This article tells a story about an imagined South African autonomy – imagined because the autonomy many had hoped for once the apartheid regime would disappear never came into being. This imagination was marked by administrative self-government and both political and economic independence. It was a radical participatory project envisioned and partially put into practice by the mass democratic movement (MDM) in the 1980s. This movement sought a radical democracy that favored land redistribution, independence from international lenders such as the IMF and World Bank, and grassroots-decision making. It was a hopeful project for the black poor majority that had suffered the most under apartheid and provided many of its cadres. Since the African National Congress’s (ANC) increasing deviation from the liberation movement’s mandate, this autonomy is referred to as the “dream deferred” (Gevisser 2007) or, more radically, the “revolution deferred” (Murray 1994) in much of the South African contemporary literature. How and why this autonomy is called deferred is the subject of this article

As those somewhat familiar with the South African situation know, there exists by now a welter of literature – most of it progressive and left-wing – that has shed a critical light on the transition (approximately 1990-1999) and South Africa’s swift move from popular anti-apartheid project to “official neoliberalism” (Bond 2000: 1). The studies and comments published commonly trace the country’s recent political trajectory from the unbanning of the liberation organizations and the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, negotiations between the National Party (NP) and ANC, Mandela’s presidency (1994-1999), and South Africa’s push for reconciliation but also neoliberalization, as well as the internecine struggles in the ANC. In this article I take this
trajectory as my guide – although not to chronicle the history of the ANC in power but to delineate the collapse of the dream of autonomy. For the sake of argument here, I especially engage the question of autonomy from the perspective of the ANC’s critics and part of South Africa’s independent left. There exists, of course, too, a tradition of strong critique from within the ANC that is currently carried by members such as Pallo Jordan, Joel Netshitenzhe, Blade Nzimande, Jeremy Cronin, Langa Zita, and Rob Davies, and most frequently published in fora such as Links, the African Communist, and diverse ANC publications. These critiques are important, but most of them keep being wedded to the hegemony of the ANC that many of the commentators on whom I rely here criticize. Given that in South Africa the sphere for robust dialogue and dissent seems to be shrinking (Ndeble 2007, see also the publication of the magazine Amandla!), these critics, too, fight with the more personal parameters of Thabo Mbeki’s presidency (1999-2008) in the ANC. This is a discussion that will have to await a different publication (Rethmann n.d.).

Thus, as anywhere else, the left in South Africa does not speak with a homogenous voice. Indeed, there exist several explanations of why the dream needed to be “deferred,” ranging from charges that the ANC has “sold out” (McKinley 1997), has “lost its soul” (Gumede 2007) and, most dramatically, that South Africa’s democracy “has been born in chains” (Klein 2007: 194). Although analysts differ in their emphases, they concur in the fact that the ANC’s acceptance of the Washington Consensus, World Bank and IMF loans, and unfettered independence of the Reserve Bank (central bank) have turned out to hold South Africa’s ultimate liberation in the balance. From this point of view, South Africa’s story of “failed liberation” is not simply one of “disappointed
hopes” (O’Brien 2002) but one of missed historical opportunity. Around 1990, at least in
South Africa, history did not seem just over yet, as Francis Fukuyama (1992) had claimed
after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although the Freedom Charter, the iconic document that
enshrines the core principles of the ANC (including the right to work, decent housing,
freedom of thought, and distribution of resources and wealth), was formed in June 1955,
in 1990 it still formed the nexus around which ANC politics and negotiations were
constructed. When Nelson Mandela walked out of prison, the nationalization of certain
sectors of the economy still seemed within reach, and both the mass base and top of the
ANC rejected the free-market orthodoxy of the day. In the years between 1990 and 1994,
however, developments set in that prevented the former liberation movement from
reclaiming and redistributing the country’s resources and wealth. Most notably, in those
years the ANC began to “rebrand” (Gumede 2007: 158) itself from a more or less radical
liberation movement to social democratic and centralist party. More concretely, the ANC
aligned itself with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, former German chancellor
Gerhard Schroeder, and Swedish Social Democratic leader Göran Persson to embrace the
idea of the “Third Way,” amounting to less government, emphasizing the market and not
the state for delivery, distance from unions, and an overall closeness to business. It even
used the same advisors as New Labor, including the services of US election campaign

