

Moving beyond polemics: Civil society politics in South Africa



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Introduction

'Square pegs in round holes', 'buzzing and diving mozzies'; these are metaphors that have caricatured social movement activists and organisations in the *Mail & Guardian* in 2004. The most recent explosion of this debate can be analysed in the letters and comment pieces following Ferial Haffajee's 'Fact, fiction and the new left' where she critiques social movements for their 'predictable' analysis of post-apartheid South Africa as a 'revolution sold down the river.' She argues that such analysis illustrates the ways in which social movements try 'to make South Africa a node on the map of anti-globalisation resistance' rather than rigorously grappling with the complexities of change. A slew of letters and comment pieces contested her arguments (for instance, by the Social Movement Indaba, Fatima Meer academic and activist with the Concerned Residents in Durban, Roger Ronnie, General Secretary of the South African Municipal Workers' Union, and subsequent responses by academics such as Patrick Bond and others).¹

The emotive intensity, at times angst, embedded in this debate between activists, state officials, politicians, journalists, and academics highlights contestation over the politics of progressive post-apartheid social movements and civil society in general at this juncture ten years into democratisation. What is it about progressive social movements, in particular, but civil society organisations in general, in this period in South Africa that has positioned this issue so centrally in public, political and academic discourse? I consider this question in this short paper by reflecting on the complexities of practice of civil society organising in

relation to the state. Although research on community-based civil society organising informs the analysis,² I draw on conceptual literature on civil society in general to think through the South African polemic on social movements and the role of civil society in the post-apartheid period.³

Despite different visions of development and politics, theorists and practitioners across the South African political spectrum conceptualize 'civil society' as necessary and good, as an instrumental element of post-apartheid reconstruction and democratisation (Johnson, 2002). But quite contradictory assumptions are built into the promotion of civil society. Popular, 'anti-neoliberal' ('ultra left'⁴) critics frame South African urban politics as an adversarial, oppositional polarization of the state versus progressive organs of civil society (McDonald, 2002; Bond, 2000a). 'Liberal' thinkers from a range of political perspectives stress governance and participatory models through which civil society must work with the state (Parnell et al., 2002). In these divergent interpretations, the role and dynamic of post-apartheid civil society has been polarized (Habib and Kotzé, 2003).⁵

Images of 'progressive' and 'emancipative' civil society movements in the populist, anti-neo-liberal camp, on the one hand, and capacitated, voluntary, representatives of the 'community,' by liberals, on the other, speak at cross purposes.⁶ Both readings of politics frame civil society organising in South Africa in monolithic, simplified hues. From research on community-based social movements, I argue that these binaries do not do justice to the practice of civil society organising: in other words, polemical political discourse does not

match the complexities of political practice. For instance, in everyday initiatives to get services or to protect those that already exist, **community-based** civil society organising crosses the boundary between opposition and engagement, combining both for strategic purposes.

Analysis of civil society practice at the community scale highlights, instead, the diversity of community-based organising that builds from historical and geographical differentiation across cities, towns and rural areas. Community organizing illustrates wide-ranging demands on and engagement with the state, as well as savvy and selective opposition to state programs and policies. The multiple positions and strategic engagements that community-based organisations and social movements adopt produce a often contradictory and always uneven politics that has been under-theorized in academic and policy debate.

Civil society, the state, and development

The promotion of civil society and the centrality of images of opposition and engagement in reading civil society-state relationships are not particular to South African development or to South African conceptual work. These tensions are mirrored in the international neo-liberal and post-structural, post-development literature on civil society, the state, and models of state-civil society relationships.

In line with global initiatives, decentralized planning and service delivery and civil society participation and partnerships have been promoted across the developing world. A turn to the local scale through decentralization has been championed by the ‘new right,’ in particular donor agencies and global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund through the conditions attached to structural adjustment programs (Teriba, 1996; Mohan and Stokke, 2000). At the same time, the ‘new left,’ in particular post-structuralist theorists, have also promoted the local, arguing that at

this local scale there is a space for radical democratic projects such as progressive social movements to attempt to reinvent and restructure the political and economic inequalities underpinning the status quo (Friedmann, 1998). Critiquing development as modernist, these approaches emphasize the particular and the local as sources of indigenous and appropriate knowledge (Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1995).

