An Urban commons? Notes from South Africa

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Abstract This article explores the critical relationship between the commons and the state, through an examination of urban squatter movements in South Africa as a form of urban commons. Focusing on the largest and most fully realized, the Abahali base Mjondolo in Durban, the author demonstrates how commitments to autonomous practices and deep social relationships have developed over time. Citing David Harvey, the author calls for a ‘double-edged’ approach in which the state is forced to provide public goods for public purposes, but in a way that builds on the local knowledge and self-organization created through commoning.

Introduction

Peter Linebaugh warns us against the tendency to speak as if the commons are a natural resource and encourages us to insist that ‘the commons is an activity’ (2008, p. 279). He also warns us that thinking in terms of the practice of commoning, rather than of the commons as a natural resource, can itself be complicit with the World Bank logic that ‘would like us to employ commoning as a means to socialize poverty and hence to privatize wealth’ (2008, p. 279). Linebaugh’s warning about attempts to affirm commoning as a means to socialize poverty takes on an intense urgency in large parts of the global South where, for many people, the enclosure of land has not been followed by proletarianization in the form of wage labour. In this context, uncritical celebration of the popular energies invested in ‘informal’ housing and livelihoods often results, precisely, in attempts to socialize poverty in a manner that absolves the state and the market of social obligation. This is almost invariably gendered, and it is frequently racialized. At the same time, forms of Marxism that are unable to look beyond dogmatic assertions of the a priori political priority of the industrial working class, or, for that

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matter, immaterial labour, can blind us to potentially emancipatory currents or moments within the politics of people living on squatted land and generating livelihoods outside of formal employment. But if commoning is to offer emancipatory possibilities that enable us, in Silvia Federici’s words, to think and act outside of the idea that the state and the market are ‘exhaustive of our political possibilities’ (2010, pp. 1–2), it needs to reach beyond attempts to simply survive dispossession and exclusion and to develop or connect to modes of struggle that can achieve both a decent quality of material life and some capacity to subordinate the state and the market to society. If commoning is to be able to undo rather than to escape or merely survive what Anna Selmeczi (2012) calls ‘the lethal segmentation of the urban order’ in the capitalist city, it needs to enable insurgency, insurgency with a capacity to attain some sort of hegemony, as well as a search for a degree of autonomy in the interstices (spatial, economic, political, symbolic, etc.) of the on-going accumulation of catastrophe.

Linebaugh notes that in radical thought the commons used to be taken to refer to the past and communism to the future but that after Stalinism, and the turn towards environmentalism, this seems to have been reversed. But, crucially, he adds that ‘What is sorely needed in this debate so far is allegiance to the actual movements of the common people who have been enclosed and foreclosed’ (2010, pp. 15–16). The call for fidelity to actually existing modes of struggle, to ‘the real movement which abolishes the present state of things’ (Marx, 1845), is vital to avoid retreat into ‘dogmatic abstraction’ (Marx, 1843) that is alienated from actually existing modes of life and struggle and often used to police rather than to engage popular emancipatory initiative.

**Commoning functional and dysfunctional to racial capitalism**

As Giovanni Arrighi et al. note, ‘the South(ern) African experience (is) … a paradigmatic outlier case of accumulation by dispossession’ (2010, p.411). But although there has been on-going mass expulsion from the land since the colonial wars of the nineteenth century, a process that has continued after apartheid, proletarianization has not been complete and there are still struggles against the enclosure of remaining communal land. Perhaps one of the most surreal of these struggles in recent years was waged in 2008 and 2009 when thousands of residents of eMacambini, on the North Coast of the Eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal, fought a bitter battle against the provincial government that was reported to have sold their land, a commons that they had held through colonialism and apartheid, for one US dollar to Ruwaad Holdings, a Dubai-based real estate company. It planned to build a Zulu theme park on 16,500 hectares of 19,000 hectares of land occupied by the AmaCambini clan that would ‘provide a vibrant, harmonious and integrated “work-play-stay-live” environment for local and international
consumers, tenants and investors’ (Ruwaad Holdings, undated). Estimates of the number of actually existing Zulu people who would have had to have been evicted to build this Zulu theme park settled at around fifty thousand.\(^1\)

With recourse to the courts, road blockades organized under the novel slogan ‘Down with Dubai!’ and access to elite publics enabled by an alliance with the largely urban shack dweller’s movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, the attempt to enclose this commons was defeated despite intimidation and violence from the state.

