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Journal of Asian and African Studies 2012 47: 18 originally published online 6 December 2011

DOI: 10.1177/0021909611429436

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Journal of Asian and African Studies

47(1) 18–32

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DOI: 10.1177/0021909611429436

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 1980s, a group of left intellectuals and activists sought to press the then-exiled African National Congress (ANC) to adopt a change of strategy which would have given priority to the organized collective action of workers and the poor: they were expelled and their proposed remedies ignored. But, while it had little impact on political practice at the time, the implied debate between the dissidents and the ANC raised issues crucial to understanding the challenges which face South African democracy today. Although the dissidents' approach was based on a flawed analysis of the processes which produce social change, it did highlight an aspect of anti-apartheid resistance strategy which has made achieving a more egalitarian and democratic South African more difficult.

Keywords

Collective action, democracy, redistribution, resistance, social change

Introduction

One of the benefits of hindsight is that it can make political interventions which seemed insignificant when they were made appear more important later. So it is with an attempt, in late 1979 and early 1980, by a small group of socialists to steer the African National Congress (ANC) in a new strategic direction. Their position won them no applause – they were suspended and then expelled from the movement for their pains. While they then formed themselves into a group which they called the Marxist Workers Tendency of the African National Congress, they failed to make any impact on the strategy of the ANC at the time or to mobilize any support within the movement for their position. They were chided by an anonymous author in the SA Communist Party Journal *African Communist* for their 'economistic and "workerist" approach' (Reader, 1980). They were later said to have 'dismissed the ANC leadership as a rightwing faction whose aims ran contrary to the interests of the working class in South Africa', a judgement which was advanced to explain why the ANC 'viewed them as arrogant enemies of the ANC-led liberation struggle' (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006: 238). They were banished to the political margins and none played a significant role

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in the mainstream liberation movement after the incident. Given all this, there would seem to be little value in examining this incident now – at most it might seem to deserve an historical footnote as another among many examples, depending on our perspective, of the propensity of white intellectuals to seek to shape the strategy of the anti-apartheid struggle, or of the degree to which open debate was not tolerated in the ANC during its battle against apartheid.

This article proposes, however, to re-examine the position of the dissidents for two reasons, the one substantially more important than the other. The first is that a key member of the group who was suspended and then expelled is Martin Legassick, a key figure in left thought in South Africa who continues to participate in the national debate. The second, more important, is that hindsight suggests that the intervention by Legassick and his allies raised issues which are of cardinal importance to our understanding of South African society today. It is therefore useful to use the incident as a prism through which to examine some specific features of South African democracy today.

The intervention and the ANC's response to it may not have made much impact on mainstream understandings of the fight against apartheid, but it prompted a bitter and heated debate on left strategy and tactics whose echoes can still be heard today. This article will not pretend to offer an exhaustive account of this argument, nor will it seek to enter the controversy about whether the conduct of either the dissidents or the ANC at the time, both of which still excite heated passions, was appropriate.¹ It will concentrate only on those aspects which are relevant to its main concern: the implications of the critique of ANC strategy which cost Legassick and his allies their ANC membership for our understanding of contemporary South African realities. More specifically, it will argue that the call for a change in strategy in the fight to destroy apartheid was based on a flawed analysis both of South African society and of the way in which societies characterized by domination can become more democratic and more egalitarian. But it will insist that, despite this, the challenge which Legassick and his colleagues posed to the ANC was one which, had it been taken seriously, could have contributed to a post-apartheid South Africa far more democratic and egalitarian than that which we currently experience. One implication is that the ANC should have engaged with the ideas expressed in the critique rather than shutting its ears. But more is at stake here than an attempt to reassess this act of dissent: by understanding what it is in the critique that the ANC should have taken seriously, we also deepen our understanding of the challenges facing South African democracy today.

What About the Workers? The 'Gang of Four' and ANC Strategy

The intervention which was to drive Legassick and his colleagues out of the ANC appeared in 1979 and was titled *The Workers' Movement, SACTU, and the ANC-A Struggle for Marxist Policies* (Legassick et al., 1980). The authors were white South African socialists who had been involved in varying degrees with the trade union movement in its early days – besides Legassick, they were Paula Ensor, David Hemson and Rob Petersen (who was then editing the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) newspaper *Workers Unity* and had earlier compiled his own memorandum to SACTU expressing similar ideas; Petersen, 1979). The ANC and SACTU never responded directly to the documents but, as noted here, the four – later to become known as the 'Gang of Four' – were all suspended from the ANC in response and, in 1985, expelled. (A fifth member of the group, Peter Collins, has been largely ignored by subsequent accounts because he was not an ANC member and was therefore not suspended or expelled. From the very skimpy information

about Collins available, it appears that he was a British socialist with whom the four South Africans had come into contact.) In 1981, they formed the Marxist Workers' Tendency (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006: 195) whose publication, *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*, offers further insight into their position.

