Expressions of Citizenship Through Participation and Protest

Lisa Thompson

To cite this article: Lisa Thompson (2014) Expressions of Citizenship Through Participation and Protest, Politikon, 41:3, 335-343, DOI: 10.1080/02589346.2014.975936

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2014.975936

Published online: 15 Dec 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 610

View related articles

View Crossmark data
INTRODUCTION

Expressions of Citizenship Through Participation and Protest

LISA THOMPSON*

All aspects of our democracy in South Africa emphasise participation, either through representatives or through direct channels of participatory governance. According to government, this is a key characteristic of the transformed political landscape post 1994. Yet, a parallel characteristic of this political landscape is ever-increasing levels of protest action, particularly among the urban poor. This edition encompasses a largely case study-based appraisal of how 20 years of democracy have contributed (or not) towards substantive forms of citizenship in the lives of the previously disenfranchised. Substantive citizenship is understood here to mean that spaces for participation lead in actuality (rather than in theory or written policy) to perceptions of enhanced agency in the practice of democracy. This can occur either through self-created, or invented, forms of mobilisation and organisation, including social movements and social movement organisations, or through the increased individual or collective ability to lobby and influence representatives in different formal, or invited, democratic spaces, or both (Cornwall and Coelho 2007). The edition highlights the potential and limitations of collective mobilisation strategies. These strategies, or repertoires of engagement, are analysed in a variety of different contexts and framings, from loose and sporadic forms of grassroots social movement mobilisation, to the alliances and tensions between different forms of social movement organisations, including prominent trade unions.

Fortuitously, the articles in this volume provide description and analysis of a very diverse range of mobilisation and social organisation in response to challenges of citizenship and rights. Although analytical frames differ, a central theme is the dynamics of participation in terms of both the constitution and internal processes of grassroots, self-created or invented spaces themselves, and the links between these and formal constituted spaces of participation created by government (invited spaces). The analysis of participatory spaces and mobilisation strategies introduced by Cornwall (2002) and Cornwall and Coelho (2007) is used by a number of the contributors. The focus on differently constituted spaces and the dynamics within them highlights links between individual and collective agency, knowledge, ideology, and the formal underpinnings of democracy in the form of political representatives. Other contributions focus more on structure–agency dynamics in terms of specific moments of engagement to expose the
‘real-life’ inner workings of participation in action, the differing motivations, strategies, grassroots dynamics and outcomes that occur through differing types of mobilisation and state–society interactions.

The first contribution, written by an activist, Bandile Mdlalose, is a hard-hitting account of her personal experience of the internal conflict and leadership battles that have undermined Abahlali baseMjondolo, a prominent grassroots social movement with its largest support base in Durban. Mdlalose explores the internal dynamics of Abahlali, but more usefully, Mdlalose’s story, while a very disillusioned account, helps to highlight the more general problems that beset grassroots social movement organisations, also addressed in other papers in this volume. Mdlalose, who has since left Abahlali and started her own grassroots movement, discusses her experience of the leadership issues and internal political dynamics that in her view have weakened Abahlali in terms of its own internal democratic processes, and relatedly its ability to stand as the voice of shack dwellers in Durban. Disrupting idealist assumptions that civil society organisations are somehow better than government: immune, or at least less prone, to corruption and political agendas, Mdlalose details her experience of how the internal coherence and legitimacy of a rights-based grassroots social movement can be threatened by internal leadership and accountability issues. Mdlalose outlines three key issues that in her view have weakened Abahlali: the influence of altruistic outsiders (particularly academics) who do not sufficiently challenge social movement practices that lack accountability; corrupt leaders who become more interested in financial gain than the cause they are representing and the role of funders who provide funding to grassroots organisations with few strings attached by way of reporting and accountability, thus making it easy for funds to be used in ways that cause internal dissent due to the lack of transparency. Mdlalose describes how she experienced Abahlali, a social movement widely hailed as the epitomisation of grassroots democratic organisation and mobilisation. Mdlalose details how Abahlali became for her a top-down organisation as the leader became more and more presidential. According to Mdlalose, internal strife occurring around issues of funding, salaries and leadership ensured that the focus on the core value of solving the problems of the poor was greatly diminished during the time she held the position of General Secretary. Mdlalose’s solution to the problem of leaders demarcating grassroots organisations as their own fiefdoms is to ensure flatter structures of leadership at this level, where decisions are reached by debate and discussion. She aims to apply these principles to the grassroots organisation she has begun subsequent to her resignation from Abahlali. Similar issues relating to the lack of accountability and transparency at the level of grassroots leadership are highlighted in subsequent articles, in particular, the contribution of Thompson, Conradie and Tsolekile de Wet, reminding us to beware of the simplistic populist reading of activists and social movement organisations (SMOs) as the champions of state–society engagements.

