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# Conjunctural remarks on the political significance of 'the local'

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## Abstract

Popular protest is occurring on a remarkable scale in South Africa. Nonetheless, there is a significant degree to which it tends to be organized and articulated through the local. This contribution argues that while the political limitations of purely local modes of organization are clear, it should not be assumed that local struggles are some sort of misguided distraction from building a broader progressive movement. It is suggested that, on the contrary, the best prospects for the emergence of a broader popular struggle lie in building, sustaining and linking local struggles.

## Keywords

Alain Badiou, the local, popular politics, South Africa, squatters

Courage ... is a local virtue. It partakes of the morality of the place. (Alain Badiou)

In *Disabling Globalization*, published in 2002, Gillian Hart argued, with reference to Antonio Gramsci, that the local state had become a particularly important 'terrain of the conjunctural' (Hart 2002: 311) in South Africa. She concluded her study by arguing, with reference to Sam Gindin, that if the South African left wanted to 'move beyond largely symbolic attacks on global capitalism towards implementing an alternative vision, the new politics will have to develop its oppositional foundation locally without narrowing its goals' (2002: 312). She insisted that '[a]ny strategy to mobilize broadly based support must be firmly grounded in particular configurations of material and cultural conditions,

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and engage directly with specific local histories and translocal connections, as well as with meanings, memories, and the making and re-making of political subjects' (2002: 312).

Ten years later there is a remarkable degree of popular protest in South Africa to which much of the middle class left in various groupuscules, in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and in the academy has very little sustained and meaningful connection. The reasons for this alienation from popular struggles include a general although not uniform tendency to orientate towards donors and NGOs and their projects rather than to popular forms of organization; a tendency to prioritize campaigning around issues that have a transnational currency and are seen as global rather than local and, also, a tendency to mediate the political through the ideas, culture and language of a dissident transnational elite rather than through the languages, ideas, meanings and memories in the midst of which actually existing popular political contestation occurs in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> It is often said or implied that popular struggles lack real political significance as they are too local. For Patrick Bond, South Africa

suffers from far too many activists and analysts who promote a localist ideology that begins and ends with the municipal councillor, city manager or mayor. There are too many turf-conscious leaders who look inward, failing to grasp golden opportunities to link labour, community and environmental grievances and protests, and to think globally while acting locally. (Bond 2012)

This statement is problematic in a number of respects, one of which is that the local nature of much popular political engagement plainly emerges from below. There is both a material and political basis for this and it is not a phenomenon that is in anyway irrational. Moreover, activists that don't take the local nature of popular struggles seriously very often find themselves to be alienated from these struggles rather than being in a position to give them what they may imagine to be a better political line. However, the debate about how local and larger frames of references and modes of organization should interact in popular politics in contemporary South Africa is important. This paper, noting that it is often argued on the left that local struggles are an inadequate foundation from which to confront contemporary challenges, argues that rather than being necessarily archaic or misguided local struggles can, if they are deepened, sustained and linked, provide the best building blocks for genuinely mass-based and sustained struggles on a larger scale. It is also argued that it is at the local level where the best prospects lie for developing popular practices, ideas and meanings that can sustain broader popular struggles from below. It is suggested that local struggles provide the best route to an escalation of actually existing modes of popular resistance and a potential passage to the development of a broader movement rather than, as is sometimes assumed, a distraction from this task.

## Popular politics after apartheid

After winning control of the state in 1994 the African National Congress (ANC) sought, as national liberation movements have typically done, to demobilize the people that had

bought it to power (Heller 2001; Neocosmos 1996). Moreover, insurgent popular practices, like land occupations in the cities, that the ANC had encouraged after it was first unbanned, were now treated as criminal. '[T]he people', as Frantz Fanon had observed in 1961, were 'sent back to their caves' (1976: 72). But these attempts to contain the political within the domain of state politics which we could, following Alain Badiou (2005: 125–40), call Thermidorean, were quickly contested.

A decisive moment in the return to a politics constituted around popular assembly and willing to confront the newly invigorated alliance between state and capital was the struggle that emerged against banks that, acting with state support, were seeking evictions from bonded houses in Mandela Park in the Khayelitsha township of Cape Town in late 2000. The state responded by seeking to criminalize both this initial struggle and the broader movement, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, that emerged from it. But despite serious repression the movement was able to link a diverse set of local struggles across Cape Town and to build and sustain a collective struggle that issued a compelling challenge to aspects of the new and increasingly exclusionary and brutal urban regime in the city (Legassick 2003; Majavu forthcoming; Oldfield and Stokke 2004). Although it has never had the capacity to organize at a transnational or even national level, its network of intensely local struggles in Cape Town would go on to inspire the development of the similarly locally organized Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign.

