized framework of bourgeois democracy.

#### “Traditional Left”: COSATU and the SACP

It might well be argued (and indeed it has been), that the “transitional” presence of COSATU and the SACP, as part of both a formal alliance with the ruling ANC party as well as the “broad left” in South Africa, would translate into a collection of vibrant anti-capitalist forces capable of and willing to contest fundamentally the politics, policies and overall developmental agenda of both capital and the state.<sup>11</sup> However, the transitional reality has been that the acceptance of an unequal and essentially subservient political relationship within an ANC-dominated alliance — which is supposed to act as the political master of the state — as well as participation in corporatist institutionalism, has served to tie organized workers and large numbers of community activists with historic ties with or sympathy to the Alliance, into a false sense of ideological and strategic unity with the ANC and the state and, even if to a much lesser extent, with corporate capital.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, for the broad left in South Africa, the SACP and COSATU have been fiddling with the same strategic and political choices since the beginning of the transition. First choice: to be junior partners in an Alliance they will never run and control (but might have key positions in), and thus practice a politics of offering critiques of existing policy implementation and arguing for policies that have a more pro-poor character or more state involvement; engage in occasional campaigns and activities designed to “show” that the working class is still a force to be reckoned with and simultaneously continuing to be part of an ANC electoral machine and to participate in an ANC-run state through its various institutional mechanisms. Second choice: to go back to the basics of organizing and mobilizing the poor and the working class (which means real, practical alliances with community organizations and new social movements) based on a radical program of demands for the redistribution of ownership and wealth that will act as an organizational and political base both to shift ANC government policy — not through insider bargaining and politicking but through mass mobilization — and to re-build a genuine left political and organizational power-base to contest power relations within South African society (something which is not simply reducible to elections and running as an electoral force separate from the ANC).

The problem is, however, that the fiddling has been just that — the second choice has never really been on the agenda. As a result, both COSATU and the SACP have continued to play the Alliance political game. While this has contributed to minor policy shifts and occasional genuflections by the ANC government towards mitigation of rising inequalities and poverty, these have not happened in isolation from the myriad protests and mobilizations that have taken place outside the SACP-COSATU nexus, and which have arguably been just as responsible for various policy shifts and the more recent rise in political contestation within the Alliance. Indeed, the ANC is probably more wary of service delivery protests and uprisings in poor communities and accompanying disillusionment with ANC rule (read: electoral abstentionism) than with the regular sniping and critiques of the SACP/COSATU.

The unfortunate but predictable result of these choices has been that the politics and practical work of the SACP and COSATU have become, over the last few years in particular, tied directly to what is going on inside the ANC-Alliance in direct proportionate relation to intensifying personal and positional power struggles. This is the logical outcome of such a political approach and it has effectively paralyzed the SACP's and COSATU's ability to organize and mobilize on a genuinely practical, pro-working class and pro-poor political basis, where their programs and critiques are actually put to the test in real struggles happening on the ground and in the arena of democratic contestation for power.

Confirmation of this state of affairs could be seen at the most recent ANC Policy Conference, SACP 12<sup>th</sup> Congress and the ANC National Conference at Polokwane (all in 2007), in the form of the dictates of the personal and political battle between the “camps” of the South African ex-President (and at the time still ANC President) Thabo Mbeki, and South African ex-Deputy President (and at the time ANC Deputy President) Jacob Zuma. The preceding mobilization campaigns and practical work tended to ape this contest (i.e., the degree to which it will, or won't, take forward the personal positions and accompanying politics of this or that camp). Revealingly, the person on whose shoulders so much of the fortunes, political energies and organizational decisions of the SACP and COSATU have been placed for the last several years — Jacob Zuma — is not even an active member of the SACP (and has never been part of COSATU), and has shown, time and again, that his own political inclinations are defined by what will take his own position and power forward.

Prior to the dominance of the Zuma-Mbeki battle, the SACP's (and to a lesser extent COSATU's) politics and organizational direction were largely defined by what Mbeki represented and was doing in government. This

meant fighting (or at least spoiling to fight) the pro-capitalist policies of his government and his political control of the ANC by positioning itself as a counter-Mbeki force within the Alliance and as the real inheritor and prosecutor of the ANC's “national democratic revolution” (NDR) legacy. The alternative — acting as an independent force with both a comprehensive critique of and a programmatic path to overcome capitalist exploitation and oppression as an active mass force of the poor — has never really seen the light of day.

Ironically, it is ex-Democratic Alliance politician and now public liberal intellectual Raenette Taljaard who has captured the essence of what emerged from the ANC Policy Conference, aptly calling it, “the shade of the variety of capitalism under a ‘developmental state’ banner.”<sup>13</sup> The reality is that all the ANC (and by default, the government it presides over) continues to do is more fully to recognize that the reality of increasing socioeconomic inequality and political dissatisfaction among the poor represents a real threat both to its longer-term hold on state power, and to the organizational continuance of the alliance, which the ANC still finds extremely useful as a foil against the actual possibility of an independent left working class force outside of the alliance.

This recognition has, for the last several years, led to genuflective nods in the direction of greater infrastructural spending (although most of this has nothing to do with poor and working class communities, but much more to do with the interests and demands of corporate capital and the seemingly insatiable need of the political and economic elite for grandiose projects and affirmation from global elites that they are now real players on the global scene and can deliver things such as the 2010 World Cup); slight increases in social grants; relatively small increment increases in public sector salaries; and much more rhetoric about the need to discipline the “free market” and listen more attentively to the voices of the poor. This constitutes an astute politics on the part of the ANC — both in relation to the ANC's own chosen ideological path (i.e., a deracialized capitalism dressed up in the language of the NDR) as well as in relation to the ongoing personal and patronage conflicts within the ANC and the Alliance.

Thus, can the leaders of the SACP and COSATU make the incredibly suspect claim that the last two ANC Conferences were a “victory for the left” and that the politics that they have pursued over the last while has actually been the defining factor in this “shift,” while simultaneously claiming, for the benefit of the ANC leadership, that such a politics has been “sober and intelligent”? This is really just another way of saying that there was really no other option: i.e., that it is ludicrous to think about, or worse to actualize, either leaving the Alliance or forging a fighting program of the left separate



from the NDR-ANC-Alliance axis and testing its popular and democratic applicability with those they claim to represent. In the absence of another choice being contemplated, what we continue to witness is the repetition of the same mantra — namely, that the left in the Alliance has to “manage” the relationship with the ANC and now, given the supposedly evident shift to the left, even more closely “manage” the implementation of the developmental agenda.

Given this kind of politics, the question as to what constitutes the “left” is apropos. The SACP and COSATU have never been able to define, and still cannot define what this means because any slight seemingly progressive change in ANC and government policy that has occurred, or might occur, is interpreted as a victory for the left, precisely because to interpret it otherwise would be to undermine the larger claim and position that it is necessary and imperative for the SACP and COSATU to remain in alliance with the ANC; and also because any deeper and more realistic interpretation would undermine the entire theoretical construct of the NDR upon which the alliance rests, as well as the present political positioning of both the SACP and COSATU. The same applies to the SACP resolve, at its own 2007 Congress, that the state should lead macroeconomic growth instead of the market, without any meaningful discussion of what this concretely means in relation to the ANC’s ideological commitment (confirmed over and over again) to a capitalist macro-economy which the ANC-run state has practically led and implemented.

Because the leadership of the SACP and COSATU refuse to cut the long-standing umbilical cord with the ANC, the core of their left critique and struggle centers around contesting the character of the Alliance and ANC governance, not the systemic nature of the inequalities and injustices of the deracialized capitalism of which the ANC has long been a champion. A classic example of this is their attack on South Africa’s post-1994 “accumulation path,” where the critique centers on the particular character of this accumulation path (e.g., enrichment for the few and consolidation of the post-1996 “class project” in the ANC through use of inherited state institutions) — not the path itself. In other words, the two main traditional left forces in South Africa refuse to identify capitalism itself — and the capitalists who own and manage the means of production — as the core foundation of South Africa’s accumulative path. As a result, they have no other option but to propagate the idea that the sidelining of the individuals and selected class forces within the ANC-Alliance that are pursuing this accumulation path will then result in the possibilities of pursuing a different path.

In reality then, the core struggles of the SACP and COSATU have, over time, become a battle to cleanse the ANC politically and organizationally of its historic and more contemporary progeny: put another way, to defeat those who want their “fair share” of the capitalist system, as was so clearly enunciated by ANC Secretary General, Dr. Xuma, all the way back in 1945.<sup>14</sup> This would mean nothing less than a complete political and ideological revolution within, and through, the ANC — something that is clearly not going to happen simply because certain SACP and COSATU leaders want it to happen and proclaim its possibility as the fundamental basis for their own organization’s strategy. If ever there was a classic case of embedded “entryism” then this is it (apologies to those Trotskyists who might still claim this tactic as wholly their own).

Through the transition, but even more so during the intra-Alliance battles over the last year, there has been much talk from the SACP and COSATU about completing the tasks of the NDR. But what are we to understand by the NDR? For SACP General Secretary, Blade Nzimande, “the basic aim of the national democratic revolution is to address poverty, unemployment, disease, restore the dignity of the overwhelming majority of our people through creating a mass driven democratic dispensation, remove all forms of discrimination and build an egalitarian society.” Further, “this means provision of minimum basic necessities, services and human dignity to all South Africans.”<sup>15</sup> This is such a general definition that it can encompass (and celebrate) virtually any move to address the inherited inequalities of apartheid capitalism as well as any improvement (no matter how small or sustainable) in relation to basic services for the poor majority. It is because of this generality that Nzimande can then claim that

a key challenge therefore is that we must build an ANC (and Alliance) that consciously seek to build and lead a mass movement that is daily engaged with issues and challenges facing the mass of our people ... . This should also be seen as part of the very important challenge of building the capacity of the ANC (and the Alliance) to exercise effective oversight on government and all our cadres so deployed (and to) defeat factionalism, patronage and corruption within our ranks.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, this “challenge” fits comfortably with the accepted understanding of the NDR among the traditional left: the NDR demands that those identifying themselves as left have no other option but to follow the strategic path set out by the SACP and COSATU (as the two main left forces in the

country), and any other strategic challenge is simply counter-productive, or at best, naïve. But, completing such an imagined revolutionary transformation of the ANC (just like the same in relation to the NDR and broader societal forces) is a practical, not to mention a political, impossibility, as long as the SACP and COSATU tie their own programmatic and thus political “path” with that of the ANC-Alliance. They have already admitted many times that the ANC is not a socialist organization. And yet, the entire strategic thrust is to try to transform the ANC (through persuasion, use of “working class power,” and, most significantly, positions in the Alliance and the state) from within, so as to then embark on a different accumulation path, using the self-same organization and historic politics whose entire *raison d’être* is to deracialize the accumulation path, not to change it fundamentally or to overthrow it.

What all this represents is a crisis of confidence of, and in, the SACP and COSATU at its most acute: a crisis of confidence in the traditional left’s ability to forge a political and organizational opposition to what it stands against; a crisis of confidence in the ability and willingness of its claimed constituency to embrace a political alternative to the ANC’s deracialized elitist capitalism, and to identify with the class lines and struggles that divide South African society so clearly.

### The “New Left”: Social Movements and Community Organizations

Not surprisingly, the subjective politico-strategic choices on the part of COSATU and the SACP, alongside SANCO, have done little to stem the effectual tide of increased socioeconomic inequality and poverty.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it was the ongoing impact of such choices vis-à-vis socioeconomic realities that eventually saw the rise of a range of new social movements and community organizations from the late 1990s onwards.

Due to the implementation of the state’s neoliberal policies, massive job losses were visited upon those members of the South African working class who had been fortunate enough to be employed, the experience being accompanied by all the attendant social and economic devastation on already poor families and communities. To make matters worse, the state also implemented basic needs policies that effectively turned services into market commodities to be bought and sold on the basis of private ownership and the profit motive. This was facilitated by a drastic decrease in national government grants and subsidies to local municipalities and city councils, and support for the development of financial instruments for privatized delivery. In turn, this forced local government to turn towards commercialization and

privatization of basic services as a means of generating the revenue no longer provided by the national state.<sup>18</sup>

The logical result of these developments was a huge escalation in the costs of basic services and a concomitant increase in the use of cost-recovery mechanisms such as water and electricity cut-offs that hit poor people the most. By the turn of the century, millions of poor South Africans had experienced cut-offs and evictions.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the state’s capitalist-friendly land policies, which ensured that apartheid land ownership patterns remained virtually intact, meant that South Africa’s long-suffering rural population continued to taste the bitter fruits of labor exploitation and landlessness.

It was the cumulative result of such experiences, combined with the failure of the main traditional forces of the left, as well as civic structures like SANCO to lead and sustain counter mobilizations and active class resistance, that eventually saw the rise of new social movements and community organizations, at first in the main urban centers and then also in some rural areas.<sup>20</sup>

From their inception, these “new” left forces that have emerged outside of, and often in opposition to the traditional left within the Alliance, have been largely ignored, treated with thinly disguised contempt and regularly actively opposed by the SACP and COSATU. As these social movements and community organizations have been subjected to a consistent state campaign of rhetorical vitriol and physical assaults, the various leaderships of the SACP, COSATU, and other ANC civil society allies have often given tacit support to the state’s actions, and have conversely failed seriously to politically support and to provide material solidarity to their struggles against the state’s service delivery policies and its suppression of political dissent.<sup>21</sup> Ever during the numerous public and private sector workers’ strikes that have taken place over the last several years, there has been little, if any, effort by COSATU and the SACP around linking worker struggles for better wages and working conditions with those of poor communities for basic services and freedom of expression.

This rupture within the South African left is unfortunate, but not surprising. The hostage politics of the Alliance left, now defined more than ever by the embrace of individuals and factions, has virtually institutionalized this rupture precisely because the positioning of the SACP and COSATU demands that they play the role of organizational and ideological gatekeepers of left forces in South Africa. The practical goal of this is to control the “anti-ANC” politics and mobilizations of the new movements, so as to ensure that these social forces do not pose any ongoing or future threat to the dominance of the self-anointed left forces in the ANC and the state.

This is the main reason why the SACP and COSATU find the “new left” movements to be a problem, instead of seeing them as allies. While the traditional left appears to have no problem in throwing all sorts of nasty epithets at certain current and ex-ANC leaders and “class forces” (the shrillness and vitriol of which the supposedly non-Alliance “ultra left” has never approached), it becomes a problem when the new movements and organizations go straight to the real political reasons behind their anger with the ANC and the policies it implements through the state. It is precisely because the SACP and COSATU refuse to cut the umbilical ties to the ANC that they must adopt this wholly contradictory position.

It has been such an organizational and ideological gate-keeping role that has ensured that the possibilities of a united left capable of fundamentally contesting the state as well as broader power relations within society as a whole have remained stillborn. Despite their radical rhetoric, COSATU and the SACP have been at pains to stress that their opposition to state policies, and critiques of the ANC itself, are “not challenging the ANC” and have nothing to do with those of the new movements and their struggles.<sup>22</sup> They have also actively sought to prevent their rank-and file structures and members from working with such movements. As one former leading COSATU figure has politely tried to rationalize it: “where we differ with our friends in the social movements is that we prefer to engage [the state].”<sup>23</sup> Dinga Sikwebu, a former leading official in one of COSATU’s largest unions also states the case: “The leadership and conservative layers [in COSATU] have something to preserve in the existing status quo ... COSATU gains something from the ANC — status and all the other perks ... whilst the ANC guarantees all those things, this relationship between the ANC and the union movements will always be there because they feed into each other ... these [new social] movements threaten this political relationship.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the obvious organizational weaknesses and politically incipient nature of the new movements, they broadly represent those who are actively engaged in grassroots struggles in opposition to state policies and for the basic necessities of life, and who pursue an independent, mass-based mobilization as the only meaningful and realistic option for resisting global neoliberalism and planting the seeds for an alternative to existing political party politics. While these movements do not represent some kind of homogenous entity, and while there has been (and continues to be) substantive organizational differences and political debates within their ranks, they have become inextricably bound together by the leveling content and common forms of the neoliberal onslaught.<sup>25</sup>

### Strategic Impasse

However, the new movements have their own Achilles’ heel. Even if differentially experienced, the combined characters and actions of both the traditional and new left in South Africa have produced the effective institutionalization of a left anti-politics, grounded in an essentially reactive, issue-based and personality-driven strategic framework as the best means to confront capital, “engage” the state, mobilize “the masses” and transform societal relations under capitalism. While this kind of politics can, and does, provide an ongoing vehicle for left activism, it can only go so far. It is essentially a defensive politics, and while degrees of such have been necessary, there is no ideological, political or organizational basis from which to move onto the offensive. As such, the South African left has been taken with continually fighting rearguard battles. This has, in turn, seriously obscured seeing and acting upon the possibilities for those implicitly anti-capitalist battles to give birth to more explicitly socialist politics, struggles, and organizational forms that have the potential to contest capitalist power on a terrain and on terms that are not reflective of the demands and needs of capitalism itself, as well as to forge a lasting left unity.

The question that the South African left needs to ask honestly is whether or not it still believes in the possibilities of actually overthrowing capitalism. This is not a rhetorical question or a meaningless ideological litmus test. There is simply no subjective basis for claims to left or socialist politics and unity if the struggles that take place continue to be directed into a strategic *cul-de-sac* whereby, once a certain critical political “mass presence” has been achieved, the strategic focus becomes beating the capitalists at their own game and on a playing field tailored by, and for, them (e.g., policy reforms or contesting elections). Just like the national liberation movements of the past, these tactics become, whether this is intentional or not, the strategy and any accompanying organizational form merely reflects the demands of this strategic choice.

On the other hand, the last several decades of left politics, in South Africa and globally, have also shown, quite clearly, that the strategic sureties of a classical vanguardism have failed, precisely because the presumed class consciousness to which such a politics strives has proven to be historically fundamentally flawed. For those in need of confirmation, we only have to look at the consistent crisis of socialism, of the working class movement, that is now almost a century old. The present crisis of the South African left is much more than simply a question of the recent “collapse of communism.” At its core, it has to do with preconceived and prefigured notions of the “working class” itself and a parallel mode of strategic thinking that fetishizes

a stagiist conceptualization of an ever-expanding productive base as the prerequisite for any fundamental change in sociopolitical relations beyond capitalism. In South Africa (as elsewhere), attempts merely to reconstruct the historically determined forms of vanguards — whether through accessing state power or through independent class struggle — have led, and will continue to lead, straight into political and organizational sectarianism and ideological absolutism. Indeed, a key part of the present strategic impasse is that there is no ready-made historical form for a socialist politics grounded in a dominant strategic vision and framework such as existed with nineteenth century Marxism.

In South Africa over the last several years, then, most of the left have tended to gravitate either towards an issue-based anti-politics (often strategically conceptualized as a struggle for “revolutionary reforms”), or to seek refuge in the arms of a classical vanguardist (and often entryist) politics. Despite verbal gymnastics to the contrary, left organizational forms and the resultant politics flowing from them have continued to be predominately conceived as, and cast in terms of, a “mass” versus “vanguard” framework. More specifically, the strategic debate emanating from these approaches has tended to revolve around the possible formation of a socialist “workers’ party” (usually perceived as being borne out of the womb of a COSATU and SACP break from the present ANC-led Alliance) and to a lesser extent, the efficacy of politically independent grassroots and community struggles entering the realm of electoral politics as a means to contest the capitalist policies of the present South African state.

The problem here is that an unnecessary strategic dichotomy has been erected between anti-capitalist mass struggle and action and the need and necessity for a socialist organizational form to give politically strategic expression to such struggles. Historically, the South African left has adopted a strategic framework that has assumed the sociopolitical character of those struggles and thus, the “consciousness” of those doing the struggling, as the basis for a politically predetermined organizational form. The all too evident result has been a marked failure to capture the political imagination of those most oppressed under capitalism and thus generally to limit consequent struggle to narrowly defined understandings of production and micro-material related socio-political relations.

### A Way Forward?

We are now in an epoch in South Africa, and in many other places, globally, in which the struggles of the broad working class are increasingly, and necessarily, framed by an anti-capitalist spirit, if not content. While there

continues to be both activist and popular confusion over what exactly is, and is not, capitalist, it is quite clear that concrete struggles against, for example, privatization of the public sector and for socialized provision of housing, water, electricity, basic foodstuffs, and land are aimed at contesting capitalist relations of ownership and distribution. Given that there also continues to be much confusion over what constitutes socialism, it is all the more imperative for those that consider themselves socialist, not only to catalyze such struggles through practical involvement and varying forms of political impetus, but to win the idea, politically, that what is desperately needed or indeed demanded is the recognition and expression of such struggles as socialist. Meeting this challenge provides a potential means for overcoming the strategic divide previously mentioned, forging a practical unity among left forces and moving beyond what has become a somewhat stale and misdirected debate in South Africa around a “workers’ party.”

What is important in this regard is how the left understands the political character and organizational sustainability of the present ANC-COSATU-SACP alliance and thus, the best strategic approach to moving left politics and class struggle forward. It should now be more than clear that the alliance “ties that bind” are progressively weakening, despite what might appear as their strengthening as a result of the last ANC conference in Polokwane. This is the case precisely because the political basis for the alliance is itself being undermined by the strategic primacy of the ANC state’s pursuit of a deracialized capitalism (euphemistically referred to as the national democratic revolution).

The very basis, historically, for the maintenance of a sustainable political alliance between unions and ostensibly progressive political parties that have hold of state power is the parallel maintenance of both a politically malleable union leadership and expanding benefits for a meaningful threshold of unionized workers. On both counts, the situation of such an alliance in the South African context is taking serious strain and there is absolutely no reason to believe that this will be turned around simply because of a leadership change within the ANC or within the state itself. The ANC and the state it politically controls have already gone about as far as they can — given their strategic and ideological commitment to a deracialized capitalism framed by an overtly neoliberal macroeconomic policy framework — in relation to acceding to the basic demands of COSATU, the SACP and organized labor in general (e.g., the Labour Relations Act or the Basic Conditions of Employment Act). In fact, even those gains are now under serious threat of erosion.

What is also happening is that all but the most highly paid unionized workers gains are being seriously off-set by the erosive effects of the state’s

capitalist-friendly policies on workers' and their families' basic socioeconomic existence. This is particularly being felt in relation to the collective impact of privatization and corporatization of key state enterprises, public sector provision of basic socioeconomic services and needs such as water and electricity and the increasingly negative impacts of rising fuel and food prices.

Nonetheless, unionism is engrained, politics is not. What is therefore called for is a strategy that essentially forces unionized workers to respond politically to intensifying mass struggles from the very grassroots communities that they are also part of. As long as the struggles which are presently driven by the new left remain in the political shadows, unionized workers will feel little pressure to translate their own dissatisfaction with the political "delivery" of the ANC-led alliance into serious consideration of left political and organizational alternatives. What is needed is the (re)-politicization of unionized workers through the parallel socialist politicization and organization of those struggles. Here then, is the nexus of a political strategy that can potentially achieve what endless ideological debates, Union-Congress resolutions, limited worker strikes and marches, as well as the pre-figured formation of another political entity can never achieve — i.e., a clear socialist strategy and practical unity in action of broad working class forces.

What makes absolute strategic sense in relation to COSATU in particular, and organized workers generally, is for left intellectuals and activists to focus political debate and catalyze practical class struggles at the very point where the political connection of workers to the ANC and the state is at its weakest and most vulnerable. Unlike the position that has been taken by much of the left outside the Alliance, this should not be understood to simply mean that the key political task is to call for, and hasten, a COSATU and SACP break from the ANC in order to form a "workers' party." This approach plays right into the hands of the capitalists in the ANC, allowing them to successfully use the organizational appeal of historic loyalties and the political appeal of an unfinished national democratic revolution. It also mistakes political form for class content grounded in, and arising from, sustained mass and implicitly anti-capitalist struggles, not simply that of organized (and predominantly industrial) workers.

A more meaningful strategic approach does not hinge itself on whether there is a break in the alliance — it rather begins to lay the political and organizational groundwork for a new kind of left politics. It can do so by strategically linking the ongoing struggles of various layers of urban and rural poor communities with the struggles of organized workers, and in so doing, exposing the political and strategic sterility of an approach that seeks

to transform capitalism and an ANC that has embedded, and championed it, within South Africa's post-apartheid political economy. This can be a major step forward to a real and meaningful left unity (as opposed to the present state of false unity based on spurious claims to a de-classed, common national democratic revolution), both among and between organized workers and those struggling at the grassroots and community level.

In reference to such a potential unity, the left must also jettison what has been a very narrowly defined understanding of who constitutes a "worker." Workers are not confined to those who have formal employment (or, more specifically, who belong to a union), but also the millions of those who have worked in the "formal" economy (whether that be as industrial or agricultural workers) and continue to work in the "informal" survival economy (often erroneously classified as "unemployed", as if recognition of their work depends on "formal" measurement). To this must also be added the large numbers of domestic workers — not in the sense simply of those working for predominately white South African households, but all those — mainly women — who are just as much workers (reproductive labor) and who are not politically and organizationally treated as such.

The left must also put forward the absolute necessity of a strategic link between the revolutionary potential and power of those combined struggles and the forging of an organizational form that can directly and organically represent the political possibilities of extending ground-level struggles into the popular propagation of socialist demands on a broader, societal level. The more immediate struggle thus requires engaging in a battle of ideas, not merely through intellectual endeavor but through exposing the inherent weaknesses of present — or reworked — forms of left political organization (and this includes trade unionism) to act as the fulcrum for a renewed and relevant left politics.

In more overt programmatic terms, the basis for such a strategic approach should not be centered primarily around the need to provide electoral opposition, although this must always remain a tactical option. The point of charting a new left strategy is not simply to oppose the ANC on the electoral terrain that they now occupy in a still dominant but increasingly shaky position. Rather, it is to stake out that political and organizational terrain that they continue to ignore and take for granted — i.e., the mass of the broad working class in both urban and rural areas — as the grounding for a new organizational form for a socialist politics that has the potential both to unify practical left struggles and to contest on its own terms existent class power.

For the left in South Africa to move out of its present crisis will require a politically qualitative and organizationally quantitative advancement of the very real struggles of the broad working class, not predominately in the

intellectual and organizational capabilities of select individuals or in “capturing the heart and soul” of the ANC. The advance can be extended by taking the idea of, and debate around, new forms of left political organization directly into the heat of practical struggles taking place, and that are only going to get more intense. In this way, there becomes the possibility that organized workers and those in social movements and community organizations, through their own self activity, combined with certain degrees of intellectual and activist support, can prepare the ground for what can be a meaningful path to political and ideological independence. In other words, the objective conditions themselves are umbilically linked to the subjective will (and capacity) to sustain and intensify contemporary mass-based, anti-capitalist struggle.<sup>26</sup>

Any serious left cannot but reject the philosophical, material, and class basis for the capitalist political economy being pursued by the ANC-run state. The main task is not to force the ANC to review what it is that they have fully committed themselves towards, although the struggle for practical reforms that impact positively on the daily lives of the majority must always form part of the tactical arsenal of a meaningful left. It is then our strategic responsibility to work towards a political alternative that emanates from and is grounded in the ongoing and linked struggles of the mass of organized workers and poor against the impact and consequences of capitalist neoliberalism and those who manage and control the institutional and systemic means for its continuation. Not to undertake this task is to condemn class struggle and left politics in South Africa to the realm of cyclical mitigation and crisis.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous studies and reports conducted over the last several years that confirm this state of affairs. For example, see *South Africa Survey 2006*, compiled by the Institute for a Democratic South Africa, and reported in “Growing inequality in South Africa,” *Independent Online* 4 April 2006 <[http://www.int.iol.co.za/index.php?art\\_id=qw114416064258B211&set\\_id=1&click\\_id=13&sf=>](http://www.int.iol.co.za/index.php?art_id=qw114416064258B211&set_id=1&click_id=13&sf=>); *Statistics South Africa* <<http://www.statssa.gov.za>>; Republic of South Africa, Taylor Committee, *Transforming the Present – Protecting the Future: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2002); South African Cities Network, *State of the Cities Report 2004* (South Africa: South African Cities Network, 2004); University of South Africa, *Projection of Future Economic and Sociopolitical Trends in South Africa up to 2025: Based on the Views of Business Leaders and Economists* (Pretoria: Bureau of Market Research, 2005); United Nations Development Programme, *South Africa Human Development Report 2003: The Challenge of Sustainable Development in South Africa: Unlocking the People’s Creativity* (Cape Town: Oxford U P, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See Dale T. McKinley, “South Africa’s Third Local Government Elections and the Institutionalisation of ‘Low-Intensity’ Neo-Liberal Democracy,” *Outside the Ballot Box: Preconditions for Elections in Southern Africa 2005/6*, ed. Jeanette Minnie (Johannesburg: Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2006) 149–63.

