

Local social movements

Some questions from 'the back alleys' of South Africa

The emergence of the so-called 'new' social movements achieved a high level of visibility during the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD). Jacklyn Cock attempts to explore the nature of these organisations and questions whether they are capable of establishing a sustainable and durable presence in SA.

South Africa today is an aspirant democracy. The consolidation of that democracy depends very largely on the capacity of the state to deliver the socio-economic rights enshrined in the Constitution, and imposed by the Constitutional Court on several occasions. These rights form the core of 'social citizenship', defined by Webster as 'the right to income security and other forms of welfare such as education and health, a right to share in full in one's social heritage and the right to live in a safe, healthy and peaceful environment. (Webster, 2002:2)

This implies access to the adequate housing, water, sanitation and

electricity that many South Africans lack. At a local level, the prescriptions of Gear see a shift away from the 'statist' service delivery models of the past where the state subsidised and delivered municipal services (albeit in a racially-biased manner), towards a 'neo-liberal' service delivery model where the private sector dominates and the emphasis is on profit rather than meeting basic human needs.

This has led to a rise in the cost of basic services and increasing disconnections of water and electricity. The inadequacy of the state's provision of 6 000 litres a month of free water is illustrated by the fact that in an eight person household, one toilet flush



(using according to Johannesburg Water's own calculations, 12 litres) would make up half of the daily per person allowance.

Poor response

The poor and the marginalised are not responding passively to these changes in material conditions and state policy. A number of mass initiatives have arisen to challenge the water and

electricity cut-offs, the lack of access to sanitation, proper housing and health facilities, HIV/AIDS treatment, reparations in terms of the TRC process, popular justice, the evictions from informal settlements and lack of land redistribution.

These have involved a diverse array of resistance strategies including organised marches and petitions to parliament and local authorities. A striking characteristic of the state response to these various forms of social activism has been the use of force as well as arrests and court action.

These forms of grassroots activism have largely been neglected by social scientists. As Webster points out: 'What is missing

its failure to deliver on the socio-economic rights which define social citizenship. As Bond says: 'Success or failure in delivering water and sanitation services may become a key litmus test of progress towards social justice and meaningful citizenship...' (Bond, 2002:261)

Local-global link

But are these mass-based struggles around social citizenship largely informal and ephemeral, incapable of establishing a sustained, durable presence? Or could these 'militant particularisms' to use Raymond William's phrase, feed into an emerging global civil society and generate a broader,

Privatisation Forum (APF) said: 'We are inspired by earlier anti-globalisation protests in Seattle and Genoa and we hope our protest turns into something like Seattle. (Cited in the *Mail and Guardian* 23.8.2002) This emphasises the importance of analysing the relation between the local initiatives and the anti-globalisation movement.

The APF is a particularly significant formation in light of the argument that the 'common thread' in the so-called 'anti-globalisation movement' is opposition to 'the privatisation of every aspect of life, and the transformation of every activity and value into a commodity.' (Klein, 2001:82) Klein has

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from the conventional academic analysis of the concept of social citizenship is any notion of struggle, of agency, and of the social movements that provide the basis of a new politics of social and economic reconstruction'. (Webster, 2002:3) But the crucial question is whether they do indeed provide such a basis.

Jon Jeter has called the rise of these grassroots movements, 'South Africa's new revolution'. He writes: 'What most provokes South Africa's defiance today are what they see as injustices unleashed on this developing nation by the free-market economic policies of the popularly elected, black-led governing party, the ANC.' (*The Washington Post* 6.11.2001) Frustration could deepen if the state continues in

transformative politics? What are the connections between these initiatives and the anti-corporate globalisation movement?

Certainly new linkages – both global and local – were forged in the WSSD process. Did the process sow 'the seeds of a South African Social forum' as Bond has suggested. (Bond, 2002:360) The Social Movements United march in August last year mobilised thousands of local and international activists. Was it a significant expression of unity of community and anti-globalisation forces?

