Social Movements in Post Apartheid South Africa: An Introduction

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Introduction

Some of the most influential analysis of post-liberation mobilisation and opposition in Africa is pessimistic. Fanon observes that former liberation ‘militants disappear into the crowd and take the empty title of citizen’ (Fanon 1967: 137). Mamdani warns of the postcolonial ‘marriage between technicism and nationalism’ resulting in the demobilisation of social movements (Mamdani 1996: 21). For Mbembe, political opposition in a postcolonial context is different to opposition in a colonial context as a result of the local origins of the postcolonial elite. Whereas colonial relations are characterised by either resistance or cooperation against an external oppressor, postcolonial relations are convivial as a result of the familiarity between the population and now local elite (Mbembe 2001: 104). Mbembe describes the outcome as a mutual ‘zombification’ in which the dominant and dominated are left impotent.

... at any given moment in the postcolonial historical trajectory, the authoritarian mode can no longer be interpreted strictly in terms of surveillance, or the politics of coercion. The practices of ordinary citizens cannot always be read in terms of ‘opposition to the state,’ ‘deconstructing power,’ and ‘disengagement.’ In the postcolony, an ‘intimate tyranny’ links the rulers with the ruled – just as obscenity is only another aspect of munificence, and vulgarity a normal condition of state power. (Mbembe 2001: 128)

Whereas the need for adversarial struggle for state capture against the illegitimate apartheid state was clear, such unity of purpose does not emerge in the context of a democratically elected government. Today’s social movements are no longer affiliated to a political party working towards the capture of the state, as was the case prior to the democratic transition (Buhlungu 2004, Bond 2004). Oppositional movements of the democratic era

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1 This paper draws from a larger project on social movements located at the Centre for Civil Society and School of Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. While this paper is somewhat general, comprehensive case studies of particular movements can be accessed via the CCS web site http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/ .
are more fragmented on what it is that they oppose and what their political project is. Opponents of the state have to overcome the familiarity that characterises the postcolonial situation. For Desai, ‘It’s like marching against your mother: stoning them, forsaking them, and decrying them’ (in Wren Spaulding 2003).

Perhaps Mbembe’s analysis manifests most clearly within the ruling alliance of the African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), along with the de facto membership of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) (Zuern 2004). The pillars of the liberation movement were trade unions, centring the realm of production and the workplace, and civics which addressed issues related to consumption in the townships and villages. In post-apartheid South Africa, unions remain active, addressing policy on formal labour practice, government employment practice of civil servants, as well as the labour practice of businesses. However, their attempts to oppose the state’s chosen economic path from within the ruling alliance has limited the extent to which it can block this path. The civic movement has been even more effectively neutralised, with SANCO being described recently as a ‘moribund ally’, an ‘empty shell’ with little capacity for opposition (Forrest 2003).

Yet despite certain aspects of Mbembe’s glum predictions holding true, South African’s have not been reduced to passive recipients of the post-apartheid order. A large swathe of activism in South Africa is orientated against government policy on consumption issues. Community movements oppose the state’s failure to provide affordable services (Bond 2004, Buhlungu 2004, Desai 2003, Dwyer 2004, Egan and Wafer 2004, Pape and McDonald 2002). Privatisation and cost recovery are seen as key components of this problem. They also oppose evictions and attempt to secure land tenure (Greenberg 2004, Oldfield and Stokke 2004). The state has been opposed on its HIV/AIDS policies and, in particular, its reluctance to provide antiretroviral treatment (Friedman & Mottiar 2004).

It is not necessarily the case that social movements oppose the state itself, and there is growing interest in the way struggles can confront corporations (Cock 2004), multilateral organisations (Rustomjee 2004), institutions (Cock 2004, Smith 2004), or even other parts of civil society (Kirsten 2004). Corporations and the government are targeted on issues of pollution. Communities alongside dirty industry have brought tremendous pressure on these industries and won significant gains of the reduction of pollution. Movements also seek to counter various forms of social prejudice, which also manifests in government policy. Struggles against discrimination by sexual minorities, women, foreigners, and others, are often targeted both at state policies but have as a broader objective the disruption of social norms (Amisi & Ballard 2004, Dirsuweit 2004, Hassim 2004). Finally, there are movements that oppose
multilateral organisations and foreign corporations in relation to unplayable or odious debt, or in terms of claiming compensation from businesses that operated in South Africa during apartheid. These include Jubilee, Jubilee South Africa and Jubilee South (Rustomjee 2004).