<sup>3</sup> The positive achievements of the new social movements and community organizations should, however, be noted. Over the last ten years or so these have included: placing mass struggles back onto the political and organisational agenda of the left that has involved a partial reclamation of the history and principles of liberation struggle; providing critical opposition to both the ideas and practice of the neoliberal policies of the ANC government and contributing to a deepening of the class and ideological divisions with the ANC-led Alliance; helping to create a renewed social, political and moral consciousness and solidarity around the most basic needs of life, both domestically and internationally.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the late 1980s and first two years of the 1990s, the ANC had consistently kept to its line that, once in power, it would nationalise key sectors of the economy, would set about a radical redistribution of land and wealth and would ensure that the black working class became the main ‘driver’/ controller of a ‘people’s’ state dedicated to popular/participatory democracy. The ANC’s adoption, in 1994, of the fairly radical, social-democratic Reconstruction & Development Programme as its electoral platform, served to further fuel such expectations. For a detailed exposition of the fundamentals of the RDP, see National Institute for Economic Policy, “From RDP to GEAR,” Research Paper Series (Johannesburg: NIEP, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Ballard, Adam Habib and Imraan Valodia, “Social Movements in South Africa: Promoting Crisis or Creating Stability?” *The Development Decade?*:

*Economic and Social Change in South Africa 1994-2004*, ed. Vishnu Padayachee (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2006) 397.

<sup>6</sup> See Dale T. McKinley, *The ANC and the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Political Biography* (London, Pluto Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Ballard, "Social Movements in South Africa" 397.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Greenberg and Nhlanhla Ndlovu, "Civil Society Relationships," *Mobilising for Change: New Social Movements in South Africa, Development Update* 5.2 (2004): 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the varying contents and consequences flowing from this reality since 1994, see Dale T. McKinley, "The Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Tripartite Alliance Since 1994," *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"*, ed. Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2003) 43-61.

<sup>10</sup> These points are taken mainly from Greenberg and Ndlovu, "Civil Society Relationships" 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> Such arguments have been vigorously proffered by successive leaders of both COSATU and the SACP ever since the early 1990s. While references are far too numerous to list here, most of the key documents and speeches that have been made public over the last ten years or so can be found on the respective websites of the two organisations: Congress of South African Trade Unions <<http://www.cosatu.org.za>>, and South African Communist Party <<http://www.sacp.org.za>>.

<sup>12</sup> This acceptance has not been without its vocal critics within both COSATU and the SACP. For a detailed treatment of debate and opposition within the Alliance since 1994, see Dale T. McKinley, "Democracy, Power and Patronage: Debate and Opposition within the ANC and Tripartite Alliance since 1994," *Opposition and Democracy in South Africa*, ed. Roger Southall (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001) 183-206.

<sup>13</sup> Raenette Taljaard, "Minor Shift in ANC's Thinking," *The Star* 2 July 2007. The Democratic Alliance (DA) is the official political party opposition to the ANC in national parliament (having the second largest electoral representation at a national level). The DA was born out of the coming together of the former Democratic Party (historically representative of the interest of English-speaking white "liberals" and white capital) and remnants of the post-apartheid National Party (which, prior to 1994 was the all-white ruling party).

<sup>14</sup> In 1945, then ANC President, Dr. A.B. Xuma stated: "... it is of less importance to us whether capitalism is smashed or not. It is of greater importance to us that while capitalism exists, we must fight and struggle to get our full share and benefit from the system." Qtd. in Robert Fine and Denis Davis, *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1990) 52.

<sup>15</sup> Blade Nzimande, "The Policy Year: Reclaiming and Defending the Revolutionary Values and Traditions of Our Movement," *Umsebenzi Online* 6.1 (Jan. 2007) <<http://www.sacp.org.za/main.php?include=pubs/umsebenzi/2007/vol6-No.1.html>>.

<sup>16</sup> Nzimande, "The Policy Year."

<sup>17</sup> There are numerous studies and reports conducted over the last several years that confirm this state of affairs. For example, see those sources cited above in endnote 1.

<sup>18</sup> See David McDonald, "The Bell Tolls for Thee: Cost Recovery, Cut Offs, and the Affordability of Municipal Services in South Africa: Special Report of the Municipal Services Project," *Municipal Services Project* (2000) <[http://www.queensu.ca/msp/pages/Project\\_Publications/Reports/bell.htm](http://www.queensu.ca/msp/pages/Project_Publications/Reports/bell.htm)>.

<sup>19</sup> See David McDonald and Leila Smith, "Privatizing Cape Town," *Occasional Papers Series 7* (Johannesburg: Municipal Services Project, 2002), and Edward Cottle, "The Failure of Sanitation and Water Delivery and the Cholera Outbreak," *Development Update* 4.1 (2003): 141-66.

<sup>20</sup> Some of the main movements and organizations borne out of this period include: The Concerned Citizens Forum in Durban (which no longer exists but which spawned numerous community organizations that remain alive and active); the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Johannesburg (which continues to expand and now has nearly 30 affiliate community organizations); the Landless People's Movement (a national movement which went through a divisive split with its original NGO partner — the National Land Committee — and has since weakened but remains active in some rural and peri-urban areas); Jubilee South Africa (a national movement centred around debt, reparations and social justice issues, but which also experienced a split in its ranks in 2005/2006 which has since resulted in the existence of both Jubilee South Africa and a new formation — Umzabalazo we Jubilee); the Anti-Eviction Campaign based in Cape Town; and Abalahli base Mjondolo (a movement of shack dwellers mainly in and around Durban which has begun to link up to other shack dweller organisations in other parts of the country)

<sup>21</sup> The most public expressions of the ANC's evident contempt for the new movements and their struggles was an ANC statement in 2002, accusing them of being an "ultra left ... waging a counter-revolutionary struggle against the ANC and our democratic government," and of siding with the "bourgeoisie and its supporters." [See ANC, Political Education Unit, "Contribution to the NEC/NWC Response to the Cronin Interviews on the Issue of Neo-liberalism," internal ANC paper, (Sept. 2002)] President Mbeki waded in soon thereafter by claiming publicly that "this ultra-left works to implant itself within our ranks ... it hopes to capture control of our movement and transform it into an instrument for the realisation of its objectives." [See Thabo Mbeki, "Statement of the President of the ANC, Thabo Mbeki, at the ANC Policy Conference," Kempton Park, 20 Sept. 2002, *African National Congress Homepage*

<<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?doc=ancdocs/speeches/2002/sp0927.html&type=Speech>>. Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002, hundreds of community activists have been arrested, jailed and several tortured. See

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Simon Kimani, ed., *The Right to Dissent* (Johannesburg: The Freedom of Expression Institute, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> COSATU, “Response to Sunday Independent Article,” media statement, 7 August 2005, *Communist University*  
<<http://amadlandawonye.wikispaces.com/COSATU+response+to+Sunday+Independent+article>>.

<sup>23</sup> Qtd. in Ballard, “Social Movements in South Africa” 249.

<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi, “Pressing Challenges Facing the South African Labour Movement: An Interview with John Appolis and Dinga Sikwebu,” *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the “New South Africa”* ed. Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2003) 224.

<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed exposition of this argument see John Apollis, “The Political Significance of August 31<sup>st</sup>” *Khanya Journal* 2 (Dec. 2002): 5-9.

<sup>26</sup> These and other arguments are contained in a paper I presented to the 2008 COSATU National Political Education School entitled, “Towards a Socialist Strategy and Left Unity in South Africa.”



### **"Africanization in Tuition": African National Education?**

Ulrike Kistner

In June 2007, the Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa (CODESRIA) convened its annual Conference of Deans under the title of "African Social Research and Training in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities." The inaugural session highlighted the problems besetting African universities: marketization and privatization, casualization of academic labor, massification, the consultancy syndrome, the erosion of a research culture, trade in educational services, notions of students as private clients, problems in accessing student grants, sales of course handouts as prerequisite for success in examinations, and sexual harassment understood as in-kind-payment for academic success.<sup>1</sup>

The list of complaints appears as an echo of those from universities the world over, and of the disquiet expressed by academics responding to these developments. But a puzzling turn in this particular discussion in Dakar is evident in the attempt to formulate remedies to this malaise. Among the responses to the concerns expressed about the disintegration of higher education under the impact of marketization and privatization, great scope is given, in the Report on the Conference, to Africanization – here equated with "indigenization":

[D]iscussions on this issue emphasized ... the Africanisation (or indigenization) of the social science [*sic*] in a manner that is responsive to the realities on the continent. In calling for the indigeneity of the social sciences and humanities in Africa, the proliferation of satellite campuses of European or American pedigree was examined in relation to the relevance of curricula which is [*sic*] developed elsewhere and used for teaching on the continent.... A call for the

unity and re-configuration of the social sciences, humanities and arts was emphasized as critical for sustaining relevance.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between marketization, commercialization and privatization of teaching and research at African universities, and the rationale for the call for Africanization-as-indigenization is not immediately apparent in all its implications. It only becomes clear from a wider ambit of contributions to the *CODESRIA Bulletin*.

An article reflecting on the positioning of Africa's scientific communities in international research circles, for instance, calls attention to the fact that research commissioned by organizations and funding agencies in the global North and West tends to tie African researchers to the agendas set by those organizations and agencies, making them instruments and accomplices of their own marginalization.<sup>3</sup> The organizations providing or channeling the funding "come up with a concept and look for a partner from the South."<sup>4</sup> When asked about his research and his involvement in the activities of the West African university centre where he had been studying and working for the past twenty years, a professional researcher in Geography responded:

In the university centre, yes, everything is going on smoothly, I am still there.... As far as activities are concerned, no, everything is dead and everyone is concerned with his little contracts. Personally, I have a few of them with British organizations ... which also enables me to travel widely in the subregion ... and from time to time, in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

This phenomenon would make the calls for addressing the question of relevance and for linking the local, regional, and global dimensions of this question, explicit and explicable.

However, I would like to caution against launching "Africanization" as unqualified and unquestioned antidote to the commercialization of the university and the erosion of a research culture, and certainly against adducing "Africanization" as a panacea addressing the parlous state of higher education in Africa. I will argue that "Africanization" understood as "indigenization" has become mired in the very market-orientation that its promoters on CODESRIA platforms have decried: in the very commercialization, privatization, and racketeering against which its promoters pitch their developmentalist goals; in the very mainstreaming that ostensibly realizes its goals and that yet constructs universities as fortresses guarding socio-political inclusions and exclusions; and in the very nationalism, racism and xenophobia against which its advocates invoke their liberationist ideals.<sup>6</sup> This should motivate us to take a closer look at

Africanization agendas, "stakeholders," manifestos, programs, policies, and curricula.

The current rhetoric of "Africanization" ostensibly refers back to Pan-African or national-liberationist ideals. Participants of the CODESRIA Workshop on Academic Freedom, Social Responsibility and the State of Academia in Dar es Salaam in February 2005 invoked the debates of the 1960s and 1970s, recalling the names of Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Amílcar Cabral, and Julius Nyerere as sources of inspiration for developing a new "Eastern African Discourse."<sup>7</sup> Issa Shivji, a legal theorist teaching at the University of Dar es Salaam, captures the mood at East African universities – notably those of Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda – in the 1960s, carried, as it was, by liberationist ideals associated with "radical nationalism":

The University flourished. It became a hotbed of radical nationalism where researches were done to reclaim our history; where debates were conducted to debunk domination; where students demonstrated and protested against injustice and oppression, exploitation and discrimination, imperialism and apartheid. It mattered not whether the victims of injustices and oppression were white, black, brown or yellow. Human liberation and human freedom are indivisible.<sup>8</sup>

Shivji talks of a vibrant intellectual culture that embraced town and countryside, that celebrated the publication of books and encouraged engaged reading and debate, that staged performances, and animated creative writing.

Deviating from the familiar narrative that charts colonialism-decolonization- liberation on a historical-progressivist continuum with an ongoing imperative for "transformation" to "purge" higher education from the last vestiges of colonialism, Shivji's account inserts some traditions of African universities occluded in national triumphalism: the fight for academic freedom in conjunction with the right to self-determination, undermined by neoliberalism and globalization, which brought the return of the "colonized mind":

Imperialism and capitalism masquerading as globalization and free market set the rules of the game. Universities were dubbed white elephants. We did not need thinkers, asserted our erstwhile benefactors. We only needed store keepers and bank tellers and computer operators and marketing managers, who could be trained in vocational schools. Universities are not cost-effective, decreed the World Bank. ... The university was condemned.<sup>9</sup>

The “transformation” in higher education is unmasked as commercialization and corporatization.<sup>10</sup> The transformation of African universities is effectively one “from sites of knowledge production to sites of hotel construction: from building lecture halls to pre-fabricating shopping malls”; “from the culture of collegiality” to “the thick of corporate vultures.” Academic concerns are now centering on manipulation of mark sheets to show passes.<sup>11</sup>

In Shivji’s account, the winds of this kind of “change” came from outside of the university, along the inroads made by policies, goals, and orientations of “neo-liberalism” and the World Bank. However, the processes described by him clearly point to an internal reorganization of knowledge production and university structures. The distinction drawn by Mahmood Mamdani between privatization concerning the external relationship between the market and the university, and commercialization concerning the internal processes of knowledge production in the university, is instructive here:

Privatization was an external relationship between the market and the university, whereby the university opened up its gates to fee-paying students but did not change its curriculum to suit the demands of the market. Commercialization, however, led to a deep-seated transformation, involving not only the external relation between the university and the market but also the internal process of knowledge production in the university and internal relations between different academic units.<sup>12</sup>

In the analysis that I want to mount here, I would like to focus largely on the internal processes of reorganization of academic labor under the directives of an Africanizing and commercializing “transformation.”

What facilitates the apparently smooth transition or easy sliding, in the blueprints of Africanization and “transformation,” between a liberationist discourse, particular notions of modernization, and the commercialization of higher education; between an external and an internal impetus for the marketizing reorganization of higher education, we may ask. I would argue that this is possible because the rhetoric of “transformation” and “Africanization” can ride the waves of conflicting approaches to and understandings of the role of higher education from the immediate postcolonial period onwards – notions of developmentalism, redress, equity, and education for active citizenship, open debate, tolerance, and democracy on the one hand; and notions of bridging the skills gap for improved productivity, labor market responsiveness, competitiveness, entrepreneurialism, efficiency and effectiveness, financial sustainability and innovation, on the other.<sup>13</sup>

The blueprints of Africanization and “transformation” can similarly easily negotiate the binary opposites of the dominant ideologemes in which “Africa” has been inscribed: the supposedly “traditional African environment” and the “modern Western sector.”<sup>14</sup> This binary code simultaneously provides the rationale for Africanization. So-called “traditional Africa” receives a boost with the assertion that local knowledges, values, and identities have been suppressed by colonialism and apartheid. They need to be freed from these shackles, it is argued or implied, to be fully rehabilitated, reconstituted, and recognized as aspects of “African epistemology” and “African identity.” In tandem with such “reconstitution,” more African students and staff need to be brought into universities. It is assumed that this will have a democratizing effect and enhance a transformative vision.

Key to the functioning of this transmission belt circulating between a liberationist notion of “transformation” and the restructuring of academic teaching and research in line with market demands, are “indigenous knowledge systems” which are attaining academic respectability under general “indigenization” programs. “Local relevance,” or the reclamation and production of “African knowledge” is considered important in imparting “specific knowledge and skills,” through “specific curricula.”<sup>15</sup> This harbors a contradiction in terms. Insofar as the possibility of creating and transmitting an “African” or “indigenous” knowledge is contemplated, this could pertain only to practical, skills-based know-how but not to propositional knowledge. In so far as the possibility of propositional knowledge is entertained, it cannot be “indigenous” or “African” knowledge, as propositional knowledge is *epistemologically* context-dependent – that is, context-dependent in its formal requirements only.<sup>16</sup> Thus,

“Africanisation of knowledge” makes a certain, limited sense when applied to skills and to acquaintance-type knowledge. When applied to factual or propositional knowledge, either the term “Africanisation” is redundant or what is at issue would more correctly be called the “Africanisation of belief.”<sup>17</sup>

However, the conflation of “knowledge by acquaintance,” “knowledge how,” and “knowledge that,” contradictory as it is on logical grounds, is still discursively, ideologically and academically-entrepreneurially instrumental.

“Indigenous knowledge” is immediately linked to “skills” and “knowledge products.” Preparations for the introduction of the study of “indigenous knowledge systems” – replete with re-inscriptions of tribalism – into higher education curricula in 2010 are underway in South Africa at certain historically disadvantaged universities that formed the heartlands of

some of the former Bantustan or neo-traditional governance structures: the Universities of North-West, Limpopo, Venda, and Zululand.<sup>18</sup> Without reflecting on particular orders and domains of application of particular knowledge systems, and their respective differential normative frameworks, "Western knowledge" is simplistically pitched against "African, indigenous knowledge," with the former being backpedaled on the assumption that "Afrocentric knowledge" is more "empowering."<sup>19</sup>

What makes it "empowering" is its link to economic opportunities held out by the highly socially mobile and globally networked domain of "indigenous peoples and cultures," and by the South African government's Department of Arts, Science and Technology (DACST), which was mandated to draft a policy on Indigenous Knowledge Systems. In a workshop on Protecting Indigenous Knowledge Systems in 2006, the then Minister of Science and Technology, Mr. M. Mangena, listed the tenets of the African Renaissance as humanism, heritage, and Afro-centrism. He proceeded to outline the role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Africa's reconstruction, creativity, sustainable development, and improvement of lives. Before long, he got to the crux of the matter, postulating the development and management of Indigenous Knowledge Systems as "growth engine" for a "new dawn," realizing the "competitive advantage" of the knowledge of individuals and collectives and the "human capital ... for economic development." "Valuable IK products" are listed as "medicines and healing modalities, jewelry and different articles of adornment and decoration, art, literature, music, entrepreneurship, food security, methods of investigation." IK practitioners, it is decreed, need to be apprised of the commercial value of their knowledge.<sup>20</sup> In short, in the words of a physicist formerly from the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal (UKZN) offering his definition of "Africanization," "we can be internationally competitive and uniquely African at the same time."<sup>21</sup>

The introduction of branches of such "skills-based applied knowledge" goes hand in hand with larger-scale restructuring of the curriculum to the effect of introducing more applied sciences and vocational programs at the expense of basic sciences – which has the effect of eroding the disciplinary basis, starting with the humanities.<sup>22</sup>

Against the structural adjustment of higher education at the behest of international financial institutions, Shivji posits "nationalism" as an oppositional force worth reclaiming. Indeed, anti-colonial, modernizing nationalism was the seedbed of "developmentalist" universities in Africa in the immediate post-independence period in some African countries, and this is a clear reference point in Shivji's analysis of higher education in postcolonial Africa. Shivji registers the changed parameters transforming

"transformation" agendas.<sup>23</sup> What he and his South African counterparts do not seem to reflect on, though, is the crisis of postcolonial states as heirs of the anti-colonial movements, and with it the multiple refraction of a developmentalist project, which fails to frame and sustain "Africanization" as an emancipatory program.

While this would be the place to unpack political orientations, programs, and contestatory histories of African anti-colonial, anti-apartheid and national liberation movements in their particular articulations relevant for the trajectories of higher education, this paper cannot broach the enormity of this task. What I can do within the scope of this article, is to highlight some general tendencies, at the risk of oversimplifying generalizations. Bearing this limitation in mind, I would like to approach some of the aspects of national liberationist traditions that sit uncomfortably with present-day notions of civil and political rights.

The retrospective interpretations of the nationalism that had animated anti-colonial movements and the establishment of higher education institutions in Africa, point to their hostility towards constitutional-democratic structures and processes, and towards critical voices.<sup>24</sup> In a tradition that pitched individual rights as a screen for perpetuating racial privilege and nationalism against social justice as contestation for state power that could alone guarantee social justice and redress,<sup>25</sup> democratic and human rights principles, castigated for being derived from "bourgeois liberal democracy" and "elitism," were and still are often labeled as "foreign ideas."<sup>26</sup> Intellectuals initiating debates and unveiling ideological constructions "were ... perceived as divisive and thus inimical to the new nation-state" that was tasked with "development."<sup>27</sup> Inasmuch as universities were seen as training facilities for intellectuals who envisaged themselves – potentially or actually – in positions in the new post-independence developmental states, the demand for university autonomy seemed misplaced. Instead, the state was considered as having legitimate grounds to intervene in university structures, governance, staff appointments, and curricula.<sup>28</sup> In the context of notions of the developmental state, socialism was turned into a strategy for economic development, with the state, whose power was to be seized, as instrument of that development.

These broadly outlined tendencies of national liberation movements have left their imprints as they, through their respective parties, acceded to postcolonial governments. Programs of "indigenization" notwithstanding, state and university authorities, claims Joseph Ki-Zerbo, have no ears for local debates, "except when they threaten ... state authority."<sup>29</sup> Disciplinary action has been taken or threatened in recent years, against academics at South African universities – notably University of KwaZulu-Natal,

University of Fort Hare, and University of South Africa – for a number of alleged misconducts, including speaking to the media.<sup>30</sup> At the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, “students were being charged for bringing the institution into disrepute for criticizing the lack of freedom of expression on campus, in the media.”<sup>31</sup> Disciplinary action gets stepped up where channels for debate are either closed down or managerially organized and centralized, leading Jane Duncan to talk of “The Rise of the Disciplinary University” (2007). There seems to be an inverse relationship between Africanization and academic freedom: those universities most emphatically promoting Africanization appear to be those most insistently foreclosing upon or clamping down on freedom of expression, inquiry, and critique.<sup>32</sup> The erstwhile self-proclaimed role of the African intellectual as “organic intellectual” has fallen apart under postcolonial national regimes: many chose to remain silent, “since one could only be ‘organic’ by not being intellectual.”<sup>33</sup>

In South Africa, such anti-democratic tendencies have hardly been challenged in the immediate post-apartheid period. In West and East Africa, likewise, there were relatively early indications to the effect that the space for critical engagement and debate was circumscribed and curtailed. Yet, most academics writing on the “transformation” of the African academy make no secret of a certain sense of nostalgia for the “old style” anti-colonial nationalism on whose wings African universities and networks among intellectuals were established – notably in West and East Africa – and even call for forging a new (Pan-African) nationalism.<sup>34</sup> There is a sense of loss in contemplating the present African university in ruins from the perspective of the emancipatory ideals of anti-colonial or decolonizing movements. The expression of such a sense of loss initially seems puzzling, seeing that the new generation of Africanizers and African *renais* go to great lengths in establishing virtual connections with the erstwhile African models, statesmen, programmatic pronouncements, landmark conferences, and diasporic networks in an attempt to create an “unbroken string” of African communalism, solidarity, and liberation. In the following, I would like to give just a few examples of a burgeoning productivity in this field in particular South African higher education institutions and research organizations.

African heritage and indigenous knowledge systems re-invent an African pre-coloniality, purportedly in an attempt to remedy the psychological, economic, environmental, and cultural ravages of colonialism and apartheid.<sup>35</sup> The theme of “Indigenous Knowledge Systems” features prominently as one of the research focus areas of the South African National Research Foundation. It comprises “indigenous technologies,” “traditional

medicine and health,” “indigenous food systems,” “socio-cultural systems,” “arts, crafts, and materials,” and “cross-cutting and supportive in IK, IKS, and IT” as subcategories.

At the University of South Africa, a tertiary distance learning institution with the highest student enrollment figures in South Africa, “Africanization” is writ large. The institutional calendar is dotted with events organized by “executive management” to celebrate and panel-debate “Africanization.” “Africanization” initiatives are rewarded by allocation of funding from institutional coffers, if not on the basis of putative financial viability, then for selectively decreed “strategic importance.”<sup>36</sup> Prolific and highly rated and prize-awarded research is being carried out by educationists. Exploring “the capacity to think (from an African perspective) in the process of knowledge production,” we learn that “knowledge can have various meanings.” To explore some of those meanings, further issues are broached by way of a “fundamental question”: “What do Africans mean and understand when they say they know something?” We find out about “how the African thinks”:

The African operates with the logic of aesthetics, which holds that the whole is real.... He sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and intuitively all at the same time. The African makes use of concepts by inspection, imagination and intuition, but all these have aesthetic qualities.... An African perspective on thinking, therefore, suggests that an African sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and intuitively all at the same time.... Knowledge production within an African discourse should, therefore, contribute towards the social, cultural, economic and political upliftment of Africa’s people.

The authors conclude,

Africentric [*sic*] thought is epistemologically distinctive from the Eurocentric ideal. An African perspective on thinking suggests that an African sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and intuitively all at the same time. Moreover, Africans do not only think about such concepts; they live and feel their realities.<sup>37</sup>

A landmark Humanities faculty-wide gathering took place at UNISA in March 2005, for which a document was compiled from individual schools’ submissions on commitments and curricular contributions to “Africanization in Tuition.” The document, presented and presided over by the then Executive Dean, was framed by definitions of “Africanization” and a list of mandatory “Reorientations.” The definition provided is closely aligned with

Thabo Mbeki's version of the "African Renaissance" as presented in his "I am an African" speech, highlighting a "connectedness to Africa":

Africanization is the re-orientation of persons, institutions, structures, products, processes and ideas towards a fresh, creative and constructive imaging of Africa and African contexts which take past, present and future African reality and African potential seriously, consciously and deliberately.<sup>38</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that the heyday of Mbeki's African Renaissance had come and gone by 1999 amid subsiding ground for "Afro-optimism," its shelf life could be extended beyond its sell-by date in the context of assertions of a democratic and market-friendly Africa accompanying aggressive neoliberal economic restructuring.<sup>39</sup>

The transformation envisaged in the "Africanization in Tuition" document centers around the word "re-orientation," here used as a transitive verb: "reorienting persons/staff/individuals"; "re-orienting institutions and structures"; "re-orienting processes and ideas," culminating in the mandatory "taking Africa seriously." The directives, formulated in passive voice, have the perlocutionary force of commands. A new division is being created between "the Africanized" and the "Un-" or "anti-Africanized," implying a call for the policing of this division:

The Africanization of tuition is predicated on the condition that staff would themselves be Africanized. Un-Africanized and even anti-Africanization staff cannot drive the process of tuition Africanization.<sup>40</sup>

Ways and means are announced to enlist UNISA staff participation in and support for Africanization. Preferably, staff should support this initiative "freely and voluntarily," failing which "it may become necessary to develop some specific instruments." One of such instruments would be a manual with "guidelines on how to ensure that the study material is specifically oriented towards African contexts and realities." A second one would be a check-list to "encourage the writer to ensure that Africa and the African context has [*sic*] been taken into account in the content of the course."<sup>41</sup>

Afrocentrism, the valorization of things African, Afro-dynamism and Afro-optimism are central to the Africanizing restructuring mission. These directions and directives ostensibly indicate the "mainstreaming" of "African" issues, histories, and approaches. The thread of a long history, allegedly ruptured by colonialism, is mended through re-connections with pre-coloniality, particularly through heritage studies and practices, and through the

rehabilitation of indigenous knowledge systems. African histories, cultures, knowledge, and philosophy are directed to become the cores of new curricula. In South Africa, a nationalist renewal articulated neoliberal restructuring with governmentally refracted developmentalism. Here, "Africanisation" coincided with the structural adjustment of universities and the rise of a new managerialism. On all these levels, we can thus find continuities – historical and/or recently (re-)constructed. The question remains as to what it is – in the midst of this plenitude and among all the plenipotentiaries of "Africanization" by decree or policy or strategic plans – that evokes the sense of "loss" in the process of this "transformation" that is increasingly articulated by African intellectuals. In the following, I would like to give serious consideration to this sense of loss, insofar as I do not believe it to be a matter of an "imaginary" loss, just as I do not believe its registrations to be a matter of "melancholia."<sup>42</sup>

Capacities that are never singled out for "building," and that are conspicuous by their absence in postcolonial Africanization blueprints, are those of interrogating, searching, investigating, critical thinking and judging, debating and public-intellectual engagement. The very definition of an intellectual culture is excoriated from postcolonial Africanization agendas from the start, and possibly by design. However, no amount of mainstreaming and policy formulation, no force of law or decrees, no quota regulations governing hiring of staff, no strategic importance, and certainly no marketing of "knowledge products" could ever hope to establish Africanization as a legitimate intellectual project. Universals in knowledge are not generated from power and control over the means of "knowledge production."

