

Review

The Roots of Participatory Democracy. Democratic Communists in South Africa and Kerala, India.

Michelle Williams (Palgrave Macmillan New York, 2008)

Reviewed by Jacklyn Cock

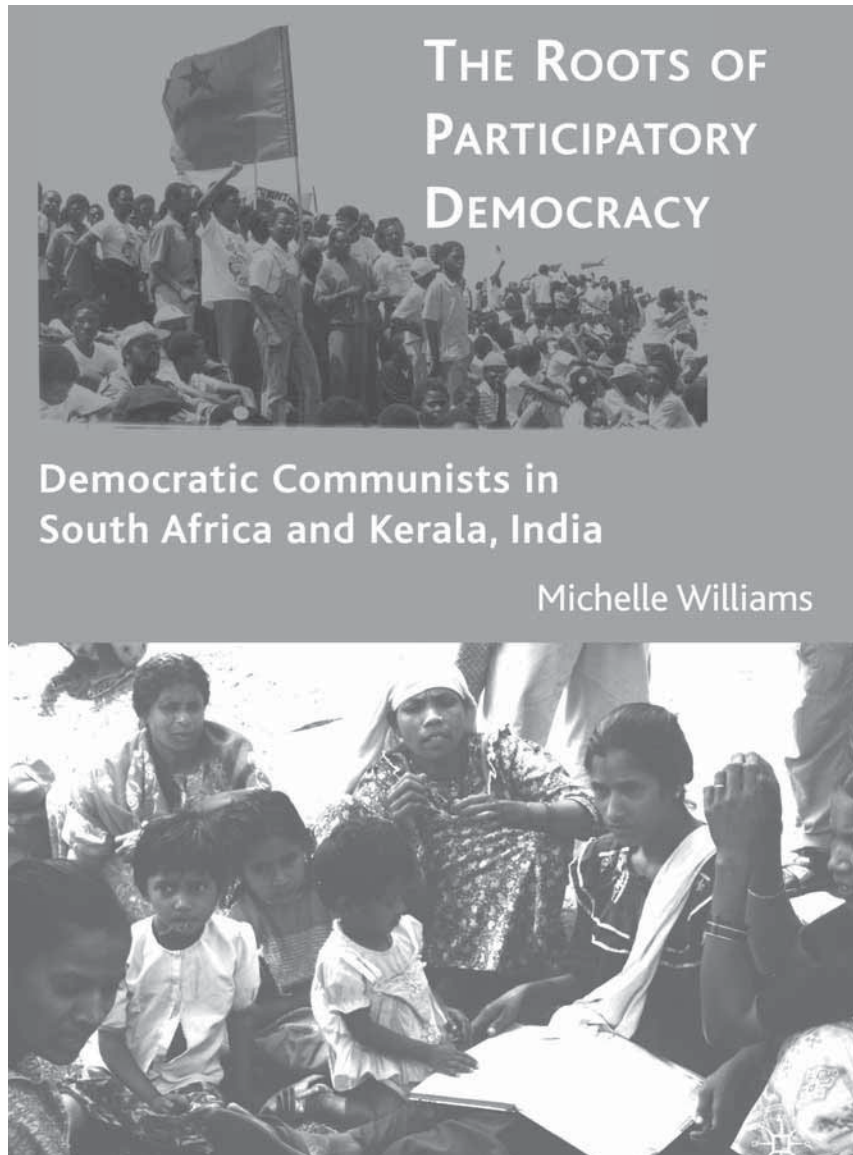
This book provides an inspiring antidote to the negativity, factionalism, intolerance and disillusion which marks our current political moment. It is inspiring in that it documents how we need not accept the inevitability of neo-liberalism with its stress on market fundamentalism, flexible labour markets, privatisation, deregulation and a competitive individualism.

This is the ideology driving corporate globalisation which creates increasing social inequality, insecurity and environmental degradation throughout the world and also creates passive consumers and the abandonment of any socialist vision.

