A Short Course in Politics at the University of *Abahlali baseMjondolo*

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Abstract

Shackdweller communities are among the most impoverished and exploited on the planet. With nearly 1 billion people living in them, one might consider them to be hotbeds of radicalism. Yet, in fact, very few settlements have become disobedient. Using the work of S'bu Zikode of the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* Shackdwellers Movement (South Africa) and the work of Alain Badiou, I show how politics is lived in Durban's shacks, and show how Badiou's thoughts supplement a series of uniquely African instances of politics.

Keywords *Abahlali baseMjondolo* • Alain Badiou • Durban • shack • slum • South Africa

Meeting Politics

> A genuinely political organisation ... is the least bound place of all. (Alain Badiou, 2005: 76)

It's late November 2005 in Durban. It's hot. There are 40 people cramped into a wooden structure of the type used as a tool shed on the better sort of construction site. But this shed is in the Pemary Ridge shack settlement in the elite Reservoir Hills suburb in Durban. On the wall are posters of birds, and vehicles – 'the train comes *down* the hill', 'the people are *in* the bus', 'the crates are *on* the truck'. The most durable building in the settlement, this shed is a multi-purpose space: classroom, crèche, community centre and, this evening, meeting room. The only social purpose it seems not to serve is a place of worship. And yet, with the lights flickering, and amid the intense concentration, we are party to an important moment of political ritual.

This is an *Abahlali baseMjondolo* meeting. All but five of the people in this room have been elected to represent a settlement affiliated to *Abahlali*; they have arrived with a mandate, and will return with a detailed report. The five of us who

represent no community have been invited as *Amaqabane* (comrades) rather than people chosen to speak for a group of *Omakelwane* (neighbours). Two of the five live in settlements that have not collectively affiliated to *Abahlali*, and three live in places with plumbing, places to which an ambulance will come if called.

Tomorrow a smaller delegation will meet with the Mayor and key municipal officials to discuss a promise of housing for shackdwellers. It was a promise delivered on the wide open fields of north Durban, on the sugar cane plantations owned by the Tongaat Hulett company (now part of Anglo American). Gesturing grandly over the land owned by his former (and quite possibly future) employers, Mayor Obed Mlaba promised a R10 billion development, in which shackdwellers would feature, receiving a small slice of public funding that would, in the main, be targeted at subsidizing office parks and middle-class housing. No shackdwellers were invited to the press conference, and few questions were asked about specific details. An attempt to find out exactly what the shackdwellers' slice is, and when it will be delivered, will be made tomorrow. The shackdwellers need to hone their tactics for their confrontation with the municipality. Copies of the Government's intelligence on local settlements, obtained from municipal council offices, are passed around, and studied by candlelight (see Figure 1). Settlers read how many of them the Government thinks they are, how employed they are, how poor.

It will not be an easy confrontation. The Government has demonstrated both its fear of the shackdwellers, and its contempt for the law in containing the shackdwellers' threat. A week previously, City Manager Mike Sutcliffe illegally suspended the shackdwellers' right to hold a public demonstration on the curious grounds that their demands were 'political'. He dispatched the Sydenham Police to intercept, and then beat, and then shoot at the marchers (see Figure 2). The images were shocking, and caught by a local supporter, Sally Giles, and an eTV news crew, eTV being the main terrestrial alternative to the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Indeed, even the SABC was forced to lead with the story. (Despite not sending a journalist to cover it, the SABC were able to use footage provided by Sally Giles.) Within two days, Mayor Obed Mlaba called a press conference to announce that the informal settlers would be prioritized to receive housing on a development in the north of the city. 'We were going to announce it later', Mlaba said, 'because of the protests and ... those people using the poor African communities ... we decided to announce it today'.[1]

Eight months before this meeting, residents of the Kennedy Road settlement in nearby Clare Estate took to the streets in a spectacular display of militancy. This event set in motion the series of processes that crammed so many people's hopes into the Pemary Ridge shed in November 2005, that were to win a major victory against the city's repression in February 2006 and set the local agenda for the March 2006 local government elections via a strongly supported boycott.

The most widely read theorization of the movement comes from S'bu Zikode, the first elected chair of the Kennedy Road Development Committee

Figure 1
Moses Mncwango studies council documents by candlelight, 23 November 2005, in the Pemary Ridge meeting hall

Figure 2
Police charge at unarmed demonstrators, 14 November 2005, at the top of the Foreman Road settlement

and now chair of *Abahlali*. His voice has been amplified outside of the move-
ment to an extraordinary degree, quoted in the *New York Times*, the *Econo-
mist*, *Al Jazeera* and the full spectrum of South African television, radio and
newspapers. His 'I am the Third Force' article appeared in the mass market
magazines *Drum*, *You* and *Huisgenoot*, which reach a readership of 5 million
in Zulu, English and Afrikaans. At the meeting with the Mayor after the
Pemary Ridge meeting Zikode will be called 'The President of the Poor' by
Mnikelo Ndabankulu, a 19-year-old leader from the Foreman Road settlement.
But Zikode is far from being alone – his is not the only voice within the
settlements and a range of people have fronted the movement. At a previous
meeting, when local and national radio called for voices to represent the *Abahlali
baseMjondolo*, two young women, Fikile Nkosi and System Cele, were
deputized. In fact the movement has been scrupulous in electing rotating
representatives to speak to the media and attend meetings. But the 'Third
Force' article has taken on a life of its own and continues to travel far from the
Kennedy Road settlement where it was written.

