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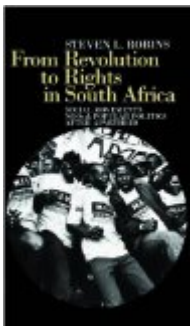

Steven L. Robins. *From Revolution to Rights in South Africa: Social Movements, NGOs and Popular Politics after Apartheid.* Woodbridge: James Currey, 2008. xvi + 192 pp. $95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84701-202-9.

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This book by social anthropologist Steven Robins is a collection of six essays the author has previously published in various journals between 1997 and 2008, as well as an introduction and conclusion written specifically for this publication. The book deals with the rights-based political strategies employed by post-apartheid NGOs and social movements, particularly in the form of what the author calls "NGO-social movement strategic partnerships." The case studies are used to make the broad argument that "rights talk" has replaced "revolutionary talk" in the political discourses and the strategies employed by such partnerships. The cases include discussions pertaining to the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and Médicins Sans Frontières' AIDS activist work; the Legal Resources Centre, Surplus Peoples Project, and South African San Institute's advocacy around the ≠Khomani San land claim and the *Hoodia gordonii* plant and patent; the Cape Town-based South African Homeless People's Federation and its link with Slum Dwellers International; and a Cape Town-based HIV support group called Khululeka. It complements recent books by Deborah James and Michelle Williams on political organizations and movements spanning the ideological divide.[1]

In the introduction, the author positions himself in relation to recent literature by (1) arguing against Zygmund Bauman and others who hold that we live in an era of the "post-political"; (2) challenging the opposition drawn by Mahmood Mamdani between the liberal individualist subject of the African city and the ethnic subject of the countryside; (3) and questioning Partha Chatterjee's critique of civil society as an elite enclave and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's critique of NGOs as the handmaidens of empire. The author points to the "vibrancy and militancy of post-1994 social movements and trade unions," suggesting that we should take cognizance of the "complex, hybrid and situated subjectivities of post-colonial citizen-subjects" that, following Richard Werbner and Francis Nyamnjoh, seems more suited to the interconnectedness and intersubjectivity that characterize African realities (p. 11). Summariz-

ing this "situationalist" perspective rather well, Robins writes that "What appears to be an autonomous rights-bearing citizen in one setting may, in another setting, morph into an 'ethnic' subject, involving indigenous values, traditional beliefs, and forms of sociality and clientelism based on family, clan, neighbourhood and community" (p. 12). The author argues in favor of the sorts of politics that are espoused by the broadly liberal NGOs and social movements under discussion, pointing out their successes on both empirical and conceptual levels because they have contributed towards expanding conventional conceptions of civil society, rights, and citizenship. Moreover these rights-based struggles have not, in his view, "merely produce[d] post-political conditions of liberal individualism" (p. 20).

In chapter 2 the author writes convincingly about how indigenous and cultural rights were not prioritized by South African NGOs and activists during "the struggle" because of the ideological-political position of non-racialism and the strand of identity politics articulated by the apartheid regime. Using as a case study the post-apartheid emergence of new Khoi and Nama identities, the author critiques earlier anthropological writings on the dangers of essentialism in identity politics.[2] Defending the strategic decisions taken by certain NGOs to exploit the discourse of First Peoples, the author notes that such examples of NGO "strategic essentialism" have their place in post-apartheid politics and are not on par with the ideologies that lay behind the state violence of apartheid social engineering or ethnic cleansing in Rwanda. In the process, he echoes arguments made elsewhere about how community and identity are being reconstituted through cultural and intellectual property rights, indigenous knowledge, and the commodification of culture and ethnicity.[3]

In chapter 3 the author pursues some of the same themes, focusing particularly on the double vision or dilemma that is faced by many donors and NGOs who claim to work with "First People" and indigenous cultures. On the one hand these institutions have to lay claim to and trumpet the cultural authenticity of the social groups they work with, while on the other they often introduce (alien) democratic accountability into these social groups as they are constituted as organizations, and as the participating actors are framed as citizens-in-the-making (p. 55). This tension comes to the fore in their effort "to promote the cultural survival of indigenous peoples and their traditional institutions, and to socialise them into becoming modern citizens within a global society" (p. 61). Robins argues that both modernizers (employing a discourse of rural development) and traditionalists (talking about cultural survival) alike seem to believe in the necessity of pure categories and identities (p. 63).

