30 YEARS SINCE THE DURBAN STRIKES:
BLACK WORKING CLASS LEADERSHIP AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRANSITION

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The paper explores some of the core themes that arise from a sustained ethnography* that spans the turbulent years of South Africa’s transition to democracy. In focusing on the emerging tensions in what used to be a strong horizontal solidarity of ‘comradeship’ since the 1980s, it explores why the ‘elastic band’ that held the movement together still holds, however stretched, despite divergent socio-economic needs among its members, despite class mobility experienced by significant numbers within its cohorts and finally, despite mounting challenges to its ‘elasticity’.2

It shows how (among the 400 people that the ethnography covered) how the ‘transition’ has proven to be extremely beneficial to 51% of this cohort; how 25% remained ‘stuck’ in the occupational milieu of the 1980s/early 1990s, and, how 22% experienced rapid deterioration of life-chances. In this longitudinal study I trace the shifts in consciousness and notions of solidarity and trace how livelihoods strategies, notions of race and ethnicity and most importantly notions of class get re-defined by the year 2000. It is a small contribution and perhaps, a final curtain-call for a generation of black worker leaders who, since the 1973 Durban strikes- that ushered the new trade unions on the historical stage-were a core component of the resistance against racial domination and economic inequality in the country.3

The Road Map
In 1988, I was responsible for co-coordinating a violence-monitoring project following the effects of the civil war in KwaZulu-Natal, the very same war that spread to Gauteng through migrant workers to the hostel system and its surrounding townships.4 At that stage we5 were trying to assess the toll of the

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5 I was co-ordinating then, the Labour Monitoring Group in Natal which started with researching and publishing on the growing boycotts and stay-aways, providing an alternative source of information during the various states of emergency. As the violence increased, it became necessary to monitor the effect of all this on the democratic trade union leadership in the region. As this was quite clandestine then much of the research and information appeared anonymously in various publications. For the early work...
violence on black worker leaders and provide alternative sources of information, trying to redress the clampdown on news everywhere in the country. Some of the experiences of that regrettable period were written up anonymously and/or under a pseudonym. I was fortunate to be involved at the same time in a network of cultural activists in the trade union movement who had embarked on a substantive project of oral history. Discussions with the Congress of South African Trade Unions in the province of Natal led to an insistence that my primary concern should be in providing the ‘most objective’ picture possible.

The original idea was to institute a monitoring project, which was as extensive as the presence of organised labour in the country. Such a grand idea proved to be unfeasible (neither the human nor the material resources were available)- the best I could come up with was a ‘reliable’ list of 400 leaders - in equal shares from trade union, women, youth leaders and cultural activists in the labour movement. The choice of a hundred for each ‘category’ was to create a capacity to


6 One of the results of this work was the above-cited (2002) ‘Autobiography of a Trade Union Movement…’

7 Such ‘objectivity’ was a necessary survival tactic as well by 1992/3 as I came to chair the Media and Culture committee of the Peace Accord’s Local Dispute Resolution Committee which provided access to me to extreme areas of conflict but made it very difficult to speak or write about it in public.

8 The Monitoring Project was seen as a supplement to the remarkable coverage of violence by the Black Sash and their dozens of committed women who worked relentlessly and provided witness to the violence and meticulous information on the dead and injured in black communities and by Prof John Aitcheson’s Pietermaritzburg-based initiative that spanned the civil war in the Midlands.

9 Leaders were defined as those elected to lead by the various structures. This involved shop-stewards from the trade union movement, working-class leaders (shop-stewards and unemployed) from the women’s movement (the Natal Organisation of Women), elected youth leaders from the areas the shopstewards came from and cultural activists/ leaders from COSATU’s worker cultural locals. The final list had therefore 52% men and 48% women. 75% over-30 year-olds and 25% youth. On trade union structures see, Pityana, S et al, (1992) Beyond the Factory Floor Ravan Press, Johannesburg; see my (1992) ‘Democracy and the Trade Unions of the 1990s’, in K.Nurnberger (ed) A Democratic Vision for South Africa, Pietermaritzburg. And the longitudinal overview provided in Adler, G. And Webster, E. (eds) (1999) Consolidating Democracy in a Liberalising World: Labour and Transition in South Africa, London: Macmillan.

provide some measureable consistency in the reporting process. The list involved, by 1990, a range of people traversing KwaZulu-Natal and the East Rand\textsuperscript{10}. Although the ‘list’ allowed for some nuance, the ability to keep a systematic contact with everyone was difficult.\textsuperscript{11} As is well-known, such violence continued throughout the early 1990s and continued for some months after the elections in 1994.

