ANY sober strategy for realizing progressive, let alone socialist, goals from the promising drama of the new struggles emerging in South Africa must necessarily begin with an interrogation of South Africa’s disappointing path to the present.1 Such an interrogation must, of course, be done with care. For one does not want to trivialize in any way that which, with the overthrow of apartheid, has been accomplished: the defeat of a bankrupt and evil system of institutionalized racism, a system entirely worthy of its consignment to the global scrapheap of history. Yet in what now looks like a classic case study of how to demobilize a potential revolution, the African National Congress (ANC), working with its new allies, both domestic and foreign, has succeeded in integrating South Africa firmly into the broader world of global capitalism.

As South Africa entered its key transition years (from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s) it would have been hard to imagine that a bald swap of apartheid for the country’s recolonization within the newly ascendant Empire of Capital could ever be seen as being a very impressive accomplishment.2 Yet it is just such an outcome that has occurred in South Africa, one that has produced – alongside some minimal narrowing of the economic gap between black and white (as a result, primarily, of a small minority of blacks moving up the income ladder) – both a marked widening of the gap between rich and poor (the latter mainly black) and a failure to realize any substantial progress towards tangible ‘development’ and meaningful popular empowerment. It is precisely this recolonization of South Africa, occurring on the ANC’s watch, that forms the context within which the left in that country now seeks to regroup and to struggle.

In this essay, then, we are left to pose some sobering questions about the country’s very transition away from apartheid: what kind of liberation has really occurred in South Africa anyway? How has what happened been
allowed to happen? And how has the ANC managed, thus far, to get away with it?

BIKO AND BEYOND

The key to understanding this denouement was, in fact, provided in a deftly illuminating commentary by none other than Steve Biko. Asked, in 1972, to reflect on the economy of the country, and identify ‘what trends or factors in it … you feel are working towards the fulfillment of the long term ends of blacks’, he suggested that the regime’s deep commitment to a racial hierarchy had actually acted as ‘a great leveller’ of class formation amongst the black population and dictated ‘a sort of similarity in the community’ – such that the ‘constant jarring effect of the [apartheid] system’ produced a ‘common identification’ on the part of the people. Whereas, in the more liberal system envisaged by the Progressive Party of the time, ‘you would get stratification creeping in, with your masses remaining where they are or getting poorer, and the cream of your leadership, which is invariably derived from the so-called educated people, beginning to enter bourgeois ranks, admitted into town, able to vote, developing new attitudes and new friends … a completely different tone’. Indeed, South Africa is

one country where it would be possible to create a capitalist black society, if the whites were intelligent. If the Nationalists were intelligent. And that capitalist black society, black middle-class, would be very effective at an important stage. Primarily because a hell of a lot of blacks have got a bit of education – I’m talking comparatively speaking to the so-called rest of Africa – and a hell of a lot of them could compete favorably with whites in the fields of industry, commerce and professions. And South Africa could succeed to put across to the world a pretty convincing integrated picture with still 70 per cent of the population being underdogs.

Indeed, it was precisely because the whites were so ‘terribly afraid of this’ that South Africa represented, to Biko, ‘the best economic system for revolution’. For ‘the evils of it are so pointed and so clear, and therefore make teaching of alternative methods, more meaningful methods, more indigenous methods even, much easier under the present sort of setup’.³

Needless to say, the Progressive Party of the 1970s was nowhere near power. And capitalists were, on the whole, still not nearly so reform-minded in the 1970s as Biko apparently felt the most enlightened of Progressive Party supporters then to be. In fact, the entire history of twentieth-century South Africa had been one much more defined by an alliance between
racists and capitalists to ensure both racial and class advantage than one defined by any deep contradiction between the two camps. Flash forward to the late 1980s, however. The reform (‘intelligent’) wing of the National Party (NP) – together with those of the capitalist class, both of English and Afrikaner origin, who increasingly claimed the allegiance of NP reformers – had become just what Biko imagined the Progressive Party already to be in his own time.

For the NP was then proving to be (at least at the top) a party capable – albeit with great caution and much obvious reluctance – of contemplating the shedding of apartheid for a system designed, more straightforwardly, both to empower a liberal capitalist regime and to move to facilitate black (even black majority) participation within it. For ‘intelligent racists’ and capitalists alike could begin to see capital’s link to the politics of racial domination as having been a contingent one. Not, needless to say, that the resultant transition to a (tendentially) colour-blind capitalism would be simple or entirely straightforward; there were genuinely dangerous alternative possibilities that had to be overcome. Nonetheless, the ‘false decolonization’ evoked by Biko was to be, precisely, the ultimate outcome to which socialist strategy for South Africa in the twenty-first century would have to address itself.

Biko, in evoking the ‘Prog possibility’, was of course following the analytical lead of Frantz Fanon. He had read and learned from Fanon’s analysis of ‘successful’ African nationalism across the northern and central portions of the continent as, in essence, fostering just such a ‘false decolonization’ – this to the advantage of domestic and international capital and of the newly ascendant African elites. Yet Biko’s understanding of South Africa’s quite specific possibilities was somewhat different. True, he was far from naive as regards the class dimensions of South Africa’s racial capitalism; indeed, Biko had good and fruitful relations in Durban with Rick Turner and others who would spark the re-emergence of the working-class-based resistance that produced the urban strikes there (with increasingly important echoes across the country) in the early 1970s.

Nonetheless, as Biko saw it, the racial structure of this system was what was central, and, for him, it was the emergence of a new confidence – and a more forthright ‘black consciousness’ – on the part of the mass of the country’s oppressed black (African, Coloured and Indian) population that could most readily open the revolutionary door to a new South Africa. This, as we know, was the politics of black self-assertion that Biko himself would follow in the few years of life granted him by the apartheid regime. Nor can there be any doubt as to broad resonance of such a ‘black consciousness’
emphasis – one evident in the events of Soweto (1976) and beyond – that helped fuel, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a mass movement for dramatic change in South Africa.

THE POLITICS OF THE PROLETARIAT: THE TRADE UNIONS BECOME COSATU

Yet it was working-class action that surfaced first on the ground to express active resistance within the country in the 1970s. This new assertion was too class-based (rather than racially-based) to be unqualifiedly approved of by those of ‘black consciousness’ sensibility. But it was also, in its orientation, much more specific and responsive to the immediate grievances of workers on the shop floor than was, for example, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) – the latter’s leadership now banned in any case and itself existing largely in exile as an international lobby group both within the global trade union network and as part of the ANC’s own established alliance of organizations. SACTU’s slant had been and continued to be (albeit now largely from exile rather than on the ground) the mobilization of workers for the broader purposes of ‘national liberation struggle’.

