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What's Left of 'the Left' in Post-Apartheid South Africa?

Abstract

This article addresses the question of 'the left' in contemporary South Africa in two senses. First, in terms of assessing the health of leftist politics; second, it asks to what extent are the self-identified left, progressive in any meaningful sense. The first half of the article reflects on the current development situation in South Africa. Here it is argued that within most sections of the South African left there is broad agreement on the need to address the triple challenge of unemployment, rising inequality and poverty. The second half of the article identifies three broad sections to the contemporary left in South Africa (the Tripartite Alliance, the left outside of the Alliance and the remnants of the revolutionary socialist left). It argues that the left within the Alliance, despite the launch of the New Growth Path, are failing to implement the sufficiently radical policy changes that are required to address the development challenges identified in the first half of the article. The left outside of the Alliance, meanwhile, despite recent attempts at co-ordination, lacks influence and remains disconnected from the masses.

Keywords: South Africa, post-apartheid, development, the left, ANC

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Introduction

In the immediate post-apartheid period Connell (1995) published an essay that suggested there were good reasons to be either optimistic or pessimistic about the future for ‘the left’ in South Africa. His optimistic predictions were based on the influence of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on the African National Congress (ANC)-led government, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as a policy programme of the left, and the strong commitment of South African citizens to democracy (Connell 1995: 19). With hindsight the factors he outlined predicting a ‘downward spiral’ have proved to be more enduring than those suggesting a more positive outlook. In particular, Connell noted the shift to the right of the ANC, the limits to the influence of the SACP due to its membership of the Tripartite Alliance, and the disappearance of the popular movement that had been so significant in the fight against apartheid (1995: 19).

It now seems apposite to revisit the question of ‘the left’ in post-apartheid South Africa for two main reasons. First, given the current socio-economic circumstances and the persistence of the historical legacies of the apartheid era (and before), there is, I argue, an ‘objective’ need for a revival, or renewal, of progressive forces within South Africa. I suggest in the first part of this article, that what is urgently needed is a shift away from the broadly neoliberal trajectory that the ANC government has pursued during the post-apartheid era; in particular since the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy in 1996. Second, the election of Jacob Zuma as ANC President at Polokwane in December 2007, and then subsequently as South Africa’s President, together with the split of some of the right-wing within the ANC to form a new political party, the Congress of the People (COPE), led a

number of observers to suggest that a leftward shift in the ANC and South African government was on the cards (see Johnson 2009; Plaut 2009). In arriving at such conclusions these analysts highlighted the support that Zuma received from COSATU and the SACP in his successful bid to oust Thabo Mbeki from office at the ANC's National Conference held in Polokwane, from 16-20 December 2007.

I focus on the question of 'what's left' in two different but complementary senses. First, the article seeks to ascertain the health of leftist politics within South Africa, now that we have reached the end of the second decade since the political transition from apartheid to democracy. Second, it interrogates how leftist many of the self-identified progressive social forces within South Africa actually are. This of course prompts the questions – what is 'the left' and on what criteria can we base an assessment of the various organisations? On the former question I have adopted the rather inclusive definition that understands 'the left' as those who pursue social change informed by the broad notion of egalitarianism in the face of various inequalities within society. Here I would agree with the view of one of the interviewees for this research, who suggests, that a minimum standard for anyone to claim to be from 'the left' 'is a genuine commitment to social equality and a defence of democratic rights' (Wesso, 25 October 2011). In terms of which actors in South Africa warrant analysis, here I have let the field of study be largely self-defined. This is because whether or not analysts agree as to the 'leftist' credentials of an individual or organisation, it is significant in itself if they proclaim such a position and self-identify as part of 'the left'. Within the South African context the most obvious example in this regard is the ANC, which President Zuma at a speech marking the centenary of the organisation was keen to reiterate is 'a disciplined force of the left with a bias towards the poor' (BBC 2012). By focusing on those who self-identify as 'the left' and mapping their intra-ideological debates, the boundaries of who is

relevant are largely drawn by the actors themselves. In terms of making an assessment of their leftist credentials I then make normative judgements based on the available evidence and in particular I seek to disentangle rhetoric from practice.

The central argument of the article is that an effective left formation in the country is not present. The reasons for this can be traced back to the dissolution of the popular structures of the anti-apartheid movement, especially the United Democratic Front (UDF), and their subsumption into the organisations of the Tripartite Alliance, and the ANC in particular. The second half of the article categorises the fractured nature of the numerous groupings within post-apartheid South Africa that self-identify as 'left'. It is suggested that the ANC and its Alliance partners are largely failing to introduce the radical policy changes necessary to address the desperate plight of the majority of South Africa's population. This is a consequence of the longstanding commitment of the Alliance to the 'two-stage' theory of the National Democratic Revolution, and the compromises that were made with capital during the negotiated transition to democracy. The article does identify some evidence of attempts to forge a renewal of cooperation between the many disparate leftist forces outside of the Alliance. However, at present the challenge remains of how to connect these to the masses, which are instead engaged in localised protest and struggle that lacks co-ordination, direction and leadership. Of the Alliance partners, it is argued that COSATU could potentially help in building that crucial link with the mass base. However, COSATU's membership of the Alliance has meant that its links with the wider community have been 'limited as it pays its allegiance first to the ANC' (Masiya 2014: 455). Recent splits within COSATU and in particular the actions of the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) do suggest that things may be starting to change in this regard.