Zikode's 'Third Force' article responds, with angry poetics, to the repre-
sentation of shack struggle, by various municipal and national ANC and govern-
ment officials, as the work of a 'Third Force'. Initially the searchlight of suspicion
fell on the Inkatha Freedom Party but soon came to rest on academics at the
University of KwaZulu-Natal. The Mayor, the City Manager Mike Sutcliffe and
the MEC for Safety and Security Bheki Cele, have circulated contradictory
claims about this (ultra-leftism, a plot by the opposition party – the Democratic
Alliance, foreign funders, NGOs looking for a bankable cause, a desire to
replace the local councillor, etc.) but in each instance the implication was none
too subtle: that shackdwellers themselves could not possibly organize or
mobilize on their own. The 'trouble' in the settlements was a result of some
external disturbance to the otherwise happy and peaceful equilibrium
maintained by the ANC. Layered atop this is a further taint – that agitation
could not have been engineered by Africans. It must be whites and Indians who
have 'stirred up trouble'.

'Everyone wants to be popular, but they shouldn't do this', said Durban's
Mayor Obed Mlaba at a press conference, in one example of this kind of
accusation. 'Why did the people not protest in 1993 or 2001 if they have had
these grievances for a long time? It is suspected that they have chosen this time
to protest because certain forces are driving them to do so, particularly now that
it is close to the election period', said Mlaba, once again conjuring up the spectre
of the Third Force. In some instances middle-class activists and academics
outside of, but sympathetic to, the movement have shared this assumption.

Zikode (2006: 186) takes on the revival of the apartheid era agitator thesis:

> We need to get things clear. There definitely is a Third Force. The question is
> what is it and who is part of the Third Force? Well, I am Third Force myself. The
> Third Force is all the pain and the suffering that the poor are subjected to

> every second in our lives. The shack dwellers have many things to say about the
> Third Force. It is time for us to speak out and to say, 'this is who we are, this is
> where we are and this how we live'. The life that we are living makes our
> communities the Third Force. Most of us are not working and have to spend all
> day struggling for small money. AIDS is worse in the shack settlements than
> anywhere else. Without proper houses, water, electricity, refuse removal and
> toilets all kinds of diseases breed. The causes are clearly visible and every Dick,
> Tom and Harry can understand. Our bodies itch every day because of the
> insects. If it is raining everything is wet – blankets and floors. If it is hot the
> mosquitoes and flies are always there. There is no holiday in the shacks. When
> the evening comes – it is always a challenge. The night is supposed to be for
> relaxing and getting rest. But it doesn't happen like that in the jondolos (shacks).
> People stay awake worrying about their lives. You must see how big the rats are
> that will run across the small babies in the night. You must see how people have
> to sleep under the bridges when it rains because their floors are so wet. The rain
> comes right inside people's houses. Some people just stand up all night.[2]

The lived truth of experience is, he suggests, a point of rupture in the smooth
fabric of political life woven by the ANC. Zikode (2006: 186–7) points directly
to the disjuncture:

> Those in power are blind to our suffering. This is because they have not seen
> what we see, they have not felt what we are feeling every second, every day. My
> appeal is that leaders who are concerned about peoples' lives must come and
> stay at least one week in the jondolos. They must feel the mud. They must share
> six toilets with 6000 people. They must dispose of their own refuse while living
> next to the dump. They must come with us while we look for work. They must
> chase away the rats and keep the children from knocking the candles. They must
> care for the sick when there are long queues for the tap. They must have a turn
> to explain to the children why they can't attend the Technical College down the
> hill. They must be there when we bury our children who have passed on in the
> fires, from diarrhoea or AIDS.

Part of the solution, he suggests, lies in a radically transformed material experience
on the part of those with power and privilege. Indeed *Abahlali* have a standing
invitation to both their enemies and would-be friends to spend a week living in the
shacks, as a prelude to broader engagement. Zikode is also very clear, however,
that the material conditions do not constitute a full explanation of the struggle.
Indeed, no material conditions, no matter how extreme, can ever explain a
struggle in terms of some mechanistic inevitability. Žižek (2005) is sensitive to
this, in his response to Mike Davis's claim that there is no left in the slums:

> One should resist the easy temptation to elevate and idealise slum-dwellers into
> a new revolutionary class. It is nonetheless surprising how far they confirm to the
> old Marxist definition of the proletarian revolutionary subject: they are 'free' in
> the double meaning of the word, even more than the classical proletariat ('free'

from all substantial ties; dwelling in a free space, outside the regulation of the state); they are a large collective, forcibly thrown into a situation where they have to invent some mode of being-together, and simultaneously deprived of support for their traditional ways of life.