But the worker assertions that emerged in Durban in the dramatic and novel shop-floor struggles in the early 1970s had a rather different perspective. The organizations being formed out of such industrial contestations sought tactically, and so as to escape excessive negative scrutiny by the apartheid state, to avoid any overly compromising links to the ANC/SACP/SACTU exile group. Many within the ‘new trade union movement’ were also suspicious of such formations-in-exile, fearful, from the vantage point of their concern to safeguard worker interests and voice, of this exile triumvirate’s vanguardist preoccupations and also its possible embrace of a negative, all-too Soviet/Stalinist modeled attitude towards true worker-centred empowerment from below.6 Indeed, as Webster and Adler argue,

the legal proscription of the nationalist movements meant that in their formative years [the] embryonic unions were able to develop leadership, organize their constituency, and define their strategies and tactics relatively independently from the ideological orientations and models of the ANC, SACP and especially their labour arm, SACTU. The space created by virtue of banning and exile meant that the new unions could develop innovative approaches to organizing that differed from the populist strategies and tactics of the nationalist-linked unions of the 1950s.7

In fact, the new labour activists of the seventies remained respectful of
the SACTU tradition and of Congress history but without feeling unduly beholden to them. Sparks struck by shop-floor confrontations at the Coronation Brick and Tile Works, at the Frame Group factories and at other sites in Durban quickly had dramatic resonance throughout the country as new trade union centrals surfaced (TUACC, FOSATU) and the wave of strike activity spread. Indeed, a nationwide context was soon created within which, even as ‘labour movements throughout much of the world experienced declines in membership and influence during the 1980s and 1990s, the South African labour movement [grew] rapidly’.9

Moreover, these unions were impressive manifestations of what Webster has termed ‘social movement unionism’, for they were both fully conscious of the imperatives of the shop-floor struggles they launched while also being aware of the broader anti-apartheid resonance of their undertakings. Indeed, Joe Foster, the head of FOSATU, would make exactly this point in a widely-cited speech in the early 1980s:

> It is … essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organization even whilst they are part of the wider popular struggle. This organization is necessary to protect and further workers’ interests and to ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters. …[Indeed], in relation to the particular requirements of worker organization, mass parties and popular political organizations have definite limitations which have to be clearly understood by us.10

This was the emphasis that Bob Fine also underscored in introducing the republication of Foster’s speech in the *Review of African Political Economy* at the time. There he drew a clear distinction between ‘popular front’ politics (where ‘the working class is merely wheeled in and out like the crowd in a Shakespearean drama’) and a much more assertive and effective working-class political presence, suggesting (already in 1982) that, in contrast, ‘there are good reasons to believe that [the popular front] was the basic conception behind the Congress Alliance; namely that SACTU subordinated the specific interests and organization of workers first to mass protest campaigns and then to the armed struggle’.11

The initiatives of such new trade union centrals as TUAAC and FOSATU, their seeds first sewn in Durban, increasingly moved centre stage, having, as we shall see, profound impact both upon the capitalist class and the apartheid state.12 Indeed, the Wiehann Report of the later 1970s which was to sanction the registration of African unions – albeit in the first instance the
better to co-opt and control them – opened, in practice, space for worker experimentation and ever more confident self-assertion. So much so that FOSATU itself continued to spread, ultimately allying with union initiatives of a quite different hue (these latter, like SACTU in its time, being more ‘populist’ – as the shorthand of the time had it – than ‘workerist’) but also with the crucially important National Union of Mineworkers, to form, in December 1985, COSATU (the Confederation of South African Trade Unions).

And COSATU was to remain a visible and active force of real prominence throughout the 1980s. Indeed, when the crucial umbrella organization of active community organizations, the United Democratic Front (UDF, see below) was temporarily banned by the government in 1988, it was COSATU that sprang forward to take up the political slack, anchoring the freshly minted ‘Mass Democratic Movement’ that, for a period, took the UDF’s place in coordinating the vast internal popular movement that fought back against the negation of resistance intended by the state’s especially brutal response to the near revolution of the mid-1980s. Of course, it is also significant that the ANC, as it moved towards power at the turn of the nineties, did not – could not – adopt the same tactics towards COSATU that it was to use in facilitating the 1991 dissolution of the UDF. In the event, SACTU, the presumptive liberation movement trade union voice, was merely allowed, in 1990, to slip off the stage, its relative marginalization in exile from workers’ struggles on the ground now tacitly acknowledged.

Nonetheless, COSATU had itself long sensed the need for a broader political project – one spearheading a counter hegemony to the historic hegemony of racial capitalism – that it could not readily imagine mounting alone. In this regard it grasped, as well, the seeming logic of its accepting the broader remit that the ANC was, during the transition period, increasingly claiming for itself. The decisive break with ‘political abstentionism’ had come in November 1984 when FOSATU (very soon to also be a key actor in the formation of COSATU) entered into joint action with student and civic organizations to participate in the first successful worker stay-away since 1976. Then, only a few years later, ‘in one of their very first acts [after COSATU’s own founding in late 1985], its new office bearers … traveled to Lusaka and endorsed the ANC’s leadership of the liberation struggle’.13

True, there is little doubt that many within the COSATU camp failed to appreciate the fact that, even as the ANC and COSATU first met, the ANC was already in the process of refusing to countenance any counter-hegemonic perspectives whatsoever towards capitalism. For if COSATU was just too strong to be, like the UDF, merely removed from the scene,
ultimately it was, in the 1990s, only to be permitted membership within a new ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance as a distinctly junior partner. Many of its own cadres would soon defect to jobs in party and state of course, while some momentary prospect (a false prospect, as it soon proved to be) of COSATU’s playing an on-going transformative role could be thought to lie in the negotiations undertaken, with both business and state representatives, through the structures of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC).14

But there was also attrition of COSATU’s own rank and file as the new ANC government’s macroeconomic policies after 1994 saw both a decline in the number of stable jobs in industry and the emergence of an economy that would become ever more reliant on a part-time casual and insecure labour force.15 Moreover, there was to be a growing number of workers in very precarious jobs (seasonal, temporary, casual or fixed-term contract work) – up to as many as 30 per cent of the active labour force.16 This latter group of workers also largely remains without trade union representation, with COSATU itself having as yet shown little vocation for organizing the unorganized. Indeed, it was tempting to see COSATU as becoming, in the post-apartheid period, increasingly representative of a ‘labour aristocracy’ of the organized and better-paid workers. True, even if there is ‘more evidence for the concept’s appropriateness now’, the ‘labour aristocracy’ label remains, as Webster warns, ‘misleading because neoliberal globalisation is eroding the core of the labour market, making this “elite” very precarious’.17 Nonetheless, differences in interests and practices between the ‘settled’ proletariat and the more precariously employed – defined in terms of differential remuneration and job security and differing degrees of effective self-organization – can be of great relevance.18

It remains true, however, that COSATU has also retained an important role as an active and critical voice for both working-class and popular interests both within the Tripartite Alliance and more generally – and its present leader Zwelizinama Vavi continues as a spokesman of protest against what has happened on the ANC/SACP watch to any transformative hopes in South Africa.19 At the same time, it is also the case that any potential that COSATU might hitherto have had to further develop itself, its goals and its possible vocation as a force for ongoing radical transformation through the mounting of some much more assertive counter-hegemonic alternative to capitalism, has, at least temporarily and with the rise to power of the ANC, been lost. As has any promise that the ANC might itself have seemed to offer as an organization capable of focusing working-class energies towards the realization of any such transformation.
THE POLITICS OF THE PRECARIAT:
THE CIVICS AND THE UDF

And what of the precariat? Elsewhere I have argued as to the importance of this latter concept with reference to many settings of the Global South where an unfinished capitalist revolution continues to pile up populations in the global cities whose formal employment (if any) and whose life itself is generally and at best ‘precarious’.20 In such contexts, as I have further noted, ‘the politics of the urban dwellers per se as distinct from that of the urban proletariat (there is some obvious overlap between categories of course) has a dynamic and thrust of its own’. This is not just a matter of ‘street-level politics’, although it is certainly that.21 For what we see in such social circumstances, and alongside more specifically working-class action, is a ‘people’ who are available for sociopolitical upsurge (in both township and rural settings) – though their actions may tend to be directed most forcefully against the state (especially at its local level) and the prevailing polity (as well as the latter’s minions and programmes), than, directly, against the employers (and capitalism) per se.

