



## Book Review

*Southern Resistance in Critical Perspective: The Politics of Protest in South Africa's Contentious Democracy.* Marcel Paret, Carin Runciman, Luke Sinwell, eds. 2017. New York, NY: Routledge. 194 pages, ISBN 978-1-4724-7346-2. Cloth (\$160.00)

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Events like Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring are characterized as part of a new global protest wave. Political economy scholars working in the Marxist and world-systems tradition draw attention to issues of capitalist exploitation that motivate much of these protests. However, as Marcel Paret notes in the introduction, few scholars have studied popular protests in the Global South and South Africa in particular.

This is interesting, because there are vital protest movements in South Africa with similarities to Occupy and the Arab Spring. Protesters in South Africa are motivated by many of the same grievances as popular global protest movements, specifically anti-capitalist opposition to the exploitation of laborers and the commodification and dispossession of housing and vital resources. However, these protests exhibit a great amount of complexity and fragmentation in terms of collective grievances and preferred strategies that deserve their own analyses as distinct from other movements. The primary source of this complexity is the relationship South Africans have with the ruling African National Congress (ANC). The ANC has held electoral office since the end of Apartheid. More recently, the ANC has become the source of protest grievances, yet it also



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maintains popular support. Because of the tacit support for the ANC and other factors detailed in the book, South Africa is excluded from much of the discourse about current global protests.

*South Resistance in Critical Perspective* makes an excellent contribution to both social movement studies and research on the Global South by challenging our understandings of anti-capitalist protest. The book makes several important contributions to social movement theory. First, the case studies demonstrate the complex relationship between citizens and the ANC, how different actors including citizen protesters, political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other actors mobilize for and against ANC policies among communities and workplaces. Second, the authors position social movements within the capitalist world-economy and a “global protest wave” by engaging various theories of exploitation, commodification, and dispossession. Along with important scholars such as Marx, Polanyi, and Gramsci, the authors also base their accounts on theories of the Global South such as Ayuero’s account of patronage politics and Fanon’s politics of exclusion, as well as theories from various South African scholars. Additionally, the authors make use of the plethora of South African scholarship that is rarely cited outside of the country.

This book covers a variety of cases to give an overall picture of protest in South Africa. It is divided into an introduction, two chapters on “Global formations” followed by three on “Community formations,” two on “Local state formations,” two on “Labour formations,” and a final one on “Left formations.” Regardless of the chapter titles, all the cases deal with community-level organizing, except for the largely theoretical section titled “Global formations” and the two chapters on workplace resistance in the part titled “Labour formations.”

An introductory chapter by Michael Burawoy describes five general features shared by local protest movements in the current period of global capitalism. First, they focus on local politics, establish regional coalitions, and share similar protest strategies. Second, they believe electoral politics has been corrupted by elite power and prefer protest politics. Third, they prefer operating in horizontal rather than vertical organizational structures. Fourth, coordination between actors and movements is facilitated by “virtual connections,” including social media platforms (24). Finally, they resist the repression of public protest by occupying public spaces. The rest of the book looks at different protests to challenge and modify some of these presumptions.

In this vein, a major contribution of this book is its insights into the fragmented nature of coalition building by South African protest movements. Whereas the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street brought together various communities and groups, in South Africa protests are organized at the community level and there are few cross-community ties. This also means that while there are a variety of local resistance movements focused on many of the same issues such as housing dispossession and employment insecurity, they do not form coalitions with one another. In chapter four, Paret draws the distinction between the notion of civil society organized around a

nationally defined polity and interactions between state and capital, and Chatterjee's concept of political society, denoting a sub-national community organized around the unique experiences of a community. Whereas civil society is organized to further the penetration of capital into daily lives, political society defines the community according to livelihood and legitimates resistance to marketization. Protesters mobilize because of shared experiences of precarity. South African protests are defined by short-term contention restricted to relatively isolated townships, housing communities, and workplaces.

Because protest movements are relatively disconnected from one another, protesters do not mobilize in city centers as did Occupy and Arab Spring protesters. Housing complexes and workplaces are among the most prominent spaces for protest in South Africa. While Occupy protesters mobilized around spaces that were symbols of oppression, South African protesters mobilized within spaces that were available and were material sites of oppression and marginalization within life and work.

The demographic makeup of protests differs greatly from accounts of the new global protest wave. As Paul Mason asserts in his recent work *Why It's Kicking off Everywhere*, global protests in the North are increasingly organized by young professionals and students that are disenchanted about their future economic prospects. Contrastingly, while there are youth movements in South Africa, protests are organized predominantly by the older urban poor that occupy the margins of life and work.

As Burawoy describes, many other popular protest movements minimize ties to social movement organizations, political parties, and NGOs because they resist formal institutional politics organized around the state and hierarchical decision-making that marginalizes some groups within the movement. As Levinson notes in chapter six, there are also few social movement organizations bolstering contention in South Africa. However, interested NGOs do ally themselves with factions within civil society organized around certain issues rather than emerging from citizen groups.

Protests in South Africa are not completely independent of formal political institutions and actors. For instance, in chapter eight Hannah Dawson shows that political parties often bolster protests and electoral politics are used along with nonpolitical tactics. Local elites establish lines of patronage connecting factions within the ANC to protest groups and ultimately shape the direction of contention. Inter-ANC factions compete for control via leveraging resources prized by different protesting communities. This sheds light on why protesters in South Africa call for changes to party leadership and deep reforms of the ANC while not choosing to vote the party out. Whereas inter-party factions can structure protest from the outset, they can also temper resistance after the fact. In chapter seven, Mukwedeya and Ndlovu show how inter-ANC fighting

depoliticizes local struggles by framing them as merely the interests of local elites. Although the book focuses on resistance to the state, it also reveals the fragmented sovereignty of the ANC.

The book would have benefitted from more engagement with a world-systems perspective to demonstrate South Africa's relationship with Global North countries where much of the scholarship is focused. As the authors show, the relationship between protesters and the ANC can only be understood by looking at pre- and post-Apartheid history. Similarly, ANC governance must be understood within the context of North-South and South-South capitalist relations.

At a time when scholarship on protests is rapidly increasing, this book demonstrates the limits to broad characterizations of protest movements and shows the need to look to the Global South for new ideas about contentious politics. The book also shows how important Marxist scholarship is for understanding the place of South African protest movements in current research on the globalization of protest repertoires. This book is indispensable for students and researchers of political economy and social movement studies alike. It is also appropriate for courses on social movements, as well as Global South politics broadly, and more specifically, South African politics. Much of the Global South literature, particularly accounts of African countries, focuses on the agency of states, and lacks an understanding and appreciation of the citizen politics richly detailed in this volume.