Uneven and Combined Marxism within South Africa’s Urban Social Movements

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Introduction

The political dynamics of contemporary South Africa are rife with contradiction. On the one hand, it is among the most consistently contentious places on Earth, with insurgent communities capable of mounting disruptive protest on a nearly constant basis, rooted in the poor areas of the half-dozen major cities as well as neglected and multiply-oppressed black residential areas of declining towns. On the other hand, even the best-known contemporary South-African social movements, for all their sound, lack a certain measure of fury.

In the face of the Government’s embrace of neoliberal social policies since shortly after the fall of Apartheid, what are often called ‘service delivery protests’ occurring many thousands of times a year, according to police statistics, are at once the site of poor people’s demands for greater responsiveness to human needs in general, but also intensely localised and self-limited in their politics. The upsurge of protest since the late 1990s invariably invokes images of the anti-Apartheid

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1. The authors thank John Krinsky for fusing the authors’ three disparate arguments, originally made at a Harold Wolpe Lecture in Durban in mid-2010. His care and sophistication in identifying solutions to our own conceptual problems remind us of the merits of internationalist collaboration and comparative Marxist praxis. The subsequent events at Marikana where a massacre of 34 striking workers was followed by an unprecedented wildcat strike wave are not covered in this chapter, but the lack of contagion from workplace to community underscores our arguments about shortcomings of the society’s uneven and combined resistance scene.

struggle and thus focuses analysis on continuities and breaks between the old anti-Apartheid mass action and the new mass action in post-Apartheid society. And yet, the majority of community protesters operate in close interconnection with parts of the Tripartite Alliance, composed of the African National Congress (ANC), the trade-union movement represented by the Congress of South African Trades Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), and so the line between insurgencies and governing organisations is not always clear. Yet their geographic and political isolation from each other has contributed to their having little leverage over the Alliance, which, notwithstanding some resistance by unions and communists, embraced neoliberal policies in the transition from anti-Apartheid resistance to class-apartheid government in 1994.

But beyond the community protests, the problems that have faced more traditional radical social movements in South Africa are, in many respects, familiar to students of social movements elsewhere: of moving from movement to governing; of cooptation and shifting roles vis-à-vis the state; of the limits of localism; and of the joining of community and workplace-based organising to forge a strong working-class politics. These are all the subject of considerable scholarship, both within and outside of the Marxist tradition, and within and outside of South Africa. We argue here, however, that in the South-African context, these can be more clearly seen as symptomatic questions of a larger problematic, what we term, following Trotsky, the problem of ‘uneven and combined Marxism’.

For Trotsky, ‘uneven and combined development’ was a fundamentally dialectical framework through which he sought first to theorise the relations between Russia’s nascent industrial base (and hence, also, Russia’s urban proletariat), and its backward, semi-feudal rural relations, and second, following this, the revolutionary potentials for Russia at the time of the Revolution. For Trotsky, this implied understanding the relationship between forms of capital both within Russia and across borders. Uneven development means that extremely different relations of production coexist within and across territory, while combined development suggests that the ‘less developed’ are not simply archaic and ultimately bound to ‘catch up’ at some point with the more advanced, perhaps going through the same ‘stages’ of development. (The South-African modernisation narrative since the early 2000s, shared by former president Thabo Mbeki and current president Jacob Zuma, is that the ‘two economies’ are ‘structurally disconnected’.)

3. For a sample of the debates on the independent Left, see Alexander 2010; Ballard et al. 2006; Bond 2006; Desai 2002; Duncan and Vally 2008; Maharaj, Desai and Bond 2011; Runciman 2011; Sinwell 2011; Williams 2006.
4. For example DeFilippis, Fisher and Schragge 2010; Piven and Cloward 1979; Katznelson 1981.
5. Bond and Desai 2006; Maharaj, Desai and Bond 2011.