It was only in 1995, when people were re-building their lives after the violence subsided, that a more coherent picture could emerge and the real experience of what had occurred, was beginning to be re-counted through in-depth interviews. By then the ‘list’ had shrunk to 361 as 39 people lost their lives mostly through the violence (29 people).\textsuperscript{12} The agreement with the trade unions and by then structures of the MDM (the Mass Democratic Movement) was that any information contained in this, by all accounts, unsuccessful attempt, was to be handed over to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The most that was achieved in terms of the monitoring project, was contacting as many people as possible to bring their cases to the Commission. If the effort yielded little that was not known about the violence, it started yielding a tremendous amount about the sociological convulsions underpinning South Africa’s transition. On the eve of Mandela’s tenure as President I thought of revisiting the people listed, now as a sociologist accountable only to my very own curiosity, to corroborate my own everyday sense that the transition and its energies were not as neat as most accounts of it were. What follows is a summary of the main trends, leaving the more qualitative narratives for a more extended manuscript.

**The Past’s Presence**
Crucial in understanding the subjective experience of the transition years, among this leadership cohort, is the highlighting of the enormous crisis that preceded it.

The civil war and the sources of violence in KwaZulu-Natal have been carefully studied.\textsuperscript{13} What was laid out by a variety of serious scholars and corroborated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that Inkatha’s ‘counter-mobilisation’ to check the rise of an alternative movement in the province, started in earnest in 1985 and its armed might got seriously entangled with the

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\textsuperscript{10} After the ‘hostel violence’ on the Witwatersrand I reconnected with the East Rand areas which were the site of my PhD research in the early 1980s. The result was the ‘The New Trivbalism...’ piece, \textit{op cit.} So East Rand leaders were added to the cohort.

\textsuperscript{11} During the last week of every month there was a joint ‘onus’ on my behalf or on the ‘listed’ leaders to make contact. If this failed there were 9 local resource-people who would try and follow up, failures in contact. In KZN, this effort was coordinated by the late Elson Gcwabaza who survived the violence only to be murdered in 2003 by still unknown assassins.

\textsuperscript{12} The rest died of accidents and/or ‘diseases’.

\textsuperscript{13} Kentridge M (1990) \textit{An Unofficial War, Capetown: David Phillip. see also, Bonnin et al, (1996) op.cit.}
regime’s counterrevolution within the space of a few months. Violence in the province escalated as primarily black working class areas became the epicenter of a desperate struggle for territorial control. The contours and tragedies of this conflagration belong elsewhere. Its consequences though are vital for this narrative in two ways.

Firstly, the violence destabilised ‘everything’. In all the accounts this is a period of total ‘disturbance’ where people got encoiled into processes that spun out of control. The extreme situations that were to follow created in tow, serious personal and social crises and, most importantly, a crisis in the leadership’s capacity to continue leading. Whereas the rise of resistance and the mobilisations it nourished made people feel ‘enabled’ to struggle and lead, their world was ‘turned upside down’. Secondly, prior to the conflict only 52% of them identified strongly with the Congress tradition in any way, in barely four years they perfuse assumed such identities or, failing in their own capacities, they uploaded hope to ‘heroes’ or the liberation movement as a whole.

But when ‘disturbance’ and loss of control coincided, such ‘uploading’ of hope reached the ‘metaphysical’ arena as well: the increase of the usage of muti for ‘war’ or ‘protection’ has been written about elsewhere. My own facts show its constant usage among this leadership by 31% prior to the violence, reaching a 68% through it, and dropping to 47% by 2000. Alongside the search for customary cures and medicines, ‘religiosity’ increased as well.

These were extreme times: so extreme, that 80% of the people concerned were dislocated from their communities and fled their homes to avoid being targeted or killed. They all lost touch with their immediate networks of solidarity for extended periods of time. 65% had/possessed guns. 59% were involved in direct violence and combat. 45% of them were directly attacked. The difference between those in Natal and those on the East Rand was that all the former ‘knew’ their ‘enemies’ and assailants; they were members of their own communities. On the East Rand, they were an external force ‘those Zulus from the hostels’.

The simple and overwhelming feature of those ‘disturbed’ years was that ‘comradeship’- the sense of belonging to a community of ‘amaqabane’ with its

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reciprocal obligations was consolidated. It signified a shift from the ‘practical’, the ‘rhetorical’ and the ‘heroic’, to the ‘substantive’: a deep sense of reciprocity, of belonging and of practical care.

Their life trajectories though changed since the transition to a post Apartheid society. The ‘story’ of the 1990s, of ‘Mandela’s Decade’ is revealed in the following simple statistic, already alluded to in the introduction:

51% Upwardly Mobile
25% ‘Stuck’ in the same occupation
22% ‘Deteriorated’ life-chances.

For the majority the decade since Mandela’s release has been materially rewarding.

Yet, a substantial number remained ‘stuck’ in their old jobs and activities, experiencing only incremental improvements in their life-chances. 22% of them lost their jobs and access to prior resources and have come to constitute the backbone of activities in the ‘survivalist/informal’ sector. The remaining 2% got themselves into serious ‘criminal trouble’ by deciding to devote themselves to violent crime and/or the peddling of drugs.

