

Article

Introduction: social policy post 1994 in South Africa

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If the reigning consensus on the South African left is to be believed, a study of attempts to address poverty and inequality in the democratic era will be about absence, not presence of re-distributive policy interventions – it will discuss how this task was avoided, not how it was tackled. Since the adoption in 1996 of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR), this consensus insists, social policy has been set on a ‘neo-liberal’ path in which the role of the market has increased at the expense of government action against poverty and inequality (Desai 2003, Terreblanche 2002, Alexander 2002, Adelzadeh 1996, Bond 2005, Fine 2001, Marais 2011, Saul 2005). This consensus has become virtually hegemonic – to challenge it is to abandon ‘common sense’ or, worse, to identify with free market economics.

But, like many consensuses, this one is subject to challenge. While the evidence does show that the post-1994 order has left the structure of the economy largely intact, contenting itself with opening existing arrangements to black participants (Webster 2013, Friedman 2015), the claim that policy is ‘neo-liberal’, that it retrenches the role of the state in the provision of welfare in favour of the market, does not seem to reconcile with the observed realities as reflected in the evidence and the papers in this volume. In the past two decades, government social programmes have expanded – at least 60 per cent of non-interest spending in the national budget is allocated to social spending and programmes ‘to alleviate poverty’ (National Treasury 2015: iii). The growth of social grants is an obvious example but so are housing programmes, the provision of free anti-retroviral medication to millions of people living with HIV and AIDS and the extension of bulk infrastructure to

urban areas neglected by apartheid (Ferreira 2015; see also papers in this issue by Groenmeyer on social grants and Friedman on the courts and AIDS). A collective bargaining system which extends significant rights to workers and trade unions has survived intact. This is in sharp contrast to those parts of the globe where neo-liberalism, or ‘austerity’, has retrenched government social interventions: an obvious example is contemporary Europe, where cuts in social provision are assumed to be inevitable (eg Margaronis 2015) and in which labour rights have been shrinking.

However, to show that social interventions have expanded is not also to claim that they have been effective in addressing poverty and inequality or even that this was their intention. A critic of government social policy argues that, while there is ‘no lack of pro-poor social assistance’ its impact is ‘disappointing’ (Seekings 2011: 39) even though key areas of government social spending were ‘progressive’ in the sense that they redistributed resources to the poor (2011: 37). Whether policy has reduced poverty is hotly contested in the literature. Some studies find that it has been reduced by projects and policy (Bhorat et al 2014), others challenge this view (Meth 2006). But all agree that the post-apartheid period has seen ‘a significant rise in aggregate income inequality’ (Bhorat and Van der Westhuizen 2012: 9). Since race remains South Africa’s most salient social and political fault-line – and it is a core goal of government policy to narrow racial inequality – it is also significant that inequality remains racialised (Bhorat and Van der Westhuizen 2012: 11). Critics of post-1994 policy are on much firmer ground when they point to its failure to address the legacy of minority rule.

These two realities suggest that characterising the trajectory of the past two decades as ‘neo liberal’ fails to grasp its essential dynamic, one in which social provision has expanded rather than contracted but this expansion has often not produced effective action against poverty and inequality. It also accords undue emphasis to the existence of an internally coherent, planned strategy with ‘neo-liberal’ intentions without considering the political limits of such a strategy in terms of political legitimacy, the effects of popular resistance (‘service delivery’ protests) and the associated political burden of redress on the state. While some programmes have achieved positive welfare effects (such as social grants and the provision of anti-retrovirals) – many have been blunted or have arguably increased social and economic divisions (a key example is land redistribution projects which favour the affluent, or housing programmes which displace people).

Both require explanation. First, the survival of an active set of social

policies and programmes is not at all automatic. As noted above, it appears to run counter to a trend towards austerity, not only in Europe but, since the introduction of Structural Adjustment in Africa, on much of the rest of the continent. There are also significant domestic pressures against support for workers and the poor – the view that strikes damage the economy and that grant beneficiaries are reduced to dependence on the state is commonly expressed by influential sections of the elite, within as well as outside the government, among the new black middle class as well as the old white one. Economic policy since 1994 has adhered closely to the international market-friendly consensus whether because the government felt there was no alternative (Kasrils 2013) or because this was the preference of a nationalist movement dominated by the middle class. Why both the social policy and the bargaining regime have remained in place therefore requires research and analysis.