The chief purpose of the document was to seek to persuade the ANC and its trade union ally SACTU to become vehicles for a socialist revolution. It insisted that the needs of 'the people in their daily lives' could not be secured '... except through the overthrow of the apartheid regime and (because they come up against the barriers of the capitalist system) on the basis of the transition to socialism' (Legassick et al., 1980: 48). Similarly, in an article in the first edition of *Inqaba* in January 1981 defending the memorandum, Legassick, writing under the pen name Richard Monroe, declared that 'the oppressed' were discovering 'that there is not a single concrete need that can be fully satisfied without sweeping away, not simply the apartheid regime, but the capitalist class that shelters behind it' (Monroe, 1981: 34). In this view, apartheid cannot be defeated unless capitalism is also overthrown – what is required, therefore, is an assault not only on racial domination but on the economic order which underpins it.

This revolution, the dissidents argued, could not be achieved by the ANC's army, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), whose guerrilla war was, The Marxist Workers' Tendency insisted in 1982, only 'an impotent method of exerting "pressure" on the ruling class'. A successful revolution could not be achieved by 'the armed actions of small groups' (Legassick, 2002: 36) which simply gave the apartheid state an excuse to increase repression and diverted attention from building a mass movement. What was required was 'methods and tactics in the realm of armed struggle which will lead to the eventual armed insurrection of the mass of working people against the state' (Marxist Workers Tendency [MWT], 1982: 155). This did not need to be created from scratch, for the 1973 Durban strikes and the 1976 Soweto uprising had revived 'the mass movement' inside the country (Legassick, 2002: 34). This mobilization had revolutionary potential because the demands of black people could not be met by the piecemeal reforms which were then pursued by the apartheid system and capitalism: South African capitalism, Monroe/Legassick argued, could not survive by 'paying a living wage, abolishing the pass laws or conceding the right to strike' (Monroe, 1981: 35). The role of 'armed struggle' in this context was 'the self-defence of the mass workers' movement' (Legassick, 2002: 44) or 'arming the workers in self-defence in preparation for a future insurrection' (Hemson et al., 2006: 298).

At first glance, it would be hard to find a clearer recipe for destroying the gains made by popular organization in the period between the strikes of 1973 and the end of the decade, when Legassick and his allies proposed the shift in strategy. A key preoccupation during the early stage of union organization was to insulate unions from the nationalist movement, which saw every gain in popular organization as a resource for its campaign to overthrow apartheid. The concern was not that nationalism might distract workers from the revolution but that it might ensure the destruction of organization not yet robust enough to withstand the repression which it would inevitably face if it identified openly with the ANC. (Friedman, 1985) Given this context, a programme which sought to throw this fragile organization to the wolves immediately not only by recruiting it to a revolutionary programme but also by arming its participants and urging them to overthrow the state seems a surer way of ensuring that organization was smashed and that mobilization became impossible than anything the ANC mainstream proposed at the time.

But some perspective is needed. The dissidents did not believe that popular organization had reached a stage at which it simply needed guns to turn mobilization into revolution – the armed insurrection was a longer-term project which could presumably only be attempted when organization had become much stronger. Thus Paula Ensor justified the strategy by arguing that the stress on MK's guerrilla war was weakening popular mobilization and organization:

While we saw the need for people to be organized and strengthened within the townships, the ANC was in a sense pulling the best cadres out . . . it wasn't that we were against the armed struggle. But we had taken up a position against the particular form that it took. (Interview with Paula Ensor, as cited in Hemson et al., 2006: 298)

In the context of the time, then, the dissidents' position was not a call for an immediate insurrection which would certainly have been crushed, but for a heightened stress on popular organization and mobilization rather than on a guerrilla war prosecuted by small bands. Presumably, had the ANC listened at the time, the consequence would have been a shift from a strategy premised on guerrilla war which would either seek to overthrow apartheid directly or to inspire mass organization (guerrilla war was meant to be 'armed propaganda' which would inspire popular insurrection; Legassick, 2002) to one in which the movement would directly support popular organization and mobilization.

