Book review–Gillian Hart’s *Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony*

Author’s response

First off I’d like to express my gratitude to Vish Satgar for his generous, comprehensive, and careful review of my book— and to recognize as well his own important contributions to a Gramscian understanding of the present conjuncture in South Africa.

In addition to Satgar, other South African activists and scholars have called me to account for the stance I take in the book on “neoliberalism”. Accordingly, I see the invitation by the *Antipode* editors to respond to Satgar as an opportunity to engage an important set of debates in South Africa and beyond. Satgar maintains that by failing to place neoliberalism at the center of understanding post-apartheid South Africa, I eschew a sophisticated political economy analysis of unfolding forces— including a hugely significant recent shift in the South African political terrain when, in late December 2013, the largest and most influential union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), withdrew its support for the African National Congress (ANC), and is moving to forge a united front of progressive movements. Satgar argues that “Hart’s analysis will have difficulties making sense of this rupture given that it articulates a strong critique of the ANC’s commitment to neoliberalism, particularly the recently adopted National Development Plan” (p.7). He also questions what he calls the spatial reductionism of my argument that local government has become the key site of contradictions.

The challenge, it seems to me, is not only to explain the NUMSA split, but also whether (and if so how) the sort of argument I make in the book might contribute to efforts to constitute political forces to the left of the ANC. Since the political stakes are high, I feel it important to try to clarify my argument.

Let me start with multiple meanings of “neoliberalism” variously defined as an economic program; a class project; a historical variant of capitalism; a doctrine or a “thought collective”; a rationality of rule to produce governable subjects; and a seductive cultural project. Neoliberalism also of course functions as a popular category to condense popular opposition. In post-apartheid South Africa neoliberalism very quickly became equated with GEAR (an acronym for Growth, Employment and Redistribution), the extremely conservative package of neoliberal macro-economic policies that the ANC government unilaterally imposed 1996—at the same time elbowing aside the neo-Keynesian Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). For many on the left within and beyond the ANC alliance, the shift from RDP to GEAR inaugurated what came to be called the ANC’s 1996 class project, and signaled a shift from racial to class apartheid. Starting in the late 1990s and gathering force in the early 2000s, neoliberalism in the form of GEAR came to operate as a hugely important popular category for crystallizing and condensing multiple expressions of discontent. It also functioned as a term of abuse, especially in relation to Thabo Mbeki. His identification with GEAR played powerfully into his deep and growing unpopularity with a large segment of the population.

Since the ousting of Mbeki in 2008, the Zuma administration has rhetorically distanced itself from neoliberalism and GEAR—even though it was Mbeki who initially

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2 As I will suggest in a forthcoming essay, we in South Africa have a great deal to learn from recent Latin American experiences and debates about the uses and limits of neoliberalism as both an analytical and popular category.
drove significantly increased government spending and a series of other interventionist (including ostensibly “pro-poor”) initiatives after 2003/4, in part as a strategy of containment (Hart 2006). As a consequence, “neoliberalism” as an oppositional category has lost much of the political traction it once had. Indeed, for many on the liberal right, the economy is being strangled by over-regulation, militant unions ramping up wages, and excessive spending on welfare that is bleeding “responsible” (read: white) taxpayers dry. This rhetoric further bolsters ANC claims that “we are not neoliberals”, and that the global economy is fully to blame for economic woes and the terrifying escalation of unemployment. I agree with Hein Marais (2011: 137) who argues that “[p]aradoxically, in singling out and demonising GEAR as the grand moment of rupture and betrayal, the left helped government and corporate South Africa script their claims of a qualitative break”. Without question the Zuma administration’s National Development Plan (NDP) to which Satgar makes reference caters first and foremost to corporate capital, and can be seen as a continuation of a neoliberal class project. Yet the chances it will have anything like the traction that GEAR did in concentrating broadly-based political opposition seem small.

