

7 • How deep is 'deep democracy'? Grassroots globalization from Mumbai to Cape Town¹

STEVEN ROBINS

[Deep democracy] constitutes an effort to institute what we may call 'democracy without borders', after the analogy of international class solidarity as conceived by the visionaries of world socialism in its heyday. This effort is what I seek to theorize in terms of deep democracy. (Appadurai, 2002: 45)

As the tasks of the state have become more complex and the size of polities larger and more heterogeneous, the institutional forms of liberal democracy developed in the nineteenth century – representative democracy plus techno-bureaucratic administration – seem increasingly ill-suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century... Increasingly, this mechanism of political representation seems ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions of the democratic ideal, assuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth. (Fung and Wright, 2001: 1)

Introduction: the limits of liberal democracy

Notwithstanding the triumphal post-Cold War celebration of the world-wide spread of liberal democracy, pervasive voter apathy and citizen cynicism continue to be identified as symptoms of the fundamental flaws in the representative and procedural democracies of the West and beyond. In response to this bleak prognosis, governments and donors have shown considerable interest, over the last two decades, in programmes aimed at strengthening 'civil society' and at creating 'active citizenship', especially as they facilitate transitions to democracy. In the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as of various popular struggles against apartheid, dictatorships and military regimes in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the idea of 'civil society' has taken on a particularly potent significance

in the popular imagination, as well as in donor-driven democracy programmes (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999). However, celebrations of ‘civil society’ and transitions to democracy have, in recent years, given way to cynical assessments and to the circulation of new terms, such as ‘low intensity democracy’ (Gills et al., 1992) and ‘democracy lite’ (Paley, 2002). Notwithstanding this widespread disenchantment with these thin versions of democracy, the idea of civil society continues to be equated with democratic renewal. This, in turn, has spurred the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).²

Most studies of democratic renewal have been interested in questions of procedural democracy and issues relating to formal political institutions, regime transitions, elections and party politics. For instance, low voter turnout in the United States and Europe has spurred numerous studies and democracy programmes concerned with the role of social capital (Putnam, 1993a), citizen participation, NGOs and voluntary organizations, all of which were viewed as antidotes to these ‘democratic deficits’ (Luckham et al., 2003). Among many critics who bemoan the limits of procedural democracy, the existence of civil society organizations is perceived as a panacea, promoting ‘active citizenship’ in the face of growing voter and civic apathy. For similar reasons, projects aimed at ‘deepening democracy’ have attracted much attention and debate in academic, donor, activist and NGO circles.

However, the notion of ‘deepening democracy’ (in the same way as concepts such as empowerment, civil society, participation and citizenship) can mean virtually anything – and yet also, simultaneously, nothing special. In other words, although the polyvalent character of such keywords may be rhetorically productive, they are often analytically weak. It is for this very reason that the purpose of this chapter is to ground the discussion of deep democracy in an analysis of the specific ways in which a South African social movement has attempted to give concrete content to abstract ideas about democratic rights and citizenship. In particular, we will investigate how a globally connected organization that claims to be ‘deepening democracy’ and working across national borders can end up becoming very parochial and strengthening patron–client relations. In other words, whatever the ‘cosmopolitan’ orientation of the organization’s ideology, its actual practice was fundamentally shaped by local struggles over access to resources.

The discussion here will focus, particularly, on a globally connected social movement – the South African Homeless People’s Federation (SAHPF). The SAHPF is a women’s organization of the urban poor that is involved in a wide range of activities, including savings clubs, housing

and land issues, income-generation projects, community policing and AIDS intervention. In the course of its struggles for access to housing for poor people in South Africa, it has been able to develop both vertical (local/national) and horizontal (transnational/global) networks, alliances and coalitions. Before discussing the actual ideas and practices of the SAHPF, however, it is necessary to provide some background to the political and economic context within which this organization operates.

A brief sketch of the post-apartheid political and economic landscape

South Africa is a relatively wealthy emerging economy, characterized by extreme forms of socio-economic inequality comparable to that found in countries such as Brazil. Following the first democratic elections in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) government opted for what has been described as a standard package of neoliberal macro-economic policies. Leftist critics (Marais, 1998; Alexander, 2002; Bond, 2000; Terreblanche, 2002) have argued that these neoliberal policies have been responsible for growth in unemployment, major cutbacks in government social expenditure, cost-recovery measures, the privatization of essential services such as water, electricity and transport, and the disconnection of essential services for those in arrears. From this perspective, the ANC government certainly has capitulated to the neoliberal agenda.

Despite divergent explanations for why and how this has happened, there is consensus among these critics that the policies and privatization initiatives under the ANC's Growth, Equity and Reconstruction programme have failed to redress (in any significant way) the forms of racialized poverty and inequality inherited from the apartheid era. In fact, current macro-economic policies have been perceived as exacerbating inequalities that have their roots in colonial and apartheid history. This failure to improve the conditions of the bottom 50 per cent of the population has occurred despite the government's claims to have achieved moderate rates of inflation, a growing economy, and state provision of housing, clean water, electricity and thousands of new classrooms and clinics. This is by no means a 'conventional' neoliberal state: the government has also established massive social grant programmes, has a well-funded and reasonably well-functioning public health system, and has provided over 1.5 million housing subsidies to its poorest citizens. Despite the benefits of a progressive constitution and some improvements in the delivery of services to the poor, South Africa continues to have massive unemployment and one of the most unequal income distribution curves in the world.