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*Zabalaza, Unfinished Struggles against Apartheid: The Shackdwellers' Movement in Durban**

Nigel C. Gibson

Talk to us . . . not about us.

— Abahlali T-shirt

If as a theoretician, one's ears are attuned to new impulses from the workers, new "categories" will be created, a new way of thinking, a step forward in philosophic cognition.

— Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom*

"We are on our own": the birth of a new movement

The struggle that started in Kennedy Road was the beginning of a new era.

—S'bu Zikode

On 19 March 2005,¹ in a scene reminiscent of the anti-apartheid struggle, 750 Black shackdwellers barricaded a major ring road in Durban, fighting the police for four hours. The shackdwellers had

*Zabalaza means "struggle" in all the Nguni languages (isiXhosa, isiZulu, etc.). Drafts of this paper were presented at the International Seminar series at Illinois State University, the Conversation series at the Institute for the Study of Race and Social Thought, Temple University, the International Lecture series at Trinity College Hartford, and the Works In Progress series at Emerson College. I would like to thank faculty and students at these events for their comments and criticisms, in particular, Lewis R. Gordon, Jane Anna Gordon, Thomas Meyer, T.Y. Wang, Ali Riaz, Rebecca Saunders, Michael Niemann, Abosede A. George, Sam Binkley, Roger House, David Bogen, and Flora Gonzalez. I would also like to thank students in my 2006 postcolonial seminar for putting up with my going on about the shackdwellers' movement. Finally, my thanks to Asako Serizawa who has been particularly helpful, and to Richard Pithouse whose advice and criticism have been invaluable. This article was completed at the beginning of 2007. For more recent information and discussions, see <http://Abahlali.org>.

1. Some of the following is based on my introduction to *Challenging Hegemony: Social Movements and the Quest for a New Humanism in Post-apartheid South Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006), pp. 1–14.

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been waiting patiently for Nelson Mandela's historic 1994 election promise of housing to be realized. The houses were to be built on a nearby piece of land, but under the pressure of real estate and commercial development, the promise was broken. Instead of housing, people found themselves facing bulldozers as well as removal 12 miles outside the city (a ten-dollar cab ride), far from work opportunities, schools, and hospitals. Not unlike the apartheid practice of treating people as "surplus population," the politics of market forces had put into relief the human reality of post-apartheid South Africa and all its broken promises.

Most of the Kennedy Road informal settlement is not "on" Kennedy Road, but is accessible through numerous paths that criss-cross the hills. The people there are desperately poor. Forgotten in "booming" post-apartheid South Africa, they live without basic services like sanitation, water or electricity in shacks dug into the side of the hills and built with advertising boards, corrugated iron, and mud, their temporary shelter having become more or less permanent. For a long time, there wasn't even garbage pickup,² even though the perimeter wall of the Bisasar Road dump (the largest in Africa) abuts the settlement where many make a living sifting through the detritus, collecting cardboard, plastic or metal to sell to recyclers in the "informal economy."

Kennedy Road itself is on the Clare Estate, a mainly Indian middle- and upper-middle class residential area that is experiencing, like much of urban South Africa, sky-rocketing real estate prices. In the interstices of the estate – in the valleys and along riverbanks and against the municipal dump – there are eight different settlements, each with different histories and organization. Whereas the Kennedy Road settlement has a radically democratic political culture that took years to develop, other settlements have different forms of government, some based on political patronage.³ Each settlement is configured by different material realities, often limited by physical space, size, and geography, which limit the possibility of constructing such things as common meeting spaces necessary to popular democracy. But, despite these constraints, looking down from the hilltops, there is something special about the

2. One result from the struggle is that there is now refuse removal.

3. Given that so much literature on shack settlements is based on UN-Habitat in Nairobi (where the problem is slumlordism produced by a rental market for shacks), it is necessary to point out that in most instances the authoritarian modes of governance that do occur tend to be based on clientelistic associations where local leaders try to offer "their people" as vote banks for the party in exchange for often very petty favors from above rather than to extract rents.

area. The real estate developers understand it,⁴ and it is not lost on the shackdwellers either.⁵

On 19 March 2005, despite Mandela's promise, the developers moved in. Seeing their Promised Land being leveled, the shackdwellers acted, blockading Umgeni Road with burning tires and mattresses and bringing traffic and businesses to a halt.⁶ The police, taken by surprise, called for support. They attacked with dogs and punched protestors. Four hours later, 14 of the 750 people from Kennedy Road informal settlement in the Clare Estate, Durban, were arrested, including two school-going teenagers. Two days later, on 21 March - "Human Rights Day" (in 1960, this was the day when apartheid police in Sharpeville fired on a crowd of demonstrators, killing 61) - 1,200 people demonstrated, demanding that the local police release the 14 or arrest the whole community. The people themselves had finally begun to press the state to be accountable; they had begun to self-consciously mobilize for their own rights.

For more than a decade, the people's anger had been steadily rising. Many had given up hope of formal employment to follow their "entrepreneurial" aspirations (collecting cardboard, plastic or metal from the stinking dump, gardening or cleaning for residents on the Clare estate), as the World Bank suggests, in the "informal economy." They accepted that "delivery" would be slow and that they had to take responsibility for their own welfare. But, as one shackdweller aptly put it, they had finally grown "tired of living and walking in shit."⁷

So, on that March day, the people from the Kennedy Road settlement organized quickly and staged their protest. They revolted because they felt betrayed. And although they might not have seen it in these terms, their action took the form of a social movement. They saw themselves on their own against the local government, the police, business, the rich, the media, and the courts.⁸ Characteristically, they did not wait for the media or for professional activists to arrive.

4. According to a member of the Kwa-Zulu Natal cabinet, "we can't build matchboxes next to three million-rand houses." Fazel Khan, "Outside the ICC again," www.southafrica.indymedia.org/news/2006/09/11083.php

5. "They want it for the rich, opines one of the shackdwellers." Alfred Ndlovu, quoted by Richard Pithouse in "Obedience doesn't pay: Inside the new revolts," *Sunday Tribune*, 27 March 2005.

6. The promise that housing would be built on the land in nearby Elf Road had been repeated two weeks before the bulldozers came.

7. Quoted in Fred Kockott, "Shack dwellers' fury erupts," *Tribune*, 20 March 2005.

8. Richard Pithouse, email to author, 21 March 2005.

They already had a democratic decision-making body, the Kennedy Road Development Committee, whose participatory meetings and social demands quickly caught the imagination of adjacent communities. Indeed, at the welcome-home party for the arrested, the chair of the Kennedy Road Development Committee, S'bu Zikode, who would become the chair of the shackdwellers' movement, affirmed the actions of the crowd in a memorable speech: "The first Nelson Mandela was Jesus Christ. The second was Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The third Nelson Mandela is the poor people of the world."⁹ The resonance was clear. The poor weren't Christs, but Christ was the first Mandela, the first liberator, who articulated a new heaven on earth. Mandela is Christ reborn, grounding liberation firmly on South African soil, his long imprisonment during apartheid a metaphor for the nation, just as his release is identified with the birth of a new South Africa. Yet the failure of the historical Mandela, the leader, to liberate South Africa was now demanding the birth of a new Mandela: the poor themselves. After many promises, all of them broken, they saw through the empty rhetoric of the local authorities. Enough was enough – sekwanele, sekwanele! – truth emanated from their own experiences: "the poors"¹⁰ had become the "reality of the nation,"¹¹ declaring the shackdwellers' movement a university where they "think their own struggles" and "are not poor in mind."¹² Subtly critiquing Mandela's leadership, the poor were taking issues into their own hands, seeing themselves as the force and reason of their own liberation; they had become their own Mandelas.

Unfreedom in the dawn of freedom

Our brothers say we born free because we born after Freedom . . . As teenagers we are saying there is no freedom in our life.

– Pinky Zulu

Thus, even if they had not heard the term "social movement," the shackdwellers had become a "social movement" by virtue of their self-organization and by developing their own linkages with other shackdwellers. For it was the *universality* of the Kennedy Road shackdwellers'

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9. Raj Patel and Richard Pithouse, "The Third Nelson Mandela," quoted in Gibson, *Challenging Hegemony*.
 10. See Ashwin Desai, *We are the Poors* (New York: Monthly Review, 2002).
 11. This is Fanon's original title for *A Dying Colonialism*.
 12. S'bu Zikode, "The Third Force," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 41, Nos. 1–2 (2006).

experience and demands that was immediately understood by neighboring settlements. The development of such horizontal links among shack settlements suggested a new kind of movement in the making. By May 2005, the people from Kennedy Road and five other shack settlements (as well as residents from local municipal flats) organized a march of over 3,000 people. With banners expressing their collective will ("We Want our Land") and homegrown political education ("The University of Kennedy Road"¹³), the marchers presented a memorandum of ten demands that had been drawn up through a series of meetings and community discussions. Written by the shackdwellers and flatdwellers after careful discussion, this memorandum, which included the need for housing, jobs, sanitation, medical care, education, and safety from police brutality and environmental toxins, became a people's charter¹⁴ – one that referred not only to the 900,000 shackdwellers in Durban, but to the poor across South Africa, where an estimated 2.4 million households live in shacks:¹⁵

We, the people of Ward 25, loyal citizens of the Republic of South Africa, unite behind the following demands:

- For too long have our communities survived in substandard and informal housing, and for too long have we been promised land, only to be betrayed. Therefore, we demand adequate land and housing to live in dignity.
- Our communities are ravaged by poverty, and we demand that the government create the jobs that we so desperately need. Therefore, we demand the creation of well-paying and dignified jobs.
- In addition to providing substandard housing, the council charges rents way in excess of our communities' ability to pay. Therefore, we demand the writing-off of all rental arrears.
- The government treats us with contempt, believing that because we are not rich, we have not earned their respect. Therefore, we demand participation in genuinely democratic processes of consultation and citizenship.
- Our communities are affected by crime, police racism, and environmental hazards. Therefore, we demand safe and secure environments in which we can work, play and live without intimidation from the authorities.
- Many in our communities suffer from illness, and the scourge of HIV/AIDS affects us all. Therefore, we demand well-resourced and staffed health facilities.
- Our young people are the future of our community, yet they have very few choices. Therefore, we demand attention to the needs of our communities' youth.
- The council charges unaffordable rates in our flats. Therefore, we demand lower rates in flat buildings.

13. Raj Patel, "A short course in politics at the University of *Abahlali baseMjondolo*," University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Centre for Civil Society Research Report, No. 41.