The intention of this chapter is to contextualise the emergence of a new set of social movements in South Africa, to examine some of their strategies and programmes, and to map out some of the lines of debate in relation to their politics. In particular, the discussion reflects on the predicaments that result from opposing a democratically elected government. Activists, for example, face the constant choice between participating in the processes of government and opposing government. A related choice is between holding to the view that good can be extracted from the government, despite what is seen as its misguided path, and the view that the government is more or less irredeemable and, by extension, to be replaced. For many activists, struggles in contemporary South Africa may be the building blocks of a new opposition to the state. Capitalism and the market remain a core concern, and the ANC’s shift towards a pro-growth strategy based on market liberalisation and a restrained national budget is understood to be the primary cause of worsening poverty in South Africa. Such activists therefore define their project as a counter-hegemonic or anti-systemic one. To put it crudely, counter-hegemonic activists feel that the revolutionary economic change that was anticipated with democracy has yet to materialise, and this remains the major project. Some explicitly describe themselves as true custodians of the liberation tradition; a title, of course, also claimed by the ruling ANC party (Buhlungu 2004, McKinley and Naidoo 2004: 19).

Yet the choice between participation and opposition with a view to rupture is, to some extent, academic. Struggles in post-apartheid South Africa respond, in the first instance, to particular manifestations of exclusion, poverty and marginality. They are very often local and immediate; they are pragmatic and quite logical responses to everyday hardships (Barchiesi 2004, Desai 2003, Egan and Wafer 2004). Activists operate to achieve direct relief for marginalised groupings on particular issues. Such activists do not focus primarily on opposing the state’s economic path, although they may do so by default, but rather on more specific struggles. This is not to say that they necessarily agree with the current national programme but rather that they choose to focus their attention on particular gains in relation to particular issues. In such situations, engagement with the state may indeed be on the cards. The country has, after all, installed a democratically elected government and given it an overwhelming mandate to pursue its programmes for overcoming the injustices of apartheid. Regardless of the effectiveness of these programmes, rhetorical interest in resolving poverty in South Africa allows considerable room for activists to manoeuvre. They recognise that the current situation allows many opportunities to nudge, coerce or force the state and other institutions to address various aspects of
marginality. In particular, movements make extensive and flexible use of the discourse of rights to add legitimacy to their activities (Greenstein 2003). Even the more militant movements who engage in technically illegal activities such as reconnections and land occupations use the language of rights to invest their activities with a sense that they are endorsed by a higher code of ‘good’.

Changing ideological and political landscape
In order to understand social movements since the transition, it is important to remind ourselves of ideological shifts in the political landscape. South Africa’s liberation struggle was arguably one of the quintessential social movements of the 20th century. Culminating in the United Democratic Front in the 1980s, this movement brought together political parties, unions, civic organisations, religious organisations, NGOs, and international supporters in a focused attack on apartheid. The relationship between local struggles and the broader anti-apartheid movement was complex. Activist concerns extended beyond the issue of state power. Specific local conditions and grievances, and issues of sheer survival in many localities throughout the country, fed into a strategy of overall political mobilisation … The anti-apartheid struggle had a coherent centre as well as disparate, uncoordinated, locally focused and untidy margins, expressed in the proliferation of multiple terrains of struggle spread geographically and thematically all over the country. It was natural to attempt to unify these multiple strands into a force that could meet apartheid head-on, confront power with power, and present an overall challenge to the regime, forcing it to yield ground and embark on negotiations. (Greenstein 2003: 11-12)

The end of apartheid per se was only one part of the objective of this collective force. Many saw apartheid as a specific manifestation of capitalism (Johnstone 1982, Wolpe 1972), and the anti-apartheid movement was thus considered to be a class struggle as much as it was a confrontation of racism. Significant changes in the economy, as well as the advent of democracy, were seen by many to be necessary for the achievement of social justice. The movement was explicitly counter-hegemonic, and often framed its intent in terms of Marxist programmes of expansionist state spending on the poor, and an avoidance of free market doctrine that was gaining dominance under Reaganism and Thatcherism.

In the wake of the negotiated transition between 1990 and 1994, the dominant political party of this liberation movement became the uncontested ruling party whose share of parliamentary seats increased in the three successive democratic elections. While the new constitution conferred unprecedented rights on citizens, the condition of those excluded from the formal economy has remained extremely marginal. Intentions to operate expanding national budget as articulated in the Reconstruction and Development Programme –
effectively the ANC government’s election manifesto of the 1994 elections – were replaced with the Growth Employment and Redistribution programme in 1996. The result was shrinking national budgets in the second half of the 1990s, a trend only reversed at the start of the next decade. State rhetoric switched to the importance of growth enabled by economic liberalisation and improving the conditions for competitiveness. Little growth was achieved and it is widely recognised that poverty, inequality and unemployment have grown (Everatt 2003). Some amelioration comes in the form of welfare payouts such as child support grants and pensions, upon which many families depend as their sole source of income. The government also attempts to target the poor through the Poverty Relief Fund and the Community Based Public Works Programme. Employment Equity and Black Economic Empowerment are touted as attempts to redress past imbalances although most doubt that they effectively target poor people.

