

Knowledge practices in Abahlali baseMjondolo

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Abstract

Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) are a South African shack dwellers' movement that struggles for land, housing, basic services and the dignity of the poor. This article explores the movement's ideology and knowledge practices. It then relates these to broader ideas in the activist and academic world in order to suggest what these knowledge practices might contribute to that world. AbM is based around a 'living politics' – a politics based on the concrete experiences of the people in the movement. As such, the movement does not subscribe to any outside model or ideology, it has its own. 'Abahlalism' is described as a new concept to form a new ideology for the movement. It draws some of its ideas from the southern African philosophy of Ubuntu. The relationship between community and individual described in Ubuntu and the living politics of the movement greatly influence its structure and activities. While emphasis is placed on concrete lived experience, I argue that as similar ideas can be found elsewhere in social movement practices and literature, some of the lessons of the movement are broadly applicable to social movement struggles and research practices in regards to them.

Introduction

This article discusses the knowledge practices of Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM). AbM is a shack dwellers movement in South Africa. It was formed in 2005 as a response to the treatment of shack dwellers by the state. Shack dwellers are routinely subjected to violence, eviction and the denial of services (Huchzermeyer 2010, 131; Pithouse 2008, 73). They are also lied to by politicians and offered empty promises, particularly in the run up to elections, to placate them. The movement demands that the poor are given land, housing, and the basic services that they need to survive, but also that they are listened to and treated with dignity. In early 2013, I spent some time in Durban, speaking to some members of AbM and observing the movement's practices. The main topic of these interviews was the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) by the movement, but during this time it became apparent that this topic would need to be complemented by discussions around the movement's ideology and knowledge practices. This paper does make some reference to the use of ICTs in the movement but it is these latter discussions that this article is primarily concerned with.

AbM is based around a 'living politics'. Simply put, this refers to a politics that comes from the lived experiences and struggles of the people in the movement, rather than external theory or analysis. This can be seen in contrast to the top-down, technocratic practices of the state. It also differs from the practices of NGOs and academics who often seek to assume or impose their own ideologies

or views on the poor, rather than listening and crediting them with their own intelligence. This view partially accounts for the movement's communitarian ethic, as it affords the poor a voice of their own, and their commitment to radical, grassroots democracy, though these practices are also informed by the groups homegrown ideology, Abahlalism.

Abahlalism is described as a new concept to form a new ideology for the movement. It is humanistic, and based on the concept of the responsibility to stand up to injustice. It can also be related to the southern African philosophy of Ubuntu. Present in Ubuntu is a '...duality of individuality and simultaneous unity...' (Oppenheim 2012, 370). This is a concept that can be seen reflected in the knowledge practices of AbM, which are communitarian yet deeply concerned with the voice and freedom of the individual, encompassing a complex interplay between the universal and the particular.

The final section of this article is dedicated to situating the movement's knowledge practices within the context of social movement scholarship. While AbM's living politics in some ways invite readings that are contingent and context-dependent, I argue that broader lessons can be found in the movement's knowledge practices that can benefit a range of progressive causes. I illustrate this by comparing the ideas explored in the discussion of AbM with other ideas and arguments within social movement struggles and academia, highlighting emergent trends and areas of contention. I conclude with some suggestions as to what readers might gain from reflection on these knowledge practices.

Emergence of a movement

In 2008, Africa was the fastest urbanising continent, with 72% of people living in 'informal settlements' or 'shack settlements' (Gibson 2008, 6). Sources in a report by the Housing Development Agency (2012, 31) vary in their estimate of the number of these settlements in South Africa – the highest estimate is 2754, the lowest 1016. A 2007 Community Survey indicates that 1.2 million households live in 'shacks-not-in-backyards'¹, though again this figure differs depending on data source (Housing Development Agency 2012, 23). Grant Saff (1994, 377) attributes this situation to the widespread urbanisation of the black population after the decline and end of Apartheid, coupled with a lack of sufficient economic growth². Marie Huchzermeyer (2010, 144) explains the reaction of the country's new African National Congress (ANC) government:

¹ In some neighbourhoods it is common to see shacks in the backyards of peoples' houses. The survey does not include these in its figures, referring only to shacks in informal settlements.

² This is, however, a somewhat simplified account. Other factors have also been noted, for instance by authors such as Adam Habid and Vishnu Padayachee (2000, 259) who have remarked that '...the ANC's implementation of neoliberal economic policies has meant disaster for the vast majority of South Africa's poor'. Nigel Gibson (2011, 74) also alludes to this. Also, Matt Birkinshaw (2008, 2) mentions a desire for independence or an escape from violence, political or otherwise, as some reasons that people end up living in shack settlements.

