



# Reconstituting Activism at the Borders of Contemporary South Africa

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Debates about the meaning(s) of activism have been perennial pre-occupations in post-authoritarian/undemocratic societies such as South Africa. There are those who insist that the attainment of formal political emancipation renders struggle and activism superfluous and anachronistic. Yet, the political realities of contemporary society have produced new struggles causing participants therein to argue for a resurrection of radical activism. In South Africa proponents of these divergent positions have used the anti-apartheid struggle as the primary historical reference to gain legitimacy. Both pivot on the crucial question of the appropriateness in a democratic South Africa of the kind of radical and popular activism that defeated white minority rule. With this in mind, how may one comprehend the evolution of activism in the unchartered terrain of formal democracy in South Africa? In this brief paper I intend to address this question by proposing that two dominant imaginings and practices of activism have taken shape, and although they have certain distinctive features, also share several common traits. An important arena in which each has been reconstituted over the past decade and a half has been the context of the creation of contentious local spaces and politics. This process has affected the potential for new forms of activism to transcend the ideological borders of the politics of parochialism and nationalism.



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## Complex Uncertainties

Under apartheid the enemy was clearly identifiable and the political rationale underpinning activism unquestionable. These certainties have disappeared in the post-apartheid era, much as they have in other "transition" societies, and have consequently unsettled a principal framework that shaped activism for generations. Political activism may have a set of universal and trans-historical attributes such as commitment to a cause, willingness to engage in struggle, self-sacrifice or the pursuit of contentious politics, but its particular manifestations and meanings nevertheless vary across space and time, and are especially affected by the specificities of political contexts. South Africa's political landscape has obviously been transformed and is now characterised by a greater complexity and fluidity than before, a situation that poses novel challenges to activists – old and new – as they struggle to find their political moorings in the new order.

It is worth noting some of the salient features that are configuring the political context within which activism is being forged and reconstituted. Post-apartheid society has undoubtedly brought about profound democratic reforms and various social benefits for the black majority. Nonetheless, the main beneficiaries of what various critical scholars have called an "elite transition" have been the established white elite plus a small class of black *nouveau riche*. This crucial aspect of modern South Africa has entrenched pre-existing social cleavages and has contributed to making South Africa the most unequal society in the world. Unemployment is estimated to be at least 30 %, and affects mainly poor black youth; squatter settlements continue to proliferate; income levels have remained stubbornly depressed for the majority and the country ranks very low on almost every global social development index (eg. education, health). The provision of housing and other services has been uneven at best, and has generally fallen short of meeting basic needs. Consequently local contestations have been generated between different constituencies over (seemingly) limited resources and public goods, in which process claims over such resources have typically been premised on assertions of authenticity, belonging and citizenship. The resultant generation of a politics of exclusion, pivoting on the production of insiders and outsiders, has become a feature of new forms of activism.

Despite this multi-faceted and deep social crisis, the African National Congress remains the dominant political party. Building on its reputation as the movement of liberation and the putative guarantor of "a better life" for the poor, the ruling party has strengthened its grip on state power, as is evident in its impressive electoral victories since 1994, which also reflects a phenomenon common to many postcolonial societies.

But lurking beneath the surface of this political hegemony is mounting and widespread evidence of dissatisfaction with the status quo. One manifestation of this has been an almost routine war of words between the ruling party and its trade union allies over a range of issues, especially on the state's penchant for neoliberal

macro-economic policies. A far more profound source of contestation, however, has been the explosion over the past decade of struggles in impoverished black areas (townships and squatter camps). Between 2004 and 2008 thousands of protests occurred annually, placing the country in pole position of popular protests in the world. Conventionally labelled as “service delivery protests”, this wave of local uprisings has challenged the state’s failure to provide proper housing and other basic services to the vast swathes of the population who remain marginalised and excluded.

This movement from below represented the high point of a resurgent activism that had its genesis in the international proliferation of struggles against neo-liberal globalisation. Numerous local (new) social movements were spawned in the process and led the mobilisation of major campaigns against the privatisation of public goods (especially water and electricity), for decent housing, in defence of land occupations, and against the proliferation of clientelism and patronage politics in the state that has resulted in widespread and debilitating corruption. The Anti-Privatisation Forum, Abahlali baseMjondolo, the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and the Social Movements Indaba have been among the most prominent of these new social movements. They may be viewed as the local counterparts of a global movement that has crafted a political identity and a semblance of coherence in the spaces of the World Social Forum. Inspired by international struggles (eg. indigenous movements in Latin America and the massive anti-globalisation protests in northern cities), these social movements executed novel forms of struggle such as direct action, land and housing occupations, internet solidarity campaigns and so forth.

