

# **DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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## **The liberation struggle revisited**

... it is of less importance to us whether capitalism is smashed or not. It is of greater importance to us that while capitalism exists, we must fight and struggle to get our full share and benefit from the system.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Xuma, President-General of the ANC (1945)

For the better part of three decades (from the early 1960s to the early 1990s), the dominant theoretical basis for the ANC's liberation struggle had been cast within the necessity for the revolutionary seizure of power. Whether applied to the smashing of apartheid and the attainment of majority rule or as a springboard to a transition to socialism, the revolutionary seizure of power was presented as a necessary pre-condition for movement forward. Joe Slovo had put it this way:

Thus there is a distinction between the creation of the new state form and the building of a new socialist economic formation. The former is made possible by a revolutionary seizure of power; the latter, through the exercise of that political power by a class whose interests are unconditionally served by a socialist order.<sup>2</sup>

Many liberal and neo-Marxist academics, as well as numerous Alliance intellectuals, have historically conceptualised arguments for a revolutionary seizure of power in narrowly statist terms. As a result, the (autonomous) state is given the status of the struggle 'throne', leaving revolutionary (purposive) struggle cast in terms of a fight for a specific form (structure) of power rather than its foundation/content. If such an approach is adopted, either theoretically or practically, there emerges a false dichotomy between the political and the socio-economic 'sides' of revolutionary struggle. Thus political control of the state can be achieved with no corresponding transformation of the economic sphere; and we only have to take one quick glance at the contemporary results of most third world political revolutions to see what kind of national liberation has been delivered. In the historical context of the South African struggle then, such approaches have provided the basis from which to lend both revolutionary credence to purely political change and ammunition for critics of any revolutionary struggle that is outside the theoretical (read:

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in, Robert Fine and Dennis Davis (1990), *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press), p.52.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Slovo (1976), 'South Africa – No Middle Road', in Basil Davidson, David Wilkinson and Joe Slovo (eds), *Southern Africa: The New Politics of Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), pp.146-147.

strategic) and practical (read: institutional) boundaries demanded by liberal bourgeois (capitalist) democracy.

However, there is nothing implicitly statist in any struggle for revolutionary change. What is implicit though, is that there must be a fundamental attack on the entrenched economic and political interests of capital (in whatever form) in order for there to be meaningful liberation. As the ANC had put this quite clearly in the 1970s:

It is therefore a fundamental feature of our strategy that victory must embrace more than formal political democracy. To allow the existing economic forces to retain their interests intact is to feed the root of racial supremacy and does not represent even a shadow of liberation.<sup>3</sup>

And yet the cumulative effect of the strategic and tactical programme of the ANC's liberation struggle, consummated in the period of a 'negotiated transition' in the early 1990s, was to demobilise gradually the only constituency capable of leading and carrying through such a revolutionary struggle – i.e., the broad working class made up of organised workers and the unemployed. The strategic primacy given to the achievement of a narrowly conceived national and liberal bourgeois democracy allowed for a fundamental contradiction to permeate South Africa's 'transition to democracy': namely, that the ANC's own base constituency (the broad working class) have had to take a transitional back seat to a whole host of powerful social and economic forces, both national and international, whose fundamental interests are inimical to revolutionary political and socio-economic transformation.

The strategic statism of the ANC's struggle for national liberation consistently underestimated and seriously undermined the potential and actual struggles of the ANC's own working class constituency. More specifically, the political strategies of the liberation movement lead to a lack of recognition and incorporation of actual struggles on the ground that were themselves, grounded in a struggle for political and socio-economic liberation from apartheid-capitalism. The false separation, both theoretically and practically, between political and socio-economic change that emerged out of the negotiated settlement, meant that processes such as democratisation took on a narrow bourgeois, nationalist and predominantly political meaning and context in which changes in socio-economic power relations were subordinated to changes in who controlled the seat of political power (that is, a privileging of the economic *status quo* – capitalism - and the institutions of bourgeois democracy essential to its maintenance).

### **The foundations of the post-1994 democratic divide**

The device by which content is replaced by form and ideas by phrases has produced a host of declamatory priests...whose last offshoots had of course to lead to democracy.

Karl Marx<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.111.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1977), *Collected Works, Vol.7*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers), p.243.

