

Strategies for Social Justice Movements from Southern Africa to the United States

By Patrick Bond | January 20, 2005

The community of several thousand South African activists from whom I learn most—a group quite consciously pro-globalization-of-people and anti-globalization-of-capital—takes pride in the give-and-take lessons of international protest, solidarity, and local self-reliance gleaned during these past five years. But a Seattle-type epiphany occurred in this region long before December 1999—and long before South African President Thabo Mbeki began confusing matters with his own rhetorical assault on “global apartheid” the same year.

As I’ve argued elsewhere, Pretoria’s formula of multilateral reform (i.e., relegitimization of existing elites)—accompanied by regional subimperialism, national neoliberalism, and local repression against community activists—is thoroughly discredited.¹ So instead, we must turn to grassroots struggles for inspiration and to confirm the durable traditions of these social movements, some dating back decades.

A History of Resistance

Southern Africa was, after all, among the world’s leading examples of superexploitative capital accumulation linked to blatant imperialism. Nearly 120 years ago in Berlin, the main colonial powers carved up Africa in a way that reflected pressures directly related to European economic downturns during the 1870s-1890s, emanating especially from the speculative financial centers of London and Paris. But soon enough, those stock markets would react as badly to news of, for example, mid-1890s Ndebele raids on Cecil John Rhodes’ mine surveyors in Zimbabwe as modern brokers did to the Zapatista uprising in Mexico and the failure of World Trade Organization negotiations in Seattle a century later.

Waves of popular resistance corresponded to more general international struggles. Anti-slavery and anti-colonial tribal-based uprisings of the 18th and 19th centuries were suppressed by the brute military superiority of the European conquerors, by devious missionaries, and by those intent upon commercial/financial/legal looting.

Ultimately, 20th-century settler-capitalism could take hold only through physically coercive mechanisms that dragged Africans out of traditional modes of production into mines, fields, and factory compounds. This system of migrant labor underpinned apartheid and its variations.

In the process, women bore the added burden of subsidizing capitalism through their own survival systems. Since schools, medical plans, and pensions for urban workers were largely nonexistent, such standard input costs of capitalist production were shouldered mainly by those left behind in the rural areas, not by the state or by businesses.

The settler elites’ nexus of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism provided an ingenious way to produce cheap black labor. Tragically, these central aspects of migrant labor remain crucial to this day in many of Africa’s extractive-oriented economies. They also help explain the vast spread of urban slums and temporary residential accommodation in the most miserable of circumstances.

In opposition, Africa’s interrelated radical traditions grew and intermingled. They included vibrant nationalist liberation insurgencies, political parties that claimed one or another variant of socialism, mass movements (sometimes peasant-based, sometimes emerging from degraded urban ghettos), and powerful unions. Religious protesters, women’s groups, students, and youth played catalytic roles that changed history in given locales.

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Anti-slavery was one of the most important international solidarity movements ever and continued into the 20th century focusing pressure against King Leopold's rape of what was known as the Belgian Congo. The continent's nationalist movements established Pan-Africanism and established newly empowered relations with Northern critics of colonialism, apartheid, and racism.

Victorious mass African movements against colonialism and imperial adventurism, stretching from the 1950s Mau Mau uprisings in Kenya and Nkrumah's Ghanaian visions to the liberation of South Africa in 1994, inspired leftists and anti-racists, including militant leaders like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael as well as church-basement activists. (To be sure, as Che Guevara found out during 1965, organizing and occasionally fighting in what was then Mobutu's Congo, not all peasant societies proved ripe for revolution.)

These are the traditions, warts and all, that today's global justice movements must periodically recall to avoid assuming that Zapatismo in 1994 and Seattle in 1999 represent a brand new mode of politics. These eruptions simply broke the ossified 1980s-1990s mold of nongovernmental (NGO), development activism.

Beyond Civilized Society

Only a few years ago, African civil society seemed largely civilized, tamed, and channeled into serving neoliberalism by picking up the pieces when state welfare programs broke down in entire communities. Reacting partly to the excesses of exhausted, corrupt, and repressive nationalist political parties, many of which were tossed from power in the early 1990s, Africa witnessed the emergence of democratic movements, human rights advocates, developmental NGOs, churches, youth and women's groups, and a variety of civil society organizations. "However, before we begin to idealize this phenomenon," warned the late Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake, "it is well to remind ourselves that whatever else it is, it is first and foremost a child of necessity, of desperation even."