But the drama that began in Mandela Park was not played out on the national stage. It was only in the winter of 2001 that the first major public fractures appeared in the ruling party's attempt to use its legitimacy to defend the priority of the market over the social. Again the commodification of urban space was the point at which the new order's hegemony could not be sustained. In July, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), a former armed liberation movement that had become a political party with very little popular traction, organized a land occupation in a place called Bredell on the East Rand between the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria. At the time state-sanctioned land occupations in neighbouring Zimbabwe had raised questions in the South African imagination about prospects for the popular appropriation of land closer to home, and so the events in Bredell took on a real charge. Reports at the time put the number of people that moved on to the land at between 7000 and 10,000. Within a matter of days 1,200 wood and iron shacks had been built. The then Minister of Housing Sankie Mthembi-Mahanyele was chased from the land by angry squatters, around 300 of whom were arrested before the new shacks were destroyed. The scenes were described as 'eerily reminiscent of apartheid' (Hart 2002: 306) at the time but violent evictions at the hands of the state are now a routine feature of day-to-day life in South Africa. When Thoko Didiza, then the Minister in charge of land, was interviewed on national television, she declared that 'when foreign investors see a decisive government acting in the way we are acting [on Bredell] it sends the message that the government won't tolerate such acts' (Hart 2002: 306).

The government's hard-line didn't contain dissent. Organized social moments began to emerge in the limited but slowly widening interstices of the ANC's hegemony. While it is certainly significant that they all were or came to be organized as alliances between local organizations, they were characterized by considerable diversity in terms of both ideas and practices. So, for instance, while the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town

was firmly under popular control, suspicious of NGOs and committed in principle to horizontal modes of organization (Legassick 2003; Majavu forthcoming; Oldfield and Stokke 2004), the Landless People's Movement, which began with branches in various parts of the country, had its roots in NGO efforts to build a national land movement. There would later be a bruising battle to free the movement from NGO control (Greenberg 2004: 1–39; Mngxitama 2004: 1–48). The Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) in Johannesburg was a project of the independent left outside of the ANC and some of its leadership, who were operating in Trotskyist versions of the vanguard tradition, assumed that, in Badiou's phrasing, 'they are the only ones able to provide "social movements" with a "political perspective"' (2006: 273). As Prishani Naidoo and Ahmed Veriava (2009) have shown, an intense engagement with local and day-to-day realities initially enabled the APF to achieve political interventions with sufficient weight and impact to make telling national interventions and to become part of transnational networks. But with a socialist group constituting itself outside of the movement's formal structures and seeking to exercise control over the broader movement in the name of a more explicitly socialist politics, and doing so in ways that, in Naidoo and Veriava's account, appear as plainly manipulative in the Freirean (1996) sense of the term, the focus of the movement's work shifted away from a politics rooted in more local and day-to-day concerns, with the result that it went into steep decline. In 2009 Naidoo and Veriava argued that the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, a key component of the APF,

has enjoyed its greatest strength and influence when it has listened to the voices of ordinary Sowetans ... It is perhaps through attempts by groups of activists to predetermine the programmes of the SECC according to their own political or other aims, rather than by listening to the needs of the people of Soweto, that the problems have arisen. Returning to the people, in a real attempt to listen rather than to tell, is probably the only way for the SECC to be rebuilding itself. (2009: 335)

The APF has since become formally defunct.

In the city of Durban, the Concerned Citizens Forum (CCF) emerged around a charismatic individual. Although the CCF was refreshingly creative in some aspects, and initially had some success in linking nodes of (often reactionary) opposition to the ANC with general outrage at evictions and disconnections and presenting this under an anti-neoliberal banner, the plainly and crassly authoritarian nature of the project (Siwisa 2008), and the blatant manner in which this came to be racialized, soon led to its implosion. The informal network that ran the CCF refused to respond to the demand for formal structures to be developed (Dwyer 2004: 1–44), with the result that there was no way to challenge its power. Decisions were nominally taken on the basis of sentiment in mass meetings but, as in the case of the APF, a small group of people, in this case informally networked, sought to take decisions for the broader movement in a plainly manipulative manner. Again the justification for this was that the 'ordinary members' lacked sufficient political vision. Again the result was not the further development of the movement and its politics but that a moment of opportunity was lost.

