

Editor's Note

In this dossier, the second in the new series of *Mediations*, we offer a collection of interventions that critically situate South Africa's long transition within a protracted post-apartheid moment. At bottom, this translates into both subjecting to critique and, at the same time, displacing the various exceptionalist national narratives that continue to dominate local mainstream political discourse. The expectations and desires first induced by the demise of the apartheid system of institutionalized racial discrimination, as well as those embodied by the emergence of a composite ensemble of post-apartheid social movements, are thus pitched vis-à-vis a political dispensation that has combined the introduction of a non-racial democracy with the full insertion of the "new South Africa" into the globally hegemonic (recent setbacks notwithstanding) neoliberal macroeconomic framework. But if this is the longer temporality that frames our contributors' different angles of observation, *Mediations* readers will also be probably curious about South Africa's more immediate political context — that is, the recent convulsions in South African party politics, which are most visibly manifested in the split from the ANC and the launch of a new centrist political formation, the Congress of the People (COPE), by former president Thabo Mbeki's supporters (minus the leader himself).

Let's start then, briefly, with the current political conjuncture. As we go to (the electronic version of) press, we are witnessing the change of ownership of a state apparatus that, after the defeat of Mbeki's faction at the 2007 Polokwane Congress of the ANC and the recent national elections, is now firmly in the hands of a new political coalition fronted by controversial president Jacob Zuma, and comprising those Left alliance partners that led the charge against the Mbekites at the Polokwane showdown — namely, the South Africa Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African

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Trade Unions (COSATU). Time will tell whether the rite of passage represented by the abrupt termination of Mbeki's mandate a few months before the elections is going to convert into a significant change of political orientation. What we have for now is a developmental state discourse that is as increasingly ubiquitous as it is vague. Beyond that, we are left taking stock of the wild rhetorical shifts of a ruling alliance that has on one hand fought an electoral campaign in the name of discontinuity — blaming the previous president for all the shortcomings of the South African transition and portraying the faction now in power as the harbinger of a new era of economic development and redistribution — while on the other reassuring international investors that the fundamentals of the South African economy are going to be left untouched.

As to the interpretive strategies that these contradictory statements elicit, it seems at least clear that to the extent that they unsettle traditional analyses based on class or Left/Right neat dichotomies, they ask us to revisit these categories through a reading of the underlying systemic dynamics and contradictions: from the potentially explosive crisis of waged employment to the impact of the current global financial crisis on the South African economy. Conversely, as these dynamics constantly produce new kinds of social stratifications, the broader issue of transformative political subjectivity and praxis itself needs to be radically rethought in the light of an ever-changing social composition that is increasingly marked by the numerical decline of permanent, unionized workers, and the emergence of new social agents and life strategies situated outside or at the margins of the so-called formal economy.

We kick off with Patrick Bond's critical analysis of the current political realignment and the discursive strategies that underpin it. Starting with a wealth of socioeconomic data — from the rise of income inequality and unemployment to the shortcomings of cost recovery strategies for service delivery — that measure the failure of post-apartheid economic policies, the article asks whether the current debate that surrounds South Africa's developmental state will turn out to be anything other than an ideological smokescreen behind which to hide the relegitimization of "neoliberal macroeconomic and microdevelopment policies." Using as a case study the plans for a mega-project — the Coega industrial complex and aluminum smelter in the Nelson Mandela Metropole, eventually derailed by the impact of the global economic crisis — Bond unveils the mismatch between the rhetorical gestures of the developmental state promoters and the reality they conceal. Even Marxist categories are not left unscathed by ideological mystification, as illustrated by the "surreal" exchange excerpted from the pages of a recent biography of Mbeki government's finance minister Trevor

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Manuel, where former public enterprise minister Alec Erwin and biographer Pippa Green trundle Marxism onstage to deliver an attack on and to shore up, respectively, a defense of Manuel's neoliberal fiscal policies. Meanwhile, although the combination of independent social and political forces needed to give wings to alternative development strategies is not yet available, it is there that we must continue to look for "durable radical politics in South Africa."

