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# Forging New Political Identities in the Shanty Towns of Durban, South Africa

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## Abstract

This contribution offers some observations with regard to political identities in a popular movement largely based in the shantytowns of Durban, South Africa. It seeks to examine, via more than a decade of immersion and research, one instance of how popular organisation and mobilisation have been mediated through shifting political identities. It argues that if discourse professionals on the left are to become effective actors it will be necessary to take popular political identities a lot more seriously, and to enable mutually transformative engagement between theory and actually-existing forms of popular striving and struggle.

## Keywords

political identities – popular politics – Durban – South Africa

The intra-elite contestation within the public sphere in South Africa has come to be shaped by intense conflict between elites organised around accumulation via the market and those organised around accumulation via the state. In ideological terms liberalism, which continues to take the form of racial capitalism, is pitted against a form of authoritarian nationalism organised around forms of clientelism that have approached kleptocratic levels.

Both sides in this conflict present their own interests as enmeshed with those of the people, or sometimes the poor, and themselves as the protagonists best equipped, in terms of credibility and expertise, to represent the people, or the poor. But, as the convergence between the state and capital formed in response to the strikes on the platinum mines in 2012 showed so clearly, there

is a shared hostility to autonomous organisation and struggle on the part of impoverished or working-class people.

Political ideas and practices in the sphere that is variously termed subaltern, plebeian, popular or common, are often apprehended through what Frantz Fanon called ‘the *a priori*’. The result is that, to stay with Fanon, this politics ‘spontaneously, by the very fact of appearing in the scene, enters into a pre-existing framework’.<sup>1</sup>

Political initiative undertaken from within the zones of exclusion, subordination and dishonour, and by people who are impoverished and black, is relentlessly subject to what Michel-Rolph Trouillot called formulas of erasure and banalisation,<sup>2</sup> including the misreading of long and complex processes via what E.P. Thompson called the ‘spasmodic view’<sup>3</sup> of popular politics. It is also often understood as an instance of what Lewis Gordon, riffing off Fanon, calls ‘illicit appearance’.<sup>4</sup> It is not unusual for popular politics to be understood via a set of tropes, acutely classed and raced, in which fantasies of criminality and external manipulation – often imagined as white – feature prominently.

This situation is not resolved when radical intellectuals, socialist or nationalist, respond with what Cedric Robinson described as ‘the casual application of preformed categories to Black social movements’.<sup>5</sup> The ‘pre-existing framework’ or ‘preformed categories’ to which it is often assumed that the self-organised politics of impoverished black people should conform tend to centre around a working-class project, with socialism as its goal, or a black project, with an end to white domination as its goal. These projects, broadly conceived, do appear within the sphere of the self-organised politics of impoverished people. But there are also ways in which this politics often exceeds understandings of these projects that take the form of what Karl Marx referred to as ‘dogmatic abstraction’.<sup>6</sup>

### A Moment of Rupture

In the early years after apartheid the first attempts from the left to organise outside of the extraordinary hegemony enjoyed by the African National Congress (ANC) were, with significant exceptions, undertaken under the authority of

1 Fanon 1967, p. 7.

2 Trouillot 1995.

3 Thompson 1971, p. 78.

4 Gordon 2015, p. 114.

5 Robinson 2000, p. 313.

6 Marx 1843.

networks largely organised through NGOs and the academy. But when counter-elites had some small-scale success in winning a popular constituency they were, uniformly, unable to sustain it. Among the many reasons for this was the often-striking disjuncture between the discourses and political practices of counter-elites and what were, at the time, often referred to as 'ordinary participants' in movements and struggles. This disjuncture was always classed and it was not unusual for it to also take a form that was acutely raced.

In 2004, ten years after the end of apartheid, there was a significant shift in the political landscape. A series of road-blockades were organised around the country by residents of townships and shack settlements. These blockades, self-organised and usually entirely independent of any connection to the left in universities and NGOs, frequently targeted local officials in the ruling party. When participants were given some access to a voice in the media they often presented themselves in the language of a defiant humanism, making statements like 'we are human beings, not dogs'. Similar statements had been common among 'ordinary participants' in popular protest, across the country, and in various languages, since the first independent mobilisation and organisation to emerge after apartheid in the latter half of the 1990s. They remain common today.

On 19 March 2005 a road-blockade was organised from the Kennedy Road shack settlement in Durban in which thousands of people lived in degrading, exhausting, stressful and, at times, life-threatening conditions. The immediate reason for the decision to take to the streets was that a small piece of land adjacent to the settlement that had been promised to the residents for housing was, without notice, being developed for a factory.

