

Politics at a Distance from the State: Speech to South African movements

BY LUCIEN VAN DER WALT

The following article is a lightly edited transcript of a talk by Lucien van der Walt (co-author of *Black Flame*), at the 'Politics at a Distance from the State' summit held at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, September 29-30, 2012. The event was a space at which academics and activists sympathetic to or involved in "politics at a distance from the state" could engage with left-wing anti-statist politics in South Africa and beyond, including anti-statist currents in the anti-apartheid movement, and contemporary attempts at building alternative, pre-figurative forms of communality in South Africa and abroad.

Issues covered included the 1980s United Democratic Front in South Africa, and the radical "workerist" trade union movement in South Africa. Attendees included writers like Nicole Ulrich, John Holloway, Jacques Depelchin, Michael Neocosmos and Lucien van der Walt, the shack-dweller movement Abahlali base Mjondolo, the Landless People's Movement, the Mandela Park Backyarders, Soundz of the South, the Unemployed Peoples Movement, the Church Land Programme, and the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front.

The need for a road map

Lucien: I think I want to just start by basically talking about the issues using the language of going to the land of Canaan, picking up on the imagery used yesterday by the comrade from Abahlali base Mjondolo.

When we think about going somewhere better, about going to a land of Canaan, a "land of milk and honey," I think we need to think about what this means in the first place, to think about what freedom itself means to us. And here I think anarchist comrades from Soundz of the South and from Zabalaza put it quite well yesterday: that we need to not just fight capitalism but to also fight *all* the many forms of oppression that people face and impose: racism, sexism, landlessness, hatred for foreigners, hatred for gay people...

If we are talking about a *real* democracy, we need to challenge *all* relations of authoritarianism, exploitation, and domination between people. And if we want to relate to each other as *equal* human beings, we have to treat each other as equal human beings. It is no good having a popular, working-class, democracy where only men participate, or where all our leaders are from rich families.

We must remember, if we want to talk about the story of the journey to Canaan, that the Israelites were not just fleeing from Egypt because they were bored! They were fleeing from slavery, they were fleeing from oppression as a captured nation, they were fleeing for somewhere that would be better, to a *future* that they would run themselves. But their difficulty was that everything was in the hands of one great leader, Moses. They fled from Egypt's Pharaoh, but in many ways they had their *own* Pharaoh, Moses, with them the whole time. He told them what to do.

And, we have done this, as well, in South Africa. What happened to our struggles in the 1980s was that we saw people like Nelson Mandela or O.R. Tambo as our own Moses, who would lead us out of the land of bondage and into a new country.

And what we found out was that, just like the old Israelites, following our Moses we ended up with 40 years in the desert. We have escaped much of the old house of bondage, but we are not yet in the Promised Land. I think we are still out there, in the desert, halfway from the old world of apartheid oppression, but without the Promised Land in sight.

And this is where I think it is important for us to talk about the importance of discussing ideas, theory, strategy. I know some people yesterday were skeptical about having "blueprints" and "theory," ... that they stressed instead experimentation and "building the road as we walk."

Well, that is a healthy reaction against simple answers to big problems, and it is also a healthy reaction to certain ideas that were associated with huge failures – failures exemplified by the disastrous record of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

But whatever we want to call it, "ideas" if we want to call it that, or "theory" if we want to call it that, is *essential* to choosing the road we walk, and to choosing where we aim to go with this road. Let us not be afraid of "theory" and "blueprints."

It is a mistake to think that everything will turn out right so long as we "listen," or to believe that every type of resistance takes us forward, or to pretend that thousands of small experiments will somehow quietly make the mighty system of capitalism and the state crumble away. Many mistakes are being made., We need have open discussion and debate about where we want to go, and how – and where we are going *wrong*. And this is *exactly* where we need to seriously engage with issues of *theory, strategy and vision*.