More recently, the commons emerged as an important consideration in the more sophisticated attempts to understand the strike on the platinum mines in Rustenburg that led to the end of the hegemony of the now irredeemably compromised African National Congress (ANC) linked union, the National Union of Mine Workers and a significant pay increase at the cost of the brazen massacre of thirty-four striking miners. The strike was largely organized by migrant workers from Mpondoland, in the rural hinterland of the Eastern Cape Province, and Keith Breckenridge’s (2012) widely read essay on these events was titled *Revenge of the Commons*.

But these attempts to defend the commons do not amount to a simple story of the commons as an emancipatory alternative to state and capital. In South Africa, it has, especially since Harold Wolpe’s now classic 1972 paper, long been argued that the commons has been functional to racial capitalism. Wolpe argued that migrant labour from the Bantustans, often a highly degraded commons, that were both spatially segregated and governed in an authoritarian manner, enabled a low-wage economy to be developed without capital, directly or via the state, having to cover the costs of social reproduction. This work was largely undertaken via the unwaged labour of African women. Ashley Westaway (2012) has recently argued that in post-apartheid South Africa, the former Bantustans continue to constitute a contemporary segregationism.

Of course if, as Elinor Ostrom and others have suggested, our understanding of the commons extends into the political, that ‘those affected by a given rule should participate in making it’ (Dolenec, 2013) then the Bantustan was not a full commons. It is also useful to draw a distinction between modes of commoning that are spatially separated from sites of wealth and power and those that are not, as well as modes of commoning that are confined to people whose subordination has been mediated through race or ethnicity. Nonetheless, it is clear that while modes of life and livelihood conducted, to some degree, outside of the state and the market may not be in the interests of certain factions of capital, there are clearly ways in which they can be broadly functional to

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\(^1\) There is a collection of articles on this at the Abahlali baseMjondolo website http://www.abahlali.org
modes of domination and exclusion that are in the systemic interests of both capital and states bent on containment rather than inclusion.

**Actual movements of the common people**

In the postcolony, it has not been unusual for some forms of nationalist thought to carry a particular investment in romantic ideas about peasant movements, while some forms of left thought invest their hopes for an equitable modernity in the working class. In both cases, there has often been a suspicion of the political capacities of the urban poor that is both entrenched and *a priori*. But in contemporary South Africa, as in much of the world, it is the cities that have become sites of sustained contestation from below. Any attempt to consider the emancipatory prospects of commoning in the light of ‘the actual movements of the common people’ will have to take this reality seriously.

In recent years, there have been a number of proposals to think about the urban in terms of the commons or the possibility of the commons. In some cases, this amounts to little more than bringing a fashionable term into the consideration of the urban question, a term that seems to offer a radical gloss to urban aspirations without being marked by the limits and failures of the past and without having to risk making any programmatic proposals or, in some articulations, direct confrontations with domination. But David Harvey’s investigation (2012) of the relation between commoning and the urban is certainly worth engaging. His point of departure is that Elinor Ostrom’s work on the commons only examines collective management of resources at a certain scale. For Harvey, it is clear that the forms of commoning that she describes will not work above a certain scale and that, therefore, some sort of state structure is required. However, he does mention that it is possible to ‘establish a commune or a soviet within some protected space’ (2012, p. 71) and offers the ‘houses of the people’ in early twentieth century Italy and, the neighbourhood associations in El Alto as examples. Harvey is also careful to insist that public spaces and public goods ‘have always been a matter of state power and public administration, and such spaces and goods do not necessarily a commons make’ (2012, p.72). He uses the examples of Syntagma Square, Tahrir Square and the Plaza de Catalunya to argue that public space can become an urban commons through collective action but stresses that in ‘order to protect the common it is often vital to protect the flow of public goods that underpin the qualities of the common’ (2012, p.73). For Harvey, the state is an essential foundation for urban commoning and the market is, via commodification, often a threat to urban commoning. He also argues that while local autonomy can enable more democratic modes of engagement at the local level, it can also allow the rich to remove themselves from social obligation to broader society in a way that exacerbates inequality. Harvey concludes
that we require ‘a double-pronged political attack, through which the state is forced to supply more and more in the way of public goods for public purposes, along with the self-organization of whole populations to appropriate, use, and supplement those goods in ways that extend and enhance the qualities of the non-commodified reproductive and environmental commons’ (2012, p. 87).

