

Rethinking public participation from below

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MUCH OF the power of concepts like public participation, civil society, democratic consolidation, social capital and others is inherent in the fact that they have donor money behind them. Attaching oneself to these concepts can produce jobs, contracts, legitimacy and acceptance into local and global networks. Often the spaces and projects created by the donor money invested in these concepts are uncritically assumed to be the incubators of values and even practices that will be able to generate some kind

of challenge to technocratic managerial despotism. This is a mistake. It is true that resistance can force imperial power to make certain concessions to legitimate its domination. And it is also true that these concessions can sometimes take the form of creating spaces that have some potential to be used for critical thinking and action in the service of constituent power. But this is far from inevitable and usually requires a conscious decision to pursue critical praxis independent of the well-funded dogma of the day.

If we intend to engage in critical praxis we need to subject the power of ideas that come to us via alliances between imperialism and local elites to historical and sociological analysis. This work needs to take seriously the often open connections between the coercive and persuasive aspects of imperialism. William Robinson has done particularly important work in this regard. Robinson makes a convincing case, substantiated by rigorous empirical evidence, that in the dominated countries civil society, rather than state power, became the key focus of American imperial strategies to secure consent for policies in the interests of transnational capital from the late 1970s. Robinson shows that US policy-making elites recognised that the strategy of supporting dictatorial regimes, especially in Southern

Africa, Haiti and South America, was resulting in the development of mass oppositional movements seeking fundamental social transformation. They concluded that liberal parliamentary democracies with a technocratic orientation to policy making would be a more effective bulwark against popular demands for social transformation. In the early 70s, William Douglas, one of the earliest theorists of a shift from supporting dictators to civil society in liberal democracies argued that:

in regard to keeping order, what is involved is basically effective police work, and there is no reason why democratic regimes cannot have well-trained riot squads...However...the real key is to find just the right balance between carrot and stick...Democracy can provide a sufficient degree of regimentation, if it can build up the mass organizations needed to reach the bulk of the people on a daily basis. Dictatorship has no monopoly on the tutelage principle (Cited in Robinson 1996, p.84).

Douglas went on to become a key consultant to various US 'democracy promotion' projects. Donor aid, usually channelled to NGOs, became the key tool and the key strategy was to use money to separate leaders from potentially threatening mass movements and to co-opt them towards the thinking of the transnational elite. So, for example, in South Africa the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (IDASA) was a central project of 'democracy promotion' work. In post-apartheid South Africa this work continued and was led by USAID. USAID was particularly interested in projects that spoke the language of 'democratic consolidation' but in fact propagated the view that mass democratic popular action, the mode of resistance in which real counter-power can be built, should be replaced with a technocratic engagement with state power on the terms of state power. Instead of using modes of popular politics to force concessions from

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the state, technocratic procedures should be used to make appeals to the state on its terms. Clearly this way of working will marginalise most people from transformative political engagement, channel popular militancy into demobilizing and disempowering drawn out technocratic procedures and allow the state to decide what it will and won't accept as reasonable demands for change.

These kinds of imperial interventions depend on well meaning local leftists to deliver popular organisations into a pedagogy of domination that teaches people that 'doing things properly' requires transformation into a 'civil society organisation' aimed at professionalized engagement in official opportunities for public participation. Hence the emergence of a set of strange alliances between USAID, a project of the US state department and an infamous tool of US imperialism, and local leftists.

The public participation model that emerged from local elites' acceptance of imperial interventions has worked very well for its designers and funders. Despite moments of rupture there has been no sustained threat to the technocratic authoritarianism that has implemented economic policies that have allowed a predatory elite to flourish as the poor slip deeper into crisis. But this model has certainly not worked well for many of the people and organisations who took it up in good faith. Defenders of the status quo will point to small shifts consequent to lobbying or advocacy in various forms but there have been no fundamental shifts in policy due to engagement in official public participation processes. Indeed the fact the fundamental policy directions are not open to debate has hardly been kept secret. GEAR was famously introduced with an explicit statement to this effect and this authoritarianism is invariably repeated on the rare occasions when organisations of the poor are able to win meetings with government officials.