Second, without open discussion, our future is in reality still in the hands of a Moses or two. Even if that Moses says he is not the leader, that Moses is still in control. A certain *theory* gets brought in by the uncrowned Moses as a *truth*, that will emerge if we "listen" while "building the road as we walk," while other views get dismissed as "theory"; and it is this Moses who judges which ideas must be dismissed as "theory," "dogma," "authoritarian," etc. This is a clever debating trick. But it is no different from any other form of closing down debate.

Someone else is making the decisions and setting the terms of discussion. *That's the problem*. Instead, we need to build our struggles through *debate* and *discussion*, and that means engaging with theory, strategy and vision.

The need to engage many views

We all need to be part of the conversation about where we want to go, and that is a discussion about vision, theory, strategy.

Yes, we need a "politics of listening" and a "politics of starting from where we start." But that means listening to a whole *range* of views on things. Because the solution to our problems is *not* always obvious. So we can't just "listen," we need to debate.

If a town councilor cuts us off, do we elect a new councilor, or do we occupy the councilor's house? Do we reconnect ourselves? Do we participate in the branch structures of the ruling party to get a new councilor? And after that, where do we go next?

It does not help to say we must stand aside from theory, strategy and vision in the name of avoiding "blueprints" and

promoting experimentation. The very meaning and methods of freedom *itself* are highly contested.

Let us not act as if the answers are obvious, as if we will somehow know what “road” we want to “walk” and “build,” or speak as if every method of struggle is equally valuable.

And if we want “listening,” we must understand and accept there will be *many* voices. And sometimes that means we need to raise positions that not everyone will accept. It is fine, it is necessary, to debate – and to be willing to propose clear analyses and strategies and “blueprints.”

The need to criticize

It's not enough to just “listen.” As an example, if we were in the mass United Democratic Front (UDF) in South Africa in the late 1980s and we said, let us just “listen,” let us just “build,” then we would have ended up *exactly* where we ended up in 1994, with the *exact* same important (but limited) transition we had in 1994 in South Africa.

This was because by the late 1980s, the African National Congress current, with its statist and pro-capitalist politics, had started to *dominate the conversation* in the UDF and elsewhere. Not just winning over people, which they did, but also preventing other people from speaking, and labeling anyone who disagreed a traitor. So, just “listening” is not enough.

We must debate, and debate entails a *battle* of ideas, because there is no way that struggles spontaneously, automatically, lead us to any Promised Land of freedom. Many positions taken by the UDF were mistakes. If they helped get us out of the land of apartheid bondage, they also left us in the desert. *We cannot just “listen,” we must debate and contest and propose.*

Engaging our revolutionary history

Here another problem arises when we dismiss “theory” and “blueprints,” and discuss issues as if the challenges we face are new, and as if everything that came before is out of date or completely tainted by failure – a position that means that only “experiments” are possible, and that no prior judgements on their desirability and feasibility is possible.

But the working class, the poor and the peasants of the world have heroic traditions of struggle going back hundreds of years, from centuries of fighting slavery, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and state oppression. *It is from these experiences that we have developed theory and strategy and vision as a way for us to try to understand that long history and to learn from the past.*

We do not have to keep re-inventing the wheel. We do not have to keep making old mistakes either. We must not dismiss this past and its “theory”; we should *reclaim* it and *engage* it. This means engaging seriously with theory, strategy and vision, including anarchism and syndicalism, in conversation with our past as oppressed classes and peoples.

We can learn and see that certain things do *not* work. There are some “roads” we should never “walk.” And there are some “roads” that stop in the desert.

One thing that is clear from all of our history, is that whenever power is taken away from the mass of ordinary people and given to politicians, given to states and to bosses, it is the working and poor people who suffer.

Yesterday, Jacques Depelchin mentioned the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, and his terrible deeds in Haiti against the heroic slave rebellion of Toussaint L'Ouverture.