The march seems to have been very much a last minute coalition composed mainly of the Landless People's Movement (LPM) and the Social Movement Indaba (SMI). Earlier one of the leaders of the SMI, the Anti-

argued forcefully that 'the only clear way forward' is for the community and anti-globalisation activists to unite.

These tactical issues need to be grounded in solid research. A crucial question for research is whether these linkages and alliances – both local and global – are sustainable? Or did the WSSD process demonstrate only episodic collective action – fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured, accountable and democratic organisation?

The SMI brought together a number of forces including the APF, Jubilee 2000, the Environmental Justice Networking Forum, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), the Rural Development Services Network (RDSN), Friends of the Earth, First People, the Municipal Services Project, the World Bank Bonds Boycott,

Indymedia, the Palestinian Solidarity Committee and the LPM. These all represent new forms of social activism, often mobilising around survival issues. As Eddie Cottle of the RDSN commented: 'New forms of organisation are forming. It's a move away from the traditionalist congress movement of the past. It's becoming mass based. Its grassroots demands are about jobs, livelihoods and living standards. We are just beginning to mobilise African civil society.' (Cited in the *Mail and Guardian* 23.8.2002) But are not some of these actions built on strong historical traditions of social mobilisation?

With some alarm the ANC has noted the emergence of issue-based organisations like the TAC, Jubilee 2000, the Basic Income Grant Coalition and SECC. These have mobilised around real grievances but tended to do so in opposition to the government and the ANC 'because of subjective weaknesses on our side or because we have left a vacuum.' (ANC discussion document 'The Balance of Forces', cited in *Mail and Guardian* 16.8.2002)

These groupings are sometimes criminalised and sometimes romanticised. For example, the Minister of Public Enterprises Jeff Radebe compared the members of the SECC to 'a gang of criminals.' (The *Sunday Times* 2.12.2001). Water Affairs Minister, Ronnie Kasrils called a group of about 70 anti-privatisation protestors in September 2002 'thugs'. (The *Star* 4.9.2002) In very different, somewhat nostalgic terms, a SECC activist said: 'It is just like the old days. We are pamphleteering, we have meetings.. What strikes me about all these protests is that we're so fresh out of political independence and it's amazing that people have shaken off the nationalist honeymoon so quickly.' (The *New Internationalist* September, 20002)

What are these movements?

Do these movements represent a new form of social activism? What is their relationship to the anti-corporate globalisation movement? Are these embryonic social movements? Are they social movements in the sense of 'purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory, as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society?' (Castells, 1997:3)

For our purposes, social movements are those relatively autonomous movements or organisations that are mass based and oriented towards social change. (Pillay, 1996:329) It follows that a crucial question is whether these initiatives seek to empower the poor and the marginalised against local, national and global elites.

Hunt has emphasised 'the multi-agency character of modern social movements.' He writes: '... a most important feature of contemporary social movements is that they rarely, if ever, take a single organisational expression... they are characterised by their multiplicity of organisational expressions... The real world of social movements is to be found in the combination of both different sorts of "organisations". And different forms of "action". (Hunt, 1997: 238)

Who are these social insurgents? We need sociological research to explore:

- the social characteristics of the participants in these networks;
- their social organisation and internal workings in relation to levels of accountability and democracy. At least formal accountability depends on an organisational centre and specific mechanisms of communication;
- their forms of mobilisation – particularly significant here is the use of rights strategies as a way of countering hegemonic practices and

strengthening marginalised communities. For example, the TAC used rights-based strategies to bring about a shift in power, with their appeal to the Constitutional Court for the provision of anti-retrovirals;

- their relationship to mass based organisations such as Cosatu and the ANC. Do they link up with labour? Do they challenge the dominance of the party which has established itself as the primary arena through which demands must be channelled? Do they pose an alternative politics?

- is there a dependence on charismatic leaders?
 - what is their gendered nature? Are women the shock absorbers rather than the leaders?
- And, most importantly, are they connecting to an emerging global civil society?

