

THE WAR AGAINST THE POOR

Gibson, Nigel, C (2011) **Fanonian practices in South Africa. From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo**. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press / New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-1-86914-197-4. Pages xxii + 312.

Derek Hook
Department of Psychosocial Studies
Birkbeck College
University of London
England

Nigel Gibson claims that without the establishment of the shack dwellers' movement *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, he would not have been able to write **Fanonian practices in South Africa**. This is true, for while the book contains much of considerable theoretical value from one of the world's foremost Fanon scholars, it is its grounding in the South African context, and particularly, in the struggles of *Abahlali*, that really underlies the force of the arguments presented.

Let me start by outlining the conceptual grounds from which Gibson proceeds. Praxis, the solidarity-forming consciousness of lived social contradictions, is a central term in his description of Fanonian practices. Drawing on Gramsci and Fanon alike, Gibson asserts that it is in the shared experience of "the damned of the earth" from which new forms of humanism, new practicable concepts and theorizations emerge. Most noteworthy perhaps – certainly for theorists of the psychosocial - is a passage in which Gibson qualifies the political meaning of subjectivity as he understands it. "Subjectivity" is not to be taken in an individualist or non-materialist sense "as an emanation of pure will" but as "an organised self-consciousness ... a praxis emerging from the lived experience of the colonised". Fanon, he says, comments:

"that the starving 'natives' don't need to discover the truth but *are* the truth, since they experience the truth of the colonial system – its violence and dehumanisation ... Yet this identity of truth and experience has not yet fully moved to self-acting subjectivity. Rather than simply a for-itself 'subject-position', subjectivity here is understood as an actional and conscious subject. Fanon's challenge ... [was to] unravel how this subject-position can become a self-determining, actional subjectivity that can absorb and change not only itself, but also the objective material world into a free, inclusive, democratic space" (Gibson, pp. 8-9).

That is to say, rejuvenated forms of humanism begin precisely from the solidarity of the damned of the earth, who, as Fanon repeatedly noted, "have been emptied of humanity and excluded from the human community" (Gibson, p. 9).

Gibson yields dialectical forms of critique in order to upend many of the commonplaces of post-apartheid governance. The important point is made that so-called “service-delivery” strikes need to be understood as *social revolts*, “products of the broken promises of liberation” (p. xiv) rather than, as de-politicizing neoliberal discourse would have it, a breakdown in provision of services. Gibson is unafraid to run against the grain of ANC rhetoric, bolstered as it is “by a homespun authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism” (p. 2). Post-apartheid politics, he regrets, has been “reduced to an elite project of capturing the state and the means of governance, in contrast to creating an expansive and inclusive democracy” (p. 2).

More cuttingly yet, “the two words ‘neoliberal’ and ‘post-apartheid’ ... [may be] considered synonymous” (p. 13). A case in point is what Arundhati Roy (2004: 36) calls “the NGOisation of resistance”, a view Gibson wholly endorses, citing the fact that such NGOs, typically cut off from grassroots contacts, often undermine incipient democracy, playing instead “a significant role in shoring up neo-colonial globalisation” (p. 33). NGO activity, in short, is premised not ultimately on the hope of democratic representation, but on relations of patronage. The point made repeatedly by Gibson and the “shack intellectuals” of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* is that the poor don’t simply want things; they want to be recognized as human equals. The vast majority of NGO rationality “fails to historicize suffering” and thus “reinforces the idea of ‘these people’ as sufferers, and thus naturalizes and objectifies them” (p. 34). The agency of the poor is endlessly thus deferred while the position of such organizations to feed, provide for, and take care of, such groups is continually reproduced. It is with this backdrop in place that Gibson can speak of “neoliberal South Africa’s war on the poor” (p. 101).