In fact, it was just such a precariat, in its South African manifestation, that did set itself, in remarkable ways throughout the 1970s and 1980s, against the racial capitalist order, its rise to special prominence in the anti-apartheid resistance being first embodied by students, the sons and daughters of proletariat and precariat alike. Here, initially, the influence of ‘black consciousness’ (BC) was front and centre – even if BC was always more a mood, ‘an idea whose time had come’, than an organization. For the BC mood was to have particular resonance in sowing the seeds of what would become, so dramatically, ‘Soweto’ – this latter term becoming crucial, both as fact and as symbol, to the dawning ‘South African revolution’. For Soweto, in 1976, witnessed the outbreak of a student revolt destined to spread out from its point of origin and, over the next decade, to galvanize a broader resistance of historic magnitude throughout South Africa. As Bundy suggests, ‘between the Durban strikes of 1973 and the Mass Democratic Movement’s defiance campaign of 1989, a long wave of popular protest surged across the South African political landscape. It eroded familiar landmarks and opened new channels, it lapped on the beachheads of white power, and its high tide left a residue of aspirations and expectations’ of great significance.22

Not even the state’s brutal repression could succeed in smothering the flames now so visible in so many centres throughout the country. Here in fact was a present-day expression, now dramatically magnified, of a long history of urban resistance to the closing fist of apartheid, a fightback cast both within the ANC tradition and outside it. Thus, in 1979–80, there was, as Bundy
further records, ‘the shaping of a new tactical repertoire of grievance-based protests’ and boycotts. Moreover, this new kind of upsurge from below was to continue to trigger actions – actions to a very significant degree locally conceived and driven – that would erupt, throughout the 1980s, from an ever greater range of players and in an ever wider set of communities. True, although such varied initiatives were linked by their sharing of apartheid as the common denominator of mass oppression, these actions were not, by and large, centrally planned or coordinated. Nonetheless, the intensity of this new drive towards confrontation would mark a sea change in South Africa, etching the reality of a mass rejection of apartheid indelibly onto the perceptions of dominant classes, South Africa and global, but also of a global public more generally.

Of course, the state did make some move (as it had with Wiehann with respect to the proletariat) to respond to this new reality and to forestall trouble. Thus its Riekert Commission led to legislation that acceded to the stabilization, even legalization, of a black urban population’s ‘rightful’ presence in the cities – albeit in the terms of the familiar urban-rural split of the black population that had long underpinned racial capitalism. This was not nearly enough. But it did signal that the premises of the most lily-white of apartheid nostrums – under which blacks were conceived merely as ‘temporary sojourners’ in the city – were themselves subject to change. And more moves of a similar nature were soon afoot: the ‘granting’ of ‘Local Representative Councils’ (albeit virtually toothless ones) to urban Africans, for example, and the attempt to oversee the incorporation of the country’s Indian and Coloured communities as junior partners within a complex system of ‘own parliaments’ for such groups. Almost immediately, however, any such ‘new constitutional dispensation’ proved to be merely a further provocation, adding fuel to the mounting mood of resistance manifested by all segments of the ‘black’ population (Africans, Indians and “Coloureds”). Indeed, it was this issue – the effective rejection, marked by massive non-participation within it, of the new governmental setup – that saw the birth of the UDF in August 1983.

The UDF, while not the motor of the myriad of local resistances that defined a proto-revolutionary moment in South Africa in the 1980s, and certainly not the sole voice to claim institutional preeminence (there were, after all, CUSA and other initiatives also in the lists), did become, to a significant degree, the presumptive dirigeant of South Africa’s vast ‘precariat’ in the townships – even though, as Popo Molefe, one time General-Secretary of the UDF, put it, the UDF was forever ‘trailing behind the masses’. Indeed, the UDF, with as many as 600 local affiliates at various
points during the 1980s, became so central to resistance – perhaps the major agent in bringing South Africa, during the period 1984-86, as close to mass revolution as the country had ever been – that the state moved to smash it, banning it in 1988 and unleashing the full fury of police and military brutality on many of its leaders and functionaries.

True, the tension between the apparent petty-bourgeois ambitions of many of those who stepped forward to lead the UDF (and would become, in turn, recruits to the ANC phalanx that would step into public office with the organization’s victory) on the one hand and its more genuinely precarian ‘foot soldiers’ who might have been persuaded by a different kind of leadership to keep the struggle for a more genuine liberation alive on the other has often been commented upon. Yet the fact remains, as Seekings records, that a new high point was indeed reached with dramatic confrontations in 1984 in the Vaal Triangle and the East Rand ‘provoked by discontent over civic issues, especially increases in rents effected by unpopular township councilors, combined with student discontent around educational grievances and the state’s constitutional reforms’. And after that, such resistance surged on: briefly stalled after 1986 by particularly savage state repression, including a temporary banning of the UDF, it was, at the very end of the 1980s, resurgent again, its drive focused by the Mass Democratic Movement, COSATU and a now unbanned and freshly defiant UDF.

Yet the question remains: where did all this potential disappear to? Of course, to sustain any such revolutionary impulse as the UDF and the mass politics it embodied would have required imagination, a shift towards confronting a new enemy, poverty, in innovative and imaginative ways. But releasing active, assertive and sustained popular energies from below, and from an increasingly empowered citizenry, was the last thing a vanguardist, increasingly conservative, ANC actually was interested in – particularly as it became easier for the ANC to envisage itself soon coming to power. As many UDF leaders had begun to envisage a new order (and the new jobs that might go with it) the ANC itself moved to encourage the UDF, its task now, ostensibly, over, to formally dissolve itself. As for the precariat, any future political role for it was to be relegated merely to the relative political passivity of voters’ box participation, to the demobilized world of the newly created South African National Civic Organization and its wards amongst the ‘civics’, and, in the absence of any more positively empowering vision, to such perverted popular purposes as would be evidenced in the xenophobic riots of 2008.

For the fact is that the demise of the UDF marked a crucial moment
in South Africa’s recent history, albeit a moment too seldom given the careful scrutiny it warrants. Van Kessel notes, for example, the very tangible ‘demobilizing effect’ of such a decision, with the ANC doing little or nothing, in the longer run, to sustain people’s waning spirit of active militancy. She also quotes Alan Boesak as making a sharp distinction ‘between the UDF years and the early 1990s’:

He noted a widespread nostalgia for the UDF years. “That was a period of mass involvement, a period when people took a clear stand. That had a moral appeal. Now it is difficult to get used to compromises…. Many people in the Western Cape now say that ‘the morality in politics has gone’. The 1980s, that was ‘clean politics’, morally upright, no compromises, with a clear goal”.

Similarly, Mona Younis reminds us that ‘as news of accommodation and concessions [during the 1990-94 period] to the previous rulers made their way to the streets, union and community leaders and activists called for the reactivation of mass action’.

