South Africa between Neoliberalism and Social Democracy?: Respecting Balance while Sharpening Differences

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ABSTRACT The diverse, rich writings of Bill Freund are celebrated, justly, for insight, critical distance and engagement with society’s most profound problems. That engagement, however, is open-ended, honest and provocative, hence inviting further debate. This paper considers Freund’s perspectives on socialism and post-colonial class orientation; South African liberation winners and losers; the nature of the post-apartheid urban experience; international and regional processes; the role of the left intelligentsia; and the emerging community-based alternative to the ruling party and its alliance with workers and communities. In all of these areas, Freund’s recent writing unveils creative tensions, often requiring rejoinders and rebuttals, as he charts a course of analysis that hovers between critique and endorsement, i.e. between an awareness of neoliberal problems and a desire for genuine social democratic solutions. From analysis to agency, Freund’s reading of South Africa allows us to sharpen differences with his viewpoint and evidence, while also respecting his extraordinary balance.

Did the liberation of South Africa represent ‘a reformed version of the existing configuration, a revolutionary negation of that configuration, or something in between’? To help judge, according to Bill Freund, there are other examples to draw upon: Russia’s 1917 revolution, the US 1930s New Deal, the French 1936 Popular Front, British Labour in 1945. Each of these cases, no matter their diversity, amounted to a ‘decisive break’, a transition sufficiently powerful to forge new class alliances that ‘provide legitimacy, to a great variety of political orders’ (Freund, 1986a).

For Freund, the dramatic rupture in the balance of forces sought by progressives must be accompanied by that crucial variable, political legitimacy for the long haul. To monitor legitimacy requires of the sympathetic analyst highly nuanced considerations of both contradictions and stabilising capacities. The ability to provide nuance has marked Freund’s work for many years across the African continent, and supplied his readers with highly detailed explorations of intra-capitalist...
machinations, of capital–labour relations, of workers’ culture, and more recently of dynamics within the main cauldron of social contradiction, the mega city (especially Durban). Freund’s contemporary South African political writing is particularly balanced, maybe to a fault, presuming as it does a basic critique of racial/gendered capitalist power relations, yet also evoking caution against excessively urgent, radical and explicitly socialist scholarship and activism. Where critics see contradiction, Freund insists there is ruling class legitimacy, even if sometimes he goes out of his way to provide it, even where that task is an intellectual and political stretch.

**Sympathy for socialism, predilection for realism**

Freund’s difficult balancing act is what I want to explore in this essay, drawing mainly upon his assessments of post-apartheid South Africa. This review, to confess, is written partly by way of personal rebuttal, in light of how seriously the scholarly community takes Freund’s views on both historical and contemporary political economy. Others know how consistent Freund has been, and will recognise the durable patterns I observe below, dating at least a quarter century to his reflections on Tanzania. Freund wrote in 1981 against the likes of John Saul, Lionel Cliffe and Issa Shivji, whose studies were, he alleged, state-centric, excessively reliant upon government proclamations and especially Nyerere speeches:

> There is a genuine irony to be observed in watching Marxists, theoretically committed to a materialist analysis, providing an ultimately idealist approach to their subject, primarily in the hope of influencing sympathetic Tanzanian officials . . . For Shivji, the principal obstacle to the road to socialism in Tanzania lay in the actual class structure of society, in particular the domination of a newly-formed ‘bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ which sought only more favourable terms from Western imperialism and did not seriously challenge Tanzania’s place in the world economy (Freund, 1981, pp. 486–487).¹

Today, one could take the material above and without much strain replace the names Saul, Cliffe and Shivji with South Africa’s strong cadre of independent socialist scholar-activists, while substituting South Africa for Tanzania. On the one hand, such an exercise would demonstrate Freund’s consistency of tone and political positionality; on the other, though, it will compel us to ask whether the historian’s gaze is perhaps not too forgiving, seeing impressionistically rather than in the sharper pointillist form often required to attract readers into outrage and then into action. Thus by 1992 when at the height of the left’s insurrectionary mood Freund critically reviewed four economic books—including one of mine (which he lambasted)—the punchline was very much in balance:

> South Africa does not actually contain revolutionary possibilities at present . . . The old power in South Africa [is not] genuinely on the point of collapse or disappearance . . . A South African revolution could, therefore, only be accompanied by local devastation, with massive emigration of skilled people and capital flight, as well as in the teeth of international...
hostility. It would at best be a harsh, militantly policed ‘barracks socialism’. Such a militarised socialism could organise a society with a high degree of equality but a low level of consumption and with few prospects for accumulation and development ... The alternative, however unwelcome to advocates of class struggle, involves conciliating much of the bourgeoisie and giving the South African middle-class of all colours a way forward (Freund, 1992, p. 85).

According to Saul, there was a cost to this kind of quiescence: ‘It is the generalisation of such a mood that emboldens various local apostles of market liberalism (Don Caldwell, Leon Louw and Frances Kendall) to bombard the book-store shelves with their volumes in praise of unqualified, “deracialised” free enterprise’ (Saul, 1992, p. 7). Given Freund’s history of anti-capitalist critique, that kind of rebuttal would be terribly unfair as a general proposition, even if in context I’m inclined to agree with Saul. But to remind ourselves of his orientation and prescience, consider Freund’s contribution to the first issue of the journal he co-edited, *Transformation*, in the heady year of 1986:

It is the stock in trade of many eloquent anti-apartheid speakers that, if only you abolished apartheid, most of South Africa’s problems would go away. This is in fact nonsense. If you abolished apartheid, most South Africans would remain poor and lead lives of material deprivation. Unless a significant social and economic restructuring occurs based on a developed notion of redistribution, only a small proportion of those who now feel oppressed would be able to benefit substantially (Freund, 1986b, p. 124).

In the same article, Freund queried whether South Africa might follow the Zimbabwe route. At the time, he wrote, that country was by no means a failed model but its successes rely on the combination of economic power remaining in the hands of an efficient ‘settler’ bourgeoisie on capitalist terms together with the expansion of peasant agriculture and a state able to create clientelist networks reaching into the black countryside. One wonders how much of this would possible, let alone desirable, in South Africa (Freund, 1986b, p. 126).²

That it was not only possible but both embarrassingly real and undesirable was emblematised in the public humiliation Jeremy Cronin received from within ANC ranks in August 2002 for, amongst other thought crimes, conceding the advance of ‘Zanufication’ within the leading ranks of the ruling party. The joint trajectory runs as follows: from elite deal-making as opposition dawns; to (‘reluctant’) adoption and implementation of neoliberal policies; to growing urban discontent by poor and working people; to exhausted nationalist repression (Bond and Manyanya, 2003).

In turn, whether one is reformist or revolutionary, the search for this kind of nuance propels us into the next debate, over details of the transition.