This point is reinforced by the strategy proposed by Monroe/Legassick to achieve the required level of popular action. The task, he wrote, is to follow the approach proposed in Petersen's memorandum: 'to strengthen and unify the movement by linking together all the struggles over day-to-day needs with the central tasks of the revolution' (Monroe, 1981: 34). This is to be achieved by developing:

a programme of revolutionary demands . . . stemming from the daily needs of working people, which show the way forward to the revolution . . . [which] will come about precisely as the masses are united in determination to strike at the heart of the fetters which block the satisfaction of daily needs. (Monroe, 1981: 34)

Similarly, *The Workers Movement* argues that the task is to:

put forward demands which are regarded by the workers as clearly right and reasonable, but which strike at the very heart of apartheid and the capitalist system . . . We have to bring out in practice – not merely through demands, but through struggles organized around the demands – the total incapacity of the system . . . (or any reforms within that system) to provide a decent life for the working people. (MWT, 1982: 48)

The document insists that: 'By organizing and struggling on the basis of these demands, the mass of the workers will be drawn through experience towards revolutionary consciousness and action' (MWT, 1982: 47). Monroe/Legassick notes: '. . . the struggle to build factory organization and independent trade unionism is a vital part of the struggle as a whole' (Monroe, 1981: 36).

The dissidents were not, therefore, proposing an immediate recruitment of organization in the service of insurrection, a strategy which would certainly have set anti-apartheid resistance back decades. Rather, they were proposing a longer-term strategy in which popular organization and mobilization were built to prepare for the time when it could become a vehicle of insurrection. It is to an analysis of this strategy that we now turn.

Method in the 'Madness': Assessing the Dissidents' Strategy

The strategy which the dissidents proposed was founded on some flawed assumptions. First, they vastly under-estimated capitalism's ability to adjust to the end of apartheid and to adapt to the end of legislated racial discrimination. The issue is perhaps best illustrated by a caption on a picture illustrating Monroe/Legassick's article in *Inqaba*. 'Can South African capitalism survive without the pass laws?', it asks rhetorically (Monroe, 1981: 35). The pass laws, of course, were abolished

five years after this was written and a quarter of a century ago: capitalism is still very much with us. This is far more than a debating point: central to their argument was the claim that effective mobilization of workers and the poor would inevitably lead to demands for the destruction of capitalism. And yet, the 1980s saw significant worker mobilization and organization, much talk of socialism – but also much evidence that organized workers were not trying to overthrow capitalism, merely to reform it. As contemporary evidence, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu)'s proposals for a new growth path, published in 2010, may seem alarmingly radical to many in business but is hardly a socialist programme (Cosatu, 2010).

The obvious objection to this point is that many poor and working people still live in conditions which the fight against apartheid was meant to end and that, had popular organization rallied around socialist demands, the changes it won would have challenged poverty and inequality as well as institutionalized racism. There is some truth in the claim that deeper and stronger organization would have ensured a redistribution of power and wealth – to which we will return – but this did not require organization for socialist revolution. There is evidence that participants in trade union organization do support deeper social and economic change than people who have not had this experience. But this does not prompt demands to abolish capitalism (Focus group interviews, cited in Charney, 1995). And, lest it be argued that this is so only because Cosatu leadership deludes workers, it is worth noting that, despite the hopes of some activist intellectuals, the new generation of social movements which has emerged over the past few years have also mobilized few grass-roots demands to destroy capitalism (Ballard et al., 2006). It remains possible, of course, that these demands might emerge out of democratic organization in the future. But the claim that participation in organizations automatically propels most South Africans to an anti-capitalist position is not supported by the evidence. Had the dissidents won the argument, and had deeper and broader popular organization followed, the available evidence suggests that the outcome would not have been socialism but a more egalitarian capitalism.

Part of the reason for this is a point made by many of the dissidents' critics: that their stress on socialism failed to take seriously the key role which racial oppression played in the consciousness of all South Africans, including most worker activists.² The fight against apartheid was, primarily, a struggle against racial minority rule and this meant that a strategy which prioritized socialism rather than racial majority rule was doomed to fail. There was no attempt by the dissidents to understand the power of racial domination and its impact on political calculations or to explain how workers were to be rallied around demands for socialism when the racial dimensions of the conflict, and their power in shaping political loyalties and strategies, were clearly a priority for black people ranging from business people and professionals through to workers and the poor.

Legassick and his colleagues knew of the important role played by racial identities in the struggle against apartheid. Petersen and Ensor had arrived in Britain hostile to any form of nationalism and eager to pursue a socialist programme. But they were advised against this by British (although South African-born) Marxist Ted Grant who told them that the ANC was destined to lead the struggle against apartheid because '... [there] will be the sense among the black masses that we must not allow ourselves to be divided' (Hemson et al., 2006: 297–8), a prediction which was, of course, completely vindicated. They had joined the ANC as a result. Their insistence that a revolutionary strategy should be built by concentrating on specifically racial strictures to which black workers were subject, such as the pass laws, also indicated a sensitivity to racial dynamics. Yet their strategic approach was premised on giving socialism priority over a nationalist programme, a position which seemed unwarranted conceptually or empirically.