One prominent set of efforts to reassert that the ANC is indeed neoliberal invokes a sort of hydraulic model in which “top-down” neoliberalism is seen as calling forth “bottom up” resistance—albeit in the form of low-grade “popcorn protests”—with ongoing protests taken as proof that neoliberalism is alive and well. Nationalism (or “neoliberal nationalism”) features in these analyses only to reassure us that it is exhausted, helping to pave the way for oppositional movements to cohere as neoliberalism intensifies. This is emblematic of a more general tendency on the left either to ignore nationalism or treat it as an unfortunate manifestation of false consciousness.

My book is in part a critique of this sort of approach, and an effort to suggest an alternative to debates over whether or not the ANC is neoliberal. Its starting point is the
imperative to take very seriously the multiple, proliferating expressions of popular anger and discontent that I call “movement beyond movements”, which exploded over the decade of the 2000s following the implosion of the first round of anti-neoliberal “new social movements”. Undoubtedly such anger is driven in part by often appalling material conditions that can be linked to neoliberal economic policies and neoliberal forms of capitalism more generally (more on this below). Yet precisely because the anger of the poor can go in many directions—as South African activist S’bu Zikode puts it, politics cannot be read directly off material conditions—what needs to be understood and explained is the ramping up of populist politics and their entanglements with multiple expressions of nationalism.

Also in need of explanation is how this roiling popular anger has gone hand in hand with increasingly anxious interventionism by the ANC government. On one level, these interventionist moves can be seen as a (somewhat belated) version of what has variously been called roll-out neoliberalism or revisionist neoliberalism—i.e. the process through which the market orthodoxy that seemed so firmly entrenched in the early 1990s in many regions of the world gave way through that decade to overtly interventionist moves to contain the disruptive tendencies unleashed by neoliberal capitalism. The key point, though, is how spectacularly unsuccessful these moves have been in South Africa, and how they have been accompanied by growing police brutality.

A key tenet of revisionist neoliberalism is a focus on “the local” as a primary site of efficiency, democracy, social capital, good governance, participation, and so forth. For many who subscribe to ideas of neoliberal governmentality, “the local” is also an important locus for the production of neoliberal subjects who will govern themselves. 3 What we see

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3 Satgar interprets my work as drawing on Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Actually I find neo-Foucauldian analyses of neoliberal governmentality quite limited (Hart 2008). Instead I draw on Gramsci’s
in South Africa—and this is one of the key arguments of the book—is how local government has become the key site of contradictions.

Satgar takes me to task on this point, arguing that a properly Gramscian analysis of the integral state “makes it difficult to merely think about crisis as simply engulfing the local state” (p.5); and that cost recovery and technocratic forms of rule have diffused to various levels of the state, producing what he calls “multiple spatial choke points” (p.5) such as toll roads in Gauteng and massive state spending on environmentally devastating coal-fired power stations, both of which have generated powerful opposition. He asserts, in other words, that I am according excessive privilege to local government.

I maintain that local government is in fact qualitatively different from other sites of technocratic governance. Most immediately local government constitutes the key site for the management of indigence. It is also a vitally important arena of accumulation, as local councilors are transformed into a petty bourgeoisie on the road to class power (as sociologist Ari Sitas puts it) through struggles over access to the growing resources flowing into local government coffers. Rather than a “spatial choke point” or simply the locus of struggles over specific resources (water, housing, etc.), local government is where technocratic forms of government come into relation with contestation and acquiescence in the multiple arenas of everyday life. A reflection of its importance is that each of the expressions of popular anger that I call “movement beyond movements”—including Marikana—has an irreducibly local dimension.

Let me be clear that in positing the importance of local government I am emphatically not in any way suggesting or implying that crisis is “simply engulfing the
local state” (Satgar, p.5). That would amount to the sort of impact model that I vigorously opposed in *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Hart 2002), drawing on a relational conception of the production of space that informs this book as well. Rather than any sort of “engulfment”, my argument is that the ongoing, unstable, and unresolved crisis in South Africa today is partly *produced* through power-laden practices, conflicts, struggles—as well as compliance and acquiescence—in the multiple arenas of everyday life; and that historically grounded ethnographic studies can potentially illuminate these processes of production. At the same time, conceiving “the local” not as bounded units but as nodal points of connection in socially produced space means that locally specific dynamics both feed into and are shaped by wider processes—they are, in other words, dialectically connected with forces at play elsewhere.