In a technocratic and perhaps late-modernist determinism, the political leadership of the post-apartheid state chose first to focus simplistically on the delivery of one million houses in its first term, and then on the target of eradicating slums or informal settlements by the end of its fourth term.

Particular attention should be paid to the use of the term ‘technocratic’. In this political sense it can be read as meaning rule by those who consider themselves the most intelligent (Pithouse 2008, 72). Technocracy is not the only relevant concept that can be used to understand the situation. S’bu Zikode’s (2010) critique of a ‘regressive left’ which assumes that only NGOs and academics can think implies a vanguardist mindset. This can also be seen in Patrick Heller’s (2012, 664) description of an ANC which, seeing itself as the heir of the anti-apartheid movement, is hostile to a civil society it does not control. Technocracy, however, is a useful concept for understanding what activist and academic communities can learn from AbM’s knowledge practices.

Richard Pithouse (2008, 72), refers to the government’s ‘Slum Clearance Project’ as being ‘based on an authoritarian technocratic decision-making model’ wherein the state uses escalating violence to ‘defend its status as the sole planning authority’. In recent times, the movement has been subjected to murder, repression and violence (Bullock 2013; Nicolson 2013). Force, eviction and forced relocation are commonly directed at shack dwellers by state authorities³ (Huchzermeyer 2010, 131). As the ideal government plan has been for new housing and settlement eradication, settlements are considered ‘temporary’. Because of this, upgrades to settlements were suspended then stopped in 2001, as was maintenance and services such as water provision (Pithouse 2008, 73). It was in this environment that, in 2005, AbM was born.

On March 18, 2005, at the Kennedy Road settlement, work was started on building a brick factory on land long promised by the council for housing. Shack dwellers moved to the site and demanded an explanation from the council, and were arrested. ‘Instead of housing, people found themselves facing bulldozers as well as removal twelve miles outside the city (a ten-dollar cab ride), far from work opportunities, schools and hospitals’ (Gibson 2007, 61). A mass meeting was held at the settlement, and a mass demonstration took place in the morning that led to a confrontation with riot police (Pithouse 2008, 75). AbM members Lindela Figlan, Bandile Mdlalose and S’bu Zikode explained to me that from this beginning the movement was formed out of a realisation by shack dwellers that they had common concerns – mostly a dissatisfaction with the broken promises of their government. In 2007 the movement described itself in the following terms: ‘Abahlali baseMjondolo is a radically democratic, grassroots and entirely non-professionalised movement of shack dwellers in South Africa.

³ These events are routinely documented on the AbM website (abahlali.org). At this time (late September 2013), evictions and demolitions are occurring at Cato Crest, Durban. Earlier in the year, an AbM activist was murdered at this place.

It grew out of a road blockade organized by residents of the Kennedy Road Shack Settlement in the City of Durban in early 2005. The words Abahlali baseMjondolo are Zulu for people who stay in shacks.’ (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2007). As I will argue, the movement does not only fight against the conditions the shack dwellers endure. It also, in its grassroots and radically democratic nature, constitutes a rebellion against the technocratic and coercive logic that is behind their situation.

Meeting the shack dwellers

For my research into AbM, I spent two and a half weeks in Durban, South Africa. During this time, the majority of my data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with members of the group. Due to the flexibility of the group’s operations, appointments for these interviews could often only be made in quite vague terms. This meant that I spent a large amount of time waiting in the office, observing its day-to-day activities. I also sat in on a number of meetings, some of which were translated for me (meetings were typically conducted in Zulu and Xhosa). On two occasions I had the opportunity to visit shack settlements in Foreman Road and the area of Shallcross. Here I met some residents and observed first-hand the communities in which the shack dwellers live. The data from these activities has been supplemented by data from secondary sources – information from the AbM website, news articles, and other academic research.

During my time with AbM I was told that the movement’s meetings used to take place in the shack dwellers’ communities. This was considered preferable, but is no longer a good idea since the armed attack on the movement in the Kennedy Road settlement in 2009⁴. Since the movement was attacked in the Kennedy Road settlement it has, with church support, rented an office in the Durban city centre. Most of my interactions with people from AbM occurred at this office. There is a computer in a partitioned ‘reception’ area in the entrance, as well as a second one in the main room. These seemed to be shared by those who regularly inhabit the office. The way the office is run emphasises inclusion, in keeping with the movement’s democratic ethos – there is an open-door policy in place as the nature of people’s problems means appointments are not always feasible. The general meeting that I attended was standing-room only, with people flowing out into the hallway. Even so I was still welcomed and provided with translations of the proceedings. Meetings go for as long as they need to, with care taken that everyone present has a chance to speak. Democratic processes

