

## **The Moral Culture of Left Activism across Three Generations**

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From the time Govan Mbeki joined the CPSA in 1938 to the time Thabo Mbeki studied at the Lenin Institute in 1969-70, Marxism was a central current and influence within left activism in South Africa, and the moral culture of Marxism was defined by certain characteristics that extended across borders of race and ideology. For this generation, Marxism provided a sense of alignment with the global power of the Soviet state; a belief that Marxist science informed their analyses and strategies in a way that resembled the role of the physical sciences in industry; a largely instrumental relationship to branches of knowledge outside Marxism; and an ethic of loyalty to the party line, self-sacrifice and self-denial for the sake of the greater cause, and a duty to protect sensitive information from outsiders in a context of state repression.

New directions were opened up for left activism around 1969: the year that Steve Biko and his comrades formed SASO under the banner of Black Consciousness; Rick Turner began arguing for a radical interpretation of Christianity to inform the SA Council of Churches Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society; and Chris Hani issued his memorandum criticizing careerism and corruption in the ANC's exile leadership. The Durban moment represented a challenge to the historical culture of South African Marxism. The generations that entered activism in the 1970s and 80s saw Marxism no longer as a relatively static and self-enclosed system, but as a rapidly growing body of theory and practice, integrally linked to new currents of feminism and environmentalism and new attitudes to technology and culture. Left activists of this generation saw organization as a means of empowering the powerless and as a catalyst for new forms of consciousness that would inform areas of work and knowledge previously regarded as technical. Even while seeking to avoid state repression, this generation upheld values of openness and transparency, political commitment as constant self-transformation and reinvention of the self, creation of non-hierarchical relationships.

This paper contrasts these two cultures of activism and the emerging contest between them, before both of them were effectively submerged by the drive for enrichment by the new liberation elite of the 1990s. It examines them from the perspective of the present, attempting to understand how a third generation of activists—from the Treatment Action campaign in 1998 to the Unemployed People's Movement in 2006—experience its legacies, often more as an obstacle than a resource. In the post-apartheid context, single-issue activism creating loose and relatively fluid networks has become the most prominent form of resistance to state power. Many people involved in such resistance would think twice about whether they were activists, or more than twice about whether their struggles represented the aspirations traditionally upheld by the socialist Left. As Stalingrad summoned the first of these generations in 1943, and the 1973 Durban strikes and 1976 Soweto uprising summoned the second generation, so the Marikana massacre of 2012 may be the moment of truth for this third generation.