

# CENTRE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY RESEARCH REPORTS, 2005, VOLUME 2

## Introduction

In the last several years, an expanding literature has traced the rise of new social movements in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>1</sup> A significant proportion of this literature has been funded, supported or published by the Centre for Civil Society (CCS), including many of the articles published in its previous research report volume. CCS has also funded a large research project focussed on the phenomenon. As Desai and Pithouse have argued, initially this literature was largely celebratory and descriptive in character and mainly announced the arrival of such movements.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as they argue, many social movements themselves have only just begun a greater interrogation of '...the constitution of counter-power'.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, to date, much criticism of the new social movements 'from without' has seldom moved beyond the ruling African National Congress's labelling of them as 'ultra-leftists' with 'hidden agendas'.<sup>4</sup>

We believe that the publication of this volume marks a deeply significant moment in the evolution of a body of scholarly literature on the emergence and development of civil society resistance to neoliberalism in post-apartheid South Africa. Specifically, we argue that the reports in this volume point to a new level of internal critique within movements. Each of the articles in this volume problematises such resistance in the spirit of sincere and open reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Ashwin Desai. *We are the Poors- Community Struggles in Post-apartheid South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002); Patrick Bond. 'South Africa's resurgent urban social movements: The case of Johannesburg, 1984, 1994, 2004', Civil society research report No. 22. Available at [www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs). Ashwin Desai and Richard Pithouse. "What stank in the past is the present's perfume": Dispossession, Resistance and Repression in Mandela Park', *The South Atlantic Quarterly: 'After the thrill is gone: A decade of post-apartheid South Africa'*.103 (4): 841-876. Many social movements were also investigated as a part of the Centre for Civil Society's (CCS's) new social movements research project. These research reports emerging from this project are all available on the CCS website: [www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs).

<sup>2</sup> Desai and Pithouse, 'Dispossession, Resistance and Repression', p. 865.

<sup>3</sup> Desai and Pithouse, 'Dispossession, Resistance and Repression', p. 869.

<sup>4</sup> As Pithouse and Desai have shown: Desai and Pithouse, 'Dispossession, Resistance and Repression'.

In thinking about how the articles in this volume highlight problems within movements of resistance, we decided to use as a starting point Sanya Osha's reading of the weaknesses of post-colonial 'counter-power'. In his report on the Ogoni movement in Nigeria in this volume, drawing on Grant Farred's recent *South Atlantic Quarterly* article,<sup>5</sup> Osha argues that

...the nomos of colonialism and the nomos of the post-colonial state inasmuch as they are marked by different orders of power and different ideological orientations share at certain moments a certain underlying logic. This is because the fundamental violence of colonialism is sustained by a self-perpetuating logic that only a stronger counter-power can arrest... In many post-colonial contexts in Africa, the radical overcoming of the colonial nomos has not been accomplished as the counter-power within the processes of decolonisation is often not strong enough to transform and transcend the dialectic of classical colonialism. (p. 9)

As Farred has argued, many narratives of post-apartheid South Africa have relied on teleological narratives of progress from the 'racist' apartheid era to a non-racial present and future post-apartheid country.<sup>6</sup> Social movements have often questioned such narratives by arguing that there are important continuities between the apartheid and post-apartheid eras, especially around the perpetuation of racialised economic inequalities. This has been reflected in the 'new social movements' literature.<sup>7</sup> However, as argued above and elsewhere, to date the new social movements literature has often failed to show the political and historical uncertainty of post-apartheid South Africa and in turn the complexities and contradictions entailed in mounting resistance to neoliberalism.<sup>8</sup>

In reality, as Farred argues, South Africa is experiencing a 'double temporality' where '...the present can be understood as the moment that is insistently not the past but that can only function politically – as a politics – because there is the historical epoch that went before'.<sup>9</sup> Differently put, he argues that the present only becomes historic after it has passed and the newness of the post-apartheid moment (not yet history) makes palatable the violence and economic

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<sup>5</sup> Grant Farred. 'The not-yet counterpartisan: A new politics of oppositionality'. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. (2004) 103 (4): 589-606.

<sup>6</sup> Farred. 'The not-yet counterpartisan'.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most prominent reading of such continuities is in Patrick Bond's reading of globalisation as global apartheid, especially as it affects South Africa: Patrick Bond. *Against global apartheid*. (London: Zed Books, 2003). Despite its title, Bond's book is weak on the role of structural racism in neoliberalism and resistance. For more on the racialised impact of global inequality, see: Salih Booker and William Minter. 'Global Apartheid'. *Monthly Review* (March 2001).