The ‘mobile’, the ‘stuck’ and the ‘deteriorating’ are not representative of a broader macro-trend in South African society: far from it, as they constituted an ‘advantaged’ stratum/position in the transformation process. They were after all, crucial leaders in a profound movement that challenged apartheid and the status quo. If corporate management and the state were looking (as they obviously did) for leadership potential to embark in a process of transformation, these activists constituted an already pre-selected and tested constituency of talent. Yet, sociologically, they did reflect the patterns of South Africa’s black working class: 53% of them were first-generation urban workers with significant connections to the homelands. 27% were second-generation urban residents, 15% were third-generation urban residents. Of those who were first-generation ‘urbans’ with significant connections to customary and/or rural areas, approximately half lost all such ‘connections’ through the civil war. For them ‘Inkatha (- controlled) areas were another country’.

Secondly, they were all ‘militant democrats’- accountability, mandates, grassroots consultations, were part and parcel of their daily existence. They distinguished clearly between themselves and the ‘others’, the ‘theleweni’ who were ruled by authoritarian populists who believed in the patriarchal, ‘I say so, so it is so’. They were in a sense among the ‘best’ democratic organisation and resistance managed to produce through the 1970s and 1980s in the geographic areas under

consideration. Most of them were ‘products’ of the post-1979 period, when trade unionism and its social movement features begun to manifest themselves. Yet, a significant 18% of them were active and youthful participants in the Durban strikes of 1973.

The Mobiles
For those (51%) who became ‘mobile’ after the transition, their affluence outstretched their ‘wildest expectations’. In hardly four years they were members of the salariat, earned anything between seven to fifteen times of what they were earning before, drove their own cars and a 55% of them had moved in terms of housing, to ‘better areas’.

Of all the variables I attempted to correlate with the fact of mobility, only prior Education shows any significance. The higher the education, the more people seem to be mobile. This correlates well the ‘other’ way: the lower one’s formal education, the more one finds oneself in the category of the ‘losers’. The institutional pull of the transition seems to dis-favour ‘oral’ people and seems to prefer some formal educational competency.

The only exception to this trend is to be found among women: their mobility was independent of education. Furthermore, only women made it higher than middle-level management positions and climbed higher to top managerial positions. Only eight women in such a cohort managed such mobility, though. Furthermore, 40% of them lived and continue to live independently as heads of household with their children and a growing number of dependents from relatives who cannot afford to educate or look after them and children from ‘comradely networks’. Especially in the ‘mobile’ cohort, the average number of people they are ‘looking after’ reaches the number of 8-10. The fascinating aspect of this is that it is only those ‘stuck’ who identify ‘education’ as the reason why ‘some people moved and others didn’t’.

Those who became ‘mobile’ entered the state, management or large-scale NGOs with a mission: to be ‘bearers of transformation’ or ‘agents of transformation’, ‘nation-builders’ or ‘community sensitive champions’- they saw themselves as servants of the new democratic dispensation.

Challenges in the Middle Strata
The ‘comrades in middle-management’ experienced untold challenges once they started occupying their new official functions. Their encounters based on their narratives, can be divided into three broad phases. The first was a period of ‘goodwill’- they were ‘there’ to ‘make a difference’, to ‘re-align their organisations with the directions of the new South Africa’. They were ‘people’s people’, ‘in touch with the grassroots’, they were supposed to ‘handle people-to-people relationships’, and they were to ‘make things happen’. They were out to ‘prove (their) worth’. This
initial ‘goodwill’ was quickly ‘checked’. The checking of this ‘goodwill’ led to frustration and in turn to a phase of ‘status incongruity’ where their legitimacy was severely challenged. This led to a third phase, where they started mobilising their energies, making empowerment and Africanisation their priority.

The first crucial problem that started ‘frustrating’ them was that a peculiar glass ceiling blocked their mobility. However much their experience and prior education got them to move ‘upwards’, the paltriness of their qualifications kept them within the bands of the middle or lower managerial functions. They lacked the qualifications a modern bureaucracy makes clear in its rules for progression. Not only where they ‘stuck’ midway to the top, but they were also concentrated mainly in human relations-related areas where they were seen to be the new intermediaries between top management and the shop floor.

Furthermore, they felt demeaned and humiliated by their interactions with white and middle-managers of Indian descent, who saw them as ‘political’ appointments, as ‘incompetent’ and as ‘skill-less’. In their perception, the raising of issues of ‘standards’ in work performance, in demanding ‘endless evaluations’ they were betraying their ‘unreconstructed’ racism. They simply ‘felt threatened’ by the new incumbents and could not break-away from Apartheid-created mental models. ‘Instead of appreciating our goodwill, they played racial games…we had to bow and scrape to their goodwill to tolerate us…we were treated like monkeys…’

As a consequence, the experience of racial tensions in their working lives increased and made them realise that their only allies in ‘this game of power’ and status were to be found on the shop floor, on the lower rungs of the hierarchy and sought the support of the broader blue-collar and African constituency for their new battles. Their common-cause was and continues to be around skills, standards of performance and shop-floor mobility.