USAID have now shifted much of their resources to Iraq but *The People Shall Govern*, a recent research report by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) and Action for Conflict Transformation (ACTION) clearly indicates that there is ongoing donor support for public participation as a mode of social control. Interestingly, the European Union and the South African National Treasury funded this report. It is no longer necessary for imperial forces to take sole responsibility for legitimating local relations of domination. There is now a real partnership in this regard. The report begins by claiming that it is concerned with the problem of 'violent' 'service delivery protests'. The structural violence of massive inequality and poverty

is not presented as violent and neither is the armed and often violent force with which the state enforces evictions, disconnections, exclusions and forced removals. It is, the report assumes, popular public protest that is violence. However it never details instances of this violence and appears to assume that "rioting and the destruction of property" (2006, p.17) are violent. The report clearly assumes that all social conflict is necessarily a bad thing. It fails to understand that basic point that civil society is, by definition, a terrain on which competing interests struggle for influence and insists that "civil society organisations should pursue their missions in an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation" (2006, p.24) and "speak with a united voice" (2006, p.42). There is a profound authoritarianism under this liberal gloss. After all how can a ratepayer's organisation wanting squatters evicted and a shack dwellers' organisation wanting the right to live in the city not be expected to be in conflict? To demand one voice is, implicitly, to take the side of those with the easiest access to voice.

The CSV and ACTION report understands violence (popular protest) as consequent to the fact that "civil society groups have limited capacity to influence government's policy decisions...This, in turn, affects the ability of researchers, think-tanks and policy specialists to make informed, and potentially valuable, input into public policy making" (2006, p.4). The casual assumption that a technocratic NGO and academic elite will act in the name of civil society is premised on highly prejudicial assumptions about the inability of the poor to, in Fanon's phrase, "introduce a decisive irruption into the national struggle" (2005, p.17). But even a cursory reading of the history of any society across time and space would indicate that the policy making elites only respond to pressures from above and are only able to introduce progressive innovation when the forces above them require it to stave off popular pressure from below. In fact in most instances neither NGOs nor academic research institutes should, strictly speaking, be considered as part of civil society. This is because they tend to be projects of states or corporate donors and civil society is most often defined as popular association independent of the market and the state. The fact that NGOs so often assume that they, and they alone, are civil society is consequent to the social relations that mean that the ruling ideas are so often those of the ruling class. It has no intellectual credibility or political integrity and must be militantly opposed.

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In the technocratic public participation model in the CSVR and ACTION report there is no space for ordinary people to act in their own interests. However, in its case study on the Mandela Park Anti-eviction Campaign the authors inadvertently undermine the logic of their whole project by noting, in passing, that “the government’s active involvement and offer to settle the situation happened only after the residents of Mandela Park resorted to violence protests and riots that damaged public and private properties” (2006, p.17). In other words they concede that what they are against, popular political action, did in fact win the results that they claim to be in favour of – meaningful public participation.

The deep suspicion of popular people’s power that permeates the report even leads to uncritical repetition of highly prejudicial and clearly bizarre views on shack dwellers and social movements by government officials. For instances the view that “shack dwellers purposively stay in dangerous areas, in the hope that they would be prioritised for housing is the event of a disaster, such as a flood or fire...(and) deliberately set shacks on fire to obtain government’s emergency assistance” (2006, p.18) is not challenged. Similarly ludicrous claims that there was a political conspiracy between foreign forces and local white reactionaries behind popular protest (2006, p.23) in Mandela Park are not challenged.

