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NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM AGAINST DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA
THE DIALECTIC OF DEMOCRACY:
CAPITALISM, POPULISM AND WORKING-CLASS POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

The South African socio-economic, environmental and political crisis is part of a global crisis of neoliberal carbon capitalism, where increasing inequality and poverty has delegitimised democratic institutions and seen the rise of right-wing populism. The entrenched power of monopoly capitalism in South Africa, only fractionally deracialised but substantially globalised, still bears the hallmarks of apartheid capitalism. However, instead of facing a left-wing Polanyian counter-movement, it has been met with a counter-force of klepto-capitalism and racial populism, which uses some of the language of the Left to win support amongst those who have been denied the fruits of the post-apartheid order.

This chapter discusses threats to South Africa’s constitutional order by interrogating two competing narratives – namely, that of liberalism and the nationalist-populist countermovement. It then considers two working-class responses that attempt to rise above these dominant narratives – Marxist–Leninism and the popular-democratic (democratic eco-socialist) alternative. Through this discussion, the role of the trade union movement in the struggle for democracy emerges as a key factor.

Indeed, it is the leading component of the democratic trade union movement, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) – which was central to the
demise of apartheid and the promotion of a participatory-democratic socialist politics – that delivered crippling blows to that very politics. Along with the South African Communist Party (SACP), it deliberately created the ‘tsunami’ that from 2007 to 2009 brought into power a nascent kleptocratic bourgeoisie, led by Jacob Zuma. This was couched as an attempt to dislodge the ‘1996 class project’, which some refer to as ‘white monopoly capitalism’ (WMC) (Malikane 2017b). One of its key allies at the time was the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) and its charismatic leader Julius Malema, who later split off to form the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Zuma’s administration became enmeshed with the parasitic business interests of the Gupta family from India, and together they are popularly referred to as the Zupta faction of the ruling ANC. While the EFF mobilised against Zupta corruption, its own leaders have been implicated in corruption scandals.

Although post-apartheid corruption is not confined to the Zuptas or the EFF (Von Holdt 2019), today the two most destabilising fractions of the nascent kleptocratic bourgeoisie are to be found inside the ANC (the Zuptas) and outside (the EFF), with the latter taking on a more strident form of racial populism. In the meantime, in 2014/2015 Cosatu experienced a major rupture when its biggest affiliate, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), was kicked out of the federation for resolving to stop supporting the ANC, followed by the ousting of Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi – both with the active collusion of the SACP, which continued to offer Zuma firm support. Numsa and Vavi went on to form the South African Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu) in 2017. Ironically, by that time the SACP itself began to move away from Zuma, and participated in nationwide protests for his removal, as the depth of the corruption over which he presided became more manifest. Today, the once strident voice of Cosatu against the klepto-capitalist class fraction is diminished – but so is Vavi’s voice struggling to assert itself within Saftu, as its largest affiliate Numsa seems caught up within the knots of its own WMC discourse (Pillay 2017).

In other words, the morbid symptoms of an old order refusing to die, and a new struggling to be born (Gramsci 1971), have been revealed in all their grotesqueness. The wealth and splendour of the entrenched and new elites, benefiting from what some in the 1990s called the 50 per cent economy (Morris 1993), has fuelled a racialised backlash that draws its breath from the deep sense of relative and absolute deprivation experienced by the excluded majority. This poses a direct threat to the constitutional order.

The tragedy is that the organised Left, in particular the trade union movement, today stands as transfixed as a deer caught in the headlights, while right-wing
nationalist-populists steal aspects of their discourse to ride the wave of discontent (not unlike what is happening elsewhere in the world). Although there is now a concerted attempt by liberal democrats within the ANC to reassert control over the state (without upsetting the economic order), the left critique of racial capitalism, and the statist solutions some have proposed, are being used by populists to try to reopen access to state coffers.

THE LIBERAL NARRATIVE: ‘WE HAVE NOW BEGUN OUR DESCENT’

Justice Malala’s book *We Have Now Begun Our Descent* (2015), written while Jacob Zuma was in power, suggests that we are entering a classic post-liberation scenario written all over Africa and other parts of the post-colony, where nationalist elites vie with each other to eat at the trough, putting the country to ruins. The unstated subtext, tweeted, for example, by Democratic Alliance (DA) politician Helen Zille, is that the institutions of modernity, built by the colonial regimes according to standards primarily set in western Europe, and slowly transformed post-liberation, were now in danger of being dismantled, or severely compromised. Zille was responding to the new ‘woke’ Fallist generation, whose ‘decolonial’ discourse seemed to deny any positive fallout from the horrors of the colonial impact, by suggesting that they were benefiting from its infrastructural legacy (piped water, roads, hospitals, education, etc.).

