

South Africa: “The Masses Are Not Protected” - Post-Apartheid Symptoms of Morbidity

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Something is dying in South Africa, and everyone’s focus is on trying to save it. Few are paying attention to what is struggling to be born. That is the nub of the crisis of post-apartheid society. In Antonio Gramsci’s words: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” [1]

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Apartheid died. Many people throughout the world helped defeat this crime against humanity when they participated in one of history’s greatest solidarity movements. Well done! But sadly, I must inform you that the job is not yet complete. The pain and suffering associated with apartheid continues. The new generations who inherit the gains of the past find that with them come continuities of oppression and exploitation.

What was apartheid in essence? Racial capitalism. Well, the ruling class continues to own and continues to rule. On August 16, 2012, thousands of miners in Marikana went on strike fighting for a living wage of R12,500 [US\$500] per month. The post-apartheid ruling class saw red. The state police shot and killed 34 of the strikers. The message was clear. Anyone who wants to end the system that guarantees the exploitation of black cheap labor in South Africa’s gold, diamond, and platinum mines must be willing to wade through a river of blood.

Nevertheless, people must be allowed to remember the greatness of the anti-apartheid movement and our role in it. We must remember the excitement and joy of the struggle of the 1980s. We must remember the spirit of youth in the Caribbean who fantasized about crossing the oceans to take up arms in support of the oppressed black people in South Africa. Workers in the United States and Europe taking boycotting action to stop the transportation of apartheid goods. We must remember what it meant to survive, share, struggle, and the gains made as we forced the regime and the capitalist class to make concessions. We must remember what it was like to feel that we were making history, that we could win real victories. All this made us braver and more determined to fight for a better future for all. For socialism.

But South Africa did not become that different future, the alternative to capitalist barbarism. Racial capitalism continues. And with it the symptoms of morbidity that Gramsci talked about. One of these

symptoms is corruption, what is popularly known as “state capture” in the country. The other is the crisis of everyday life of the working class and the poor.

Corruption Soap Opera

In 2016, Advocate Thuli Madonsela, then the country’s Public Protector, issued a report that has since left South Africa gripped in a frenzy and obsession with corruption. It was titled: “State of Capture: Report on an investigation into alleged improper and unethical conduct by the President and other state functionaries relating to alleged improper relationships and involvement of the Gupta family in the removal and appointment of Ministers and Directors of State-Owned Enterprises resulting in improper and possibly corrupt award of state contracts and benefits to the Gupta family’s businesses.” [2]

After reporting on the shenanigans of the then president of the country, Jacob Zuma, she recommended that a judicial state commission into state capture be established to cast the net wider and conduct further investigations. The country’s Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo has been conducting daily public hearings on national television for the past three years or so. Revelations and developments from the commission dominate public discourse with the image of the African National Congress (ANC), the ruling party, and of Nelson Mandela, probably irreparably tarnished.

Literary outpourings have accompanied the obsession with state capture, with books exploring its sensational aspects becoming bestsellers. The latest offering has a somewhat deeper take: Ebrahim Harvey’s *The Great Pretenders: Race and Class Under ANC Rule* (Jacana Media, 2021)

The revelations by witnesses at the Zondo Commission may sell books and enliven dinner table talk, but ultimately they are disappointing. A lasting impression is that the country, despite the idealism and dreams of the anti-apartheid struggle, is run by greedy comrades with grubby hands and groggy brains. Looting and stealing, self-enrichment, abuse of office, lies, even murder; all these and more are the ingredients of the unpalatable broth that is brewed by the ANC partly as a result of its policy of Black Economic Empowerment.

In the political dispensation negotiated between, on the one hand, the apartheid state and the capitalist class, and on the other hand, the ANC and the national liberation movement, it was ostensibly agreed that in exchange for political office, creation of a black middle class, and helping a few aspirant black bourgeoisie to join the corporate sector as bosses, private (stolen) property would be protected in the “new South Africa.” This deal is what Chris Hani, the popular leader of the South African Communist Party (SACP) who was assassinated in 1993 on the eve of liberation, reputedly warned the ANC about. He asked: “Comrades, do you want to dance with the hyena? It will chop off your hand.” It seems the capitalist hyena is intent on chopping off the ANC’s head.