The AEC and the LPM still formally exist, but have largely collapsed in practice. There are many reasons why these movements have not endured. While its broadly the

case that they have all been at their strongest when they have been closest to their members and supporters, some of the other, and often inter-related, factors that resulted in the inability of these movements to sustain mobilization include, along with repression and exhaustion, bureaucratization; the emergence of, at times authoritarian, individualized modes of leadership; conflict around donor money; conflict between different local organizations; NGO or party co-optation; demobilization as a result of limited tactical concessions on the part of the state and the renewal of the sense of possibility in the ANC that sometimes accompanies its internal battles at various levels.

Although they have all effectively collapsed, the achievements of this first generation of movements in South Africa should not be under-estimated. Sustained and effective popular mobilization and organization is a rare achievement under most circumstances and organizing in opposition to a national liberation movement in its first years in power is particularly difficult. This is compounded in South Africa where national questions retain their urgency in the new order with the result that popular dissent is vulnerable to being misrepresented as anti-national. But of course lessons do need to be learned, and one of those lessons is that when political activists – be they located in formal groupuscules, informal networks or NGOs – think that it is their unique responsibility to give political direction to popular movements, and try to effect this via external manipulation of movements rather than via open, dialogical and potentially mutually transformative practices within movements' decision-making structures, the result has not been that movements have begun to transcend the local in favour of a more national or transnational political orientation. On the contrary, serious damage has been done to movements.

While the first generation of social movements was declining, there was an extraordinary sequence of popular protest that began in 2004 (Alexander 2010, 2012) and which had reached its highest level yet in July 2012 (Duncan 2012). It has been described as 'movement beyond movements' by Gill Hart (2008: 682), as a series of 'municipal revolts' by Mandisi Majavu (2011) and as 'the rebellion of the poor' by Peter Alexander (2010: 25–40, 2012). Alexander, who has, thus far, made the most serious national study of these protests, concludes that he has 'not yet found any other country where there is a similar level of ongoing urban unrest' and that, therefore, 'South Africa can reasonably be described as the "protest capital of the world"' (2012).

These protests have taken a wide variety of ideological, organizational and tactical forms, but several broad features are clear. They have largely been organized through local networks, with claims to speak for specific spatially-constituted communities – be they constituted by the state, like particular municipal wards, or via popular action, like particular shack settlements – being common. Popular protest has often been justified, in part, by claims with a universal dimension, such as the affirmation of the humanity of its participants, or a national dimension, via the affirmation of citizenship. But when claims about the dignity of the human being or the rights of the citizen have been mobilized they have often been used to drive forms of organization and the expression of demands and antagonisms that are intensely local. When popular action outside of official structures has been legitimated in the name of citizenship it has sometimes been progressive in that it has demanded social and political incorporation into the nation and it has sometimes been deeply reactionary in that it has sought to exclude migrants or ethnic minorities from the nation (Neocosmos 2010; Pithouse 2008).

The shack settlement, which had been deeply politicized at various moments during the last century, has re-emerged as a central site for popular political action. It is striking that even organized poor people's movements that, like the Landless People's Movement or the Unemployed People's Movement, have sought to identify themselves as subjects, in these cases aspirant peasants and aspirant workers, that can more easily be recuperated into nationalist and left thought than the urban squatter, have effectively turned into shack dwellers' movements in practice.

The intensity of the shack settlement as a site of contestation, progressive and reactionary, is clearly linked to the pressing and at times life-threatening material realities in the settlements and, in particular, to the contestation over whether or not the market and the state, with the latter operating in accordance with the logic of the former, should have a monopoly over the allocation of urban land. It is also linked to the often even more pressing conditions in the rural areas and in particular in the former Bantustans (Westaway 2012). But it is also linked to the state's increasing hostility to the shack settlement. With gathering intensity since former president Thabo Mbeki announced, in 2001, that 'slums' would be eradicated by 2014 (Huchzermeyer 2011a), the shack settlement became a primary target of stigmatization, surveillance, political repression and containment exercised at the level of day-to-day life and in intimate spaces (Chance 2010; Huchzermeyer 2011a; Selmeczi 2011). In recent years, this has been compounded by the fact that the state has frequently sought to sustain its hold over shack dwellers by governing them through authoritarian individuals or networks linked to party structures but operating outside of the logic of civil society. So, in exchange for providing consent for state practices, and votes, these individuals or networks can access resources by taking on, formally as contractors or informally as power brokers, a mediating role in various 'development' projects. This strategy has sometimes led to alliances between the state and local criminal networks which have been mediated by the ruling party. The intensity of the shack settlement as a political site also has something to do with the fact that it is not fully inscribed within the formal laws and rules through which the state governs broader society. This is because its meaning is not entirely fixed. For instance its residents may be citizens with formal rights and they may even be or have been supporters of the ruling party but, at the same time, they may also be occupying land unlawfully. As a result the shack settlement is an unstable element in the national situation. The unfixing way in which the shack settlement is indexed to the situation opens opportunities for a variety of challenges – from above and from below, both democratic and authoritarian, in the name of the political, of tradition, of nationalism and of private interest, and from the left and the right – to the official order of things. Of course, neither social exclusion, nor the myriad of ways in which it is resisted, can be reduced to the shack settlement. But it is here – rather than in, say, the countryside, the school, the prison or the migrant detention centre – where the refusal to accept the idea that the human should be rendered as 'waste' (Mbembe 2011) has produced the most intense and sustained conflict between the state and its citizens over the last eight years.