Defenders of Zille argue that she was merely echoing the famous Monty Python satirical sketch in the movie *Life of Brian*, where a group of anti-Roman revolutionaries ask, ‘What did the Romans ever do for us?’ Some go further, and say what she is doing is akin to what Karl Marx did in the *Communist Manifesto*: severely criticising capitalism as an exploitative and oppressive social system – but simultaneously acknowledging capitalism as a revolutionary phenomenon, with science, technology and rational thought sweeping away the vestiges of pre-capitalist ignorance, superstition and frozen hierarchies of oppression. For Marx, the task of socialists was not to try to return to a mythical past, but to build on the positive within capitalism, in order to take society onto a higher plane of social justice and equality. In a similar vein, Zille, while not a socialist, was looking to East Asian states like Singapore and Hong Kong, where locals apparently dwell not on their colonial past, but on their post-colonial present and future.

The response to Zille was harsh, labelling her as an apologist of colonialism. As a prominent politician of the liberal opposition, which has its roots as a liberal white
party that challenged the apartheid government from within the apartheid parliament, Zille was an easy target of the ‘woke’ generation. Very few black people came to her defence, for fear of being labelled an appeaser of colonial attitudes. Indeed, Zille’s dogged insistence on repeating this Twitter narrative earned her rebukes from within her own party, as a new generation of black DA leaders, who promote a new ‘afro-liberalism’ (Jolobe 2019), became increasingly afraid of the political consequences of any suggestion that colonialism had any positive impact. On the other side of the spectrum, the tilt towards aspects of the decolonial discourse, such as a critique of white privilege and support for affirmative action, alienated right-wing DA supporters who had drifted towards the party after the demise of the National Party, the apartheid-era ruling party (see Africa 2019; Jolobe 2019).

The DA, of course, primarily represents the interests of liberal capitalism (in both its mild redistributive/afro-liberal and more strident neoliberal manifestations), and its voter base has its roots in white liberal suburbia. While it has attracted a sizeable number of black voters in recent years, many middle-class black voters drifted back to the ANC under Cyril Ramaphosa, who promised a return to ‘normal’ capitalism (i.e. based on the rule of law) by cleaning up the state, and rebuilding the integrity of state institutions and public enterprises crippled by corruption under the Zuma administration. In this he attracted support from sections of white liberal opinion (such as the former editor of Business Day, Peter Bruce), as he is perceived to be an important bulwark against a right-wing, parasitic populism both from within the ANC, and its EFF offshoot.

Protecting the constitutional order, however, is not only the concern of liberals within the DA and the Ramaphosa faction of the ANC. Others within the ANC Alliance and the opposition (including broader civil society) also argue that, whether or not capitalism as a system is supported or criticised, stark choices have to be made in the short to medium term. The decline of Zimbabwe and Venezuela as examples of ‘anti-imperialist’, statist alternatives has boosted arguments that productive capital in the private sector, as employers of vast numbers of people and contributors to the coffers of the state (in order to, amongst other things, fund social and physical infrastructure), ought to be boosted, not lambasted. In other words, monopoly capitalism, even if it has influence over the state in some ways, must be contrasted with unproductive parasitic capital such as that of the Zuptas (see Basson and Du Toit 2017; Bhorat et al. 2017). In this view, while state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have an important role to play, the experience of state capture under the Zuma regime has rendered them dysfunctional and a major drag on the fiscus, with bailouts to SOEs such as electricity utility Eskom, the South African Broadcasting
Corporation (SABC) and South African Airways (SAA) being the most visible. The role of SOEs, however, remains an issue of debate within the Ramaphosa administration (Bruce 2019).

Nevertheless, as Von Holdt (2019) points out, corruption has not been confined to the Zupta nexus, but forms part of an informal political-economic system that began with ANC rule, as corruption became a mechanism of class formation for black people who were excluded from networks of established (white) capital that monopolised key sectors of the economy. Indeed, the established private sector is also not immune to corruption, as the recent Steinhoff case vividly illustrates (see Rose 2018; Styan 2018). These points are stressed by those who reduce the Zupta nexus to mere ‘lizards’ next to the ‘crocodiles’ of ‘white monopoly capital’ (see next section).

Even if this countercharge is conceded, defenders of the constitutional order support the view that productive private capital remains a critical component of any developmental path that seeks to reduce inequality and eliminate poverty. These sentiments are embedded within the logic of the National Development Plan (NDP), which emerged through a process chaired by former finance minister Trevor Manuel and Cyril Ramaphosa during 2010/2011. The labour movement does not necessarily question the role of private capital (at least in the short to medium term). However, it has argued for much greater state (and civil society12) involvement in policy determination to curb its profit-maximisation tendency and redirect the social surplus towards developmental outcomes, through a capable democratic developmental state. This is consistent with the perspectives of Keynesian left critics (and Marxists who see the logic of reforms within an overall transformational trajectory).

