

# Privilege, Solidarity and Social Justice Struggles in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The last decade has seen a noticeable increase in the number and prominence of social justice movements in South Africa. Many of these movements have received the support of relatively privileged individuals who are not members of the oppressed group represented by the movement. In this paper, I draw out some of the possibilities, ambiguities and limitations of the role of privileged individuals in South African social justice movements. The paper takes as its particular focus the relationship between one such movement, the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM), and a student organization, the Students for Social Justice (SSJ), both of which are based in Grahamstown, South Africa. I argue that while privileged supporters of such movements can play a constructive role in social justice struggles, the experiences of the SSJ and UPM illustrate some of the tensions that are likely to emerge and need to be addressed when privileged people participate in popular struggles.

Popular protest was a key feature of the struggle against apartheid. When apartheid ended in 1994, it was expected that frequent political protest would cease to be a characteristic feature of South African politics as the reasons for such protests – injustice, lack of democracy, racism, oppression and the like – had come to an end, or would shortly be addressed, with the democratic election of the African National Congress (ANC). Thus the wave of popular protests that gained momentum in the early to mid-2000s and the social justice movements that emerged at this time took many by surprise. While the rise of such movements has not resulted in a significant decrease in electoral support for the ruling ANC, it is evident that many South Africans are sufficiently unhappy about some aspects of government policy and practice to take to the streets in protest. Many of these protests are organized by labour unions, including labour unions affiliated with the ANC, but others have been organized by emerging social movements which mobilize around issues related to social justice. While these movements are principally organized and supported by working class or unemployed people living in former 'townships'<sup>2</sup> or in informal urban settlements, many of these movements have relatively privileged supporters who seek to stand in solidarity with these social movements despite not sharing their conditions. By 'relatively privileged' I refer to people with a greater degree of wealth, education and access to resources than most South Africans. In the South

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the UPM and SSJ for their willingness to openly discuss their experiences and share their views on this topic. I thank Mbali Baduza for her assistance in transcribing and translating the interviews.

<sup>2</sup> In South Africa the word 'township' refers to urban settlements where black South Africans were forced to live during apartheid and which remain almost exclusively inhabited by black, mostly poor South Africans. While there are more upmarket areas within the townships, many middle-class black people today live in the former white suburbs.

African context, relatively privileged supporters of social justice struggles are typically employed as academics or in the civil society and NGO sectors. They are disproportionately white and often foreign.

The participation of these relatively privileged individuals in South African social justice struggles occurs in a context of great inequality and division. Since 1994 South Africa's already high levels of income inequality have actually *increased* slightly and divisions along racial, cultural, linguistic and rural-urban lines persist despite some degree of erosion in the post-apartheid era. Because such inequalities and divisions are such a defining feature of South African society, any attempt to bring together different groups committed to bringing about a more just society has to attend to the question of how such divisions can be bridged. This paper focuses on one important division that requires bridging if solidarity around social justice struggles is to be fostered – that of the division between those who occupy a more and a less privileged societal position in contemporary South Africa. I explore this issue by discussing the attempt by a group of Rhodes University students known as the Students for Social Justice (SSJ) to stand in solidarity with the Grahamstown branch of the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM).

### **A Note on Methodology**

The research draws on my own observations and peripheral involvement in the UPM and SSJ as well as on interviews and focus group discussions with SSJ and UPM members. I conducted two focus group discussions (one with UPM members and one with SSJ members), two face-to-face interviews (one with a UPM member, one with an SSJ member) and one email interview (with an SSJ member who is no longer based in Grahamstown). One focus group discussion was conducted in both Xhosa and English, while the other and all interviews were conducted in English only. In what follows I will avoid using the names of interviewees, simply numbering them UPM1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 and SSJ1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

I should make clear at the outset the 'situatedness' of my perspective on this topic. As a Grahamstown-based researcher with my own interests in and commitments to struggles for social justice in Grahamstown and in South Africa as a whole, this paper entails reflection on my own practices and those of my colleagues, friends and students. In doing such research (and in making clear my own investment in it) I reject the positivist view that the researcher is – or ought to be – 'a disembodied, rational, sexually indifferent subject – a mind unlocated in space, time or constitutive

relationships with others' (Grosz, 1986, cited in McDowell, 1992, p.405). Rather, in line with the view adopted by, among others, feminist geographers, I argue that researchers cannot and ought not to be detached from their subject of study and that their own position and its influence on the research process ought to be made visible rather than concealed (see Desmond, 2004; England, 1994; Gold, 2002; Katz, 1994; Madge, 1993; 1997; Nast, 1994). Rather than trying to do what Haraway (1991, p.191) calls the 'god-trick' whereby we seek to present a neutral view from nowhere, we should assume a 'situated perspective' which acknowledges that our research is being conducted by a particular person located in a particular place at a particular time (Haraway, 1991, p.188-196). In this way we will be forced to recognise that our knowledge is not 'objective, pure and innocent' but rather 'contingent, partial and historically located' (Desmond, 2004, p.268).

