

# Political economy traditions in South Africa

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The study of South African political economy has an extraordinary set of lineages. There remains in political economic research an excellent potential for praxis-based scholarship and for revitalizing what was once a world-leading intellectual tradition, even if there is not a single program in a tertiary educational institution that carries its name.

Taking a longer view of economic and social relations, the various South African traditions of radical political economy were always infused with concern about race, geography and also, increasingly, gender and environment. All came together in studies of *superexploitative* capital-labour relations that underpinned apartheid. While fierce debates between radicals and liberals (whether Weberian or modernisationists) motivated 1960s-70s political economic studies, these matters go much further back as research problems, as they draw upon longstanding concerns within Marxism about superexploitation.

The origins of British capitalism, after all, were in 'primitive accumulation', the initial capitalist strategy of dispossessing non-capitalist spheres of social life, most famously in land enclosures which forced peasants into the proletarianisation process. But in South Africa the use of political power to dispossess black people of their livelihoods, so as to compel them into wage labour relations, entailed durable extraeconomic, crudely racist methods which were not just a once-off initial condition for primitive accumulation.

For researchers of South African political economy during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the idea of superexploitation was a way to understand an ongoing history of extremely biased accumulation, combining capitalism and non-capitalist sites of work, of life and of nature. This process of 'uneven and combined development' can be identified not solely on the basis of exploitation (surplus value extraction) at the point of production – the main point of Marx's *Das Kapital* – but instead in relations between market and non-market activities. It is here that an 'articulation of modes of production', between capitalism and non-capitalist systems is also of great relevance on the world stage today.

Racial restrictions were initially considered by political economists primarily as power relationships. As an early Trotskyist, Moshe Noah Averbach (1936, 131), explained, migrant labour would 'prevent the formation of a stable, hereditary urban proletariat which would become used to the traditional methods of organisation and struggle – trade union and political – of the city working classes.' But the Chamber of Mines also recorded how the 'cheap labour' system was crucial to their profitability (in official testimony to a 1944 government commission): 'the mines are able to obtain unskilled labour at a rate less than ordinarily paid in industry... otherwise the subsidiary means of subsistence would disappear and the labourer would tend to become a permanent resident upon the Witwatersrand, with increased requirements' (cited in Wolpe, 1972).

Labourers also began generating their own analysis of this kind of political economy. Amongst urban black African workers, intellectual and political figures, there were exceptional speakers in the revolutionary tradition – e.g., C.B.I. Dladla, Dan Koza, Isaac Bongani Tabata, T.W. Thibedi – whose arguments have only sporadically been recorded. At

the same time, the South African Communist Party (SACP, 1989) developed the theory of 'colonialism of a special type' (CST). Drafted by leading Johannesburg Communist Mick Harmel, CST was officially adopted during the early 1960s, and represents an internal version of dependency theory. According to the most widely-circulated analysis, 'The South African capitalist state did not emerge as a result of an internal popular anti-feudal revolution. It was imposed from above and from without.'

But because the CST framework implied that the underlying dynamic of South African political economy was not capitalist, it came under repeated questioning from left intellectuals. New generations of political economists added several other branches of Marxian analysis: Harold Wolpe's articulations of modes of production argument during the early 1970s; neo-Poulantzian 'fractions-of-capital' analysis during the late 1970s; the concept of 'racial capitalism' during the early 1980s; the Social History school of the 1980s; French regulation theory (and 'Racial Fordism') during the late 1980s; and the 'Minerals Energy Complex' from the mid-1990s.

The central concern remained race/class at the point of production. Although more and more workers began living permanently in cities near manufacturing jobs, there was still a large supply of migrant labour. From 1948 through the 1970s, 3.5 million people were forcibly removed onto the reserves, which could simply not handle the environmental demands placed on them. What Wolpe did not express was how gendered the process became. The migrant 'tribal natives' did not, when they were young, live under a system that required companies to pay their parents enough to cover school fees, or pay taxes for government schools to teach workers' children. When sick or disabled, those workers were often shipped back to their rural homes until ready to work again. When the worker was ready to retire, the employer typically left him a pittance, not a pension that allowed the elderly to survive in dignity. From youth through to illness to old age, the subsidy covering child-rearing, recuperation and old age was provided by rural African women.

The economic functionality of apartheid was, for Wolpe, a logical and necessary outcome of the post-war development of South African capitalism. But there was ample room for contesting Wolpe's chronology and understanding of the dynamics of capitalism. Historian Martin Legassick's (1974) work on the increasing capital intensity of manufacturing offered a more fertile direction of inquiry, and a critique emerged of the chronological argument about capitalism and apartheid. In a subsequent book, Wolpe (1988) backtracked substantially from the earlier position that apartheid was necessary to capitalist development, and instead agreed with critics that central aspects of their mutual evolution were contingent.

From the mid-1970s, international trends in historical materialism — especially the success of Althusserian and Poulantzian structuralism — began having a larger impact on South African political economy research, via the University of Sussex. There emerged a fascination with which 'fractions of capital' controlled the state at particular moments of political change. Although the various fractions became increasingly blurred by the 1960s as South Africa's big mining finance houses diversified into manufacturing and services, several leading neo-Marxist researchers identified prior distinctions between capitals in terms of their sector of production (mining, manufacturing or agricultural), their location within the circulation of capital (industrial, financial, commercial, landed), or their 'nationality' (Afrikaner, English-speaking, foreign) (e.g., Davies 1979). According to some critics, however, the Poulantzians' focus on fractions of capital highlighted questions of

state power but distracted from the capital accumulation process and capital-labour conflicts.