The blockade was targeted at the local ANC ward councillor. In terms of its immediate demand, of what Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar refers to as 'the practical scope' of struggle,<sup>7</sup> the protest was simultaneously about access to centrally-located urban land for public housing and an attempt to subordinate local party structures to popular authority.

The assumption undergirding the collective decision on the part of the residents to target the local councillor, an assumption that was common across the country at the time, was that he, rather than the ruling party as a whole, was responsible for the situation confronted by the residents of the shack settlement. There was, at that point, still an investment in the possibility of what Aguilar, borrowing from René Zavaleta, refers to as the 'national-popular' horizon for popular politics.<sup>8</sup> There was a sense that people in the settlement, and

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<sup>7</sup> Aguilar 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

others like it, had been ‘forgotten’, accidentally left out of the count of the nation by problematic local representatives of the ruling party, still widely thought of as a national-liberation movement. The blame for this was frequently ascribed to local party officials who were accused of having used impoverished people as ‘ladders’ on which they had climbed for their own personal advantage. This idiom had been around for a while – the worker-poet Alfred Thembela Qabula had used it in a poem first published in 1995:

Although you don’t know us, we know ourselves:  
we are the movable ladders  
that take people up towards the skies,  
left out in the open for the rain  
left with the memories of teargas, panting for breath.<sup>9</sup>

But now the idea that people who had been comrades, protagonists in the making of history and a nation, had been turned into ladders for the advancement of a few took on a powerful political valence. There was a sense that by removing their consent for local forms of representation, the ‘ladders’ that had enabled betrayal could be disassembled and repurposed – that people would be able to represent themselves, directly, to more senior political leaders. This, it was hoped, could re-animate the political possibilities of the ‘national-popular’ horizon.

The blockade, a form of collective presentation as well as disruption, did not result in democratic engagement from the party or the state. It was met, as had happened elsewhere in the country, with state-violence, arrests and a declaration that it had been organised by criminals.

In a large meeting held the day after the road-blockade, while the highly-militarised riot police occupied the settlement, the language of betrayal, understood in national terms, was ubiquitous. The statement that, more than any other, concretised the sense of the discussion came from a young quietly-spoken man, S’bu Zikode, who declared, ‘We are now alone.’ This moment marked the beginning of a long process of separation from the idea that the ANC was a genuinely national liberation movement, and the beginning of a reaching toward the kind of political horizon described by Aguilar as ‘community-popular’.<sup>10</sup>

This developing sense of political identity did not conform neatly to orthodox socialist ideas in which work and the workplace are taken as fundamental

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9 Qabula 1995, p. 14.

10 Aguilar 2014.

to progressive political identity, or to forms of nationalist politics that aspire to black unity across class. The reasons for this included a set of material realities. Most residents of the settlement were not employed as factory workers and many did not even have precarious work as casual labourers, security guards or domestic workers. The first antagonists in the struggle – the councillor, the man who had bought the land, and the police that repressed the road-blockade – were all black.

Ten days after the blockade, at a celebration to welcome home the people who had been arrested during the protest and subsequently subjected to illegal detention, Zikode spoke, clearly, to the sense that a new political identity was being marshalled: ‘The first Nelson Mandela was Jesus Christ. The second was Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The third Nelson Mandela is the poor people of the world.’

Reflecting on this moment more than a decade later, Zikode observed that:

The idea of being poor has always been there. It is associated with rural areas, which are seen as places of no hope, as places of deep poverty. Being poor becomes shameful, a matter of disgrace, of something degrading. We politicised the idea of being poor. We said that it is not something to be ashamed of. We said that the same system that made the rich to be rich made the poor to be poor.<sup>11</sup>

The economic dimensions of popular understandings of that ‘system’ centred around an idea of racial capitalism, with the colonial expropriation of land understood as the foundational defeat that resulted in contemporary forms of racialised impoverishment. But there was also a pronounced political dimension to how that ‘system’ was understood, which centred around the expropriation, initially colonial, of the right to participate in decision-making about public affairs. Emancipation was understood in terms of the recovery of dignity, understood, fundamentally, in terms of access to land – urban land – and the right to participate in decision-making.

At the same meeting when the standard call-and-response chant of ‘Amandla’ (Power) and ‘Awethu’ (It is ours) – part of the political culture of the ANC since the early 1960s – was used, it was immediately questioned. Zikode asked the participants at the meeting a question: ‘Is power really ours?’ If it was not, he suggested, perhaps pretences to the contrary should be put aside.