To the extent that African intellectuals transcended the idea of a "national culture" to embrace a pan-African vision as a form of universalism and inclusive citizenship, they had their hopes dashed by the national chauvinism of postcolonial elites, which was inimical to expressions of independent critical thought. Ali Mazrui's point is instructive in this respect: "The decline of intellectualism and the decline of pan-Africanism unfolded almost simultaneously."<sup>43</sup> Fanon describes this "Africinity" as a "universal standpoint" and understands it as a necessary counterpoint to "national culture." The "heart-breaking return to chauvinism in its most bitter and detestable form" is identified as one of the greatest "pitfalls of national consciousness."<sup>44</sup>

To the extent that African intellectuals expected their visions for political and social transformation to be taken over by the postcolonial developmental state, their hopes were dashed by the recession of the state and the tightening grip of repression. Having been led to believe that a national liberation

movement or party acceding to state power would dispense social and economic goods, “delivery” or withholding of “delivery” became issues of social mobilization. It becomes increasingly clear, though, that charges of “non-delivery,” echoed across the spectrum of the social movements on the margins or outside of the African National Congress/Congress of South African Trade Unions/South African Communist Party Alliance in South Africa, fail to find an addressee in the state. With respect to higher education, it is not a matter of national liberationism turning into a state project annexing the university to that state project and clamping down on independent critical thought in the process of implementing a state-determined agenda – as Mamdani claims it is.<sup>45</sup> Rather, I would argue the reverse case: that it is a matter of the recession of the state, and the absorption of some of its important political functions into the ruling party riding on the waves of a popular movement and demanding “unity” – of and between “the people,” “the movement,” and “the party” – as a disciplining mechanism.

Defensively guarding the institutional base for power, high incomes, status, and prestige that come with a new form of cultural capital closely associated with “transformation,” managers at some universities vociferously promoting “Africanization” are increasingly nervously hedging their proclamations and agendas, as people hailing from other African countries, not confined to closely delimited labor recruitment and labor migration, come to South Africa and knock on the doors of culture and learning.<sup>46</sup> Immigration policies, nationalist-populist mobilizations and official pronouncements on the racial-xenophobic violence in South Africa have relegated migrants and refugees from marginalized areas in South Africa and from other African countries to precarious spaces or to the bottom of the internal hierarchies as domains of selective and systematically arbitrary inclusion. These policies and statements, recent research suggests, are happily supported by the elites, including the political leadership and management structures of some universities, notably those without traditions of relative academic autonomy.<sup>47</sup> Higher education opportunities are opening up for increasing numbers of South African students, and there is a frenzy of market competition for international student recruitment, particularly on the part of tertiary institutions offering distance learning programs. Yet intellectuals from other African countries face increasingly tight visa regulations, restricting access to employment at South African universities.<sup>48</sup> Some universities embrace the spirit of South African immigration policies, and add their own internal restrictions. They tend to rigidly apply the regulations that debar black scholars from other African countries from appointments to positions at South African universities.<sup>49</sup> Black Economic

Empowerment regulations impose another constraint: “non-national” employees are not counted in the quantitative determination of employment equity targets. In this context, “Africanization” amounts to empty sloganeering, unless it is translated into a challenge to the dominant nationalist legal and political framework.

The criterion of “indigeneity” associated with “Africanization” in South Africa makes of “Africanization” a program of “South-Africanization.” The threat of being labeled “non-indigenous” carries enormous consequences for one’s hold on citizenship rights. “Indigenization” is openly flaunted in the UNISA Research Development Plan’s provisions for postgraduate student assistantships under the “growing your own timber” program, which is reserved for young black South African researchers only. The University of the Free State also boasts a “Grow our own timber (GOOT) Programme of Staff Development and Performance Management.”

The vision of pan-Africanism that once animated African intellectuals is consistent with notions of an inclusive African citizenship that was asserted in opposition to state oppression and exclusion in the course of anti-colonial struggles, as well as during urban uprisings in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>50</sup> However, citizenship came to be defined, post-apartheid, in terms of descent and indigeneity, with increasingly rigidly drawn distinctions between “citizens” and “foreigners.” While the “indigeneity” view of “Africanization” in higher education in South Africa is indicative of a new nationalism associated with closely guarded class boundaries and exclusive citizenship, it also reveals some assumptions of economic liberalism that had associated an abstractly “free” domestic labor market with (national) democracy, while recruitment of migrant labor was associated with apartheid oppression inimical to democracy. The discourse of the “national democratic revolution,” fed by these associations of apartheid with migrancy, equated “national” democracy with the exclusion of “non-nationals.”<sup>51</sup>

The national and “indigeneity” constructions attaching themselves to “Africanization” in higher education have not only defined inclusions and exclusions along the lines of access, entitlements, recognition, and (academic) citizenship. Together with the particular types of “transformation” agendas to which they are closely linked, they have stratified the administrative and managerial levels of higher education, aligned them with structures of corporate enterprises, and separated them from the constituencies grouped around the teaching-learning relationship. From a managerial perspective, all “stakeholders” – intellectuals, academics, students, researchers, and policy makers, managers, entrepreneurs, investors, funders, marketing experts, consultants, auditors, and accountants – celebrate a necessary and happy co-existence at higher education institutions. Perhaps

it is time to acknowledge and give scope to antagonisms from within which questions of the emancipatory role of higher education could be posed and thought anew.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ecoma Bassey Alaga, "CODESRIA Conference of Deans in Retrospect," *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1&2 (2007): 42-43, and CLS Chachage, "Higher Education Transformation and Academic Extremism," *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1&2 (2001): 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Alaga, "CODESRIA Conference" 42.
- <sup>3</sup> See also the report on the Workshop on Academic Freedom, Social Responsibility and the State of Academia, held in Dar es Salaam in February 2005, in which "participants highlighted the need to develop an Eastern African Discourse which can draw inspiration from the debates of the 1960s and 1970s" in the face of "the state of intellectual inertia and marketization of academia that has set in with the invasion of neo-liberal agenda in our universities"; Carlos Cardoso, "Academic Freedom, Social Responsibility and the State of Academia," *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1&2 (2005): 64.
- <sup>4</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace: The Dilemmas of Neo-liberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989-2005* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2007) 101.
- <sup>5</sup> Alphonse Yapi-Dihaou, "Research and the Challenge of Expertise in Africa," *CODESRIA Bulletin* 3&4 (2005): 15.
- <sup>6</sup> See also Eve Bertelsen's argument to the effect that talk of "development" and "relevance to local needs" has been appropriated and assimilated by advocates of the market-led restructuring of higher education; see Eve Bertelsen, "The Real Transformation: The Marketisation of Higher Education" *Social Dynamics* 24.2 (Summer 1998): 138-40.
- <sup>7</sup> Cardoso, "Academic Freedom" 65. Mahmood Mamdani would add the name of Cheikh Anta Diop as initiator of debates on the construction of knowledge in Africa, which were path-breaking for postcolonial equatorial and West African academies; see Mahmood Mamdani, "Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town: A Critical View of the 'Introduction to Africa' Core Course in the Social Science and Humanities Faculty's Foundation Semester, 1998," *Social Dynamics* 24.2 (Summer 1998): 8.
- <sup>8</sup> Issa Shivji, "Whither University?" *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1&2 (2005): 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Shivji, "Whither University?" 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Apart from Shivji's critique on this score, see Bertelsen, "The Real Transformation"; Chachage, "Higher Education Transformation"; John Higgins, "Institutional Culture as Key Word," *CHE: Review of Higher Education in South Africa* (2007), <[http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000146/8-Review\\_HE\\_SA\\_2007.pdf](http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000146/8-Review_HE_SA_2007.pdf)>; "Managing Meaning: The Constitutive Contradictions

- of Institutional Culture" *Social Dynamics* 33.1 (2007): 107-129  
<<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=g901493882~db=all>>; and Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace*.
- <sup>11</sup> Shivji, "Whither University?" 3.
  - <sup>12</sup> Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace* 118.
  - <sup>13</sup> In the South African context, such conflicting goals were inherent in the South African National Commission on Higher Education's 1996 Framework for Transformation, and then in the Education White Paper 3 of 1997; see Thiven Reddy, *CHE: Higher Education and Social Transformation: South Africa Case Study Report*, February 2004.
  - <sup>14</sup> See Nico Cloete and Johan Muller, "South African Higher Education Reform: What Comes After Postcolonialism?" Paper prepared for the European Review, June 1998.
  - <sup>15</sup> See H. W. Vilakazi, "The Problem of Education in Africa," *African Voices in Education*, ed. P. Higgs, N.C.G. Vakalisa, T.V. Mda and N.T. Assie-Lumumba, (Lansdowne: Juta, 2000) 194-212.
  - <sup>16</sup> See Kai Horsthemke, "Knowledge, Education and the Limits of Africanisation," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38.4 (2004): 582. Horsthemke outlines the working definition of factual or propositional knowledge:

A person (*S*) knows that something is the case (*p*), if and only if  
*S* believes that *p*,  
*P* is true, and  
*S* has suitable justification for believing that *p* (582).

- <sup>17</sup> Horsthemke, "Knowledge, Education and the Limits of Africanisation," 584.
- <sup>18</sup> Joe Teffo, "Towards Indigenising South Africa's Higher Education Curriculum," Paper presented to the University of South Africa (UNISA) Colloquium, Africanisation of the Curriculum: Beyond Debate? 26 September 2008.
- <sup>19</sup> Joe Teffo explains:

The advantages which the indigenous studies qualification has over present qualifications are: (1) it is afrocentric in focus and (2) it is multi-disciplinary. For instance, a present module dealing with cure for *Depression* deals with psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, and neurotherapeutic treatment. The indigenous studies module however deals with the above mentioned and also such indigenous cures as herbal, divination, and ritual cures. Clearly, a black African student is likely to find the latter module much more empowering and self-fulfilling. The following are examples underpinning the mentioned degree:

African Ethno Mathematics



African Indigenous Metallurgy  
 African Religions and Philosophies  
 Culture, Gender, Science and Technology in Africa  
 The rights of indigenous People  
 Intro to the study of Human Science.

<sup>20</sup> M. Mangena, "Opening Speech for the TCI Conference on Indigenous Knowledge System" [sic], 26 July 2006, *South African Government Information* <<http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2006/06080212451001.htm>>.

<sup>21</sup> Nithaya Chetty, "Africanisation – What Does It Mean?" 2006, *Physics at PMB – Physics* <[http://physicspmb.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/Africanisation\\_what\\_does\\_it\\_mean%3F](http://physicspmb.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/Africanisation_what_does_it_mean%3F)>.

<sup>22</sup> See Mamdani's examples of the introduction of an ethnobotany program and a Bachelor of Agribusiness Management at Makerere University; Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace* 101.

<sup>23</sup> Shivji, "Whither University?" 4.

<sup>24</sup> This is the context that Mamdani outlines in his analysis of the demise of Makerere University in *Scholars in the Marketplace*. Likewise, Ali Mazrui lays the stifling of intellectual life in Kenya at the door of rising political authoritarianism, declining academic freedom, and a one-party system of rule; see Ali Mazrui, "Pan-Africanism and the Intellectuals: Rise, Decline, and Revival," *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, ed. Thandika Mkandawire (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2005) 61.

<sup>25</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, "The Intelligentsia, the State and Social Movements in Africa," *Academic Freedom in Africa*, ed. Mamadou Diop and Mahmood Mamdani (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1994) 247-61.

<sup>26</sup> Thandika Mkandawire, "African Intellectuals and Nationalism," Mkandawire, *African Intellectuals* 26.

<sup>27</sup> Mkandawire, "Introduction," *African Intellectuals* 2.

<sup>28</sup> Mamdani, "Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town" 3.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in Mkandawire, "Introduction" 2.

<sup>30</sup> See David Macfarlane, "Education Under the Axe," *Mail & Guardian Online*, 13 July 2007, <<http://www.mg.co.za/article/2007-07-13-education-under-the-axe>>, and Jane Duncan, "The Rise of the Disciplinary University", Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture, University of KwaZulu/Natal, 17 May 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Duncan, "The Rise of the Disciplinary University."

<sup>32</sup> Clamphdowns have drawn public ripple effects, such as those culminating in the UKZN strike in February 2006 and more recently in the outcry over the disciplinary tribunal instituted against professors Nithaya Chetty and John van den Berg for criticizing the response of Vice Chancellor Malegapuru Makgoba to demands for debating issues of academic freedom in Senate. Reported in the media, they have sparked further protest action from academic staff and students, and prompted

solidarity action and declarations from academics and activists both locally and internationally; see, for example, the letter signed by high-profile academics from universities in the UK, the US, and Canada, "All for academic freedom," *Mail & Guardian* 5-11 December 2008.

Foreclosures are more effective from the point of view of the management of a corporatized university seeking to pre-empt debate and the open expression of dissent in advance, through more or less veiled threats, intimidation, or demonising of certain courses of action or deliberation as "improper," "shameful," "unworthy," "negative," "blocking progress," "complaining," "resisting transformation," "destructive," "devoid of thought and meaning," and polarizing the academic community into "us" and "them," depending on which side of this discursively constructed axis of evil they may choose to line up. Such discursive strategies are legion in the addresses and statements to Senate by the Principal, Barney Pityana, at the University of South Africa (UNISA). In the wake of restructuring of job grades and service conditions, and of the progressive marginalization of associations representing academic staff in mid-2007, the Principal addresses "resistance," which he disqualifies as retrogression, as follows:

We are having to deal with some resistance in pockets of the university that, in my view are hankering after a past long gone, and devoid of any critical intellectual thought.

See Barney Pityana, "From the Vice Chancellor's Desk," *Focus. UNISA Staff Newsletter*, June 2008: 12.

<sup>33</sup> Mkandawire, "Introduction" 3.

<sup>34</sup> See Shivji, "Whither University?" 4; Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace* 256, 258, and 259; Joseph Ki-Zerbo, "African Intellectuals, Nationalism and Pan-Africanism: A Testimony," Mkandawire, *African Intellectuals* 89-90, and Mazrui, "Pan-Africanism and the Intellectuals" 61.

<sup>35</sup> For a critique of these efforts to "decolonize" the academic curriculum, see Mamdani's contribution in "Teaching Africa at the Post-Apartheid University of Cape Town" and *Scholars in the Marketplace*. Mamdani points out that while there is a claim to reconnect historically across the colonial "rupture," pre-colonial history is not treated as an object of study, and becomes completely vacuous (*Scholars in the Marketplace* 256).

<sup>36</sup> While African Languages are being decimated to the point of disappearing from the institutional-academic landscape, the Centre for African Renaissance Studies' profile is shored up by generous funding. More recently, the establishment of another "super-structure" has been announced – viz. the Thabo Mbeki Leadership Institute.

<sup>37</sup> Philipp Higgs and Berte van Wyk, "African Philosophy and Knowledge Production in Higher Education," *Journal of Educational Studies* 6.2 (2007): 52 and 54.

<sup>38</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke, “Africanization of Tuition at UNISA – A Perspective from the College of Human Sciences,” unpublished document, UNISA, 3 March 2005.

<sup>39</sup> James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006) 113-114.

<sup>40</sup> Maluleke, “Africanization of Tuition at UNISA” 2-3.

<sup>41</sup> Maluleke, “Africanization of Tuition at UNISA” 3.

<sup>42</sup> See Sigmund Freud’s distinction between “mourning” and “melancholia” in “Mourning and Melancholia,” *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985): 245-268. For extrapolations from this distinction, see Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *boundary 2* 26.3 (1999): 19-27, and Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Mazrui, “Pan-Africanism and the Intellectuals” 61.

<sup>44</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; London: Penguin, 1990) 218, 232, and 126.

<sup>45</sup> Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace* 259.

<sup>46</sup> For the exorbitant salaries, both in absolute and relative terms, of the new managerial stratum at South African universities, see Primarashni Gower and Monako Dibetle, “The vice in VC,” *Mail & Guardian Online*, 5 November 2008, <<http://www.mg.co.za/article/2008-11-05-the-vice-in-vc>>.

<sup>47</sup> Fanon traces the processes unfolding between ruling-class Africanization, racism, nationalism, and class divisions:

[On the morrow of independence, the native bourgeoisie] violently attacks colonial personalities ... . It will fight to the bitter end against these people “who insult our dignity as a nation.” It waves aloft the notion of the nationalization and Africanization of the ruling classes. The fact is that such actions will become more and more tinged by racism, until the bourgeoisie bluntly puts the problem to the government by saying “We must have these posts” ... . The working class of the towns, the masses of the unemployed, the small artisans and craftsmen for their part line up behind this nationalist attitude; but in all justice let it be said, they only follow in the steps of their bourgeoisie. If the national bourgeoisie goes into competition with the Europeans, the artisans and craftsmen start a fight against non-national Africans ... . From nationalism we have passed to ultra-nationalism, to chauvinism, and finally to racism. These foreigners are called on to leave; their shops are burned, their street stalls are wrecked, and in fact the government ... commands them to go, thus giving their nationals satisfaction. (*The Wretched of the Earth* 125)

<sup>48</sup> See Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and outsiders. Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA: Zed, 2006) 33, and John Sharp,

“‘Fortress SA’: Xenophobic violence in South Africa,” *Anthropology Today* 24.4 (August 2008): 2.

<sup>49</sup> Sharp, “‘Fortress SA’” 2.

<sup>50</sup> In the SADC Draft Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons in the SADC Region of June 1995, the influence of pan-Africanism is still clearly visible. Citizens of member states were to be able to cross borders without controls: “... the Draft Protocol calls on member states *inter alia* to confer, promote, and protect in relation to every citizen of a member state:

The right to enter freely and without a visa the territory of another Member State for short visit;

The right to reside in the territory of another Member State;

The right to establish oneself and work in the territory of another Member State (Section 566).

Qtd. in Michael Neocosmos, *From ‘Foreign Natives’ to ‘Native Foreigners’: Explaining Xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa. Citizenship and Nationalism, Identity and Politics* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2006) 84-85.

<sup>51</sup> Neocosmos, *From ‘Foreign Natives’ to ‘Native Foreigners’* 81 and 83.

**Layers of Permanence: A Spatial-Materialist Reading of Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View***

Shane Graham

In his introduction to the anthology *Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai notes a growing divorce – which he characterizes as a kind of “apartheid” – between academic and policy debates about globalization on one hand, and on the other hand “vernacular discourses” concerned with protecting cultural autonomy and economic survival at the local, regional, or national level. He argues:

a series of social forms has emerged to contest, interrogate, and reverse these developments [that threaten such autonomy] and to create forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilization that proceed independently of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system....These social forms rely on strategies, visions, and horizons for globalization on behalf of the poor that can be characterized as “grassroots globalization” or, put in a slightly different way, as “globalization from below.”<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, Appadurai calls for academic research and cultural theory to engage with grassroots globalization – for instance, in the form of transnational advocacy networks – in a more serious way.

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In the particular context of literary studies in South Africa, Michael Green is one of the few critics to call for such a grassroots hermeneutic, in his essay on Phaswane Mpe's novel *Welcome to our Hillbrow*:

[M]ovements like the Treatment Action Campaign, the National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS, the Education Rights Project, and the Concerned Citizens Forum, quite specifically try to give ordinary people a voice and some control over their daily lives without calling upon a nationalized sense of the political. If we are to read *Welcome to our Hillbrow* seriously in terms of an attempt to 'regain a capacity to act and struggle' in the post-nationalist political world of post-apartheid, then it is for some sort of alignment with these social movements that we could most profitably look.<sup>2</sup>

To Green's list I would add the more radical Anti-Privatization Forum and allied groups, as well as the local activists who have organized protests against failures in service delivery throughout the country in recent years.

Both Green and Appadurai implicitly argue for situating cultural production within a multifaceted context that includes the material conditions of that production; the social inequities that characterize those conditions under post-Cold War capitalism and neoliberal economic regimes; and the newly emergent social movements that attempt to challenge these regimes. In this essay I attempt to construct such a reading, which I describe as a "spatial-materialist" interpretation, of Ivan Vladislavić's third novel *The Exploded View* (2004). In doing so I hope to rectify what I see as a blind spot in much of the criticism of Vladislavić's earlier work – a failure or refusal to note the social and material spaces within which the work is written and in which the fictional events he describes take place.

The tendency toward dehistoricized or dematerialized readings is by no means exclusive to criticism on Vladislavić, but is in fact common in much recent South African literary and cultural studies. Emblematic of this vein of scholarship is the high profile work of Sarah Nuttall, whose recent writing relies on a rather depoliticized reading of the work of Walter Benjamin: she interprets the new urban fiction of South Africa through the figure of Benjamin's *flâneur*, which she defines as the "aesthetic bohemian, drifting through the city like a film director," and which "invites us to read the city from its street-level intimations, to encounter the city as lived complexity, to seek alternative narratives and maps based on wandering."<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, in a reading of youth culture and social space in the shopping mall the Zone at Rosebank, Nuttall observes a process that she calls "*the stylization of the self*", or "how people seek to transform themselves into singular beings."<sup>4</sup>

Nuttall's work gives us a valuable glimpse into the protean social networks at which Vladislavić's novel likewise hints, and at the rapidly changing processes by which subjectivity is formed in the new urban spaces of South Africa. Yet it quickly becomes apparent that, for Nuttall, styling the self is essentially a process of consumption, as evidenced in the "Books, CDs, comic strips, advertisements, food, urban design, and techware" reviewed in the pages of the youth-oriented *Y* and *SL* magazines.<sup>5</sup> The unexplored implication is that the ability to shape one's own identity in the post-apartheid, postmodern city is contingent on a certain level of financial and educational privilege, and as Michael Watts notes, the "question of what the Y generation represents politically, of what a 'stylistics of the future'...means, remains enigmatic and elusive."<sup>6</sup> While Nuttall acknowledges the aspirational qualities of this youth culture – it reflects where teenagers would like to be, not necessarily where they come from – and while she recognizes that the poor are made to feel unwelcome at consumer sites such as the Zone at Rosebank,<sup>7</sup> she never addresses the question of how "stylizing the self" might play out for the desperately poor, for whom the world of the middle class might seem alien and unattainable.

Vladislavić's fiction, on the contrary, is highly attuned to questions of cultural production and identity formation *within* the material conditions, physical spaces, and continuing inequities of South African society. Yet most critics of *The Exploded View*, as well as critics of Vladislavić's previous works such as *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), focus on the linguistic and discursive aspects of Vladislavić's writing, while ignoring or underemphasizing the writer's clear preoccupation with physical and social space.<sup>8</sup> This oversight is especially curious given the author's longstanding interest in architecture and urban space – revealed, for instance, in his co-editing the volume *blank\_\_\_\_: Architecture, Apartheid and After*.<sup>9</sup> Certainly the author *is* fascinated by language, words, and word games, but most of his critics largely fail to note (or at least understate) the relationship in his works between language, discourse, and *material* space. Vladislavić tells Warnes:

As people write about the making and re-making of South African cities, the question of what's changed and what hasn't becomes urgent. What the project [of editing the anthology *blank\_\_\_\_*] confirmed for me is that the actual physical structures of apartheid are going to be difficult, if not impossible, to erase, and that we're going to be living within those structures for a very long time.<sup>10</sup>

As I note elsewhere, “a recurring theme in all of Vladislavić’s writing is that the disorientation and historical amnesia that characterize post-apartheid life and culture result at least in part from the contestation on several fronts of spatial configurations that reinforce older social formations.”<sup>11</sup> In this light, Vladislavić’s word games and puzzles should be read, not merely as attempts to elude the foreclosure of meaning, as Felicity Wood reads them, but also as attempts to map the rapidly shifting, labyrinthine social and physical geographies of the post-apartheid city.

This tendency is even more apparent in *The Exploded View*, the very title of which offers a spatial metaphor for itself. An exploded view, as the character Gordon Duffy explains, is an illustration of a building project in which each piece of wood, nail, screw, etc. is detached and floating as if in mid-air to demonstrate where the builder should place each piece.<sup>12</sup> This representational strategy becomes a trope for the novel’s own operation, which attempts to dissect what one character sees as the city’s “layers of permanence,” and to illustrate the complex interactions of people, material commodities, and social and physical space that constitute life in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

It is arguably even more important in South Africa today to take into consideration the material processes that govern the production, organization, occupation, and use of space than it was during the apartheid era, when the Nationalist government obsessively posited race as the predominant principle for such a spatial economy. Gillian Hart notes that “political liberation and emancipatory promises coincided with the ascendance of market triumphalism on a global scale, defining the terrain on which the newly elected democratic state came to embrace neoliberalism.”<sup>13</sup> The ending of the government’s pathological preoccupation with race, the lifting of economic sanctions and cultural boycotts, and the ANC’s embrace of neoliberal or so-called “free market” economic policies have led to South Africa’s fullest integration into the networks of global capitalism to date. With this immersion into late capitalism has come massive unemployment, a widening gap between rich and poor, and a severe segregation of social space, albeit along class rather than strictly racial lines. It is difficult to drive through the suburbs of Johannesburg, for instance, without being struck by the degree to which post-apartheid architecture is one of barricaded exclusion against urban poverty and crime.

In the post-1994 era, then, it has become more important than ever in South Africa to take cognizance of the insights of Henri Lefebvre, who argues that “every society – and hence every mode of production...produces a space, its own space.”<sup>14</sup> Lefebvre further notes that if “space is a product,

our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production.”<sup>15</sup> Neil Smith poses the same idea succinctly as “the *political* question: how does the geographical configuration of the landscape contribute to the survival of capitalism?”<sup>16</sup> The importance of these questions becomes increasingly clear in South Africa’s urban centers as privatization and fortification become the primary forces shaping development. In Johannesburg, for example, Lindsay Bremner notes that the businesses that have remained in the embattled inner city have become tightly controlled citadels, in which everything employees need – “library, restaurant, convenience store, travel agent, bank, crèche – can be found on its secured inner street.” As Bremner describes it, the corporations that have chosen to remain in the Central Business District “have, quite simply, dug in. They have staked out their turf and carved up the city into patrolled, flag-festooned, designer-paved, rubbish-binned corporate enclaves....For those inside, the city has ceased to exist; for those outside, the city is a pretty desperate place.”<sup>17</sup> Steven Robins sees the same phenomenon playing out in Cape Town, where, by removing non-whites from the inner city, “apartheid spatial planning created the racialized grids upon which the template of the ‘postmodern,’ post-apartheid city could seamlessly settle.”<sup>18</sup>

The juxtaposition between barricaded affluence and devastating poverty and crime – readily apparent, for example, in the proximity of wealthy Sandton to impoverished Alexandra Township, and in the view of the shanty towns surrounding the power plant on the Cape Flats from the opulent campus of the University of Cape Town – is blatant evidence of *uneven development* in South African cities and townships. Neil Smith argues that uneven development is a strategic and integral part of global capitalist expansion: “Capital, rather than using the underdeveloped world as a source of markets, has instead used the Third World as a source of cheap labor, thus preventing its full integration into the world market.”<sup>19</sup> Patrick Bond has argued further that “the *uneven development* of South Africa’s cities and black townships...was generally *amplified* during the 1990s transition to democracy, which was also a transition to ‘neoliberal,’ market-oriented ways of organizing urban policy.”<sup>20</sup>

The Marxist tradition out of which these readings of the city derive typically sees the buildings and infrastructure of a city as “*capital*, set in intractable, immovable, and hence confined, space. ...But in turn, cities are spaces where contradictions in the capitalist mode of production therefore play themselves out most forcefully.”<sup>21</sup> Smith likewise argues that a “spatial fix for the internal contradictions of capital” is impossible, but that “in the doomed attempt to realize this spatial fix, capital achieves a degree of spatial fixity organized into identifiably separate scales of social activity.” The

urban scale is probably the most visible of these and is “the necessary expression of the centralization of productive capital,”<sup>22</sup> the limits of which are determined by labor markets and commute times. Recently, however, other theorists operating within the Marxist tradition have argued that new technologies and new postmodern forms of socio-spatial organization have decreased capital’s reliance on urban spatial fixity: “We now find that capital is no longer concerned about cities. Capital needs fewer workers and much of it can move all over the world, deserting problematic places and populations at will.”<sup>23</sup> This is nowhere more glaringly true than in Johannesburg, where virtually the entire infrastructure and labor force of a regional business and financial capital were uprooted from the Central Business District and rebuilt in Sandton over the course of two short decades.