Whereas civil society and the ‘local’ are important, they are not exclusively so or critical in a normative, idealized sense. In this global turn to the local as the site for development, there are several inherent dangers.

In particular, there is a tendency to romanticize the local and to view the local in isolation from broader economic and political structures (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). For instance, local, social movements, and associations – organs of civil society – do not operate in vacuums or in contexts and with power of their own choosing. Nor is ‘civil society’ by definition ‘civil’ or ‘virtuous’ (Hearn, 2001; Bayat, 1997; Kasfir, 1998; Markovitz, 1998). In analysis of civil society, therefore, investigation of the access to and use of power becomes critical, placed in relation to the heterogeneous and complex character of organs of civil society and their varied relationships with the state and market forces. The nature of the power that state and civil society actors and institutions draw on becomes an empirical question rather than a conceptual assumption. The following section traces out this debate in the South African context.

Debating the nature of South African civil society-state relationships

Habib and Kotze identify a critical “need to transcend the false divide that has emerged between opposition and engagement in South Africa” (2003: 28). The following discussion outlines the issues and discourses in which engagement and opposition are articulated in the South African context. In particular, arguments for

engagement prioritise issues of governance, while proponents of opposition stress issues of justice.

Reconstructing Governance versus Achieving Socio-economic Justice

The post-apartheid state, at all tiers, has prioritized recreating governance patterns and broadly reconfiguring state-society relationships, outlined in the Constitution (RSA, 1996) and in other state policy and legislation (such as the White Paper for Local Government 1998 and the Municipal Structures Act and the Municipal Systems Act of 1998 and 1999, respectively). Statutorily mandated community development forums (such as Reconstruction and Development and Community Policing Forums) have been instituted to facilitate communication between local government and civil society, and to provide a platform through which civil society could participate in area-based decision-making (see Chipkin, 2003, for instance). This model of local governance assumes however that organs of civil society can access forums, have the capacity to participate, and find these bodies logical places in which to pursue agenda. The arena of civil society is defined as a space for progressive debate on development, symbolic of the democratic era. Although forums should not be written off⁷, they have been monopolized by established and (or) well-resourced organizations; and, in many places and political contexts, they are unworkable, replicating existing bodies and adding an additional layer of community-based bureaucracy and gate keeping (Oldfield, forthcoming).

Nonetheless vast amounts of intellectual and official energy have been channeled into reconstructing South African governance so that society – communities, organizations, and citizens – may engage with the state to access services from the state, particularly those groups previously disenfranchised and discriminated against. State structures have been reconstructed so that national, regional, and local governments are both independent and interdependent (Parnell et al., 2002).

Policy design, finance, and implementation have been divided across the tiers of government.

In most instances, municipalities are at the forefront of delivery, responsible for the building and maintenance of low-income housing and the delivery of water and, in some instances, electricity. In practice the period since 1996 has seen complex relationships evolve between civil society actors and organisations, councilors, state officials and institutions that demonstrate the complexities involved in shaping ‘positive’ urban governance.

At the same time that the South African state has grappled with means to institutionalize and deliver on its development imperatives, it has made particular choices at the macro-economic scale. Emblematic in the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution framework (GEAR), macro-economic policy has embraced neo-liberal ideologies that prioritize a restructuring and downscaling of state activity and a promotion of private sector actors and logics. These policies emerge at the urban scale as, on the one hand, the promotion of competitiveness through ‘global city’ status and the development of ‘world class’ infrastructure to attract foreign investment (Robinson, 2003); and, on the other, in the context of local governments implementation of policies of cost-recovery for services. Populist, anti-neo-liberal critics argue not only that these choices demonstrate the neo-liberal turn to the right in South African governance, but that these decisions have come at the cost of socio-economic justice and redress (Bond, 2000b).

The collection of papers in the volume edited by McDonald and Pape (2002) on cost recovery and service delivery best represent this perspective. They argue that policies of cost-recovery in service delivery jeopardize the post-apartheid project by disenfranchising and further alienating black communities and citizens already disadvantaged by the ravages of the apartheid system. These actions, they demonstrate, negate the government’s extension of services in the democratic era. Poor households and communities face an affordability crisis due to high unemployment levels and the real difficulties in eking out livelihoods in the post-apartheid period. Their evidence refutes claims

that residents do not pay their service bills, rentals, and rates because of cultures of non-payment nurtured as forms of resistance to the apartheid state. Although these arguments and figures have been challenged, this type of conceptual and empirical work provides an ideological and factual platform on which many social movements understand and articulate the service delivery crisis. Although implementation of cost-recovery policies have been piecemeal and specific to different local authorities, cut-offs of water and electricity, removal of furniture in lieu of rental payment, evictions and arrests for protesting such actions have become commonplace. In response, residents go without water and electricity (even homes in extreme cases); many illegally reconnect themselves to services⁹, and organize not only in their neighborhoods but also across the city.