An Introduction to Epistemology

If the material basis of struggle is insufficient to help us anticipate it, what else are the signposts of struggle, what are the telltale signs of a rupture with existing political thinking (and passivity)? Zikode (2006: 187–8) himself points to a constitutive moment that initiated the *Abahlali*, a moment beyond the material experience of shackdwelling:

> 16 February 2005 was the dawn of our struggle. On that day the Kennedy Road committee had a very successful meeting with the Chair of the housing portfolio of the executive committee of the municipality, the Director of Housing and the Ward Councillor. They all promised us the vacant land on the Clare Estate for housing. The land on Elf Road was one of the identified areas. But then we were betrayed by the most trusted people in our city. Just one month later, without any warning or explanation, bulldozers began digging the land. People were excited. They went to see what was happening and were shocked to be told that a brick factory was being built there. More people went down to see. There were so many of us that we were blocking the road. The man building the factory called the police and our local councillor – a man put into power by our votes and holding our trust and hopes. The councillor told the police 'Arrest these people they are criminals'. The police beat us, their dogs bit us and they arrested 14 of us. We asked what happened to the promised land. We were told 'Who the hell are you people to demand this land?' This betrayal mobilized the people.

He theorizes the struggle as beginning from a particular *event*, one constituted in part by individuals and ideologies, but which contained something else – a moment of truth. This supplement of truth, and the notion that truth constitutes people, mobilizing them, rendering them militant is an idea that has important parallels in those of French theorist Alain Badiou. Badiou's work can, I suggest, be profitably mined for insight for an interpretation of current *Abahlali* politics.

A point of convergence in both Zikode and Badiou's thought lies in what is to be explained – the moment of rupture with the past, through truth. For both, 'politics' is corrupted through its commonplace reference to the daily business of sanctimony, double dealing and violence. At the beginning of today's meeting, Zikode has asked, to nods and murmurs of approval from all gathered, that 'politics' be left out of this space. In further confrontation with the city, he has again suggested that: 'It must be clear that this is not a political game. This movement is a kind of social tool ... who ever wins the elections will be challenged by us ... We have decided not to vote'. 'Politics', in the sense of electoral politics, is no politics at all.

Unsurprisingly, the ANC has reacted badly to this. It is, after all, sensitive about its credentials, and its claims to legitimacy. The recent elections assumed great importance for the ANC as a litmus test of their right to rule. In a context where the party is absorbing the political opposition through mergers (as with the ANC's 2005 absorption of the National Party, the architects of apartheid), coalitions (with the ANC's ruling coalition with the South African Communist Party and the increasingly fractious coalition member, the Congress of South African Trade Unions) or through 'floor-crossing' legislation, a means through which members of parties frustrated by their inability to achieve results can reconnect themselves to the power marshalled by the ruling party, the ANC is moving towards 'Zanufication' – the one-party national-statism of Zimbabwe's rulers. The appearance, then, of a strong and democratically secured mandate is essential to the ANC's hegemony in South Africa.

Note here what voting has become. When the formal trappings of democracy, such as opposition, become increasingly less viable, yet when the legitimacy conferred by the appearance of democracy is absolutely necessary to secure hegemony, it is the ruling bloc – not its opponents – that insists on the absolute importance of voting and elections. The recent Senate elections in Zimbabwe, for example, demonstrate this well.

Badiou (2005: 78) offers a similar rejection of 'politics' and of what he calls the logic of the parliamentary-capitalist order, offering a scathing attack on 'democracy' as it is most commonly understood:

> In fact, the word 'democracy' concerns what I shall call *authoritarian opinion*. It is forbidden, as it were, not to be a democrat. More precisely, it stands to reason that humanity aspires to democracy, and any subjectivity suspected of not being democratic is regarded as pathological. At best it refers to a patient re-education, at worst to the right of military intervention by democratic paratroopers. (Emphasis in original)

Like Zikode and those gathered in agreement at today's meeting, Badiou wants to leave the sordid understanding of 'politics' in the gutter, developing something in its stead which more accurately reflects what's going on here. Badiou (2005: xxxix) proposes a name for the alternative, a 'metapolitics' defining it thus:

> by 'metapolitics', I mean whatever consequences a philosophy is capable of drawing, both in and for itself, from real instances of politics as thought. Metapolitics is opposed to political philosophy, which claims that since no such politics exists, it falls to philosophers to think 'the' political.