Second, while it is common to attribute policy's limited success to technical weaknesses in government, expressed in the oft-heard cliché that the government produces good policies but does not implement them, research shows that social policy's effectiveness is constrained more by policy design than implementation incapacity (Khosa 2003). Since the framing of policy is a political process, this suggests that the political dynamics which have produced social policy may also be responsible for its limitations. The politics of social policy's impact is therefore as important an issue as the politics which created and sustained it. The technocratic argument is challenged by data showing significant government provision. The 2012 census finds that the proportion of five and six year-olds receiving schooling rose from 22.5 per cent in 1996 to 91.7 per cent in 2011 (Stats SA 2012: 31); the percentage of the population which had finished school grew from 16.3 to 28.9 per cent (Stats SA 2012: 33). The percentage who have no access to piped water dropped from 19.7 to 8.8 per cent – the proportion enjoying access to it in their dwellings grew from 60.8 to 73.4 per cent (Stats SA 2012: 60). While 58.2 per cent used electricity for lighting in 1996, in 2011 the figure was 84.7 per cent. The equivalent figures for cooking are 47.5 and 73.9 per cent (Stats SA 2012: 61). A study finds significant increases in access to public assets between 1993 and 2011 – a formal dwelling; 'decent roof material'; 'high quality wall material'; piped water; electricity for cooking; electricity for lighting; and 'flush/chemical toilets' (Bhorat et al 2014). Despite this, inequality has remained stubbornly high, which suggests that the problem is not the government's inability to provide goods and

services, but a failure to address the causes of poverty and inequality. The problem is political, not technical.

This special issue is devoted to exploring the politics which makes intervention possible but also limits its impact. It proposes a framework for understanding the trajectory of the past two decades which differs from the prevailing consensus – not as a capitulation to ‘neo liberalism’ but as a process in which political circumstances have both created impetus for social policy and programmes but have limited their capacity to address the needs of the poor or to narrow inequality. This locates the South African government’s response to inequity not in a response to international pressure for liberalisation and austerity but in domestic political dynamics.

The papers in this issue were, with one exception (Graham, Sadie and Patel), researched and written for a four-country research project – ‘Expanding not shrinking social programmes: the politics of new policies to tackle poverty and inequality in Brazil, India, China and South Africa’ – coordinated by the School of Advanced Study, University of London. The project sought to understand why social policy in the countries, all members of the BRICS group, appeared to be expanding at a time when the international trend was said to favour contraction. It challenges a pervasive pessimism about the possibility of redistributive social policies in the current global climate by showing that, in the four countries, expanded social policy is not only feasible but is actively pursued by governments. Since two of the countries, India and China, are the two most populous on the planet and a third, Brazil, has the largest population in Latin America, the conventional wisdom that social policy is retrenching in the face of ‘economic reality’ ignores the experiences of most of humanity. Austerity is a regional trend, mainly in Europe – it is neither global nor inevitable. It finds too that a key flaw in the assumption that redistributive social policy is everywhere in retreat is the failure to acknowledge the role of politics. Where austerity is chosen, this is a product of particular configurations of power and the politics which they produce: if politics presses some countries towards austerity, it may also, as it does in the four countries, impel intervention to address poverty.

These findings show that South Africa’s expansion of social policy is not unique. But to explain the post-apartheid experience as a product of a universal dynamic in middle-income countries is as inaccurate as attributing it to a global trend towards liberalisation. Not all middle income countries pursue redistributive social policy – within the BRICS group, Russia is an outlier – while neo-liberal policies are noted for their similarity, the form and

effect of expanded social policy in the four countries differs significantly. The commonalities which South Africa's experience shares with others does not remove the need to examine the domestic politics which produced the policy expansion but also, in most cases, limited its effect.

Beyond 'neo liberalism'

The assumption that the GEAR policy framework implemented by Thabo Mbeki's administration in 1996 ushered in an era of 'neo liberal' austerity suggests that there were and are no limits to implementing a neo-liberal agenda, that the political forces cohered around it are entirely coherent, consistent and free of contradiction, and therefore have little need to secure their legitimacy by meeting the social expectations of the electorate. The papers published here suggest, by contrast, that complex and contradictory political forces are at play within the state and civil society and that these have ensured an expansion of social policy but not an effective assault on poverty and inequality.

