ABAHLALI BASEMJONDOLO AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CITY IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA[1]

RICHARD PITHOUSE
Department of Politics
Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
R.Pithouse@ru.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The racialised regulation of space under apartheid was increasingly undone by insurgent popular action from the late 1970s. After apartheid a technocratic agenda that reduced the urban crisis to a housing crisis successfully depoliticised the urban question. At the same time the state made often violent attempts to reinscribe certain aspects of apartheid spatial logic by forcibly removing shack dwellers living in well located suburbs to tiny houses, and then later 'transit camps', in peripheral ghettoes. However from 2004 there was a remarkable sequence of popular protest against local governments across the country. An autonomous shack dweller's movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, emerged from this grassroots ferment and has since issued a compelling demand for organisational autonomy, grassroots urban planning and the right to the city.

KEYWORDS: Abahlali baseMjondolo. Apartheid. Autonomy. Durban. Shacks. Social Movements. Urban Planning.

ABAHLALI BASEMJONDOLO E A LUTA PELA CIDADE EM DURBAN, ÁFRICA DO SUL

RESUMO

A regulação do espaço conforme critérios raciais sob o apartheid foi sendo crescente por ações populares insurgentes a partir de fins dos anos 70. Após o fim

---

[1] Where references are not given the claims presented here are based on three years of day to day involvement in Abahlali baseMjondolo, as a member of the organisation, and before that, work with the Kennedy Road Development Committee from March 2005.

do apartheid, uma agenda tecnocrática que reduziu a crise urbana a uma crise habitacional conseguiu, com sucesso, despolitizar a questão urbana. Ao mesmo tempo, o Estado fez, com frequência, tentativas violentas de reinscrever certos aspectos da lógica espacial do apartheid por meio da remoção forçada de sem-tetos que habitavam *suburbs* bem localizados para casinhas minúsculas e, após isso, para "centros de triagem" [*transit camps*] em guetos periféricos. Entretanto, a partir de 2004 tem havido uma notável sucessão de protestos populares contra os governos locais ao longo de todo o país. Um movimento autônomo de sem-teto, Abahlali baseMjondolo, emergiu desse fermento presente nas bases sociais e, desde então, tem representado com vigor a demanda por autonomia organizacional, planejamento radicalmente de baixo para cima e o direito à cidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Abahlali baseMjondolo. *Apartheid.* Autonomia. Durban. Sem-teto. Movimentos sociais. Planejamento urbano.

THE APARTHEID CITY

The apartheid state began its project of spatial segregation in earnest in the mid 1950s. The ideal model for the apartheid city reserved city centres and the suburbs around them, as well as those close to major roads, for people classified white. Middle class people classified as Indian and coloured were housed further out, then working class people classified as Indian and coloured and then, still further out, working class people classified as African. Unmarried African women and the African poor were entirely excluded from the cities and banished to rural 'homelands' constituted on an ethnic basis.

Squatters' movements and struggles had had some important success in the 1930s (MAYLAM, 1996) and 40s (BONNER, 2005; STADLER, 1979) and squatters were able to mount vigorous resistance to forced removal to peripheral townships in the late 1950s (EDWARDS, 1959). But in the end these struggles were crushed by the apartheid military. The eradication of squatting and the segregation of the cities were largely achieved by the early 1970s.

In 1961 Frantz Fanon (FANON, 1976) famously described the colonial city as a "world cut in two":

> A world divided into compartments, a motionless, Manichean world. [...] The native is a being hemmed in; apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments of the colonial world. The first thing which the native

learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits (FANON, 1976, p. 40).

This is as perfect a description as one could find of the apartheid city. However it is worth keeping in mind that apartheid, and before that colonialism, was not just interested in the physical separation of people on the basis of the different races into which they were categorised. There was also a consistent attempt to use housing as a form of social control. Individual 'agitators' were excluded from access, whole communities were given concessions or excluded on the basis of their political leanings, townships were laid out in designs primarily planned around security concerns, authoritarian leaders willing to collaborate with apartheid were given various forms of power and from 1947 transit camps, which often had a clearly carceral aspect, were used to gain control over autonomous squatter's movement by offering temporary freedom from eviction at the price of strict state controls (HUCHZERMEYER, 2003).

For Fanon the event that inaugurates the end of the world of compartments occurs when the violence used to police the dividing line between the compartments is "taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters" (FANON, 1976, p. 31). Fanon concludes that:

> The shanty-town sanctions the native's decision to invade, at whatever cost and if necessary by the most cryptic methods, the enemy fortress. The *lumpenproletariat*, once it is constituted, brings all its forces to endanger the 'security' of the town, and is the sign of the irrevocable decay, the gangrene ever present at the heart of political domination (FANON, 1976, p. 103).

From the late 1970s the hermetic seal around white space began to be broken by land occupations and the formation of new shack settlements. This reached a peak in the 1980s. Many of these new settlements were on the peripheries of the cities, and while they may have improved the circumstances of the people who could gain some access to the cities through them, and while they broke with the tight control of the state over urban land and urban planning, they did not fundamental disrupt the apartheid racialisation of space. However others were in the inner suburban core reserved for people classified as white and wealthy and middle class people classified as Indian and coloured. These settlements constituted a decisive break with the spatial logic of apart-

heid. The situation in the city of Durban was unique in that there were a large number of land occupations in the suburban core.

While many people involved in these occupations were simply trying to secure access to a livelihood, or to unite families divided by apartheid regulation of access to urban space, there was a considerable extent to which these occupations were an explicitly political practice. The new settlements were often named after African National Congress (ANC) leaders in exile and, certainly in Durban, the circumstances of their founding and defence are invariably well remembered and often remembered in explicitly political terms. In some cases the new settlements were run democratically and without the extraction of rent and therefore constituted the creation of a new and insurgent urban commons (HUCHZEMEYER, 2004)[2]. However there were also authoritarian projects that were organised around the extraction of rent and some that were directly complicit with apartheid in return for qualified right to remain in the cities. Some of the anti-apartheid organisations in the settlements were also, especially towards the end of the state of emergency in the late 1980s, authoritarian.

THE POST-APARTHEID CITY

The post-apartheid housing deal was negotiated in 1993, the last year of the interregnum between apartheid and parliamentary democracy. It was developed from local capital's engagement with World Bank models, a process that began in anxious response to the 1976 Soweto uprising. The World Bank developed its model from the housing policy designed at the University of Chicago for Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship. It is based on the allocation of a fixed government housing subsidy per household to be awarded to private contractors who must take their profit from building within the subsidy limit. It inevitably results in cheap land being used to build housing for the poor and, therefore, banishment to isolated peripheral ghettoes (HUCHZERMEYER, 2004, p. 145-178; COHRE, 2008).

In 2001, writing in a Fanonian vein, Nigel Gibson ascribed the general ideological capitulation of the ANC to a failure to develop a popular radi-

---

[2] Although she does not use the language of insurgency or commons this is clear in Huchzermeyer's *Unlawful Occupation: Informal Settlements and Urban Policy in South Africa and Brazil* (especially p. 114-118).

cal intellectual praxis adequate to the challenges of the transition (GIBSON, 2001). In the same year Patrick Heller also pointed to the vanguardism of the ANC and argued that "a once strong social-movement sector has been incorporated and/or marginalized by the ANC's political hegemony, with the result that organized participation has atrophied and given way to a bureaucratic and commandist logic of local government reform" (HELLER, 2001, p. 159). The result, he concluded, was "the irony of an increasingly Leninist party defending neoliberal economic orthodoxy" (HELLER, 2001, p. 134).