With an upsurge in protest beginning with the Durban labour movement in 1973, and with the economic slowdown beginning around 1974, political economists' attention turned from aspects of apartheid-capitalist stability and control, to instability and crisis. The theory of 'racial capitalism' was invoked to link the political and the economic. As explained by John Saul and Stephen Gelb (1981), 'From the late 1960s, the growing saturation of the white consumer market limited not only sales but also the ability of the manufacturing industry to benefit from economies of scale.' On top of new-found worker militancy beginning in 1973, Saul and Gelb identified the shortage of skilled labour as a crucial weakness created by the apartheid system's colour bar and Bantu Education policies. These shortages became acute by the early 1970s. In addition, as Charles Meth (1991) posited, overaccumulation of capital also set in, reflecting the saturation of local consumer and capital goods markets, simultaneous to similar problems at the world scale.

The fractions and racial capitalism perspectives were most harshly criticized, starting in the early 1980s, by a Thompsonian school of South African social history which prided itself for looking at society and economy not from the top (state and capital), but from the very lowest levels of the voiceless majority. Charles van Onselen (1996) did the most publicized work in drawing out detailed empirical information, although the social historians' aversion to theory was criticized by Mike Morris (1988). Indeed, no matter how rich and interesting the particularities of the social history case studies proved, they added up to very little that was generalisable for the purpose of answering the larger questions of capitalist development. The broader theoretical discourse about race and class in South Africa seemed to peak in the 1970s, and with rigorous detailed probing underway in the 1980s in the context of the search for specificity, research into the nature of the mode of production tailed off markedly.

By the late 1980s, the larger questions were again placed on the agenda. It was a time when South Africa's capitalist class demanded, perhaps for the first time, an end to formal apartheid. The reasons for this are closely related to economic stagnation and financial crisis, but what was disconcerting was how dramatically this shook many political economists who, earlier, so profoundly rejected the liberal thesis that apartheid and capitalism were incompatible. As Gelb (1987) put it, radicals must 'develop a substantial and consistent analysis of capital accumulation which preserves their view of the earlier relationship between apartheid and capitalism, explains the transformation from long run apartheid boom to economic crisis and then analyses the crisis itself.' To that end Gelb introduced the French Regulation Theory of Lipietz, Aglietta and Boyer to dissect the relative stability of South African capitalism from 1948 through the early 1970s. In honour of a phrase coined by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, 'Fordism' (signifying the symbiotic relationship between mass production and mass consumption, the product of Henry Ford's assembly line and \$5/day wages), the French considered this linkage as the basis for a full-fledged 'regime of accumulation.' South African 'Racial Fordism,' as Gelb termed it, could not succeed in linking black producers with white consumers. Others used the idea of 'peripheral Fordism' to reflect the partial linkages to the world economy.

The task for the regulationists - whether relying upon internal or international causality - then became how to stitch together a new set of 'post-Fordist' institutions and assist in the process of kick-starting capitalist growth. Wage restraint, productivity quid pro quos, social

contracts and even Taiwan-style export-orientation were advocated by Gelb and other economists connected to the Economic Trends Group 'Industrial Strategy Project. At the same time, however, Regulation Theory lost momentum internationally, and after 1991 there were no further major academic works published in this tradition.

Ben Fine and Zav Rustomjee (1997, 21) cautioned, 'The relationship between abstract theory and empirical application is not unique to the study of South Africa. But the virulent form taken by its racism within the bounds of a predominantly capitalist economy has cast considerable doubt on the simple expedient of examining South Africa's development in terms of hypotheses derived from ready-made analytical frameworks.' Their own approach was relatively institutionalist, by identifying the nexus of a Minerals-Energy Complex around which accumulation, state, labour relations and other economic phenomena could be understood. Within a decade, Fine (2008) addressed the post-apartheid political economic nexus in terms of financialisation, as 'macroeconomic policy has been designed to /manage /the capacity of the South African conglomerates to disinvest'.

In contrast, leading ANC intellectuals - such as Thabo Mbeki (2003) and Joel Netshitenzhe - justified the neoliberal economic policies they inherited and amplified, arguing that South Africa was suffering from 'two economies', and as for those left out, 'Of central and strategic importance is the fact that they are structurally disconnected from our country's "first world economy".' Yet there remain many structural *connections* still reminiscent of older labour migration systems, as SACP youth leader David Masondo (2007) observes: 'A combination of unreconstructed vulgar Marxism and modernization theory have provided conceptual basis for contemporary neoliberalism, which is dressed up as the "first economy" drawing in the "second economy" to a successful market process.' Moreover, warns Masondo, 'The CST and its National Democratic Revolution (NDR) strategy is also used by some in the ANC to justify the current neoliberal incorporation of the emerging black bourgeoisie into the structure of capital accumulation.'

With growing SACP and Cosatu critiques of Two Economies political economy, Netshitenzhe (2006) became aggrieved by 'the ideological bloodletting that sometimes accompanies policy making. It would be better if we could leave all our "isms" at home when rethinking policy.' The SA Communist Party (2006) replied, 'The point is to reflect critically upon our reality and our engagement with it, in order to unify ourselves around the most effective strategic and programmatic interventions. We need to be practical, but being practical does not mean being merely pragmatic, still less anti-intellectualist. Theory does matter, and we do need to constantly re-visit our "isms".'

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# Uneven development in Southern Africa

By Patrick Bond and Greg Ruiters (article forthcoming in *Antipode*, 2016)

## Abstract

Southern Africa is probably the most unevenly developed region on earth, combining the most modern technologies and an advanced working class with the world's extremes of inequality and social militancy. This article is a tribute to the legacy of Neil Smith, whose contribution to our understanding of political economy was exemplary (though he visited the region only once). We consider how Smith's theory assisted us in understanding financial markets within the framework of capital overaccumulation and intensified spatial unevenness, the politics of scale, difference and the way that class apartheid in this region fits within contemporary geopolitical economy.

**Key words:** Neil Smith, uneven development, urbanization, geopolitics, capitalist crisis, social resistance, solidarity, scale, unevenness within the working class.