However, ‘revolutionary’ Marxists (as well as anarchists) tend to see no positive role for private capital, and seek its immediate overthrow (at least in the abstract). In such a logic all capital is ‘corrupt’, because capitalism as a system is ‘corrupt’, so there is no need to specify and target one form of corruption over the other (see Gentle 2019).\(^{13}\) This seems to be the logic behind, for example, the rhetoric of Numsa and its recently formed Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP)\(^{14}\) – and coincides in material ways with the nationalist-populist argument, by minimising the importance of the Zupta phenomenon in favour of an exclusive focus on WMC.

In other words, the liberal-democratic constitutional order, exposed to the winds of an economic order that has failed to address racialised inequality, poverty and unemployment, has ushered in a countermovement that can threaten its very foundation.
NATIONALIST-Populist Responses

Following liberal capitalism’s global crisis of legitimacy, the term ‘populism’ has re-emerged in recent times, in relation to figures like Trump in the US, as well as Malema and the EFF in South Africa. In the 1980s it was used by critics (mainly within the re-emerging democratic trade union movement) to specify, firstly, the undemocratic leadership styles of organisations in relation to their organisational practices (with top-down leadership, often based on charismatic leaders, with weak structures of accountability); and secondly, their non-class ideological discourses, with an emphasis on an undifferentiated ‘people’, or ‘black people’, as opposed to a specification of class (and gender) differences. This lack of specification allowed middle-class male leaders to assume leadership of organisations, whereby working-class people were used as ladders for their elite advancement. Laclau (1979) tried to make a distinction between bourgeois populism and working-class populism – in the former a populist ideology articulates with specific bourgeois interests, whereas in the latter populism articulates with working-class (or socialist) interests. Today US media (including left media such as Jacobin magazine – see Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2020; Solty, this volume) tend to refer to Donald Trump and democratic socialist candidate Bernie Sanders as variants of populism (right-wing and left-wing, respectively – see Gordon, this volume). By contrast, Marxists such as Hall (1980), Mouzelis (1978) and Saul (1986) preferred the term popular, or popular-democratic, to differentiate a popular alliance under a democratic socialist leadership from that of elite or authoritarian populism (see later).

The ANC could be seen as a hybrid movement that, within its alliance with the SACP and Cosatu, casts itself as ‘popular-democratic’ (see Saul 1986), but in practice contains strong liberal-populist as well as narrow nationalist/Africanist populist impulses. The latter found full expression in the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) split-off in 1959, and more recently through the EFF (with significant remnants coalescing around the Zupta faction of the ANC). While, as previously noted, corruption is not confined to any of these factions or split-offs (Von Holdt 2019; see also Olver 2017), it reached unprecedented heights during the Zuma administration. Today we have two major populist forces, the Zuptas and the EFF, competing at times, but increasingly finding common ground against the more liberal nationalist faction currently holding power by a thin margin within the ANC (and supported by the SACP and Cosatu). Both populist forces have ties to parasitic capital and are mired in corruption scandals.15
Marxist writers such as Patrick Bond (2019) have applied the US media terminology to South Africa, whereby the EFF is referred to as ‘left-populist’, given its ‘Marxist–Leninist–Fanonist’ ideological stance (EFF 2013), and its usage of red working-class overalls in parliament to denote an identification with the working class. This is in contrast to those who have labelled it neo- or proto-fascist (see Baccus 2013; Head 2019; Lagardien 2019; SAPA 2015; Satgar 2017), given its macho militaristic posturing, flirtations with violence, and use of race-baiting to whip up support amongst its followers, many of whom are alienated, unemployed youth. Despite its ‘Marxist–Leninist’ pretensions, the EFF has a faint presence within the organised working class, mobilising as it does on an anti-white, narrow nationalist basis – a populist discourse that invokes ‘black people’ to its cause. Its organisational form accords very much with a populist type, with Malema occupying an undisputed leadership position. His enormous charismatic appeal resonates amongst his followers and within the party, where he seems to wield unquestioned power. While the party does have structures at various levels (see Essop 2015), it is difficult to imagine the EFF without Malema at the helm. His ‘black consciousness’ discourse, however, often slips into a narrow Africanism (betrayed by his antagonism towards people of Indian origin).

Despite its left-wing pretensions, the EFF more clearly resembles a right-wing narrow nationalist movement that thrives on racial polarisation (the flip side of right-wing white nationalism). However, is it ‘fascist’? As Barney Mthombothi reminded us in his Sunday Times column on 28 July 2019, fascism in Italy and Germany during the 1920s and 1930s began life within the socialist movement, and used socialist discourses and appeals to the working class to sideline and attack left-wing organisations. However, without state power, it would be difficult to pin the EFF down as unambiguously ‘fascist’. It seems more like a hybrid of fascistic and Stalinist authoritarianism, and racial populism. (In this volume, see Satgar for a more fluid understanding of ‘fascism’ in the context of ‘eco-fascism’; Gordon, for the term ‘fascistic’ to describe non-institutionalised forms of right-wing populism in the USA; Saad-Filho [‘neo-liberal authoritarianism’], Nilsen [‘authoritarian populism’] and Solty [‘right-wing authoritarian nationalism’] avoid the term altogether in their respective analyses of right-wing governments in Brazil, India and the USA.)