⁴ The armed attacks on the movement at the Kennedy Road shack settlement in 2009 were perpetrated by an armed gang associated with a local ANC branch. However the ANC initially blamed the violence on AbM and twelve of its members were arrested and detained in prison without bail. They were all later acquitted when the state was not able to provide any evidence against them (Socio-economic Rights Institute of South Africa 2011). More information on the attacks is available at Abahlali baseMjondolo (2012) and Chance (2010).

are not compromised in the name of efficiency. The same cannot be said for the representative democracy of many modern governments.

I also visited two settlements and spoke to some of the residents. I spent some time at Shallcross with Albert Ngubane. Ngubane is the AbM committee chairperson at Shallcross, ePhuleleni. The movement is involved in a legal battle in Shallcross regarding corruption within a housing project. A final court decision is still pending. AbM members Mnikelo Ndabankulu and Philani Ntanzi live in the Foreman Road settlement. Foreman Road is located right next to a neighbourhood consisting of conventional houses. Many of the settlement's residents work in these houses – this is an important point as relocation to rural housing as often mandated by the government would mean long and expensive commutes to work. This is an example of the kinds of pertinent issues that would warrant discussion, if those in the government were willing to engage with the poor about their lives. This emphasis on dignity for the marginalised and the realities of life in the shack settlements is a crucial part of the discourse of the movement as will be discussed.

Abahlalism and living politics

AbM is based around a 'living politics' – a politics based on the concrete experiences of the people who the movement is comprised of. Former AbM president S'bu Zikode explains that, as such, the movement does not subscribe to any outside model or ideology, it has its own. 'Abahlalism' is described as a new concept to form a new ideology for the movement. Zikode describes it as being about 'humanistic characteristics' – fear the bad, have sympathy for others. It is about the responsibility of being a human, the responsibility to act when wrong is occurring. Importantly, it entails the acceptance that freedom will never be delivered on a silver plate. People need to know that their situation is not God-given – for Zikode, this attitude is some of the greatest damage that the Apartheid system has left as its legacy. In reality, people are made poor by political decisions. Abahlalism emphasises the importance of being conscious of the forces that create poverty and inequality. Zikode talks about how the people in Haiti were made to believe that the earthquake which devastated the country was God's will. But, he points out, in the aftermath somebody has chosen that they suffer, and somebody benefits. For this reason also, he criticises charities that ignore the politics of such situations.

In the case of South Africa, it is a politics that denies agency to the very subjects of the issue of poverty – the poor (a common AbM slogan reads 'talk to us, not about us!'). As a main concern of the movement is the dignity and voice of the marginalised poor, it is not surprising that the AbM is critical of those who assume that they know better than, or can speak for the poor. This includes a number of academics. AbM Secretary General Bandile Mdlalose considers that many academics use their own terms and vocabulary, and can't relate well to activists. While academics have much more time to think, activists are

concerned with action. She is critical of academics that do not get involved, engage, experience:

Academics who sit behind a desk are no better than the government who breeds poverty, who criticises the people on the ground, who think that we are poor because we make ourselves poor, who have not gone down to the people and realised what is really really happening to the people on the ground...

This is not to say that academics and intellectuals are not needed or wanted among the struggles of the poor. Zikode stresses that this struggle needs to be for everyone. Jacob Bryant (2008, 50) notes that links with the middle class (such as academics) connect the struggle to a 'network of resources'. Academics and shack dwellers also engage in mutual learning, aiming to '...combine the two universities – the one of experience and the one of academics...' (Figlan et al 2009). However, AbM is conscious to avoid 'zim zims' – dogma, terminology or nomenclature that privileges those who know it above those who do not (Pithouse 2008, 80). Such language can be seen as a tool to reinforce technocratic and vanguardist notions around who is fit to think and philosophise and theorise, and who is fit only to be subjected to the well-made plans of the elite.

The assertion by AbM that the poor can think for themselves has not always made them popular. There have been many efforts to crush the group, from both the right and the left. In the words of Zikode, 'Our crime has been, "Who the hell are you that you can speak for yourself, because you should have known your place in the first place, which is, your place is in the shack".' Similarly, AbM member Thembani Ngongoma notes that those who associate with the poor are seen as tainted by that association, the exception being once every five years at election time when politicians appear in the settlements appealing for votes. This attitude from a government (among other groups) that is supposed to represent the people has led AbM to conclude that it is better that they speak for themselves, and get their mandate from one another. Ndabankulu points out that what AbM are fighting for, they will be the direct beneficiaries from. This is unlike political parties, where your camp may win, but you don't really win anything, the party or candidate wins. The shack dwellers, in contrast, are fighting for land, houses and services for themselves, not the AbM leadership. The reality of AbM's 'living politics' is that, for the shack dwellers, these politics are inseparable from life, victories or losses directly correspond to the conditions of shack dwellers' lives. Put this way, it seems perverse for such a politics to be seen as lesser to one that is more removed or abstract.