**Who won and lost in South Africa’s liberation**

A decade after liberation, writing again in *Transformation*, Freund defended ‘success’ along the lines he had earlier predicted:
I wish here to suggest that while the ANC government has been won over by the need of participation in globalising economic institutions such as membership in the World Trade Organisation, with macro-economic policies aiming at high interest rates, an autonomous Reserve Bank, and low state indebtedness and the reduction of import tariff barriers, it has simultaneously, contradictorily, moved with increasing firmness towards a nation-building project along fairly classic lines. This movement has been more coherent under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki than it was during the presidency of Nelson Mandela (1994–99). This has been especially apparent in the circumstances precipitated by the US occupation of Iraq (B. Freund, 2004, p. 41).

This is the core thesis one finds repeated periodically in Freund’s contemporary analysis. To sharpen the differences, consider a reconstruction of the paragraph with an entirely opposite orientation:

South Africa’s power transfer entailed the ANC’s embrace, participation and legitimisation of globalising economic institutions, notwithstanding the detrimental impact on the bulk of the party’s constituents. The De Klerk regime forced SA membership in the World Trade Organisation (though without consultation Alec Erwin agreed on the Alliance’s behalf); the Transitional Executive Committee’s first act in December 1993 was to sign a condition-laden IMF loan; and World Bank teams advised profusely on development policies, including the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy (Bond, 2004, chaps 1, 3; Bond, 2005, chap. 5). In order to impose neoliberal macro-economic policies, ANC leaders adopted a nation-building project along fairly classic lines, by talking left while walking right, a process that became simultaneously more vocal and unbalanced under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki. The contradictions were especially apparent in the circumstances precipitated by the US occupation of Iraq, highlighted by superficial anti-war sentiments but more durably characterised by cooperation in the prosecution of the war where it counted: $250 million in Denel arms sales to the US/UK belligerents, warship docking rights, collaboration in the UN’s May 2003 endorsement of US occupation, and the legitimisation of George W. Bush’s Africa gambits during a July visit (Bond, 2004, chap. 2).

Differences here are a matter of emphasis, to be sure. And so while agreeing with Freund that the ANC has built an impressive, race-conscious ‘national’ sensibility, we might also pause to consider the costs of a ‘fairly classic’ nationalist project in modern Africa. And here we would logically consult Frantz Fanon:

The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary. Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neocolonialism. The national bourgeoisie will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie’s business agent, and it will play its part without any complexes in a most dignified manner (Fanon, 1963 [1961], pp. 152–153).

Should a commentator of Freund’s calibre and political leanings not more rigorously challenge the transmission line from Washington to Pretoria? When he does explicitly address the ANC elite’s historic mission—as imperialism’s political intermediary in Africa (as discussed below)—Freund certainly recognises the neoliberal drift codified in GEAR. But he then adds a touch of dignity:
In certain areas, a shrewd observer could certainly find aspects of South African policy that either did not fit or went against this kind of neoliberal logic, however. For instance, the ANC put forward progressive and supportive trade union legislation at a time when trade unions internationally were largely on the defensive. Nedlac, a corporatist body meant to create permanent dialogue between business, labour, civic organisations and the state received much attention (although its actual efficacy has been fairly limited). Generally speaking, the social service budgets increased while the apartheid era military budget declined dramatically in size. Privatisation was given strong verbal support but rather little real privatisation took place. Instead, the state took care to create regulatory agencies with reference to telecommunications, broadcasting, etc. (B. Freund, 2004, p. 46)

Taking these claims one by one, we might start with ‘progressive and supportive union legislation’. Aside from mining safety laws, labour legislation has been neither path-breaking nor appropriate. Initially in 1995, movement strategist Karl van Holdt worried that the Labour Relations Act’s corporatist orientation would ‘undermine unions’ (Von Holdt, 1995, p. 6). Subsequently, as Andries Bezuidenhout showed, these plans amounted merely to ‘the rearticulation of past logics within the process of change’:

The hope [of labour law drafters] was maybe that generalised exercises of ‘negotiated reconstruction’ would ... create the high road of post-Fordism ... [But] the post-colonial workplace regime is quite able to contain elements of ‘negotiated reconstruction’, ‘authoritarian restoration’ or ‘wildcat cooperation’—often simultaneously, but also at different times ... Even if firms shift their approach to one of negotiated reconstruction, the question remains as to how sustainable such an approach would be in the context of an absence of state structures to sustain large-scale transformation. Islands of cooperation in a sea of despotism do not really change landscapes—they lead to the enclave economies created by settler colonial societies based on the logic of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion (Bezuidenhout, 2004, p. 21).

Freund may well concede this failure to genuinely change the industrial landscape, as well as the predictable reaction by the ANC’s neoliberal bloc, egged on by the IMF and World Bank: to roll back some of the law’s overtime and job protection goals shortly after Mbeki’s election in 1999, and to propose the construction of a second-tier under regulated market in 2005 (the latter has so far been resisted). Freund would not have expected Nedlac to address such matters, for GEAR and recent labour regime changes were simply not taken there, leaving the institution moribund (aside from its ongoing function as a corporatist talk shop, fruitlessly validating meaningless national economic summits).³

But what of his comment that ‘the social service budgets increased while the apartheid era military budget declined dramatically in size’? Naturally, without the burden of border wars, colonial occupation of Namibia, proxy guerrilla armies, military import substitution and a nuclear weapons programme to fund, the defence budget was already falling rapidly, well before 1994. Naturally, so as to prosecute its growing subimperial functions in Africa (invasion of Lesotho in 1998, plus missions to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Cote d’Ivoire and Sudan, as well as potential military roles in other hot-spot zones), Pretoria offered the SA National Defence Force generous new weaponry,
costing between R40 and R80 billion, depending upon which currency conversion dates are used. This meant that from 20 per cent of total state spending in 1990, ‘protection services’ dominated by the military and police fell to 16 per cent in 1997 but then increased to 17 per cent by 2000, where it has remained.

As for social spending, the trends were also uneven: the percentage of the state budget allocated to social spending rose from 46.7 per cent in 1995/1996 to a high of 49.2 per cent in 1998/1999 before falling to 47.7 per cent in 2001/2002, thanks mainly to a drop in education spending, and rising again subsequently with increased welfare spending (Hunter et al., 2003, p. 19). Using slightly different measures, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shows the ratio fluttering between 49 and 53 per cent of state spending. (At the same time, the state budget in relation to GDP was declining from 31.1 per cent in 1995/1996 to 28.0 per cent in 2001/2002; although there was a slight subsequent rise to 30.1 per cent in 2004/2005.) Using an updated measure that includes health, education, welfare and community development, the IMF recalculated the rise in social spending from 13.7 per cent in 2003/2004 to 14.8 per cent in 2006/2007 (International Monetary Fund, 2007, p. 35). This is not at all impressive, given the vast inherited gaps in race-based inequality between state recipients. Indeed, it was telling that in 1996, the then welfare minister, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi (then Communist Party vice-chairperson), proposed cutting the child welfare grant from R135 to R75/month so as to spread the grants to more people, before resistance by churches clawed it back to R100/month.