The research for this article included nine semi-structured interviews with eleven individuals that represent a range of institutions that self-identify as ‘left’. The interviews were conducted in Cape Town in October 2011. This constitutes one of the key contributions that this article makes to the existing literature. Often scholarship on ‘the left’ in South Africa is either focused on specific actors (Friedman 2012a) or tends to focus on Johannesburg and the surrounding region (Bond 2012). Without conducting research on the ground there is a danger of over-emphasising the significance of certain organisations. For example, one of the key activists of the Democratic Left Front (DLF) acknowledges that it needs to ‘invest in cadre-formation...we have done very well in a very short space of time, but it is still very early’ (Andrews, 31 October 2011). The limited and partial nature of these qualitative interviews is acknowledged and as a result they have been triangulated with speeches, primary documents and the secondary literature. The locational bias given the interviews were exclusively focused in Cape Town is also acknowledged and as one of my respondents noted, the situation might look slightly different, especially with regard to the extent of leftist activity outside of the Alliance, if one looked at Johannesburg (Trout, 28 October 2011).

The rest of the article proceeds in the following fashion. The first half outlines what I see as the key realities of the political economy of South Africa, focusing in particular on rising levels of inequality and the persistence of poverty and underemployment. It is suggested that these realities pose major challenges to broad-based development in South Africa and I emphasise that the situation is a direct consequence of the macroeconomic strategy pursued since the end of apartheid. The second half of the article then assesses the significance and influence of self-identified leftist forces within South Africa and the extent to which they can be considered ‘left’ in relation to the definition outlined earlier. The left is understood as

being broadly composed of three layers: the left within the Tripartite Alliance, the left outside the Alliance, and the remnants of a revolutionary socialist left.

The Realities of Post-Apartheid South Africa

What is noticeable across these different elements within the left in South Africa is that they do appear to broadly agree on what the key development challenges are. This was evident from the research interviews conducted. Three main themes emerged from the interviews when respondents were asked what they saw as the main concerns in this regard: unemployment, rising inequality and poverty. At a rhetorical level, at least, these are also the major issues that are acknowledged by the government. In his July 2014 state of the nation address, after the national elections, President Zuma maintained that ‘the triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment continue to affect the lives of many people’ (2014).

However, despite this level of agreement on what the problems are, there is much less of a consensus on what the main obstacles are to overcoming these challenges. While members of the SACP, who hold key positions in the government, argue that a shift in the growth path engendered by changes in government policy will address these concerns, others in the left outside of the Alliance, see the continued hegemony of the ANC as the main concern (Wesso, 25 October 2011). Then there are those in the revolutionary socialist left who question the entire ‘notion that capitalism somehow or other can develop South Africa and that everybody can be a winner’ (Blake, 27 October 2011).

While there have been many achievements under ANC rule, the development challenges that the country faces demonstrate significant continuities from the apartheid era. South Africa

continues to reflect the polarised society that apartheid policy sought to embed. However, as Marais highlights ‘attributing these outrages solely to the apartheid system hides the political-economic contours of inequity that still define South African society’ (2011: 7).

Absolute poverty, measured by the familiar income-based indicators, has declined to a limited extent during the post-apartheid era, mainly as a result of the introduction of social grants by the government. Analysts have concluded that without the introduction of such basic state support the incidence of poverty would have worsened during the post-apartheid era (Liebbrandt et al. 2010: 46). The trend of urbanisation has also had an impact on such absolute measures of poverty. Hence, ‘...what ordinary observers view as a manifestation of dreadful policy failure - peri-urban shack settlement stretching for miles with dreadful living conditions - is in reality an improvement over life in the depressed, hopeless rural periphery’ (Desai, Maharaj, and Bond 2011: 3). Nevertheless, a recent report highlights that 53.8% of the population are still below the national poverty line and over two-thirds of these people are living in extreme poverty (Statistics South Africa 2015a: 14). It should also be noted that such absolute measures fail to capture the subjective and less quantifiable aspects of poverty. As Marais (2011: 206) argues, poverty ‘...has important non-material dimensions (such as pride, self-respect, dignity, independence and physical security) that resist measurement and enumeration’.

South Africa’s official unemployment rate initially increased during the post-apartheid era from 16.9% in 1995 (the first full-year of the ANC-led government) to a peak of 31.2% in 2003 (International Labour Organization 2013). Although the overall rate has since fallen somewhat, recent data for 2014 highlights how there is significant and persistent variation in the unemployment rate amongst racial groups as shown below.

Table 1: Quarterly Official Unemployment Rate by Population Group for 2014

Population Group	Unemployment Rate (%)			
	Jan - Mar 2014	Apr - Jun 2014	Jul - Sep 2014	Oct - Dec 2014
Black Africans	28.5	28.3	28.6	27.2
Coloured	23.5	25.3	24.1	22.9
Indian/Asian	12.4	12.1	11.5	11.9
White	6.6	8.1	7.3	7.7

Source: Statistics South Africa (2015b: 4-5).

It should also be noted that the official unemployment rate only includes those members of the labour force who continue to actively seek work. It does not include what are labelled as ‘discouraged workers’ and others who are ‘not economically active’. Another more meaningful measure of the true extent of the crisis of unemployment is the absorption rate, which measures the ratio of the working age population (ages 15-64) who are employed (either in the formal or informal sectors), which for the final quarter of 2014 was only 49.4% (Statistics South Africa 2015b: 4).

Meanwhile, the distribution of income in post-apartheid South Africa remains stubbornly skewed in favour of the richest fractions of the population. This is reflected in the Gini Coefficient, which measures the extent of income inequality within a society. (Leibbrandt et al. 2010: 32) have estimated that this was 0.66 in 1993, 0.68 in 2000, rising to 0.70 in 2008. Similarly if we look at the distribution of income by population deciles then again there has been an increasing concentration amongst the top ten per cent of the population at the

expense of the rest. In fact as Table 2 shows, for 2008 the top twenty per cent of the population command almost three-quarters of the national income.¹

Table 2: Share of Income in South Africa by Decile of Population

Population Decile	1993	2000	2008
1st	0.27%	0.44%	0.40%
2nd	1.03%	1.07%	1.01%
3rd	1.66%	1.56%	1.52%
4th	2.21%	2.15%	2.08%
5th	3.15%	2.95%	2.78%
6th	4.33%	3.96%	3.65%
7th	6.16%	5.61%	5.35%
8th	9.61%	8.76%	8.56%
9th	17.69%	16.79%	16.57%
10th	53.89%	56.71%	58.07%

Source: Leibbrandt et al. (2010: 78).