Thus, I would like to make clear at the outset that my interest in this project relates to my own experiences and concerns about how relatively privileged people (particularly those associated with universities) can best contribute to ongoing struggles for social justice in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> I should also make clear that while I have no formal position within either UPM or SSJ, I have been an active (although sometimes critical) observer and supporter of their activities. This research is intended to help those similarly situated to think through how best the privileged may contribute to the struggles of those less favourably situated in unjust and unequal societies.

### **Social Justice Movements in South Africa**

As mentioned earlier, over the last decade or so there has been a resurgence in popular protest in South Africa and several activist organizations challenging the South African state have emerged. The regularity of protests in South Africa has led some to describe South Africa as the 'protest capital of the world' (see for example Alexander 2012a). It is difficult to provide reliable estimates of the number of protests taking place in South Africa as figures vary greatly – for example, while Peter Alexander reports that there are well over a 1000 protests annually and Cronje notes that police report responding to around three protests per day, more conservative commentators provide figures of between 100 and 250 per year for the last few years (see Alexander, 2010, 2012b; Cronje,

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<sup>3</sup> For another article which reflects on the involvement of privileged individuals in social justice movements and includes comments on the challenges of doing research on movements in which one has had some involvement, see Dawson and Sinwell (2012) as well as other articles in the special issue of *Social Movement Studies* in which this article appears (Vol. 11 No. 2). See also footnote 1 in Naidoo and Veriava (2005).

2012; Karamoko & Jain, 2011).<sup>4</sup> However, even if we go with more conservative figures, it is evident that protest action is a regular and noteworthy feature of post-apartheid South Africa.

Many of these protests are organized by labour unions, most of which are affiliated with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) which is part of the ruling tripartite alliance and is thus an ally (albeit a critical one) of the ruling ANC. However, other protests are organised by organisations without any political party affiliation and which could be called 'social justice movements'. By 'social justice movements' I refer to groups which work outside formal party politics, but which have political agendas focused on issues relating to social justice and which claim to represent marginalised or oppressed groups – the poor, the unemployed, shackdwellers, and the HIV-positive, for example. Some of the more prominent among such movements are the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the Landless Peoples Movement (LPM), Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM),<sup>5</sup> the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC), the Unemployed Peoples Movement (UPM) the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), and the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). I list these as these are some of the movements which have attracted the most attention in the media and academia, but these groups differ widely and some have splintered or disintegrated after a few years of much-debated activity.<sup>6</sup>

These post-apartheid popular protests are receiving increasing interest in academic literature. Several edited books have recently come out exploring some of the features and implications of this phenomenon (see Gibson, 2006a; Ballard et al., 2006; and Beinart and Dawson, 2010).<sup>7</sup> There is growing debate in such literature about the nature of these protests and about the state's response to them. One point of contention in the literature relates to whether the media's frequent description of these protests as 'service delivery protests' is adequate or whether this characterisation of protest action fails to adequately capture the complex reasons why people take to the streets (see Alexander, 2010; Pithouse, 2011). A further point of contention relates to questions of continuity between current forms of protest and apartheid-era protest activity (see Buhlungu, 2006). Another issue often raised in the literature relates to why such protest action has

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the conservative estimates are based on the number of protests recorded in the SA Media News Database and in South African Local Government Briefing Reports while Alexander's higher figures are based on police records of crowd management incidents where 'unrest' occurred. It seems likely that the lower figures underestimate the number of protests as not all protests are reported upon in the media. Note also that if peaceful crowd management incidents are included the figure is much higher than 1000 as this is the approximate number of unrest related crowd management incidents, but many protest marches are peaceful.

<sup>5</sup> 'Abahlali baseMjondolo' means 'People who live in shacks'. The movement has received considerable attention in recent literature – see for example Bryant (2008), Patel (2008) and Pithouse (2006, 2007, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See Mckinley (2012) on the APF, for example, and Levenson (2012) on the LPM.