David Harvey goes on to note that different fixed forms – political borders, built environments, etc. – have been “precipitated out of different historical moments and assume qualities reflective of social processes at work in particular times and places. The result is an urban environment constituted as a palimpsest, a series of layers constituted and constructed at different historical moments all superimposed upon each other.”<sup>24</sup> Andreas Huyssen likewise uses the metaphor of “urban palimpsests” to describe contemporary Berlin; in debates over city planning, Huyssen suggests, a notion is emerging of “Berlin as palimpsest, a disparate city-text that is being rewritten while previous text is preserved, traces are restored, erasures documented.”<sup>25</sup> Amin and Thrift use a different variation of the urban palimpsest metaphor, arguing that “the spatial and temporal porosity of the city also opens it to *footprints* from the past and contemporary links elsewhere.”<sup>26</sup> The concepts of the urban palimpsest or the footprint from the past have suggestive implications for contemporary Johannesburg – for example, the mostly black but also coloured [mixed race] and Indian residents of Sophiatown were removed to the Meadowlands and other remote townships southwest of the city. The new whites-only area was officially renamed Triomf (“Triumph”), only to become a mixed-race suburb once again in the 1990s, and then renamed Sophiatown in 2006.

Lisa Yoneyama describes the challenge facing urban planners in cities marked by traumatic events as the “reregistering” or making visible of memory.<sup>27</sup> This challenge certainly confronts those who would rewrite the spatial codes of post-apartheid urban space, whether they be architects and urban planners or authors of urban novels. The postmodern phenomena of technological change, hypermobility, planned obsolescence, consumerism, commodification, and time-space compression all act to thwart this inscription of memory onto urban spaces. In this context, the impulse to *archive* and preserve the past must be seen not as contradicting the amnesiac

tendencies of late capitalism, but rather as *responding* to them by searching for cultural stability and identity through fixed spatial configurations. Huyssen asks: “What if the relationship between memory and forgetting were actually being transformed under cultural pressures in which new information technologies, media politics, and fast-paced consumption are beginning to take their toll?” He further notes that the Freudian “psychic processes of remembering, repressing, and forgetting in individuals is writ large in contemporary consumer societies as a public phenomenon of unprecedented proportions.”<sup>28</sup>

These simultaneous palimpsestic and amnesiac qualities of postmodern/post-apartheid architecture and urban design pose unique difficulties to any attempt to represent or “map” urban and peri-urban spaces. In an analysis of such self-contained commercial citadels as Melrose Arch and Montecasino in Johannesburg’s north suburbs, Achille Mbembe argues that “postapartheid commercial architecture constitutes a mode of erasure all the more dramatic because it is accomplished with painstaking care against the duties to memory ritualized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”<sup>29</sup> He argues further that:

In the South African context, surfaces such as Montecasino and, to a lesser extent, Melrose Arch represent new genres of writing time. But this new inscription of time is paradoxical. For it to be possible at all, the built form has to be construed as an empty placeholder for meanings that have been eroded by time rather than remembered by it. That is why they are largely the manifestation of the failure of the racial city to assimilate the passage of time. While bearing witness to a demand that the past be forgotten, this architecture asks the spectator to forget that it is itself a sign of forgetting.<sup>30</sup>

By “racial city,” Mbembe presumably means the urban spaces engineered by apartheid and segregationist social policy to be whites-only citadels. The implication is that, insofar as the racial city disavowed the African past and was designed according to principles of repression and exclusion, it anticipated the postmodern cityscapes described by Huyssen and others, though the palimpsestic qualities of such urban geographies have become still more pronounced in the past decade. Such paradoxical spaces, which both erase the past and leave visible the marks of that erasure, underscore the complexity of any attempt to archive or decode the past inscribed on and erased from those spaces.

South African artist and theater maker William Kentridge has devised a style of animation that, I would argue, is particularly well adapted to

registering the marks of erasure and forgetting on the post-apartheid urban landscape. In an interview, Kentridge explains how his style of draw-and-erase animation differs from traditional animation in which the object in motion is redrawn many times on separate sheets of cellophane:

With a technique of animating or drawing, the stages of a movement are drawn on the same sheet of paper, and the previous ones erased, so you have a visible trace of that journey around the table.... This is how the effect of erasure and the effect of imperfect erasure puts on to the very surface and into the heart of the drawing or piece of the film itself the fact of time passing, but also makes visible something that is normally invisible. One can perceive the multiplicity of the self passing through time, which would end up as a single self if the moment was frozen in a photograph.<sup>31</sup>

My argument in the remainder of this essay will be that, in *The Exploded View* as in his earlier work, Vladislavić develops the prose equivalent of Kentridge's draw-and-erase animation style – that is, he forges a mode of representation that can register the continual inscription and effacement of social relations onto the physical urban landscape through which his characters wonder bemusedly. This aesthetic of “imperfect erasure” operates in tandem with the trope of the “exploded view” in Vladislavić's attempt to dissect contemporary Johannesburg and lay bare the social and economic processes that create and intersect it.

The notion of the exploded view is introduced in the novel by the character Gordon Duffy. Perhaps because of his childhood obsession with his father's DIY magazines, Duffy possesses a “surgical ability to see how things fitted together,” but wonders how useful this is in a world now dominated by microcircuitry: “this skill seemed to him increasingly outmoded in the world he lived in. It was no longer clear even to the most insightful observer how things were made or how they worked. The simplest devices were full of components no one could see, processes no one could fathom.”<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Vladislavić takes up the metaphor of the exploded view as a representational strategy through which he exposes the multifaceted social and physical infrastructures of contemporary Johannesburg. This strategy extends to the very narrative structure of the work itself, which is not a unified novel in the traditional sense so much as four vignettes featuring four sets of characters whose paths interconnect in subtle ways. The four protagonists' careers are diverse and seemingly unrelated: Budlender in “Villa Toscana” is a statistician for the census; Egan in “Afritude Sauce” is a

sanitary engineer; Simeon Majara in “Curiouser” is an artist famous for his representations of genocide in Rwanda and elsewhere; and in “Crocodile Lodge,” Gordon Duffy's company erects signs and billboards, specializing in signs announcing the future use of construction sites. Yet each character's perspective allows us to see different facets of the complex cultural and material processes that make everyday life in the city possible.

Like Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*, Budlender likes to make lists and catalogs; he also has a “passion for statistics,” and just as Tearle studies the phone directory to track changes and trends across the city, Budlender uses statistics as a means of archiving those changes.<sup>33</sup> The extent of his faith in the technologies of archiving are revealed in his notion that the most trivial facts must be “lodged somewhere in the circuitry of his memory,” though he is frustrated at his inability to recall those facts at will.<sup>34</sup> Another trait he has in common with Tearle is his keen awareness of the effect of architecture and other built spaces, as we see when he approaches a new housing development, Villa Toscana, on the northern outskirts of the city to interview a woman about her census form:

The boundaries of Johannesburg are drifting away, sliding over pristine ridges and valleys, lodging in tenuous places, slipping again. At its edges, where the city fades momentarily into the veld, unimaginable new atmospheres evolve. A strange sensation had come over [Budlender] when he first drew up at the gates of Villa Toscana, a dreamlike blend of familiarity and displacement.... [H]e was like a man in a film who has lost his memory and returns by chance to a well-loved place.<sup>35</sup>

If the changes that have taken place in the city center reflect the grimy underside of uneven capitalist development, the new developments and “edge cities” that have sprung up in the far-flung outskirts of the city reflect in turn the glittering aspirational lures of postmodern/global consumer culture. Bremner has argued, for example, that edge cities are “the entry points for many into middle South Africa, providing instant access to the essence of the new South African dream” for the emerging black middle class.<sup>36</sup>

The faux Tuscan architecture of Villa Toscana, like the mural of Alibia in *The Restless Supermarket*, embodies what Mbembe calls “an architecture of hysteria”: its evocations of an imagined European past are like the “remiscences” of hysterics, “repressed memories that fail to be integrated into the psyche.” Mbembe explains:

The architecture of hysteria in contemporary South Africa is the result of a painful, shocking encounter with a radical alterity set loose by the collapse of the racial city. Faced with the sudden estrangement from the familiar resulting from the collapse of the racial city, this architecture aims to return to the “archaic” as a way of freezing rapid changes in the temporal and political structures of the surrounding world. It is an architecture characterized by the attachment to a lost object that used to provide comfort....[T]he mark of the past here is only a trace, not a literal recollection.<sup>37</sup>

This could be taken as a summary of Vladislavić’s depictions of Johannesburg in all his recent work, in which the traces of the past serve as mechanisms of forgetting rather than recollection.

For Budlender, the new faux European subdivisions pose a bewildering experience, but one which he finds strangely intoxicating. Returning from one of his many visits to Iris du Plooy, the woman at Villa Toscana with whom he grows increasingly obsessed, Budlender gets lost: “At first, he was irritated. Not just with himself for his carelessness, but with the whole ridiculous lifestyle that surrounded him, with its repetitions, its mass-produced effects, its formulaic individuality. But then this very shallowness began to exert a pacifying effect on him.”<sup>38</sup> The postmodern spaces of the edge city seem to resist the ordering compulsion that Budlender craves. As Michael Titlestad and Michael Kissack note about *The Exploded View*, “Cartographic plans...are constituted in the gaze of the planner, and link more directly to a desire for an ordered and predictable future than to the actual rivalries, expectations, conflicts, histories and vested interests that comprise the ways in which individuals inhabit cities.”<sup>39</sup> Like Egan in a later scene in the book, Budlender finds that there is “no elevated position from which he can control the shifts and disruptions of metropolitan life.”<sup>40</sup>

If Budlender finds his lived experience of the city disorienting because of his inability to gain the ordered perspective of the cartographic overview, he encounters a similarly hypnotic disorientation from watching television, which he rarely does until he meets Du Plooy, a continuity announcer for SABC1. The music videos in particular, with their dizzying strobe of jump cuts and close-ups, cause him to despair for his culture: “Why did everything have to happen so quickly? So incompletely? It was nothing but bits and pieces of things.” In a passage that could have been written by Tearle, he complains about the images flashing across his television, an “endless jumble of body parts amid ruins, a gyrating hip, an enigmatic navel...sign language from a secret alphabet, fragments of city streets, images flaring and fading, dissolving, floating in airtime, dwindling away into nothing.”<sup>41</sup>

Given Budlender’s ambivalent relationship to the newly resurgent consumer culture, it is interesting that he develops an infatuation with du Plooy, whose job seems the very embodiment of postmodern surface and simulation. From his nights watching her on television, Budlender “became acquainted with the continuity announcers and the odd interiors in which they were displayed, generically decorative spaces with crimped and puckered surfaces, draped and folded satin sheens...in which they moved stiffly like overdressed mannequins, animated goods.”<sup>42</sup> Budlender recognizes that within this space of pure artifice (which bears certain similarities to the faux-Tuscan architecture of the edge cities described above), identity is a fluid, malleable thing, and wonders if du Plooy had been honest on her census questionnaire about whether there was a man in her life: “But why should she be? It was just an exercise, after all. She might have made up a new persona for herself. She could be anyone she chose.”<sup>43</sup> Though Budlender does not make the connection, the notion that people might use the census form as a means of inventing their identity has destabilizing implications for his project of archiving and documenting the world through ordered facts and statistics.

As if acknowledging this shortcoming in the kinds of archiving practiced by Budlender and Tearle, Vladislavić turns in the second story, entitled “Afritude Sauce,” to the perspective of Egan the sanitary engineer. He recognizes ruefully that “Sooner or later, everyone figured it out: you were in the shit business.”<sup>44</sup> Though it provides fodder for his self-deprecating sense of humor, waste management is of course absolutely integral to the functioning of the modern city, and Egan’s perspective gives the reader a glimpse into the invisible material infrastructure and processes that undergird the city’s visible facades. Because he is involved in new housing developments from the earliest stages, he sees such developments as the product of layers of “permanence” – pipes and cables underneath the surface, houses that rest “lightly on their bases,” electrical poles, paving and brick, etc. “Permanence grew like a crust. Each layer added depth.” Furthermore, Egan compares the infrastructure of the city to the human body undergoing surgery: “Workers clustered around a manhole, surrounded by striped barriers under a makeshift awning of green canvas, would remind him of nothing so much as surgeons in the operating theatre.”<sup>45</sup>

Egan is employed by the government building permanent houses for shack dwellers, and he is proud of the contribution he is making to the country’s transformation. Or at least, he wants to be proud of it, but he is forced to recognize the faults in that contribution by the complaints of the new residents who have already moved into the barely-completed homes. Many of the problems have nothing to do with Egan’s job, but he is required



to listen to these complaints by his employer in the name of “doing your bit for reconciliation.”<sup>46</sup> One woman, Mrs. Ntlaka, complains that the doorways are too narrow, there is no ceiling separating the room from the roof, one wall is cracked, the toilet is positioned too high for her feet to reach the floor, and everything is too small and generally “fucked,” the word she repeats with emphasis. Egan dismisses Mrs. Ntlaka’s complaints as the rantings of a “drama queen,” but they effectively draw the reader’s attention to the shortcomings of the post-apartheid government’s efforts to transform systemic spatial inequities.<sup>47</sup> Egan’s lack of empathy for the plight of the people who must live in the houses he helps build is symptomatic of a mindset that regards the country’s housing shortage as an abstract policy problem to be addressed by bureaucratic social engineering, with scarcely more regard for the needs of residents than was shown by the apartheid policies that created the housing crisis in the first place.

Furthermore, though Egan’s view of the city as “layers of permanence” provides a valuable insight into the material processes that constitute and produce those urban layers, it proves little help to him in navigating the new *social* geographies of post-apartheid South Africa. This is driven home when he is invited to a business dinner at Bra Zama’s African Eatery attended by five town officials and members of the Residents’ Association:

He had to wonder about the cosy relationship between the councilors and the men from the Residents’ Association. Who was the fifth man? Was it seemly that they should all be meeting like this? Who would be picking up the tab? But his questions lost their force in the face of a new certainty: this was the way the world worked and there was nothing to be ashamed of. It was all about connections, it was about who you knew.<sup>48</sup>

At first the conversation is conducted mostly in English, and “Egan began to feel like one of the boys,” part of this complex new network of power.<sup>49</sup> But then:

Slowly, peristaltically, Egan felt himself moving to the edge of the conversation. They were talking mainly in Sotho now, switching back into English occasionally to include him....[H]e began to suspect that *nothing* important was being discussed with him. That the real purpose of their exchange, in which he appeared to be an equal partner, was in the sidelong chatter, the small talk he didn’t understand. It was possible, wasn’t it? That everything that mattered lay between the lines?<sup>50</sup>

Note that Egan uses spatial metaphors to describe his sense of alienation – “the edge of the conversation,” “between the lines.” Meanwhile the adverb “peristaltically” implies another bodily metaphor, with the body here standing in not for the city, but for the networks of power that govern the production and use of space, at least on the small scale of this peri-urban town.

Several bottles of wine later, when one of his hosts spoons some of the restaurant’s trademark “Afritude Sauce” over Egan’s steak without asking, Egan wonders, “What did it mean? Was it a sign of sharing, of hospitality?...Or was he being ridiculed? Why did he even think this was a possibility? He could no longer tell the difference between kindness and cruelty.”<sup>51</sup> His inability to decode the simplest of cultural signifiers points to another source of disorientation for many white South Africans, beyond the socioeconomic forces underlying postmodern time-space compression. Egan struggles with only partial success to find his way in a new social landscape in which the back-room deals that shape the physical landscape are conducted in languages he does not understand.

Meanwhile, Simeon Majara, the protagonist of “Curiouser,” faces another sort of identity crisis. A successful black artist, Majara struggles not with the linguistic multiplicity of the country, but rather with his own position of privilege in the midst of a continent full of poverty. He established his reputation with a series of works on the theme of genocide – first the Holocaust, then Bosnia, and finally in Rwanda. While visiting the site of a massacre in Nyanza, Majara meets a “cross-cultural adventurer” from Europe who has toured genocide sites around the world. When asked what he did, “Simeon could not bring himself to say he was an artist. The idea made him queasy. It suggested an intolerable common purpose with his fellow traveler.”<sup>52</sup> His disavowal of his true profession suggests an unconscious discomfort with what could be seen as an exploitive or parasitical relationship to the subjects of his art.

Unexpectedly, he runs into similar discomfort with his follow-up project, entitled *Curiouser*. The title is a punning reference to the African masks, statues, and other curios that he cuts into slices and arranges on wall-size surfaces. The project was born when the owner of Bra Zama’s African Eatery asked Majara to design the new restaurant’s interior décor. He managed to buy several crates containing thousands of the masks and curios, some of which he turns into lamps to hang spookily on the walls of Bra Zama’s; the narrator notes that “he had chanced upon a talent for frightening people, for giving them goosebumps by doing violence to their ordinary clutter.”<sup>53</sup> This effect, incidentally, goes some way to explaining Egan’s discomfort during

the dinner scene in the earlier vignette; the two passages together reveal Vladislavić's awareness of the ability of architecture and design to affect social interaction in subtle ways.

After finishing the Bra Zama's project, Majara finds himself with thousands of curios left over, and thus he begins the *Curiouser* (or "Curio-user") project. His first installation in the series is simply a "wall layered with masks": "The sheer profusion was disconcerting, [Majara] knew, like a pavement display standing up on end. It made you feel that the room had toppled over on its side."<sup>54</sup> Then he turned to slicing wooden statuettes of animals into pieces, in a kind of "mechanical compulsion, a tirelessly repeated dismemberment." He soon finds that he "could graft the parts of different animals into new species, the head of a lion, the horns of a buffalo, the legs of a hippopotamus, exquisite corpses, many-headed monsters for a contemporary bestiary."<sup>55</sup> His artistic obsession culminates in the centerpiece of the exhibition, "Crazy Paving," which was laid out on the gallery floor: "It contained cross sections of twenty different species and covered a surface of nearly fifty square meters. It looked like an aerial photograph of a newly discovered planet."<sup>56</sup> At the closing party, Majara's friend John comments that he thinks *Curiouser* is about "reconstruction. ...It's about putting things together in new ways."<sup>57</sup>

Then, however, the conversation takes an uncomfortable turn, when another party attendee accuses Majara of "dealing in stolen property" with the masks he bought on the street at a suspiciously large discount. Later in a private conversation, even Majara's friend Amy raises a similar concern, pointing out that "You carve up a cheap curio and put it in a gallery, and suddenly it's worth a packet."<sup>58</sup> He attempts to dismiss her point with abstract arguments about popular craft versus high art: "The curio is in one system and the art work in another. If you move an object from one system into another, by the sweat of your brow, you change its purpose and therefore its value." But Amy boils the matter down to simpler terms: "I can't help being aware of the balance of power, the imbalance, one should say. The way you live here [in affluent Greenside], the way the people who made these masks must live."<sup>59</sup> This conversation evokes the reluctant memory in Majara of a conversation he had at university in which a fellow student forced him to think about the "means of production" that go into the making of such a simple item as a can of soda: the miners who extract the aluminum from the earth, the factory workers who make the paint for the can, the sugarcane harvesters, etc. "These things had been put here by thousands of people, tens of thousands of people, bound together in a massively complex web of work, whose most surprising characteristic was that nearly all of it was invisible and unacknowledged."<sup>60</sup>

Majara's reluctance to acknowledge these complex webs of work that underlie even the simple carved wooden animals he deconstructs in his work suggests a kind of postmodern existential despair, perhaps rooted in the consuming subject's extreme alienation from both his or her own labor and from the objects of consumption. His nagging discomfort is shared by Gordon Duffy, protagonist of the final section of the novel, "Crocodile Lodge." I discussed above his lament for the irrelevance of his intuitive mechanical skills in a world where "the simplest devices were full of components no one could see, processes no one could fathom." He goes on to wonder, after some hypothetical massive catastrophe, "What could be saved of our high-tech world? How many people knew what went into the manufacture of a fiber-optic cable, a compact disk, a silicon chip, a printing press, a sheet of paper? How was information coded digitally?"<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, like Majara, Duffy is uncomfortably aware of the material derivation of commodity goods, as his thoughts reveal when stopped at a traffic light where street vendors sell their goods between cars. One of them is selling a miniature balsa wood schooner that "came sailing through the Highveld air. From a distance there was an illusion of intricacy and craft; from close up it was shoddily made, stuck together with staples and glue. A slave ship, mass-produced, he supposed, by children in a sweatshop somewhere in Hong Kong or Karachi or Doornfontein."<sup>62</sup> These few lines contain an entire allegorical critique of consumer capitalism: that which glitters and appears to float unencumbered in the air is in reality rooted in a system of human sweat and desperate poverty. And by including Doornfontein, a manufacturing area in central Johannesburg (very near to Vladislavić's home, incidentally), at the end of a list of cities infamous for their sweatshops, the author implies moreover that South Africa is equally caught up in the massive web of transnational capitalism.

Vladislavić applies the same demystifying process to one of the characteristic features of the postmodern landscape, the billboard. Duffy puts them up for a living, specializing in billboards outside construction sites for new developments. In an essay on youth culture in contemporary Johannesburg, Sarah Nuttall discusses billboards as one of many "urban visual forms, which embody concepts of the urban, of race, and of culture that have much to tell us about Johannesburg as it participates in global cultures of circulation."<sup>63</sup> Vladislavić's treatment of billboards does invite discussion in terms of surface images and simulacra. For example, Duffy wonders why the convention of labeling the illustrations of future housing developments as "Artist's Impression" has lapsed, and speculates: "Now that the fanciful images were practically indistinguishable from the photographically real, were more vividly convincing in fact than the ordinary world, disclaimers

were no longer required.”<sup>64</sup> Yet the novel also reinforces the material reality behind the production of those images; for instance, the Crocodile Lodge billboard had “taken a week to put up. It was on rocky ground, on a sloping stand beside the N3, and sinking the posts had been a performance. Josiah and his team were breaking rock with a jackhammer for a solid day.”<sup>65</sup>

The novel’s grim conclusion likewise suggests a certain skepticism toward romantic ideas about the liberatory potential of information technologies. Whereas Egan views the city as composed of layers of permanence, Duffy views it as an intricate network of mechanisms and flows that he is able to “jack into” and navigate skillfully with the help of technology such as the radio traffic report: “Usually it was reassuring, this invocation of rises and dips and the states associated with them, a map of sensations keyed to his own body...It would soothe him to hear that each of the named intersections had become the hub of a failed mechanism, the end point of an incomplete trajectory, and that he was implicated in none of it, he was still on course.” The radio thus seems to function as an extension of his senses, linking his body not just to his immediate surroundings but to the larger network of the city. But his faith in the system is shaken at the beginning of the vignette, when, leaving the construction site, he hears the radio announcer report a traffic jam he is already stuck in: “But this afternoon, caught in the rush hour and sensing trouble up ahead, the measured words fell on him like a judgment.”<sup>66</sup>

This inauspicious beginning to his evening foreshadows darker events, which begin when he realizes he has misplaced his cell phone – another piece of technology literally connecting him to larger networks. Turning his car around to look for it, he finds himself disoriented by its absence: “Twice in the space of a kilometer he thought he should call [his wife] to say he’d be late, and twice he had to remind himself that the phone was gone. A broken record player, he said to himself.”<sup>67</sup> Significantly, he has become another “failed mechanism” like that resulting in traffic accidents; even his short-term memory seems to falter without the technological crutch of the phone (which for many people doubles as a personal phone directory and appointment planner – that is, it doubles as a mnemonic aid). Fumbling in the dark for his phone at the construction site of the future Crocodile Lodge, Duffy is attacked by the occupants of a taxi-van that Budlender had earlier remarked as suspicious, but the license number of which he is unable to recall from the “circuitry of his memory” – yet another failed mechanism.

Read together, the stories in *The Exploded View* paint a portrait of contemporary Johannesburg as containing almost unfathomably complex interactions between fixed spaces (houses, office buildings, shopping malls, streets), movements (of people, commodities, money, information), and the

mechanisms that both facilitate and regulate those movements (traffic lights, fiber optic cables, cell phone towers). Vladislavić’s depiction of the city thus parallels certain aspects of Saskia Sassen’s analysis of the spatiotemporalities of globalization: “global economic features like hypermobility and time-space compression are not self-generative. They need to be produced, and such a feat of production requires capital fixity....As such, the spatiotemporality of economic globalization itself can already be seen to contain dynamics of both fixity and mobility.”<sup>68</sup>

Compounding the complexity of Vladislavić’s portrait is the fact that the fixed spaces are not so permanent as they might seem, but are in fact subject to rapid transformations that render problematic attempts by the inhabitants of those spaces to navigate through them, as well as attempts to inscribe social memory on them. Indeed, the novel points out the utter inadequacy of any single existing mode of archiving and documenting the city’s past or present. Budlender’s obsession with statistics is emblematic: killing time in a restaurant straddling the freeway, he counts cars: “He counted women drivers, did the conversion. Cars for men, cars for women. Rivers of drivers. He stopped counting and let his eye dance across the trends: roof racks..., bull bars, trailers, spoilers, roll bars, bakkies, 4x4s. Entire lifestyles, dissolved in the flow like some troubling additive, like statistical fluoride, became perceptible to his trained eye.”<sup>69</sup> Yet his compiling of statistics equips him poorly for everyday life in the dizzying, shifting geographies of Johannesburg, where memories tend to follow the route of his attempts to recall the license number of that taxi: “There had been a motto too, in the back window, and a name printed by hand on the panel below. But all of it was gone.”<sup>70</sup>

On a cursory reading, passages from *The Exploded View* like those quoted above seem to confirm Nuttall’s observations about the post-apartheid city. In a volume of *Public Culture* entitled *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, for example, she and co-editor Achille Mbembe propose reading the city “in terms of its extracanonical leakages, its lines of flight, its borderlands and interfaces”, and suggest that “a geography of fortifications and enclosures [and the] increasing demand for spatial and social insulation” need to be “counterbalanced by attention to other, varied responses to the city’s transformation, most of which reflect the complexities of class, race, generation, and ideology.”<sup>71</sup> Yet as I have noted above, Nuttall does not so much “counterbalance” the focus on fortification and segregation, as bypass such concerns altogether.