For, as Younis continues, many had viewed the ANC’s much talked-of ‘national democratic’ stage as primarily to be thought of as a ‘transitional one toward the attainment of socialism’. Small wonder that when the conference was convened to consider the possible dissolution of the UDF, it actually saw a clear and strong voicing of the view that, as an effective organ of ‘people’s power’, the UDF should be retained. ‘Proponents of this view’, she writes, ‘envisaged the UDF’s role as one of watching over the government, remaining prepared to activate mass action if the need should arrive. Many leaders and activists emphasized that the preservation of the UDF was imperative to ensure that participatory, rather than merely representative, democracy prevailed in South Africa’. Of course, as we have seen, a majority at that conference ultimately sanctioned the disbanding of the UDF. Nonetheless, the loss of purpose this represented was a very damaging one.

Or so, finally, Rusty Bernstein, the veteran and highly respected ANC and SACP member and militant, has testified most forcefully. Writing in the last year of his life (2000) Bernstein eloquently reflected on just why the liberation project to which he had devoted his life had become so unglued during the transition:

Mass popular resistance revived again inside the country led by the UDF, [but] it led the ANC to see the UDF as an undesirable factor in the struggle
for power and to undermine it as a rival focus for mass mobilization. It has undermined the ANC’s adherence to the path [of] mass resistance as the way to liberation, and substituted instead a reliance on manipulation of administrative power. …It has impoverished the soil in which ideas leaning towards socialist solutions once flourished and allowed the weed of ‘free market’ ideology to take hold.32

From such a perspective, in short, it seems that the dissolution of the UDF was rather less ‘logical’, ‘unavoidable’ and ‘unremarkable’ than Seekings (as cited in footnote 27, above) has claimed. For the ANC had actually to work quite hard to see the UDF into its grave, quite literally killing it off not for what it had done but for what, under another kind of national leadership than the ANC was prepared to offer, the UDF initiative might have become.

This is not to deny the ‘continued radical instincts of [various] high–quality unions, community–based organisations, women’s and youth groups, Non–Governmental Organisations, think–tanks, networks of CBOs and NGOs, progressive churches, political groups and independent leftists’.33 Indeed, all of these assertions – still manifest because of COSATU’s survival and despite the UDF’s demise – were crucial to what Bond terms to have been a ‘1994–96 surge of shopfloor, student and community wildcat protests’. True, the wave of such outbursts of popular discontent, mounted in the very teeth of the deal between the ANC and capital, would temporarily subside. Nonetheless, as Bond continues, they provided a meaningful bridge to the awakened popular revolt that has since come to mark the new century – not least, in this respect, the ‘IMF Riots [that] continued to break out in dozens of impoverished black townships subject to high increases in service charges and power/water cutoffs’. Here, as we will emphasize in our conclusion to this essay, the promise of ongoing radical action by proletariat and precariat alike – a promise that Bernstein saw to lie, in part, at the base of the UDF – would continue to live.34

THE ANC: THE POLITICS OF ‘THE POSSIBLE’?

Just who then was the slayer of revolutionary promise? We have implied an answer above, but here must underscore it. Thus John Daniel, in a sobering article entitled ‘Lusaka Wins’, emphasizes not just the act of killing the UDF but also that of killing the latter’s fundamental spirit. For the UDF, however much he may define it as being, in essence, ‘the ANC in disguise’, is nonetheless seen to have been ‘a very different creature from its external progenitor’: ‘in orchestrating a national insurrection’ it was ‘not a centralized entity at all’ but instead ‘one that practiced a robust and raucous form of
participatory democracy in which a premium was placed on grassroots consensus and accountability. It was in most respects the antithesis of the essentially conformist ANC in exile’. Indeed, it was precisely this openness that the external wing of the ANC feared most, the possibility that the UDF would begin ‘to carry its practices into the emerging domestic structures of the ANC’ – and even set in train a process of further radicalization. In sum, ‘hidden largely from the view of the so-called “magic” of the Mandela era with its policies of rainbowism and reconciliation [and recolonization], a subterranean struggle for the heart and soul of the ANC ensued through the early and mid-1990s’, a struggle capped by a victory for ‘Lusaka’ with all its attendant negative implications.

In fact, Daniel goes further, rooting the ‘victory’ in the much longer history of the ANC, insisting that the ANC was never a mass-based party (‘it embraced notions of democracy, [but] was not popularly democratic in practice…. In reality, it was a small, elite-led, top-down hierarchical party with neither a significant working class nor a rural base’). Indeed, it was this ‘modus operandi’ that the ANC took into exile ‘where, in an initially hostile Western environment, in conditions of semi-clandestinity and heavily reliant on its Soviet and East German allies, it transmogrified into a tightly-knit, highly centralized vanguard party’ – its political practice that of particularly strict democratic centralism, ‘with policy largely devised behind closed doors and then passed down to the lower ranks …[and] deviation was met with expulsion and relegation’.

It therefore followed, ineluctably, that when the very top leadership of such an organization took, unequivocally, the capitalist road and used its newly-won power to consolidate such a choice it was ‘game over’ for any who harboured, within the movement, some more radically democratic and/or socialist goals than those now enunciated by the vanguard. As McKinley writes, ‘many cadres in the movement [were] angered by the apparent abandonment of long held principles and policies’. And yet, as he continues,

the sheer pace with which the ANC leadership was traveling down the road of accommodation and negotiation instilled in its constituency the feeling there was no real alternative to a negotiated settlement which would entail compromise. This was further catalysed by the delegitimisation of socialist polices (associated with the collapsed economies of the USSR and Eastern Europe) and the accompanying confusion and demoralization experienced by movement socialists.
Of course, it is precisely this that explains Bernstein’s dismay when the opening offered by the UDF, with the radical possibilities that it revealed, were merely squandered by the ANC’s top brass.

In addition to the overbearing influence on the ANC of the authoritarian ethos characteristic of the Soviet model, there was the quite similar ethos within both the front-line states bordering the region and the other liberation movements within the region itself with whom the ANC interacted. For the war for southern African liberation was not a context that nurtured democracy in practice – even if its essential long-term goals were often presented in terms of democratic demands. Organizing for military confrontation against an absolutely unscrupulous and proactive enemy tended everywhere to privilege hierarchy, secrecy and even abuse of power on the part of those who would seek to lead any such resistance. Habits so formed would prove to be extremely difficult to shake.

Granted, such vanguardist militarism as marked the ANC did not lead readily to great success in terms of effective combat. In fact, from the Wankie campaign (an ill-starred military incursion into then Rhodesia, undertaken alongside Zimbabwean combatants, in 1967) forward, the ANC’s practice of ‘guerrilla struggle’ did little, in and of itself, to shake the confidence of the regime. On the other hand, the drama of such sorties as the SASOL attacks in the early 1980s had a marked impact on growing popular self-confidence – as did FRELIMO’s defeat of the Portuguese in Mozambique in the 1970s and the Cuban/Angolan success against the South African Defence Force (SADF) at Cuito Cuanavale in the 1980s. At the same time, the real drama of the time was being played out inside the country, on the shop floors and in the townships themselves, in ‘rising social militancy and township unrest’, as Elisabeth Drew emphasizes.