On the first score, if 'nationalist' demands such as the abolition of pass laws could only be met by the defeat of capitalism, then these demands were a vehicle for a socialist programme. Workers

and the poor would not have to be told to fight for socialism – they would find themselves doing it automatically as they fought for full national citizenship. On the second, while the distinction between analyses based on ‘race’ or ‘class’ were very popular among academics in the 1970s because they distinguished the liberals who wanted a non-racial capitalism from the socialists, in lived political practice the distinction was blurred. Union shop stewards on the East Rand during the 1980s fought ‘class’ and ‘race’ issues at the same time: while there were some tensions between these priorities, they were not nearly as neat or as decisive as the academics believed (von Holdt, 2003). The real difference between the dissidents’ approach and that of the mainstream ANC was not the choice between two abstractions called ‘nationalism’ and ‘socialism’ but between an approach which relied on a military and political elite to interpret what ‘the people’ needed and one which stressed the agency of working people themselves. Turning it into a fight between socialists and nationalists did more to detract from the point than to reinforce it – particularly since a principled position which gave primacy to the agency and choices of the organized grassroots surely would have to accept the right of that grassroots to make their own decisions about their future rather than seeking to impose on the choices of millions a pre-ordained outcome.

Second, the dissidents assumed a model of grassroots organization which is belied by the success of the very union movement whose emergence inspired them. Effective popular organization is not built by focussing it on demands which cannot be met. While Legassick/Monroe suggests that this would radicalize the grassroots, convincing them that their frustrations will persist until the entire system is overthrown, the effect would have been precisely the opposite: to demoralize participants who would see their efforts to alter the distribution of power and privilege constantly come to naught and would therefore conclude not that radical change was needed but that no change was possible. Their anonymous critic in *The African Communist* thus argued: ‘The mobilization of the masses and their success in winning concessions as the outcome of struggle is of fundamental importance in overcoming frustration and developing self consciousness in the struggle’ (Reader, 1980: 84). This was precisely the experience of the trade unions – that winning concessions increased the confidence of workers and prompted them to demand more, while defeats produced demoralization, not radicalization (Friedman, 1985). The organizational strategy proposed by the dissidents may well thus have done more to retard the fight to defeat apartheid than to advance the march to socialism.

Third and perhaps most important, the theory of change proposed by the dissidents, that of organization for a decisive revolutionary rupture and the seizure of state power, while popular at the time, is a model which cannot produce the emancipation it promises. The British-based theorist John Hoffman has demonstrated convincingly why a socialism which can be achieved only by entirely destroying what exists and replacing it with something entirely new is doomed to fail (Hoffman, 2009; Friedman, 2010a). First, it rejects strategies which seek to create the new out of what exists and so compels a path to Utopia which seeks to destroy all the incremental progress that even deeply imperfect orders may contain. This destroys capacities and possibilities as well as domination and its fetters. It almost ensures that the new must be built on the rubble of the old and rubble is an implausible ingredient of a society with enough capacity to administer its affairs and produce enough for its needs. And so the insistence on a total break with the past dooms the future to incapacity and scarcity which can be remedied only by authoritarianism. And, by denying the possibility of incremental but structural change within the old order, it denies us an essential tool in the creation of workable alternatives, a set of criteria for judging which changes might take us nearer to a sustainable but more egalitarian society and which would not. The total revolution which these theories assume rarely if ever happens – the overthrow of states and their replacement by revolutionary alternatives has invariably changed far less than the revolution promised. Mao

Zedong's perhaps apocryphal but poignant response to Richard Nixon's description of him as a man who changed the world – 'I have only managed to change a few small areas in the vicinity of Beijing' (Friedman, 1985: 496) – makes the point that dramatic political upheaval does not necessarily induce qualitative political or social change. And so most of the change we encounter in the concrete world is not a radical upheaval but an incremental shift in the existing order. Programmes which, by implication, deny the authenticity of any change within the existing order cannot understand most or all of the change which we actually experience. A more plausible route to change, Hoffman shows, is a dialectical approach which recognizes that the present must not be smashed but must be transcended – its useful elements need to be preserved even as it is transformed into something new. A dialectical approach to change does not dismiss shifts which occur within a society in which domination prevails – it seeks ways of ensuring that they produce structural changes which can produce more shifts.

What needed preservation most of all in the 1970s and 1980s was the grassroots democratic politics whose possibilities the dissidents had perceptively discerned. A programme which saw this purely as a resource to be used to smash the state would not have paid the emerging organization the respect which the dissidents told the ANC it deserved – it would have been treated purely as a device to achieve state power, which no doubt would lose its utility once it was achieved. Thus, the dissidents' *African Communist* critic pointed out that: 'The idea that every gain won by the working class is merely absorbed by capital to its own advantage is an old one; it is an idea which totally underestimates the gains in many spheres made by the working class' (Reader, 1980: 84).