Aside from recurrent social spending, what kind of class bias can be determined within the state’s substantial capital investments during the post-apartheid era, especially on durable infrastructure? The United Nations Development Programme reported that the two major post-apartheid shifts in state fixed investments were a cutback in the construction of schools, hospitals and administrative services termed ‘social infrastructure’ (by 5.3 per cent from 1995–2002) and an increase in capital investments benefiting business (up 7 per cent) (Table 1).

### Table 1. State Capital Spending, 1995–2002

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<th>Current prices, Rand billion</th>
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<td>Capital expenditure</td>
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<td>(gross fixed investment)</td>
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<tr>
<td>As % of GDP</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
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<td>Economic infrastructurea</td>
<td>6.0</td>
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<td>Social infrastructureb</td>
<td>5.1</td>
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<td>Economic servicesc</td>
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aRoads, bridges, dams, electricity, water supply.
bSchools, hospitals, etc. and administrative services.
cBusiness enterprises not included in economic infrastructure.

Freund continues his survey of the ANC’s ideological inclinations: ‘Privatisation was given strong verbal support but rather little real privatisation took place. Instead, the state took care to create regulatory agencies with reference to telecommunications, broadcasting, etc.’ Critics at a leftist NGO, the Freedom of Expression Institute—the only genuine watchdog in the telecoms field—argue, instead, that the ANC government took great care to either destroy or end-run any independent instincts amongst the captive-regulatory bureaucracies, especially telecoms/broadcasting (Duncan, 2005).

Contra Freund, there is also a vast catalogue of post-apartheid privatisation and corporatisation within, amongst others, the telecommunications, transport, electricity and water sectors (Bond, 2005, Afterword). In the wake of widespread recognition of failure, in June 2004, COSATU expressed new-found confidence in the redeployed minister of public enterprises, Erwin: ‘We welcome the fact that the minister has, like the president, placed the issue of employment creation at the centre of the restructuring of the State-Owned Enterprises’. Writing at the same time, Freund was also sanguine about state services commercialisation: ‘If privatisation has not been abandoned, it is clear that sectors such as water provision are not going in that direction. Recently it has also been made explicit that the large state corporations will be expected to play a central role in development, rather than hived off for purchase by the private sector’ (B. Freund, 2004). Unfortunately, however, the state’s leading water official, Mike Muller, used the opportunity of a groundless Mail & Guardian attack on the independent left in mid-2004 to blithely announce that 275,000 households had been disconnected because of non-payment in 2003, demonstrating in the process that notwithstanding the horrific implications for HIV+ consumers in the context of renewed cholera, diarrhoea and later typhoid, water services were indeed going in the direction of commodification (Muller, 2004).

The alleged developmental state role of parastatal corporations was also unveiled as a fib in September 2004, when unions threatened ‘the worst strike in SpoorNet’s history’ once the railway firm announced retrenchments in the immediate wake of parent parastatal firm Transnet’s R6.3 billion pre tax loss. According to Chris de Vos, secretary-general of the SpoorNet union UTATU, at his first meeting with labour in July, the left talk accompanied a walk right: ‘Erwin had said SpoorNet as a state-owned company had the responsibility of creating jobs, not shedding them’. By the end of August, Erwin clarified his position, ‘saying state-owned companies were not employment agencies and that managers had to do everything possible to make businesses profitable, including cutting jobs’ (Faniso, 2004).

By any account, a developmental state should create conditions in the broader economy that increase employment; the South African version appears committed instead to defining away the problem. The alleged two million new ‘jobs’ created by 2004 were mainly based in the informal sector, lacking security, regulation, a living wage or benefits. Independent newspapers labour commentator Terry Bell explained:

Homemakers who help sustain themselves and their families out of backyard vegetable plots or who keep a few chickens are part of the new employed class. In fact, that vast army of the
barely hidden jobless who stand forlornly on street corners for hire or who sell coat hangers, rubbish bags or handfuls of sweets at traffic lights or railway stations in the hope of making a few rand all add to this two million jobs figure. According to the latest statistics, in September 2001, 367,000 workers earned nothing for their labour, while a further 718,000 were paid between R1 and R200 a month.

As Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) leader Zwelinzima Vavi told Bell, ‘It is absurd to record such labour as jobs’ (Bell, 2004).

For Freund, the state’s failure to create jobs ‘has much to do with a failure of capacity and imagination rather than bad will or hostility’ (B. Freund, 2004). But after a decade and more in power, surely the capacity excuse begins to wear thin—and surely it is a more appropriate excuse for a state like Mozambique’s than one which not very long ago manufactured nuclear weapons. As for imagination, it does not take much thinking to be reminded of past public job creation programmes on a massive scale, including but not limited to the ruptures with exhausted capitalism noted in the first paragraph. A stubborn blindness corresponds to Neoliberal pressures, as finance minister Trevor Manuel revealed in a January 2000 interview: ‘I want someone to tell me how the government is going to create jobs. Workers can go on a general strike against the government day after day and you’re not going to create jobs. It’s a terrible admission but governments around the world are impotent when it comes to creating jobs’ (Randall, 2000). Surely this exemplifies a fused failure of personal/state capacity/imagination, with bad will and hostility to the trade unions and unemployed millions.

Ambivalence about the transitional city

Official ill will is especially evident in transitional Durban, a municipality that is typically praised by mainstream commentators for catalysing national initiatives such as free water. For Freund, looking at Durban in late 2004, ‘The new government is committed to breaking down white power as it existed ... [and] is committed to equity in services, employment, etc. as part of the making of the “new South Africa”’ (W. Freund, 2004; see also Freund, 2001). It could be more accurately argued, though, that Durban’s municipal managers are explicitly committed to the opposite: inequitable services. Without shame, their project is based upon increasing class differentiation in services, geographical dispersal of the poor, and residential income segregation, combined with a ferocious proclivity to disconnect water and electricity to people unable to pay their bills, as we will see in coming pages. It is perplexing that Freund is so generous to the rulers of his adopted hometown, given numerous critiques of Durban’s world-class attack on poor people, by Baruti Amisi, Richard Ballard, Saranel Benjamin, Ashwin Desai, Desmond D’Sa, Peter Dwyer, Fazel Khan, Alex Loftus, Fiona Lumsden, Fatima Meer, Ntokozo Mthembu, Raj Patel, Bobby Peek, Brandon Pillay, Richard Pithouse, Trusha Reddy and others.4

Consider the best possible case, eThekwini Water and Sanitation’s delivery of free water. Durban officials gained national and international fame for persuading
SA water minister Ronnie Kasrils to adopt a national free water policy, covering 6,000 litres per household per month in 2000. Why that amount? The ill-advised Kasrils couched his justification in the narrowest of financial terms: ‘It would save money because local authorities would not be saddled with the problem of administering large numbers of small accounts’ (SA Press Association, 2000). Using this logic, the obvious non-sequitor is that at litre number 6,001, a municipality is expected to charge not for one litre consumption (i.e. avoiding large numbers of small accounts), but instead for 6,001—which in turn defeats the whole purpose of the free basic water subsidy. This is a life-and-death matter for those many large households with HIV+ members and with tenants who desperately need what the RDP promised: at least 60 litres of water per person per day, not 6,000 litres per household per month, an amount biased towards small yuppie/dinkie (double-income, no kids) households. Durban’s solution is to limit tens of thousands of poor families to only 200 litres per household per day in a drum with extremely low water pressure, which cannot be expanded even during times of high need for water such as funerals, holiday periods or emergency health problems.

