

CIVIL SOCIETY PROTESTS IN SOUTH AFRICA:

THE NEED FOR A VISION OF ALTERNATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa has arguably the highest rate of protest action in the world.[1] In the debate on the role and nature of civil society some light might be shed from a consideration of the widespread protests that pepper the South African landscape.[2] In this chapter we will look at how civil society, in the form of working class communities, is taking action to influence social change in South Africa. The masses ostensibly are interfering with history in order to push their agenda. What is the thrust of this agenda? What will it take for the masses to succeed? These are the questions this chapter tries to answer by way of a brief account of the protest action taking place in the country, consideration of the different causes of the protests, and an assessment of the politics of the protests.

Protest politics played a crucial role in the struggle that culminated in the transition from apartheid to democracy. Protests continue to play a role in the democratic post-apartheid South African society although it is as yet unclear what the long term implications are for the country. The history of the anti-apartheid struggles suggests that protest politics can be essential in the struggle to create a better and more just society. Forms of mass mobilization such as demonstrations, marches, protests and direct action are, therefore, modes of political engagement that help ordinary people to challenge vested interest in order to win their demands and satisfy their needs. From this point of view, protest politics are not a threat to democracy, they can actually strengthen democracy by ensuring that the voice of the weak, the downtrodden and the excluded is heard. In the South African context this appears to apply to the legitimate democratic – and neoliberal – government of the ANC as much as it did to the illegitimate apartheid regime. I will argue below that protest action alone is not enough as it is only one component of the struggle; what is also necessary is a transformative politics that facilitates the generation of new forms of governance and new forms of ownership that will replace or transform the present imperfect ones. For such a politics to emerge and develop, alternative visions of society are necessary. It is my contention and the main argument of this chapter that that alternative visions would immensely enhance the transformative potential of the issue by issue, community by community, protest politics gripping the country today.

DISCONTENT AND PROTEST IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has a proud history of the use of mass mobilization to achieve popular ends. Protests and mass action have characterized our political history from about the early 20th century until the dawn of democracy. People took to the streets, either in marches, demonstrations or the erection of barricades, with the aim of winning political, economic or social demands. For the purpose of analysis, it is possible to identify and delineate waves of mass mobilization that took place during different periods of the country's political history such as the military resistance during the 19th century wars of conquest, the strikes and worker action that convulsed the 1920's, the defiance campaign demonstrations of the 1950's, the student uprisings and resurgence of strike action in the 1970's, and the call in the 1980's to make South Africa ungovernable that saw the apartheid regime relent and scurry to the negotiating table.

Throughout these struggles we can detect varying forms and methods of organization, discern different and sometimes conflicting political perspectives and, with hind sight, make evaluations of the effectiveness, success, strengths and weaknesses of the struggles. The mass mobilizations against apartheid were waged against a hated regime, a state viewed as illegitimate and oppressive. The struggle in South Africa engendered perhaps the greatest international solidarity movement in history with many civil society organizations in different countries denouncing apartheid and exerting pressure on their respective governments and corporations to do the same.[3]

When Nelson Mandela walked out of prison and became president of the country it marked a turning point in the history of the country. For many it represented the culmination and end of many decades, even centuries, of struggle. It was the beginning of a new and happy era. Once the new government was in place, an ambiguous attitude towards protest politics developed. Political leaders appeared to relegate protest action to the bad old days of the apartheid era and viewed it as an aberration in the democratic "new South Africa". They made a sharp distinction between the old illegitimate government and the new people's government and frowned upon mass action against the latter. It was suggested that mass mobilization should be used to support government programmes and positions rather than oppose them. Where people insisted on protesting in the streets it was expected that such action would be orderly and "non-disruptive". Since protests might weaken "our" government, other ways had to be found to draw attention to things the government might be missing or doing wrong.[4] In addition, there was an anxiety with what was perceived as a carry-over of the politics of protest and resistance from the past into the present era. The new government, for example, felt it necessary to organize against the "culture of non-payment" and in this respect launched a special campaign ("Masakhane": let us build together/each other) to teach the masses to pay for their services and end the mentality garnered from the boycott

of service payments during the apartheid days.

Some commentators argue that protest action was not the only form of mass participation discouraged. The role of civil society itself was reviewed and recast as not always good for “development”.^[5] The ANC, as head of the national liberation movement, closed down many organizations that epitomized the characteristic vibrancy and militancy of civil society under apartheid. The biggest and most important organization that was closed down was the United Democratic Front; this was justified on the grounds of the “new balance of forces” and the strategic imperatives of the new political situation. On hindsight, given the subsequent embracing of neoliberalism by the ANC government, it increasingly seems as if the political motives behind the demobilization and disorganization of the masses was a deliberate weakening of civil society by the new rulers to undermine opposition to its unpopular policies. The masses were being robbed of their agency and being reduced to spectators and at best supporters of the unfolding political process. The leaders knew best and they had to be left to lead. Perhaps this was harder to see at the time because everyone was too busy watching the drama of the unfolding transition. People held their breath in awe of the dawning of a new era. Whatever the reasons and motivations, a lull in mass mobilization and protests ensued.

The penny dropped in 1996 when the ANC government announced that it was abandoning the mildly redistributive Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in favour of the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic policy. The die had been cast. The new government had chosen the path it was going to travel; it was embarking on a neoliberal project. Henceforth it was going to prioritise the interests of big business and pursue economic growth; redistribution of wealth would take place according to a trickle-down model. In practice this meant that the masses would have to wait longer for the economic benefits of freedom and democracy. In some instances it would involve the masses losing some benefits they had enjoyed under apartheid.^[6] This unexpected development sparked off some harsh criticism but no significant protest action accompanied this momentous rightward shift in policy and ideological orientation by the new government. The SACP and COSATU protested verbally but their opposition was contained and muted by their loyalty and allegiance to the hegemonic bloc, the ANC-SACP-COSATU Tripartite Alliance.