14. It is important to note that it was the principle of the handful of middle-class activists/intellectuals from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) involved in the movement to make sure that the people spoke for themselves.

15. "South African shack dwellers speak out," *Agence France Presse*, 25 December 2005.

- We are entitled to decent social services in our communities. Therefore we demand these services, including proper sanitation, a community garden for our poor, and free education to our communities' orphans. Finally, for his failure to deliver these needs to his constituents, and for putting local business interests ahead of those of the poor, we therefore demand that Councillor Yacoob Baig, a career-politician since apartheid, submit his resignation.

The march ended at the offices of the local ANC councillor, and here, the marchers declared that if Baig did not resign, they, his constituents, would declare Ward 25 councillor-less. They brought along a coffin to act out Baig's political death.¹⁶ The point obviously is clear, but what is also worth noting is the marchers' self-consciousness as both a class pitted against the interest of property and a collective pressing the government to not only deliver on its promises, but to include them in its deliberations. The marchers, in other words, were self-consciously challenging the elite character of the local government and by implication the class character of the "elite transition."¹⁷

Some months later the shackdwellers' movement, Abahlali base-Mjondolo (AbM),¹⁸ was launched following a meeting of 12 settlements at Kennedy Road.¹⁹ Consistently ignored by the local council and often treated as criminal and lied to, shackdwellers across Durban began to join the movement. "The only language they understand is getting us into the street" proclaimed Zikode, and throughout the following year, mass marches and demonstrations brought the plight of the shackdwellers to local, national and even international attention with stories being featured in *The Economist* and other international and local media, including a full-page story in the *New York Times*. With few resources and on a quick learning curve, the movement has been able to not only represent itself but also to respond to misrepresentations in the media.

It soon became clear that the shackdwellers weren't going away, and daily demonstrations and actions in all of South Africa's major cities began occurring alongside Abahlali's growing reputation and

16. Baig started his career in the apartheid National Party and joined the ANC after a stint in the Democratic Alliance.

17. Legitimation of the shacks could take different forms. One form, which is akin to privatization, is to legalize the shacks by providing title deeds, thus making shackdwellers into individual property owners. The shackdwellers' movement is not advocating this strategy since it would probably undermine the autonomy of the settlement and would prove detrimental to a movement based on community solidarity.

18. The roots of the word Mjondolo (the colloquial word for shacks) are multiple. One line of thought is that it originally referred to the tractor-crates that were used for shack construction in the 1970s.

19. Of the 32 representatives, 15 were women.

media presence.²⁰ President Mbeki's response was to call for them to stop. "These are the things the youth used to do in the struggle against apartheid" and were no longer applicable, he declared, reminding the country that "we must stop this business of people going into the street to demonstrate about lack of delivery."²¹

But there is continuity between this current struggle and the struggles against apartheid. Acknowledged even by Mandela and the ANC in 1993, it was widely believed that the end of apartheid would see the development of the shantytown.²² The shackdwellers' conditions were viewed as a consequence of apartheid.²³

In fact, South Africa has always been a country of extremes, of rich and poor, and developments in the South African economy have always been articulated in the context of global capitalism. According to the "Washington Consensus" of the early 1990s, for example, the end of apartheid, which was helped along by a goodly kick from multinational corporations (and the World Bank), was reduced to an elite political transition. Co-opting some of the best brains of the struggle, while transforming the formal movements into structures of governance, the ANC promised that the legacies of apartheid would be addressed.²⁴ Yet the ANC's policies and practices never matched the rhetorical promises. At first this was put down to the politics of transition especially at the local government level. But a real shift came in 1996 when, trading on its credibility as "the" liberation movement (not to mention Mandela's own charisma), the ANC tightened its hold over its internal opposition and, without discussion, shifted its economic discourse from the neo-Keynesian Reconstruction and

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20. In 2005 alone there were over 600 community actions across the country – such as demonstrations, occupations, and battles with police that resulted in bloodshed. These were not isolated events and were often aided by new technologies, such as cell phones (in South Africa, as in Europe, one can receive calls on a cell phone without having to pay). Whatever new technology may have done to aid communication, the shackdwellers' movements, more so than previous movements, have been able to speak for themselves and represent themselves in the media.
 21. Richard Pithouse, "Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers' Movement in Durban, South Africa," *Monthly Review*, No. 1 (2006).
 22. In a 1993 press release, the ANC proclaimed that people living in "squatter areas" should make their voice heard: "Your problems are my problems, your solution is my solution, says President Nelson Mandela."
 23. As Dumslane Makhaye put it, "The crisis in housing in South Africa is . . . a result of apartheid" (ANC, Southern Natal Statement on the Housing Crisis, 9 November 1993).
 24. On the South African transition see Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition* (London: Zed, 1999). For more on this issue, see Hein Marais, *South Africa: Limits to Change* (London: Zed, 1998).

Development Plan (RDP) to the trickle-down market liberalization of Growth and Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) and a range of neoliberal economic policies including budget cuts, privatization and trade liberalization.²⁵ The privatization and commercialization of municipal services that it encouraged have deprived millions of people of housing, electricity and water. Though subject to international pressures, the direct authors of this “homegrown” structural adjustment were the new Black and old white elites.²⁶

The main beneficiaries of GEAR have been South Africa’s banks and multinationals, now taxed less than they were under apartheid. This includes the white elite as well as, most famously, thousands of Black dollar millionaires.²⁷ Today the South African economy is more integrated into the global economy than at any time in its history, and post-apartheid South Africa quickly moved to a neoliberal economic model to encourage capitalist global investment and the further privatization and liberalization of the economy including the corporatization of basic services such as water.

The Black working class, especially the poor, have been the losers. Ten years of GEAR have seen the rise, not decline, of inequality, with the number of people living in shacks increased by one million and more than 40% of the economically active population unemployed. Despite promises of basic rights, 10 million have been disconnected from water and electricity and 2 million have been evicted from their homes.

After 1994, the ANC attempted to rein in demands from below through a discourse of “sacrifice” and moderation. Deep cuts in budgets for social services and healthcare have been exacerbated by denial about the magnitude of HIV/AIDS on the part of senior government officials and President Mbeki himself. Couched in the rhetoric of anti-imperialism, the denialism²⁸ in fact recapitulates apartheid

25. See, in addition to the studies by Bond and by Marais, Nigel Gibson, “Ideology, Political Education and South Africa’s Transition from Apartheid,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2001).

26. Alan Hirsch suggests [in *Season of Hope: Economic Reform under Mandela and Mbeki* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2005)] that the neoliberal program was instituted by the government to protect South Africa’s sovereignty against the imposition of a neoliberal program by the IMF/World Bank.

27. On the formation of the new South African elites see Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652–2002* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002).

28. See Mandisa Mbali, “Mbeki’s Denialism and the Ghosts of Apartheid and Colonialism for Post-apartheid AIDS policy-making,” www.hivan.org.za/admin/documents/Mbeki's%20denialism.doc

notions of public health. With GEAR, serious discussion of the social and economic consequences of years of colonialism and apartheid has given way to a neoliberal discourse about the poor, who are represented as “undifferentiated, unwilling carriers of social diseases” – in other words, as morally corrupt and behaviorally undisciplined.²⁹

The new South African constitution declares that “everyone has the right to adequate housing” and that the state must take measures to progressively realize this right. The post-apartheid government embarked on a massive new housing program, but the houses became smaller, cheaper, and shoddier – “rush job houses” as many residents call them, much worse than some of the older apartheid township housing – and they were beginning to fall apart. Moreover most of these one-room toilet-sized houses had been built far from the urban centers and were thus economically non-viable for many people for whom living close to economic opportunities, as well as to educational opportunities for their children, are vital. In this context, a shack in the city was a much better option. Thus when the eThekweni Municipality’s plan (which includes metro Durban) for a “city without slums” is described as moving shackdwellers “to the periphery,”³⁰ it is correctly understood by the shackdwellers as the return of the apartheid policy of removing “black spots.”³¹ Once again Black people were being “pushed out of the city and dumped in the rural ghettos.”³²

Shantytowns have continued to grow. They have become recognized settlements, and the local government plans for housing cannot keep up. Even the practice of providing electricity connections to shackdwellers who could afford a fairly steep deposit was stopped in 2001, and other promises of toilets and taps have remained unrealized.

29. See Franco Barchiesi, “Wage Labor and Social Citizenship in the Making of Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 42, No.1 (2007), pp. 46–7.

30. Quoted in Richard Pithouse and Fazel Khan, “Durban: A New Enemy Moves into Sight: A Bitter Struggle Begins,” www.southafrica.indymedia.org/news/2005/09/8749.php

31. We should remember that after Koornhof announced in 1981 that forced removals would end, they did not. What changed was the tactics and language, which included “vague promises, ambiguous statements, announcements and retractions, rumors and harassment” (Laurine Platzky, “Relocation in South Africa,” *South African Review* 3 (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1986), p. 395. The same tactics are appearing in post-apartheid South Africa. For example, promises to bring electricity to the shacks were retracted because the informal settlements were “temporary” and the shackdwellers would be rehoused by 2010. Now the 2010 date has been retracted.

32. Nonhlanhla Mzobe, paraphrased in Richard Pithouse, “Coffin for the Councillor,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 41, Nos. 1–2 (2006), p. 176.

The realities of daily life – the lack of water, the problems of sewage, the lack of electricity, and the danger of fires – create dismal situations. Shantel Vachani, arguing in the *Sunday Tribune* that deaths from shack fires are a direct result of the municipality's non-electrification policy, declares, "One would have to ask what those living in informal settlements during Apartheid, supporting the ANC government throughout, have gained from years of struggle . . . How many Mhlengi Khumalo and Zithulele [Dhlomo] cases [a 1-year-old and a 70-year-old killed by shack fires at Kennedy Road] must occur before justice is served?"³³

The class character of the situation is plain. Access to "sufficient water" is guaranteed in the South African constitution, but the increasing price of water has seen water consumption drop. In the shacks, the situation is worse because lack of access results in deplorable conditions: a few taps and toilets serving thousands of people. It is not simply that those in the shacks can't afford sufficient water and electricity – some can – but shacks burn because there is insufficient water and no electricity, and yet fire engines are not dispatched when fires do start. As S'bu Zikode puts it, "We have seen that when the wild forests and plantations of the rich are on fire there are often large helicopters with hundreds of tons of water to extinguish the fires. But when our shacks are on fire the helicopters and ambulances are nowhere to be found . . . Helicopters only come for us when we march. The state comes for us when we try to say what we think."³⁴

The booming economy has magnified the threat to shackdwellers. What was marginal land is now becoming prime real estate. Local housing officials are simply the paid hacks of the developers (schooled in the bootstrap discourse of World Bank seminars) insisting that the shackdwellers have just got to understand that it is far too expensive to build in the city and that new developments would create economic "opportunities" on the city's margins. As each of South Africa's big cities – Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town – vies to become "world class," namely, a city without shantytowns, the government discourse about "informal settlements" has become increasingly reactionary: as the Africana philosopher-activist, Frantz Fanon, had described in *The Wretched of the Earth* 45 years ago, the existence and growth of shantytowns is seen as a sign of a constitutional depravity

33. Shantel Vachani, "Shack Fire Takes Life, eThekweni Municipality Electrification Policy Takes Soul," *Sunday Tribune*, 20 August 2006.

