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Social Dynamics

A journal of African studies

ISSN: 0253-3952 (Print) 1940-7874 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rsdy20

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To cite this article: Claire-Anne Lester, Laura Phillips, Niall Reddy & William Shoki (2024) Beyond apocalypse: rethinking capitalism, democracy and crisis in South Africa, Social Dynamics, 50:2, 253-260, DOI: 10.1080/02533952.2024.2460142

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2024.2460142

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Published online: 13 Feb 2025.

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SOCIAL DYNAMICS
2024, VOL. 50, NO. 2, 253–260
https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2024.2460142

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Beyond apocalypse: rethinking capitalism, democracy and crisis in South Africa

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KEYWORDS Democracy; capitalism; crisis; South Africa

Between October 9 and 11, 2024, the conference, "Beyond Apocalypse: Rethinking Capitalism, Democracy, and Crisis in South Africa," was held at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg, co-hosted by the Wits Institute for Economic Research (WISER), the Innovation Foundation for Democracy (FIDEMO) and Alameda Institute. Organised by Laura Phillips, senior researcher at WISER; Claire-Anne Lester, lecturer in Sociology at Stellenbosch University (SU); Niall Reddy, researcher at Wits' Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS) and William Shoki, editor at *Africa is a Country* (AIAC) blog, the conference was designed as an opportunity to reflect critically on 30 years of democracy in South Africa. The event brought together a select group of "born-free" academics, artists, activists, and practitioners and featured a range of contributions, with each panel carefully curated by the organisers to encourage a diversity of perspectives.

While it marked a point from which to ruminate on the past 30 years of democracy, the context for this conference was a year in which nearly half the world's population held elections, from Taiwan, India, Mexico, and the United Kingdom, to November's presidential election in the US. In May, the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa lost its majority for the first time. In November, in a fellow Southern African country, the Botswana Democratic Party lost to its opposition after 58 years of rule, while in Mozambique, Frelimo's victory in an election widely seen as fraudulent triggered mass protests and demands for change, reflecting the general decline of liberation movements in Africa. Right-wing populist parties, many of which campaigned on anti-immigrant platforms, gained immense ground in the European parliamentary elections. Right-wing parties increased support in Austria, Romania, and Portugal, and the Alternative for Germany became the first far-right party to win a state election since World War II (Wike, Fagan, and Clancy 2024). Through a series of panels, discussions, and a keynote

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address, participants engaged with the complexities, contradictions, and potential futures of South Africa's democratic project amidst this international context.

The opening keynote address, titled "Reflections on Thirty Years of Democracy," delivered by Achille Mbembe, presented a nuanced critique of dominant tropes in South African decolonial theory, including Afro-pessimism and the critique of Rainbow Nation idealism. He challenged the apocalyptic narratives often found in public discourse about South Africa's current state, urging attendees to move beyond simplistic depictions of decay and despair. Instead, he called for a critical yet hopeful engagement with the structural and historical factors shaping the country's democracy, framing the discussion in terms of both its challenges and possibilities.

The first panel was titled "Continuity and Change: from Apartheid to the post-apartheid." The discussant, Claire-Anne Lester, framed the session, noting details on the transition period – how the transition did not emerge as a sweeping revolution, but as a negotiated settlement borne out of a protracted and widespread struggle against the apartheid regime. The panel included Samukelo Ndlovu, a researcher based at Wits; Andile Cele, a research and advocacy consultant; and Joshua Budlender, a postdoctoral fellow at the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Using the recent election as a vantage point, Ndlovu provided a meditation on time itself, probing "Western" conceptions of time. Cele used the rise and success of the Mkhonto we Sizwe (MK) party in KwaZulu Natal as a warning of further loss of support to the African National Congress (ANC) if people's basic needs are not catered for, refuting the notion that support for MK can be attributed merely to voting along ethnic lines. Cele averred that MK was able to harness the energy of the "masses" – those who have been systematically excluded from economic privileges and whose status has remained unchanged since 1994. She said that she often heard people say,

> Ngangikhwazi ukuthenga isinkwa kusakhona uZuma. (I was able to buy bread when Zuma was around)
>
> Ngihamba noZuma. (I'm going with Zuma)

Budlender spoke to poverty and inequality trends from 1993 to the present. His data showed that, since 1993, there has been good progress in reducing "multidimensional poverty," with reductions in deprivation in all indicators such as sanitation, fuel, years of education and nutrition. However, drawing on Alexia Lochmann (2022), he showed that deprivation, while reduced, was still widespread and largely followed apartheid patterns, with deprivation more concentrated in the former "bantustans." In terms of race and inequality, Budlender stated that the wealthy are racially diverse, with half the richest 10% of people being "white" and the other half being "black" and that most inequality is now found within racial groups rather than between them.