The Zupta faction of the ANC does not mobilise on an overtly racial basis, but bears all the hallmarks of parasitic populism under the guise of a left-wing ‘radical economic transformation’ discourse. As revelations about Zupta corruption reached a crescendo in 2017 (see books by Pauw [2017] and Myburgh [2017], along with the media publication of damning emails, and a Public Protector report on state capture), it became increasingly difficult for Zuma supporters to mount a defence...
of him. Key allies in the SACP and Cosatu deserted him, and critical voices within the ANC began to speak out more openly, alongside a range of voices within civil society and opposition parties (Basson and Du Toit 2017). The defeat of the Zuma faction within the ANC at its Nasrec conference in December 2017, and the ousting of Zuma as state president in February 2018, as well as the closing down of Gupta media outlets ANN7 and New Age newspaper in 2018, saw a temporary decline in public support for both Zuma and the Gupta family.

However, during 2019 the Zupta fightback, using the office of the ANC general secretary Ace Magashule, who is implicated in a number of corruption scandals (see Myburgh 2019), as well as the office of the Public Protector, was given a boost (and an informal alliance was formed with the EFF, who since Zuma’s departure has targeted those exposing corruption). The strategy includes giving left-wing cover to corruption, casting aspersions on those fighting corruption, labelling journalists and other opponents apartheid spies, and issuing veiled threats of violence. Many of these tricks come out of the Trump ‘fake news’ playbook, with the aid of computer bots on social media. The public and key opinion formers now have to rely on the courts for credible, rational dissection, to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Chris Malikane, former economics adviser to Cosatu and Numsa, who went on to become the economic adviser to Zupta appointee Malusi Gigaba in Treasury in 2017, is one of the more sophisticated defenders of the WMC thesis and its predatory discontents (see Malikane 2017a). He uses the Marxist critique of the minerals-energy-financial complex (see Ashman et al. 2010), which identifies the white economic oligarchy as one power elite, against the predominantly black power elite within the state. The two have an antagonistic yet symbiotic relationship, and the creation of a black capitalist class fraction is limited by its dependence on the entrenched capitalist class, and its embeddedness in the financial sector (see Mbeki 2009; Southall 2016). Malikane believes that, compared to the crocodiles of WMC, the Guptas are mere lizards (pers. comm.).

It is widely accepted amongst left critics that monopoly capital (in both its Afrikaner and English forms) has historically benefited from its access to state power. Some further allege that monopoly capital had a secret economic agreement with Mandela and the ANC to secure their vested interests in the economy. They subsequently engineered massive capital flight during the 1990s, with the meek agreement of the ANC government (see Terreblanche 2012). Big capital played a major role in ensuring that the ANC adopted neoliberal economic policies in 1996, and is believed to be influential in ensuring that critical appointments in Treasury and the Reserve Bank meet with its approval.
For Zupta-friendly critics like Malikane, this is a form of state capture that dwarfs what the Guptas did. Indeed, in this view the Guptas, notwithstanding their corruption, by entering onto the terrain of WMC, posed a major threat to them and had to be ousted. While there may be elements of truth in this, Malikane underplays or ignores the hollowing out of state institutions during the Zuma period, which created instability and undermined the ability of productive capital (public and private) to grow and thrive (and in the process, create revenue for the state for redistribution). Taken further, if big capital is to be tamed, deracialised and demonopolised (and create decent jobs), an efficient and democratic developmental state needs to be built – but precisely this was undermined by the Zupta project.

If Oppenheimer and the Anglo American Corporation were the face of WMC in the past, today it is Afrikaner capital, the ‘Stellenbosch mafia’ (see Du Toit 2019), that is allegedly pulling the strings. This is an accusation levelled by both the EFF and the Zupta faction, as they seek to displace WMC through nationalisation of the land without compensation, as well as nationalisation of the mining sector, amongst other statist measures. It is an emotively powerful narrative that has enormous traction amongst the EFF’s supporters, as well as within the ANC. It was used to great effect by the PR firm Bell Pottinger on behalf of the Gupta family during the 2015–2017 period, before being exposed (Basson and Du Toit 2017). In recent times the narrative has been revived, with the EFF leading the charge as it tries to discredit Ramaphosa as an agent of WMC, now that its chief protagonist Jacob Zuma is no longer at the helm of the ANC.