The Conditions of Politics

One of the reasons to turn to Badiou is that he builds nicely on Zikode's theorization, and that both are looking for what it is beyond the existing material and ideological conditions that produce a rupture. This rupture, for Badiou, is an event. We might want to consider an event as something that

radicalizes. Within the Left, we have cultures of asking questions like 'when did you become radical?', 'when did you make the break with prevailing opinion?' Badiou systematizes this, talking of an event as that kind of thing that not merely happens to people, but produces them, produces *people*. He contrasts *people* who are produced through events, with the rest of the world, with beings who are ethical automata, who parrot the ethical and politics opinions upon which they have been suckled. A key condition of Badiou's definition of an event is that it is open to anyone, rich or poor, black or white, man or woman – that there are no bars, no reasons why anyone at all cannot undergo this kind of transformative experience, and be shorn of their opinions. 'Opinion', incidentally, is a technical term. Badiou uses it to describe the analytical dead-zones of thought which pass for 'ethics' and 'politics', but which in fact *prevent* rather than facilitate investigations of truth in ethical and political domains. Opinion is the stock-in-trade of party politics, of the anaesthetizing simulacrum of politics which today passes under the banner of democracy. Undergoing an event, being produced by one, opens one to the possibility of dispensing with opinion in its entirety, living instead according to principles of truth.

> Let us say that a *subject*, which goes beyond the animal (although the animal remains its sole foundation [*support*]) needs something to have happened, something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in 'what there is'. Let us call this *supplement* an *event*, and let us distinguish multiple-being, where it is not a matter of truth (but only of opinions), from the event, which compels us to decide a *new* way of being ... (Badiou, 2001: 41, emphasis in original)

This new way of being comes with its own terrain, its own codes and logics that break completely with the past, but which are fully contained within the existing situation. Badiou (2001: 40–4) explains further with this example:

> From which 'decision', then, stems the process of a truth? From the decision to relate henceforth to the situation *from the perspective of its evental [èvènementiel] supplement.* Let us call this a fidelity. To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* (although all thought is a practice, a putting to the test) the situation 'according to' the event ... It is clear that under the effect of a loving encounter, if I want to be *really* faithful to it, I must completely rework my ordinary way of 'living' my situation. If I want to be faithful to the event of the 'Cultural Revolution', then I must at least practise politics (in particular the relation with the workers) in an entirely different manner from that proposed by the socialist and trade-unionist traditions ... I shall call 'truth' (*a* truth) the real process of a fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity *produces* in the situation. For example, the politics of the French Maoists between 1966 and 1976, which tried to think and practise a fidelity to two entangled events: the Cultural Revolution in China, and May '68 in France. ... Essentially, a truth is the material course

> traced, within the situation, by the evental supplementation. It is thus an *immanent break.* 'Immanent' because a truth proceeds *in* the situation, and nowhere else – there is no heaven of truths. 'Break' because what enables the truth-process – the event – meant nothing according to the prevailing language and established knowledge of the situation. We might say, then, that a truth-process is heterogeneous to the instituted knowledges of the situation. Or – to use an expression of Lacan's – that it punches a 'hole *[trou]*' in these knowledges. (Emphases in original)

The figure of the militant is central here. She might be described as a modern day 'seeker of truth', though this is an inaccurate description – better would be 'a person produced by truth' and whose mission, rather that seeking, is to maintain a fidelity to the event. The militant does not arise *ex nihilo*, but is produced in a specific place and context.

Note, too, the absolute importance of place here. Central is the observation that all truth-processes assume a particular mode in relation to the prevailing and the new knowledges of an event. A truth process is, at the end of the day, contiguous with the instituted possibilities of the situation. The process is utterly disruptive of prevailing assumptions, and is so not because it expressly engages with these prevailing assumptions, but because these truth processes, in being directed to other politics, destroy *en passant* the authority, the stature and the pseudopolitics of these prevailing knowledges. There can be no political guru descending to a radical movement from above. All militants must open themselves to being pierced, and thereby remade, in the vortex of struggle. Badiou (2001: 44) directly connects his epistemology to militancy:

> I call 'subject' the bearer *[le support]* of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of truth. The subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely nonexistent in the situation 'before' the event. We might say that the process of truth *induces* a subject. In the same way, the subject of a revolutionary politics is not the individual militant – any more, by the way, than it is the chimera of a class-subject. It is a singular production, which has taken different names (sometimes 'Party', sometimes not). To be sure, the militant enters into the composition of this subject, but once again it exceeds him ... Events are irreducible singularities, the 'beyond-the-law' of situations. Each faithful truth-process is an entirely invented immanent break with the situation. Subjects, which are the local occurrences of the truth-process ('points' of truth), are particular and incomparable inductions. It is with respect to subjects of this kind that it is perhaps legitimate to speak of an 'ethic of truths'. (Emphasis in original)

This, then, is the condition of politics – an event, which in turn is inseparable both from people produced through it, and the place in which it happens.