34. S'bu Zikode, "The greatest threat to the future stability of our country vs. the greatest strength of Abahlali baseMjondolo movement S.A. (shackdwellers)," Harold Wolpe Lecture, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, March 2006, p. 1.

that must be eradicated. Sounding much like the colonial public health official of the early twentieth century, who had spoken of “the odors of the native quarters . . . the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething,”³⁵ the post-apartheid government views the growth of shantytowns as “unacceptable,” using terms typically applied to life-threatening epidemics, such as “eradication.”³⁶

“Eradication” refers, at one at the same time, to the necessity of psychosocial segregation from the threat of contagion, and to economic segregation as a protection of property value. Eradication, as Marie Huchzermeyer points out, aligns with the government’s “*continued fixation with orderly and segregated development in South African cities*” (my emphasis). Fanon famously described the division of the colonial city between the European quarter (full of light and space) and the “native town” (hungry and airless). The post-apartheid city, similarly divided between the well-lit gated communities, with their gardens and paved roads, and the crowded settlements, with no amenities, expresses with brutal clarity the exploitative character of post-apartheid society.³⁷

Twelve years after the birth of a new South Africa generated by the first full and free election on 21 April 1994, 5000 South African shackdwellers from the 14 informal settlements that had joined Abahlali the preceding year came out not to celebrate freedom, but mourn “unfreedom day.” How can “we celebrate freedom when we only hear tales of freedom or see people’s lives changed for the better in other parts of the country, but never in our communities?” S’bu Zikode asked, questioning, in effect, the state of freedom in the whole of the country. “How can

35. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Boston, MA: Grove Press, 2005), p. 7.

36. Marie Huchzermeyer, “The struggle for in-situ upgrading of informal settlements: Case studies from Gauteng,” Paper presented at the Southern African Housing Foundation Conference and Exhibition, Cape Sun, 9–11 October 2006. The “eradication” of informal settlements, she notes, is often justified through selective reference to the UN-Habitat and World Bank “Cities without Slums” campaign, which is interpreted in the South African context as meaning the physical removal of slums rather than their improvement.

37. It would be interesting to consider how the “Negrophobia” that Fanon had described in *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) is reproduced in the anxieties of “making it” through the ANC government’s policy of “Black Economic Empowerment.” In *Black Skin*, Fanon had written of how “inferiority had been felt economically” (p. 43); the Black with a white soul had dreamed of joining high society by living in a mansion on a hill that overlooks the city. In late apartheid South Africa, it turns out that with the end of influx controls, shantytowns transgressed race/class boundaries. In post-apartheid South Africa those boundaries have become increasingly rigid. For the African and Indian elite (let alone the whites who live in gated communities), the shackdwellers embody the return of the repressed – the dirty, the bad, the frightening and criminal Black.

a community of 5,000 people celebrate when it is expected to make do with six taps?"³⁸ Indeed, how could the country celebrate? And what can be done so the country *can* celebrate?

Who is S'bu Zikode?

I started to see S'bu Zikode and I thought, "this is man who knows what he is talking about, I can fight [together] with this guy" ... S'bu opened our eyes.

—Anton Zamisa

Government officials, politicians and intellectuals ... have no idea what they are talking about. They are too high to really feel what we feel.

—S'bu Zikode

The president of the shackdwellers' movement, Abahlali base-Mjondolo, is a 30-year-old former gas station worker, S'bu Zikode.³⁹ A father of four who has lived in the shacks for over 10 years, he is a former boy scout from a small rural town who gained distinction at school but had no money for university. In 1993 he came to Durban and rented a shack in Kennedy Road. He got a job at a gas station and was able to attend the University at Durban-Westville for a semester during the very short period of reduced student fees after the end of apartheid.⁴⁰ In 2001 he was elected chair of the Kennedy Road Development Committee and before that the chair of the Clare Estate Slum Clearance Project. He speaks of having tried "so-called diplomacy" and recounts how he approached high-profile members of the ruling party and tried to make deals about access to basic human necessities. Now he says it was "all in vain."⁴¹

Since 2005, Zikode has gained national prominence, appearing on TV shows, on radio, and in the national and local print media, with his words being reprinted in pop-culture magazines with a combined circulation of 5 million.⁴² S'bu Zikode might be the Abahlali philosopher – indeed, he articulates the struggle as "thought on the ground, running" – but he has rigorously resisted calls to run for

38. Majova, Zukile "5,000 Join in 'Death of Freedom' Protests," *The Mercury*, 28 April 2006.

39. Early in 2007 he lost his job because of his political activity.

40. This information is gleaned from Pithouse's "'Our struggle is thought on the ground running': The University of Abahlali baseMjondolo," University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Centre for Civil Society Research Report, No. 40. pp. 22, 25. Pithouse notes that Zikode was committed to public participation and even became a reserve constable in Sydenham police station in 1997.

41. S'bu Zikode, Speech at the University of KwaZulu Natal (Durban) Centre for Civil Society Colloquium [transcript], March 4, 2006.

42. Noted by Jacob Bryant, "Toward Delivery and Dignity," University of KwaZulu Natal Centre for Civil Society Research Report No. 41, p. 69.

local government or be the single spokesperson of the movement. He maintains that the problems are more systemic⁴³ and sees himself only as the people's servant, elected on their behalf and subject to recall. Inviting Zikode to speak at one or another workshop, NGOs are often shocked to be told that the movement will first discuss whether or not to attend the workshop and then, if they decide to attend, will send an elected representative or representatives. This is no one-man show.

Nevertheless, Zikode has developed a knack of talking over the head of the government to the whole country, and his message is a challenge to the nation. He reminds people what the struggle has been about in the most profound and basic terms.

In response to the shackdwellers' threat not to vote in the 2005 local election, ANC politicians accused Abahlali of being a "Third Force." The charge was picked up in the popular press and gained a life of its own. The accusation is as outrageous as it is threatening since it associates the shackdwellers' movement with the murderous apartheid-sponsored violence of the early 1990s. But Zikode didn't deny it. Instead, he cleverly turned it around, linking the struggle against apartheid not only to the struggle for basic necessities, but also to the post-apartheid government's indifference to life in the shacks: "Government officials, politicians and intellectuals who speak about the Third Force have no idea what they are talking about. They are too high to really feel what we feel." Quite literally, high up in their offices, they couldn't see the people "down here" – physically, conceptually, experientially – and quite possibly the reality was that the Third Force was something the politicians could not understand: "We are driven by the Third Force, the suffering of the poor. Our betrayers are the Second Force. The First Force was our struggle against apartheid. The Third Force will stop when the Fourth Force comes. The Fourth Force is land, housing, water, electricity, health care, education, and work."⁴⁴ The "second force," the ANC, had betrayed the struggle and produced not liberation but a "third force," namely, the suffering of the poor. In this logic, the as-yet unrealized fourth force was, of course, none other than a vision of the future.

In a tradition of liberation theology,⁴⁵ Zikode was quoted in an article in the *Mail & Guardian* on Christmas Day 2005, reminding

43. Raj Patel, "Adventures in Memory and the metapolitics of the land struggle in South Africa," unpublished paper, December 2005, p. 11.

44. S'bu Zikode, "The Third Force" (note 12), pp. 188–9.

45. Bishop Desmond Tutu is probably the most popular and best known of South Africa's Black theologians, yet Zikode's rhetoric highlights the importance of Black Consciousness and Black theology ideas of liberation in popular consciousness of the poor in post-apartheid South Africa. Though many consider Black

people that there was 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 not in the *jondolos*. People stay awake worrying about their lives. You must see how big the rats are that run across the babies." The point is that something had to be done. Abahlali has made its voice heard, but apart from a small grant to help clean portable toilets, little had in fact been won. Giving notice to the ANC that their vote could not be taken for granted, the shackdwellers decided to boycott the municipal elections.⁴⁶

Based on the equation "No land, no house, no vote," the shackdwellers' decision was not simply a critique of local government policy. It also spoke to the form and content of democracy in post-apartheid South Africa, which had – following the script of the elite pact "transition to democracy" program⁴⁷ – successfully become a polyarchy based on the exclusion of the voices of the masses of poor and working people and legitimized by periodic elections. Abahlali therefore declared that it was no longer going to government offices to sit on "comfortable chairs" and listen to "crooks and liars." In the future, "they must come and sit with us where we live."⁴⁸

In Clare Estate, the ANC, unsure of the Indian middle-class vote, has traditionally relied on the African shackdwellers at election time. Now, though, in response to Abahlali, it had decided to substitute class for ethnic solidarity, shifting its focus to the Indian middle-class homeowners, arguing that only the ANC could save their property values from the shackdwellers who were claiming land and housing in the area.

Consciousness an intellectual movement, it was firmly grounded in Black people's experiences and by the mid-1970s firmly integrated into the consciousness of mass movements. In contrast to the technicist ANC, the ideas of Black consciousness as a philosophy (rather than as an organization) and as a notion of liberation of the mind remain an important source of moral/psychological strength.

46. Non-participation in apartheid structures was more than a tactic; it was a central element of South African politics that went back to the struggle against segregationist representation in the 1930s. The struggle against apartheid from the Soweto revolt of 1976 onwards was largely an urban one, centered on township revolts, school boycotts, and industrial action. A central element of the drive to make South Africa ungovernable (in the mid- to late 1980s) was the strategy of nonpayment and boycott. In the early 1980s, nonparticipation in the tricameral elections killed the hopes of the apartheid reformers and legitimated the anti-apartheid movement around the United Democratic Front (and its smaller rival, the National Forum). See Nigel Gibson, "Why Participation is a Dirty Word in South African Politics," *Africa Today*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 1990, pp. 27–52.
47. For a critique of this "transition" see Nigel Gibson, "The Pitfalls of South Africa's 'Liberation,'" *New Political Science*, September 2001, pp. 371–388.
48. Zikode, quoted in Pithouse, "Coffin" (note 32), p. 179.