Despite all this it looked like protest politics are ingrained in the collective psyche of the South African masses. The first wave of protests took place around and immediately after liberation. This first wave consisted of the much-ridiculed “popcorn protests” that dotted the political scene for a short while. These protests were sporadic but there were enough of them to form a trend. They involved expressing dissatisfaction with what we now call “service delivery”, namely, municipal services, housing, roads, etc. People mobilized, for example, in Tembisa, a working class township on the East Rand, where residents

fought against electricity cut-offs. Some of the “popcorn” protests seem to have been organized by new community organization that were independent of the newly-constructed hegemony of the ANC and its alliance partner, including its civic arm, the South African National Civics Organisation.

More research needs to be done on this first wave of protests after independence. It should be noted that most communities developed local civic bodies during apartheid days which often followed the contours of the particular history and dynamics of the area in question and the character of the local leadership. However, many of these grassroots organizations were gradually hegemonised by the “Congress tradition” as the struggle against apartheid peaked and it became clear that the ANC was going to be the new ruling party in South Africa.[7] The ushering in of the new government and the excitement surrounding this raised expectations, a development that might have accentuated frustration leading to protests. Some communities and their leaders probably found it necessary to assert themselves and make their demands heard given the then rapidly changing political landscape and balance of forces. The new order must have also undermined local vested interest and the response to this took the form of protest action in some areas.

The popcorn (or “mushroom”) protests were marked by a degree of militancy such as in the example of Tembisa referred to above where residents invented “Operation Khanyisa”, re-connecting themselves to the electricity grid after being cut off for non-payment.[8] I imagine many creative collective actions were taken by communities responding to the possibilities offered by the dawn of democracy. For example, there was a sudden increase in the number of informal settlements in the country as people invaded land and put up their shacks. Everyone wanted to have a place in the sun and a piece of the pie.

A negative development during these early post-apartheid days of protest was the regimentation and ritualisation of the protests. Protest action increasingly took the form of marches. The response of the authorities was to contain the action by making use of the Public Gathering Act which had a leveling effect on the militancy of the marches. To have a march you needed to apply, fill a form, write letters of notification to your adversary or target, attend a meeting with the police and national intelligence operatives, plan the route and times of the action jointly with the police, and end the march with the obligatory memorandum of grievances. The authorities played hardball trying to make the marches as short, invisible and non-threatening as possible. While one should not underestimate the political importance of these chaperoned protests, it soon became clear to the masses that the march was sometimes unable to elicit positive policy change from the government. Some senior officials were accused of simply ignoring the protest marches. Recent research suggests that some memoranda submitted by marchers were not seriously considered nor responded to by the authorities despite the government’s projection of itself as responsive and the government’s

formal petitions response procedure.[9]

We now turn briefly to the one-day general strikes by COSATU that took place towards the end of the 1990's when the union federation felt compelled to act against privatization. The opposition to privatization was a direct challenge to GEAR, the government's neoliberal macroeconomic policy. Many government workers were finding themselves "outsourced", that is, removed from the government payroll and re-employed by contract companies. In some cases government departments became companies and the workers' conditions of service changed mostly for the worst. A landmark struggle arose when, in 1997, the Johannesburg city council unveiled a comprehensive neoliberal restructuring programme.[10] At the same time the University of the Witwatersrand was laying off hundreds of workers with its goal being to outsource workers. The combination of the two struggles, against municipal privatization and against university neoliberal restructuring, saw the birth of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) in 2000, a body that would be central in the next wave of protest action that took hold of the country organized by the "new social movements".[11] Despite these developments and, notably the massive one-day strikes, the government did not move away from its stubborn neoliberal course.

The rise of protest action and mass mobilizations organized by social movement organizations, such as the APF, the Treatment Action Campaign, the Anti-Eviction Campaign, Jubilee South Africa, Landless Peoples Movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo and other organizations, heralded another wave of struggle in South Africa. The background to this is to be found in the increasing deterioration in living standards experienced by the working class as neoliberal policy started to bite. The neoliberal regime's policies had immediate negative consequences for the masses. For example, the policy of cost recovery in the provision of basic services meant that people had to pay steeply rising prices for essential services such as water and electricity. It also meant less houses being built as government tried to keep costs down in line with neoliberal's fiscal discipline and austerity regimen. Disaster struck and was partly averted by civil society mobilization led by the Treatment Action Campaign, one of the new social movements, when President Mbeki's administration tried to duck responsibility for the provision of medical treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS. The victory against the myopic HIV denialism no doubt saved many lives. Arguably, it also symbolizes the effectiveness of social mobilization and protest organized at the level of civil society. There has been no such victory, despite mobilization led by the Landless Peoples Movement, against the neoliberal policy of "willing seller and willing buyer" that has slowed down the South African land reform programme to a snail's pace.[12] Nor has Jubilee South Africa, a social movement organization organising against the repayment of the apartheid, managed to stop the government's approach to this question. Mostly fighting issue by issue, the new social movements and their mass mobilization marked a definite period or wave in the history of protest action in the country. Each

significant aspect of the government's neoliberal policy pushed the masses into struggle and facilitated organization.

The new social movements arose at a time when the world was on fire because of the anti-globalisation (anti-capitalist) movement that dramatically entered into the history books in Seattle in 1999. This global movement tremendously transformed our conceptions of civil society. South African protests organized by the new social movements are best understood against the stage set by this bigger international movement as much as arising out of the specific conditions and challenges of the South African struggle. Further research into the question is likely to reveal that new social movement activism in South Africa presents with some of the characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of the global movement. It is noteworthy that the decline of the new social movements in South Africa has broadly coincided with that of the international movement.