By contrast, a programme which saw the emerging organization as a precious resource to be nurtured, both in the struggle against apartheid and after it, and which recognized also that the break between the old and the new is always partial and that the role played by independent mass organization in the struggle against apartheid would not be qualitatively different from the one it would need to play after it would have played a far more vital role in enhancing worker power and agency than one based on an apocalyptic seizure of power and on a stark difference between an old and a new which were always destined to be far more similar than this theory of change suggests. It is to a discussion of this possibility that we now turn.

The People Shall Really Govern? The Implications of ANC Choices

If armed insurrection or an apocalyptic leap to socialism were never possibilities, a different sort of ANC surely was – an ANC which celebrated, supported and sought to build the popular mobilization and organization which began with the 1973 Durban strikes rather than one which sought to channel it into paths which ensured its subordination to the movement and its elite. If such an ANC had indeed emerged, it is possible that political reality would be very different today. The outcome would not have been the replacement of a nationalist movement by a socialist one, nor would it have been the overthrow of capitalism which Legassick and his colleagues sought. But it could have been one in which both a more inclusive democracy and a more effective means of challenging inherited inequalities may well have been possible.

The dissidents unwittingly – for that was not their prime purpose – highlighted an important contradiction in the nature of the ANC which persists to this day. On the one hand, the movement has a vice-like grip on the political loyalties of most South Africans – a reality no more clearly illustrated than in the trajectory of the trade union movement whose growth so inspired the 'Gang of Four'. The movement was seen both by many of the socialists who helped to found it and by some of the mainstream unionists who played a key role in the Federation of South African Trade

Unions (Fosatu) – one of Cosatu's precursors – as a bulwark against the nationalism of the ANC (Friedman, 1985); it would become a source of worker power which would be independent of the political movement. And yet, not only did this hope effectively evaporate with the formation of Cosatu in the mid-1980s: the degree to which it had always been a fantasy was best illustrated by the fact that some of the most vociferous advocates of union independence later became ANC public officials.³ It was this dynamic which prompted Grant to advise anti-nationalist socialists that they had best join the ANC because the power of racial identities would ensure that it remained the primary vehicle of resistance to apartheid. Yet this immense appeal never translated into anything like a commensurate capacity for mass mobilization or organization, even during the period in which the ANC was a legal organization. Thus, at its height during the 1950s, it claimed a membership of 100 000 (ANC, 2010: 7), a fraction of the constituency which it sought to represent. Many of the campaigns it organized during that period failed to ignite mass support, often because they responded to elite concerns only (e.g. Lodge, 1981).

The mass campaigns which inspired Legassick and the other dissidents were not planned by the ANC or its ally SACTU, whose status as a bystander during the 1973 strikes is illustrated by the fact that its general secretary Mark Shope wrote to Barney Dladla, the KwaZulu government representative who played a major role in seeking to mediate the strikes, expressing his admiration for his efforts and that of the Durban-based trade unionists who were seeking to turn the militancy demonstrated in the strikes into organization. His letter makes it clear that SACTU played no role in the strikes or the subsequent organization (Shope to Dladla 28 January 1974, cited in Sithole, 2009: 235). The other spur to organization, the Soweto uprising of 1976, was a product of organization by black consciousness activists, not the ANC (Kane-Berman, 1978). Certainly, the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 confirmed the degree to which the ANC dominated the hearts and minds of activists, for it was an attempt to align internal resistance with the ANC tradition. ANC activists certainly played a role in the UDF but, as an account sympathetic to the ANC's role notes, the ANC did not establish or control either the UDF or its affiliates (Suttner, 2004: 698). The ANC's role during much of this period was less to initiate popular mobilization than to seek to ensure that it was loyal to the ANC. There is copious evidence of this in the labour movement – and a good deal of it can be sourced to work by scholars sympathetic to the ANC who document strenuous efforts by SACTU to seek to ensure that the growing union movement became part of the ANC camp (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006). The ANC was thus concerned not to initiate organization but to persuade those who did organize to accept its leadership.

The critique launched by Legassick and his colleagues clearly spoke to this. Had the ANC listened, the clear implication was that it would need to see popular organization as an end in itself, whether or not it accepted the ANC's authority. This was less selfless than it might have seemed: the ANC commanded enough legitimacy to secure the loyalty of the independent organization which emerged without it, in the workplace as well as outside it. An ANC which relied on mobilizing and supporting popular organization for its own sake would have to become a very different organization to the one which 'the Gang of Four' sought to change. It would have had to grow far stronger roots in its social base than it did during the exile period (and, indeed, those before and after it) and, while there is certainly no iron law of politics which decrees that organization rooted in a popular base is always democratic, the need to respond routinely to a constituency introduces dynamics which, at the very least, make a politics rooted in grassroots realities more likely. Nor could the ANC have successfully supported organization unless it recognized that grassroots organizations cannot be strong unless they are controlled by their members and that popular organizations, if they were to challenge apartheid power relations, would have needed to be controlled by their members, not by a revolutionary elite which assigns to itself the status of popular vanguard.

