



Church Land Programme

Finding our Voice in the World

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Finding our voice in the world

The self-organisation of the poor by the poor and for the poor has meant that all of those who were meant to do the thinking, the discussing and to take decisions on our behalf - for us but without us - no longer have a job. ... Some of the people who have refused to accept our demand that those who say that they are for the poor should struggle with and not on behalf of the poor are in the state. Some are in the party. Some are in that part of the left, often in the universities and NGOs, that sees itself as a more progressive elite than those in the party and the state and which aims to take their place in the name of our suffering and struggles. ...

We have recognised our own humanity and the power of our struggle to force the full recognition of our humanity. Therefore we remain determined to continue to refuse to know our place.

“*Serving our Life Sentence in the Shacks*”, compiled by Zodwa Nsibande and S’bu Zikode, Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement SA, July 2010.

Background

Since the Church Land Programme's (CLP) conscious shift to a broadly Freireian and emancipatory commitment to 'animation' as its core process, continued attention to ongoing cycles of reflection and action is central to its organisational life. In the build up to its 3-year Strategic Planning process in July 2010, CLP staff conducted a series of reflection sessions. In January a joint session developed elements of a collective 'contextual analysis' and, in the months that followed, each staff member was responsible for preparing and facilitating reflective sessions looking at their own and CLP's work through the lens of 'praxis' or animation. Much of that thinking and material from those sessions was taken into the evaluation process and is captured in that documentation. In this short note we bring together contributions made around a couple of related themes that ran through many of the discussions.

Emancipatory politics as the art of the impossible

[T]he dictionary of foreign words informs us that the art of the possible is ‘a policy which endeavours to achieve what is possible under given circumstances’. ... [O]ur practical struggle ... must be the realization of our basic principles in the process of social life and the embodiment of our general principles in practical, everyday action. And only under these conditions do we fight in the sole permissible way for what is at any time ‘possible’. ... [I]f we begin to chase after what is ‘possible’ according to the principles of opportunism, unconcerned with our own principles, and by means of statesmanlike [sic] barter, then we will soon find ourselves in the same situation as the hunter who has not only failed to stay the deer but has also lost his gun in the process.

Rosa Luxemburg, “*Opportunism and the art of the possible*”, September 1898, at:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1898/09/30.htm>

There is an oft-repeated English saying that 'politics is the art of the possible'¹. But CLP increasingly reserves the name 'politics' for those properly emancipatory moments - or ruptures -

1 Originally attributed to Otto von Bismarck, German aristocrat, Prussian Prime Minister (1862 -1890), and First Chancellor of Germany (1871 – 1890).

where the people establish their human subjectivity in the wider society, and throw off the oppression of being objects of history and domination. Under these conditions, politics is precisely the refusal to accept that the world-as-it-is determines what could be.

The world-as-it-is is structured by an underlying architecture of institutions and ideas that seem to work together to uphold the state of things in the interests of those who benefit from it. It's like a secret code of collaboration to create a certain mentality so that the people are more-or-less indoctrinated to accept the abnormal as normal; to accept it as 'reality' outside of which there is no serious alternative. The Italian marxist, Antonio Gramsci, elaborated important elements of this in his analysis of hegemony.

As Gibson, Harley and Pithouse pointed out in their contribution to the *Living Learning* publication, Gramsci argued that

as we learn to accept domination we learn hegemony. Hegemony is the process by which 'educative pressure [is] applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into 'freedom'.² This is why Steven Bantu Biko famously wrote that 'The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor, is the mind of the oppressed.'³ Ben Okri was thinking along similar lines when he wrote that 'reality is also a battle of contending dreams...we live inside the dreams of others. We might be imprisoned in them.'⁴ But although hegemony by definition is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive.

"Out of Order: A living learning for a living politics", 2009, CLP.

Hegemonic domination limits 'creativity' to finding ways of surviving within this oppressive state of things. It was noted how this connects with the thinking of some of the philosophers we have been drawing on in the past while. Perhaps Alain Badiou would characterise this 'realism' that is determined by how things are as '*the state*' and its debased 'creativity' as un-thinking. (We recalled in an earlier session that Badiou's colleague, Jaques Ranciere, insists that 'politics is of the order of thought'). Indeed, Ranciere might well describe this state as the '*extant*' - whereas for him, politics proper creates the possibility of what could be, of the impossible.