Since the turn of the century, and with growing momentum since 2004, there has been a sequence of escalating popular protest in cities and towns across South Africa. This sequence of popular protest has, overwhelmingly, identified itself as a struggle or set of struggles of, by and for the poor. Although some larger movements have emerged out of the ferment, this sequence of popular protest is generally not organized by sustained and formally constituted social movements and is, in some respects, analogous to what Raúl Zibechi (2012) calls a ‘society in movement’ as opposed to a social movement. The politics and practices in this sequence of protest are diverse, unstable and often, at the level of organization, acutely localized. The broad thrust has been towards social inclusion, but there have been moments when this has taken a reactionary and, in particular, a xenophobic or ethnic form. There have also been points at which it has intersected with the contestation for access to patronage within the ANC. Despite the local scale at which much of this protest is organized, there is a clear degree to which these struggles have, despite their obvious diversity, developed a shared repertoire of practices and ideas. For instance, the road blockade has emerged as a key tool to effect disruption and to signal discontent and there is a growing commonality in the ideas, songs, slogans and symbolic repertoire through which protest is expressed. The shack settlement has, as has happened at various points over the last century, become a site of acute political intensity. Insurgent spatial practices, sometimes taking the form of quiet encroachment and sometimes taking the form of overtly political mobilization, continue to offer a significant challenge to the ability of the state and capital to sustain their duopoly on urban planning.

There are aspects of this sequence of protest, and the forms of everyday life from which it emerges, that can easily be read as local forms of commoning. The most obvious of these is that the shack settlement is usually on land that has been appropriated by popular action, be it overt or covert, outside of the logic of the state and the market. This may conform to authorized forms of spatial segregation, but it can also take the form of spatial insurgency. When the shack settlement is an insurgent presence in elite space the risk of eviction escalates dramatically but, if the land can be held access can be won to social goods like schools, libraries, hospitals and sports fields as well as opportunities for livelihoods. There are also often projects like vegetable gardens and crèches within shack settlements as well as the appropriation of services like electricity and, to a lesser extent, water and sanitation. However, in each case, these activities can be undertaken in a manner that
is collectively organized or not and they can be undertaken in explicitly non-commodified ways or subject to informal forms of commodification. When informal forms of commodification do arise, they are sometimes linked to local party structures and can become the basis for authoritarian modes of political containment. These struggles do have some capacity to choose to resist informal commodification, but they do not have the capacity to generate alternative livelihoods via commoning on a significant scale. Most people remain dependent on the market or the state for livelihoods that frequently leave people in acute material deprivation.

There are also aspects of this sequence of protest that are, quite clearly, rooted in a demand for the provision of social goods from the state including land and housing, services like water, sanitation and electricity and access to institutions like schools. There are also frequent demands for the state to provide these goods and services in a manner that is more consultative and less corrupt. Elite discourses frequently reduce the politics of this on-going rebellion to a demand for ‘service delivery’, a demand that is often understood to be a simple question of the efficiency of the state that can be addressed within current policy commitments. This is fundamentally mistaken. For a start the scale of the demands that are being made on the state are beyond its capacity in its current form. Moreover, the demands for more democratic modes of development – often sincere but sometimes co-opted by local power brokers for their own interests – also exceed the logic of the state as it currently exists. And these protests also go beyond simple demands for service delivery when they challenge spatial segregation and seek to integrate popular appropriation, such as land occupations, which can take the form of commoning, with the provision of goods and services by the state.

However, the increasing physical presence of poor people in cities outside of regulation by the state and the market, and their increasing political presence outside of modes of political representation authorized by the state, the ruling party and civil society, is resulting in increasing violence in response to insurgent spatial and political practices. This is largely organized by the state but is also sometimes organized by private power, the ruling party and, on at least one occasion, civil society. When sustained forms of democratic self-management do arise in communities or in struggle, they are at serious risk of both repression and co-option. Repression is exercised by the police, local party structures and, in Durban, assassins assumed to be in the pay of party structures. There is also repression in the symbolic sphere from middle-class actors, usually NGOs but including would-be left vanguards, that, like the state, sometimes seek to delegitimize popular action undertaken outside of their authority – usually by pandering to the set of stereotypes widely held about the urban poor in bourgeois society. Co-option is usually achieved via patronage networks linked to the state, party or NGOs. The risks of both repression and co-option tend to escalate dramatically if there is success in
forcing the state to provide development in the form of housing and services because local party structures, now organized via patronage more than principle, are often unwilling to allow development outside of their control.