One objection to this analysis was that attributed by Legassick to a fierce opponent of his position, Bernard Magubane, who, he says, insisted that “‘democratic unions’ were not possible under apartheid” – ‘to insist that unions could be democratic in a “fascist” society was a contradiction in terms’ (Legassick, 2008: 244). This argument, of course, is a convenient apologia for a politics in which the liberation elite, in exile or underground, retains control over popular organization. It also means that the sort of ANC strategy proposed here would have been an impossibility. Even if this abstract position is rejected, it could be argued that a banned organization had little or no space to engage in popular organization given the repression to which it was subject. But Magubane’s reported claim is refuted by the experience of unions during the 1970s and 1980s. Whatever may have been happening in the society, the imperatives of dealing with industrial conflict ensured that democratic organization was possible in the workplace – the building of a democratic grassroots politics which offered its participants an unprecedented opportunity to control their own organizations while winning increasing power over their work circumstances was one of the great achievements of the union movement (Friedman, 1985). Outside the workplace, organization was never as democratic but there were important examples of democratic organization here too (Suttner, 2004). So democratic organization clearly was possible under apartheid. Also, an ANC underground which was organized enough to infiltrate organizations to ensure that they were loyal to and willing to accept a political lead from the ANC was presumably capable also of helping these organizations to grow so that they become independent centres of power.

The notion that democratic organization is impossible in an undemocratic society is a symptom of a fallacy discussed by Hoffman (2009) – the assumption that where domination shuts off democratic possibility, the latter can only be created by the destruction of the former. In reality, change is a process in which what exists is superseded but also preserved. Again, the insistence on a total break with the past prevents the creation of democratic possibility while domination persists – without which the new is likely to be not much less oppressive than the old (Hoffman, 2009; Friedman, 2010a).

The ANC’s failure to heed the call for it to give priority to building popular organization confirms this prognosis. The assumption that organization was of value only if it could be harnessed in the service of goals determined by the movement’s elite ensured a resistance politics in which the gap between the elite and those it sought to represent was inordinately high. Claims to have consulted ‘the people’ invariably meant that the next level of activists had been engaged, not that the speaker was connected to a solid grassroots base. And, while some of that could no doubt be attributed to the impact of repression, not all of it could. It was possible, at least in principle, for the ANC to adopt a different approach to grassroots mobilization and organization, even as it remained a broad national liberation movement rather than a socialist party. Its failure to do so did not, in all likelihood, affect the trajectory of the fight against apartheid significantly because popular organization and mobilization occurred despite, not because, of the ANC and it may well have been that a shift by the ANC of the sort suggested by Legassick and his allies would not have altered the depth or breadth of popular collective action. But it would most certainly have affected the nature of the transition to formal democracy and the trajectory of government since 1994.

The depth and breadth of democracy is directly related to the extent to which people are able to engage in collective action in pursuit of their interests and values (Friedman, 2007). Democracies are established when social groups which are excluded from power are able to organize effectively to win their inclusion. These are not necessarily grassroots groups – since organization requires a range of resources and potential access to power, it is usually the elite groups among the excluded who organize to ensure their inclusion – hence Barrington Moore Jr’s celebrated dictum on the genesis of the industrial democracies of the North: ‘No bourgeois, no democracy’ (Moore, 1966:

418). In several African polities today, formal democracy is emerging as the result of the organization of business and professional groups (Friedman, 2008). Democracy achieved in this way, however, does not include – except as voters able to select between competing elites – social strata whose collective action was not responsible for the democratic breakthrough. The creation of a formal democratic system then creates opportunities for further deepening and broadening, which occur if – and only if – social strata which have not been substantively included by formal democratization are able to organize effectively to secure their inclusion: a *locus classicus* is the role of labour organization in deepening and broadening citizenship in Western Europe (Przeworski, 1985). The democratization of polities through collective action by subaltern social groups has concrete material consequences: the more the previously excluded find ways to act collectively, the more they place their issues on the agenda. If they are then able to form alliances which enable them to assemble social majorities, the result is substantive policy change which takes into account the expressed needs of the excluded. The failure of new democracies over the past two decades to produce substantive social and economic policy change is not, therefore, a symptom of formal democracy's inherent anti-poor biases but in the reality that avenues for collective action by the dominated which were available in 20th century Western Europe are not currently available anywhere (Friedman, 2002a). Formal democracy will begin to yield substantive policy changes for the excluded when subaltern groups acquire the means to engage in the collective action needed to turn formal rights into substantive influence.