Moreover the city officials' technicist response to the concrete problems articulated by Abahlali was almost Kafkaesque. They simply stated that they were going to develop a "business plan" to "improve delivery in an integrated manner."⁴⁹ After years of being ignored, the shackdwellers weren't going to be fobbed off with such verbiage. Boycotting the vote was not taken lightly, but for the shackdwellers democracy meant much more than a periodic vote. The decision to boycott represented a real shift in thinking about the core values of post-apartheid society. For them, democracy was a moral concept that included reciprocity, caring, and inclusion. "Politics," associated with the city administration and elite-decision making, was "too high." The shackdwellers were speaking a different language that emanated from below and was grounded in the struggle of the everyday. They were concerned not with political negotiations but with principles that would emanate from an open and egalitarian moral discourse and democratic practice: "Our struggle is for moral questions, as compared to the political questions as such. It is more about justice," declares Zikode. "Is it good for shackdwellers to live in mud like pigs, as they are living? Why do I live in a cardboard house if there are people who are able to live in a decent house? So it is a moral question."⁵⁰

Just as the struggle against apartheid brought the vote, the shackdwellers' struggle has challenged the meaning of the vote and given a voice to the poorest of the poor: "Now *the tide has turned*," says Zikode, "you are hearing from the horse's mouth . . . We have come out to say *this is who we are, this is where we are and this is what they want*" (original emphasis).⁵¹

Thinking in the communities

It is true that if care is taken to use only a language that is understood by graduates in law and economics, you can easily prove that the masses have to be managed from above. But if you speak the language of the everyday . . . then you will realize that the masses are quick to seize every shade of meaning Everything can be explained to the people, on the single condition that you really want them to understand . . . The more people understand, the more watchful they become and the more they come to realize that everything depends on them.

—Fanon

49. An official of the Department of Agriculture, Health and Welfare, quoted in Pit-house, "Coffin" (note 32), p. 174

50. Quoted by Xin Wei Ngiam, "Taking poverty seriously: What the poor are saying and why it matters," www.abahlali.org

51. Interview with S'bu Zikode (May 2006) in Beresford.

Fazel Khan [an academic at the University involved with Abahlali] has already indicated that he has seven taps and a number of toilets. He also has a vehicle to move around. Therefore he cannot be compared to a person who has nothing ... We from Abahlali are living at the grass root level. There is no one below us ... Some of our people are doing cleaning at this university. They also have important things to say.

—Zikode

In a paper presented at the Centre for Civil Society at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in March 2005,⁵² Zikode explained that the shackdweller's conception of politics is not about political office; it is a politics of the poor in the language of the people. And participation is based on a shared experience and political practice is dependent on democratic meetings in the settlements: "Our politics is a traditional home politics which is understood very well by all the old mamas and gogos [grannies] because it affects their lives and gives them a home." It is a language which all can speak and understand and thus creates a situation which is consciously collective. In Zikode's words, "we look after each other and think about the situation and plan our fight together." Zikode's notion is a challenge to the elite politics that has characterized the post-apartheid transition and its technicist aftermath. It is not a question of empowerment, or inclusion in terms of having a seat at the policy table, but a challenge to alienation inherent in the attitudes and proposals of the housing policy experts. And it is an alienation that is a result of the elite attitude toward the poor, as well as the poor's systemic exclusion from any policy decisions made about them.⁵³

Thus, at first, the Kennedy Road movement saw itself as a movement unto itself. It was utterly divorced from the discourses of social movements or left NGOs. A year later, in his presentation at the

52. Later, AbM and the Anti-Eviction Campaign caused a stir when they left the Centre for Civil Society-sponsored Social Movement Indaba and protested what they perceived to be a paternalistic attitude toward them by "the left" who want to speak for them rather than to the shackdwellers. Abahlali have since broken all ties with the Centre for Civil Society. Sadly, some of the left have responded by labelling the shackdweller protest at the Social Movement Indaba criminal and irrational. See the *Mail and Guardian*, "On the Far Side of the Left," 8 December 2006, and "Report Glosses over Tsotsi Politics," 16 December 2006. However, unedited video footage of this protest shows it to have been both peaceful and rational (see www.abahlali.org/node/657). These events prove how difficult it is to be at two universities, the University of Abahlali and the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, at the same time.

53. Interestingly, before the March 2005 action, the only people who had consulted the shackdwellers about their livelihoods and their homes were the World Bank and the Urban Foundation, an NGO set up by private investment.

Centre for Civil Society, Zikode directly linked the self-activity of the shackdwellers not only to housing politics, but also to national politics:

We believe that the housing policy does not only require housing specialists, rich consultants and government. We believe that housing policy requires most importantly, the people who need the houses. *But* [my emphasis] we also know, as poor communities and as Shackdwellers that the broader poor have no choice but to play a role in shaping and reshaping this country into an anti-capitalist system.

And this alternative, he added, comes out of the “thinking that we do in communities.”

The challenge to the academics and intellectuals in the setting of the university was quite clear; it required listening to and taking seriously the thinking done in the communities. In other words, it was about challenging the preconceived idea of who does the thinking and where it is done. This is not simply about entitlement or asserting ownership over a meeting; it is to appreciate that the people who know a situation should do the thinking so they can demand a “more reality based, and a more scientific and effective mode of operation.”⁵⁴ Rather than an application of dialectics to a situation, the demand for concreteness in the Marxian sense involves tracing the dialectic that arises out of the struggle, and is thus a challenge to theory and theoreticians.⁵⁵

Historical antecedents

Thinking about “alternatives” in a radically open way is not an attribute of the ANC, which has always been an elite and often dogmatic organization, but it was certainly part of the anti-apartheid “civic” struggle and incipient trade union organizations of the late 1970s and 1980s.

Today, people come to Abahlali with different political histories and traditions. There are those who consider themselves ANC, and there are those who were part of the United Democratic Front and other anti-apartheid organizations during the late apartheid period,

54. I am grateful to Richard Pithouse for this point.

55. Hegel famously said that “truth is concrete” and that “the real is rational.” Here the challenge to “theory” is the reality of the situation, expressed by the thinking (rationality) of the shackdwellers. Rather than a “source” of theory, the thinking done in the communities is itself a “form of theory.” See Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002). Dunayevskaya’s argument (in *Marxism and Freedom* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988]) that Marx reorganized *Capital* on the basis of ongoing struggles and the “limits of an intellectual work,” is a point lost on many Marxists.

and there are those with no political identification. Yet these traditions had little resonance at the birth of the Kennedy Road movement. Even though they supported the ANC,⁵⁶ the language of struggle still used by the ANC to legitimate its policies had no resonance with life in the settlements. What was important instead was the autonomous democratic culture that had developed there, and it is indeed this that remains central as the movement has grown and incorporated and re-appropriated other struggle languages, even anti-capitalist discourses.⁵⁷ And as Abahlali has developed, its discontinuity with the earlier struggle has morphed into a sense of continuity with the earlier struggle's unfinished character. As Sibusiso Mzimela put it, "The struggle against apartheid has been a little achieved . . . That's why we're still in the struggle, to make sure things are done right. We're still on the road; we're still . . . struggling."⁵⁸

Ashwin Desai caught one expression of this new post-apartheid identity in his book, *We are the Pooors*,⁵⁹ about the housing struggle at Chatsworth, Durban that took place in the late 1990s. The title of the book came from a response by an "elderly aunty," Girlie Amod, to an ethnic slur by a local ANC councilor. Amod's declaration, "we are not Indians, we are the pooors," which was immediately echoed "we are not Africans, we are the pooors," was not simply a announcement that class trumped ethnicity but a critique of elite multiculturalism, as well as post-apartheid ethnic politics, and a new statement of consciousness where the very localized and marginalized struggles for survival of poor people were beginning to have national reverberations. It was not the poor as the object of sociological study, but the pooors as a self-identification – perhaps also with new biblical undertones: the pooors shall inherit the world.

Though the Chatsworth movement petered out, it was a turning point that was caught by Desai. The shackdwellers had no knowledge of the Chatsworth struggles when they began their own struggle, but the rapid growth of the shackdwellers' movement indicates that Girlie Amod's pronouncement was no mere local phrase lost in the day-to-day struggle for survival. Indeed, the concreteness of this new self-consciousness is also

56. In the beginning, people asserted that they were ANC-supporting dissenters but this has fallen away.

57. Richard Pithouse has informed me that a popular song is "I am a socialist," which people learned from the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee. The chorus is, "My father was a garden boy/My mother was a kitchen girl/And I am a socialist."

58. Quoted in Bryant (note 42).

59. Ashwin Desai, *We Are the Pooors: Community Struggles in Post-apartheid South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review, 2002).

expressed by Abahlali's expansion beyond the shack settlements to include formal housing estates and street traders among its members.⁶⁰ Abahlali now also has a good number of Indian members.

The laziness of the intellectuals?

It so happens that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people, their laziness . . . will give rise to tragic mishaps.

—Fanon

Labor produces marvels for the rich . . . it produces palaces, but hovels for the worker . . . The worker feels himself to be freely active only in his animal functions – eating drinking and procreating, or at most also in his dwelling and personal adornment – while in his human functions he is reduced to an animal.

—Marx

The shantytown sanctions the native's biological decision to invade the enemy fortress.

—Fanon

Shackdwellers' revolts are often considered as necessarily spontaneous, fragmented, and disorganized. According to some Marxists, shackdwellers are individualistic and reactionary, living in a world of scarcity, a Hobbesian "natural" world of all against all, and their revolts are highly combusive, energetic, violent and short.⁶¹

60. Indeed, on the basis of Girlie Amod's phrase, I asked at the Frantz Fanon lecture at Durban Westville in 2004 whether "new civic organizations that have emerged from struggles for basic human rights open up new spaces from where visions and practices of an alternative post-apartheid South Africa . . . may be organized and discussed" and whether these "new mass-based organizations . . . are capable of not only representing themselves but also developing through discussions with intellectuals and activists alternative philosophic programs" (The lecture was published as "The Limits of Black Political Empowerment: Fanon, Marx, 'the Poors' and the 'new reality of the nation' in South Africa," *Theoria*, August 2005 pp. 90–118). It seems that a year later the answer was given in the affirmative. Indeed, Abahlali has been, I believe, developing a philosophic program. The interesting and important caveat in my question is that it has come "through discussions with intellectuals and activists" almost only insofar as those activists and intellectuals are within the shacks. Certainly, intellectuals outside of the shacks, in the university, and on the left have had a very hard time making connections with the movement because of the continued belief that they are, in the Leninist sense, the bringers of consciousness (and theory) from outside. Fanon's statement in the *Wretched* that the poor "are the truth" still creates quite a reaction (see for example Homi Bhabha's introduction to the 2005 edition). Fanon's point that the wretched of the earth are the source, the basis of the new society, is the beginning not the end of a new kind of thinking.