At the same time they were frustrated by the inflow of a new generation of black ‘University people’ into the bureaucracy and in the managerial structures who, unlike them, had the necessary qualifications and by implication, a different mobility track. This new generation was seen to be ‘disloyal’ and ‘shifty’ and not ready to recognise their authority in processes of decision-making or decision taking. These ‘new moegoes’ had not been ‘of’ the ‘struggle’, they were ‘individualist’, and they were ‘opportunists’.

Through this new interface of tension and contestation they found themselves, searching for educational opportunities to consolidate and further their advancement. This proved difficult: they were within an age-cohort where further education became a burden to their family lives. Their part-time studies and training interfered with expectations of more quality time devoted to their new social experience Also, management preferred to support the education and training of younger and more qualified groups in their ranks. About half of the ‘mobiles’ (a
term used by the ones who were ‘stuck’) were already working under a more qualified ‘African youngster’ whose ability they sincerely, doubted.

At the collective level, a nascent racial populism is on the ascendance amongst the ‘mobiles’ - ‘Indians’ and ‘Whites’ are a ‘problem’ and ‘enemies’ in a zero sum game of either ‘us’ or ‘them’. They demand an end to ‘Eurocentric’/ ‘Apartheid’/ ‘Racist’ blockages, standards of performance and other ‘nonsense’.

The most salient feature of the racialised ideas that permeate their lives, is that they do not only frame ‘stereotypes’ but that among 9% of them, they have shifted to perceptions that have crossed an emotive boundary into racism. Whites and Indians are ‘so and so’ (usually derogatory statements follow), essentially, naturally and unchangingly. ‘They are so’ inherently and they constitute an obstacle and an expendable surplus in organisations in South Africa. Although the origins of these perceptions are to be found in a lethal dialectic of an ‘anti-racist racism’ (in the classical Sartrean and Fanonist sense), they are beginning to mature into a positive and practical philosophy of ‘being’. Despite the fact that such ideas are held in a small percentage of the broader mobile cohort, they are bound to have a major impact. We can therefore speak about, however impossible I thought such a conclusion was going to be, an embryonic black racism in the middle strata of the society.

For the majority though the main expression of racialised ideas is close to an African nationalism that has lost the open-ness\(^{18}\) of the national liberation movement. Amongst them belonging is natural ‘for all those who were ‘Natives’ ‘Bantu’ or ‘Plurals’ in previous racial dispensations’. The ‘rest’, the ‘others’ can belong only through permission, a permission granted by their own spontaneous classification schemes. No one but they can decide who belongs and who doesn’t. Such a framework ‘externalises’ Indians, Coloureds and Whites.

For another small minority, (8%) the essence of the national democratic revolution continues to be non-racial, but their view is that it will take years to materialise. It is, I was told, only concrete struggles over concrete issues that will shift the ‘false consciousness’, the feelings of ‘superiority’ and the racism of other groups. The crucial distinction is this: the idea of non-racialism has been that blacks will prove that they are capable of being equals - through education, capacitating and training; through proving to others that they are worthy of equality. This was rejected with contempt. The others instead have to prove their non-racism through ‘concrete struggles’ and solidarity. They have to prove that they are ‘brothers and sisters’.

If this co-hort had an eye ‘upwards’ towards further mobility, it had another ‘downwards’ towards their old comrades. Part of this has to do with their self-definition: they still themselves as part of the ‘productive classes’, as non-owners of the means of production. A third of them still belong to trade unions that organise white-collar workers and are still, mostly, members of COSATU -affiliated trade unions. Even those who are not members of trade unions, minimise and trivialise their newly-found life-chances and their pay-packets, their moves to more middle-class suburbs away from their old township ‘matchboxes’ and so on, as consequences of how capitalism works. They still rationalise their beliefs as part of a broader labour movement.

The main reason given in their answers is neither political nor theoretical: it has to do with social and cultural preoccupations, a politics of ‘decency’ and reciprocal obligations. 62% stressed that they made an effort to be with their old comrades at weddings and funerals, to visit them as often as possible, to seek them out when in trouble, to help them with their current problems, to enroll them on committees and to support their old community’s social, recreational and cultural activities. They saw themselves still as ‘men and women of the people’. Yet, 65% agree that many of the new fields of activity their new status has opened up for them and their families, take them away from their old constituencies and communities.

The ‘Stuck’
Those who remained ‘stuck’ in their own words, paint a picture of a process that went through three phases as well: like the mobile cohort, they experienced an initial time of ‘goodwill’. This was overtaken by an intensive a crisis as their job security was ‘assaulted’, ‘decimated’, ‘restructured’ as their workplaces experienced dramatic levels of ‘down-sizing’ as the economy in turn, felt the competing rhythms of a global economy. The third phase was a period of re-building ‘from the ruins’.