What are the sources of social policy expansion? If we look simply at the proximate causes, the case studies tell a story in which the key driver of change is the innovative individual or small group. Social grants, Groenmeyer's article shows, were extended because academics and senior public servants saw a political gap in apparently unpropitious circumstances (the appointment of a National Party minister of social welfare in 1994) which enabled them to place grants on the agenda. Later, a minister determined to make his mark in a portfolio to which he had been relegated by the president turned the policy change into a concrete reality by ordering a programme to ensure that grants reached beneficiaries. Andersson and Alexander note the role of pioneering public officials and non-governmental organisations in launching and sustaining the Community Work Programme (CWP). It was, Friedman and Groenmeyer note, then Labour minister Tito Mboweni who pressed business and labour to negotiate the Labour Relations Act. Van Niekerk's discussion of health policy warns of excessive reliance on the pro-poor credentials of minister Aaron Motsoaledi who is credited with moving the public health system in a more egalitarian direction. In Friedman's discussion of the courts, the role of judges committed to social justice is central. But to assume from this that social policy is a product purely of individual zeal would miss a crucial point – that these interventions were possible only because the political context was conducive to them.

To say that a context is ‘conductive’ to particular outcomes does not, of course, mean that those outcomes are inevitable: it means that it makes some interventions and outcomes possible which would be impossible in another context (Friedman 2003). Action and strategy are still required but they have reasonable prospects of success which would be very slim, if they existed at all, if the context was different. In South Africa, the context which has created possibilities for redistributive social policy is the continuing salience of race, which is still the society’s core division.

A fight against racial domination in the society as well as the polity created a broad resistance alliance in which demands for social equality played a significant role. To simplify a complex reality, the nature of the fight against apartheid generated alliances, assumptions, slogans and policy positions which were conducive to the intervention to address poverty. Van Niekerk notes the role of the African National Congress’s *African Claims* in laying the groundwork for a national health system as far back as 1943, in tandem with the radical Gluckmann Commission which developed an unimplemented plan for a state controlled National Health Service in the ‘war years’; this is only one example among many themes which were articulated during the fight to defeat apartheid which create openings for social policy. Friedman’s discussion of the courts discusses the crucial role of the implied consensus between judges and politicians in favour of dismantling the legacy of apartheid (the product of a common fight against the system) in making it possible the government to accept for rulings with egalitarian implications.

But, contrary to analyses which claim that the ANC turned its back on radical economics (Bond 2005), opposition to social and economic inequality was never an unambiguous goal of the struggle to defeat apartheid – nor was it, therefore, a necessary feature of the post-apartheid project. The fight was primarily one against racial domination and so it is reversing the racial domination of the past which is a core feature of that project. This legitimates policies which seek to build a class of black industrialists or to favour the promotion of capitalist farming over land redistribution. But racial inequality is so intertwined with poverty and social inequality that it also, as the record of the courts described by Friedman shows, provided a persuasive rationale for redistributive policy. A potent weapon in the hands of reformers is the claim that failure to implement a change will perpetuate apartheid-type racial inequalities: the reformers who won the battle for social grants were aided by the argument that black people were entitled to what whites already had.

In a highly unequal society in which poverty and inequality are racialised and whose history has been shaped by a fight against legalised racial domination, for efforts to achieve equality have a resonance which they would lack elsewhere, particularly if they are explicitly phrased as an attempt to extend to all that which only whites once enjoyed.

The nature of the governing coalition, forged in the battle against apartheid, makes it more difficult to express overt indifference to (or contempt for) the poor. The ANC purports to speak for the nation – and most members of the nation are poor. The poor are not organised, which is why they lack power within the ANC, but nor can they be entirely ignored without alienating most of the nation. The balance of power within the governing alliance, composed of left leaning as well as more market friendly voices, (and of groups with differing economic interests) explains why it has produced no coherent strategy to tackle poverty and inequality – but it also explains why it cannot say no to social grants or community public works or adequate protection for trade unions and workers, or why it goes at least some of the way to implementing court judgements which require it to address poverty. There is also a concern for legitimacy as a ‘liberation movement’ and a consequent need to be actively seen to be redressing the stark inequalities inherited from apartheid which still take a racialised form. This creates opportunities for alliances around re-distributive social policy. It explains why, as Van Niekerk points out, a third opening might produce a national health system after two earlier opportunities were not taken.