Why then were people so eager to accept the ‘jailed and exiled leadership of the ANC as [their] counter elite?’, Drew asks, concluding that ‘the long-standing legitimacy of the ANC as opposition organization appears to have been part of the “social memory of the opposition”’ with, in addition, ‘the personal prestige of Nelson Mandela’s leadership … unmatched by any other opposition figure’. Similarly, Raymond Suttner, while arguing the case that there was, in fact, a more active ANC underground inside South Africa itself than many commentators have conceded, also concedes that

it was not inevitable or preordained that the ANC would achieve hegemony within the liberation struggle and the new democratic South Africa. Indeed, there were times in the history of the organization when it was virtually dormant. …That it did survive [however] depended in the
first place on the way in which the ANC had, over decades, inserted itself into the cultural consciousness of people, becoming part of their sense of being, even if at times of great repression there was no public forum of outlet for this identity.\[^{40}\]

Here, perhaps, is one crucial reason why the ANC established its hegemony within the anti-apartheid struggle – and, in the process, ‘got away’, at least temporarily, with shrinking that struggle’s overall thrust to one of ‘mere’ nationalist assertion. For at this potent level of the popular imagination, the ANC/SACP/MK tandem came to serve even more as forceful myth than as reality – this also being true of the quasi-mythological status that had accrued to Mandela while he was in prison during the 1980s. The result: when a capitalist-friendly ANC was beckoned, as Fanon has once said, to ‘settle the problem’ around ‘the green baize table before any regrettable act has been performed or irreparable gesture made’, the stage had also been set, within the resistance movement more generally, for the ANC’s eventual accession to formal power.\[^{41}\]

It must therefore be underscored that the ANC’s compromise reached with capital was no accident.\[^{42}\] As early as 1984, future president Thabo Mbeki had written boldly and presciently that ‘the ANC is not a socialist party. It has never pretended to be one, it has never said it was, and it is not trying to be. It will not become one by decree or for the purpose of pleasing its “left” critics’.\[^{43}\] In the late eighties, he and his cronies would seal a deal with capital on behalf of the ANC – adroitly outflanking Chris Hani and other potential critics within the movement as he did so.\[^{44}\] Soon, too, even the sainted Mandela – despite his provocative statements about nationalizations and other aspects of economic strategy upon his release from prison in 1990 – would retreat from such heterodox thoughts. The ANC was well launched on its two-track process of negotiations – negotiations with both capital and the apartheid state – to determine the outcome of South Africa’s struggle for liberation. Small wonder Hein Marais could conclude that, among other things, it was clear that by 1994 ‘the left had lost the macroeconomic battle’.\[^{45}\]

As for the broader movement, it had been pulled emotionally past any lingering black consciousness or ‘workerist’ sensibility and, ever more firmly, onto the ANC’s symbolic terrain. What might have happened had a political organization like the ANC sought to build on and to draw out the revolutionary possibilities of the time is now a matter of merely disempowered speculation. The hard fact remains that the ANC leadership was, quite simply, prepared to reach a deal, defined largely on global and
local capital’s own terms, in order both to guarantee the consolidation of a
colour-blind, formally democratic but capitalist-friendly, outcome and to
ensure its own coming to power.

AGENTS OF DEFORMED CHANGE I:
CAPITAL AND THE POLITICS OF POSSESSION
For much of the twentieth century the phrase ‘racial capitalism’ accurately
epitomized the nature of a social and economic system in South Africa
that was intractable, even seemingly invulnerable. In this system the twin
pillars of dominant social power in South Africa – the racist overrule that
culminated in apartheid and the class rule inherent in capitalism’s centrality
to the country’s economy – came to complement each other, with any
possible contradictions between the two modes of ordering social hierarchy
merely smoothed away with relative ease.

True, some have insisted in seeing these two hierarchical modes – that
of racial domination and that of class differentiation – as being in stark
contradiction (as indeed they might appear to be in the realm of abstract
model-building). This could then be presented as, on the one hand, racial
prejudice trumping profit while, on the other hand, a colour-blind capitalism
being forced to concede costly and ‘uneconomic’ ground to the captains of
racial domination. But this is quite misleading. As Frederick Johnstone has
clearly demonstrated, a crucial ‘exploitation colour-bar’ (favouring capital)
was merely complemented by a ‘job colour bar’ (favouring, up to a point,
white workers). For Johnstone demonstrated that any tension between
the demands for entitlement based on the claims of race and class is best
understood as representing relatively mild jockeyings for advantage within
an overall structure of shared white-skin-cum-capitalist-class privilege.

It was this reality, of course, that led Biko in the 1970s to his conclusion
that it was racial privilege that tied the entire South African system together
– with ‘black consciousness’ thus becoming the key ingredient in any
meaningful radical endeavour in the country. Interestingly, however, it is
also true that, even as Biko spoke, the grounds for such a stark premise were
beginning to slip away. This was most evident, initially, within the camp of
capital itself. To begin with, some fractions of capital felt themselves to be
more constrained by apartheid than others, notably, in this respect, certain
sectors of manufacturing capital that could sense the super-exploitation of
blacks as defining a constraint on the wider domestic markets they sought.
Moreover, as a more complex capitalism also emerged, the various racial
discriminations within the job market – even though the apartheid system
was often rather more flexible about them in practice than in theory – could
also be felt as a constraint upon the capitalists’ effective deployment of any and all labour, regardless of its pigment.

Indeed, the die was really cast when the unrest of the 1970s, already visible enough to unsettle both capital and the apartheid state, escalated, from 1984 on, into the broadscale eruption of black action. In such a context, the defection of capitalists from the apartheid project (albeit initially and most markedly its English-speaking members) escalated dramatically. For many now saw – as some had already seen in the 1970s – the dangers in continuing to link the exploitation (indeed super-exploitation) that they thrived upon any too tightly with the racial repression that marked the ‘racial capitalist’ system. Indeed, with mass African resistance continuing to escalate in the 1980s, the oft-quoted remark of big-business insider Zac de Beer takes on its appropriate resonance: ‘We all understand how years of apartheid have caused many blacks to reject the economic as well as political system…. We dare not allow the baby of free enterprise to be thrown out with the bathwater of apartheid’. Of even more significance, perhaps, was the 1985 comment by Gavin Relly, then Chairman of the powerful Anglo-American Corporation, who noted after the fateful meeting in Lusaka of leading capitalists with the ANC leadership that ‘he had the impression that the ANC was not “too keen” to be seen as “marxist” and that he felt they had a good understanding “of the need for free enterprise”’. Time was to demonstrate fully just how perceptive was Relly’s 1985 reading of the ANC’s own emerging mindset.

As Dan O’Meara reminds us, American and British capitalists were themselves beginning to rethink the odds in South Africa and to step back from apartheid. Recall, in this connection, the dramatic conclusions of Malcolm Fraser, the deeply conservative former Australian Prime Minister and a key member of the Commonwealth’s official mission sent to South Africa in 1986 to evaluate the situation there. He was also author of the mission’s eloquent and tough-minded report, one that called for an extension of sanctions against South Africa in order to force it to come to its senses before the confrontation there escalated out of control. As Fraser further warned, in an escalating conflict ‘moderation would be swept aside…. The government that emerged from all of this would be extremely radical, probably Marxist, and would nationalize all western business interests’. Fraser’s warning would in turn inspire Brian Mulroney, Canada’s Prime Minister, to put sanctions on the Canadian political agenda but also to push for them both within the Commonwealth and in the G-7. Mulroney was not successful at first in the latter forum but then, slowly, Margaret Thatcher and, albeit with even greater reluctance, Ronald Reagan began to come over to such an understanding – all the more so as the global ‘threat’ of the
Soviet bloc itself appeared to wane.

