

## Politics in the Slum: A View from South Africa<sup>1</sup>

The modern state, and its civil society, have always been comfortable with workers in their allotted place – be it formed around the immediate needs of industrial production, like the migrant workers hostels in apartheid South Africa or contemporary Dubai, or an attempt at creating a haven, like the suburban home which has its roots in the gendered and raced class compromise reached in North America after the Second World War. When there has been a part of the population rendered or considered superfluous to the immediate needs of production there has been a degree of comfort with the inevitably bounded spaces into which these people have been abandoned or contained – prisons, ghettos, Bantustans etc. But both the modern state and civil society have always been acutely uncomfortable with that part of the ‘dangerous class’ - vagabonds or squatters - that are, by virtue of their occupation of space outside of state regulation, by definition out of place and threatening to domination constructed, along with other lines of force, on the ordering of space.

In 1961 Frantz Fanon, the great philosopher of African anti-colonialism, described the shack settlements that “circle the towns tirelessly, hoping that one day or another they will be let in” as “the gangrene eating into the heart of colonial domination”. He argued that “this cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonised people”.<sup>2</sup> Colonial power tended to agree and often obliterated shanty towns, usually in the name of public health and safety.

But by the late 1980s the World Bank backed elite consensus was that shack settlements, now called ‘informal settlements’ rather than ‘squatter camps’, were opportunities for popular entrepreneurship rather than a threat to white settlers, state and capital. Slum clearance projects were often abandoned and NGOs embedded in imperial power structures were deployed to teach the poor that they could only hope to help themselves via savings groups, micro-loans and small businesses while the rich got on with big business. At the borders of the new gated themeparks where the rich now worked, shopped, studied and entertained themselves the armed enforcement of segregation, previously the work of the state, was carried out by private security.

But in many places this deal is coming undone. In the contemporary world one of the factors in the calculus by which the location of a city’s place in the global hierarchy is determined is the efficiency with which its rulers provide a separate domain for its workers, contain its ghettos, eliminate its spaces created against its laws by popular power and secure it against the entry of the undocumented. From Lagos, to Delhi and Johannesburg evictions are back on the agenda. And from Port-au-Prince, to La Paz and Durban popular struggles are also back on the agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> This article, at the request of *Das Argument*, synthesises two pieces first published in English. They are ‘[Thinking Resistance in the Shanty Town](#)’ *Mute Magazine*, 25 August 2006, and ‘[The May 2008 Pogroms: xenophobia, evictions, liberalism, and democratic grassroots militancy in South Africa](#)’, *Sanhati*, 16 June 2008. They have both been reduced in length and some new text has been inserted in order to weave them together. However this piece does not deal with events in South Africa after May 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin), 1976, p. 103.

The hope or fear that the city may, as well as being the primary seat of duly constituted power, also provide a vessel well suited to the development of social ferment is not new. The vagabond and the squatter have long loomed large in these fears and hopes but in recent years the sheer scale of the shack settlement as a planetary (although of course not universal) phenomenon has put it at the heart of consideration in contemporary philosophy, civil society, military planning, and popular politics. The need to impose order from above is a constant theme across the political spectrum. Richard Norton, of United States Naval War College, warns of the “anarchic allure of the feral city for criminal and terrorist groups”<sup>3</sup>, names Johannesburg as a particular cause for concern and calls for the development of military capacity adequate to this challenge. For Slavoj Žižek “the principled task of the twenty-first century is to politicize and discipline – the ‘destructured masses’ of slum dwellers”.<sup>4</sup> Mike Davis may well be correct when he argues that “there’s a consensus, both on the left and the right, that it’s the slum peripheries of poor Third World cities that have become a decisive geopolitical space”.<sup>5</sup> But it is, nevertheless, important to sound a note of caution when this consensus takes on an overly apocalyptic tone. Some of the contemporary enthusiasm for the shack settlement as an evental site is fundamentally shaped, whether in anxiety or hope, by the reactivation of the old stereotypes of the urban poor that, as Alejandro Portes warned in 1972, “confuse sociological realities with psychological realities”.<sup>6</sup> It most certainly remains true that, as Janice Perlman warned in 1976, the left is also influenced by the myths of marginality.<sup>7</sup>