Arguments that underpin struggles for socio-economic justice or reconstructing governance are not incorrect or falsely constructed, but they are partial. Their partiality reflects, in part, the politics of engagement and opposition in the post-apartheid context.

Theorizing civil society organizing and everyday politics

Everyday civil society is complex, differentiated, at times confrontational and ‘uncivil,’ at other times, cooperative and collaborative.¹⁰ Research on community-based civil society practice illustrates that local context directs activism, the spaces and sites for a wide range of activities that present a continuum between engagement and opposition. These choices reflect local context and they shape the autonomy of community based organizations to act within their areas and to engage with other organisations and the state. Local context also directs community-based civil society to different parts of the state – to particular institutions, policies, and particular officials and politicians. This differentiation is not uniform, nor completely disparate – instead it coalesces around particular issues such as water politics, housing policies, or particular actions by the state and/or activists. Moreover the consequences

of local action cannot be assumed as bounded to the local. Local actions have ramifications at multiple scales, and their origins and inspirations also derive from the multi-scalar nature of activist and community-based networks within and outside of South Africa. This complexity and plurality informs civil society organising as well as the range of relationships with the state.

Conceptualizing State-Civil Society Relationships

Models of state-society relationships have also been built on a dichotomy that distinguishes between processes of synergy (engagement) and processes of separation (opposition). Does the state act in synergy with civil society? Or, does the state act on civil society, forcing and shaping its engagement? Evan’s (1995) work on ‘embedded autonomy’ provides a useful route out of this binary by arguing that ‘successful developmental’ states have some autonomy from civil society and market actors, but must also be embedded in society.

The depth and durability of the state’s embeddedness are crucial for understanding state action, discourse, and the implementation of its developmental agenda through its relationships with particular groups in society. This argument proves useful for analyzing local politics, specifically the wide variety of relationships between the state and civil society that span from engagement to opposition. But, this type of model only provides a generic architecture or framework to articulate power relations between state and society. It charts out a continuum on which state-society relationships may be placed with ‘developmental’, successful cases on one end and ‘predatory’, failed examples on the other. Although useful at an international scale, this normative model is not able to differentiate relationships within a national context, or, for instance, within cities.

A second question thus arises: why does the state – its various institutions, policies, actors – act in uneven and unequal ways in different places, contexts, and with different groups? To conceptualize the differentiated experience of and character of civil society-state politics

– to move beyond a binary of ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘engaged’, or ‘oppositional’ – requires another set of analytical tools. Here, Jessop’s (1990) strategic-relational analysis of the state proves useful.

He argues that the state is constructed relationally – it is a site of, an agent in, and a product of struggles for power (through access to resources or decision making, for instance). This complex mix of roles, functions, and processes do not occur simultaneously or evenly. Rather, they coalesce in contingent and strategic moments, in places, and in particular projects. The combination of Evans’s architecture of embedded autonomy combined with Jessop’s strategic-relational argument facilitates analysis of the South African state’s relationships with civil society.¹¹ Combined with examination of the geographies and diversity of civil society, this type of approach helps move beyond a binary of opposition and engagement.

Conclusion

In simplified terms, contemporary South Africa is marked by a competition over the right to be the legitimate representatives of ‘poor people in struggle.’ On the one hand are the hegemonic forces of the tripartite alliance and its civil society affiliates, with extensive symbolic capital rooted in and maintained through representations of the anti-apartheid struggle and post-apartheid political achievements. On the other hand are the new social movements that mobilize communities in a continued struggle for socio-economic justice and substantial democracy in the context of post-apartheid liberal democracy and neoliberalism. Whereas the hegemonic force (the tripartite alliance of ANC, SACP and COSATU) possesses extensive objectified political capital, the power of social movements (like the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Gauteng and the Western Cape

Anti-Eviction Campaign) originates in their ability to mobilize communities for public acts of resistance and speak on behalf of the working poor.