This article traces the problem of autonomy as a lost historical opportunity. To
begin to tackle the increasing loss of South Africa’s autonomy and radical democracy
project requires moving through and beyond polemic rhetoric about the ANC’s “sell out”
to documenting the processes and developments that fostered the ANC’s rightward
trajectory. There has been a tendency in contemporary South African historical and political culture to track its far-reaching changes through life stories, testimonials, biographies, and auto-biographies (Feldman 2004; Posel 2008). This tendency, I believe, has less to with a desire to add to the iconic status of South Africa’s “struggle heroes”. Rather, it has more to do with the fact that the closing down of political possibilities has been closely associated with the political designs of particular figures and the acrimonious (and public) struggles within the post-apartheid ANC. In much of the literature that I have read, the ANC’s difficult transition from liberation movement to governing and a heavily centrist party are closely associated with the presidency of Thabo Mbeki. It is for this reason that I will use his leadership and presidency of the ANC as an entry point and continuing reference point in my discussion. I would like to make clear, though, that this strategy only serves to elucidate the systematic logics that seemed to have hijacked the radical project of autonomy. Much of my discussion will center on the economic aspects of South Africa’s post-apartheid history for the simple reason that first, it is generally argued and assumed that in South Africa political autonomy seems to have been achieved, and secondly, at a time when global economic turbulences have left orthodoxy in intellectual and practical tatters, this is an area of discussion that forms the site of some of most South Africa’s (and beyond) recent and future contradictions.

This article builds on many discussions and interviews with South African self-identified progressive intellectuals who are situated in critical relation to the current policies of the ANC. Many of the people I interviewed agreed on condition of anonymity, and it is for this reason that some quotations are not explicitly attributed. All of the
discussions took place between November 2006 and February 2008, that is, the months in which the battle for Thabo Mbeki’s succession was in full swing. These were also the months that saw the vehement debates surrounding current ANC president Jacob Zuma’s potential presidency of the South African state, including hard-hitting accusations of fraud and his rape trial in 2006. Criticisms of Mbeki and official ANC policies toward Zimbabwe’s ZANU-PF and the regime of Robert Mugabe were at their peak, while condemnations of Mbeki’s “African renaissance” and AIDS policies had already been going on for years. In December 2007, all of these criticisms and events culminated in a drama-filled 52nd ANC meeting in Polokwane. At that meeting Jacob Zuma, who shares a long and complicated political and personal history with Thabo Mbeki, was elected president of the ANC, putting him in a key position to become South Africa’s president in the national elections that happened occurred in April 2009. In a spectacular aftermath to the palace revolution that happened in Polokwane, on September 28, 2008, Mbeki resigned as president of South Africa, while former trade unionist and member of the ANC’s militant wing Umkonto we Sizwe (loosely translated as “Spear of the Nation”) Kgalema Motlanthe assumed the position of interim-president. In the meantime, the potential presidency of Jacob Zuma was viewed with an almost equal mix of enthusiasm and suspicion. While South Africa’s intellectuals, as well as the black and white middle classes, view Zuma with obvious hints of misgivings, he is embraced by many disaffected black youths, traditionalists, trade unionists, and socialists as a potentially left-leaning president who will make good on the ANC’s liberation promises. If and how this will be the case remains to be seen.
In the meantime, especially in South Africa’s critical press and discourse, there exists a widening gap between ANC party politics and the grassroots. There exists consensus among progressive thinkers in South Africa that globalization has become synonymous with neoliberalism, unfettered growth, and aggressive modernization, often to the detriment of the poor. Critics distinguish between the globalization of the economy and of the people (Bond 2000), with the latter harking back to a tradition of pan-African and internationalist anti-colonization struggle, as well as the formation of an international anti-apartheid movement. It is from this tradition that South Africa’s new and independent social movements draw their energies and the struggle will continue. In the spirit of keeping some possibilities open, toward the end of the article I draw attention to these movements which take a multiplicity of forms, including grassroots organizing. Asked if the struggle will continue (a luta continua), the answer has been clear: It will continue as it always has, for long decades.