The second contribution in the volume by China Ngubane, also an activist, provides a more positive experiential account of the power of grassroots social movements to pressure government to deliver on socio-economic rights.
Ngubane focuses in particular on the role of ideology from an activist standpoint—How do political ideas develop in the townships and how do these affect mobilisation? Ngubane examines the ‘Occupy Umlazi’ movement and the mobilisation strategies it spearheaded in Umlazi Ward 88 in 2012. Ngubane focuses on how the movement came together—a loose grouping of NGOs, CBOs and other political leaders, who for a time put aside their party allegiances in a process of resisting authority to affect a change of leadership at the local ward committee level to achieve socio-economic rights linked to basic services and housing. Resorting to civil disobedience in the face of the state’s ‘willingness to use violence’, the strategy of occupying municipal offices, and organising sit ins and marches, led to a process of formal negotiation with the municipality. This yielded the positive outcome of a local government ward committee re-election, a change of representatives and as a result, better service delivery. Although Ngubane indicates that the movement did not sustain itself as a result of internal corruption and fragmentation post 2013, in the time period described (2012) sustained and organised resistance across a number of organisations led to very tangible results.

The focus on grassroots forms of mobilisation continues in the contribution by Angela Storey, who examines how knowledge and accountability are shaped and challenged in participatory spaces that purportedly encourage dialogue between grassroots social movements and government. Storey details the dialogue between the Social Justice Coalition (SJC) in Khayelitsha and local government around the social audit that SJC conducted on a development contract for basic sanitation in Khayelitsha. Storey investigates how the construction of official knowledge on the part of local government is presented to citizens who are on the receiving end of those services, and what happens when this knowledge is challenged with a counter-strategy of the collection and presentation of alternative knowledge. Storey documents how SJC, in line with their main campaign of ‘providing safe, dignified sanitation to informal settlements’ spearheaded a social audit on the delivery of portable standalone toilets by a private company over the period 2010–2013. The audit examined both the contract and the stated delivery targets as supplied by local government. SJC and local residents then collected information from the recipients of Mshengu toilets in Khayelitsha and evaluated this information in the light of the official data received from local government. This was then presented to City of Cape Town (CCT) officials and Western Cape Provincial representatives. As Storey outlines, ‘... during this dialogue residents of Khayelitsha repositioned themselves as legitimate voices ...’, in so doing claiming their role in creating knowledge and presenting a counter narrative.

The CCT’s response was to reject this grassroots knowledge by discrediting the countervailing discourse. Officials publically responded that residents needed to take responsibility for maintaining the toilets in the face of overwhelming evidence to their lack of effectiveness, and the unsanitary state in which many were found. According to Storey, the dialogue between the SJC and residents on the one hand, and City officials on the other, became accusatory, with the official response resorting to neo-liberal framings of customers needing to ensure the
effectivity of services, rather than an examination of the failings of the policy rollout and indeed the service itself. As Storey points out, not only was the control over services taken away from residents, but they were also subsequently publically blamed for the failure of service delivery. Storey concludes that City Officials ‘...under pressure of neo-liberal policies are unable to accept the knowledge produced by audit participants as legitimate’.

Despite the denial and delegitimisation process on the part of government to drown out counter-hegemonic narratives aimed at putting pressure on government for a variety of rights encompassing what are broadly called services, Storey concludes that this process of knowledge contestation is still vital. Without this countervailing production of knowledge, local government, in the face of the global pressure to privatise and commodify, will be able to quietly metamorphase from their role as service providers, ‘...to government as regulator of industry and custodian of citizen customers’. As emphasised by the engagement between SJC and local government, Storey points out that there is a ‘practical incompatibility’ between citizenship engagement and neo-liberal policy. Thus despite the efforts of local government to delegitimise local voices, invented spaces remain the crucial domain in which these alternative forms of knowledge can be generated to challenge official discourses.