### **The View from Metropolitan Left**

The metropolitan left has recently developed an interest in the prospects for resistance in shanty towns. Mike Davis’ first intervention, a 2004 *New Left Review* article, ‘Planet of Slums’, famously concluded that “for the moment at least, Marx has yielded the historical stage to Mohammed and the Holy Ghost” and so “the Left (is) still largely missing from the slum”.<sup>8</sup> This was a little too glib. For a start the left is not reducible to the genius of one theorist working from one time and place. And as Davis wrote these words militant battles were being fought in and from many shack settlements around the world. Moreover proposing a Manichean distinction between religion and political militancy is a little silly. Some of the partisans in these battles were religious. Others were not. In many instances these struggles were not in themselves religious but rooted their organising in social technologies developed in popular religious practices. Davis’ pessimism derived, at least in part, from a fundamental methodological flaw. He failed to speak to the people waging these struggles, or even to read the work produced from within these resistances and often read his imperial sources – the UN, World Bank, donor agencies, anthropologists, etc – as colleagues rather than enemies.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Norton Norton, *Richard Feral Cities* (2003) ‘Feral Cities’ *Naval War College*  
[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0JIW/is\\_4\\_56/ai\\_110458726/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0JIW/is_4_56/ai_110458726/)

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso), 2008, p.426

<sup>5</sup> Mike Davis, *Interview with Mike Davis* Online: <http://bldgblog.blogspot.com/2006/05/interview-with-mike-davis-part-1.html>

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Loïc Wacquant *Urban Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity), 2008, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Janice Perlman *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1976, p. 250.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Davis ‘Planet of Slums’, *New Left Review*, No, 26, 2004 <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2496>

At around the same time as Davis wrote his Slums paper Žižek, writing in the *London Review of Books*, argued that the explosive growth of the slum 'is perhaps the crucial geopolitical event of our times'. He concluded that we are confronted by:

The rapid growth of a population outside the law, in terrible need of minimal forms of self organisation ... One should resist the easy temptation to elevate and idealise slum-dwellers into a new revolutionary class. It is nonetheless surprising how far they conform to the old Marxist definition of the proletarian revolutionary subject: they are 'free' in the double meaning of the word, even more than the classical proletariat ('free' from all substantial ties; dwelling in a free space, outside the regulation of the state); they are a large collective, forcibly thrown into a situation where they have to invent some mode of being-together, and simultaneously deprived of support for their traditional ways of life. ... The new forms of social awareness that emerge from slum collectives will be the germ of the future ...<sup>9</sup>

Zizek didn't ground his speculative (although tentative) optimism in any examination of the concrete. But it had the enormous merit of, at least in principle, taking thinking in the slum seriously.

Davis sees slums in explicitly Hobbesian terms. As he rushes to his apocalyptic conclusions he pulls down numbers and quotes from a dazzling range of literature and some of the research that he cites points to general tendencies that are often of urgent importance: post-colonial elites have aggressively adapted racial zoning to class and tend to withdraw to residential and commercial themeparks; the lack of toilets is a key women's issue; NGOs generally act to demobilise resistance and many people do make their lives, sick and tired, on piles of shit, in endless queues for water, amidst the relentless struggle to wring a little money out of a hard, corrupt world. The brown death, diarrhoea, constantly drains the life force away. And there is the sporadic but terrifyingly inevitable threat of the red death – the fires that roar and dance through the night.

But even when the material horror of settlements built and then rebuilt on shit after each fire has some general truth, it isn't all that is true. It is also the case that for many people these settlements provide a treasured node of access to the city with its prospects for work, education, cultural, religious and sporting possibilities; that they can be spaces for popular cosmopolitanism and cultural innovation and that everyday life is often characterised, more than anything else, by its ordinariness – people drinking tea, cooking supper, playing soccer, celebrating a child's birthday, doing school homework or at choir practice. It is this ordinariness, and in certain instances hopefulness, that so firmly divorces purely tragic or apocalyptic accounts of slum life from even quite brief encounters with the lived reality of the shack settlement. Furthermore, in so far as general comments about such diverse places are useful, an adequate theory of the squatter settlement needs to get to grips with the fundamental ambiguity that often characterises life in these places.