A Short History of the Making of Neoliberalism in South Africa (or the Mbeki Project)

The ANC’s “long walk to freedom” entails a long history of dissent, including protest marches, defiance campaigns, exile, formation of underground structures, incommensurate and competing strategies and ideologies, fierce discussions, imprisonment, torture, death, and militant actions. When in 1990 the ANC emerged from almost four decades of underground existence, it largely consisted of four distinct strands with entirely different political cultures. First, many of the exiles were urbane intellectuals like South Africa’s future president Thabo Mbeki, who had attained political
maturity in the capitals of the world, operating in utmost secrecy and under the highest standards of discipline to reduce the constant danger of infiltration by apartheid spies. By necessity, decisions were frequently taken by a few key leaders and conveyed on a strict need-to-know basis. Crucially, the exiles controlled the ANC’s financial, intelligence, and military networks, and any future leader would need their support. Second, the “elders” included Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki (Thabo Mbeki’s father), Harry Gwala, and others who had served long terms of imprisonment on Robben Island. In spite of fierce political differences, they had developed a highly consensual style that canvassed the broadest possible opinion, no matter how long it took, before any decisions were made. Third, the internal wing, or “inziles,” had been represented by the United Democratic Front (UDF) since 1983, and encompassed trade unions, civic and church groups, and women’s, student, and parent organizations. Their style was one of grassroots consultation, mandate by the masses, and robust political debates. The fourth group consisted of the members of Umkontho we Sizwe. Operating from camps in countries such as Angola, Tanzania, and Zambia, they adapted their political styles to the harsh conditions of guerilla warfare, with the command structure functioning as a tight and disciplined military unit. Their support lay firmly with the exiles. When the ANC set about regrouping after it was unbanned, Thabo Mbeki, ANC president Oliver Tambo’s right-hand man in exile, emerged as one of the ANC’s leaders. The powerful exile and ANC security nexus was sure that Mbeki, who had spent twenty-eight years in exile (Sussex, Moscow, London, Lagos, and Lusaka), would protect their interests.

Thabo Mbeki’s spectacular climb to ANC leadership and South African presidency was a combination of birth, luck, intelligence, and ruthlessness. Yet, perhaps
ultimately, it was the assassination by right-wingers in 1993 of the tremendously popular South African Communist Party (SACP) general secretary Martin Thembisile Hani, aka Chris Hani, that opened the door for Mbeki to capture the presidency. Until his death, Hani had much of the support of the exiles and MK for him. He was the protégé of legendary SACP chairman Joe Slovo, revered by the radical youth, and gifted with charisma and intelligence. In 1990, with Oliver Tambo’s health failing and Nelson Mandela chosen to succeed him as leader of the ANC, it was a foregone conclusion within the tripartite alliance of the ANC, SACP, and COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) that either Hani or Mbeki would be the next leader. The violent death of Hani solved that question. Although Mbeki lacked a strong popular base both within the organizations and in South Africa, was seldom seen at branch meetings, declined many party speaking engagements, kept a low media profile, and made no effort to canvass popular support amid the sprawling communities of South Africa’s homeless and landless (where, for example, Chris Hani was a familiar figure), he was known (if not liked) for his diplomatic and negotiating skills. Combined with a penchant for secrecy, Mbeki’s critics outside and within the ANC have argued that it was this ability that has led to South African macroeconomic restructuring and the ANC’s general closeness to business and not the poor.

Under the direction of Oliver Tambo in the mid-1980s, the ANC began to co-ordinate diplomatic campaigns and to pursue a controversial strategy to involve more white South Africans in anti-apartheid activities. There existed at that time a widespread feeling among ANC-cadres that the armed struggle was unproductive, and that new tactics needed to be considered. Initial meetings between Mbeki and leading white South
African businessmen were clandestine, as were the Mbeki-led ANC delegations with apartheid National Intelligence Services in 1987. After returning to South Africa in 1990 – and while Nelson Mandela and COSATU leader Cyril Ramaphosa led the constitutional negotiations in public – the Mbeki-led economic talks took place in camera, allowing the centrists free rein on compromise. When confronted by ANC leaders asking for report backs, Mbeki downplayed the discussions as technical and administrative.

Among ANC leaders, there was a strangely naïve expectation that the abolition of apartheid in itself would put an end to black economic deprivation, or that it would be sufficient to “deal with the economic question once the democratic government was in place.” Indeed, nationalization was the single view on which ANC economic policy rested. In a statement following his release from prison Nelson Mandela said:

“Nationalization of the mines, banks, and monopoly industry is the policy of the ANC, and a change or modification of our views in this regard is inconceivable.” While the majority of ANC members shared this view (with many equating capitalism with apartheid), the ANC had undergone a dramatic shift towards economic conservatism by 1994.

