PART ONE

THE CITY CAN BE TAKEN: POPULISM, THE AFRICAN

PROLETARIAT AND MKHUMBANE SHACKLAND

SOCIETY DURING THE LATE 1940S[1]

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1.   An earlier version of this section was presented as "Swing the assegai peacefully? 'New Africa',
Mkhumbane, the co-operative movement and attempts to transform Durban society in the late
1940s" at the History Workshop conference, University of the Witwatersrand, February 1987. An
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<u>Ground</u> (Witwatersrand University Press, 1989).

Introduction

With the increasing acknowledgement that the 1940s constitute a politically crucial and yet under-researched period, greater attention is currently being devoted towards certain aspects of African city life during the period. Recent analysis has focussed on employment, the changing labour process within a rapidly expanding industrial sector, day-to-day struggles around household and residential issues, women in the city, regional and ethnic differences, class formation, and the nature of various proletarian organizations and movements.

Much of this work is aimed at analysing the character of African political culture in South African cities during the later 1940s, and with the specific reasons why an African working class failed to develop stronger, more effective forms of trade unionism and political organization. Living in a period when the economy was undergoing a period of uncertainty which "brought to a head the effects of structural changes generated at various levels of the economy during the war", the significantly enlarged African proletariat was seemingly incapable of taking advantage of an uncharacteristically indecisive state.[1] Others have maintained that various shantytown movements, millenarian sects and other groupings had succeeded in transforming only certain areas of the urban landscape.

It is generally accepted that the dominant theme in the political culture of such shack settlements was the question of land and housing. Lacking both effective forms of trade union organization and with shack settlements being based around notions of a community unity which could often disguise growing class distinctions, the site of struggle was very much over residence in the city. And yet such communities were unable to defend their territory or gain increased legal rights to city land. Such newly formed communities were "still too fluid, too diverse, too unformed to take advantage of the state's fumbling indecision."[2] By their very nature, the political culture of such a proletariat was introverted, sectional and transient.

Although probably undervaluing the aims and aspirations of proletarian movements such work has certainly cast doubt on the acceptability of many recognized analyses of African political experience during the later 1940s. It is no longer adequate to assert that during this period the African working classes had, under the influence of the Communist Party of South Africa,[3] developed a militant nationalism which radicalized the ANC and consequently placed this latter organization "at the centre of the non-racial liberation movement that has lead the struggle since the early 1950s."[4] Similarly, it is far too simplistic to ascribe the lack of apparent

1.   D Hindson, "The Pass System and Undifferentiated Labour", paper presented to an African Studies Institute seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, July 1982, p 3.

2.   P Bonner, "Siyawugogha, Siyawugebhola Umblaba ka Maspala: popular struggles in Benoni, 1944-1952", paper presented to an African Studies Institute seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, October 1985, p 1.

3.   J Simons and R Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850 - 1950, (London, 1983), p 609.

4.   K Luckhardt and B Wall, Organize or Starve, (London, 1980), p 72.

political mettle in the proletariat merely to organizational weaknesses within independent African trade unions, divisions within SATLC or state repression. The apparent weaknesses in the political culture of an African proletariat are also not directly related to the dissolution and subsequent banning of the CPSA. It is also incorrect to believe that during the later 1940s, the rejuvenated ANC was able to step "into the gap left by the absence of a mass workers' party and [become] the focus for the nationwide movement of the Black working people."[5] With regard to the African proletariat in Durban, it is also highly doubtful whether "the two most important developments in African politics during the 1940s were the manner in which both the Congress Youth League and the Communist Party were able to gain influence over the African National Congress."[6]

To study the lives of African proletarians through analysing some of the organizations which claimed influence amongst such persons is insufficient.[7] The history of the political character of African proletarian consciousness during the later 1940s is concerned with populist movements rather than with highly structured organizations. The proletariat was never able to develop any organizational coherency within their politics, neither having any broadly based linkages between various mass movements and sects nor seeing the need for a political party. Furthermore, the various proletarian movements always lived out an ambivalent and often contradictory relationship with then established political organizations.[8] During the later 1940s African political organizations in Durban were extremely weak, with such organizations being consistently unsuccessful in establishing any proletarian support basis.

During the later 1940s the ANC in Natal was an extremely weak organization. In 1947 the ANC had only two hundred and twenty-one members in Durban. By 1949 membership in the city had declined to one hundred and forty-seven people.[9] Champion used the organization as his own "feudal empire".[10] Contemptuous of the needs and views of the African proletariat, Champion sought entrepreneurial success among this very same population.