The authorities did not take kindly to the militant actions of the new social movements. Many of them tended to be politically critical of the ANC government and its neoliberal policy. Some of them went so far as to demand fundamental social change notably calling for an end to capitalism and its replacement by socialism.[13] They were also prone to resort to militant forms of mass action including "direct action". The ANC leadership organized the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance to unite behind a line that denounced the social movement organizations as anti-government and indeed counter-revolutionary. The president of the country then, Thabo Mbeki, took it upon himself to be champion of this battle against the social movements and in the process achieved a division between important segments of South African civil society thus arguably weakening these. ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance members were encouraged to be hostile to the social movements despite the ostensible commonality of their problems. An exception to the rule was the TAC which somehow managed to work with COSATU despite the twists and turns of the relationship. It can be argued that this is one major weakness of this wave of struggle led by the social movement organizations, the struggle of the workers at work and of the workers in the community took the form of two independent, mutually exclusive and even hostile struggles. This bifurcation of struggle weakened the struggle somewhat.

The last wave of mass action is the current one which consists of local community uprisings and militant national strikes. The first such community uprising took place in Diepsloot, a sprawling dormitory township and shanty town north of Johannesburg, in 2004. Everyone was caught by surprise. One day it was quiet the next the community was running berserk barricading roads, stoning cars, burning council offices and having running battles with the police. The struggle was mainly over housing although there are many issues to organize around in this desolate place that started as a "transition camp".[14] The next community to rise up in rebellion was Intabazwe, a working class township attached to Harrismith, a small town situated halfway between

Durban and Johannesburg in the Free State province. Seventeen-year old Teboho Mkhonza, a high school student, was shot dead by the police during the fracas. This community appeared to have sparked off a series of similar uprisings in several small towns and townships in the Free State. My own tentative research into this phenomenon suggests that the expulsion of rural workers from the commercial farms in the province and the decline in mining activity put pressure on the livelihoods of some of these small communities thus leading to eruptions. The riot movement spread to the Eastern and Western Cape, Gauteng and to other provinces, notably the Mpumalanga province. The peculiar characteristics of these community protests were established quite early on in this movement: they tend to have broad support and involve a big section of the community, they are often violent and disruptive and their demands relate to the provision of basic services, the accountability of councilors and corruption. Housing is a central issue as many of the communities are shack settlements or have significant sections of the community housed in the shacks. The community leaders in some areas tend to use the word "development" quite a lot to denote what they and the people want. Development means some improvement in the area: jobs, roads, electricity, recreation facilities, local economic development, etc. It should be noted that a study of the demands of the communities in question reveal a wide and deep range of issues, styles and emphases which reflect each area's circumstances: history, politics, organization, leadership, etc. However the riots quickly acquired a nomenclature, "service delivery protests" which has stuck but whose descriptive accuracy is subject to question.[15] Since about 2004 until today they have steadily increased in number and notably peaking around the time President Zuma was elected president of the country in April 2009 and, to date, showing no sign of abating.[16]

There are a number of points one can note about this last wave of mass action. Firstly, it has been around for a long time, about 5 years. Secondly, it has had its peaks and downswings but the trend seems to be steadily increasing and spreading to new areas.[17] Thirdly, a strike wave accompanied the wave of protests in the community although there was no clear or immediate connection between the strikes and the uprisings. In 2007 workers took to the streets in the biggest public sector strike in the history of South Africa. There were also several important national strikes in the private sector that gripped the country just before the great strike. These strikes were bitter, protracted and often violent, such as the security workers' strike which saw several workers killed. This sad and unacceptable development, in my opinion, is a reflection of the desperation of the strikers. Fourthly, we are now seeing repeat uprisings in many areas such as Orange Farm, Balfour and others. This seems to point to the intractable problems underlying the uprisings and might result in a search for radical solutions by the masses and their leaders as they realize that barricading the streets and burning the local council office does not lead to the desired change. Fifthly, some of the community protests have involved attacks on African immigrants and the burning and looting of

their small businesses. The association between xenophobic attacks and the protest action is worrying and requires further research. This issue is in a section discussed below. Lastly, there is a need for further research into the impact and influence of the protests on general South African politics because they have become a permanent albeit sporadic fixture in the country's political landscape. Few political players in the country can ignore them and below we look at the different perspectives advanced to explain the protests.

THE CAUSES OF THE PROTESTS

We can identify different takes and perspectives on the protests if we consider the question of what is behind the protests. Establishing causality requires us to interrogate the protests further in order to find explanations for their appearance and development. Three approaches to the question of what causes the protests in South Africa are presented and critically discussed. This discussion allows us to later suggest the implications of the protests for civil society theory and for political philosophy.

From a sociological point of view, the protests present a unique subject matter that, if well researched, theorized and understood, can yield powerful insights into the operation of South African society and, generally, the nature of political processes in the 21st century. Their constancy spanning almost a decade since freedom was attained in the country. The protests exist *sui generis*; the protests are a reality, they happen almost everyday, they happen in many different parts of the country, they have happened in the past and they are likely to happen in the future. They cannot be ignored or wished away. This constant presence facilitates systematic study. They are a "social fact".

There are certain political implications about the protests as fact. I want to suggest that it is increasingly dawning on the ANC government that it simply has no control over the protests and might not have the power to stop them. This was brought home sharply when the protests increased rather than decreased when Jacob Zuma, the people's president, took over from the detested Mbeki upon whose head all the ills of the country were put. There is no doubt that the protests pose many questions and raise many issues that might uncomfortably challenge the status quo. It is likely that the protests are increasingly seen by the ruling class as a potential threat to the configuration of social forces and interests that constitute South African society in the 21st century.