But there are other models of public participation than those that came to us via American imperialism and which are now official state policy. In an important and generally well researched and argued 2001 article¹, Patrick Heller reports on a comparative study between the Indian state of Kerala, the Brazilian municipality of Porto Alegre and South Africa. He shows that officially endorsed forms of public participation have largely failed to enable meaningful popular participation in South Africa but that they have had important successes in Kerala and Porto Alegre. Given that in all three instances external pressures towards marketisation under technocratic managerialism are the same, the South African failure cannot be explain solely by external forces. Heller concludes that in South Africa a vanguardist movement has taken state power, incorporated or marginalized social movements and retained its “instrumentalist understanding of state power...(and) insulationist and oligarchical tendencies” (2001, p.134). However in Kerala and Porto Alegre “social movements that have retained their autonomy from the state have provided much of the

ideological and institutional repertoire of democratic decentralization” (2001, p.134). Autonomy from the state, which requires resolute autonomy from the party, makes a movement fully accountable to the people that constitute it rather than to powerful social forces above it. This enables genuine contestation.

Heller’s research shows that technocratic policy making “has deeply depoliticizing and autocratic impulses” (2001, p.135). He argues that:

Where the technocratic vision is lacking is in its impulse to sanitize decentralization of everything political. For starters, any effort to move the state requires redistributing political power. Democratic decentralization is a political project (2001, p.136).

This has been achieved to a meaningful degree in Kerala and Porto Alegre where “The traditional Left goal of capturing state power has given way to a strategy of devolving state power and reinvigorating civil society” (2001, p.150). Heller adds that

In contrast to the technocratic view that sees state reform as a technical proposition that can be handled through appropriate institutional redesign, decentralization in both these cases has been messy, nonlinear, and driven by distinctly conflictual processes (2001, p.157).

We have, he concludes, “the irony of an increasingly Leninist party defending neoliberal economic orthodoxy in South Africa, and in Kerala and Brazil of two de-Leninizing parties defending people’s planning” (2001, p.159).

If Heller is right, and the broad thrust of his argument is persuasive, then the route to more effective opportunities for public participation in South Africa will come from popular struggles for democratisation waged outside of direct control of the party and state. But if this is what needs to be done there is no easy road ahead.

The recent (March 1 2006) local government elections provide a useful case study. Despite an elite consensus to the contrary the fact is that the elections were not free, fair or peaceful in Durban. There had been two primary challenges to the ANC from within the poor and working class African constituencies that it claims as its own. In the shack settlements nestled into the valleys in the suburbs of Clare Estate and Reservoir Hills, longstanding ANC supporters were unhappy with their councillors, the worsening material conditions in the settlements, threats of forced removal and the complete failure of a decade of engagement in official public participation processes. Organised together as *Abahlali baseMjondolo* they decided to boycott the election under the

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slogan 'No Land, No House, No Vote'. Across town in the E-section of Umlazi, a group of longstanding ANC and SACP activists were unhappy with their councillor, Bhekisasa Xulu, and claimed that he had withheld ANC membership cards to engineer his re-nomination despite widespread unhappiness with his conduct. They decided to put up an independent candidate, Zamani Mthethwa, to oppose Xulu. In both instances the response to these expressions of open dissent was swift, brutal and clearly illegal.

Abahlali were effectively banned from undertaking any meaningful political activity outside of the settlements in the lead up to the election. City Manager Mike Sutcliffe first banned an *Abahlali* march on 14 November 2005 and while he continued to ban marches *Abahlali* were subject to various incidents of illegal police assault and detention. There were more than a hundred arrests, all on entirely spurious charges, and the police were even used to physically prevent *Abahlali* from taking up an invitation to appear on the SABC talk show *Asikhulume*. There was no scandal about this. On the contrary Mawethu Mosery, Chief Electoral Officer in KwaZulu-Natal, went so far as to laud the *Asikhulume* show as proof of the free political climate. There appears to be an elite consensus that sees illegal repression of basic political rights by the state as unimportant when the victim is not a political party. *Abahlali* were finally able to garner the resources to take Sutcliffe to the High Court on 27 February 2005. The Freedom of Expression Institute had repeatedly described Sutcliffe's march bans as 'illegal and unconstitutional' and the judge quickly issued an interdict against the City and the police, preventing them from interfering with the shack dwellers' right to march. After their dramatic court victory, thousands of waiting shack dwellers left their settlements, into which they had been barricaded by a massive militarised police operation, and marched into the city in triumph and presented a memorandum to the office of the MEC for Housing, Mike Mabuyakulu.