61. David Harvey is among the more sophisticated of these Marxists. In *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Development* (London: Verso, 2006), Harvey

Because shackdwellers are poor, they spend an inordinate amount of time taking care of “animal” needs, which many, who don’t count the number of taps in their house, take for granted. Consequently, it is argued that there is no time for building organizations. The point is not to primitivize or romanticize shack life: certainly, in the settlements, there are thieves and charlatans, alcoholism and rape,⁶² there

creates a schematic division between what he calls accumulation through expansion of wage labor in industry and agriculture and “accumulation through dispossession” (or what Marx called primitive accumulation). The former he says produces an “oppositional culture” such as that “embedded in trade unions and working class political parties) that produced the social democratic compromise,” and the latter produces a “fragmented and particular” culture (see p. 52).

This is not the place to question the schematic division between these modes of accumulation, but I do wonder whether there is a privileging of a social democratic oppositional culture formed by trade unions and labor parties (he calls them working-class parties but the designation is unclear to me). Marx, we should remember, on hearing of the English trade unions’ chauvinism toward the Irish workers, proclaimed that the “The proletariat is revolutionary, or is nothing.” He opposed the reformism and chauvinism of British trade unionism arguing that one needed to go “lower and deeper” and appeal to the masses, whom the trade unions avoided (unskilled workers, the poor in the East End of London, and peasants newly arrived in cities), to find the revolutionary strata. We should also keep in mind that when Lenin articulated the dialectical relationship between social democracy and imperialism during World War I, his critique of Marxist “orthodoxy” shifted the dialectic of liberation to include struggles in the colonies. This point is worth remembering since it seems to be overlooked that the majority of slums are developing in the postcolonial South, and the most rapidly urbanizing continent is Africa. Additionally, since Harvey’s argument is about political culture, what is particularly interesting in the development of Abahlali baseMjondolo is its political culture, which is not fragmented or particular, or necessarily local. For example, AbM has organized in solidarity with shackdwellers in Zimbabwe and Haiti.

62. It is important to note that not only the lack of toilets, but also rape and lack of security in the shacks were mentioned by many in their letters to President Mbeki in the “Unfreedom Day 2006: No freedom for the poor.” As Zama Ndlovu puts it, “The place is not safe for children and women. Young girls are getting raped more often. Nobody cares about that, neither the police nor the councilor. South African law is against poor people. Rapists are walking free. Tsotsis and all the criminals are free, but when innocent people are protesting against slow service delivery they are getting arrested” (“Izimpilo Zethu/Our Lives,” Photography by Women, included in University of KwaZulu Natal [Durban] Centre for Civil Society Research Reports, 2006, Vol. 1). In an article called “Shack Shame” in the widely read *Move* magazine, Mpuni Zulu interviewed S’bu Zikode. He pointed out that the six toilets that are shared by 7,000 are often blocked and that consequently “People often go to the nearby bush to relieve themselves. This very often makes women and children vulnerable to rape. The stinking toilets have worms around them and hungry children often mistake them for rice and eat them.” The report continues: “But besides the physical dangers there is the unseen emotional brunt and stigma of living in a

are those who struggle and those who are tired; there are those who stay and those who leave. In other words, the “informal communities” of the shacks often take on a formal life of their own; they have become formal structures that stay up for years, and life and life’s struggles are much like those in any other poor working-class community. But from these generalizations, it is difficult to see how a common clarity can emerge and how a shackdwellers’ organization has developed in and around Durban.

Mike Davis’s popular *Planet of Slums* is one of many narratives that paint a depressing account of the exponential growth of informal settlements supposedly devoid of human subjectivity. Those who live in the slums are uniformly defined as either a “lumpen” or reactionary, mass-produced by an economics of survival. What lies behind Davis’s position is his theoretical claim that the slum is the solution, “warehousing the twenty-first century’s surplus humanity,”⁶³ where life is a social Darwinian struggle of the survival of the fittest and a “self-consuming violence.” While we might debate whether this warehousing allows for the development of a social community or only produces a violent struggle of all against all for the scraps, there should be no doubt that the “surplus population” – many of those who live in the “informal” settlements, whether they work in the formal economy or not – is very much part of the working class.⁶⁴ But Davis doubts that such a diverse dispossessed population has access to “the culture of collective labor or large scale class struggle.” Indeed in Davis’s “apocalyptic anti-urbanism” there are no progressive forces capable of challenging the social order. As Tom Angotti argues, Davis’s fixation on a small group of conservative NGOs blinds him “to the large grassroots networks of active, militant, community-based organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.”⁶⁵

place that does not have something as simple as a flushing toilet” (Mpumi Zulu, “Shack Shame,” *Move: A Magazine for Women*, No. 54, March 14, 2006, pp. 16–17).

63. Davis, “Planet of Slums,” *New Left Review* 26 (2004), p. 28. In Durban, at least, this is not true. The state does not like the shantytowns and wants people moved to formal peri-urban and rural ghettos.
64. People may not have factory jobs (whose numbers are decreasing) but workers in the service industries are members of unions.
65. “Apocalyptic anti-urbanism: Mike Davis and his Planet of Slums,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 30, No. 4, December 2006, p. 965. Davis maintains that the left is absent from the slums, where Marx has given way to Mohammed (Davis, “Planet of Slums” (note 63), pp. 30–31), which implies, of course, the brewing of terrorists. In the article (which preceded the book of the same name), Davis argues that revolt in the slums is “episodic and discontinuous,” akin to “eighteenth-century sociologies of protest” and that the absence of the left in

If Davis's theoretical pessimism is built on a narrow conception of class struggle,⁶⁶ Slavoj Žižek's theoretical, perhaps romantic, optimism is based on another series of generalizations.⁶⁷ Žižek argues that the

the slum has seen the rise of Pentecostalism and Islamic fundamentalism. His conclusion that the left is absent from the slum is taken up in Richard Pithouse's "The Left in the Slum: The rise of a shack dwellers' movement in Durban, South Africa" (History and African Studies Seminar, 23 November 2005, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal). Pithouse makes the point that Davis's dichotomy between religion and resistance is historically uninformed. Certainly, Christopher Hill's work on the English revolution makes it clear that such a dichotomy is fallacious. On the other hand, Davis's quote from the socialist Prime Minister of Morocco is telling. Youssoufi states that "We [the left] have become embourgeoisified. We have cut ourselves off from the people" (p. 30). This suggests that the division between slum-dwellers and the left is not only about where one lives physically, but also where one lives conceptually. The issue is not to live in the slums but to hear what the people are saying and thinking, and to take that seriously rather than having a dismissive and bourgeois attitude to the poor. The first response of the "left" in Durban was mainly to consider the shackdwellers' eruption a spontaneous one that exhibited no special consciousness "in itself"; the shackdwellers, in other words are simply force, not reason. The "shacks" become an issue within a larger critique of local and national policy, rather than a basis for rethinking not only policy but also philosophy. Post-apartheid debates are thus narrowed to a discussion of RDP (good) and GEAR (bad) rather than a complete overhaul of the elite foundations of both policies. It is not a question of what is good for the poor but a question of the poor becoming the authors and architects of policy, and thus starting the debate about post-apartheid South Africa from scratch and from the ground up. When it became clear that the shackdwellers' movement would not allow 'the left' to speak for them, the view shifted from misunderstanding the shackdwellers' movement as spontaneous to an embrace of the state's (racist) white agitator thesis.

66. Davis's book has a global perspective and has been defended as a metanarrative, but it does not excuse his relative lack of engagement with the people who live in the slums. There is barely a word from the poor themselves. In an extensive review of Davis' work, David Cunningham argues, "Pithouse's complaint that Davis 'relies so heavily on the work of [World] Bank and other institutions of contemporary imperialism' seems misguided, for it misrecognizes the level of analysis at which a text as such operates." It is telling that the reviewer then goes on to talk of Pithouse's position as "fetishized" ("Slumming It: Mike Davis's Grand Narrative of Urban Revolution," *Radical Philosophy*, 62 [2007], pp. 11, 17). Whether that is because he views such positions as quaint, idealistic or nostalgia is not the point. It goes to show that these discussions are too abstract to include ground-level activities in their textual critique (they are "too high," as Žižek puts it, and blind to the reality of what's happening on the ground). Certainly, dialogue takes place at multiple levels and doesn't always disconnect, but the shackdwellers' movement seems to be precisely challenging "the grand narrative" to reinsert the human subject.
67. Which, in part, can be considered a product of his Lacanian "Marxism" and politics of desire, with absolutely no engagement with the people who live in slums. Žižek's brief remarks are found in "Knee Deep," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 26, No. 17, September 2004.

slum dwellers like Marx's proletariat are free in a double sense; they have nothing and they have a degree of autonomy outside the state. Yet he celebrates, rather than investigates, the contradictory conditions of this "autonomy." For Marx, the proletariat's freedom is ironic and negative. They are free to starve, or sell their labor power "freely." The slumdwellers are autonomous in this sense too, since they are also products of the absolute law of capitalist accumulation, the increasing concentration of wealth at one pole and of misery, agony, and brutality at another. The burgeoning migration to urban areas is part of the same process, the production of an industrial reserve army forced to rely on its wits for day-to-day survival in the "informal economy." Thus the growing number of shackdwellers and urban slumdwellers can be considered a product of the double processes of primitive accumulation and concentration and centralization of capital - inclusion and exclusion.⁶⁸

Davis's idea of warehousing and Zizek's notion of autonomy are rooted in privileging this exclusionary moment. The logical end of Marx's "absolute law" is that the unemployed army wrecks capitalism. For Marx, the conscious, subjective side of the equation is produced by the increasing socialization of labor and the cooperative form of the labor process. Zizek's argument gestures to Marx's absolute law, but in place of Marx's cooperative form, he contends that being thrown into this situation "they [the slumdwellers] have to invent some mode of being together." Framed this way, perhaps we can schematically think about autonomy in two ways: a negative autonomy with the need to set up settlements outside the gaze of the state, and a positive autonomy, which, in defiance of the state, can blossom within these interstitial spaces and include the development of systems of governance based on collective democratic practices. Either way, the life-affirming⁶⁹ actions find a resonance with the democratic character of contemporary autonomous social movements

68. Thus how does one characterize the growing world of squatters: increasingly autonomous from the state, or a lumpenproletariat, or both? Robert Neuwirth notes that some of the squatters he lived with wanted nothing more than "rights," namely the rights that accrue from property deeds. Thus, in contrast to a quest for autonomy, there is a quest for legalization, or at least for the safety that comes with property ownership. Then it is believed that the state will not come overnight and destroy the squatter cities as it did in "operation clean-up" in Harare, displacing 700,000. Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World* (New York: Routledge, 2005) pp. 281-306.