The material concerns animating this sequence of protest have included access to land, housing, education and services, but they have also often been concerned with the forms of decision-making and the allocation of positions within local party structures. Opportunists of various sorts have certainly entered local struggles for their own

purposes, including with a view to winning direct or indirect access to power in local party structures. But it is a serious mistake to misread the acute contestation around how local party structures function as nothing other than competition for access to the resources that, in an increasingly brazen system of clientalism, flow through local party structures.

In South Africa the party is rapidly becoming 'a means of private advancement' (Fanon 1976: 146) and it's equally clear that it often functions to 'hold the people down' (Fanon 1976: 146). Indeed, repression is now sometimes directly undertaken by local party structures with the support of the police rather than, as was more common a few years ago, the other way around (Chance 2010; Sacks 2010). But the more one lives in the world of informality the closer one's day-to-day life intersects with – and even, in some cases, depends on – party structures. When access to housing, social grants, opportunities for temporary work and food parcels are mediated through local party structures, and are essential for day-to-day life, the party will play a different role to that which it typically plays in the life of a person with easy access to the formal world where there is a greater degree to which access to the basic requirements for day-to-day life are mediated through the market. There is, therefore, nothing irrational about the widespread desire to confront local power brokers as an urgent political priority. In fact in many cases there simply are no prospects for an independent political project rooted in specific neighbourhoods if local elites in and around party structures have not been successfully confronted. And this is not an easy task or one in which progress that has been made is not under constant assault. There are instances where popular struggles have built a degree of counter-power outside of party structures and been able to win some gains on their own (Gibson 2011; Huchzermeyer 2011b). But given that the ANC routinely responds to organization outside of its authority in the language of criminality and treason, frequently followed by both attempts at co-option and increasingly violent repression at the hands of the police or the party itself, this can often be a difficult and dangerous path to take. Sustained political autonomy from local party structures requires sustained local organization.

The struggles that have, cumulatively, constituted this sequence of extraordinary protest have frequently aimed to discipline the local structures of the party from below and, at times, attempted to formally democratize decision-making in these structures. The temptation to misrepresent all popular struggles as nothing but a quest for personal position within the patronage machine is, like the idea that all popular struggles are inevitably xenophobic, often predicated on what Michel-Rolf Trouillot calls 'an ontology, an implicit organisation of the world and its inhabitants' (1995: 73) rather than an engagement with empirical realities. Its function is to silence the sustained popular demand for social inclusion. Amongst the left is has another role, which is to sustain the fiction, not infrequently racialized, of a pre-political mass engaged in spontaneous if not spasmodic struggles and requiring enlightenment and political direction from above.

Although there are some particular areas, like the Thembelihile shack settlement in Johannesburg or parts of Khayelitsha, like Mandela Park, from which there has been sustained activism and protest for many years, its generally true that this sequence of popular protest has taken the form of short-lived bursts of activity that, while they have sustained a growing collective momentum, have not generally lead to sustained



organization in particular places. There is one sustained and formally organized movement that has emerged from this wave of struggle which is the shack dweller's movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, which was formed in Durban in 2005. The Unemployed People's Movement emerged alongside this sequence of protest in 2009 but has successfully intersected with it on occasion. Like the first generations of movements to have emerged after apartheid, Abahlali baseMjondolo is an alliance of local organizations. It is clear that a key reason for its ability to sustain itself has been its resolve to remain a project that is driven by its members and supporters and rooted in communities where social bonds are mediated through families, crèches, churches, choirs and the like. When it was formed in 2005 it, like many popular mobilizations, initially took the form of opposition to local municipal councillors. Through these local confrontations the movement built real popular support, a considerable capacity for local counter-power and developed confidence, skills and wider networks. The targets for protest then shifted to the mayor, the provincial government and then the state president. At the same time the movement was able to move from struggles against immediate threats like evictions to be able to mount a significant challenge to a regressive shift in government policy towards shack settlements. And in Durban, where the movement has had its strongest base, it has been able to win sustained access to the elite public sphere. Moreover, the movement's success in taking on local issues and in building sustained local organization enabled it to make all sorts of transnational connections, some of which have been fruitful engagements. When it has suffered repression there have been protests at South African embassies abroad and it has, for instance, organized events in solidarity with struggles in Haiti and sent a representative to do solidarity work in Palestine. Local organization allows people to choose accessible and popular targets, to win the small concessions that build people's confidence in the value of struggle and, crucially, to organize in such a way that the stigma of oppression can be confronted, suffering ministered to and courage nurtured. In the case of Abahlali baseMjondolo it has been the foundation on which a broader politics sometimes capable of making significant national interventions has been built.