## Introduction

Southern Africa was an ideal site for Neil Smith to visit, even once. In 1995, he came to both South Africa (when Durban hosted the International Geographical Union) and Zimbabwe (the Bvumba mountain straddling Mozambique, where he illegally jumped a mine-infested border trail on a bird-watching quest). Periodically from the early 1980s until his death, he encouraged our application of the core Marxist ideas about uneven development. Those ideas affected our research and contestation of financial markets (Bond), urban processes and regional dynamics (Ruiters) and geopolitical strategy (both of us).

We knew Smith personally thanks to doctoral studies in geography at Johns Hopkins University in the 1980s-90s and occasional suppers at David Harvey's Baltimore residence. What we permanently value from Smith's remarkably hard-line yet nuanced revolutionary Marxist project, is not only the unstinting conviction for which he was world famous, but a sense that without the rigour, creativity and eloquence he epitomized, we are all bound to live in an intellectual ghetto.

Southern Africa is the last place, however, one would expect to ghettoize historical geographical materialism given how many attempts there have been at neo-Marxist (albeit sometimes un-Marxist) political economic theorization. Until some attempts by the likes of Samantha Ashman, Ashwin Desai, Ben Fine, Susan Newman, Trevor Ngwane and ourselves over the past decade, no one here tried to pull together the perspective on uneven development Smith pointed to from 1984 onwards. No one here properly specified the structured character of divergences in production, reproduction and society-nature relations under global capitalism, *in spite of Southern Africa being the most unevenly developed region on earth*.

Smith warned that uneven development in capitalism is "structural not statistical" (1990, xiii). But some simple data offer a starting point that makes this abundantly evident (Bond 2014):

- Gini income inequality coefficients for South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia are the world's four highest;
- in polls (of business leaders) regarding worker militancy within national working classes, those in South Africa and Angola are, respectively, least and fourth least cooperative, according to the World Economic Forum;
- South Africa can boast amongst the highest levels of protests (counted by police reports) per person in the world that we know of, and the most corrupt capitalist class anywhere as measured by PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2014;
- the region suffers life-long political leaders whose patronage-based rule is tied to crony capitalism in Swaziland (Africa's last feudal monarchy under King Mswati), Zimbabwe (where Robert Mugabe persists at age 91, in his 35<sup>th</sup> year in power, as we write), Angola (the most extreme kleptocracy, where José Eduardo *dos Santos* has ruled since 1979) and the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo (a Kabila family kingdom following Mobutu's 1965-97 dictatorship).

Finally, some of the most important *ideological and strategic* lessons we learned from Smith, who as a Marxist, was once a leader in a small revolutionary political party, are today vitally needed in our politically turbulent region. Smith had what (to one of us he confessed) was a formulaic approach to Trotskyism during the 1980s but his departure from the fold due to a dispute over whether feminist socialists should have the space to organize a caucus within the International Socialism tradition, showed how genuinely concerned he was to avoid the most rigid kind of Leninist party in search of something more appropriate to the context. That is precisely the sensibility needed to penetrate the politics of difference, a politics we are left with in South Africa at a conjuncture in which Smith would, as do we, celebrate the dissolution of old alliances that are no longer in the interests of the broad phalanx of the oppressed: poor and working-class people, women, youth, the elderly, the LGBTI community, and environmentalists. But it is in making the new that the challenges arise – especially resurgent xenophobia amongst the lowest income urban residents – and that Smith's ideas about uneven development root our own sense of capitalism's limits.

### **Uneven Zimbabwe and South Africa** (Patrick Bond)

My first mentor was, in retrospect, not hard to find. It was a moment of considerable frustration, in the society and for me personally, immersed as I was in classical guitar studies during winter-spring 1982. The season was a cold one for the left, as Reaganism gathered pace. Warmed considerably at the Johns Hopkins University Grad Club, which Neil had established for conviviality's sake – so necessary at that staid institution – there was an unending series of informal seminars on Marxism. Thanks to Neil, I found myself shaking off the musty tradition of Kennedy liberalism along with my training in neoclassical economics received up the highway at Swarthmore College. My junior-year semester sojourn was at the Peabody Conservatory, a few miles down Charles Street from the Hopkins Homewood Campus protests, pubs and polemics where Neil was a constant presence. More than any brief period, those were the formative weeks for my personal politics. I hadn't met David Harvey at that stage. But after many hours learning from Neil and his mates, and nearly joining the International Socialist Organization under his

tutelage, I drifted back to finish my BA-Economics in Philadelphia. After graduation and a (repay-the-student-debt) job at the Federal Reserve augmented by finance studies with Edward Herman at the Wharton School, by 1985 it was time to move on. I took very seriously Neil's suggestion that I start my PhD with David, a stroke of great luck. Neil's life-changing advice is something that so many others can also testify to.

He made one vital intervention as I thought through research topics for the doctorate. Neil remarked on how much theoretical work on capital's spatial, sectoral and scalar unevenness was now accomplished, what with *Limits to Capital* placing these matters so centrally within political economy. The era of globalized financialisation was gaining unstoppable momentum, and Neil motivated an empirical study of the phenomenon using a particular place that was comprehensible as a country unit within a fast changing world context.

That led to my permanent move to Southern Africa in 1989; here, over the past quarter century, Smith's ideas came to serve with a force as great only as Harvey's. Since then, I've spent most of my time cataloguing the unevenness of Zimbabwe and South Africa. Zimbabwe was especially important because a century of colonial power could be traced, from 1890-1990, with a national specificity rare in doctoral case studies. There were, of course, both imported and organic forms of capital accumulation, as the dynamic of class formation corresponded to settler-colonial economic interests. For these reasons, Smith's work has been vital to my analysis, and grows ever more so the more capitalism teeters.