Overall, the structure of the economy also demonstrates significant continuities from the apartheid era. This can be traced back to the negotiated nature of the transition to democracy. It continues to be dominated by big monopoly capital (Anglo American, Anglovaal, Old Mutual, Sanlam, Liberty Life, etc.) many of whom have now taken the opportunity provided by the liberalisation of capital controls to list on the London Stock Exchange. The economy remains wedded to a trajectory based on finance, mining and retail and what we have witnessed since 1994 is deindustrialisation. As Table 3 demonstrates the contribution of manufacturing to the overall GDP has declined significantly since 1995.

Table 3: Annual Value Added by Industry as a percentage of South Africa's GDP

Sector of Economy	1995	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010	2013
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	3.5	3.4	3.2	2.8	2.7	2.3	2.1
Mining and quarrying	6.3	6.2	7.6	6.4	7.8	8.5	8.3
Manufacturing	19.4	17.6	17.3	17.2	15.1	12.9	10.3
Electricity, gas and water	3.2	2.8	2.3	2.1	2.1	2.4	2.7
Construction	2.9	2.7	2.2	2.3	2.8	3.4	3.4
Wholesale and retail trade; hotels and restaurants	13.1	12.2	12.8	12.5	11.8	13.5	14.8
Transport, storage and communication	8.1	8.6	8.8	8.8	8.2	8.3	7.9
Finance, real estate and business services	15.0	16.5	17.4	18.5	20.1	19.0	19.3
General government services	14.7	15.7	14.0	13.5	12.9	14.7	15.3
Personal services	5.0	5.3	5.5	5.7	5.4	5.6	5.3
Taxes less subsidies on products	8.8	9.1	9.0	10.2	11.1	9.4	10.5
Total	100.0	100.1	100.1	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.9

Source: Data for 1995, 1998 and 2001 adapted from Statistics South Africa (2009: 28) and data for 2004 onwards adapted from Statistics South Africa (2014: 12). NB Percentages do not always total 100 due to rounding.

In recent years this trend appears to have accelerated despite the introduction of an active industrial strategy discussed in the next section. Moreover, within the manufacturing sector itself, we have seen much slower growth in labour-intensive sectors than capital-intensive sectors. In part, as Gelb (2010: 52) suggests, this can be explained by trade liberalisation in the immediate post-apartheid era, which saw import penetration in labour-intensive sectors

rise from 55.5% in 1993 to 67.5% in 1997. In addition to this, during the post-apartheid era, there has been a significant switch towards capital-intensive production processes within the South African economy as a whole (OECD 2010: 218).

The Post-Apartheid Development Strategy

The situation described above, has developed during a period where the government has, since its adoption of the GEAR strategy in 1996, adopted a broadly neoliberal development strategy (Marais 2011: 139). In fact, as Saul (2001: 20) makes clear, certain measures were agreed during the negotiated transition that precluded alternative policies being adopted by the ANC after the election in 1994. It is important to acknowledge that the particular content and form of neoliberalism in South Africa has taken on a local dimension. There has been, as noted in the previous section, a rise in the provision of social grants. However, although the number of recipients has risen dramatically, given that their real value is limited, it has been suggested by Bond that this is ultimately ‘tokenistic welfarism’ (Saul and Bond 2014: 176). Moreover, these grants (mainly focused on the elderly and child support) are means-tested and the current government has made it clear they are unsustainable and that South Africa cannot become a ‘welfare state’ (Business Report 2011b). In essence, they should be understood as a necessary part of the government’s attempt to ensure social stability in the context of significant inequality. The government also introduced its Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) strategy designed to try and reverse the racially skewed distribution of income inherited from the apartheid regime. The main outcome of BEE, however, has been the growth of a black business elite described by one commentator as ‘the new Randlords’ (Russell 2010). They are mostly ANC politicians (both active and retired) who, as a result of

the benefits they enjoy from the current system, become ever more resistant to radical economic policy changes (Marais 2011: 144).

The ANC had adopted the RDP as the equivalent of its manifesto for the 1994 election. Its philosophy was neo-Keynesian in that it sought to seek a balance between growth and development, on the one hand, and redistribution on the other. In the RDP document itself it is stated that, ‘the key area where special measures to create jobs can link to building the economy and meeting basic needs is in redressing apartheid-created infrastructural disparities’ (African National Congress 1994: 13). After the election this RDP Base Document was committed to a process of consultation amongst stakeholders. Unsurprisingly, not all sections of South African society were in favour of the development strategy outlined within it. This led to the RDP White Paper, which in particular incorporated criticisms over the costing of the programme, which came most notably from the business community. As a result it spoke of the need for fiscal discipline, private sector expansion and a greater external orientation in trade and industrial policies (Government of the Republic of South Africa 1994).

These ideas then came to prominence in the GEAR strategy that was published in June 1996 (Department of Finance 1996). This policy was formulated by a small number of government-appointed economists and was the result of exclusive discussions within the upper echelons of the ANC. GEAR was little removed from the type of neoliberal proposals found in numerous Washington Consensus-style loan agreements that had been implemented by the IMF and World Bank throughout much of the developing world. It was concerned with the state providing an enabling environment, with the ambitious targets for jobs and growth to be almost wholly dependent on the performance of the private sector. In particular GEAR

was concerned with opening up South Africa to the global economy and there was a strong emphasis on foreign investment becoming the main driver of economic development. As a result, we have seen the liberalisation of capital controls which allowed major South African corporations to list overseas (in London and elsewhere). The premise being that they ‘would be able to recapitalise and invest afresh in the South African economy (as ‘foreign’ investors)’ (Marais 2011: 124). In its external trade relations, due to its membership of the WTO, South Africa agreed to a range of tariff reductions. To demonstrate its commitment to the neoliberal model, in some parts of its trade portfolio it moved faster than required in this regard. For example, the government decided that for clothing, only a seven-year, rather than the suggested ten-year, period of adjustment should be imposed (Kaplan 2004: 633).