For most of the first decade after apartheid the South African state and its allied NGOs had considerable success in reducing the general understanding of the profound urban crisis inherited from apartheid to a simple housing crisis which was in turn reduced to a question of the number of houses required to overcome the 'backlog'. Although it had not been long since the mass mobilization against apartheid in the 1980s – a mobilization that was often driven by popular organisations acting with a considerable degree of autonomy from centralised party control (NEOCOSMOS, 2007), and which often confronted the urban question directly (HUCHZERMEYER, 2003) – the reduction of a deeply political set of questions to the technocratic language that measures success in terms of 'units delivered' became largely dominant in civil society. The embrace of this technocratic consensus, a consensus that strictly reserved urban planning as a state and NGO function[3], enabled an increasingly unlawful and violent state led assault on the popular challenges to the spatial logic of apartheid[4]. At times this was simply to sooth middle class anxieties[5] that

---

[3] Marcelo Lopes de Souza, writing against a technocratic and state centric planning consensus, has introduced the valuable phrase (which has been taken up with enthusiasm by Abahlali base-Mjondolo and allied movements in South Africa) 'grassroots urban planning' (SOUZA, 2006).

[4] There is, as yet, no comprehensive national study of how the state, in the era of constitutional democracy, began, often with the tacit support of civil society, to act as if the poor living 'out of place' were some how beneath the protection of the law. While it certainly does not offer a comprehensive account of this form of state criminality in even one city the report on housing rights in Durban by the Centre on Housing Rights & Evictions (COHRE, 2008) does, at least, keep some sort of record with regard to some recent instances of state criminality in one city.

[5] The best study of white middle class attitudes towards shack settlements near to or in middle class suburbs is Richard Ballard's 'Middle Class Neighbourhoods or African Kraals?' The impact of informal settlements on white idenrity in post-apartheid South Africa' (BALLARD, 2004). Although Ballard only looks at white responses to adjacent shack settlements his argument as to how the presence of shack settlements in middle class suburbs can result in profound anxieties to middle class claims to 'modern' and 'first world' conceptions of the self could, with further research, be extended to include the black middle class. Although this is not widely acknowled-

demanded that the poor be returned to their place – the apartheid style peripheral ghetto. But at times the steady return to this aspect of the spatial logic of apartheid also enclosed land appropriated in the popular struggles against apartheid in the interests of a new round of accumulation by dispossession[6].

In order to make sense of the post-apartheid evasion of the politics of the urban question, an evasion followed since 2004 by vigorous country wide grassroots ferment around urban questions, it is useful to consider that there are (at least) two diametrically opposed conceptions of the political. The idea of politics has both an elevated and debased sense. The former is the public and ideally popular posing of the questions essential to the constitution of a just society. The later is the private, and therefore self serving and cynical competition for power and influence.

The technocratic reduction of the urban question to a housing question by the state and much of civil society after apartheid resulted in a radical evasion of politics in its elevated sense. Progress was assumed to be a quantitative question, something that accountants could audit. In the rush to 'deliver' more 'units' it was forgotten that at the heights of its power the apartheid state had been one of the largest builders of state housing in the world and that a properly post-apartheid approach to housing would have to consider questions such as the quality of houses built, the location of those houses, the nature of their ownership, the degree to which they were served by affordable transport, the processes by which they were planned and built and so on.

However while the state/NGO complex largely posed housing as a strictly technocratic question it became deeply political, in the most debased sense of that term, on the ground. Housing projects were routinely captured by local political elites and, at every level from the awarding of construction contracts to the allocation of individual houses, used to support the personal and political interests of those local elites. This was often undertaken ruthlessly, and on occasion violently, by local party structures.

It has often been noted that after its unbanning in 1990 the African Na-

---

ged in the academy, casual and crass anti-African racism is very common (although of course not inevitable) amongst middle class residents in suburbs formerly reserved for people classified as 'Indian' or 'coloured' and it has not been usual for middle class African residents to respond to the development of shack settlements near to their homes with considerable anxiety and hostility.

[6] This awaits a full length study. But there are numerous instances where land from which shack dwellers have been relocated has been developed for private profit.

tional Congress (ANC) moved swiftly to demobilise the popular organisations that had done vastly more to break the iron fist of apartheid than the ANC's fantasies of armed struggle. But it is also important to understand that the significant degree of autonomy that had been developed by popular organisations was lost completely as they were bought under the control of top down party structures. In the case of ANC aligned shack settlements each local organisation had to reconstitute itself as a 'Development Committee' affiliated to and under control of the ANC aligned South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO)[7]. When Development Committees in settlements are under SANCO control, or as has increasingly happened following the serious decline in SANCO, under the control of the local Branch Executive Committee of the ANC, it becomes increasingly difficult for these organisations to challenge local political elites. On the contrary these organisations generally become a mechanism for local elites to control the grassroots and this process is invariably authoritarian and sometimes violent, or premised on threats of violence or expulsion from settlements.

Where NGOs, most notably People's Dialogue which later become Shack/Slum Dwellers' International (SDI)[8], have sought to build a grassroots constituency they have most often done so on an explicitly non-political basis that, while it is technocratic in so far as it does not engage in public challenges to the state, is also deeply moralising in so far as it aims to demonstrate to the state and donors that its members are the deserving and disciplined poor – obedient and frugal. In South Africa SDI has succeeded spectacularly in so far as it has given the state an official partner that allows it to claim that it works with shack dwellers while it demonises and represses autonomous shack dwellers' organisations that issue public challenges to the state[9]. However it has failed

---

[7] In the period between the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 and the first democratic election in 1994 SANCO had argued for the democratisation and decommodification of state housing but after 1994 SANCO not only abandoned these positions but also sought to become a shareholder in the privatized commodification of essential services (HUCHZERMEYER, 2003).

[8] There have also been attempts on a much smaller scale by some left NGOs, the sort associated with the World Social Forum, to build a constituency in shack settlements. However these have been inconsistent, largely unsuccessful and plagued by grassroots allegations of authoritarianism on the part of some of those NGOs (and, in one instance, allegations of violence on the part of 'activists' sub-contracted to deliver a political constituency to one of these NGOs).

[9] SDI has never publicly condemned the active demonization and repression of autonomous shack dweller's organisations by the South African state.

to make a significant intervention in resolving the housing crisis, or to publicly raise the questions pertaining to the wider urban crisis. The latter failure is due to its refusal of politics in the elevated sense. The former failure is due to the fact that its technocratic orientation, and its accompanying explicit refusal to engage in "prescription and militancy" (TOLSI, 2008) has left SDI entirely unable to confront politics in its debased sense. SDI receives massive support from international donors and the national government but has no capacity to discipline local political elites who continue to capture and distort housing projects in their own narrow interests. However there are many cases were entirely unfunded grassroots organisations have developed this capacity for some time and to some degree.

Post-apartheid political realities at the micro local level have varied enormously but in so far as one can generalise it is fair to say that, via co-option of local leaders and an intense and often NGO supported ideological capture that posed development as a necessarily technocratic, and therefore expert led project, local organisations generally became a mechanism for top down control that was often exercised in an authoritarian manner.

This was accompanied by an authoritarian approach to development in which state officials would negotiate with local political elites, who in turn would make deals with the leaders (by now often unelected but supported from above) in the settlements. The role of those leaders would be to ensure consent for the developments negotiated between state officials and local political elites. In this way ordinary people were excluded from any meaningful participation in discussions around housing and other development. But the appearance of their consent for development projects became a commodity that, once won or enforced, could be traded.