The extravagant, for want of a better adjective, use of Marxist terminology, here in the guise of the French regulation school's version, in the upper echelons of the South African political apparatus also frames Ashwin Desai's narrative of the 2000 Volkswagen strike at Uitenhage, in the Eastern Cape. Turning on its head the analytical approach of this theoretical paradigm, National Union of Metalworkers' economists sought to use it to devise new strategies for the support of capital accumulation through workers' participation and increased productivity. In this context, the strike functions as an index of the modes of containment implemented by the union machinery to manage the transition to a version of industrial democracy that replaced the slogans of people's power and worker control with the embrace of corporatist industrial strategy projects. Zooming in on the "anatomy" of the first post-apartheid strike directed against a trade union, Desai argues that the "provides a window into the quick transition of the union from a militant organization into one that was determined to enter into agreements and police them even if it meant the erosion of gains made through the 1980s." This in turn points to the broader corporatist reorientation of COSATU, South African biggest trade union confederation, to which the National Union of Metalworkers is affiliated. Still, Desai concludes, it is in the renewed opportunity for a combined mass mobilization of community and social movements and radical segments inside the trade union movement and the ANC that lies the possibility of a post-corporatist crossing of the labor/community divide and, thus, a new radicalization of class politics.

The same focus on the transformation of organized labor is shared by Franco Barchiesi's intervention, which analyzes the steadfast numerical decline of full-time, formal jobs, and the consequently diminished capacity of waged labor "to function as a vehicle for inclusion in social citizenship." In this scenario, the ANC's and, most emphatically, COSATU's reassertion of "the normative centrality of wage labor" finds itself increasingly at variance with the life experiences of the majority of South African poor. Looking at the present regime of hybrid social citizenship, in which social hierarchization and stratification are defined in terms of access to often unavailable waged employment, Barchiesi argues that, precisely because of its material absence, waged labor today functions as a disciplining

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mechanism, or Lacanian “‘master signifier’ of social existence” calling into being an “idealized social subject — the patriotic, hard-working, law-abiding, family-responsible, morally frugal, and politically moderate poor.” Conversely, building on the results of his fieldwork focusing on subaltern life strategies and implicitly revisiting familiar positions within contemporary autonomist Marxism, Barchiesi argues that they point to radical innovations with decommodification and redistribution that call for “a choice between liberation *of* and *from* wage labor.”

In the next contribution, Dale McKinley returns to the question of political subjectivity and organization by offering an insider’s view of the current divisions within the South African Left (sections of the paper elaborate arguments presented at the 2008 COSATU National Political Education School entitled “Towards a Socialist Strategy and Left Unity in South Africa.”) The article offers an historical outline of post-apartheid Left politics, which is focalized through the lens of a rearticulation that has seen on the one hand the institutionalization of the traditional Left, and on the other the emergence of social movements and civil society organizations that resist easy ideological and political categorization. In his excursus, McKinley also offers a critical analysis of both the discursive and political strategies of displacement required by the maintenance of a Left rhetoric by political forces such as the SACP and COSATU, which are *de facto* implementing the negotiated program of deracialization of the accumulation path, as well as the issue-based orientation of many social movements and community organizations, which has thus far failed to provide the basis for a political alternative. The crisis of the South African Left is thus seen as the product of a disjunction between rhetoric and practice, whose negative outcomes, from vanguardism to organizational sectarianism and ideological absolutism, have led to so many political cul-de-sacs. The solution to this “strategic impasse” for McKinley is not going to be found in abstract debates on reform and revolution or an elusive workers party, but in overcoming the dichotomy between mass struggle and a socialist strategy that needs to be reimaged anew.