Considerable successes in infrastructural delivery and more limited success with land transfers have been offset by massive job losses and the resulting inability for many to pay for services (Desai 2003, Pape and McDonald 2002). The government’s cost recovery approach to service delivery and its policies of privatisation have resulted in cost structures that are unaffordable to the poor (Bond 2004). Desai (2002) has argued that there is no longer a ‘culture of non-payment’ as there was in the 1980s intended to undermine the minority government, but rather an ‘economics of non payment’ whereby individuals simply cannot afford services as a result of their marginalisation from the formal sector. Yet the government responds as if this was a problem of discipline, cutting off services and evicting delinquent residents.

The reluctance to oppose has been evident in South Africa both within and outside the ruling alliance (Cronin 2002, Desai 2003, Saul 2001, 2002). After the transition, frameworks of opposition were in disarray (Marais 2001: 162). Many had hoped that the need for adversarial opposition was over, but the state’s fiscal discipline embodied in GEAR from 1996 signalled for many a shift to more centrist policies. Opposition to the state’s economic path was not to be found amongst political parties. Tellingly, the official opposition is now the white dominated and pro-free market Democratic Alliance which scored 12.37% of the electorate’s support in the 2004 general election (also see Saul 2001). There is little evidence that the electorate is rallying around alternative economic paths amongst the other parties that polled more than 1% – namely the Inkatha Freedom Party, United Democratic Movement, Independent Democrats, New National Party (now absorbed into the ANC), and the African Christian Democratic Party.

As well as overwhelming support from the electorate and little significant parliamentary opposition, the ANC government has been given considerable space to explore this development model by its former liberation partners and supporters (Saul 2001). The critical voice of Unions, the Communist Party,
and Civics was quietened through their alliance with the ruling party, notwithstanding important stands they have made (Cronin 2002, Desai 2003, Mantashe 2003). Many civil society organisations switched to a cooperative service delivery role (Boulle 1997, Marais 1997). Some movements such as the women’s movement, civics and unions struggled to maintain any vigour as a result of the fact that many former activists had moved to government (Hassim 2004, Lumsden and Loftus 2003: 19).

**Post apartheid hardships & the rise of a new generation of social movements**

With the opposition parties representing economic principles that are broadly in line with the government’s approach, more critical voices turned placed their hope in civil society and social movements in particular (Bond 2004; Desai 2002, 2003; Pape and McDonald 2002; Saul 2001, 2002). As a result of the way the new democratic state drew many former activists into its project, there is little institutional continuity between liberation social movements and the current generation of social movements – although it should be recognised that many of the activists and leaders themselves were involved in the liberation struggle (Bond 2004). In effect, social movements had to be reconstituted and re-invented. The new generation of social movements appeared in earnest once the ANC’s second term in office began. The Treatment Action Campaign (formed in 1998), Concerned Citizens Forum (1999), Anti-Eviction Campaign, Anti Privatisation Forum, Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (2000), the Landless Peoples Movement, Coalition of South Africans for the Basic Income Grant (2001) and the Education Rights Project (2002), have been amongst the more enduring and visible struggles to have reconstituted a vibrant oppositional civil society. Countless unnamed small scale and ephemeral struggles have also emerged across the country.

Burawoy states that ‘[i]n the postcomunist era progressive struggles have moved away from distributional politics to focus on identity politics or what Nancy Fraser calls a politics of recognition’ (Burawoy 2003: 242). While the politics of recognition enters South Africa’s social movements in fascinating and poorly understood ways (e.g. see Tarrow 1998: 17, hooks 1990), the somewhat northern analysis that distribution is decreasingly relevant does not hold true at all. The emergence of a new set of struggles since the late 1990s must be located squarely within the high and growing level of poverty and inequality that characterises our society.

Yet while distributional issues are paramount in South Africa, it does not follow that the result is a union-led ‘class struggle’ of the kind that many believed characterised the anti-apartheid movement. In this movement, worker struggles were seen to be the vanguard of the broader movement to capture the state and establish a socially just post-apartheid society. Since the transition COSATU remains an important advocate of the interests of workers but its alliance with the ruling party has rendered it somewhat incapable of
more forcefully expressing its stated opposition to the government’s chosen economic path. COSATU has been pursuing a kind of minimum objective of simply defending against the further erosion of employment (Desai 2003). It also explored other remedies such as a universal basic income grant, advocated and mobilized through the Coalition of South Africans for the Basic Income Grant. This welfarist remedy is one to which to government appears singularly unreceptive.