Their initial ‘goodwill’ was defined by their effort in ‘making things work’; to do ‘(their) bit for the new democracy’; to participate in decision-making as this was made possible by the new Labour Relations Act; to ‘bring the working class’ into the new forums and partnerships. This by all accounts, was not easy. They found themselves incapable of trusting management. Instead of consultation and participation, experts and consultants were brought in to change the nature of work. They were being called to help legitimise job-losses, intensification of work and low (below inflation-rates) wage-increases.

Unlike the ‘mobile’ cohort, issues of race do not feature extensively in their recounting. Most certainly I was told, there was an increase in racial incidents but they explain this away as a result of ‘black workers standing up for their rights and speaking out what they thought and kept silent about’ in the past. This ‘brought out’ the white racists who then could be challenged effectively and decisively on the
shop-floor. In their stories, racism exists in a continuum spanning the past and the present and will only disappear gradually with the ‘new generations.’

Their most overwhelming experience (90% of this cohort) was around defending and protecting jobs. As both vulnerable and successful firms downsized and restructured, (the former because business declined, the latter because business increased in the shadow of global competitiveness) their time and their meetings were spent on devising defensive strategies to protect their co-workers. They felt that the effort was not futile and each one had numerous examples and details of how their contribution saved many jobs. Whether this feeling is based on fact or fiction, in the light that 20% of formal jobs were shed in the overall South African economy\(^{19}\) is irrelevant, in their version of events, had they not been there, the consequences of restructuring would have been even more devastating.

At the same time, realising that they were stuck, about a third of them started attending a variety of classes and training programmes to improve their personal position. This has not been easy as the pressures on them from their families and networks to act in a variety of supportive ways as the only wage earners in a sea of unemployment added to their ‘burden’. They have understood what their ‘deficit’ was in terms of mobility but feel too constrained by ‘pressures’ to redress it.

For the majority (72% of those ‘stuck’) trade union power diminished vis-à-vis management’s prerogatives and diminished too, within the ‘Alliance’ between the ANC, the Communist Party and the trade unions- despite the fact that they have been challenging the ‘situation’ as best as they could. A few mentioned that it was easier to influence decisions at the ANC local and branch level, rather than wasting their time trying to be ‘heard’ through their trade unions.

Furthermore, most of the participation ideas failed even when management showed ‘goodwill’ towards them. The main reason given again, was that external consultants engineered most restructuring, bringing onto the shop floor new rules, new ways of working and new designs. This was done in the ‘spirit of global competitiveness’ with minimal worker input. The only participation was later: ‘how to make the consultants’ messes work’.

They also found that their status as wage-earners made them more responsible in their broader families’ activities and livelihood strategies and, although their wages have been gradually going up, the pressure of reality, made their purchasing power limited. They do complain about the costs of basic services and the fact that most of their income and loans had to make up for what they lost in the civil war. Such losses were extensive: from houses gutted or damaged, to places looted and to the burden of loans entered to during those hard times.

\(^{19}\) See my ‘From People’s Skills to People’s Jobs’- Report to the Economic Development Department, Durban Metropolitan Council, 1998.
If there is a constant and re-curing theme in their accounts is that the ‘voluntarism’ of the old days was dying. They found it hard and they found it amongst their co-workers harder still, to devote their time to ‘good causes’. The new freedoms of movement, the normalisation of their children’s lives, the increasing funerals they had to attend, their role as emerging elders in their networks, left little time. They also devoted a lot of their energies, as the ‘more experienced people’, helping others establish small businesses and survivalist activities. Many of them are ‘doing things’ they never had time to do before- anything from ballroom dancing to coaching youth in soccer, from becoming members of school committees to elders in church groups. They also commented on the fact that a new hard-nosed subculture is rising: ‘you don’t want to do things for free’ because ‘no-one does things for free in the new South Africa’.

At a deeper ideological level, they see themselves as ‘the working class’ or its core productive component. Their labour is seen as the source of wealth in the country and the source of state revenue. They do see themselves and their communities as the ‘just recipients’ of re-distribution. Their ‘line’ on every issue from housing to pensions, from the restructuring of work to state services, is one of ‘class’, which shifts from antagonism to state policies to cooperation with institutions of the new dispensation. There is in their statements, a hint of a growing subculture of ‘co-operative alterity’.

At the level of their own individual life-chances, the responses tended to be fatalistic. They seem resigned that they will only see marginal improvements for themselves and their families. They are optimistic though, that ‘things’ will get better for the majority of black people in the country but they invariably add, that ‘things’ will not get better without ‘struggle, struggle, and struggle’. There are ‘two fronts’ to this ‘struggle, struggle and struggle’-to get rid of the ‘real counter-revolutionaries’- the gangsters and thugs in their communities; and, to make ‘all leaderships accountable’. The examples of ‘unaccountable’ leaderships traverse the trade unions, their local political branches, development institutions, municipal councilors and customary authorities.