This is just one of many paradoxes associated with the bravado over Durban’s alleged commitment to ‘equity in services’. Oxford doctoral candidate Alex Loftus ventured into the Durban townships to investigate municipal water policy and practice, and offered a mid-2003 report worth quoting at length:

eThekwini Water and Sanitation (eTWS) executive director Neil Macleod has been praised internationally for his efforts to service informal areas and develop a free basic water policy whilst systematically being able to reduce demand and recover most of the costs of supplying and distributing this water. . . . We met families who were in the process of being experimented on by the Metro’s flow-limiting technologies, another sign of the dynamism the National Geographic so admires.

As if to emphasise the double-edged sword of the free water policy, the development of these technologies seems to have gone hand-in-hand with the development of the free basic water allowance. Macleod had reliably informed me that the intention is to reduce the flow of water to the free water allowance of 6kl per month. Families finding themselves in financial difficulties will thereby be helped by the installation of these trickle devices. In a way, he seemed to view it as a near perfect financial management tool for struggling families (i.e. the ‘deserving poor’).

If only Macleod could have visited some of the families with dirty buckets being filled by a lonely drip. One head of such a household showed us her bill (now free and with arrears frozen) but the amount she’d been able to access from this constant drip was less than 1kl of water over one month—less than 33 litres a day for a family of three. It seems the experiment in limiting consumption still needed some fine-tuning before its launch.

In an interview with Macleod, what angered me above all was his insensitive arrogance towards such situations. He openly admitted to roughly 1000 disconnections taking place across the municipality daily. This shouldn’t be viewed as a problem, he assured me, there is no need to adjust the tariffs or increase the free water allowance, rather the disconnections are (once again) merely a mechanism of financial management.
And what about the woman’s situation with her ‘over restricted flow’? She must have a leak. Now, even I’m enough of a water engineer to know that if she had had a leak, her meter would read a higher level than she was actually receiving. Instead, what Macleod wanted me to understand, was that people lie in townships. They lie about not being able to afford to pay for water and lie about how many people live in their houses. They lie to PhD researchers. These terrible lies have even touched the upper echelons of the city council, the Exco, who Macleod’s team are busy convincing of the error of their ways (along with ‘countering the lies of the enemy—those concerned citizen whatever’s’). I was told of families with satellite dishes and mobile phones who would never make any payments for water. In fact he would take me to the houses of these cheats if I still remained so adamant in my disbelief.

In a separate interview with the manager for research and development, the fourth one I’d had, he parted by asking me if I’d been in Durban long enough to be convinced by the position of eTWS. He joked about my initial horror at the levels of disconnections in the city and said; now you must understand why. But, after ten months of visiting Inanda, KwaMashu and Mzinyathi, I don’t understand their mistrust for people, I don’t understand their insensitivity and I don’t understand why their policies are so blatantly self-destructive.

By bringing new customers into the network but disconnecting them as soon as water arrives, or by limiting people’s flow to a stingy amount, which is claimed to be people’s sole moral dessert, they are pouring anger and resentment into the expanding network. Just as the water network is connecting more people throughout the city (bringing with it the potential to connect struggles), it is locking people into the uneven circulation of capital through the veins of eThekwini Water Services. These flows of capital bare little regard for human needs nor wants, rather this circulation of money shapes relations of social power. These relations ensure that the poor of Durban are forced to limit their consumption of water to levels barely enough for subsistence, whilst the rich can consume with rash abandon (Loftus, 2003, p. 1).

Across Durban, such stories are legion. Two researchers working with the municipality—Reg Bailey and Chris Buckley—revealed in 2005 an extraordinary one-third reduction in the consumption of water recorded by low-income Durban residents, from 22 kiloliters/household/month in 1997 to 15 in 2004. This decline occurred during the period of health epidemics (cholera, diarrhoea and HIV/AIDS), and although sufficient data do not exist to determine the adverse public health, gender and economic implications, these probably have been serious. Due to pricing changes, poor people cut back their consumption far more than did wealthier Durban residents—with a price elasticity of $-0.55$ for the poorest third compared to $-0.11$ for the richest third. Indeed, as a result of these processes and increasingly uneven access by water consumers, resident satisfaction with Durban water supply is a matter of some concern, with the December 2006 ‘State of the Cities’ reporting a decline in households with in-house water supply from 62 per cent in 1996 to just 50 per cent in 2001 and 2004, as a result of municipal demarcation changes. But unlike every other major South African municipality, this record did not improve during the early 2000s.

Moreover, as a matter of city policy, the poorest residents are regularly compelled to relocate from well-located public housing or informal shack settlements
to distant, outlying townships. Either there is a bribe—200 litre water drums and urinary-diversion toilets—or physical force reminiscent of apartheid forced removals. For those who struggle to remain, coercion typically occurs through water or electricity disconnections. This is not a secret, and a typical story in the Durban media reads as follows:

A sickly Wentworth woman claims her health has deteriorated since her electricity was cut two weeks ago after she had failed to pay a R13 000 account. Colleen Samuels, a disability pensioner from Wentworth who suffers from asthma attacks, says having no electricity has made the last few weeks an ordeal. Her problems began in November last year when she received a bill of R13 000, which showed a high water consumption. Samuels said her bill normally came to around R100 . . .

Neil Macleod, head of Water and Sanitation, said that they were not sure about why the account had come to R13 000 and that a meter test needed to be performed. ‘It could be due to a leak or a faulty meter, both of which the customer must sort out as it is on private property. She must also pay the fee to have the meter checked’, said Macleod. He said the money would be refunded should they encounter a faulty meter, but since Samuels refused to pay for the meter to be checked, they couldn’t do anything to help. ‘Only after the meter is tested for faults can we think of adjusting her account’, said Macleod (Packree, 2005, Herald Supplement, p. 1).

Another:

As if being physically disabled and preparing for final exams are not enough, pupils at an Umlazi school have the added challenge of having to cope with their water supply being cut off. Since last Thursday, the Mason Lincoln Special School for Physically Challenged Learners in Umlazi V-Section has had no water. The hostel on the school’s premises caters for its 80 pupils, who come from around KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. According to a letter received by the school from the eThekwini Municipality’s Water Credit Control department, the non-payment of their account led to a restrictor being installed on the water meter; and a site investigation ‘confirmed that you have tampered with the water supply resulting in a higher flow of water’. The letter cautioned that further tampering would result in the water connection being removed.