Over the following months meetings were held in nearby settlements, and committees in these settlements began working together. The participants in

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<sup>11</sup> Zikode 2016.

this developing network were organised through two kinds of ways of making place. One was consequent to popular agency – the land occupations that, since the late 1980s, had come to be recognised by the state, and NGOs, as ‘informal settlements’. The other was consequent to the state – the municipal wards set up after apartheid. Other forms of solidarity – familial bonds, communal ties from rural villages and so on – were mediated through these territorial forms of identity. It was common for people arriving at a first meeting to identify themselves via these forms of territorial organisation. It was not unusual for people to begin from the position that their problems were specific to their settlement or ward.

The people involved in these discussions had a range of political experiences that included personal and familial participation in trade unions, political organisations and various kinds of struggles. There were also many people with experience of rural forms of collective organisation and people who were participants in, or proximate to, the African-initiated churches that have sustained organisation at a vast scale over many generations. From the beginning, social technologies and ideas drawn from all these influences were present in the emergent movement.

The new form of politics was often described as a ‘home-made politics’. This was taken to imply a number of things, including the fact that, unlike party and NGO politics, it had no money behind it. But there was also a significant sense of *bricolage*, of making-use of a range of resources, practices and ideas already present in the settlements.

The emerging movement was simultaneously of the ANC and moving beyond it. People addressing meetings in settlements new to the developing collective political project would sometimes joke by shouting out ‘Amanga’ (lies) to which people would mechanically reply ‘Awethu’ (are ours) before realising what they were claiming. There was, at this point, a powerful sense of venturing into unknown and dangerous terrain – of the construction, uneven but clear, of political heresy.

### Forming a Counter-identity

The meetings that followed the blockade organised from the Kennedy Road settlement took the form, frequently attested to in the South African historiography of various moments of popular rupture with constituted authority, of careful deliberative discussion aimed at reaching consensus. Participation in this kind of collective deliberation was not only understood in terms of an instrumental logic relating to attaining consensus. There was also a sense that

participation in the process, constituted through the creation of ritual space, conferred an immediate sense of dignity on its participants.

These kinds of practices are often understood to derive from rural tradition where they can be deeply gendered. But in the shack settlement, where women are often in the majority, usually independent from fathers and seldom married, women often constituted the majority of participants in these discussions. Reference to feminist ideas, largely by younger women, and the use of social technologies developed in churches, where women are able to accrue significant social authority, enabled women to take leading roles in these discussions.

Credible leadership was understood to take the form of enabling collective deliberation organised around the search for consensus. The understanding that this process legitimated dissent by posing collective virtue against the corruption of the local party structures was rooted in a commitment to the meeting as, in Álvaro García Linera's phrase, an 'actual convergence of equals'.<sup>12</sup> It carried the sense of being, in Fanon's turn of phrase, 'a liturgical act', a set of 'privileged occasions given to a human being to listen and to speak'.<sup>13</sup>

Various elites, and in particular local party leaders and municipal officials, often actively exploited the territorial identities with which people entered this political space to try and prevent impoverished people from building alliances that reached across space. Ethnic and racial identities, as well as identities deriving from national and provincial places of origin – the latter often a proxy for ethnicity – were exploited in the same manner. There were also active attempts to divide shack-owners from renters. Development – access to land and housing – was often presented and, indeed, approached, as a zero-sum game in which advances for some, people with the right vertical alliances, would be at the expense of others. This meant that a solid basis for forms of horizontal unity that transcended class differences, particular settlements and wards, as well as other identities, like ethnicity and race, had to be developed. When it was developed it had to be sustained. Generating and sustaining mutual trust was central to this work. This political labour, largely invisible in the elite public sphere, was, and still is, the foundation for forms of politics – protests, road-blockades, land occupations and so on – that periodically become highly visible in that sphere, and are often misread as spontaneous, and at times almost biological, eruptions.

People resolved to identify themselves, both in their own spaces and to wider society, in two primary ways. The first was to make residence in a particular

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12 Linera 2014, p. 225.

13 Fanon 1967, p. 157.

settlement – residence rather than origin – the primary basis for immediate solidarity. The second was to link the organisation in different settlements via a shared identity, not spatially defined, as ‘the poor’. This was not an identity that had to be invented. As noted by Zikode above, there was a pre-existing collective sense of being poor as a particular social location and experience. The decision to identify the new struggle as being by and for the poor was a matter of offering political affirmation to a pre-existing sentiment. As collective insubordination cohered around an oppositional political identity as ‘the poor’ it was placed at a clear remove from both the nationalism of the ANC, at that time firmly in elite hands both locally and nationally, and its authorised form of class politics – a largely masculinist working-class identity rooted in the increasingly bureaucratised trade unions.