Today, a more radical approach is evident in Africa's social-movement hotspots and is akin to Karl Polanyi's view of society as an active, countervailing force against market excesses than to Antonio Gramsci's pessimistic picture of civil society as stabilizing capital, property relations, and the state. Under conditions of never-ending structural adjustment, most Africans who lobby for democracy and basic socioeconomic services from their governments are, and will continue to be, frustrated. Progress will be forged not from good ideas and polite advocacy, technicist interventions, and insider persuasion tactics but rather through mass-movement campaigns emanating from well-organized communities and shop floors.

Across Africa, there is increasing evidence to allow us to move from inspiring historical examples to a diverse set of ecological, community, feminist, and labor struggles. In recent years, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have been sites of intense conflicts between social activists and ruling parties. Continent-wide, the economic contradictions are endemic, and the continuation of "IMF Riots" confirms that the global justice movement's critique of neoliberalism remains valid and relevant.

However, this radical critique is not limited to Washington Consensus macroeconomic policies, debt peonage, and unfair terms of trade. The Africa Trade Network, the Gender and Trade Network, and Jubilee Africa's affiliates are regular critics—and active protesters—at the sites of both global-scale negotiations and African elite summits. In addition, the micro-developmental and ecological damage wreaked by neoliberal policies is also widely recognized.

In fact, some of the most impressive recent upsurges of protest have been in the realm of environmental justice. Following the militant example of 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai two decades ago in building Kenya's Greenbelt Movement, women in the oil-rich Niger Delta regularly conduct sit-ins at the local offices of multinational companies. Oil workers at several delta platforms have vigorously pressed not only for higher wages but also for broader community demands, even taking multinational corporate managers hostage for a time.

In Botswana, indigenous-rights campaigners are contesting the DeBeers diamond corporation, the World Bank, and the Botswana government over the displacement of Basarwa/San Bushmen from the central Kalahari Desert. According to the *Guardian*, the San targeted for relocation away from diamond exploration areas “had their water supplies cut off before being dumped in bleak settlements with derisory compensation.” The impact was so great that by August 2002 the *Botswana Gazette* described the government as a “disease-ridden international polecat.”

In the same spirit, activists have resisted large dams that threaten mass displacement in Namibia (Epupa), Lesotho (Highlands Water Project), Uganda (Bujagali), and Mozambique (Mphanda Nkuwa) and have opposed the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline. Solidarity from Northern environmentalists has been crucial.

In South Africa, where capital is strongest and most sophisticated, the Environmental Justice Networking Forum and far-sighted NGOs like groundWork collaborate with counterparts elsewhere against environmental racism, toxic dumping, asbestos damage, incinerators, biopiracy, genetically modified food, carbon trading, and air pollution. Movements against privatization of Africa’s basic services—mainly water and electricity but also municipal waste, health, and education—began in Accra and Johannesburg in 2000 and quickly attracted global solidarity. To illustrate, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee’s Operation Khanyisa (‘Switch On’) illegally reconnects people whose electricity and water supplies have been cut because of poverty and rising prices associated with Johannesburg’s drive to commercialize services. Similar community-based protests in Durban and Cape Town against disconnections, evictions, and landlessness have won recognition from across the world.

The African Social Forum and Its Strategists

Can these sorts of protests and campaigns graduate into a more generalized program and mature ideology? If so, it is possible that the African Social Forum (ASF) will be the catalyzing agent, especially in the wake of the gathering just completed in Lusaka.

From December 10-14, several hundred African grassroots, labor, women, and student leaders gathered in the Zambian capital to strategize and plan for the future.

The ASF’s emergence has not been easy, given each African region’s different languages, cultural styles, and political priorities. In January 2002, dozens of African social movements met in Bamako, Mali, in preparation for the Porto Alegre World Social Forum. Bamako was one of the first substantial conferences to convene progressive NGOs, labor organizers, activist churches, and social movements from diverse regions of the continent. It was followed by ASF sessions in Johannesburg (August 2002), Addis Ababa (January 2003), Maputo (December 2003), Mumbai (January 2004), and now Lusaka.

