

We Are All the Public

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Across the country the most vulnerable people in our society are being subject to brazenly unlawful and often violent action at the hands of the state. Homeless people, refugees, sex workers, street traders and shack dwellers are all being taught, in the most literal sense of the term, to know their place. But state illegality is not only aimed at the segregation of physical space. It is also about ensuring that the people on the margins of society know their political place.

This is why protests are often illegally banned and attacked. Protestors are routinely arrested on the charge of 'public violence' when there has been no damage to property or person. As grassroots movements have often noted there is a clear implication that some people have been defined as being outside of the public and that their demands for inclusion are automatically considered to be an assault on 'the public'.

The lived reality of our society is that every citizen has a right to access some of the basic means to sustain life – social grants, a little water, some health care. But if you are not a worker or consumer in the 'formal' realm you must know your place. That place is outside of both the physical and political spaces that are reserved for the acceptable and legitimate public.

It is true that our constitution is better than most. But because it costs money to access the courts, the constitution offers no systemic protection against state criminality. It is also true that our civil society is more vibrant than most. But because it is largely committed to technocratic interventions that carry no material force civil society is equally unable to offer systemic protection against the state. The left in the Congress alliance has strengthened its position in government, but we have not yet seen any willingness on its part to take a real stand against the active, armed and often violent attempts at social exclusion by the state.

We need to do some serious thinking about the failures of our democracy.

In recent years there has been a fairly vigorous discussion in our elite public sphere about the way in which the democratic potential of key institutions like the SABC, parliamentary committees and some of our universities has been curtailed. This discussion is important, however it has often failed to take sufficient account of the unstable but nevertheless clear set of alliances between the authoritarianisms of elite nationalism and corporate power. In fact it has not been usual for critics of the former to see the latter as the world class alternative to the local deviation of the former. This is profoundly mistaken.

Elite nationalism, in and outside of the state, constantly strives to present its narrow interests as those of the nation as a whole. It is not unusual for it to deploy the radical

language of resistance to advance interests that are clearly parasitic on society as a whole. Although it evokes a political discourse, it is a discourse in which a small part of the nation is taken to represent the whole with the result that it functions to close down the space for popular political engagement.

When ordinary people try to stake their claim or to hold their ground in the nation, it's not unusual for them to be very quickly defined out of the community of people that legitimately make up the public. For Wayne Minnaar, spokesperson of the Johannesburg Metro Police, people who have been driven to live on the streets of Johannesburg should be arrested and herded into prison because they are not 'clean'. For Michael Sutcliffe, the manager of the eThekweni Municipality, whose administration has a long and brutal history of illegal evictions, forced removals and bans on protests, as well as police violence against peaceful protests, most of the traders at the City's oldest market must be evicted in favour of a corporate mall because they are now suddenly 'illegal'. Tokyo Sexwale recently warned housing activists that the government would distinguish between organisations 'acting legitimately' and those 'acting under other flags' for whom the police would display 'zero tolerance.'

Corporate authoritarianism works, with equal vigour, to justify its continual expansion to new areas of social life in the name of a claim to efficiency and competence that will, by enabling 'economic growth', 'competitiveness' and 'development', be in the general interest. This is a self serving fiction. Once again the interests of a privileged part are being confused with those of the whole. When public housing, peasant farming or education are brought under corporate control the reality is greater exploitation, greater exclusion and an increasingly rapid movement towards a society split into two fundamentally unequal and physically segregated worlds.

Corporate authoritarianism is organised via the deeply anti-political and therefore anti-democratic system of managerialism. When managerial despotism is extended outside of the corporation it often uses the language of science, with all the authority inherent in that language, to take decision making out of the hands of the public and to place it under the control of 'experts'. It is not just the poor that are excluded from active participation in society and it's institutions as corporate logic is extended to new areas of society. When university professors suddenly find that they must account to 'line managers' who will audit their subordination to a 'performance management system' the ancient ideal of a university as an institution constituted by a community of scholars has been quietly clubbed to death by 'human resources experts'.

When applied to 'development' the logic of corporate authoritarianism invests despotic power in the hands of 'experts' who know very little about the lived realities of the people whose lives they seek to plan. When apartheid denied shack dwellers services in cities and then forcibly removed them to transit camps in the middle of nowhere this was denounced as a crime. Now development 'experts' declare the same processes as 'best practice'. No ordinary person is deemed to have a right to challenge their expertise and so opposition can only be read as perverse, as a matter for the police.

The death of protestors at the hands of the police is not uncommon and the real scandal is that these deaths do not result in any scandal in elite publics. They are just a footnote to the daily news. Some people, like the 'girl from Kwazakhele' shot in the head during a protest for houses, water and electricity and toilets on the 1st of July, just don't count.

The predatory nature of the alliance of nationalist and corporate elites has perhaps become most extreme in eMacambini on the North coast of KwaZulu-Natal where many thousands of people face eviction from their land so that a Dubai developer can build a giant themepark. A recent newspaper article on the proposed 'AmaZulu World' themepark declared that although there is community opposition to the 'development' it had the strong support of the 'influential KZN Growth Coalition', a 'public private partnership' between business and the state.

In this formulation the people of eMacambini, those who have most to lose from the alliance between corporate and political elites, are not the public. The assumption that the people are not the public is one against which we must rebel if we are all to count and our democracy is to be a living force in our society. We are all, sex workers and accountants, the public.