EDITORIAL

Governance, land struggles and engaged scholarship: honouring Lungisile Ntsebeza

In the year that the *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE) celebrates 50 years of publication, it is fitting that this year’s volume should feature a special issue honouring the life and work of a leading African scholar-activist and one of our contributing editors. The purpose of starting this journal was to provide a forum for serious research articles and radical left debate in the service of movements of liberation from colonialism and neo-colonialism on the African continent. We hope that we have provided such a forum. As we return to publishing independence and move to become a fully open-access journal, we will continue to provide this forum both as a journal and through our lively and expanding website with what we hope will be much greater participation by engaged scholars across Africa in both media.

Our next issue will celebrate our 50th anniversary, reflecting on our purpose and our engaged contribution to African liberation. This issue celebrates the life of a scholar-activist that typified the founding editors of ROAPE, or at least the way they thought of themselves. They were activists in their political parties, or in solidarity movements with those in struggle, for example against apartheid South Africa or US imperialism in Indochina, or with those progressive movements and political groups working across the African continent to support governments seeking to effect a radical transformation of their economies and societies. As Lungisile Ntsebeza notes in his rejoinder at the end of this issue, it is not the intention of such engaged intellectual activists, one of which he has most notably been, to be at the head of such movements for transformation, as if that were possible, but to ensure that we remain a forum for enquiry and debate, not only about what is actually happening on the ground but also about what is to be done.

Today, as 50 years ago, the countries of Africa are the object of imperialist plunder mediated by domestic bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ruling classes, to the cost of the majority of the people. It is our task to expose the operations of the hegemonic US imperialism and its allies in the political and military spheres as well as to chronicle and analyse the expansion of global capital which the US and its allies facilitate. Indeed, although the term ‘state capture’ has been almost exclusively used in the case of South Africa and the Gupta brothers (Desai 2018), the phenomenon of the state acting in the interest of the dominant fractions of capital has a long history, now enhanced through the power

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of large global corporations and their subsidiaries. This finds its way across the African continent through corporate land grabs and mineral concessions which enrich the global and comprador shareholders and impoverish the already poor and increasingly landless local populations.

From the 1990s, Ntsebeza’s work, that of a leading African scholar, has prominently featured in the debates on the land question, rural local government and social movements in South Africa and Africa more broadly. In South Africa, in particular, the land question and the role of chiefs and social movements which have been topical issues during colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid eras constitute the main body of Ntsebeza’s scholarly work. This has focused on issues relating to land and governance in the rural areas even before the fall of apartheid. The recognition of his contributions was affirmed in 2008 when he was awarded an A-rated National Research Foundation (NRF) Chair through the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI).

Ntsebeza’s Chair focused on three themes: democratisation in the countryside, with specific reference to the role of chiefs in a democracy; the role of land in the eradication of poverty; and the role of social movements in the countryside. Up to the time when he retired in 2019, Ntsebeza dedicated his work to the issues of ordinary people’s struggles around land and governance in the countryside, not only by conducting research on these and related themes, but also by training students through the NRF SARChI Chair. As the articles in this volume show, Ntsebeza’s work has not only been academic; he has used his research on land and rural governance to inform and support the daily struggles of communities in different parts of South Africa and the continent. This special issue is published to honour and engage with his work as an African scholar-activist.

The articles in this issue

The articles come from a two-day seminar held in June 2021 to mark Ntsebeza’s retirement from the University of Cape Town, where he had been Director of the Centre for African Studies and holder of the AC Jordan Chair in African Studies. People who have known and worked with Lungisile as a colleague, collaborator, teacher and supervisor were invited to present their articles at the seminar. Participants were asked to reflect on their interactions with Lungisile as a person and on his scholarship. Because of the Covid-19 restrictions, the first seminar was held virtually and a total of 21 papers were presented. The second seminar to review the draft papers was held in June 2022, and most of the participants attended in person. This issue includes a selection of these papers that have been further revised after peer review.

The common theme which all participants highlighted in their reflections on Lungisile’s work is that of an engaged scholar, described as a scholar who is committed to making available their ideas and knowledge to challenge the dominant discourses and create agency in marginalised communities. All the articles in this volume highlight Ntsebeza’s commitment to social justice, manifested not only in his own struggles against the apartheid regime but also against unfair and marginalising practices in post-apartheid South Africa. This is evident not only in the research topics on which he has focused over the past four decades but also in the way he has used his research findings to connect with different communities in their struggles against injustice and marginalisation. Ntsebeza’s
decision to focus his scholarly attention on the above broad themes is not accidental; it is rooted in his involvement in the struggle against the injustices and the brutality of the apartheid regime that required taking a principled position against oppression and suppression. Consequently, this special issue of ROAPE focuses on the role of engaged scholarship in the struggles for justice and change, especially in poor and marginalised rural communities, related to land and governance.