Shauna Mottiar’s article on protest and participation in Durban continues the exploration of the challenges of citizenship participation from below in an area of neo-liberal local governance. Mottiar examines the forms of protest and participation used by a number of social movement and civil society organisations, and the degree to which ordinary residents in Cato Manor, Merebank and Wentworth become involved in mobilisation around rights. In the case study, Mottiar explores whether citizens choose to be ‘makers and shapers’ rather than ‘users and choosers’, as Gaventa puts it, and whether citizenship is attained through practice and engagement, rather than passively accepted as bestowed by law.

Mottiar’s case study material shows differences of perception and strategy between the three case study areas with regard to the use of invented spaces (following Miraftab, she includes protest as an invented space) to challenge the participatory status quo within invited spaces, particularly those controlled by councillors whose interest in political office is more about self-enrichment than community service. Mottiar shows that the role of social movements and grassroots organisations can be pivotal in creating a sense of agency in the broader population, for example, in Cato Manor the role of activist organisations has led to a far greater sense of agency through participation and protest than in Merebank and Wentworth. In Mottiar’s account, the positive transformative role of Abahlali baseMondjolo and South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) in claiming rights are pivotal in the way in which community members report being included in a range of participatory strategies to claim their rights. Mottiar describes how social movement organisations initiate collective action as a method of exercising agency to both realise rights and hold the state accountable. While this does not amount to a Gramscian counter-hegemonic ‘war of position’ from below, as challenges are addressed within dominant
ideologies, it nonetheless challenges the power structures within local government to ensure that grievances relating to housing and environmental pollution by business, to mention just two issues, are addressed. Mottiar’s interpretation of collective action and mobilisation adds a different dimension to the position of Ngubane who sees the potential for counter-hegemonic knowledge and ideology at the grassroots level, even if such manifestations are historical moments rather than a build-up of ideas and organisational momentum.

The paper by Thompson, Conradie and Tsolekile de Wet continues the theme of examining the ways in which grassroots NGOs and social movements contribute to a sense of collective agency in communities in Khayelitsha. The paper focuses on two key invented spaces in Khayelitsha, the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) and the Khayelitsha Development Forum (KDF). Thompson et al. explore how the potential for collective mobilisation is hindered by internal leadership battles, factionalism and party politics. The case study material shows that the collective sense of potential to make a difference at the heart of robust participation has gradually been diminished over the last 20 years. A key problem is that leadership positions in invented and invited spaces have become sought after as a means to access resources rather than to increase the range of collective agency to bring about change to the socio-economic conditions of the many urban poor who are still denied basic services. This is compounded by organisational splits around leadership battles, illustrated by the phenomenon of two rivalling SANCO committee structures at the branch and zonal levels in Khayelitsha. While KDF has been more successful in uniting communities around a common developmental agenda, its inability to facilitate the spread of resource gains throughout larger community has led to a lack of broader credibility in terms of its goals and functions. This is especially the case because resource gains are seen by communities as the decisive determinant of effective collective agency. As a result, perceptions of agency are weak among the average citizen and a lot stronger among the leadership elite. Both invited and invented participatory spaces are still animated by collective participation, yet the form of participation is mostly passive, and appears to leave the general perception of disempowerment and disaffection with political engagement rather than ensuring a more robust sense of agency.

The papers by Ruiters and Masiya turn to an examination of the connections between grassroots forms of organisation and larger social movement organisations, in particular, trade unions. Ruiters examines the new repertoires of action and collective organisation emerging in the last two years, particularly around labour–community interactions. Ruiters examines what he terms the new ‘post Alliance’ landscape in South Africa, so called because of the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) decision to disassociate from the ANC after the 2012 Marikana massacre. Ruiters poses a counter argument to the commentary of other left-wing analysts who focus on the weakness of leading trade union movements after Marikana in the face of the ANCs diluted commitment to addressing the socio-economic plight of both organised and unorganised labours. He argues that this critique of trade unions has strengthened the neo-liberal cause by
demonising labour. Ruiters distinguishes between what are elsewhere called new
social movements, and older forms, in particular trade unions, which advance both
a socio-economic and a political cause. While Ruiters states that the new left and
organised labour have not coalesced into a united struggle front, there are glim-
mers of hope in the way that invented spaces are being created between different
alliances of grassroots and trade union movements. Ruiters examines the strat-
gegies employed by NUMSA and those organisations that have joined forces
with NUMSA recently to demonstrate outside Parliament (the NUMSA 9) as
well as the ways in which SAMWU and the Cape Town-based Housing Assembly
(consisting of smaller social movement organisations such as the Cape Town-
based branch of Abahlali baseMondjolo, Gugulethu Backyard Dwellers and
others) have mobilised together with SAMWU in joint marches and protest
action on services, and in 2012 to present a memorandum to the CCT on the
rights of temporary (contract) workers. Ruiters suggests that these ‘... micro-pro-
cesses of alliance formation and acts of public citizenship are fundamental to the
slow molecular rebuilding of the social forces for transformation’. In Ruiters’s
view, within these ‘spaces of hope’ there is more room for such micro-processes
and alliances which may see the emergence of a more vibrant citizenship culture.
Ruiters concludes that collective strength may be found in these day-to-day acts of
solidarity between the oppressed, rather than in the more monolithic structures of
larger trade unions too closely allied to government.