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<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek 'Knee Deep', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 26, No. 17, 2004  
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n17/slavoj-zizek/knee-deep>

On the one hand the absence of the state often means the material deprivation and suffering that comes from the absence of the basic state services (water, electricity, sanitation, refuse removal, etc) required for a viable urban life. But the simultaneous absence of the state and traditional authority and proximity to the city can also enable a rare degree of political and cultural autonomy. This ambiguity is often a central feature of squatters' lives and struggles. A.W.C. Champion was the head of the famous African Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) that organised shack dwellers in Durban in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Speaking in 1960, just after the state had destroyed the Umkumbane settlement and moved its residents to formal township houses outside of the city, he recalled Umkumbane not only as a bad memory of shit and fire, but also as "the place in Durban where families could breath the air of freedom".<sup>10</sup>

Robert Neuwirth's *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World*, is able to capture this ambiguous aspect of shack life. He doesn't shy away from the horror of the conditions in some settlements. But because he has lived in the places that he describes and spoken to the people that he writes about he is able to capture the ordinariness of the ordinary life of people and communities and the fact that there are, at times, certain attractions to slum life. He quotes Armstrong O'Brian, a resident of the Southland settlement in Nairobi, who says, "This place is very addictive. It's a simple life, but no one is restricting you. Nobody is controlling you. Once you have stayed here, you cannot go back."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it is rumours of this air of freedom, this lack of control, that fill the sail on Zizek's radical hopes for the slum.

Fanon insisted that "The shanty town is the consecration of the colonised's biological decision to invade the enemy citadel at all costs".<sup>12</sup> But most of the writing produced by contemporary imperialism tends to take a tragic and naturalising form and to present squatters as being passively washed into shack settlements by the tides of history. Unfortunately Davis generally fails to mark the insurgent militancy that is often behind the formation and ongoing survival of the shack settlement. So, for example, his naturalising description of Soweto as "having grown from a suburb to a satellite city"<sup>13</sup> leaves out the history of the shack dwellers' movement Sofasonke which, in 1944, led more than ten thousand people to occupy the land that would later become Soweto. However, Neuwirth's book is very good at showing that the shanty town often has its origins in popular reappropriation of land and often survives by battles to defend and extend those gains and to appropriate state services.

No doubt Human Rights discourse takes on a concrete reality when one is being bombed in its name. But when grasped as a tool by the militant poor it invariably turns out to contain a strange emptiness. Hence the importance of Neuwirth's assertion of the value of the fact that squatters are "not seizing an abstract right, they are taking an actual place". But he sensibly avoids the mistake of assuming that popular reappropriation is automatically about creating a democratic commons. If the necessity or choice of a move to the city renders rural life impossible or undesirable, and if the cosmopolitanism of so many shanty towns

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Maylam, 'Introduction' in Maylam and Edwards (eds.), *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press), 1996, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Neuwirth *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World* (New York: Routledge), 2005, p.96.

<sup>12</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 103

<sup>13</sup> Mike Davis *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso), 2006, p.44.

puts them at an unbridgeable remove from traditional modes of governance, there is no guarantee that the need to invent new social forms will result in progressive outcomes. Shiv Senna, the Hindu fascist movement that built its first base in the shanty towns of Bombay, is one of many instances of deeply reactionary responses to the need for social innovation. As Neuwirth shows, choices are made, struggles are fought and outcomes vary. Many settlements are dominated by slum lords of various types. But this is not inevitable and does not justify Davis' Hobbesian pessimism about life in shack settlements. Communal ownership and democracy are also possible and there are numerous concrete instances in which they occur.

In South Africa the shack settlement has been both a site of popular radicalism and a site of popular reaction. With an entrenched unemployment crisis that excludes around 40% of people from formal employment now compounded by the sudden escalation in food and transport prices there's not much disagreement about the depth of economic exclusion of the poor. Of course people do invent new modes of solidarity and survivalist communalism to cope but a dangerous desperation is also rife. Not everyone is in a position to confront the prospect of entering their 30s without ever having had a decent job with equanimity.