This is where the simultaneous spatio-historical processes I am calling *de-nationalization* and *re-nationalization* enter the picture. At the moment when the ANC and other political parties were unbanned in 1990, the South African “nation” did not exist: it had to be produced through practices and processes of re-nationalization that encompass multiple articulations of nationalism. De-nationalization refers to how, simultaneously, powerful South African conglomerates were straining to break away from the confines of the national economy and to reconnect with the increasingly financialized global economy from which they had been partially excluded during the 1980s by sanctions, exchange controls, and the heightening crisis of the apartheid state.

De-nationalization shines the spotlight on the specific but changing character of South African capital and its relations with the post-apartheid state in the context of the rise of new forms of finance capital since the 1970s. It encompasses GEAR, but instead of

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4 The most lucid account of the neoliberal counter-revolution in my view is by Peter Gowan (1999; 2009), who traces the shift from what he calls the Bretton Woods Regime of relatively fixed exchange rates and
seeing 1996 as the primary moment of rupture it compels attention to the crucial and ongoing role of corporate capital in the transition from apartheid since the second half of the 1980s—including what we now know are a set of secret negotiations over economic policy in 1993. It focuses as well on practices and processes that exceed GEAR—including massive and escalating capital flight in which the Zuma administration has been fully complicit; how corporations have restructured their operations to enable continuing disinvestment from the national economy; their ongoing influence over ANC government policy; and how these forces continue to play into and intensify brutally racialized inequalities and the degradation of livelihoods of a large proportion of the South African population. Far from eschewing a political economy analysis, I see neoliberal forms of financialized capitalism as central to these processes—but they have to be understood in terms of their concrete spatio-historical specificities and transnational connections.

De-nationalization also needs to be understood in relation to processes and practices of re-nationalization. Most important among those I identify in the post-apartheid era are articulations of South African nationalism that conjure up histories, memories, and meanings of racial oppression, racialized dispossession, and struggles against colonialism and apartheid. They co-exist with “non-racial” articulations of the Rainbow nation, and with efforts to bound “the nation” in harsh new ways that fuel xenophobia—and all three are in tension with one another.

Inextricably linked with the contradictions erupting at the level of local government, de-nationalization and re-nationalization are playing out in relation to one

capital controls to the Dollar Wall Street Regime and the emergence of new forms of finance capital. Elsewhere (Hart 2006) I have suggested the salience of Gowan’s analysis to South African debates. For a useful recent account of neoliberalism as financialization, see Fine (2012).

5 As I have argued elsewhere, identifiably neoliberal projects and projects play out on terrains that always exceed them (Hart 2008).
another in increasingly conflictual ways—and their dialectical interconnections are what
drive my analysis of the unraveling of ANC hegemony and the forces propelling the
proliferation of populist politics. Since Satgar challenges my analysis of hegemony for
neglecting neoliberalism, I’d be interested in his alternative analysis of “how ANC
hegemonic nationalism and neoliberalism articulate” (p.6).

Let me now try to respond to Satgar’s question about “the state in crisis in its
integral sense and at the national scale” and a related question about “the crisis of the
historical bloc of forces making up the ruling forces prevailing over the state in its totality”
(p.5). Since Satgar and I have different readings of Gramsci’s concepts of the integral state
and historical bloc, I’ll answer with reference to the section of the Prison Notebooks that I
draw on most directly: his analysis of crisis in “Analysis of Situations. Relations of Force”
(Gramsci 1971: 175-185; Q13§17) in which he argues that “[t]he specific question of
economic hardship or well-being as a cause of new historical realities is a partial aspect of
the relations of force, at the various levels”. Of direct relevance as well is the concept of
passive revolution.