There are some striking points of connection between popular politics in contemporary South Africa and struggles of the urban poor elsewhere. So, for example, the road blockade marked by burning tyres, an accessible tactic of disruption, appears in the struggles of the urban poor from Palestine, to Haiti, Thailand and Bolivia. There are also clear similarities in the situation confronted by the urban poor in many countries. For instance, there is a general, although not uniform, militarization of the land which is occupied and developed by poor people who are acting outside of the law in the cities of the Global South (Zibechi 2008). In countries like Brazil, India, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, there has been state violence against shack settlements and their inhabitants on a scale that exceeds anything that has happened in post-apartheid South Africa (Huchzermeyer 2011a). And the shack settlement has been a central site in progressive mass mobilizations in countries like Bolivia (Zibechi 2010), Haiti (Hallward 2007) and Venezuela (Fernandes 2010). It has also been a site of ethnic conflict in Kenya (Huchzermeyer 2011b) and, of course, shack settlements provided the original popular base for the fascist politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India (Hansen 1999). For John Berger the essential characteristic of our time is that '[t]he poor have no residence' (2010: 91) and 'the essential activity of the rich today is the building of walls – walls of concrete, of

electronic surveillance, of missile barrages, minefields, frontier controls, and opaque media screens' (2010: 92). The struggle, against the exclusionary logic of the market, for a place to live is one with a clear transnational resonance.

And the local nature of much popular politics is far from being unique to South Africa. Asef Bayat has famously argued that in Tehran

for the poor, localized struggle, unlike an abstract and distant 'revolution,' was both *meaningful* and *manageable* – meaningful in that they could make sense of the purpose and have an idea about the consequence of those actions, and manageable in that *they*, rather than some remote national leaders, set the agenda, projected the aims and controlled the outcome. In this sense, for the poor, the local was usually privileged over the global/national. In addition, the flexibility and perseverance associated with such grassroots activism enabled the poor to extend their social space and to respond to political constraints more effectively. (1997: 160–1, original emphasis)

And while Bayat is talking about a context in which 'quiet encroachment' is the primary form taken by popular political initiative, it is also often true that when a poor people's politics articulates itself to a national political project and is able to be more explicitly political, it remains intensely rooted in local modes of solidarity that connect both to each other and a broader political project. Recent analyses of popular movements that have attained wider significance in Bolivia (Zibechi 2010), Haiti (Hallward 2006) and Venezuela (Fernandes 2010) have all made this point. For this reason the local experiments that are being undertaken within popular struggles in countries like, say, Bolivia and South Africa have a potentially wider resonance that could help us to understand how people living without formal work or housing can organize effectively in the contemporary world where huge numbers of people live without access to formal work.

In August 2012 the centre of gravity in the sphere of popular politics in South Africa shifted decisively to the mines when the police were sent out to break a wild-cat strike on a platinum mine. The strike had been accompanied with violence but this has been a common and tacitly accepted feature of strikes in recent years. What marked this strike out as an unusual event was that it was organized out of the control of, and in fact against, the mine workers' trade union affiliated to the ruling party. At the time of writing official statistics put the number of striking miners killed by the police on 16 August at 34, the number of injured miners at 78 and the number of miners that have been arrested at 170. With the final changes to this article being made on 30 August, it is far too early to draw any firm conclusions about the likely political consequences of this massacre. It is clear, though, that the ANC is starting to lose the organizational hold on workers that its alliance with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has, thus far, secured for it. Given that, for a variety of reasons, it is much easier for unionized workers to sustain organization as a coherent force across multiple sites than it is for shack dwellers, it is possible that this event could enable the emergence of a popular politics that is better equipped to sustain organization at a broader scale. Of course if this did happen there are no guarantees as to the nature of the project that might emerge. However, given both the scale of unemployment and precarious employment in South Africa, and the degree of protest amongst the urban poor in recent years, it is clear enough that any political project

aimed at mounting a general challenge to the state of things would have to make and sustain effective connections to the longstanding political ferment in the cities.