In Umlazi supporters of the Mthethwa campaign claimed that there was widespread intimidation in the lead up to the election including death threats, assaults and whippings. They also alleged that there had been blatant fraud during the election.

On the day after the election they staged a small protest against the alleged electoral fraud. The Public Order Policing Unit shot dead a young woman, Monica Ngcobo, near the protest and shot and seriously wounded S'busiso Mthethwa in his home. The police claimed that Ngcobo had been shot in the stomach with a rubber bullet but the autopsy showed that she had been shot in the back with live ammunition.

An organisation called Women of Umlazi was formed in response and organised a large march on 31 March in protest at these police shootings. Two former SACP activists who had worked closely with the Mthethwa campaign and the organisers of the march, Komi Zulu and Sinethembe Myeni, were later assassinated in separate carefully planned attacks. Others survived assassination attempts. An associate of Xulu, Bheki Magubane, was later killed in a fight that developed from an argument in a tavern. MEC for Safety and Security, Bheki Cele, insisted that aside from the police shooting of Ngcobo none of the attacks were in any way political. Mayor Obed Mlaba, who lives in Umlazi, said nothing at all. Women of Umlazi responded by organising weekly mass meetings attended by hundreds of residents to which the Umlazi SAPS were invited. On 1 June, the Umlazi SAPS entered Councillor Xulu's fortified house and arrested two of Xulu's employees for the murder of Komi Zulu. Thousands of residents of E-Section are now organising to ensure that there is a fair trial and to push for the arrest and prosecution for Xulu.

The police beatings of the shack dwellers, and the drama of their court victory over Sutcliffe and triumphant march into the city, received considerable local, national and international press coverage for a couple of days. This was probably because the drama began in an elite suburb, moved to the High Court and ended with the striking image of a sea of red shirts outside the City Hall. But there was no sustained reflection on what this blatant suppression of basic constitutional rights means for democracy. There has been no action against Sutcliffe or the police.

The shootings and murders in Umlazi happened in a working class township far from elite eyes and have received very little media attention. No newspaper has seen fit to seriously investigate the story or run an angry editorial. No Human Rights NGO has issued a statement. None of the academic experts who trade in pithy soundbites have bothered to go and spend some time in Umlazi. Aside from Bheki Cele's now infamous comment, there has, at the time of writing, been no statement on the Umlazi shootings from any politician. The scandal is that there is no scandal. In Durban, democracy is clearly in profound crisis at the level of local government.

The immediate problem here is not neo-liberalism or any particular policies. The immediate problem is the willingness of the political elite to openly ignore the laws and policies that do exist in their thrust to

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crush opposition. This is a political problem, which requires a political solution. Academic and NGO research is overwhelmingly directed by the imperial power of donors and generally has little to offer our thinking about this political problem. But the intellectual work done in some popular organisations is a lot more useful. In Durban the reflection on the experience of struggle in *Abahlali baseMjondolo* has produced a theory of a politics of the poor that throws some light on what will be required to wage effective struggles for democratisation from below. The first lesson is that the will to risk open resistance against an authoritarian local state has no necessary connection to the degree of material deprivation or material threat from state power. It is always a cultural and intellectual rather than a biological phenomenon. It therefore requires cultural and intellectual work to be produced and sustained. Spaces and practices in which the courage and resilience to stay committed to this work can be nurtured are essential. Formal meetings are necessary to enable the careful collective reflection on experience that produces and develops the movement's ideas and principles. The music and meals and games and prayers and stories and funerals that weave togetherness are essential to sustain both a collective commitment to the movement's principles and a will to fight.