They are ‘in touch’ with both their ‘mobile’ and ‘deteriorating’ comrades-their encounters continue mostly at social events and through reciprocal visits. In such encounters they converse freely about their respective problems, exchange information and discuss solutions. In the words of one of them, ‘no doors have been closed’. Their common past still animates much of their conversations.

The Deteriorated
Those whose life-chances deteriorated through job losses had also gone through distinctive phases of emotion through the transition: the first phase was described as a period of a ‘million promises and a thousand handshakes’ – it involved a lot of discussions with power-brokers about new opportunities; it also involved planning
for alternatives, ‘waiting, contacting and waiting again’. The second phase prompted them to act- they tried to valorise the many political contacts they had made and to try and activate their networks to generate some kind of livelihood. The third phase, following closely upon the failure of all their ‘efforts’ has brought with it a significant level of disillusionment.

The dominant interpretation though is that ‘it is still all-possible’: if it were not for corrupt intermediaries and individuals, the ‘movement’ would have been able to look after them. It is the intrusion of ‘unprincipled elements’ and ‘thieves’ in the movement who keep them away from success for their own benefit. Another inference was that ‘if it was not for illegal immigrants’, ‘unprincipled operators’ in the streets, and, a general ‘anarchy’ in the informal sector, they would have been able to establish something more secure for themselves.

Most of my intellectual and practical work has been in enhancing the encroachment politics of the vulnerable sectors of the working class, so a more thorough account for the dynamics in this sector is provided elsewhere. Vulnerable economic activities involving this cohort of leaders span the city and the country, local authorities and customary ones and an endless process of negotiating space, losing space, re-grouping and encroaching further. In this, their comradeship networks have been vital. In an area of economic activity where so many needy people are involved, each one with their own networks, the ‘mobile’ and the ‘stuck’ comrades remain valuable resources for their efforts.

Some (10 cases), have experienced such deterioration through alcohol or multiple diseases, that their life can literally be described as ‘miserable’. Even when more resourceful comrades intervene, they are seen to have become ‘beyond repair’ and a further ‘burden’ on their families.

Amongst them are some (a third) of the most virulent critics of the ‘compromise’ that ushered the South African transition: they are critical of the settlement with ‘the Afrikaners and the Bosses’; ‘look at them they are stabbing us in the back and we are saying thank you’ and the appeasement of the ‘black elite’. The majority though blame their prior disadvantage - ‘no skills, no education, no nothing, now we are suffering’.

If the ‘mobile’ group is experiencing ‘status incongruity’ this cohort is also going through similar emotive feelings. Their past leadership bestowed status, now they are ‘judged harshly (by) their children’. ‘You destroyed our lives for nothing’ was the children’s common motif, or you gave everything and ‘now you are nothing’.

20 ibid
Trust and Reciprocity

Unless the horrific period of the counter-revolution is understood, the notion of ‘comradeship’ remains unfathomable. The nature of ‘umzabalazo’ (struggle) and the myriad of reciprocities it necessitated and encultured, are a vital backdrop to come to terms with present trust systems. Comrades according to their moral code are those who were ‘the reliables’, who ‘sacrificed themselves’, who ‘looked after us’; they are the ‘genuines’ and all those people the ‘genuines’ say that they are also ‘genuine, now’ in turn. Such trust systems encompass the ‘upwards’ and the ‘downwards’ and of course, all those of the cohort who are ‘in-between’.

Nevertheless, it is also ‘common sense’ that they are disgruntled with ‘the situation’ and with the status quo. Such grievances and issues arising from ‘the situation’ define their everyday interactions with each other and the rest of society. If I am allowed to distinguish between three dispositional categories I have used elsewhere21 - of dissonance, alterity and resistance (corresponding to disquiet with a situation, to a definition of an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ and to an active defiance and challenges to the status quo, respectively) their responses could be grouped as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dissonance</th>
<th>Alterity</th>
<th>Resistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
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(in 36% of the responses I had difficulty in classifying any definite disposition).

Only 16 people in the cohort have crossed the dispositional boundary towards actual resistance. They are not only discontented but they are actually involved in the organisation of discontent in a variety of social movements. The fascinating aspect is that only half of them have made their ‘comrades’ aware of their activities. Asked why this was so, they expressed awkwardness and discomfort about breaking away from their sense of belonging. If 4% have crossed such an emotive boundary, 36% are becoming disinterested in politics: they are becoming indifferent to calls of further involvement. They respect those who are not like them, but they had had ‘enough of both toyi-toyi and of promises’.