This sequence of popular protest should not be dismissed on the grounds that it is generally not characterized by formal organization. In their classic text on poor people’s movements from the late 1970s, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward argued that when popular struggles did not conform to the predictions of an analysis of nineteenth century capitalism ‘the left has not tried to understand these movements, but rather has tended to simply disapprove of them’ (1979, p. x). They stressed that popular insurgency ‘flows from historically specific circumstances: it is a reaction against those circumstances, and it is also limited by those circumstances’ (1979, p. xi). At the heart of their analysis was the conclusion that ‘it was not formal organizations but mass defiance that won what was won in the 1930s and 1960s’ (1977, p. xv). Nonetheless, there is no teleology at play and it should not be assumed that popular protest will necessarily transform itself in to some sort of higher stage or, if it does take new forms better able to contest national politics from below, that this will be in a potentially emancipatory direction. Alain Badiou draws a distinction between ‘immediate riots’ and ‘historical riots’ and argues that the first mode of protest is ‘restricted to the site where its participants live’ and that it is ‘only when it constructs – most often in the city centre – a new site, where it endures and is extended, that it changes into an historical riot’ (2012, p. 23) that is characterized by the ‘assertion of a shared demand’ (2012, p. 35). It is certainly possible that popular protest in South Africa could, without a formal organizational base, cohere into mobilization around a shared demand. If, for instance, there was a simultaneous mass occupation of unused urban land across the country, that could mark a significant challenge to the urban regime. However, the moment at which popular action came closest to assuming and seeking to realize a shared demand across various parts of the country and at the same time was the xenophobic and ethnic pogroms of May 2008. There are no guarantees as to the political trajectory of the current ferment. This is compounded by the fact that political contestation on the elite terrain is taking an increasingly authoritarian, hyper-masculinist and, in some cases, even proto-fascist form in a context in which competing elite actors, none of which propose a progressive urban regime, are engaging in increasingly vigorous contestation to try and rally popular constituencies to their projects. There is peril and promise in the current conjuncture. However, this should not blind us to what has already been achieved.

There are already many people who, with the access to work and education enabled by presence in or proximity to elite spaces afforded by land occupations, have been able to make dramatic advances in their quality of lives or those of their children. Moreover, there is a significant degree to which poverty has been effectively politicized from below and poor people effectively
affirmed as political actors from below. However, with importance exceptions— all consequent to anomalous instances of sustained organization—grass roots activists have seldom been able to hold a constant place in the higher reaches of the public sphere. This has meant that the shack settlement frequently appears to elite publics as space where, to appropriate Jacques Rancière’s words, ‘only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger or anger could emerge, but not actual speech demonstrating a shared aisthesis’ (2010, p. 38).

**The Abahlali baseMjondolo movement**

Abahlali baseMjondolo is the only sustained and mass-based movement to have emerged from this ferment. The movement was formed in Durban in 2005. Its early years were characterized by a tremendous collective excitement and the warmth and mutual care of a congregation. Because the movement did not emerge from a vanguard with a fixed set of political ideas, it was able to develop its own ideas in an open manner drawing from a variety of political currents. These included people’s histories in trade unions and the United Democratic Front, social technologies developed in churches and forms of popular politics rooted in modes of engagement that offer an immediate affirmation of the dignity of participants. Meetings were characterized by slow, open-ended discussions in which everyone was encouraged to speak and which aimed at developing consensus. The initial theoretical work within the movement focussed on the necessity of developing ‘a politics of the poor’ and a ‘living politics’ rooted in everyday life and accessible to all. From the beginning, the movement developed a non-ethnic politics in which women have frequently held powerful positions. It refused electoral participation for a variety of reasons, some instrumental and some motivated by a principled and clearly drawn distinction between ‘people’s politics’ and ‘party politics’.