The period since the late 1990s also witnessed the emergence of what may be termed social justice movements, which shared many of the characteristics of the burgeoning social movements but were also distinctive in important respects. Some of them launched campaigns around specific rights-based issues, while others utilised the law against powerful institutions, including the government and corporations that were perceived in their policies or actions to undermine the country’s constitution (or international conventions). Whereas the new social movements typically espouse strident anti-African National Congress (ANC) rhetoric, many of the local social justice movements have cultivated a critical association with the ANC alliance. NGOs, often linked to global funding networks, tend to be at the core of these movements. Perhaps the most significant example of this kind of movement is the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), which waged a successful campaign that combined astute advocacy, legal strategy and community mobilisation for access to anti-retrovirals in the struggle to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Both the aforementioned movements consist of and have often been led by activists from the anti-apartheid era. However, they have also been characterised by an influx of a new generation of activists, most notably women who have suffered disproportionately from the socio-economic crisis. Other marginalised and

excluded groups, including migrants, gays & lesbians, casual workers and the homeless have also been drawn into these movements. Although the youth and unemployed have also been present, they have arguably not yet emerged as the primary activists, at least not on the same scale or with the same political influence as in the uprisings sweeping across North Africa.

## **Two Traditions**

What is evident from the admittedly attenuated description above is that struggle and activism did not end in 1994. On the contrary, there have been crucial continuities with the liberation struggle. In attempting to make sense of this process, it is important to distinguish between two different forms of activism that have imprinted themselves on contemporary politics. First, the ANC and its alliance partners (the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Union) play a critical role in the ways in which activism is imagined and practiced. The ruling party argues that it remains the authentic bearer of the historical traditions of activism, which notion in fact draws heavily on the iconic image of the revolutionary as an armed young black man. Here the defining attributes of an activist are arguably discipline and adherence to a party line, which is influenced heavily by the traditions of the Communist Party, as well as the experience of political exile. It is an activism embedded in hierarchical politics and, not surprisingly, has transferred rather effortlessly into the state. The erstwhile revolutionary figure is now in power and is of course subjected to the discipline of the state, but is still nevertheless cast in the role of activist with the increasingly nebulous agendas that make only perfunctory gestures in the direction of transformation. This exercise of disciplining eviscerates activism of some of its essential characteristics, namely, of being critical and disrupting hegemonic powers.

Second, a more innovative, disruptive and dynamic form of activism has emanated from the new social movements. It is an activism defined by a non-hierarchical approach of political engagement, of promoting disruption, “speaking truth to power”, mobilising direct action and attempting, albeit with uneven success, to create spaces where poor communities can define their own politics and repertoires of struggle. Many of the activists in these movements have only tenuous connections to the ANC, or any other party for that matter. Others are explicitly contemptuous of party politics. A significant, and often unacknowledged, contribution made by these movements is that they have opened spaces in which ordinary citizens, the majority of whom retain varying degrees of residual loyalty to the ANC, can speak openly and critically to the ruling party. Speaking out against a range of practices that are antithetical to the culture of activism of the 1980s, such as the abuse of power, self-enrichment, disregard and disdain for the poor, misogyny and homophobia is a difficult but critical step in the constitution of new activism.

## Making Claims

Both forms of activism outlined above draw on the history of the anti-apartheid struggle for inspiration and legitimacy. Ironically, neither makes any effort to engage the multiple experiences of past modes of activism and project a uniform and uncontested memory of struggle. In fact, their historical antecedents within the anti-apartheid struggle are quite different. Current social movements have far more in common with the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of the 1920s, the insurgent local protests of the 1940s and the civic struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, which were popular movements of the urban and rural poor and were often led by women. The tradition coveted by the ruling alliance was largely created by the educated political elite, whose history of activism has been synonymous with the development of the ANC and Communist Party. As new traditions of activism are forged it is critical, I would argue, to dispute the hegemonic constructions of memories of struggle and to disrupt narrow and partisan interpretations of anti-apartheid activism (which are designed primarily to legitimate current regimes of power) in order to free the process of constituting activism from the shackles of party and state discipline.