If doing not ‘saying’, deeds not words, praxis not argument, defines the distinguishing feature between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to their cohort- in other words that trust is based on demonstrable commitments- then change can only occur in two ways: firstly, it is through the gradual disappearance of that generation and the appearance of a new one with new priorities and orientations. The new managerial and public bureaucracies will recruit new University entrants, the workplaces will select and recruit new workers. This might prove difficult because it

21 ‘Neither Gold nor Bile…’ *op cit.*
has to presuppose that the older generation in a workplace will not ‘socialise’ the new one into cultural formations that preserve past codes of conduct and behaviour. The alternative is a break-up from within, as an organic leadership defines a new language that begins to snap the ‘elastic band’. For this to occur, it presupposes an experiential rupture, a crisis that cannot be externalised any longer and a trusted leadership that says so and is ready to act accordingly. From, the narratives above, ‘outsiders’ armed with new ideas and orientations will not be given a substantive hearing.

**For better or for worse**

Intellectual voyeurs and journalists, armed with data of increasing poverty ask whether life in the post-Apartheid dispensation could be compared with how life was in the Apartheid past. Such a question would be met with intense hostility from all the participants in this narrative- even by those whose lives border on destitution. Having been in the throws of untold hardships during the Apartheid period and then through the violence of a civil war, the fact of peace alone, was a significant one. They all emphasised that as a major achievement before they went on to speak about substantive rights, about better treatment on the shop floor, about more ‘voice’ in a plethora of forums, about fairer and more transparent rules.

To the facts of ‘intolerance’ within government, they point to the fact that a TV sequel like Yizo Yizo (most of them were disturbed by it) could be and was shown on TV. To the facts that many of the projects that flourished under their leadership had died in the new dispensation (like the Culture and Working Life Project, the Trade Union Research Project and many other Labour Service Organisations’ initiatives) they point to the fact that they survived on donor money and that they should have found their own local dynamism. The only regret that borders on romanticism was the gradual disappearance of an old-style leadership that they admired- Mandela, Tambo and Sisulu, Hani and Slovo, Tutu and Hurley. All the others in leadership positions, they consider as ordinary people like themselves doing ‘extra-ordinary’ jobs.

Pressing on during my interviews in 2000 to understand significant reconfigurations of ‘meaning’ that had occurred in the new dispensation, I decided to focus on ‘gatherings’ that were seen to be significant. At first, my understanding was shaped by a political notion of the ‘gathering’ to confirm intuitions about changing priorities. I ended up with an idea of the kind of ‘pilgrimages’ they made that were particularly ‘meaningful’ in their life. The following picture emerges in frequencies of its perceived importance

- Mandela Release rally in Durban, (67%)
- Visit to Robben Island (48%),
- Attendance of the Moriah-church Easter Celebrations (38%)
- Sun City or Lost City holidays (35%)
- Durban’s Beachfront over festive days (31%),
- National Team’s (Bafana Bafana) Soccer games (28%)
- ‘Traditional’ rites of Passage (27%),
- The Chris Hani funeral (25%)
- Shembe Church Festivals (22%)

Although full of sociological clues such a tabulated response is meaningless unless it is periodised to tell a more robust story: It starts from the release of Mandela and the Durban rally. This was more than significant because only 2% of the KZN –based leaders did not attend. This was the initial highpoint, during the civil war and a week after Mandela was released.

By 1993, 25% of them (10% from KZN) highlight the importance of the Hani funeral at the same time there seems to be a shift towards the Shembe church. The coincidence of the two is powerful. Half of those from KwaZulu-Natal who attended the Hani funeral also felt attracted towards the Shembe rituals. This corresponded with their physical dislocation through the war and the reported increases in religiosity and the search for sangomas and inyangas who could ease their plight.

By 1995 what emerges significantly is meaningful attendance of ‘traditional rites of passage’ as people are beginning to re-build their lives; close in tow by 1996, pilgrimages to Moriah up north over Easter increase in frequency; and the celebrations of the national soccer team’s prowess throughout 1996.

By 1997 as ‘normalisation’ increases so does the Durban Beachfront gains in prominence in festive periods including the majority of East Rand respondents who chose to travel there. By 1998, visits to Robben Island as a symbolic gesture gain ascendance primarily amongst those with better income a ‘pilgrimage’ that also coincided with organised expeditions to Sun City/Lost City. From then on, meaningful activity fragmented into micro-frequencies of no shared significance.

The obvious picture that emerges is that the significance of the ‘politics of liberation’ is decreasing, to re-appear as a private symbolic and mnemonic act through visits to Robben Island. There is a small core of less than 10% that continues to attend ANC-related rallies. Yet, the religious and customary pre-occupations continue and so does the enjoyment (by those who could afford it) of leisure-related activities. Their eyes though were wide-open to a worsening socio-economic situation: everyone highlighted the increase in crime at the grassroots: ‘true, many of the things they buy are known to be stolen but the majority sees criminality as a moral affront’. They support direct action to get rid of criminals and their households. They also attend trade union and community meetings.