One consequence of the exclusion of ordinary people, and therefore of any consideration of their interests, from discussions about urban development in post-apartheid South Africa was that post-apartheid housing development did not break with the fundamental spatial logic of apartheid in so far as that logic banished the African poor to the ghettoes on the urban periphery. In fact this logic was often actively reproduced. The key reason for this is that the material interests of local political elites were best served by accommodation with the market.

Urban development in post-apartheid South Africa has certainly not, as Fanon recommended, sought to end the division of one world in to two. On

the contrary there has been an active attempt to simultaneously deracialise the elite zones, the zones that used to be reserved for people classified as white, while simultaneously reconstituting the spatial manicheanism of apartheid on the basis of class. Where there have been attempts to connect former black areas to former white areas the black areas in question have invariably been relatively privileged and the project has been to extend rather than to do away with the zone of securitised privilege. So in many cities, and especially in Johannesburg, there has been an active project by the state and capital to expel the poor from city centres and to reinstitute the rule of money over these areas. And while there has been active support for the deracialisation of the suburban areas in terms of ending racial barriers to the housing market there has, simultaneously, been a vigorous attempt to remove poor squatters from these areas. At the same time there has been a massive boom in building access controlled and highly secured residential communities, shopping malls, office parks and beach and golfing resorts. The general development model has taken the form of public investment in an attempt to create a 'world class city' so razor wire encircled monumental kitch like themparks, 5 star hotels, casinos, conference centres as well as golf course estates and sports stadia have been prioritised.

State housing for the poor has largely been built on the urban periphery, often entirely out of sight from the zones inhabited by bourgeois eyes, as well as the transport corridors between them that are traversed by bourgeois eyes. Exclusion from the city often results in a dramatic decline in economic well-being, access to education and health care and public spaces like libraries, parks, sports fields and so on. The sweetener in the relocation deal is that life saving basic services – toilets, electricity and adequate water in particular – are withheld from the shack settlements but provided (on a commodified basis) in the relocation settlements. The justification for withholding services, like sanitation and electricity that would free people from constant diarrhoea and fires, is that it has been announced that the shack settlements are 'temporary'. The date on which the last shack will be taken down was first set at 2010, then moved to 2011 and now stands at 2014. This is rank denialism. The state's own research shows that the number of people living in shacks is growing. But the denialist fantasy works very well to justify withholding and sometimes even removing life saving services from settlements and to pathologise all protest as (1) unjustified and therefore part of some sinister conspiracy and (2) a threat to

the development plan and therefore to the rational administration of society. The Plan is always discussed in a neo-liberal developmental jargon as impenetrable as it is meaningless that offers the apparent authority of (pseudo) science to a millennial fantasy in which the real desire is clearly to eradicate the poor rather than poverty. The state calls its Plan for the poor 'service delivery' and has declared it a stellar success. At times it has even been described as 'revolutionary'.

POPULAR FERMENT IN THE POST-APARTHEID CITY

The simultaneous evasion of politics in its elevated understanding, in the sense of the popular posing of questions of justice, and descent into politics in its debased understanding, in the sense of self serving machinations on the part of local elites, has come under increasing popular pressure in recent years. The beginnings of an urban ferment were first organised with the formation of the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town in 2000. The Landless People's Movement was formed the following year and was able to develop some strength in shack settlements around Johannesburg. Both of these movements contested politics in its debased sense as well as evictions and forced removals to the urban periphery as well as, crucially, the technocratic approach to urban development. The Anti-Eviction Campaign emerged with complete autonomy from NGO politics and the Landless People's Movement broke with its 'partner NGO' in 2003. Both organisations called for a boycott of the 2004 local government elections and, in consequence, faced unlawful and violent state repression.

But 2004 was also the year in which a popular rejection of politics in its debased sense and a demand for politics in its more elevated sense began to be taken forward with remarkable vigour in a sequence of popular protests that still continue, although perhaps now more sporadically[10]. These protests were often organised from shack settlements and, due to their generally local focus, are well described as municipal revolts. They most often took the form of blockading

---

[10] John Pilger, a critic who, like most of the global left celebrities, prefers to ground his engagement in South Africa with left NGOs rather than popular movements but who, nevertheless, is very well placed to make comparative assessments, recently argued, presumably on the basis on 2006 statistics, that at a rate of 10 000 protests a year South Africa may have "the highest rate of dissent in the world" (PILGER, 2008).

roads with burning barricades and usually targeted municipal party councillors. Although they were inspired by each other, via the media and the mobility that often characterises life in shack settlements, they certainly had no overarching, or even linking organisational structure. This hydrarchical form of struggle has its weaknesses, foremost of which is the difficulty in sustaining unorganised rebellion after the first evental flashes. But there can be some virtue in the fact that a new political sequence constituted in this way is firmly under popular control in thousands of different locations and so lacks a head for the state to arrest and beat into obedience or for the state/NGO complex to co-opt. This can create a degree of temporary structural autonomy that enables critical discussion about issues of organisation and principle to take place before the inevitable attempts at co-option via party politics, state development and NGOs.

Official discourse, from the state, media, academics and NGOs, including most human rights and left NGOs, more or less uniformly described these protests as 'service delivery protests' with the implication often being that there was a popular demand for the perfection of top down 'service delivery'. It was often argued that the widespread targeting of local ward councillors in these protests indicated an inability to 'understand democracy' because the councillors 'do not drive the housing roll-out'. These judgements were most often delivered without any attempt at all to speak to the people actually organising and undertaking the protests.

There was no national study of the national wave of municipal protests that was not a quantitative attempt to measure the incidence of 'service delivery protests'. But the language driving the actual planning and implementation of these protests, a language occasionally glimpsed in the mass media in slogans and songs and, every now and then, a direct comment from a protester, was generally quite different to the paradigm of 'service delivery protests' and most often spoke to notions of the dignity of personhood, the virtue of honesty and integrity, and the idea that the disrespect shown towards people and their political intelligence and innovations by the state had now become intolerable. Certainly this disrespect had a lot to do with an absence of toilets, intolerable water queues, candles burning dangerously close to flammable walls in cramped cardboard and plastic shacks not to mention violent forced removals to the rural peripheries of the cities. But it also had a lot to do with the pervasive sense that the state disrespected people by lying to people during elections

and by failing to listen to them at other times. Again and again people asserted that the poor are excluded from decision making about their own lives, and therefore from citizenship and that, in an enduring and pervasive trope, they remained foreigners in their own land. Citizenship is widely understood to refer to the material benefits of full social inclusion in the material and spatial senses as well as the right to be taken seriously when thinking and speaking through community organisations. To put it differently there was a clear demand for popular democracy against both the technocratic authoritarianism (of bureaucracies) and the politics of clientelism and patronage (of parties).

During this upsurge of popular protest since 2004 this line of critique has often taken the form of a very practical demand which is for the local state to negotiate directly with popular community organisations rather than with local party councillors. The logic of this demand is clear: local party councillors most often function as a means of top down social control aiming to subordinate popular politics to the party and, thereby, society to the state. This is invariably undertaken via networks of patronage and has often extended to councillors or their associates deploying armed force against their constituents. The politics of patronage, driven by local party elites networked around ward councillors, is often opposed to the technocratic fantasies of state bureaucrats and NGOs in that it vigorously asserts specific interests against the fantasy of the top down rational administration of a plan. But local bureaucracies are ultimately subordinate to party politics and local bureaucrats make their deals with local political elites and not the people affected by those deals. Politics in its debased sense routinely trumps the technocratic fantasy of a smooth developmental space.

