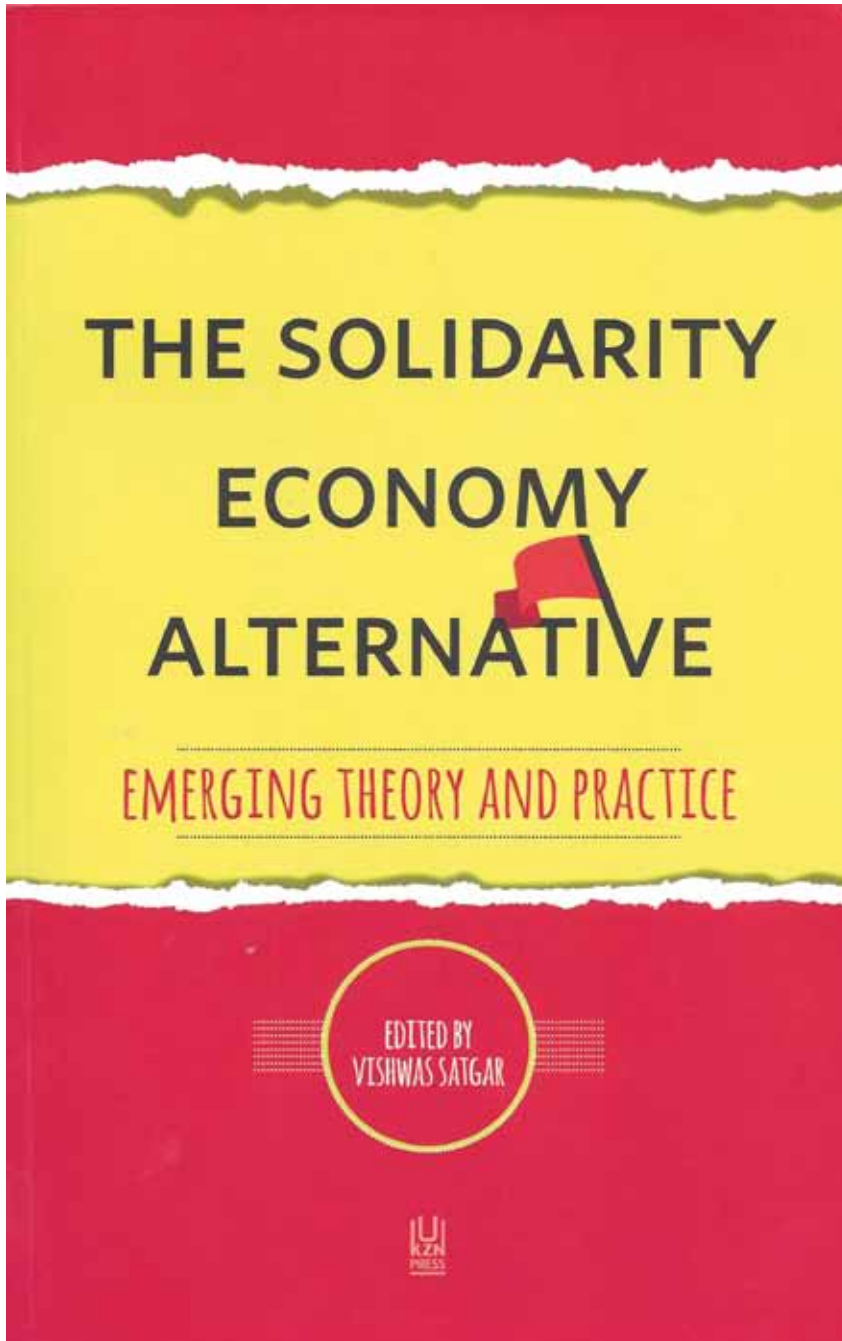


Review

*The Solidarity Economy Alternative
Emerging Theory and Practice
By Vishwas Satgar (Editor)*

*Published by University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014
Reviewed by Jacklyn Cock*



This is an inspirational book in three senses: it shows us why we have to change, provides us with a goal – a vision of a very different future, and it shows us how to get there. What readers of the *South African Labour Bulletin* will find exciting is how the book is grounded in a confidence in our capacity – not only as workers – but as human beings to do this. The book demonstrates our capacity to cooperate, care for each other, share, learn from our mistakes and – most importantly – a confidence in our capacity to work together to create a more just and equal world.