Mdlalose asserts that every individual should have dignity and in AbM, 'We don't need to be inside [government/politics] to speak' - the shack dwellers have dignity as an organisation. She notes that in reality, most people do not count, and there is a need for techniques and strategies to correct this. Many have

protested against councillor Nigel Gumede⁵, but he is still in power. Mdlalose states that she cannot remember a time when an elected councillor listened to the people. She has thus concluded that voting amounts to taking your power and giving it to someone else. A well-known AbM slogan is ‘No land, no house, no vote’. This basically means ‘if you don’t give us what you promise then there is no point voting for you’. This rejection of formal politics in favour of living politics and democracy permeates all aspects of the movement’s practices.

While the movement is ethnically diverse (Figlan et al 2009; Zikode 2010), certain cultural influences can be seen. Zikode states that Abahlalism can be related to the southern African philosophy of Ubuntu. The word ‘Ubuntu’ comes from an isiXhosa proverb – ‘umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’ – ‘a person is a person through their relationship to others’ (Swanson 2007, 53). Claire Oppenheim (2012, 370) states that, ‘Ubuntu is a spiritual ideal, a way of life that is conceptually represented in a wide range of sub-Saharan African societies. While Ubuntu exists in many variations within different African cultures and languages, each conceptualization retains the same core of meaning...’. Zikode notes in his explanation of Abahlalism that personal virtue is not enough - the state of the community is important. This has obvious parallels with the ‘...duality of individuality and simultaneous unity...’ present in Ubuntu, where true personal enrichment is naturally compatible with the nurturing of community (Oppenheim 2012, 370). Nicolito Gianan (2011, 63) argues that this core concept here can be found in other cultures. For instance, a comparable view of the relationship between the universal and particular, the general and specific, can be found in descriptions of the Global Justice Movement (GJM)⁶.

The phrase ‘Unity in Diversity’ has roots in non-western cultures back hundreds of years, such as indigenous North Americans, Taoists and Baháí (Lalonde 2004). It is a well-known slogan of the GJM. With some irony it can be noted that it has also been adopted by some nation-states, including South Africa. When asked whether he considers AbM to be part of the GJM, Zikode answers yes with some caveats. The term ‘global’ raises a lot of questions. For Zikode, there is a link between the local and global, and both views are necessary. It can be problematic, however, when people have no base or foundation in local movement, but want to be big from the start. Any universality needs to be grounded in popular movement. Part of AbM’s living politics is ‘living solidarity’. Zikode says that he believes that the movement underestimated the power of global solidarity during the Kennedy Road attacks. Due to the personal pain and frustration of those affected, which others elsewhere did not feel

⁵ Gumede is a long-time opponent of the movement, the AbM website (www.abahlali.org) states clearly its position (Nigel Gumede must go!), while Gumede himself has openly threatened S’bu Zikode (Pambazuka News 2011).

⁶ It is also a theme that spans a vast range of scholarly works. This is noted by Chantal Mouffe (2000, 34) – ‘Let’s just recall that the anti-essentialism I am endorsing, far from being restricted to post-structuralism, constitutes the point of convergence of many different currents of thought and that it can be found in authors as different as Derrida, Rorty, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, Dewey, Lacan and Foucault’.

themselves, or see themselves, it at first felt somewhat unreal. However, this view has changed after witnessing solidarity marches in New York and London, and their impact in South Africa. He notes that many injustices are similar in nature around the world, so to a certain extent one can identify with this, and recognise what is common with other movements. An attempt to identify such commonalities is made in this article, in the ‘discussion’ section where I suggest what the insights from AbM’s knowledge practices can contribute to other social movements and scholarship. In the next section, though, the implications of the movement’s discourse for its practices will be explored.

Movement praxis

The above provides a brief illustration of the ideas that underpin the movement. These can be seen as informing the movement’s praxis in several ways. A communitarian ethic unites the poor and affords them power in their struggle. At the same time, however, awareness of the delicate relationship between the universal and the particular, community and individuality, means careful articulation of the struggle is needed to maintain a true living politics. As well as this, the movement is concerned with reasserting the identity of the poor as people who matter, and who have agency and intelligence. This is achieved through a radical commitment to grassroots, participatory democracy.