The literature on the protests is replete with the search for causes: what is behind the protests? Analysts require explanations in their quest for understanding, practitioners need explanations in order to deal with the protests, some to stamp them out and others to egg them on. The most affected party is of course the ANC government. Its approach to the question has been mainly to acknowledge the existence of "service delivery" problems and to attribute these to the weaknesses

("lack of capacity") of local government. The people need water, electricity, houses, roads, clinics and schools, but they are not getting them, so they get frustrated and protest. The solution: improve local government and service delivery.

It is interesting to note that the script the government is reading from when explaining the protests sometimes changes emphasis, contains many nuances and often new elements and twists are introduced by different government leaders and spokespersons. However, it is possible to detect the various thrusts in the government's argument. A significant theme is for the government to blame the protests on a "third force", that is, on unknown people with unknown agendas that seek to "destabilize our democracy".[18] Another is the accusation that certain people, in particular ANC local leaders, are agitating the masses in order to position themselves for leadership positions in the next local government elections in 2011. The latest explanation is the admission that blame cannot be put only on local government, provinces are also to blame.[19] This is an interesting admission because in some cases the ANC senior leadership has responded to the most volatile protests by firing mayors and councilors seen as responsible for poor service delivery in a particular area. This begs the question of how many mayors will and can be fired given the fact that a substantial number of local municipalities are dysfunctional in South Africa. A possible way out of this has been to add the charge of corruption in addition to their being incompetent or not responsive to the needs of constituencies. Corruption is a thorny issue in South Africa and many protesters complain about this. The hitch is corruption seems widespread and permeates all levels and spheres of government; what is done about it in local government might set difficult to implement precedents for other spheres.

The ANC needs an intelligible and politically viable explanation for the protests but there are many difficulties in this respect. How does the ANC, for example, explain the fact that ANC members and supporters are increasingly involved in protest action? There have been instances when ANC councillors' houses have been burnt down by protest action organized by the local ANC branch leadership.[20] There are many implications of this for the ANC as the ruling party. Some old arguments that were used to keep things in control may lose their power. Mbeki tried to marshal ANC and Alliance forces to close ranks against a common enemy defined as those who agitate the masses to protest. But if it is members of the ANC and its alliance who are protesting then dismissing them as "counter-revolutionaries" and "ultra-leftists" seems unconvincing and problematic. A bigger problem is that the ANC can hardly afford to be protested against by its own members because this suggests a loss of support and might have disastrous electoral implications. The biggest problem is that the ANC appears today as a highly factionalised party where increasingly members of the respective factions ruthlessly attack each other oblivious of the political damage to the ANC as a whole. This means that some explanations given by the ANC government for the protests require scrutiny.

How does the media in South Africa explain and project the protests? Despite its sensationalist approach to newsworthy items, the mainstream press in South Africa is largely in line with the programme and vision of the government as both institutions share a neoliberal outlook and are in fact part of the bourgeois state.[21] On the question of the protests the media tends to follow the government's line with a few peculiar caveats which usually reflect the interests and concerns of its owners, big business. The bourgeois media is not exactly in love with the ANC even though the latter manages the bourgeois state. The capitalists were forced to accept ANC rule because no other party had the ability and the authority to lead South Africa from apartheid to democracy. The ANC qualified for the job because the masses had chosen it to be the party of national liberation and, most importantly, its leadership was willing to compromise with capital on the question of a new dispensation for South Africa.[22] This involved the ANC agreeing to respect the law of profits and binding itself to protecting (stolen) private property. The ANC was also the only party that could successfully contain mass dissatisfaction with a less than perfect political dispensation because of its strong influence over the masses. But, the capitalists did not just wake up one day to the realization that the ANC could be useful in this way. There were times of mutual suspicion and hostility and this chapter in history could not simply be wiped clean. For example, at first and for many years big business cultivated and encouraged the Inkatha Freedom Party of Gatsha Buthelezi as a possible future capital-friendly regime. But their man did not have enough mass support and his underhand machinations backfired badly when he was found out to be conniving with the apartheid regime to kill anti-apartheid militants. The media also failed to sell Buthelezi to the masses despite giving it a good try. With the ANC in power we note that the media tends to support the broad pro-capitalist neoliberal thrust of the ANC government but is constantly sniping at and undermining the ruling party. Any kind of pro-working class policy is often subjected to a lot of scrutiny, criticism and ridicule by the press. It is also possible that there is a desire to keep the ANC anxious and confused rather than poised and confident in its seat of power. But when it comes to the protests it seems reasonable to expect that the ruling class is worried. The newspaper editors, like the government spokespersons, blames poor service delivery for the protests. They are also vexed by the question of to what extent and in what respect throwing their money at the problem could end the protests. Interestingly, the press, the capitalists and the government are all politically cautious in their approach to the protests but all seem to be getting impatient and exasperated with the protests. They all seem to echo the government's line that protest is fine but "violent protest" is unacceptable and will be (or should be) responded to with an iron fist.

Some influential commentators argue that, in fact, the real cause behind the protests is not dissatisfaction with service delivery. They claim that the real problem for communities is poor governance and a deficient

democracy that does not afford the citizen a proper say over public affairs. This second position differs significantly from that of the dominant government referred to above. The ANC government is assessed to be a “distant government” that is not responsive to the people’s needs and views, and that does not involve the people in governance. In other words, it is a political problem rather than an economic problem. The solution suggested is participatory democracy, the people must have a real say in the day to day running of their affairs. This argument emanates from a sensibility that sees the notion of “delivery” as casting the masses as passive recipients of government services rather than as active citizens. The people are robbed of their agency as historical actors.