<sup>7</sup> There have also been special issues of journals on social movements in South Africa. See for example special issues of the *Journal of Asian and African Studies* in 2004 (Volume 39 No. 4) and in 2008 (Volume 43 No. 1).

not resulted in a significant reduction in the ANC's electoral support and whether or not it may in the future have this result (see Atkinson, 2007; Friedman, 2012; Levenson, 2012). A further theme receiving consideration is the state's response to protest action (see Duncan, 2011; McKinley & Veriava, 2005). The televised killing of Andries Tatane during a protest in Ficksburg in April 2011 and the killing of 34 striking miners at the Lonmin Platinum mine in Marikana in August 2012 have led to increased concerns about police brutality and state repression. Evidently, political protest is once again an important feature of the South African political landscape hence the increasing academic and civil society interest in it.

### **Thinking about the Participation of the Privileged**

As mentioned earlier, many South African social justice movements have supporters who join or support these movements out of shared convictions rather than shared conditions. Such individuals can be said to be demonstrating 'out-group solidarity' (Blum, 2007) in that they are expressing solidarity around issues (such as unemployment, homelessness, poverty and eviction) that do not directly affect them and support such movements out of a concern for justice, an ideological commitment or some similar motive. Most often such expressions of out-group solidarity are welcome, but it is important to acknowledge that a number of potential problems arise when those who are relatively privileged seek to stand in solidarity with oppressed and marginalised groups. In her discussion of the 'paradox of the participation of the privileged', Sally Scholz (2008) touches on some of these potential problems. She points out that solidarity presumes a sort of equality, and can thus be threatened by the presence of relatively privileged individuals within a group made up largely of marginalised or oppressed people. She warns that the very presence of a member of a privileged group may silence members of oppressed groups who may not feel comfortable speaking in the presence of the privileged individuals (Scholz, 2008:152). Herein lies the paradox she outlines: privileged participants in social justice movements have attempted to renounce some aspects of their privilege in order to join struggles for justice, but their societal status may intimidate others within the movement or may give them privilege within the movement. Thus their privilege may be reinscribed in the movement for social justice in which they operate (Scholz, 2008:158). Nevertheless, Scholz does not believe that the privileged ought to withdraw from struggles against oppression, but she warns that vigilance is required to ensure that privilege is not reinscribed within struggles aimed at achieving social justice.

In the South African context where there are such stark societal divisions and so many different contours along which privilege is awarded, the question of how to properly craft solidarity between the oppressed and their privileged supporters is particularly tricky. While it seems worth encouraging attempts by privileged individuals and groups to stand in solidarity with social justice struggles, tensions have already emerged in some social justice struggles in relation to the appropriate role that privileged activists should play in such struggles. There is a small body of literature commenting negatively on the role played by some relatively privileged activists within social justice struggles in South Africa. In such literature, privileged activists have been accused of using movements to advance their own projects (Desai, 2006; Siwisa, 2008; Walsh, 2008), of crowd-renting (Siwisa, 2008), of being accountable to each other rather than to those they claim to represent (Desai, 2006), of romanticising the poor (Desai, 2006; Sinwell, 2011), and of co-opting social movements to support particular NGOs (Gibson, 2006b: 15-16; Mngxitama, 2006).<sup>8</sup>

Some of the above critiques of the role of privileged individuals in social justice struggles function to discredit particular individuals or social justice movements. The tone of this paper is quite different. Rather than revealing a problematic (or indeed admirable) instance of solidarity in social justice struggles, I use the reflections of members of UPM and SSJ members in order to highlight some of the challenges that almost inevitably emerge when privileged individuals attempt to act in solidarity with social justice struggles. While I should make clear that UPM and SSJ both have their strengths as well as their weaknesses, my aim here is not to reveal and discuss these. Thus the paper is not a critique of either or both of these movements, but rather seeks to make a contribution to thinking carefully about how best we can build solidarity within broader struggles for social justice based on the reflections of UPM and SSJ members themselves. In the section to follow I briefly introduce the UPM and SSJ, but do not discuss their activities at length. Rather I move quickly on to a discussion of the challenges they experienced in this attempt to work in solidarity with each other. Following a discussion of these challenges, I very tentatively suggest some ways in which such challenges may be negotiated.

### **The UPM and SSJ**

Before introducing the UPM and SSJ, it is necessary to make a few brief comments about the town in which they both operate – Grahamstown, also known as Rhini. Grahamstown is situated in the

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<sup>8</sup> I will not here debate the correctness of the claims made by the quoted authors. It is my view that some of these criticisms are unfair. The reason I include this list of critiques here is simply to give some idea of the nature of existing critiques on the role of privileged actors in South Africa social justice movements.