Although of limited impact thus far, innovative new unions have emerged in response to the growth of the informal sector (Devenish & Skinner 2004). The recently closed Self Employed Women’s Union in KwaZulu-Natal achieved significant success in forcing the recognition of more survivalist livelihoods in the informal economy. As a result of pressure from this group, the city of eThekwini no longer clears informal traders from the streets – a success yet to be achieved in Johannesburg whose managers appear convinced that vendors work against the achievement of a ‘world class city’ and should therefore be cleared from the streets.

Some believe that without the commitment of unions, a new generation of social movements will be hamstrung. Russel and Swilling insist that ‘[t]he key to the revival of social movements on a significant scale will be whether the trade union federations allow their huge, nationally structured institutional resources and leadership cadre to support these nascent processes’ (Russel & Swilling 2002: 93). And for Saul, ‘finding a way to more effectively to link trade unions and social movements (in a “structured moment” a political party?) for progressive purposes is just one off the many challenges, barbed and unpredictable, that must be on the agenda of the ANC leadership’s critics’ (Saul 2002). However, the ‘muted’ role of unions globally, as Harvey puts it, is forcing many to re-think their centrality (Harvey 2003b: 35, also see Desai in Wren Spaulding 2003). Their relationship to the politics of the poor has become indirect given that poverty is characterised by exclusion from the formal sector.

Buroway (2003) draws on Polanyi to suggest that counterhegemonic potential lies not only in the realm of production, as classically understood, but in the domain of consumption and the market:

Everyone suffers from the market inasmuch as unrestrained it leads to the destruction of the environment, global warming, toxic wastes, the colonization of free time, and so forth. … Whereas alienated and degraded labour may excite a limited alternative, it does not have the universalism of the market that touches everyone in multiple ways. It is the market, therefore, that offers possible grounds for counterhegemony. We see this everywhere but especially in the amalgam of movements against the many guises of globalization. (Buroway 2003: 231)
Harvey argues that unions were in the ascendancy during an era of expanding reproduction (2003a: 172). Once this became difficult to sustain, from the 1970s, capital sought to bolster its earnings through a return to ‘accumulation by dispossession’. This involved privatisation of utilities, further attempts to end communal land ownership and other forms of crude appropriation. Harvey argues that the kinds of struggle that were appropriate in engaging with expanding reproduction and with accumulation by dispossession were different. These are diverse and inchoate precisely because of the variety of contexts and forms of dispossession taking place. Rather than being ‘postmodern’ as they have sometimes been classified, Harvey argues that they are defensive responses to various attempts by capital to generate profit through dispossession (2003a: 174).

In South Africa, as we have seen, issue-based movements emerge over issues such as evictions, landlessness, electricity and water cut-offs, lack of access to medicine, lack of access to education, pollution of living environments, privatisation, cost recovery and so on. The Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Anti-Privatisation Forum, the Concerned Citizens Forum, the Soweto Electricity Crisis committee and others oppose cost recovery for services. Through illegal reconnections, court injunctions and protest they attempt to expose the contradiction whereby councils demand payment from residents who do not have sufficient incomes. Further movements such as the Education Rights Project and the Treatment Action Campaign address other aspects of state delivery around schooling and health. These all relate to the inability of people to pay for what that they need and the failure of government to supply it at affordable prices. While these appear to be narrow single issue struggles, they reflect the systemic nature of poverty underpinned by high levels of unemployment (see Desai in Wren Spaulding 2003). As one delegate stated at the 2004 Social Movements Indaba meeting, ‘we are all movements of the unemployed’.

While it is possible to attribute the hardships created by cost recovery and job losses on the state’s economic model, some hardships have been created by other features of post-apartheid society. Although the Treatment Action Campaign has identified the behaviour of pharmaceutical corporations as highly problematic, a major focus was – in fact – on the government’s denial that AIDS may be a disease at all and that antiretroviral are an appropriate response (Friedman and Mottiar 2004). Various movements seek to counter other causes of marginality that are not explained by historical materialist analyses and their contemporary cousins of anti-neoliberalism, anti-globalisation. Instead, class is seen to interact in complex ways with racism, homophobia, xenophobia, patriarchy and other dimensions of exclusion that produce the marginality that people experience. In some cases, such as that of economic migrants and refugees, an identity may place one in the most marginal of positions in society, not only materially but also because of the
xenophobic social and cultural exclusions that result from not being readily accepted into host groups. It is therefore vital to track grassroots protests against xenophobia and exclusion (Amisi and Ballard 2004). A variety of groups deal with the longstanding marginalisation felt by women who often bear the brunt of deprivation, such as the white ribbon campaign which opposes violence against women (Hassim 2004). Identity-related concerns are also taken up by gay organisations who have successfully overseen the passage of new legislation and who seek to counter social prejudice (Dirsuweit 2004).