While the Zupta faction in the ANC does not exhibit an overtly racialised populism, the EFF displays racialised, fascist-like (or fascistic) characteristics more clearly. Both parasitic fractions, however, have posed severe threats to the liberal-democratic constitutional state, and have undermined the possibility of it becoming a capable, democratic developmental state.

What has been the response of the organised working class to populism and the democratic transition?

WORKING-CLASS RESPONSES: MARXIST–LENINISM OR POPULAR-DEMOCRATIC ECO-SOCIALISM?

Historically, working-class organisations have offered a powerful counter to both economic liberalism and narrow nationalism in the fight against racial capitalism. This includes the democratic trade union movement as well as Marxist-oriented groups and parties like the SACP and the ‘Cape radicals’ (see Soudien 2019;
Webster and Pampallis 2017), which since the 1920s asserted a ‘non-racial’ class politics. The SACP, along with Cosatu, became outspoken critics of post-apartheid black economic empowerment (BEE), labelling it black economic enrichment of the few (even if in practice many of their leaders at all levels benefited from it).20 The vanguardist politics of the SACP, and the subordination of the working class to the ANC’s ‘national democratic revolution’, however, severely compromised the popular-democratic potential of their politics (Pillay 2011).

Unlike populism, a popular-democratic politics couches, within a popular discourse, an explicit class politics, whereby the working class leads an alliance of class forces in pursuit of popular democracy. Where this issue was fudged in the 1980s related to what was meant by ‘working-class leadership’. The SACP in exile whispered to its cadres that it meant the leadership of the SACP, as the supposed vanguard of the working class. This is a perverted conception of popular-democratic politics, as it reduced democracy to a catechism – a ritualistic camouflage that covers the elite politics of the vanguard within the ANC–SACP. For the democratic unions, it detracted from independent but politically engaged ‘social movement unionism’, and took them into the realm of ‘political unionism’, where in extreme versions unions sacrifice their independence and internal democratic integrity in favour of the predetermined politics of the vanguard, which gives the unions instructions (Pillay 2013).

There were those within the unions and the United Democratic Front (UDF), however, who had a richer understanding of working-class leadership, and saw it lying within the power of the working-class movement, led by the unions at that time. The unions combined a powerful mass base with the presence of a notable intellectual capacity, composed of both university-trained intellectuals and worker-intellectuals who rose through the ranks, buttressed by a strong shop steward movement. Indeed, it was the trade union movement that led the internal struggle against apartheid during the latter years of the 1980s, when the UDF was effectively banned (see Pillay 2011, 2013).

After 1990, however, Cosatu’s absorption into a triple alliance with the ANC and the SACP meant that, firstly, key leaders and intellectuals would leave the union movement, either to join the ANC in various capacities (local, provincial and national parliament and government) or to become wealthy businesspeople. This severely depleted the unions’ intellectual and policy-making capacity, which became known as the ‘brain drain’. Secondly, Cosatu’s internal politics became such that any questioning of the triple alliance was viewed with suspicion. This severely constrained its internal democracy, as well as the federation’s impact on the direction the transition to democracy within the country was taking. Thirdly, the upward
mobility of respected leaders created an expectation amongst new layers of leaders, such that the union affiliates became targets of patronage, and corruption became endemic. Fourthly, the formation of investment companies with little scope for oversight from members severely compromised the transparency and accountability within many unions, and opened up more avenues for corruption.

In other words, since 1990, and particularly since 1994, the unions drifted closer towards political unionism and to some extent economistic or business unionism, and along with the SACP gave left cover for the liberal-populist politics of the Alliance, dressed up as the ‘national democratic revolution’ (see Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi 2017; Satgar and Southall 2015).

When the ANC government adopted the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic policy in 1996, Cosatu and the SACP reacted strongly against it, particularly as they were not consulted. It was also a decisive shift away from the more socially redistributive Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which the unions had initially promoted (see Marais 2011). This led to increasing tensions between the working-class components of the Tripartite Alliance and the governing party, particularly after Thabo Mbeki took over as president in 1999. Cosatu and the SACP flirted with the idea of splitting off, but the symbiotic relationship between them and the ANC, which was a gateway to upward mobility for unionists and party leaders (through positions in the state and BEE tender contracts) made that a non-option in reality. In 2003 Cosatu instead adopted the policy of ‘swelling the ranks’ of the ANC, with the intention of influencing the future direction of the ruling party. As mentioned previously, the two leading working-class organisations proceeded to put their weight behind Jacob Zuma to become ANC president at the 2007 Polokwane conference (Pillay 2011).