In the aforementioned discussion I have deliberately created a dichotomy in order to highlight some of the salient features in the two identified forms of activism. Obviously, the situation is far more complicated and complex, and there are critical overlaps between these experiences. For example, there is a tendency within both these frames to promote *ideal* types of activism/activist, albeit within different political frameworks, and to engage in “proprietary activism”, that is, to claim ownership of the supposed best form of activism and to denigrate other experiences.

## Dilemmas of Activism: On the Border Between the Local and the Global

The explosion of locality-based struggles over the past decade or so may be interpreted as generative of insurgent politics, and has been crucial in rethinking activism in South Africa. These movements have been complex and contradictory. Most often they espouse an anti-local state politics (mostly against particular councillors or practices), but simultaneously demand state intervention to provide welfare and sometimes also to instil law and order. Mass anger has been expressed at local ANC leaders, but this has not always and consistently developed into anti-ANC politics, as communities often demand the intervention of national ANC figures to resolve local problems. Although many of these struggles have focused on local issues, they do not always produce parochial politics. Thus many of these movements have self-consciously associated with broader struggles against commodification or privatisation. Importantly, they have been linked to international struggles and given substance to the mantra, “think globally, act locally”.

Nonetheless, the activism produced by these movements has at times been infected by conservative parochialism, the most egregious expression of which has

been the persistence of xenophobic violence. At the ideological level the emphasis on nation-building, a *leitmotif* of South Africa's democracy, has also been identified as a principal factor behind the mounting exclusionary attitudes and discrimination against foreign immigrants: South African citizenship has become a crucial determinant for identifying who has "legitimate" claims over rights in the country, especially for access to social rights (such as social grants, work and housing). Furthermore, the persistence of the "insider"/"outsider" cleavage in poor (mainly black) locations, which has been exacerbated in the new dispensation, has also been felt in the most radical social movements. Thus, at times, activists have defined their constituencies in exclusionary terms, and have demanded public goods only for South African (local) citizens, thereby excluding mainly other Africans from access to these goods. The xenophobic violence that engulfed many townships in May/June 2008 was emblematic of this kind of popular politics and has become a regular adjunct to local uprising since then. It is a new form of activism that stands in contradistinction to the internationalism of the anti-apartheid struggle, especially practised by the trade union movements, and also of the Africanism formally embraced by all liberation movements.

But this conservative parochialism has also generated a counter-movement in which activists deliberately articulate a politics that challenges the validity of borders, call for African-wide solidarity and challenge both the essence and effects of nationalism. And as the meaning of activism is being contested by hierarchical and non-hierarchical tendencies, one may argue that the fundamental character of South Africa's post-apartheid activism will rest on a capacity to transcend localism, challenge borders and consistently articulate internationalism.

### **Activism and the Democratic Left Front**

The recent launch in January 2011 of the Democratic Left Front (DLF) suggests the possibility of extending and consolidating the experiences of democratic and non-proprietary activism that were spawned in the new social movements. Several of us cut our activist teeth in the anti-apartheid struggle, while others came to the fore in the anti-neoliberal struggles after 1996 when the ANC formally adopted a home-grown neoliberal economic programme. Although the DLF is neither the first nor the only initiative of its kind, it is distinguishable from other efforts because it has brought together a wide range of activists from diverse and historically antagonistic political backgrounds, including activists from Trotskyist, Communist Party and Africanist traditions. Critically, the DLF has deliberately prioritised the nurturing of new forms of political practice, which, firstly does not proceed from the premise, so characteristic of left-wing movements historically, that it has the answers (a predetermined programmatic blue-print) that has to be imposed on the masses. The notion of a privileged group of educated, *über*-activists has firmly been jettisoned. Second, we see the existence of a plurality of anti-capitalist voices as a strength, and not the source of adversarial competition. Third, the DLF has brought into its orbit a wide range of grassroots movements involved in anti-capitalist struggles on various fronts, such as,

opposing evictions, homophobia, high food prices, job losses, ecological destruction, racism and xenophobia. By foregrounding an inclusive activism based on mutual respect and commitment to a continuously evolving set of political ideas and programmes of action, the DLF has potentially placed itself in the forefront of a new emancipatory activism.