It should be noted that this position does contain some commonalities with that of the government. Zuma, for example, has spent some time going to communities to “listen” to what people are saying rather than to bring or promise to bring the delivery goodies. Also, government officials sometimes argue that the problem is not so much delivery as the government’s failure to “communicate” and keep people informed about its programmes. Some newspaper editors sometimes argue this way. This boils down to claiming that the government’s policies are fine and the rate of delivery is fine (even if admittedly a bit slow); what is needed is a change of style, the government needs to learn to deal with the “soft” issues, with process, participation, buy-in, ownership, communication and public relations, as much as it deals with the hard issues of bricks and mortar, dams and pylons.

A third explanation of the causes combines the two positions above somewhat in that both economic and political factors are emphasized. The people are seen as engaging politically with the government through protest action to express their dissatisfaction both with poor service delivery and how government is run. Significantly, this position does not see the protests as a problem or nuisance that needs to be quickly done away with. Rather, the protests are seen as a legitimate course of action and possibly an effective strategy to press and win the demands of the oppressed and exploited. No opposition is introduced between economic and political demands as these are seen as complementing each other. My position is closer to this one and I hope to make some observations that might strengthen it and close some gaps in the argument.

Commentators who espouse this position tend to celebrate the protests rather than see them as a major problem. Indeed some analysts, admittedly not many, think the protests are the best thing that is happening in South Africa. For them the protests are an embodiment of the revolutionary dynamic that is inherent in the working class and its allied classes; inherent in the historical and sociological sense. The protests are the down-trodden people in action, the subaltern classes rising up to shake the social order; they are an expression of the agency of the working class, its self-activity, its tendency to respond collectively to solve common problems. Not only do they help the working

class to press forward its demands but they are also a practical school of struggle that teaches the masses valuable lessons about politics, strategy and tactics, the nature of the enemy and other important aspects of the struggle for human emancipation.

Celebration is good but this must be qualified by the observation that it is necessary to identify not only the strengths but also the weaknesses of the protest movement with the aim of overcoming these and finding a stronger way forward. I will turn to this task somewhere below. For now let us note that, in general, those who celebrate the protests are analysts whose search for solutions to social problems takes them to ordinary people rather than to the elite. They are people who believe that that through mass organization and collective action vested interest can be challenged and defeated and a just outcome attained.

To conclude this section, we can observe that the search for causes of the protest reveal the seekers' standpoint, motivation and thus something of the interests they represent. In this respect, a dividing line is drawn: some commentators seek the causes of the protests in order to stop them, others in order to support them and make them stronger. One group sees a problem, the other sees a solution. One rejects, the other embraces. If we are correct in putting matters this way then the implications of these two opposing motivations for analyzing the protests are profound and may be very hard to bridge in theory and in practice.

XENOPHOBIA IN THE PROTESTS

Xenophobic attacks are a serious issue in South Africa. The country and the world were shocked when in May 2008 tens of people were killed and thousands displaced due to attacks on "foreigners", black African working class immigrants. Since these have been correctly condemned by all and sundry the remaining concern is whether such attack will recur and, if so, how this can be averted. There have been sporadic attacks since the May eruption and this has strengthened the argument of those who say the underlying causes of the attacks have not been addressed so there will be a recurrence. A worrisome development has been the occurrence of xenophobic attacks during anti-government protests around service delivery and related issues. Although in practice there seems to be a clear distinction, based on the motives and goals of the action, between a xenophobic riot and community and worker action, overlaps sometimes occur and it is these that warrant attention. Hopefully this exercise will help us arrive at a better understanding of the protests and the xenophobic attacks, and the steps that need to be taken to fight the latter.

In Siyathemba township, Balfour, in the Mpumalanga province, the community has twice erupted in violent protest demanding jobs and improvement in their area. They burnt down government building including libraries. On both occasions some protesters attacked shops belonging to

immigrants from African countries. This gave rise to a debate about the relationship between militant protest and xenophobic attacks. Some people, assessing the turmoil in the South African body polity, conclude that the same dynamic that produces protest action produces xenophobia. They point to the ostensibly similar conditions of living and problems faced by communities engaging in xenophobia and protest. We therefore shouldn't be surprised if xenophobic attacks re-occur in the form of protests turning xenophobic. Often protest organizers or observers will blame a "criminal element" that takes advantage of the situation to enrich itself by leading looting campaigns against immigrant shops. In a conversation I had with 2 leading activists in this township it emerged that the organizers of the protests were against the attacks on African immigrants' shops. But they conceded that some people with xenophobic or criminal intentions took advantage of the situation. One of them even said that if you attack immigrants "the government will come running" because xenophobia is seen as bad for the country (what with the World Cup soccer games coming up and all). In other research it has been reported that in Khutsong, for example, there were no xenophobic attacks during the May 2008 wave partly because the leadership of this community, embroiled then in militant revolt against the government on the demarcation issue, actively promoted tolerance and unity between South African born locals and immigrants in the light of their bigger common struggle to resist re-demarcation into the North West province.[23] Research in Soweto revealed that some community organizations successfully influenced significant sections of their constituency to adopt anti-xenophobic positions including persuading people to provide moral and material support to immigrant communities in need.[24]

Collective action is usually guided by a politics, co-ordinated by a leadership and waged by an organization, group or community. The script the leadership reads from has an influence on whether protest action turns xenophobic and on whether members participate in xenophobic attacks. Research indicates that South African society exhibits significant xenophobic attitudes some of which has been activated into attacks. It is therefore difficult to imagine that such attitudes and behavior will not be played out during protest action around other issues unless active steps are taken by protest leaders to admonish against this and espouse a politics that emphasizes co-habitation, tolerance and mutual respect irrespective of country of origin. There are, however, certain factors in the situation which might influence matters one way or the other, such as the nature of the relationship between local born South Africans and immigrant communities in their midst. Research seems to suggest that the possibility of hostile attitudes and attacks is reduced if there is positive social intercourse between different groups in society.[25] There is also strong evidence to suggest that vested interest can promote xenophobia such as predatory employment practices by employers that seek to take advantage of the insecure status of the immigrant. This means that to avert xenophobia community organizations, trade unions, political parties and social

movements, that is, popular organs of civil society, need to counter the xenophobic ideology of the xenophobes. Left to themselves things will turn xenophobic in South Africa given the frustration of the masses and the tight political management of discontent by the government that leaves little room for the masses to ventilate constructively. Indeed, government officials often say or act in ways which are xenophobic and that promote xenophobic attitudes, for example, the police harassment of immigrants, the handling of the issuing of papers at Home Affairs and, more generally, the failure to provide enough housing and other basic necessities to satisfy everyone's needs.