CLP's shift to animation as its core process a number of years ago was precisely a decision to break with this deadening version of 'realism' and to work within the spaces of the impossible possible⁵. For Ranciere, politics is defined as 'the clash of the logic of egalitarianism with the logic of the police' (i.e., a clash with the logic of what is counted, of what exists, of what is known, of what is extant). Our orientation in CLP is towards enacting real human equality through all the work we do. We have developed a conscious practice of strengthening the voice of the marginalised, and we are known as those who will not act for others but will carefully explore ways to act in solidarity with those resisting their dehumanisation.

If emancipatory politics is marked by this rupture with the state-of-things and by the active subjectivity of those who should be objects of this state, then the question arises: 'is real human freedom/liberation a possible outcome of any state project of development and/or delivery?' This is especially critical since:

- 'development' must assume you are currently immature and simple – but we promise to

2 *Selections from The Prison Notebooks* (1995, page 242).

3 Steven Bantu Biko, *I Write What I Like* page (1978, page 68).

4 *A Way of Being Free*, page 53.

5 The theologically-minded will no doubt sense the rich possible connections here with language and categories like 'being *in* this world but not *of* it'; the eschatological tension between 'the world' and the 'reign of God'; the 'flesh' and the 'spirit' – especially the holy (meaning 'wholly other') spirit. Some of these and other areas will be explored in forthcoming work distilling elements of CLP's theology.

- develop you; and
- 'delivery' must assume a passive recipient.

Both of these assumptions are directly contrary to the principles of emancipatory praxis.

Thus there is the need for a popular conception and popularisation of Badiou's idea of 'politics at a distance from the state' as being integral to what Zikode has called a 'living politics'. This includes the question of elaborating 'politics at a distance', or the idea of 'subtraction' in Badiou's work. This is not the same as 'ignoring the state' or 'refusing to engage government' or ruling out that people demand things of the state (which some seem to think it implies). As per Lazarus (and Hallward), it precisely creates the possibility of a 'prescriptive' politics. But a prescriptive politics is utterly different from a domesticated plea to have the state 'deliver' things or 'develop' you! (This is the clear reason why mainstream media, civil society and the state invariably label popular, and often deeply political, rebellions as 'service delivery protests'.)

Within CLP, we have discussed some “principles of good praxis” (which are described a little later on). But what is critical is that these are only meaningful *in praxis* – i.e., in the work of doing politics in the democratic spaces that are opened by struggles. It's not enough simply as some sort of 'liturgy' that we can learn to say and repeat by heart.

Having faith in nothing

What then *is* the work we do in those spaces? As one person put it in a reflection session: “We are not the messiahs but what could be CLP’s role?”. For CLP, it's mainly to be present and to journey with the people and support their struggles. But sometimes it is difficult to know what it really means to 'support' when we meet with people and groups who you would think expect more. In a material sense, I/we come with nothing, I/we have nothing. In a way, our political approach in CLP sharpens the question because we do not go in to places of poverty offering a solution and resources that we deliver as a product or a programme.

It was important to reflect carefully on this 'nothingness' that we bring as CLP. Even those raising this question mentioned some of the immaterial things we do bring – love, care, energy and ultimately perhaps, a simple commitment to being with the people.

But more than that, we are *there* and we bring 'nothing' because we deeply believe that nothing other than the struggles of the people themselves create the possibility for really changing the world – changing it away from what it is, and towards what it should and could be. We have seen and learned enough to know by now that anything else, any promise that some outside power or project will free the people, or will develop the people, or will fundamentally change the world, is a lie. And we know that the effect of that lie is to continuously make the people avoid the terrible but liberatory truth that change, rebellion, transformation is in their hands. In short, we have a theory of change in the world, and we continue to build our confidence in this. Our 'theory of change' assumes the people are the agents of human liberation. Our praxis as CLP assumes this, and must therefore assume a faith in the struggles of the people. Our praxis cannot continue the lie that some other power or agent, let alone little CLP, can 'deliver' real change and freedom.

However that faith is not a blind faith that romanticises 'the people' or assumes every grassroots action to be emancipatory. It is possible – indeed necessary – to make principled judgements around these questions and to begin to discern the good stuff. In CLP we have been tentatively testing whether the following 'principles of good stuff' are practically helpful in this regard. We think that the 'good stuff' we want to support seems always to fit the following conditions (and all must apply at the same time – i.e., ticking 2 out of 3 doesn't cut it!):

- it is the counting of the uncounted, the speaking of those who should remain silent, the thinking of the un-thought who are not supposed to think
- it emerges from, and proceeds within, a properly/radically democratic base, which may have nothing to do with liberal democratic norms but has everything to do with a pre-figurative politics where 'everybody matters, really' (i.e, egalitarianism is axiomatic and practised throughout)
- it makes universal truth claims – that is, they are true for everyone, everywhere
- it is announced/contained/made in out-of-order militant actions (this last one is really not separable from the previous one, nor even from the first one – so we're calling this a list of 3 principles!).