In February 2006 the government launched the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative – South Africa (AsgiSA). The main aim was to halve poverty and unemployment by 2014 (The Presidency 2006: 2). The basic method for achieving these aims remained the GEAR and its emphasis on attracting foreign investors. What AsgiSA highlighted was some of the constraints that had hindered progress in achieving the necessary levels of economic growth. It focused on economic infrastructure (road, railways, electricity, water, etc.) and social infrastructure (schools, housing, health provision, etc.) and the lack of skills by targeting both schooling and training programmes.

Then in November 2010 the government published a new strategy: the ‘New Growth Path’ (NGP) (Economic Development Department 2010). This was reflective of the new context of Zuma’s rise to power on the back of significant support from the Alliance left. The NGP is certainly a leftward shift in relation to previous macroeconomic approaches developed during the post-apartheid era (Tregenna 2011: 634). It puts employment at the heart of the policy,

rather than simply economic growth, demonstrated by its target of creating five million new jobs by 2020 (Economic Development Department 2010: 8). It also sees a more active role for the state (industrial policy, a more interventionist competition policy, improved education and skills, and a rolling programme of investment in infrastructure) and proposes wage moderation, including the capping of higher salaries. Nevertheless, it still sees the private sector as being the main driver of employment creation and outlines how government should continue to maintain a tight fiscal policy, which may ultimately undermine the ability of a more active state to alter the growth path of the economy. Moreover, it steps back from a more radical agenda such as a more progressive structure of taxation and controls on capital flows, to reduce the power of transnational capital to continue to determine the policy agenda. Capital flight is an issue completely ignored in the NGP and it has been suggested that this is ‘a symbol of the power of finance that needs to be overcome if any new type of growth path is to come onto the agenda’ (Fine 2012b: 565).

The NGP, as discussed below, is viewed in contrasting ways by different sections of the South African left. Unsurprisingly, those in government see the NGP and the associated Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP) as ‘seeking some quite bold and fairly ambitious changes’ (Davies, 24 October 2011). Similarly, Habib argues that, taken together these policies represent ‘the strongest indication of the government’s shift to the left’ (2013: 98). In contrast, others emphasise the continuities between the NGP and the development strategy that has been followed since GEAR. One interviewee suggested that, despite the rhetoric contained in the preamble, when we look at the detail ‘the prescription comes out the same...what we need in terms of economic policy is emphasis on education, skills development...government must play an overarching role...to lure private capital to play the developmental role’ (Gentle, 31 October 2011).

More recently the National Planning Commission, established in May 2009, published its National Development Plan (NDP) (2012). COSATU's leadership has expressed concern at the role given to former Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel, in leading the formulation of the NDP, which they feel is undermining the influence of Ebrahim Patel, a long-time trade union leader and now Minister of Economic Development (Plaut and Holden 2012: 66). The NDP represents a shift away from the focus on industrialisation in the NGP and places far less emphasis on state interventionism. The historical structure of the economy is being preserved even when it comes to the infrastructure subsidies outlined in the NDP. The focus is on two mega-projects which benefit the existing minerals energy complex (Bond 2014a). Moreover, as Fine (2012a) notes, the NDP envisages the continued reliance on the liberalisation of the financial sector as the basis for South Africa's future development. Since its publication, the NDP has become central to the ANC's message on the economy and was referred to eight times by former Finance Minister, Pravin Gordhan, during his final budget speech on 26 February 2014.

The rest of the article now turns to an assessment of the left within contemporary South Africa. It identifies three broad categories: the left within the Tripartite Alliance, the left outside the Alliance and the remnants of a revolutionary socialist left. This is not to imply that each section of the left (or even the organisations themselves) is internally coherent or that each category is mutually exclusive. In the analysis that follows each group's significance is assessed before I turn to examine the extent to which elements within each category can be considered genuinely committed to the normative conceptualisation of 'the left' outlined in the introduction.

The Left within the Tripartite Alliance

Historically, it was certainly the case that during the liberation struggle against the apartheid regime, the most significant leftist formations within South Africa were to be found within the ANC, organised labour and to a lesser extent, the SACP. As McKinley (2009) argues, despite the passage of time, this assessment continues to represent the orthodox view of what constitutes ‘the left’ in South Africa today.

The ANC, despite the social realities outlined in the first half of this article, continues to dominate South African elections. In the 2014 general election they received 62.1% of the votes cast, which translated into 249 of the 400 seats within the National Assembly. It is clear that part of the explanation for this enduring electoral dominance is the legacy of the ANC’s role in the liberation struggle, which was a central message of their most recent election campaign. Meanwhile, membership levels have increased significantly in recent years. An audit concluded that by June 2012 they had reached 1,220,057, almost double the level in 2007, the year that Zuma was elected ANC President at Polokwane (Tolsi 2012).

The ANC remains the most senior Alliance partner although things are complicated somewhat by the overlapping memberships of individuals. In particular, almost all of the cadres within the SACP are also members of the ANC. Nevertheless, the extent to which there is now a leftist grouping within the party is questionable. Historically the ANC began life as a fairly conservative organisation. It has always operated as a broad-church and was only united by the struggle against racial division and apartheid. The achievement of democracy, aptly described as an ‘elite transition’ by Bond (2000), led to a series of compromises that saw South Africa move fairly smoothly from apartheid to neoliberalism.