It is not as if the daily hearings at the Zondo Commission are changing anything. The stealing and looting continues. Private sector price gouging is the order of the day. Covid-19 afforded the hungry comrades-turned-hyenas another avenue to pilfer. ANC-connected business people suddenly set up companies selling personal protection equipment (PPE) at inflated prices to the state, some of whose quality did not meet minimum standards. On May 26, 2021, Zweli Mkhize, the Minister of Health, announced that a R150-million (US\$10,884,212) communications contract awarded to Digital Vibes by his department had been irregular. Investigative journalists had established over several months that the minister had hidden ties to the communications consultancy, which was inflating prices, including charging millions of rands for scheduling Mkhize’s media briefings during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chris Vicks, a journalist who set up COVIDComms, a voluntary communications operation to help spread the message about Covid-19, is starting to get over his anger “at how public money was chowed in the midst of a pandemic. But I still can’t get my head around the fact that the money that was chowed was meant to save lives, to empower people in such a way that they could prevent infection and avoid transmission. It wasn’t money to market margarine—it was money to prevent sickness and death.” Some of the lives of the 55,874 dead from Covid-19 could have been saved.

How much time are they going to spend discussing who is capturing the state in the Zondo Commission? The capitalists do not need to capture it. Because it is not just a state, standing outside of history and politics. It is a capitalist state. They have already captured it. Since the days of colonialism and apartheid, it has been a state serving the capitalist class, facilitating profit-making, protecting private property.

Crisis of the Working Class and the Poor

Ordinary people see the rich and powerful looting and stealing all around them. They see them talking about it on TV. Meanwhile, ordinary working-class life is a life of crisis. Everything is a crisis: jobs, housing, services, education, income, food, healthcare, security. Every day is a struggle. For the nine million people who live in shantytowns, there is no respite. As S’bu Zikode, leader of their movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo (“The People of the Shacks”), puts it: “Our bodies itch every day because of the insects. If it is raining everything is wet—blankets and floors. If it is hot the mosquitoes and flies are always there. There is no holiday in the shacks.”

On TV, revelation upon jaw-dropping revelation are aired daily about how the state electricity company, Eskom, was mismanaged and disorganized by looters connected to the state president. Meanwhile, some black working-class communities, such as Sun Valley, Soweto, and other townships and villages, live up to nine months without electricity with the state doing nothing to help them. Instead, the victims are more likely to be blamed because of the user-must-pay mantra, which—in the light of Eskom’s debt crisis—justifies less or even no service at all to the poor.

When the World Bank’s latest report states that: “South Africa remains a dual economy with one of the highest, persistent inequality rates in the world, with a consumption expenditure Gini coefficient of 0.63 in 2015,” it is not just numbers. It is real living human beings paying the price for the capitalist economic crisis in South Africa, made worse by Covid-19, corruption, and state neglect. Black grannies living in darkness in the height of winter. Children inhaling paraffin and charcoal fumes because there is no electricity in the house.

Bourgeois Morality

The masses daily confront the contradictions of bourgeois democracy and the hypocrisies of bourgeois morality. The latter denounces some forms of corruption. Thus, it is fine to make profits, that is, to steal through ownership of private property. It is not fine to steal by grabbing the handbag of an old lady. It is fine that millions die because they are denied medical care. It is fine when millions are denied electricity when they cannot pay. But it is not fine when corruption starts to mean that law and order are undermined. Or when corruption starts to mean that there is economic inefficiency—so that when the middle class pays, they do not receive the goods. And when the middle class works hard, their savings disappear because of government decisions. It is at that point that the issue of corruption becomes a crisis.

The capitalist state epitomizes this contradiction. The public sector is not just the public sector. It is the public sector under capitalism—corrupted, commodified, commercialized. The public sector has been turned into a center of distribution of public money to the hands of the capitalist class. Some of it as profits, some of it as crude corruption.