Makana municipal region in the Eastern Cape province, the poorest of South Africa's nine provinces. It is home to Rhodes University, a small university which caters mainly for relatively wealthy students who do not come from the town or its surrounds, but who are attracted from the rest of the country and from neighbouring countries by the university's good reputation and the university-town culture of Grahamstown. As with most South African cities, Grahamstown is a very unequal and divided town, with the wealthy living on the West side of town in the formerly (and still predominantly) white suburbs where the university is situated, while the majority of the town's population of 70 000 live in the 'township' in the East which remains almost exclusively black. Many Rhodes university students never set foot in the township during their entire stay in Grahamstown and, while the town is more racially integrated than it was in the apartheid era, divides along racial and class lines are obvious and stark.

The Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) in Grahamstown came into being in August 2009. It came about as a result of concerns about high unemployment in Grahamstown and dissatisfaction with the local government's response to this situation. It was formed by a small group of people living in Grahamstown, among them Ayanda Kota who became its chairperson. Those who established the UPM were 'ordinary' citizens of Grahamstown's township most of whom were unemployed and thus had few resources, but who were able to establish links with individuals and organizations who had resources and connections. Soon after deciding to set up the UPM, meetings were held with a local NGO, Masifunde, and with veteran activist MP Giyose of the Jubilee Campaign at which Masifunde and Giyose's support was garnered. A community meeting was called at a local high school at which the new organization and its aims and objectives were discussed. The name and logo of the organisation was subsequently decided upon and the organisation began to create networks and build support. By December 2009 the UPM had established connections with the nascent Democratic Left Front (DLF)<sup>9</sup> and a meeting of the DLF was convened in Grahamstown at which connections were made between the UPM and other regional social justice movements as well as between the UPM and academics at Rhodes.

At around the same time a similar movement, calling itself the South African Unemployed People's Movement, formed in Durban. Representatives of the two organisations met and decided to work together under the banner the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM). Currently, they operate independently, but regularly communicate and support each other's activities. This paper focuses exclusively on the Grahamstown-based UPM which is referred to as UPM from this point forward.

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<sup>9</sup> The Democratic Left Front (DLF) was at this time known as the Conference for the Democratic Left, but has since adopted this name. See [www.democraticleft.za.net](http://www.democraticleft.za.net) for more on this organisation.

During 2010 and 2011 the UPM gradually attracted more attention locally and also some attention nationally.<sup>10</sup> While most of the small group of founders drifted away from the organization – some amicably, others less so – new members joined and became active and Ayanda Kota remained in the role of chairperson and was in many ways the public face of the organization. Several protest marches were organized and the UPM began to be recognized as an important role player in the Grahamstown community. In addition to organising protests and demonstrations, the UPM convened public meetings, issued media statements, met with various communities, participated in public debates, and built linkages with similar organizations nationwide. The UPM positioned itself as a left-wing, anti-capitalist organization that insisted on independence from all existing political party structures. The organisation initially ran without funding, securing what resources it had through what members could bring together themselves and through connections made with more privileged Grahamstown citizens who provided limited funding, equipment, use of internet and photocopying facilities, transport, and the like all on a fairly ad-hoc basis. In 2011 the organisation secured funding from the Rosa Luxemburg foundation which resulted in them setting up an office and being able to employ some part-time administrators as well as fund some activities.

In February 2011 three UPM members, Ayanda Kota, Xola Mali and Nombulelo Yami as well as one non-UPM member were arrested after a protest march which took place in Phaphamani, a poorly developed area on the periphery of Grahamstown.<sup>11</sup> Ayanda Kota subsequently attended a Rhodes University screening of a film about Abahlali baseMjondolo where he spoke about UPM and about the circumstances that led up to the arrest of these four activists. Some of the students attending this event were motivated by this discussion to form some kind of organisation which would be committed to fighting for social justice in Grahamstown. Further discussions among these students led to the subsequent formation of the Students for Social Justice (SSJ).

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<sup>10</sup> For example, since 2009 the UPM has been mentioned in 62 items in the local newspaper, the *Grocotts Mail* (this includes all articles and letters referring to the UPM as well as special features available only online such as slideshows and opinion polls). Ayanda Kota, chairperson of the UPM from its founding until early 2012, was declared '2011 Newsmaker of the Year' by the *Grocotts Mail*. Those interested in reading the local press coverage of the UPM can visit [www.grocotts.co.za](http://www.grocotts.co.za). The Grahamstown branch of the UPM has featured in the national weekly *Mail & Guardian* which has run articles written by Ayanda Kota.