During the later 1940s, the small local branch of the CYL and the Communist Party, acting indirectly through the Youth League, were to attempt to influence the nature of ANC organization and policy in Durban. However, while there were people on the provincial executive who both realized the faults of Champion's leadership and the increased militancy of the African proletariat, the ANC would remain weakly supported until the later 1950s.[11]

5.   Inyaba ya Basebenzi, (March-May 1984), p 9.

6.   T Lodge Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, (Johannesburg, 1983), p 20.

7.   For a valuable perspective on this issue see Eric Hobsbawm's comments in the Radical Historian's Organization, Visions of History, (New York, 1983), p 31.

8.   See D Mac Rae, "Populism as an Ideology" in G Ionescu and E Gellner (eds), Populism, (London, 1969), p 156 and E Laclau, Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory, (London, 1977), p 150-151.

9.   CKM; reel 3B; 2: DA 19: 30/2, ANC (Natal), annual report, 1947 and 2: DA 19/1:44, ANC (Natal), list of branches-1949.

10.   Interview with Mr R Arenstein, 24 July 1985.

11.   CKM; reel 3B; 2: DA 19/1: 62/1; ANC (Natal) annual report 1949.

While the Congress Youth League was mainly comprised of teachers and other newly educated young city-dwellers, the organization had managed to sustain contact with and supported many issues important to the city's African proletariat. However this contact was often weak, contradictory, or out of step with proletarian struggles. And the communists had all but abandoned contacts with the ever-diminishing African trade unions.[12] The Party was able to develop often close contacts with various community groupings and became centrally involved in organizing many city-wide struggles. However as with the Youth Leaguers, the Party was never in any position to determine the pace and nature of proletarian struggles within the city.

During the later 1940s the political terrain of proletarian life in Durban lay beyond the reaches of established organizations claiming influence amongst the proletariat. At this time, forged in the day-to-day experiences of the African proletariat came a desire to sustain a political struggle which, while independent of established political organizations, aimed to transform the position of the Durban proletariat.

Although the weakness inherent in the proletarian populism of the later 1940s would soon be manifest, there was clearly both a militancy and an ambition within the politics of the period. Yet this militancy was not the anti-capitalist populism which has often developed amongst an urban poor, particularly those resident in shacklands. The proletarian populism of the later 1940s was based around a struggle to gain increased material wealth and power from the cycle of commercial capital in the city. Commerce and markets were the central features of this struggle. Amongst a proletariat both long resident in the city and newly arrived, fully employed, casually employed, unemployed or desiring to resist full proletarianization, came a desire to reflect on the nature of their experiences of city life. In this developing consciousness lay an acceptance of the process of industrialization but a rejection of the African proletariat's position in the city. Integral to this consciousness was an attempt to understand the dominant morality of the city: why the White citizenry castigated Africans for being unclean, socially reprobate and villainous.

Having a finely tuned ability to define the key characteristics within the dominant ideology, the proletariat became increasingly aware of certain structural features of African life in Durban. It rapidly became clear that certain constraints were deliberately imposed so as to deny Africans access to standards of workplace and residential amenities demanded by White citizens. Furthermore the African influence on civic affairs was restricted in ways which were designed to curb any attempt to transform city life in ways not conducive to the interests of the city's White population.

But these perceptions were not those of a broad African nationalism. Proletarian commentary on the position of Africans the city was imbued with a desire for proletarian struggle which saw the need to reject the excessive influence of an established African elite. Here was a populism based essentially in the commonality of day-to-day proletarian experiences. The proletarian culture of the period revealed a growing belief in notions of ethnic unity, chauvinism and indeed 'Zulu-ism'. These were ideas which related directly to proletarian populism. Although broadly based African nationalist organizations attempted to reflect such a new consciousness, success was ver⎯ ⎯ '

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12.   SATLC Pap(Durban and District Local Committee-General Secretary, 24
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The aspirations and goals set by the proletariat have been underestimated by current research. In some ways this is understandable. By the early 1950s the failure of attempts to gain increased residential security in the city on terms desired by the proletariat was clear. In other ways the struggles of the proletariat during the later 1940s have been somewhat unfairly judged against the possible political gains which may have ensued from greater industrial unionism. That the struggles were based on a consciousness which accepted the industrializing landscape but failed to develop any notion of trade unionism is clear. This does not nevertheless diminish the ambitious nature of proletarian demands. It was around such struggles that a new society in Mkhumbane developed.