It is not a given that organized civil society will consistently act in a progressive manner. Research reveals that some social movement organizations had their hands full organizing against xenophobia and rooting out the xenophobia virus sometimes from their own members. A broad coalition against xenophobia was formed in Johannesburg consisting of more than a hundred organizations.[26] At the centre of this initiative were social movement organizations such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum and its affiliate the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee. These organizations and others did a sterling job raising public awareness around the issue. However, they had to contend with some of their own members succumbing to the disease. The leaderships actively intervened to educate, persuade and bring the strays back home.[27] In situations where leaders choose not to respond promptly and decisively the cancer may spread.

Xenophobia needs to be fought and eradicated and research suggests that the issue of xenophobia should be part of the mix of things that communities or unions organizing and planning protest action discuss in their meetings. Creative ways must be found to "mainstream" the issue into protest politics. Active steps can be taken to promote tolerance, understanding and solidarity through well-thought out programmes. For example, the needs of immigrants can be included in the demands of a protest so that their issue becomes everyone's issue. In some areas "cross-cultural" sports events and other social activities have been organized by civil society organs to promote unity between South African born locals and Africans born elsewhere on the continent. Research indicates that ideology is important in the type of politics that is deployed in mass action.[28] Education and ideological training is important in civil society organs such as social movement organizations in order to share and develop the political values of the organization to the benefit of all its members. Research revealed that ignorance, "political illiteracy", or the deprivation of information about the world, might be an important factor in making people vulnerable to xenophobic influences.[29] This suggests that the struggle against xenophobia traverses all spheres of life and that most of our activities can provide avenues for us to fight and destroy this scourge. Protest politics is one such sphere.

What is the strongest ideological foundation upon which we can base the

struggle against xenophobia? Research suggested that any attempt to preach tolerance between different or identifiable groups immediately raises the question of identity. Some activists who organized against xenophobia long before the May 2008 outbreak strongly identified with their “African brethren and sistren” and as Pan Africanist, believed that “Africa for Africans” which they linked with Kwame Nkrumah’s vision of a “United States of Africa”.^[30] We can see here that the chosen identity is “African”. But socialist ideas helped these activists go beyond Africa as they talked of the unity of the oppressed and exploited throughout the world. They invoked the ideas of Karl Marx and talked about international working class solidarity. The slogan of the Campaign Against Xenophobia was NO ONE ILLEGAL! We can see how ideological choices made with respect to how we define our identity and that of others provides an essential foundation for the struggle against xenophobia.

In conclusion, protest politics is exactly that, a politics. Its ideological content will differ according to what its protagonists know, think and have experienced. Without ideas that sensitise and immunise contest protesters against xenophobia, it is likely that some protests will turn to xenophobic attacks. It seems to me that the crucial factor here is vision, the kind of future and world that people imagine they are fighting for. If it is a world that is confined to their own immediate area or province, then localism and provincialism can characterize their thinking and influence their politics. If their world ends at the country’s national borders, xenophobic influences might connect with aspects of this national consciousness and xenophobic attacks can occur. But if the world is the protesters’ oyster then that imagination can be an effective antidote against the contamination of protest politics by xenophobia. Ideologies that promote international solidarity, tolerance of people different from ourselves, and similar values, need to be actively promoted.

CRITIQUE OF PROTEST ACTION

In the struggle there are no guarantees. There are no pre-determined paths upon which all struggles must tread. So it is with protest politics in South Africa. We have already seen how the victory against apartheid was truncated and the result was a disappointing turn to neoliberalism by the government of national liberation. The dreams, hopes and aspirations of millions of people were only partially realized. Since protest politics was an essential aspect in the struggle against apartheid it is legitimate to ask: what went wrong? What was missing, from the point of view of the masses in struggle, in the politics of the situation and in protest politics that allowed the transition from apartheid to democracy to have a neoliberal outcome? A critical assessment of protest politics is necessary in order to understand what happened and, given the present protests in South Africa, to avoid another disappointing outcome. However, due to time and

space problems I will confine my critique to post-apartheid protest politics with a few allusions to the shortcomings of protests during the anti-apartheid era. Many books have been written about the anti-apartheid struggle some of them quite critical whereas the protests in post-apartheid society have not yet been adequately assessed.

During the transition from apartheid to democracy organizations such as the United Democratic Front, that had organized and coordinated the protests that contributed to forcing the apartheid regime to its knees, were closed down and seen as redundant. The ANC, poised to take power (“ready to govern”), appeared to be extending control and hegemony over popular organs of people’s power. Once in power an impatient, suspicious or even hostile view of civil society activism developed in the leadership of the ruling party. The mistake made by the anti-apartheid protesters, on hindsight, was that they allowed their (ANC) leaders to define and circumscribe popular action and activism. The happiness and excitement engendered by the release of political prisoners, return of exiles and other developments that indicated the birth of a new era should not have been allowed to make the protesters drop their guard and forget that the enemy fights in many different ways and that there are no guarantees in the struggle. I also think that a clear class analysis was missing thus allowing the blurring and confusion of national interests with class interests. This severely limited independent working class organization and action thus allowing bourgeois elements to dominate the movement.[31]

It is a feather in the South African working class’s cap that despite the ambivalent and often hostile attitude of the new democratic government to protest politics and mass action, this continued well into the new order. However, we can identify some weaknesses in this politics starting with the first “popcorn” protests of the mid-1990s, to the one-day general strikes, the birth and rise of the new social movements, the strike wave and the current wave of community protests. It is impossible to go into each wave in great detail and further research is in any case needed, so I hope the reader will forgive the sketchiness of this assessment and some important omissions.