In the spirit of Abahlalism, love, taking care of one another, is power. On this, Zikode states:

I have always also viewed this power as a basin that collects tears...In one of the meetings we had in Pietermaritzburg about four years ago, one woman stood in the meeting, the hall was fully packed, the woman stood and said “I’m a single mother, I have no husband, when I voted then I put my trust on my councillor”, and she burst into tears, saying that “today, I have no one to report to. The pain that I have, I have nowhere to share.” ...and that’s how people get frustrated and for us, that moment of being able to be a platform for people to speak for themselves. It’s really important because we don’t know what kind of damage happens when tears fall inside a person.

Zikode notes that this is one thing that the shack dwellers have that the rich lack. In South Africa, he says, rich people have gated communities, they don’t know their neighbours, so they have no sense of community. For AbM community makes a human being complete. You can only be a human being if you recognise other human beings around you.

Zodwa Nsibande came to Durban in 2003. Her mother was one of the people who first formed the movement, and she got involved over time. She studied Information Technology for two years until she was injured in an accident. Though it was not revealed in the interview, I later learned that this accident

was a shack fire (*The Guardian Weekly* 2009). Nsibande had wanted to be a private investigator - she considers that many of those skills have been transferable to her work with AbM, as it concerns itself with finding facts about corruption and duplicity in government. Knowledge can be power, Nsibande says, and she considers that AbM speaks truth to the powerful. Powerful people are scared of things being written about them. She states that she knows that some in the government have good intentions, but the government is detached from the people. AbM tries to inform those with good intentions so they can act well, but the government often doesn't like this. Nsibande asserts that as political parties do not help the poor, the poor must unite.

Zikode argues that, 'The reality is that there are many forces in our society that contest power...' The poor people who have united as AbM have in doing so become one of those forces. This illustrates one of the bigger questions within the movement – challenging the assumption that poor cannot think for selves and need to be represented by someone else (Zikode notes that this assumption is also made if you are black, female, young...). Shack fires, a serious and often fatal problem in the settlements, are often seen as happening because shack dwellers are careless, or drink too much, rather than a consequence of the state not providing electricity to the area. This dismissiveness belies the fact that shack dwellers are quite aware of the circumstances surrounding shack fires, as shown in a report by Matt Birkinshaw (2008). As Zikode points out, people in Berea (a richer area of Durban) also drink - they just don't have burning candles to knock over. This perception means that the shack dwellers first need to define themselves and stand firm that they count just like anyone else – they possess the same intelligence, the real question is of opportunities that they may not have had.

Zikode notes that AbM is viewed in different ways by different people. A difficult task for the movement is to develop its principle that there are no human borders – that a human is a human – into organisational unity across spatial locations. For a movement that insists that it will only struggle with people, and not for people, organisational unity requires constant and time consuming interaction, AbM's main base in Durban maintains some solidarity with other regions through phone communication, but this is not enough to sustain a living politics. In fact the Western Cape AbM is fairly autonomous from AbM in Durban. Ndabankulu says that this is partially because of lack of resources. Another difficulty is that questions often arise over the movement's political affiliation - for instance, the ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) have a history of bitter conflict and it is often asked whether the movement is secretly aligned to the IFP or ANC. Others try to use membership as a career move, seeing it as an opportunity to leverage themselves into NGOs or political parties, which shows a misunderstanding about the fundamental character of the movement.

AbM believes in, and practices, grassroots democracy. In Durban I witnessed several of the movement's meetings and the great lengths that were gone to in

order to maintain a democratic praxis. Pithouse (2005) explains the process involved:

A democratic practice within struggle has to have structural mechanisms to take account of the fluidity of struggle and it has to take account of the fact that mass participation in decision making is vastly more democratic and renders movements vastly less vulnerable to co-optation or coercion than representative approaches to democracy. A radically democratic approach also makes gender representation come right and ensures that lots of people get experience reducing dependency on individuals.

Abahlali baseMjondolo is approaching decision making in a genuinely democratic manner. All movement meetings are preceded by community meetings at which representatives to the movement meetings are elected and mandated for that meeting only. If the movement meeting has to choose a delegation (or individuals) to undertake negotiations with council, meet with other movements or take a platform on the radio etc then people are elected and mandated for that one specific task. There is always a report back and discussion.