At their best, when they are well organised, sustained and democratic, popular community organisations enable a bottom up politics that can, in slow, grinding battles with occasional flashes, steadily subordinate the local political elite, and thereby the local state to society. This often takes the form of local party political elites withdrawing from contestation around local developments thereby enabling local community organisations to negotiate directly with the local state bureaucracy. Once politics in its debased sense has been successfully confronted it becomes possible to begin to undertake politics in its elevated sense. Bureaucrats can now be confronted with a different set of particular interests – but this time they can be popular interests.

The acute material crisis resulting from the withholding of services in shack settlements and the exclusion from the cities that follows relocation drove the return to a mass politics. But it is very clear that the key demand of that politics is for a democratic rather than a bureaucratic resolution of the crisis.

It seems that the national state prefers to tell itself that it is being confronted by militant 'service delivery protests' because this implies that people are only demanding 'delivery' which can be safely understood as a demand for a more effective technocracy, for a more totalising subordination to bureaucratic power under party control. In other words it enables the assumption that people are only demanding the extension and perfection of the current system. The response of the state, when not entirely and ludicrously paranoid and authoritarian, is either to recommend 'stakeholder management' (co-option, teaching obedience) (BUTLER and NTSENG, 2008) or to promise more efficiency from the state machinery. Some times this takes the form of recommending that consultation, environmental assessments and so on be cut back as they 'slow down delivery'. It seems likely that much of the middle class academic and NGO left is comfortable with the reduction of this national upsurge in popular and militant political action to a demand for 'service delivery' for a similar reason — they often see themselves as a more enlightened rival technocratic elite and this understanding allows them to read and present the protests as a vote of popular support for their power point presentations over those of the state's consultants[11].

However there is a popular demand for something quite different to 'more effective delivery'. Because even services essential to basic safety are often denied to shack settlements, and only made available in the out of town relocation sites, people opposing forced removals to these sites are in fact opposing 'service delivery' as it currently exists rather than asking for it to be speeded up in the form in which it currently exists. Moreover a key demand has been for people to be able to make their own decisions about where they would like to live. Sometimes this has been generalized into a collective demand for the right to the city. In many instances protesters have demanded to be able to stay in their centrally located shacks rather than to be moved to new housing

---

[11] Marcelo Lopes de Souza's term 'left wing technocratism' (SOUZA, 2006) seems perfectly appropriate to describe this anti-political spirit.

projects on the periphery of the cities showing that the question of housing is not reducible to being formally housed by the state. Where one lives can be more important than the nature of the structure in which one lives. The right to the city is not only undone by forced removals to the periphery. In some parts of the country, most notoriously Durban and the Eastern part of Johannesburg, it is also undone by the fact that in every relocation people not on the state's housing list (people without papers, single men, single women without children, new arrivals, people renting shacks etc) simply have their homes (illegally) demolished and are (illegally) left homeless. And it is undone by the fact that there is a ban on developing existing shacks and on building new shacks. In Durban this is closely monitored by a mix of local informers, often reporting to the local branch executive committee of the ANC under the ward councillor, and aerial surveillance and is enforced by (the generally patently illegal actions of) militarised land invasions units.

A second key demand has been the right to co-determine 'development' by subordinating the state, especially in its more local manifestations, to society. In other words there is, against the elite assumption that an electoral mandate is a mandate for 5 years of top down technocratic planning by elites strung between the state, academy, donors, consultancies and NGOs, a clear demand for what Souza calls 'grassroots urban planning' (SOUZA, 2006). This includes both a demand to recognise grassroots urban planning that has already occurred, by, for example formally recognising past land occupations, and a demand that future planning, such as the building of houses or the provision of services, be jointly undertaken by communities and the state. The state relentlessly tries to subordinate popular politics to the party or, when that is clearly hopeless, to technocratic processes. Popular political initiatives often struggle, with an equal tenacity, to exit the control of the party and to then subordinate technocratic processes to popular counter-power and, thereby, to subordinate the state to society.

There has been one academic who, against the anti-political technocratic consensus, has a clear grasp of the very political demand that is at the centre of what is at stake, and which is entirely occluded by the routine anti-political reduction of three years of an often hydra like national series of municipal rebellions to 'service delivery protests'. Catherine Cross, an anthropologist in the employ of the state, concluded that "the fragile civil order" is at risk from those who

threaten a 'heroic government' by posing 'grassroots communalism' against the 'state bureaucracy'. She warned that we have a situation where there is "an anti-bureaucratic system of informal institutions that competes directly with formal institutions" and that if the state can't sustain its dominance "communal... institutions will be waiting to replace the current system of party-list councillors and ward committees" (CROSS, 2006). She recommended a few strategies to secure the domination of the bureaucracy over grassroots planning but her final and most vigorous suggestion was to demand the urgent deployment of the police.

ABAHLALI BASEMJONDOLO

In the port city of Durban, South Africa's second largest city, where there are more than 500 shack settlements, there was a unique development. On 19 March 2005 a road was blockaded by residents of the Kennedy Road settlement, as roads had been blockaded around the country since 2004. The road blockade was inspired by a deep sense of betrayal on the part of the local ANC councillor. The ongoing mass mobilisation following the violent police repression of the road blockade targeted the councillor. He had been elected with the support of shack dwellers but had become widely unpopular amongst shack dwellers after siding with middle class residents in their push to have shack settlements 'cleared' from the area. The widespread hostility to the councillor amongst shack dwellers meant that it was possible to invite nearby settlements to join the campaign against him. In settlements were there were elected committees responsive to bottom up pressure this was achieved very easily. But in settlements were there were unelected committees responsive to top down pressure from the local ANC it was often was difficult, and sometimes dangerous, to propose rebellion against the councillor[12].

The mobilisation against the councillor took the form of a mock funeral in which he was symbolically buried. This was then taken up in an adjacent part of the city where shack dwellers also symbolically buried their councillor. At this time most of the people involved in these struggles remained loyal to the ANC and saw dishonesty and self interest amongst the local political elite as the key problems. But there was something profoundly radical about the sym-

---

[12] Death threats were common although no one was killed. But there were instances where people were forced to leave the settlements where they had been living for fear of violence or having their shacks burnt. This was most acute in the Burnwood settlement.

bolic burials of the councillors in that there was no call for one councillor to be replaced with another. The whole institution of the party councillors was being rejected and a clear demand was being issued for the local party leadership to be structurally subordinated to its base.

On 6 October 2005 a meeting of twelve settlements was held in Kennedy Road. There were thirty-two elected representatives there, seventeen men and fifteen women. They agreed that they would not vote in the coming local government elections and that they would stand together and fight together as *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (shack dwellers) (Pithouse, 2006). The decision to refuse electoral politics placed them outside of party politics. That decision was in part a straightforward consequence of disgust at politics in the debased sense. But it was also a decision that was simply necessary to make the building of a mass movement viable in a situation where most settlements were run as vote banks for one of the parties and local elites, sometimes armed, did not allow rival parties to operate on their territory. There were also no ethnic entrepreneurs, no political organisations, in the sense of small sects looking for a constituency, and no NGOs involved in the formation of the movement. It had no donor funding and was accountable only to its members and only via its own meetings. It was, in the sense of the term developed by Souza, an autonomous political project (SOUZA, 2000).