They were also deeply concerned about the debilitating spread of sickness and the frequency of funerals in their communities. Although divided on their views on HIV/AIDS and confused by the debates happening in their organisations and in
the media, they were aware that there was ‘something out there, killing us’. Those who were active members in the SACP (South African Communist Party) were almost unanimous that HIV causes AIDS and that ‘Mbeki and Manto are wrong’. This reflected serious organisational discussion and/or education. In turn, those who believed that HIV causes AIDS and still wanted to justify government’s reluctance to roll-out an anti-retroviral campaign, rationalise the situation by saying that ‘they (the government) must know something which none of us does and they are not saying it because of its consequences’.

Most of them were conscious of (and abhor) corruption - they pointed out that it was a feature of homeland administration and of local councils in the Apartheid period. They added though that ‘now it is becoming a feature everywhere’. There was a harsh judgment involved here: ‘comrades are accountable, those who are not, are not comrades. Finished. Don’t give us black this or that, or white psychology, facts are facts’. They explained this tendency for easy-corruption in terms of disease metaphors using the language of viruses, bacteria and contamination.

The multi-level privatisation processes that the post-Apartheid government has initiated, is definitely seen in a bad light by 62% of them. Their logic was simple: it means further job losses and it will come to mean higher costs for the poor. The only privatisation that they would consider supporting was a transfer to non-profit entities like ‘Section 21’ companies and Trusts. They were also ambiguous about trade union-linked companies: although the money will went towards worker interests, these companies are part of a market-system (‘the system’) and they would have to also increase costs adding to the burdens of poorer communities.

The greatest ‘scourge’ though, was increasing unemployment. For the majority of the leaders interviewed, it lay at the root of all other problems. They pointed out that you ‘can’t expect capitalists to solve it, it is against their reason of existence’. They insisted that the ‘government must solve it’. Some added that, ‘we must help the government solve it’. Yet, others added, ‘if it fails we must force the government to solve it’. The mounting pressure for job creation and state intervention is bound to reverberate at all levels of the society.

Conclusion
In conclusion: the elastic band that held the horizontal comradeships of the labour movement together in the past has not snapped. The memory of reciprocity and its constant re-call and re-invention continues. The radical diversification of needs and immediate interests that emerged through the transition exercises tremendous strains on the elasticity of the band. Yet, from the evidence at hand if it does so, it will be snapped from ‘within’ through legitimate leaders who have been able to demonstrate consistency over time. In the meantime, the pressures of rapid
stratification and the existence of contrary claims over issues do not seem to be sufficient to do so.

The articulation of nation, race and class so central in the self-definition of comradeships, was being challenged by the everyday reality of divergent needs, yet it was proving to be resilient. It would therefore be easy to argue that all the above proves the longevity and resilience of nationalism as a defining ideology. It would also be easy to demonstrate that this resilience was also due to a more material core: the inter-cutting projects based on concrete interests that remain inter-dependent: the encroaching strategies of the new poor were unthinkable without those who were ‘stuck’ as wage-earners; the mobilising discourses of those in the salariat were unthinkable without the others. Each cohort, could be seen to be providing the necessary ‘social capital’ for the other. The articulation of race, nation and class continued despite its ‘shifts’ in meaning has been re-configured. People we have come to learn from social history and agent-sensitive sociology, are not spasmodic respondents to impulses of economic forces or the ‘base’. Finally, they were not victims of ‘false consciousness’ or permanent ‘misrecognisers’ of their ‘real’ interests.

The narrative concerned a generational cohort that averages an age of 50.01 years. Its presence on shop floors is ‘thinning out’. The new shop-steward leaderships in the trade unions is made up of ‘30 year olds’. These ‘youngsters’ were born in 1973, they were ten year olds when the United Democratic Front was formed; those who do have a matriculation certification, received it between 1991-3. They were old enough to experience the carnage of 1988-1994 and they were, given the youthful nature of the ‘war’ old enough to have participated in it, but not old enough to lead it.

They entered working life as a successful minority amongst growing youth unemployment in their own generation. They furthermore, did not have to ‘fight’ for any of the reforms or the democratic structures the previous generation won and created. They are literally, the HIV/AIDS generation. On average, they are 1.5 grades more ‘educated’ than the generation of the ‘comrades movement’. Their survival on the shop floor given the ‘first-in, last out’ principle during job losses, makes them latter-day Darwinian winners. The older generation complained about their different cultural tastes- to the elders’ preference of ‘maskanda music’, they respond with kwaito and hiphop. They see them dismissively as more ‘American than South African’ but they also see them as being more entrapped in debt and to

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24 Campbell, op cit.
the lures of a commodity culture. They also see them as restless. The future of dissonance, alterity or resistance will be a negotiation between the two generations.

* This paper is therefore an abbreviated ‘summary’ of the main trends and therefore the more qualitatitive narratives are not individuated. Only a lengthier manuscript can do full justice to the rich texture of data and voices that have been gathered.