It is this confidence in the human capacity that is the basis for the principles on which Vishwas Satgar's notion of the 'solidarity economy' is based – participatory democracy, social justice and ecological sustainability. This confidence implies different social practices which the book describes – a different quality of social relations which are marked by solidarity meaning a commitment to collective empowerment rather than individual advancement. This is a strong contrast to the intense, possessive individualism of neo-liberal capitalism.

Satgar demonstrates that neo-liberal capitalism can no longer sustain life. The creative and productive capacities we have as human beings are being destroyed by the levels of poverty, unemployment, debt, homelessness and hunger in our society.

There is no blueprint for the solidarity economy or eco-socialism. We have to build it from the bottom up. But solidarity – cooperating and sharing – is at the core.

Almost half of all South Africans have been classified as ‘food insecure’ which is a sanitised term for ‘hunger’. The neo-liberal capitalist food system serves only those who profit from it – large corporations. The latest report of the International Panel on Climate Change, written by 300 of the world’s top scientists, warns that this is going to get worse especially in southern Africa. The more extreme weather events of droughts and floods will mean more crop failures of staple foods like wheat and maize and higher food prices.

At present 70% of households in the poor areas of Johannesburg are food insecure. At the same time a third of all the food produced in South Africa is wasted (half of all the fruit and vegetables) and there are restaurants in Johannesburg which charge R4,900 a person for a special supper of luxury foods imported from all over the world. Rosa Luxemburg posted the future as either socialism or barbarism: barbarism is already with us.

But this book shows how we can begin to organise an alternative – an alternative which focuses on meeting social needs rather than on profit, which deepens democracy, which promotes localisation and ecological sustainability.

In his chapter Andrew Bennie describes how the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre (Copac) has been working with cooperatives in Ivory Park for the last 15 years. One of their projects is the Tswelane Bakery Cooperative which bakes delicious bread and sells it at half the price charged by shops. Copac is attempting to build a solidarity economy around the key idea of food sovereignty. This means realising the Right to Food which is in our Constitution; challenging the power of the corporations which

control the present food system; it means participatory democracy, bringing consumers and producers together, and participating in the decisions that affect them; it means working with nature through composting and mulching instead of using chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

This organising round food sovereignty is not reformism; it is not the kind of defensive and ameliorative strategies like food parcels and soup kitchens. This amounts to ‘picking up the pieces’ without trying to stop the breakage that Michelle Williams describes in her chapter on the social economy. As she writes, ‘The social economy does not challenge existing power relations’ (p. 49). Of course it is important to note that reforms which address immediate needs can have a transformative potential if they are imbued with energy and build popular power. As Marx said about the restrictions on the length of the working day in 19th century England, it was the first step down a revolutionary path. Food sovereignty can be a building block for the social relations of support and sharing that are at the core of the solidarity economy or eco-socialism.

Another building block is the notion of worker cooperatives. A worker cooperative ‘is an enterprise that is jointly owned and controlled by workers. All workers own the cooperative on an equal basis and all workers collectively take all the decisions about the labour process, production, distribution of surplus and so on’ (p. 282). One chapter in the book describes how a group of workers from the Mielin-Tap Engineering factory, attempted to occupy the bankrupt factory and establish worker control.

We can learn a great deal from such courageous social experiments

described in this book. There is no blueprint for the solidarity economy or eco-socialism. We have to build it from the bottom up. But solidarity – cooperating and sharing – is at the core. As Hilary Wainwright writes in her chapter, ‘the political importance of the solidarity economy, (is that it is) not simply a sector or part of a sector between market and state, but a concept identifying all those struggles and initiatives which move beyond protest and beyond amelioration to demonstrate in practice – and in struggle – the possibility of a mode of production with human creativity and solidarity at its core’ (p. 94).

The importance of this book goes way beyond South Africa. The force of neo-liberal capitalism is destroying society around the world – it is doing so materially through the dismantling of the commons (like land, water, education, health care) turning them into private goods that can be bought and sold for profit, and ideologically through promoting an ethic of competition rather than cooperation.