Questions of citizenship, gender, and sexuality often exacerbate material disadvantage, and are not the indulgent concerns of a ‘classless’ petit-bourgeoisie. Indeed, there is a notable absence in South Africa of new social movements of the kinds described in the industrialised world as – perhaps – middle class individuals concerned with social and economic justice orient their energies to poor sectors of society. As we shall see below, one effect of this is the way in which the political projects of such movements is constructed by their leaderships.

**Tactics**
De Certeau distinguishes between the strategies of the powerful and the tactics of ‘the other’:

> a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus … The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power … and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers. It poaches them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. (De Certeau 1984: 37)

Power is, therefore, not the exclusive property of elites, and the poor and marginalized are capable of influencing elites to take directions they might otherwise not have taken. In South Africa, extensive use has been made of tactics not sanctioned by authorities in order to hinder and oppose the state (Miraftab & Wills forthcoming). These might include reconnections of electricity and water, occupations of land and houses, and protests deemed to be illegal.

Furthermore, it is not always necessary to operate outside of the legal framework in order to achieve results. Neither is it necessarily the case that an adversarial stance is required to deflect the state from its intentions. Grassroots organisations such as the Homeless Peoples Alliance prefer a ‘politics of patience’ with a high degree of ‘bureaucratic intimacy’ in order to
achieve the delivery of housing (Khan and Pieterse 2004). The Treatment Action Campaign has ranged between adversarial and cooperative at various points in its campaigns (Friedman and Mottiar 2004). Movements thus seek to reconstitute instruments of deprivation as instruments of change (Tarrow 1998: 30). Notwithstanding alarmingly repressive behaviour at times, there has been an undeniable opening up of the state since the end of the apartheid regime. Increasingly, instruments and spaces have become available for the state to engage with civil society, and indeed, for civil society actors to challenge the state. The National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), the media, the courts, the constitution, formalized attempts to have public input into policies, local governments’ Integrated Development Plans, and even rhetorical support for mass demonstrations provide a significant repertoire of ‘in-system’ mechanisms for influencing policy and challenging the government.

The new political, economic and social order is underwritten by a constitution that enshrines first and second generation rights, clauses that have been used by a number of social movements to either defend themselves or advance their campaigns. Badiou (2001) rails against the global focus on human rights arguing that it merely attempts to prevent universally defined evil. Unlike Marxism, he argues, human rights cannot imagine and work towards the good. The uncritical celebration of rights is indeed problematic in that they tend to result in the assumption that because one has a right to education, adequate housing and services that it must somehow be so. Even the reinforcement of a right in the constitutional court may not translate into material improvements in the lives of the poor, as the much celebrated Grootboom case shows.

Yet it is important to note the creative ways in which social movements in South Africa, even militant ones, have adopted and made use of the notion of rights. The Gay movement claims as a core success the fact that 35 pieces of legislation that affected sexual minorities have been changed in the last 10 years (Dirsuweit 2004). The Western Cape anti-eviction campaign is using constitutional clauses to prevent evictions and frustrate the state (Oldfield & Stokke 2004). Legislation is not only an end in itself. Kirsten reports that the development of gun control legislation was crucial to creating broader debate in society and therefore shifting norms around gun ownership (2004: 23).

The claim to rights helps legitimate even illegal activities such as reconnections and occupations of property (Greenstein 2003: 29). The use of the language of rights can amount to an attempt to call on a broader framework to legitimate and gain credibility for otherwise risky activities. Indeed such deployment, at times, bears little relation to actual legally inscribed rights (Greenstein 2003: 24). The discourse of rights has advantages over other expressions of marginality such as ‘needs’ which appear somewhat subjective. Rights are supposedly objectively defined, codified in the
constitution – regarded by almost all as sacrosanct – and are endorsed by elites. Rights can be the kind of tactic defined by de Certeau above: an opportunity afforded by official processes to demand that the state put its money where its mouth is. Through the legal system, the marginalised are able to challenge the state and thereby shift relations of power, particularly when combined with popular mobilisation (Greenstein 2003: 21). Cock describes such strategies as potentially counter hegemonic (Cock 2004). Movements are, thus, not restricted to illegal activity in order to diametrically oppose the government; to use parts of the state against itself.