Those who disagreed with Zuma as ANC president were either expelled from the SACP or marginalised. The Marikana massacre of mine workers in 2012 (Sinwell and Mbatha 2016), along with increased dissatisfaction with ANC economic policy, eventually saw the emergence of what some have called the ‘Numsa moment’ in December 2013, which resulted in the formation of Saftu in 2017 (Pillay 2017) and the SRWP in December 2018.

The formation of the SRWP was the culmination of a prolonged process following the momentous 2013 decision by Numsa to stop supporting the ANC and the SACP. After a promising start, whereby Numsa showed signs of reviving the participatory-democratic ethos of its origins in the 1970s and 1980s (Forrest 2011), combined with an ecological thrust that hinted at possibilities of forging an eco-socialist working-class politics (Numsa 2012), the union eventually sidelined independent
thinkers, and the leadership closed ranks around a dogmatic version of ‘Marxist–Leninism’ (Pillay 2017). It undermined its initial efforts around forging a united front of left-wing organisations engaged in a wide cross-section of struggles, and decided to forge ahead with forming a political party (which in the 2019 national elections received a derisory 0.14 per cent of the vote – 24 439 votes, compared with Numsa’s membership of around 340 000 – winning no seats in parliament).

The idea of an independent working-class party to take on the SACP first emerged with force within the trade union movement in the 1980s, but never took off. By 1993 Numsa had given up hope of forming an alternative party, and it gradually became a key recruiting ground for the SACP, which by the 1990s had a hegemonic presence within all Cosatu affiliates. While the party imposed on the unions its ’Marxist–Leninist’ interpretation of the national democratic revolution, as the first phase towards socialism, this was a much more flexible version than the more rigid Stalinist–Leninist discourses that defined the pro-Soviet party since its formation in 1921. Party general secretary Joe Slovo’s seminal 1990 discussion paper, ’Has Socialism Failed?’, coming after the fall of east European one-party bureaucratic state socialism, opened up a debate around the relationship between socialism and democracy. This was as much informed by developments in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, and failures of one-party regimes across Africa, as by the social movement union practices of Cosatu.

A consensus emerged from 1990 onwards that a liberal-democratic constitution was essential to ensure democratic freedoms of various kinds, with built-in checks and balances. Within the unions and the SACP, following developments in Europe, the idea of ‘democratic socialism’ gained some traction. However, while the SACP ditched its formal commitment to the pursuit of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ as a necessary precondition for an advance to stateless communism – an ideological discourse that justified vanguardist ‘democratic centralist’ practices, which Slovo admitted was more centralist than democratic – the SACP retained its adherence to ‘Marxist–Leninism’. It seemed to adopt the view, articulated by Blade Nzimande (1992), amongst others, that socialism was inherently democratic, and therefore ‘democratic socialism’ was a tautology. Nzimande went on to become party general secretary in 1998, a position he has held onto ever since (see Williams 2008).

In the pure Leninist conception, true democracy occurs directly between the people and the ruling vanguard party/the state, unmediated by multiple political parties and parliaments (Legassick 2007). The promise of the eventual demise of the state under communism (an ‘administration of things’) legitimises ‘temporary’ statist-authoritarian rule in favour of the people as a whole (via the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, as a counter to the ‘dictatorship of the bourgeoisie’). However, as
Polan’s (1984) detailed examination of Lenin’s seminal *State and Revolution* argues, the promise of pure democracy under one-party or no-party rule effectively means the rule of an unaccountable ‘vanguard’. In other words, Lenin’s pure democracy contains the seeds of its own negation: in the absence of opposition parties to hold rulers to account, it is actually anti-democratic. Like liberal democracy, and its populist countermovements, Marxist–Leninism is implicated in the dialectical dance of democracy/anti-democracy.22

The narrow and dogmatic ‘Marxist–Leninism’ of the SACP in the past has now been revived by the SRWP23 and Irvin Jim, Numsa general secretary and the 2019 election face of the party. It directly contradicts the popular-democratic, social movement union ideological discourse Numsa’s predecessors promoted in the 1980s (Forrest 2011). This legacy, however, remains embedded within the union movement.

Today, a popular-democratic working-class politics, which sees an integral connection between democratic freedoms and social equality, also sees a need to incorporate the fight for climate justice (which includes all environmental threats caused by carbon capitalism) – in other words, to forge an eco-socialist, working-class politics (Pillay 2017). Numsa picked up this ball in 2012, but has since dropped it, wheeling out its policy on socially owned renewable energy as a fig leaf while it has forged alliances with BEE coal interests. While Numsa and Cosatu affiliate, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), are beginning to work with climate justice activists (Cock 2019), it remains to be seen whether NUM can rid itself of its coal addiction, and aggressively pursue a just transition to a post-carbon future.