To be sure, capital’s new caution was also framed by the escalation of public pressure upon it from an emboldened anti-apartheid movement in the West – now responding dramatically to the unsettled economic horizon a turbulent South Africa had begun to present to the world. But note, too, that a continuing and concerted effort to win over the ANC to a post-apartheid order extremely friendly to capitalism was clearly afoot – and beginning to promise results. Not that, in the event, much persuading of the exile group seemed to be required – even though it meant jettisoning the more elaborate dreams of a socialist future that many in the ANC/SACP had once professed to harbour.

AGENTs OF DEFORMED CHANGE II: THE APARTHEID STATE AND THE POLITICS OF POSTPONED PROMISE

While Afrikaner capitalists moved a bit more slowly towards such an understanding, something of a sea change had begun to occur even within the Afrikaner polity nonetheless. Thus, O’Meara and others have demonstrated clearly the manner in which the fault lines of class distinction within Afrikanerdom had begun to eat away at the volk – and at the National Party itself. For the class character of ‘Afrikanerdom’, the chief electoral base of the ruling National Party, was visibly shifting, however slowly and uncertainly, and the party itself had begun to fray.

In fact, difficult as it may now be to remember, P.W. Botha – even granted that he was ever the bully – came to prime-ministerial office, in the wake of Vorster and Muldergate, as a reformer, a verligte over and against the serried ranks of verkramptes. Of course, he would seek to ‘reform’ in order to preserve – to preserve, in his case, the racial hierarchy, rather than the much more unequivocal offer of ‘mere’ class hierarchy that the capitalists would increasingly offer as the eighties dragged on. Indeed, his successor de Klerk would prove ultimately to be of Botha’s persuasion as well, although he would feel forced to go even further in a ‘reform’ direction than had his presidential predecessor – while still, almost to the very end, trying to safeguard some attributes of the racist order itself.

Thus, in the 1970s and as a new wave of popular agitation begin to surface that was fired by both proletariat and precariat in the cities and in the townships, Botha and others sensed that some pre-emptive initiatives, beyond the Bantustan strategy and brute force, were also advisable. As a result and as part of a ‘Total Strategy’ that Botha and coterie now favoured and advocated, several novel attempts, noted above, at ‘formative action’ were undertaken – as framed, notably, by the Wiehann and Riekert reports.
The results, as the renewed (and quite dramatic) internal uprising of the mid-1980s would soon show, were to be quite different from any mere domesticating of resistance, however. For the fact is that Botha, the Nats, and the apartheid state more generally, were now trying to do several seemingly contradictory things at the same time.

The problem followed from their very interpretation of “Total Strategy”, of course – an interpretation that also rationalized the formidable centralization of power and command into Botha’s own hands as Prime Minister (later President) – and, under his leadership, into the hands of the ‘securocrats’ of the police and (especially) the military. Professing themselves to be following the lead of such global gurus as Beaufre and Huntington, their ‘security state’ sought to ‘reform’ and to ‘liberalize’ just enough to take the steam out of the kettle of popular protest – but to make such (limited) ‘reform’ stick with as much force as would prove to be ‘necessary’.

In doing so – accepting of black trade unions and legalizing the permanency of the presence of some significant numbers of blacks in the urban areas – the Nats did, to be sure, move some distance away from the main premises of traditional ‘apartheid’ – far enough at any rate to accelerate the rightward drift of many amongst the lower ranks of Afrikanerdom who felt themselves to be threatened by change and who now came to strengthen the ranks of Andres Treuernicht’s Conservative Party and other such dark forces of genuine reaction as Eugene Terreblanche and his Afrikaner Weerstands Beweging (AWB) and Constand Viljoen and his Freedom Front.

Nonetheless the ‘reform’ so envisaged could actually do very little to quell the popular (black) rejection of the fundamentally racist predilections of Nat reformers. For the black population increasingly sought not some mildly improved terms within the overall apartheid framework of power but, instead, a full-scale change, democratic and transformative, of that very framework; it was on this basis that the push from below that fired popular uprising of 1984–86 was launched, in fact. Of course, this is also precisely where the other, darker side of Total Strategy came so grimly into play. For the policing function of the ‘security state’ was now deemed to be absolutely essential. And, finely honed as such a state apparatus has been through the preceding decades of imposing apartheid, it was fully prepared to be tough, brutal and merciless enough to attempt to force the African population to be (rather less than) ‘half-free’ – and to keep quiet about the rest.

This remorseless side of the story cannot be rehearsed here. Suffice to say that there was now locked into place a reign of terror by the state, the abuse of power that this embodied providing much of the focus for the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission. True, such a
preoccupation would come, negatively, to deflect the TRC’s attention away from the more mundane structures of corporate and political power that had long sanctioned and bolstered apartheid. Nonetheless, there were more than enough chilling accounts of the impact of this underside of Bothaism presented to serve as a useful reminder of just what apartheid had actually meant in practice over all the years of its grim sway.56

Meanwhile, the neoliberal clock was ticking for the Nats as well. Indeed, the latter-day economic strategy of the National Party-in-power was itself, by the end of the 1980s, increasingly premised on the freshly established neoliberal script being written by global capitalism. This was why, despite Botha’s bluster, so many even within the apartheid government were particularly alert to negative signals from that quarter, and why the South African state now sought to create an ever more free market context within which capital could operate quite freely. Of course, this might appear to be somewhat counterintuitive in light of Botha’s own otherwise dirigiste, and still quite racist, approach to the overall society. But it was precisely onto this kind of economic terrain that capital, and an increasing number of centrist political actors, sought, with ultimate success, to draw in the ANC – itself, in any case, an increasingly willing ‘victim’ of this particular ploy.

In the event de Klerk himself advanced this ‘strategy’ dramatically, although, like Botha, he did not yield up any such ‘reform’ entirely straightforwardly. For he too was still trying to have it both ways. Thus, after his release of Mandela and unbanning of the ANC, he continued, throughout most of the subsequent transition period, to deploy the state’s cruel apparatus of enforcement, manifesting (to put it charitably) a toleration of the malign activities of various so-called ‘third force’ elements and of Buthelezi’s bloodthirsty cohort in an attempt to either defeat the ANC outright or, if not that, at least to skew the transition in the direction of more white-friendly outcomes. Not for de Klerk, until very late in the day, any mere reliance on shared trans-racial class interests to safeguard privilege beyond apartheid. Nonetheless, in the end and after a bumpy road (the grim events of Bisho and Boipatong massacres and the killing fields of KwaZulu and the Vaal townships demonstrating the abyss that threatened to swallow the country) de Klerk came to feel he had no choice. Between chaos and the acceptance of a new ruling-class coalition transcending race he saw, ultimately, no realistic, more overtly racist, choice.