The core transferrable insight from Smith (1990, 149), in my view, is that uneven development represents "the geographical contradiction between development and underdevelopment where the overaccumulation of capital at one pole is matched by the overaccumulation of labour at the other." Drawing upon Harvey's (1982) *Limits to Capital* framing, there are two core dynamics of a geographical nature here. First, the fulcrum of geographical unevenness is the differentiated return on investment that creation and/or destruction of entire built environments – and the social structures that accompany them – offer to different kinds of investors with different time horizons. Meanwhile, different places compete endlessly with one another to attract investment and in the process they tend to amplify unevenness, allowing capital to play one local or regional or national class configuration off against others. The territorial power blocs that emerge are the subject of geopolitical analysis, in a formulation that works well at various scales.

Smith's (1989) later argument stressed the "continual, if never permanent, resolution of opposing tendencies toward the geographical equalisation and differentiation of the conditions and levels of production. The search for a spatial fix is continually frustrated, never realised, creating distinct patterns of geographical unevenness through the continued seesaw of capital." How well does Smith's sense of seesaw unevenness relate to societies where capitalist and non-capitalist relations are in such constant tension as in this region? Many others within the Western Marxist tradition had already noted capitalism's unevenness in Africa. Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul (1973, 145) railed against:

*uneven development* thrown up by capitalist penetration in Africa. For the underdevelopment of Africa as a whole relative to the industrial centres of the West has been accompanied and mediated by uneven development as between regions, states, tribes, and races *within* Africa itself, and this fact adds important dimensions

to the class struggle in Africa and to the character of the resistance of progressive African forces to contemporary imperialism.

But after noting the obvious, few investigated the dynamic underlying it. One was Ian Phimister (1992) who telescoped out to the global scale at the critical moment in the colonial-capitalist era, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Scramble for Africa was codified in the 1885 Berlin Conference continent-carving of borders, an outcome of overaccumulation, financialisation and shifting geopolitical power that ebbed and flowed according to both metropol and settler-colonial relations. Phimister (1992, 1) offered an

interpretation of the Scramble [that] locates its dynamic squarely in the advanced capitalist countries of Europe, but also attempts to pay due regard to changing conditions in the periphery contingent on the manner of capital's penetration of Africa itself. Africa was partitioned, then, because of capitalism's markedly uneven development after c.1870. This unevenness manifested itself both between countries and within social formations. Concretely expressed, the changing balance of economic power between the advanced industrial nations caused the weakest of them, France, and to a lesser extent, Britain, to embark on programmes of colonial expansion. British intervention, however, invariably reactive and reluctant, was crucially shaped by City interests encapsulated in the policy of Free Trade.

Next came the formal organization of space by settler-colonial regimes, starting in South Africa following the discovery of diamonds (1860s in Kimberley) and gold (1880s in the Witwatersrand area better known as Johannesburg). In the 1890s, the anticipated gold finds in Zimbabwe led to a similar settler-capitalist invasion described by Giovanni Arrighi (1973, 336): "the most important single element determining the nature of economic and political development." Overestimating the potential for gold finds near what are now the country's second and third largest cities (Bulawayo and Masvingo) meant that Cecil Rhodes had to recoup his railroad and telegraph infrastructure expenditures by importing more than 20,000 English settlers with the promise of free land and a future in farming – with all that this entailed for displacement and dispossession. Rhodes, who gained his fortune in Kimberley's Big Hole consolidating the diamond industry by hook or by crook in the 1870s-80s, had completely missed the mid-1880s Witwatersrand gold finds that made Johannesburg Africa's richest city. This made him more desperate to find the next seam, taking the unprofitable risk with the British South Africa Company invasion of Zimbabwe.

But as Arnold Sibanda (1990) then showed, it was not Rhodes' mistake, but the inexorability of mining capital's imposition of wage relations – formal capitalism – that would cement its extreme uneven development. I recall Smith agreeing with this bigger-picture argument, stressing the necessity of capital's outreach rather than the contingency – no matter how compelling a personal story – of Rhodes' outsized ego. (That ego, in turn, meant an entire university, Cape Town, received its original bequest from Rhodes' ill-begotten fortune. But in 2015, his dominating statue briefly became the national focal point for #RhodesMustFall activism – which began with a black student hurling a bucket of excrement on Rhodes and ended a month later with the statue's eviction – thereby symbolizing how little of the 'elite transition' had trickled down even at the country's main tertiary education site of elite reproduction.)

How was this unevenness expressed in terms of the space economy of production? In South Africa, the phenomenon of apartheid-era unevenness was considered a case of “articulations of modes of production,” as the exiled lawyer-sociologist Harold Wolpe (1980) theorized in the early 1970s, based on Claude Meillassoux’s (1975) study of articulations between capitalist and non-capitalist relations of agricultural production in the Ivory Coast. Smith (1990, 156), however, explained it in more abstract theoretical terms:

The logic of uneven development is theoretically prior to the problematic of articulation of modes of production. The point is that today the ‘articulation of modes of production’ is a product of the developments and limits of capital, not vice versa. More concretely, it is the logic of uneven development which structures the context for this articulation.

The settler-colonial and minerals-based power of those who accumulated most capital in the period prior to national independence – Zimbabwe in 1980, South Africa in 1994 – led to such structured unevenness that the phenomenon was mainly amplified after liberation. Indeed, Smith’s ideas were vital to our understanding the process by which neoliberal capitalism worked through the inherited spatial form and abused it further, for example, after 1994 in the extension of migrant labour for South Africa’s new platinum mines and lowering of prevailing wage rates, ubiquitous suburban sprawl, rampant property speculation (with a small amount of central city gentrification in Cape Town and Johannesburg), and perhaps most importantly, the region’s deepened insertion into a world system intent on debt peonage, reversion to primary export orientation and the deindustrialization of South African and Zimbabwe manufacturing.

Finance was central to the neoliberal policy regime and to the amplification of unevenness. Both Harvey and Smith showed how, theoretically, the tendency to overaccumulation crisis affects capital’s search for geographical differentiation and how space then becomes a much more crucial “means of production” (Smith, 1990, 85-87). As overaccumulation sets in, productive investment meets gluts and is redirected into financial circuits. Neoliberalism in both Zimbabwe and South Africa was, two decades ago, utterly dominant in policy discourses. It was a despairing time, with no obvious countervailing forces on the horizon aside from internal capitalist contradictions. This we agreed on.