Encouragingly, Saftu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, in a *Sunday Times* article penned with climate justice campaigner Alex Lenferna, added his voice to growing concerns about climate justice (Vavi and Lenferna 2019). Saftu participated in the Johannesburg climate strike on 20 September 2019 – one of the largest environmental marches ever seen in the country (alongside others around the country, and the world). Vavi, as Cosatu general secretary, played a critical role in ensuring the labour movement defended democratic rights and freedoms during Zuma’s reign, and now combined these sensibilities with an explicit identification of the need for a just transition to a post-carbon future. This builds on the work done by small groups such as the now moribund Democratic Left Front (DLF 2011), the One Million Climate Jobs Campaign (2016) and the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign,24 which have argued for the necessity of red–green alliances (see Cock 2013; Rathzel and Uzzell 2013).

The organised working class is, however, highly fragmented, with low union density of less than 25 per cent (Marrian 2019a) and a faint presence among precarious
workers (Webster and Englert 2019). Indeed, many question whether trade unions in post-apartheid South Africa represent the interests of the entire working class or merely those of a relatively privileged ‘insider’ elite (or, as some argue, the Big Labour flip side of Big Capital – see Gentle 2019; Seekings and Nattrass 2006). Are they a lost cause, or can they be revitalised to fulfil their popular-democratic potential? Or must those interested in building a democratic eco-socialist alternative to both liberal capitalism and statism look elsewhere? This remains a fluid, open question.

CONCLUSION

Democracy is a highly contested concept, and used to legitimate different class interests. Liberal capitalist interests might promote a liberal-democratic order that enshrines critical rights and freedoms for all. However, the promotion of relatively unhindered market power dilutes the content of those rights for the majority of citizens (as well as enshrined environmental rights). Thus, the very foundation of liberal democracy sows the seeds of its own destruction, through rising inequality, poverty and environmental degradation which, in the absence of a democratic socialist alternative, can ignite countervailing authoritarian-statist alternatives. In this scenario, democracy as process (termed ‘bourgeois democracy’ or, in South Africa, ‘white liberal democracy’) is countered with the discourse of democracy as outcomes (i.e. social equality) – either in the form of national-populism or Marxist–Leninism, or a hybrid of the two.

In a low-grade democracy such as South Africa, where progress towards a Weberian state has been severely compromised, statist solutions can lead to a collapsed economy. In this context the liberal critique cannot be easily dismissed, even if it is constrained by the class interests of its key proponents. Caught between a compromised and inefficient state and a profit-maximising, monopolised private sector, the democratic Left (offering substantive-democratic, non-statist and ecologically informed alternatives) struggles to make its voice heard. For the SACP and Cosatu, re-establishing ‘normal’ capitalism on a sound democratic basis, with rebuilt institutions able to serve a hopefully job-creating capitalist economy, and more equitable and effective redistribution of the social surplus, is in keeping with the ‘first stage’ of the ‘national democratic revolution’ (notwithstanding rhetorical flushes around a ‘second phase’ within the first stage). This implicitly means that it is the best that can be hoped for in the short to medium term.

For others on the Left, in social movements and NGOs (and, perhaps, some unions), reining in the fossil fuel economy – dominated by what some term ‘carbon
capital’, within a highly constrained ‘carbon democracy’ (Mitchell 2011) – includes protecting rural communities under siege from mining (see Mwnana and Capps 2015; Skosana 2019), as well as moving workers out of dirty jobs into a new era of green jobs with a strong socially owned (i.e. non-state and non-market) component. These objectives are critical, as part of a longer-term vision of building an alternative working-class politics that draws on the popular-democratic promises of the 1980s, and combines it with a renewed emphasis on democratic eco-socialism. This, ultimately, is the only real safeguard against the threats of both ‘neoliberal’ capitalism and its parasitic, narrow nationalist and racial-populist responses.

NOTES

1 ‘Neoliberalism’ refers to the post-1980s dominance of the private market (or corporate sector) over the state and society, which takes on many forms, while ‘carbon capitalism’ (or, as some prefer, ‘fossil capitalism’) tries to capture the centrality of fossil fuels in the emergence and consolidation of capitalism.

2 See Karl Polanyi (1944). Writing during the rise of fascism, he argued that a counter-movement to the self-regulated market can assume either a left-wing (socialist/social-democratic) or fascist form. In this he is in keeping with the Marxist view that the demise of capitalism can usher in socialism or barbarism (see Angus 2014).

3 Of course, as Karatani (2014) shows, the institutions of Western modernity copied a lot from centuries-old Asian bureaucracies.

4 ‘Fallist’ refers to the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall student movements that emerged during 2015–2016. The ‘decolonial’ discourse of many student leaders often assumed a strident Black Consciousness tone, and ‘woke’ was a term used for those who had awakened to their condition of blackness in the face of white supremacy and privilege.

5 They then proceed to reluctantly admit that the Romans brought the aqueduct, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, public order and peace – but then conclude, apart from all that, ‘What did they do for us?’