The early protests faced serious problems in that the hegemony of the ANC was at its strongest as was the anxiety that protest action could undermine the new government. As the pejorative term “popcorn” suggests, the protests were trivialized, marginalized and demonized. Notwithstanding this, the popcorners were carrying forward a tradition of working class politics and a combativity that withstood the demobilization and pacification of the militant anti-apartheid protest movement during the political transition. Over time the early protests allowed themselves to be contained by the authorities using the Prohibition of Unlawful Gatherings Act which more or less ritualized and removed the “disruptive” element in such protests. Indeed, this also happened with the unions although a major factor for them was their ties to the ANC government through the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance. The one-day

general strikes by COSATU, while impressive in size, were planned and prepared for well in advance, sometimes as long as 6 months in advance, as the unions went through the cumbersome legal steps necessary for a political strike (the “Section 72” application”) and the obligatory negotiations with the government and the bosses to try and find each other, with the hope of getting concessions that would allow the strike to be called off, and to ensure that such strikes were as minimally disruptive as possible.

The birth of the new social movements requires a broader and more wide-ranging critique because, as noted above, they appeared on stage as part of and hence possesses certain attributes of the anti-globalisation movement. A lot has been written about the latter but for our purposes I want to point out that this great movement was born as an expression of disappointment with “old forms of organising” and a perceived need to invent a “new” politics. Newness was emphasized from the word go. While every epoch has its unique contribution to culture and the tradition of struggle, it cannot cut itself too much from the previous era. It needs to engage with the old if only to overcome it. But what seems to have happened with the new social movements and the global movement for economic justice, now more appropriately called the “anti-capitalist movement”, is that the baby of tried and tested methods of struggle was thrown out with the bathwater of mistakes and deviations that had severely crippled the struggle in the 20th century. The search for a stronger way forward necessitated a wide-ranging critique of left strategies of social change but this, in my mind, was taken too far.

A whole body of writing emerged which basically criticized and even rubbished Marxism because of the failures of Stalinism and other Marxist deviations. There was an attempt to revert back to pre-Marxist ideas and approaches to struggle despite the conclusive critique and limitations of these. Form got confused with content; for example, disappointment with left political parties was made into a theory of rejection of political parties as such. The “iron law of oligarchy” thesis was invoked with a vengeance and the critique went overboard as the idea was propounded that not only were political parties bad for the struggle, but politicians, politics, political organization, organization itself, leaders and leaderships, trade unions, the state, state power, and so on, were all concepts and entities that had no place in revolutionary politics. The failures of working class politics provoked a rejection of the notion of working class leadership in the struggle, these in toto rejections culminated in a declaration that the working class was dead. Crowning the theoretical and philosophical hysteria was the rejection of the socialist vision and the very notion of vision as a “totalizing narrative”. Alex Callinicos and other Marxists have spent a lot of time and ink pointing the problems in this nihilistic approach.[32] Solid revolutionary insights developed over decades and even centuries of struggle were discarded all in favour of starting anew. But, as we can see today with the floundering of the anti-capitalist movement its uncertainty about the way forward, this approach did the struggle a

disservice despite its noble and revolutionary intentions.

The “new social movements” in South Africa were influenced by the anti-capitalist movement in a number of respects. They adopted some of the ideas of the global movement in addition to the inspiration, solidarity and support the local movement they received from the global movement. One outcome was that some social movement organizations in South Africa began to see themselves as centres of their own political universe, celebrating instead of mourning their isolation from organized labour and organized politics. Many opportunities were lost to engage in joint programmes with the unions and political parties. A problematic approach attitude developed towards politics where movement organizations would argue, for example, that they were “non-political”. This position against politics presented itself as being “non-party partisan” but, in practice, it represented the avoidance of the movements’ leadership of a serious analysis and attitude towards the ANC. The movements kept their distance from rank and file union members and ANC supporters thus sidestepping the bureaucracy and leaving workers in the clutches of this bureaucracy.

The issue by issue approach seems to have pared down the vision for an alternative society. The struggle around localized issues and celebration of this as “organic”, true struggle discouraged the development of positions that could unite movements across struggles. Struggles increasingly became inward-looking until, at last, the political field looked like a Tower of Babel of small, isolated, fragmented, episodic and ever weaker struggles. I am not at all surprised that by the time the next wave of protest action, the community uprisings, the new social movements were not in a position to link up with let alone lead such struggles. Some had even imploded by the time of the latest wave of protests.

The militant strikes that culminated in the public sector strike point to a renewal of struggle by workers at the workplace after many years of containment primarily due to the politics of class collaboration propounded by the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance. The problem with the alliance is not that a trade union is allied to a political party, it is that a working class organization is allied to a bosses party, the ANC, manager of the bourgeois neoliberal capitalist state. This means that workers are fighting the bosses with their hands tied behind their backs because an alliance with the ANC opens the gates for the politics and ideas of the bosses to make their way into the workers’ movement. The alliance also means that instead of COSATU organising opposition to the ANC government and its pro-capitalist policies its leaders fight to achieve influence inside the ANC. The struggle for influence over the ANC, during election time, becomes a struggle to get workers to vote for the ANC. The potential better. Capitalist ideology and the politics of class collaboration have succeeded to trample upon the working class vision. The vision of socialism needs to be rescued and shared with the youth that have been deprived of it. We need to give the protesters a chance to dream.