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The *Abahlali* have also found that even if there is a growing will to fight, no collective militancy is possible when communities are not run democratically and autonomously. If they are dominated by party loyalists, the ragged remnants of a defeated aristocracy, slum lords or some combination thereof this will have to be challenged. Often lives will be at risk but the power of local tyrants, which is often an armed power, simply has to be broken by a few people with the courage to organise mass democratic opposition. If the people who break the power of the local tyrants immediately act to make open and democratic meetings the real (rather than performed) space of politics then a genuinely popular politics becomes possible. Part of making a meeting democratic is declaring its resolute autonomy from the state, party and NGOs. Then and only then is it fully accountable to the people in whose name it is constituted.

People fight constituted power to gain their share and to constitute counter power. Choices have to be made and adhered to. Any conception of popular

politics that sees the mere fact of insurgency into bourgeois space or against bourgeois discipline as necessarily progressive in and by itself risks complicity with micro-local relations of domination and, because local despotisms so often become aligned to larger forces of domination, complicities with larger relations of domination. The fact of mere movement driven by mere desire for material advance is not sufficient for a genuinely democratising politics. A democratising politics can only be built around an explicit thought out commitment to democratic community.

After a movement has become able to put tens of thousands on the streets, brought the state to heel and made it into the *New York Times*, swarms of middle class 'activists' will descend in the name of left solidarity. Some will be sincere and alliances across class will be important for enabling access to certain kinds of resources, skills and networks. Sincere middle class solidarity will scrupulously subordinate itself to democratic processes and always work to put the benefits of its privilege in common. It will, in other words, work to make itself redundant. But, as Fanon warned, most of these 'activists' will "try to regiment the masses according to a predetermined schema" (2005, p.27). Usually they will try to deliver the movement's mass to some other political project in which their careers or identities have an investment. This can be at the level of theory in which case lies will be told in order that the movement can be claimed to confirm some theory with currency in the metropole. It can also be at the level of more material representation in which case the movement's numbers will be claimed for some political project that has donor funding, or the approval of the metropolitan left so attractive to local and visiting elites, but no mass support. Tellingly these kinds of machinations tend to remain entirely uninterested in what ordinary people in the movement actually think, attempting instead to separate off and co-opt a couple of leaders to create an illusion of mass support – to turn genuine mass democratic movements into more easily malleable simulations of their formerly autonomous and insubordinate selves. On the elite terrain the middle class left will, at times, openly express contempt for the people that they want to regiment.

People on the middle class left that do find casual contempt for the underclass to be problematic, or who refuse to allow themselves to be used as bridges for attempts at co-option, will be excoriated on that terrain as divisive trouble-makers. However, they will, as Fanon wrote, find "a mantle of unimagined tenderness and vitality" (2005, p.27) in the communi-

ties where politics is a serious project – where, in Alain Badiou’s words, “meetings, or proceedings, have as their natural content protocols of delegation and inquest whose discussion is no more convivial or superegotistical than that of two scientists involved in debating a very complex question” (2005, p.76).

The middle class tendency to assume a right to lead usually expresses itself in overt and covert attempts to shift power away from the spaces in which the poor are strong. However the people that constitute the movement will in fact know what the most urgent issues are, where resistance can press most effectively and how best to mobilise. A politics that cannot be understood and owned by everyone is poison – it will always demobilise and disempower even if it knows more about the World Bank, the World Social Forum, Empire, Trotsky or some fashionable theory than the people who know about life and struggle in poor and working class communities.

