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Class, Social Movements and the Transformation of the South-African Left in the Crisis of ‘National Liberation’

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the shifting ways in which left discourses in post-apartheid South Africa have related to the social processes and movements taking place in the context of transition to post-apartheid democracy. As such, my argument is not primarily focused on the policy performance of left organisations during the first seven years of democratic government led by the African National Congress (ANC), or on the ways in which left orientations have tried to contest developments inside the ANC. Therefore, rather than assuming the state or the ruling party as central sites of contestation, I will critically assess the extent to which the social and economic dynamics set in motion by the collapse of the racist régime have affected the Left’s potential to advance an emancipatory project and the possible lines of contestation on the form such a project should take.

The main hypothesis advanced in these pages is that the concept of the ‘Left’ in South Africa is being
questioned and problematised by an increasing diversification of social subjects, forms of identity and organisational patterns. These processes are severely questioning the strength and stability of categories (such as the primacy of waged working-class politics, the national-liberation discourse, progressive forms of state-driven development) that, in the past, have been powerful elements on which a general left project was based. This ‘explosion’ of the political and discursive field of the Left, in which traditional working-class organisations have been most negatively affected, is the result of two concomitant processes. First, the ideological and policy field of ‘national liberation’ hegemonised by the ANC has undergone important changes due to the re-insertion of the country in the circuits of globalised capitalism and to policies functional to this process. This dynamic has caused a demand for a re-alignment of left forces historically linked to the ANC, a dynamic that has determined important contradictions. Second, the rise of new social movements mainly at the level of urban and working-class communities has accompanied and shaped the ANC-led process of socio-economic restructuring, while advancing agendas, organisational forms and patterns of social subjectivity that challenged and questioned established traditions of ANC-aligned left organisations.

The combination and intersection of these two processes ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ is, on the one hand, responsible for the decline of established paradigms of the ‘Left’ in South Africa. On the other hand, however, new areas of social contestation and forms of political practice, probably in need of further conceptual clarification, are emerging in tune with developments that have characterised anticapitalist resistance on a global scale in what is often referred to as the ‘post-Seattle’ age. Finally, a further cautionary note seems important. While this paper discusses various ‘left’ movements, providing a complete repertoire is a task that requires a much larger space and deeper research. Therefore my attention is primarily focused on movements related to urban working-class constituencies.

The neoliberalisation of the South-African national liberation and the changing location of its social subjectivity

After twenty years of renewed militancy against the apartheid régime, which followed a decade of intensified repression of opposition movements, the South-African national-liberation struggle culminated in 1994 with the electoral