A DISFIGURED TRANSITION
With capital, local and global, increasingly on side, and the proletariat and precariat more or less brought to heel (now both to be rendered politically as
presumptive ‘citizens’ rather than as active comrades in a continuing struggle for genuine liberation) the stage was set for transition – or was it? For there were a number of other bridges to be crossed during the four deeply troubled years that separated Mandela’s release in 1990 and the unbanning of the ANC and the SACP from the first genuinely free, all-in, election of 1994 – and there were a number of other players at the transition table to be dealt with cautiously, even somewhat nervously.

To begin with, in the prevailing context of quasi-stalemate, there was the substantial residue of an apartheid polity, state and army, still holding the reins of governmental power with none of these quite certain as to how much political power they could or should concede. In this crucial sphere alone the spectres of ‘power-sharing’, ethnic vetoes and much worse could be seen to loom. There was also Gatsha Buthelezi, the Zulu leader, never quite a ‘stooge’ of the government but someone who was quite prepared to become its active partner in countering, in blood, the ANC. There was the white right, too, from Eugene Terreblanche and his AWB (though this force would eventually disqualify itself with its ill-fated raid into Bophutatswana) through to General Viljoen. The latter’s own vaunted presence was, in fact, ultimately to dwindle away into an unsuccessful bid for a special volkstaat to be created for exclusive Afrikaner presence within the broader boundaries of South Africa, but not before his movement, the Freedom Front, posed a shadowy threat, like that from Buthelezi, right up until a few days before the election. In the end, however, the ANC did win – although capital did too.

How then accurately to interpret all this?

For starters, we are here carried back to our initial paragraphs on Biko and Fanon. After all, Fanon was the most scorching critic of the false decolonization that Biko thought South Africa might, because of its distorted, racially-structured nature, be spared. But recall Fanon’s classic shorthand description of decolonization in the more northern parts of Africa where independence had arrived while he was still alive:

The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary. Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism [recolonization].

Isn’t this what we can see all too clearly to have happened in South Africa as well: a power-grab by a middle class risen from among the recently oppressed population who now, riding the back of ‘liberation’, had thrust
themselves forward, both in the state and the private sector, to take the role of well rewarded junior partners of global capital?

There are, of course, other perspectives. Some will merely offer the self-exculpatory argument that ‘globalization made me do it’ as sufficient explanation of the ANC’s capitulation to capitalism: the Soviet bloc quickly disappearing, a much too powerful capitalist system, global and domestic, left standing. This is the kind of ‘fatalism’ offered up by many ANC apologists: mere resignation to ‘necessity’ as the rationale for the government’s opting quite unapologetically for capitalism. True, such capitulation is often presented as being social-democratically tinged, but the essence of the position is clear: Africa and Africans have no choice; whatever the outcome of taking the present tack, ‘there is no alternative’. Small wonder that South African President Thabo Mbeki could himself, famously and quite specifically, state (and with some apparent glee), ‘just call me a Thatcherite’.

No less an observer than Naomi Klein (in her *Shock Doctrine*) has argued, however, a different view, seeing the ANC instead as prisoners of capital – however short-sighted and naïve they may have been with regard to the dangers of any such entanglements. Klein, in fact, calls up some strong witnesses to support her view: South African economist Vishnu Padayachee, for example, whom she paraphrases as arguing that ‘none of this happened because of some grand betrayal on the part of the ANC leaders but simply because they were outmanoeuvred on a series of issues that seemed less than crucial at the time – but turned out to hold South Africa’s lasting liberation in the balance’. Similarly, William Gumede’s view, as directly quoted, is that “if people felt [the political negotiations] weren’t going well there would be mass protests. But when the economic negotiators would report back, people thought it was technical”. This perception was encouraged by Mbeki, who portrayed the talks as “administrative” and as being of no popular concern. As a result he [Gumede] told me, with great exasperation, “We missed it! We missed the real story”.

Yet Gumede, Klein further notes, ‘came to understand that it was at those “technical” meetings that the true future of his country was being decided – though few understood it at the time’. But, one is tempted to ask, had Padayachee and Gumede not read their Fanon? For Klein’s own position is, like theirs, fundamentally incorrect. It is impossible, in fact, to imagine that the ANC leadership, having sought assiduously from at least the mid-1980s to realize just such an outcome, such a false decolonization, could simply have ‘missed it’ – missed, that is, the main point of what was happening to
Hence the decision, by the now powerful, merely to instead celebrate capitalism, its present and its ostensibly promising future. One might think this is a difficult position for any concerned African to take in light of recent history. Yet in elevated circles in South Africa it has become simply commonsense. Mandela, for one and despite having an apparently alternative vision immediately on his release from prison, came to embrace a firmly capitalist South Africa in just such a ‘commonsensical’ manner.60 And Trevor Manuel, Tito Mboweni, Thabo Mbeki and others have too – with many other erstwhile ANC activists also moving briskly into the private sector.61 Moreover, as further evidence to support such an interpretation, Patrick Bond has itemized a whole set of highly questionable but crucial economic policy choices friendly to global capital made during the first half-decade of ANC power, from ‘agreeing to pay illegitimate apartheid era debt in part by taking on an unnecessary IMF loan of US$750 million (1993) with predictable strings attached’ to ‘adopting a bound-to-fail neoliberal economic policy and insulating the Reserve Bank from democracy so as to raise interest rates to South Africa’s highest real levels ever’.62 Indeed, by 1996, the ANC leadership had crafted for itself and the country the firmly neoliberal GEAR (‘Growth, Employment and Reconstruction’) strategy – declared by Trevor Manuel, to be ‘non-negotiable’ – to replace 1994’s mildly more left-leaning RDP (‘Reconstruction and Development Programme’).63

Interestingly, Pippa Green’s hagiographical biography of Manuel, one of the chief architects of the ANC’s economic strategy, is entitled, boldly and altogether instructively, Choice, Not Fate.64 In its pages we find the case for recolonization being presented as, primarily, a smart developmental choice.65 Similarly, Alan Hirsch, from his vaunted position as ‘Chief Director of Economic Policy at the Presidency, South Africa’, has averred that ‘the intellectual paradigm within which the ANC operates’ is one in which ‘elements of a northern European approach to social development [are] combined with elements of Asian approaches within conservative macroeconomic parameters’.66 Some beneficiaries of this choice will have had quite self-interested and crass motives for making it, of course. Others (Hirsch perhaps) may have thought – this being the perennial illusion of social democrats everywhere – that you can ‘permit’ capital to do the heavy lifting of accumulation and the provisioning of material requirements while ‘the good guys’, from on high, and through taxation and a variety of not too onerous ‘controls’, bend such a capitalist system to meet a range of humane social preferences and less tangibly material ‘needs’.

Lost in this latter project, however, is the way in which class imperatives
and the uneven distribution of power almost inevitably rots out shared social purpose under capitalism — even as capitalism is also fostering a culture of consumerism and ‘possessive individualism’ unlikely to sustain any alternative, more high-minded, politics. Operating here is a kind of Gresham’s law that affects mildly progressive politics, under which ‘law’ one witnesses the gradual debasing of the coinage of progressive sociopolitical purpose and instead the fostering of a merely parasitic state and a self-seeking governing class. This is, at best, what I would myself judge to have become of South Africa’s presumed transition — and even this kind of pretence as to the retention of some higher aspiration and some higher purpose is fast fading in ruling circles.