Proletarianization involves a host of issues other than those which surround the creation and maintenance of controls to restrict African power within the process of proletarianization and the nature of employment and remuneration. Recognizing their weakness against established employers and being in many ways totally dependent upon both wages and industrialization in general, proletarian struggle became focussed around residential life and city power. With the various co-operative societies and redistributive networks in the shantytowns came a vision of control over commercial cycles of capital. From these images came an enthusiasm for the development of industrial enterprises for the training and employment of Africans on terms vastly more beneficial than those which prevailed in existing industry and commerce. All of these issues involved both an acceptance of industrialization and a refusal to be subjected to the detrimental forces created by this process. For the African proletariat these struggles had the potential to transform the nature of their lives.

Transforming the character of African proletarianization could also be achieved through gaining more secure residence in the city. From legal rights to property ownership, in the city could easily come a power to outflank the very administrative and legislative means whereby Africans were denied effective power over their employment and wages. From property ownership access to political power appeared that much easier.[13] The struggle to gain legal ownership rights to land and improved housing was an issue which pervaded shack struggles of the later 1940s.

From these levels of struggle came a critique of existing civic power in the city. From conditional support for elections to the various Advisory Boards came those failures which produced the demands for full and equal representation on the City Council. Confident of their increasing power in the city, such struggles appeared not inappropriate to the city's African proletariat.

Within this new style of proletarian politics, the Mkhumbane shacklands figured large. In many ways Mkhumbane came to symbolize the goals of Durban's African proletariat. Despite not having legal tenure to the land, vast areas of Cato Manor Farm had been occupied by Africans who vociferously maintained both their right to permanent life in the city and a greater share of the material and political benefits produced in the city. Furthermore, the Mkhumbane shacklands lay outside of effective external authority. The Mkhumbane shacklands was a contested urban space in which the residents had moulded a new society. It was this very

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13. Such a belief was certainly over optimistic. Constituency and civic politics within the city still remain segregated on racial lines with White control of the City Council.

contested nature of African residence in the area that was to provide the Mkhumbane residents with their greatest advantages. Conscious of the ambivalent attitudes of Indian landowners towards African shack settlement in the area and aware of municipal indecision and weakness, shantytown residents seized the initiative and fashioned a new society.

Dominated by a new proletarian consciousness, Mkhumbane society was based around complex networks of patron-client relationships. From African shacklords or rackrenters, minor entrepreneurs, messianic priests, squatter leaders and other "nobodies" emerged a new leadership stratum.[14] Having either control over or decisive influence over access to material resources, such a new leadership element offered residents a form of protection and guidance in return for money, goods and the services of loyalty and obedience so essential to patronage relationships.[15]

Desiring to personally avoid the rigours of full waged employment, but being neither members of the established African urban elite or heirs to a chiefly heritage, such leaders both viewed themselves and were accepted by residents in different ways. Borrowing from the terminology of kinship, leaders were "fathers to their people". Others were the prophets of the Old Testament leading their flock to new land. Shacklords assumed the mantle of 'landlords'. At the apex of this new hierarchy were those known by the thoroughly urban term: these were the "mayors" of Mkhumbane. Claiming to neither kinship nor chiefly tradition, the "mayors" were the most powerful.

The growing power of such persons was often accompanied by some struggles within the shacklands over access to land, housing and other important residential facilities. It was through this very process that the new leaders emerged with the most successful leaders being those who could maintain the loyalty of residents and mobilize against external threats, whether they emanated from elsewhere in Mkhumbane or from outside.

Yet the new society provided a sense of belonging to the shacklands residents. Although the dominant form of social organization in Mkhumbane, the patron-client relationships thrived because of a new ethos: the belief in the need for proletarian unity and the establishment of grassroots structures which would allow residents to both live and struggle within the city there was far more to the structure of Mkhumbane Indeed this new moral economy became fashioned not merely by the shacklords and other entrepreneurs, but also by others who, whilst of influence, had little control over material resources in the area. It was these persons, many of whom were Zionist priests, who shaped the ideas of a new Zulu-ism that, while employing the images of a past Zulu pride, integrated such traditions onto a sense of proletarian city power. Integral to the creation of a new consciousness came the defining of heresy. For the new Zulu-ism, the ultimate heresy was opposition to the wishes of the ordinary African.

For many African residents of Durban, Mkhumbane shackland society was central to proletarian politics during the later 1940s. Not only had the shack residents occupied land and built houses, but the shacklands sustained an internal redistributive economy and a social structure which allowed the proletarian

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14.   Interview with Mr H C Sibisi, 28 November 1985.

15.   See E Gellner and J Waterbury, (eds), Patrons and Clients, (London, 1977).

gain a greater understanding of their own power within Durban. For many Mkhumbane was 'New Africa'. It was only after the January 1949 Riots that the essential weakness of proletarian power within the city, class divisions within the proletariat and the tenuous nature of a shantytown society based in a contested terrain would become clearly evident.