The school’s principal, Happy Shoba, however, insists they have not tampered with the water meter or restrictor . . . ‘Last Tuesday a representative from the mayor’s office came to the school to discuss the issue. Two days later, they disconnected our water’, she said . . . ‘We pay the current consumption, which is usually R5 500 to R6 000 a month. Even Dr Michael Sutcliffe (city manager) is aware of the problem. When we made the agreement, he was there.’ . . .

Since the water was disconnected, the pupils have had to change their timetables. The norm is to wake up around 6am to get ready for school. But, because many have to wheel themselves to the water tanks and back to the bathrooms, this week they have been getting up at 4am to be ready for class . . .

According to the head of water at the municipality, Neil Mcleod, the problem began in 2000. ‘They seemingly have tenants who appear to be nurses, teachers and police and they don’t pay the school (for the use of the utilities).’ McCleod said they had been trying to sort the
problem out since 2000. He said the money the school paid every month was just keeping the bill around the R600 000 level (Parsons, 2004).

Freund is not a social historian and would not be expected to document such detailed indignities of state delivery policy. And moving to Johannesburg, he does offer somewhat more critical perspectives, noting in his 2005 State of the Nation chapter that in relation to iGoli 2002 public services corporatisation, ‘Cross-subsidies and decommodified provision of basic needs were not part of this conception. In its own terms, this plan has been quite successful. Johannesburg has been restored to something like fiscal health and gradually a new bureaucratic ethos has been established on a stable basis’ (Freund, 2005, pp. 306–307). Objections to this description, though, would come not only from low-income people—disconnected at the rate of 20 000 households per month in the run-up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development—who know from brutal disconnections that the ‘Red Ants’ aren’t a good example of a modern bureaucratic ethos (something Freund also notes later in that chapter). In addition, there are legions of middle-class and upper-class victims of Johannesburg’s regular electricity outages and never-ending billing fiascos.

In sum, though, the vignettes above—added to which is a wave of municipal protests against ineffective services—suggest that the most relevant future urban research will necessarily tackle more forcefully the apparent class-apartheid orientation of South Africa’s governing elite. Freund, too, observes in his 2005 review that municipal authorities’ rhetoric about transcending apartheid desegregation is, actually, ‘only limited in success’ because ‘the process is mostly driven and largely spearheaded by the dictates of the private sector along long-established lines . . . [T]he beneficiaries today may be better defined in class than in race terms’ (Freund, 2005, p. 316). Thus while on the one hand, Freund’s writing is exceedingly diplomatic about the new bureaucratic/political elite (and especially the relegitimised apartheid-era managerial elite including Macleod), on the other hand, he also offers a powerful structural critique of Durban’s neoliberal form and content:

Umhlanga symbolises the typical features associated with the globalised city: a sharp division between a cut-off and protected rich and growingly unwanted and irregularly supported poor, an obsession with security and the hunger of capital for exploitation of new land for constructing houses and commercial property. The architectural models used are eclectic and international with little or no use of any South African indigenous building forms. While the expansion of Umhlanga serves to decentralise Durban, as in many international examples, the gentrification option is however also present in the form of upgrading the wealthiest parts of older inner suburbia . . . The logic of capital is one that the ANC government is very unwilling to counter; there is complete acceptance of the need to accommodate and attract business as the key dictate in urban policy (W. Freund, 2004, p. 14).

Yet, ever balanced, Freund culls more optimistic information from the township closest to his own university office, Cato Manor:

[Cato Manor Development Agency] was staffed with committed ex-activists associated with alternative housing NGOs and foreign sympathisers; [and] while there was a board of control
with local representation . . . political circumstances meant that it was possible for these bureaucrats to operate free of political pressures. They were able to devote the first years of CMDA activity to knife-edge political negotiation at which they proved very skilful, gradually stabilising conditions. They also proved very skilful at attracting outside funding, particularly from the European Union, to what was billed a model project. This situation controverts neoliberal wisdom in important ways: a strong central state eager to make centre-left interventions, a set of enlightened bureaucrats willing to dispense with overly much stakeholder intervention and large-scale extra funding with few or no strings attached. The results have been correspondingly positive in important ways (W. Freund, 2004, p. 15).

Why, then, did angry Cato Manor residents protest so vociferously several times in 2005? On one occasion, on 27 April, thousands of demonstrators threatened to block highway traffic to Mbeki’s appearance at the 11th anniversary of liberation, before hundreds of police intimidated them into returning to the slum. Notwithstanding the obvious class tension, Freund tends to take seriously the *bona fides* of the new municipal power structure. He remains acutely aware of the underlying dynamic of degradation, but in a coauthored study on Durban Local Economic Development celebrates the municipal administration as ‘well-equipped under the leadership of Michael Sutcliffe, the City Manager, a white former academic with a strong ANC history’. Yet shortly thereafter, returning to his structuralist roots, Freund is also willing to consider (if not yet document) the apparent dangers:

It is striking that the different initiatives of the municipality in local economic development are conceived of as modalities within a partnership of the public and private sectors . . . The recovery of debt payments, the reading of water and electricity meters on which the payments to the municipality are based and the use of private security companies working under contract to the local police are examples . . . Here partnership really is just a slip that effectively masks not just the privatisation of public services but, more seriously, the public sphere generally . . . [Local authorities] forge alliances with private operators in the mounting of large-scale projects which has . . . the effect of consolidating a new and politically useful local economic elite. One can imagine, beyond the PPP framework, an alliance between the old (and white) elite and the new elite (of colour) that might be forged in the future. The consequences for the mass of disinheritcd Durbanites, however, are more uncertain (Freund and Lootvoet, 2004, p. 20).

As Freund prepared that paper in 2004, some of these consequences were very certain. According to a *Mail & Guardian* report on a case that became Durban’s latter-day version of Hector Peterson (the first child murdered in Soweto on 16 June 1976), ‘The killing of a 19-year-old boy in Phoenix, Durban, two weeks ago by city council security guards has again cast a spotlight on the measures state authorities use against impoverished communities in protest. Marcel King was shot dead on Thursday June 24 by a member of a security company hired by the Durban council to disconnect electricity that had apparently been illegally reconnected in the impoverished Durban suburb’ (Robinson, 2004). When one of Sutcliffe’s privatised security officers pointed a gun at King’s mother, Marcel stepped up to protect her, and so received a bullet to his head.
Third Worldism or subimperialism?

It is when we turn to South Africa’s post-apartheid international record that Freund’s political optimism is perhaps most out of character:

If we try to assess changes under the Mbeki presidency, they represent if anything a return to more traditional forms of developmentalism and a conscious return to the politics of the Third World ... [T]he government is putting more weight on the potential of economic ties within Africa. It is strongly behind the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) initiative associated with the new African Union. Nepad has been dissected by radical critics who are correct in discerning the absence of socialist language and the presence of assumptions about participation in a globalised world economy. However, there is equally a nationalist emphasis on self-reliance and if anything ... a retention of high modernist development goals. Perhaps more significantly, South Africa has participated with countries such as Brazil and India in a rejection of Group of Eight ideas about international trade, demanding more open access to Western markets in return for further openness in other spheres. This represents a kind of Third Worldism in the spirit of Bandung revived in the wake of the dissipation of Clinton era consensus.