Exclusion from substantive citizenship is also a question of space. The South African state is seeking to reverse the popular desegregation of cities achieved since the 1980s. There are major projects to drive the poor out of flats in the city centres in the name of creating 'World Class Cities'. Centrally located shack settlements are also under attack from a full fledged programme to 'eradicate' shacks by 2014. While most cities have one or two well funded projects to upgrade centrally located shack settlements they are the exceptions that legitimate the rule. The fact is that the state is beating the poor out of the cities in the name of 'slum clearance', the precise phrase used by apartheid, and before that colonialism, for the same purpose. The poor are being driven out of urban spaces over which there is sometimes a considerable degree of autonomous self management into regulated and commodified contemporary versions of the peripheral apartheid township – a space separate in every way from the fantasy of world class cities but far enough out of town for this fact to be tolerable. An often politically innovative urban proletariat which appropriated urban land, as well as electricity and water, and often, although not always, turned it into a commons organised with a considerable degree of popular autonomy from state power is being recomposed into an individualized set of consumers safely warehoused on the urban periphery. The return to forced removals is a direct attack on people's livelihoods, access to education and health care, desire for an urban life and identity as citizens. With regard to the latter it is worth recalling that the denial of the right to the city was a central part of the denial of citizenship to Africans under apartheid. Every successful eviction increases the already severe overcrowding in the spaces that survive and escalates competition for space that can take all sorts of forms including ethnic and racial conflict amongst South Africans.

Despite more than 4 years of vigorous protests by the grassroots left across the country against local party councillors and their ward committees the reality of political exclusion doesn't have much elite currency. Civil society doesn't always easily recognise that democracy isn't only about elections and NGOs. People who appropriated or forged substantive rights to citizenship through the insurgent popular struggles of the 80s, or who were promised full social inclusion in Mandela's image of the nation, now find that, what

ever their identity documents may say, they have been excluded from a key aspect of substantive citizenship - the right to speak, to be heard and to co-determine their future. Developmental processes are overwhelmingly technocratic and expert driven and the party is, for the very poor, now a top down structure that is used more for social control than as a space for popular discussion. In fact in many shack settlements party structures are the armed enforcers of state discipline. Many of the thousands of popular protests over the last few years (often clearly misnamed as 'service delivery' protests by both the NGO left and the state) were aimed at trying to subordinate local party structures and representatives to popular power. It has been very striking that in many of these protests the people organising them have declared that they have returned to struggle because they have, again, 'been made foreigners in our own country'. This crisis in citizenship caused by a widespread exclusion from substantive citizenship has expressed itself in some remarkable mobilisations that have united people with and without legal citizenship to struggle to democratise society from below. But in the absence of democratic organisation it can also take the terrifying form of a desire to assert one's own citizenship by turning on the 'real' non citizens.

### **Abahlali baseMjondolo**

In Durban an organised shack dweller's movement emerged out of the general ferment. In March 2005 a road was blockaded by residents of the Kennedy Road settlement, as roads had been blockaded around the country since 2004. Kennedy Road is the inner suburban core of the city and had been marked for eradication. In the months after the road blockade there were intense discussions with people from 11 nearby settlements, all in the inner suburban core, and in October that year a decision was taken to form the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* [shack dwellers] movement (AbM) and to pursue a politics of the poor by and for the poor.

The movement was not founded by an NGO or a political organisation and had no donor funding. It drew on the traditional language of the dignity of each person, reworked into a cosmopolitan form appropriate for urban life. From the beginning the movement had something of the feeling of the warmth and mutual care of a congregation, a slow, deliberative and deeply democratic political culture. It was, in the sense of the term developed by Marcelo Lopes de Souza<sup>14</sup>, an autonomous political project.

Since then the movement's experience with the state has swung from outright repression to a cautious but productive engagement. From the founding road blockade in March 2005 until September 2007, when a legal and peaceful march on the mayor was violently attacked by the police, the state refused to accept AbM as a legitimate organisation.

In some respects settlements that had collectively affiliated to the movement were treated as dissident territories by the police and there were instances where settlements were occupied by the military at times of heightened tension. AbM protests were unlawfully banned and then attacked when they went ahead in defiance of bans. Well known members

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<sup>14</sup> Marcelo Lopes de Souza Souza, 'Urban Development on the Basis of Autonomy: a Politico-Philosophical and Ethical Framework for Urban Planning and Management', *Ethics, Place and Environment*, Vol. 3, No.2 2000.

were forced out of their jobs, there were more than two hundred arrests and all kinds of other forms of police harassment including the use of police violence to physically prevent the movement from taking up invitations to debate politicians on radio and television. During this period of repression the movement was subject to consistent slander from the state much of it alleging a political conspiracy by a white agent of a foreign government tasked with destabilizing the country.