A further factor is that, while the racial attitudes which underpinned apartheid remain firmly in place, racial inequality has been discredited in the public debate. This limits the options of social policy’s opponents. It may well explain why social grants have not been killed off by the chorus denouncing them as a cause of ‘dependency’ which discourages employment and, as Friedman and Groenmeyer suggest, why (still largely white) business has grudgingly learned to live with a labour relations system it clearly dislikes.

In sum, the country’s racial past and present create a possibility for egalitarian social policy. Because the core of the agenda is racial redress rather than social equality, this is not automatic and so it has not produced a coherent government programme to tackle poverty and inequality. But it creates a context which can be used by those in government and outside it who press for egalitarian social policy and these have been used by reformers. The factors discussed here show why South Africa does not fit

the stereotype of a society in which the forces of local and global privilege close off all attempts to create a fairer society.

Politics as constraint

If politics explains the existence and survival of redistributive social programmes, it also explains why they have not made a significant impact on inequality.

One reason is that the post-apartheid project has, perhaps ironically, ensured a path dependence which ensures that past patterns, including social exclusion, are repeated. A core assumption of the post-1994 project is that everyone should enjoy what whites enjoyed under apartheid – this means that arrangements existing in 1994 should be extended to all rather than that new ones should be developed (Friedman 2015). This is a significant influence on social policy-making: while there has been innovation, the patterns of the past exert a significant influence and the case studies reveal that some of the ‘new directions’ in post-1994 social policy are, in reality, attempts to extend to all what whites (and in some cases other racial minorities) once enjoyed alone. Friedman and Groenmeyer argue, for example, that the current labour relations regime, usually regarded as an innovation in the early days of the democratic order, is largely an extension of the bargaining system established by the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act, which excluded black African workers.

This is not necessarily a barrier to redistributive social policy – on the contrary, as the previous section explained, it has sometimes opened possibilities – we have noted Groenmeyer’s finding that a key weapon in the fight for extended social grants was that some grants were already paid to racial minorities. However, as Sayed’s study shows, fitting black people into existing patterns rather than creating new ones may well ensure that seemingly egalitarian policies are devices for perpetuating inequality. And, because social policy is made and implemented in a wider context of path dependence in the economy and society, its capacity for change is blunted. Following North’s (1990) interpretation of path dependence, the concept describes a trajectory in which change in control of the state does not necessarily alter the social relations and patterns of behaviour obtained before the change: elites may continue to act in the same way as they did under the old system. The pattern discussed earlier – in which public provision of services and infrastructure has been more effective than conventional wisdom suggests but has been limited in its impact – is

explained by this path dependence in which the essential patterns of exclusion in the economy and society remain, even if the identity of the included (although generally not of the excluded) has changed – a reality which is central to Friedman and Groenmeyer’s analysis of the bargaining system.

One reason for this highlights another implied theme in the studies – the absence of a strong redistributive coalition. Because the poor are almost invariably talked about rather than listened to in debate on social and economic policy (itself a continuation of past patterns), the priorities of racial redress are often framed through the lens of organised insiders (inevitably drawn from the middle class or above) rather than the perspective of the poor. The problem is not, as a profoundly elitist national debate often assumes, that the poor are willing to cede their agency to political leaders. Graham, Sadie and Patel’s findings suggest that the importance of redistributive policy, and its link to constitutional rights and party politics, are well understood by recipients: on the one hand, respondents, who not surprisingly see grants as an important entitlement, do not see them as a benefit which is available only if they support a political party; on the other, they are aware that grants are a policy choice which could change if party politics changes (although the official opposition currently supports grants in principle, it is not impossible that a different governing coalition would adopt a different position on grants). This suggests that grant recipients’ political preferences are the product of strategic choice, not blind obedience to political leaders – and that grassroots citizens are interested in supporting redistributive social policy. They are constrained from doing so by power relations which render them unable to influence policy. An effective redistributive coalition would, of course, offer them a route into the arena.

The absence of such a coalition is, however, demonstrated both by the already mentioned reality that most policy interventions discussed in these studies are the product of individuals or small lobby groups and by the absence of an organised movement able to contest effectively the education realities, analysed by Sayed, or to press for the national health service which Van Niekerk advocates. It might also explain why there has not been far stiffer resistance to the obstacles to establishing an effective CWP described by Andersson and Alexander as due to government bureaucratisation and political interference by local elected politicians: there is no organised force which could hold officials and politicians to account on behalf of beneficiaries.