Shifting focus to higher education, Ulrike Kistner argues that far from presenting an indigenous alternative to the many problems faced by African universities — beginning with those generated by the growing commercialization of higher education institutions — the slogan of “Africanization” has become caught up in the same contradictions to which it was supposed to offer a way out. Among the many pitfalls of “Africanization” as it is currently presented, Kistner lists the commodification of indigenous knowledge systems and the restructuring of curricula in the direction of vocational programs at the expense of non-applied sciences and the

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humanities, fully as much as the stifling of critical thinking and public intellectual engagement. Most troublingly, the particular brand of indigeneity that is being introduced in some South African higher education institutions not only promotes a market-friendly version of Africa, but reproduces forms of nationalism that, their promoters’ claims to the contrary notwithstanding, are eclipsing the vision of Pan-Africanism and universalism to which so many progressive African intellectuals had attached their highest political hopes. Hence the “sense of loss in contemplating the present African university in ruins from the perspective of the emancipatory ideals of anti-colonial or decolonizing movements.”

Moving, at last, to the disciplinary concerns that most immediately pertain to this journal, in the next contribution Shane Graham offers a “spatial-materialist” reading of Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View*. This interpretation of a representative work of the author that is currently being canonized as the pre-eminent “postmodern” South African novelist, goes almost entirely against the grain of a critical reception that has for the most part obliterated the material — which is to say, social — realities represented in Vladislavić’s texts. The article thus revises what Graham perceives as a general tendency in contemporary South African literary and cultural criticism to gloss over socio-economic contradictions in favor of a privileged focus on narrowly textual dynamics or, at best, identity politics. To do this, Graham proposes a “grassroots hermeneutics” that illustrates how Vladislavić’s fiction, on the contrary, “is highly attuned to questions of cultural production and identity formation *within* the material conditions, physical spaces, and continuing inequities of South African society.” Central both to Vladislavić’s fiction and Graham’s recent critical writings is the intersection between the ever-changing urban landscape of Johannesburg and the complex modes of map-making and inscription of social memory involved in trying to make sense of this metropolis’s highly mobile social geographies.

Changing literary genres, in the next article Kelwyn Sole examines the cultural politics of contemporary South African poetic production. Contrary to what one might expect, given the limited local market for literature in general and poetry in particular, Sole shows that in fact poetry has found new ways of accessing the South African public sphere, where the figure of the poet is surrounded by a somewhat puzzling aura of reverence. The article has a panoramic quality to it. Sole presents a compilation of excerpts from interviews, commentaries and poems that lets the poets speak for themselves, while critically framing their statements to provide if not the whole picture, at least some of the multifaceted social dimensions of contemporary South African poetry: from a tool of nation building, to a vehicle for social critique

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and speaking the truth to power, to the expression of diverse subcultures and the literary interpellation of a consumerist subjectivity. Among the most intriguing quotations collated by Sole, there are those that display an almost hilarious idealist over-inflation of the role of the poet: from former ANC deputy president Baleka Mbete's opining that the "best compliment you can give me ... is to tell me that I am a poet," to prominent businessman Hermann Mashaba's statement that the entrepreneur is "the poet of the private sector." The article then concludes by asking what are the literary and political values displaced by the current celebrations of "expressive freedom" and "sanitized versions of individual subjectivity and cultural, as well as national, identity."

From there, in the final section we contrapuntally move to a selection of poems and a wide-ranging interview with Lee Sustar on "Africa's Struggles Today" by internationally acclaimed poet Dennis Brutus. One of the driving forces behind the campaign for the desegregation and international boycott of South African sport during the apartheid era, as well as a cultural organizer who played a crucial role in putting African literature on the world map — he was, *inter alia*, instrumental to the formation of the African Literature Association back in 1975 — Brutus is still a pivotal figure in global justice grassroots movements. In these poems, he documents his recent wanderings from his native South Africa to international sites of struggle, such as Seattle, Porto Alegre, and Cuba, where his poetic statements of political belief find renewed global resonance. Following a perceptive suggestion from *Dennis Brutus Reader* co-editor Aisha Karim, the interview and the poems are interleaved rather than separated, so as to underscore the organic continuity between Brutus's various forms of engagement, which resist both aesthetically and conceptually the breaking-up of the realm of literature from that of the political. We hope that in compiling this dossier, which shares the same impulse, we have done justice to his vision.

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Pier Paolo Frassinelli, guest editor
Johannesburg