

Resourceful Cities

Berlin (Germany), 29-31 August 2013

The Agonist State?

The Case of Johannesburg: City of Strife

Li Pernegger

Paper presented at the International RC21 Conference 2013

Session 27.1: Contentious Mobilisation, Conflict and Agonistic Pluralism in Urban
Development:
Transformative Potentials and Trajectories

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Sociology

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Abstract · The world-wide upsurge of anti-state protests has created misgivings that democracy is not living up to its promises of inclusivity and equality for ordinary citizens. The newly-democratic South Africa too, is plagued by perpetual, often antagonistic, street-based and other forms of strife protesting aspects of state service delivery. Can Mouffe's (2000) model of 'agonism' – theorising conflict as a necessary facet of democracy that can force positive change – cast light on how states might engage with their citizens 'agonistically' to govern more productively and creatively to achieve more democratic outcomes? The dynamics of urban strife, in the case of the local-level state post-1994 in Johannesburg, are illuminated here through the analysis of thirty-nine qualitative interviews with senior state officials, politicians and affiliates, and an appraisal of relevant primary and secondary data. Emerging findings of doctoral research currently underway have identified multiple factors impacting positively and negatively on the ability of the City of Johannesburg to operate 'agonistically'. The paper argues that unless states can adopt a deliberately consistent 'agonist' stance towards conflict management, Mouffeian positive outcomes for ordinary citizens are likely to remain uneven and minimal at best.

Key words · Agonism · Strife · Democracy · the State · City of Johannesburg · Conflict · Service delivery

INTRODUCTION

"... you need conflict to move on. You need conflict to cause change, and cause change to move forward..." says Sean Dinat, a state official in Johannesburg (Interview 026, 16 November 2012). But just exactly how do democratic states around the world manage processes of state-citizen conflict to bring about positive change?

In South Africa, former pro-liberation struggles in defiance of the former apartheid regime brought about the country's first democratic elections in 1994 (Marx, 1992; Guelke, 2000; Glaser, 2001; Guelke, 2009; Lodge, 2012). That starting point led, further, to the 'democratisation' of its local sphere of government (Cameron, 1996). Despite local government's strong developmental agenda (Oldfield, 2002; Parnell et al., 2002, reprinted 2007; De Visser, 2005; Tapscott, 2008; Stanton, 2009), its rationally designed, well-intentioned, inclusionary state-citizen participation processes, especially with poor

communities (Picard, 2005; Mc Lennan, 2007; Wenzel, 2007; von Holdt, 2010; Rosow, 2011; Sinwell, 2011), have met with the seemingly irrational anger of 'service delivery protests'.

The post-apartheid state, especially at the local government level, has borne the brunt of approximately 578 such 'protests-with-pickets' in the streets of South Africa between 2004 and 2012 (Municipal IQ, 2012). They peaked at 173 protests in 2012 alone: a third of all protests documented since 2004 (ibid.). Although 'protests-with-pickets' are not the only form of protest against state actions¹, they have become so frequent and so violent, with significant vandalism and damage to property and loss of life (Karamoko, 2011) to have captured the attention of academia (Beall et al., 2000; Greenstein, 2003; Oldfield and Stokke, 2004; Barrett, 2005; Beall et al., 2005; Ballard et al., 2006; Booyesen, 2007; Handmaker and Berkhout, 2010; Ngwane, 2010; Ngwane and Vilakazi, 2010; Glenn and Mattes, 2011; Ngwane, 2011; von Holdt et al., 2011; von Holdt and Alexander, 2012) and the media².

The broader research for my doctoral study was sparked by how 'service delivery protests' and other conflictual contexts have been viewed by, and responded to, by the post-1994 state, over time. Moreover, I question in this paper how these processes of strife in the arena of state service delivery can be recast, so as to reframe state-society relations in more creative and constructive ways, resulting in potentially more democratic outcomes for ordinary citizens.

I try to provide early answers to the puzzle in this paper, which will potentially inform my overall thesis, of course in far more detail than is possible in this paper. I reflect on the state's stance on strife through the prism of agonism by depicting the case of the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality³ (known as 'the City'), from standpoints within the state. I argue that unless states can adopt a deliberately consistent 'agonist' stance towards

¹ 'Protest-with-pockets' is also another dominant, much less noticed, form of protest by both the middle-class and lo-income groups. I thank Anna Cox for this term, journalist at *The Star* newspaper and a consumer watchdog. In discussing how the middle-class lodges objections with the state, she said they "protest with their pockets" (Interview 002).

² A quick scrutiny of the first 500 photographs of any news item recorded in the online archives gallery of the *Mail and Guardian*, a South African weekly newspaper, showed that 13 per cent of all photographs depicted some form of street protest. Of these, two-thirds (62 per cent) were ascribed to 'service delivery protests' (available at <http://photos.mg.co.za/newsinphotos.php?start=90>), accessed on 31 March 2012).

³ And all its institutions that collectively make up the City.

conflict management, Mouffeian positive outcomes for ordinary citizens are likely to remain uneven and minimal at best. Five early findings reveal that multiple factors at different times of the City's recent history have impacted positively as well as negatively on the ability of the City of Johannesburg to interact 'agonistically' with its citizens.