69. These actions are akin to what Georgy Katsiaficas calls an "eros effect." See *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006).

around the world,⁷⁰ which are in principle open to all, encouraging the participation of marginalized people and the articulation of needs from below.⁷¹

To be sure, many squatter settlements develop under the radar in marginal spaces and thus beyond the gaze of the authorities. These settlements develop by necessity and over time become permanent, with established working rules. And one cannot be cavalier about necessity. Indeed, the existence of a settlement does not guarantee the development of democratic self-governing structures.⁷² Yet, at the same time, autonomy from the state is not necessarily a threat to the state's legitimacy, as Žizek might think. Since the shack settlements are illegal occupations, their continued existence depends on remaining subterranean and effectively outside the state. Thus, while it is important to stress that such autonomous practices develop out of necessity, in dire situations, it is also precisely in these autonomous spaces that both potentially radical and reactionary social and cultural practices, as well as various systems of governance, can develop and are contested.⁷³

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70. On Favela activism in Latin America see, Marcelo Lopes de Souza, "Urban development on the basis of autonomy: a politico-philosophical and ethical framework," *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 3(2), pp. 187–202; on global activism in the slums, see www.metamute.org/en/Naked-Cities-Struggle-in-the-Global-Slums; and for an analysis of the German squatters movement of the 1980s and early 1990s see Katsiaficas, *Subversion of Politics* (note 69).
71. See "Independently Formulated, Self-guided Actions are the Phenomenal Form of Contemporary Social Movements: An Interview with Georgy Katsiaficas," *Left Eye on Books* (Lefteyeonbooks.org).
72. We should remember that there are vast differences in the politics and histories of shack settlements in South Africa that stand right next to each other. But, on the other hand, the existence of self-governing structures in these settlements may be a legacy of struggles against apartheid. Marie Huchzermeyer has pointed out (in "The struggle for in-situ upgrading of informal settlements", note 36) that because of its politicization in the late anti-apartheid struggle, the shantytown might be less commodified in South Africa than, for example, in Kibera (Nairobi), Kenya, where informal settlements are shaped by exploitative super-profit-driven landlordism and corrupt land distribution practices.
73. In the late apartheid period, shack settlements were celebrated by the ANC and other anti-apartheid organizations because they transgressed the apartheid geography of control. But political life in the shantytowns, often also shaped by the political situation, was often far more complicated than the anti-apartheid movement understood. During the late apartheid period, the more militant United Democratic Front was uncritical of authoritarian shantytown political figures they considered to be anti-apartheid, which led to disaster at Crossroads in Cape Town. Crossroads, one of the larger "informal settlements" or "squatter camps" on the outskirts of Cape Town, was first settled in 1975. By the mid-1980s Crossroads and the squatter settlements neighboring it had a population of over 100,000. There was an ongoing struggle between the militant youth and the authoritarian Crossroads executive, led by Ngxobongwana, who was also leader of the Western Cape Civic Association.

Still, insofar as autonomy is contingent on a settlement's marginalization, Zizek's conception of the settlement's freedom from the state may seem like freedom only from a distance, from on "high," where shackdwellers remain an abstraction, willfully ignored by the state. Indeed the shackdwellers' movement is neither a struggle to remain marginalized nor a struggle for wholesale inclusion. Their struggle is potentially risky because it endangers an element of their vital

Yet in the early 1980s, the "UDF turned a blind eye" to Ngxobongwana's political practices and his suppression of any political opposition, including progressive organizations in the Crossroads; it was a bad political miscalculation, according to Josette Cole (*Crossroads: The Politics of Reform and Repression 1976–1986* [Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987]). Between 25 May and 12 June 1986, around 60,000 people were forcibly removed (and 18 people were killed by the police). In contrast, the struggles in Kwa-Zulu Natal in the early 1990s that ran along party lines of the UDF and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) often turned into bloody turf wars with little to do with liberation politics. The local "civil war" with the IFP, encouraged by the clandestine shadow force of apartheid police and military, known as "the third force," resulted in the deaths of thousands.

Yet political contestation does not always run along party lines. We should also note that political actions in the history of shantytowns in South Africa have often been at the vanguard of the anti-apartheid struggle but not necessarily in the way that it is romanticized by the ANC, which "ignores very real gender struggles within society and its own organization" (Iain Edwards, "Cato Manor 1959: Men, Women, Crowds, Violence, Politics and History," in Paul Maylam and Iain Edwards [eds], *The People's City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban* [Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996], p. 103). In the autonomous spaces of the "shack lands," there existed not only patriarchal power structures but revolt against them. The shantytowns transgressed apartheid rules in numerous ways. As Pitso points out, homosexual marriage was pioneered in South Africa in the Umkumbane settlement in the 1950s. In Cato Manor, open homosexual relations were indicated by language. In other words, secret Zulu words and phrases were openly used to describe their own views of themselves and the society in which they lived. In a great struggle for women's economic autonomy, women contested patriarchal power in Cato Manor and, in 1959, fought a triple struggle against the local patriarchal power and the alliance between it and the ANC, as well as the moderate ANC's women's league and the apartheid state. Indeed, the ANC, as an elite organization, has always been more Victorian when it comes to social mores than many in the shacks are, though the latter are often perceived as inevitably and necessarily deeply reactionary on questions of gender and sexuality. In short, these are always contested politics. It was popular pressure that broke the political alliance between the ANC and the strongmen. Yet despite a measure of female autonomy, the shack lands were a male dominated society and women were in the end defeated by a "male deal" expressed in the "man to man" talk that Durban's manager of Bantu administration held with one of the Cato Manor leaders (Edwards, "Cato Manor 1959", *ibid.*). It is worth pointing out that some people who saw the famous protests of women in Cato Manor as children are now members of AbM. In other words, this is "live" history.

autonomy, that of being beyond the gaze of the state.⁷⁴ Once shackdwellers make demands on the state, they become subject not only to the state's administration, but also to its increasing scrutiny. Since services have not been delivered, nor promises honored, the shackdwellers' movement has experienced the state's force, but only negatively. Once the movement used extra-parliamentary means to pressure the state – mass mobilizations, the courts, the media, etc – the movement became subject to the state's scrutiny and violence. And now, carrying out its threat to boycott the local election has resulted in the further political banishment and criminalization of Abahlali. At the same time, however, such actions/self-actions have allowed the shackdwellers to move from being "on their own" to *becoming* a political movement, challenging political "business as usual". In short, they have developed political autonomy; they have become a grassroots poor people's organization based on transparent democratic principles that demand such principles from the state as well.

As a consciously organized democratic material struggle for toilets, taps, and running water, the movement is an attempt to extend control over day-to-day life in the shacks. But the content of the demands is inseparable from their form. They don't simply want things to be administered from above, nor do they want political power, which would subject them to such administrative power from above. They are struggling not merely for "delivery" but for a vision of a different kind of politics.⁷⁵

One theoretical problem is navigating the culture of the day-to-day and the development of politically conscious individuals in democratic organization over time. Post-apartheid social movements are often considered "popcorn" movements, spontaneous eruptions that quickly organize and tap into resources from NGOs and other organizations. But as they erupt quickly, they also die off quickly. So while they are celebrated by the far-left for having qualities of autonomy, they are criticized by the orthodox left for not being explicitly socialist and for being led by lumpenproletarian elements, rather than by what they consider the working class.⁷⁶

Abahlali has suffered from this critique, as well as from the ANC's charges that it represents a counter-revolutionary "third force." But

74. Pithouse notes that the "massively dense" settlement near Kennedy Road at Foreman Road was "allowed to become so huge because it is behind a hill and hidden from bourgeois eyes." Pithouse, "Coffin" (note 32), p. 179.

75. That the leftist critics of the ANC agree with the ANC that the protests are about delivery indicates a far larger conceptual agreement between the two groups.

76. See Patrick Bond, "Johannesburg's Resurgent Social Movements," in Gibson (ed.), *Challenging Hegemony* (note 1).

Abahlali has proved to be more than a popcorn movement. Where other movements die off after the first wave of collective euphoria wanes and difficulties emerge, Abahlali has created a democratic organization and weathered a storm of attacks. It has vigilantly insisted not only that the voices of the poor be heard but that the poor be respected as thinking and actional human beings. This has helped engender a profoundly democratic spirit in the Abahlali branches and settlements. Despite all the maneuverings against it, the attempts at division, the criminalization and smearing of the movement as a third force, a counter-revolutionary force, and so on, Abahlali has now existed for more than two years and has grown in stature and in numbers. It is clearly a movement whose time has come. And my argument here is that the importance of shackdwellers as a challenge to the post-apartheid elite, local government functionaries, NGO paternalism, as well as the authoritarians in the shantytowns, is based on their self-organization.

So, what is the meaning of the shackdwellers' movement?

As mentioned, the movement began with an understanding that the shackdwellers were on their own. Fragmented, alienated, and cut off, they have discovered a tremendous solidarity among themselves, across Durban and beyond. They have discovered a larger struggle, seen footage of shantytown struggles in Haiti, Turkey, and Latin America, and spoken with activists and slumdwellers across the country, the African continent, and in Europe. They are still on their own, but it is also understood as positively constructive; their "autonomy" is grounded in a belief in the idea that change will come from their own actions, that they are their own agent of liberation. The shackdwellers' struggle is not simply a fight for inclusion, but a struggle to change the terms of inclusion.⁷⁷ And Abahlali has developed a culture of democracy that has spread among the settlements; it has made democratic governance a condition of settlement affiliation, thus proving the

77. That their autonomy is in part a product of their marginalization and in part a product of the struggles against apartheid, indicates that they are neither powerless, nor without ideas. They resist being moved out to peri-urban areas because they understand that it is better to live in the shacks in the urban areas than to live on the periphery, even further from employment opportunities, schools, and hospitals. They want ambulances and fire engines to serve their communities, and they criticize the class character of a state that serves rich people but lets the shacks burn without a fire engine in sight. And while they are continually forced to protect themselves and rely on their own collective endeavors for survival, they have created autonomous democratic spaces where they make working decisions over their own rules and structures of governance.

shackdwellers' ability to decide policies over their future and to govern themselves.

