

Fidelity to the Durban Moment After Marikana?

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The Durban Moment is about many things – the political innovation of a new generation, independence from the official nationalist movement and left of the time, the relationship between the university and popular struggles, the assertion of autonomy – black autonomy and workers' autonomy as well as the autonomy of the individual consciousness, the political value of intellectual work, local innovation with regard to both a national and an international context, the value of popular organisation, new thinking about race and class (amidst a general silence with regard to questions around gender, space and the political capacities of people outside of the industrial working class), reflection on alternatives to apartheid that went well beyond black management of the state or entirely statist conceptions of socialism and much more.

The enduring resonance of all this – along with the need to resist the presentation of the history of resistance to apartheid in increasingly narrow and militaristic terms – is obvious. But if we see Marikana as the culmination of an increasingly militarised political imagination in which popular political innovation undertaken outside of the ruling alliance has been presented as criminal and anti-national amidst both a long standing intersection in the interests of white and black elites and a crisis in the left in and out of the ruling alliance, then the moment after Marikana, perhaps – as with the Naxalbari massacre in India in 1967 – a moment that will mark the emergence of a new generation in political terms, requires a profound rethinking.

In his meditation on the idea of generation in the postcolony Ranajit Guha writes that in India “hopes and ideas which had ignited and spread so well in the heat of an embattled nationalism, died down as soon as power was grasped. What had glowed once as an immense possibility turned to ashes as mere opportunity, and barely a handful even of that.” In Guha's account the political disappointment that had settled in by the 1970s led to the questioning of a whole generation that had gone before. But it is usually facile to suggest that the solution to political failure is simply to replace one generation with another. While Fanon's insistence that “Each generation must discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it” is often cited, the full sentence, which includes the observation that this must be undertaken “in relative opacity” is not always taken seriously.

This contribution to the conference notes that, although not to the degree that was the case in South Africa in the years after 1968, we inhabit a moment in which, in theory and practice, there is an international renewal in confidence in prospects for popular emancipatory political action. It takes the view that innovation, here and abroad, should be taken seriously. But, while noting that

every generation must think its own situation, and that while it is necessary to be attentive to the way in which political sequences emerge and run their course, it argues that fidelity to some aspects of the Durban Moment could provide us not, as some assume, with permanent prescriptions for praxis that are invariant of context but, rather, with some touchstones – touchstones that offer some sense of continuity with some of the best moments in past struggles.