Left-wing critics such as William Gumede and Naomi Klein argue that at the beginning of the 1990s Mandela may have still had the power to reject these deals. Like all of the “elders,” Nelson Mandela came from a generation of African nationalists who used the iconic Freedom Charter, which calls for public ownership, as their economic and moral touchstone. For months after his release from Pollsmoor Prison, Mandela faithfully continued to refer to the articles of the Charter. The specter of nationalization deeply alarmed South Africa’s business world, however, and eventually became such an
albatross that Mbeki, senior ANC strategists, and the influential Brenthurst Group (named after the private estate of mining giant Anglo-American’s CEO Harry Oppenheimer) suggested that Mandela should refrain from all public references to the concept. In contrast, quite a few ANC leaders expected post-apartheid South Africa to benefit from something similar to the Marshall Plan, the US-led initiative to rebuild Germany after the Second World War. This thinking was based on the fact that many Western countries and corporations had been complicit in extending apartheid’s lifespan through direct or indirect economic support for the regime. This notion, however, was quickly squashed when Western governments made it plain that the best the ANC might expect was a deluge of foreign investment if South Africa applied orthodox, market-friendly economic policies. In 1992, under vehement protests and accused of betraying the Freedom Charter, Mandela boldly proposed that the ANC should abandon nationalization. The then-leadership of the ANC emphatically rejected the idea. Alec Erwin – then still firmly on the left – angrily stated that COSATU objected to privatization as an alternative to nationalization. The tensions over economic policies between the ANC and its partners on the left threatened to imperil the negotiations.

Prior to 1994, the majority of the tripartite alliance members believed that an ANC government’s economic policy would be based on those of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, or Cuba. When constitutional negotiations got underway in South Africa, however, several governments that had evolved from former liberation movements in the developing world were in deep economic crisis. One of the problems, as “struggle hero,” former communist and ANC negotiator Sathyandranath Ragunanan “Mac” Maharaj explains: “there were no examples to learn from or use as a guide […] We could not go it
alone. Countries that [once] did, such as Sweden, had the space to do so with the Cold War still raging and the world being bipolar. The ANC came to power at the end of the Cold War in a unipolar world. We had no room to maneuver.” In one interview, SACP general secretary Jeremy Cronin made clear: “The triumph of neo-liberalism was as its zenith in the early 1990s. So for a combination of reasons, including the sheer power, the ideological and hegemonic power of the neo-liberal model and the weakness of the left, which may have been with us through the twentieth century, but had become apparent in the 1990s, whether from panic or deep concern, laden with the responsibilities of governing, they were persuaded of certain aspects, not necessarily the whole package. The core aspects of the neo-liberal paradigm became very influential in government circles and in leading parts of the ANC.” In addition, they were aware of the experience of African states which had chosen to deviate from established economic models, such as Tanzania under Julius Nyerere and Egypt under Gamal Abdel-Nasser, and continued to suffer from “underdevelopment”. This situation made it easier for the centrists in the ANC to push for policies that appealed to a broader public.

When apartheid ended, the ANC needed to attain three goals simultaneously: constitutional democracy, industrial modernization, and economic and social reform. Having spent more than three decades in underground, the ANC had not planned for the practical implementation of anything except assuming power after centuries of colonialism and oppression. As many internal critics have conceded, the ANC was guilty of grievous omissions especially since it had never done its homework on the internal dynamics of South Africa’s relatively developed industrial economy. Most studies were confined to the economies of Vietnam, Cuba, Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe – all
foreign to the character of South Africa’s existing model. At the same time, international and local business groups churned out sophisticated and ready-made economic scenarios and lined up selected foreign economists to give orthodox opinions, which were widely quoted in the press. Most of the times, supporters of redistribution were portrayed as members of a “loony left,” while praise was lavished on centrists. It was an onslaught for which the ANC as a whole was extremely poorly prepared. Treated as the government-in-waiting, key economic leaders were regularly ferried to the head offices of international organizations, taking part in abbreviated executive trainings at foreign business schools, investment banks, economic policy think tanks and the World Bank, where they were “fed a steady diet of neo-liberal ideas” (Adelzadeh 1996). When the leadership of the SACP and COSATU was growing increasingly nervous, both Mandela and Mbeki warned that strikes during the constitutional negotiations were not only “destabilizing and unhelpful in coming to a negotiated settlement with representatives of the National Party” (Gumede 2007: 89). But also they were reinforcing perceptions of the ANC as a militant organization. Both Mandela and Mbeki were careful to show the ANC as a responsible government-in-waiting.