## The local and the left

Given the global power of finance capital, multi-national corporations, the US military, the World Bank and other international institutions as well as the NGOs trailing in their wake, it's hardly surprising that influential thinkers as diverse as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) and David Harvey (2008) have argued that a politics which is articulated though the local is inadequate to the challenges that we face.

In the abstract the logical force behind the call to prioritize resistance on an international or global scale is undeniable. However, attempts to pose potentially global actors like the multitude or the working class against Empire or capital tend not to take full measure of the degree to which, across the global South, contemporary modes of domination produce vast groups of people who are excluded from formal work and easy access to travel and communication technologies and for whom it is, at a material level, not easy to operate at a global scale or even, sometimes, across a single city. Moreover, it's not unusual for the more creative and progressive parts of the middle class or the organized working class to be outrightly hostile to the urban poor living and working informally. One result of this is that opposition to Empire or capital does not necessarily grant these groups an easy right to adequately represent the people as a whole. Moreover, spatial exclusion and containment are central features of contemporary modes of domination. Popular resistance to transnational processes that produce de-territorialization and re-territorialization from above often take the form of attempts to either hold onto territory or to appropriate new territory from below. These struggles invariably take a powerful local form.

Some formulations of the call for a new global politics present struggles rooted in particular spatial situations as archaic, irrelevant and even reactionary in the name of a superior politics of 'the global' (Quadrelli 2007). We should be cautious about accepting the idea that a transnational politics is necessarily contemporary, and that a local politics is necessarily archaic. For one thing, a popular transnational politics is as old as the transnational reach of capital (Linebaugh and Rediker 2001). There is also a tendency to conflate the universal with access to the transnational – which is frequently misrepresented as 'the global'. This is a serious error. The universal, as an idea, is equally available to all people. But access to the transnational, as a set of practices, is clearly mediated by material considerations which are frequently mediated by class. For instance, in South Africa access to a space for international engagement like the World Social Forum is controlled by donors and NGOs because poor people's organizations and movements do not have the independent resources to access these spaces on their own terms.

Moreover, the local, as a mode of life, is not necessarily archaic. The gated community and the shanty town in a city like Bombay or São Paulo are equally contemporary, and they are both cosmopolitan spaces. They have been produced by the same economy. Their inhabitants and their ancestors have been dispersed from any sense of a primordial native inhabitation by the self-same broad forces which created them. But

while the shanty town and the gated community are both nodes in the space of flows, the lived sense of place, of the local, is much more pronounced in the former. A key reason for this is that money extends the ability for mobility and reduces dependence on spatially situated sociality. Most people in most of the world have very little money; so, most people depend on spatially situated sociality for child care, for security, for caring of the sick, for fire fighting, and for burying their dead. For most people, then, there is a strong degree through which sociality is practised through the local.

There is no human space that is not traversed and constituted by flows of many forms. There is, however, a difference between spaces in which lived experience is strongly tied to place as a situated site of sociality and spaces in which there is a stronger sense of place as a node in a dispersed network of sociality. The degree to which life as it is lived in a point in physical space takes on a form that is experienced, socially, as local cannot, as is sometimes assumed, be reduced to the degree to which it sustains an industrial or pre-industrial character.

Even amidst the incredible rate at which the icy waters of financial calculation wash old worlds away, most people, including the expropriated, and including migrant workers, continue to make much of their lives in spaces that are certainly, in the spatial sense, local. The time of the vagabond certainly didn't end with Arthur Rimbaud (Ross 2008) but most people come, like Tom Joad, to rest in some local space. It may be constructed as a site of containment or as a site of survival, or even as a place of insurgent appropriation, but it remains acutely local. In South Africa an effective activist will often have solid connections to local churches, undertakers, the local clinic and to a local police station, as well as links to wider networks including lawyers and journalists. Indeed, a striking number of activists come out of local projects like crèches. This is not surprising because a history of founding and then running a crèche invariably carries far more political weight in popular politics than, say, fluency in the language of international socialism. Sustained participation in existing modes of sociality counts far more than the ability to mobilize the rhetoric of dogmatic abstractions. This is why, for example, if an individual approaches Abahlali baseMjondolo seeking membership of the movement, she will be asked to return to her community in order to mobilize her family and then others, preferably in families, and to return when she has 50 people with her. The movement has learnt that the mode of solidarity that is most valuable in a sustained and dangerous struggle is that which emerges in the thick bonds of situated modes of sociality.