However, there was not a complete overlap in our perspectives, notwithstanding the common roots and permanent admiration. As one example, the relationship between finance and uneven spatial development was, at least initially, inadequately conceptualized by Smith (1990, 150). He situated the origins of uneven development in “the constant necessary movement from fixed to circulating capital and back to fixed. At an even more basic level, it is the geographical manifestation of the equally constant and necessary movement from use-value to exchange-value and back to use-value.” But because the movement from exchange-value to use-value and back *depends on money as a medium of exchange and store of value*, with credit amplifying these roles, the dynamism of uneven development relates at least to some degree to the exercise of financial power, a point Smith observed empirically with anecdotes in his *Uneven Development*, but one he simply neglected to theorise (as Arrighi 1994 did later, for example, in *The Long Twentieth*

*Century*). During the prior century's epoch of imperialism, entire currency blocs battled each other for trading dominance. This sort of totalising process was one through which finance *seemed to* level local dynamics of uneven development, in the course of imposing similar conditions drawing closer the various components of the global space economy into a universal law of value.

But in this respect, scale differentiation proved a vital ingredient in understanding unevenness over time in a case study site like Southern Africa. Again, we have Smith (1990, 134), to thank for this insight, for scale is a "crucial window on the uneven development of capital, because it is difficult to comprehend the real meaning of 'dispersal,' 'decentralization,' 'spatial restructuring' and so forth, without a clear understanding of geographical scale." In my own study of Zimbabwe's financial deepening and periodic crisis formation over the course of a century, it was evident that power established and exercised at the highest scales became subject to challenge and to decay, depending on how that power related to the accumulation process. The "uneven development of scale" meant that at some points in time – the 1930s-40s and 1960s-70s most obviously – there was much greater national determination (what is today termed "policy space") while at other points (the 1920s and 1980s-90s) an overarching logic of global capital came to bear, and scale power shifted to world financial circuitries (Bond 1998).

Again, it is interesting to assess minor disagreements, for Smith, relying on *production-bound* understandings of scale derived from the division of labour, apparently considered the uneven power of finance at different scales a contingent (and relatively unimportant) feature of capitalist development. My objective, in contrast, was to theorise it as a function of the tendency to overaccumulate in the productive sector, switching capital into the financial sector, and then in the process discovering vital policy power shifts from national to global sites. Instead, for Smith (1990, 123), the key to uneven development was the changing basis of the centralisation and dispersal of productive capital across international, national and urban scales: "Certainly the spatial centralisation of money capital can be considerably enhanced by the centralisation of social capital as a whole, but in itself the spatial centralisation of money capital is of little significance." To make his case, Smith originally (his 1984 thesis) referred to the *accommodating function* of finance, not factoring in the power of finance to remake economic policy.

But as overaccumulation becomes generalised and financial power is ascendant, the spatial centralisation of money capital (e.g., in the 1970s from petroleum consumers to the New York bank accounts of Arab rulers) is typically the proximate catalyst and facilitator for the subsequent amplification of uneven development. During the 1970s, the flood of Petrodollars to Third World dictators was a central cause in the restructuring of the international division of labour and dependency relations of peripheral regions, especially once the Debt Crisis broke in 1982 when Mexico defaulted. After all, in contemporary times the main way in which spatially-centralised financial power is experienced is through the determination of national-level policies by the Washington, DC-based international financial institutions acting on behalf of the commercial and investment banks. By the time of the 1990 edition of *Uneven Development*, Smith delighted in recounting the view of Wall Street's Thomas Johnson, describing the contradictions behind the power of world finance over the Third World: "There is a possibility of a nightmarish domino effect, as every creditor ransacks the globe attempting to locate his collateral" (Smith, 1990, 161).

In other respects, Smith understood the determination of scale not by productive relations but by financial power. Uneven development of the built environment at the urban scale, for example, intensifies principally because the land rent structure becomes one in a set of portfolio options for financiers. Smith (1990, 148) confirmed: "To the extent that ground rent becomes an expression of the interest rate with the historical development of capital, the ground rent structure is tied to the determination of value in the system as a whole." Rent as an integrative lever – in this case, a means of universalising capitalist space relations – is hence integrated into the broader capitalist economy by another lever of financial power, interest. The rate of interest in turn reflects a combination of factors, of which the most important are the demand for money and the concomitant balance of power relations between creditors and debtors of various sorts.

The financial accentuation of an underlying boom-bust phenomenon is what Smith and I discussed when we occasionally met during the 1990s, as I sought clarity on Zimbabwe's uneven socio-spatial structure. As Phimister was most effective in proving at the outset of settler colonialism's birth, the power of finance profoundly affected the subsequent articulation of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production, generating the basis for disarticulated development. And although she did not work specifically on the Zimbabwe case (her secondary research material was drawn from South Africa, Namibia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Rosa Luxemburg's 1913 text *Accumulation of Capital* has very similar insights about overaccumulation, financial bubbling and extreme tendencies towards accumulation by dispossession (Luxemburg 1968). Smith's argument that the logic of uneven development (at the global scale) is "prior to the problematic of articulation of modes of production" helps put these insights into perspective.

### **The politics of uneven development, scale, difference, strategy and agency (Greg Ruiters)**

There are, in Africa, many questions about applying a theory of uneven development to political solidarity, given the vast differences among poor and working people on the continent. Smith's work is increasingly relevant in the context of extremely serious challenges facing revolutionary movements in South Africa. Given South African capital's expansion into the rest of Africa and the inflow of refugees and migrant workers, there are new possibilities for up-scaling from national to regional working class politics. At a time of severe xenophobia in the South African working class, this up-scaling may one day help address deep-rooted problems of regional chauvinism and a divided labour movement.