Despite the difficulties faced by the movement from October 2005 until September 2007 a considerable amount was achieved. The movement declared a *University of Abahlali baseMjondolo* and in the discussions of that university resolved to protect its autonomy by refusing party politics. It was decided to only engage with NGOs if and when they were prepared to work with the movement on the basis of mutuality and connections were made with the churches. A key slogan in what came to be called the movement's 'living politics' became 'talk to us, not for us'. During this time the movement continued to grow and was able to achieve a remarkable degree of unmediated access to public voice. Shack dwellers, who had been rendered a politically inert category after apartheid, emerged on the national stage as political actors acting in their own name as a rational and speaking presence in the media independent from party and NGO control.

In practical terms AbM was able to reach a point of being able to successfully resist evictions in all the settlements where they were strong, to build and defend new shacks, to openly undertake and successfully defended their expansion of existing shack settlements, to win access to various state services outside of party patronage, to set up crèches and various mutual support projects, to (illegally) safely connect thousands of people to electricity and many to water, to vigorously contest police oppression, to democratise the governance of a number of settlements to win sustained unmediated access to voice in the popular media, to defend the right to dissent against local party elites, to contest the withholding of welfare as a punishment for dissent and to fight a high profile battle for land and housing in the towns and cities.

AbM become able to call meetings and initiate campaigns in which those NGOs, academics and lawyers willing to work with a grassroots movement on the basis of mutual respect, and on the terrain where the movement is strong, rather than, as is more typical, on the basis of an assumed right to lead and to dominate grassroots organisations from without, could work with the movement. The first campaign developed in this way was against the Slums Act. The Slums Act was first proposed and passed in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in 2007 and was meant to be replicated in other provinces. The Act essentially criminalised the unlawful occupation of land, resistance to evictions and any form of shack dwellers' organisation that occupied land unlawfully and raised money via a membership fee.

It slowly became clear that the movement had entered a second phase after the attack on the march in September 2007. This attack was witnessed by the local bishops who strongly condemned it and it was also condemned by international human rights organisations. Unlawful police repression stopped, the state recognised AbM as the legitimate representative of 14 settlements in Durban and negotiations began with city officials. In the beginning there were explicit attempts to persuade AbM to 'shift from a political discourse to a development discourse.' This was refused. For a while there was something of a stand

off but once AbM had secured the right to remain political in and outside of the negotiations the negotiations could continue.

The experience of Abahlali baseMjondolo has shown that the will to fight has no necessary connection to the degree of material deprivation or material threat from state power. It is always a cultural and intellectual rather than a biological phenomenon. It therefore requires cultural and intellectual work to be produced and sustained. Spaces and practices in which the courage and resilience to stay committed to this work can be nurtured are essential. Drawing from the diverse lifeworlds that come together to make the settlements and the movement requires a hybrid new to be woven from the strands of the old. Formal meetings are necessary to enable the careful collective reflection on experience that produces and develops the movement's ideas and principles. Part of making a meeting democratic is declaring its resolute autonomy from state, party and civil society. Then and only then is it fully accountable to the people in whose name it is constituted. The music and meals and games and prayers and stories and funerals that weave togetherness are essential to sustain both a collective commitment to the movement's principles and a will to fight.

People fight constituted power to gain their share and to constitute counter power. Choices have to be made and adhered to. Any conception of shanty town politics that sees the mere fact of insurgency into bourgeois space as necessarily progressive in and by itself risks complicity with micro-local relations of domination and, because local despotisms so often become aligned to larger forces of domination, complicities with larger relations of domination. The fact of mere movement driven by mere desire for more life is not sufficient for a radical politics. A genuinely radical politics can only be built around an explicit thought out commitment to community constructed around a political and material commons. The fundamental political principle must be that everybody matters.