ICTs are used where possible to further communitarian and democratic aims. This is complicated, however, by the need to operate outside of the communities for safety reasons since the Kennedy Road attacks (not to mention various violent incidents since then, documented on the movement's website). Unfortunately, Zikode points out, in the office a computer with internet access makes it easier to communicate with outside world than with the movement's own, computerless comrades. For instance the website serves more to communicate in solidarity with the outside world than with AbM members. The movie *Dear Mandela*, a documentary by Dara Kell and Christopher Nizza, has also served as a powerful tool in this respect. It has allowed the movement to travel around the world without having to actually travel. Also, the spread of phones with internet access is helping close the gap. The nature of the movement's use of ICTs is an example of AbM's knowledge practices in action.

Some of the discussions with AbM members seemed to suggest that the barriers to ICT use created by poverty, and the unequal access to ICTs within the movement, is at least slightly mitigated by the dedication of AbM to community, and direct, participatory democracy which keeps everyone in the loop. When I ask Ndabankulu, he is quick to stress the importance of technology, especially cell phones:

...A comrade which doesn't have a cell phone is one of the most difficult comrades to work with. Because even to coordinate the meetings, we rely on the mobile phones. You have to phone the coordinator or the chairperson of a particular branch to tell the comrades that there is a general meeting, and then that person who received a call from the office can then use the word of mouth to the locals...

Ndabankulu relates an anecdote that illustrates why he believes in the worth of ICTs to the movement. Ndabankulu and Nsibande are Facebook friends. When there was a protest at Kennedy Road, Nsibande was in Pietermaritzberg, outside of the city. Ndabankulu took a photo of the protest on his Blackberry and uploaded it to Facebook. The media called Nsibande, who was not well informed of what had happened, but was able to comment on behalf of AbM via information on Ndabankulu's Facebook page. Ndabankulu emphasises that you can't trust everything on Facebook, but if it comes from a trusted source you can. Ndabankulu notes that the relationship between the two, and Ndabankulu's status within AbM as a respected leader, who takes the struggle seriously, means Ndabankulu's posts are considered reliable. He also mentions that Facebook and Twitter are useful to communicate with comrades outside of South Africa because of their low cost. Even so, most shack dwellers have very limited or no access to such technology, so its usefulness is dependent on the particular way that the movement conducts its business, with an emphasis on inclusion.

This was illustrated further by Albert Ngubane. Ngubane has been involved with AbM since 2010. He is a committee chairperson for the area where he lives, in Shallcross, ePhuleleni, where there are about 87 AbM members. As committee chairperson it is his job to pass information on to the community. He states that many people in Shallcross have houses now because of AbM. Indeed, Shallcross settlement consists of both shacks and government houses. Ngubane has a house but is hesitant to leave his shack as ownership of the houses is disputed at the moment and it is possible he could lose it. He showed me a large folder of documents relating to an ongoing legal battle. When the houses were built, it was discovered that none of them were being allocated to the shack dwellers living in the area. AbM fought this in a court battle. This exposed corruption within the housing project. For instance, houses were being sold to multiple buyers. Some of the culprits have since been jailed, but at the time of the interview the final court decision on ownership of the houses was still pending. Ngubane explains that it is this side of AbM's activities that he is involved in – information gathering and legal challenges, rather than protests.

Ngubane agreed to take me to his area in Shallcross, where he introduced me to several women from the neighbourhood, who I talked to briefly. Importantly, none of them regularly used ICTs themselves but all recognised their importance in the movement. Bongiwe Nkabinde is a community organiser and coordinator in the area. She has been involved with AbM for 2.5 years. Nontokozi and Phileleli are AbM members. Nontokozi joined AbM after the municipality tried to evict her family. Nkabinde states that she has seen technology used by AbM. It was used to inform people about court dates and provide information around evictions, she also remembers the presence of the media. Phileleli relates how AbM contacted them with cellphones during evictions. She also recognises the media power it affords them. Nontokozi has likewise seen ICTs being used to disseminate information. She stresses importance of working together and the confidence this provides people. She also stated that she thinks seeing me at the settlement means the organisation is

growing. This echoes a point made by Lindela Figlan back at the office. He stated that mostly, people in the movement don't know much about using technology, but also pointed out that it was the AbM website that led to my very presence in the AbM office in Durban.