There were intense discussions about the character and possible strategies of what was termed ‘a politics of the poor’, understood as something that would have to be forged, on unchartered terrain, from below. From the beginning the fundamental matrix in which these discussions took place was a form of humanism. Socialist ideas were not absent, but the idea of dignity had far more resonance than that of socialism – and twelve years on it remains central.

Zodwa Nsibandé, who participated in these early discussions as a teenager, recalls that the fundamental ethical logic was that ‘every person is a person that counts irrespective of what materialistic [*sic*] you have. You may have or you may not have a house, or a job. But the fact that you are a human being means that your dignity is very respected.’<sup>14</sup> She stresses that an important dimension of the affirmation of dignity was that ‘it was important for us to define ourselves before someone else defined us’. There was also a commitment, allied to this, to ensure that people were allowed to participate in all decision-making that related to themselves and their communities.

This commitment was applied to the ruling party, the state and the NGOs presenting themselves as ‘civil society’, including those on the left. It was quickly turned into a slogan – ‘Talk to us, not for us’ – that may well have drawn from the sediment left by the influence that Paulo Freire’s work had exercised on thinking about praxis in Durban, and beyond, in the ’70s and ’80s. The idea that solidarity, or just respectful forms of engagement, must, in Freire’s terms, be ‘forged *with*, not *for* the oppressed’<sup>15</sup> was responded to with strikingly similar forms of paranoia and hostility in the party, the state and NGO-based ‘civil

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14 Nsibandé 2016.

15 Freire 1996, p. 30.



society', all of which has assumed the right to forms of paternalism, a phenomena that was often intensely raced in the 'civil society' context.

There were clear memories of a period, usually in the 1980s or early 1990s, when land had been occupied as an explicitly political project. But the dominant sense was that in the new democracy the function of self-organisation and self-representation would be to approach senior figures in the party via the identity that Linera describes as 'that of litigant, not that of ruler'.<sup>16</sup>

From the outset there was a commitment to resist evictions from established settlements and to insist on the dispersal of decision-making authority to democratic structures and processes in the settlements. But outside of this, the first forms of self-organisation that emerged, or were politicised, were often – like establishing crèches, working-out safe arrangements for taxis picking up children for the school run, arranging refuse-collection, ensuring protection from robbery and assault and so on – not a direct challenge to the authority of the ruling party or the state.

### Undoing Shame

On 3 October 2005 representatives from twelve settlements took a decision to form a movement. The new movement followed the trade unions, at that time affiliated to the Communist Party, in choosing red as its colour against the black, yellow and green of the ANC. After considerable discussion it was decided to call the new movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. The term means 'residents of the shacks' in Zulu. Foregrounding an identity as residents was not controversial. But both the decision to choose a Zulu name, and its explicit reference to shacks, were controversial. Zikode recalls that some people saw the name as 'degrading' and 'not modern or sophisticated'. A range of actors higher up the class hierarchy, sometimes only slightly, warned against this mode of identification. There were frequent suggestions, offered from above, that the name be changed.

Later on, some middle-class activists – the kind of actors that Linera describes as 'discourse-professionals' not accountable to 'neighbourhoods, committees and communities'<sup>17</sup> – would insist that the proper form of identification should be as the working class or as black subjects. These identities have not been absent. But when they are taken as 'preformed categories' the particularities of life, striving and struggle in the shack settlements can be

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<sup>16</sup> Linera 2014, p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> Linera 2014, p. 234.

masked rather than illuminated. The uncritical attraction to fixed ideas about appropriate political identities is one reason why a long list of attempts by middle-class intellectuals to mobilise from above, usually via the NGO-form, have ended in rapid failure.

The political work of undoing the shame associated with impoverishment and shack life requires its particularities to be taken seriously. This is work that can, and often has been, enriched by external theory, but it does not require external theory. There is, particularly among older people, a clear historical memory of a forced transition from autonomy to proletarianisation and then impoverishment. It is often presented as a transition from wealth derived from land and cattle, to livelihoods derived from the mine and the factory, and then on to the situation of mass-unemployment and precarity in the shack settlement. Creating the spaces where these historical memories can be narrated, discussed and understood in collective terms is vital political work.

Another mechanism for undoing the sense of shame was to insist on the role of the residents of shack settlements in building the city – whether directly as labourers on construction sites or via other kinds of reproductive labour, such as security and domestic work. This included the politicisation of the work of social reproduction – of building and sustaining houses and homes – in the shack settlement. People often spoke, and still do, of land occupations and the construction of homes in terms of humanising space. Land is often said to have been ‘opened’, ‘cleared’ and made ‘safe’ by occupation.