But let us also remember that Napoleon himself came out of

the destruction of the French Revolution. The French Revolution, when it started, overthrew kings, overthrew feudal landlords, made slavery illegal, and took steps to grant colonies independence. Its revolutionary Assembly included former slaves, like Jean-Baptiste Belley. But that Revolution, which was made by the popular classes, was captured by an elite that then crushed every popular movement and demand. From that elite was born a new Moses, Napoleon. A key figure in the revolutionary army, he seized state power through a *coup d'état*. Although he brought in some reforms, he also crushed popular revolts and rebuilt the French Empire.

And this disaster was all possible *because* the revolution did not keep power in the hands of the people. As the anarchist Pytor Kropotkin said, the popular classes *made* the French Revolution, but a new ruling class captured and *killed* the Revolution *through the state*.

So I say we need to speak openly about theory, strategy and vision, and to engage openly with the revolutionary traditions of the popular classes, like anarchism and syndicalism, born of our past struggles, *distilled* from those struggles. I also want to stress that we need to do this in a bottom-up way.

We need to engage in politics and debate in a different way to the mainstream political parties and certain NGOs, where, many times worldwide, small groups of people hijack struggles and movements, introduce positions and committees nobody has agreed to, then control the debates, control the money and even bribe individuals. So when we debate about theory, strategy, vision, as we must do, we need to do it in a comradely, democratic and libertarian, anti-authoritarian way. *How we debate matters as much as what we debate.*

The need for clear alternatives

In doing all of this we need to think about *concrete future alternatives*. We have spoken a lot about who we are, what we do today, and so on, but we need to think about what we do in the *future*.

It is not enough just to stay in the position of resisting the system, and worshipping resistance as an aim. The question has to be asked, can a *new society* be put in place, and then, what system? If so, then resistance becomes a *means* to that end.

But our means shape our ends. We can learn from our past and from our theory, learn a few things that are always very useful for movements.

And the first thing is that movements need to be based on *strong grassroots structures*. That is to say, rather than build a movement based on a few individuals who can be arrested, oppressed, bribed, and so on, we need to have movements that are based on base-level structures, like street committees, ward committees, workers committees, but tolerating open debate.

It is also crucially important that people's *ideas* are changed. At Marikana, where workers in a splinter union were shot down, the main miners' union at the time, the National Union of Mine Workers, NUM, stood completely silent, failing to condemn the massacre.

And we can point out, rightly so, that NUM's actions were completely deplorable. But we also have to face the fact that NUM workers *elect* leaders like Frans Baleni, *democratically*. That the basic NUM structures are quite democratic. The point is, if we have the right structure, but the old ideas, then we can easily turn our structures into something that does *not* assist at key moments, into something that turns around and even attacks us, into

something that ends up led by a Moses, a Pharaoh, a Napoleon.

Ideas matter, strategy also matters

This is why ideas matter, and why we should be so careful about dismissing “theory” and “blueprints.” Unless we have a clear idea about where we want to go, the best democratic structure can be captured, destroyed, or corrupted.

It is the ideas, theory and strategy in people’s minds that shape the structures and the struggles. And people definitely do not always think or struggle in ways that take us *forward*, nor do our struggles spontaneously create a new society through thousands of “experiments” and “building the road as we walk.”

After all, people are exposed, from birth to death, to ruling class propaganda, through TV, schools, songs, elections: *it takes time to free our minds, our best weapons.*

Views that suggest everything will just turn out fine by itself, will be “all right on the night,” that dismiss the revolutionary ideas and experiences of the past, with their valuable and hard-won lessons expressed in theory, do not take us forward. They are a healthy response to top-down, failed politics, but are *not* an alternative politics. Taken literally, they can take us back to the top-down politics they fear.

Resistance is not enough

Ja, now there are just two last points I want to make.

The first one is that *resistance is not enough*, our struggles as oppressed classes need a *strategy* that aims at taking *economic* and *social power*. If we really want a life for everybody that creates human dignity, that creates real freedom, then the economy, the coercive and administrative resources, either in the hands of the state or in the hands of private business, whether mines, farms or the water grid, have to be put under some sort of *democratic, popular, working class, bottom-up control*.