* * *

Still, it ain’t over ‘til it’s over. Indeed, South Africa is currently very close to being the world’s leader in grass-roots social protest and demonstrated dissidence. True, as I have observed elsewhere, this unrest, this ‘rebellion of the poor’ (in Peter Alexander’s evocative phrase), remains more locally focused (as protest) than nationally focused — not yet being integrally linked to some presumptive counter-hegemonic project that might effectively challenge the ANC and its project while also aiming at a much more genuine liberation than the country has as yet come even close to realizing. Yet the voices of dissent are many and their potential real. Indeed, there are even signs that, ‘fuelled by a dangerous mixture of high unemployment, slow growth, weak leadership and fierce feuding within the governing party’, some ‘influential factions’ in the ANC itself are ‘pushing to transform the courts, the media, the economy and … the much praised constitution’. Can one not see in this diverse contestation, both within and without the ANC, the slow dawning of the ‘next liberation struggle’, a continuation of the very popular struggle that, as we have seen in this essay, the ANC leadership — in the name of neoliberalism and what one can only call ‘recolonization’ — had worked so hard to thwart in the transition years from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s?

NOTES


2 On the concepts both of ‘recolonization’ and of a new ‘Empire of Capital’ — one not so readily defined as previously in terms of various nationally-defined imperial purposes — see my Decolonization of Empire: Contesting the Rhetoric


4 See, on this and many other related points, Lindi Wilson, Steve Biko, Auckland Park, S.A.: Jacana, 2011.

5 Eddie Webster, oral communication and in his contributions to the public discussion following the presentation of his paper ‘A Seamless Web or a Democratic Rupture: The Re-Emergence of Trade Unions and the African National Congress (ANC) in Durban 1973 and Beyond’, at the conference ‘One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories and Democracy Today’, held in Johannesburg, 20-24 September 2011.

6 I heard this position most forcibly articulated in the late seventies at their then shared house in Durban from both then trade union activists Alec Erwin and (at that time banned) Johnny Copleyn who ultimately came to move in quite different directions from the opinions they expressed on that earlier occasion.


12 Not that FOSATU and TUACC (the Federation of South African Trade Unions and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council) sounded the only emergent trade union voices of black workers to be heard during this period, Webster and Adler recording a number of other important initiatives of the time, ‘Exodus Without a Map’, pp. 127-128.

13 Webster and Adler, ‘Exodus Without a Map’, p. 129.

14 For a detailed discussion of the NEDLAC process, and more generally of the challenges facing COSATU during this period, see Carolyn Bassett, ‘Negotiating South Africa’s Economic Future: COSATU and Strategic Unionism’, a doctoral dissertation submitted to York University, 2000.
Indeed, Franco Barchiesi’s (in his “‘Schooling Bodies to Hard Work’: The South African State’s Policy Discourse and Its Moral Constructions of Welfare”, paper presented at the North Eastern Workshop on Southern Africa (NEWSA), Vermont, 2007) estimates that during the post-apartheid period ‘full time waged employment was a reality for only less than one third of the African economically active population’.

As indicated by Marlea Clarke in a personal communication and in her “‘All the Workers?’: Labour Market Reform and “Precarious Work” in Post-apartheid South Africa, 1994-2004”, a doctoral dissertation submitted to York University, 2006.

Eddie Webster, personal communication, although, as he correctly adds, ‘to have a job at all in these times may be seen as a privilege rather than a curse’.

And so do differences between the ‘proletariat’ and the urban ‘precariat’ even more broadly defined – a distinction I will elaborate upon at the outset of the following section.

Saul, ‘Liberating Liberation’.


On this subject see, crucially, Jonathan Barker, Street-Level Politics, Toronto: Between the Lines, 1999.


Bundy, ‘Survival and Resistance’, p. 27.


This widespread campaign of naked suppression was a particularly important focus of the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Thus, Seekings, for one, can write in his book merely that, ‘less dramatically, the UDF faded away before finally disbanding formally in August, 1991. There was a certain inevitability to the organisational shift from the UDF to the ANC. …[it was] a logical, unavoidable, even unremarkable event’. Here, too, he quotes the then president of the South African Youth Congress, Peter Mokoba’s 1991 statement: ‘Now that the ANC can operate legally, the UDF is redundant’.

An option the weaknesses of which are crisply parsed by Seekings and by Elke Zoern in her The Politics of Necessity: Community Organizing and Democracy in South Africa, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.

Ineke van Kessel, ‘Beyond Our Wildest Dreams’: The United Democratic Front


31 Michelle Williams’s valuable The Roots of Participatory Democracy: Democratic Communists in South Africa and Kerala, India, New York and London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, contrasts sharply the politics of Kerala’s communist party with that of the ANC/SACP, emphasizing the latters’ reliance on mere ‘mass mobilizing’ – designed primarily to, in effect, draw a crowd to popularly hail its ascendancy. There could be very little place for a proactive UDF-like organization within such a scenario.

32 In a letter to the present author, which, however, I subsequently published under the title ‘Rusty Bernstein: A Letter’, in Transformation (South Africa), No. 64, 2007.


to the anti-apartheid than the threat of armed insurrection’ was ‘the ANC’s reestablished public presence after the Soweto uprising and its provision of a culture of resistance and [of] popular anti-apartheid frames’.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 48; as he then continues, ‘if the masses, without waiting for the chairs to be arranged around the baize table, listen to their own voice and begin committing outrages and setting fire to buildings, the elites and the bourgeois parties will be seen running to the colonialists to exclaim “this is very serious! We do not know how it will end; we must find a solution – some sort of compromise”’.


As quoted in the *Financial Times*, 10 June 1986.


O’Meara’s *Forty Lost Years* remains, as noted above, the *locus classicus* of analysis of the National Party’s trajectory – from egg to earth as it were.

See again, on the distinction between ‘proletariat’ and ‘precariat’, my ‘What Working-Class?’


See, among others, the six volume official report of the TRC, Cape Town: *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 1998; as well as numerous nightmarish book length accounts of the period.

Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 122. As Fanon continues, ‘The national middle
class will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie’s business agent and it will play the part without any complexes in a most dignified manner.


60 Recall his apparent hailing, in 1994, of the free market as a ‘magic elixir’ in his speech to the joint session of the Houses of Congress in Washington.

61 Indeed, some of these latter were also to be involved in the breakaway COPE movement that, in the wake of Mbeki’s overthrow and in a (hostile but largely mistaken) anticipation of Zuma’s radicalization of the ANC project, launched itself in 2008 – and contested the 2009 election, not very successfully, as a possible national liberation-linked alternative to the right of ANC.


64 Pippa Green, *Choice, Not Fate: The Life and Times of Trevor Manuel*, Rosebank, S.A.: Penguin Books, 2008. The book itself is a startling example of hagiography (both as regards Manuel and also the ANC at its most conservative) but the lead title is also an arresting shorthand advertisement for the way in which the ANC would apparently like to present itself to right-thinking readers.

65 We might be forgiven for thinking it to be not quite so ‘smart’ from the point of view of the vast mass of the South African population, of course.


67 See my ‘Liberating Liberation’; and also Alexander, ‘Rebellion of the Poor’; as well as his ‘SA protest rates’.

68 Geoffrey York, ‘ANC’s radical voices growing louder: Proposed agenda includes black economic ownership, farm expropriation, nationalization and tighter controls on the courts’, *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 8 June 2012.