Note that we also think it is worth testing the following additional clarification or elaboration - namely an ecological implication. It might be considered implicit (but is worth making explicit) in the principle of the universality of the truth claim. Thus, universality here signals not only (or narrowly) a claim for everyone as human being/s but, more holistically⁶, a claim for everyone *in and of this world*.

Those (including so many civil society organisations) who come in, promising resources and solutions (a) are lying – they cannot possibly have enough resources to transform the conditions of life of masses, and (b) make it impossible for people to realise their own agency and action on their own terms. At the risk of over-simplification, there are two paths: either 'we' solve *for* you, or the people create a new future and new possibilities through their own action. Part of our contribution to the latter might be that, in our praxis, we act showing our faith that everyone is really equal, that every person is a human being with dignity and with the capacity for making their own life⁷.

Maybe ironically (since so far we emphasise bringing 'nothing') of course CLP does have, and can access, some material and other resources too. But we are enabled to draw on these resources in ways that don't undermine the people's agency only once they themselves have committed to action and struggle - at which point, perfectly legitimate and helpful demands and requests of CLP can be issued, and CLP does its best to respond to these. But the material resources we might bring at that point are worthless for the project of human emancipation and effective change without this foundation in the immaterial things we 'bring'.

So we share our faith in the people by the manner of our work with the people. We come with 'nothing' but a deep belief in the people and convinced that people's action is the best way to change the world. 'Being there' is rooted in love and respect for people's agency – but it's a tough and rigorous discipline too. We are with these people based on our principles. This is not just a general attitude of “whatever you say is OK brother/sister”! No, we are there on a principled basis, and we take our place in a properly political terrain – i.e. in the space opened in and by 'the clash of the logic of egalitarianism with the logic of the police' (Ranciere) - this is what matters. We believe *now* in the project of egalitarianism, and we demonstrate that belief through our praxis *now* – then maybe we'll get somewhere.

6 Ghastly, over-used word, but we mean that each person only realises their human being in relation – and not only in relation to other people, but also in relation to the world they're in.

7 By contrast to our approach, sometimes the 'explanations' of how and why things are as they are, even critical leftist analyses about 'the world-as-it-is', can have the effect of creating despair and the demobilisation of people's militancy. For example, it is common for experts and vanguards to 'explain' people's struggles in terms of things (like neo-liberalism, the World Bank, etc.) that are presented as overwhelmingly powerful and big, and requiring specialist analyses and so on. Whatever the conscious intention of these people is, the effect is firstly to tell people engaged in actual concrete struggle that they are wrong and basically stupid. A second effect is to conscript the people's structures and energies into terrains and forms of struggle that are not grounded in the real strengths of the people's struggle - and that are actually totally ineffective in really changing the world. Our conviction is that you can always act, act now and act here to make real the world you want to achieve.

In relation to democratic movements, this approach of enacting real human equality through all the work we do implies a relation of dialogue between equals. Respecting the autonomy of movements is not at all the same as ruling out the possibility of raising critical questions, of engaging in mutual debate and critique. The broad intention to build peoples' power remains paramount but movements themselves are complex, human and dynamic. Sometimes the existence of 'struggles within struggles', where militants within actively contest and shape the politics of the movement, can be healthy indicators of internal life. Even so it is only our own praxis as CLP that we have control and responsibility over. By being disciplined and principled in our praxis, we will support properly democratic praxis in the spaces where we work. But ultimately we cannot control or dictate to those spaces. Remaining disciplined and principled in CLP's praxis requires ongoing and open discussion, reflection, discernment – and sometimes tough choices – the same is true in other spaces. In those other spaces, an effective tool to encourage fidelity to properly democratic praxis is to always encourage people to think their struggles, strategies and tactics in discussion about how they see the world as it is and how it could be; and to ensure that what 'could be' is established *in the praxis of the struggle for it*.

In addition, there is the question concerning the role of elites and anti-egalitarian tendencies that can arise from time-to-time within movements. This question applies in all the spaces where we work. Perhaps it is worth remembering that grassroots movements constitute new power precisely where there was not power before - that's pretty much the point of building a movement! As a result, they create the possibility for an abuse of that new power even from within the movement.

Also, it is more useful to approach the challenge as a question of *practice* and not reduce it to assuming that people who are elite based on some objective criteria (like education, economic class, institutional power, social position and so on) are always bound to be elitist in their practice. On the contrary, our experience shows that:

- (a) even grassroots leadership can practice elitism; and
- (b) some objectively 'elite' people can act in non-elitist ways.