Issa Shivji’s preface sets the scene in which the broader struggles for change in Africa should be located by highlighting the different aspects of the agrarian question, which include the question of land, democratisation in the rural areas and the position of African rural and urban dwellers in the global capitalist economy. Struggles around land are ongoing in all parts of the continent, not only in rural but also in urban areas, whether one looks at this in terms of proletarianisation, de-peasantisation or re-peasantisation. The processes associated with these dynamics at the community, country, regional or global levels require the deployment of knowledge and research tools to inform and equip communities with a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics beyond the dominant populist alternatives.

Andrew Nash, in the first paper from the seminar, takes us back to the early days of Lungisile’s formative years which proved crucial to his later work as an engaged scholar. Here we find an activist deeply involved in the struggle against apartheid, evident in the co-founding of the People’s United Front for Liberation of South Africa (PUFLSA), whose manifesto is reproduced in this issue, and in his detention, imprisonment and banishment. It is not just the commitment to the struggle against apartheid which emerges here; we also see a young man determined to study, and to acquire relevant knowledge in the service of the struggle. Serving a prison sentence was no doubt a critical moment that engendered the quest for knowledge and the commitment to use the knowledge acquired to promote social change and to support the fight against injustice. It is the combination of these two features which form the foundation of Ntsebeza’s engaged scholarship.

Fred Hendricks, his PhD supervisor at Rhodes University and later a colleague, also brings out the deep-seated quest in Ntsebeza’s work to use scholarly inquiry in the service of social struggles. This is brought out more prominently by Hendricks through Ntsebeza’s work with and leadership of several non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In his work with NGOs, civil society groups and social movements, Ntsebeza had studied the issues around which people struggled and he used this knowledge to expose the injustice and challenges of some of the mainstream views which obscure social injustice. For example, Hendricks mentions researchers’ use of black Africans to collect data on their fellow Africans whom the white scholars are studying. Ntsebeza has been challenging this as a form of exploitation of both the African ‘intermediates’ (data collectors) and those who are studied.

Fani Ncapyi and Mercia Andrews, who have worked with Ntsebeza for almost 40 years, provide an in-depth analysis of his engaged scholarship, detailing how his work does not end at collecting data from communities but extends to putting his research knowledge and expertise at the service of those communities’ struggles for change. They particularly highlight Ntsebeza’s commitment to working with marginalised communities to promote their awareness around social justice issues as well as contributing to building their agency. His work in rural communities is said to have made a significant impact not only by challenging unfair policies and practices, but also by striving to promote
the education and upliftment of local people. The Cala University Students Association (CALUSA), which Ntsebeza co-founded, is an example of his commitment to promoting agency among rural communities.

June Bam-Hutchison’s article brings out a different dimension to Ntsebeza’s engaged scholarship. Through collaboration with the Khoi and San structures, which Bam-Hutchison was spearheading, Ntsebeza was pivotal in bringing the issues of marginalised groups to light by organising research, conferences and public debates where critical issues were discussed. The precolonial catalytic projects, and the A/Xarra forum which he initiated, also in collaboration with Bam-Hutchison, exemplify his commitment to the struggles of marginalised people.

Horman Chitonge’s contribution, using concrete examples of ordinary people’s encounters with capital in rural and urban areas even when not directly engaged in capitalist relations of production, argues that engaged scholarship such as the work of Ntsebeza is central to exposing the violent nature of this capitalist encounter. His work on land and rural governance has illustrated the importance of scholarship which puts expert knowledge at the service of marginalised communities. Although some analysts have argued that capitalism in Africa has not exploited the people enough because of the weak development of productive forces, the article shows that it is precisely because of those weak productive forces that the encounter with capital in Africa is made more brutal, a form of primitive accumulation, including direct dispossession of land, all sanctioned by the state.