This panel ran seamlessly into the next, titled "Race and the National Question,' which brought into focus the unresolved racial tensions that continue to shape South Africa's political and social landscape. The panel included PAC member Lindokuhle Patiwe and Khwesi Mabasa, economic and social policy lead at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), with Alex Hotz – from WoMin African Alliance and former Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) activist – as the discussant. Panellists examined topics such as racial capitalism, "white monopoly

capital" and the impact of land on inequality. Their contributions highlighted how race remains a potent force in both formal politics and public discourse, complicating efforts to build a truly inclusive society. Hotz, picking up from the previous panel's discussion on Zulu nationalism, spoke to the rise of "coloured nationalism," noting what she saw as a double standard in the tendency to problematise the former over the latter. She referred to the increase in support for the Patriotic Alliance (PA) party, run by Gayton McKenzie, which earned 2.1% of the vote, making it the sixth largest political party. The party essentially ran on an anti-immigrant ticket, regurgitating the right-wing scripts fuelling the re-election of Donald Trump in the US. Between 2019 and 2024, the PA increased its votes from 6,660 to 330,425 (Payne 2024).

Critical points of disagreement emerged during the first two panels, raised through interventions from the audience. Sarah Nuttall, for example, discussed the relationship between non-racialism and anti-racism, calling for the adoption of the stance of anti-racism. Andile Zulu, researcher at the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC), contested this in defence of non-racialism: "Have we given up on the effort to transcend these [racial] categories?" he lamented. Similarly, when Patiwe made the point that there needed to be an embracing of "black values" because "white values" had only led to oppression, Lester questioned how, if we accept that race is socially constructed, anyone could meaningfully talk about "black" or "white" values. Referencing Budlender's statement from the previous panel that 50% of the top wealthiest in the country are "black", she probed whether one would then need to say that these "black" people were merely driven by "white" values?

Questions of economic development were at the heart of the next panel discussion, which interrogated whether South Africa has moved towards development or de-development in its post-apartheid economy. Ihsaan Bassier, lecturer in economics at the University of Surrey, took a firm-centred approach to analysing South African capitalism, stating that an analysis of how firms are structured can explain much of the inequality in the country in terms of how workers are paid. He noted that "firms explain more than a third of wage inequality in South Africa" (see Bassier 2023). Bassier gave the example of profit-driven retrenchments, where retrenchments are made not for the survival of the business, but to maximise profits, which has become a feature of South Africa's labour jurisprudence. Dominic Brown, a researcher at AIDC, and Benjamin Fogel (Alameda), provided analysis on the patterns of accumulation underpinning South African capitalism. Brown spoke to the steady decline in industry across the manufacturing, mining, and agricultural sectors. Fogel characterised de-development as a process where countries experience regression rather than progress, with increasing poverty, declining education levels, worsening security, and a deterioration in basic services and quality of life. He explained that this phenomenon goes beyond a mere decline in material conditions. Drawing on Indian philosopher-economist Amartya Sen's concept of development as the "expansion of real freedoms," de-development entailed a significant erosion of those freedoms, he argued. It was also noted that the politics of de-development tend towards strategies that ensure access to a diminishing pool of resources through exclusion based on racial, ethnic, or other forms of group identification, reflecting and driving the rise of a new right wing (see Fogel 2024). Juhi Kassan, a researcher at the Institute for Economic Justice, focused on care regimes and the question of social reproductive labour in South African economic life. In synthesising

the presentations, the discussant, Kamal Ramburuth-Hurt, raised critical questions about the distinctiveness of South Africa's economic challenges.