It does not matter much if resources are run by a state director at Eskom or a corporate CEO at Lonmin. Privatization, private ownership, is not a solution, but nationalization, state ownership, is not a solution, either. Both rest upon minority control, and that is *exactly* the problem we face: rule by a ruling-class elite, for a ruling-class elite, and of a ruling-class elite.

Why must we always fight for a few houses and struggle, struggle bitterly, to get them? *Why* can we not all collectively control the building industry and agree to build so many houses? And build them with four rooms, plus a lounge and kitchen? Agree that we will also want so many parks in our areas, so many schools, not houses in the middle of nowhere?

Why do we have to beg for this, with endless struggles?

It is because we lack real economic and social power. We have no say. And *until* we have that power, we will always be stuck in the position of *resisting, responding, reacting* ... never *solving* the problems, never ending the problems. Resistance should be just a *means* to an end, not an end in itself.

We must move from resistance to reconstruction. The idea that our movements must always and only be about resistance, and stop there, means we must *accept* a system that we have to resist.

The idea that we must just keep resisting, and shy away from complete and systematic and planned change, is incorrect.

Resistance is a *response* to injustice. If our politics begins and ends with resistance, then it rests upon the *existence* of injustice.

Our resistance must form the *basis* for radical social change, in which injustice, and the resistance that it generates, fall away, like bad memories.

And we can finally leave the land of Pharaoh, and leave the

desert too, and enter the Promised Land: freedom with equality. And we do not take a Moses or a Napoleon with us.

The need for (counter-) power

Last, in building for these things, building for a breakthrough into the Promised Land, realize that there is a point at which the big corporations and the state, both of which are controlled by the small elite, the ruling class of politicians and classes, will crack down with massive repression.

The notion that many small rebellions, experiments and resistances will slowly crack the system, and crumble it down, is naive. When resistance, and the movements built up in resistance, reach a certain point, they come into a *decisive confrontation* with the old order.

The old order will *not* go quietly, and it will *not* go easily. This is a dangerous dream. But the old system *will* have to go so that injustice and oppression will end, *or* the resistance and the movements will be defeated, and injustice and oppression will continue.

It is necessary to warn the working class and poor that there will not be a peaceful, gradual shift; that in walking our “road,” we will come to a terrible road-block. Will we break through or stop or turn back?

Realize this: the ruling class of politicians and bosses will never ever agree to what our movements want. The small ruling class does not have the same interests or identity as the working class and poor. They will never come over. Some of the more sensitive and principled individuals will come over, and should be welcomed, but not the whole class.

So, in closing, to go to Canaan, people must use methods and structures that take a direct route to Canaan. And if that Promised Land is to be a land of milk and honey, it must be based on social and economic power through popular, working-class democracy – the power of everyone.

The journey will not happen easily, accidentally, and not end without clear vision, theory, and strategy – getting there requires using the toolbox of revolutionary ideas, among them anarchism and syndicalism. These distill the lessons of the historical experiences of oppressed classes and peoples. They indicate what works, and what doesn’t.

Audience: Loud applause.

Comment from floor: I agree exactly, the role of ideas is important. We must not lump together and dismiss all ideas as irrelevant “theory” ... we do need a pre-planned strategy, and we should avoid the approach that says “let’s be careful of people who have an agenda.” We *all* have agendas, so this approach is either a ploy to set you up, or it shows you are confused.

Lucien: Let’s not be afraid of vision, theory and long-term planning because some people abuse them: some people abuse water supplies, we don’t boycott water as a result!

Comment from floor: It is also completely contradictory, this dismissing theory as “dogma”; that is itself a *theoretical* approach ... The idea that we must just “experiment” and “listen,” rather than have perspectives and strategy, this is completely contradictory; the idea of just building through “experiments” and “listening” is *itself* a strategy based on a theory.

Lucien: To move forward, you need new ideas, new structures, and you need a bottom-up approach, you need power. Okay, the MC’s saying that time’s up!

Rather than build a movement based on a few individuals ... we need movements that are based on structures, like street committees and workers committees