‘Society’ means a recognition of our interdependence and the social bonds of trust, reciprocity and cooperation that hold us together. So what is at stake is not just our individual humanity but society itself. It is in this sense – of providing both a vision of an alternative kind of society built around human creativity and solidarity – and a compass for our daily practice – that this book, from a remarkable scholar-activist, is essential reading. **LB**

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Review

Nothing Left to Steal
By Mzilikazi wa Afrika

Published by Penguin Books South Africa, 2014
Reviewed by Zwelinzima Vavi

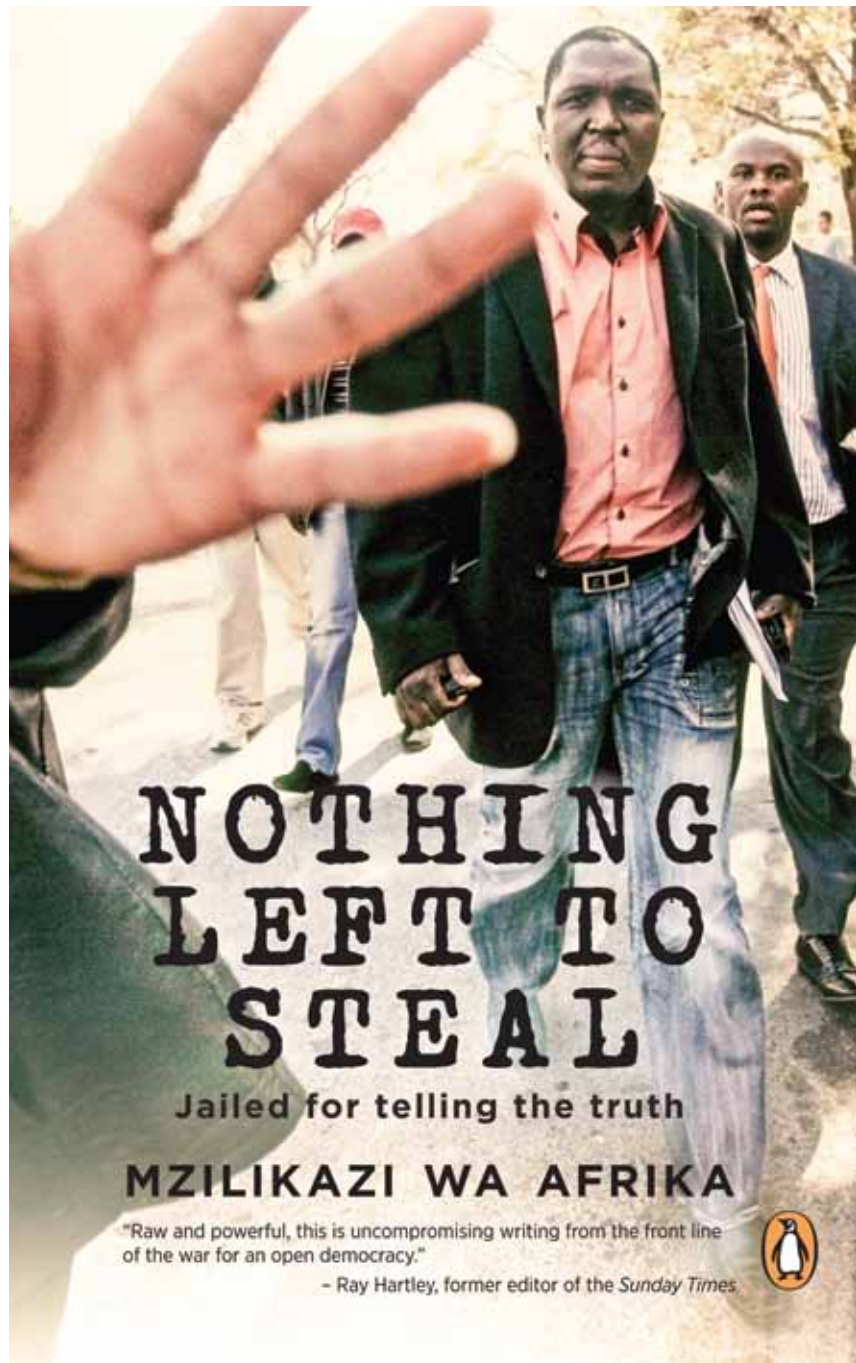
Freedom of expression. -
(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the press and other media' Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

'A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy. The press must be free from state interference. It must have the economic strength to stand up to the blandishments of government officials. It must have sufficient independence from vested interests to be bold and inquiring without fear or favour. It must enjoy the protection of the Constitution, so that it can protect our rights as citizens,' Nelson Mandela.