As negotiations began in earnest in the early 1990s the ANC began to align itself with ‘Third Way’ thinking and as Rethmann observes (2009: 367), it used the same advisors as New Labour did in the UK. During the last two decades there have been significant power shifts within the ANC itself. Much of the leadership has now become part of the business establishment, thanks in part to the introduction of BEE.

The SACP does appear, on the surface at least, to be becoming more significant in recent years. When the party was unbanned in 1990, its total membership stood at just 2,000 (Connell 1995: 19). However, this had risen to 150,000 in 2013 with a trebling of size during the five preceding years (Paton 2013). In July 2015 it was claimed that this trend had continued with membership now standing at 230,000 (Marais 2015). Moreover, with the removal of Mbeki as President, they have more members in influential positions within the government. As Gumede noted in the wake of Polokwane, ‘not since the 1960s...has the SACP left so dominated the top leadership structures of the ANC’ (2008: 267). However, we have to question both the ‘leftist’ credentials of the SACP and the actual extent of its influence in government. While SACP members now hold some key posts – notably Minister of Trade and Industry and the recently created post of Minister of Economic Development – the leadership of the SACP, according to one critic from the revolutionary left, ‘hasn’t embarked on any programme since 1994 to challenge the domination of private capital within South Africa’ (Fataar, 30 October 2011). In a similar vein McKinley (2009) argues that ‘in real, objective terms...the SACP and COSATU are part and parcel of an ANC which makes and implements the capitalist policies that they then turn around and attack and disown’. Moreover, this is not the first time that SACP members have had influential positions within the government. After the first multi-racial election in 1994 five out of eighteen posts within the cabinet went to members of the SACP (Adams 1997: 240).

While membership of the SACP might be rising and this may indicate a growing appetite for its leftist credentials, we should also ask to what extent is this because their status in the Tripartite Alliance means that being a card-carrying member of the SACP can be seen as part of establishing a successful career trajectory. Given the continued significance of the Alliance it is one obvious route to gaining formal political power. The SACP's membership of a government, that has adopted the NDP as its development strategy, highlights how compromised its position has become. In essence, the SACP has become a faction within the ANC, rather than anything remotely resembling a mass party fighting for the interests of the working class.

In contrast to the ANC and SACP, COSATU has represented a more leftist stance in comparison with its Alliance partners. For example, COSATU's Central Executive Committee adopted a resolution in June 2013 that listed a number of criticisms of the NDP, which included the view that it 'fails to pursue the IPAP and NGP vision of reindustrialising the economy, policies which themselves are being undermined by an inappropriate macroeconomic policy framework' (COSATU 2013).

There are weaknesses, however, with its current position within the wider left. As one interviewee suggested, COSATU has remained constrained by its membership of the Alliance but it has also 'distanced itself from ongoing struggles that are happening in working class communities' (Gentle, 31 October 2011). During the post-apartheid era, COSATU members have enjoyed a relatively privileged position in South African society. During this period the COSATU Workers' Survey has been able to trace how their social characteristics have changed as public sector unionisation has increased, resulting in a relative decline in the

proportion of members classified as unskilled or semi-skilled (Bischoff and Tshoaedi 2013: 51). This may help to explain ‘their optimism and support for democracy, the government and institutions such as the tripartite alliance’ (Buhlungu 2008: 40). Hence, COSATU has evolved from an organisation that pursued wider social transformation (social movement unionism) to one that increasingly prioritises collective bargaining within the parameters prescribed by post-apartheid labour legislation (political unionism) (Gentle 2014; Masiya 2014; Mosoetsa and Tshoaedi 2013; Pillay 2013). This problematizes the debate on COSATU and the calls for it to break free from the Alliance and become independent.

While COSATU leaving the Alliance might help to develop a significant and influential leftist movement, it does not represent precarious workers and the underemployed in South Africa (Saul 2013: 218). It has failed to make any progress in recruiting beyond its core base of workers in the formal economy. As a result COSATU could become ‘increasingly isolated from the rest of the working class, particularly from the new movements formed to mobilize against the effects of economic liberalization on the working poor and the unemployed’ (Buhlungu 2008: 37). In fact, in parts of the mining sector, the perceived weakness of the COSATU-affiliated National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has led to a surge in recruitment by breakaway mining union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). So the question of whether COSATU remains in the Alliance or not, is not a panacea for the left given the significant changes in the profile of its membership over recent years. Instead the key issue is how COSATU ‘relates to what has become the majority of the working class, which is the casualised, informalised and so on, of which they have no relationship at all’ (Gentle, 31 October 2011).

Those in the Alliance left often distinguish between the performance of the government during the Mbeki and Zuma eras respectively. In doing so, they demonstrate an awareness of the observations made in the first half of this article, with regard to the direction of the development strategy that the government has adopted during the post-apartheid era. For example, one leading SACP representative suggested that in addition to the legacies of apartheid, South Africa is suffering from ‘some reverse gears that we took in the last ten years by the previous ANC administration, in its adoption of most conservative policies, the so-called GEAR’ (Magaxa, 28 October 2011). Similarly, Masiya suggests that at the time of Polokwane, ‘COSATU argued that Zuma would facilitate a fundamental shift in...the economy to help improve workers’ conditions’ (2014: 453). The debate here is whether the contrast they seek to make between the two administrations outweighs aspects of constancy. For example, in his medium-term budget speech in October 2011, then Finance Minister, Pravin Gordhan announced a further relaxation of capital controls with a limit of acquiring no more than a 20% stake in a foreign entity (Business Report 2011a). Moreover, the government has allowed the increasing casualization of work and has resisted long-running demands by COSATU for the outright banning of labour brokers (Di Paola and Pons-Vignon 2013). COSATU has also consistently opposed the government’s introduction of its Employment Tax Incentive (formerly known as Youth Wage Subsidy) which they argue just subsidises employers without creating new jobs (COSATU 2015). When we look at practice, rather than rhetoric, it appears that there are continuities in policymaking, which the self-identified left within the Alliance seem unwilling to acknowledge.