Smith helps these movements address a basic conceptual error which has significant strategic implications, namely the mistaken search for universality or sameness of class experience as the basis of political solidarity. This challenge, we shall suggest, is best approached through the prism of uneven and *combined* development – an approach that allows for paradoxes rather than simplifications. Smith's reformulation of uneven and combined development, as *equalisation and differentiation*, assists in understanding specific social formations (class, race and gender and place) and particularities at different geographical scales as well as the particularities of concrete politics, especially using his classic work on the 'conquest of scale.'

The first dilemma is in understanding complex changes that drive the production of difference within the broad working class, and the second is assessing what levers might

exist to build organised coalitions and united fronts between sections of the class (see Ruiters 2014; Ashman and Fine, 2011; Ashman and Pons Vignon, 2014). Smith's insistence that we need to be absolutely aware of how scale defines our politics and the place where we stand in respect of our spatial ideologies is fundamental to any progressive politics (1990, 172-5).

Smith wrote in a very pithy and sometimes aphoristic style. One of his aphorisms was, "the conquest of scale is the central political goal" (Smith, 2004, 205). The question of scale is of course simultaneously a methodological, political and organisational one. Smith argued for a "critical internationalism," insisting that although "capital might for now make the world in its own image, it does not control the global or any other scale." He was concerned to show how uneven development – by which he meant "equalisation and differentiation" – is not a transhistorical law, but has specific pertinence within capitalism which also "produces real spatial scales which give uneven development its coherence" (xv) and incoherence. Capital organises uneven development at various scales (1990, 136) with national and urban scales acting as the main forms of organising difference, and the international scale pre-eminently driven by the tendency to equalisation (1990, 139).

Smith issued a number of caveats about uneven development that are worth emphasising: first, many tend to neglect *equalisation* as an aspect of uneven development (Smith, 1990, xii) preferring to look at only produced differences (inequality, etc). Yet, equalisation, as Smith argues, is the overriding imperative of working class politics and indeed its "political future lies in the equalisation of conditions and levels of development of production... laying the basis for socialism" (1990, 153). For "In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal *interdependence* of nations..." (Marx and Engels, 1998, 39). But Marx overemphasised capital's levelling and universalizing tendencies, argued Smith (1990, 94-5), and while not oblivious to differentiation, he saw the former as primary. Of course, in retrospect Marx's prediction that India would equalise if not overtake Britain rings more true even though this development has taken much longer than Marx anticipated.

Smith used the "see-saw" metaphor to describe the "development of underdevelopment," arguing that this is central to uneven development at the urban scale as well as globally. He believed (wrongly if Arrighi, 2009 is right about the rise of China and India) that the basic global pattern of development centred on US dominance and underdevelopment in the periphery would remain constant with perhaps only a "handful of so-called newly industrialising countries" emerging to disrupt that pattern (1990, 151; 158).

In his 1906 book *Results and Prospects* Trotsky (2005) was less concerned with predictions about levelling as such: rather he emphasised deepening interdependence between countries and the ways in which entirely new combinations of social formations arose. He argued,

Imperialism links up incomparably more rapidly and more deeply the individual national and continental units... bringing them into the closest and most vital dependence upon each other and rendering their economic methods, social forms, and levels of development more identical. At the same time, it attains this 'goal' by such antagonistic methods, such *tiger-leaps*, and such raids upon backward

countries and areas that the *levelling of world economy* is upset by it even more violently and convulsively than in the preceding epochs....

The common view (and one echoed today by flat earth scholars) is that capitalism is becoming more or less the same everywhere. Differences across national capitalisms (or the scale of the nation state) were dismissed as epiphenomena, mere “warts on the face” of capitalism. Similarity of conditions across the global working class (regional or international) in this view is what makes internationalism possible. This, however, is a doubly flawed idea, and one that does not reflect what Marx meant. What makes politics *concrete* is an understanding of the real peculiarities (or “recombinations of places and events”, as Smith, 1990, ix called it). Moreover, Smith grasped that differentiation is not an epiphenomenon but is rooted in sites including the household and the bodily scales (Marston and Smith, 2001). Smith went on to argue that social life in general cannot be understood from a singular scalar view, and different abstractions (race, gender, class) and forces are constructed at different scales with very different and contradictory political alliances.

Where Smith wrote of “differentiation and equalisation”, Trotsky used the formulation “combined development” which refers to the multifarious ways in which spaces and historical stages are fused in novel ways. The notion of less developed areas (or countries) “leapfrogging” intermediate stages of development under the “whip of competition” seems crucial in understanding why some places might be more volatile than others. The importance of context and specificity of time and space in both Trotsky and Smith cannot be overstated. Similarly, it is not about the abstract primacy of class but in different places, gender or race could be the decisive issue for that working class as combined and novel social forms take root. To illustrate, Smith’s (1990, 174) own writings on Lower Manhattan’s Tomkin’s Square Park conflict suggest that progressive and potentially revolutionary struggles can start anywhere at any scale. He shows enormous sensitivity to the role of agency in deciding strategically how to place and define the geography of particular struggles. This is an “open” form of Marxism which Smith keenly promoted, especially in more recent work.

Smith’s work has significant implications for political strategy and for socialist internationalism. There is a danger of a one-sided focus on equalisation and differentiation as separate dynamics, and consequently neglecting the ways in different parts of the globe are related, connected to form an organic whole. The crucial political point, as Smith noted, is the conquest of scale and recognising that similarity cannot be a foundation for class politics within the highly differentiated global working class where each national working class facing distinct contexts. A worker in China has very different socio-political conditions from car workers in Detroit (who lose their jobs), yet they remain connected in innumerable ways. Black workers in South Africa are very differently positioned from white workers.