In September 1993, COSATU convened a special national congress to debate the adoption of a reconstruction and development programme (RDP), which would be presented to the ANC. The intention was that COSATU would persuade the ANC to adopt the programme as its election platform, and in this they would succeed. Although the final RDP document adopted by the ANC was revised many times in an attempt to make it more acceptable to the business community, it retained the core elements of the COSATU proposals. It famously promised a “better life for all” in the form of a million
houses over a five-year period, basic services such as electricity and water, and free education for the previously disadvantaged. In a way, the RDP marked a temporary return by the ANC to its initial strategy of growth through redistribution.

Seeking to avoid upsetting South Africa’s and the international business world, the Mandela-Mbeki axis in the ANC leadership continued to be keen to present packages of compromise economic proposals that would and could break logjams in negotiations, and reassure white, local, and international business that the ANC was capable of running South Africa’s massive state machine. Among the costliest agreements reached at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) was the honoring of contracts for public servants. The so-called sunset clause that protected apartheid-era employees from wholesale retrenchment was designed to prevent upset state employees from destabilizing the transition from apartheid to democracy, but the costs were exorbitant. One of the most far-reaching compromises agreed to by the ANC guaranteed the full benefits for all public servants who wished to leave voluntarily, imposing a huge financial burden on the incoming government. ANC land reform policies were based on the World Bank’s 1993 willing-buyer, willing-seller principle, protection of private property, and market-related compensation for expropriations. The intention was to ensure stability in the rural areas, maintaining the existing white commercial farmers and extending black commercial farming, with scant attention being paid to redistribution of land to subsistence farmers or impoverished communities in the bleak rural areas so that they could at least produce their own food. As part of a market-confidence-boosting measure, the ANC negotiators also agreed to repay the apartheid government’s foreign debt to commercial banks, and accepted guarantor responsibility for more than $25 billion owed by para-state bodies.. In
1994, South Africa’s national debt stood at Rand 190 billion. By March 1999 it had ballooned to Rand 376 billion.

There has been a perception, even among the more radical and left-leaning members of the liberation movement, that the ANC had little choice but to accept the responsibility for the debt incurred by the apartheid regime: “We had to be careful not to leave important people disgruntled. This would have been a source of instability, something we could not afford.” Although the hope had been the ANC’s agreement to pay the debt would elicit a positive response from the market, it also quickly became clear that “the business community did not trust the black government. They thought we were a bunch of radical revolutionaries, bent on pursuing the communist policies of the Soviet Union and likely to go the same way as liberation movements that had become governments in the rest of Africa” (Mac Maharaj, interviewed by William Gumede). In particular the business community was looking for more assurances and guarantees that the SACP and COSATU could not force nationalization on the country. A new economic strategy focused entirely on growth would be an acceptable guarantee. The only possible solution, Mandela and other ANC officials argued, was to accept economic policies in line with the Washington Consensus. In July 1995, after a tide of COSATU-directed strikes had washed over the country, Mandela instructed his cabinet to make economic growth a top priority, focus on macroeconomic growth, and inspire business confidence. As a response, the controversial Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) initiative was launched in June 1996.

GEAR marked a dramatic departure from the foundations of the RDP. While critics within the ANC and on the left were told that GEAR was a stabilization package
that the government was forced to adopt following the collapse of the rand earlier in the year (in February 1996 the rand had plunged 20 per cent against the US dollar within a few weeks), the ANC leadership promoted GEAR to business and international finance organizations as a radical shift in the government’s economic strategy compelled by a thorough reassessment of its earlier policies. GEAR recommended (and has realized) the almost complete privatization of non-essential state-owned corporations and the partial privatization of others. It called for wage restraints by organized labor and the introduction of regulated flexibility in the labor market. It promised lower inflation and trade liberalization, and the removal of most tariffs and other forms of protection. Since its release, GEAR has been subject to extremely harsh criticism, both by COSATU, the SACP, and a number of South African left-wing intellectuals. The crux of almost each criticism which I heard and about which I read has been the radical downsizing of the public sector.