This theoretical framework helps us understand the concrete impact of the ANC's failure – or reluctance – to give priority to popular mobilization and organization. It did not prevent a transition to formal democracy because this did not require (as Legassick and his allies seemed to think it would) the organized leadership of workers and the poor: as noted earlier, a transition to formal democracy which effectively empowered only the professional elite was possible, as it has been in other societies where formal democracy was denied. But it ensured a pattern of politics since 1994 in which millions of citizens are excluded from a substantive say in decisions because they lack the organization to force themselves into the policy debate. An important analysis of South Africa's transition to democracy (Marais, 1998) described part of the reality when it argued that the problem lay in the failure of the organized left within the ANC to impose its policy agenda, but it did not go far enough since it did not explore why this happened: because, despite the impressive surge of popular organization which inspired Legassick and his allies, popular organization was never deep or strong enough to make more than a limited impact on the programme of the ANC. Union organization was one of the motor forces of apartheid's defeat, but rising levels of formal unemployment ensured that the labour movement represented a minority among the poor. Organization outside the workplace which could have remedied this was less deep than it seemed – it was largely a populist mobilization behind a broad anti-apartheid programme which was entirely functional to the ANC's aim of ending apartheid but was never an effective organized force for social and economic redistribution.

It is this which has shaped the response of post-apartheid governance to poverty and social and economic domination. This is often portrayed as a process in which, after the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy of 1996, a government elite failed to listen to 'civil society' – primarily to the labour movement and to those non-governmental organizations who champion a more egalitarian social and economic programme. In reality, no organized group has a serious problem making itself heard – to be organized is to be part of the conversation which produces national decision-making. The problem, rather, is that the poor are not heard – by the labour movement and the civil society organizations as well as the politicians: how else to explain the fact that all the major organized groups, including the key civil society organizations, spent several years in the early 1990s in the National Housing Forum negotiating how to get mortgage

finance to the poor when all the available evidence suggests that poor people wanted nothing to do with mortgages (Tomlinson, 1997)? Nor is this an isolated example – post-apartheid social policy is riddled with examples in which the participants in the national debate, including the ‘pro-poor civil society organizations’, were out of touch with the needs and preferences of the grassroots poor identified in numerous studies (Friedman, 2005; Friedman et al., 2005). The problem is not that new forms of public participation need to be found to ensure that government hears the poor better. It is a symptom of the degree to which highly unequal access to the means of collective action ensure that the needs and wants of most of the poor are excluded from formal politics and thus from decision-making. Thus poverty and inequality are not successfully addressed not only because the policy agenda is made for most rather than by them: the uneven distribution of access to collective action means also that government is primarily accountable to elite groups – including white suburban elites – because only they are able to engage in collective action which forces public decision-makers to account. If any evidence is needed, when last did the national policy debate’s obsession with ‘service delivery’ (itself a term redolent with elite bias) ever show any interest in the effectiveness with which social grants are paid? Government more in touch with the wants and needs of the grassroots poor would not only be better able to craft effective development policy – it would also reflect a changed power balance without which development policy must remain ineffective because, if the voice of the poor is not heard, it can neither reflect nor make possible the heightened empowerment of most citizens.

That there is a grassroots voice seeking to be heard is illustrated by the fact that mobilization of the poor is currently a ubiquitous South African phenomenon – grassroots social protests have been a constant reality since at least 2004 and they show no signs of abating. While mainstream interpretations have explained the protests as demands for ‘service delivery’, the evidence suggests that the common thread is, rather, a demand to be heard (Pithouse, 2010). This explosion of mobilization has not, however, been accompanied by organization and so the protests have not achieved a shift in urban power: few if any have been followed by negotiated changes in law, policy and practice which might give the protesters more power over the environments in which they live. The protests show that the urban poor are not quiescent – but that they have not yet achieved the organizational momentum which would make their demands and concerns part of the policy debate. They illustrate in two ways the centrality of organization (and its absence) in the circumstances of the poor. They show both that many poor people demand a voice – and that weak or absent organization means that they have been unable to achieve it.

While the stilling of the voices of the grassroots is a consequence of unequal social power relations rather than the conscious decisions of political leaderships, a change of direction by the ANC in the late 1970s and early 1980s from a strategy in which popular organization and mobilization was something others did and the ANC controlled to one in which it was something which the ANC did and grassroots people controlled could have ensured a very different sort of transition to formal democracy and a different pattern of governance after it.

Conclusion: Prospects for Change?

The potential offered by the dissidents’ call for a strategic shift was not realized – partly because the ANC had no wish to entertain a change of strategy and partly because the dissidents’ own vision of change was inadequate. While the mass organization for socialist insurrection which they advocated was never feasible, the ANC could have opted for a strategy which placed greater stress on supporting independent mass organization and this could in turn have made a more democratic politics and a redistributive economic and social policy direction possible.