The key point is that elitist practices, from whoever, undermine the proper and radical democracy of real egalitarianism. Our own approach to elitism as practice can be informed by some basic principles – e.g., that those who suffer it lead it; that a properly democratic understanding of 'leadership' assumes the ability to be led by listening; that there is no issue too 'complex' or tough that it cannot be discussed in open and inclusive meetings of the movement; and so on.

Voice in the World

“politics begins when one decides not to represent the victims but to be faithful to those events during which victims politically assert themselves”
Alain Badiou

As we have made our journey discovering principles and dilemmas, a question has been raised: 'where is the voice of CLP in the world? It is all very well to be strengthening the voice of others, but where is our voice; shouldn't CLP be taking its place in the world, developing more effective advocacy strategies to communicate our positions on things?'

During the reflection sessions unpacking that question itself (i.e., “how does CLP find its voice in the world?”), we broke the question down into its two main components and tried to think carefully about what's behind each. What do people (outside and within) CLP mean by “**voice**”, and what do

they mean by “**the world**”?

Some who observe and comment on our work, seem especially interested in victories and end results or achievements of CLP: “at the end of the day, can we say that CLP did something?, or got something out of this?”. What is behind this approach is an assumption that the 'agency' that matters is civil society agency. In other words, the '**voice**' presumed is the voice of civil society. CLP is very critical of this assumption and, in our work, consciously commit to listening rather than speaking – for us, the 'voice' that matters is the speaking of those who should not speak, the counting of the uncounted.

When we think about what is really meant in the “**world**” part of the question, it is clear that CLP has fundamentally changed what we assume to be 'the world' that matters. When others ask us these questions, they are implicitly referring to the 'world-as-it-is', the world of spaces and practices of constituted power or elite power. For CLP in practice, the world that matters is that 'world' opened by properly political (or emancipatory) rupture with what exists or what is given; precisely NOT the world-as-it-is (or the 'state' as Badiou would have it, or 'the order of the police' for Ranciere) but its 'void'; not the 'extant' (Ranciere) but the possible. The one is the world-as-it-is where the poor do not lead, but others do (whether it be politicians, the market, vanguards, priests or prophets). Our world is the world made where the poor resist the world-as-it-is and lead that struggle. In that rupture emerges the **truth** of that situation – and that is **what** we support. Badiou's categories of event and fidelity, of truth and the militant bearer of that truth, clarify what we mean. In our world, the poor lead; only their struggles can liberate the world and humanise themselves and the oppressors. That's what we support – that's where our voice lies, in solidarity. So, yes perhaps we have a responsibility to make our 'truth' known in the world, but that is not the same as the thinking that assumes we (as NGO) must be in and of that public domain where the poor do not lead – it is about being constituted as subjects of truth.

We acknowledge that our voice, as CLP, is shaped and deepened in reflection. Our processes of discussion within CLP can also help us to develop a common language to communicate what we do and why. Nonetheless, it remains true that our praxis is itself the principal and most eloquent articulation of our approach and of the assumptions behind it. We recall from the previous 3-Year Strategic Plan process there was a spiral diagram illustrating the cycles of action and reflection that are 'praxis'. That diagram included an arrow going out into the world – **that** is our praxis, our politics. And that praxis has less talking, more listening and solidarity – so our 'voice' is our praxis and our politics, which is rooted in emancipatory work.

We said earlier, that the fundamental truth of a situation emerges in a rupture with the state of things ('the event'). That truth is what we support. That truth is 'universal' in the sense that it is valid for everyone everywhere – it is not simply about a local struggle or interest group or stakeholder; it is not even just about a particular movement like Abahlali or the Rural Network or whatever. So perhaps one implication is that it is wrong to assume that CLP's position refuses engaging 'the world as it is'. No, the truth of any politics implicates everything in the world. Our discipline is simply that it is not for those other than those who suffer it to lead it. A further implication is that we too, even in an NGO(!), are capable of being constituted as subjects of its truth and therefore as militants in fidelity to an event.

Which finally brings us to a kind of affirmation that perhaps “finding our voice in the world” could be the framing task for the next 3 year period – provided we remain faithful to the principles:

- that our **voice** is that of subjects to a truth;
- that those who suffer it, must lead its resolution; and
- that our **world** is that universe possible only in and through the militant clash between the

world-as-it-is and the resistance of those who don't count in the world-as-it-is.

A sequence in praxis?