**Black Economic Empowerment**

Currently, South Africa is one of the most divided societies in the world. On the one hand, in 2007, the number of South Africans classified as “dollar millionaires” jumped to more than 48500 of all races. In that year, 5073 new dollar millionaires, a third of them women, joined this expanding club. In itself, this individual wealth might not matter much, but the other side of the coin is that 22 million South Africans, most of them black, eke out an existence in abject poverty. Almost 10 percent of the country’s top 20 percent of high earners are black, compared with only 2 percent in 1990. But there is
scant evidence that empowerment has done more than allow a small clique of black South Africans to acquire a significant portion of some of the country’s largest companies.

One goal of the ANC was to get the economy going. In 1997 the government launched Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), a strategy devised to redress the inequalities of apartheid by giving previously disadvantaged groups (black Africans, Coloreds, Indians, and Chinese (declared to be Black on June 2008) who are SA citizens economic opportunities previously not available to them. It was launched by the South African government to include measures such as Employment Equities, skills development, ownership, management, socio-economic development and preferential procurement. The way the government promoted BEE, however, created a negative perception to start. Damningly, BEE has since come to be associated with a small and elite group, out to make as much money as they can at the expense of the broader black society. As one response, in 2005 the ANC announced a fresh effort to make empowerment more broad-based, moving away from equity ownership as a criterion for BEE towards a more balanced approach, in which affirmative procurement, skills and small business development counted as BEE. Since then, the effects of BEE have started to become more broad-based, though they remain a far cry from being of benefit to the poor.

Even for the ANC, BEE ranks as a disappointment. Establishing a black middle and business class was important as a bulwark against pressure from labor and the poverty-stricken masses for more expansionist policies. Thabo Mbeki has argued that one of the reasons for the failure of African countries to develop, compared to East Asia, is that Africans did not deliberately try to establish a national bourgeoisie or middle class
who spent their money in developing countries at home, rather than abroad. Many post-
liberation African societies continued to feature a small rich elite, often connected to the 
ruling elite and the poor masses, with a small class sandwiched between. Mbeki also sees 
BEE as crucial for the formation of a black capitalist class, which he believes is the key 
to a non-racial South African society.

Since the term was first introduced in the early 1990s, there have been two key 
interpretations of BEE. The first is a rather narrow view, confined to the creation of a 
new black capitalist or business class in post-apartheid South Africa. The assumption was 
that, once such a class had been established, benefits would trickle down to the poor. This 
approach emphasized increased proportional representation of previously disadvantaged 
groups, as well as the career mobility and advancement of blacks through managerial, 
professional, and business ranks. Essentially, this view focuses on promotion of a new 
class of wealthy and powerful American movers through the media and big business, and 
has become the accepted public interpretation of BEE.

The second interpretation of BEE is far broader, and includes the economic and 
social development of black society as a whole. Following initial outrage over “narrow” 
development, Mbeki instructed senior ANC and government economists to find a more 
appropriate model. The result was the Black Economic Empowerment Commission 
(BEECom), set up by former COSATU-leader Cyril Ramaphosa. Two years later, 
BEECom produced a report that accepted the broad definition of black empowerment. 
The SACP and COSATU lobbied the commission heavily to include the broader 
definition of BEE. Not surprisingly, the government’s economic mandarins received the
report with skepticism, and Trevor Manuel dismissed it as short on detail and reading
“like a text out of the Communist Manifesto.”

Political Centralization

According to Jean and John Comaroff (2005), what has come to pass in South
Africa is an “age of ID-eology.” What this term partially describes is the transformation
of the ANC from a broad-based liberation movement to a governing political party, with
centrist political, social, and economic policies firmly oriented towards the market.
Ideologically, the ANC has always been what its members call a “broad church,”
sheltering under its umbrella myriad political hues: liberals, Christian democrats,
communists, socialists, social democrats, African nationalists, and Africanists. And
although this has been true since its foundation in 1912, the ANC bears scant
resemblance after roughly fifteen years in government to the liberation movement that
has endured decades of vilification and suppression by the apartheid regime. In 2006,
COSATU stated that there were “signs that we may be drifting towards dictatorship” and
the SACP criticized Mbeki’s “overly centralized presidency” (Legassick 2007: 520). In
the words of someone with whom I talked, “radical democracy has clearly become the
victim.” Another person charged that “[Mbeki] has shown a dangerous tendency to
prejudge and label potential organizational opposition and dissenting political viewpoints
within the alliance as inherently negative and undermining the movement.”