The identity to which Mbeki reaches for the new South Africa is African and assumes that South Africa takes its rightful place in the world as a source of influence and weight within the African continent. With the emergence of his presidency (the first term ended in 2004), co-operation with the USA and the UK has diminished. The ‘bilaterals’ of the Clinton era are forgotten. South Africa has positioned itself rather as a leader of the Third World and the African continent. The presidency puts an ever greater weight on foreign affairs and on a South African moral presence which legitimates African nationalism (B. Freund, 2004, p. 50).

Again, might a reconstruction of the argument be offered (in italics in my own words), so as to avoid giving dignity where it is not due?:

*If we try to assess changes under the Mbeki presidency, they represent if anything a return to the apartheid-era ‘constellation of Southern African states’ strategy, which in essence was designed to codify regional hegemonic status, to mollify political opposition and to enhance accumulation by Johannesburg-based capital. This requires dusting off theories about developmentalist states, seen frequently in Mbeki’s weekly newsletter and the ANC journal *Umrabulo*, as well as a conscious return to the rhetorical politics of the Third World ... The government is putting more weight on the potential of economic ties within Africa to enhance capital accumulation in South Africa, including the enhancement of super exploitative migrant labour relationships, financial liberalisation to attract African elite capital flight, revitalised IMF relationships with the DRC and Zimbabwe so as to weaken those countries’ economic defences, a much more unbalanced trade surplus with the rest of the continent, surplus extraction through a retail-driven foreign direct investment wave which has deindustrialised large parts of southern/central Africa, and promotion of extractive mining house strategies in many African countries. To assist with the penetration of Johannesburg capital and broader neoliberal relationships, Pretoria founded a Nepad initiative and through trickery foisted it upon the new African Union (Adesina, 2002, p. 5). Nepad has been dissected by radical critics who are correct in discerning the absence of socialist language and the presence of assumptions about participation in a globalised world economy. Moreover, while there is an occasional rhetorical emphasis on self-reliance and if anything a retention of high modernist development goals, these do not
successfully veil the neoliberal thrust of the project, which was concisely described by the Bush State Department as ‘philosophically spot on’ (Gopinath, 2003). Perhaps less significantly, South Africa has participated with countries such as Brazil and India in a rejection of Group of Eight ideas about international trade, demanding an even more neoliberal global agricultural regime, with more open access to Western markets in spite of the enormous damage this will do to African peasants unable to defend against cash cropping, and in spite of the fact that further Third World openness in other spheres will destroy more of the lower-income countries’ far less competitive manufacturing base. This represents a kind of Third Worldism in the spirit of late Bandung—only because the Non-Aligned Movement was subsequently hijacked by men like General Marcos of the Philippines and Mobutu of Zaire who could spout redistributive rhetoric with no consequence—which must be revived in the wake of the dissipation of Clinton-era consensus. For this is now a time when a new sub imperial grouping in India, Brazil and South Africa is urgently required by the G8 to press ahead with the Washington Consensus in their respective spheres of influence (even if in turn, Brazil and India—along with Germany and Japan—refused to dignify South Africa’s desire for a full-voting permanent UN Security Council seat in September 2005, offering instead second-class citizenship reminiscent of the Tricameral Parliament).

The identity to which Mbeki reaches for the new South Africa is African in imagery and assumes that South Africa takes its rightful place in the world as the central source of influence and geopolitical—military—economic weight within the African continent. With the emergence of his presidency, cooperation with the USA and the UK has remained strong in spite of repeated indignities such as over Mbeki’s desire to maintain repression in Zimbabwe so as, in turn, to dampen post-nationalist labour-led prospects at home. The ‘bilateral’ of the Clinton era were, from 2001, amplified through formal audiences—albeit invariably fruitless—at G8 sessions in Genoa, Kananaskis, Evian, Sea Island and Gleneagles. To maintain this posture, South Africa has positioned itself as a leader of the Third World and the African continent, but at crucial moments takes marching orders from Washington, even to the extent of Minister Trevor Manuel’s welcoming of the new World Bank president—Iraq war architect Paul Wolfowitz—as ‘a wonderful individual . . . perfectly capable’ (World Bank, 2005). The presidency puts an ever greater weight on foreign affairs and on a South African moral presence which in reality legitimates G8 neoliberalism and imperialism in Africa.

The case could be argued either way, perhaps. Again, such a reconstruction of Freund’s work suggests differential emphasis, with South Africa’s independent left consistently offering ruthless pointillist critique, compared to the warmer, fuzzier, impressionistic landscape Freund paints. But it is in looking for an alternative to neoliberalism where the need for detail is perhaps most acute, and where both Freund’s in between analysis and the independent left’s socialist inclinations must continue to inform each other.

Socialist agency

More than any scholar active in South Africa at present, Freund engages political debates through serious and compelling book reviews. In one of two tough critiques of my own efforts (e.g. ‘too superficial and predictable’), he concedes that ‘the Left has the field largely to itself. By contrast, and it says something
about the lack of serious debate in current South Africa, there is virtually no sustained defence of government macro-policies outside the realm of occasional writing and more or less financial journalism.’ Freund’s efforts here and elsewhere are not, he assures, ‘a defence of the status quo’ but rather ‘to break the ice and encourage critical discussions on these absolutely vital topics’ (Freund, 2000, pp. 81–82; Khosa, 2000, p. 21).

In that spirit, then, four minor factual rebuttals to his review of my work are in order. According to Freund, ‘Bond considers the RDP to be a much less radical document—“centrist” being the word he favours—than he was prepared to admit in the past’. Actually, for the record, I wrote in the African Communist a few weeks after the RDP was published—as well as in Elite Transition—of the triple character of the RDP: neoliberal in some of the economic analysis, centrist in the perpetual desire for corporatist pacting systems like Nedlac, and proto-socialist in its mandates for basic needs (and a few other select reforms). And I agree with Freund’s view that at least in terms of the fourth chapter of the RDP, ‘Thabo Mbeki is quite right when he asserts that the RDP and GEAR are not inconsistent; it is the way that they have been contextualised in the media that has made the difference between them seem so stark.’

The differences we have on the RDP are codified in his 1994 review in Southern Africa Report, where Freund correctly alleges that the document ‘failed to prioritise policies. It scrupulously avoided the possibility that there may be hard choices to make.’ While this problem cannot be disputed, it was well known at the time that the RDP was aspirational and that the Macro Economic Research Group (later National Institute for Economic Policy) was in the process of doing a rigorous costing exercise, issued shortly before the 1994 election. As for the next sentences—‘Nor was it integrated in any sense with the economic section of the programme and thus how the delivery side was to be paid for was never made very clear. Without this connection, without this explanation, Bond puts himself in the position of demanding social rights and delivery but with only the vaguest sense of how they could be paid for’—this is unfair criticism, given that the ‘integration’ would have followed a classical Keynesian demand-stimulation trajectory (as another MERG (1993) document, Making Democracy Work, modelled). Moreover, the RDP’s services sections in Chapter 2 clearly called for cross-subsidisation by wealthier/higher-volume consumers of electricity and water (the two most important state services whose under financing led to more than ten million disconnections of consumers during the first decade of democracy) (Freund, 1994).