Vladislavić does indeed suggest in *The Exploded View* that concerns with material spaces and social inequalities are insufficient in themselves for

understanding the invisible infrastructures that make the contemporary South African metropolis function. Yet the novel also implies that we entirely ignore these concerns at our peril. Majara is unable to indulge in “stylizing the self” without experiencing intense self-consciousness about the derivation of the material and consumer goods that enable that process of self-conceptualization. The sweat and aggravation experienced by Duffy’s work crew make it difficult to romanticize billboards as “the loci of a language of aspiration,” and impossible to regard them as signs within a closed semiotic system devoid of material referent.<sup>72</sup> Egan’s being confronted by the residents of one of the ramshackle houses he has helped to build exposes the superficiality of much of the celebratory rhetoric of the “post-liberation” era. These and countless other examples in Vladislavić’s writing make it clear that without paying attention to the “layers of permanence” and the human toil that determine the way people occupy, use, and traverse urban spaces, any attempt to map alternative ways of understanding and organizing space will be deeply impoverished.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001) 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Michael Green, “Translating the Nation: Phaswane Mpe and the Fiction of Post Apartheid,” *Scrutiny* 2 10.1 (2005): 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Sarah Nuttall, “City Forms and Writing the ‘Now’ in South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.4 (2004): 741-742.
- <sup>4</sup> Sarah Nuttall, “Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 432.
- <sup>5</sup> Nuttall, “Stylizing the Self” 446.
- <sup>6</sup> Michael Watts, “Baudelaire over Berea, Simmel over Sandton?” *Public Culture* 17.1 (2005): 185.
- <sup>7</sup> Nuttall, “Stylizing the Self” 434.
- <sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Gerald Gaylard and Michael Titlestad, “Introduction: Controversial Interpretations: Ivan Vladislavić,” *Scrutiny* 2 11.2 (2006): 5-10; Saffron Hall, “South African English in the Post-Apartheid Era: Hybridization in Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* and Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket*,” *postamble* 2.1 (2006): 13-29; Mike Marais, “Visions of Excess: Closure, Irony, and the Thought of Community in Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket*,” *English in Africa* 29.2 (2002): 101-117; Susan Van Zyl, “Skyhooks and Diagrams: The Signing of South Africa in Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View*,” *Scrutiny* 2 11.2 (2006): 75-84; Christopher Warnes, “The Making and Unmaking of History in Ivan

- Vladislavić’s *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 67-89; Felicity Wood, “Taking Fun Seriously: The Potency of Play in Ivan Vladislavić’s Short Stories,” *English Academy Review* 18 (2001): 21-37; and Elaine Young, “‘Or Is It Just the Angle?’ Rivaling Realist Representation in Ivan Vladislavić’s *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*,” *English Academy Review* 18 (2001): 38-45. Even Stefan Helgesson, who is perhaps Vladislavić’s most insightful critic, argues that “Rather than document change in a realistic mode, Vladislavić thematises language itself as the very material of understanding and being”; see Elaine Young, “‘Minor Disorders’: Ivan Vladislavić and the Devolution of South African English,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.4 (2004): 777. I develop this critique at greater length in “Memory, Memorialization, and the Transformation of Johannesburg: Ivan Vladislavić’s *Propaganda by Monuments and The Restless Supermarket*,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 53.1 (2007): 70-96.
- <sup>9</sup> Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavić, eds., *Blank \_\_\_\_: Architecture, Apartheid and After* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 1998).
- <sup>10</sup> Christopher Warnes, “Interview with Ivan Vladislavić,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 278.
- <sup>11</sup> Graham, “Memory, Memorialization” 73-74.
- <sup>12</sup> Ivan Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2004) 171.
- <sup>13</sup> Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Berkeley: UP of California, 2002) 17.
- <sup>14</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 31.
- <sup>15</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 36.
- <sup>16</sup> Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) xiii.
- <sup>17</sup> Lindsay Bremner, *Johannesburg: One City Colliding Worlds* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004) 57-58.
- <sup>18</sup> Steven Robins, “City Sites,” *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 411.
- <sup>19</sup> Smith, *Uneven Development* 157.
- <sup>20</sup> Patrick Bond, *Cities of Gold, Townships of Coal: Essays on South Africa’s New Urban Crisis* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000) xiii, his emphasis.
- <sup>21</sup> Bond, *Cities of Gold* 6.
- <sup>22</sup> Smith, *Uneven Development* 135-136.
- <sup>23</sup> David Harvey, “Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form,” *Transforming Cities: Contested Governance and New Spatial Divisions*, ed. Nick Jewson and Susanne MacGregor (London: Routledge, 1997) 20.
- <sup>24</sup> Harvey, “Contested Cities” 21-22.
- <sup>25</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003) 81.

- <sup>26</sup> Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) 22, my emphasis.
- <sup>27</sup> Lisa Yoneyama, "Taming the Memoryscape: Hiroshima's Urban Renewal," *Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) 129.
- <sup>28</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts* 17.
- <sup>29</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 402.
- <sup>30</sup> Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity" 402.
- <sup>31</sup> Dan Cameron, "An Interview with William Kentridge," *William Kentridge*, ed. Neal Benezra, Staci Boris and Dan Cameron (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001) 67.
- <sup>32</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 190.
- <sup>33</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 5.
- <sup>34</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 22.
- <sup>35</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 6.
- <sup>36</sup> Bremner, *Johannesburg* 42-43.
- <sup>37</sup> Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity" 402-3.
- <sup>38</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 30-31.
- <sup>39</sup> Michael Titlestad and Michael Kissack, "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*," *Scrutiny* 2 11.2 (2006): 14.
- <sup>40</sup> Stefan Helgesson, "Johannesburg as Africa: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Exploded View* by Ivan Vladislavić," *Scrutiny* 2 11.2 (2006): 34.
- <sup>41</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 24.
- <sup>42</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 23.
- <sup>43</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 40.
- <sup>44</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 55.
- <sup>45</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 58.
- <sup>46</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 62.
- <sup>47</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 71.
- <sup>48</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 85.
- <sup>49</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 85.
- <sup>50</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 86-87.
- <sup>51</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 90.
- <sup>52</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 105.
- <sup>53</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 120.
- <sup>54</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 140.
- <sup>55</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 137.
- <sup>56</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 138.
- <sup>57</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 125.
- <sup>58</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 145.
- <sup>59</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 146.
- <sup>60</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 148.

- <sup>61</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 191.
- <sup>62</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 162.
- <sup>63</sup> Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self" 432.
- <sup>64</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 187.
- <sup>65</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 174.
- <sup>66</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 159-160.
- <sup>67</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 164-165.
- <sup>68</sup> Saskia Sassen, "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization," *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai 262.
- <sup>69</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 15-16.
- <sup>70</sup> Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 22-23.
- <sup>71</sup> Mbembe and Nuttall, "Writing the World" 365.
- <sup>72</sup> Mbembe and Nuttall, "Writing the World" 365, and Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self" 432.

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## **Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky?: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa**

Kelwyn Sole

### **Poetry and Political Issues after 1994**

It is easy to presume that literature plays something of a minor public role in a postcolonial context such as South Africa, and thereafter to assume that, within the domain of literature, the importance afforded poetry must be marginal. This has a degree of accuracy. In a relatively undeveloped publishing and reviewing environment, there is certainly a socially less "well-defined marginal position ... (and) clear space" from which poets write than exists in metropolitan countries; a fact that causes local poets some despondency.<sup>1</sup> However, it can be suggested that one of the paradoxical consequences of this has been that poets regularly take on a social position that would be regarded as unusual in those developed countries where the relative autonomy of the "poetic space" is circumscribed by the expectations and pressures of the literature industry, which has in effect acted to limit the scope of poets' role as active and meaningful social agents.

One of the most puzzling, if compelling, aspects of recent poetry in English in South Africa has been the way in which it has engaged with, reflected upon, and tried to influence ongoing processes in the country's wider sociocultural and political life. Since liberation, it is apparent that private spaces have become more porous: and the traditional dividing line in South African poetry between private and public expression has been brought increasingly into question.<sup>2</sup> This has affected not only the nature of political poetry, but of less public genres as well.

Poets continue to involve themselves in public affairs, as they did before liberation. Many stalwarts of the ruling party, the African National Congress

(ANC), continue to act in the service of the state, and the policies of the party and its partners. Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyele, Minister of Housing from 1999-2003, has agonized over the work expected of her as a “soldier-poet”; poet Vusi Mavimbela (a long-time loyalist and confidant of former President Mbeki), appointed Director-General of the National Intelligence Agency in 1999, spoke out in the late 1990s in support of instituting economic policies for South Africa based on the model of the “Asian Tigers”; the current Treasurer of the ANC, Matthews Phosa, has published a book of Afrikaans poetry; ANC members Jeremy Cronin and Mongane Serote both served spells as Members of Parliament; Lindiwe Mabuza continues to write poetry even as she serves as a diplomat for the government in a variety of geographical locations, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Even among the younger poets this is the case, although the frequency seems to be diminishing. For instance, both Seithlamo Motsapi and Lisa Combrink served as speech-writers for the Mbeki presidency, while Lance Mogorosi Nawa has spent time as the mayor of Mamelodi.

Examples of poetry’s reach abound. The first general elections served as a basis for many poems. So did the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), with Ingrid de Kok in particular employing it as an enduring theme in her work. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) solved the dilemma of having only 20 minutes to put forward their perspective concerning the complicity of big business in apartheid at the TRC by using a poet, Nise Malange; and the most revered and emulated poet of the 1980s, ANC-aligned Mzwakhe Mbuli — later jailed for armed robbery — was praise singer at Nelson Mandela’s 1994 presidential inauguration, Master of Ceremonies at the re-launch of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in 1995, the “singing spokesman” for the national railways for a period in the 1990s, and did a half-time show at the match at which the South African national soccer team became African Champions in 1996.<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s there was a flurry of publishing activity around poetry. A celebratory anthology of poetry and prose was issued at the presidential inauguration of Thabo Mbeki, and anthologies on matters of concern such as AIDS, women’s issues, poverty, and homelessness, or in praise of Nelson Mandela, saw the light of day.

To a limited extent, some of these visible effects can be attributed to the more public role afforded certain genres of poetry in African public life from pre-colonial times onwards. The traditional genre of *izibongo/lithoko* (praise singing) has taken on a new vitality. Yet especially noticeable at present is the manner in which the figure of “the poet” has become infused with huge ethical and ideological weight and potential. Among practitioners and audiences alike, poetry is repeatedly regarded as allowing access to a more

sublime or insightful “truth” than political discourse, or even social analysis. Es’kia Mphahlele has argued that the African poet had come to function over the years as a prophetic figure; and this function appears to intermingle with congruent assumptions from the European Romantic tradition inherited through colonialism. Poetry is seen as an incisive discourse, potentially free of cant and deceit; while the figure of the poet is presented as a unique purveyor of authenticity; a visionary and purveyor of a “truth” — including social truths — invisible to others.<sup>5</sup> This assumption has become as prevalent in advertising and the media as in poetic circles.

This phenomenon occurs among public figures as well. Speaker for the House of Parliament and — more recently — Deputy President of the ANC Baleka Mbete opines that the “best compliment you can give me ... is to tell me that I am a poet”; businessman Hermann Mashaba, winner of the 2004 Free Market Award, argues that the entrepreneur is “the poet of the private sector”; while a Premier of the Western Cape, bemoaning the lack of racial unity and interaction in his province, has recently suggested that “if we want the Western Cape to be a home for all, maybe we must ask our poets to pick up where we couldn’t. We need to usher in an era of our poets again.”<sup>6</sup> The list that could be made of such utterances is lengthy. Poets who otherwise position themselves in the body politic very differently have joined in the chorus. For instance, Pan-Africanist Motsapi proclaims that, in contradistinction to poetry, contemporary “politics, journalism, and advertising (are) ... driven by passion for illusion, talent for obfuscation and predisposition to ostentation”; liberal poet Chris Mann believes the purpose of poetry is “to shake by the scruff of the neck all jargon, cant and doublespeak ... the lie private, commercial or political”; while Lebogang Mashile, possibly the most popular of the younger generation of poets, says that poetry “demands my honesty. I cannot lie in a poem.”<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless on closer scrutiny there is less agreement on the role of poetry than at first appears. On the one hand, a group of poets has, since 1994, become deeply involved in the enterprise of writing about, and encouraging, national reconstruction and nation-building in both articles and poems, and has seen this as best advanced through support of the ANC. In an article published on the ANC website, for instance, Nawa calls for the party to oversee the building of what he calls a “national patriotic culture” as a priority, and urges that such cultural planning should seek to ensure that all South Africans have access to cultural expression and activity *via* local government rather than treating culture “as a concurrent competence between national and provincial governments.”<sup>8</sup> Yet even among such poets close to the ruling bloc, there is by no means consensus about political, economic, and social issues, either in their pronouncements or in their poetry. Serote,

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for example, has adopted a consistently Africanist position and used his poetry to inveigh against the role he has had to play in government institutions promoting “reconciliation.” In his epic poem “Freedom, Lament and Song” he laments his position:

at the big house  
at this HQ of God, Cape Town  
I listen, I look, I touch  
there are liars  
cheats and betrayers  
they manoeuvre  
they are like vacuum cleaners  
like hyenas  
in their speeches<sup>9</sup>

Other poets within the Government alliance, most notably the South African Communist Party member Jeremy Cronin, have involved themselves in economic debate and critique; Cronin emerging as a vocal, and often critical, presence in the ANC-led alliance. He has written voluminously inter alia on the policies of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and South African Reserve Bank; on the South African State’s post-1996 Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) economic policy; on the socialist pedigree of privatization policies in China; on the role of the new black middle class; and he has raised concern over the “ZANUfication” of the ANC and involved himself in many debates about strategy. He has also managed to be a loyal supporter of both Mbeki and, more recently, Jacob Zuma.<sup>10</sup> Similar critiques, from positions both to the right and left of Cronin, have been articulated in the period under discussion.<sup>11</sup>

Since the early 1990s there has been a movement among some poets away from any notion that poetry should be functional to politicians and their agendas. On returning from exile, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile (the present poet laureate) stressed that, while he still saw writing as a political activity, he was opposed to politicians determining what artists should produce; while later Lesego Rampolokeng voiced a similar sentiment when he suggested that the era of the “bring-on-the-poet-to-lick-the-stage-clean-for-the-politicians thing” had ended.<sup>12</sup> However, it is easy to become too optimistic about this development. The urge to use poetry merely to praise power has not vanished in the nearly two decades since liberation. Mabuza’s poetry in particular is in essence a paean of praise to party personalities, policy, and ideals, and the role of praise poetry in particular is open to becoming a

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vehicle for sycophancy. In a 2005 article, Limpopo activist and poet Vonani Bila speaks of

poets who are invited to most government and corporate functions. I’ve heard rumours they are paid extremely well. These poets, by nature, are opportunists. As long as they get paid and receive sufficient media coverage in the colours of the rainbow nation or Coca-Cola or Vodacom on Bafana Bafana, they are willing to suffocate the real voices within. You can call these clowns anything, but certainly not poets. The kind of content that characterizes their scribbling is inept human rights rhetoric, slogans about non-existent transformation and change, blind celebration of NEPAD and African Renaissance, and self-praise. Often they write about sex and are known for shouting women’s power. They call Biko, Hani and Sobukwe’s names without having read enough of the doctrines these fighters pursued in their lifetime.<sup>13</sup>

The evidence of this kind of lip service to past ideals and the struggle against poverty among poets who in fact are aligning themselves with South Africa’s present pro-corporate and wealth-friendly reality is noticeable. Indeed, the amount of poets willing to occupy this space has, arguably, grown apace in the new century — an issue which will be discussed later.

Throughout the period since liberation there have been poets, on the other hand, who have seen their utterances as fulfilling a critical purpose at odds with state or ruling party debates and policies. A number of prominent poets distance themselves from current government positions, most often on the left. Dennis Brutus, for example, an ongoing and vociferous critic of the role of the IMF and World Bank in global politics and of South Africa’s economic policies since liberation, inveighs against the new black elite who are

frustrating any efforts to achieve the kind of just society that they spoke about and if that’s not bad enough, worse is the fact that while they can see people living in poverty, near starvation, sickness without medical care, homelessness — they can live in disgusting affluence without a sense of guilt.<sup>14</sup>

Using a rather different conceptual approach and discourse, there are also poets (especially among the young) who have reacted with suspicion to what Ntone Edjabe, editor of the journal *Chimurenga*, describes as the puritanical culture of “don’ts” in some of Africa’s newly independent countries that are



involved in “the dull enterprise of nation-building.”<sup>15</sup> Sharp criticism is, on occasion, aired as regards some of the most hallowed institutions of post-apartheid South Africa, including what Lesego Rampolokeng calls South Africa’s “malice-in-wonderland” Constitution (“Rap-Ranting”).

Since liberation a chorus of poems have emerged critical, at times harshly so, of the new generation of politicians, and the corruption and nepotism that has attended them. In the face of a media obsessed with icons and role-models, the trope of the “hero” has been subjected to scrutiny. In some cases, such as Chris Mann’s poem “Where is the Freedom For Which They Died?” the names of heroes and martyrs of the anti-apartheid struggle are used as a comparative counterpoint to shame other South Africans involved in internecine conflict, family abuse and violence. In others — such as Karen Press’ “Tiresias in the City of Heroes” and Bila’s “Mandela, Have You Ever Wondered?” — heroes are shown to have feet of clay. These poems highlight the degree to which a country awash with nationalist rhetoric has accepted old habits that do not challenge people’s preceptions of, or responses to, structures of power.

Any perusal of the poetry of Mbongeni Khumalo, Press, Motsapi, Bila, Rampolokeng, and many others shows a radical, critical spirit of enquiry at work. From this perspective, the duty of poetry is, according to Bila, “to ask embarrassing questions”; an attitude increasingly removed from the poets of the ruling order.<sup>16</sup> As Sipiwe ka Ngwenya states in “Killjoy”:

i see nothing fine  
when the sun shines  
i mock the poet singing praise in parliament  
i cause a predicament  
reveal poverty  
in our liberty  
I am killjoy  
I am killjoy

#### Healing: Utopia and Reality

In the early years of his editorship, Robert Berold (editor of the poetry journal *New Coin* between 1989-1999) speaks of receiving poems demonstrating “fragments of psyches ... together presenting a picture of a traumatised disturbed society. ... I began to realise that in a society like ours it is extremely difficult to distinguish between psychological and social manifestations.”<sup>17</sup> It is little wonder, therefore, that after liberation the poetry’s potential for exploring and processing psychological anguish has

manifested itself, in terms that vary from the young poet Kabomo’s belief that he could “let the bullshit out on paper ... (and) be more honest on paper than with my mother, my girlfriend, my best friend and even myself” to Berold’s more expansive belief that “writers who can bring the different fragments of reality together will have an important healing function.”<sup>18</sup>

A supplement to this desire for succor in writing or reading poetry is the fact that liberation in South Africa occasioned expectations that the future would be immeasurably better than the past. In a 1995 interview, Serote noted that “for a long time the two opposites, the ideal world and the real world, are going to form the basis of a very strong articulation on the part of writers”; while three years later Cronin suggested that “a relevant South African poetry should force the actual and the desirable into the same aesthetic, linguistic and subjective space,” adding that political themes in post-liberation poetry have turned to “grappling with the shortfall between post-apartheid aspirations and actual realities on the ground.”<sup>19</sup> In another version of this utopian urge, Bila called for “a new world of understanding and love” which, from his perspective, would be forged by “taking a journey through African mythology ... crossing borders of cultural traditionalism and conditioning.”<sup>20</sup> For the last decade and a half, as a consequence, cheek-by-jowl with the optimism of government media statements (most immediately discernible in such tropes as the “rainbow nation” and “African Renaissance”) a series of poetic perceptions of the contemporary state of the country have emerged which claim to be closer to social reality, and which are a great deal darker. In Rustum Kozain’s “February Moon: Cape Town,” for example:

My land’s an expanse of rubble  
and slogans, charters, accords.  
Handshakes commit chattering guns  
to obscenity and soap operas.  
Every day, violence kitsches itself  
onto front pages ... .

Clearly, any closer analysis of how life is experienced in South Africa at present will magnify the huge discrepancies of wealth, education, and access to resources. Pertinent is the need to recognize a

lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism ... the social relations of space are

experienced differently, and variously interpreted, by those holding different positions as part of it.<sup>21</sup>

For some poets, a particular focus on the quotidian both highlights the lack of political change and contains a longing for the desired transition to a better country. At its most extreme, this can be seen, for instance, in Tatamkhulu Afrika's narrative poems of first-person liminal encounters and transactions with the social outcasts of Cape Town in minutely-drawn, deprived, and detritus-strewn inner cityscapes. Critics have regarded his work as a commentary on the Others of wealth and privilege, enacting "engagements with everyday existence ... illuminating encounters that are rendered concretely and exactly while pointing to an unknown beyond themselves of which they may be said to be the astonished trace."<sup>22</sup>

Politics also has a habit of irrupting into daily life through the ways in which the political and economic choices made by the political leadership limit and shape the boundaries of experienced life. In essence, to conceive of South Africa as a "normal" society now is as far-fetched as the prior pre-liberation dogma of apartheid's supporters. One of the most enduring qualities at present seems to be an ambience of insecurity and instability. Kgositsile spoke on his return from exile of "a level of decay in the moral fibre of our society which, until now, could not have vaguely formed part of even my most bizarre nightmares."<sup>23</sup> Press, in turn, notes:

Every map is out of date.  
The roads go to unbuilt houses.

... Everyone gets a star.  
Soon there'll be none left.  
You have to eat it; they aren't for planting.

Put up a mirror where you are  
and make yourself at home in your familiar eyes.  
Outside the wind blew it all away.

("Reclaiming Our Land")

Rather than the triumphal march into the future beloved by nationalist discourse, time is at worst experienced by many South Africans as circular, as promises made never seem to be carried further and — on a national level — social betterment is painfully slow, and experienced by some — especially the poorest and most marginalized — as non-existent. Promises

about bread rarely turn into bread. Conversely, therefore, "Things stand still here, / where everything is always / moving ... / There is no place for history. / We are gluttons with words" (Ian Tromp, "Durban"). What is equally clear, though, is that the changed political landscape has made the desire for "normalcy" a site of undeniable, potentially explosive, demand.<sup>24</sup> Mxolisi Nyezwa, poet and editor of the literary magazine *Kotaz*, suggests:

writing must remember that something always happens. All the time.  
... A poem tries to capture a watery history — a transient memory.  
What makes the load heavy for many is this seamless vacuity, the emptiness of life — and the ceaseless lies. Literature grounds down this vacuous history to manageable forms. Something that even the guy in the street can dig and begin to understand.<sup>25</sup>

In a historical scenario where being black (in particular) has previously been experienced as a regimented, cramped, and policed experience — not only politically but spatially — a re-examination of local quotidian experience remains important: especially in terms which can gauge the degree to which this has changed, if at all. Some poets focus on the disconnected reality in which most South Africans live, where "it's a civil struggle / to make sense of it" (Joan Metelerkamp, "Mother"); others seek to defamiliarize the everyday, as a means to revolutionize subjectivities that have become oppressed by the familiar and humdrum. This is certainly the case for a number of female poets. Implicitly, the task of the poet is to try and stay true to the ideal, even whilst focusing on its opposite: thereby seeking out and uttering what is at present obscured by the deceptive surface and self-interest of official public pronouncements. As Motsapi puts it:

all day  
I sit under my armpit  
& break stones

all day i sit  
& break stones  
with my teeth

all day i sit  
 & break stones  
 so that songs  
 may haul down  
 the sky

(“seben”)

### The Tasks Given Subjectivity

There can be no doubt that colonialism and apartheid in South Africa significantly stunted the full expression of humanity among both black and white. There can be little doubt either that liberation in South Africa has shifted the borders of what is acceptable and possible, in explorations of the self in relation to society. Many writers, including poets, took Albie Sachs’ 1989 attack on “solidarity literature” as a signal for a fresh approach.<sup>26</sup> At best, this allowed poetry to deal with personal issues in ways which challenge existing societal norms and open up fresh spheres of contemplation and, perhaps, activism, as can be seen in a recent poem by Hale Tsehlana:

I write to untie the knots  
 that lump my throat  
 and turn into splitting headaches  
 when I could simply say fuck off but can’t  
 because I am an African woman  
 and my mouth must not be foul.  
 I write to wipe the tears  
 as the pages of pain  
 scroll from my thumbs  
 smudging my mascara.  
 I write myself into time.  
 I write that they may know  
 I became even stronger  
 when my heart was broken  
 by culture, church,  
 civilization  
 even  
 syphilization.

I write to share with you the quiet  
 revolution raging inside my brain ...

(“I write to ...”)

However, it is unclear the degree to which the emphasis on subjectivity in contemporary South African literature has widened the parameters of personal expression; when, in some instances, there is an inclination to use literature to refurbish traditional notions of “the individual” and compartmentalize subjective experience into emotional and social categories divorced from the social.

Liberation saw a reiteration, among more conservative and liberal poets, of the model of the discrete individual of liberal theorizing. This was combined with a notion that poetry should act as a bulwark against political, or public, demands. The Johannesburg poet Lionel Abrahams praised the vision of those white liberals of the past who “chose a solution that relied on gradual moral and philosophical transformation within the will of individuals.”<sup>27</sup> From this viewpoint, the individual poet should eschew what Cape Town poet Stephen Watson calls “any position of subservience to history.”<sup>28</sup> The poet is seen as a watchdog against “social engineering” or any invasion of politics or public discourse into personal space. In such a view poetry, especially lyric poetry, is a means of preserving and expressing a non-reducible “inner life,” and sensitizing individuals through acts of communication between writer and reader.<sup>29</sup> Poetry is perceived as indirectly serving the same mooted cause as liberal politics; to “serve the well-being of one’s fellow creatures” based on the grounds of one’s own “artistic integrity.” Abrahams is a remarkably candid example of the contradictions of contemporary South African liberals’ self-image: a self-abnegation hand in hand with a somewhat patronizing certainty in the ultimate rectitude of their ideological position. He makes clear the role each liberal follower — including each writer — bears in this:

The more developed — that is to say the more individualised the identity, the more significant the identification. ... [S]olidarity on the one hand and the imaginative act of human identification on the other requires entirely different things of the self ... . This difference accounts for the human and aesthetic poverty of so much political writing: it addresses itself not outwards to the unpredictable heart of the stranger who is your other self ... . But there is the other side. The opening of our society lends a new urgency to the maintenance

of our standards as individuals and as bearers of our inherited culture ... . We have to guard our own, not *against* others but, in the first place, *for ourselves*, and, in the second place, *for* others, our compatriots, against the time when, if ever, they may choose to share it, for the future of the land.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the emphasis on poetry as a means of communication and shared empathy between the “human natures” of individual addresser and addressee is nothing new: and, in the absence of any questioning of the terms employed, bids fair to end as merely an acknowledgment of the astonishing diversity of a mildly differentiated humanity. Nowadays, the type of lyrical poetry favored by the white academy in South Africa in the past — marked by a rather defensive and inward-looking response to social issues — is taking a great deal of strain, and is tending to demonstrate this in themes of avoidance, violation, and fear. It is by no means clear how this kind of subjectivity can act as a point of reference and model for the wider social canvas of South Africa.

A number of South Africa’s presently most highly regarded poets outside the liberal paradigm are nonetheless now seen by reviewers in similar terms to what has been outlined above; and this, it can be argued, is a reductive commentary on the salience of their work. For example, Shaun de Waal, long-standing books editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, describes one of de Kok’s volumes as follows:

Empathy and compassion are the keynotes in poems such as these, in which the poem is a way of meeting, treating, and in some way internalising the words and worlds of others ... one that speaks to and of common humanity ...<sup>31</sup>

A number of poets — including some of the more fêted younger poets — have made similar pronouncements about the *modus operandi* of their work. “When I stand on the stage I see you on the page, I write on you, I write on your heart, on your spirit, on your ear” remarks Lebo Mashile, speaking of the manner in which she sees her relationship to members of her audience; while Gabeba Baderoon’s perception are similar. As an interviewer reports:

Readings, she says, teach her about her own poems, a quest for an intimate and “naked” exchange. After a poem is published, Baderoon says, “I learn it for the first time by how it feels reflected on someone else’s eyes.”<sup>32</sup>

As it is safe to say that published poetry at least in South Africa is still the domain of better-educated and middle-class individuals, the “human” concerns of their poems tend to be inflected with unconscious expressions and perceptions of privilege and class. Whether defined socially, politically or psychologically, the viewpoints of the socially marginalized are in danger of either being patronized or ignored. The poet Dineo Mosiane confronts this conundrum when she says, “the deep thoughts the one ‘in need’ falls into are much deeper than of those who have all they want”,<sup>33</sup> while Nyezwa (somewhat idealistically) exhibits a similar belief, suggesting that the “most afflicted people will always hold the dearest poetry. There’s a ... relationship between affliction and the ability to speak the truth.”<sup>34</sup>

Allan Kolski Horwitz of the Johannesburg poetry group the Botsotso Jesters was less sanguine in a 1998 interview, observing that “it’s a time of individualism, a time when people are out for themselves ... . It’s a corporate world now.”<sup>35</sup> From this perspective, as private life becomes more and more regulated and fashioned by the economic forces of late capitalism, “innerness” bids fair to become a commodity to be solicited and sold like any other. This is equally true of displays of “innerness” and uniqueness in poets’ self-fashioning. In such a scenario, Berold believes that the “struggle now is to tell the truth, to resist being turned from human beings into consumers”; while Cronin insists that “in poetry, the construction of the ‘I’ is part of the political argument.”<sup>36</sup>

### Subjectivity and the Yearning to Belong

If there is one theme that seems to unite many poets of different persuasions at present, it is that of the individual in search of his or her putative identity. Historically, both apartheid and its opponents came to reduce the diversity of South African population into the confines of four essential races (or “four nations”), even as apartheid, for its own purposes, both emphasized and fossilized Africans’ division into separate ethnic groups. Mirroring debates in a wider South African intellectual context, expressions of identity among poets tend to vacillate wildly between those intent on stressing the hybrid nature of South Africans, and those who articulate their essential sense of belonging inside a group, however this is defined. Some poets can be seen to imbricate these potentially contradictory urges within a sense of personal identity.

