Review


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The challenge in capturing the complexities of contentious politics is to demonstrate the common structural factors that help to explain stark inequality and marginalisation without discounting the agency of individuals and communities to respond; it is also to demonstrate the similarities between diverse actions without homogenising a very heterogeneous and contentious field of movement politics. *Challenging Hegemony* sets out to do this. The authors broadly define the influence of neo-liberal economic politics internationally and the ANC’s dominance domestically and lay out the theoretical and empirical implications of this hegemony. Radical social movements provide the clearest challenge to this hegemony, but their role is neither automatic nor uncomplicated by debates and divisions. In order to balance the power of hegemony with the politics of resistance and the development of alternative frameworks, the contributors to this volume demonstrate the dialectical relationships at play. This is difficult to do while still providing a clear analysis, but the book as a whole does a commendable job in working to meet this challenge.

The neo-liberal economic policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as well as those of the South African government since the introduction of the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) framework, broadly define the economic and social paradigm that the authors seek to challenge. Neocosmos, ‘Rethinking Politics in Southern Africa Today: elements of a critique of political liberalism’, Bond,
“Johannesburg’s resurgent social movements”, and Mngxitama, “National Land Committee, 1994-2004: a critical insider’s perspective”, most directly work to define the functioning of this hegemonic system, respectively focusing on the power of “Western, state-dominated, (neo-) liberal political thought” (55), “Johannesburg’s neo-liberal municipal restructuring” (105) and the politics and false promises of NGOs. Neocosmos argues that on the African continent both neo-liberalism and state nationalism “are founded on liberal precepts and are fundamentally authoritarian” (59). He adds that the technocratic language of state development works to exclude the very people in whose name development is meant to be achieved. Neocosmos concludes: “Democracy cannot emanate from the state (nor can it be defined by state logic), but only from altering relations between state and society as a result of political prescriptions emanating from society itself” (92).

Bond offers a closer look at the human impact of the restructuring of service delivery in Johannesburg and the sharp disconnections not only between what people need and what they receive but also between what the state promises during election campaigns and what is actually available to citizens in practice. This overview outlines the stark marginalisation that ordinary people face, the motivation for a number of radical movements and the incredible challenges they face in bringing about real change. Mngxitama’s analysis complements Bond’s arguments by demonstrating the lack of focused attention to land restitution and reallocation and the incredible inequities that the current system maintains. Here Mngxitama demonstrates the controversial and difficult role played by NGOs which he argues, despite partial victories, work to limit real transformation. He points to two “very seductive discourses which helped to maintain the fidelity of organs of civil society such as NGOs to the new state: “National Liberation” and “Developmentalism”” (176) thereby lending support to a number of central arguments made by Neocosmos in his chapter. Mngxitama clearly demonstrates how the National Land Committee (NLC) was trapped both by its early liberal politics and by its later partnership with the state into supporting policies that unfortunately have not worked to empower those most affected by land dispossession, such as farm workers.

These three chapters offer a number of the book’s central critiques of liberalism and the liberal tradition. Together with the remaining chapters, they effectively work to demonstrate the shortcomings of a purely rights based approach and the ways in which working through the existing system often reproduces fundamental inequities and limits the construction of true alternatives. This is a very important point as it demonstrates the ways in
which many civil society actors may work to support a system they often critique. But distinctions need to be made between different systems both theoretical and real. For example, the authors unfortunately do not define different state or regime forms. While the disempowering effect of state policies such as developmentalism are clearly described, the potential for or form of a more empowering regime is not addressed.

It may well be the case that truly emancipatory states exist only in the realm of theory, but this should not remove the task of at least defining a continuum of regimes ranging from those that are most repressive and authoritarian to those that offer greater spaces for engaged popular action. The importance of defining such a range is crucial to the aims of this volume when considering the options available to social movements in deciding how to interact with the state. Much of the present analysis suggests that the only options left are largely defiance of the state and resistance to its programs. This may well be appropriate for some movements such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) and the Landless People’s Movement (LPM); perhaps it is even true for the majority, but it must not be the best strategy for all movements in every circumstance. By defining a regime, even a theoretical one, with which movements could productively work, the authors could engage a wider range of possibilities for bringing about substantive change in ordinary people’s daily lives.