After reading Mzilikazi wa Afrika's book - *Nothing Left to Steal*, it dawned on me how lucky we are that Nelson Mandela lived in our time and said all these things to all of us, and how fortunate we are that we have the Constitution that reflects our people's dreams for a free and democratic South Africa.

These two are the biggest gifts this nation has received and which we must cherish every day of our lives.

Anyone reading this book will realise that every story in it is something we have read about in the media before, except the roots and life of Mzilikazi wa Afrika. Yet the book exposes the extent to which we are still in denial about the real challenges facing our young democracy.



The countless death threats you received, the insults, name-calling and labels, the torture, beatings, and attempts to pull the wool over your eyes did not succeed. Today we are celebrating the work of these three who are special gifts to South Africa.

Chapter One of the book succinctly summarises the dangers that we must mobilise our society to be on the alert for. It demonstrates that power was abused to cut corners to award a tender to buy a R500-million building. This happens notwithstanding the existence of such a brilliant policy framework as the Public Finance Management Act.

It exposes the ever-existent family connections, and how politicians and state bureaucrats connive to inflate prices and milk taxpayers dry. It demonstrates that when it comes to the power of money, very few are not gullible.

Money turns a journalist against a journalist. It demonstrates how some of our police get easily used to undermine the very principles of our Constitution; how even the judiciary can be manipulated to obfuscate and divert attention away from the real issues and the contempt with which it can be treated by those abusing power and authority.

It demonstrates that in this manipulation not even those who are members of the African National Congress (ANC), whose struggle gave birth to the Constitution and produced luminaries like Nelson Mandela, are immune from manipulation by powerful elites who occupy strategic positions within the party and the state.

Yet at the same time this book is a celebration of our democracy and supremacy of our Constitution. It underscores the importance of the separation of powers, in particular between the executive and the judiciary. It is also a celebration of press freedom and whistle blowers.

After reading Chapter One, I jotted down a mental note, wondering what the heroes and heroines of Mpumalanga would make of this fiasco. Gert Sibande was one of

those arrested in the longest treason trial that ran between 1956 and 1961. He dedicated most of his adult life to liberate farm workers from the daily humiliation at the hands of their racist and brutal farm bosses.

In 1947 he helped Michael Scott and Ruth First compile their press exposure of the near slavery conditions of Africans on the Bethel farms.

What would he say when reading this book, discovering the role of the racist land barons that he dedicated his life to defeat, have been substituted by crooks who have infiltrated his organisation – the ANC – and are carrying forth with the command to kill his people!

The book not only underlines the critical importance of the freedom of the media but the extraordinary tenacity of some of the journalists in our country. Mzilikazi wa Afrika and his colleagues, Stephan Hofstatter and Rob Rose, have endured everything the hyenas can throw at them.

Mzilikazi has stared death in the face and survived countless death threats, illegal imprisonment, torture at the hands of criminals, attempts to bribe running into millions, all to get him to cooperate with jackals and to keep the truth away from the unsuspecting public.

This trio had an opportunity to join the gravy train and to enjoy birthday parties where life is nice and where millions are spent on the most expensive whiskies and wines, as the elites flaunt their newly acquired opulence. They had a choice to look at the other side and cosy up to those with power and money.

They were inspired by what George Orwell wrote: 'If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.' They went to

extraordinary lengths, including in hostile foreign countries, in search of the truth, so that we may be better informed about what is happening around us.

The countless death threats you received, the insults, name-calling and labels, the torture, beatings, and attempts to pull the wool over your eyes did not succeed. Today we are celebrating the work of these three who are special gifts to South Africa. In celebrating you, let us be reminded of what our international icon said about goodness: 'Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished' (1994).

Today we are celebrating the work of these three special gifts to South Africa, which is collated into a book that will serve as a reminder to the coming generations of the challenges we faced in the first two decades of our democracy.

Often it is assumed that changing the colour of the owners of the monopoly-owned media houses is the end of the struggle to challenge the dominant ideas in our society. We have come to terms with the reality that this is a simply untrue. We are making a monumental mistake if we think that the neglect and marginalisation of news that matters to the working class withers away along with the substitution of white for black in terms of ownership of our media houses.

eTV is largely owned by black South Africans today. The Independent Newspaper group has been taken over by blacks with strong links to the labour and liberation movements.