The gendered dimension to this was explicitly recognised – women were often referred to in political contexts as ‘izimbokodo’ (rocks).<sup>18</sup> There was some resonance with the ‘motherism’ described by Nomboniso Gasa<sup>19</sup> and the argument, made by bell hooks, that ‘historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a home-place, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical dimension, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely construct the issue of humanization.’<sup>20</sup>

This was a period of tremendous collective excitement in which struggle was often framed as a school, or a university – an idea that derived from the presentation of the political prison as a university during apartheid – and its

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18 A reference to the famous women’s march led by the ANC in 1956 under the slogan ‘*Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo* [You strike the women, you strike the rock].’

19 Gasa 2007, pp. 207–29.

20 hooks 1990, p. 42.

participants as learners in this space.<sup>21</sup> But, along with this general sense of collective excitement, discussions often included shared expressions of pain – referred to as ‘coughing out’.<sup>22</sup> This was enabled by creating open and emotionally supportive spaces for discussion in which the sharing of intensely personal stories enabled solidarity to be strengthened, and the development of a collective understanding of impoverishment as a matter of systemic oppression, or injustice, rather than as a matter of personal failure, or as an immutable ontological fact. This work, which is also vital for building and sustaining trust, had, and still has, an element of the congregation about it.

This was not anomalous. A number of the social technologies used in the new movement, like visiting the sick, or ‘camps’ – all-night meetings for discussion, interspersed with embodied practices of solidarity in the form of song and dance – came directly from churches. S’bonele Mpeku (who was assassinated a year after he was interviewed for this paper) observed that Abahlali ‘is the same as church’.<sup>23</sup> People may have framed their decision to join the movement in material terms (most often to resist an eviction) or in political terms (most often a sense of betrayal) but it was, and still is, not unusual for people to present their decision in terms that have a certain resonance with religious conversation.

One aspect of the logic via which the movement offered an immediate affirmation of the dignity of its participants, as well as a commitment to an uncertain and risky struggle aimed at ‘returning’ or ‘restoring’ their dignity in relation to wider society, was that the commitment to ensure that people were entitled to full participation in all decision-making which related to themselves and their communities was also applied within the movement. In order to sustain organisation and mobilisation across multiple settlements, the movement as a whole had to be scrupulously careful not to take decisions for branches. For Nsibande it is significant that when branches undertook specific struggles, often around particular pieces of land, T-shirts – a significant marker of political identities in popular politics in South Africa – would usually include the movement’s logo on the front and a statement chosen by the branch on the back. The banners for each branch also include the movement’s shared logo and slogans along with a branch name (Marikana, eNkanini, etc.) and statement particular to the branch.

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21 Raj Patel gives an account of a meeting in this period (Patel 2008).

22 Anna Selmeczi gives an account of this dimension of the movement (Selmeczi 2012).

23 Mpeku 2016.

### Evolving Identities

When the movement was formed its members overwhelmingly came out of some kind of loyalty to the ANC, and often direct participation in its structures. As it steadily became clear that it was not just local party officials that were hostile to both the material and political interests of impoverished people occupying urban land, there was a growing distance from the ANC's ongoing attempts to assert a monopoly on struggle. One of the ways in which this was marked was that a new version of the old chant in which 'Amandla' was now responded to with 'Awethu Ngenkani' became increasingly prominent. The term 'inkani' refers to a forceful and stubborn determination. Across the country, it was, in various languages, becoming an increasingly important way of thinking about resilience and striving, often in contexts in which women played a significant role.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, shack settlements were often given names like 'Joe Slovo', 'Chris Hani' or 'Lusaka'. This placed the land occupation, and its protagonists, in a national drama articulated to a national-liberation movement with an army posed to return from exile. After apartheid, names like 'Nomzamo' (striving), or 'eNkanini' (the locative form of inkani), names that spoke to forms of independent and community-based resilience, striving and struggle that were not conceptualised in nationalist, militaristic or millenarian terms steadily became more common.

This sentiment was soon articulated to a political strategy. A significant dimension of how consent for political representation was removed was, following similar developments in previous movements like the Landless People's Movement and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, as well as a more widely-present popular sentiment, to refuse to vote for the ANC without voting for rival parties.

This was accompanied by a set of modest day-to-day encroachments onto the authority of the party and the state. One example of this relates to the authority delegated to local party structures to mediate aspects of the relationship between the informal and the formal. In South Africa proof of address is required for all kinds of financial transactions – such as opening a bank account or entering into a contract. People inhabiting formal space usually offer this proof by way of a municipal bill for services. But people inhabiting informal space are usually reliant on a local councillor to provide a letter confirming their address. This is one of a number of mechanisms by means of which councillors, and local party structures, can exploit their position to reward obedience and punish insubordination. Members of the movement were not able to get these letters from their local councillors, and so the movement began to

issue its own letters – which were accepted by banks, mobile-telephone companies and so on.