For Badiou, as for Zikode, the place, the time and space that bind and make events, are important, for they shape the kinds of rupture that follow the political

truth processes. As Hallward has observed, Badiou's work since the 1980s has, having established the basis of his philosophical ideas, moved to consider the concrete elements at work in politics. It is an almost sociological project, but one that Badiou has theorized, using the work of Sylvain Lazarus (Hallward, 2004).[3]

Badiou visits moments of rupture, and identifies its place, theorist and time period, or sequence. Consider three European events: the French Revolution, the era of Communism's spectre and Bolshevism. Each presented a rupture with that which preceded it. Each event produced its own disruptive logic of action, and its own geography of power and place – the French Revolution seized power from the Chateaux and took it to the Convention and meetings of the *sansculottes*, between 1792–4. The working-class movements, constituted not through non-membership of the aristocracy, but rather through proletarianism, through a community of work, offered a rupture with the new bourgeois order, from working-class organizing to the Paris Commune. The dawn of Bolshevism offered similar terrain, creating a new kind of capillary power through The Party.[4]

The list is non-exhaustive, and lest one consider my adoption of Badiou as complicity with his reduction of the world to Europe and China, there are four examples from Africa to add. In the Southern African context, we might want to say that Mugabe's current political project is one with an exterior mode, in which those rendered militant by it need external authorization for their politics, which some elements of ZANU-PF are placed to supply. By contrast, we might want to see the United Democratic Front's (UDF) struggles during the anti-apartheid years as interior, there being no authority other than the (often) covert meetings in which politics were forged. Again, to carry over the example of Mugabe, if his mode of politics is exterior, its place is the nation. If the UDF's mode of politics is interior, its *places* were the *meetings*. In this lies an important link to the present, and to the *Abahlali* experience within its meetings.

In many of the township struggles during the 1980s, precisely because the ANC was banned, the lived experience of anti-apartheid politics was melded not in the crucible of the ANC, but within the space of the United Democratic Front.[5] As Swilling (1987) notes, the key analytical construct in the UDF was autonomy:

> Resistance became increasingly effective because of the UDF's capacity to provide a national political and ideological center. However, the township revolt was not caused by strategies formulated and implemented by UDF national leadership. With the exception of key national campaigns (e.g. the black local authorities election boycotts of 1983–84 and the anti-tricameral parliament campaigns), *the driving force of resistance came from below, as communities responded to their terrible living conditions.* (Emphasis added)

With the unbanning of the ANC, this period came to an end, and the honeymoon of national reconstruction, with its suppressions, postponements and betrayals, began. But the politics of the UDF have not been forgotten. In fact, there is a helpful theoretical line to be traced between the UDF and the

meetings of the *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, though with one critical difference. The UDF legitimated its autonomy in the name of the authority of the ANC, exiled but certain to come home. *Abahlali* have no absent father. They can only act in the name of their own suffering and intelligence.

This is a vision that is democratized, or rather, pluralized, by Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he notes:

> Individual experience, because it is national and because it is a link in the chain of national existence, ceases to be individual, limited and shrunken and is enabled to open out into the truth of the nation and of the world. In the same way that during the period of armed struggle each fighter held the fortune of the nation in his hand, so during the period of national construction each citizen ought to continue in his real, everyday activity to associate himself with the whole of the nation, to incarnate the continuous dialectical truth of the nation and to will the triumph of man in his completeness here and now. (1965: 161–2)

The idea of the nation referred to here is not, however, the same as that conjured by, for instance, Mugabe's demand for subordination to his patriarchal authority or Mbeki's demand for subordination to the technocrats that remake society to better feed The Market. This idea of the nation is not subordinated to any particular party or state. It is that for which individuals have fought in the struggle for independence, and for which they continue to fight, despite the actions of the national bourgeoisie, with a clear trajectory not towards some perfect nationalism, but towards a humanist flowering of social consciousness which, while incubated in the project of national liberation, must transcend it. For Fanon the dialectical of negativity is permanent. The political fabric that connects individual to collective experience is not 'made in South Africa' any more than it is made anywhere else.

Two other African theorists have pondered this with respect to Badiou's work – Ernest Wamba-Dia-Wamba and Jacques Depelchin. Depelchin's *Silences in African History* (2005) observes the destruction of indigenous modes of politics, notably the palaver (a term which, in English, has come to mean precisely its opposite – no longer a term for engaged dialogue and politics, palaver now just means a process of windbaggery). Wamba dia Wamba (1994: 258), in his search for modes of politics within Africa, has followed Badiou's trajectory, and offers a Badiou-sounding critique of the 'democratic' (and, we should add, 'developmental') state as an impediment to politics, because it presents an impediment to thinking:

> Politics (political capacity, political consciousness), the active prescriptive relationship to reality, exists under the condition of people who believe that politics must exist ... Generally in Africa, the tendency has been to assign it [this political capacity] to the state (including the party and liberation movements functioning really as state structures) *per se*. Unfortunately, the state cannot transform or redress itself: it kills this prescriptive relationship to reality by imposing consensual unanimity ... the thrust of progressive politics is

> to be separated from the state. It is not possible to achieve a democratic state,
> i.e. a state that is transparent to, rather than destructive of, people's viewpoints,
> if people only 'think' state, internalize state and thus self-censor themselves.