The people that founded the movement had direct connections and familial links with a rich tradition of struggle including the trade union movement where some had accessed Marxist political education, the popular urban struggles of the 80s, rural struggles against the institution of 'traditional leadership', the 1973 Durban strikes that gave birth to the black trade union movement, the great squatter struggles of the late 1950s and even the 1906 Bambatha Rebellion, the last anti-colonial revolt. But traditional ideas about communal access to land[13] and the morality of the churches, in which each person is understood to carry a spark of the divine, were also very important. But it was

---

[13] It must be noted that these have been, to a significant degree, stripped of their original sexism when transplanted to the urban context. AbM has taken up issues of gender explicitly but the predominance of women in leadership is not at all unique to AbM. This is also often the case in shack dwellers' organisations affiliated to SANCO, the ANC, SDI as well as authoritarian formations organised around the extraction of rent or political clientalism. This may be explained by the fact that women are a majority in shack settlements but minorities have often oppressed majorities and the tendency, to which there are of course many exceptions, for women to have a powerful or leading place in shack dwellers' organisations in South Africa still requires a careful theorisation grounded in the lived experience of life in the settlements.

the traditional language of the dignity of each person, reworked into a cosmopolitan form appropriate for urban life, that was, from the beginning, given primary consideration ahead of any of the more explicitly political languages. This may be one reason why Abahlali has always had something of the feeling of the warmth and mutual care of a congregation.

From the beginning an immediate commitment to radical equality was upheld as an axiom[14]. This meant that there was no regard for ethnicity, race or nationality and elected leadership positions have been filled by, and the movement's support mobilised for people who are Phondo and Xhosa (in a Zulu dominated city), people who would have been classified as Indian under apartheid and undocumented migrants[15]. It also meant that there was an absolute commitment to the letter and spirit of radically democratic practice[16]. There were a number of reasons for this, one being that the movement emerged, precisely, as a rejection of top down political practices and so its founding ethical commitment was to bottom up democracy. But it was also necessary to commit to radically democratic practices to secure the safety of the project in the face of intense slander and rumour mongering from the local political elite.

---

[14] I am using the idea of an axiom in the specific sense developed by Peter Hallward (2005).

[15] This is not to say that there have not been individuals who have raised criticisms of this axiom but rather to say that the movement has consistently adhered to it, and that that adherence has consistently sustained popular support. It has always been democratically confirmed, even amongst a rising tide of ethnic chauvinism associated with Jacob Zuma's campaign for the presidency of the ANC and then the country. For instance, in 2008, Mashumi Figlan, from a Xhosa background, was elected as chairperson of the Kennedy Road settlement by a mostly Zulu electorate. Mnikelo Ndabankulu, from a Phondo background, was elected as spokesperson for the movement by a largely Zulu electorate. Shamita Naidoo, who is of Indian descent, was elected as the chairperson of Motala Heights by a mostly African electorate. Fanuel Nsingo (an undocumented Zimbabwean migrant) was given the position of national administrator by the elected Abahlali secretariat, etc., etc.

[16] In the past observations in this regard have been rejected as a propensity to 'romanticise the poor'. However this is a claim about the political practices in specific organisation at a specific moment in time. It is not, in any sense, a claim about the poor in general. On the contrary to make that bizarre assumption is to assume, bizarrely, that all people who happen to be poor carry some sort of universal essence. Moreover all of the people that have rejected descriptions of Abahlali baseMjondolo as radically democratic have, without exception, had no personal experience within Abahlali baseMjondolo and so an assertion that an account of this democratic practice is 'romantic' is in fact an *a priori* assumption that such practice is not possible amongst people who happen to be black and poor. This is straightforward prejudice. It is worth noting that all of the now large number of students and academics from around the world that have visited Abahlali baseMjondolo and attended its meetings have, without exception, observed first hand the fact that the movement is deeply democratic. The first academic work on this aspect of the movement, an essay by Raj Patel (2008), probably remains the best.

Furthermore there had previously been rivalry between different settlements to secure 'development' and it was essential that the movement could not be seen as 'really' being in the interests of one settlements. Finally the settlements are amongst the most cosmopolitan social spaces in South Africa and there is always the danger of a project being seen as ethnically partisan if it is not scrupulously democratic.

The movement is organised via elected committees in each settlement that network through an elected overarching movement secretariat that facilities connections between the settlements. In this sense the hydra has cohered but it is not directed from a head. All positions are subject to election and office holders at settlement and movement level are elected by secret ballot for one year terms from which they can be recalled. Their mandate is to facilitate democratic decision making on the issues falling under their portfolio but not to act as representatives for a term. All meetings are open to all (including non members) and settlement committees take important matters to open assemblies and the movement secretariat takes important matters to the settlement committees. The movement secretariat never acts unilaterally for a settlement and only intervenes in support of a settlement committee when it has requested assistance on the basis of a decision at an open assembly. So while lots of actions are decided on and taken together across the settlements many more are decided on and taken at local level via radically devolved decision making. Moreover, in a clear break with the practices of the ANC and, also, the Zulu Nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), Abahlali affiliated settlements have allowed other political projects to contest for influence.

The strict commitment to the letter of the requirements for democratic practice takes the form of regular open meetings at set times, annual elections for all positions and so on at all levels of the movement's structures. Each affiliated settlement or branch is required to hold a regular weekly meeting at a set time which is open to all who live in the settlement. Although a number of settlements have not sustained the practice of regular open meetings most have and it is clearly a viable organising practice. Various *ad hoc* and permanent subcommittees, such as the women's league and the youth league, have their own meetings too and the overarching movement structures have regular meetings that are also open to all members and any visitors. The age of people participating in the meetings ranges from 16 to people in their 70s, women are strongly

represented at all levels and the meetings reflect the movement's diversity in terms of ethnicity, race and nationality. Attendance has been consistently good since 2005 (although if there is no immediate crisis to confront a soccer derby does usually leave the meeting considerably thinned out...) It is true that the meetings tend to be long, and that there are many of them, but, although the meeting culture is very formal, they are most often accompanied by the warmth of a congregation and a sense of excitement at the level of discussion, the range of people having the discussion and the broader consequences of those discussions.

It is of course entirely possible for a strict adherence to the letter of demo-cratic practices to be undertaken in a spirit that is contrary to the stated inten-tions. But Abahlali baseMjondolo meetings have always been gentle in tone, usually have some of the sense of a sacred space and have always taken the form of talking things though until consensus is reached. No one has ever been insulted or diminished in a meeting even when there are difficult issues on the agenda. The point has always been to affirm the dignity of everyone present, to 'think together' and to reach a consensus on that basis rather than for one person or some faction to seek to dominate.

However while all of this is very encouraging there does appear to be a structural limit to the growth of the movement. All of the settlements in which Abahlali drew its initial support in Durban, and then in the nearby town of Pin-etown and city of Pietermaritzburg, were within the central suburbs that were formerly reserved for whites, Indians and people of mixed race and which now faced forced removal to the rural periphery of the city. In other words they were settlements that in the mere fact of their being had radically undone apartheid spatial segregation and settlements that were, for that precise reason, most at risk of forced removal. Settlements further out towards the periphery of the city, where the majority of shack settlements are located, have tended to only make the decision to leave the ANC or the IFP and to join Abahlali when facing an eviction crisis. In and beyond the areas formerly reserved as African townships evictions are much less common and are generally a result of specific local fac-tors, usually infrastructural developments such as the building of new roads.

