

People Think! People Think! People Think! People Think!

For this edition of your Padkos we're sharing Michael Neocosmos' "*Comments on democracy*", which were the basis for last week's hugely successful Padkos event. The Church Land Programme (CLP), and all those comrades and friends that were able to join us for the conversation with Michael, are very grateful to him for coming down to be with us, for the work he put in prior to the event developing these notes, and for the passion, humour and engagement that marked the various interactions that unfolded.

In the few days we had with Prof Neocosmos, we were able to facilitate a number of engagements:

- an in-depth session with CLP staff reflecting critically and jointly on questions of principled praxis for emancipatory politics;
- an extended and participatory conversation on democracy with those from the Padkos list who could be there, including academics, civil society organisations, delegates from grassroots struggles, as well as CLP Board members and staff;
- an open academic seminar, presented in collaboration with Anne Harley of the Paulo Freire Project of the Centre for Adult Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal), on Michael's paper titled "*Transition, human rights and violence: rethinking a liberal political relationship in the African neo-colony*"; and
- an engagement with delegates from both Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) and the Rural Network at the offices of AbM in Durban.

In the previous serving of Padkos we commented that sometimes Neocosmos' written work is long, not easy to read, and systematically challenging - "but well worth the effort". Your Padkos attachment this time round is short, easy to read, and remains systematically challenging and well worth the effort! In our view it is one of the most powerful, truthful and useful resources we've had the privilege to share on Padkos. As a teaser to encourage everyone to read the attached notes, we recall here some of the comments Michael made alongside the actual text during the conversations.

Introducing the discussion, Michael characterised his ongoing work as an effort to sustain a principled fidelity to the truth of two key events that shaped him personally:

1. the events of 1968 in France; and
2. the mid-1980s 'people's power' UDF moment in South Africa.

In the latter, what was clear and striking was that people stood up for themselves and became subjects of their own history. It was a moment of genuine self-empowerment and self-confidence, at mass popular scale, when people could and did move mountains. In the period that followed in South Africa, what was equally striking was the total collapse of that confidence. In a process of people disempowering themselves, they came to accept instead that "I will elect someone else to speak for me"; "Leaders will talk on my behalf". But this process also does not end there and, after a while, things return in a circle and people have begun to say 'hang on, this is not good enough. We can and must take back our power and subjectivity'.

Dealing with the question: what does democracy name in South Africa?, Neocosmos insists that it "names two completely distinct phenomena" (see attachment)- (a) a form of state and (b) a form of political practice deployed by the people themselves. He commented that, as the mid-1980s UDF-event demonstrated, the latter is not about representing people but is the act of the people presenting themselves/ourselves. By contrast, democracy as the domain of the state reduces 'politics' to the management of interests, and inherently reduces people to animal parts of the natural order.

Given the dominance of the politics of the state over the emancipatory possibilities of democracy as principled practice, it is imperative to think critically about the concepts we are relentlessly

bombarded with - 'freedom', 'democracy', 'rights', and so on. This process of thinking critically always begins in the act of listening to what people (and not just 'the poor') actually say and do. People **do** know the truth of their situation – they say clearly and explicitly, “we are told there is freedom but there is unfreedom”, “we are told this is a democracy but there is no democracy”.

In his “*Comments on democracy*”, Michael clarifies that “civil society” is better understood as a domain of state politics (esp. of liberal representative democracy) with characteristic ways of thinking and relating between people and the state, and not simply as a list of organised interest groups. He commented that, for thinking a state politics, it is necessary for the state to have a monopoly on the claim to speak for the universal – 'we speak for the people', 'we are the interests of the nation' and others are only allowed to speak for little 'interest groups'. This is why the state is so very threatened by any irruption of a universal politics as the principled practice of people in collective action at a distance from the state.

A central insight is Neocosmos' contention that “the majority of people [in South Africa] do not relate to the state within a domain of civil society and rights at all, but within what I term ‘uncivil society’ where the core of politics is founded on patronage not on rights” (see attachment). During the Padkos conversation, delegates from grassroots movements emphatically affirmed the truth of this observation. Michael suggested that, even if you haven't been in a township or shack settlement, you only have to watch a Mafia movie to understand how the politics of patronage goes down, and how saturated it is with violence as an early resort! Beyond acknowledging this reality and thinking its conceptual implications, the real challenge is how to conduct an emancipatory politics in this domain of the uncivil. This is why the 'living politics' of a movement like Abahlali baseMjondolo is so terribly important to learn from and with.

Towards the close of the Padkos event, Neocosmos made a strong call to place the principle that “People Think!” at the heart of our current project for an emancipatory politics. “People Think. People Think. People Think. And from there we must ask 'what is it that people think when they think?', 'what is it that people actually do when they think?' AbM have tried to work this out and their living politics confirm it is thought fundamentally differently from the logic of the state”.