Yet that has not guaranteed that the bias of the news against the economically marginalised is ended.

For example, eNCA has been feeding us stories about some rich

young man, living a life of glamour and fame, who killed his girlfriend. Yet the stories of working-class people, who are robbed, maimed, raped and denied their right to justice do not enjoy the same prominence.

Independent Newspapers immediately dismissed one of the most pro-worker, pro-poor editors, Alide Dasnois, as soon as the so-called revolutionaries took over, replacing her with someone else who is more likely to sing praises to what is, at the end of the day, an anti-black, anti-liberation stance and against the workers' and women's agenda.

What does this book tell us? The book communicates a categorical message that things have gone very wrong in many respects. Let me hurry to say I don't belong to that school of thought that says nothing has been achieved in our democracy.

We are not exaggerating or forming wrong opinions based on a 'few examples' of rotten apples exposed in newspaper headlines. If this was the case we would not be worried. Please do not let anyone tell us we should not be worried and that things are under control.

This 268-page book gives us a summary of why this nation should be extremely concerned. The biggest concern is that not a single person exposed by the heroic work of these journalists is languishing in prison. There is irrefutable evidence, confirmed by parliament, courts and the Public Protector that some should have been imprisoned.

A country in which so much looting has been exposed should be ashamed that such a small fraction of those exposed have been in the courts and even the handful who have been convicted are playing golf and continuing with their looting spree.

This is what lies behind the culture of impunity and arrogance amongst the hyenas – there are absolutely no consequences. Society is watching this daily, speaking about

it at their dinner tables, in the taxis, trains, stokvels and social media.

The power is slowly shifting away from the critical mass of the people to the powerful elite. Daily we are seeing a new culture creeping in, replacing the culture of robust debate and accountability of the leadership with fear, whispering and gossip in safe corners with many just shrugging their shoulders in the face of this rampant arrogance and looting.

The second reason why we should be extremely worried is the invasion of the foreign capitalist culture into the liberation movement, the capitalist 'dog-eat-dog' mentality and the 'survival-of-the-fittest' mantra. It is as if we have accepted our fate. The most corrupt receive unequivocal support from us and this comes out clearly in the book. We love them corrupt and sing praises and threaten to kill anybody who shows to us that those we support have countless questions to answer.

Revolutionary morality is on the back-foot, taking a pounding from a marauding new culture of selfishness, individualism and greed.

The third, and most worrying reason, is the ease with which the masses have been manipulated to defend and praise what is indefensible.

Mzilikazi's book reminds us of how a clearly rented crowd came to the court wearing the sacred symbols of one of the most respected liberation movements, which was led by at least two Nobel Peace Laureates – Chief Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela. The crowd came to taunt, insult and threaten a journalist they should be praising, for exposing abuse of power that eventually leads to delaying every of their demands, enshrined in the Freedom Charter, by many more years.

It is this crowd that has become more vocal and – threatening, diverting attention away from the real issues and forming a formidable wall of sycophants behind which the most corrupt hide.

Che Guevara said: 'Patriotism is used by rotten Third World rulers to cover up their robbery of the land and its resources.'

We would say to Che, comrade, the only patriotism which we should teach our generation is that they should love their country and that no political party, no union, no newspaper, nor anything else should be rated as important as the country. All of these formations were created by us, for the sole reason of building a better country than what we have now.

How many times have we heard the phrase: 'Lets close ranks comrades for the sake of our movement', which means 'let us hide this rot and looting, comrades, for the sake of our movement?'

The masses are now 'beginning to sulk'. There is a dangerous resignation and alienation of ordinary people from politics. Increasing numbers of ordinary people no longer trust anything tagged as political. Cynicism has taken root and negative perceptions about politics are deepening.

Days are going where a mere mentioning of political leaders such as OR Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Chris Hani and countless others invoked emotions of nostalgic pride at their heroism and selflessness. Increasingly too many people regard politicians as self-serving aliens, only interested in promoting the fortunes of their families.

Those who have not yet read Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, should read this timeless piece alongside Mzilikazi's *Nothing Left to Steal*, and draw the profound parallels between the two worlds depicted in these books.

I hope this book will force a discussion about what is to be done. ■

Zwelinzima Vavi is the general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions.