PROJECT MUSE®

Ungovernable: reclaiming autonomy, letting go of authority

Molemo Moiloa

Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa, Volume 104,
2020, pp. 81-92 (Article)

Published by Transformation

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/trn.2020.0034>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/777048>

Article

Ungovernable: reclaiming autonomy, letting go of authority

Molemo Moiloa

moiloa.molemo@gmail.com

It has by now become something of a platitude to say that the crisis engendered by Covid-19 has exposed the problems of society, often in specific ways according to each specific context. But of course platitudes are often true – they have just also become boring. Yet, as this extended time of uncertainty plays out and we move from urgent crisis to a time that allows a bit more thought, some of the issues exposed play out in ways that shift and change and become worth revisiting. One such case that has unpacked itself over the past months, is South Africa's relationship to the authority of the state and the man who holds its highest office. It reflects various fits and starts in our understandings of power over the past two and half decades. And conversely the need to reclaim an imagination of horizontal power and agency I would like to believe we once owned. Reading the Covid crisis through the lens of how power and influence are wielded, inevitably pushes us to attempt to imagine strategies that may have enabled a greater space of safety and collective support in response to the crisis. But also beyond the crisis, the spaces of dignity, livelihood and societal support that we are clearly missing.

Like many, I breathed a sigh of relief on the March 15, the day president Ramaphosa announced the first national actions to address the impending Covid chaos. The announcement seemed inordinate, but I was in the last throws of a Covid-scare post-travel, had unsuccessfully attempted to get tested in the previous week, and had been battling that stomach-churning dread that one can get when navigating South African systems and services and recognising the depth of their ineptitude. Some urgency, some initiative, some accountability, was greatly welcome. But in the days that followed, as the practicalities of implementation began to come into full view, the dread

returned. I remember speaking with a recently-retired veteran of the Gauteng Department of Health who had decades of experience in provincial HIV/AIDS community mobilisation and mass awareness programmes as well as previous Ebola outbreak response teams – and who was one of the many that, just over a year before, had run down the stairs of the Bank of Lisbon Building as it burned, with no functional fire-fighting sprinkler or hose systems in sight despite the stringent regulations requiring them. I had asked her, who on earth had the capacity – the skills, capabilities, commitment, ability not to magically pocket monies intended for others – to actually implement the needed processes that were clearly coming our way. ‘Very few’, she said, ‘at national or provincial. And the ones who can, may not be allowed to’.

There are many ways to tell the story of the first six months of lockdown, and for this I tell it briefly – and somewhat simplistically – with something of a lens of where power and leadership lay. Over the following months, with one of the most severe lock-downs in the world, it became increasingly evident that South Africa’s Covid response was led by a relatively strong and committed team, that had the country’s buy-in for the most part. By and large, the president proclaimed and the people obeyed. The nature of the early parts of South Africa’s lockdown were characterised by a benevolent pater, a grave set of uncles and aunts, a mass of children who needed to follow instructions and who, if they didn’t do as told, would be punished – maybe some push-ups, a solid yelling-at, perhaps even a shot in the head (I say this flippantly to emphasise its sense of banality but the truth is at least ten people lost their lives and many others were assaulted). The patronising extended to what we could imbibe, and at least initially, we as the populous mostly agreed we were not responsible enough to drink alcohol and follow rules at the same time.

The verso of this solid grip on leadership from above, was a significant lack of capacity for its implementation at the local level, and little to no interest or understanding in the need for ground-level engagement, mobilisation and communication. The committee leading the Covid response was made up of major CEOs of big business and politicians with limited input from civil society or community based organisations (CBOs). Foodpacks were haphazardly distributed by a combination of ward councillors and African National Congress (ANC) local branches. Existing systems and organisations for food sharing and community care were side stepped and ignored. The once systematic and large-scale home-based care and door-to-door health and de-stigmatisation campaign programmes South Africa has developed

in the throes of our last, and ongoing, health crisis, were long collapsed due to dysfunctional and corrupt government health departments. And in their absence, misinformation, confusion and punitive control flourished instead. Footage on television showed frustrated constables trying to keep hours-long queues in 1.5 metre intervals. And the frustrated military trying to get groups congregating in the sunshine outside their freezing shacks to disperse. Sometimes the footage was worse, as frustration, disorganisation and a penchant for repression resulted in violence. Our infection numbers soared to global heights, though thankfully quite briefly. But many did die. Our only mode of engagement about the state of our lives became an irregular and always late, address by the president, thoroughly meme-ified as ‘My fellow South Africans’. And as time ticked by, despite the president’s early admonishments that emergency funds would not be subject to the usual corruption, of course, they were.