Yet, as I have also been suggesting, the situation is ambiguous. Abahlali demands services and insists on being subject to no one. It wants taps and police protection, but it also understands that the police will continue to harass it. In short, it wants to democratize the state itself and change the meaning of politics on its own terms.

For the shackdwellers' movement is built on the reason of the poor who, as Fanon puts it, "cannot conceive of life otherwise than in the form of a battle against exploitation, misery, and hunger"; it is through this struggle that a fighting culture and principle emerge. The shackdwellers' idea of politics is thus not focused on the state, which, with its bureaucratic and technicist language and administrative mentality, acts to depoliticize politics.⁷⁸ By encouraging their own and other poor people's voices – voices currently silenced in the official politics of South Africa – to speak, to be heard, to be part of the discussion, they have not only opened up new spaces for alternative political thinking,⁷⁹ but have also affirmed their *raison-d'être*.

The declaration that "we are human beings" is echoed in the Abahlali shackdwellers' outrage at the politicians who ignore their plight. This is not simply a technical issue about the redistribution of resources (though it includes that); it is a most concrete reflection on being human, about the fact that human beings should live in homes fit for human beings. The shackdwellers don't only demand things – they don't only want redistribution – they also demand recognition.⁸⁰ They stand for a different kind of politics, one in which all the excluded and poor in South Africa will be included. Their demand for recognition goes beyond the liberal tradition of "inclusion" in a political or legal system; it is based on a simple premise: the people who live in the shacks are the most knowledgeable about them. They take seriously the freedom won in the struggles against apartheid, and they want

78. On the depoliticization of politics see Michael Neocosmos, "Rethinking Politics in Southern Africa Today: Elements of a Critique of Political Liberalism," in Gibson (ed.), *Challenging Hegemony* (note 1).

79. Since the shackdwellers are often perceived to be "uncivil" (lawless, criminals, and so on), this movement challenges the exclusionary nature of post-apartheid civil society.

80. See Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition* (London: Verso Press, 2003). In interviews and on the Giles and Khan's film, "Breyani and the Councillor," we hear the shackdwellers speaking of the conditions they have been enduring and asking, "should anyone have to live like this?" But there is no abstract discussion of ethics, no discourse on points of view; the discussion of what kind of home human beings should live in is grounded in concrete conditions revolving around taps, sanitation, light, and warmth.

this freedom to be truly equal. While fighting for what is guaranteed by the South African constitution is an important strategy,⁸¹ what is at stake is the need to address deep-rooted structures of economic inequality that are legacies of apartheid and colonialism. In that sense the demand for “redistribution” is a real and urgent one, but it is moreover a critique of elite-driven politics, be that right-wing, top down technocracy or “left wing technocraticism,”⁸² NGO paternalism or vanguardism.⁸³ The shackdwellers are stakeholders in housing policy and seek to be an essential part of decision-making.

No longer on their own: a movement whose time has come

The people stagnate deplorably in unbearable poverty; slowly they awaken to the unutterable treason of their leaders.

—Fanon

Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs.

—Marx

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81. South Africa has a liberal constitution that grants recognition to individuals and to “minorities.” Indeed, in contrast to its apartheid past, South Africa is promoted as a “rainbow” nation celebrating multiculturalism. In advocating “reconciliation,” Nelson Mandela went to great lengths to stress, “I love each of you - of all races.” Additionally material rights, such as housing, are included within the constitution even if the extent of the guarantee is debatable. The fact that the constitution includes language about the second generation of human rights means that the law courts, however weighted, are still a terrain of struggle in which the shackdwellers’ movement operates. But at the same time, they are weighted by liberal discourse and constrained by the state. In Kwa-Zulu Natal, where the shackdwellers’ movement has developed, there has also been the issue of Zulu cultural nationalism, which, in the context of overt economic inequalities, Jacob Zuma attempts to ride inside the ANC.
82. A term used by Marcelo Lopes de Souza to describe “urban reform”; a situation when too much attention is paid to technical instruments and too little to popular participation. The reforms are developed by scholars and NGO staff “while the poor and their grassroots organizations only play a very secondary role in terms of strategy building and intellectual elaboration” (“Together with the state, despite the state, against the state: Social Movements as ‘critical urban planning’ agents,” *City*, Vol. 10, No. 3, December 2006, p. 337).
83. Abahlali is far from alone in its critique. Writing in the *Mail and Guardian*, Richard Calland argues that South Africans deserve more from democracy than a government of experts with a plan. Explicitly criticizing “Durban city manager and ANC stalwart Mike Sutcliffe,” he argues for “a very different vision of a participatory democracy, in which citizens are provided with meaningful opportunities to engage government in a permanent conversation, as opposed to the anachronistic, five-yearly episodic model of representative democracy” (“Resist the Prison of Expertocracy,” *Mail and Guardian*, 21 January 2007).

The emergence of the shackdwellers' movement has not been simply a product of mechanical forces. The movement appears spontaneous, local, and specific, but in fact has been long thought about and expresses something much more universal. What allowed the Kennedy Road actions to develop from a demonstration into a mass movement was the democratic organization that had already existed. In contrast to other shackdweller revolts occurring at the same time, the revolt at Kennedy Road was a product of an organized community that was able, for example, to support those who were arrested and thus to articulate the beginnings of a new movement. The shackdwellers' movement is also unlike the movements against eviction (such as in Chatsworth and in the Western Cape) because they were not fighting to defend what they had, but for what they *should* have – indeed what had been promised to them (which goes to explain the moral dimension of their argument). Indeed the Kennedy Road settlement's initial demand that the council not renege on its promises did not even threaten the interests of commercial banks. What made them effective was the settlement's degree of autonomy, which allowed them the space to develop a culture of democracy.

Of course, the movement is defined by more than its "founding" event, but the founding event has now become a story oft retold.⁸⁴ Indeed, that event is the nodal point, but here I am interested in how it has become a moment, philosophically speaking – how the movement has transcended the particular event. The movement cannot be explained by issues of resource mobilization or the aid of outside forces or even the event's material success. What was expressed through the settlement's self-mobilization was its insistence on open meetings where all could speak and hash out issues, coupled with the straightforwardness and moral suasion of their demands. The rest was word-of-mouth and personal communication, which, by the end of the year, had engendered a new organization, Abahlali base-Mjondolo. And if Abahlali's will to growth (it now represents 30,000 people and has members in almost 40 settlements) is tempered, it is only because it stresses the importance of its principle. Each shack settlement that joins, each new branch that forms, has to follow the democratic principles of Abahlali. This means that each political action requires a number of meetings (and meeting of subcommittees)

84. I am reminded of Rosa Parks' decision not to sit at the back of the bus as a "founding event" of the civil rights movement in the US, leading to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The fact that Parks was a civil rights activist and was not alone in the action is often forgotten in the popularization of the story.

as well as communication between settlements. Press releases are written, discussed, and distributed. Each settlement and branch has its own autonomous committees that then send delegates to Abahlali meetings.⁸⁵ The Abahlali meetings rotate between all the affiliated settlements and are usually attended by about 30–40 elected representatives from the various committees and are open to all residents from the local settlements.⁸⁶ It is worth noting that though the democratic culture of the organization has spread across the settlements, it doesn't always overcome authoritarianism. Even where settlements have strong Abahlali activists it has often been difficult to get beyond the armed authoritarianism of "leaders" who trade votes for private deals with the state.

Governed on such a grassroots democratic basis, with meetings open to all adults (regardless of age, gender,⁸⁷ ethnicity, origin, and length of time in residence), each settlement has at least one weekly meeting, and representatives from each of the settlements elected each week meet as Abahlali baseMjondolo every Saturday. Every day there are a number of meetings of various subcommittees. The meetings are very formal, with decisions arrived at by consensus and with an emphasis on the inclusive process of "listening to others' ideas" and "being together."⁸⁸

Thus the movement has remained very suspicious of outsiders who try to speak for it or take over. It has come to understand who are its real friends and enemies. At its birth, three activist academics at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, who believed that the poor should speak for themselves, helped put the shackdwellers in touch

85. Pithouse reports that on 6 October 2005, "a meeting of 12 settlements that all now had autonomous committees was held in Kennedy Road. There were 32 elected representatives there, 17 men and 15 women. They agreed that they will not vote in the coming elections and that they will stand together and fight together as the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* movement." Pithouse, "Our struggle" (note 40), p. 39.

86. Alex Beresford, "Trapped in Corporatism? Trade Union Linkages to the Abahlali BaseMjondolo Movement in Durban," unpublished paper, 2006, p. 40. Beresford based this observation on an Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06) and Abahlali Workshop for Provincial Indaba at The University of KwaZulu Natal (21/05/06).

87. Pithouse notes that though all are included, it is mostly women without young children or older women with teenage or adult children who are able to go. He says that for meetings to be fully democratic, childcare will have to be provided, though in some settlements there just simply isn't a space large enough for collective childcare arrangement. "Our Struggle" (note 40), n.110.

88. Jacob Bryant, "Toward Delivery" (note 42), p. 61.

with lawyers and typed-up press releases. These people became trusted through their acts of support and connectivity.