<sup>11</sup> Subsequent to a UPM-organised protest in the city centre, some Phaphamani residents who had participated in the protest, dug up part of a road in Phaphamani and burnt tyres in protest against lack of consultation regarding the (lack of) provision of services and housing in the area. The police dispersed the crowd with rubber bullets. The next morning the protest broke out again and three prominent UPM activists (who had not actually played a prominent role in the Phaphamani-based protest, but had organised the original city centre protest which sparked the subsequent protest) and one Phaphamani resident were arrested. The charges against all four were eventually dropped, but the case was postponed several times before being thrown out and the bail conditions of the UPM activists prevented them from being present at political meetings which compromised the ability of the UPM to continue organising effectively.



Some of the core members of SSJ reflect that in addition to their desire to stand in solidarity with the UPM, what motivated them to start the organisation was also a sense that the Rhodes University campus lacked active student organisations which organised around political issues. While Rhodes University does have small branches of the ANC-aligned South African Students Congress (SASCO) and the Democratic Alliance Student Organisation (DASO) as well as many student organisations which organised around single issues, the SSJ students wanted to create an organisation that was not affiliated to any political party but which was concerned with broader political issues. They also wanted to engage with the broader Grahamstown community in a way that differed from the official university-run community engagement programme which co-ordinates student involvement in various projects around town but which the students felt was insufficiently political.

During 2011 the SSJ was very active, although it was a relatively small number of students who were consistently active throughout the year. The students kicked off by putting forward a candidate for election in the May 2011 municipal elections. The candidate was not successful in winning the ward in which the university is based, but the campaign helped publicise the SSJ. During the rest of 2011, the students organised regular meetings, set up a facebook page to share ideas and post notices, attended some UPM meetings, set up social events where students from Rhodes University could meet and socialise with UPM members, joined the UPM in protest marches, and participated in the organisation of a local 'Occupy' event in the city centre. They also participated alongside the UPM in activities related to the national Democratic Left Front.

After this very active period of activity, the SSJ sunk into a lull of activity during 2012. Some of its active members had finished their studies and left the University, some felt exhausted and decided to dedicate more time to their studies, while others felt disillusioned with the original goals and values of the organisation and so drifted away. Commenting on the decline of the organisation, some of the key members also commented that while they had decided at the outset not to elect an executive committee and to run in a very informal, non-hierarchical way which they felt was more in line with their values, they later realised that this way of organising had its downside in that it was very difficult to assign clear roles and to get things done efficiently. Others commented that because they had worked so closely with the UPM, they were also negatively affected by what they felt were organisational difficulties within the UPM.

The situation at the time of writing is that the UPM and SSJ both officially continue to exist and to support each other, although some SSJ members declared that the organisation is now 'dead' and UPM members commented on the students' absence this year, with one lamenting that 'this year, SSJ, we can't see them ... We are all alone' (UPM1; 2012). The UPM organised a fairly large annual general meeting early in 2012 and elected a new executive committee so that for the first time Ayanda Kota, while still on the executive, no longer serves as the organisation's chairperson, being replaced by Asanda Ncwadi. The organisation experiences much fluctuation in terms of active membership, but continues to meet regularly. The SSJ, on the other hand, has met infrequently.

### **Challenges in building solidarity**

One of the most obvious challenges when building solidarity between more and less privileged people is that it is difficult to bridge the many social divisions that result in some being privileged while others are marginalised and oppressed. As I indicated at the outset, South Africa is a very divided society and attempts to build solidarity between various actors committed to achieving some kind of more just South African society are hampered by these divisions. The existence of such divisions and the difficulties they create was evident in the attempt by the SSJ and UPM to work together. Members from both organisations stressed that while they were keen to work with each other they did sometimes find it difficult to bridge the many divides that separate poor, unemployed township residents from wealthier university students. One UPM member commented 'Students will always be students; people from the community will always be people from the community' and suggested that it is difficult for students to work with 'people from the community', urging them to 'endure' it (UPM3, 2012). He also said that he sometimes felt as if students wanted to emphasise their difference – 'they want us to feel that, ja [yes], they are the students' – in a way that made him feel awkward and not respected. The students in turn spoke of their initial enthusiasm about building bridges between themselves and community members and their later disillusionment with this idea. They spoke of travelling to the township for events expecting to meet with large groups of people, but finding only a small number of people who did not seem to want to speak to them anyway or were suspicious of their intentions. They also spoke of a time they went along to a funeral on the urging of UPM members but spent the whole afternoon peeling potatoes for the funeral alongside women from the community while hardly exchanging a word with them. This was partly because of a language barrier as many SSJ students cannot speak the local language, Xhosa, while some community members cannot speak English. However, a Xhosa speaking SSJ member stressed that it was not just a language barrier: 'Well, I was like "Molo mama, kunjani" [Hello, mother, how