The original Bamako Declaration insisted that “the values, practices, structures and institutions of the currently dominant neoliberal order are inimical to and incompatible with the realization of Africa’s dignity, values and aspirations.” Of particular concern was the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), promoted mainly by President Mbeki. The African Social Forum “rejected neoliberal globalization and further integration of Africa into an unjust system as a basis for its growth and development. In this context, there was a strong consensus that initiatives such as NEPAD that are inspired by the IMFWB strategies of Structural Adjustment Programs, trade liberalization that continues to subject Africa to an unequal exchange, and strictures on governance borrowed from the practices of Western countries are not rooted in the culture and history of the peoples of Africa.”

But a critique of the ASF emerged in Lusaka, spearheaded by South Africa’s Social Movements Indaba, echoing concerns about the World Social Forum: “The under-representation of social movements in relation to NGOs is reflected in the political content of the forum. It manifests in the persistence of the notion that the African Social Forum is nothing other than a space, in contrast to the perspective that it should have a program to advance our struggle against neoliberalism.” Hence, as Durban activists Amanda Alexander and Mandisa Mbali wrote about the ASF, “Capturing social forums and blunting

their impact is a tantalizing outcome for the World Bank and ‘third-way’ politicians.” Alexander and Mbali note that extremely strong advocacy by social movements averted that danger in Lusaka.

Indeed, as Console Tleane of the Johannesburg-based Freedom of Expression Institute wrote in the ASF’s *African Flame* daily newspaper: “The message was clear: there [was] no way that the ASF would entertain any dealings with the [World] Bank. Activists in the NEPAD session came to the same conclusions on the potential of neoliberal institutions and policies.”

To be sure, the difficulty of pulling together a continental initiative is profound, especially when “suit-and-tie NGOs”—sometimes set up by former politicians and bureaucrats anxious to maintain petit-bourgeois lifestyles—predominate in some countries. And it is just as great a challenge to weed out neoliberal philosophy among African intellectuals.

Consider the once great tradition that conjoined liberatory thinkers and activists (and occasionally national leaders), exemplified by Claude Ake, Ahmed Ben Bela, Steve Biko, Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Ruth First, Patrice Lumumba, Samora Machel, Archie Mafeje, Ben Magubane, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Oginga Odinga, Bade Onimode, Walter Rodney, Thomas Sankara and others who, mainly, were in their prime during the 1960s-1970s. This legacy has been kept alive through the writings and speeches of independent-minded nationalists, feminists, critical political economists and anti-imperialists, including Jimi Adesina, Neville Alexander, Samir Amin, Dennis Brutus, Fantu Cheru, Jacques Delpechin, Demba Dembele, Ashwin Desai, Yasmine Fall, M.P. Giyose, Paulin Hountondji, Dot Keet, Sara Longwe, Amina Mama, Mahmood Mamdani, Patricia McFadden, Guy Mhone, Thandeka Mkandawire, Gilbert Mudenda, Dani Nabudere, Njoki Njehu, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, Adebayo Olukoshi, Mohau Pheko, Brian Raftopoulos, Issa Shivji, Yash Tandon, Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, and many others who are shaping ASF constituents’ strategies.

Economic conditions are not easy for most African intellectuals, with many academics surviving on

salaries of less than \$100 a month. Even in once-proud universities like Dar es Salaam and Makerere, former leftists are prone to taking jobs or consultancies with multilateral agencies, donors, corporations, or wealthy Northern NGOs.

Nevertheless, the April 2002 Accra meeting of the Council for Development and Social Research in Africa and Third World Network-Africa called upon “scholars and activist intellectuals within Africa and in the Diaspora to join forces with social groups whose interests and needs are central to the development of Africa.”

Deglobalization, Decommodification, and Political power

To that end, Dakar-based political economist Samir Amin argues for a “delinking” strategy that “is not synonymous with autarky, but rather with the subordination of external relations to the logic of internal development... permeated with the multiplicity of divergent interests.” In 2002, a restatement of Amin’s delinking theme was advanced by Bangkok-based Focus on the Global South director Walden Bello in his book *Deglobalization*: “I am not talking about withdrawing from the international economy. I am speaking about reorienting our economies from production for export to production for the local market.”

