

2021

Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective: Review of The Politics of Protest in South Africa's Contentious Democracy

Gary Prevost

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, Gprevost@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters



Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Prevost, Gary (2021) "Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective: Review of The Politics of Protest in South Africa's Contentious Democracy," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, 80-82.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1078>

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol5/iss1/13

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Social Encounters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Book Review:
***Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective:
The Politics of Protest in South Africa's Contentious Democracy***

Gary Prevost
Professor Emeritus of Political Science
College of St. Benedict and St. John's University
Research Fellow and Honorary Professor
History and Political Studies
Nelson Mandela University

Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective: The Politics of Protest in South Africa's Contentious Democracy. Marcel Paret, Carin Runciman, and Luke Sinwall, eds. London and New York: Routledge Publishers, 2017, Hardcover, ISBN:978-1-4724-7346-2 (hbk)

Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective: The Politics of Protest in South Africa's Contentious Democracy is an important contribution to scholarship on contemporary social movements, especially if it is read in conjunction with another 2017 Routledge title, *The New Global Politics: Global Social Movements in the 21st Century*. Both volumes are important because they make their primary focus on the movements in the Global South rather than those in the United States and Europe that have previously received greater attention.

The three South African-based scholars Marcel Paret, Carin Runciman, and Luke Sinwall and their contributors bring to the book a solid understanding of the complex relationship among a myriad of social movements that have developed under the South African democratic system, created with the formal end of apartheid in 1994. A reality that lies underneath the development of the post-apartheid social movements is that while political democracy has been firmly established under the rule of the dominant African National Congress (ANC), many of the problems linked to apartheid and colonial rule that preceded it for three hundred years continue to persist -- racially driven poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to land. Ironically, many of these ongoing issues are rooted in the bargain that was made between the ANC and the National Party in 1990 when the rulers of the apartheid state conceded the inevitability of black majority political rule in exchange for an ANC agreement that property, including, the lucrative mining sector, would remain in the hands of the white owners, not transferred to the government. More than 25 years after the first democratic government took power, South African wealth has remained primarily in white hands and the country suffers from 30% unemployment. The government has relatively few resources at its disposal to improve the lives of the black majority. Not surprisingly this has meant that over the past twenty years there has been almost continuous pushback from the poor majority, often drawing on tactics and methods of the powerful anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s that helped to convince the National Party to bring apartheid to a negotiated end.

For the authors a defining moment of recent South African history tied to the social movements was the massacre of miners at the Lonmin mine in Marikana in 2012 by South African police where scores of strikers and their supporters were killed. The police action sparked further strike activity in the platinum belt and much national soul searching and protest action. The miners at Marikana were carrying out militant labor action in the tradition of worker actions during the

Book Review:
Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective:
The Politics of Protest in South Africa's Contentious Democracy

apartheid era, but they did so independent of the establishment labor movement of the ruling ANC (COSATU), and as a result found themselves more open to repression. Since the book was published the leaders of the ANC have apologized for the conduct of the police and have sought to make restitution to the survivors' relatives.

Working class militancy has been somewhat muted since the events at Marikana but is never far from the surface given the continuing high levels of poverty and unemployment. Two contributions to the book provide details on contemporary labor organizing: Ludwig and Webster write about municipal workers in Johannesburg, and Luke Sinwall contributes an excellent chapter on organic intellectuals in the mineworkers' movement.

The Marikana events underscored the continued militancy of labor activism rooted in apartheid, but the authors highlight other more persistent forms of protest that are neighborhood based and also linked to the apartheid era. The apartheid system created communities that were strictly segregated by race. Such a system created the basis for local organizing against the system. In the late 1990s, as the positive feelings over the end of apartheid waned, there was an upsurge in township-based struggles, often over evictions and electricity cutoffs. Simultaneously, new organizations appeared at the national level like the Anti-Privatization Forum, Landless Peoples Movement, Anti-Eviction Campaign, and the Concerned Citizen's Forum. However, as demonstrated throughout the book there were even more locally based actions under the broad label of service delivery protests. As the article by Lodge and Mottiar on movements in Durban points out, there was some tension between the agendas of the national groups and the objectives of the township-based actions.

The national groups became closely linked with the worldwide resistance to neoliberalism and in the context of South Africa, a criticism of the ANC for having moved in a decidedly neoliberal direction, especially under President Thabo Mbeki who came to power in 1999. These national groups came together around the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 where they organized a demonstration of 25,000 to oppose neoliberal-oriented development. They also participated in the World Social Forum gatherings of that era. However, in hindsight these South African organizations with a broad anti-capitalist focus, like their world counterparts, were in decline by 2005.

The locally based action committees, in contrast, had different objectives and have stayed active all the way to the present, but their overall impact on life in South Africa can be questioned because of their localized character. Service delivery protests that began to take shape in 2004 and peaked between 2009 and 2012 were often very different in their objectives from the nationally and internationally based anti-neoliberal movements. Their objectives were usually localized and specific, demanding better services, including the delivery of new houses promised by national government to everyone who lived in a sub-standard dwelling. These protests expected action from the government and more often than not the protestors were ANC members. Some local protests were also the playing out of factional struggles within the ANC, especially after the ouster of Mbeki from the presidency in 2008. When Jacob Zuma assumed the presidency in 2009 there was an upsurge in protest activity as many protestors felt that his populist rhetoric made it more likely that the ANC would give in to their demands. The chapters

by Mukwedeya and Ndluvo on the Buffalo City municipality and Hannah Dawson's piece on protests, party politics and patronage in the Zandspruit informal settlement in Johannesburg underscore the importance of understanding social movement activity in the context of party politics.

Noor Nieftagodian's concluding chapter on "South Africa's new Left movements" is an excellent conclusion to the book by looking forward into the future of social movements in the context of the ANC's diminishing electoral majority, which fell to 56% in the 2019 national elections, and the continuing growth of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the ANC's first serious challenge from the left. The chapter does an excellent job of discussing the ongoing crisis within the Congress of South African Unions (COSATU) in the wake of Marikana, but also the challenges of building an alternative to it through the efforts of the National Mineworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and their failed electoral alternative of the United Front. The book was published too soon to have a thorough analysis of the Fees Must Fall student movement that was led in significant measure by EFF activists operating under the banner of the Student Command. This movement, which achieved significant concessions from the government for free university education, deserves its own serious study.