Smith and Harvey have spent years arguing for a dialectical, relational theory of development. Applied to the world, their focus has been the relatedness of parts and the ways in which parts are determined by the whole and do not exist as original entities. Harvey (1996, 290), for example, argues that without seeing relations between places, identities and processes we run the risk of worshipping the condition that produced difference. “Discovering the nature of (such) connections and learning to translate

politically between them is a problem for detailed research". For Harvey, like Trotsky, historical time and periods are compressed under capitalism – a mode of production ceaselessly “searching out new organisational forms, new technologies, new lifestyles....” (1996, 240). Where Trotsky explored the wider socio-political strategic implication of time-space compressions for working-class power (struggles for democracy and socialism), using the terms “uneven and combined development”, Harvey’s focus remains largely on cultural and populist reactions to time-space compressions (people clinging onto national and local identities). There is enormous relevance, as we write, to a South Africa today terribly divided by xenophobia by the poorer sections of the working class.

Harvey goes on to argue for an epistemology that permits a deeper understanding of the distinction between the “significant” and “insignificant othernesses” (1996, 363). Harvey believes that the “mere pursuit of identity as an end in itself” that is focussing single-mindedly on difference does not help to overcome the conditions that produce difference in the first place. The approach adopted by Chandra Mohanty (2003, 226) on third world feminism emphasises that in

knowing differences and particularities we can better see the *connections* and commonalities because no boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining... Specifying difference allows us to theorise universal concerns more fully... it is this intellectual move that allows for women of different identities to build coalitions and solidarities.

And Iris Marion Young (2011) in her classic discussion of difference and multi-culturalism argues for “differentiated solidarity” where *difference* not sameness of experience became the lodestone of universality/internationalism/solidarity. Using an anti-essentialist approach in South Africa, Trotsky could argue that the “black republic” in South Africa was the key slogan even though it had no apparent “class content”. He argued (in a mode that even Biko or Fanon might have accepted) that white workers could never act as class-conscious fighters until they shed their racism against black workers (see Drew, 1996, 149 for Trotsky’s letter). Shocking his local workerist supporters, Trotsky vehemently put the race/native question as *the* determinant question arguing that we cannot make even the “smallest concession to the privileges and prejudices of the white workers” (in Drew, 1996, 150). Hence, race was not merely a supplementary feature of South Africa’s capitalism, but fundamental.

“Uneven development... thy name is war,” said Smith (1990, 154). He demanded that we connect with a “political treatment of uneven development”. By this he understood that political strategies for solidarity must be different in different places. The acid test of revolutionary politics for Smith (2004) was one’s position on the question of national and regional chauvinism. As already noted, the common conceptual error, which has significant strategic implications, is the mistaken search for sameness of class experience as the basis of social solidarity. The basis of class solidarity, however, may not be sameness but interdependencies. This is best approached through the prism of uneven and *combined* development.

Theories of uneven development fall apart when they presume that the particularity of each country or region is merely of supplementary significance and simply needs to be seen as an added factor to be taken into account when thinking about progressive politics.

This is much like those for whom national, racial or gender oppressions are mere residual factors that deserve air time after class oppression. In this respect, it is instructive to revisit the Trotsky-Stalin debate on uneven development and to indicate why the combined aspect is so crucial. Stalin argued:

the foundation of the activities of every Communist party ... must be the *general features* of capitalism, which are the *same for all countries*, and not its specific features in any given country. *It is precisely on this that the internationalism rests.* The specific features are merely *supplementary* to the general features. (Stalin cited in *Bolshevik*, No.1, 1930, 8)

Trotsky's rebuttal starts with asserting that

it is false that world economy is simply a sum of national parts of one and the same type. It is false that the specific features are 'merely supplementary to the general features,' like warts on a face. In reality, the national peculiarities represent an *original combination* of the basic features of the world process. This originality can be of *decisive significance* for revolutionary strategy over a span of many years. ... it is absolutely wrong to base the activity of the Communist parties on some 'general features', that is, on an abstract type of national capitalism. ...National capitalism cannot be even understood, let alone reconstructed, except as a part of world economy (2005, 126)

In South Africa, at sub-national scale, we see increased tensions between places (eg, provinces and cities competing for investment, tourists, skilled labour, universities, etc). Xenophobia against African foreign workers and migrants and fear of internal migrants are important aspects of South Africa's scalar politics and urbanisation. At the urban scale we also see gated communities (mini-suburbs of mainly rich whites that act as separate mini-states (Lemanski, 2004; Miraftab, 2007) has documented the rise of revanchism (see Smith, 1998) in South African cities, most notably Cape Town, which has declared a low level war on the poor and the homeless in the city.)

Provinces receiving internal migrant labour seek to blame various problems on the donor province. The Western Cape government, for example, has sought compensation from the central government for the inflow of low-income black Eastern Cape migrants, whom the provincial governor – an upper-class white – controversially termed “refugees”. This provincial chauvinism show how militant particularism in the name of job creation and better services can have devastating results and feed into larger social tendencies such as xenophobia. In the Western Cape, coloured workers vote for the neoliberal party (the Democratic Alliance), endorsing the idea that the Western Cape has to look after its “own people” first.

Since 1994 when South African corporations started to dramatically increase investments in the rest of Africa, millions of refugees from other African countries have come the other way. By 2014 about one third of all South Africa exports went to African buyers and about 12% of company profits came from African operations. In 2013, “South Africa invested in more new FDI projects in Africa than any other country in the world, and the number of projects from the country has increased by almost 536% in the past decade”.

Standard Bank has the biggest banking footprint in Africa, with operations in 17 countries. In 2013, Absa spent R18-billion buying up the Africa business of its parent company, Barclays, which has a presence in 12 countries, including Kenya, Ghana and Uganda (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013). “MTN has invested approximately \$10 billion through capital expenditure in Nigeria since 2009. Assessed by capital invested, India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and China exceed South Africa in Africa during 2012. India’s capital amount was more than four times more, and China’s 28 projects saw capital allocations of \$2.8 billion and \$2.2 billion respectively.” Financial and business services and communication accounted for only 4% of capital allocation while infrastructure-related projects draw in the largest chunk of capital, at nearly 40% (*Mail and Guardian*, 2013). One major retailer, Shoprite, has 131 stores in 16 countries throughout Africa (excluding South Africa), and employs 11 000 people in these operations.