As a result, there has been a growing sense of factionalism within COSATU, due to the failures of the ANC government to deliver significant material benefits to the majority of the population. This was temporarily put on hold with the election of Zuma at Polokwane but

these tensions are now increasingly visible again. In particular, NUMSA, which at the time of writing is South Africa's largest trade union, has been at the forefront of those within the Alliance questioning the leftist credentials of the ANC government.² NUMSA has long acted as a leftist critic within COSATU. This approach can be traced back to its former incarnation (the Metalworkers and Allied Workers Union), which was a member of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) that sought to retain its independence by refusing to align with the ANC during the liberation struggle (Gentle 2014).

In a special national congress in December 2013, NUMSA decided to withdraw electoral support for the ANC and called on COSATU to leave the Alliance. They then organised a week-long political school to discuss the way forward, which included an invitation to 147 social movements to discuss common interests (Plaut 2014). These developments culminated in the announcement on 2 March 2014 of plans for the formation of a broader leftist movement known as the 'United Front and Movement for Socialism' (United Front) (NUMSA 2014). Then, in November 2014, COSATU's National Executive Committee announced that NUMSA had been expelled and it appears increasingly unlikely that NUMSA will seek a return to the federation. Significantly, another eight of the twenty-one COSATU affiliates are broadly supportive of NUMSA's position, although the Communication Workers Union is reported to be moving back towards COSATU (Nicolson 2015). It seems clear that these developments signal an end to attempts by NUMSA to steer the Alliance towards a more leftist trajectory from within (Ashman and Pons-Vignon 2015: 95). NUMSA is now considering forming alliances with other trade unions outside the Alliance, such as AMCU, which is a member of the National Council of Trade Unions (Letsoalo 2015).

The ultimate aim is to create an independent workers' party in time to contest local elections in 2016 and the next national poll in 2019. This has long been an ambition of NUMSA. As Ruiters reminds us they proposed ending the Alliance and forming a workers' party as long ago as 1993 (2014: 430). Research by Bezuidenhout, however, suggests that support amongst COSATU members for such a project remains low, with only 8% in favour of the idea of a workers' party before the election in 2014 (cited in Pillay 2014). Another note of caution is that NUMSA demonstrates only limited appreciation of the need to broaden its focus by tending to refer exclusively to organised workers. Nevertheless, Gentle (2014) is correct in his suggestion that these developments are of significance, because they state '...unequivocally that the future of South Africa lies in a movement to the left of the ANC'.

The Left outside the Alliance

An exclusive focus on the Alliance ignores a variety of different organisations that can make a convincing case for being considered part of 'the left'. To understand the historical trajectory of this broader left that exists outside of the Alliance, we need to go back to the elite nature of the negotiated transition to democracy. During the 1980s, domestic resistance organised by the United Democratic Front was embraced by the exiled ANC. After the transition to democracy, however, civil society organisations became significantly weakened and marginalised from decision-making. My analysis here rejects the liberal notion of civil society representing an entity distinct from the state. As Marais highlights, '...many popular organisations [have] experienced financial and political pressure to partner with the private sector and/or the state and focus their work on 'delivery'' (2011: 448). Such an approach sits comfortably with a neoliberal strategy, which seeks to depoliticise the process of development in favour of a focus on the effective delivery of services.

The compromised position, resulting from its close links with the ANC, of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) has been symptomatic of this trajectory. We have seen a number of civil society organisations become both co-opted and marginalised. Hence, it has been argued that ‘SANCO was no more revolutionary than was the ANC itself. Nor was it particularly confrontational in championing anyone’s cause, least of all the ‘historically marginalised’ (Seekings 2011: 145). This meant that for the ANC’s first term of office, at least, the remnants of this key part of the anti-apartheid movement lay dormant, with the majority of the population putting their faith in the ANC to deliver (Gentle 2014).

However, as the full impacts of the GEAR programme took hold during the late 1990s (in particular job losses and the commodification of basic services) we saw the rise of what were labelled ‘new social movements’. This marked a clear rupture in the South African left as a whole. Their significance lies in the fact that they operate independently of the structures of the ANC. They include the Treatment Action Campaign, Anti-Privatisation Forum (now defunct), Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, Landless People’s Movement, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and Abahlali baseMjondolo (the South African shackdwellers’ movement). They represent a rather disparate group of social movements although Marais (2011: 451) suggests that despite their heterogeneity they tend to share three key features:

1. they target alleged failures of the state;
2. they tend to rely on middle-class activists who have a pedigree based in the anti-apartheid struggle;
3. most have sought to organise and mobilise the poor and the marginalised.

Nevertheless, they do have quite different aims and agendas. Some, such as the Treatment Action Campaign, have made specific rights-based claims within the existing economic

framework (i.e. their hugely effective campaign in demanding the roll-out of ARVs in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic) while others seek to challenge the existing economic order more directly.

Since the turn of the century, we have also seen the rapid growth of what have been labelled as ‘service delivery protests’ (see Zuern 2014). Alexander (2012) suggests that South Africa is rather unique in the extent of such ongoing unrest in urban areas. In fact, these protests, although localised, tend to be about more than just the delivery of services and include very real concerns about unemployment and the accountability of local politicians. What they signify is that there is a level of resistance, however spontaneous and uncoordinated, to the neoliberal policies of the government. This led one interviewee to assert that South Africa ‘is not a country which has a crushed working class’ (Gentle, 31 October 2011). However, detailed research into specific protests highlights that beyond a demonstration effect engendered by media coverage, there are no organic links between them and scant evidence of ‘sharing experiences, let alone coordinating action’ (Alexander 2010: 36). Another study draws very similar conclusions noting that ‘one of the striking elements of South-African protest is its failure to ‘scale up’, or join together either geographically or politically’ (Bond, Desai, and Ngwane 2013: 238).