South Africa has fared quite well through the global crisis, at least so far. This is without question due in part to the early lock-down where everyone duly played their part. It is also due in part to the comparison to other parts of the world – chiefly the United States – that make most of the world look substantially successful. And also, finally, some unclear and perhaps mostly lucky circumstances that have largely left the African continent in good stead, despite our fears. And yet the way it has played out leaves many questions, particularly as we sit with the banal nothingness left in the wake of the most anxious moments. Are our standards for how well we fared through the crisis based on the fact that our expectations were quite low to begin with? Or perhaps the fact that we have come to accept as reasonable, grand inequality, mass unemployment and the inability of families to feed their children, perhaps even for some to die for the greater neoliberal good. For a country with a relatively recent history of organised and mass self-determination, why was so much of the response to a deep social crisis entirely top down? While the nature of World Health Organisation (WHO) designated pandemic requires the coordination of states, and the ‘stay home’ narrative specifically, required non-mobilisation to begin with, the questions still remain. Why was so much of the national narrative devoid of the voices of civil society? Why were existing models of formal and informal community organisation and social support not incorporated into state responses? Why did the president and his closest command, and big business, who really only offered loans, become the heroes of the story of our crisis – and not nurses or food-pack distribution workers? Have we become a country who believe, first and

foremost, in the authority of big men and completely forgotten that we once believed in the authority of ourselves?

It must be said of course that there were many community-based mobilisation programmes that were very active and made substantial impacts, particularly in highly localised ways (Essop and von Holdt 2020, van Pinxteren and Colvin 2020). Unfortunately, the length and focus of this article does not enable me to discuss them in any detail. Still, the ways in which a country understands itself during crisis says much about our dependencies and insecurities, and where we turn when we need strength. We can likely also look at this relationship to authority and assume that, without intentional change, it is our normal for the foreseeable future.

Many have written on the now ubiquitous and decades old service delivery protest and its complex relationship to paternal tender and custody of the state (Zuern 2014). The service delivery protest points to our state of community power determination being centred on its ability to call the state into intimacy with it. Others have written similarly about figures at the centre of struggles over the meaning of power, such as Julius Malema or Jacob Zuma. Many of these again reflect a complex relationship to authority, with arguments such as those of Hilton White stating that ‘in Zumania, the love of the self and the love of the state were intimately joined ... in a structure of political sentiment that holds within it profoundly authoritarian possibilities ... and a politics of security’ (White 2012:424). I have written elsewhere (Moiloa 2012) about the complex relationship with state authority that youth politics can tell about our futures, in which obligation, security and provision drive a complex navigation of political ideology. The interdependency with the paternalism of the state that Covid makes so evident is not a new phenomenon and it is not one likely to distinctly change within the political imaginaries of young people who will define our futures.

This kind of deep intimacy with a perceived guardian state is of course in complex antagonism with a history of deep conflict with the state pre-1994. And perhaps from this time we might reclaim some strategies and potentials for rebalancing our understanding of how power is wielded, and the ways in which a claim for independence from the state enables progressive movement forward in the interests of the majority. Perhaps by drawing from these histories we may also be able to claim a kind of interest in the majority that rejects the kind of pitfalls that a similar sense of independence from state elite imposition created in the United State’s response to Covid-19. By claiming a tradition of self-determination and collective responsibility

that emerges in the 1980s in the form of ungovernability, we might be able to rewrite some narratives of anti-apartheid resistance as experiments in radical autonomy and collaborative governance. This is a valuable thought experiment as ungovernability potentially offers us a reimagination of a history substantially written as the story of liberation movements, big men and mass protest. While all these things are no doubt vital to the story of South Africa overturning an autocratic apartheid state, there is also the story of the ordinary, the everyday. This story is of the lives that people built in small interconnected ways that served as experiments in collective self-determination and defining in deeply localised contexts, what was important for people and their own lives.

Ungovernability emerges out of existing practices within black sites of resistance in the late 1970s and 1980s and is, in essence, the refusal of state determination over our lives. It is in response to this increasing organic practice that the president of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1984, calls on the people to 'render this country ungovernable', creating formal strategy out of what already was and expanding it. While this period (1980s) is often associated with the state of emergency, mass protest and significant violence, ungovernability also began to formulate in ways that politicised existing forms of both traditional and community organising. It began to imagine how ungovernability might refuse external governance but create a self-driven coordination of resources, infrastructures and the social good. When we focus in on this part of ungovernability we are also able to claim forms of politics that were responded to and built upon by the ANC and the United Democratic Front but that were first and foremost a power of and from the people.

Though emerging from before the ungovernable period, yard, street and block committees, civics, and people's courts emerge in this period as a substantial framework of self-determined coordination of social infrastructures (Burman and Schärf 1990, Pavlich 1992, Shubane 1994).

Clean up campaigns and people's parks became organs by which communities imagined and began to create the kinds of environments they wanted. Parents and Relief committees sought to facilitate forms of care and support for the livelihoods of neighbours, including basic support to detainees and the parents of detainees, the organising of funerals, and even the mobilisation of health care. (Burman and Schärf 1990, Shubane 1994). While there has been much thought dedicated to the loss of this momentum and the inability for civics to emerge into a democratic dispensation (Glaser

1997, and others), the existence of this history and some of its tentacles that remained post the 1990s may be of value in how we imagine a different kind of relationship to power as we emerge out of the crisis period of Covid-19. We might, through remembering, enable the infrastructures of localised society that would enable healthier responses to crises in future.

From this we may begin to learn more about our long-standing complexity in relationship to authority, and complexify how we choose to respond. But we might also begin collectively to theorise and practise what small scale, deeply localised organising can enable in very direct ways, but also in expanded, networked ways. It might help us recall the resilience of small scale coordination, the rapid capacity of decentralised functions, and the agile relevance of locally specific infrastructures. From the people's courts we might reclaim the knowledge that large scale investigative commissions and the constitutional court are just one small part of our understanding of justice, and the localised relational accountability has a substantial role to play in how we coordinate our communities. From clean up campaigns we might begin to lay claim and ownership of our environments, our own agency and capacity for the places in which we live, rather than seek political parties who 'will fix the potholes'. Peace Parks might again engender in us the value of public space – an endangered species in a city like Johannesburg – and our need for relationships to green environments. From street committees and civics we might recall the potential of distributed powers and coordination, and begin to think in rhizomatic and fractal ways about the power of many interlinked small coordinating centres. From relief and support committees we can reclaim the potential for communal care as part of the larger picture of mega state health infrastructures, mass social welfare systems, and the commercialisation of how we lay our loved ones to rest. Importantly ungovernability at this time is not about denying the need for national coordination of pandemic responses or state infrastructures that address the needs of the majority. But rather that these are not the foundational structures of our wellbeing and should not be the drivers of our environments. How state authority is wielded is significantly subject to the whims and capacities of powerful people far away, how our localised structures hold us up, is largely up to us.

There is an increasing body of knowledge that begins to frame community organising within ecosystemic or Healthy Living Systems terms (Brown 2017, Wheatley and Frieze 2015, and others). By understanding ourselves and our social infrastructures as natural, and thus largely defined by the same

patterns and flows as nature, an understanding of healthy living systems begins to emerge. This is already a radical position, to frame political organising in terms that do not separate our political from the natural that is ‘out there’. And is particularly unusual in South Africa in which concern with ecosystems is colloquially attributed to the paler and ‘a-political’ stock of our citizenry. But ungovernability and ecosystemic thinking are closely aligned. They very similarly operate in decentralised ways, with independent areas acting as needed rather than determined by a singular point. Though decentralised they are deeply networked, or rhizomatic, linking in systems, strategies and agendas. This interlinked interdependence is important so that if certain parts are paused (by the apartheid state or by a falling tree) the other parts can continue, and the affected parts can reconstitute accordingly. They operate in deeply localised and specific ways according to the set of circumstances and capacities available to them, but this structure is fractal and able to replicate itself – in a sense at scale, but not in the sense of monolith or singularity. This non-monolithic scaling enables various interests and positions to stand alongside each other without being the same – moving beyond simplified identities and nationhoods to collaboration and connection (sometimes temporarily) based on action and motion. Most importantly in both cases, these forms of operation are first and foremost about survival, but when harnessed and given space to grow, enable thriving.

A range of capacities begin to emerge from the understanding and practice of ecosystemic thinking in community organising and the history of ungovernability. Collaboration and coordination are the most fundamental capacities that become necessary and that are very much about facilitation of ideas, knowledges and difference for agentive and productive purposes. These require and inculcate the ability to navigate conflict, to negotiate consensus and to make space for dissensus. This requires reorienting our minds towards the small scale and to the necessity of degrowth, which needs us to let go of our long standing imaginations of growth and development as our markers of progress. We would need to assert the importance of complexity and specificity, and remove the desire for simple broad scale solutions that feel efficient. We would need to reclaim the value of labour beyond the limited frameworks of salaried work and toward the resilience of our community networks and the actions of groups aimed at care and coordination. These capacities begin to emerge quite naturally when organising in these small scale but networked ways. But they are also difficult to obtain – such as in the case of consensus building – when so much of our capacity is oriented

around established understandings of structures such as ‘majority rules’. The sharing of knowledges, strategies and skills enables smoother transitions into ways of organising, and less reinvention of the wheel. This sharing thrives within the frameworks of networked and rhizomatic small scale organising, and increasingly links internationally.

My own experience of this approach to organising is that it enables deep resilience and flexibility. Small groups are nimble and can be responsive, can up and move, even relocate entirely without much difficulty. Within small groups, and particularly for young people, skills are dispersed, shared and grown exponentially – driven by problem solving and the innovation of limited resources (of time, money, space and people). When networked, these small scale units of organisation are multipliers expanding systems of influence in ways that can be more deep even if less wide. And the capacities and intentions of these networked groups can remain in residues and other applications even when the groups remain difficult to retain – and these residues remain connected and linked in ways that germinate in unexpected places, and mushroom into a community of practice. These loosely linked communities of practice expand thinking and creativity in our approaches, our methodologies and the work that we produce, in ways that would be impossible if we remained on our own. This is the case for networked alternative education programmes across the majority world, as much as it is the case for artistic practice across small towns in South Africa or decolonial ecosystemic micro-farming practices in townships in Johannesburg. And vitally it is the case for the connections across all of them, which begin to recognise the intersections of imagining new, dignified, and multifaceted lives for ourselves.

Internationally these strategies are increasingly being incorporated into progressive movement building that is focused on deep transformational change at small scale but in networked, cumulative ways, rather than broad but shallow forms. In North America and the UK, mutual aid groups – the epitome of small scale support frameworks responding to shared resources and localised needs – emerged in response to the Covid-19 lockdowns. For many this was a mainstreaming of longstanding tactics of disadvantaged and oppressed peoples such as trans and disabled communities (Spade 2020). While some of these mutual aid groups were limited and short term, the long-standing strategies of organising emerging from crip and queer mobilisations have offered us a trove of strategies, skills, toolkits and approaches, often free to access (Brown 2017, Spade 2020). In Kerala, still hailed as a unique case

of Covid management, their strong communication, limited lockdowns and low numbers are substantially attributed to a significant relationship between government structures at a highly localised level and a strong social network with coordinated local organising that was able to respond in small but multiplying ways (Isaac and Sadanandan 2020, Menon et al 2020). These are established relationships between state and local groups, built over time, that are then mobilised differently at crisis moments. This requires relationship building and engagements of trust outside of crises, but can then spring into action in near automatic and deeply responsive ways when needed. We learn also from Kerala what becomes possible when governments are not hostile to independent localised capacities.

It is vital to recognise that there already exist many CBOs, organisations and organisers and even informal, ad-hoc strategies for care and support among neighbours and extended families in South Africa. And many of these organising strategies are already in practice in conscious and unconscious ways, because resilience and agility have been absolutely necessary just to survive. However, there is an increasing sense of animosity from the state of engaging with these formations. And, even outside of relations with the state, these existing frameworks have far more potential than we have been able to reach. Much like the ecosystems found in the natural world, these forms of organising, when honed and systematically and strategically implemented, can enable us to move beyond survival. And this is really the vital issue. We survived Covid-19, at least most of us did. But when did we decide that survival was enough? We have returned to a normal that was never an environment in which we might be able to thrive, move beyond poverty and the limitations of an eternal under-employment and increasing precarity. We have decided to leave our fate in the hands of the big men and the top, and to seek our salvation in the resources of the state. Ungovernability offers us a memory, though fading, of what it meant to rehearse lives of our choosing. It helps us to honestly face up to the fact that Ramaphosa or the ANC are not going to save us, we are all on our own, but we are on our own together, and we are all we need.