More generally, the absence of organised redistributive pressures may

also explain a familiar constraint identified by several of the studies: state capacity which is inadequate to the task of building a fairer economy and society. Besides Andersson and Alexander's analysis of failure to extend the CWP in a workable manner, Graham, Sadie and Patel's respondents express familiar concerns at local misuse of resources, and Van Niekerk points to the role of capacity in constraining options for health care change. While conventional analyses blame technical and managerial inadequacies for capacity constraints and usually unspecified moral failings for corruption, both can be seen as political – as evidence of a weak or absent coalition for change. The National Treasury is widely seen as the most efficient government department (probably even by many who do not like that which it is efficient at doing); while this does have something to do with the technical abilities of the senior officials which it employs, it seems reasonable to assume that it would not seek out their talents if it was not under pressure to perform in particular ways by the international market-place and the businesses who act in it. It is therefore a reasonable working hypothesis that the Treasury is more efficient because it is held to account by organised interests and that, if the public officials who are constraining the CWP or are failing to meet the expectations of Graham, Sadie and Patel's social grant respondents were subject to the same pressure to account as the Treasury officials, the problems and perceptions which their studies discuss would be very different.

State incapacity is, therefore, largely if not entirely, a consequence of limited pressures to account which are in turn the product of a public sphere in which the voices of the admirers of market efficiencies routinely drown out those of the champions of equality and social solidarity. In the absence of effective pressure for redistribution, the voices which define the policy agenda are those of a middle class which may be racially divided but also united in framing its interests as those of the entire society. It is this which produces a widespread view that grants create dependency or hostility to trade unions and strikes. While national health and more egalitarian education do not face the same stigma, this may be because pressure for both remains limited and so tolerance for change among those with a stake in the present is untested. But evidence that it may well fail the test is Sayed's study in which a racially re-configured alliance of the middle class invested in establishing semi-elite public schooling by exploiting policy openings which allow it to opt out of the worst components of a failing system of public schooling. The effect is obviously to deepen inequality.

But middle class consensus on grants, strikers or education inequality does not mean that the racial divide has been dissolved. The country's racial past and present provide strong pressures against neo-liberalism. But it also probably excludes the possibility of a broad social coalition for change which might unite the middle class with those below – witness the fate of the Gluckman Commission recommendations discussed by Van Niekerk – and may also make some redistributive outcomes more difficult. As widespread middle class opposition to a Basic Income Grant demonstrates, it excludes the possibility of the solidaristic social policy which, as Esping-Andersen shows, underpins Scandinavian social democracy and, under current circumstances, limits policy to liberal welfare state measures which seek to alleviate the worst effects of poverty rather than to unite society behind a common set of entitlements (Esping-Andersen 1990).

The result is a complex policy environment in which there are strong pressures against egalitarian outcomes at the same time as there are opportunities for those willing and able to work strategically for change. It is not one in which a broad egalitarian consensus has been built – or even one in which a strong social coalition has been assembled which could press for it. The result is policy 'equilibrium' in which abandoning the poor is not an option but a concerted assault on poverty and inequality are also not a prospect. This is the product not of the ineluctable logic of economic gravity or the inescapable power of the ubiquitous 'foreign investor' who is said to bar the door to progress, but by the absence of a credible domestic coalition for change which could gain and demonstrate public support, mobilise a constituency and engage in credible bargaining with the holders of public and private power. Although the campaign for publicly funded treatment for people living with HIV and AIDS, discussed in Friedman's study of the courts, suggests that it is possible at times to assemble a coalition on a specific social policy issue, it is noteworthy that in this case the mainstream interests which endorsed the campaign and may have ensured a favourable ruling by the constitutional court was being asked to endorse not a solidaristic policy but one targeted at a specific group considered to be in need of special care, the defining feature of liberal welfarism.

In sum, the country's racial past and present currently obstruct pressures for social solidarity and structural change but create a possibility for social policy interventions which individuals and lobbies have used to achieve change. South African social policy may be deeply flawed and may, as Sayed shows, often serve the middle class rather than the poor, but, as the case

studies show, it is not and has not been a post-1994 ‘neo-liberal’ rejection of the demands of the poor. That it has not done so is as much a product of politics as the fact that it has not abandoned intervention. The factors discussed here show why South Africa does not fit the stereotype of a country in which the forces of local and global privilege close off all attempts to create a fairer society. And they suggest a need to reframe the constraints on redistribution in a way which recognises the primacy of domestic politics and acknowledges both the possibilities and limits which it imposes.