The vibrancy of South Africa's public sphere was the subject of another panel, where Efemia Chela, a literary critic, editor, and author; Tsogo Kupa, a writer and filmmaker; and Wamuwi Mbao, senior lecturer in English literature at Stellenbosch University, examined the cultural, social, and intellectual developments over the past three decades. The panel was chaired by Khanya Mtshali, writer at *Africa is A Country* blog. Panellists reflected on how South Africa's public sphere has contributed to the construction of national identity while also engaging with global cultural trends. Chela spoke about the state of literature and commercial publishing, while Kupa reviewed shifts in the film scene. Mbao stated that while it may be tempting to speculate on the banalisation of culture, we should not catastrophise or merely bemoan the impoverished state of South African literature. Analysing the function of literature at the present time, for Mbao, required an analysis of what its function had been in the past, and he cautioned against the tendency to locate the centre of reading culture in the domain of middle-class reading habits. This discussion underscored the importance of cultural production as a site of both contestation and cohesion. All panellists reflected on the decline of culture as a public good – from the commodification of television through the rise of mass-produced streaming content and the collapse of national broadcasting, to the TikTokification of reading culture and newer forms of cultural production eschewing responsibility to the public, failing to take them seriously, and prioritising maximising market penetration.

Justice and legal systems in South Africa were critically examined in the session titled "Courting Justice: Winning and Losing in South Africa's legal system." Discussant Claire-Anne Lester framed the conversation, highlighting the duality of the law both as an instrument of oppression and a tool for advancing social justice (see Lester 2020, 2024). The panel included Bhavna Ramji, a lawyer and activist; Dan Mafora, lawyer and researcher at Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution (CASAC); Sohela Surajpal, law clerk to Inspecting Judge Edwin Cameron at South Africa's prisons inspectorate; and Luthando Vilakazi, a legal researcher at Open Secrets. Ramji provided a critical take on the practice of strategic litigation in South Africa – the use of the courts to advance popular struggles. She argued that there is no empirical evidence confirming that strategic litigation actually builds political movements and that it is not the legal sphere that will advance progressive politics but progressive movement-building that leads to social justice. Mafora provided an illuminating overview of the architecture of South Africa's legal system and related shortcomings, such as corruption among magistrates, issues of cost and access, the tendency for legal actors to want to settle disputes rather than vindicate rights, and the limited capacity – and funding – of the judiciary (see Mafora 2023). This led to productive disagreements: when Mafora called for more funding for the judiciary, Ramji disagreed, stating that the last thing South Africa needed was more lawyers. Surajpal provided a chilling overview of South Africa's criminal justice system and prisons, appraising their compliance with the Constitution and human rights (see Surajpal 2020). She provided a historical overview of how, following 1994, the ANC government had attempted progressive reforms of the penal system. "Of course," she stated, "many of the ANC's leaders had been in prison themselves and experienced firsthand the abuses prisoners

suffered." However, these reforms were gradually abandoned, and now South Africa's general social malaise is magnified in its prisons. South Africa has a total of 157,056 people incarcerated (World Population Review 2025), while prison capacity is only for 100,000, Surajpal noted. Prisons are overcrowded and, to manage this, prisoners are often only permitted out of their cells for one hour a day. Vilakazi critiqued mechanisms of accountability regarding State Capture, the Arms Deal Scandal and the Seriti Commission of Inquiry (2011–2016), which controversially cleared all parties of wrongdoing, findings no evidence of corruption related to the Arms Deal (see Holden and Van Vuuren 2011). Vilakazi reflected on the review, sought by civil society organisations in 2019, where a full panel of judges headed by Judge President Dunstan Mlambo declared the Seriti Commission's findings invalid. The panel addressed the judiciary's successes in upholding democratic principles while also critiquing its limitations in addressing systemic inequality and ensuring uniform access to justice.

The role of the state in delivering services and meeting citizens' needs was a central theme in the panel on "Politics from above and below." This panel included Phindile Kunene, programme manager at FES; Carilee Osborne, PhD candidate at Brown University and Luke Sinwell, from University of Johannesburg, chaired by Andile Zulu (AIDC). Kunene discussed the shifting capacity of the state to deliver basic services and sought to recover the idea of "the public" and "public things." She highlighted the collapse of local state services, reflecting on the need to reclaim and invest in these public things. Osborne focused on the social grant system in South Africa, showing how, in 1994, the ANC had sought to move away from a welfarist model, even changing the Department of Social Welfare's title to "the Department of Social Development," with the idea that development would gradually lead to employment and reduce reliance on welfare. However, over the past 30 years the number of people on grants has increased. Sinwell highlighted the rise of service delivery protests as an indicator of growing frustration among citizens. Chaired by Zulu, the panel emphasised the interplay between state action and grassroots mobilisation, illustrating how social and political movements are reshaping expectations of governance.