Covid has presented to us the fundamental realities of our lives, and the sense of limited capacity to define our lives. Covid showed us that in a state of emergency, we turn to the government and not to each other. We have seen through the results of this, and the realities of South Africa prior to March 2020, that this results in a cyclical redundancy, a kind of ‘going nowhere’. We know from what happened, and is happening, during Covid-

19 that we need infrastructures of care, we need ways of building consensus and buy-in based on knowledge and empowered understanding. We know that food packs are not the way we want to feed our children, and that we struggle deeply with violence and punitive forms of control. We know that the government, the military, our local ward councillors, are not our solution. Instead we might look to ungovernability, to ecosystems approaches and emergent strategy to rehearse alternatives. We might learn from why existing structures of localised coordination during the ungovernable period were unable to thrive beyond the democratic dispensation, and to adjust and reframe for our contemporary moments. We can test out small, prototyped strategies, in ways that each of us feels possible – and connect these small steps together. And as a whole, we might just get a little closer to the lives we want to lead together.

References

- Brown, AM (2017) *Emergent Strategy: shaping change, changing worlds*. California: AK Press.
- Burman, S and W Schärf (1990) ‘Creating people’s justice: street committees and people’s courts in a South African city’, *Law & Society Review* 24(3). Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3053857> (accessed June 15, 2014).
- Essop, T and K von Holdt (2020) ‘South Africa: popular movements mobilise under lockdown’, *Daily Maverick*. Available at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-17-south-africa-popular-movements-mobilise-under-lockdown/> (accessed November 8, 2020).
- Glaser, D (1997). South Africa and the limits of civil society’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23(1). Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637135> (accessed November 8, 2020).
- Menon JC, PS Rakesh, D John, R Thachathodiyl and A Banerjee (2020) ‘What was right about Kerala’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic?’, *BMJ Global Health*. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003212
- Moiloa, M (2012) ‘Youth in Khutsong, South Africa: nostalgia for a different political present’, *Peace and Conflict: journal of peace psychology* 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029074>
- Pavlich, G (1992) ‘People’s courts, postmodern difference, and socialist justice in South Africa’, *Social Justice* 19(3). Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766692> (accessed November 8, 2020).
- Shubane, K (1994) ‘The future of civics’, *Indicator* 11(2). Available at: https://hdl.handle.net/10520/AJA0259188X_1415 (accessed November 8, 2020).

- Spade, D (2020) 'Solidarity not charity: mutual aid for mobilization and survival', *Social Text* 142. Doi 10.1215/01642472-7971139.
- van Pinxteren, M (2020) 'How COVID-19 changed community engagement in South Africa's low income areas', *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://the-conversation.com/how-covid-19-changed-community-engagement-in-south-africas-low-income-areas-146767> (accessed November 8, 2020).
- Wheatley, M and D Frieze (2015) 'The lifecycle of emergence: using emergence to take social innovation to scale', *Kosmos Journal* (spring/summer). Available at: <https://www.kosmosjournal.org/article/lifecycle-of-emergence/>
- White, H (2012) 'A post-Fordist ethnicity: insecurity, authority, and identity in South Africa', *Anthropological Quarterly* 85(2). <https://doi.org/10.2307/41857248>
- Zuern, E (2014) 'Popular organizations in South Africa: from civics to service delivery protests', in E Obadare (ed) *The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa: nonprofit and civil society studies*. doi:10.1007/978-1-4614-8262-8

Addendum:

Reviewer comment

I read this paper with a lot of interest and fun. It is an excellent piece. I wish that the author had looked more closely at hints of emerging solidarity and co-action in the early days of the lockdown. I think that the president and his government were missing in action for the last 9 months and missed the opportunity of galvanising the early strands of solidarity that appeared. Was this a moment to reimagine bottom-up mobilisation by looking at the popular response to the lockdown initially?

Reviewer comment

Reminds us of past community organisation, civics, street committees. 'We are all that we need' – lovely motto and important reminder of this truth.

Author response

There is certainly much fruitful work to be done on what can be learned from those actions that did emerge. There is potentially some really valuable insight to be gleaned particularly around the specific contextual circumstances – contemporary but also historical – that enable very strong community mobilisation in some places but not in most, and the ways in which this can be strengthened in other contexts. One very good discussion of this is by Manyá van Ryneveld, Eleanor Whyte, Leanne Brady (2020)

titled 'What is COVID-19 teaching us about community health systems? A reflection from a rapid community-led Mutual Aid Resource response in Cape Town, South Africa', *IJHPM: international journal of health policy management*. Available at: https://www.ijhpm.com/article_3904_e4aea0e55d269d384d5371f3009ff358.pdf