Since the ANC assumed power in 1994, its internal political culture has changed
radically. In fact, critics have charged that the ANC approaches what Anthony Giddens
(1994) has called a “radical centre,” that is, the shedding of ideology as excess political
baggage. For example, branches used to be the heartbeat of the party, serving roles not unlike those of community organizations or churches. Members could secure support for anything from funerals to administrative headaches, such as registering a birth, or just enjoy forms of human solidarity. Now most of community-building has changed and the top echelon of the party has adopted the colder formalism of a business operation. Appointments must be made, ID documents produced. Often the leaders are too busy with “national concerns” to spend time with members. Voices of the opposition, especially left opposition, are increasingly ignored. Where the ANC was concerned, Mbeki seemed to demand centralized control and an absence of dissent, with recalcitrant critics being ruthlessly marginalized. Critics both within and outside of the ANC argue that the presidency resembles a royal court, with minions jockeying for position and jostling one another to gain access to the king. SACP members likened his leadership style to that of a “Napoleon Bonaparte or a Caesar standing above the ANC,” and lament the fact that Mbeki (much like Mandela) used his presidential office and prestige to “override” the ANC’s alliance partners and even grassroots opinions.

Since Mbeki’s presidency, South Africa’s electoral process has discouraged dissent in party ranks, as members of parliament are appointed from party lists rather than being elected to an individual basis. This process strengthened Mbeki’s hand in maintaining party discipline, as he could strike names off the list at will or redeploy fractious MPs. Many members from the moderate left and political centre formerly associated with the United Democratic Front in the 1980s and spanning the ideological divide of the ANC alliance, have been systematically neutralized, and since the ANC does not have a policy of competitive election of leaders, internal democracy has been
stamped out. In addition, Mbeki was particularly aggressive in marginalizing provincial leaders whom he perceives as rivals or having the potential to build a mass following that could be used to take on the centrists.

From an official ANC perspective, of course, the argument has been one of internal modernization, with the ultimate goal to transform the ANC from a liberation movement to an effective election machine. The creation of more bureaucratic structures, of course, also brought about changes in the way in which the party imagines its apparatus and itself. As a response, there has been a push to restore internal democracy within the ANC. In the drive for greater transparency and accountability that began at the ANC’s national policy conference in 2007, ordinary ANC members insisted that the ANC National Executive Committee regularly monitor the performance of ministers, senior civil servants, and politicians, such as premiers and mayors. On the one hand, this shows that ordinary members have become acutely aware of the dangers of vesting much unconstrained power in one office. On the other hand, it also shows the growing disaffection within the ANC – a dissatisfaction that eventually led to Mbeki’s ousting.

A Possibility For Autonomy?

In contemporary South Africa, there seems to exist the sense that both COSATU and the SACP are mere shadows of themselves. Within the context of the current ANC, the trade unions, for example, are not viewed –as in the past – as privileged allies with an exclusive access to government, but as social partners, more like business, which need to compete like any other organization for the ANC’s ear. As one response, both COSATU and the SACP have refocused their energies to tackle the ANC on black economic
empowerment and Zimbabwe, two important strategic issues for South Africa’s left. And it is also certainly true that both issues affect ordinary black South Africans deeply. As many are upset that a handful of well-connected elitists are amassing vast fortunes while the majority suffers continued economic deprivation, many black South Africans, for example, feel imminently threatened by the influx of Zimbabwean refugees. COSATU and the SACP intend capitalizing on public dissatisfaction over BEE and Zimbabwe, hoping that these issues will allow them to succeed where their campaigns against GEAR and privatization have failed.

In addition, and with the ANC repositioned at the political centre, the SACP and COSATU, with the latter perhaps still the most organized alliance strategy in the country, have been driven into a corner. The question faced by their membership is if the unions and the SACP should move further left, or adopt a more pragmatic position around the political centre? To date, the trade union federation is split between the pragmatist centrists and what Mbeki himself called the “ultra-leftist tendency.” For a while, it seemed as if the pragmatists should hold sway, but COSATU’s left and mass membership turned increasingly outraged at what it saw as compromises with business. However, by December 2007 COSATU’s public support for then-demoted former deputy president Jacob Zuma had ripped the organization apart and reconfigured its internal politics. Following on the heels of Jacob Zuma’s rape trial and quest for the presidency, COSATU president Willie Madisha admitted “that [these scenarios) have created permanent seeds of suspicion, and hatred,” and a willingness among comrades to physically harm their fellow comrades. As one consequence, the trade union federation split into three parts: the pragmatist wing split into those who either support or oppose Zuma’s presidential
candidacy. The third group opposed both Mbeki and Zuma on the grounds that neither had adequate leftist credentials. The ANC’s succession battles divided the unionists to such an extent that COSATU’s largest federation, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), warned that COSATU might lose its status as the most coherent, influential, and organized social force in South Africa.