There are alternatives to the politics of the development state. The idea of *Mbongi* offers one of them. Depelchin (2005) offers a definition of the space that sounds strikingly like the meeting with which this article began:

> In a country where citizens have been treated as cannon fodder or worse by
> politicians, it is re-invigorating to hear and see in practice the principle –
> central to the *Mbongi* – that 'everyone thinks, everyone counts, no one counts
> less or more than one'.

Adding that the *Mbongi* is more than just a venue, Wamba dia Wamba's (1985: 31) thoughts, from 1985, flesh out the notion of *Mbongi* further: 'Besides being an ideological and philosophical struggle organized and carried out communitarily (*sic*), it is also above all a process of very intense generalized mass education'. These spaces have leadership within them (it is wishful to suppose that, within a space where all are treated equally, people will behave *identically*). Sometimes, the *Mbongi* is furthered by a *Nzonzi,* someone Depelchin describes as 'a good shepherd', someone who seeks to inculcate fidelity to the events that produce the *Mbongi*, and who serves as what Badiou understands as a militant. Of course any fetish of the militant risks collapse into a new mode of authoritarianism if radical democratic commitments are not woven into the very conception of militancy. This means a certain orientation to leadership from the movement (and not, it turns out, the other way around). Badiou (2005: 72) has something to offer here:

> Even if it is obvious that the bond is constitutive of the mass movement, it does
> not follow that it is constitutive of politics. On the contrary, more often than not
> it is only by breaking the presumed bond through which the mass movement
> operates that politics ensures the long-term durability of the event. Even at the
> heart of the mass movement, political activity is an unbinding, and is experienced
> as such by the movement. This is also why in the final analysis, and in terms of
> the sequence we are talking about here, which once again includes May '68 and
> its aftermath, 'mass leaders' were not the same type of men as political leaders.[6]

Abahlali baseMjondolo take this condition of possibility seriously, with a leadership that is flexible and contingent. At every meeting, the chair is elected, and mandates are forged and revisited. From the very outset, the leadership has been led by the base. From the decisions to march to demand the promised land, to march against the Mayor despite the illegal banning of the march, or to reject the offer of the R10 billion land deal, demanding instead that land be compulsorily purchased closer to the settlements where people live and go to school, ordinary *Abahlali* supporters have been a radical force in the dialectic between mass and representative. This tension is one that seems to have worked well – so far, the movement has avoided sclerosis in leadership, and flexibility in

tactics and strategy. The role of leader as negotiator is one that necessarily demands the delivery of compromise on behalf of the poor. By reasserting a radical and maximal mandate (no forced removals, upgrades, free water, etc.) the tendency for pre-emptive compromise ('We should say we want more than 6 kilolitres of free water per month before we pay – how about 10 kilolitres?' 'No, water must be free') is tamped down, and the ability of leadership to betray the constituency is minimized.

Badiou's work enables us to present a broad set of necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for real politics, the mode of struggle deemed free of politics in *Abahlali*. The degraded physical reality of the settlements is insufficient to generate these politics – Badiou points to 'the event', of the place of politics, of the mode of politics and of the people who are transformed in the political process. If this looks like a list of ingredients, it cannot be, for there can be no recipe. The irreducibility of place and context makes a mockery of the idea of 'replicating' these processes through any pre-ordained process of political chemistry. Events cannot be staged. They occur as precious interruptions in the web of obedience that usually weaves society together and, if not faithfully theorized, are quickly woven closed. But politics can, and do, travel. For Fanon, the travel is temporal – politics forged in the armed struggle can and should exist after the armed struggle because the importance of that politics lies not, as too many commentators have hazarded, in mindless violence, but in violence under popular control, not voluntarism, but in transformative and transgressive organization. For Badiou, further, the place of politics is not an insistence on 'microlocalism', for some fetishization of specific time and place, but of the understanding of the importance of time and place.[7]

Indeed, to commit to an understanding of something is precisely to reject its fetishization. That *Abahlali* politics have been forged in a particular place does not mean that they cannot also be seen outside those places. Thus, for instance, meetings of the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* can, and do, travel. They can happen outside the *imijondolo*, in the Mayor's office during a 'caucusing' break or in a meeting of the Social Movements Indaba in Johannesburg where the substantively undemocratic and authoritarian style of the meeting was challenged by the *Abahlali* from the floor. Thinking, too, happens outside the meeting, and the politics within the shackdwellers' movement is not, of course, the only politics within the shack settlement. It is a subject of further study to appreciate better these articulations within the *imijondolo*. Nonetheless, for both Fanon and Badiou, the process of politics and political thinking is dialectical, configuring and reconfiguring place, space and the people within it. It is therefore necessarily autonomous of the State, for the State cannot tolerate this kind of reconfiguration. It cannot, in the South African context, allow any alternative kind of democracy but its own. In the shacks of Durban, political thinking necessarily becomes autonomous of 'the party' too, because in this context, the ANC has systematically betrayed its constituents. For the *Abahlali*, the party's over.

