

and Sapref (South African Petroleum Refinery owned by BP and Shell) or in Vanderbijlpark where pollution of the groundwater by Iscor (now Mittal Steel) has had devastating impacts on the health and livelihoods of thousands of people. These are mainly the poor and the powerless whose voices go unheard. This silence is linked to the invisibility of much air and water pollution which makes it easy for policy makers to ignore ecological damage.

This damage has reached crisis proportions. Kovel does not present any apocalyptic scenario, but rather “a slow and steady decline in ecosystems associated with a rise in authoritarianism”. We see this rise in the war against terror. Kovel argues that, “The dialectics of terror and ecological disintegration are joined in the regime of oil. This constitutes, on the one hand, the chief material dynamic of the ecological crisis, and on the other, the organising principle for imperial domination of those lands where the conflict is being fought out. Petroleum fuels industrial society and the growth of the West is necessarily a growth in the exploitation and control of these lands where it is most strategically located. As these happen to be largely Islamic, so is the stage set for the great struggle now unfolding”. Kovel wrote those words in 2002 and it is now widely recognised that oil production in the world has peaked, and that some 72 000 people have been killed in the ‘war on terror’ since 9.11.2001.

Confronting the reality of ecological collapse involves more far reaching measures than renewable energy, unleaded petrol or recycled newspapers. In the way that Rosa Luxemburg posed the choice for humanity as ‘socialism or barbarism’, our choice now is ‘either capital or our future.’ Capital “is not what most people take it to be. It is not a rational system of markets in which freely constituted individuals create wealth

in healthy competition. It is, rather, a spectral apparatus that integrates earlier modes of domination, especially that by gender, and generates a gigantic force field of profit-seeking that polarizes all human activity and sucks it into itself.”

Kovel’s solution is a revolution he calls “ecosocialist” which he claims is the only way to ensure not just survival but a better life for all. If we value a future “capitalism must be brought down and replaced with an ecologically worthy society.” To overcome capital “there must be basic changes in ownership of productive resources so that, ultimately, the earth is no longer privately owned, and second, our productive powers, the core of human nature, have to be liberated, so that people self-determine their productive power.”

Ecosocialism is ‘more than socialism’ with “its association of economic failure, political repression and environmental blight”. Nature will cease to be simply a store of resources or a repository of waste. Ecosocialism will ‘restore the intrinsic value of nature’ to a free association of producers. The ideal of sufficiency will replace growth. “Sufficiency makes more sense, building a world where nobody is hungry or cold or lack health care or succour in old age... Sufficiency is a better term than the ecological buzzword, sustainability, as the latter leaves ambiguous the question of whether what is to be sustained is the existing system or not”.

While Kovel is weakest on the nature of ecosocialism and the means of achieving it, his book is totally convincing on the ecologically destructive nature of capitalism. The labour movement needs to acknowledge this because, as Kovel states, “There is no time to lose and a world to be won”.

Jacklyn Cock is a professor of sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Khabzela’s life spotlights youth realities

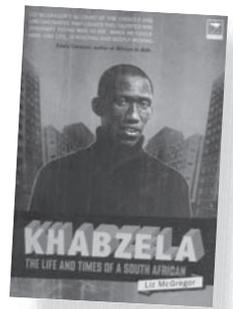
In the previous *Labour Bulletin* we reviewed *Khabzela: The Life and Times of a South African*. Sharon Ekambaram also read the book and it provoked for her some important reflections on youth behaviour seen through the lens of Khabzela’s life experience.

Reading Nkululeko Nkomo’s review of Liz McGregor’s book *Khabzela: The Life and Times of a South African in Labour Bulletin* 30.3 made me reflect on the HIV epidemic and young people.

These are my thoughts informed mostly by reading McGregor’s book. My interpretation may also be informed by the fact that I am an HIV/AIDS activist and that I am a black woman struggling with issues of sexuality in a society dominated by violence against women and women’s growing economic empowerment.

This book about one man’s life reflected for me the tragedy of thousands of young people dying prematurely from this disease. Something that could be avoided. I asked myself “Is it because poor people’s lives are cheap?”

Khabzela’s death was a shocking and



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sad event for many people. He revealed his status on YFM in the prime of his career. He was supported by the station staff and even his wide listenership respected him for his honesty at the time. His death was particularly tragic because in spite of such a supportive environment he struggled to come to terms with living with HIV. The rest of his life story involving Tina Van de Maas and the misery and suffering he was subjected to before he died, is history.

The life of Khabzela is that of a typical young person growing up in post-apartheid South Africa under poor living conditions with very little money. Khabzela came from humble beginnings in a poor family headed by a strong-willed mother. His life experience reflected the explosion of talent and culture that today's youth is expressing. This expression through kwaito's music and poetic lyrics does not, however, exist in a vacuum. Most youth living in townships and informal settlements live dangerously at knife's edge - a factor which increases their risk of HIV infection.

Khabzela became a loved icon. This he earned through his passion for music and his understanding of the needs and aspirations of poor young people with little more than music to keep them going. He took a keen interest in promoting this culture and out of this grew his popularity.

But his life and his life style reflected in McGregor's book, needs to be studied by everyone in this country if we are to understand what is driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic and why it is that young people are at risk of infection.

Yes it is true that violence against women and gender

imbalances are a factor. But none of these touches the core of why there is an increasing HIV prevalence rate amongst the youth and particularly amongst young women.

Khabzela represents a generation of young people that YFM radio station has successfully captured as its audience. People like Dirk Hartford the CEO at YFM understood that this audience was a generation of youngsters who sacrificed their education for liberation. They were the young people who were called upon to make the country ungovernable in the 1980s. Now in the world of BEE and tenders and suits and ties, the majority of these poor young people have been left unskilled, neglected and written off as the 'lost generation'.

The striking feature of this 'lost generation' is that it requires a huge effort to fight the current system and to win. Khabzela's life was about that battle. A battle which he won. He struggled for a space, for an opportunity and when he got his chance he never looked back, until he found out that he had HIV.

Khabzela's success was reflected in his desire for smart cars and beautiful women. These were young women who knew what they wanted and went out to get it. This is surprising given that the usual picture painted of women living under impoverished conditions, is that of a victim who is abused and lacks power to make decisions.

Young people living in poverty seek pleasure and escape through a culture of music which then leads on to alcohol and drug abuse. When life has little more to offer than a struggle to make ends meet, with no hope of a job let alone a career, then sex, music,

drugs and alcohol is a means to an end. It is about survival. And young women see successful men like Khabzela as opportunities for a better life. And in the middle of all of this is unprotected sex.

It is a generation that no one is speaking to. A generation left to its own devices who engage in high risk activity because they have nothing to lose.

SO WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS?

Sexual health messages should be formulated with the understanding that increasingly young women are 'in control' specifically when it comes to sex - who she gets sex from and why she wants sex. We need to ensure that young people of this generation in particular feel that they are understood, in the way that Khabzela understood them through his radio programme and in the way he lived his life with his peers. Only when we understand this context can we respond appropriately and then begin to talk about having sex using a condom, or changing the attitudes of men and women about sex, relationships and life.

Only by improving the lot of this generation and providing real opportunities for change and a way out of the indignity of poverty will we be able to capture the ear of the young generation.

Khabzela taught us that it is not enough to simply preach about HIV and safer sex. We have to give young people something tangible to live for. Something that makes them want to get up in the morning and welcome the new day. Something in return for finding out their HIV status and staying healthy.

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Sharon Ekambaram is the project officer at the Chris Hani Institute.