The movement has used road blockades, land occupations, legal protests in the form of marches and pickets, litigation and participation in debates in the broader public sphere to advance its struggle for land and housing in the cities. Its demands have gone way beyond a call for the state to simply provide housing and services more efficiently and the movement has, for instance, insisted that the social value of land must come before its commercial value. It has been highly successful in stopping evictions. It was also able to achieve an organized and non-commodified appropriation of services and has had some success in self-organized projects like crèches, vegetable gardens and so on. It has also been highly successful in winning and holding a space in the broader public sphere, especially the African language media. However, while it has sometimes blunted some of the excesses of the state’s approach to the urban crisis, halted some aspects of its rightward drift on urban policy and effectively called its credibility into question, it has not been able to achieve fundamental reforms. There is a stalemate of sorts.
From the beginning, the movement had to confront the routine arrest of its members on trumped up charges but its collective optimism and congregational sense of warmth and mutual care was sustained until 2009 when it was subject to armed violence by local party structures with the explicit sanction of Municipal and Provincial ANC leaders and the tacit but clear sanction of the police. People were imprisoned, tortured, driven from their homes and subject to open death threats. A number of key figures in the movement had to go underground for some months. The movement survived this traumatic episode which, three years before the Marikana Massacre, marked the end of any democratic credibility on the party of the ANC. For years, there had been a plethora of smaller meetings during the week and two or three mass meetings every weekend. But the exigencies of survival curtailed this, introduced a degree of brittleness into the flow of the movement’s sociality and raised the stakes that some had in the movement with the result that for the first time, there was a sense of factionalism. The need to sustain support meant that people were welcomed into the movement at a rapid rate even if they did not share its philosophy in a time when the movement was not able to continue its programme of self-education – via its self-declared University of Abahlali baseMjondolo – with the same rigour as it had in previous years. There was also a degree of bureaucratization, unavoidable given the escalating scale of the movement’s engagements on the formal terrain – including an exhausting trial. However, the movement has since rebuilt its self-education project, continues to grow and is enjoying a higher media profile than at any time in its history. At the time of writing, there are fifty-four branches in good standing in Durban along with branches in some smaller towns and in Cape Town. But the road ahead is not clear. It has, for some years now, been just too big to sustain the kinds of intimacies on which it was founded and which made democratic engagement a deeply personal experience. And as the movement continues to expand quite rapidly despite attempts to slow down growth, and to make it conditional on developing an understanding of and commitment to the movement’s politics, there is a growing diversity of political opinion, and practices, within the movement. At the same time, its mass base and high public profile have meant that it is subject to constant attempts, vertical and horizontal, at influence or capture by a sometimes dizzying range of projects including political parties and groups, NGOs and cultural and religious projects of various sorts. There are no guarantees that it will be able to indefinitely sustain the political ideas and practices on which it was founded. Moreover, in June 2013, there was a return to outright repression when a charismatic local Abahlali baseMjondolo leader, Nkululeko Gwala, was assassinated in Durban.

Over the years, there have been a few moments in the struggles waged by Abahlali baseMjondolo in which the idea of the commons, although not
usually named with this precise term, has come to the fore. In the experience of this author, this was most pronounced in Motala Heights, a neighbourhood in Durban. As has often been the case, people in this neighbourhood turned to the movement when facing eviction. A local resident, doing domestic work in a middle-class home, made contact after she found the movement’s website at work. The eviction was driven by an alliance between the local party structures and a local gangster aiming to build private housing in the area. The movement flourished in the area for some years and then declined. As is often the case, success in fending off eviction and winning an agreement from the state to build formal houses in the area was part of the reason for the decline. But the death of two key activists and the very difficult personal circumstances that two others had to confront were also central, as was the fact that all of this happened at a moment when the movement as a whole was struggling to deal with serious repression.

In Motala Heights, people of Indian and African descent developed and sustained personal and political intimacies in struggle despite the marked hostility of both Indian and African power-brokers in the area to this solidarity across race. The relationship between two women, Shamitha Naidoo and Louisa Motha, was central to this, and to the strength of the movement in Motala Heights for some years. As is often the case in popular politics in South Africa, Naidoo had first acquired respect in the community by running a creche. This is often a gendered role but it enabled her to enter the movement with pre-existing respect and from there to develop wider forms of engagement. She recalls that ‘I came up in Abahlali. That is where I learnt to stand like a man’ (2013). When asked about the roots of their relationship, Naidoo and Motha both pointed to the solidarity that their fathers had developed sleeping in the bush together after an eviction under apartheid. But it was noted that there was a prior point of connection at the river.

Shamitha Naidoo: We had a very close bond because as much as we used to wash clothes in the river they also used to wash clothes in the river. Even that little dam where the jondol [shack settlement] is now - we used to go all the way there to collect water. And when the river started flowing from there, when it started coming nice, we all used to play in the tunnel, we used to make our own beach! (Laughs) At the river there we used to wash clothes on the stones, there were big huge stones, then we’d carry our clothes and come all the way here and dry them.