A significant section of **Fanonian practices** is devoted to the question of xenophobia, which, for Gibson, cannot be understood as an instance of mindless mass rage but must instead be seen precisely as a politics. More than this, it is a politics “channelled by factions of the government elite and its civil servants” (p. 191). From here Gibson segues into a critique of the disparities and greed underlying current strategies of Black Economic Empowerment. He is likewise scathing of “nativist” presumptions that claim an essential black unity and that justify the pursuit of wealth on the basis of black suffering. Here again, it is worth quoting him at length:

“[T]he black bourgeoisie is essentially a neo-colonial comprador class ... the new class of ‘Black diamonds’, donning a hollow mask of African nationalism and looking for quick profit has a ‘White soul’. We cannot assume that being Black, or living the Black experience of suffering and rebellion, insulates Black people from desiring or taking advantage of the social mobility afforded by living ... in a capitalist society ... South Africa’s new Black middle class asserts its Africanity, often [thereby] privileging a narrowly ethnicised politics (pp. 191-92).

It is the book’s fourth chapter, “unfinished struggles for freedom”, that focuses most clearly on the shack dwellers’ movement, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*. *Abahlali baseMjondolo* was born from a protest action launched by members of the Kennedy Road settlement in Durban, in March 2005. The initial act of resistance, the blockading of a key thoroughfare for business and commuter transport, was sparked by the broken promises of land by the local council. The resultant clashes with police and the

subsequent demand by the community as a whole to be arrested – occurring on 21 March, the anniversary of Sharpeville, now called Human Rights Day – forcefully invoked memories of the anti-apartheid struggle. The uncomfortable fact of such historical resonances has been a recurring feature of *Abahlali*'s political practices. The symbolic impact of such a strategy is profound. The plight of the poor and landless thus articulated evokes the spirit of the anti-apartheid struggle precisely *against* today's political elite who claim it as the basis of their own political validation. "No land, No house, No vote", *Abahlali*'s slogan, like their poignant celebration of "Unfreedom Day" in April of the same year (i.e. a play on South Africa's "Freedom Day" – 27 April) juxtaposes the past struggle with the present. These acts point thus to the many ways in which the new South Africa has stalled, and to how today's political leaders have failed the poor, condemning them to the status of "surplus population".

Gibson includes much valuable material on *Abahlali* including a forward by *Abahlali* representative, S'bu Zikode who, cutting to the chase, memorably remarks that "liberation has been privatized" (p. vii). Gibson emphasises the inclusive, democratic and participatory ethos of *Abahlali* pointing out that "the culture of Abahlalism" entails "a deeply rooted humanism where everyone shares everyday suffering and pain, as well as laughter" (pp. 157-58). The strength of *Abahlali*'s continued growth has much to do with its rejection of donor money and patronage politics; with its collectivist practices and shared leadership; and with the fact that the shack dwellers' "knowledge derives from their existentially experienced situation ... their politics from theorising their situation" (p. 159).

Zikode's own contribution to the book underscores the broader set of arguments that Gibson uses Fanon to expand upon:

"We have learnt to draw a clear distinction between those forms of leftism that accept that everyone can think and which are willing to journey with the poor, and those forms of leftism that think only middle-class activists, usually academics or NGO people, can think and which demand that the poor obey them. We have called this ... type of the left the regressive left ... [W]hen it comes to how they relate to us we see no difference in how they behave and how the state behaves. The tendency to treat our insistence on the autonomy of our movement as criminal is the same. The tendency to co-opt individuals and slander movements is the same. The desire to ruin an movement they cannot control is the same" (Zikode, p. vi).

In his engagement with *Abahlali*'s shack dwellers, Gibson speaks a political truth that remains routinely elided in the neoliberal word: that we exist within the conditions of an ongoing war against the poor. He thus gives a new life to what is one of Fanon's most enduring lessons. This is an acute ethical and political awareness of what the category of the 'human' silently excludes, namely the 'damned of the earth', for whom the fight for the status of humanity is most urgent, and from whom the proponents of post-apartheid democracy have the most to learn.

REFERENCE.

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