Democratic popular struggle is a school and will develop its range and reach as it progresses. But a permanently ongoing collective reflection on the lived experience of struggle is necessary for resistances to be able to be able to sustain their mass character as they grow and to develop. It is necessary to create opportunities for as many people as possible to keep talking and thinking in a set of linked intellectual spaces within the settlements. Progress comes from the quality of the work done in these spaces – not from a few people learning the jargon of the middle class left via NGO workshops held on the other side of the razor wire. This jargon will tend to be fundamentally disempowering because of its general indifference to the local relations of domination that usually present a movement with both its most immediate threats and opportunities for an effective fight back. Moreover the accuracy and usefulness of its analysis will often be seriously compromised by its blindness to local relations of domination and how these connect to broader forces. There needs to be a self conscious development of what S'bu Zikode, chair of Abahlali baseMjondolo, calls 'a politics of the poor – a homemade politics that everyone can understand and find a home in'.

The experience of Abahlali is that for most squatters the fight begins with these toilets, this land, this eviction, this fire, these taps, this slum lord, this politician, this broken promise, this developer, this school, this crèche, these police officers, this murder. Because the fight begins from a militant engagement with the local its thinking immediately pits material



force against material force – bodies and songs and stones against circling helicopters, tear gas and bullets. It is real from the beginning. And if it remains a mass democratic project, permanently open to innovation from below as it develops, it will stay real. This is what Abahlali baseMjondolo call ‘the politics of the strong poor’.

### **The Pogroms of May, 2008**

The Freedom Charter, adopted in Johannesburg in 1955 as the manifesto of the struggle against apartheid, declared that ‘South Africa belongs to all who live in it.’ But for two terrible weeks in May people unable to pass mob tests for indigeneity were intimidated, beaten, hacked, raped and burnt out of shack settlements and city centres across South Africa. The attacks began in the shack settlements around Johannesburg. In the Harry Gwala settlement the homes of two Shangaan families, one of whom had come from Maputo in Mozambique and the other from Giyani in South Africa, were burnt and demolished. All that is left is squares of burnt earth. The local Landless People’s movement moved swiftly to condemn the attacks and to work with the local police, with whom they have often been in conflict, to stop them from spreading further. In the nearby Makause settlement, which is not organised into an oppositional movement autonomous from the state, things were far worse. Here the settlement is dotted with burnt out and demolished buildings. There is also a terribly empty 200 metre long strip where, in February last year, 2 500 shacks were unlawfully demolished at gunpoint by the state and the residents forcibly moved to a ‘transit camp’ 40 kilometres out of town.

In the second week the pogrom spread to the city centre and there were clashes at the Central Methodist Church, a haven for undocumented Zimbabweans, where residents successfully barricaded themselves in with piles of bricks for defence. In January there had been a much more damaging attack on the church. On that occasion the attack came from the police. They stormed in with dogs, pepper spray and batons and arrested 500 people. The church told the media that people were assaulted and robbed in the attack and that even those with documents were arrested.

In the second week the pogroms also spread to Durban, Cape Town and the small towns in the hinterland. In Durban the first attack was on a down town Nigerian bar and was followed by attacks on Rwandese and Congolese people living in city flats and then attacks on Mozambicans, Zimbabweans and Malawians living in shack settlements. In Cape Town it began with the Somali shopkeepers, who have been murdered at an incredible rate for years. The state has dismissed the clearly targeted nature of the ongoing killing of Somalis as ‘just ordinary crime’.

Some of the mobs were singing Jacob Zuma’s campaign song, Bring My Machine Gun. Some came out of shack settlements and migrant worker hostels linked to the Zulu nationalist movement Inkatha. Some were just drunk young men. The most widely reported tests used to determine indigeneity, such as seeing if people know the formal and slightly archaic Zulu word for elbow, were taken straight from the tactics that the police have used for years. The mob definition of foreigner always centred on foreign born Africans but in some instances Pakistanis and South Africans of minority ethnicities, especially Shangaan, Venda and Tsonga people, were also targeted. There are a number of credible allegations of police complicity

in the pogroms but in some places community organisations were able to work with local police stations to bring the violence under control. There are many accounts of individual acts of brave opposition to the attacks by both South Africans and migrants. In the Protea South shack settlement in Johannesburg migrants were able to successfully organise themselves into self-defence units and to protect themselves with round the clock patrols. It is striking that in many, although not all, of the areas under the control of militant organisations of the poor that have been in serious conflict with the state there were no attacks at all.

