

HOUSE ORGAN

Amandla!

February 27, 2006. I am in the Sydenham Police Station with Richard and Shannon of the Center for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. We are seeking four young residents of the Kennedy Road Settlement who have been picked up by the Durban Police and beaten for the offence of assembling for a legal march; to be more exact, we are hoping that our presence may inhibit further brutality. The youths were preparing to assemble along with four or five thousand other shack dwellers to protest the snail's pace at which their subhuman conditions of life are being addressed by the government, but the police got there first, clogged the roads, harrassed the marchers and made arbitrary arrests. The conditions protested include, besides the shacks which are sufficient in themselves to drive protest, unemployment of 40 percent (South Africa has the highest unemployment rate of 61 countries tracked by Bloomberg News, 26.7 percent); AIDS rates of roughly 30 percent; a steady pulse of evictions and privatization of water and electricity despite virtually no sanitary facilities; phenomenal pollution (in the case of Kennedy Road this entails being adjacent to a foul-smelling and toxic waste dump, with no garbage pickup for the community itself); and a tide of crime that seeps from the settlements to the society beyond. The march was perfectly legal because South Africa has perhaps the world's most progressive Constitution, thanks to the heroic revolution that overturned apartheid. Yet, twelve years into the "New South Africa," police are once more bringing the dread "Kasspirs," those hideous armored personnel carriers that look like they belong to a demented video game, into the wretched settlements that continue to scar this green and pleasant land; and young blacks are still feeling their wrath.

It is my fifth trip to South Africa, and the present issue of *CNS* reflects one of its purposes, which is to develop an editorial group at CCS, and join hands with comrades from the Global South. This association did not materialize out of thin air. Patrick Bond, the director of the Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, is a long-time *CNS* contributor and a prominent member of the international circuit from which the journal emerges. South Africa has been an important place for me since the late apartheid era. I was fortunate to have been able to lecture in the country just as the blockade against the racist regime was giving way, in 1989, and I have returned on four occasions since, in part for family reasons, but also drawn by the sheer dynamism of the place.

The economic product of South Africa is about as large as the rest of the continent combined, and it plays a hegemonic role within Africa comparable to, and substantially integrated with, that of the United States from without. This turn of events was anticipated in some bitter discussions amongst comrades on the scene in 1989. It was evident that the long nightmare of apartheid terror was coming undone under the pressure of mass uprising, global embargo and Cuban arms, and that nothing could stop its unravelling. But there was also recognition that the impending revolution was going to be bourgeois-nationalist in character, and that there was no great hope that it would go onward in a socialist direction given the balance of forces, notwithstanding the powerful labor movement, the highly developed class-consciousness of the people, and the presence of the South African Communist Party. This latter was communist, however, in the pitiable manner of its

“stagist” partners around the world, that is, it saw privatization as the road to socialism. More importantly, it had long been obvious that the leadership of the dominant African National Congress saw things the same way, except for the socialist part, which despite some rhetorical flickers was never on the table so far as it was concerned. Nelson Mandela will be justly remembered as one of the great figures of our time. But his giant stature, still largely beyond criticism, has also served to block out the light of a future beyond the rule of capital.

I suppose Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, and the other leaders of the “New South Africa” reckoned that the violent heritage of apartheid had left the country vulnerable to a bloodbath if capital were to flee. But there was more to it than that. An unseemly embrace of the big bourgeoisie and a cold shoulder to the pauperized masses has marked the ANC since taking power. And it was not necessary. I sourly recall during a visit in 1997 watching the great leader greet with his radiant smile the IMF delegation come to View With Pride the fruits of their Structural Adjustment Program, and thinking: Never had a better opportunity for socialism been squandered. Here, at last, was a revolutionary surge, with that power from below which it takes first-hand exposure to Africa to appreciate, but carried out for once in the context of a high level of development. Not Cambodia here, not Nicaragua, not Cuba sucked dry by Uncle Sam, not bleeding Russia, not raped China—but a vital civil society with schooling in democracy and a yearning to move beyond a disgraceful past, a first-rate technical-industrial apparatus, splendid infrastructure, a geostrategic setting invulnerable to invasion and packed with natural wealth, and most important of all, a nation buoyed up by a mass base yearning to be free. It could have been truly wonderful . . . And they signed it over to the IMF.