In keeping with its living politics, day-to-day AbM says little about the big institutions. Zikode explains that the World Bank, or the IMF, are too abstract for ordinary people with more immediate concerns like electricity or sanitation. Still, these institutions work by working with smaller entities to promote injustices. For the shack dwellers this is where the fight is – '...it makes sense for people in Abahlali to deal with local councillors, they can see them, they interact with them, they lie to them, they steal from them...' The AbM website statement on this highlights the importance of the particular in keeping the universal relevant and legitimate (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2006a):

The kind of 'radical' academics who like to write about the struggles of the poor without deeming it necessary to speak to the poor or to attend their meetings or take any attempt to learn their language have often considered these mobilisations a consequence of ignorance or false consciousness. They would prefer a march on the World Bank, or, at least, the president or capital or white power. But ordinary people live and work in local places and are watched and controlled by the state, via the party, in these local places. No popular radicalism is possible without first taking on the local relations of dominations that immediately restrict the possibilities for subaltern militancy. Local councillors chair the local ward committees and Branch Executive Committees of the ANC through which local and micro-local political control is exercised over an often restless populace.

It is not only in this sense that the living politics of Abahlalism can be seen in the practices of AbM. Not only does the movement eschew grand narratives and ultimate theories of social change or revolution, it shows aspects of local practices and culture which are specifically relevant to their particular struggle. For instance, meetings sometimes, seemingly spontaneously, break into song, or start with one, as well as prayer. This is another example of the many ways in which the struggle is inextricably part of how the people of AbM live their lives.

This is also seen in one particular protest action undertaken which integrates the idea of 'toyi-toyi', a protest dance used regularly in the anti-apartheid struggle. Toyi-toyi distracts dancers from their fear, and during apartheid symbolized a 'triumph of spirit'. It is now often used by post-apartheid social movements for similar purposes (Nevitt n.d.). Figlan describes a 'cellphone toyi-toyi' conducted by a group of AbM members. Tired of marching and being on the road, AbM members coordinated phone calls to the housing department. Someone would call, asking 'W questions' ('When are you going to build our houses? How?' etc.). When this call ended, the next one would begin, asking the same questions. This would continue all day, wearing down their quarry with comparatively little energy expenditure for the callers.

Discussion

In the same way that Gianan argued that the core concept within Ubuntu can be found in other cultures as well, certain themes within the knowledge practices of AbM can be found in other schools of thought. This accords with the emphasis on shared humanity in Ubuntu, as well as the idea that similarities can be found in injustices and struggles in many places. It is important because it helps to make the case that activists and academics anywhere can potentially learn from the knowledge practices of a group like AbM. Meditations on the relationship between the universal and particular have been shared by a range of philosophers as well as academics studying groups within the GJM. These insights in turn can serve to inform the way that social science is conducted – as noted by AbM, governments are not the only institutions that seek to wield technocratic power, this can also be seen as a sickness within academic circles, one which seriously compromises some academics' ability to form relationships with other social actors committed to social change.

In a 1972 conversation, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze discuss political representation as a ploy to maintain total (and totalising) power. In a way that corresponds with Mdlalose's argument that voting is an act of giving one's power away to someone else, Deleuze asserts the importance of the fact that 'only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf.' Attempts by those concerned to speak for themselves threaten the power of those who seek to maintain their dominance over the population. Metaphorically, 'If the protests of children were heard in kindergarten, if their questions were attended to, it would be enough to explode the entire educational system.' (Foucault and Deleuze 1972). This is a fact that the activists of AbM can surely relate to, as their attempts to speak for themselves have met with severe repression. In an interview, Zikode notes, '...the system makes it impossible for everyone to count. If ordinary people counted it would collapse immediately' (Pithouse 2009, 46). AbM is a current example of the validity of forms of democracy that eschew the idea of representation by the political class.

Claims by the state that it represents the people, coupled with attempts to crush any people who challenge this claim, are fundamentally incompatible with the universal/particular relationship articulated in Ubuntu, which strongly influences Abahlalism. There does appear to be some ideological kinship, however, between this articulation and sentiments expressed by Ernesto Laclau (1996, 35):

The universal is incommensurable with the particular, but cannot, however, exist without the latter. How is this relation possible? My answer is that this paradox cannot be solved, but that its non-solution is the very precondition of democracy.

This idea is to an extent reflected in some other social movements around the world today. Richard JF Day (2005, 202) describes what he refers to as the ‘newest social movements’ (as opposed to ‘new social movements’) - ‘Groundless solidarity arises from a precarious ‘unity in diversity’ of its own, a complex set of (partially) shared experiences of what it means to live under neoliberal hegemony, what it means to fight it – and to create alternatives to it’. SA Hamed Hosseini (2009, 31) argues in an article on the GJM theory of justice that this theory contrasts with the inadequacies of past theories of justice, social movements and globalisation that have failed to capture the real complexities (fragmentation, tension, interdependence, interconnection) of these issues today. The topic of the rest of this section will be the implications of the themes of this article for theory and social science research.