are you], you know, formalities. There was nothing else to say so I went back to my friends ... It was so awkward' (SSJ3, 2012). Another black SSJ member stressed that these divisions were also not straightforwardly along racial lines although race was certainly a factor. He commented that 'by being in Rhodes University, even if you are black, you are also white in the township. You are called "umlungu" [white person]' (SSJ6, 2012). He felt that both the students and the community members sometimes stereotyped each other and because of this could not bridge the social distance between them.

It should be noted that these divisions were experienced despite that fact that not all the SSJ students are from affluent backgrounds and that two UPM members are currently in the process of applying to come and study at Rhodes University and so may soon be students themselves. It should also be noted that the older UPM members, who perhaps have clearer memories of the more extreme divisions of the apartheid era, seemed less distressed by the differences between SSJ and UPM members and expressed satisfaction that some headway had been made in working across these divisions. One commented that she felt that the students, despite not all being able to understand Xhosa understand their problems and that 'In the past, white and black people could not work together. Now, with democracy, a person is the same as other people. We can engage with white people and educated people and understand each other' (UPM2, 2012). It seemed that it was the younger UPM members and the SSJ members who felt more concerned about and uncomfortable with existing divisions and their failure to bridge them.

Speaking to UPM and SSJ members it was also very evident that there is much diversity in both groups, so that the members differ very much from one another and may also experience some difficulty in bridging social divides within their own organisations. Also, it was evident to me that the power dynamics that emerge between social justice movements and their middle-class supporters are complicated and do not always entail the stereotype of the powerful middle-class activist who is able to manipulate others within the social movement. In the case of the relationship between the SSJ and UPM power dynamics were further complicated by the fact that while the SSJ students wield some power through having access to resources and the social status of students at an elite university, SSJ members are younger than the majority of UPM members and some of them felt that this made it hard for them to refuse to do as UPM members asked. One student made reference to the way that respect for elders is strongly emphasised in many South African cultures, noting that she felt at times that people within UPM placed particular pressure on her, as a black South African with a similar cultural background to UPM members, because they knew she would feel

uncomfortable refusing to do what someone older than her asked her to do (UPM3, 2012). Furthermore, leaders of movements such as UPM are typically strong-willed and charismatic, and are quite able to detect and oppose agendas they feel are being imposed upon them by middle-class supporters as well as to pressure such individuals to do as they prefer. Thus, while societal divisions certainly hamper attempts at solidarity between privileged actors and members of social justice movements, we should guard against assuming that the power dynamics always favour the middle-class supporter.

In addition to the challenge of bridging divides, another issue that emerged in the reflections of SSJ members related to how difficult it is for privileged individuals to break out of problematic roles when participating in social justice struggles. The students who formed SSJ stressed repeatedly that they hoped to do something new and different with SSJ. They wanted to 'experiment' and 'rethink' things and were determined to be different from other student organisations and from the university's official community engagement programme which they felt was 'apolitical', offering only 'band aids to the many social injustices in Grahamstown' (SSJ4, 2 and 5, 2012). In addition to wanting to avoid the charitable and philanthropic tone of such interventions, the students also stressed that they did not want to impose their views on community members and act as if they knew everything. Rather than being 'some sort of a vanguard', they wanted to 'play second fiddle to the UPM' in their attempt to engage with the community (SSJ5, 2012).

However, reflecting on their activities, some SSJ members felt that they had ended up playing roles they had not initially intended to play: they had ended up being one more node of charity in a town filled with charitable organisations or they had ended up dominating conversations despite intending to take the lead from UPM members. For example, one student reflected very cynically on the SSJ and UPM's Occupy Grahamstown event (SSJ1, 2012). She said that the SSJ members had wanted the event to be an opportunity for the SSJ, UPM and other interested parties to meet and converse and build alliances, but that it had ended up like some kind of charitable event as she suspected that many people only attended the event because they heard that free soup was being served. She comments that 'At some point I found myself behind a table pouring soup into cups and there was a row of black people [lining up to get soup] and a bunch of white students [handing it out]'. This was exactly the kind of relationship she and other SSJ students had *not* wanted to establish. They did not want to be wealthy philanthropists handing out soup and yet somehow they often found themselves in situations that seemed rather like the charity-based activities they had been so keen to avoid. Commenting on another SSJ/UPM proposed activity in which the SSJ was

supposed to assist UPM in building a house, the same SSJ member asked 'are [we] going to have a conversation or [is what we're doing] a philanthropic act where we become the purse?' (SSJ1, 2012).