When South Africa's first ever one-person, one-vote elections in 1994 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the ANC, the majority of South Africans understandably celebrated the arrival of a new democracy. After all, the ANC and its liberation movement allies were now in political control of the state thanks to the votes of those who had, throughout South Africa's modern history, been denied the right of institutionalised democratic participation. Accompanying this however, there still remained a broad based (but ultimately mistaken) expectation amongst the black majority that the new ANC state would immediately begin to pursue a more socialist - or at the least, radically redistributive - political economy.

Besides the contextual backdrop of militant, mass-based political and socio-economic struggles that had been waged since the mid-1980s alongside the continued radical rhetoric of the ANC itself, such an expectation was fuelled by the ANC's adoption of the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP) as its main policy platform on which it had based its electoral campaign. With its rhetorical centrepiece being the creation of a 'people centred society', the RDP proposed to pursue growth and development through reconstruction and redistribution, sought a leading and enabling role for government in guiding a mixed economy, prioritised the meeting of basic socio-economic needs for the poor majority and argued for a living wage as a prerequisite for achieving the required level of economic growth.<sup>5</sup> The millions of organised workers and unemployed who had provided the ANC with both its political and organisational power, looked to the RDP's promises to create millions of jobs, provide massive increases in infrastructure, meet basic social needs and redistribute large amounts of white-owned land.

It did not take long however, for the new ANC state to make it known that the basis upon which the objectives outlined in the RDP were to be approached would be through a tightly controlled macro-economic balance. Thus, at the same time that the RDP was being seen by ANC supporters and most black South Africans as the framework for a more radical and substantive shift in the country's political economy, the ANC government was stressing the need for fiscal discipline, export-oriented growth, privatisation and decreased levels of corporate taxation<sup>6</sup>.

Importantly then, the first two years of South Africa's new democracy witnessed the ANC's gradual, even if at times contested, political and ideological acceptance of the broad framework of a globally dominant, neo-liberal political and economic orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup> In these early transitional years, the ANC cleverly sought to utilise the all-encompassing, legitimating argument of liberal bourgeois democracy; namely, that "its link to society is held to be that it operates at the level of the general interest".<sup>8</sup> When coupled to the more practical global offensive of internationalised corporate and finance capital (otherwise known as neo liberalism), it then appears as though liberal bourgeois democracy has taken on the mantle of a necessary and natural political product of an equally necessary and

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed exposition of the 'fundamentals' of the RDP see, National Institute for Economic Policy (1986), 'From the RDP to GEAR', Research Paper Series, Johannesburg, NIEP.

<sup>6</sup> See Adam Habib & Vishnu Padayachee (2000), 'Economic Policy and Power Relations in South Africa's Transition to Democracy', University of Natal –Durban School of Development Studies Research Paper.

<sup>7</sup> This was ameliorated, to some extent, by a period of intense legislative activity designed to repeal apartheid-era discrimination and facilitate new social and economic opportunities for 'historically disadvantaged' sectors of the population.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Levin (1989), *Marx, Engels and Liberal Democracy* (New York: St. Martin's Press), p.140.

natural economic order. Under such a scenario, democracy itself becomes synonymous with the capitalist 'free market' and everything else is merely about degrees and emphases.

Crucially, the rightward ideological shift of the ANC was paralleled by the systematic dismemberment, or incorporation into the organisational framework of the ANC itself, of most all, independent and allied community organisations (whether 'civics', women's organisations and/or youth groupings etc.) in South Africa. By the mid-1990s the vast majority of those community organisations that had been so central to the radicalisation of the anti-apartheid struggle and that had sustained the hope of millions for an anti-capitalist transformation of South African society, had been swallowed by the ANC and, to a lesser extent by its Alliance partners.

As a result, the political and organisational terrain for active and militant resistance to the ANC's creeping neo-liberalism, elite deal making and wholesale acceptance of the institutionalised framework of bourgeois democracy was effectively contained within the ANC and its Alliance partners. In turn, this ensured (in the short-term at least) that the possibilities for independent, mass-based and anti-neoliberal organisation and struggle were severely curtailed.