An agenda for research – and change

The perspective which unites these paper – that egalitarian social policy is a product of politics and power, not economic logic and technological imperatives – hold implications for change strategies and suggests a research agenda.

Contrary to some current rhetoric, effective government action for a fairer society and economy is not purely an act of the will – the political context discussed in these papers show that it will not be achieved purely by replacing one set of politicians by another or ensuring a greater sense of public service and compassion among public officials. Some of the studies do show that individuals can make a difference, but they have suggested too that a change in the structural constraints which obstruct redistribution is needed if sustained progress is to become possible – this requires the emergence of an effective redistributive coalition capable of eliciting the compromises which are needed to chart a different path.

A strategy for change needs, therefore, to understand the constraints which have prevented it emerging and the pressures and processes which might enable it to be born. It is a task which explicitly requires the replacement of much of the wishful thinking of current left analysis which ironically often turns traditional radical diagnoses on their head, exaggerating the power of agency while ignoring the constraints imposed by structure, and also exaggerates the power of a neo-liberal agenda in a society seeking to emerge from racial domination. What direction do the case studies suggest for strengthening the prospects for redistributive social policy? In the absence of organised and effective pressure from below, prospects of addressing structural constraints would seem to depend on the negotiated compromise advocated by Webster (2013) and discussed in Friedman and Groenmeyer’s article – economic crisis could prompt government, business and labour to negotiate a new approach to growth which would address the path

dependency which excludes many from the formal economy. Change would not, of course, be the product of the social coalition posited by Van Niekerk but of a recognition by elites that the current trajectory severely constrains growth.

Beyond this, while a grand redistributive coalition pressing for structural change from below is almost certainly not possible, the constraints on change are not immutable and the papers suggest that possibilities for change have not been fully explored. If the shape of racial politics creates opportunities for individuals and lobbies to win change, it also creates possibilities for organised movements. Graham, Sadie and Patel's study suggests that people living in poverty have no need to be taught the elements of social citizenship and that they do have a sense of their rights and interests which could ensure receptivity to an organised movement for change. Power relations may constrain this but organisation is precisely about changing these relations, as the history of the trade union movement discussed by Friedman and Groenmeyer shows. An organised movement for change does not yet exist but that does not mean that it could not be created.

While the middle class is unlikely to unite with the poor to seek structural change, Van Niekerk's analysis suggests that the transformative potential of the middle class in relation to the 'public good' has not been realised. To say that a grand coalition is not possible is not to exclude common pressure for change on specific issues. Changing political conditions do, he argues, allow for new possibilities for the incremental universalisation of the public good, such as health care reform. The 'third moment' for achieving a universal national health service (NHI) is, for example, predicated on a cross-class social compact between the poor, working-class and middle class. This agenda will need to engage with vested interests in the private sector. It will also need to tackle severe problems of capacity to deliver in the public sector if it is to be able to draw the middle class back into public forms of provision. The impact of the post-apartheid fiscal federalist arrangements on the ability of the nine provinces, with vastly differing bureaucratic capacities, to deliver quality health care to the same universal standard regardless of geographical location will also require serious consideration (Van Niekerk 2012). But to say that this movement for change would face obstacles is not to say that it is not possible.

Finally, even if an effective movement for change does not emerge, the context which, as Friedman shows, has enabled the Constitutional Court to intervene in social policy and which, as Groenmeyer shows, made a lobby

for social grants possible, will continue to create possibilities for lobbies seeking more generous social policy if they understand the strategic environment in which they are working and develop strategies appropriate to it. This is so not only because the racial legacy has created opportunities to persuade the government to accept change but because, as Friedman and Groenmeyer suggest in explaining the survival of the bargaining regime, apartheid's lack of legitimacy makes it difficult for economic power holders, most of whom are white, to overturn change which appears to right racial inequities. The evidence also suggests that a discourse of the social rights of citizenship as contained in the constitution is still strongly embedded in the consciousness of citizens. This principle of social justice which underpins these social rights can serve as a potential basis for mobilisation for the universalisation of public goods, in conjunction with legal activism.