At present there are powerful discourses at work, disseminated most obviously through the commercial and state media, which emphasize explorations of the self in search of a “true” identity (generally marshaled racially). It is clear that in the topography of South African identity formation

there are many — and this is not simply related to those who agree with state and media discourse on the subject — who wish to use notions of authenticity and cultural or racial knowledge. Some poets (Dikobe wa Mogale is an early example) stress the politics of their art as a response to an ongoing racial divide between white and black based on privilege and access to resources. For Mogale, the “slogan that ‘art is a weapon of struggle’ will be valid and sound as long as there are still two contending cultures, namely the cultures of the oppressor and oppressed”; while more recently Bila among others has insisted that the black/white divide remains strong, while refuting any suggestion that whites or blacks are a homogeneous group.<sup>37</sup> Some poets — Mzi Mahhola is the most vocal of these — are concerned about the loss of traditional and indigenous forms of knowledge and expression in a rapidly modernizing nation, and the implications this holds for the future.<sup>38</sup>

Mahola’s poetry gives space to themes surrounding growing up in a rural community in the Eastern Cape. Other poets have involved themselves in a searching for “roots” through poetry, reaching back to what they believe will be a more authentic identity based on the retrieval of value systems ravaged by colonialism. This kind of poetry tends to combine castigations of present global and local inequalities with invocations of iconic figures from the history of the colonized, in poems which vary from superficial hagiography to insightful analyses of the connection of past injustices to present inequalities.

In her “A Poem for Sarah Baartman,” Diana Ferrus (who claims Khoisan descent) addresses the slave woman taken from the Cape and exhibited as a “freak” and “scientific curiosity” in Europe two hundred years ago because of her steatopygia. The poem, recited at the time of the return of Baartman’s remains from a European museum and their reburial in the Eastern Cape, can be found on official websites, as well as those promoting tourism.<sup>39</sup> In many ways it is exemplary of South African official ideology in its current phase: natural landscape (symbolically deployed and romantically depicted) is linked to identity, and identity seen in terms of images of origin and the legitimacy of one’s possession of “the land.” The last line of the poem is remarkably candid in demonstrating that what is finally at stake, in poems such as this, is the usage to which they are put in journeys of self-fashioning and self-discovery:

I’ve come to take you home -  
home, remember the veld?  
The lush green grass beneath the big oak trees  
... I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,

your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,  
the proteas stand in yellow and white  
and the water in the stream chuckles sing-songs  
as it hobbles along over little stones.

I have come to wrench you away -  
away from the poking eyes  
of the man-made monster  
who lives in the dark  
with his clutches of imperialism  
who dissects your body bit by bit

... I offer my bosom to your weary soul  
I will cover your face with the palm of my hands  
I will run my lips over lines in your neck  
I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you ...  
I have come to take you home  
where I will sing for you  
for you have brought me peace.

There are other voices that explore similar terrain, but use markedly different modes of perception and utterance. The work of Motsapi, for instance, mobilizes and employs a range of references embodying exemplary values seen to inhere in symbolic politics or figures (such as pre-colonial African kingdoms and contemporary African-American jazz musicians) in order to make statements about contemporary African realities. Through these means he constructs a poetry that “resists a global network of oppression involving the whole range of Euro-American epistemological and physical domination of the globe stretching from Columbus’s voyages to the I.M.F.,”<sup>40</sup> simultaneously making ironic commentary — often through neologisms and portmanteau words — about those elements of African and diasporic black culture and behavior he believes have become prey to an anaesthetizing global culture of consumerism and consequent inauthentic notions of self:

what shad / what shadow  
takes over the land so

... i’ve known you so  
with receding suns & invading sands  
no calm but the ominous violin  
of incessant flies

your history a knot of storms  
 reprobate seers & hip healers  
 the speak / speed of yr drums  
 now drowned to a croak  
 by the convenient noises  
 of popular music

i've known you so  
 seed left too long  
 in the sun  
 an eventual death  
 in the refugee camps  
 cos we sd no  
 to the scum of politricks

... only de poor suffer  
 only de poor suffer.

("drum intervention")

At worst, the poetry of identity formation can be said to have become pronouncedly fashionable, and this tendency does have its critics. Press observes:

The interface between people's psychological collaboration in identities and the fact that identities are created by social means, is not innate. ... I don't pretend for a moment that they don't exist in the daily texture of people's lives. But they are not the defining moments of reality for people: I think poverty, hunger, loneliness are just as strong ...<sup>41</sup>

while Ari Sitas voices a determination to struggle against the false "new tribalisms (that) are being remembered and reinvented."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, there are poets who question any easy correlation made between race and class. Even as he gives expression to a political poetry highlighting the inequalities surrounding race under global capitalism, Rampolokeng, for one, notes that "one weakness of our past political engagements was the way apartheid made us posit everything on a racial basis — when everyone knows that the class thing was lurking there and was far more threatening."<sup>43</sup>

In such a complex scenario, it is premature to claim that

the advent of majority rule produced a cultural situation in which the divided aesthetics of the past were rendered obsolete ... narratives of the racial Other, which inform colonial writing, or of the oppressed Self in the writing of the colonised, are no longer possible in stories of social actuality.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, many contemporary poets, both white and black, have sought to explore new and interstitial spaces of identity, and express experiences more hybrid than has traditionally been allowed for. Goodenough Mashego, for instance, sees the challenge for South African poets as finding ways "to position themselves to a point where they cannot be black/white/coloured or Indian but poets."<sup>45</sup> The result has been, at best, poetry of a rich complexity. One of the most delightful examples is Johannesburg poet Immanuel Suttner's appropriation of rastafarian discourse to comment on his white, Jewish roots:

Um yisrael wen 'cross to babylon  
 started callin hisself irwin cohn  
 writin for de newspaper in washinton  
 bin nice n pleasant to everyone

or got hasidic in ol new york  
 bowin to de hot air in de rabbi's talk  
 dancin to de beet of de fals messiah stalk  
 dey say he gonna come if we stay away from pork

me i say me eyes is full o sand  
 i gotta smash de idols bilt by de fader's hand  
 like trotsky done or like avram's stand  
 and bild mehself meh own promise land

("De tetrach hammer")

### Democracy and the "Rainbow Nation"

Since liberation, South Africa has been configured in media and politicians' pronouncements as a "rainbow nation": a conglomeration of different races, cultures and persuasions living in harmony and equality. In concord with this, a multiplicity of voices, interpretations and "stories" are now celebrated in literary forums. Yet the social reality is less ideal. What is less scrutinized is the manner in which this diversity relates to harder political questions,

where the challenge facing South Africans remains, in Cronin's words, "how to forge some kind of national unity, shared space ... and yet sustain plurality, diversity, debate."<sup>46</sup>

At the moment, such celebration is almost always linked with a promotion of political pluralism, conceived to work in much the same style as it has always functioned in the capitalist state. If taken into the realm of identity and culture, such pluralism is often idealistically portrayed, as in Mabuza's "Today You Are Not Well":

We must also borrow  
From the rainbow  
Such heat, such energy such cleansing water  
And judge just so much that we may  
Fuse them into finest colours  
And splash them across the sky

Yet what precisely this "rainbow" consists of, or should consist of, remains open to disagreement. Chris Mann, Grahamstown poet and stated opponent of South Africa's "endemic yobbo and shebeen cultures," uses up one whole book explicitly trying to embody the "rainbow nation." In a series of poems collected together in *South Africans: A Set of Portrait Poems*, individual (and, presumably, exemplary) individuals from different origins and backgrounds are described against the social backdrop of the country around the time of the first elections. Thus, according to its blurb, the book provides a "series of portraits of people as individuals and in groups of individuals ... a glimpse of the astonishing diversity of the people who are South Africans."<sup>47</sup> The work is strongly imbued with — and the individuals who are subjects of poems tested against — liberal values. For Mann:

Business and political leaders in the new South Africa are living in an intellectual climate not unlike that of the Renaissance. The Medicis were part of a rising business class that cast aside the despotism of the medieval church and rediscovered their potential as humans. Many new South Africans, both black and white, are thrusting aside the despotism of apartheid, tribalism and Marxism and finding fresh creative energies.<sup>48</sup>

While intellectuals honor the emergence of hybrid subjectivity, the advertising of South Africa as a "rainbow nation" (with its overtones of mutual acceptance and accommodation) gives a falsely optimistic picture of how differences are experienced and negotiated — or not negotiated — on the

ground, in a scenario where disparities of wealth and competition over limited resources can become, literally, deathly. Horwitz notes that, as far as the rainbow nation is concerned, "in the absence of broader political direction it is left to advertising literally to create the new culture ... it's going to be a disaster because it's superficial."<sup>49</sup> Often a facile pluralism is assumed, where the individuals who emerge from different languages and cultures are regarded as now meeting on an equal footing, with scant regard for past or present inequalities. The individual is unproblematically placed within a "race" or "culture"; and literature is assumed to act out an embodiment, in diverse forms, of communication between individuals thus placed. This is in sharp contrast to poets like Rampolokeng or Motsapi, who illustrate how the "human" is a space intersected by material constraints and subject to the manipulations of the powerful: a world which, according to Rampolokeng, makes "humanity a stool / between parted buttocks of international conspiracy" ("Broederbondage"); where "death is the coldest currency / ... it foreign exchanges in the silence of finance's terms / dictates of THE NEW VAMPIRES" ("the tosh song trilogy").

Thus, while it is apposite to say that current struggles in South Africa are "emblematic of broader human issues," as Cronin does, his proviso that "we live in a world dominated by (capitalism) and far from solving the universal human problem, it is deeply aggravating them" is equally important.<sup>50</sup> At the moment, the individual's ability to find fulfillment or to act in any fully human way is curtailed by social and economic forces outside his or her control, and often globally distant. As Roshila Nair notes:

love still finds me here  
in the post-colonial hour,  
here  
among the politics of viruses  
and neo-liberal economic policies,  
here among the grand things  
that have curled around us  
and sprouted wings  
like god's heavenly creatures  
vainly trying to transport us to paradise

here in Fanon's no-man's land  
 we are beginning to learn  
 how to make everything  
 out of nothing again.

(“Fanon's land”)

### The New Century: Poetry as State Asset

In the last two decades, youth culture in South Africa is being reformulated in ways that are at times difficult for older generations (including older generations of writers and poets) to understand or evaluate.<sup>51</sup> In a recent article on youth culture in contemporary Johannesburg, Sarah Nuttall tries to follow through some of the borrowings, interstices and intersections of the “loxion culcha” (location culture) of trendy black youth, through expressive and aesthetic choices such as fashion, music, magazines, and argot. With clear allegiances to musical forms such as rap, she suggests that this culture has a simultaneously admiring and parodic stance vis-à-vis African-American culture, where a “cut-and-paste appropriation of American music, language, and cultural practices is simultaneously deployed and refuted.”<sup>52</sup>

As has happened in the U.S. and Europe — and, indeed, is happening elsewhere in Africa — the intermingling of poetry and musical forms and lyrics has resulted in an upsurge of “spoken word” and slam poetry, as well as poetry associated with hip-hop artists and their music. Garvey Ite notes:

Call it celestial intervention or the need to add more spiritual aspects to entertainment, or something more tangible, like hip-hop trying to retrace its steps. Whatever the case, poets are crawling out of every corner of urban landscapes, holding phallic pens to challenge sky-scraper. ... Jazz joints, college campuses, art galleries and quaint restaurants have been invaded. Those left out of the loop are scrambling to be invaded. It has become survival of the fittest — even for the word.<sup>53</sup>

Concomitant to this is a growing use of technology in poetry, both in performance and via the use of the internet, even among those poets — such as Nyezwa, Rampolokeng and Motsapi — who have on occasion criticized its dominance. The seminal importance of the “Word of Mouth” radio program initially hosted by Mvulane Mnisi (a.k.a. Rudeboy Paul) on Yfm Radio in spreading access to, and popularizing, poetry since 2003 is noteworthy.<sup>54</sup>

In such a scenario, there has been a certain amount of concern expressed — inter alia among older poets, writers, and cultural critics — about the American influence visible in this culture, as well as the seeming loss of political awareness or interest among the youth.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, it may be true that a type of youth culture and a constituent layer of younger poets have emerged unconcerned with politics in any form, as Nuttall indicates. This is however not borne out by the evidence in any general sense. Generalizations such as Matthew Krouse's that “gone is the poetry of political opposition. More and more writers tend towards a poetry of personal mystery” are exaggerated; for there is still a widespread belief, as the younger Gauteng poet Maakomele Manaka points out, that “we all have a message to do.”<sup>56</sup> Many, like Manaka, still hold fast to the possibility that they speak for a wider constituency.

It is daunting to try and delineate the contradictory aspects of current social and political awareness among poets. Mashile, presenter of the television program *L'attitude* and the first South African poet to win the Noma Award since Serote in 1993, says “The poet serves struggle to the minds of the people / Like fresh fruit to their mouths / Where poetry is sustenance / We grow strong” (“Poetry Africa, 2004”). Nevertheless, as in the past, there are divergent conceptions of what “sustenance” — or, indeed, “struggle” — in the present South African context means. Mashile herself observes that growing up as the child of exile parents in Providence means that she now has to negotiate “being too African for America, being too American for Africa.”<sup>57</sup> An iconic figure for a younger generation of urban, self-assertive, upwardly-mobile black women, Mashile constantly voices a poetry that demands gender and racial equality and awareness, and has not been reticent in appearing on public and institutional platforms. She has performed at the inauguration of President Thabo Mbeki, been a guest speaker on MTV Base alongside Tony Blair, and has been named one of South Africa's “most awesome women” by the South African edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.<sup>58</sup>

Despite its socially-minded impetus, at worst some of the poetry emerging from this trend approaches social and, specifically, women's issues through a rubric of slogans, clichés and a discourse of self-improvement not unlike that of Oprah- and *Cosmo*-speak. One need only quote from Mashile's “Sisters”:

I see the wisdom of eternities  
 In ample thighs  
 Belying their presence as adornments  
 To the temples of my sisters  
 Old souls breathe



In the comfort of chocolate thickness  
 That suffocates Africa's angels  
 Who dance to the rhythm  
 Of the universe's womb  
 Though they cannot feel  
 Its origins in their veins

... I pray to the voices  
 That whisper in my soft curves  
 For the lionesses of my blood  
 To hear the songs of the cool reeds

It is unclear the extent to which "loxion culcha" emanates from actual townships or "locations." There are indications even in Nuttall that it is more often than not the creation of a better-educated urban stratum who are striving to establish and authenticate a new, self-knowingly hybrid, version of African identity. At the same time, it is clear that certain forms of identity are regarded as more authentic than others, with "Africa" an enduring lodestone of values. Thus Kgafela oa Magogodi, in his poem "bohemia," excoriates the kind of person who

somersaults  
 in its mother's womb  
 pops out feet first  
 no labour pains  
 ... it skips the nappy  
 for a pair of jeans  
 it suckles  
 from a pint of beer  
 ... it is zimzim come to jozi  
 ... it is chasing fame  
 in rocky street  
 it is not foolish  
 just learnt  
 to speak pure english  
 thru blocked nose<sup>59</sup>

To some extent, the fascination with fashion, technology, and other alluring forms of expression leads to some peculiar results, such as the appearance in a magazine fashion shoot of the politically-outspoken poet Righteous the Common Man.<sup>60</sup> In the face of this, it is sometimes hard to

register or understand all the different qualities the profile of "the poet" may signify to its users. Suffice it to say that this type of positioning by poets has brought a degree of criticism, even from their peers: Mbongeni Khumalo, for one, ironically comments: "I pay tribute to the writers / For misleading the people / Into fantasies" ("Tribute").

Nevertheless, in all forms of poetry there are those who continue to express themselves critically and openly about the social ills of South Africa, and the complacency among some of the youth. This can be seen not only on the printed page but among some of those who span the gap between poetry and hip-hop culture and music. Marlon Burgess, for example, also works as M.C. CaCo; and his poetry provides incisive commentary on sociopolitical issues, consumer culture, and the emergent political leadership:

We were in bondage  
 now we are worse than we ever were.  
 We keep ourselves afloat on a very thin dream  
 Celebrating ten years of de"mock"racy  
 And we thought our liberation was from racism?  
 We're all in a cell we can't see  
 As *Isidingo* snatches at *Generations* of those who owned the  
 mines  
 Wah wah revolution  
 Wah wah revolution  
 It must be *kak* confusing  
 From being abused to doing the abusing.<sup>61</sup>

Some hip-hop groups and artists, such as Tumi and the Volume, Hymphatic Tabs, and the all-women group Goddessa, also strike similar attitudes.<sup>62</sup> Protests at social conditions frequently segue into entreaties towards the need for activism. Cape Town poet Khadija Heeger urges:

can you ask why we sit around clamouring to be just like the  
 picture of whitey  
 I'm talking about material economy and how it's used you see  
 ... I just keep hearing, what's that you're saying, "it's because I'm  
 black you see!"  
 no I don't  
 ah but that's the famous copout for the dropout for the victim  
 and though its true  
 there is still no excuse for you to think that makes up for exemption  
 from your own redemption

... are you ready to ask why, why not,  
 why you why me  
 why not change why not change ...

(“Black label”)<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, there is evidence that poetry is increasingly being viewed as a useful medium by both state and big business. Some of the older poets who emerged just before or just after liberation have alluded to this new trend in less than flattering terms: Rampolokeng, for example, is somewhat testy about its consequences (“now poetry is beauty pageant / jump the class fence & land in affluence / but what lies beyond the prettiness of the performance / when gangrene sets in after the applause?” [“Talking prose”]). Poetry is being put to use to attract a younger generation of South Africans to support and participate in business ventures. For example, oil company SASOL’s 10 percent equity ownership transaction *Inzalo*, which offered 19 million ordinary shares in SASOL to black people, featured prominent poets as part of their promotion drive. The SASOL group brand manager explains:

The team ... looked for a contemporary, powerful way to engage people emotionally .... The result was a campaign that relied on spoken word poetry and poster artwork. Designed to look nothing like traditional advertising, the theme of “a new beginning” was expressed using poetry and art from local poets Don Mattera, Lebo Mashile and Mac Manaka. Each poet recited their poetry in ten second television commercials and radio spots.<sup>64</sup>

The view that poetry is a tool to bring about political effects endures. The Lentswe Poetry Project, an initiative launched in 2005 with the assistance and backing of the television channel SABC2 as well as a number of poets such as Antjie Krog and Masoja Msiza, is an example of a poetry mobilized to underwrite versions of citizenship in congruence with the present government’s version of national identity and priorities. Set up, according to Msiza, because “in order for us to be successful as a nation, we need to know who we are as a people. We must learn about our heroes,” poetry was chosen as a medium especially suited to the purpose, because it is “the only form of art that is so easy, because you can do it as an individual.”<sup>65</sup> Lentswe has run competitions and workshops, poetry cafes, roadshows for poetry competitions, television platform, and prizes. Aimed, in the words of the television sponsor, to “stimulate the nation’s poetic side,” one of the earliest

competitions challenged poets to write poems on the theme of national holidays:

As a proud supporter of the arts, SABC2 seeks to stimulate the nation using this fresh, interactive development. Creative Africans with a penchant for dabbling in words are encouraged to submit their poems, which will be broadcast on the channel. ... The channel believes that through the Lentswe Poetry Project, we can build a more inspired, motivated and culturally aware nation.<sup>66</sup>

Generally speaking, nowadays a plethora of festivals and prizes has emerged aimed at rewarding the utterance of poets, and poetry is a presence on radio and television. The question one must ask of this is (as it always is) what kinds of utterances are rewarded. There is a discernible tendency by organs of the state and big business to turn to poetry in order to communicate marketing and political messages, as well as helping shape the subjectivity of the “ideal individual” required by the nation state and by capitalism.

The lyric poem in particular can be a powerful tool for implicitly modeling and shaping individual subjectivity, and hence social behavior. The crucial question, consequently, is the relation of this desired subjectivity to social issues in the country. In such an ambience, poetry may serve to play out versions of the “model citizen” required by the State in its current phase of transition and change; a transition that needs to build willing participants who know not only what should be changed, but what should not: in other words, encourage a literature which will foreground some social and individual desires and concerns, and be silent about others. This builds on the conviction, visible for much of South African history — especially the history of people striving for education and betterment — that literature (“the book”) is a considerable tool for self-improvement. Even Kgositsile, who had on his return from exile distanced himself from the notion that poetry should be functional to politics, is prepared to urge audiences in specific instances to “buy this book if you want to become a better person.”<sup>67</sup> In addition, this exemplary function seems to have occasioned an increasing emphasis on more traditional forms of lyrical poetry, as against the formal explorations of the 1990s. As early as 1993 Donald Parenzee warned that “Someone’s cutting off the rough edges of the struggle, / making a smoothly sinuous public edifice / ... Soon we’ll be able to visit the gallery / And pour our anger into erudite forms ...” (“Artifice”), and this tendency is becoming more apparent in the ways in which current poetry is being evaluated and reviewed.

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The issue here could be put more starkly: poetry is being imbued with demands which are simply new versions of the “solidarity literature” regarded as outdated after liberation, albeit in a less obvious form.<sup>68</sup> As Sandile Ngidi notes in his poem “But Nations Love Their Poets”:

freedom has come my friend  
you are now truly free  
to write and sing as your heart pleases  
now pursue art for art’s sake

... it’s that age for your rage to be tamed  
your tongue can do with some English manners  
we no longer need your song friend  
your slogans have no place in freedom square  
... discard nostalgic fantasies about beloved Africa  
now the future is oily bright and as shiny as gold

... no! my friend, no shouting now  
for God’s sake be reasonable now  
no! you can’t jump the queue  
send me a proposal first  
but my hands are tied ...

Reading contemporary South African poetry, one is left with a vertiginous sense of the contradictions of a country which is — to use the words of Achille Mbembe in a different context — “constructing itself out of heterogeneous fragments and fortuitous juxtapositions of images, memories, citations, and allusions drawn from its splintered histories.”<sup>69</sup> The problem, of course, is that the ideological and expressive baggage residing in these “splintered histories” does not seem to want to go away; certainly not merely through the promptings of imaginative literature written or otherwise disseminated by an educated stratum.

### Conclusion: W(h)ither South African Poetry?

In South Africa poetry has become a minor, but illustrative, site of disagreement over political, social, and psychological issues, as well as aesthetic and evaluative criteria. A potent ideological function still resides in the country’s poetry after liberation: and the ceaseless reiteration of “rainbow nation” clichés and celebrations of expressive freedom by critics mask the fact that there are powerful forces at work seeking to utilize the medium for a new

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hegemony in favor of the present ruling classes and their sanitized versions of individual subjectivity and cultural, as well as national, identity. It is possible to see contemporary events in poetry in optimistic terms, and stress its burgeoning use, and the many different interest groups and taste cultures that have been drawn to it. Some critics and poets — Baderoon would be the most vocal of these — are consistently optimistic about the current expansion of South African poetry in English, articulating a sense of energy and confidence in the burgeoning of the medium, while nevertheless pointing out some of its problems.<sup>70</sup> Others, though, inject a warning, at times pessimistic, note. Rampolokeng caustically wonders whether “we’re once more doing a monkey dance for colonialism”;<sup>71</sup> while Horwitz suggests that in South Africa

poetry won’t ever die but at the moment we don’t live in a time when there’s clarity, when there is a clear direction. It’s a time of individualism ... the sense of solidarity has broken down completely. There always were opportunists, but now it’s very open and unashamed. ... No doubt our arts will reflect that...<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps the clearest reflection of this kind of anxiety is present in Sitas’ bitter prose poem “Lament for the dying of the word,” which describes the funeral of “a poetess who died”: someone who seems to symbolize literary and political values which the poet suggests are under threat in contemporary South Africa:

Her latest poetry book reviews itself. It is a hesitant and reflective account of recent declarations from critics who own the means of persuasion: apparently they had persuaded somebody, somewhere, that work like hers was out of joint with these times.

... One hundred cellphones ring in tandem. They all echo, like some epiphany, the voice of Mzwakhe Mbuli singing about peace in KwaZulu Natal.

... An imbongi bursts through the crowds orating in a language no one remembers.

... A slogan sings itself. To infinity.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Poetry anthologist Denis Hirson qtd. in Robert Berold, "Interview: Denis Hirson," *South African Poets on Poetry*, ed. Robert Berold (Pietermaritzburg, Gecko, 2003) 79.
- <sup>2</sup> Andries Oliphant, "Inside Out: Spatial Retracings in Some Recent South African Poetry," *Sulfur* 44 (1999): 225-26.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Gevisser, "The Poet with a Politician's Instincts," *Mail & Guardian* 20-26 Jan. 1995; Howard Barrell, "Thabo's Man to Debug the NIA," *Mail & Guardian* 29 Oct.-4 Nov. 1999; see also Mavimbela, "An African Renaissance Could Be Far More than a Dream," *Sunday Independent* 15 June 1997.
- <sup>4</sup> See Jeremy Cronin, "The Oral and Contemporary South African Poetry," New Spaces in South African Poetry Conference, Poetry International, Rotterdam, Oct. 1998, 2.
- <sup>5</sup> See Es'kia Mphahlele, "The Voice of Prophecy in African Poetry," *English in Africa* 6.1 (1979) 33-45, as well as remarks made by traditional *izimbongi* (praise poets) in Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983) 65, 76, 81. The syncretic nature of "Romantic" attitudes to literature in South African history is further discussed in my "John Higgins and the Pitfalls of Underdetermination," *Litnet* 2009 <[http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause\\_dir\\_news\\_item&news\\_id=63563&cause\\_id=1270](http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&news_id=63563&cause_id=1270)>.
- <sup>6</sup> Sandile Dikeni, "Poetic Justice for Beautiful Baleka," *Cape Times* 12 Feb. 2001; Hermann Mashaba, "Entrepreneurs, Poets of the Private Sector, Can Flesh Out Freedom," *Cape Times* 19 July 2004; Babalo Ndenze, "Era of Poets Needed—Rasool," *Cape Times* 25 Sept. 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> Motsapi, "Black Foam & Babble," *Mail & Guardian* 2-8 Nov. 2001; Chris Mann, "Towards a Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *English Academy Review* 12 (1995): 113; Prudence Chauke, "Lebo Mashile: Wordsmith Extraordinaire" <<http://www.jamati.com/online/books/lebo-mashile-wordsmith-extraordinaire/>>.
- <sup>8</sup> Lance Mogorosi Nawa, "Towards a National Patriotic Culture," *African National Congress* 2004, 15 May 2009 <<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?doc=ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo21/patriotic.html>>.
- <sup>9</sup> Poetry sources are listed at the end of the article.
- <sup>10</sup> A few examples: Cronin, "The Boat, the Tap and the Leipzig Way," *African Communist* 130 (1992): 41-54; Cronin, "Mbeki Sets Off on Long Walk to the Future," *Sunday Independent* 13 Dec. 1998; Cronin, "Learning from the Dragon," *Sunday Times* 2 Dec. 2001; Helena Sheehan, "Interview with Jeremy Cronin," 24 Jan. 2002 <<http://webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehan/za/cronin02.htm>>; Cronin, "Freedom Has Brought a Frantic Scramble for a Slice of the Boardroom Cake," *Cape Times* 3 Oct. 2006; Anon., "Zuma plans to 'decentralise' power," *Mail & Guardian* 25-31 July 2008; Cronin, "'Prudent' Economic Policies Need to Change," *Cape Times* 19 Nov. 2008.