The ANC's political decision to turn its back on previous commitments to its broad working class constituency to implement more radical socio-economic policies was then institutionally codified with the formal unveiling of the overtly neo-liberal *Growth, Employment and Redistribution* (GEAR) macroeconomic strategy in mid-1996. GEAR committed the ANC state to: slash government spending (as a means to reduce the budget deficit); keep inflation in single digits (through high real interest rates); provide tax holidays and other incentives for corporate capital; phase out exchange controls; create a more 'flexible' labour market; encourage 'wage restraint'; and, speed up the privatisation of state assets.

Key to the future political role for, and economic impact on, the millions of workers and unemployed though, was GEAR's choice of socio-political 'vehicles' for carrying through the 'transformation' of South Africa's political economy. GEAR proffered that a combination of economic affirmative action (through land distribution to a new class of black commercial farmers and state assistance to emerging black industrial entrepreneurs) and new black economic empowerment initiatives through 'partnerships' with corporate capital, would best 'deliver' the desired outcomes of economic redistribution, equity and growth as well as job creation. Just as GEAR rubbished any latent applicability of the RDP as the vehicle for economic transformation, so too was the oft-stated 'leading' role of the ANC's historic mass base – the millions of workers and unemployed – rubbished as the vehicle for the socio-political transformation of post-apartheid South Africa.

By the mid-1990s, if not before, it should have been clear to anyone paying attention, that anti-capitalist class-based struggle, generated and led by organised workers and the poor majority, had been fundamentally rejected by the ANC as a strategy for political and socio-economic change. Rather, the ANC's strategic path was now firmly located within its earlier acceptance of a negotiated solution that politically institutionalised bourgeois democracy and economically, laid the foundation for a de-racialised South African capitalism.

Nowhere have the political and organisational consequences of such a strategy been more acutely realised than in relation to the political role of the ANC's key alliance partners, COSATU and the SACP. Their acceptance of an unequal political relationship within an ANC-dominated alliance<sup>9</sup> has served to tie organised workers and large numbers of community activists into a false sense of ideological and strategic unity and to continuously weaken the ability of the broader working class to fully engage in independent and anti-capitalist class struggle. In turn, this surrendering of political, and thus organisational, independence has facilitated the believability in the interlinked notions (energetically propagated by the ANC and Alliance leaders) that South Africans can 'find' a 'national consensus' about the economic and social path upon which the country should travel, that class struggle can be effectively 'suspended' and that the contradictions emerging can be successfully managed.<sup>10</sup> Thus, at the same time that the ANC state moved full steam ahead with the implementation of GEAR in the mid-late 1990s, the main organised forces capable of leading a collective working class struggle against the logic and practical effects of capitalist neo-liberalism, succumbed to the exigencies of the ANC's full embrace of bourgeois politics.

Not surprisingly, such subjective choices could do very little to stem the effectual tide of objective realities that were being experienced by workers and poor communities across South Africa. Massive job losses were visited upon those members of the South African working class who had been fortunate enough to be employed, the 'experience' being accompanied by all the attendant social and economic devastation to already poor families and communities. To make matters worse, the ANC state also implemented basic needs policies that effectively turned such needs/services into market commodities, to be bought and sold on the 'free market' and framed by the pursuit of profit. This was facilitated by a drastic decrease in national government grants/subsidies to local municipalities and city councils and support for the development of financial instruments for privatised delivery. In turn, this forced local government to turn towards commercialisation and privatisation of basic services as a means of generating the revenue no longer provided by the national state.<sup>11</sup>

The logical result of these developments was a huge escalation in the costs of basic services and a concomitant increase in the use of cost-recovery mechanisms such as water and electricity cut-offs that necessarily hit poor people the most. So, between 1999-2000 over 75,000 water-cut-offs occurred in the Greater Cape Town area.<sup>12</sup> During 1999 close to 20 000 houses had their electricity supplies cut off every month in Soweto with Brian Johnson, the manager of Eskom, openly boasting that, "the aim is to disconnect at least 75 per cent of Soweto residents".<sup>13</sup> By the turn of the century, millions more poor South

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<sup>9</sup> This acceptance has not been without its vocal critics within both COSATU and the SACP. For a detailed treatment of debate and opposition within the Alliance since 1994 see, Dale T. McKinley (2001), 'Democracy, Power and Patronage: Debate and Opposition within the ANC and Tripartite Alliance since 1994', in Roger Southall (ed), *Opposition and Democracy in South Africa*, (London: Frank Cass Publishers), pp.183-206.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview (since 1994) of the varying contents and consequences flowing from this reality see, Dale T. McKinley (2003), 'The Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Tripartite Alliance since 1994', in Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi (Eds.), *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the 'New' South Africa*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers), pp. 43-61.