### Organising Amidst a Turn to Chauvinism

By 2006 an authoritarian and populist project within the ruling party, mobilising the language of the people against distant elites, had cohered around the personality of Jacob Zuma, at that time Deputy President of the country. In Durban John Mchunu, known as a warlord in Inkatha, the reactionary Zulu nationalist movement, during apartheid and now chairperson of the ANC in the city was a key organiser in this project. It took on an explicitly ethnic dimension in this city.

When Zuma was tried for rape in 2006<sup>24</sup> there was a significant project to mobilise an intersection of Zulu ethnicity and masculine authority, sometimes presented in militarised terms, as a political force. Abahlali baseMjondolo was frequently disparaged for having Indian and Mpondo members in its leadership and, in a classic colonial trope, accused of being consequent to white conspiracy and manipulation. One founding leader was lost to the ANC during this period, and one supporter with local political weight, a former ANC soldier, turned against the movement. But its politics, rooted in residence in particular settlements rather than ethnic or racial origin, and articulated via an affirmation of a shared identity as ‘the poor’, withstood the ethnic mobilisation without much difficulty.

Mahmood Mamdani has argued that, given the enduring weight of colonial strategies to govern the colonised via the constitution of ethnic authority, it is vital that progressive African states must award rights on the basis of residence rather than origin.<sup>25</sup> By 2008 it had become clear, in Durban, that this imperative was equally urgent for attempts to build a popular progressive project from below.

Things become more difficult in 2008 with two simultaneous developments. A decision was made to welcome a settlement, Siyanda, which had an historical affiliation to the Zulu-nationalist movement Inkatha. This required a long and at times difficult process of building solidarity. It necessitated, among other things, the literal invention of a new political language. Words for ‘branches’, ‘comrades’ and ‘neighbours’ were all implicated in the aftermath of the civil war that had been fought in the 1980s – a civil war from which many of the

<sup>24</sup> Motsei 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Mamdani 1996 and 2012.

movement's members carried literal scars. Conservative ideas about gender and ethnic suspicions had to be negotiated. In the process there was frustration, suspicion, hurt and resentment.

In the same year a new party, the Congress of the People (COPE), split off from the ANC. In Durban it was presented as an ethnic project, as a Xhosa reaction to Zuma's rise to power which, in turn, was presented by some protagonists in the project that had cohered around Zuma as the restoration of the ANC to Zulu control. With a prominent founding-member of Abahlali baseMjondolo briefly showing some signs of attraction to COPE, considerable work had to be undertaken to show that the movement was committed to a non-ethnic politics. One strategy that became important was to enact ethnic diversity in large assemblies, primarily via forms of dress, music and dance.

In 2008 xenophobic violence, sometimes carrying an ethnic inflection, spread around the country. The mobs were reported to have been singing Zuma's campaign song, a military song, during some of the early attacks. Michael Neocosmos's analysis of xenophobia in South Africa notes that at the end of apartheid trade unions, with a sense of political identity rooted in the workplace rather than origin had explicitly rejected chauvinist forms of national identity.<sup>26</sup> This was not an historical anomaly. Today migrants are key figures in the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).

When the 2008 attacks began Abahlali baseMjondolo immediately resolved to 'shelter and defend' migrants, and it is a matter of record that there were no attacks in any of the settlements affiliated to the movement. A politics rooted in identities constituted around residence rather than origin passed a significant test.

In 2009 the movement confronted a serious challenge when it was subject to open attack in the Kennedy Road settlement by armed men mobilised in ethnic terms as Zulu and in political terms as ANC.<sup>27</sup> The attack was openly supported by senior political figures and by the police. Until this point there had been a degree of ambiguity about the relation to the ANC, with at least some members retaining the hope that the party could be pressured into reforming itself. But the attack marked the end of these ambiguities. There was now outright hostility to the ANC.

As time progressed, the movement had become increasingly direct in its encroachment into terrains monopolised by the state and the ruling party. There had also been a challenge to the authority of the market, in terms of the basis on which urban land is distributed, but the movement had largely tended to

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26 Neocosmos 2010.

27 Chance 2010.

pressure the state to intervene against the market and to allocate land on the basis of a social logic, rather than to occupy land directly. It now became openly committed to organising and defending new land occupations.