While chapter 4 is not strong ethnographically speaking, it contains some of the most interesting arguments presented in the book. In it the author writes about how a Cape Town-based NGO called the South African Homeless People's Federation (SAHPF) established links with the U.S.-based Slum Dwellers International (SDI). SDI has generated an important number of "activist intellectuals" and is often held up in the social movement literature as a glowing example of how "transnational advocacy networks" work and as an example of "globalization from below." The author argues that as the SDI and local activists tried to introduce democratic ideals such as "horizontal networks" and "deep democracy" to the workings of the SAHPF, the local institutions ended up unwittingly reinforcing local power asymmetries and patronage networks. The author did not observe these but notes reports about undemocratic practices, centralized forms of political leadership, financial mismanagement, and hierarchical political styles--all of which came to dominate the local chapter of SAHPF.[4] Members of SAHPF were also implicated in the "ANC patronage machine" and, in the context of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) perhaps rightfully, had not giv-

en up on the state to create the conditions for upward mobility. As a result, there emerged a gap between the official SDI ideology that is steeped in a radical critique of state-led technocratic development and the praxiology of the local organization (p. 91). The author argues then that "for the popular classes in the Global South it is seldom possible to entirely avoid having to engage with the undemocratic and authoritarian political institutions and practices of uncivil society" (p. 79). The author bemoans the highly normative democracy discourse emanating from the SDI in which only certain forms of agency are recognized, arguing that this normative discourse not only restricts agency but also frames citizens as one-dimensional agents (p. 82). A situationalist perspective, the author seems to imply, would not embrace such a normative and restrictive discourse of democracy and would produce a different kind of politics (although this is not spelled out). Again, the reader is presented with too little ethnographic evidence and is left wondering whether the reports about financial mismanagement and authoritarianism are not accusations in the context of factional infighting rather than reflections of real existing practices.

Chapter 5 explains why--given the history of South Africa, the prevalence of rights discourses in the present, growing citizen mistrust of science, and a global pharmaceutical industry--race and identity lie at the heart of responses to the AIDS pandemic and to AIDS science. It also examines why questions of AIDS science, scientific authority, and biomedical citizenship became central for TAC activists. Noting the ways in which the TAC negotiated the limits involved in ideological mobilization and focused on the development of experientially based understandings of illnesses, the author contributes to the important and growing literature on one of the most successful new social movements of post-apartheid South Africa--one that managed to mobilize grassroots support through articulating a rights-based discourse while activating specific working-class rituals that were steeped in the history and culture of the mass movements of the 1980s.

The idea of the *experience* of illness and treatment is taken further in chapter 6, arguably the strongest chapter in the collection. The author claims that "experiences of illness, treatment and participation in TAC and MSF can produce radical transformations in subjectivity and identity that go well beyond conventional liberal democratic conceptions of 'rights' and 'citizenship'" (p. 128). Analyzing treatment narratives from activists can help us "to understand the extraordinary biosocial power of ARV treatment and AIDs activism in a context of hyper-stigma and AIDS traumas of social and biological death" (p. 128). The author makes use of Victor Turner's classic analysis of the ritual process--as involving the stages of separation, liminality/communitas, and reintegration--to produce insights into the ritualized nature of the radical transformation that is brought about by testing positive ("near death") and finding treatment within the TAC ("new life"). We also gain insight into the collective cultural repertoire and activist culture of the TAC. Such an analysis, the author contends, which looks at the "biosocial passage from 'near death' to 'new life' ... extends social movements theories beyond those that simply attribute activist commitments to instrumental rationality, rational choice, education and conscientisation" (p. 138).