Although it did not emerge explicitly in any particular session, we tentatively suggest that there is a praxis *sequence* to be discerned in the work of CLP. We have some hesitation about putting it 'out there' because to suggest something like a step-by-step model seems at odds with a fundamental learning from our journey in praxis. That learning is to recognise that there is no blueprint that can map beforehand the 'correct' steps to follow guaranteeing emancipatory outcomes for CLP or anyone else. What is abundantly clear for CLP is that good praxis can and must be guided by good principles. But there is no short cut in the application of those principles - they must be worked out, again and again, in particular situations.

Nonetheless a broad 4-stage sequence does seem to be emergent. It's logic derives from an understanding that our 'voice in the world' is ultimately our praxis. One clear implication is that our 'voice' is sometimes expressed in silence, in the conscious and political decision not to speak but to listen. Of course it is equally valid that our 'voice' sometimes does imply speaking – and that sometimes 'speaking' is non-verbal communication by and through our actions, decisions and choices informing what we do (and what we refuse to do) in the world.

The shape of the sequence is also informed by the prior recognition of the imbalances and corrupting tendencies that are inherent in the relation between a formally-constituted and resourced civil society organisation (like an NGO) on the one hand, and spaces of militant popular and emancipatory struggle on the other.

Given that relation and the dangers it carries, the *first* phase of connection between the two requires of the NGO far more silence than words; more listening than speaking. As should be clear by now, that 'silence' is nonetheless eloquent of a particular political commitment. What is 'spoken' in this discipline of not speaking for, or about, or at, the people, is the principled basis of CLP work.

A *second* moment in the sequence is basically a decision to be made by CLP itself. Although this step has not been self-consciously recognised as one till now, it is in fact part of how the organisation's work unfolds. The decision essentially puts what has been learned from listening, up against an abstracted set of principles that CLP believes are essential characteristics of emancipatory work. These 'principles of good stuff' that CLP has discussed and developed over the past years have been introduced earlier in this note. They are useful in assessing whether or not a particular struggle, action, formation or movement offers a prospect of genuinely emancipatory work or not.

As noted above, we argue that the 'good stuff we would want to support' always fits the following conditions (and all three must apply each time):

- it is the counting of the uncounted, the speaking of those who should remain silent, the thinking of the un-thought who are not supposed to think
- it emerges from, and proceeds within, a properly/radically democratic base, which may have nothing to do with liberal democratic norms but has everything to do with a pre-figurative politics where 'everybody matters, really' (i.e. egalitarianism is axiomatic and practised throughout)
- it makes universal truth claims – that is, they are true for everyone, everywhere
- it is announced/contained/made in out-of-order militant actions (this last one is really not separable from the previous one, nor even from the first one – so we're calling this a list of 3 principles!).⁸

The decision therefore answers this simple question: from what we have learned, does working in this space hold the possibility of emancipatory praxis? If the answer is no, then consideration must be given to exiting from that space. If the answer is yes, then we proceed to the third step in the sequence.

To decide a 'yes' is no mere technical decision. It is a constitutive action that makes CLP a subject to the truth of the particular struggle, action, formation or movement. It is therefore intimately linked with the *third* phase of the praxis sequence where CLP take its place as a subject of that truth and effectively, a militant of that struggle. The decision is therefore constitutive – both of CLP as a subject, and also of 'the world' that CLP and all militants simultaneously inaugurate and inhabit. That world, inaugurated by emancipatory struggle, is universal; is populated by equals; and is informed by the logic of egalitarianism. And it immediately demonstrates the truth that the state-of-things-as-they-are (i.e., the 'world' that realists will tell us is all there is) is simply that with which we are required to fundamentally break from - it is the terrain of death and dead-ends.

The *fourth* phase unfolds within this fragile and powerful 'true' world: we speak as equals with the militants whose fidelity in action takes it forward. In itself, entering into this last phase tells us nothing about how *much* to speak – sometimes we will be quiet (and those who suffer it, speak) and sometimes we will speak. Sometimes we will speak among the militants in modes of reflection, critique and/or action, and sometimes we will speak in other spaces of world-as-it-is - so long as what we say, and the process of determining that, are faithful to the politics and the subjects of that struggle. And thus we find our voice in the world.

⁸ Following Sylvain Lazurus (who has built on the work of Badiou in useful ways), good stuff that fits these conditions can set in motion a political sequence. That sequence can remain 'good stuff' but only by maintaining or sustaining fidelity to the originating event. While such a sequence holds to this fidelity, then of course CLP should continue to support it. But this is a fragile and rare thing to sustain, and so it is far from guaranteed. This means that we have to remain vigilant all the time and check back against our principles – and at times, this will require us to critique and even withdraw support (which can be difficult and costly).