<sup>11</sup> See David McDonald (2000), 'The Bell Tolls for Thee: Cost Recovery, Cut offs, and the Affordability of Municipal Services in South Africa': Special Report.

<sup>12</sup> David McDonald and L. Smith (2002), 'Privatizing Cape Town', Occasional Papers, No.7 (Johannesburg: Municipal Services Project), p.41.

<sup>13</sup> *Mail & Guardian* (2000), 6-12 April

Africans had also experienced cut-offs and evictions as the result of the ANC's neo-liberal orgy.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the ANC state's capitalist-friendly land policies, which ensured that apartheid land ownership patterns remained virtually intact, meant that South Africa's long-suffering rural population continued to taste the bitter fruits of labour exploitation and landlessness.

It was the cumulative result of such experiences, combined with the failure of the main traditional forces of the South African working class (e.g., COSATU, SACP) as well as 'civic' structures like SANCO to lead and sustain counter mobilisations and active class resistance, that eventually saw the rise of new social movements.

### **The rise of the new social movements**

'We must understand that the new democracy cannot allow for hostile surveillance of the democratic process and the participants in this process'.<sup>15</sup>

Thabo Mbeki (1994)

At first in South Africa's main urban centres and then later in rural communities, a collection of social movements arose to challenge water and electricity cut-offs, housing evictions, forced removals and lack of land redistribution. As Ashwin Desai has noted:

The rise of these movements based in particular communities and evincing particular, mainly defensive demands, was not merely a natural result of poverty or marginality but a direct response to state policy. The state's inability or unwillingness to be a provider of public services and the guarantor of the conditions of collective consumption has been a spark for a plethora of community movements (and) the general nature of the neo-liberal emergency concentrates and aims these demands towards the state ... activity has been motivated by social actors spawned by the new conditions of accumulation that lie outside of the ambit of the trade union movement and its style of organising. What distinguishes these community movements from political parties, pressure groups and NGOs is mass mobilisation as the prime source of social sanction.<sup>16</sup>

The rapid growth of social movements and their increasingly militant opposition to the policies of the ANC-run state from the late 1990s, soon led to a rupture between those organisations/movements opposed to the ANC state's political trajectory and economic policies and those that chose continued (even if at times critical) loyalty to the ANC 'line'. This was best exemplified in the run-up to, and during, the World Summit on Sustainable

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<sup>14</sup> See McDonald and Smith (2002) as well as Edward Cottle (2003), 'The Failure of Sanitation and Water Delivery and the Cholera Outbreak', in *Development Update*, Vol.4, No.1, pp.141-166.

<sup>15</sup> Thabo Mbeki (1994), 'From Resistance to Reconstruction: Tasks of the ANC in the New Epoch of the Democratic Transformation – Unmandated Reflections', unpublished mimeo. This document, which remained in the possession of a select few ANC-Alliance hands until the late 1990s, was penned when Mbeki was ANC Deputy General Secretary and was circulated amongst the Alliance leadership prior to the ANC's 49<sup>th</sup> National Conference in December, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Ashwin Desai (2002), 'Witnessing the Transition' – <http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs>

Development (WSSD -August 2002), that saw a decisive split between the two ‘camps’ – the former gathering together under the rubric of the Social Movements Indaba (SMI) and the latter collectively grouped under the Civil Society (People’s) Forum. The most visible result of this developing fault line were the dual Alex-to-Sandton marches on the WSSD, with the march by the SMI and allied formations such as the Landless People’s Movement attracting 25 000 people onto the streets and the ANC-backed Forum march attracting fewer than 5000.<sup>17</sup>

This developing fault line represents nothing less than a clear ideological and organisational divide amongst historically progressive forces in South Africa. The bulk of the new social movements represent those that still believe in principled internationalism and the possibility of a non-capitalist future, who increasingly desire to push beyond the enforced barriers of institutionalised bourgeois democracy and who pursue an independent, mass-based mobilisation and struggle as the only meaningful and realistic option for resisting global neo-liberalism and forging an ideological and organisational alternative to the capitalist ANC.<sup>18</sup>

On the other side stand the ‘traditional’ progressive forces in South Africa, represented in the main by the various leaderships of COSATU, SACP, SANCO and SANGOCO. While employing left (socialist) rhetoric and proclaiming organisational independence, they have critically accepted the ANC state’s capitalist developmentalism, lost what confidence they did have in the ‘leading role’ of the broad working class (both domestically and internationally) and chosen institutionalised ‘democratic’ privilege and access - all rationalised by reference to historic Alliance loyalties, the necessities of the ‘national democratic revolution’ and the ‘realities’ of global capitalism.