Similarly, the students had not wanted to impose their views on UPM and to act as if they were there to teach the community members, yet they found themselves taking on such a role. One student commented: 'We did not quite eradicate that mentality of seeing us as superior and seeing themselves as inferior to us ... because of our intellectual understanding of the position that they are in, we tend to sometimes go overboard in explaining' (SSJ6, 2012). They had also not wanted to have hierarchies within the SSJ itself and had insisted on not choosing a chairperson or executive committee, yet a hierarchy seemed to emerge anyway and the lack of official roles made it difficult to organise efficiently.

The students experienced frustration with regard to their inability to transcend what they thought were problematic ways of involving themselves in struggles for justice. They were perhaps more reflective than most university students on the potential problems that emerge when privileged actors participate in struggles for social justice, but their awareness of these problems did not seem sufficient to prevent these problems from re-emerging and their frustrations in relation to this made some reluctant to continue being involved.

### **Ways Forward**

For privileged actors to be able to act in solidarity with less privileged people involved in social justice movements requires careful thought about how the challenges described above can best be approached. Clearly, the social divisions in South Africa are difficult to bridge and it is difficult to break out of the roles traditionally adopted when privileged actors engage in struggles for justice. Thus, I do not have any clear and easy 'recommendations' with which to end this article. However, I do want to make some tentative suggestions about how to tackle these challenges.

Firstly, while some privileged activists have chosen to become part of or even to create social justice movements, the students who formed the SSJ opted to form a separate, independent movement which would act in solidarity with the UPM, but which would organise separately and have a wider scope than simply supporting UPM. However, to some extent the organisation began to depend quite extensively on UPM and focused on supporting and acting with UPM. In retrospect, some SSJ members reflected that perhaps they should have concentrated more on making interventions

among students rather than focusing so much on supporting UPM. One student commented 'If we really wanted to change things, then we should have focused on changing the mindset of students ... we didn't think about these ... students that at some point in the next three years are going to leave this place with the same ideas in their heads' (SSJ1, 2012). She suggested that the SSJ should have concentrated more on changing students' mindsets so that once they left university they would act in ways more likely to contribute to building a more just society.

While some UPM members seemed to envisage the main role for the students to be one in which they focus on supporting the UPM financially or assist it to set up poverty alleviation projects, others insisted that it would be better if the students organised autonomously and had their own clear and separate agenda. One commented: 'As soon as they say "how can we help them", these problems continue, because once UPM goes down, they go down' (UPM6, 2012). He insisted that they must see themselves as agents for change in their own society making 'their [own] contribution to the struggle', rather than just 'reduc[ing] it to helping these poor people'. The SSJ could then stand in solidarity with the UPM where appropriate, but would have its own separate agenda. This way of organising could be helpful in handling the sense of division members of both UPM and SSJ experienced. Rather than expecting to be able to bridge divisions and work together as one, building autonomous movements recognises the students' different position in society and requires them to work within their own context in ways that are in solidarity with other organisations, but are distinct. It also recognises that changing an inequitable society requires changing the mindset of the privileged rather than just trying to intervene in the lives of the poor. The privileged may be better equipped to do this work than they are to be actively involved in building social movements in poor or marginalised areas or determining on such movements' priorities or projects.

Conversations with UPM and SSJ members also suggest that privileged actors need to think very carefully about their role in analysing and theorising the conditions of the poor. UPM members stressed that students could play an important role in helping community members better understand their conditions. One UPM member stressed that the most important role he saw for the students in supporting UPM was the provision of information lacked by the community. He comments 'if we are fighting for toilets, it is just for toilets and we don't have any further information about what is going on. Everything goes back to information. They [the students] must be eager to share information and everything that they have learnt' (UPM3, 2012). Similarly, another UPM members stressed that because the students are 'very smart theoretically', they could use their knowledge to build consciousness among less educated community members (UPM6, 2012).