### After the Break with the ANC

In the immediate aftermath of the turn to brazen repression by the ANC there was a marked decline in the impressive quantity and quality of the political discussions that had characterised the first years of the movement. It was no longer safe to hold open public discussions in shack settlements. When discussions were held the focus was often on dealing with practical urgencies, including questions of security.

It took some time to restore the practice of open discussion about political ideas in meetings and assemblies. An important moment in this process was a large meeting held on 13 February 2012. A whole day of discussion was dedicated to questions of socialism and communism with a view to establishing the movement's position. The result was a commitment to 'ubuhlalism', the philosophy of abahlali (residents). It sought to root itself in the politicisation of ubuntu (loosely translated as 'humanism'). Zikode recalls that socialism (largely encountered through small sectarian organisations and NGOs) and communism (largely encountered through the South African Communist Party) 'seemed to be leaving us out' so 'we broadened it' to 'find a space for our lives and struggles in the left'.<sup>28</sup>

The movement was, and remains, clear that it is on the left. It enjoys good relations with radical movements across the globe, such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil, among others. But, like popular movements in, say, Haiti<sup>29</sup> or Bolivia,<sup>30</sup> it seeks to bring its own histories, ideas and practices into dialogue with the left as a global project.

The massacre of striking miners, many of whom were residents of a shack settlement named eNkanini, at Marikana on 16 August 2012 had an immediate impact on popular politics across the country, including within and around Abahlali baseMjondolo. After the massacre a number of new land occupations around the country were named 'Marikana' – a name that spoke to a new kind of collective imagination, one constituted at a clear distance from elite nationalism and the authority of the ANC.

<sup>28</sup> Zikode 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Hallward 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Aguilar 2014; Linera 2014.

Abahlali baseMjondolo soon had two new land occupations called 'Marikana'. One of these occupations, in Cato Crest, became a site of serious contestation with the state. The struggle to hold this land cost three lives, and included, among other forms of contestation, a series of simultaneous rush-hour road blockades across the city. This land occupation has two sections – one named for Nkululeko Gwala and the other for Nqobile Nzuza, both murdered in the struggle to hold the land. This identification marked a political imagination saturated with an awareness of death. It carried a strong sense of resolve but, in contrast to the mass politics of the 1980s, there was not a millenarian sense that there would, in time, necessarily be some sort of collective national redemption. The political was largely understood in terms of bitterly contested struggles for bits of territory scattered across the interstices of the city.

In July 2013 the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) formed as a youth-driven breakaway from the ANC locating itself, via demagogic leadership, at the intersection of radical nationalism and a deeply statist understanding of socialism. In the attempt to renew the political credibility of the 'national-popular' horizon, it further entrenched the symbolic militarisation of politics that Zuma had reintroduced in 2006. It ignited a sense of political possibility among many young people.

The emergence of the EFF resulted in shifts in the movement. The red beret, made famous by the EFF, was added to the movement's 'uniform'. But discussions about the EFF's break with some of the ANC's language in favour of a militarised language (e.g. its leader is referred to as The Commander in Chief) concluded that terms inherited from the ANC should be democratised rather than militarised. The 'mass meeting' was now described as an 'assembly', the 'committee' as a 'council' and so on.

On 2 May 2014, after sustained open discussion, made open to the public, members of the movement voted to put aside the election boycott, which had been sustained for nine years, and to make a tactical vote<sup>31</sup> for the largest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA) in protest at repression.<sup>32</sup> There had always been elections in the movement but this was the first time that a decision was taken by vote rather than a discussion aimed at reaching consensus. A charismatic young leader, a founder-member of the movement, swung the majority of the participants in the meeting in support of a decision to vote with the official opposition.

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31 Zikode 2014.

32 The following year the EFF also made a decision to make a strategic alliance with the DA against the ANC.



The decision was consequent to intense hostility to the ANC in the wake of the Marikana moment, broadly conceived to include the highly contested Marikana land occupation in Durban. The logic of the decision was that the EFF had no meaningful support in Durban, that it was intolerable for an ethnically diverse movement to consider a vote for a party with an ethnic project and that, therefore, the DA was the only meaningful way to punish the ANC on the electoral terrain. It was a shock to most of the movement's leadership, and many of its allies.

Over the weekend of 24 and 25 May 2014 the movement held a 'City Wide Summit on Land, Housing and Dignity'. Here, over two days of discussion, it was clear that the general mood was intensely hostile to the ANC, now seen as outright oppressors – and that the decision to vote for the opposition was consequent to this hostility rather than to any form of positive attraction to the opposition. One speaker, lifting up his shirt to show scars from bullet wounds suffered in the 1980s, declared, to general assent, that Mandela had been freed, and the ANC was able to return from exile, by virtue of the struggles of the people, including the poor. The party, others went on to argue, had then proceeded to 'sell' that struggle to the whites and the capitalists for their own gain. The 'community-popular' horizon had completely displaced the 'national-popular' horizon long-monopolised by the ANC.