Modern radical politics begins with the grand ideas of the French and Haitian revolutions, and with their dramatic defeat of old forms of domination which led to the constitution of new nations. In both cases these were events of world historical importance, and while they were, to some degree, animated by transcendent philosophical concepts, they were also sustained, driven and often decisively shaped from an alliance of more local solidarities. The latter were not just sites where transcendent philosophy was turned into a situated material force. They were also sites where revolutionary ideas were produced both against the old order and against the elites within the revolutions. In the sections of Paris between July 1772 and September 1773, and the occupied plantations of Haiti between October 1773 and May 1794, the local was pivotal: it was a decisive site of revolutionary force and reason.

This is also true of the Paris Commune, a founding event for the modern left. In 1979 Ranajit Guha (2009) described Marx's reading of the Paris Commune as an attempt to carve a concept of an emergent mode of proletarian power out of an inchoate and developing revolutionary experience. Guha, enthralled by the heat of Marx's chisel still warming the pages a hundred years later, didn't apply his more usual scrupulousness to Marx's view that it was the proletariat that had named this new aspiration the Commune. Careful empirical work shows that the Commune was in fact a case of besieged city dwellers, primarily and explicitly organized in neighbourhoods, in revolt against the French state rather than a case of workers in revolt against capitalism. Roger Gould describes the political agitation during the siege as an 'intense neighbourhood localism' (1995: 140): it was primarily a demand for local autonomy. History, including the history of the mass mobilization in South Africa in the decisive sequence of popular politics that unfolded during the 1980s, shows that a commitment to engaging the local is not an *a priori* barrier to achieving a politics of scale or, indeed, a politics that can produce both transcendent ideas and consequence. On the contrary, an intense engagement with the local is very often the passage to broader modes of political engagement.

However, there is a long-standing tension in left thought between the cultivation of local solidarities and practices and ambitions of national and global projects. The defeat of the Paris Commune is often cited as a key moment in the turn to both the vanguard party and a more transnational vision of emancipatory change. But it is worth recalling that the Commune, the Soviet, the Council, the Congregation and the Street Committee have their place, a very different place to that of the vanguard party, in the history of popular insurgency.

There are certainly moments when people are willing to fight to realize ideas that are abstracted from their lived reality. But, along with sufficient and sustained commitment, this requires a social structure appropriate to the task at hand. It's possible for communes or councils to come together, and to take on a broader project beyond their local concerns, but this cannot happen when they have not yet come into their own local existence.

It's all very well for Leon Trotsky to have declared that local cretinism is the historical curse of the peasant movements, but it would not be entirely surprising if a Russian Guha or Jacques Rancière encountered a peasant intellectual who had declared that centralized cretinism is the historical curse of the Communist movements. If movements that transcend the local detach from it to the degree that a class of professional political activists assume the right, outside of any obligation to dialogical praxis, to issue direction to popular politics, their popularity will soon wane. What will soon follow is irrelevance and, quite possibly, authoritarianism.

In contemporary South Africa most would-be vanguards have not emerged from local practices nor do they account to them in any meaningful way. Their power, generally speaking, has a bureaucratic base in universities and in NGOs, and a financial base among donors (Payn 2011; Sacks 2011). If they find that they are subject to critique from below, they can, because they are not compelled to operate in specific local situations, simply look for other, more pliable, groups to work with rather than engaging in self-reflection and genuinely democratic discussion.

Guha quotes Trotsky's comment about 'local cretinism' showing that revolutionary thinkers like Engels and Mao took a similar position (1999: 278). But while Guha does

take the view that '[t]erritoriality was indeed not the stuff with which to build a revolutionary party' (1999: 278), he notes that the struggles that took this form during the anti-colonial struggle in India during the 19th century were one of the elements that 'made the broader and more generalized struggles of the Indian people possible in the twentieth century' (1999: 332–3). This is important: a mass movement cannot be built and sustained before local struggles have emerged, made errors and developed. Sometimes these can coalesce into broader struggles, sometimes they will leave only a sedimented experience from which future projects can draw. But without local struggles, a sustained broader struggle is unimaginable. The lesson is clear: local organization is a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustained organization at a larger scale.

Fanon is correct to warn that local militancy risks, via the intoxication of immediacy, succumbing to a hubris of localism. But an alliance of communes or councils remains a very different proposition to that of a vanguard of some sort that assumes authority on the basis of a right to give political direction derived from access to pre-existing theory, theory that has sought to crystallize the lessons of other struggles in other times and places, rather than from thinking, together, with all available tools, amidst an upsurge.