The clash between policies for economic liberalization and struggles for socio-economic justice is an ongoing multi-faceted struggle. The local and national politics it generates are diverse and dynamic with everyday civil society characterised by balancing acts between political engagement and opposition. While political engagement may grant access to material resources for community development, it may also undermine the legitimacy of the movement as an independent representative of struggling people. On the other hand, community mobilisation may empower the movement in dealing with state institutions, but may also lead to branding as disruptive forces are made into a target for state repression.

The political discourses of the ‘old anti-apartheid’ and ‘new post-apartheid’ movements revolve around shared reference points, as both claim to be the legitimate representatives of poor people that struggle for social justice. This congruence creates a political space for constructive collaboration. The present period seems, however, to be marked by a growing mistrust between civil society organisations and actors from the state. On the one hand, state officials and politicians interpret activities by social movements and ‘left’ civil society as by definition, adversarial. On the other hand, activists and organisations interpret state actions as, by definition, neo-liberal and therefore counter to the interests of the poor and progressive politics. The polarization within and between civil society and the state in the post-apartheid period holds real consequences. We need more complex and grounded understandings of civil society¹² and less polemical constructions of state-society relationships as products of neoliberalism and democratisation to move beyond the polemic.

FOOTNOTES

1 See the following Mail & Guardian issues: June 18-24, June 25-July 1, p.30-34 and July 2-9, 2004.

2 See, for instance, Oldfield and Stokke (2004). *Building Unity in Diversity: Social Movement Activism in the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign. Globalisation, Marginalisation and New Social Movements in South Africa*, Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu Natal.

3 'Civil society' is a term and concept that includes a wide variety of organizations with diverse forms and politics. The broadness of its definition is problematic. Clearly 'civil society' organizations in South Africa span a continuum from 'radical' social movements, political parties, civic organizations, to clubs and religious organizations, for instance. In this paper I draw reference to community-based organizing (the focus of my empirical research) as 'civil society', I am not arguing that civil society should be so narrowly defined. Although I do not include this in my analysis, a typology of South African civil society would be useful to better understand the diverse practices and politics the term encompasses.

4 This polemic resonates with national-level African National Congress rhetoric about the politics of civil society, illustrated in President Mbeki's castigation of the 'ultra left' and their project of 'disunity' and the ANC deputy secretary general Mthembu-Mahanyele's contrast between "positive social formations" that have responded sympathetically to the government and those with which "we have a bit of a problem" (Electronic Mail and Guardian, 15 August 2003) – in other words, President Mbeki's 'ultra left.'

5 Similar issues are articulated by Johnson (2002) as the question of reconciliation of popular movements and mass mobilizations with liberal democracy and Mangcu as a shift 'from the lifeworld of social movements to the systems world of bureaucrats and technical experts, all in the name of empowerment and reconstruction' (2003: 288).

6 In contrasting these groups, I am not arguing that the South African context represents a 'level playing field.' Groups have differential access to power. Actors and institutions that promote engagement often work with or closely to state resources, policy, and administrative channels. In comparison, 'anti-neo-liberal' activists face a dire shortage of financial and administrative resources.

7 The effectiveness and politics of forums in post-apartheid South Africa is a topic that requires systematic research attention.

8 See the series of articles in the Sunday Independent in June and July, 2003 by the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Ronnie Kasrils, and academics Patrick Bond and David McDonald debating not only the survey statistics but also their interpretation.

9 For instance, of the 87 736 cutoffs done between 1996 and early 2001 in the Tygerberg Administration of the City of Cape Town, 52 670 households were reconnected illegally (McDonald and Smith 2002: 31, quoted in Xali, 2002: 116).

10 There is an extensive historical and contemporary literature on South African civil society. See, for instance, debates in *Urban Forum* and a variety of Centre for Policy Studies reports.

11 For a more detailed discussion of these issues see Oldfield (2002).

12 The Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu Natal, has just completed a project on 'Globalisation, Marginalisation and New Social Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa' that takes significant steps in this direction. The individual reports on seventeen different South African social movements are available on the Centre's website and the analysis has been drawn together in a book edited by Habib A., Valoidia I., and Ballard R. (forthcoming).

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