After two weeks 62 people were dead, a third of them South African citizens, and figures for the number of people displaced ranged from 80 000 to 100 000. Some had fled the country and others were sheltering in churches, at police stations and in refugee camps. Conditions in the camps are often grim. Human rights organisations have issued strenuous condemnations and there have already been threats of collective suicide, clashes with the police and demands for the United Nations to take over management of the camps from the South African state.

The extreme hostility with which the post-apartheid state has responded to African migrants is well documented in numerous human rights and academic reports.<sup>15</sup> Migrants to South Africa confront a notoriously ungenerous policy regime that is compounded by a bureaucracy and police force that are both systemically corrupt and prone to extorting money from migrants, documented or not, on the threat of arrest and deportation. There are many cases where South Africans have also been arrested and deported to countries they have never previously visited because they could not speak Zulu well, didn't have the 'right' inoculation marks or were 'too black.' If the police suspect that someone may be an 'illegal immigrant' and she doesn't have papers on her she will be detained in a holding cell and then sent to a repatriation centre to await deportation. If she is documented but doesn't have papers on her she may still end up being deported as it is people picked on suspicion of being illegal that have to prove their legal right to be in the country. There is no burden of proof on the state. There is a right to one free phone call from the police holding cells and another from the repatriation centres but that right is routinely denied. Sometimes people whose presence in South Africa is perfectly legal just disappear. Their families only discover what has become of them after they have been deported. One consequence of this is that any one who thinks that they may be under suspicion has to carry their papers with them at all times. The similarity with the apartheid pass system has not escaped the notice of migrants.

The Lindela Repatriation Centre looms with a particular malevolence in the fears of migrants. Set in an old mining compound on the outskirts of Johannesburg its function is to hold illegal immigrants while they wait to be deported. The phrases 'gross violations of human rights' and 'concentration camp' role out with the word 'Lindela' in the language of human rights organisations as naturally as the word 'criminals' goes with 'illegal immigrants' in the language of the politicians, police and much of the popular media. Yet none of this resolute condemnation, much of which is undergirded by exhaustive empirical detail, has had any significant difference. Detailed human rights reports going back to 1999 describe

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<sup>15</sup> See Michael Neocosmos *From 'Foreign Natives' to 'Native Foreigners': Explaining Xenophobia in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Dakar: Codesria), 2006

routine violence, deliberate sleep deprivation, sexual assault, the denial of the right to a free phone call, appalling and appallingly limited food, a total lack of reading and writing materials, endemic corruption, unexplained deaths and extended periods of detention without judicial review. There have been riots in Lindela going back to at least 2004. It is still hell. Senior people in the ANC Women's League have financial interests in Lindela.

The state has not been alone in this. On radio talk shows, in newspapers and university lecture theatres it quickly becomes clear that the fears and stereotypes that white people projected onto black people under apartheid are now often projected, unapologetically, onto the poor in general and shack dwellers and migrants in particular. Things that can no longer be publicly said about black people can still be said about the poor, with and without papers. It is not unusual for middle class black people to take this up with enthusiasm. It's been an open season for a long time. The fear and hostility of the old order have been redirected rather than overcome in the new order.

The popular movements that have rebuilt a democratic grassroots militancy were able to successfully defend and shelter people at risk in the May pogroms and, on at least one occasion, confront attackers head on. There was not one attack in any of the more than 30 settlements where the largely Durban and Pietermaritzburg based shack dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo is strong. Despite being crowded into ever fewer bits and pieces of urban land, all of which remain under threat from a state determined to 'eradicate shacks by 2014', the movement was also able to offer shelter to some people displaced in the attacks. In a widely circulated and translated statement Abahlali baseMjondolo declared that "An action can be illegal. A person cannot be illegal. A person is a person where ever they may find themselves. If you live in a settlement you are from that settlement and you are a neighbour and a comrade in that settlement." The Landless People's Movement in Johannesburg and the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town were also able to mount some opposition to the pogroms. In Khutsong, a town to the West of Johannesburg where popular conflict with the state has probably been most acute, the Merafong Demarcation Forum was also able to ensure safety. All of these organisations have, in the face of considerable repression boycotted elections and sought to build a militant grassroots politics outside of the party structures beholden to the state. Their politics moves from the bottom up and the state and many NGOs, including most emphatically some of those on the left, consider it to be outside of professional civil society and its aspirations to manage the poor and, therefore, criminal.

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