While opportunities still exist for working with the state and developing a redistributive agenda, they are often undermined by bureaucratic inertia and local political interference. This reflects the limits of engagement with a state apparatus that is increasingly unresponsive to dynamic non-government interventions which seek a sustainable model of partnership between communities and government around shared goals such as employment creation. But, as we noted earlier, these constraints are political and could be changed by a more effective redistributive politics which would raise the costs of incompetence, inertia, or political resistance to change.

Thus, for those who hope for a society which moves decisively away from the inequities of the past, the message is one of possibility: what politics has created, politics can also change. The evidence presented here suggests that there are many more strategic possibilities for change than conventional wisdom assumes. South Africa's current social and economic trajectory is the product of a certain type of domestic politics – it would change if domestic policy changes. By making these points in different ways and in different contexts, the case studies therefore point the way to a different understanding of the preconditions for a more effective politics of redistribution and a change in framework in which current realities are analysed.

This alternative way of viewing the constraints on redistributive politics also suggests a research agenda which might give it further flesh. For a start, we need to know more about the ways in which class and race influence or impede the formation of interest alliances. A key area of study is the new black middle class which is much talked about but often little understood.

On the one hand, as noted earlier, there is a cross-racial middle class consensus much like that in other parts of the world which labels social policy interventions as sources of dependence rather than development. On the other, racial divisions within the middle class ensure a pervasive sense in the black middle class that racism continues to obstruct it. While this has thus far ensured far more black middle class voices pressing for a change in the racial composition of the elite than those urging an assault on poverty and inequality, it remains possible that again a response to racial inequality could also produce support for egalitarian social policy. Research could reveal far more of the nature of this middle class, its location in the social structure and the degree to which it is available for or resistant to redistributive politics.

Far more also needs to be known about the propensity of business and the affluent to accept or resist change. While it can be safely assumed that radical change is not their preferred option, the sketchy evidence we have suggest that attitudes might be more complex than conventional wisdom on the left or right assume. The financial journalists and commentators who routinely insist that business is deterred by strikes are contradicted by survey evidence cited by Friedman and Groenmeyer which shows low levels of concern. Research conducted just after democracy was introduced in 1994 showed both strong resistance among affluent members of racial minorities to perceived racial redistribution but acceptance of measures which were framed as expressions of universal, non-racial, fairness (Friedman 2005). While the research is outdated, it is also suggestive – a fresh and more detailed attempt to research the strength both of resistance to and willingness to accept social and economic change would do much to deepen the analysis proposed here.

Fresh research is also needed into the labour movement. While its travails – it appears internally divided, organisationally weak and has been buffeted by structural realities discussed by Friedman and Groenmeyer – seem to condemn it to a marginal role in the politics of social policy, organised workers remain a significant force and it is hard to imagine a politics of redistribution which ignored them. But, while the union movement has been more thoroughly researched than the other interests discussed here, far more information and analysis is needed on its current crisis and the ways in which this may impel it towards or away from the path dependence which currently constrains it (Webster 2013).

With notable exceptions, dynamics in townships and shack settlements

are under-researched – the rich, textured, studies of politics on the ground which abounded during the last years of apartheid are now much rarer. Graham, Sadie and Patel therefore break new ground when they investigate grass roots responses to social grants. But it is trite to point out that many more studies are needed which tell us far more about grass roots attitudes to change and, equally important, investigate the power dynamics which constrain effective organisation of those citizens with the most interest in redistributive social policy – as well as those grassroots realities which might point towards a more assertive role.

Finally, if it is accepted that domestic politics is the key determinant of social policy's limits and possibilities, we need to know more about the ways in which specific social policies have been adopted and why others have been rejected – in this collection, Groenmeyer's study of social grants and Sayed's analysis of schooling policy are examples of case studies which can enrich our understanding. The more we know about concrete policy contests, the more we may be able to turn the general points made here into a nuanced account of the ways in which the politics of race and class constrain or make possible redistributive social policy.

These ideas chart a broad path for research which is suggested by the analysis proposed in this focus issue – much detail can and should be added. But, if, as these papers argue, it is domestic politics and the structural issues which shape it which determine the society's willingness and ability to challenge poverty and inequality, then research needs to be far more concerned with the texture and detail of dynamics within the key interests and in their interaction in the social policy arena.

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