South Africa's position within a polycrisis world was explored in a panel that examined its regional and global relationships. Panellists included Alf Gunvald Nilsen, who teaches at the University of Pretoria; Fabio Luis, a professor of Latin American studies at Unifesp and Prolam-USP, and Ruth Castel-Branco who is currently a researcher at Wits's Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS). They discussed the flows of people, goods, and ideas that connect South Africa to its neighbours and the broader world. Nilsen drew on the work of Antonio Gramsci, analysing what he called the "southern interregnum," a comparative conjunctural analysis of hegemonic projects in Brazil, India, China, and South Africa. The southern interregnum – a period of flux where no clear hegemonic order has emerged – is marked by instability and contradiction. Emerging powers must balance the imperatives of capital accumulation with the demands of domestic legitimation. This often leads to authoritarian populism, as ruling elites deploy nationalist and exclusionary rhetoric to maintain control. Far from offering a path to justice, this turn deepens inequality and exacerbates governance crises. Nilsen expands on this in a forthcoming book (see Nilsen et al. 2025).

Luis also drew on Gramsci, analysing South Africa's "interregnum" through the lens of Brazil, and comparing the leadership styles of former presidents Jacob Zuma and Jahir

Bolsonaro. Luis argued that both nations are experiencing an interregnum marked by a hegemonic crisis and attributed these legitimation crises to unmet aspirations for social integration and nation-building: Brazil's neo-developmentalism under Lula aims to position the country as a global power, while South Africa's black economic empowerment seeks to address historic economic disparities. However, both efforts have become entangled in corruption, reflecting the constraints of twenty-first-century capitalism. Luis framed the political dynamics in both countries as a contest between crisis containment, represented by leaders like Lula and Ramaphosa, and the acceleration of hegemonic breakdowns, represented by figures like Bolsonaro and Zuma. He also analysed the challenges to ANC dominance posed by Zuma's MKP and Malema's EFF in the context of Brazil's *Bolsonarismo*. Castel-Branco spoke of the interconnectedness of Southern African economies, highlighting networks of exploitation and accumulation. Focusing on the relationship between Mozambique and South Africa, she explored flows of labour and remittances between the two countries. Chaired by William Shoki, editor at AIAC, this session probed critically the "South African exceptionalism" narrative.

The concluding session brought together insights from across the conference, focusing on post-election analysis and the state of South Africa's democracy. Niall Reddy, Gumani Tshimomola, Rekgotsofetse Chikane, and Tasneem Essop engaged in a wide-ranging discussion on the implications of the 2024 elections for South Africa's political landscape. Reddy provided a sharp analysis of the potential avenues for South Africa's political landscape, answering the question whether, in light of MKP's rise in KZN, we could expect a more widespread trend towards populism (see Reddy 2024). This, for Reddy, is unlikely for five main reasons: First, social divisions make a populist majority unlikely; Second, populist movements have weak inroads into the black middle class, where SA's populism lacks the middle-class base that populism enjoys in Brazil; Third, because of the Radical Economic Transformation (RET) leaders' (Zuma and Malema) corruption legacy and low ratings; and fourth, populist parties having no clear political programme. Fifth and finally, Reddy argued that Capital would reject an RET agenda (see Southall 2022), and that the RET faction could hardly afford to reject Capital. Tshimomola, a parliamentary researcher for the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), analysed the role of Treasury in South Africa's political economy and, in discussion, disputed that RET had any legitimate resonance with the EFF, which Reddy swiftly dismissed. Chikane, a former student activist, referenced a previous discussion on land and landlessness, asking, metaphorically, "is the left landless?," speaking to the paralysis of the left and its inability to mobilise. Essop concluded the panel reflecting on right-wing populism, the Patriotic Alliance and the public sector wage bill.

As noted in closing comments by Mbembe, the conference brought together the "next generation" of academics, activists, artists, and professionals, most of whom would have had no memory of apartheid. In Mbembe's words, the gathering exemplified "the recomposition of South Africa's intellectual public sphere." Many participants had been involved in student politics during the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall period and remained engaged in struggles to advance social justice in various ways. Panellists and participants from the floor engaged in pointed debates in ways that pushed presenters to clarify or defend their points, engaging in a spirit of good faith in a way that was refreshing, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic inhibited fora of debate such as these for so long. All contributors, both panellists and

those who joined to engage in discussion, expressed a commitment to debate and to seeking pathways, both intellectually and practically, beyond apocalyptic narratives and towards traversing the landscape of the future of capitalism and democracy in South Africa and globally.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank the following for the funding support for the conference: The Innovation Foundation for Democracy (Fidemo), the African Trust Infrastructure Chair at Wiser and the Alameda Institute.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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