However, he also stressed that when students and other privileged activists seek to be involved in the struggles of poorer people, they need to assist in theorising these struggles in a way that builds upon the practical and immediate experiences of the people. He insists that there 'is no standard bible that must be orthodox', but that theorisation of people's conditions must start from those conditions rather than starting from a particular theory or ideology (UPM6, 2012). Educated people can and should help the poor to better understand their situation, but as one UPM members put it 'how do you go to someone who is in the umkhuku [shack] and say "capital is the enemy"? They will ask "Who is this fellow capital?"' (UPM6, 2012). Driving the point home, he insists: 'You might theorise about the World Bank, but you must also realise how do I go to where I stay and start shouting about the IMF? I mean that would be ridiculous. I will be talking to myself or I will be talking down to people .... You [can] help in infusing class consciousness in a practical manner, meaning you integrate it into what you are currently doing ... without imposing it' (UPM6, 2012). Educated people, whether they are members of a poor or marginalised community or whether they are coming from a more privileged context,<sup>12</sup> have a very valuable role to play in providing information to marginalised groups and in helping such groups gain perspective on their situation. However, as one of the SSJ members stressed in reference to his experiences at conferences organised by left-orientated civil society organisations, educated people have to be careful not to impose their views upon people who may not see any relevance in the obscure-sounding theories that educated people sometimes bring to discussions about poverty and injustice (SSJ6, 2012).

Finally, a further point that came out from the focus group discussion with the SSJ students was the real disillusionment felt by some students regarding their inability to transcend the problematic roles they felt privileged actors often play. For some of the students, this seemed to have led them to a point where they withdrew from further contact with UPM as they felt too uncomfortable about being a 'purse' for the community or ending up doing soup-kitchen style interventions. This disillusionment brings to mind some of the reflections of privileged white feminist thinkers in the West whose realisation of their own complicity in unjust structures and of the difficulty of throwing off privilege and ceasing to be complicit in problematic relations had led to them sinking into inactivity. Alison Bailey (1999:88), for example, speaks of the 'political paralysis' she felt on realising

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<sup>12</sup> Note that there are educated people within poor and marginalised communities. Some members of social justice movements based in poor communities have had some tertiary education (although they have often had to drop out of tertiary education) and others may lack formal education, but are well-informed about socio-political issues. It should be emphasised that in South Africa there are many unemployed and poor graduates some of whom join such movements. I make this qualification here as it is sometimes assumed that community members forming these movements are without such knowledge or have no formal education, but I would stress that it must be recognised that movements like the UPM include educated and very well-informed people as well as those who have very little information and education on socio-political issues.

that she was unjustly privileged, but that she could not fully throw off this privilege. What Bailey and others reflecting on privilege came to realise was that they could not completely throw off privilege or escape some complicity with injustice, but that they could use their privilege in ways that would ultimately undermine privilege (see Bailey, 1999; Bartky, 2002; Kruks, 2005). To do so, however, requires tolerance for 'messiness' and willingness to take up uncomfortable roles and make difficult compromises. It may be necessary for privileged actors to accept that sometimes they are going to be pushed into being the benevolent funder of charity-type projects, for example, even if they are convinced that it is more important to address structural injustices and that charity has little use. Sometimes it is difficult not to fall into pre-determined roles, but it may be better to persist even when ending up in such roles, rather than to hanker after some kind of innocent, unproblematic way of participating in social justice struggles.

## **Conclusion**

While the relationship between SSJ and UPM has its own unique features, many of the challenges the two organisations faced in working together are likely to be similar to those faced in other instances where relatively privileged individuals seek involvement in social justice struggles, both in South Africa and elsewhere. In radically unequal societies the privileged can bring necessary resources, networks, information and awareness into popular struggles and thus their involvement in popular struggles is likely to be welcomed. However, careful attention is required to ensure that privileged participants in popular struggles do not reinscribe their privilege with such struggles. The experiences of SSJ and UPM suggest that some degree of autonomy between social justice movements and their privileged supporters may be helpful. Their experiences also suggest that while privileged supporters (particularly those who are well-educated) may have an important role to play in providing information and analysis to those involved in popular struggles, care has to be taken that educated outsiders do not impose their analyses upon others involved in social justice struggles and that their analyses build upon peoples lived experiences of oppression. Finally, the SSJ students difficulties in forging relationships with UPM members that did not resemble the charitable kinds of interventions they regarded as insufficiently political suggests that the privileged's involvement in popular struggles entails degrees of 'messiness' and complicity that are uncomfortable, but that may have to be carefully negotiated rather than strictly avoided. In closing I should stress, that these suggestions are tentative and require further thought and further fleshing out, but it is hoped that these tentative thoughts can help further discussions on how to build solidarity in struggles for social justice.



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