<sup>11</sup> I discuss poets' reactions to post-liberation economic policy more fully in my "The Witness of Poetry: Economic Calculation, Civil Society and the Limits of Everyday Experience in a Liberated South Africa," *New Formations* 45 (2001/2002): 24-53.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Lesego Rampolokeng & Ike Mboneni Muila" in Berold, *South African Poets* 138; Heather Robertson, "Talented Kgositsile Back from Obscurity," *South* 4-10 Oct. 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Vonani Bila, "The Irrelevance of Prizes to Poetry," *New Coin* 41.2 (2005): 8. It could be argued that this relates to the prevalence of a wider official discourse and "multi-theorized rhetoric" which (in poet Mark Espin's words) "suggests radical argument, but which ultimately evades the dilemmas which confront us"; see Espin, "Ubuntu Bourgeoisie is Bogus," *Mail & Guardian* 9-15 May 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Johan van Wyk, "Interview with Dennis Brutus," *Alternation* 8.2 (2001): 213.

<sup>15</sup> Edjabe, citing Rajat Neogy in "The Dour Rhetoric and the Don'ts of Nation-building and the Hungry Eye of the Poet Revolutionaries," *Rhodes Journalism Review* 24 (2004): 60-61.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Vonani Bila" in Berold, *South African Poets* 156.

<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Mike Alfred, "Writer Who Opened Up Galaxies for Others Moves On to More Prosaic Concerns," *Sunday Independent* 12 Sept. 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Berold qtd. in Andrew Johnson, "Young Poets Brush Aside Poverty to Give Language a Shot of Something Stimulating," *Sunday Independent* 7 Nov. 1997. Kabomo qtd. in Nadine Botha, "In a Word," *Mail & Guardian* 30 July-5 Aug. 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Rolf Solberg, "Interview: Mongane Wally Serote," *Reflections: Perspectives on Writing in Post-apartheid South Africa*, ed. Rolf Solberg and Malcolm Hacksley (Grahamstown: NELM, 1996) 65-66; see Cronin's remarks in Robert Berold, "Interview: Jeremy Cronin" in Berold, *South African Poets* 128, 133-34.

<sup>20</sup> Bila, "This Poetry You Must Understand," *No Free Sleeping*, ed. Donald Parenzee, Fred Vonani Bila, and Alan Finlay (Johannesburg: Botsotso, 1998) 43.

<sup>21</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994) 3.

<sup>22</sup> Dirk Kloppe, "Review of *The Lemon Tree & Other Poems and Flesh and the Flame*," *New Coin* 31.2 (1995): 76.

<sup>23</sup> Keorapetse Kgositsile, "Crossing Borders Without Leaving" *Staffrider* 9.4 (1991): 7.

<sup>24</sup> Including the "struggle" poet Sipho Sepamla, who in 1993 opined that South Africa "will still be concerned with politics for a while. But later on, one hopes, we shall become a normal society, in which writers will be concerned with values of human justice and freedom applicable all over the world"; see Thengani Ngwenya, "Interview with Sipho Sepamla: 2 Sept. 1993," *English Academy Review* 11 (1994): 81.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Finlay, "Kotaz Interview – Mxolisi Nyezwa," *New Coin* 44.1 (2008): 24.

<sup>26</sup> See Albie Sachs, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom," *Exchanges*, ed. Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyk (Pietermaritzburg, U of Natal P, 1991) 117-125.

<sup>27</sup> Lionel Abrahams, *The Democratic Chorus and Individual Choice* (Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1996) 11.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Watson, "Stephen Watson" in Brown and van Dyk 89.

<sup>29</sup> Examples of this formulation in South African poetry reviewing are overwhelming. For an illustrative example, see Nicholas Meihuizen, "'Shaping Lines': New South African Poetry 1994-1995," *English Academy Review* 12 (1995): 87-88.

<sup>30</sup> Abrahams, *The Democratic Chorus and Individual Choice* 26 (emphasis in original).

<sup>31</sup> Shaun de Waal, "Poetry: Cycles of Life," *Mail & Guardian* 2-8 Feb. 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Mashile and Baderoon qtd. in Brent Meersman, "Stage versus page," *Mail & Guardian* 29 June-5 July 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Qtd. in Joanna Hemsley and Roy Blumenthal, ed., *Of Money, Mandarins and Peasants* (Johannesburg: Homeless Talk, 2000) 89.

<sup>34</sup> Finlay, "Kotaz Interview" 25.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Botsotso Jesters" in Berold, *South African Poets* 124-25.

<sup>36</sup> Berold qtd. in Marita Kritzing, "Open to the World," *Mail & Guardian* 20-26 June 2003. For Cronin, see the debate between Cronin and Breyten Breytenbach in *Sunday Independent* 9 Aug. and 23 Aug. 1998. Perhaps the most articulate analysis of the relationship between personal experience and what she calls "structural reality" is to be found in Press. See her remarks in Vicki Bertram, "Karen Press in Conversation," *PN Review* 22.1 (2000): 46.

<sup>37</sup> Mogale qtd. in Brown and van Dyk *Exchanges* 46; for Bila, see Berold, "Interview: Vonani Bila" 155.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Mzi Mahola" in Berold, *South African Poets* 52.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, *SouthAfrica.info*, Published for Brand South Africa by Big Media Publishers <<http://www.southafrica.info>>, and *ZAR.co.za*, ed. CoZania, Jan. 2007 <<http://www.zar.co.za>>.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Lewis, "'This Land South Africa': Rewriting Time and Space in Postapartheid Poetry and Property," *Environment and Planning A* 33 (2001): 2100.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Karen Press" in Berold, *South African Poets* 20.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Ari Sitas" in Berold, *South African Poets* 70.

<sup>43</sup> Qtd. in Gwen Ansell, "A slice of revolution and of revolution betrayed," *Cue* 29 June 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Andries Oliphant, introduction, *At the Rendezvous of Victory & Other Stories*, ed. Andries Oliphant (Cape Town: Kwela, 1999) 8.

<sup>45</sup> Qtd. in Goodenough Mashego, "About Goodenough Mashego," *Timbila* 4 (2003): 76.

<sup>46</sup> Cronin, "The oral and contemporary" 1.

<sup>47</sup> Back cover blurb of Chris Mann, *South Africans: a set of portrait-poems* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Mann, "Without Patrons, Malls Will Be Our Monuments," *Business Day* 6 Jan. 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Berold, "Interview: Botsotso Jesters" 125.

<sup>50</sup> Qtd. in Charlotte Bauer, "Poet with a Talent for Propaganda," *Weekly Mail* 26 Oct.-1 Nov. 1990.

<sup>51</sup> As the Comaroffs aver: "youth tend everywhere to occupy the innovative, unchartered borderlands along which the global meets the local. This is often made manifest in the elaboration of creolized argots, of street-speak and cybertalk, that give voice to imaginative worlds very different from those of the parental generation"; see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 18.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 442.

<sup>53</sup> Garvey Ite, "Talk about it," *Sunday Times* 20 July 2003. Napo Masheane, a member of the poetry group Feelah Sistah, puts this more cynically: "We're living in a society where everyone with dreadlocks or an Eryka Badhu headpiece calls themselves poets," qtd. in Botha, "In a Word."

<sup>54</sup> See Dikato Mametse, "Voice of Azania," *Mail & Guardian* 11-17 July 2003; Janine Walker, "I see, I hear, I say what I like," *Mail & Guardian* 19-25 Sept. 2003.

<sup>55</sup> See Krouse, "SA's changing culture," *Mail & Guardian* 5-11 Jan. 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew Krouse, "Talkin' loud," *Mail & Guardian* 14-20 June 2002. Nuttall makes much of an informant who says, "We understand where we come from, but I am not interested in politics and about what happened in the 80s because I wasn't there. And even if I was, I live for the future." She believes his words "mark him as a public representative of 'the now' in South Africa," but her drawing of general conclusions from one interview is clearly unwarranted; see Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self" 439; Maakomele Manaka, interview, *Take Five*, SATV1, 18 July 2003. In the same interview, Manaka states, without irony, "I speak what the people speak."

<sup>57</sup> Lebo Mashile, interview, *Curious Culture*, SATV2, 5 Mar. 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Chauke, "Lebo Mashile."

<sup>59</sup> "Zim-zim" is a term of abuse originally meaning "cannibal"; "jozi" is Johannesburg. Rocky Street is a main thoroughfare in Yeoville, Johannesburg; a suburb is regarded as a trendy synecdoche for the spirit of the "new South Africa" in the first few years after liberation.

<sup>60</sup> See "Fashion: Threads Wrap da Poets' *Y Mag* 44 (Apr.-May 2003): 83.

<sup>61</sup> Qtd. in Suzy Bell, "Spoken Word Festival Mixes Rap, Poetry and Politics," *Cape Times* 3 Aug. 2004. "Kak" is an Afrikaans word meaning "shit"; "Generations" and "Isidingo" are popular television soap operas that have somewhat different weightings in the racial composition of their audiences.

<sup>62</sup> For further discussion, see Adam Haupt, *Stealing Empire* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008) 142-215.

<sup>63</sup> Khadija Heeger, "Black Label," *Pambazuka News Weekly Forum for Social Justice in Africa* 292 (2007) <<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/books/39934>>. Thanks to Lee-Ann Pilleggi for drawing this poet to my attention.

<sup>64</sup> "SASOL's Inzalo campaign is pure poetry" *Marketing Mix* <<http://www.marketingmix.co.za/pebble.asp?relid=2720>>.

<sup>65</sup> Qtd. in Riekje Pelgrim "Turn Up the Vocals," *Mail & Guardian* 13-19 Jan. 2006.

<sup>66</sup> "SABC Looking for Poets," 6 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.represent.co.za/sabc2-looking-for-poets.htm>>. National holidays targeted include Heritage Day, AIDS Day and Valentine's Day.

<sup>67</sup> Kgositsile, address, release of Gabea Baderoon's *The Dream in the Next Body*, The Boekehuis, Johannesburg, 20 Apr. 2005.

<sup>68</sup> See endnote 28.

<sup>69</sup> Mbembe is talking about the spatial and stylistic architecture of post-liberation Johannesburg; see Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Superfluity," *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 399.

<sup>70</sup> For example, see Amatoritsero Ede, "Interview: Beauty in the harsh lines," *Sentinel Poetry (Online)* 37 (2005) <<http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/1205/interview.htm>>; and Baderoon, "The State of Verse," *Mail & Guardian* 29 June-5 July 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Lesego Rampolokeng, "Interview," *The h.a.l.f. ranthology*, Ambush-street Corner Mixes, Mehlo-Maya, 2002.

<sup>72</sup> Berold, "Interview: Botsotso Jesters" 124-26.

### **Africa's Struggles Today**

Dennis Brutus

**Africa is obviously very poorly covered in the U.S. media, in particular during the period around the war in Iraq. What was unfolding in Africa was ignored except for the Liberia crisis — although once it reached a certain stage, it began to get some attention. Of course, the Bush trip to Africa shed some more light on what's been happening. You've been there for several weeks, watching things unfold from the African point of view. What can you tell us about the overall picture?**

It's quite true that the Bush visit put an enormous spotlight on Africa when Bush traveled with his 600-person entourage, journalists, etcetera. In many cases media events were carefully controlled so that only the American press were allowed at the press conferences. In fact, there were long articles in the

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The subsequent poems are from the Dennis Brutus Collection at Worcester State College and were edited by Ken Gibbs, WSC professor of literature. These poems and more, along with some 12,000 other documents, archived by Wayne Kamin, will be published by the College in late Spring. Thanks to Ken Gibbs and Wayne Kamin for selecting the poems and making them available for publication in this issue of *Mediations*. - Ed.

South African press about journalists who finally sneaked in to stand at the back of the hall and were told they were not allowed to ask questions. Bush goes to Senegal, he goes to Gorrei, which is the island from which slaves were shipped to the New World. He comes to South Africa and meets with [Prime Minister Thabo] Mbeki in Pretoria and significantly does not go to Maputo where the AU is meeting — the new African Union heads of state. Then he goes to Botswana which is very rich in diamonds, does Uganda very briefly for a couple of hours, and ends up in Nigeria, which of course is Africa's biggest oil producer.

But I would say for the whole of Africa, if they look at the total visit, the event that they would say is the most significant was Bush meeting with Mbeki and announcing that Mbeki is his point man. Specifically, of course, on the Zimbabwe issue, where Mbeki's quiet diplomacy the British have been screaming about is now endorsed by the U.S. government, which says whatever Mbeki does is okay. But more seriously, the process is a signal to the rest of the continent that they have to take orders from Mbeki. His sub-imperial role is clearly defined.

I should mention that wherever [Bush has] gone there were protests. In South Africa, we had huge protests. In Johannesburg the protests were directed not at Bush but at Mbeki's embracing of Bush. So you had loyal ANC people, labor, workers, and so on joining in a march in protest against Mbeki's welcoming of Bush. But at the same time, ironically, the ANC put together a small protest saying, we're not protesting against our president, we are protesting against the U.S. president and the invasion of Iraq. So that you have a kind of tail attached to the protests. They come in with this little footnote.

The second issue I would focus on as being of major significance for me and for most Africans — apart from Bush's designation of Mbeki as his agent in Africa — was Bush's endorsement of NEPAD [New Partnership for Africa's Development] and saying this is the program which is being led by Mbeki and which has the U.S.'s endorsement. So simultaneously you have an allegedly African initiative together with a U.S. initiative coming together.

The two of them, of course, mainly focused on trade — doing two things and we should recognize both. On the one hand giving South Africa access to the U.S. textile market. Although interestingly, one of the conditions is that the manufacture of textiles has to be done with U.S. material. So you can manufacture the goods but the raw material has to be U.S. produced. So it's not really as advantageous even as it appears on paper.

The other more significant — and I think far more dangerous — element for the future is the creation of free-trade zones, where you would have U.S. manufacturers being able to produce without being taxed locally on the

products. And of course within these free-trade zones labor controls on wages are removed. So there is freedom to depress wages to the lowest possible level in order to increase the margin of profit on the product. And there are already several areas in Southern Africa that are free-trade zones. In one case on the island of Mauritius, they've gone from making a region of the island a free-trade zone to the entire island becoming a free-trade zone.

So the last point I should make is that I was very impressed to hear people talking on talk shows in Africa. One of the things they're saying was that there is no country in Africa where there is not some opposition to NEPAD. So maybe just a word about NEPAD. The notion is that Africa becomes an equal partner in trade either with the U.S. or the developed West — Europe and the United States. But others have compared it to the partnership between a rider and his horse. You know the African does all the work and the partner (the U.S. or Europe) is in fact riding on the back of Africa. The whole thing is unequal and we could go into it in detail, but I might as well focus on the one issue in NEPAD that seems the most damaging. If you read the document called the "New Partnership" you'll find that it says very explicitly that Africa will be brought into line with the requirements of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. And that spells out more clearly than anything else the dependency relationship which Africa is being forced into. With South Africa leading that process. Now, as you know, Mbeki was the first chairman of the AU and in that way was directing the NEPAD process. But he's no longer chair as he's just handed over the chair to President Joaquim Chissano from Mozambique. But since there is a troika consisting of the three people who fathered NEPAD — that's Mbeki, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, and President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal. The three of them really gave birth to NEPAD as we know it. They still are pretty much the power brokers, and although Chissano is the chair, the three of them still exhibit a very strong influence.



Prose poem: Visiting my father's birthplace

The landscape is familiar: gently sloping hillsides covered with Greenery — brown shrubs. I am going in search of my father in the country of his boyhood and though I'm in a car with family members, it is all intensely private — so private that I don't even allow myself the murmured converse I usually conduct with myself. This green-shadowed landscape troubles me. The hills have been slashed open, of course, so that there are red-raw stretches all along the wide asphalt roads — and I cannot suppress the knowledge that these wide swift roads were planned to ensure the rapid transit of military vehicles to any area where there might be "trouble" — the euphemism for unrest provoked by police brutality or the ruthless enforcement of inhumane laws. There is another reminder of the iron land of repression — the miles of gleaming wire and cable that conveyed instantaneous alerts about these same "troubles"; that sent helicopters or armored patrols — scorpions, hippos, buffaloes (these vehicles had animal names, sometimes because they evoked a resemblance) — with screaming sirens and flashing headlamps into the "townships," as the segregated and menaced areas were called. They are a constant presence. And though they no longer carry the same menacing quality, they are a brooding reminder, a symbol not to be shaken off. So it is with the load pressing on my mind that we enter the small fishing village where my father grew up, after stopping at an information cottage near the entrance and picking up some material from a helpful but somewhat perplexed attendant. The sea stretches out, pale blue to silver at the horizon and the bay curves gently, with fishing boats in the foreground, and a bulky factory on the headland of the entrance. The town will, of course, have changed greatly, but the sea is the same sea, and this is pretty much the scene he would have looked out on. I try to see with his boyish eyes: try to feel what he felt, to enter somehow into the thoughts and feelings of the father who would never let me enter his mind. Nothing comes of it. Only the thought of that lingering military presence. And of the greed for profit that will bring more factories to destroy this landscape that can still tug at my heart.

2004

**With NEPAD, is the view from the standpoint of South African capital and these three players to try to create a more economically unified Africa, to try to negotiate a position to play the U.S. and Europe off one another — to try to look for the better deals as opposed to playing separately?**

My guess would have to be yes and no. Instead of regional agreements, you have one for a continent. But that's only half the answer because simultaneously there are agreements with Europe and the EU, including the Lomé Agreement.\* The catch here, why I'm kind of hedging my answer, is that when these three guys recently went to Evian to meet with the G8, and then they meet with the EU representatives, there is a sense in which what you suggest of them playing Europe against the U.S. is still going on. But it's almost as if the U.S. and Europe have already agreed on spheres of influence between themselves. So when the Africans go to Europe there are certain things they know they can get and certain things they can't get. Then they go to the U.S. for those.

I'll give you one example and a very dangerous one. In Evian, where the G8 met, they refused to give Africans anything. Even the promises they made in Canada, they didn't deliver on those. But guess what — they offered Africa \$15 billion to set up a military force, an RDF. So Africa is going to have a Rapid Deployment Force funded by Europe. Not by the U.S. So it's as if Europe is getting into the act in one way. Of course this means supplies of weapons. You've got to update your weapons and all that. But at the same time that Europe is taking care of the military side, the U.S. is taking care of the economic side. So the colonization of Africa is really going to be a two-fold process. The attack comes both from the United States and Europe.

**The other news that we did get in the U.S., however briefly, was that during the world conference on racism there were actually sizable demonstrations that brought some focus on different social movements and different trade union struggles in South Africa in particular. Can you tell us about that and how that fits into the overall opposition to this program?**

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\* The agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries signed in February 2000. It contains provisions on the terms of access of European investors and businesses to ACP economies. For a detailed analysis of EU's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with African countries, see Patrick Bond, *Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation* (London: Zed Books, 2006), especially chapter 4, "Unequal Exchange Revisited." — Ed.

Yes, I am glad that you mentioned that. Of course, there was the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, followed by the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. And you really should take the two together because the same forces are at work in both cases. You have your whole combination of government and corporations on one hand and you have the people in the streets. About 10-15,000 in Durban and over 20,000 in Johannesburg. And both of these really are the embodiment of the social movements we've seen in Seattle, Genoa, and Prague.

The focus in Durban was on the kind of glossy façade, which said racism in South Africa is over. Even while people are still living in shacks and their water was being cut off, electricity was being cut off. So you get the homeless and the jobless and people with AIDS and of course your activist movement, student movement, your labor movement coming together very powerfully in Durban. And as you may remember, one of the strongest elements in Durban was this demand for reparations, a demand for the cancellation of debt. So these two elements come into play in Durban. And then later they come into play in Johannesburg. Johannesburg was called the WSSD [World Summit on Sustainable Development]. And what is striking there is that Mbeki calls a rally in the stadium in support of the WSSD and gets under 5,000 people. And then the social movements — they group themselves under something called the SMI (Social Movements Indaba) — from the same stadium they put 20,000 people into the streets, marching from Alex (this is one of the worst slums in Johannesburg) to Sandton (which is your most expensive suburb).

Both of them, it seems to me — and I think you've made the point, I just want to reinforce it — reflect this kind of global opposition to the global agenda. It's taking on the corporate power and governmental power, the whole neoliberal project. The commodification of water, commodification of air, it all fits into this.

## Night sequence

## I

## Ships at night: Bosphorus

Sailing across dark waters  
under low glimmering stars  
with a burden of centuries  
murmuring through breathing air:  
years crowd in, achievements,  
sorrows, joys foregone in vain:  
well, we must endure past years,  
await, crumpled, some uncertainties:  
on dark Bosphorus waters

## II

Darkness closes in:  
portent of horrors:  
there is reason to despair:  
evil men work their evil ways  
wreak terror on our earth:  
miscall it "shock and awe"  
blinded by arrogance  
or drunk on ichor of hubris —  
its reek, acrid fumes, or —  
simply, perhaps stupidity  
their combat-boots pound our world  
while we cringe, defenses inadequate  
turn our faces to the wall:  
it is time, perhaps for despair.

Silence in the still warm room  
 silence pressured from the silent street  
 snow-muffled, traffic-deserted:  
 the self, in the stillness, poised  
 a pivot around which nothing revolves  
 looks inward, finds itself in flight  
 from itself and the inexorable demand  
 for surrender to the ocean of selflessness:  
 this is what love is about:  
 and it resists, hugs fiercely  
 its self to itself:  
 is doomed to loneliness.  
 And still it cries out against aloneness.

January 14, 1997

**Can you tell us about the lineup of forces? Certainly from Mbeki fronting for NEPAD and an imperialist project in Africa, the prestige of Africa's greatest liberation movement is being used for these purposes. We have seen tensions in the Communist Party [CP] alliance, the ANC and the trade unions. COSATU [the Congress of South African Trade Unions] has been much more critical. How is the legacy of the national liberation struggle and the politics of this opposition playing out? How are people defining themselves and what are they trying to put forward as an alternative?**

It's not easy but I'll try. I have to start by stressing that the new struggles all emerged as initially local issues. People's water being cut off. People's kids dying because they don't have food. People dying in the streets. More homelessness, more unemployment than there was under apartheid. The gap between rich and poor has increased. And South Africa now has become the number one country in the world with the largest gap between rich and poor by their own statistics. Very significantly, recently they showed that real earnings for blacks have gone down by about 15 percent in the past ten years, just as for the white minority and few elite blacks it has gone up by 16

percent. So the gap actually widens there. I think one has to stress that it's a response to lived experiences that people build a new movement and new struggle. And then it takes different forms — the homeless, the jobless, the landless, the people with AIDS, people with water cut off, with lights off.

All those come together. Now in that context you get a tension developing on the Left — in ANC, in COSATU, and in the NGOs. It takes two forms and it's a little bit difficult to explain and even I can't satisfactorily explain it for myself. For instance, people recognize that one of the reasons they are homeless and waterless and lightless is privatization. The social services have become commodities and they can't pay. So they understand that the whole process of their immiseration is driven by privatization. When you understand that you have to ask why is the government doing this? And then you get a split within the Left — those who defend privatization and those who attack privatization.

This is where we find the dilemma being crystallized. Jeff Radebe, who is a member of the central committee of the Communist Party, is the minister in charge of driving the privatization process. So you have a man who is both a member of the Communist Party — which denounces privatization — and is also the minister who is driving the privatization process. Of course we challenge him. And the explanation is, "Oh, if you are a member of the Communist Party and you become a minister of government your first loyalty is to the government." You can claim to be loyal to the party but your first loyalty is to the government. COSATU identifies very clearly that privatization is why they are losing jobs. A million jobs lost. And they say this is what privatization has done.

So what do we do? Every year, at what is now called the annual general meeting, they call a strike against privatization. Then they meet with the government and they call the strike off. It's a ritual annual strike: "We're not going to take it any more." Then the government says, "OK, go ahead but don't do it again." Until it happens next year. It really has become a ritual.

So that partly explains it. But of course the CP now has 50 members in parliament. And they get really nice perks. They get free airfare, free hotels for themselves and their families, and so on. The perks, I hate to say it, I think are really quite important. And the government, I think, has the ability to disperse all these advantages. The resources are there. There may be a few people if you read the left literature (especially the CP) you'll find them coming up with a kind of tortured logic, which says in any case we're not really free. Of course this is also what George Soros says, that the ANC is a captive of the World Bank and IMF. But there are people in the CP itself who say we don't really like what we're doing, but we're not really free not to do it.

A dream

Still, they come, stalwarts with  
peaked faces shrunk by hunger  
shoulders caved with hours of  
labor, gathering to gather  
energies for a never-ending  
struggle, unobtrusively  
I slip away, seeming akin,  
my work known by few (my name  
by even fewer) till someone  
greet me, murmurs thanks mixed  
with praise, imprint of a kiss  
still woven on my hand as I leave.

May 4, 2003

Gull gliding against  
Gray-silver autumn sky  
sees a vast miasma of greed  
slowly encompass our entire planet  
cries out to unheeding stars  
to whom wails of children rise  
in shrill unending caterwauls  
Gull sees traps and snares  
lethal pellets of noxious lead  
noisome sewers of excreta  
dribbling across continents  
rivers of pesticide  
oozing from lush golfcourses  
Gull gasps, chokes on acrid billows  
from rainforests rampaging fires  
rancid with roasting flesh  
ashen with cindered bones  
Gull breasts with buckling wing  
fierce gusts of questions  
strives, resists against questions  
slowly droops against questions  
succumbs twisting against question  
submits to extinction: Questions

October 18, 1995

Seattle  
In the Tenderloin

Some last flicker  
of defiant vitality  
gutters in the collapsing husk  
a despairing lunge  
of shrinking sexuality  
reaching with skeletal fingers,  
disarticulated, arthritic,  
for my frissoning skin  
from a cavernous skull  
shrunk to a calcined thinness  
eyes glare, plead, twinkle  
in appeal, denunciation:  
halloween's pumpkin mask  
of play, horror and grisly humor  
All-Saints and the unavailing reprise  
of All-Souls, doomed and damned.

September 20, 1996

Flying, after Seattle

Eastward, with wings sun-silvered  
at sunset, flying after Seattle  
we dip into encroaching gloom  
a surge of joy irradiating darkness  
as a new youthful song proclaims hope:  
at a crux in time we made our choice  
beat back predatory ghouls  
who would devour our inheritance:  
big-shouldered we thrust through dusk,  
strong-voiced with deep throated snore  
buoyant on wings borne on sweet air  
after acrid stench, boots and concussions  
our searchlight glare disrobes their putrescences  
crouched under miasmas of confused lies.  
Arise, you billions to assert our will:  
We begin to construct a better world.

December 15, 1999  
Pittsburgh, PA  
(Flying to JFK November/December 1999)

**There are many struggles. There is the beginning of protests but also an ideological challenge to this as well. How does the labor movement fit into this and the unions, the pressure from the rank and file?**

Not yet. Not yet. There's talk of dissatisfaction. The way COSATU has dealt with it is rather clever. You do have these annual strikes of thousands in the street or you may have a stay-at-home or a one-day strike — and then after that there's just a massive shedding of jobs. The mines have just announced that another 18,000 are going to be fired. And the mining union says we're going to go on strike and then they make some compromise. I don't follow those negotiations closely because they're so repetitious. There's talk and threats and little action.

Interestingly, I've met with the head of COSATU, but I didn't meet him on those issues. COSATU is an ally of Jubilee South Africa with which I serve in filing the case for reparations [from corporations that benefited from apartheid]. COSATU is our ally and is also an ally of the ANC as part of the tripartite alliance. When they came over to our side on reparations, they went back to the government to check if they could do it, and the government said we will neither support you nor oppose you. But since then, under pressure from (a) corporations and (b) the U.S. government at Davos [Switzerland, the site of the World Economic Forum], the COSATU guys backed off. Suddenly they are no longer our allies in the reparations fight, although they started out as our allies. Now, apparently this happened in Davos. The U.S. government and of course the IMF and the banks said don't touch it.

Jubilee South Africa filed a suit in New York for reparations in the name of a collective of the homeless and jobless and it was OK'd by COSATU and by the churches. Suddenly the churches announce, "We don't like what you are doing." And this was quite remarkable because evidently Mbeki and people in the government contacted the churches and said get out of it. So at the moment it looks like Jubilee is alone in conducting the suit.

Now it's not really as simple as that because what they've said is not that they're getting out but that they don't like the way we're doing it and they'd like these changes and so on. So the fact of the matter is that they are trying to find a way of killing the action. They told us you can't have a conference so we went ahead and had a workshop instead. We had about 140 people coming from twenty-three to twenty-five organizations willing to buck both the churches and COSATU — saying in spite of those guys we'll go ahead. After that the churches and trade unions said go ahead, we can't stop you, so we'll go ahead and join you. My feeling is they'll either stack that one with so many church organizations that they'll either wipe us out or discredit us or maybe even instruct the lawyers to drop the suit. There is a whole range of

possibilities. What we are trying to do of course is to mobilize our allies so we will be there in force. The dates are August 20-21. The government has filed a countersuit in New York in opposition to our suit for reparations.