All of the chapters do importantly address the work of movements which have risen to national attention in recent years. They discuss not only the present context but also the historical development of activism, past alliances and method of resistance. Mbal, ‘TAC in the history of patient-driven AIDS activism: the case for historicizing South Africa’s new social movements’, Mngxitama and Bond offer important historical context to the struggles that they engage. Bond importantly refers to movements that have formed since the late 1990s as ‘resurgent’ rather than ‘new’ social movements. This points to their connection to past mobilizations and organisations. It also distinguishes these movements from the ‘new’ movements in European and American social theory which focus on identity struggles in place of basic material struggles. Barchiesi, ‘Classes multitudes, and the politics of community movements in post-apartheid South Africa’, adds to this discussion by demonstrating that these resurgent movements ‘present themselves as alternatives not only to ANC-aligned civic structures, but also to labor organizations’ (222).

The consistency of the material concerns raised by these movements including land ownership, access to effective medical care, and basic
services such as electricity and water underline some of the great shortcomings of South Africa’s much heralded transition. The repression which many of these movements have, at various moments, experienced at the hands of the post-apartheid state is chilling and sadly reminiscent of a previous era. The post-apartheid government also presents new challenges in the often frustrating and constraining politics of alliance and partnership, which work to stifle demands and indefinitely delay many forms of action. But alongside these challenges, the creation of a formal, institutional democracy in South Africa has also provided new opportunities for movement actors. These new opportunities and their limitations are most clearly demonstrated by the successes and failures of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). Mbali’s chapter discusses the ways in which TAC has built upon and learned from a history of gay rights and patient rights struggles which were often divided by the politics of race, class and gender. Mbali also does a nice job of engaging arguments made by other authors in this volume; this works to begin to draw the chapters into a productive conversation. It is by pressing this conversation further that the book might have more directly tackled some of the central challenges of balancing the constraints of powerful systems of rule with the diversity of struggles, ideas, arguments and methods of action among and within movements.

TAC is a movement that has engaged in radical actions such as the illegal importation of antiretroviral drugs and civil disobediences campaigns; it has called for the arrest of the Ministers of Health and of Trade and Industry on the charge of culpable homicide. TAC also employs a broad rights-based framework; it works through existing state institutions, engaging in negotiations with state actors and, when necessary, pursuing its claims through the courts. TAC’s most well known leader, Zackie Achmat presents himself as a loyal member of the ruling party who disagrees with specific policies of the government. TAC works with organisations (including NGOs) which support its programs. In sharp contrast to the ways in which movements generally defined as more radical, such as the SECC and the LPM, have been demonised in the mainstream media, TAC has repeatedly been lauded domestically and internationally as a successful example of civil society activism (with all of the liberal presumptions that go along with this). While the tactics and strategies of TAC are not necessarily appropriate to the struggles of the SECC and the LPM, TAC does raise the question as to whether some engagement with the institutions of the state and NGOs might not be productive in particular circumstances. TAC therefore represents a form of activism that many of the contributors to this volume
would define as playing into hegemonic constructions rather than challenging them. While a number of authors refer to the impact of TAC’s activism in positive terms, they do not directly engage the lessons to be drawn from its approach.

In his introduction, ‘Calling everything into question: broken promises, social movements and emergent intellectual currents in post-apartheid South Africa’, Gibson argues that middle class activists and NGOs both helped movements to grow in the short term but also presented key impediments to their further development leading to ‘demobilization and fracturing’ (15) over the longer term. The tensions created by outside supporters has in many cases led to contentious debates and the disempowerment of those on behalf of whom movements activists claim to mobilize. The clearest example of this is presented by the interactions between the NLC and the LPM, leading Mngxitama to the provocative conclusion that: ‘the NGO form must cease to exist’ (193). This is an argument which clearly deserves greater debate. Pithouse, ‘Solidarity, co-option and assimilation: the necessity, promises and pitfalls of global linkages for South African movements’, offers another perspective. While Pithouse agrees with the other contributors to the volume that many civil society projects are more co-optive than transformative, he clearly seeks to avoid simple juxtapositions arguing: ‘a false binary between social movements and NGOs is utterly unhelpful’ (257). Applying this argument to the successes and failures of the TAC would help to further elucidate to what degree and in what circumstances the dangers of co-option, disempowerment, and disintegration might be overcome, or not.

Readers of Challenging Hegemony will benefit from the important debates that its authors engage both in challenging conventional approaches and in indirectly challenging each other. The individual chapters include rich footnotes which are also worth careful scrutiny for their insights and the theoretical and empirical sources they offer. The book unfortunately lacks an index which would have made cross-referencing the chapters easier. While the volume may at times overstate some of its claims in order to make a point, and a few chapters could have been shortened in the editorial process, Challenging Hegemony will serve as a significant resource for anyone interested in present day struggles for a more humanistic society and the broader theoretical and practical implications of the politics that they present.