As the New South Africa moves through its second decade, the consequences of this betrayal are unfolding. Kleptocratic degrees of corruption are sensationalized in the press. The deposed Deputy President goes on trial for rape. President Mbeki jets about the world spinning utopian jargon and muttering about dealing severely with those paupers who agitate to improve their conditions of life. Meanwhile, a soft fascism creeps into the precincts of the ANC. As organized resistance is violently suppressed, Mbeki is celebrated like a tinhorn dictator by the state-controlled TV, which urges the viewer-citizen to be “Proud to be South African,” while otherwise anaesthetizing her. Is South Africa heading in the direction of Mexico’s PRI, who took over a victorious revolution and strangled hope for 80 years with a one-party system? Or, as quite a few fear, is a more rapid downturn in the wings, sometimes called the “ZANU-fication” of South Africa after the path set forth by Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, who has dealt with the failure of his revolution with a turn toward racist authoritarianism? What is not speculation, however, is that, in lockstep with the great centers of global capital, the technicians of the ANC will keep the beat of privatization going, or as Patrick Bond develops the notion below, continue the “looting of Africa.”

By the standards of this world, neoliberal South Africa is thriving, with a large budget surplus, a strong currency, and splendid shopping centers. Retool the commodity logo’s and put the cars on the proper side of the street (please!), and there are spots here where a stranger can imagine he is in San Diego or Miami. But the more capital develops wealth, the more it develops poverty, which in Africa engages a history radically different from that of the plundering countries—a history inflected by Ashwin Desai in this issue for KwaZulu Natal, the state of which Durban is the metropolis.

The looting of Africa is the looting of its people. The profound alienation of poor Africans is not only revealed in terms of unemployment, AIDS, and all the indices of material misery, but also stems from the memory of a nightmarish past and the failed promises of the present. On the lee side of a great emancipatory event, the weight of 350 years of “Europe” presses down all the harder. But the sufferings inflicted upon these diverse peoples do not take from them the fundamentals of their humanity, only the means to realize it. It is the job of resistance to enable a new set of means.

Here the activist in Africa has an advantage over her counterpart in the metropolis, for the tentacles of capitalist rationalization reach less deeply, and the degree of emotion that can be mobilized is greater. Multiple legacies can be engaged—the still-fresh memory of a heroic struggle atop the memories of original society. I remember getting off the plane in 1989 and being directly taken to a rally and march protesting the vile apartheid police (who were given to tossing freshly beaten activists from the tenth floor of their headquarters). Never had I experienced such a sense of power coming from a political event. I recall thinking: these people are going to win, nothing ultimately can stop them. That power—in Zulu they call it “Amandla!”—still reverberates, linked to its response, “Uwite!”: *Power to the People!* It came forth here in a remarkable strike at the university, an institution obedient to the dictates of the Master (there is reason to believe that the World Bank was directly calling at least some of the shots), and squeezing the public sector just a little more. A year ago a similar struggle had fallen apart in bickering among the four unions representing the university’s workers. This time they stood together, and that wondrous and scarce appreciated phenomenon, *solidarity*, emerged. Solidarity—the creation of a new human ecosystem through the sublation of the existent. A preserving and transforming, the only kind of path toward a better world. The strike sputtered a bit, but then caught on, as a fire will, a fire that builds as well as consumes. Service staff and faculty shouted and danced and marched together, blacks, Indians and whites, women and men—people talked to each other, opened up, rejoined. After nine days, the administration crumbled and gave in. The outcome matters enormously to the impoverished lower end of the working hierarchy. But what matters, too, is the fact that solidarity, which is the precondition for another world, is possible and accessible through militant action. The making of a new world are contained within the hopes and memories of the existing world. *Amandla!* is its sign and substance.

—Joel Kovel