We think we can sue for \$100 billion. And we don't think we'll get it. But what we might get is a settlement out of court when we go after Ford, GM, IBM, Citibank, and these guys. They'll do what they did on the Holocaust issue. They settled out of court when they saw they were going to lose and the dirt was flying around. And we think that money should go into institutional reparations — schools, hospitals, clinics for people with AIDS, and so on. But the corporations have decided that they don't want to go into court and they want to kill this suit. And the way to kill the suit is not by themselves, but to get the churches and trade unions to say don't touch it.

At night, after Porto Alegre;  
South African Airways 747

In this dim winged cathedral  
soaring above oceans of silvery cloud  
far beyond Atlantic's tumultuous heave  
we move, star-girt, distant  
from greed's debris, genocides, calcined bones  
curled in our private shrines  
or bent over light-pooled pages  
to a new world, new earth, where finally  
our dreams can be fulfilled.

April 1, 2001

When the blight of stillness advances  
 when songs and speech are silenced  
 when a light of life and laughter is gone,  
 the spirit still speaks and endures  
 like sparks that flash from silica —  
 tough stardust, common dust of the world.

June, 1995  
 For Mumia Abu-Jamal

Still they sing  
 sirens of insensate longing  
 driving us to shatter  
 on shoals of frustrated hope

Still they weave  
 patterns of disjunct design  
 stab pierce and slash  
 with random logicless shears

Still, blind fates,  
 they urge, awaken desire  
 for utopian dreams;  
 still we shipwreck on love.

September 30, 1998

### The March

The march will be remembered  
 the march  
 from Alex to Sandton  
 the long march  
 the long march will be remembered  
 with all the other marches  
 the march in Sharpeville  
 the march in Sebokeng  
 the march in Boipatong  
 the march in Ginsburg  
 the march in Bisho  
 they will all be remembered  
 together they make the Great March  
 the Great March to Freedom  
 from Alex to Sandton  
 the Great March to Freedom.

August 31, 2002; revised October 31, 2002

X Parish, New Orleans

Corpses floating in that murk  
of water, mud, debris, arms dangling  
or stiff in death's rigor, breasts  
bloated with congealed blood;  
burly boatmen, bursting with vigor  
in orange protectors, pole  
their skiffs expertly, their tenterhooks  
grapple with cadavers, impale thighs  
exposed in death's indifferent obscenity;  
in call centers data clerks enter ciphers  
that record someone's loss:  
there is no place for grief.

October, 2005

Cuba's Malecon:  
waves fling their lacy spray  
against obdurate rocks.

October 9, 2005  
Havana

**In recent weeks we've heard about demands for Western military intervention in Liberia. Groups like the Congressional Black Caucus, which has been quite good on African debt, are now calling for intervention in Liberia. What attitude should people in the global justice movement take toward that issue?**

I was very interested in the debate that the Left has had on the future of the UN. I can understand people saying things like somebody has to do something in Iraq. And if it's not the U.S. then it better be the UN. And I say: Too bad. The one is as bad as the other. We'll have to find alternative ways to go in and clean up Iraq. But to ask the UN to do it is to ask it to go in as a surrogate for the United States. First of all, it's a U.S. mess you're asking them to clean up, and the UN has not demonstrated independence of mind or independence of values. Even if you ask why did the Security Council stand up to the U.S., you get a set of very mixed motives. The French and the

Germans were worried they wouldn't get a piece of the oil. You get a whole set of reasons that have nothing to do with ethics. This is not morality we're talking about. I would say Africa is an enormous mess mostly generated by the West — its diamonds, its oil, and its mercenaries. So when you get to a mess in Africa the wrong people to call for help are the people who caused the trouble. As desperate as the situation is, I promise you, if you get Charles Taylor out of the way, you'll get another American stooge, a Mobutu being installed to protect American interests — gold or diamonds or oil, or uranium. There are terrible killings and of course they must be stopped. But sending a killer to clean up the killing operation ...

**Twenty-five or thirty years ago I think that debate would have been answered by a Left in solidarity with the struggles. The idea of national liberation and self-determination was at the forefront. Now there's formal independence — the formal colonies are virtually all gone, although Iraq may be something different. How can we get that politics back on the agenda?**

The reality is that Africa has been re-colonized. It is the neocolonial process that is now paralyzed. And it is that neocolonial process that generates those conflicts, internecine conflicts in Africa. Genocide and fratricidal killings of people even from the same community. One side paid by the other side. Armed by both sides. The South Africans are selling guns to both sides like crazy. They don't care as long as the money comes through. Black diamonds out of Botswana. Blood diamonds out of Sierra Leone. And who profits? They are now selling diamonds on the streets of Amsterdam.

So the short answer, again, is don't send in the killer to clean up the killing. Find alternative solutions among themselves. I think we are in a terrible mess, but we aren't going to solve the disease by giving the patient poison.

Those women, desperate  
huddled over their knees  
in soundless weeping  
those scraps of torn washing  
stretched anyhow, anywhere

O, the night seems to come  
in slabs of cold blackness  
in slabs of black coldness  
here where people huddle  
under sacking, tarpaulin, rags  
huddle vainly against the cold  
(bare ruined choirs  
where late the sweet birds sang)

O, that staring frightened child's eyes  
the bundled pathetic belongings  
lost, forgotten, abandoned  
such a wail of misery  
rising in the night  
appealing,  
vainly appealing.

12:15 am  
November 8, 2007  
For Shauna

For the young, the buoyant young  
young men and women of our land  
boys and girls, our upstanding youth  
greetings and welcome.  
I feel that you belong,  
inherit the bounty that is yours  
and surge, surge to new hope  
bring your fresh energies  
to make our land ever better  
ever more bountiful  
more generous in gifts  
more open to growth, to fellowship.

October 11, 2008

Shimon Peres is honored by Balliol College, Oxford  
Nelson Mandela honors Cecil John Rhodes  
(on the occasion of Mandela's birthday)

Chorus Directions:  
For he's a jolly good fellow (3 times)  
and so say all of us (3 times)  
INCLUDING CECIL RHODES (3 times)

Yes, he skulked along all roads  
yes, he whipped folks with all goads  
he kissed princes, made them toads  
he burdened blacks with all loads  
disguised himself with various woads  
his gut swarmed with trematodes  
we condemn him, whatever bodes  
he's the worst of SOD's — or Sodes  
he's the robber-barron, free-booter, mercenary, soldier-of-  
fortune, colonizer, pirate,  
bully, servant, architect of imperialism CECIL RHODES

Bailed out by Old Balliol  
Haled (Hauled?) before old Halliol  
Sold out via old Sailliol  
Traded by old Traillol  
Dismally failed by old Failliol  
Deserves jailing by old Jailliol  
Tyburn is the place where he should burn  
Terrorist of all the terrorists  
Shimon Peres is the tera of the terrorists  
Together we mourn these events;  
together we mark these betrayals  
together in shame and sorrow we mark these events.

Worcester, MA



**We have had the rise of a global social movement. Africa is increasingly vocal and important in that. How do we take the issues out into the movement?**

Glad you asked that. I think this is where the social movement globally becomes significant for Africa. Alliances form because other parts of the world are suffering from the same imperialism. We have allies at the same time we begin to construct our own opposition. And usually the very simple lesson is that we fight the oppressor where we find him and we define our resistance in terms of that oppression. So it varies from place to place. Just for the record, we now have an African Social Forum. We have a Southern African Social Forum and in South Africa we have SMI. People are suspicious in Africa about things not indigenous to Africa and they want to know that we do it in our own way.

One of our curious problems is that at the moment, parallel to the uncertainty people have about the UN, we have uncertainty about the AU. You must remember that the AU is the replacement of the OAU [Organization of African Unity]. It is perhaps good in one area, which is the emphasis on decolonization, on African independence. That was its strong point. It was full of intrigue and dishonesty and was infiltrated by the CIA. They were corrupt people in there so it really wasn't very good except on the insistence of an independent Africa. And eventually, of course, we pretty much won that struggle after a fashion. Most of Africa is in some way or another independent.

Then, along comes the AU. And the AU is not about independence. Ideally, it's about "good governance" if you like. It's certainly about trade relations and international stature. There's talk about the African Renaissance and so on. But for the left, radicals in Africa have been unable to define their attitude towards the AU. And you can understand why. We do need a continental body. It makes sense. The disappearance of the OAU was not regretted ... but once you have a vacuum you're in trouble. You need some sort of organization there. So we do need a coordinating body. Should it be the AU? The answer more and more is no.

Which is interesting because what people are saying is what is the AU all about? The heart of AU is NEPAD. Now if NEPAD is what the AU is about, it means we are going to be subjugated to the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. It means surrendering ourselves into bondage by believing that we were establishing an autonomous body. Interestingly, about two weeks ago when they were meeting in Maputo, the AU was discussing NEPAD, and there was a meeting with Bush in Pretoria, we issued a statement and for the

first time we denounced the AU. We said as long as the AU has NEPAD as its backbone, we must regard the AU as suspicious.

And again, out of the African Social Forum we may have to develop an alternative to the AU. It may take some time, but the AU is not in our interest and we need to build a new one.

**For those of us who were active in the 1980s, the South African struggle was a touchstone. Today, there are all these contradictions and difficulties. I'm not asking for inspiration, but it seems to me that the struggles are repeating and beginning anew and drawing from the past.**

I like that and I'll give you an interesting little episode. Last year, just before the World Summit on Sustainable Development, we got together to plan an action. And the place we chose was a house on a farm in Johannesburg called Rivonia. Now Rivonia was the house in which Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela had met to plot the overthrow of the apartheid government. So when we met there I said this is the beginning of a new struggle and it's appropriate that we meet in the place where the serious challenge to the apartheid regime began.

## (Statement of Political Beliefs)

It seems to me  
 it might be possible  
 to put together a coherent statement  
 of my political beliefs  
 (or of how I see the world)  
 by looking at my poetry —  
 at least finding implicit statements —  
 though these things — eg. my belief in non-violent struggle  
 which may not come out clearly  
 since I have not articulated them —  
 some central ideas  
     freedom is basic  
     creative action is an assertion of humanity / freedom  
         is necessary  
         is heroic  
         (but does not need  
         heroic posturing / dogmatism — of any sort — is to be avoided  
         (though one may occasionally be guilty of it)  
  
 slogans, sloganizing, sloganizing (and clichés) must be avoided  
     like the plague (hmm!)  
  
 to assert one's full humanity is also to achieve one's full potential —  
     it is what true freedom is about (as defined among others,  
     by Karl Marx), but  
     I arrive at definitions  
     independently.

November 22, 2008

An erratic experience  
 concrete wilderness  
 a scrivener's jungle  
 they will exclaim dismayed  
 somewhat in pity, somewhat in horror  
 while I chuckle amused  
 buried in my predicament.

The Cubans are a proud people:  
 admired by some, pitied by others  
 they have endured terrible inflictions  
 consequent on Yankee "manifest destiny."  
 they are also showered  
 with gifts from those who share  
 their courageous opposition to  
 imperialist designs:  
 grateful for generous offers  
 they still decline to become beggars:  
 their courage is also a product of the pride  
 that inspires them to resist.

The truth, I think, was different  
 it may have been in that shelter  
 where I prepared to spend the night with you  
 when some drunk kissed my hands  
 and thanked me for my services  
 to the wounded suffering poor  
 that I knew I could never leave  
 it meant we would always be parted  
 and I would always be  
 dogged and stubborn, my  
 country's servitor.

### **Marxism after Marxism**

Imre Szeman

*From Marxism to Post Marxism?* by Göran Therborn. New York: Verso, 2008, 208 pp., US\$23.95, ISBN 1844671887.

What comes next for Marxism? This is the question animating Göran Therborn's *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?*, which considers the future of Marxist theory in the context of the new political, economic, and social circumstances of the twenty-first century. Perhaps more than any other theoretical tradition, Marxism has been especially attentive to the circumstances in which it operates; a meta-awareness of its own conditions of possibility is an essential characteristic for a mode of thought in which history plays a constitutive role and ideas are of necessity anchored in the stuff of life. Marxism originated and developed in circumstances starkly different than our own. In what ways has it changed or does it need to change to remain relevant in this new era?

I had imagined that this book would address this question through an extension and expansion of Therborn's insightful "After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in a Post-Communist World," which appeared in the January-February 2007 issue of *New Left Review*. The hoped for broad and systematic overview of Marxism's theoretical legacies and its status in the new millennium is not exactly what one finds here. Instead, the book consists of three variations on a theme. Each of the chapters has been previously published: the first in *New Left Review* in 2001, the second in the edited collection *Companion to Social Theory* (Blackwell, 1996), and the third in *The Handbook on European Social Theory* (Routledge, 2006) before appearing in *NLR* 43 as the overview on post-communist social theory mentioned above. While not covering the exact same ground, they also don't

quite add up to a whole: each retains traces of its origin as something akin to an encyclopedia entry or review essay, offering overviews of where we stand from slightly different vantage points. This isn't meant as a criticism. Therborn's enviable familiarity with debates and discussions in twentieth-century Marxism makes this book a valuable guide for thinking about the possibilities and challenges facing Marxism at the present. The five-year gaps between chapters function as a useful index of changes in Marxist perspectives (if in a foreshortened way) on recent developments as they have unfolded — from the end of the Soviet Union to the empirical and theoretical challenges of globalization and the post-global era we are now entering.<sup>1</sup>

"Into the Twenty-First Century: The New Parameters of Global Politics," the book's first chapter, presents a survey of geopolitical circumstances (circa 2001) with an eye on the future possibilities of a Left whose political fortunes seem to be in doubt. Like many leftists writing about globalization, Therborn's aim is in part to offer a sober corrective to widely-circulated claims about the shape of the present — claims which rapidly came to shape the social imaginary about the nature of life under globalization. While the United States remains a dominant world power, geopolitics is far from being unipolar; despite the increase in numbers of interstate actors, the state remains the most significant political force; and (perhaps surprisingly) corporations have not grown as fast as the GDP of core economies, even if they seem more powerful than previously. Some of these points feel dated, especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The disavowal of the nation, for instance, has been challenged by numerous critics of globalization discourse, and the collapse of the U.S. economy means that multipolarity is the name of the game for the foreseeable future. However, other points that Therborn develops in his wide-ranging assessment of global politics are valuable and deserve to be discussed further. The first has to do with the decline of class politics and the rise in its place of a generalized social irreverence. These are not linked phenomena, or even developments occurring on the same level, but significant changes nevertheless which give new texture to contemporary social life and to which the Left must pay attention. In Therborn's opinion, the epoch of the industrial working-class — never a truly global phenomenon even at its European height — is definitively over, never to return. De-agrarianization and social modernization have together brought about an erosion of traditional forms of deference based on political authority, gender, caste and class, and other forms of social privilege. This has the potential to produce "new forms of rebellious collectivism" (20), but has also expressed itself in new forms of authoritarianism, fundamentalism and xenophobia. For Therborn, "the new capitalist vigour, and the situation of less class and more irreverence, calls for something that goes beyond

attention to 'new social movements'" (60). He ends the chapter with a call to the Left to start thinking from a trans-socialist perspective:

Trans-socialism is a perspective of social transformation going beyond the strategies and historical institutions of socialism, the centrality of the working-class and the agency of the labour movement, of public ownership and large-scale collective planning of production. It is not 'postsocialist', because it does not imply an acceptance of capitalism as the only possible game and because it implies a rejection neither of the goals of historical socialism nor of the attempts to 'build' it. On the contrary, it starts from an acceptance of the historical legitimacy of the vast socialist movement and its heroic epic of creativity and enthusiasm, of endurance and struggle, of beautiful dreams and hopes as well as of blunders, failures and disillusion — in short, of defeats as well as victories. It retains the fundamental Marxian idea that human emancipation from exploitation, oppression, discrimination and the inevitable linkage between privilege and misery can come from struggle by the exploited and disadvantaged themselves. It then continues by recognizing that the twenty-first century is beginning to look very different from the twentieth — not more equal and just, but with new constellations of power and new possibilities of resistance. (61)

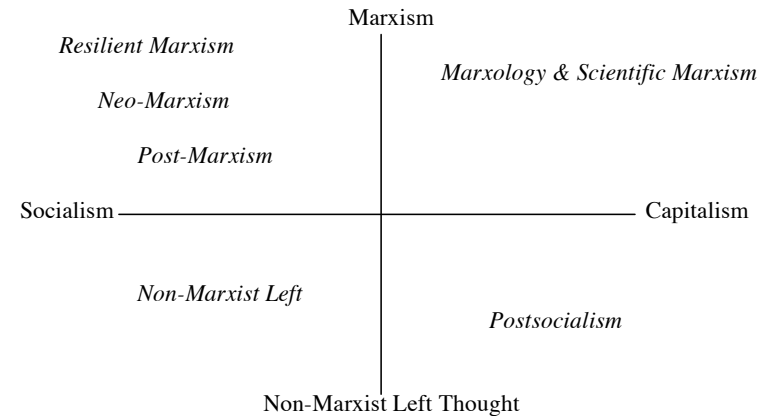
This insistence on the need to face up to the new and give up on the comforts of the old is at the heart of all three essays in the book. Whether this represents a shift from Marxism to something meaningfully described as post-Marxism is left open.

"Twentieth-Century Marxism and the Dialectics of Modernity" investigates the lasting significance of critical theory in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As he does throughout the book, Therborn links Marxism with the project of modernity. "Marxism defended modernity with a view to creating another, more fully developed modernity" (67), he writes. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School lies at the heart of the exploration of the dialectics of modernity. The core of the chapter consists of Therborn's insightful attempt to defend the achievements of critical theory and Western Marxism more generally against claims that its philosophical achievements came at the cost of a political defeat: a shift from the barricades to the classroom, from politics to theory. This is, of course, the view of Western Marxism offered up by Perry Anderson, though Therborn notes similar constructions in the work of Martin Jay and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>2</sup> He offers a strikingly different account of Western Marxism, which he reminds us was never a true group in the manner of the Frankfurt School but a *post*

*hoc* reconstruction intended to capture broad tendencies in the diverse work of a generation of thinkers. It is political victory and not defeat which animates this work: for the generation of Left thinkers who started to write after World War I, the October Revolution was seen “as a decisive, world-historical event” (91), one which required considerable political and philosophical reflection to connect to the main line of modernity in the rest of the Europe. Anderson sees the failure for the revolution to occur elsewhere as a reason for a retreat into theory. Therborn argues that “the main function of the 1960s Western Marxism” — the era in which it comes to fullest fruition — “was to open up an intellectual horizon and a field of reflection, where theoretical and conceptual issues could be discussed without being foreclosed by party-line polemics or divisive political loyalties” (90-91). What Anderson views as defeat, Therborn reads as the possibility of thinking outside of party limits, which allowed critical theory to bring out and develop fully “the problematic of Marxism as a dialectic of modernity” (109). He also criticizes Anderson for failing to consider the theoretical work of feminists, labour movements, and the anticolonial struggle. Anderson considers only philosophers, because “philosophers were very prevalent in 1917, and latter-day Marxists have wanted to listen to philosophers” (92) — the idea of Western Marxism being about defeat thus takes on the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While the second chapter considers developments in Marxist thought from 1917-1991 (the death of Henri Lefebvre acting as the endpoint of Western Marxism for Therborn), the final chapter, “After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in the North at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century,” takes us from 1989 to the present. The change in subtitle from the *NLR* version points to a change in perspective: a present no longer defined by the dusk of an older moment but by the dawning of something new. Here again, Therborn insists on the need to see Marxism as part of the drama of modernity and proposes that it be seen as constituted out of three nodes which produce a conceptual triangle: historical social science, a philosophy of dialectics, and politics. In the wake of the disaster of neoliberalism, this triangle “has been broken — in all likelihood, irremediably” (119). The bulk of the chapter is catalog of Left social theory over the past two decades. The names Therborn discusses are familiar ones for the most part — Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Giovanni Arrighi, Immanuel Wallerstein, Étienne Balibar, Judith Butler, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Manuel Castells — and his stocktaking of successes and failures is not unexpected (he views the lay of the land with a sociologist’s eye), though even the task of providing such a survey is productive and helpful.

More compelling is the conceptual grid of left-theoretical positions he provides at the end of the chapter:



At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Marxism is characterized by a sharp divide between theory and politics. Therborn notes that the North American Left can be found on the left side of the center line, while the European Left is more to the right — a surprising claim, perhaps, though he reminds us that there is no equivalent in Europe of figures like Noam Chomsky or Mike Davis. The bottom right quadrant is occupied by Third Wayers such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck (a slightly unfair characterization in the latter case). The bottom left is relatively empty — “there has been little radical programmatic thinking in social democracy anywhere since the ambitious but politically ill-fated wage-earner-funds proposal by the Swedish blue-collar unions” (162) — although Therborn also places the work of Robert Mangabeira Unger and the activity of the World Social Forums there. The top right quadrant is also relatively empty; works like Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993) and Terrell Carver’s *The Postmodern Marx* (1998) belong there, both making use of Marx without connecting their analyses to any form of anti-capitalist political practice.

This leaves the top left quadrant as the site of real action — despite a general lack of attention to an elaboration of socialist alternatives. *Post-Marxism* refers to “writers with an explicitly Marxist background, whose recent work has gone beyond Marxist problematics and who do not publicly claim a continuing Marxist commitment” (165). In this group, Therborn names Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth,

Manuel Castells, Régis Debray, and Zygmunt Bauman. *Neo-Marxism* includes the work of Slavoj Žižek and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. This group is largely comprised of political philosophy or cultural analysis which avoids the necessary hard slogging through the muck and mire of social analysis. Finally, there is the category of *Resilient Marxism*, a kind of catch-all slot into which Therborn places the work of Marxist journals (*New Left Review*, *Das Argument*, *Prokla*, etc.), encyclopedia projects (Wolfgang Fritz Haug and Frigga Haug's fifteen-volume *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis's *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, etc.), and lesser-known writings by Daniel Bensaid, Alex Callinicos, Michael Burawoy, and Erik Olin Wright. This grid is not meant to name winners or losers (though the upper left is of course of most interest to Therborn) but to identify the modes of Left thought at the outset of the twenty-first century. "The existing repertoire of positions is unlikely to please everyone, but it does nevertheless include rallying points for nearly everybody on the left" (179), and despite the oft-repeated claim about Left impotence and political frustrations, Therborn reminds us that there is far more Left intellectual production at present than forty or fifty years ago.

Have we moved from Marxism to post-Marxism? The title is posed as a question; the book leaves little doubt about the necessity of such a move, whether it has actually happened as yet. "Post-Marxism" need not be seen as abandonment of the insights of Marx and the Marxist tradition into the operations of capitalism or the ongoing dialectic of modernity, so much as a shift from older historical problematics to a direct confrontation with our bad new days. As the book makes clear, this is already happening. *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* is less a rallying cry for new approaches and for braving theoretical and political paths not taken, than a ground-clearing exercise that might allow Left thought to better understand its past, present, and future. Therborn writes that the book makes "no claim to being an intellectual history or a history of ideas, and may be seen rather as a traveller's notebook, unpretentious notes jotted down after a long, arduous journey through the climb, passes, descents and dead ends of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Marxism" (x). One could not hope for a better guide for the arduous journey still to come.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Post-global? At least insofar as globalization was the name for an ideological project — neoliberalism — we have now moved onto new territory. This has been pronounced by none other than Robert Kagan, who has recently reversed Francis Fukuyama's infamous claim about the end of history. If it was once imagined that history had come to an end with the establishment of a "new kind of international order, with nation-states growing together or disappearing, ideological conflicts melting away, cultures intermingling, and increasing free commerce and communications" (3), Kagan insists that history has now returned in the form of international competition among nation-states. The developments of the past twenty years have proven wrong the assumption that economic liberalization leads to political liberalization, as well as the "abiding belief in the inevitability of human progress, the belief that history moves in only one direction" (5). Only the right would find this surprising. See Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. New York: Knopf, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

**Franco Barchiesi** Franco Barchiesi is Assistant Professor in the Department of African American and African Studies at Ohio State University. His research interests are in the study of African labor movements, with particular regard to Southern Africa, in relation to changing forms of employment, collective identities, civil society, social movements, social policy, and social citizenship. He has edited (with Tom Bramble) a book on *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the 'New South Africa'* (2003).

**Patrick Bond** An academic at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society, Patrick Bond studied at Johns Hopkins under David Harvey, and moved to South Africa in 1990. His books include *Elite Transition*, *Unsustainable South Africa*, *Against Global Apartheid*, *Talk Left Walk Right* and most recently, *Climate Change, Carbon Trading and Civil Society*.

**Dennis Brutus** One of the first South African poets to be widely read in Europe and the U.S., Dennis Brutus's work found early critical acclaim. His first book, *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots*, was published while he was imprisoned for defying a "banning" order by the apartheid government following his campaign to desegregate the South African Olympic team. His best-known book, *Letters to Martha*, deals with his prison experiences. After being shot in the back by Johannesburg police during an escape attempt and breaking rocks for 18 months at the notorious Robben Island prison alongside Nelson Mandela, Brutus was exiled in 1966, and in London resumed simultaneous careers as a poet and anti-apartheid campaigner. He was instrumental in achieving the apartheid regime's expulsion from the Olympics, won numerous awards for poetry, and helped organize key African writers' organizations with his colleagues Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. Upon moving to the U.S., Brutus served in several academic positions, including at Northwestern University and the University of Pittsburgh, defeating efforts by the Reagan Administration to deport him. Following the transition to democracy in South Africa, Brutus has remained active with grassroots social movements in his home country and internationally. In the late 1990s he became a pivotal figure in the global justice movement and a featured speaker each year at the World Social Forum. In the anti-racism, reparations, and economic justice movements, he continues to serve as a leading strategist, working closely with international networks such as the Jubilee anti-debt movement. In South Africa, he has been a key figure in the Social Movements Indaba. In Southern Africa, he has traveled widely and has numerous contacts within the region's social justice movements. He is an

Honorary Professor at the Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal, in Durban.

**Ashwin Desai** Ashwin Desai is based at the Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg. He is closely involved with the resurgent social movements in South Africa and has written a book about these developments entitled *'We are the Poors': Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2002). His latest book, co-authored with Goolam Vahed, is *Inside Indenture: A South African Story 1860-1914* (2007).

**Pier Paolo Frassinelli** Pier Paolo Frassinelli teaches Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University, South Africa campus.

**Shane Graham** Shane Graham is an Associate Professor of English at Utah State University, and was formerly a Mellon Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He is the author of *South African Literature after the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (2009).

**Ulrike Kistner** Ulrike Kistner teaches in the Department of Classics and World Languages at the University of South Africa in Pretoria. The fields of her teaching and research include aesthetic, literary, and political theory; psychoanalysis and narrative; (trans)nationalism and cosmopolitanism; and human rights in postcoloniality. She has published a book, *Commissioning and Contesting Post-Apartheid Human Rights: HIV-AIDS-Racism-Truth and Reconciliation*, and numerous articles on these and related subjects.

**Dale T. McKinley** Dale T. McKinley is an independent writer, researcher and lecturer based in Johannesburg. He is a long time socialist political activist and has been intricately involved in the South African left since the late 1980s. He is the author of *The ANC and the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Political Biography* (1997) and, with Ahmed Veriava, *Arresting Dissent: State Repression and Post-Apartheid Social Movements* (2004). He has also written numerous research reports, book chapters, journal and press articles on South African and international political, social, and economic issues.

**Kelwyn Sole** Kelwyn Sole was born in Johannesburg in 1951 and was educated at the Universities of the Witwatersrand and London. He worked in Johannesburg, Botswana, and Namibia in a variety of jobs, and is currently

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Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Cape Town. He has published numerous articles, reviews, and polemics, mainly on South African culture and literature, as well as postcolonial and Marxist cultural theory, and is the author of five collections of poetry, the most recent of which is *Land Dreaming: Prose Poems* (2006).

**Imre Szeman** Imre Szeman is Professor of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. Recent books include the second edition of *Popular Culture: A User's Guide* (2009) and *Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader* (2009).