Conclusion

Is a coherent anti-corporate globalisation movement emerging and consolidating global civil society? Are the South African forms of grassroots activism connecting to this and generating new forms of resistance politics? There are high expectations of these initiatives. It could be that the forms of social activism here are what Castell calls 'embryos of a new society'. We need theoretically informed sociological research and extensive debate on these questions. The critical question is whether the SA forms of grassroots activism are connecting to this global civil society and generating new forms of resistance politics.

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While its meanings are highly contested,

An emerging global civil society

the concept of global civil society (GCS) suggests both a new space of social interactions and new social patterns. It is a terrain constituted by transnational networks and alliances of individuals and groups who understand themselves to have some point of affinity; some shared political or ethical understanding.

Politically, the crucial question is whether GCS provides an effective challenge to existing global relations of power and privilege, or is it a mystification, a class-blind concept that obscures and detracts from the task of strengthening the democratic state institutions with the capacity to deliver the goods and services necessary to meet human needs? There is a vociferous global civil society rhetoric which must be subjected to critical scrutiny.

New forms of activism – The GCS is new (since in the 1990s) in the sense that the number and range or scope of international NGOs operating has increased dramatically. Around one quarter of the 13 000 international NGOs in existence today were created after 1990. The new forms of activism are most dramatically evident in the various parallel summits that have taken place at successive UN conferences on gender, population, the environment, social development and habitat. The WSSD conference became a focal point for regalanising environmental interests and activism. South African environmental NGOs became reanimated in their efforts to promote various, diverse agendas that linked environmental issues to questions of health, development and social justice.

North/South cleavage – Many of these global meetings illustrate how GCS continues to reflect the deepening inequalities both between and within nations. In particular they mark the major social cleavage of our time – that

between the countries of the North and the South. At numerous international meetings (for example the Vienna conference on Human Rights in 1993) the majority of organisations at the NGO forums came from Western Europe and North America.

The GCS is technologically driven and hence requires access to increased resources. In this situation of inequality some international NGOs have become donor-driven with all the problems of accountability becoming an issue. It has even been provocatively suggested that the concept of civil society is preferred by western donors, who in the 1980s decided that African states could not deliver and that NGOs could be more effective in holding government accountable.

Social context; increasing social visibility of risk and insecurity – Throughout the world people are increasingly anxious and bewildered by the scale and scope of the changes we are living through. This is amplified by the failure of many states to protect their citizens and maintain the monopoly on violence that has traditionally been viewed as the hallmark of state power. The privatisation of security is a worrying global development.

Ideological and social diversity – The key characteristic of GCS is its diversity of both social composition and constituent ideas. It also includes transnational networks of right-wing groupings, financial speculators, anti-gun control, and anti-abortion, pro-fundamentalism, pro-creationism, para-military and mafia-like formations.

A new collective identity(ies) – The networks which constitute GCS allow for the powerful expression of collective identity(s). 'In a world of global flows of

wealth, power and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning... identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning... People increasingly organise their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are'. (Castells, 1996:3)

This raises interesting questions about an emerging global citizenry many of whom are grounded in their search for alternatives to corporate globalisation.

Dense social interactions – The networks which constitute GCS are dense in the sense that interactions of individuals and organisations with each other and with key political institutions seem to be frequent. These interactions are often intense and in that sense involve new forms of solidarity. GCS is a source of the social relations of trust, reciprocity and obligation that constitute 'social capital'.

The politics of inclusivity – The ideological and social diversity of GCS means that one of its features is an emphasis on inclusivity. The politics of inclusivity is demonstrated by the numerous feminist initiatives that constitute an important part of GCS. Since the 1980s (at least) these initiatives have moved beyond the simplified notion of 'sisterhood' to recognise diversity. (Cock and Bernstein, 2002)

Social effectiveness – GCS has had some resounding policy successes, notably the global anti-landmine campaign pointed to above. The fact that three disarmament-related NGOs have received Nobel Peace Prizes in recent years testifies to their influence and relevance. But the impact of GCS requires scrutiny in relation to specific outcomes and goals.

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