The modes, language, jargon, concerns, times and places of a genuinely democratic and democratising politics must be those in which the poor are powerful and not those in which they are silenced as they are named and directed from without. Anyone wanting to offer solidarity must come to the places where the poor are powerful and work in the social modes within which the poor are powerful. Respect on this terrain must be earned via sustained commitment and not bought. All resources and networks and skills brought here must be placed in common. There must be no personalised branding or appropriation of work done. There must be a principled opposition to the Post-Seattle struggle tourists from North America who call the inevitable general disinterest in their assumed right to lead ‘silencing’ and write about people without bothering to speak to them. Local socialists and radical nationalists must be dealt with equally firmly when they call people ‘ignorant’ for wanting to focus their struggle on the relations of domination that most immediately restrict their aspirations and which are within reach of their ability to effectively fight back. Democratic popular struggle is a school and will develop its range and reach as it progresses. But a permanently ongoing collective reflection on the lived experience of struggle is necessary for resistances to be able to sustain their mass character as they grow and to develop. It is necessary to create opportunities for as many people as possible to keep talking and thinking in a set of linked intellectual spaces within the settlements. Progress comes from the quality of the work done in these spaces – not from a few people learning the jargon of the middle class left via NGO workshops held on the other side of the razor wire. This jargon

will often be fundamentally disempowering because of its general disinterest in the local relations of domination that often present a movement with both its most immediate threats and opportunities for an effective fight back. Moreover the accuracy and usefulness of its analysis will often be seriously compromised by its blindness to local relations of domination and how these connect to broader forces.

People who represent the movement to the media, in negotiations and various forums, must be elected, mandated, accountable and rotated. There must be no professionalisation of the struggle as this produces a vulnerability to co-option from above. The state, parties, NGOs and the middle class left must be confronted with a hydra not a head. There needs to be a self conscious development of what S’bu Zikode, chair of *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, calls ‘a homemade politics that everyone, every old gogo, can understand and find a home in’.

Some will say that none of this means that the power of global capital is at risk. This is not entirely true – stronger popular organisations inevitably mean weaker relations of local and global domination. Given that states are largely subordinate to shifting alliances between imperialism and local elites, confrontation with the state is inevitable and necessary. Because some of the things that the poor need can only be provided by the state, the struggle can not just be to drive the coercive aspects of the state away. There also has to be a fight to subordinate the social aspects of state to society beginning with its most local manifestations and moving on from there. And most often the fight begins with these toilets, this land, this eviction, this fire, these taps, this slum lord, this politician, this broken promise, this developer, this school, this crèche, these police officers, this murder. Because the fight begins from a militant engagement with the local its thinking immediately pits material force against material force – bodies and songs and stones against bullets. It is real from the beginning. It is not about abstract rights. And if it remains a mass democratic project permanently open to innovation from below it will stay real. This is what the *Abahlali* call ‘the politics of the strong poor’. It is this politics, which can, if it can survive state repression, leftist vanguardism and NGO co-option, democratise society from below.

Despite the huge scale and media impact of the *Abahlali* march on the offices of the Housing MEC

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on 27 February 2006 a meeting with the office of the MEC was only granted on 20 July 2006. At this meeting the *Abahlali* were told that the slum clearance policy was not negotiable and that criticising the policy as oppressive was 'out of order'. They were also accused of being used by an agent working for the intelligence agency of an unnamed foreign government and threatened with arrest. They stood their ground and the sole concession made by the office of the MEC was that they could attend meetings at which they could be informed about housing policy if they joined Slum Dwellers International (SDI) - (SDI is an international NGO that presents itself as a social movement and is widely criticised as functioning as a sweet heart 'partner' to governments in place of

actually existing shack dwellers' movements). After leaving that meeting some of the *Abahlali* delegation went straight to the Joe Slovo settlement, which is between Lamontville and Chatsworth, where *Abahlali* women have been subject to severe harassment by local elites for standing up against corruption and ethnic chauvinism. The Chatsworth police had been refusing to take statements from the Joe Slovo women. But after a meeting in Joe Slovo, *Abahlali* occupied the police station and, after a tense stand off, eventually forced the police officers to take the statements from the Joe Slovo women. This kind of direct popular confrontation with official power is where we should invest our hopes for democratisation.

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ENDNOTE

- 1 Richard Ballard pointed me to this important article.