There were two other striking features of the discussion. One was a deep cynicism about all party politics and the legal order. Strategic engagement on the electoral and legal terrains was presented as necessary, but the deeper roots of an emancipatory project were understood in terms of ideas about political power and the allocation of land that were presented in explicitly Africanist terms. For instance the idea, always present, that the commodification of land was a colonial imposition that should be undone was now at the centre of discussion. At the same time direct action, and in particular the occupation of land, was affirmed as the only route to progress. There was considerable discussion about how to generate and sustain the personal and collective *inkani* necessary for this.

On 3 October 2015 Abahlali baseMjondolo held its tenth-anniversary celebration, attended by thousands of members, in the Curries Fountain football stadium. The stadium has a significant political history. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was launched there in 1985 and the Pro-Frelimo Rally, organised by the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), was held there in 1974. For a movement that began in the zones of exclusion, domination and dishonour, a movement of impoverished people often not awarded full presence in the categories of the nation or the working class, a movement with leaders who were unmarried mothers and migrants, this was a moment of triumph.

Although media representation is not stable there had been a clear shift, particularly in the Zulu and Xhosa-language media, that is most important to the majority of the movement's members, from presentation of the movement in terms of criminality and conspiracy to presentation of it as a legitimate and respected actor in the agora. Prior to his murder, Mpeku affirmed that 'people love to become part of the struggle when they see the movement's power' and noted that, as the years have passed, more and more organisations have borrowed from its lexicon.<sup>33</sup> In Nsibandé's estimation, 'being in the media has made it [the affirmation of the movement's particular set of political identities] easier'.<sup>34</sup>

Today (September 2017) the movement has forty-six branches in good standing. A membership audit, in the form of a door-to-door census in the branches, is currently underway. Members in good standing, which includes being paid up for a year, have been counted in eighteen branches. The number of members in good standing that have been counted so far is 28,470. The final figure will be significantly larger than this.

When a new branch is launched, a process that requires a minimum of fifty paid-up members and a series of preparatory meetings and agreements, an open assembly will be called. The primary purpose is to hold an election for positions in the new branch, but the assembly will include political education in the form of two presentations, followed by discussions, one on *ubuhlali* and the other on the politics of the left. In these meetings the language of dignity, and a politics centred on the acquisition of land and the dispersal of political power, is presented as adjacent to the language of socialism, or communism, and a critique of capitalism and imperialism. The hinge that connects these two forms of politics is that of the idea of a 'living politics', a form of politics accessible to all – and explicitly not the province of the expert – that is rooted in everyday forms of life and struggle. There have been some attempts, but never fully-formed, to extend this work of synthesis into the idea of a 'living communism'.

### Bringing Struggle into Theory

Marxist ideas remain prominent in some trade unions but, despite aspirations to do so, the unions have not made significant alliances with popular struggles constituted outside of the workplace. With the exception of the EFF none of the projects that has sought, in full or in part, to constitute itself around a fidelity to Marx, or orthodox understandings of socialist ideas, has been able to

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33 Mpeku 2016.

34 Nsibandé 2016.

win significant popular support in a time of rapidly escalating popular protest and withdrawal of support for the ANC. There are a number of reasons for this, including debilitating forms of sectarianism that have descended into extraordinarily toxic forms of behaviour, an uncritical attraction to the NGO-form, and a failure to grasp that mass-urban impoverishment requires thinking about the sites and subjects of politics which extends beyond established categories like workers and factories and peasants and the countryside. It seems clear that one of the reasons for the political failure of the left is the repeated imposition of *a priori* political identities derived from pre-existing theory onto actually-existing modes of life, striving and struggle.

What Aguilar terms orthodox Marxism has operated with a set of conceptual categories that frequently do not fit with empirical realities. It has, for instance, often been unable to engage productively with the reality that the urban peripheries have become sites of acute political contestation. It has also often been unable to grasp that impoverished African people are not merely subjects awaiting pedagogical intervention from above, a mass requiring direction, but that they have access to, and are constituted by various political histories and ideas – including those made and formulated from below.

But if, still following Aguilar, we take the view that critical Marxism is a theory of social struggle, rooted in ongoing and dynamic acts of resistance and creation, then the development of social conflict takes on specificity in time and space. Popular struggle, a phenomenon always constituted around and through a shifting set of political identities, must be brought into theory.

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