The issues around democratisation in the countryside and the land question, which occupied a central place in Ntsebeza’s work, led him to examine the rural–urban connection. Rural–urban studies are particularly linked to the question of land, approached from the context of stubborn and growing unemployment which has now become a pressing issue in South Africa, especially among the youth. In engaging with this issue, Ntsebeza tried to investigate whether the redistribution of land can make a difference in the lives of the unemployed youth in urban areas. Ari Sitas, who has been Ntsebeza’s colleague in Durban and Cape Town since the 1990s, notes that unemployed youth is the ‘second-fastest growing sociological category’. He queries the part this category played in the Durban July riots, which for him is part of the rural–urban dynamic, evident in the intricate relationship between labour, land and what he calls ‘structural inequality’. Sitas argues that one of the reasons why explaining the causes of the riots in terms of a structure of inequality is the failure to understand the changes that have been taking place in that very structure and its agents. This has led to a situation where the struggles against the distribution of surplus value at the point of production are now replaced with what Sit​as refers to as the ‘politics of encroachment’, embraced by an aspiring African bourgeoisie that is trying to valorise tradition and cultural expressions. Sitas calls for an engagement with those involved in rioting to discover their reasons and the nature of their struggles in society, which have often been clouded by political rhetoric and competition for power by the elite.

Thembele Kepe, another long-time colleague of Ntsebeza, uses the example of the Mpondo Revolts to highlight the deliberate strategy of the political elite to distort historical events to serve their interests. He shows how they brush aside the real issues which force people in communities to engage in struggles and focus on side issues instead. In the case of the 1960 revolts and subsequent massacre of people in Mpondoland, the
politicians replaced the real issue, land, which sparked the revolts with issues of access to electricity, water, housing and income generation. He argues that it is here where engaged scholarship is critical to unmasking the tactics of the political elite. Ntsebeza’s work in this regard has been exceptional when it comes to exposing the deceptive tactics employed by politicians. According to Kepe, Ntsebeza’s work is that of an ‘insurgent scholar’ committed to confronting misinformation and political rhetoric.

The practice of asking tough and uncomfortable questions on anything, including to those in power, as a way of getting to the real issues is a dominant feature in Ntsebeza’s work, and this is highlighted in Luvuyo Wotshela’s contribution. Wotshela, who has also worked with Lungisile for many years, reflects on the question of who governs the countryside, focusing on the period between the 1980s and early 1990s when apartheid-sponsored local governance was characterised by ‘muddled power’. Wotshela shows how local communities in the former Bantustans mobilised to resist relocation designed by the apartheid regime to deal with the issue of the ‘black spots’. Communities mobilised and resisted these plans as part of the move to undermine the powers of traditional authorities which were seen as instruments of apartheid. Ntsebeza’s research work in these communities through the Border Rural Committee (BRC) unearthed not only the devastating levels of poverty but also oppressive structures employed by the apartheid regime using traditional authorities.

Ntsebeza’s work on democratisation and governance of the countryside raises critical issues around the role of traditional authorities in rural areas, a theme that is discussed in the article by Frank Matose (Ntsebeza’s colleague for over 25 years), Simphiwe Tsawu (his PhD supervisee) and Moment Malandu. Here, they look at the delicate issues around the governance of protected areas, highlighting the contested role of traditional leaders in the governance structure. The two case studies discussed in the article, though from different governance contexts in Zimbabwe and South Africa, highlight the common struggles communities face in dealing with structures established to manage protected areas as they seek to access natural resources. In the context of protected areas on customary land, the structures put in place to manage these areas raise the question of the legitimacy of these structures, which often lead to confrontation between local communities and the people in charge of protected areas.

At the heart of these struggles is the failure to synchronise participatory with representative governance models which have formed a central part of Ntsebeza’s scholarly work. Questions around such models are discussed in more detail in George Hull’s article, which looks at the practical shortcomings of representation and participation as core principles of democracy, especially in rural areas. One of the main shortcomings Hull has identified, which Ntsebeza highlighted in his work, is that in South Africa, as in countries with similar electoral systems, the leaders elected by proportional representation are more accountable to the party that nominated them than the people who elected them. In such circumstances, informal representative groups from civil society, including engaged scholars, can play an important role in highlighting the lack of accountability and transparency when responding to issues faced by communities.

The articles in this issue honour and engage with Ntsebeza’s scholarly work and his activity with communities. They present the different aspects of his life as academic, activist, teacher and intellectual committed to the struggles of local communities. Ntsebeza read all the contributions, and the issue concludes with his rejoinder.
Note

1. In July 2021, KwaZulu-Natal, particularly Durban, and parts of Gauteng experienced violent riots and widespread looting at major shopping malls. These events were initially attributed to public anger induced by the incarceration of former president Jacob Zuma following the contempt of court ruling by the Constitutional Court on June 29 for his failure to appear before the Zondo Commission.

Reference


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