Popular politics and resistance movements in South Africa

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BOOK REVIEW


Popular Politics and Resistance Movements in South Africa is a historiographical project that, in Mfaniseni Sihlongonyane's words, not only ‘draws out the political threads that bring together the various seams of power in the manufacturing of consensus’ (190), but sorts through these threads in an attempt to map out the continuities and discontinuities of the emancipatory practices of the anti-apartheid movement and those emerging as a result of the now rumbling discontent with the 1994 democratic project. The book spans the apartheid and post-apartheid era, examining varied forms of resistance from the Durban strikes of the 1970s and the Nelson Mandela campaign in the early 1980s, to the post-apartheid HIV/AIDS campaigns of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and the struggles of the Anti-Privatization Forum (APF) against the commodification of basic services. The book, in a concise caption from Jacques Depelchin which prefaces Kelly Rosenthal’s chapter, consistently puts forward the idea that ‘a radical transformation in South Africa will depend more on how the past is remembered than on how the future is plotted’ (243).

Edited by William Beinart and Marcelle Dawson, the book contains 13 chapters from a group of Oxford University students most of whom, presumably, studied under the tutelage of Beinart, a historian at St Anthony’s College, University of Oxford. The chapters are written in different styles and approached from different angles. What appears to hold the chapters together is a desire to draw attention to discounted aspects of South Africa’s protest movements and to draw out the reasons that led to either their durability or decline. The introductory chapter overviews popular politics and resistance from 1970 to 2008. Chapters 2 to 5 cast the memory of the reader back to various mobilisations from the apartheid era, including the 1973 Durban strikes and the Fatti’s & Moni’s strike in the late 1970s. Chapters 6, 7, 10 and 12 each cut across the apartheid and post-apartheid eras, comparing instances of past and present resistance. The remaining chapters (8, 9, 11 and 13) focus on the emancipatory praxis of post-1994 social movements.

The intention of the authors of the book is to explore and unpack the often undocumented but critical aspects of South Africa’s history and to consider the similarities and differences between contemporary resistance movements and those of the past. The book makes an invaluable contribution to the academy because it addresses several of the issues that academics, activists, analysts and political actors have consistently wrestled with over the years. The book challenges some of the uncritical assumptions made about South Africa’s transformative and violent past
and about the role and influence of a range of actors and actions that brought about the fall of apartheid. The book points out that the dramatic shift from an authoritarian apartheid state to a democratic formal democracy was not simply a shift from a criminal state to a virtuous state. There are features of the apartheid state that still persist while changing material and ideological conditions have shifted other features. Drawing on Sidney Tarrow’s definition of ‘political opportunity structures as consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent or national – dimensions of the political environment which either encourage or discourage people from using collective action’ (268), Michelle Dawson suggests that the democratic state shares features with its predecessor criminal state in defining the contours of political opportunity structures.

Some of the highlights of the book include Kelly Rosenthal’s chapter, ‘New social movements as civil society: the case of past and present Soweto’, which invites the reader to consider the view that ‘different forms of oppression engender different forms of resistance’ (244) and that under South Africa’s democratic dispensation, new social movements, in contrast to their anti-apartheid predecessor organisations, appear to organise along socialist lines. They are not the mechanical reincarnation of their predecessor organisations and they appear to be fighting for the ‘globalisation of people and against the globalisation of capital’ (244). Also noteworthy is Mfaniseni Sihlongonyane’s chapter entitled ‘The Nelson Mandela Museum and the tyranny of political symbols’, which observes that ‘the target of popular resistance is often ambiguous’ (201) in the post-apartheid era. This useful comment points to the fissures existent among community-based organisations, civil society groups and other groups organising contemporary resistance against the state. In defining their relationship to the governing ANC, many of these groups continue to look to the ANC as a liberation movement and thus opt for collaborative engagement; others, steering clear of party politics, opt for issue-based engagement with the ANC government, while yet others have chosen to organise their power beyond the influence of the ANC in a space framed as anti-party politics as witnessed by the emancipatory praxis of Abahlali BaseMjondolo in Durban.

The book also makes a contribution to discussions of the notion of the third force or the agitator thesis. Both Julian Brown’s case study of the 1973 Durban strikes and Simonne Horwitz’s study of nurses’ strikes in Soweto touch on the way in which ‘agitators’ (37) or ‘agent provocateurs’ (220) were blamed for workers’ actions. Talk of such agitators has emerged again recently, in the tripartite alliance’s analysis of the August 2012 Marikana massacre, where the rhetoric has been one of closing political space in defence against an imagined ‘third force’. This book reminds us that while many things have changed, others have remained the same.

Chizuko Sato’s chapter, ‘From removals to reform: land struggles in Weenan in KwaZulu-Natal’, discusses how the intervention of civil society in the struggles shifted from an emphasis on legal assistance towards an emphasis on ‘publicity and negotiation’ (123) Reading the chapter, one realises that public interest legal organisations today face similar challenges to those of the past. Sato’s penetrating analysis speaks to contemporary South Africa because of its discussion about the need to nurture complex local alliances. Similarly, Thula Simpson reminds us that during apartheid the success of particular protest movements or actions was partly dependent on the ability ‘to reach black members of the police force and community councillors resident in those townships, who were the local organs upon which white
domination of black urban areas rested’ (79). In thinking about current popular resistance, it can be argued that if the frontline workforces of the current regime are not won over, from the local police stations and municipal councillors to ordinary members of ANC branches, South Africa is bound to continue to drift along a protracted path of ethical blindness against the expectations which result from the country’s Constitutional prescripts.

The book’s strength lies in its perceptive argument that genuine change in the present depends upon an accurate understanding of the past. The book will therefore be of interest not only for the academics at which it is aimed, but also for the general public in that it describes some of the key moments in popular protest in South Africa. This book is undoubtedly a breath of fresh air for aspiring scholars and thinkers in a generation thirsty to take their part in a young and evolving South African democracy.

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