A Laboratory for Truth within the University

Instead of guidance by any overriding principles or dogma, learning, leadership and mistakes have been central to collective political development of *Abahlali baseMjondolo*. The idea of a struggle as a *school* has gripped the imagination of many *Abahlali* (see, for example, Pithouse, 2006). This in no small part is because the protests, at which *Abahlali* have shown collective strength and unity against the State, have demonstrated that being a shackdweller is not a source of stigma, and indeed that a recognition of 'jondolo consciousness', with its cultures of resistance, can itself be an event. People are created through *Abahlali* protests. At the first legally sanctioned protest from the Kennedy Road settlement one of the banners simply stated 'University of Kennedy Road'. Enrolment at the 'University' grew quickly. Each new protest saw new banners declaring new Universities, associated with new settlements that joined *Abahlali baseMjondolo* until, finally, the University of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* was declared (see Figure 3).

There is no building for this university. And if the students of this university are created through events, they are educated through the place of learning – the meeting. The meeting is the classroom, and the spirit of the discussions are well captured by Alain Badiou (2005: 76):

> Everyone on the ground is essentially alone in the immediate solution of problems, and their meetings, or proceedings, have as their natural content

Figure 3
A banner at the 14 November 2005 Protest at the Foreman Road settlement
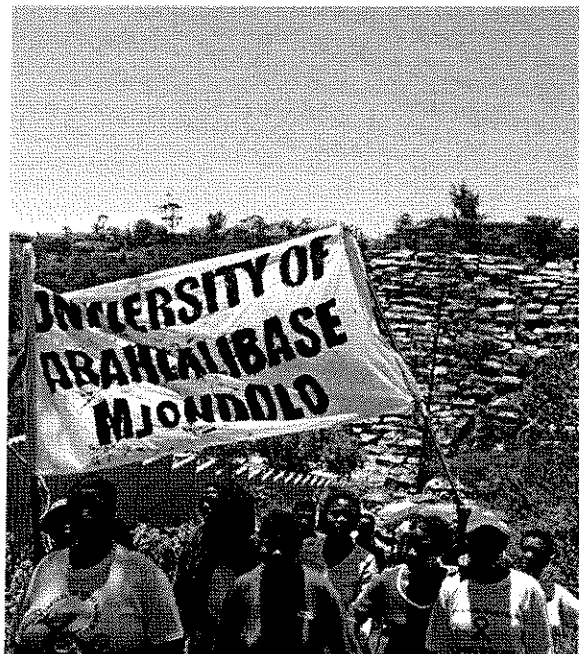
> protocols of delegation and inquest whose discussion is no more convivial or superegotistical than that of two scientists involved in debating a very complex question.

The curriculum at this university is as yet unwritten. The importance of spaces of education deeply informs this struggle, in ways strikingly reminiscent of Freire's pedagogy. *Abahlali baseMjondolo* has a self-consciously open-ended political programme. Zikode (2006) explained that:

> we have a number of levels for our programme in Kennedy Road. We have done the first level, we have waited. We have tried the second level of talking them. We are doing the third level by marching. If that doesn't work, we have a fourth level. I cannot talk about it, *I don't know what it will be*, but they will see. (Emphasis added)

This openness, the absence of a strict programme for the movement, yet coupled with a sensitivity for the need for new tactics is, I think, a key strength of the movement. It marks the absence of a directive politics, but the presence of a prescriptive one – change must happen, but its contours are not possible to strategize for one man, or one committee alone.[8] Observations of the course of the movement have borne out this interpretation, and of the concomitant increase in radicalism within the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* not as a matter of pre-ordained principle, but as a matter of practical politics.[9] This eminently practical dimension to politics, returning to Badiou's definitions above, is what characterizes 'truth'.

Interim Conclusions

At the meeting in Pemary Ridge, consensus has been built slowly. The injunction to 'remain free of politics' has been followed. The resolutions of the meeting have been painstakingly worked through. Zikode has, with support from academic Fazel Khan (who had been elected onto the negotiating team on the basis of his long experience as a union negotiator), put forward suggestions for compromise with the State. This compromise is eventually rejected by the meeting after an intervention by a young woman, Fikile Nkosi, incites a more radical line of discussion. A follow-up statement in support of Nkosi's position by the equally young Mnikelo Ndabankulu is carefully discussed and receives wide support. This is not in any way considered an indictment of Zikode or Khan as individuals but rather an acknowledgement that leadership will involve compromise with the State, and that the meeting rejects such compromise (not, it turns out on grounds of dogma, but because of the hard-won lesson that 'we know they will just lie to us, so why should we believe them now?'). The tactics are formed around which people on the negotiating team will ask what questions, with two people asking questions on their assigned topics of housing, land, electricity, sanitation, access to schooling and so on. This structure of asking questions is put forward to ensure that all questions get asked, and that, if one person falters within the space of the

encounter with the municipality (and all are aware of the difficulty of making one's voice heard in a venue chosen by the powerful), answers will nevertheless be sought. The meeting disbands with an '*Amandla! Awethu!*' (Power! It is ours!) It has been a long night. People leave the meeting exhausted.