Mrs Naidoo [Shamita’s mother] interjecting: There was 21 washing stones. All of us we used to go there – the blacks, the coloureds and the Indians. All of us. (2009)

The shared experience of this form of commoning, women’s commoning, was the foundation of the political work that defeated attempts to expel the
poor, Indian and African,\(^2\) from the area in order to enclose it for commercial
development. And while many residents pointed to the nearby factories and
middle-class homes, both sources of work, as well as the local schools, as
reasons why they resisted eviction, Motha (2009) gave a different answer.
She said that in Motala Heights, there is always green banana curry:

> It’s one dish that you don’t sweat for in preparing. You just go and harvest
banana and prepare it as a curry or fry it or boil it. You can also get mealies
[maize] and this, there is this root, it looks like potatoes. You just take that,
prepare it. If you push you can prevent starving in this land, Motala.

In other words there is a degree to which food is available from the local
commons. Motha, who also started a women’s gardening group which they
called The Motala Diggers, also stressed that her secure access to food in
the area was also consequent to a certain form of sociality.

> My neighbour can’t go starving if there is cabbage in the garden, Shamitha
can’t go starving if I have cabbage. I can’t go starving if Shamitha has onions
in her garden. And the potatoes that we peel, that is our seed, we take it back
to the garden, why should I go and buy potatoes if I have hands? I don’t need
to go and buy potatoes, I plough potatoes.

Motha, like Naidoo, stood with real courage against the state, the decidedly dan-
gerous local gangster, the armed and thuggish local party councillor and some
men in the community too. Her justification for her rebellion seemed to carry an
echo of Gerrad Winstanley. In meeting after meeting she asserted, with firm con-
viction, that ‘It is a sin for anyone to own land. Land comes from God and it
cannot be owned’. Asked about this conviction she explained that:

> It’s one thing that you make sure your family has a place to stay and has a
place to use. What that doesn’t deal with is that there are people who don’t
have land, who live on river banks, who live in back yards who don’t have
anywhere, you know. Now if you are a good land owner you think about
those people and you offer them land to build houses, to live on, to use also
in order to live. That also means that you are aware that someday you will
need them. Whether they are poor, it means that you are aware that someday
you will need them.

There was a period, after the threat of eviction had been defeated, when a de-
cision was taken to erect a gate on the road leading to the shack settlement.
A sign was placed on the gate declaring that this was Abahlali baseMjondolo
territory and that the government was not welcome there. This is the furthest
that any Abahlali baseMjondolo community went in affirming autonomy
from the state. But, while that autonomy came with well-located land and

\(^2\) People classified as ‘coloured’ under apartheid were forcibly removed from Motala Heights in the 1970s.
some access to food it still left people poor. It was a better arrangement for people than being in a state housing project on the urban periphery, or in the rural areas which some of them had migrated from, but it was still far from a full realization of the right to the city. The declaration of autonomy was undone when, as a result of a collective struggle, a number of Abahlali base-Mjondolo branches including Motala heights were able to enter into negotiations with the Durban Municipality around the provision of services and formal housing. This marked a shift from independent social organization which in Motala Heights meant self-built shacks and the well-organized appropriation of electricity towards negotiating the provision of housing and services from the state. But the experience of commoning was bought into these discussions. It was insisted, against the state’s model of housing, that infrastructural provision should be made for washing to be a collective activity.

Conclusion

The experience of Abahlali base-Mjondolo indicates that neither commoning, much of it outside the law, nor the state can be ignored. Commoning cannot be ignored because it provides some of the ground for sustaining a popular presence in the city, solidarity and formal organization. It also provides a material basis for democratic modes of politics, for mass defiance of the law and for spatial and political insurgencies. But it is equally clear that the state cannot be ignored. For one thing, it is a source of serious repression. But it is also the case that some of the goods and services that people are demanding can only be effectively accessed through the state. Moreover, it is only via the state that spatial inclusion can be secured and the surplus redistributed via social projects. If we reduced our thinking of the urban question to the commons, we would be left with occupied land – some of it constituting spatial insurgency – vegetable gardens and so on but no way to think beyond survivalism or gradual inclusion and into real transformation of both the material quality of people’s lives and the nature of South African cities. If we reduced our thinking of the urban question to the state, we would very quickly lose connection with the material and political basis for a popular challenge to the state that could, if sustained and extended, possibly succeed, in at least some degree, in subordinating it to society. It seems that what S’bu Zikode, a founder member of Abahlali baseMjondolo and arguably the movement’s most important intellectual, calls a ‘living communism’ requires us to think, as Harvey recommends, commoning and progressive state interventions together and in a manner that could transform both.

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References