The political vacuum to the left of the ANC has, in fact, been partly filled by social movements, most of which are community-based, and vary in size, focus, and influence. What unites them, though, is a common determination to address the problems of their communities, a strong aversion to political and corporate bullying, insensitive government bureaucracies and greed, and a focus on townships, squatter camps, and rural settlements. They raise their voices over issues of direct concern to the poor -- HIV/AIDS, evictions, power and water cut-offs, retrenchments, privatization, and calls for the repudiation of apartheid debt. Many of their methods are those once successfully used by the ANC: pamphlets, house visits, marches and defiance campaigns, and a predilection to stage their most visible protests in traditional ANC strongholds. Much of the protests are organized around the failures of social deliverance, especially in the areas of water, electricity, housing, and jobs. Perhaps not surprisingly, all of these movements are outside the ANC, seeking to build new and productive alliances with other social and independent movements around the globe.

One of the first and most successful new social movements in the “new” South Africa was the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), combating the ANC government’s reluctance to distribute antiretrovirals against the HIV/AIDS epidemic by a combination of mass demonstrations and court actions. In Gauteng in 2000, the Anti-Privatisation
Forum (APF) was launched on the basis of student struggles against the privatization of tertiary education and opposition by the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) and communities to the privatization of municipal utilities. A powerful affiliate was the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, led by former (expelled) ANC councilor Trevor Ngwane and launched to resist electricity cut-offs for non-payment which in 2001 were running at R 20000 a month. Subsequently, movements arose to resist the installation of prepaid water meters. In Durban, resistance against evictions in the townships of Chatsworth led to the formation of civic groups in other townships and to the formation of the Concerned Citizens Forum as a coordinating body in July 2001. In the sprawling townships on the Cape Flats, most notably Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, Tafelsig, and Mandela Park, similar movements have been on their way. The chief form of protest of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (WCAEC) is moving into an area where evictions are pending, staging sit-ins to obstruct official councils from carrying out the evictions, and helping evicted residents to reoccupy their homes immediately. For many of these residents, the government has created nothing more than “empty promises.” The Landless People’s Movements, Abahlali baseMjondolo, has been concerned with issues of land restitution.

Although most critics recognize an orientation to the rank and file of COSATU, SACP, and the ANC, they see as the most immediate need the task to link up with the spontaneous service delivery struggles and other struggles emerging in the communities. What is called for is a strategy that essentially forces unionized workers to respond, politically, to intensify mass struggles from the very grassroots and communities that workers are also part of. What is needed is the (re) politicization of unionized workers
through the parallel socialist politicization and organization of those struggles. The creation of a more meaningful strategic approach does not hinge itself on whether COSAT does, or does not, break from the ANC/SACP, but begins to lay the political and organizational groundwork for a new form of socialist politics, whether a “workers’ party or otherwise…by strategically linking the ongoing struggles of various layers of the “mass” (in urban and/or rural working class communities, etc.) with the struggles of organized workers (not simply COSATU), and in so doing, exposing the political sterility of the ANC/SACP. It is almost so that the ANC that played such an important role in the making of liberation it has become an obstacle to its completion/fulfillment. Hence the emergence of ANC/SACP/COSATU-independent movements; hence the renewed call for a “democratic revolution.”

There seems to be a consensus that it is unlikely that the ANC will assume its former movement character to address popular demands. As for its former motivations and ideals, what seems to be in question is the very idea of autonomy itself. Nearly all proponents of South Africa’s new social movements argue that what is needed is the creation of a new imaginary, an imaginary that equally speaks to the tradition of the great emancipatory struggles but also takes into consideration the demands of the poor. In effect, the hope is that such a project would challenge what Patrick Bond (2005: 83) has called “reformist reformism”: that is, reforms that do not challenge economic, social, and political structures that reproduce inequality, but which actually reinforce them. In effect, such a project would begin to build the anti-hegemonic structures – be they embodied in the party, in socialist ideology, or elsewhere – for which so many South Africans long.
References


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