The life of the movement has been through two phases since its foundation and it seems that it is about to enter a third phase. The first phase was charac-terised by state repression. From the moment of the founding road blockade

on 19 March 2005 until 28 September 2007, when a legal and peaceful march on the mayor was violently attacked by the police, the state refused to accept Abahlali baseMjondolo as a legitimate organisation. The movement began outside of civil society and in what Partha Chatterjee (CHATTERJEE, 2004) calls political society, or what Abahlali has called a fourth force outside of the NGO/state/party triad (GIBSON, 2008), for the simple reason that the people that founded it were on their own. It was kept there at gun point for 3 years.

Abahlali baseMjondolo was constantly subjected to brazenly unlawful state repression and paranoid slander. In some respects settlements that had collectively affiliated to the movement were treated as dissident territories by the police and there were instances where settlements were occupied by the military at times of heightened tension. Abahlali Protests were unlawfully banned and then attacked when they went ahead in defiance of bans. Well known members were forced out of their jobs, there were more than two hundred arrests and all kinds of other forms of police harassment including the use of police violence to physically prevent the movement from taking up invitations to debate politicians on radio and television.

The only offer made to the movement by the state[17] during this time was that their members would be granted the ear of the state if they gave up their autonomy and joined Shack Dweller's International but would face arrest if they continued on their own. When this offer was immediately and publicly refused on radio S'bu Zikode and Philani Zungu, at that time President and Deputy President of the movement respectively, were immediately arrested and subject to torture at the hands of the police.

The slander directed at the movement by the state at this time most often took the form of alleging a political conspiracy by a white agent of a foreign government tasked with destabilizing the country. Although at times it got still more bizarre. At one point it was declared by the Branch Executive Committee of the ANC in Clare Estate that S'bu Zikode was an "evit(sic) spirit flying around to terminate good" (CELE, 2006).

From the beginning the state was wholly unsuccessfully in its attempts to slander the movement. It was decided early on that all Abahlali meetings would

---

[17] Although it should be noted that there was always, often off the record, negotiations, some successful, with individuals in some state organisations such as the municipal fire and refuse departments, social workers and so on.

be open to everyone who wished to attend them and this openness, together with clear and scrupulously honest communication with the media and an eloquent and widely published defence of the right to dissent by S'bu Zikode (2005), was very effective in making the state's paranoia look ridiculous.

The unlawful banning of protests was eventually stopped in the High Court with *pro bono* legal support. But police repression, which was often highly racialized in the suburbs that had been reserved for people classified as Indian under apartheid, continued unabated despite mobilization and legal action against the police and regular media coverage of police violence that was overwhelmingly sympathetic to Abahlali.

By the end of this period of repression the vast majority of active Abahlali members saw themselves as separate from and opposed to the ANC and the refusal to vote in the 2006 local government elections had widened into a general refusal of all forms of party and electoral politics. The targets of Abahlali's actions slowly moved from local councillors, to the mayor and the Municipal government, and then the provincial government.

Despite the difficulties faced by the movement from October 2005 until September 2007 a considerable amount was achieved. The movement was able to continue to grow and to achieve a remarkable access to public voice. For the first time shack dwellers, who had been rendered a politically inert category after apartheid, emerged on the national stage as political actors acting in their own name as a rational and speaking presence in the media[18] independent from party and NGO control. They were able to, to use Emilio Quadrelli's (2007) phrase, assert themselves as autonomous 'grassroots political militants'. Despite the ongoing repression this self assertion was accompanied by a tremendous sense of collective excitement.

In practical terms Abahlali was able to reach a point of being able to successfully resist evictions in all the settlements where they were strong, to build and defend new shacks, to openly undertake and successfully defended their expansion of existing shack settlements, to win access to various state services outside of party patronage, to set up crèches and various mutual support projects, to (illegally) safely connect thousands of people

---

[18] A number of Abahlali activists have become well known protagonists in debates in the popular media. Many of them are very young and many of them are women.

to electricity, to vigorously contest police oppression, to democratise the governance of a number of settlements to win sustained unmediated access to voice in the popular media, to defend the right to dissent against local party elites, to contest the withholding of welfare as a punishment for dissent and to fight a high profile battle for land and housing in the towns and cities. They were also able to protect their autonomy and rejected party politics, the councillor system and NGOisation[19] in favour of what they have called a (non-party and non-electoral) 'politics of the poor' and 'a living politics'. Perhaps the most important idea in the understanding of the politics of the poor that has been developed in the movement is that shack dwellers should organise themselves and think and speak for themselves, that shack dwellers should no longer be 'ladders' for the politically ambitious but should fully own their own politics and own it in common. The central idea in the understanding of a living politics is that politics should not be something imposed on people from above via sterile and often alienating dogma but should rather be something that, in its discourse and practice, emerges from and speaks to the immediate life world of shack dwellers.

But the declaration of Abahlali baseMjondolo as a university was a signally unique intervention into the South African political landscape where 'left' political education is usually something undertaken by NGOs in access controlled conferences venues in English during working hours and with an overwhelmingly economistic orientation that tends to ignore the politics of politics. The power relations in these situations are often highly racialised and gendered and are always deeply classed. But here a mass movement of the poor had decided to educate itself where its militants live and struggle in the languages that they speak via ongoing careful collective reflection on its experiences of oppression and resistance. Like Joseph Jacotot the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo is concerned "not with the emancipation given by scholars, by their explications at the level of the people's intelligence, but with the emancipation seized, even against the scholars, when one teaches oneself" (RANCIERE, 1991). For the first time in post-apartheid South Africa the

---

[19] This has often meant rejecting offers of money made to individual Abahlali leaders by NGOs. In this regard the practice of left NGOs associated with the World Social Forum has often been indistinguishable from those associated with USAid, the World Bank etc.

political form as well as the economic content of neo-liberalism was facing an uncompromising popular challenge.

The university has a formal and structured aspect with computer classes, annual graduation ceremonies and so on. But it also has a fluid and dynamic aspect in so far as it is also refers to the ongoing general practice of organised and very formal collective reflection on the lived experience of oppression and resistance.

An important aspect of the declaration of the movement as a university was that it created not just a space to think but also a space to nurture, support and affirm popular intellectuality with the result that Abahlali become able to call meetings and initiate campaigns in which those NGOs, academics and lawyers willing to work with a grassroots movement on the basis of mutual respect, rather than, as is more typical, on the basis of an assumed right to lead and to dominate grassroots organisations, could work with the movement. The first campaign developed in this way was against the Slums Act – a clear case of bloody legislation against the expropriated. The Slums Act was first proposed and passed in the province of KwaZulu-Natal and was meant to be replicated in other provinces. The Act essentially criminalises the unlawful occupation of land and, in a blatant return to apartheid and colonial tactics, also criminalises any resistance to evictions, any form of shack dwellers' organisation that occupies land unlawfully and raises money via a membership fee (as Abahlali does – annual membership is 1 US dollar) and recommends the formation of transit camps to which shack dwellers should be evicted[20]. The process of resistance to the Slums Act, a process incited by and organised by Abahlali, has resulted in mass mobilisation, public debate and an ongoing legal battle to have the act declared unconstitutional.

It slowly became clear that the movement had entered a second phase after the attack on the march in September 2007. This attack was witnessed by the local Anglican and Methodist bishops who strongly condemned it[21] and it was also condemned by international human rights organisations. Some Abahlali members assumed that this may have provoked the change in attitude on the part of the state. Others thought it was the fact that Abahlali had withstood

---

[20] The full text of the act and various responses to it are online at http://abahlali.org/node/1629

[21] While the movement has received strong support from a number of church leaders, especially Anglican Bishop Rubin Philip, the Catholic Cardinal, Wilfred Napier, has sided with the state.

the assault and still others thought that perhaps the state had decided to make an accommodation with the movement before the 2010 Fifa World Cup in order to avoid the risk of mass protests at the event.

Unlawful police repression stopped[22], and the state gave up on the agitator thesis and began to develop a very good understanding of who the key people were in each settlement and branch[23]. At the same time negotiations began with city officials in Durban. While officials were locked into a technocratic paradigm they did not share the paranoia and crude authoritarianism of the politicians and, although a slow process, it was possible to find common ground. As Souza's work shows so well once some kind of potentially positive interaction becomes possible with the state "Taking part in institutionalized state-led participatory processes is a 'risky business, and the more the ruling party (or parties) is efficient in providing effective participatory channel and forums, the bigger is the risk for social movements" (SOUZA, 2006).

In the beginning there were explicit attempts to persuade Abahlali to 'shift from a political discourse to a development discourse.' This was refused. There was also an explicit demand, as used to happen under apartheid, that, in order for the negotiations to proceed, Abahlali would have to undertake to prevent the expansion of the existing settlements. This was also refused. For a while there was something of a stand off but once Abahlali had secured the right to remain political, to continue with mass mobilisation outside of the negotiations, and to expand and develop settlements according to people's needs the negotiations could continue. Abahlali was particularly concerned about co-option and insisted that large numbers of people would attend each meeting (at least 2 from each of the 14 settlements then collectively affiliated to the movement in the city of Durban). In order to insure intellectual autonomy from the process rotating delegates were elected for each meeting with the City, each meeting with the City officials was preceded and followed by an open Abahlali meeting at which all the issues were carefully discussed and it was made clear that decisions would only be taken at these meetings. It was also decided to

---

[22] But it must be noted that the police have continued to harras the movement when they can do so in terms of the law. For instance they continue to remove illegal electricity connections and to seek the arrest of people installing these.

[23] This became apparent from the questions that the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) would ask people.

keep some of the best and most respected activists entirely outside of the negotiations to ensure that the movement could retain its intellectual autonomy from the process.

The negotiations were around development in terms of housing and services and so only the 14 settlements that had collectively affiliated to the movement in Durban could participate. However when new areas to the movement came under threat of eviction Abahlali threatened to withdraw from the negotiations if evictions went ahead. This proved to be effective.

The negotiations were slow and at one time Abahlali withdrew in protest at the lack of progress. During this time the movement found that there was a general decline in active mass participation due to the decline in repression and the fact that there were no longer threats of eviction. Although support for the movement, in terms of membership continued to grow much of the new membership was largely passive. Furthermore the new areas that joined often tended to join in a time of crisis, usually a threatened eviction, and to then become passive once that threat was seen off. But the fact that police harassment and eviction pressure had eased off did make it possible for the movement to become less reactive and to take up a wider range of issues, like electricity and fires, school fees, developing crèches and community gardens etc. And when there was a need to call the membership into action it was still possible to mobilise effectively and to be hegemonic with popular consent in the affiliated settlements.

This became most apparent during the pogroms in May 2008 in which African migrants were attacked and hounded out of shack settlements across the country. Abahlali baseMjondolo took a decision to shelter and defend all people born in foreign countries and were able to ensure that there was not a single attack in any of the settlements affiliated to the movement (GIBSON, 2008; NEOCOSMOS, 2008), and even to stop two in progress attacks (one the in the Kenville settlement in Durban and the other in the Ash Road settlement in Pietermaritzburg) in settlements not affiliated to the movement.

In July 2008 Abahlali baseMjondolo launched a Cape Town branch and in September Abahlali baseMjondolo joined with the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town, the Landless People's Movement in Johannesburg and a new church linked rural movement in KwaZulu-Natal, the Rural Network, to form the Poor People's Alliance. How the alliance would work

given both the geographic distance between Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg and the fact that it has no donor funding is not clear. In the past, when Abahlali baseMjondolo was only operating in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, it often proved very difficult to keep the struggles in Durban and Pietermaritzburg sufficiently connected. If the new national alliance is to succeed it may well be necessary to seek non-dominating donor support in order to have the material basis to sustain a 'living solidarity'.

At the time of writing (January 2009) Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Durban Municipality are about to announce a deal which will, assuming all goes well, result in the *in-situ* participatory upgrading of three settlements and the provision of some basic services to 14 settlements. If this deal goes ahead as expected it will mark the beginning of a third phase in the life of the movement.

It will mark a number of major victories including a decisive break with the spatial logic of apartheid (the settlements to be upgraded are in the inner suburban core), an acknowledgment that settlements need services and that development is not an all or nothing once off event limited to 'delivering housing opportunities' and a recognition that development can be a collaborative process between communities and the state.

However it will raise a number of major challenges for the movement. In so far as it will mark the transition of the movement from political society to civil society there will be an increased danger of co-option. It may also become difficult for a movement founded on the common situation of all its members to negotiate the complexities of a range of very different situations. Furthermore, in settlements where the ANC still has a presence there has, in the past, been a clear tendency for concessions won for the state by Abahlali's action to be 'delivered' via local ANC structures even when the ANC is a small political minority within a settlement. Given that Abahlali allows political parties to freely contest for influence in settlements affiliated to the movement there is always the danger that, especially around election times, local party political elites will seek to re-enter local development to ensure that the benefits of this deal will be 'delivered' via ANC and in the interests of ANC structures.

The movement is also confronting some new challenges unrelated to this deal. They include the difficulties associated with growth, and in particular a local movement becoming national; an over dependence on some of the found-

ing members and the exhaustion of some of those members (the movement is actively working against this but, thus far, with limited success), the fact that some of the new areas have not had the same sense of responsibility for the movement that the founding areas have had, a marked increase in ethnic and national chauvinism following the mobilisation around Jacob Zuma that has on occasion led to assaults on the leadership of the movement from groups of young men opposed to the movement's cosmopolitanism[24]. This has been linked to an increasing problem with crime. Criminals are a small minority in the settlements and are not organised in to gangs and it is easy enough for local communities to deal with them. Most settlements have judicial arrangements that are largely organised around conflict resolution, and which often draw on traditional techniques in this regard, and which can be much more humane than the state's criminal justice system. But if repeated or severe anti-social behaviour is ultimately sanctioned by expulsion from the settlement there is sometimes a need to enforce this sanction. This poses a major problem as the police tend to treat all shack dwellers as criminals and to refuse to offer protection to shack dwellers from criminals. But when the police do apprehend criminals from the settlements for crimes committed against middle class people they have often offered to drop the charges in exchange for the criminals making allegations against activists. This means that any attempt at community policing places activists at serious risk from the state. However a failure to undertake community policing places communities, and at times the movement, at risk from criminals. Finally some members of the movement, including one key activist, have been strongly drawn to the new political party, the Congress of the People (COPE), formed by a breakaway faction in the ANC. These Abahlali members have argued that while it is clear that COPE does not pose an alternative to the ANC in terms of its class agenda it has taken a clear position against the descent into ethnic politics that has surrounded Jacob Zuma's recent campaigns and that this rejection of ethnic politics should be supported. At the time of writing Abahlali has scheduled a meeting of rep-

---

[24] These groups of young men have not been organized into political formations but they have been organized in the sense that the attacks have been planned and well co-ordinated. Abahlali has concluded that they are probably not linked to the state because the comments made during attacks have always been against the cosmopolitanism of the movement and not against its rejection of the ANC.

resentatives from all of the 53 settlements where it now has members in the province of KwaZulu-Natal to decide whether to continue with its active boycott of electoral politics in the coming national elections or to decide to leave participation to the conscience of each member while keeping the movement as a whole outside of party politics.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Abahlali baseMjondolo has constituted a significant challenge to the spatial and political logics of post-apartheid South Africa — both of which are premised on the exclusion of the poor. But at the same time as the state is making significant, although specific, limited and local concessions to the organised power of the movement it is rapidly escalating its general anti-poor discourse and seeking to put in place laws and policies that will increasingly treat urban poverty as a security problem rather than a question of justice. For instance monstrous 'transit camps', often located on the far edges of the urban periphery, and often highly carceral in nature[25], are increasingly being used to house people forcibly relocated from well located shacks. The transit camp rooms are usually very small (20 square metres as opposed to a post-apartheid state house at 30 square metres and an apartheid state house at just over 50 square metres) and extremely overcrowded. People moved there do not usually have any certainty about when or if they will 'transit' to some where else.

Clearly the state hopes to demobilise Abahlali baseMjondolo via the specific concessions that it is prepared to offer while simultaneously escalating repressive measures more generally. The movement is well aware of this and has determined to continue to oppose the turn to a more repressive state agenda and to assert the right to the cities for all. But given that Abahlali's power is very much regional rather than national and that, so far, it has only been able to exercise effective pressure on the local councillors and municipal governments in Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town and the provincial government in KwaZulu-Natal, but not yet the national government, it may well be that the ability of the movement to effectively take on national government will depend on the fortunes of the Poor People's Alliance. But the Poor People's

---

[25] For a photo essay of the Delft transit camp in Cape Town by Kerry Chance visit http://abahlali. org/node/4721

Alliance confronts significant challenges. For instance it is not funded and there are all kinds of material barriers to working nationally without access to basic resources like the ability to make regular telephone calls. There are also significant differences in the political cultures of the movements that have formed the Alliance which will have to be carefully negotiated.

Important victories have been won over the last three years but the future, as they say, is wide open.

REFERENCES

BALLARD, Richard. Middle Class Neighbourhoods or African Kraals? The impact of informal settlements on white identity in post-apartheid South Africa. *Urban Forum*, v. 15, n. 1, p. 48-73, 2004.

BONNER, Philip. Eluding Capture: African Grass-roots Struggles in 1940s Benoni South Africa's In: DUBOW, Saul and JEEVES, Alan (Eds.) 1940's: worlds of possibilities Cape Town: Double Story, 2005. P. 170 – 191.

BUTLER, Mark; NTSENG, David. Politics at stake: reflections on civil society; a note on stakeholder analysis. *Sanhati*, jul. 2008. Disponível em: <http://sanhati.com/articles/902/>. Acesso em: 17 November 2008

CELE, S'phelele. Red T-shirts unsettle community. *The Rising Sun*, mar. 2006.

CENTRE ON HOUSING RIGHTS AND EVICTIONS, See *Business as Usual*: Housing Rights and 'Slum Eradication' in Durban, South Africa. Disponível em: <http://www.cohre.org/southafrica>. Acesso em: 17 November 2008

CHATTERJEE, Partha. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflection of Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.

CROSS, Catherine. Local Governance and Social Conflict. In: HUCHZERMEYER, Marie; KARAM, Aly (Ed.). *Informal Settlements: A perpetual challenge?* Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2006. P. 250-273.

EDWARDS, Iain. Cato Manor, June 1959: Men, Women, Crowds, Violence, Politics and History. In: MAYLAM, Paul; EDWARDS, Ian (Ed.). *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth Century Durban*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996. P. 102-144.

FANON, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin, 1976.

GIBSON, Nigel. The Pitfalls of South Africa's 'Liberation'. *New Political Science*, v. 23, n.3, P.371-387, 2001.

GIBSON, Nigel. Upright and free: Fanon in South Africa, from Biko to the shackdwellers movement (Abahlali baseMjondolo). *Social Identities*, v. 14, n. 6, p. 683-715, 2008.

HALLWARD, Peter. The Politics of Prescription. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, v. 104, n. 4, p. 769-789, 2005.

HELLER, Patrick. Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa and Port Alegre. *Politics and Society*, v. 21, n.1, P. 131-163, 2001.

HUCHZERMYER, Marie. A Legacy of Control? The Capital Subsidy for Housing, and Infor-

mal Settlement Intervention in South Africa. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, v. 27, n. 3, pp 591-612, 2003.

_____. *Unlawful Occupation:* Informal Settlements and Urban Policy in South Africa and Brazil. Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 2004.

MAYLAM, Paul. Introduction. In: MAYLAM, Paul; EDWARDS, Ian (Ed.). *The People's City:* African Life in Twentieth Century Durban. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996. P. 1-32.

NEOCOSMOS, Michael. Civil society, citizenship and the politics of the (im)possible: rethinking militancy in Africa today. *Abahlali baseMjondolo Website*. 2007 Disponível em: <http://www. abahlali.org>. Acesso em: 17 November 2008.

_____. The Politics of Fear and the Fear of Politics: Reflections on Xenophobic Violence in South Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies, v. 43, p. 586-594, dez., 2008.*

PATEL, Raj. A Short Course in Politics at the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, v. 43, n. 1, p. 95-118, 2008.

PITHOUSE, Richard. Struggle is a School: The rise of a shack dwellers' movement in Durban, South Africa. *Monthly Review*, v. 57, n. 9, 2006. Disponível em: <http://www.monthlyreview. org/0206pithouse.htm>. Acesso em: 17 November 2008.

PILGER, John. The Struggle Against Apartheid Has Begun Again In South Africa. *Z Net*, 12 abr. 2008. Disponível em: <http://www.zmag.org/zspace/commentaries/3459>. Acesso em: 17 November 2008.

QUADRELLI, Emilio. Grassroots Political Militants: Banlieusards and Politics. *Mute Magazine*, 30 mai. 2007. Disponível em : <http://www.metamute.org/en/Grassroots-political-militants-Banlieusards-and-politics>. Acesso em: 17 November 2008.

RANCIERE, Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster:* Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation. Stanford: Standford University Press, 1991.

SOUZA, Marcelo Lopes de. *Together* with the state, *despite* the state, *against* the state: Social movements as 'critical urban planning' agents. *City*, v. 10, n. 3, p. 327-342, 2006.

_____. Urban Development on the Basis of Autonomy: a Politico-philosophical and Ethical Framework for Urban Planning and Management. *Ethics, Place and Environment*, v. 3, n. 2, p. 187-201, 2000.

STADLER, Alf. Birds in the Cornfield: Squatter Movements in Johannesburg 1944-194. *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Special Issue on Urban Social History), v. 6, n. 1, p. 93-123, 1979.

TOLSI, Niren. Slumming it with the NGO jet-set. *Mail & Guardian*, 20 out. 2008. Disponível em: <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2008-10-20-slumming-it-with-the-ngo-jetset>. Acesso em: 17 November 2008.

ZIKODE, S'bu. *We are the Third Force*, nov. 2005. Disponível em: <http://www.abahlali.org/node/17>. Acesso em: 17 nov. 2008.