This does not, of course, mean that the prospects for grassroots organization for a democracy in which all have a say and in which the poor are able to organize effectively to claim social and economic policies and programmes favourable to their interests have passed forever. On the contrary – if the circumstances in which organization occurs have changed, the central reality has not: that only by organizing effectively will poor people be able to claim a say in their destiny and the substantive outcomes which flow from that. The contribution of Legassick and his colleagues to the debate on our present is the reminder that deeper democracy and more egalitarian social and economic policies are a product of collective action by the poor and marginalized, not the technical capacity of elites, whether they appear in the guise of revolutionaries who intuit the needs of the nation or as government experts able to discern the needs of citizens (Scott, 1999; Friedman 2002b). This is as important an insight today as it was then.

A discussion of the precise nature of this organization and the strategies which would be needed to achieve it is outside the scope of this article.⁴ What can be said here is that the collective action required to make the promise of citizenship a reality for most South Africans does not require organization for the revolutionary overthrow of the state and its replacement by an entirely new order. What is required is organization which will enable most South Africans to use formal democratic rights to achieve a more substantive democracy. This clearly entails the use of organization to alter the patterns and power relations which constrain the full social and economic emancipation of most South Africans. The problem is illustrated by Legassick's adversary (and former ally) Bernard Magubane who has noted the perpetuation in the post-apartheid of important patterns of the old. Thus for Magubane, the development of post-apartheid society is constrained by a value system 'deriving from past and current social relations of capital that encourages greed, crass materialism and conspicuous consumption' (Magubane, 2010: 8). Not only do these patterns perpetuate corruption – as Magubane points out. They are also an obstacle to effective action against poverty and inequality. And they are one of many reminders that formal majority rule, as important a change as it undoubtedly was, does not in itself end the social inequality and exclusion which minority rule wrought – it provides only a set of possibilities which need to be actualized if the promise is to become reality.

While some would insist that the use of formal rights to achieve a redistribution of power and resources has been tried and has failed, the reality is that it has not yet been tried. The key challenge for an effective democratic and redistributive politics is to find ways in which the millions who now have a vote but no voice can acquire both. This requires not that the institutions won in 1994 be smashed but that they and, more importantly, the formal rights which underpin them, be used effectively to broaden both the depth of democracy – the social strata who participate in it – and its breadth – the range of issues which are subject to democratic control. What set of policies or type of social system would emerge from such an exercise we do not know. What does seem probable is that it would be far more sustainable than the abstract Utopias currently on offer because it would be born of concrete realities – of the degree to which the poor and weak can organize to claim a voice and the social and economic power they are able to exercise as a result.

As this article has already suggested, a key ingredient of a redistributive politics in which organization is used to engage with the institutions of formal democracy and in which progress is made by incremental gains rather than revolutionary rupture, is that gains must be the result not of enlightened leaders using the courts or policy forums to achieve concessions, but of the collective efforts of organized citizens who can, by changing the constraints under which they live – even in seemingly modest ways – acquire a greater sense of their own power and efficacy and thus the capacity to remove more and more of these constraints. This approach, which built the trade union movement, remains the only strategy for popular empowerment which has a proven record of success.

If these points would not have found favour with Legassick and his allies in 1979 – and may well not do so now – any effective organization for redistribution will need to place at its centre a principle which surely would win their approval: an absolute insistence on building democratic organization which will offer those currently excluded from power and access to resources the means to shape their own demands and strategies. If that principle is followed, then at least some of the debates pursued here would become far less important than they seem since the future would begin to be shaped by the active agency of the organized grassroots rather than by the theories of those of us who try to understand social processes. Whatever the merits or otherwise of their theoretical approach, by drawing attention to this reality, Legassick and his fellow dissidents remind us not only of the past which could have been, but also of the future which is still possible.

Notes

1. Legassick has repeatedly drawn attention to his and his colleagues' treatment of the ANC which he insists was a violation of the ANC constitution (see for example Legassick, 2002: 9–10). Their critics insist that they were suspended and expelled because their behaviour was inappropriate (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006: 238). Similar sentiments have been expressed in interviews conducted for a biography of the Marxist sociologist Harold Wolpe (Friedman and Hudson, forthcoming).
2. For a closely researched account of worker and national consciousness among trade unionists see von Holdt, 2003.
3. One of several examples was Fosatu general secretary Joe Foster, who later became an ANC senator and then chair of the State Lottery Board (Rowland, 2000). Another is former metal workers leader Moses Mayekiso who became an ANC MP but has since joined the breakaway party Congress of the People (COPE), which he represents in the Gauteng provincial legislature (Bell, 2009).
4. For one attempt to propose such a strategy see Friedman, 2010b.

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