Not only economic but also cultural expansion (mostly of the downward sort) has happened as SA has exported its racism, bad television shows, malls and taxis to cities such as Maputo, Dakar etc.

In the last two decades, African immigrants have faced bleak prospects in assimilating into South African society. African immigrants in SA typically face physical violence as well as “negative judgments on aspects of a different culture” (Jandt, 2004), especially their languages. Their critics (and competitors) are mainly lower-income black South Africans. Other (white) immigrants from other continents such as Europe have not encountered such problems. In supporting the idea that South Africa was part of Africa and part of an African Renaissance, the ex-president of South Africa Thabo Mbeki asserted in *ANC Today* (2001):

Our intimate relationship with the rest of our continent is illustrated by the significant numbers of fellow Africans who have sought to settle in South Africa since 1994. Undoubtedly, this trend will continue, adding a new richness to our own society. Many of these new immigrants bring with them important skills that our country needs. Many of them are also people who are creative, full of initiative and driven by an enterprising spirit. The more they impart these characteristics to us as well, the better we will be as a people and a society.

With this myopic perspective, Mbeki was unable to predict or comprehend the 2008 xenophobia, even when warned it would happen in late 2007 by an Africa Peer Review Mechanism team. Yet with South African capital moving north, South African trade unions have seen opportunities to build external links of solidarity. Many social movements also have begun to operate continentally. The leading trade unionist, Zwelinzima Vavi (in contrast to Mbeki), made the suggestion in a 2014 speech that

For African trade unions the most important principles to defend are *continent-wide* minimum standards of workers’ rights: to form and join unions, to have the same labour protection under the law, and the same minimum wages and conditions, regardless of national origin. The aim must be to level up rights and conditions of workers, rather than levelling them down to the lowest prevailing standards of poverty. Trade unions should recruit and organise cross-border migrant workers, regardless of document status. COSATU has taken concrete steps in this direction, in

particular the organisation of cross-border migrant farms, domestic and hospitality workers – all sectors of high levels of precariousness” (Vavi, 2014).

The first premise of progressive working class politics has to be overcoming localism, racism and chauvinism within the working class. This of course has to be understood in the context of racial capitalism (white ruling class, racially segmented working class, migrant labour and an enduring apartheid spatial legacy) which has left its imprint even on events such as the Marikana massacre. The specificity of South African capitalism (and its recent re-entry into Africa) makes it exceptionally volatile and imparts a special responsibility to working class leadership given the propensity on the part of middle-class business elites for xenophobia and the tendency for reactionary working class formations to blame foreigners for stealing their jobs.

The specificity of South African capitalism and its deepening African connectness immediately give the events now unfolding a larger scalar character and opens up a wider horizon for socialist politics. As the most advanced proletariat in Africa, South African workers have a special role to play continentally. To paraphrase Trotsky, this does not mean Nigerian or Algerian workers must await the signal from the large organised working class formations, or that Mozambique workers patiently wait for the proletariat of the South Africa to free them. On the contrary, “workers must develop the revolutionary struggle in every country, where favourable conditions have been established, and through this set an example for the workers of other countries.” In the early 1970s the Mozambique revolution led by Samora Machel became the signal for the South African revolution and the Black Consciousness movement as well as the 1976 uprising. Zimbabwe’s struggles similarly inspired South Africans. Simultaneously, leadership in small towns such as Cradock – guided by Matthew Goniwe during the 1980s – became beacons for the South Africa freedom struggle (Ruiters 2011). Uneven development leaves open many surprises. A bold approach is needed that includes decisive efforts to organise foreign workers in South Africa (legal or not) into unions and into social movements (Hlatshwayo 2009, 243-246).

## **Conclusion**

The crux of class solidarity lies not in sameness but interdependencies. The prism of uneven and *combined* development provides powerful ways to think about interconnectness. The political and material basis of class solidarity implodes when it is assumed that the particularity of each country or region is simply of additional import and merely should be factored into progressive politics. As the old ideological and historical allegiances to the ANC melt away aided by the icy hand of neoliberalism, new solidarities among the working class (including the poor, the youth, women and unemployed) are developing. Uneven development of class awareness and internal divisions (casuals versus permanents, skilled versus unskilled; those in large versus small firms; local versus foreign workers and so on) within the working class is itself a major terrain for applying the theory of uneven and combined development. The uneven development of the working class (both its objective and subjective dimensions) and the localism of much protest is a major hurdle but the new United Front politics inaugurated by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa could yet become a national and regional beacon for up-scaling struggles.

One crucial test of this new, unifying politics within the conjuncture of South Africa in 2015 is the way xenophobia is addressed. Smith's critique of segregatory unevenness within the urban process is of enormous importance to a new anti-xenophobia activism. The challenge will be a scale-jump of internationalist activists of the working class (not middle-class moralisers): from the shack settlements, inner cities, migrant labour hostels and smaller villages where attacks on African, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian immigrants are recorded, to the sub-regional and continental sites of struggle over artificial borders carved in a Berlin conference hall in 1885. Those borders are, in turn, reflective of the geopolitical balance of forces during the prevailing global overaccumulation crisis, in which centralised finance set the context for the Scramble for Africa. Smith helped identify why unevenness born of that process is still the defining territorial expression of capital in southern Africa. With his memory of sensitivity to the nuances of revolutionary politics, it is Smith's critique of the myriad socio-political, ecological and economic features of uneven and combined development that we can return to the urban scale, in search of a socialist United Front that aims to end that uneven-and-combinedness.

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