Tyanai Masiya’s paper on the role of social movement trade unionism as articu-
lated by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATUs) both comple-
ments and contrasts Ruiters’s conclusions by again focusing on the social
movement dimension of the trade union encapsulated in the broader ideological
and political agenda that has shaped COSATUs history. Masiya makes the point
that COSATUs social movement role, while very strong in the 1980s and
1990s, has been diluted by alliance politics that have also caused intra-union con-
icts. Masiya uses social movement unionism theory to explain COSATUs collec-
tive action during and after Apartheid. Masiya explores the historical build-up of
collective organisation and action during and post Apartheid that both strength-
ened the structure of the social movement over time. The links formed between
the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the ANC during the
liberation struggle paved the way for the formation of COSATU in 1985 with
its transformative vision of building broad-based alliances with other social move-
ments and trade unions. The linkages between COSATU and black consciousness
also initially ensured a broader transformative strategy than simply workers’
rights. Broader socio-economic issues relating to economic exploitation in
general ensured that the connections between formal labour and the political
economy of townships were seen as indivisible.

The fractures in the alliance began around the introduction of GEAR and have
continued to widen after Jacob Zuma’s government failed to deliver on its prom-
ises for sustainable wages and policies that balanced neo-liberal global pressures
to keep wages as low as possible. Despite these antagonisms, Masiya points out
that COSATU has always campaigned for the ANC during elections—thus
shifting closer to a form of political unionism with the ANC than functioning as an independent social movement. This is further aggravated by the symbiotic relationship between the Trade Union bureaucracy and the ANC leadership, a relationship characterised by ‘… élite self preservation rather than the struggle for workers socio-economic rights and upliftment of the poor.’

As explored by Ruiters, Masiya also contrasts the actions of NUMSA, which has pulled out of the Alliance, and in so doing has revitalised itself as a movement that has credibility and legitimacy among the urban poor. Present-day COSATU on the other hand, ‘seems exhausted … tired of failing the workers … tired of failing’. Masiya nevertheless concludes that even a weakened COSATU remains an important pillar in the social movement arena in terms of ensuring the gains of workers are consolidated and as protection from the forces of neo-liberalism ever present in government economic policy decisions.

The final paper in this volume by Patrick Bond turns conventional liberal wisdom on its head regarding the constitution as the focal point of rights enforcement. Bond argues that constitutionalism acts as a barrier to the resolution of protest in South Africa. Bond explains that the constitution and the rights movements reliance on it acts as a barrier to resolving community grievance, according to Bond, the constitution becomes ‘a cul de sac where satisfactory exit is blocked by property rights’. As a result, Bond argues, it is a mistake to invest too much in constitutional fantasies of socio-economic rights. According to Bond, ‘… the neo-liberal flavour of the constitution underpins the status quo and white privilege’. Business and foreign investors have exercised a disciplinary function on the ANC so as to prevent it from changing the constitution, thus ensuring that neo-liberal economic policies may flourish due to the inability of the ‘liberal capitalist’ constitution to deal with this. The failure of guaranteed rights allows for high levels of social protest as described in previous papers by Mottiar, Ngubane and Storey.

Bond explores instances where constitutional judgements failed to protect the poor, such as the Wallacedene case, where the constitutional ruling that was purportedly a ‘building block in creating a jurisprudence around socio-economic rights’, yet Grootboom died homeless a few years after the judgement. Similarly, the constitution failed to uphold socio-economic rights in the case of Phiri complainants’ action between 2003 and 2009 around the installation of pre-paid meters. In the final instance, the 2009 constitutional court ruling upheld and vindicated Johannesburg Water, concluding that pre-paid meters were reasonable and lawful as self-disconnection is not a denial of water services. This ruling was a major blow for the Anti-Privatisation Forum, and in their view, ‘… an insult to the poor’.