For the left outside of the Alliance, therefore, it is difficult to make strategic use of such visible disenchantment with the current order. Although the level of protests has intensified since the election of Zuma, the politics behind them are complicated. Alexander highlights (2010: 34) that he ‘found no evidence that Zuma, or the ANC in general, were held responsible for people’s problems, and some of his interviewees argued that the timing of the protests was linked to having a government that, at long last, would listen to people and

address their complaints'. Similarly, Sinwell (2011: 66) concludes, that despite the radical nature of the tactics employed in such protests, given the ANC's ideational hegemony, it is a mistake to assume that underlying them is a clear commitment to a new, leftist politics. It may be that the massacre of striking miners at Marikana in August 2012 proves to be a turning point both in how the ANC are viewed and in sharpening the emerging splits within COSATU (Alexander 2013). Such horrifically violent actions by the police force made it clear that the ANC government will ultimately protect the interests of capital by any means possible.

Nevertheless, for the left outside of the Alliance, the localised nature of such protests remains problematic in two senses. First, it restricts their ability to seek to connect them into anything more significant. Second, there is a disjuncture between localised struggles and the perceptions of the poor towards national government and the role of the ANC in particular. As Zuern (2014: 288) suggests, many of these protests are actually led by ANC members who employ the use of protests to pursue their own careers within the party.

In recent years there has been an attempt to unite many of the disparate elements of the non-Alliance left. In 2008 the Conference of the Democratic Left was created and this was re-launched in January 2011 as the Democratic Left Front (DLF). In the words of one of the architects it is hoped the DLF:

can contribute to consolidating, building an alternative politics beginning to build the linkages, build the bridges and helping us to bring together these popular struggles, these social movements with an intelligentsia, with a continuity in struggle, with an inter-generational dynamic and also with a tradition of left politics which comes from outside of the Communist Party (Andrews, 31 October 2011).

The DLF is currently still rather embryonic and is led largely by disillusioned former SACP-members. Its rather vague stance is that other parts of the South African left are stuck in old revolutionary paradigms and that what is needed is new ideas. The DLF is committed to a more democratic form of left politics and there is an awareness of the need to be sensitive to both gender inequalities and environmental challenges. In contrast, there are those within the revolutionary socialist left who suggest that the DLF is ‘largely about how we can make this participatory democracy work...within the capitalist frame’ (Blake, 27 October 2011).

The problem remains that both electorally and in ideational terms the ANC maintains a position of hegemony amongst a significant fraction of the South African population. Despite the renewed attempts at co-ordinating an alternative leftist programme outside of the Alliance, there remains a need to connect this to the masses. Meanwhile, COSATU does have a membership base that would allow organic links to be formed with the rank and file. As one interviewee put it, ‘if you don’t engage with the COSATU rank and file, you’re really engaging in futile sectarian struggles, that is what the DLF needs to do’ (Fataar, 30 October 2011). Activists in the DLF do seem to be aware of this dilemma and it has been noted how they have been visible in various activities to highlight their solidarity with the workers at Marikana (Saul and Bond 2014: 264). A DLF statement in support of NUMSA’s Special National Congress held in December 2013 is also indicative of this approach (Democratic Left Front 2013). Reflecting on recent developments, Ruiters (2014) boldly suggests that South Africa has entered a ‘post-alliance’ landscape which offers new potential for creative engagements between organised labour and social movements. Ultimately it remains to be seen whether the impetus given to the United Front by NUMSA, will allow it to more effectively realise the kind of linkages envisaged by the DLF.

The Remnants of a Revolutionary Socialist Left

Within the South African left there remain a number of small groups that still follow a revolutionary socialist agenda, which has a history in the country dating back to the 1930s (see Hirson 2005: 88-105; Drew 2000: 137-165). They are notoriously prone to splits and internal disagreements. Groups such as the Workers and Socialist Party (that contested the 2014 elections securing only 0.05% of the vote), the Revolutionary Marxist Group and the Workers International Vanguard League remain active, although significantly marginalised within the broader left.

The peripheral position of this fraction of the South African left can, in part, be linked to events prior to the introduction of multi-racial elections in 1994. In the period leading up to the end of apartheid the ANC suspended and then expelled a faction within the party known as the Marxist Worker Tendency (see Friedman 2012b). Here the role of the SACP was significant during the 1970s and 1980s in forming ‘what became eventually the dominant view in the mass structures...so you have the beginnings of a squeezing out of the revolutionary left already’ (Blake, 27 October 2011). As a result, when it came to the transition to democracy, the voice of the revolutionary left was already marginalised. It was difficult to generate any meaningful opposition to the negotiations at the time, although this was the position advocated by the League for the Fifth International (1990) who argued that ‘the only guaranteed weapon against the sell-out being prepared by the ANC leadership is revolutionary mass action by the workers and the rural poor’.

The political position of these groups remains based on a complete rejection of reformism of any kind and a corresponding belief in the need for a Marxist revolution inspired by the ideas

of Trotsky. As a result, most of these groups eschew working with organisations that fall within the other two categories of the left identified in this article. There are some, such as Keep Left, who do acknowledge the need to address the practical realities that face the left in South Africa. Keep Left is affiliated to the DLF and in this regard, they have recognised that ‘the challenge for the left is to form organic links with the rank and file within the townships’ (Fataar, 30 October 2011).