More than 30 years ago Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1979) made some points in their book on poor people's movements in the US in the '30s and '50s that are well worth revisiting at this juncture. They stressed that popular insurgency emerges from, and is constrained by, specific circumstances, that it is short-lived, that it inevitably confronts tremendous barriers and that it never conforms to the theories of university intellectuals. They also argued that unorganized mass defiance has often won more than formal organization, and that mass defiance outside of electoral processes has often won more from elected officials than participation in elections. And they argued, strongly, that 'the left has not tried to understand these movements, but rather has tended to simply disapprove of them . . . The movements of the people disappoint the doctrine, and so the movements are dismissed' (1979: xi). They concluded that '[o]rganizers and leaders who contrive strategies that ignore the social location of the people they seek to mobilize can only fail [and] that strategies must be pursued that escalate the momentum and impact of disruptive protest at each state in its emergence and evolution' (1979: 36–7). There are plenty of ethnographic or participatory accounts from the contemporary global South that make related observations. So, for instance, Asef Bayat notes that in Tehran 'civil society excludes and even scorns modes of struggle and expression that . . . are more extensive and effective' (1997: 161) than those that civil society itself can produce.

This line of analysis will seem defeatist to people who are waiting for a movement that conforms to what Fanon called 'some pre-existing schema' to emerge. But we should recall that while, across space and time, there is a rich supply of examples of particular emancipatory sequences in which specific but significant gains were won, there are no examples of an ultimately successful emancipatory project that proceeded to a successful conclusion under the leadership of a group of experts who operated according to a pre-existing formula. It is the assumption that a perfect movement waits just over the horizon, rather than a serious commitment to engaging (and where necessary, challenging), defending and escalating what resistances actually exist, that is delusional.

Badiou insists that 'the singularity of situations as such . . . is the obligatory starting point of all properly human interaction' (2002: 14), and Harry Englund, following

Badiou, makes the point that '[s]olidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity' (2006: 31). In essence, this is what a movement like Abahlali baseMjondolo is asking for when they request 'a living solidarity'. One reason for this is that, in Hallward's precise formulation, '[a] consequential prescription requires an effective foothold in the situation it transforms' (2005: 773). As Hallward notes, one cannot effectively oppose 'capitalism' or 'globalisation' in the abstract, but one can, certainly, take a side with people who are taking concrete steps to oppose certain consequences and aspects of predatory systems. Commitment to dogmatic abstractions is not the same thing as solidarity with actually existing nodes of resistance, or with living movements that confront the state of things.

### The local as the passage to the universal

Theoretical insights worked out in particular situations can be used to illuminate, and sometimes with extraordinary power, other circumstances across space and time. But when they are reified and applied in a dogmatic manner they are more likely to blind us to the novelties and subtleties of the new than to offer any clarification. When a theory aims to engage with popular politics, it needs to be attentive to the particular realities of the temporal, the spatial and everything else that constitutes a specific presence in the world.

A living struggle, a genuine mass struggle, always thinks in time and place. It is always what S'bu Zikode (2010), a key intellectual in Abahlali baseMjondolo, calls a 'living politics' – a politics which is home-made and is located in the hands of ordinary women and men. To affirm this is not just to establish the need to think each particular situation through or for new generations to think their own kind of politics. In contemporary South Africa, an affirmation of a living politics is, inevitably, bound up with the local.

This is not only a consequence of the sociological fact that popular politics is overwhelmingly locally constituted. It is also because certain forms of local habitation, particularly the shack settlement, have taken on the form of what Badiou (2009) calls 'a site' – a place of rupture in which new forms of appearing, of local presentations of being, are possible. If Badiou is correct, and there is no greater transcendental consequence than the political appearance of an element of a situation that had previously not appeared as one of its elements, then certain forms of local habitation have a particular political intensity. The mere affirmation of existence, of a shared and equal humanity, carries no political weight in places where this has already been established. But in a place, a local place, like a shack settlement or an occupied inner city building or any other site which is not indexed to the transcendental, it can wrench a worldly dislocation. A site of real political possibility, for good or ill, should certainly not be dismissed as merely local. It should be engaged as a site of real, and possibly emancipatory, politics.

### Note

1. This is certainly not unique to South Africa. For instance, Peter Hallward argues that in Haiti '[r]ather than organize with and among the people, rather than work in the places and on the terms where the people themselves are strong . . . [left NGOs] organize trivial made-for-media demonstrations against things like the uncontroversial evils of neo-liberalism or the high cost of

living. Such protests are usually attended by tiny groups of 30 or 40 people – which is to say, by nobody outside the organizer’s own inter-connected circles’ (2007: 181–2). Hallward also notes that this is frequently racialized. And as Gayatri Spivak notes, the ‘privileged inhabitant of neo-colonial space is often bestowed a subject-position as geo-political other by the dominant radical’ (1999: 339).

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