The immediate response of the ANC state to the emergence and activities of the new social movements was to embark on a political propaganda campaign that sought to portray these movements and their activists as ‘criminals’ and ‘anarchists’. When this seemed to have little effect on the activities and growth of the social movements, the ANC leaders chose to use the state’s repressive apparatus to launch a co-ordinated ‘law and order’ crackdown. This culminated in physical assaults on, and arrests and imprisonment of, hundreds of social movement activists and community members across the country before, during and after the WSSD.<sup>19</sup>

When COSATU’s affiliated unions, energetically supported by several social movements, embarked on an anti-privatisation strike soon after the WSSD (despite the Alliance leadership’s attempts to negotiate the strike away), a more systematic and high-level ANC propaganda campaign kicked into gear. The ANC accused all those who were actively critiquing and opposing its neo-liberal policies and the democratic content of its

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<sup>17</sup> See, ‘Historic United Social Movements Mass March To WSSD Sends Clear Message – The People Will Be Heard’, SMI Press Release. 1<sup>st</sup> September 2002 – <http://www.apf.org.za>

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed exposition of these positions see, John Apollis (2002), ‘The Political Significance of August 31<sup>st</sup>’, in *Khanya*, No.2 (December), pp. 5-9. Amongst the new social movements however, there have been (and continue to be) substantive organisational differences and political/ideological debates. While the social movements do not represent some kind of homogenous entity, they have become inextricably bound together by the levelling content and common forms of the neoliberal onslaught (both nationally and, to a lesser extent, internationally)

<sup>19</sup> For an extended critical analysis of the WSSD and the role of the ANC state’s attempts to repress opposition to it, see, Patrick Bond (2002), ‘The World Summit on Sustainable Development: Critiques From the Left’, Paper presented to the University of Pretoria Department of Sociology, 18<sup>th</sup> July. Also see the excellent collection of essays in Simon Kimani (Ed.) (2003), *The Right To Dissent* (Johannesburg: Freedom of Expression Institute).

governance as being an “ultra left ... waging a counter-revolutionary struggle against the ANC and our democratic government”, and of siding with the “bourgeoisie and its supporters”.<sup>20</sup> President Mbeki waded in by claiming publicly that, “this ultra-left works to implant itself within our ranks ... it hopes to capture control of our movement and transform it into an instrument for the realisation of its objectives”.<sup>21</sup> Mbeki went further: “They should also have known that the people know that, historically, those who opposed and worked to destroy the ANC, and tried to mobilise the workers to act against our movement, were the same people who sought to entrench and perpetuate their oppression”.<sup>22</sup>

Such shrill and high-level attacks on the new social movements (and that minority in COSATU, the SACP and other allied organisations who continue to actively resist ANC state policies) have only served to widen the political and class fault lines that now so clearly divide South African society. Indeed, this appears to be precisely what the ANC desires, as the tactical means to pursue a strategy of ‘divide and rule’, specifically as applied to those forces on its left. This was confirmed later in 2003 when ANC Deputy Secretary General, Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyele distinguished between “positive social formations” (i.e., those who have responded positively to the state) and those with whom “we have a bit of a problem”. She added: “We are a young democracy ... we need a consensus. So we cannot behave in a manner like societies (that have been) independent for many years”.<sup>23</sup>

What better and convenient way to confirm the presence and evident threat of an enemy of the state, democracy and ‘the people’, while affirming the ANC and the state as the guardians of that democracy and the hand-maidens of those ‘people’, than to let loose the vultures of insinuation, caricature and demagoguery? Worse still, to effectively proscribe anti-capitalist (and thus, anti-state) dissent and struggle and to declare the political, and indeed moral, inviolability of an enforced, institutionalised bourgeois democracy? The script has been all too familiar – manufacture an ‘enemy’, construct its self-fulfilling destructive character and purpose and then launch a sustained assault against it under the guise of rationality, ‘law and order’, the nation’s political heritage and identity, the preservation of democracy and, of course, in the name of the ‘people’.