Have we exhausted ourselves in understanding this meeting? The answer to this question must be no. The meeting itself needs to be more carefully located in a sociology that takes into account life lived outside of the meeting. The complexities of the relationship between what happens within the meeting and what happens afterwards, of the candle-studded enquiry and the work, and the search for work undertaken the next day, in short what happens in and around the meeting, demands further work. While it can be argued that meetings are the political marrow of the *Abahlali*, the connective tissue of politics, of social reproduction itself, necessarily exceeds, and vastly so, the space and time of meeting. And yet this tissue is the very material condition of possibility for the meeting. And, as we know, social reproduction is often the site of all kinds of modes of domination, many of them articulated through the nuances of gender, generation and the classes within classes and so on, which are often excluded from rigorous political analysis. This is not to say that the meeting cannot, and on occasion does not confront these, but it is to say that the meeting has limits. Once the political value of the intellectual work done in the meeting is accepted then the next question that will have to be confronted is how far the principles that sustain the meeting can move into other sites and modes of thinking and action in the social realm that sustain the meeting. We need, in other words, to understand the meeting and its politics not only by connecting it backwards and forwards in time with events, but also by connecting it in space with the 'ordinary' material and lived experience of People (in Badiou's sense, 'mobilized people' in Zikode's) around this, at times, extraordinary site of interior political work.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. It is an announcement that will turn out to be premature. The owners of the land on which the new houses are to be built, the Moreland property management company, which runs land acquired by the colonial sugar company Tongaat-Hulett, announced on 29 November that there has, as of yet, been no deal at all. It would seem that the municipality violated Amilcar Cabral's dictum to tell no lies, nor claim easy victories. No doubt Tongaat-Hulett will forgive Mlaba. He used to work there, as the Mayor contracted them to develop a development plan for the city and then hired them to run the loss-making, publicly funded theme park that they recommended.
2. This mode of writing is strikingly different from alternatively technocratic and hysterically nationalist language of the ruling party, or the technocratic, psychoanalytic and stolidly

dogmatically socialist modes of writing typical of most of the middle class left (see issues of *ANC Today* for the former and Bond (2001) for examples of the latter). In its structure and language, Zikode's Third Force article recalls a broad humanism in the tradition of Desmond Tutu's sermons against apartheid. For example Tutu himself, in a 23 November 2004 Nelson Mandela lecture used similar words:

> Too many of our people live in gruelling, demeaning, dehumanising poverty ... In the struggle days it was exhilarating because they spoke of a mandate – you had to justify your position in vigorous exchanges. That seems no longer to be the case. It seems sycophancy is coming into its own ... What is black empowerment when it seems to benefit not the vast majority but a small elite that tends to be recycled?

Thabo Mbeki responded angrily, suggesting that 'it would be good if those that present themselves as the greatest defenders of the poor should also demonstrate decent respect for the truth'. Tutu responded that he would continue to pray for Mbeki and the Government as he had for the apartheid government. This exchange is important not only for the schism that it reveals in the post-apartheid order, but also because the drawing on humanist Christian tropes is one that Zikode has done before, in a subtle blending of anti-apartheid and Christian humanist politics: 'The first Nelson Mandela', he explained, 'was Jesus Christ. The second was Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The third Nelson Mandela are the poor people of the world'.

3. I am indebted to a forthcoming paper by Michael Neocosmos for his reflections on Lazarus, and for bringing out the specifically African applications of it.

4. Badiou also gives two other analyses of events, the Parliamentary and Stalinist modes. In these, the process of thinking is subjugated to the power of either the Party (different to Bolshevism, because there the Party is the way through which thinking happens – in Stalinism, it is the way thinking is appropriated), or 'elected representatives'.

5. Though never purely so. My understanding of the UDF is not entirely romanticized – it was a struggle not only between forces within South Africa, but also pulled by tensions within its South African meetings, by the ANC in exile in Lusaka to control and shape it.

6. We need to be urgently cautioned by Badiou's sexist formulation of this point. The question of who counts, and how, as a potential participant in meetings always needs to be asked urgently in theory and in practice. *Abahlali* are no exception.

7. I mention this because I realize that in locating my story telling in a meeting of the *Abahlali*, I might be seen as fetishizing a particular building, a particular school house or the Pemary Ridge settlement. This is not the case.

8. See Hallward (2003) for a helpful and clear presentation of the politics of prescription. *Abahlali* politics reads well alongside his interpretation of Badiou, especially if we consider the political axiom driving the movement's politics to be one of equality.

9. This dialectical development of political militancy, fuelled by democratic reflection on lived experience is one familiar to scholars of Fanon.

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