The likelihood of the approach adopted by the revolutionary socialist left being remotely effective is small to the say the least. While a new left project in South Africa clearly needs to offer an alternative to the largely rhetorical stance adopted by the ANC and SACP, given the failures of vanguardism, it also needs to adopt a strategy that is likely to attract widespread support. Moreover, it is a fallacy to suggest, as the revolutionary left often do, that the options are simply revolution or social-democratic reformism. In this sense it would be wise to look to the Gramscian idea of ‘structural reform’, which in the context of South Africa, has been developed in the work of Saul. During the transition to democracy he suggested that such an approach offers the possibility of avoiding ‘the twin dangers of, on the one hand, a romantic (and inevitably all too rhetorical) ultra-revolutionary approach and, on the other, collapse into a mild reformism that will do little to alter the balance of inherited class power’ (Saul 1992: 2). Structural reform implies that the push for concrete improvements to the lives of the impoverished South African majority should always include plans for more significant changes in the future. As I have argued in this article and as Saul (2011, 94) reminds us, these reforms need to be grounded in popular struggles so that the working class and their allies develop an awareness of their agency and capacity for future reforms.

Conclusions

The dangers of the continued absence of an effective leftist mass movement are clear. These are most evident in the populist politics of Julius Malema, who skilfully uses leftist rhetoric in speaking to precisely those people in society, the young and underemployed, who remain marginalised and disconnected from other leftist formations in South Africa. What Malema does very well is express the failings of the ANC government in a language that resonates. His new political party, The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which he now leads as ‘Commander in Chief’ seeks to position ‘itself as the vanguard of black South Africans rather than the working class as a whole’ (Fogel 2014).

There is no doubting that the formation of the EFF and the fact they secured over one million votes in the 2014 election is an important consideration for the processes of the realignment of ‘the left’ in South Africa that are discussed in this article. The EFF have helped to encourage an increased level of protest and dissent, which is reflective of their performative approach to politics within the National Assembly. Bond describes how ‘exceptionally gripping protests against historic racial injustices emerged, which reflect EFF influence in South Africa’s politics of symbolic drama’ (2015: 23). However, as Nieftagodien (2014) usefully reminds us, the EFF is ultimately a product of the crisis in South Africa and the ANC’s failings in government. We should remember that Malema and many other key figures in the EFF, built their political careers within the structures of the ANC. In fact, they explicitly portray themselves as part of that long tradition, which they argue has been corrupted in recent years. For example, Floyd Shivambu (Deputy President of the EFF) suggests that ‘during Comrade Julius Malema’s leadership of the ANC Youth League, we understood that the struggle for economic freedom in our lifetime was not exclusively our

struggle...we drew inspiration from the founding generation of the ANC Youth League' (2014: 10). What this representation selectively ignores, argues Nieftagodien, is that 'the struggle for economic freedom was well underway when the ANCYL leaders awoke to the disastrous effects of South Africa's home-grown neoliberalism (2014: 25).

As a result, there is deep suspicion of the EFF amongst NUMSA's leaders because of both the EFF's limited links to a trade union base and the fact that Malema and others acted as 'crony capitalists' during their time at the helm of the ANC Youth League (Fogel 2014). Bond notes that 'Malema's own personal tenderpreneurship...reportedly led to a \$5 million looting of state coffers' (2014b: 17). The EFF's approach is based on vanguardism and this has resulted in its limited involvement in the broader realignment of leftist forces that is underway (Nieftagodien 2014). Shivambu is clear in his view that other factions of the left need to unite under the banner of the EFF and he confidently predicts that 'efforts to start a rival socialist or workers' party will dwindle into insignificance and will not benefit the working class and workers whom our ideological allies claim to represent' (Shivambu 2015: 16).

In conclusion, this article has highlighted how the left within post-apartheid South Africa remains factionalised to a large extent, despite attempts by first the DLF and now the United Front to unite various groups. The Alliance left remains officially committed to the idea of the National Democratic Revolution. This entails a continuation of a strategy that is concerned with capturing the soul of the ANC which, as the election of Zuma at Polokwane demonstrates, remains a deeply problematic enterprise. Here I would concur with McKinley who suggests that, 'the main task is not to force the ANC to review what it is that they have fully committed themselves towards, although the struggle for practical reforms that impact

positively on the daily lives of the majority must always form part of the tactical arsenal of a meaningful left' (2008: 86).

Instead efforts should be continued in the task of co-ordinating leftist formations outside of the Alliance. However this alone, without clear links to the mass base, will not lead to meaningful socio-economic progress for many South Africans. If COSATU were to formally break away from the Alliance then it might be able to help in this regard, but given its changing social composition, it could only partially fulfil such a role at best. A potential mass workers' party in South Africa would have to '...be able to move beyond the specific interests of the organised working class in order to raise concerns of the entire social class' (Whittaker 2014). NUMSA's call for the rest of COSATU to split from the Alliance seems unlikely to be heeded by the majority of the federation's trade unions. As Beresford demonstrates, the political views of workers cannot be assumed to simply correlate with their material interests and the ANC retains support, in part, because of the 'symbolic political capital which a liberation movement is endowed with upon assuming power' (2015: 23). Moreover, the most recent COSATU Workers' Survey suggests that for two-thirds of members the main reasons for joining a union were either job security or improvements to pay and conditions (2012: 18). It therefore remains difficult to be overly optimistic about the prospects for an effective leftist formation in South Africa, despite the recent attempts at co-ordination and the persistent socio-economic crisis outlined in the first half of this article.

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Endnotes

¹ More contemporary data at this level of detail is not available. However, data from Alvaredo, Facundo, Anthony B. Atkinson, Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, *The World Top Incomes Database*, <http://topincomes.g-mond.parisschoolofeconomics.eu/> accessed 12 February 2015, suggests that the income share for the top decile in South Africa in 2011 was 54.14%.

² According to the NUMSA website their membership in January 2014 stood at 339,567.

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