The outcome in South Africa is that the solidarities which marked the anti-apartheid struggle have unravelled, civil society has been demobilised and an active citizenship engaged in both a critique and alternatives seems remote. This is why we have much to learn from this book about the principles, practices and institutions of participatory democracy.

Through over two years of extensive fieldwork Michelle Williams builds a picture of the ideology and practices of the communist parties in Kerala, a state in India, and South Africa in the late 20th century.

She documents how both developed a remarkably similar vision of socialist democracy structured around four common themes, which represent elements of what she calls 'a counter-



hegemonic generative politics'. These themes are participatory democracy, a new developmental state, the coexistence of capitalism and socialism and an economy built around social needs through state intervention to promote

cooperatives and the decommodification (stop the selling of services for profit) of key services. However, the two communist parties diverged hugely in their political practices.

The South African Communist

Party (SACP) emphasised what Williams calls “a hegemonic generative politics” which prioritised state-led development that involved mass mobilising and high profile events such as marches, demonstrations and strikes.

By contrast the Communist Party of Kerala the CPI(M) emphasised “counter-hegemonic generative politics” meaning long-term participatory organising and society-led development that involves capacity building and empowerment at the local level through political education, seminars and workshops.

Williams’ main interest is to explain these differences in order to understand what makes a “counter-hegemonic generative politics” possible.

She chose to study these two communist parties because both had similar visions of socialist democracy. Both were also challenged by significant changes in their domestic contexts. And both have been politically central with long histories of popular struggle, strong links to mass-based civil societies and powerful labour movements. Both parties present a challenge to the current pessimism about alternatives because they are committed to participatory and representative democracy. Both “sought a politics that facilitates the capacity of ordinary citizens to participate in decision-making processes”.

Williams shows that both parties are splintered between different factions with different understandings of the crucial agents of change and development. For example, a trade union faction sees the organised working class as the crucial agent of change and prioritises development through industrialisation. This is in contrast

with a grassroots faction which focuses on ‘subaltern’ classes (unemployed, informal sector and the organised working class), and a faction which focuses on the role of the state.

The author explains the differences in the political practice of the two parties in terms of a number of factors. The most important of these is the context they operated in, “The SACP faced a political transformation in which capital was a strong and organized force able to coax leading sectors of the ANC in its favour, while Kerala’s CPI(M) faced a transformation in which capital was weak and subaltern classes were not only strong and well organized but firmly moored in the state.”

Williams’ analysis is highly original and innovative in several respects. Firstly, her book is an important corrective to the tendency of western scholarship to ignore communist parties in the Global South.

Secondly, in opposition to much triumphalism about social movements, she demonstrates the centrality of political parties in effective development. Related to this is her challenge to the tendency of development scholars to focus exclusively on the role of the state, as well as to those with romantic notions of civil society.

Building on the ideas of Hannah Arendt, Williams’s interest is in “generative politics” which build new institutions and spaces for popular participation. This is opposed to the mass-mobilising practice of protest politics. “Generative politics is about innovation in collective action that seeks to engender new political actors, organizations and institutions.”

It can be either hegemonic

(supporting the dominant forces in society) or counter-hegemonic (opposing the dominant forces). The impact of counter-hegemonic generative politics is to extend the role of civil society over the state and the economy. The state is not bypassed or neglected as in much of the social movement literature. Democracy involves transforming the state and this requires political parties with deep roots in civil society, the arena of voluntary group activity. It is political parties which organise civil society around the centrality of subaltern class interests.

The book is theoretically informed and grounded in an optimism about human capacities and potentials, and reflects the author’s own deep commitment to a socialism anchored in participatory democratic practice. It is a hopeful book. It demonstrates that a counter-hegemonic generative political project is possible.

It’s tough minded analysis however means that it is not an easy read and might be best tackled in discussion groups. As Williams emphasises, there are no short cuts to socialism. “Socialism... requires a long transition consisting of many phases and multiple forms grounded in local conditions: there is no blueprint.”

What is urgently needed in current South Africa is a strategic vision of an alternative social order, a participatory, socialist democracy. Williams has provided us with an inspiring account of what we have to do to get there. LB

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