Charles Tilly (1995, 1594-1596) describes a tendency in academia to look for invariant models to explain cases, an assumption that all will fit if the right model is found. He warns against this approach. To borrow his metaphor - political phenomena are not like the tides, easily explained and predicted with the right knowledge, but like great floods, coherent to the casual viewer but variable in structure, sequence and consequence due to many factors – you can understand water flow and physics but there are always other variables (Tilly 1995, 1601). To this end, the construction of invariant models in any study of social phenomena like protests or revolutions is counter-productive. Tilly instead advocates a focus on the smaller, contingent principals which together make up the larger phenomenon (Tilly 1995, 1605). This is not only a matter of ‘doing it right’. It has an ethical dimension. Bent Flyvbjerg (2005, 39) comments on the dangers of the search for invariant models, of treating social sciences as natural sciences. He argues that it serves to produce technocratic practices, where theories and models are applied to social situations by those who presume to know best. ‘If societies that suppress conflict are oppressive, perhaps social and political theories that ignore or marginalize conflict are potentially oppressive, too’ (Flyvbjerg 1998, 229).

Flyvbjerg’s argument seems to be supported by the experiences of AbM, who have faced the wrath not only of a technocratic government but also the authoritarian tendencies of the vanguardist left. Another criticism of academics by AbM concerns the use of specialist language that reinforces the privilege of those who are schooled in it. This is an issue that has been raised within academia, for instance in Noam Chomsky’s (2003) criticism of Foucault:

Foucault is an interesting case because I'm sure he honestly wants to undermine power but I think with his writings he reinforced it. The only way to understand Foucault is if you are a graduate student or you are attending a university and have been trained in this particular style of discourse. That's a way of guaranteeing, it might not be his purpose, but that's a way of guaranteeing that intellectuals will have power, prestige and influence. If something can be said simply, say it simply, so that the carpenter next door can understand you. Anything that is at all well

understood about human affairs is pretty simple. I find Foucault really interesting but I remain skeptical of his mode of expression.

This statement can be likened to Denis Dutton's (1998) 'Bad Writing Contest' in which he criticised various writers for what he considered to be deliberately obscure writing meant to convince readers of the author's intelligence⁷. In the case of AbM it is clearly apparent that the relationship between activists and academia is a work in progress, and could benefit from increased reflexivity. This is hardly a new discovery, but it remains a pertinent issue.

Conclusion

This article has sought to provide a basic description of AbM's knowledge practices. It is limited in scope and without doubt excludes valuable detail and nuance in the thought and action it describes. This is inevitable in any attempt from an outsider to explore a social movement, particularly one whose politics are drawn explicitly from living the movement's struggle. This is why I have largely stuck to the use of the interviewees own words, with little extrapolation. However, it is also noted that many struggles share some traits, which is what makes the shack dwellers' experiences relevant to scholars and activists. This is shown in how the knowledge practices can be (partially) situated in broader themes and debates.

Most important, I argue, is the rejection of the technocratic knowledge practices that are the logic behind the repression of groups like the shack dwellers. Acknowledging that the poor can think calls into question those who would rather ignore those thoughts. It is not without importance that the ANC was once hailed as a force of liberation in South Africa. This illustrates that it is not only the most obvious authoritarians who can fall into technocratic behaviour patterns. It is also a tendency that anyone seeking social change (and engaging in the accompanying power games) must guard against, including sympathetic scholars of social movements.

The movement gives an account of a 2006 march on its website (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2006b):

When Abahlali marched, (entirely peacefully and to put a reasoned position) into the University of the state under this banner ['University of Abahlali baseMjondolo'] in late 2006 a number of 'left' intellectuals, in the precise manner of the state, declared them criminal in the national press!

⁷ One of the targets of this criticism, Judith Butler (1999), accused Dutton of being politically motivated, and indeed the context of the contest, in the midst of the 'Science Wars', gives some credence to this. Chomsky is also a partisan in the wars, as evidenced by his current dispute with Slavoj Zizek (Chomsky vs Zizek debate 2013). This aspect, however, is tangential to the discussion here.

At that moment it was clear that competing elites in the state and the institutionalised left were united on the position that the poor should not think their own politics and that doing so, no matter how calmly, peacefully and rationally, rendered the movement 'out of order' and even criminal. Abahlali's intellectual project is founded on the decision that "when order means the silence of the poor then it is good to be out of order".

The order being spoken of in this passage seems to suggest some kind of respectability or credentials that mean membership in an intellectual vanguard. If this is so, surely those who wish for another world would do well to stay very much out of order.

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