Bond notes that it was only through the Treatment Action Campaign’s global lobbying and action against Big Pharma that social movement organisations have been effective in ensuring rights enshrined in the constitution. He concludes that the South African constitution provides ‘talk left and walk right’ language that has raised hopes for civil and political freedoms that have been denied due to the constitution’s inherent neo-liberal bias. A genuine breakthrough in freedoms of
both a political and a socio-economic nature would require far greater social movement organisation and mobilisation, as well as a new political party to challenge the ANC and its failure to counter global neo-liberalism as well as internal factionalism.

The articles that comprise this volume vary from analyses of micro-processes of mobilisation and alliance formation to the larger processes of mobilisation and organisation taking place in social movement organisations at both local and national levels. There are a number of emerging themes, of which three stand out as worthy of mention in conclusion to this introduction. The first, and perhaps most important theme, centres around the crucial role of grassroots forms of participation to counterbalance the overwhelming and insidious influence of global neo-liberalism on policies that affect the poor (despite the flaws inherent on grassroots forms of mobilisation). The contributions by Ngubane, Mottiar, Storey, Ruiters, Masiya and Bond reflect in their different ways on the dilemmas of engagement in different political and socio-economic environments where despite differing contexts, the discourse on democratic processes and practices collides with the prevailing neo-liberal emphasis on citizens as customers, clients and consumers. These explorations of repertoires of civil society action zoom in on the tensions that neo-liberalism creates in policy in terms of the attainment of socio-economic rights.

The second theme relates to the nature of the participatory dynamics that occur within different spaces. Whether spaces are self-created/invented/grassroots or formal/invited/government-created, the processes of engagement interweave with how power and knowledge are mediated within the space. In other words, participation may be more or less meaningful in terms of imbuing a sense of collective agency, depending on whether countervailing discourses that challenge the hegemonic narrative of either type of space are mediated by discussion and compromise, or suppressed. Storey, Ruiters, Masiya and Bond emphasise that to a large extent the challenge to the influence of countervailing discourses is partly related to how well these are able to penetrate the government’s policies at any level in the face of the global structural influences of neo-liberalism, and relatedly to the ways in which hegemonic knowledge is successfully challenged through different forms of social organisation and participation, or negated by official knowledge/policy and power dynamics.

The third theme that unites the contributions to this volume relates to the relative weakness of collective action and social movements themselves in presenting a loud and coherent enough collective front of networks and alliances across a range of issues and governance levels to speak truth to power. As important as the impact of neo-liberalism on struggles for rights is the failure of what Cox (1987) would call social forces to organise themselves sufficiently into movements and alliances that are able to use political and social opportunity structures and moments in ways that sustain visibly robust counter movements and discourses. Ruiters, Masiya and Bond reflect on this failure in their different ways, with Ruiters illustrating the potential for alternative forms of social movement alliance building such as the NUMSA 9. Ruiters argues that the gradual tapering
off of the post-liberation alliance between social movements and social movement organisations and the ANC shows the potential for this countervailing movement and discourse. Masiya and Thompson et al. show that the early potential of social movement organisations such as COSATU and SANCO are compromised by the failure of these SMOs to separate their own internal dynamics and processes from ANC party politics, conflicts and factionalism, as well as the ANC government’s drift towards ‘talk left, walk right’ socio-economic policies that have become gradually more and more obviously neo-liberal in design and implementation.

On final reflection, the personal account of Mdlalose’s experience of what she terms the rise and decline of Abahlali baseMondjolo in Durban emphasises that to speak truth to power, countervailing movements and discourses need not only to build, but to retain their own sense of internal democratic coherence, purpose and voice, without which collective credibility and legitimacy may be threatened. Further examples of this type of struggle to retain credibility in their role as representatives of the poor are the two national movements, SANCO and COSATU. Unfortunately, the legitimacy of both these organisations, even while previously well grounded in larger urban poor settings, has been severely eroded over the last 20 years. It remains to be seen whether the ‘new spaces’ and alliance moments as described by Ngubane, Ruiters, Mottiar and Storey, and alluded to by Bond in his conclusion, will be able to gather the momentum necessary to face the challenges of representing the poor in an increasingly neo-liberal political and developmental environment.

Note

*African Centre for Citizenship and Democracy (ACCEDE), School of Government, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Email: lthompson@uwc.ac.za

References