Is this an impossible dream? It is an impossible dream which has been made possible in every major mass struggle of oppressed, exploited and alienated people. It is the impossible dream which was made possible when hungry, homeless, unemployed people struggled together against apartheid – in a movement which could only move if it was driven by solidarity; targeting the satisfaction of material need – but driven by a spirit of collectivism and solidarity in the very midst of deprivation. It is an impossible dream which is going to have to be made possible again – otherwise there will never be an end to hardship and suffering. The struggle is about taking what capitalism makes impossible – and building a workers movement so powerful that it makes possible what was impossible.

CONCLUSION

We can see how important civil society movements and organizations are in the struggle for a humane and just society. The struggle against apartheid was won because protests contributed to the overall fight against the racist social system. Today's protests are an attempt to defend and deepen the victory against apartheid. The new challenge for the masses of South Africa is the ANC government's neoliberal policies. The protests represent a critique of neoliberalism and increasingly will herald the birth of a new post-neoliberal society. This movement will be strengthened and succeed if, among other things, it is imbued with a vision of alternatives.

NOTES

[1] The only country with as high a number of protests per capita seems to be China.

[2] "Civil society organizations exist as a cartridge between the state and society" (Steve Ouma, 'Civil society and the nation-state – The case of Kenya', Development Dialogue, No. 49, November 2007, p.1100)

[3] Dennis Brutus famously organized the sports boycott against the apartheid regime.

[4] The management of protests changed under the post-apartheid government. Protests were allowed but had to be conducted with the close cooperation of the police and within the strict guidelines they provided.

[5] "An oft-asked question by those in power was: what do we need civil society for now that we have a government of the people? ... Civil society organisations were seen as at best a nuisance and at worst a threat to the democratic government." Xolela Mangcu, *To The Brink: The State of Democracy in South Africa*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Durban, p. 123.

[6] Many workers lost their jobs when trade liberalization was introduced. Many residents who had untrammelled access to water suffered when pre-paid meters were installed. Communities that had lived in certain areas were forcibly removed. All this was happening under the new government.

[7] The Congress tradition refers to that part of the national liberation movement that followed the politics of the ANC.

[8] This liberation or communing of electricity by communities was made famous by the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, an affiliate of the Anti-Privatisation Forum.

[9] There is evidence emerging from the present wave of protests (2009 to 2010) where communities often provide proof of many attempts going back many years to “engage” the authorities on issues affecting the people.

[10] The Igoli 2000 programme of the Johannesburg City Council entailed introducing the profit motive in all the services provided by the municipality.

[11] It is important to note that for a moment the trade unions worked closely with community organizations in the anti-privatisation campaign. That moment was lost.

[12] In an interview, the minister concerned, Gugile Nkwinti, was dismissive of the targets set by the government to buy back 30% of the land from commercial farmers and redistribute it by 2014. He said this was unattainable so he had scrapped the target and no new target was going to be set. City Press, 8 March 2010.

[13] The APF adopted socialism as its “official vision” a couple of years after it was formed.

[14] Under apartheid we had transition camps where victims of forced removals would be “temporarily” kept. Then, as now, people ended up living permanently in these desolate places.

[15] Steven Friedman is quoted expressing this position in South African Institute of Race Relations, ‘Protests not just about service delivery’, defenceWeb, 11 February 2010,

[16] Further research is needed to quantify the protests.

[17] Again further research is needed to map the trends.

[18] The National Intelligence Agency was made to write a report on the protests several years ago and the government was embarrassed when instead of a third force it was found that it is often ANC members who organise and lead the protests in some areas.

[19] “[We have] failed municipalities by not honouring our promises as a provincial administration,” said David Mabuza, the premier of Mpumalanga province, in a recent provincial summit on improving service delivery. (SABC news, 27 February 2010)

[20] This emerged in the research of the Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg, study of protests especially in Mpumalanga.

[21] This is notwithstanding liberal protestations and claims about the independence of the media. Yes, there is a degree of autonomy but both serve the same class interests even if their approaches might differ from time to time.

[22] Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*, Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005.

[23] Joshua Kirshner and Comfort Phokela, *Khutsong and xenophobic violence: Exploring the case of the dog that didn't bark in South African Civil Society Response to the Xenophobic Violence of May 2008*, Atlantic Philanthropies – Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg, 2010.

[24] Trevor Ngwane and Nonhlanhla Vilakazi, *Social movement responses to the xenophobia: a case study of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, the Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Coalition Against Xenophobia in South African Civil Society Response to the Xenophobic Violence of May 2008*, Atlantic Philanthropies – Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg, 2010.

[25] Ngwane and Vilakazi, *op. cit.*

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] One of the APF affiliates based in Alexander, Vukuzenzele, was filmed making xenophobic statements. The APF moved quickly to re-affirm its anti-xenophobic stance, conducted an investigation, took disciplinary steps against the culprits and involved its affiliates in activities promoting solidarity with African immigrants.

[28] “Urban social movements take on mixed political coloration”, according to David Harvey, because of the axis of class struggle and “other axes” of revolt and revulsion. “The vision of possible alternatives is put up for grabs”. *Consciousness and the Urban Experience: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanisation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 2.

[29] Ngwane and Vilakazi, *ibid.*

[30] Ngwane and Vilakazi, *ibid.*

[31] Please see Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*, *op. cit.*

[32] See for example: Internationalism Socialism, *Can we change the world without taking power? A debate between John Holloway and Alex Callinicos*, World Social Forum, 27 January 2005.

[33] Michelle Williams, *The Roots of Participatory Democracy: Democratic Communists in South Africa and Kerala, India*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008.