For Freund, “Can’t pay, won’t pay”, to take the title of the famous play by anarchist Dario Fo, is a seductive slogan but, without an answer to the fiscal question, without structural advance on the part of the real economy, the danger could be spiralling inflation, serious debt problems and, in the end, intensified immiseration’. But the larger fiscal/monetary danger was the opposite set of policies, which were indeed adopted: fiscal austerity that led to real cuts in social spending for a few years; Reserve Bank monetarism (with historically unprecedented real interest rates); ANC repayment of the apartheid-era debt (in excess of $25
billion foreign and even more domestic); and vast cuts in taxes (e.g. from 48 per cent to 30 per cent on primary corporate rates, albeit mitigated a slight amount by a secondary tax and capital gains) on the very corporations and wealthy beneficiaries who benefited most from apartheid.

Second, asks Freund, ‘But can one seriously imagine a policy which would provide good quality housing as a gift to millions of unemployed and semi-employed people?’ A more careful reading of the RDP would unveil how Chapter 2.5 on housing was not premised on the once-off capital subsidy gift that the World Bank, Urban Foundation, US AID and National Housing Forum foisted on Joe Slovo via his neoliberal director-general Billy Cobbett (himself now the key manager of a global World Bank project, Cities Alliance). The multiple problems with the capital subsidy are recognised by Freund in a 2004 co authored study of Cato Manor (and there are a great many other problems spelled out in my Elite Transition, Chapter 4): ‘Some of the housing in Cato Manor is pathetically tiny and basic and unsurprisingly gets sold illegally for less than the official value of the house . . .’

In contrast, the RDP (Section 2.5.5) called for government to ‘allocate subsidy funds from the budget—to reach a goal of not less than 5 per cent of the budget by the end of the five-year RDP—so that housing is affordable to even the poorest South Africans’—but not through the individualised, atomistic, private property model adopted. Instead, ‘housing, infrastructure and services must involve and empower communities’ (Section 2.5.6) and, moreover, ‘The democratic government must ensure a wide range of tenure options including individual and collective home ownership as well as rental, and facilitate a wide range of housing types. Sufficient affordable rental housing stock should be provided to low-income earners who choose this option’ (Section 2.5.7). Instead of a once-off capital subsidy gift, a longer-term collective housing credit system should be established:

2.5.14 Government funds and private sector funding must be blended in order to make housing finance affordable. A national housing bank and national home loan guarantee fund must be initiated to coordinate subsidies and financing most efficiently . . . Mechanisms (such as time limits on resale, or compulsory repayment of subsidies upon transfer of property) must be introduced to prevent speculation and downward raiding. Subsidies could apply to a variety of tenure forms, but must be paid directly to individuals, groups or community-controlled institutions. Communities must get sufficient funds in order to ensure that they are not divided. 2.5.15 End-user finance and credit must be made available for diverse tenure forms, community designs and housing construction methods. Commercial banks must be encouraged, through legislation and incentives, to make credit and other services available in low-income areas; ‘redlining’ and other forms of discrimination by banks must be prohibited. Community-controlled financing vehicles must be established with both private sector and government support where necessary. Locally controlled Housing Associations or cooperatives must be supported, in part to take over properties in possession of banks due to foreclosure. Unemployment bond insurance packages and guarantee schemes with a demand-side orientation must be devised. Interest rates must be kept as low as possible (African National Congress, 1994, Section 2.4).
These and related positions, which are certainly not about a ‘gift’ approach to housing, were strongly advocated by the SA National Civic Organisation, against the interests of financiers and contractors, who worked with the neoliberal housing lobby to have Slovo reject the RDP and adopt a completely different policy. Yet without investigating the very feasible financing possibilities for 350,000 houses (using 5 per cent of the budget, i.e. R10 billion in 1994, at R30 000 per house), Freund endorsed the Urban Foundation’s pre-1994 site-service-shack policy: ‘In my view, emphasis should far rather be on site provision, upgrades and servicing for existing housing as the most practical help that the state can actually give with the money shifted into the creation of secure jobs, if need be at low pay, on a mass scale. Pity that the ANC has swallowed a pious rhetoric that makes this seem shamefully inadequate.’ Pity that Freund didn’t do the calculations and endorse the more redistributive, socially progressive strategy of a larger, community-controlled and decommodified subsidy noted above.

Third, in discussing ‘electric connections, water taps, telephones, houses, clinics, etc’, Freund makes a small but interesting conflation of delivery and foreign loans: ‘Indeed this policy of delivery was begun for political reasons in the last years of the old regime, eager to buy votes, on a basis which actually did raise our national debt from the measly “underborrowed” levels of the high apartheid years to moderate amounts of international indebtedness’. Actually, there has been virtually no foreign credit for basic needs delivery, as should be the case (the World Bank gave mainly advice and only a couple of tiny loans). Indeed some of the sentences in the RDP I am most proud of defending during the drafting process were: ‘1.4.17 The pressures of the world economy and the operations of international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and GATT, affect our neighbours and South Africa in different ways. In the case of our neighbours, they were pressured into implementing programmes with adverse effects on employment and standards of living’; and

6.5.16 The RDP must use foreign debt financing only for those elements of the programme that can potentially increase our capacity for earning foreign exchange. Relationships with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund must be conducted in such a way as to protect the integrity of domestic policy formulation and promote the interests of the South African population and the economy. Above all, we must pursue policies that enhance national self-sufficiency and enable us to reduce dependence on international financial institutions.

At one point, Freund notes: ‘As [Bond] admits, the first IMF loan taken up by the new South Africa, a relatively small one, came only in 1997’. Not so, a World Bank loan was taken on then, but the IMF made a $750 million loan to South Africa, approved by the ANC in the Transitional Executive Council, in December 1993.

Fourth, says Freund, ‘This relatively benign assessment of ANC delivery is not merely my own quirky opinion; it is what black South Africans repeatedly tell survey takers when asked for their view of the government’. In surveys done by
the Human Sciences Research Council at the time, the vast majority of respondents described apartheid-era conditions as either not having improved or having actually degenerated between 1994 and 1999: 75 per cent for sewage and 61 per cent for water delivery; 72 per cent for affordable housing; 67 per cent for education; 64 per cent for healthcare; 61 per cent for public transport; and even higher ratios for refuse removal, recreational and library facilities, police services and the like. By 2004–2005, the police were recording nearly 6,000 annual protests, most related to service delivery grievances. Per person, this is the highest level in the world I know of.