### **Democracy and the state under capitalism**

‘The political system of liberal democracy looks more and more like a mixture of plebiscitary dictatorship and corporate oligarchy’.<sup>24</sup>

James Cornford (1972)

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<sup>20</sup> African National Congress (2002), ‘Contribution to the NEC/NWC response to the Cronin interviews on the issue of neo-liberalism’, Internal ANC paper by the Political Education Unit (September).

<sup>21</sup> Thabo Mbeki (2002), ‘Statement of the President of the ANC, Thabo Mbeki, at the ANC Policy Conference’, Kempton Park (20<sup>th</sup> September) – <http://www.anc.org.za/docs>

<sup>22</sup> Thabo Mbeki (2002), ‘Letter from the President: The Masses are Not Blind’, *ANC Today*, Vol. 2, No. 40 (4-10 October).

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Marianne Merten (2003), ‘The thrill of uhuru is over’, *Mail & Guardian*, 15-21 August.

<sup>24</sup> James Cornford (1972) as quoted in Michael Levin (1989), *Marx, Engels and Liberal Democracy*, p.145.

The starting point for any meaningful understanding of, and practical engagement in/with, democracy is a theoretical base. Unfortunately, the dominant theoretical construct that has informed interrogations of, and approaches to, South Africa's 'democratic transition' - i.e. capitalist (bourgeois) liberalism - falsely separates democratic form and content/context. As such, democracy is conceptualised outside of its historical materialist base, as some sort of neutral principle floating somewhere outside material relations. The result is that we are left with a single analytical starting point; namely, that democracy is a function of institutional arrangements within capitalist society. In turn, this leads to the concept of class and the practice of class struggle being understood solely in relation to the dominant, contemporary institutional form of democracy under capitalism (i.e., representative democracy).

The generalised failure to grasp the theoretical nettle of democracy under capitalism necessarily leads to a focus on existing institutions of representation as the axle upon which any meaningful social and political activity turns. In relation to the character and content of the various struggles of South Africa's new social movements then, the main argument, vigorously punted by ANC/Alliance intellectuals, becomes one about the necessity for social movements to accept, and participate in, the institutional 'democratic' framework ('institutionalised politics') as a legitimate and acceptable means to impact on, and potentially change, both state and society.<sup>25</sup>

The conceptual heart of this argument is fundamentally embedded within the precepts of classic bourgeois liberalism. In other words, that institutionalised pluralism (i.e., of a multiplicity of organisational forms) is the essence of democracy regardless of the dominant social relations within which such pluralism operates. The problem here is obvious though - such an institutionalisation, under capitalist social relations, has always and everywhere lead to an inevitable 'democratic' sterility. Pluralism simply becomes a catchword for a range of organisational and individual voices that are contained and limited within the narrow institutional and political confines of liberal bourgeois democracy that offers precious little in the way of seriously contesting the parallel character and content of a capitalist state and the policies it implements.

There is no space here for fundamental (revolutionary) systemic challenges or for an alternative politics that is not bounded by *status quo* institutionalism. The sterility that inevitably derives from this approach has been more than evident over the last ten years, in relation to South Africa's traditional political and social organisations/movements. It is clear for all to see, except those still wearing their 'transitional, national democratic revolution' blinders, the devastating effects of this institutionalised sterility on the long-term capacity of working class organisations and poor communities to effectively challenge the agenda of capital and the state institutions that now act, in the main, as the 'public' arm of the private (capitalist) sector. Regardless of the institutionalised pluralism that has accompanied processes of political democratisation since 1994, the South African state remains a capitalist state (albeit a deracialised one). Those social forces that remain oppressed and exploited under the 'guidance' of such a capitalist state, thus have every reason to practice their politics predominately outside of its institutional boundaries, and that can also include associated electoral processes.

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<sup>25</sup> See Michael Sachs (2003), 'We don't want the fucking vote: Social movements and demagogues in South Africa's young democracy', *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol.27, No.6 (December), pp. 23-27.

