

The Riotous Underbelly of the New Normal

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Here we are, almost twenty years after apartheid and from the prisons, to the shack settlements and the farms, the riotous underbelly of our society is on television most nights. We're not even a full month into the year and its been reported that the police have killed another protester in the Boland and, depending on which newspaper you read, three, four or six people in Zamdela in Sasolburg.

The new normal that we are being asked to accept after Mangaung has won consent in some quarters by replacing a demagogic populist with an oligarch and putting an end to the discussion about nationalisation. Its basic logic – crony capitalism greased with corruption, wrapped in an escalating conflation of both the nation and the state with the ruling party and defended with growing authoritarianism – can work well enough for capital. In fact international capital often finds authoritarian states to be its most attractive destinations for investment. And it's not unusual for the middle classes to be quite comfortable with forms of authoritarianism that restrict the basic democratic rights of the popular classes in defence of the domination of society by an alliance between business and political elites – after all, just look at how many South Africans think Dubai is a great place to live.

Capital is not only comfortable with the sort of efficient party-state machine that rules China. Other, and altogether messier, forms of authoritarianism more dependent on popular participation can do just as well. The Indian state of Gujarat is run by Narendra Modi of the far right Hindu supremacist *Bharatiya Janata Party*, many of whose leading members are little more than gangsters, and some of whose intellectuals are openly pro-Nazi. In 2002 more than 10 000 Muslims were murdered in a horrific pogrom that included gang rape, the mutilation of women and child murder and clearly had active support from the political elite. But Gujarat, now branded as 'Vibrant Gujarat', is attracting investment at a velocity seldom seen outside of China's coastal cities and Modi's authoritarian populism has the full support of legendary film actor Amitabh Bachchan, and key people in India's business elite like Ratan Tata and Mukesh Ambani. British business has successfully pressured its government to lift the diplomatic ban it placed on Modi after the pogrom. It has been argued that the anti-Muslim riot a decade ago laid the ground for Gujarat's economic success by smashing democratic aspirations, normalising the mediation of violence by party structures, allowing a ruthlessly predatory elite to cloak itself in popular nationalism and creating a vulnerable scapegoat onto which the dispossessed and exploited could project their frustrations.

But there are also cases where riots have laid the ground for an entirely different sort of politics – a politics that is a democratising force with regard to the state, civil society and capital. In a sequence of insurrectionary moments in Bolivian cities from 2000 to 2003, and again in 2005, popular action, rooted in a democratic politics of assembly and frequently taking the form of blockading roads with burning tyres, overturned water privatisation in the city of Cochabamba, and then, spreading to El Alto and La Paz, issued a major challenge to both the subordination of society to corporate interests and the centuries long subordination of indigenous people in Bolivia. A succession of governments were overthrown and Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president, elected into office. It has been argued that popular emancipatory energies have since been demobilised and even repressed by the Morales government but, whether or not this is true, there's no question that Bolivia is now a much more inclusive, democratic and hopeful place.

Most of the riots in contemporary South Africa are, more or less, what the French philosopher Alain Badiou calls immediate riots – located in the territory of the rioters, aimed at local symbols of power and often inspired by seeing similar action elsewhere on television. These riots usually burn themselves out after a few days and leave little in the way of sustained organisation or the generation of emancipatory ideas that can attain wider traction.

But with the pace at which popular protest is escalating, and the increasing tendency for it to become riotous, it is not impossible that we may reach a point at which we begin to see what Badiou calls historical riots – riots that occupy a central space, forge direct connections between people from different areas and carry a clear and compelling demand onto the national stage.

A state confronted by the degree of popular protest that we see in South Africa has a fairly standard set of choices. It can make carefully calibrated reforms, it can try to repress dissent with violence - be it the vertical use of armed force by the police and the army or the mobilisation of horizontal violence through party structures, it can try and contain popular dissent spatially and ideologically, it can try to co-opt its leading figures into the party, state or NGOs, it can try to bring popular mobilisation into bureaucratic processes and it can try to capture popular anger and redirect it against a vulnerable scapegoat. We've seen elements of all of these strategies already but while they've had local success they have not halted the rising tide of protest as a general phenomenon. As it exhausts itself, is co-opted or beaten into submission in one area it appears somewhere else.

It seems likely that mass protest, much of it disruptive, some of it riotous, is going to be with us until democracy is undone in order to contain popular dissent more effectively or popular dissent finds more effective ways to use democracy to overcome the politics of contempt - the transit camps, mud schools, bucket toilets, systemic unemployment, poverty wages, torture and all the rest - that the ANC has carried over from colonialism and into the new order.

This reality requires us to address the question of the character of popular protest in South Africa. There's no doubt that some popular action undertaken outside of the law and authorised institutions is, like xenophobic, homophobic and gendered violence – including rape and witch burning, as well as some forms of vigilantism, horrific. These kinds of actions could be drawn into a vastly more dangerous mode of authoritarian populism than that to which we are currently subjected. And there are certainly cases where popular anger is captured by opportunists and demagogues of various kinds. In some instances this brings popular politics firmly into the realm of clientalist politics organised around struggles for power within the ruling party, which, while it can grant certain rewards for fealty, imposes very narrow limitations on the horizon of what is politically possible.

But it is also clear that popular protest is often directed towards urgent and entirely just aspirations – some research shows land and housing to be the two most common demands. It is equally clear that protest often emerges from democratic or at least consultative processes in which it is not unusual for women to take important roles and that it is often legitimated by a moral economy rooted in a conception of dignity that insists that it is unacceptable for people to be treated as animals, children or, in a troubling formulation, foreigners. When this moral economy doesn't collapse into a narrow conception of belonging it speaks to a deeper conception of equality and democracy than those that are currently available via authorised modes of politics and has been, and could continue to be, the basis for emancipatory action. Moreover all sorts of material and political victories, usually at the local level, have been won through protest. At the national level, sustained protest has made it quite clear to a range of constituencies that business as usual is simply not viable and that something needs to shift.

But, with notable exceptions, the discussion about popular protest in the elite public sphere is seldom rational or rooted in a solid grasp of its realities. Across space and time elites have frequently presented popular dissent as *a priori* irrational, violent, consequent to malevolent conspiracy and even monstrous with little regard to the actual realities of the particular events in question. Contemporary South Africa is no exception. Experts and authorised representatives of elite organisations are often given much more access to voice in discussions about protests than people organising and participating in protests. Most reporting simply assumes that popular protest, particularly if it involves disruption or damage to property, is violent even when it is plainly not. Police violence, on the other hand, is normalised to the point where even in cases where the only violence has come from the police it is the protesters that are likely to be reported as violent. Much of the early coverage of the Marikana massacre was simply disgraceful and gave a fresh charge to Karl Marx's observation, back in 1871, that "The civilization and justice of bourgeois order comes out in its lurid light whenever the slaves and drudges of that order rise up against their masters."

Engaging popular protest rationally will require a lot more careful listening, a lot more sustained presence amongst the people organising this ferment, a lot more attention to the particularities of each protest and a lot less recourse to easy assumptions and pernicious stereotypes.

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