In South Africa, as in many other parts of the world, bourgeois democracy has not satisfied the needs of the working class. The freedom of bourgeois democracy is limited. But with the defeat of apartheid, the political freedom that is being claimed is that of bourgeois democracy. The latter comes historically with limitations. They are essential to it. It is an inherently restricting impoverished political form and view of freedom. It comes with the imperative of protecting private ownership of the wealth. This means acceptance of exploitation and oppression. Protection of private property leads to continued poverty, requiring suppression of the struggle of those trying to put an end to exploitation. As such, bourgeois democracy is a diseased, limited, discriminatory, oppressive, and inadequate freedom. It is a million miles less than the freedom that human beings have imagined in the course of their struggles for freedom.

Capitalist Crisis

There was a time in history when capitalism was young, lively, and growing. That time has passed. Today's generations must live with a system in crisis. There is and has been for a long time a rolling capitalist crisis. The 2008 crash was an aspect of it. The truth is, capitalists and capitalist governments cannot resolve their crisis. And the social force that has the power to institute an alternative economic order, the working-class movement, is not organized politically to resolve that crisis through the seizure of power.

It is primarily a crisis of profits. The predicament is how to manage the crises of everyday life. From the capitalists' point of view, it is a problem of how to impose the costs of the crisis on the working class. From the capitalist states' point of view, it is how to maintain law and order in a system that is increasingly failing to deliver on its promise of political rights and economic prosperity for all.

As the capitalist system loses its vitality, so does bourgeois democracy. It gets increasingly exhausted, limited, distorted. We have seen struggles for democracy such as in the Arab Spring and struggles for the deepening and extension of democracy such as by the Occupy Movement. This includes various other protest mobilizations in the world, not least in South Africa, which at one time claimed to be the "protest capital of the world." The South African experience in this regard provides a lesson and a vantage point from which to see and understand what happened in other countries.

Despite its many protests, the South African protest movement did not challenge for state power. The protesters made demands, but it was as if the government would always be the government; the ANC would always be the governing party; there would always be a capitalist government. There was hardly a hint of "regime change." There was no popular mobilization around the call for the government to fall. There was no vision of an alternative government. A new political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, formed in 2013, projected itself as such an alternative, but its leaders have not cut their political umbilical cord with the ANC from which they split. As such, the authenticity of their ambitious claim and revolutionary aspiration are questionable.

The South African protesters were eclipsed by even more vigorous protests from other parts of the world thus losing in the "protest capital of the world" championship stakes. The power of these protests saw regimes fall, such as Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia. The call was for "free and fair elections," and indeed, there have been the elections of bourgeois democracy in these

countries. In Egypt, the military staged a coup against the democratically elected government and the mass movement was unable to stop this. In sum, the political questions of social and economic power were hardly posed let alone answered. The dictators resigned without alternative popular structures of power being instituted. There was no seizure of power by the masses. Social media, apps, and smartphones played their role in the mobilizations, but they could not govern. And so, we saw revolutions without taking power. Indeed, revolutions that ceded power.

The process of forcing governments to resign without popular structures in place meant that the result was “free and fair elections” with the repressive structures of the state left untouched. In other words, these were classic political revolutions that saw power changing hands at the top but the same social structure remaining in place. Even when the armies stood with the masses, they only promised not to shoot the protesters but had no intention of handing over their guns to them. When the revolutionary fervour subsided, some of them were ready to shoot.

In the United States last year, we saw George Floyd making history. His death spearheaded the greatest mobilization of protest in the United States if not in the world. Some of the movement’s banners and demands were or implied direct attacks on American racial capitalism and its reliance on racism and class suppression to maintain law and order. The situation raised the question of power but was hardly asked by the vast majority of the protesters. Since politics tolerates no vacuum, this was replaced by the call “Trump must go!” Booting this douchebag out was good but not good enough.

As the working class and the poor are realizing in South Africa from the truth of their own lives, the problem with the ANC is not just this leader or that leader. Jacob Zuma is gone, but the crisis continues. Nor is it just a problem in this place or in that place. It is a problem everywhere all the time, because the ANC is a capitalist political party. It is acting to protect the capitalists. And protecting capitalists means that it is acting against workers. And when working-class organizations such as the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) are supporting the ANC, they are supporting a capitalist political organization even against workers.