The hope of attracting potential allies from a (mainly mythical) “national patriotic bourgeoisie” still exists in some formulations of delinking and coincides with reformist tendencies among state-aligned intelligentsia and trade unions. The challenge in any such conversation is to establish the difference between “reformist reforms” and change that advances a nonreformist agenda. The former are strategies that tend to legitimize, strengthen and deepen existing state control and capital accumulation functions, while doing nothing to shift the balance of forces towards the oppressed. The latter would include, for example, social policies stressing more generous and universal state services, controls on capital flows and imports/exports, and inward-oriented industrialization strategies allowing democratic control of finance and production in order to

meet social needs. These nonreformist reforms would ideally strengthen democratic movements, empower producers (especially rural women), and open the door to contesting social and economic oppression.

The strategic formula that the South African independent left has broadly adopted—internationalism combined with rigorous demands upon the national state—places a high priority on removing from Third World necks the boot of the multilateral capitalist agencies: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as neoliberal donors (usually orchestrated by the World Bank in most African capitals and at the Paris Club). For example, South Africa's Jubilee movement endorsed the defunding one of the nerve centers of neoliberalism in 2000 through the World Bank Bonds Boycott (<http://www.world-bankboycott.org>).

Of course, even if sensible deglobalization policies were adopted to “lock capital down,” a national capitalist strategy in a society like South Africa would still be insufficient to halt or reverse uneven global development. South Africa's independent left fully understands the need to transcend national-scale capitalism. One step along the way is the strategy of decommodification.

The South African decommodification agenda is based on interlocking, overlapping campaigns to turn basic needs into genuine human rights including: free anti-retroviral medicines to fight AIDS, at least 50 liters of free water and 1 kilowatt hour of free electricity for each individual every day, extensive land reform, prohibitions on service disconnections and evictions, free education, and a monthly basic income grant. Social movements, women's groups, churches, NGOs, and trade unions are all basically committed to this agenda, even if temporary divisions arise over alignments with Mbeki's ruling African National Congress.

To make any progress on decommodification, it is evident that deglobalization and delinking from the most destructive circuits of global capital will be necessary. Those circuits rely upon the three main multilateral agencies, which apply most of the

direct pressure on African state elites to oppress their citizenries.

Hence a unified international strategy is urgently required, focused on the IMF, World Bank, and WTO and targeting the U.S. state agencies—the Treasury, the U.S. Trade Representative, the Federal Reserve—and the corporations that set the priorities for all of these entities. Amplified assistance is required from Northern progressive movements, which are already hard-pressed to resist President Bush's militarism and to build solidarity with the Iraqi people.

Ultimately, even if the neoliberal imperial project is rolled back, it is not clear whether progressive forces will be strong enough to fill the political and economic vacuums in Africa's national settings, as Venezuela now suggests is feasible in Latin America. But this vision must still be our agenda. We must capture state power through elections in which a democratic political party amasses community/worker/peasant support by generalizing the sorts of struggles discussed above, eventually contending with those elites who remain locked into neocolonial power relationships.

The objective conditions for change are present, and prospects for a remake of Africa are ripe. More than 40 years ago in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon made a prediction that remains frustratingly valid today: “The former colonial power increases its demands, accumulates concessions and guarantees, and takes fewer and fewer pains to mask the hold it has over the national government. The people stagnate deplorably in unbearable poverty; slowly they awaken to the unutterable treason of their leaders. This awakening is all the more acute because the leaders are incapable of learning its lesson. The distribution of wealth that it effects is not spread out between a great many sectors; it is not ranged among different levels nor does it set up a hierarchy of half-tones. The new caste is an affront all the more disgusting in that the immense majority, nine-tenths of the population, continue to die of starvation. The scandalous enrichment, speedy and pitiless, of this caste is accompanied by a decisive awakening on the part of the people and a growing awareness that promises stormy days to come.”

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END NOTES

¹ "The 'George Bush' of Africa: Pretoria Chooses Subimperialism," July 2004; "WSSD both Attacks and Abets 'Global Apartheid,'" September 2002; "Thabo Mbeki's New Partnership for Africa's Development: Breaking or Shining the Chains of Global Apartheid?" April 2002.

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