If one understands the transition from apartheid through the frame of passive
revolution, it was centrally about re-establishing the conditions for accumulation on a more
stable basis, as well as enabling corporate capital to reconnect with the global economy.
Yet this effort to resolve the prolonged crisis of the apartheid state has generated new
instabilities, contradictions, and conditions of crisis in a Gramscian sense. In a nutshell,
capital needs the ANC to manage the fallout from its accumulation strategies and keep a lid
on things, which the ANC tries to do with articulations of nationalism that are part of re-
nationalization—but processes of de-nationalization are rendering this hegemonic project
increasingly impossible. In other words, rather than just the charges of greed, corruption
and incompetence commonly leveled against the ANC, there are far more deep-seated (or
“organic” in Gramsci’s sense) processes through which ANC hegemony has been unraveling over the post-apartheid era.

What appear to be driving Satgar’s question over the crisis of the historical bloc (I would use the term social bloc in this context) are doubts about whether my analysis is capable of explaining NUMSA’s splitting from the ANC, which happened over four months after the book was published in South Africa. Actually I would argue that what needs to be explained is why it has taken so bloody long for at least some segment of the working class movement to split from the ANC given the relentless assault on the livelihoods of working (and increasingly unemployed) people, only very partially alleviated by social grants, in the face of obscene and escalating inequality. While we probably agree that the Marikana massacre was a decisive moment of rupture, the question is why did it take so horrendous an event for NUMSA eventually to disengage? The answer, I suggest, lies in understanding ANC hegemony as well as the processes through which it has been eroding—which is precisely what the book is about.

Finally there is Satgar’s critique that “NUMSA evokes a form of nationalism other than the one Hart discusses: it points to a betrayal of the Freedom Charter, the cornerstone programmatic commitment and revolutionary nationalist basis of the ANC-led Alliance” (p.7). It is indeed the case that in mid-2013 when I finished the book, I failed to predict both the NUMSA split and the specific articulation of nationalism that it is invoking. Yet I most certainly do recognize the Freedom Charter as a key element in articulations of South African nationalism, and conclude the book with a discussion of how Govan Mbeki participated in the formation of the Freedom Charter in Ladysmith in the mid-1950s. That NUMSA is invoking the Freedom Charter as a way of trumping the ANC alliance’s notion

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6 The 2014 US edition of the book contains a note entitled “South Africa after Mandela” in which I do discuss the NUMSA split.
of the National Democratic Revolution is not surprising, and is in fact totally consistent with the argument of the book about how articulations of the nation and liberation are crucial to hegemonic politics. What is ironic is that NUMSA’s predecessor MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers Union) was deeply suspicious of Charterist politics.

This leads me to a concluding point about how my analysis speaks to some of the challenges that NUMSA is currently confronting in its strategy of constituting a united front—which turn around the simultaneous imperatives and dangers of articulations of the nation and liberation. As I write in early April 2014, a month before the incredibly important May 7 election, we are witnessing an extraordinary confluence of forces. On the one hand the combination of Mandela’s death and Zuma’s Nkandla scandal have eroded the ethico-political traction of the ANC’s articulations of the nation and liberation just at the moment when they are most needed. Yet my analysis suggests that it is premature and dangerous to declare that ANC nationalism is exhausted as some on the left are doing—and to imply that nationalism can therefore safely be set aside. Indeed, the Economic Freedom Fighters are vigorously re-articulating nationalism in terms of race and nature—the theft by white colonizers of the land and rich mineral resources of South Africa—while also dismissing the Freedom Charter on the grounds that it “sold the birthright of Africans, precisely because of that clause: Africa belongs to all of those who live in it, both black and white”.\(^7\) At the same time they are invoking Badiou and Žižek to position Malema as a bizarre combination of Mao and a Maggie Thatcher of the left.\(^8\)

\(^7\) Malema “decimates” the left: An interview with Andile Mngxitama. *The Con* 11 October 2013  

http://mg.co.za/article/2014-03-13-soap-box-how-malema-became-maolema
NUMSA may not now be spinning its wheels, as Hein Marais remarked of the South African left in general in his endorsement of my book written in mid-2013. Yet they confront a formidable set of challenges, as well as opportunities—which is why the political stakes in how we understand the present conjuncture are so high.

References