6 Zille was regarded as being on the liberal Left in the 1970s–1980s, both as a journalist (who broke the story of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko’s murder in prison) and as an active member of the anti-apartheid women’s group Black Sash. She has in recent years allied herself more firmly with the ‘libertarian’ faction of the DA, which flirts with white nationalism in an attempt to win back conservative white voters after an underwhelming performance in the 2019 national elections. Her subsequent election as chairperson of the DA’s federal executive prompted the resignation of DA leader Mmusi Maimane and Johannesburg DA mayor Herman Mashaba.

7 The author visited Hong Kong in 2018 and encountered similar views from a wide range of Hong Kong residents, who contrasted the oppressive presence of the Beijing-friendly government, with that of the British presence (which apparently left a sound institutional legacy).

8 The DA descends from the Progressive Party, whose former leader Helen Suzman is widely respected for her work in support of black political prisoners and banned leaders such as Winnie Mandela.
The word 'liberal' is used in its political sense here, to denote belief in a strong liberal-democratic constitutional order. Liberal economics, on the other hand, is more akin to what is often referred to as free-market 'neoliberalism' – namely, minimal state or public intervention in the operations of the self-regulating market economy (as promoted by the race relations wing of the DA, and certain fractions of capital). In practice, since the 1980s, 'neoliberalism' has mutated and some argue it does not exist except as a rhetorical device. This remains a matter of debate.

Albeit with a stronger redistributive tint than that of the DA, at least at the level of rhetoric. The DA's so-called social democratic wing (seemingly coterminous with 'afro-liberalism') claims to have a very similar socio-economic agenda to that of the ANC.

The ANC Alliance refers to the ruling party and its SACP/Cosatu allies. Under 'liberal opposition' one can also include a wide range of very small parties that seek to uphold the liberal-democratic constitution, and do not question the market economy as such but may have varying views regarding redistributive measures to address the social deficit.

By this is meant public participation in various decision-making forums at national, provincial and local levels, as well as within specific sectors and workplaces, as envisaged in the RDP (see Webster and Sikwebu 2009).

The word 'corrupt' here is misleading. Corruption refers to operating outside the rule of law, or breaking the law, as opposed to simply being oppressive or exploitative. In a Weberian sense, it means corrupting the rationality of the bureaucratic state, and operating according to the whims of pre-modern patrimonial, clientelistic behaviour.

See the SRWP's Red Book, which asserts a statist form of socialism/communism, along with Lenin's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and 'democratic centralism' (www.srwp.org.za). These sentiments were articulated by Irvin Jim during their election campaign. See various posts during the election campaign on the Facebook page 'Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party', www.facebook.com, retrieved 5 October 2019.

Malema was implicated in corruption scandals in Limpopo province while leader of the ANCYL, and he and the EFF had strong ties to tobacco smuggler Adriano Mazzotti, who donated money to the EFF. Malema and the EFF have also been implicated in a corruption scandal involving VBS Bank and tender deals with the city councils of Johannesburg and Tshwane (in exchange for supporting the DA governments there) (see Brummer and Reddy 2019a, 2019b; Suttner 2019).

Bond (2019) admits that it is difficult to pin down a consistent label for the EFF, given its hybrid character (see alsoNieftagodien 2015).

Recent utterances against xenophobia, as opportunistic as they may be, also point to hybridity, given that xenophobia is a key defining feature of fascist mobilisation.

Both were dismissed soon after Ramaphosa became state president in February 2018.

See response by the SACP’s Jeremy Cronin (2017) and a critique of both Cronin and Malikane by Lehulere (2017).

BEE offers incentives for established white businesses to incorporate, in the main, politically connected black people into the corporate sector – as board members, shareholders and owners (often highly indebted). A few, such as President Ramaphosa, have become billionaires as a result (but many are debt-ridden).

Economistic unionism has also been called collective bargaining unionism (focused on narrow member interests), while business unionism is associated with unions engaging in the capitalist market sphere – for example, through investment companies (see Marrian 2019b; Pillay 2013).
22 See Gibson (2017) for a more positive interpretation of Lenin’s ‘libertarian moment’, where he argued for the right of independent trade unions to exist (against Trotsky and others in the party). Lenin lost this argument and his warning was not heeded: ‘The proletariat was conflated with the party, the party with the state. The revolution in Russia, much like many of the anti-colonial movements to come, collapsed into authoritarianism and oppression. But Lenin remained confident about prospects for human liberation,’ argues Gibson (2017: 5). No mention is made of Lenin’s stance against a multiparty state and a free parliament, however.

23 The SRWP’s ideological stance is also influenced by the thinking of Trotskyists from the Workers International Vanguard League, who adopt a dogmatic version of Marxist–Leninism.

24 See www.safsc.org.za.

PERSONAL COMMUNICATION
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