But these objections may appear as minor quibbles. More power to Freund now and in coming years; it is an ironic function for this great historian to have to play in contemporary South Africa. In a poignant reflection, Freund laments the departure of many of his own university colleagues:

Independent critical intellectuals, especially but not only those intellectuals who were not black, lost their political base when Cosatu signed on with the ANC, accepting the exiled organisation as the political master of alliance politics. They really had nowhere else to turn (except emigration or total opting out of politics) beyond working for the post-apartheid government in a loyal and supportive way … Those intellectuals might be said to have bought into more conservative strategies in order to survive politically within the ANC world … While as an academic in South Africa, Bond will be well aware of the academic scene, it is important to acknowledge, as he does not, the drastically diminished willingness of the universities to support critical activity of the kind that seemed crucial to promote in the days of sanctions and boycotts. They too hardly provide suitable havens that sustain left critics with no social or political base (Freund, 2000, pp. 85–86).

Many intellectuals active since the early 1990s might contest that point, of course. In a starker critique of the difficulty of engagement, Freund also lamented ‘the dramatic decline of social movements and the incapacity of COSATU to form a coherent basis for independent political analysis in the way the independent union movement did in a remarkable phase of the struggle era’ (Freund, 2000, p. 86).

Yet at the time of his writing these words, the possibility of socialist agency was again on the agenda, with the formation of groups like the Treatment Action Campaign (1998), Jubilee South Africa (1998), Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (1999), Durban Concerned Citizens Forum (1999) and Anti-Privatisation Forum (2000). To be sure, many subsequently foundered, but Freund was well aware of these, as his 2005 State of the Nation chapter and 2004 Transformation article suggest. In the first, though, he predicts that pre-paid meters together with ‘the establishment of regulatory agencies at one remove at least from the state, will take some of the fire out of the urban protest movements more permanently’ (Freund, 2005, p. 324). But the success that many urban protesters are having in either destroying these meters or in circumventing them by tampering illegally suggests otherwise. And in the 2004 analysis, here we have a last opportunity to interrogate his concerns about the ANC Alliance’s left opposition, namely:
the social movements of the poor which protest the inadequacies of service provision, of the absence of secure jobs, the lack of free land and the failure of the state to provide medicine against AIDS. Thus far these movements, although clearly making the state highly uncomfortable, both because they challenge its authority and because they seem to call for a permanent dole, are not able to challenge the ANC in terms of political hegemony or to form in any sense a counter-politics. Part of the discomfort comes from their ability to pin the World Bank label onto the ruling bureaucracy. It is not so clear that they have very plausible alternatives or that the ANC acts out of malice rather than confusion or lack of focus although the extent to which the ANC is captured by the bureaucrats, by the beneficiaries of the system who lack vision and expertise—usually trained by the mediocre institutions set up for black people under apartheid—does create a barrier to solving problems (B. Freund, 2004, p. 51).

How, to conclude, might this paragraph’s reconstruction proceed, in the manner of the independent left, and in a manner that Bill Freund would—in his most critical yet also balanced mode—also approve?

One result currently is the emergence of social movements of the poor which protest the inadequacies of service provision, of the absence of secure jobs, the lack of free land and the failure of the state to provide medicine against AIDS. Thus far these movements, although clearly making the state highly uncomfortable, both because they challenge its authority and because they seem to call for socialism, have begun to challenge the ANC in terms of political hegemony in particular locations and on particular issues. It is the Treatment Action Campaign, for example, that society turns to for serious interpretations of the latest political pronouncement on AIDS or to verify data on medicines roll-out; and similar movements (and allied NGOs) are striving for such status on privatisation and state services, debt/reparations, land policy, education, and the like. This is the basis for a counter-politics replete with rights-based rhetoric and a potentially overlapping, interlocking programme of decommodified, socialist provision of goods and services. Part of the discomfort comes from their ability to pin the World Bank label onto the ruling bureaucracy, well deserved given the Bank’s use of South Africa as its ‘knowledge bank’ guinea pig, and predilection to commodify everything. In contrast, the new movements generally offer plausible alternatives aimed at decommodifying, redistributing and deglobalising the key relationships (drug patents, water supply, financing). In responding, it is increasingly apparent that the ANC acts out of malice rather than confusion or lack of focus—a problem evident since at least the 1999 upsurge of services disconnections, AIDS denialism and accusations of ‘ultraleftism’ and ‘counterrevolutionaries’ against internal ANC dissidents (e.g. former Soweto regional chair Trevor Ngwane and Durban stalwart Fatima Meer). While 2002 was probably the high point in the ANC leadership’s tirade, the advent of police torture and the bannings of an anti-water disconnection march in 2004 on the occasions of the 10th anniversary election and the opening of the Constitutional Court point to residual malice. These might merely be signs of classical exhausted African nationalism, during which the ANC is captured by the bureaucrats and by the beneficiaries of the system who lack vision and expertise. Ultimately, though a barrier to solving immediate problems, the state’s predictable reaction to the new social movements—its failure to coopt them, its tendency to blame the victims, its proclivity towards violent oppression, and its ongoing insistence that any activism outside the ANC is unpatriotic—seeds the ground for a new community/labour political party of the left, of socialism.
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Notes

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1. Freund’s critique of Shivji included ‘his too uncritical endorsement of “underdevelopment theory”, his structuralist formulations and his overemphasis on sectors of the petty bourgeoisie espousing a “proletarian ideology” as an advanced vanguard. However, he provided the first real key to a comprehension of Tanzanian developments rather than taking the state ideology at its face value and, in this sense, we are very much in his debt.’

2. One reason Freund assumed it might not be possible to generate an elite deal was the inability and indeed lack of desire by business forces to accept change in their own interests, not an uncommon mid-1980s perspective. In 1987, he observed, uncharacteristically, ‘that business is frightened of a fundamental shift in the nature of the state. The likelihood that black majority rule or ANC rule would bring to bear forces that are overtly anti-capitalist and a leadership with little taste or capacity for the running of a capitalist society is much greater than the shift that 1948 brought’ (Freund, 1987, p. 94).

3. In its last important role, Nedlac united the government, labour and business in search of international corporatism, namely, the ‘Social Clause’ campaign of 1999, led by the clothing workers’ union. That was a strategic disaster on several fronts, as it split then trade minister Alec Erwin from the Third World he had hoped to lasso at the World Trade Organisation in Seattle late that year (ending in fury for Erwin, when Africa broke consensus and crashed the summit). It also distinguished COSATU trade unionists from more radical WTO opponents who took to the streets to disrupt the summit’s opening day; Erwin then invited SA labour and business representatives inside the infamous ‘Green Room’. For more on why this strategy was and remains counterproductive compared to heightened labour internationalism, see Bond (2003, chaps 9, 10).

4. See e.g. Desai (2002); and articles/reports posted at http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs. To be fair, though they don’t inform his Durban work, some are cited in Freund’s 2005 State of the Nation chapter.

References