There is a pattern in the world where mass anger is directed against neoliberalism. And there are attempts to revive social democracy, or bring social democratic solutions. But what does this mean in the context of a rolling capitalist crisis, which capitalism cannot resolve? It is not about defence and incremental gains. It is about a different way of resolving the crisis of bourgeois government. The masses are not protected. Everyday life is still filled with every problem. It becomes part of a struggle to deal with the exhaustion of bourgeois democracy, of sustaining capitalist governance.

Struggle for Power

June 16, 1976: Students in Soweto staged a mass uprising against the apartheid regime. Inspired in part by the U.S. civil rights movement, their slogan was “Black power!” Those were brave youngsters facing and fighting a murderous enemy. They showed us what is possible and, like George Floyd, the many who died among them watered the seed of liberation with their blood. In the midst of barbarism, there is a moment of possibility.

Underneath the morbid symptoms of a dying capitalism, two things never change: the need for a comfortable, safe, healthy life and everything that makes that possible; and the fact that everything that can make that possible already comes from the hands of the working class. Workers are the producers. The problem is only this: Everything is not organized and controlled and planned to meet the needs of the people; it is organized and planned and controlled to provide profits to bosses. In South Africa, in the Caribbean, the United States, China, everywhere, it is the same.

The needs are there, and they provide a basis for developing a unifying set of demands. When the struggle seems to stall, it does not mean the possibilities are not there. It means that the obstacles are also there. Workers are never just left alone to draw strength from each other. There is a class enemy that is fighting back. In South Africa, bolstered by the anti-working class policies of the ANC government, it is a class enemy who is getting more arrogant and more confident. The problems of everyday life, which were intolerable, are getting worse.

The struggle against apartheid reminds us that, as much as we struggle with the immediate issues of everyday day life, we have to take the lesson of history, repeated again and again in place after place. The struggles of everyday life will be pushed back without a vision of building a different power. It cannot be about forever forcing those in power and government to do what they would not do. It cannot be about sidestepping power. It cannot be about ceding power. It must be about taking power.

We cannot take power from the capitalist class in the absence of the organized working class, of organized labor. It can only happen if the organized working class is there—confronting and answering the questions of power. In South Africa, it sometimes seems easier to substitute the energy and militancy of unemployed youth for the struggle to draw on the energy and militancy that can and must come from workers with jobs. Substitution is a political problem. It ends up compounding the difficulties of mobilizing workers with jobs.

Part of the obstacle in the way of mobilizing organized workers is the crisis of confidence: Ordinary working-class people have been forced to the belief that there can never actually be real solutions. They have been stripped of the confidence that fundamental change can happen. An acute part of that is a lack of confidence that they themselves and their class can be the agents of real solutions. For workers there can be no solution as long as the power and wealth lies with the capitalists. And, the solution is the re-organization of economic and political life under working-class control. Such clear knowledge and vision gets buried beneath the muck of bourgeois thinking. Capitalist agents oppose this on the grounds of (capitalist) realism. They tell workers to forget dreams and to be realistic. And even if they dream, they are only allowed a dream that is infested, diseased, and small.

These are problems that must be addressed and cannot be solved by taking workers for granted. They need patience, respect, and understanding of what is forced onto workers every day. And what was forced on them historically, going back to the days of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. They need to rebuild the confidence that there actually is this power—the power of workers. They need confidence that workers have this power in their own hands. The power to struggle not just for wages and conditions, but for everything.

Not to have to struggle for every gain and then to struggle again for it tomorrow. Not to struggle in one place without moving forward in another. But to struggle together for political power—so that workers together can govern the whole of society. That ordinary working-class people can come up with a plan to produce what people need for comfortable safe lives. What is waiting to be born is a workers' plan under workers' control of production, not for profit for the bosses, but to meet workers' needs.

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P.S.

- New Politics. Summer 2021 (new-politics-vol-xviii-no-3-whole-number-71):
https://newpol.org/issue_post/the-masses-are-not-protected/
- TREVOR NGWANE has been a scholar-activist since the days of the anti-apartheid movement. He is a sociology lecturer at the University of Johannesburg and the president of the South African Sociological Association.

Footnotes

[1] 1. Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (International Publishers, 1971), 276.

[2] “State of Capture: Full text of Thuli Madonsela’s report.”:
<https://www.politicsweb.co.za/documents/state-of-capture-full-text-of-thuli-madonselas-rep>