State responses
The state’s intolerance of some protest and the illegality and confrontationalism of protest have been mutually constitutive of one other. The state has chosen, for example, not to approve some applications for protest. In March 2004 an application for the Anti Privatisation Forum to march on the opening of the constitutional court was declined and a decision to proceed resulted in 52 arrests – some of whom were simply members of the public who happened to be wearing red T shirts. On election day in April 2004, 62 members of the Landless Peoples Movement were arrested for conducting a protest. There is growing concern of the stigmatization of the ‘ultra-left’ and the desire to repress protests (Cronin 2002; Desai 2002, 2003; Greenstein 2003: 30-1; Saul 2001, 2002; Vally 2003). The state maintains that whereby illegal tactics were justified under apartheid, such approaches should be considered insurrectionist against a legitimate democratic state (Sachs 2003: 26).

It is clear that social movements have provided a substantial challenge to the government. Its repressive response betrays the extent to which movements have hit a nerve. This resentment is multi-faceted. The ANC dislikes the way in which social movements have been able to upstage it by, for example, organising a significantly larger march at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. Much is also made of the ANC’s historical intolerance for dissent. Movements are regarded as impertinent, not showing sufficient respect for the government which believes, somewhat paternalistically, it has a mandate from the majority of the population to proceed the way it feels best. Movements also remind the ANC of its tendency towards centralism, which is in tension with participatory democracy (Greenstein 2003: 9). In addition, Bond argues that movements, having targeted neoliberalism, are a threat to vested interests (Bond 2004: 27).

Given the overwhelming electoral support the ANC continues to receive, its somewhat hysterical response to dissenting voices may initially seem to be an over-reaction. Yet they can be read as a shrewd attempt to monopolise the definition of legitimate expressions of citizenship. Miraftab and Wills (forthcoming) suggest that the effect of identifying and demonising the ‘ultra left’ is to create a distinction between two kinds of civil society. On one hand
is what the politically powerful consider to be legitimate civil society which engage in ways that the state sanctions. On the other are inauthentic kinds of civil society which operate outside of state-sanctioned spaces of participation. The state thus seeks to construct certain expressions of citizenship as more legitimate than others and thereby pull the rug out from under its most vociferous opponents who attempt to operate in spaces that it cannot control directly.

**Political project of social movements**
At first glance, many movements appear to be concerned with particular issues such as cut-offs, evictions and privatisation (McKinley & Naidoo 2004: 11). However, single issue causes become vehicles for achieving broader ideological objectives (Flacks 2004 quoted in Egan & Wafer 2004). Many radical activists and academics define their progressiveness in terms of the promotion of a socialist alternative and, in this sense, construct their counter-hegemonic project as an anti-capitalist one. Ngwane argues unambiguously that ‘[s]ocial movements … have to fight the state, destroy it and replace it with a workers’ state’ (Ngwane 2003: 32). Particular campaigns around electricity or other narrow issues thus are taken to be a means to an end. The scale of focus is broadened from a particular issue to the state’s economic path. The role of movement leaderships and intellectuals is crucial in imbuing a generalised impulse to mobilise and take action with a ‘sense of strategic and political purpose’ (Barchiesi 2004: 5, also see Mngxitama 2004). Such intellectuals identify their ideology through markers such as: anti neo-liberalism, anti-capitalism, anti-GEAR, anti-globalisation, anti-marketism. A number of such voices gather in the Social Movements Indaba, which was convened in response to the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, and continues to meet periodically. These are movements such as the Anti Privatisation Forum, Anti Eviction Campaign, the Landless Peoples Movement, Concerned Citizens Forum, Jubilee South Africa, Environmental Justice Networking Forum, Rural Development Services Network, and others (Cock 2003: 20). One delegate at the Social Movements Indaba meeting of 2004 referred to their collective as the ‘socialist movements’. There is a sense within the Social Movements Indaba that they constitute the ‘real’ social movements of the country in contrast to more collaborationist and reformist organisations. Ngwane differentiates between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ social movements (Ngwane 2003: 32). Bond distinguishes between organisations that emerge in the implementation of formal social policies (such as welfare agencies or implementation-oriented NGOs) or the reproduction of daily life (mutual aid groupings) – and movements. The latter are both protest-oriented and utopian, in the sense of attempting to construct the community of a future society in the decay of the old. (Bond 2004: 9-10)
Drawing on Tironi, Bond distinguishes between the desire for participation and the breaking of the social system or its rupture (Bond 2004: 10). Social movements, then, tend to be imagined as the ‘hinge’ around which society can be diverted in a new direction (Hetherington 1998:10). This is particularly the case in South Africa where the legacy of the liberation movement has put many in the habit of viewing social movements as agents for cataclysmic social change. Collaboration with the state is seen as pointless as it represents bourgeois interests (Buhlungu 2004, Sachs 2003). The test of an authentic movement, from this perspective, is whether it holds a vision for a socialist alternative or at least opposes the state’s neo-liberal growth path. From this perspective, successes in relation to particular issues such as the provision of HIV treatment is not unambiguously good unless it is attached to this broader project. Indeed it can be harmful. Leaders of the TAC are derided for their simultaneous criticism of the government’s failure to deliver HIV treatment, and proclaiming to be a loyal card-carrying members of the ANC (Friedman and Mottiari 2004). The decision to work with the government on the delivery of antiretrovirals – now that it has decided to supply them – is seen not as a success, but rather to have compromised their ability to oppose the state vociferously in the future.