<sup>8</sup> For a further critique of the weaknesses of such an approach see: Kerry Chance and Mandisa Mbali. 'Talking is walking: A critical review of Patrick Bond's Wolpe Memorial Lecture'. Available at: [www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs).

<sup>9</sup> Farred. 'The not-yet counterpartisan', p. 593.

trauma of post-apartheid South Africa (history). This double temporality has important political implications for Farred as he characterises various political actors as 'partisans/(not yet) counter-partisans'.<sup>10</sup> Those counter-partisans who destabilise dominant narratives are political actors operating in 'zones of indistinction'.<sup>11</sup>

The reports in this volume show greater indistinction, nuance, contradiction and uncertainty in assessing counter-power. This in turn leads to thicker descriptions and theorisations of counter-power in all its manifestations, including non-governmental organisations, social movements, trade unions and higher education institutions.

Andile Mngxitama's report offers an 'insider's perspective' on the crisis within the National Land Committee (NLC), and clearly shows that there can be no unproblematic 'easy road to revolution'. Indeed, it shows that there are weaknesses and divisions in organisations and movements aiming to address ongoing injustices in the post-apartheid era. Firstly, it highlights the dismal failures of post-apartheid land policies to date and the fact that the period has marked 'no clear break' with colonial and apartheid oppressive, unequal and exploitative land ownership patterns and relationships. Secondly, it shows a contest within the NLC between the white liberal, 'welfarist', 'Black Sash' tradition and a more militant United Democratic Front (UDF) driven, mass-action anti-apartheid tradition. The primary strategic disagreements between these factions in the transition and post-apartheid era hinged around land occupations and whether and how to engage with the state: whether to accept government contracts or to fully support the Landless People's Movement (with whose formation it was associated) and its land occupations.

Mngxitama also describes the mutation of the NLC from its activist origins to a more 'professional' lobbying and advocacy organisation. Most importantly, in relation to this mutation he discusses how this professionalisation led to a racial division of labour with coordinators, directors, researchers and managers mostly being white and fieldworkers mostly being black. Politically correct invocations of managing 'diversity' and 'difference' could not address the tensions inherent in this division of labour. By trying to 'be all things to all people' the NLC had become 'directionless'. His report shows the dangers of neoliberalism from below through the NGOisation of politics and points towards the possibilities presented by 'radical' NGOs, who would be prepared to subordinate their struggles to those of anti-sexist, anti-racist social movements fighting corporate globalisation.

Raj Patel similarly zeroes in on the management of property relations -

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<sup>10</sup> Farred. 'The not-yet counterpartisan', p. 599.

<sup>11</sup> Farred. 'The not-yet counterpartisan', p. 604.

specifically, land and agriculture – as the central problem of development and international relations. Patel makes links between the prosperity of the North and the impoverishment of the South by showing how modern development has relied upon a fundamental restructuring of the international food system – through oil-for-food deals, tariffs, the subsidisation of Northern farmers and more – to make its gains. His paper focuses on Via Campesina, an international network of peasant movements challenging the WTO and broader neoliberal policies, largely through its call for ‘food sovereignty’ (in contrast with dominant ‘food security’ models). Just as food sovereignty attempts to politicise an agrarian policy that has long been a depoliticised, technical project, Via Campesina is politicised around the possibility of a permanent and radical agrarian politics. In his attack on the urban chauvinism of the intellectual left, Patel makes a convincing argument that the most systematic and thorough-going alternative to the existing order may come from rural agrarian political spaces. Patel reflects on the practical challenges of building an international agrarian ‘counter-movement’ committed to ‘a rejection of a specific form of appropriation of voice by NGOs’. In observing how Via Campesina ‘complicates the space of civil society...by demanding that we differentiate and qualify the kinds of organisation, and organisational projects, that can create effective counter-hegemonies’ (p. 108), Patel offers a complicated view of the organisation itself.

Peter Van Heusden and Rebecca Pointer’s report on subjectivity and resistance to neoliberalism in Cape Town adds to our understanding of counter-power as manifested in new social movements. The report on three communities in Cape Town where the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) is active goes beyond simply viewing resistance as emerging from objective material factors such as monthly bill payments or punitive police action to analyse how human relations between neighbours and family members shape activists’ subjectivities and, in turn, their politics. As with Mngxitama, the authors of this report are participants in the movement they write about and they aim to show the AEC ‘warts and all’. For instance, in the case study on Tafelsig, the report highlights the operation of gender power in new social movements as the researchers show that while most of the Tafelsig AEC’s members are women, all its public spokespersons are men.

