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A study of collective subjectivity and political representation within the Economic Freedom Fighters in the North West province

Essop, Tasneem

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Abstract

The emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) as a new and 'radical' political party significantly altered the shape of the political landscape in South Africa. As one of the starting points in this paper, I show how the EFF comes out of a history in the ANCYL before turning attention to public discussions on the organisation. These contemporary debates about the EFF have taken numerous forms, oftentimes in deeply polarised ways - from those who argue that the EFF is pejoratively populist or fascist to arguments that the party is a crucial left alternative. Within the context of these debates, this research paper grapples with the question of the political character of the EFF, ultimately arguing that the EFF is populist. I use, however, a framework for populism set out by Ernesto Laclau thus marking a break with most discussions on the EFF that are often theoretically limited. This research works with both the empirical and the theoretical – in doing this I utilise Michael Burawoy's 'extended case method' to ground the discussion and to provide a method that encompasses the field research – I used semi-structured interviews and participant observation – with a theoretical inquiry. This research is based on the Marikana Branch of the EFF, in the North West Province.

In using data from respondents, a number of conclusions about the EFF in Marikana are drawn out around the membership base of the EFF, organisational structures, the relations with other organisations as well as the class, gender and age substance of the party. These conclusions partly stand on their own in building an understanding of the EFF. They are also used in a central discussion around populism in the EFF and the building of a collective political subjectivity that is premised on the popular. In this way, this research works on two interlinked levels that feed into answering questions around the EFF as a new political formation. In line with Burawoy's method that is used throughout this research, I also outline some of the key limitations of using Laclau's theory of populism in understanding the EFF and how we move from these limitations through the work presented around the Marikana Branch.