The responsibility for a utopian future is thrust upon local level struggles by the poor. In the process, effects are confused and conflated with intentions. While it might be possible to say that community struggles are – by default – anti-neo-liberal, it does not follow that they set out with this ideology in mind. Mark Heyward of the TAC suggested at a conference in Durban in October 2004 that revolutionary social movements as defined by the left were a figment of their imagination. While his sentiments created a stir, they did bring to the fore, as Ferial Haffajee (2004) has noted, the necessity to distinguish between ideal types and reality on the ground. As Harvey recognised, there is no necessary link between what he calls ‘insurgent movements against accumulation by disposession’ and a socialist political programme. Many such movements would, in fact, resent being ‘co-opted by socialist developmentalism’ (Harvey 2003: 166). Strategic rhetoric, then, should become an object of analysis in and of itself. The spectre of empire, globalisation, neoliberalism, the Washington consensus, and the ANC government’s compliance with these, are attempts to solidify and personify as a recognisable adversary an otherwise dauntingly amorphous world system. They are discursive tools as much as they are objective descriptors of the way the world works. They are intended to have the same symbolic effect as the evils of apartheid and capitalism had in the past, to be vanquished by the morally righteous. To fire up the troops it is necessary to know who the bad guys are, and to clearly draw the battle lines. They provide a black and white, good and bad reading which attempts to squeeze out ambiguity and exert an order on the world (see Bauman 1991 on ambivalence).
Many struggles do not seek rupture or even necessarily a socialist alternative. While some activists involved may be mindful of, and even sympathetic to, these objectives, their primary focus is a local or issue specific struggle. Drawing on Castells’ notion of ‘militant metropolitan dwellers’, Desai points to movements that ‘concentrate on fighting in their own locality and are often animated by the immediacy of their situation’ (Desai 2003). They do this ‘without any grand ideology’ (Desai 2003). Desai speaks of movements where the poor defend the little that they have (Desai in Wren Spaulding 2003). They do not address anti-IMF or World Bank struggles, or anti-state politics directly not because they disagree with them necessarily, but because they are operating at a local and immediate scale.

Is it necessarily the case, then, that progressive politics is impossible in the absence of a long term objective to ‘overthrow the capitalist system’ (Ngwane 2004 cited in Bond 2004: 29)? Some question whether the objective of the seizure of state power should be the benchmark of radical action, the qualifying property the truly progressive. For Mngxitama (2004), ‘[r]evolutionary theory as we know it has become suspect, together with the old answers it prescribed’ (Mngxitama 2004). Greenstein (2003) deploys some of the writings of post-Marxists such as Laclau and Mouffe to reflect anew on movements that do not position themselves as revolutionary. Is it possible to achieve counter-hegemonic goals outside of the traditional trajectory specified by socialism? Such movements can claim to be progressive in as much as they challenge existing power relations, although such challenges are not cast as a political revolutionary project. They therefore seek to challenge state power without merely ‘replacing one set of relations of domination with another’ (Greenstein 2003: 16). Or rather, they do not imagine that the only way to oppose state power is to seek to overthrow the state. Cock argues that new forms of mobilisation best described with Williams’ phrase ‘militant particularisms’ (Cock 2004). To quote Barchiesi, politics of the multitude is ‘non-teleological’ and seeks to ‘open up previously unchartered terrains of political possibility and lines of advance’ (Barchiesi 2004: 6 & 7).