While the state (both in general terms and as applied to South Africa) is a complex entity possessing its own set of internal contradictions, it is not a neutral institution that can somehow be enveloped and radically transformed through participation in its associated institutional 'network' (including elections). States are, as Marx so cogently argued, the organic repressive and ideological apparatuses of a class and in South Africa's immediate future that class is capitalist. This is regardless of the hypocritical attempts by the new black elite (both inside and outside the state) to present themselves as part of the broad working class and somehow suspended above material relations and class realities.

Certainly the South African state has, and will continue, to play a role that is not necessarily always in line with the highest expectations and demands of corporate and finance capital - it will no doubt, for example, continue to play a part-time welfarist role that tries to smooth over class conflict and struggle. However, while capitalist relations remain the driving force in society, the state will always imbibe and reflect those dominant relations in the most specific of ways. The kind of classless analysis of democracy and the South African state that presides over it, that passes for critical intellectual endeavour, leads directly to the kind of quiescent and sterile 'institutional politics' that most of South Africa's new social movements want to avoid, and transcend.<sup>26</sup>

If, as a sizeable section of South Africa's new social movements do, we understand contemporary politics under capitalism as the continuing practice of class struggle, then we can also understand why the existing state, its institutionalised politics (i.e., bourgeois democracy) and its socio-economic policies are seen, and treated, as a central target of that practice. The democratic content of that practice cannot be manufactured and/or imposed. Those struggling to create new avenues of political expression and to free themselves from the shackles of capitalism's 'democracy' will create it.

### **Representation and social transformation**

The analytical (contextual) focus on 'representative democracy' that has come to dominate notions of contemporary democratic content and practice has, in South Africa, come to represent the foil, against which the organisational trajectory and practical activities of the new social movements should be adjudged. It is not however, representative democracy that has seen a 'flowering' of social movements. Rather, it has been the inexorable push towards more inclusive and meaningful forms of direct and participatory democracy, that have little or nothing to do with the institutional forms of representation within bourgeois 'democratic' society, which provides the contextual background to the genesis and rise of social movements in South Africa.

One of the ANC's up-and-coming young intellectuals, Michael Sachs, has argued that those social movements that position themselves in opposition to representative democracy will remain marginal to the process of social transformation.<sup>27</sup> This represents an approach that conflates the institutional forms of representative democracy - and the

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<sup>26</sup> Eric Hobsbawm's argument that intellectuals who have been part and parcel of a revolutionary party/liberation movement most often retreat into the "posture of the (liberal) advocate" once they have realised that the politics-ideology of that party/movement is not going to deliver what was expected, rings true in the South African case. See, Eric Hobsbawm (1973), *Revolutionaries* (London: Phoenix Publishers).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Sachs (2003), 'We don't want the fucking vote...', p. 26.

politics thus produced - with the democratic practice/activism that arises out of class struggle in a capitalist society. The 'new' social movements arose out of, and have been shaped by, direct opposition to specific state policies and actions, not representative democracy itself. It is Sachs' kind of self-constructed and uncritical acceptance of the political primacy of representational institutionalism that allows the ongoing struggle for democracy to be viewed as a simple exercise in finding the best way to fit into the existing institutional (capitalist) order while mitigating its effects on the poor/workers. It's the same tired old mantra that has been discussed, and (to a lesser extent) pursued, for decades amongst so-called progressives/leftists that have occupied state power. And, what has been the result?; more inequality, more oppression, less freedom, more poverty and certainly less democracy.

If the entire arena of class/political struggle under capitalism is pre-framed as one in which there are no other strategic and tactical choices other than to work within the representational parameters of capitalist 'democratic' institutions, then any (proto) revolutionary class struggles against capitalism are being effectively proscribed. Here, there is absolutely no room to view and practice 'engagement' with such institutions, from a perspective of independent and anti-capitalist class politics and struggle.

It is not that South Africa's new social movements see every democratic institution as 'dangerous mechanisms for the co-option of the poor' or view the vote (within the present capitalist framework) as 'meaningless'<sup>28</sup>. Rather, it is simply a matter of understanding that a reliance on formalised participation in such institutions, that includes participation in electoral politics, is inherently incapable of fundamentally transforming social relations (i.e. as long as capitalist property relations remain the bedrock of social relations). Most social movement activists have no illusions in the revolutionary efficacy of such institutions, whether or not the former liberation movement (which has now become the main political vehicle for the class interests of a new black bourgeoisie) occupies a dominant position within them.