The last case study chapter takes several of the earlier themes further as it deals with the case of a group of men in Cape Town whose organization tries to produce new masculinities and the case of the public consequence of the Jacob Zuma rape trial. The rape trial, the author argues, showed up the "deep-seated clash between the sexual and gender equality ideals enshrined in the constitution and promoted by progressive civil society organisations, and the sexual conservatism of Zuma's supporters and the broader public" (p. 145).

This book is an excellent contribution to the literature on social movements in post-apartheid South Africa. This volume speaks to a number of important issues that haunt contemporary debates about the organization and politics of social movements in South Africa. Some may argue that, in the wake of the rise of populist nationalists such as Julius Malema, revolutionary talk has not completely been replaced by rights talk. Moreover, among many sectors of society there is a noticeable and growing discontent with the "progressive constitution" of the country. This sentiment is often accompanied by a nostalgic longing for the order, law, and personal security that in many of the contemporary older generation's memories characterized the then apartheid South Africa.[5] It is this gap between the democratic and progressive ideals of many NGOs, social movements, and our constitution and the lived realities of citizens in compromising local contexts that constitutes one of the most important arenas of debate in contemporary South Africa. While the author of this volume does not propose solutions to this, his call for the recognition of the situational rationalities and dynamics of actors and groups--the switching of sides, repertoires, registers, and identities--involved in local politics should be taken seriously. This gap is often reproduced within NGOs between, on the one hand, "activist academics" and middle-class educated leaders, and on the other hand, theircomrades who tend to be grassroots members of "popular classes" (p. 15). This debate became particularly heated following the contestations over Abahlali base Mjondolo and what transpired during and after the Kennedy Road attacks in Durban.[6] Moreover, accusations of and admissions to the existence of sexual violence, homophobia, and xenophobia within some of the most prominent social movements have also brought debates about the internal culture of these organizations into the open. Moreover, Robins's arguments about the salience of racial and cultural identities should also be taken seriously, especially by the more radical social movements that have yet to come to terms with and find the language of race, identity, and gender through which to ***both*** articulate their struggles and organize/mobilize support. As the author shows, questions of identity and race have confronted the consciousness of academics and activists in new ways and have produced varied responses. What is needed to complement this study and address some of the burning issues that are raised here are ethnographic accounts of the culture and praxis of social movements ***qua*** organizations, accounts that produce fewer celebratory readings of revolutionary leaders and more nuanced life histories of rank-and-file branch members.[7]

Notes

[1]. James, ***Gaining Ground: "Rights" and "Property" in South African Land Reform*** (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Williams, ***The Roots of Participatory Democracy: Democratic Communists in South Africa and Kerala, India*** (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[2]. For example, J. Sharp, "Land Claims in the Komaggas Reserve," ***Review of African Political Economy*** 61 (1994): 403-414; E. Boonzaier, E. "Ethnic Identity and Performance: Lessons from Namaqualand," ***Journal of Southern African Studies*** 20, no. 3 (1994): 405-415; and A. Kuper, "The Return of the Native," ***Current Anthropology*** 44, no. 3 (2003): 389-411.

[3]. J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, ***Ethnicity, Inc.*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[4]. For an ethnographic account of such in a similar setting see E. Bähre, ***Money and Violence: Financial Self-Help Groups in a South African Township*** (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

[5]. J. Dlamini, ***Native Nostalgia*** (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2009); G. Kynoch, "Apartheid Nostalgia: Personal Security Concerns in South African Townships," ***SA Crime Quarterly*** 5 (2003): 7-10.

[6]. See S. Walsh, "Uncomfortable Collaborations: Contesting Constructions of the Poor in

South Africa," ***Review of African Political Economy*** 35, no. 2 (2008): 255-279; L. Sinwell, "Defensive Social Movement Battles Need to Engage with Politics," ***South African Labour Bulletin*** 34, no. 1 (2010): 37-39; and H. Böhmke, "The Branding of Social Movements in South Africa," ***Dispositions,*** no. 1 (2010), URL: http://dispositionsjournal.blogspot.com/2010/04/i-branding-of-social-movements-in-south.html.

[7]. Cf. J. Dlamini, "The Root of the Matter: Scenes from an ANC Branch," ***African Studies*** 69, no. 1 (2010): 187-203.