For post-Marxists, then, it does not follow that the absence of a socialist programme renders one unprogressive. While local struggles often focus on particular sites or situations, they are not confined to them and can expose and contribute to broader struggles (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 18). Small scale, locally embedded actions can contest broader relations of dominance and subordination. It is therefore limiting to say with some disappointment, as Guha does of Indian rebellions, that they failed to overcome their parochialism and transform into a national liberation movement (2000: 6). As South Africans well know, liberation movements are indeed an opportunity for dramatic progress. Yet state capture often disappoints many who were hoping for a better deal and they cannot therefore be seen as the be all and end all of radical activity. As Laclau and Mouffe have argued, the political nature of struggles is not confined to parties
and the state, but is rather any ‘type of action whose objective is the
transformation of a social relation which constructs a subject in a relationship
of subordination’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 153). The existence of a range of
struggles, even if not coordinated in a national liberation movement, can
result in a ‘chain of equivalence’ that confronts and transforms relations with
dominant powers.

Such movements avoid black and white analysis which flattens the
complexities that confront activists. They possess higher tolerance for
ambiguity, uncertainty, the absence of road maps. This requires novel
reflection on complex ethical choices rather than resorting to the well known
scripts (Bauman 1993). Committed socialists such as Harvey believe that the
innovation of embedded politics is an inadequate replacement for marco-
politics.

The danger … is of seeing all such struggles against dispossession as by
definition ‘progressive’ or, even worse, of placing them under some
homogenizing banner like that of Hardt and Negri’s ‘multitude’ that
will magically rise up to inherit the earth. This, I think, is where the real
political difficulty lies.’ (Harvey 2003a: 168-9)

The problem in South Africa, though, is that any attempt to trump up a
moral equivalence between the apartheid state and the post apartheid state on
the grounds of the latter’s continued adherence to capitalism is simply not
going to ride with the majority of the population, as the continued loyalty to
the ANC in the face of growing economic exclusion attests. A programme of
state capture would be a non-starter when the present state is led by a recent
liberation movement which continues to embody so strongly national
aspirations. Or rather, aspirations have been channelled through a nationalist
project which resonates with the population despite enduring poverty.

Conclusion
Mbembe’s characterisation of postcolonial opposition is indeed evident in the
elite’s expectation of acquiescence, in the very existence of an alliance with
unions and the communist party, and in activists own anxieties in opposing
former comrades. However, Mbembe’s fatalistic expectation of mutual
zombification is contradicted by the reality of various movements across
South Africa who have transformed the political landscape in post-apartheid
South Africa (Barchiesi 2004: 4). The obvious tangible effect of social
movements on the political landscape of the country is that they represent the
interest of the poor and marginalised and apply pressure on the government
to pay greater attention to the welfare of these groups. This is an avenue for
marginalised people and those interested in the plight of the marginalised to
impact on material distribution, on social exclusion, and on claiming a certain
degree of influence and power over state itself. In a context where the formal
political system has failed to produce a significant political party to the left of the ANC to more directly champion the cause of the poor, social movements restore a degree of political balance in favour of the poor.

Most movements have had a direct or indirect influence on policy. Some, such as Self Employed Women’s Union, Treatment Action Campaign, Homeless Peoples Alliance, have explicitly set out to influence state policy through engagement and negotiation. Others have influenced state policy through, in effect, making certain courses the state wanted to pursue more difficult for them. Social movements are setting boundaries and limits to state activity (or inactivity) that might not otherwise be there. Resistance comes to redefine what the government sees as the path of least resistance, so to speak. Pro-poor policies suddenly seem attractive in comparison to being tied up in expensive and time consuming court proceedings or being faced with hostile protestors.

It might be argued that the impact of social movements is manifesting in the government’s rhetorical shifts away from the austerity of the 1990s. Many remain sceptical that this will translate in to a meaningful change in the lives of South Africa’s jobless. It may well be argued, furthermore, that such shifts are the twin of the strategy of repression. For Harvey, drawing on Gramsci, ‘[t]he power of the hegemon … is fashioned out of and expressed through an ever-shifting balance between coercion and consensus’ (Harvey 2003a: 37-38). Realising that it has opened the door for others to gain support through more explicitly worded anti-poverty manifestos, the ANC government shifted to re-capture this ground in the build up to the 2004 election.

Within movements, there are debates around participation and reformism versus opposition and rupture. These positions speak to a somewhat hypothetical ideal rather than to the reality of the current effect of social movements. It is arguable that, at times, activists and critics alike place excessive focus is on the extreme end point of some radical action, which is revolutionary political change. Mobilisation by the poor has unsettled the elite’s presumption that it can proceed how it feels best. In and of itself, this is both radical and counter-hegemonic.

References


http://general.rau.ac.za/sociology/Greenstein.pdf