When Fanon wrote in the *Wretched* that intellectuals needed to put themselves in the school of the people, he had in mind a grounding of new concepts in what Zikode calls “thinking that is done in the communities.” This thinking, which emerges from experience, is at once pragmatic and critical. Ideas and formulas repeated at meeting help generate new ways of knowing in the communities. In the case of Abahlali, the movement’s intellectuals and its leaders are truly organic to it. They live in the settlements, and this goes a long way to overcome the separation of intellectuals from the masses that pre-occupied Fanon. The shackdwellers’ movement has recognized this and demands that university and NGO activists work with them rather than speak about or for them. Yet it is when activist academics make such a commitment, they run up against university administrations and state security forces. This is exactly what has happened at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. All three of the academics who worked closely with Abahlali in the first year of the struggle came under enormous pressure from the university, resulting in two of them leaving and the third fighting to keep his job.⁸⁹ This should not come as a surprise since the university’s mission is grounded in the idea of becoming an exclusive world-class public institution, which means, of course, looking to Northern donors for legitimation. The thinking and action of the shackdwellers is most definitely excluded from such lofty plans. Hence the praxis of academics who work with Abahlali is seen as a threat to its world-class, elite, goals.⁹⁰

Richard Pithouse, a philosopher by training who taught at the University of Durban Westville in the late 1990s before becoming a research fellow at the Centre for Civil Society, has played an important

89. Since this writing, Fazel Khan was fired from his job. For the full story of his struggle and the continuing struggle against the university as well as documentation of their threadbare justification for his dismissal see <http://fazel.shackdwellers.org/>

90. Two of the three, Fazel Khan and Richard Pithouse, were involved in struggles in the 1990s to keep the University of Durban Westville (UDW) open to the poor (S'u Zikode was enrolled at the university the early 1990s). Later, UDW merged with the University of Natal to become the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal and becoming world class which, argues Khan, meant “Accelerating the process of commodification in the interests of local elites and against the interests of ordinary South Africans.” Fazel Khan “The Struggle for a Better Education for All,” in Richard Pithouse (ed.) *Asinamali: University Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006). Additionally, the same three academics were also involved in a mass workers’ strike at the university in 2006.

part in the development of Abahlali. Since there have been absurd accusations that he is the white man behind the movement,⁹¹ one needs to be careful that in reaction to such provocations the actual role of this committed middle-class activist is not understated. It is crucial to avoid the pitfalls of social movement "resource mobilization" literature that overstates the role of "outsiders." Such a position is exemplified by the vanguardist left but also among paternalistic liberals and leads (especially in the South African situation) to racist and classist thinking that poor and marginalized people can't organize and think for themselves. The situation is complex and complicated and I am not going to be able to do it justice here, but since the issue is important it must be addressed.

For Fanon, the intellectual who enrolls in the "school of the people" – marvelously articulated on the banners at marches, as the "University Of Kennedy Road" or the "University of Abahlali" – does not come empty-handed. Fanon's point is that to appreciate the creativity of the wretched of the earth does not mean transferring the responsibility for the working out of principles and concepts onto the backs of the people. Indeed, intellectuals from outside must come to the school having cleared their heads of conceptions of the "backwardness" of the masses. But this does not mean that

91. See Lennox Mabaso and Harry Mchunu, "Shackdwellers under the sway of an agent provocateur," *Sunday Tribune*, 24 September 2006. The charge that Abahlali is run by a white man – a charge leveled by both the ANC and part of the NGO left – is certainly a racist claim (namely, that the shackdwellers could be so manipulated and couldn't organize such a movement on their own) and has been repeated by Jacob Zuma, the Vice President of the ANC and former deputy president of the country. Richard Pithouse's participation at the beginning of the movement shouldn't be dismissed. The assumption is that outsiders bring resources and thus "buy" loyalty is part of the "third force" and "outsider agitator" lines of argument. Commenting on a draft of this paper, Pithouse wrote that the most important contribution in the beginning was "through discussion, to give people confidence in their right to resist and to explore modes of resistance." He helped to get a lawyer for those arrested on 19 March 2005 and wrote an article in the local paper that explained the road blockade from the point of the view of the people who had organized it.

Hearing about the roadblock, Pithouse went to Kennedy Road and was initially shunned by the youth. But he stayed around and began to talk with others and slowly built a relationship of trust. Nonhlanhla Mzobe, the then deputy chair of Kennedy Road Development Committee, remarks that when "we met Richard . . . the people didn't like him and chased him away, but he introduced himself to me. For a while I was the only one who trusted him and whenever he would come people would say 'hey princess your umlungu [white man] is here.'" Attitudes changed after they read Pithouse's article in the press. See Bryant (note 42), p. 68.

they must come with an empty head. Indeed, this would be an expression of their bad faith. Conscious of their own thinking, they bring ideas, concepts, and learning that can aid the people's own self-understanding and thereby in a sense work to make themselves redundant. This is exactly where the problematic begins. The danger is underestimating the role of outside activists who can put their expertise to the service of the people. Pithouse himself insisted on this Fanonian position: that the militant's task is to overcome the spirit of discouragement marginal people feel⁹² and to help them build confidence through discussions that explore viable modes of resistance. Having worked with and written about social movements in post-apartheid South Africa,⁹³ Pithouse brought a practical knowledge of the kind of movements that had been successful and those which had not. Turning the anthropological gaze on its head, he became an informant on how to engage with the state, how to express opposition, and how to navigate the donor/NGO terrain.⁹⁴ But he stresses that while he was an active participant in the discussions that shaped Abahlali baseMjondolo, he was one of many, each of whom brought particular experiences and skills to the table. Thus, following Fanon, he, together with Raj Patel and Fazel Khan, put himself in the school of the people. His actions exemplify those of Fanon's committed intellectual, who uses knowledge snatched from the elite university to help the "wretched's" self-government. From the perspective of the institutional elite university, this is truly incendiary, since universities (accredited through technical language and designed in Fanon's terms to "cheat the people"⁹⁵) consider this knowledge part of their intellectual property and are not particularly happy when researchers share their knowledge with poor people who will use it to challenge the establishment, which includes the university itself. For these universities, knowledge, and therefore power, flow the other way: rather than sharing knowledge with the subalterns to empower them, the researchers' role is to

92. On Fanon's challenge to intellectuals and his conception of political education, see *The Wretched of the Earth* (note 35), pp. 185–205, and Nigel Gibson, *Fanon: The Post-colonial Imagination* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003), chapter 8, esp. pp. 192–200.

93. The most widely read of Pithouse's articles is one co-authored with Ashwin Desai on the Mandela Park (Cape Town) Anti-Eviction Committee, "But we were thousands: Resistance, Repression and Repossession in Mandela Park," University of KwaZulu Natal, Centre for Civil Society Research Report, 2003.

94. Before his involvement, he had written the important piece "Solidarity, Cooption and Assimilation," which appears in Gibson (ed.) *Challenging Hegemony* (note 1).

95. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (note 35), p. 189.

bring back the knowledge snatched from the subalterns to the university to reinforce its walls, building them ever higher.

The point, in other words, is not to praise Abahlali but to engage with it. Fanon argues that one of the most important challenges facing the nation after independence is to overcome the “spirit of discouragement” and promote confidence in the masses of their own self-understanding. The challenge, as Zikode has insistently pointed out, is to take the thinking of the poor seriously. This is the starting point to working out the “new concepts” that Fanon calls for in his conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Zikode’s challenge to radical academics to bring “our university” (of Abahlali baseMjondolo) to “your university” (e.g., UKZN) reflects the importance the movement puts on the power of thought and on theory that elucidates the “objective situation.” As Marx put it, “minds are always connected by invisible threads with the body of the people,”⁹⁶ and the role of practice-based theory is not just to develop solidarity but to bring about a meeting of the minds. This idea, articulated also by Fanon, was taken seriously by the three activists who initially started working with the Kennedy Road movement.

Abahlali’s deputy president, Philani Zungu, understands the class politics and simple materiality of the university’s actions against sympathetic academics in a series of rhetorical questions: “Why are we not allowed to work with academics at the university? Why are academics at the university not allowed to work with the poor? The answer is clear. This democracy is not for us. We must stay silent so that this truth can be kept hidden. This democracy is for the rich who will build and then enjoy themselves at uShaka, King Sensagakhona Stadium, and King Shaka Airport. We will only go to these places to protect and clean up for the rich.” Zungu understands that the University’s actions against academics who work with the poor is not a conspiracy, but the result of what Marx called the hallmark of class society, the division between mental and manual labor. Indeed Zungu adds, “Fazel Khan, a sociologist at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), is facing charges for speaking to the media . . . With other academics, academics who are already gone from the University, he has spoken to the poor instead of for the

96. Marx quoted in Peter Hudis, *Marx and the Third World* (Detroit: News and Letters, 1983), p. 30.

poor. He has worked with the poor instead of with the rich in the name of the poor."⁹⁷

The birth of the movement resulted in a nuancing of attitudes. Voices are being heard that were once silent, and voices of the poor are being heard in spaces where they do not usually speak, such as newspapers, radio, and television, on the internet⁹⁸ and in academic journals. The feelings of isolation and struggling alone have been offset by concrete experiences and new connections. Abahlali developed because other shack settlements saw an affinity with the Kennedy Road struggle, and through this development, the Kennedy Road movement made connections that allowed them access to people across the city and country. A struggle that began locally, with people seeing the councilor as the major problem, is now seeing a more systematic problem. And there has been a radical mutation of ideas. In May 2005, the shackdwellers' experiences of working in and living next to a middle- and upper-class Indian community on the Clare Estate could have easily led to the belief that the source of suffering was directly linked to Indian anti-African racism. Yet, by September 2005, shackdwellers were collecting hard-earned cash to pay for a taxi to support people in the predominantly Indian working class suburb of Bayview.⁹⁹ Over time some NGOs and other individuals have given practical support, but Abahlali is not dependent on any external funds. In fact, from the first day, the wealth of the movement has been measured by the energy, commitment, and enthusiasm of its members and its self-organization. Still, Abahlali remains particularly concerned about its ability to maintain political autonomy within the democratic structure of the organization. "It's quite interesting because sometimes we are aware that these organisations have got money but they don't have constituents, you know, *people*," says Zikode, "Abahlali is the poor struggle - struggle of the poor - therefore money will not tempt us ... we cannot therefore be bought."¹⁰⁰ In other words, Abahlali is aware of the potentially disastrous effects of external funding on a poor people's movement, that it may not only broker a movement but also potentially destroy it.

97. Philani Zungu, "From Party Politics to Service Delivery to the Politics of the Poor", <http://Abhahli.org/node/304>

98. As noted above, Abahlali now has its own website and films about the shackdwellers' struggle that are available on www.YouTube.com.

99. Pithouse, "Coffin" (note 32), pp. 180-181. It is worth noting that there are now a good number of active Indian members.

100. Zikode interview in Pithouse, "Coffin" (note 32), p. 44.

Again, Zikode reminds us that human beings do not live on bread alone. They are poor, he says, they know that, and they might be poor in life, but they are not poor in mind.¹⁰¹ One cannot but appreciate the dignity and “the nobility which burst forth from these toil-worn” people, for it is among these “wretched” shackdwellers that the practical and ethical challenge to post-apartheid South Africa has most profoundly emerged.¹⁰²

101. Zikode quoted in Pithouse, “Our Struggle” (note 40), p. 25.

102. See Marx’s letter to Feuerbach, 11 August 1844, where he speaks to Feuerbach of his excitement at attending a meeting of the French workers; “You would have to attend one of the meetings of the French workers to appreciate the pure freshness, the nobility which burst forth from these toil-worn men.” The dignity of the workers moves Marx to proclaim, “It is among these ‘barbarians’ of our civilized society that history is preparing the practical element for the emancipation of mankind.”