Ultimately, Pointer and Van Heusden represent new social movements as a Farredian ‘zone of indistinction’ where non-state power is organised along ‘other lines’ of neighbours, friends, and within family groups who share food and basic necessities in ways which might allow for the sharing of information and knowledge, and result in power being channelled in new directions in ways which facilitate and block resistance. The three case study communities the authors analysed have different histories, with residents largely belonging to different racial categories. Yet in all the communities studied, neighbourly and family

support structures largely maintained by women were fundamental to their residents' survival, in ways which shape movements. This is labour largely rendered invisible by men in ways which may have led to the Unicity underestimating the resistance it would encounter to neoliberal policies.

However, Van Heusden and Pointer are careful to point out that 'the same people whose constant contact with neighbours provides an amazing network for transfer of information and 'intelligence' within the townships might at other times be forced into being insular by concerns within their local family that are not shared outside the household's walls'. Moreover, this 'insularity' can manifest itself as racism or xenophobia which need to be guarded against, especially as they affect movements. As with the Mngxitama report, Pointer and Van Heusden caution that movements should guard against hierarchies and the centralisation of power whether they are based on race, gender or nationality.

Mthetho Xali tackles a question that many have contemplated since the notable absence of trade unions at the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development protest marches which announced the presence of many of the new social movements. As Xali points out, their absence was somewhat puzzling given that unions had been a leading force in anti-apartheid struggles and in campaigns against the neoliberal features of the ANC-government's early years in office. Xali examines the obstacles that stand in the way of linkages between organised labour and the emerging social movements through the lens of relations between the Cape Town branch of the South African Municipal Union and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign.

Xali focuses on particular institutional, political and organisational obstacles, as he probes 'beyond the generalised divide of organisations at the point of 'production' (trade unions) and those contesting the sphere of reproduction (social movements)' (p. 168). The result is an experiential look at current modes of organising. Xali outlines possibilities for opening communication between activists at all levels of the organisations, and argues that unions may need to 'restructure so as to have greater flexibility to act locally and to retain and build links with retrenched workers, the informalised workers and the unemployed' (p. 204).

Teresa Barnes analyses and problematises the discourse shifts around how institutional and social disparities in South African higher education should be addressed by the state. By demystifying what has become a 'blanket code word', Barnes traces shifting meanings of redress as 'rectifying a wrong', 'reparation', 'restoring equality' and 'empowerment' and the implications of these shifts on policy and (to a lesser extent) activism. Academics, university bureaucrats, policymakers and student activists have all been involved in transforming the country's higher education institutions in their own ways, and have contributed to

formulating a discourse which has relied on imagined (and re-imagined) pasts and futures to articulate its goals.

Focusing on the period of 1994-2001, Barnes discusses how each discourse shift was concretely linked to a reorientation in the deployment of government funds. By 1996, a National Commission on Higher Education Report already featured redress, according to Barnes, 'less as a fundamental principle and more as a contingent goal seen as dependent on the provision of adequate funding' (p. 217). Barnes also offers a critical look at the discourse around institutional reparations, which has often relied on popular constructions of historically disadvantaged institutions as sites of resistance against apartheid (and therefore deserving of redress funding). Though students led the way, Barnes points out that institutions were not always as quick to follow. In problematising this discourse, Barnes argues that 'the institutional reparations argument for redress thus partly rested on sentimental rather than factual foundations'. Finally, Barnes' study of recent history offers insight on the current institutional mergers. She argues that they are one result of the legacy of competing discourses of change which ultimately conceptualised higher education 'in political and financial (rather than purely educational) terms' (p. 228).

Lastly, in order to understand counter-power as expressed to neoliberalism, we need nuanced readings of neoliberalism itself. Greg Albo's report, which is re-published in this volume, argues that neoliberalism is a new form of capitalism. In turn, as a Marxist political economist, he argues that capitalism is a particular form of social relations and mode of production with its own logic of reproduction. It has led to great global turbulence and is far from an entirely coherent and uncontested system.

Albo also argues for a better conceptualisation of the social logic and variations of neoliberalism. In terms of this, he argues that it is a contingent, historically specific and socially contested phenomenon. As social actors try to change their social conditions and institutional context they transform neoliberal capitalism itself. This article is published at the end of this volume as it suggests that while resistance is problematic it is not, therefore, necessarily futile and ineffective. Neoliberalism might be inherently weaker than it seems.

The critical reflection contained in this volume is particularly vital now when people across the country are organising protests for housing, land and basic services – largely outside of the space of existing movements. Ongoing reflection within these movements is stepping up, in turn, to tackle questions of hierarchy, scope and identity in new light. More such reflection – on the role of past discourses in framing (and constraining) today's debates, on the function of racialised and gendered power within spaces of resistance, and more – is necessary to drive resistances forward with keener assessments of power and counter-power alike.

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