Indeed, South Africa has already entered into the terrain of a low intensity and commodified democracy. This is a terrain in which the mere existence and functioning of representative democratic institutions and processes increasingly mask the decline of meaningful popular democratic participation/control, where elections have become the political playground of those with access to capitalist patronage and where electoral choice is reduced to different shades of grey.

This has not meant however, that various social movements have been unwilling to utilise the institutional mechanism of the vote as a tactical means/space to put forward alternative ideas and positions, to expose the neoliberal agenda of the ANC-run state and most importantly, to mobilise the poor outside of the institutional framework of the mechanisms of their own oppression. Democracy must not be conflated with the formal institutions that have been tailored, under capitalism, to channel expressions of 'popular democracy'.

While there is no doubt that some of the material and social interests of the poor majority can be partially realised through political representation in the institutions of bourgeois democracy – something that has been the case since the introduction of the universal franchise in all 'modern' capitalist countries – the most crucial question is most often not

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp.25-26.

even posed: How can the poor majority realise (and where have they realised) a different, non-capitalist society by defining and ‘ring fencing’ their struggles within the institutional framework of capitalist representative (democratic) institutions?

There is no necessary or inherent connection between participation in such an institutional framework (through utilising the vote, representation in state bodies etc.) and the ‘deepening of democracy’ in ways that can make a systemic difference in the lives of the broad working class under capitalism. What is actually ‘deepened’ though, is the width and breadth of the institutional framework (i.e. the forms) but not the content of popular democracy itself. Fundamentally then, institutionally bound forms of ‘popular democracy’ can have no real long-term meaning or effect as long as capitalist social and material relations remain politically and organisationally unchallenged.

### **Facing Realities**

Most of South Africa’s new social movements (and the poor who make-up those movements) have, unsurprisingly, exhibited little desire to be part of the institutionalised mainstream of South African politics. This is precisely because these movements have been borne out of the very failures and betrayals of South Africa’s main political ‘currents’ and the institutional democratic framework that gives them contemporary – but lessening – legitimacy.

The fact that the social movements are presently outside of the mainstream of South Africa’s institutional politics is representative of a reality that the ANC and its Alliance partners appear wholly unwilling to face - i.e., that an increasing number of poor South Africans no longer see active participation in the present institutional set-up of ‘representative democracy’ as being in their social and material interests. Empirical confirmation of this can be easily found in the rapidly declining numbers of poor who actually are utilising their vote (especially at the local level) and this, only ten years after the ‘victory of democracy’ for which they fought for so long and hard.

The complementary fact that millions of South Africans have registered to vote does not, in any way, then mean that the present representational mechanisms of institutional democracy are the answer to the democratic aspirations of the majority of South Africans. What it does mean though is that the majority continue to look, either passively or actively, to institutional representation precisely because there are, presently, few (in depth and breadth) alternative avenues for democratic expression. The social movements are just at the beginning of struggling for, and building, such alternatives and it is to be expected that their size, appeal and actions will (for some time) continue to be up against the inherited and accumulated ‘legitimacy’ of bourgeois representative democracy as practiced, supported and institutionalised by the ANC. If that constitutes being on the margins instead of the mainstream in the short-term, then that is exactly where the social movements should be and, mostly, want to be.

In many poor urban and rural communities, it is through the activities of the new social movements that an increasing number of people experience and practice meaningful democracy. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the growing impact and popularity of the daily ‘bread and butter’ issues and struggles taken up by the social movements, is directly linked to the adverse effects of the ANC government’s neo-liberal policies on the poor

majority that are most acutely experienced through the ‘offices’ of the various institutional mechanisms of representative democracy.

If, in the coming years, the struggles of the social movements intensify, both qualitatively and quantitatively, then it will be the equally intensifying failures of a capitalist state and its bourgeois (neoliberal) politics that increasing numbers of the broad working class will be struggling against. Real democracy cannot be achieved and/or measured by institutional representation, processes and proclamation but by consistent and radical popular participation and mass struggle to ensure that the fundamentals of life are the property of the *demos*, not of a state, not of a political party and not of a capitalist elite.

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