Agonism is a political theory conceived by Belgian political philosopher, Professor Chantal Mouffe (2000) detailed in her work "*The Democratic Paradox*" (2000) Agonism is based on the notion that conflict is a vital and necessary facet of democracy and may be a positive, rather than destructive, force for change. As authors in a number of disciplines have observed, most democratic states are founded on principles of consensus, deliberation, participation and rationality - notions that have come under increasing criticism for their ineffectiveness at producing democratic outcomes in practice (Hood, 1991; Zakaria, 1997; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Adams and Hess, 2001; Hay et al., 2006; Diamond, 2008). Agonism seems to offer an alternative lens for state practitioners through which to consider the potentially positive role of conflict in the democratic state interaction with its citizens. The theory of agonism outlines the distinction between 'agonists' – a 'friendly enemy' who shares a common goal with his opponent but may disagree on the route used to achieve those goals – and 'antagonists' – an archenemy that must be destroyed. Other Mouffeian concepts referred to in this paper will be explained as they arise.

It is essential to highlight that the term "service delivery protests" currently has no common definition in South Africa. Building on the commentary offered by Municipal IQ (2009; 2010), the term can mean the institution of government and all its resources and processes involved in the provision of any service as well as the service itself to the ordinary citizen, such as the supply of water and electricity, refuse removal, street cleaning, public transport, infrastructure investment, health services, housing, parks, street trading and market stalls, and social amenities. But, as Turski (2011) and Skogly (2002) point out, the term expands to include intangible development ideals parcelled up with expectations of democratic government, such as "*social justice*"⁴ (Turski) and "*the right not be poor*" (Skogly). This promise of transformation, of meeting basic needs, of the ability to attain a decent quality of

⁴ As revealed by empirical research undertaken by Turski (2011) in 21 countries which demonstrated that "income inequality is perceived as social injustice and ... social justice was argued to be a tangible output that people demand from democracy" (p. 20).

life, and of reversing the damage of the past, are contained in the Freedom Charter, the Constitution, the Reconstruction and Development Programme, and other policies and frameworks of post-apartheid South Africa. They are also incorporated in ANC political manifestos (2000; 2001; 2006; 2011) and more critically, in the minds of citizens, according to Harber (2009).

As some South Africans have come to realise that the promise has not been delivered, frustrations have been vented in the form of what has been typically called 'service delivery protests'. These are street-based, highly visible, sometimes violent protests involving marches, demonstrations, barricading and digging up of roads, property vandalism and toy-totying, chanting, shouting, with or without weapons, banners and pickets. . However, not all protests about service delivery play out on the streets, and street protests represent but a fraction of all state-society conflicts. A review of protests in Johannesburg post-1994 shows that service delivery protests originate from both the poor and the middle-class, and tend to follow specific typologies according to characteristic dimensions such as the income group that protestors originate from; the intensity of the protest; the location of the protest; and the channel of protest employed. Broadly, 'protests-with-pickets' and 'protests-with-pockets' are the two main types focused on in this paper, as you will see later on.

Research approach

In getting to grips with how strife has been seen by the state over time, my investigation into the institutions making up the post-1994 City and the multiplicity of service delivery protests is based on a range of data inputs.

These include thirty-nine qualitative semi-structured interviews with senior City officials, politicians and affiliates conducted largely at the end of 2012; a review of select secondary literature, and a desktop-based, thematic analysis of 5 300 pages of news articles, press releases, state web sites and reports collated in mid-2012 [mainly. The data was evaluated as part of the methodology of case study preparation, and it provides a rich backdrop.] The desktop data has been assembled in eight categories, according to a timeline of six five-year

time periods⁵, and covers country and city milestones, pertinent policy and legislation, political issues, institutional make-up, city challenges, city statistics, citizen expectations, episodes of strife in Johannesburg, and state responses to strife.

In the paper, I refer to the collated material to chart a timeline of the City's stance towards dissenters over since the first local government elections in Johannesburg in 1996. I concentrate on key highlights of four phases in the City's progression, that I have named the Transformation, Consolidation, Maturation, and Evolution phases. The timeline is augmented by the initial thematic, qualitative, analysis⁶ of the interviews— and reveals a rich and complex story of strife within Johannesburg and responses by the state to conflict over time.

SUMMARY TIMELINE OF CITY STRIFE

Transformation: 1996 - 2000

Directly after the first local government elections in 1996, and concurrent with similar makeovers at national and provincial levels of government, the former thirteen municipal administrations with jurisdiction over Johannesburg continued the transformation processes that had already been unfolding since the Soweto Accord of the early 1990s towards the creation of the local government institution that is known as the City today (Emdon, 1993; Turok, 1993; Mabin, 1994). During this period, the metropolis was governed by two iterations of a central administration with four related municipal substructures, with each having autonomy over its own affairs⁷. The City had its hands full dealing with both these restructuring challenges *and* looming insolvency due to the financial crisis facing the city in 1998. The need for hard cash likely prompted the City's hard-line attitude towards the Sandton Rates Boycotters who objected to the incipient cross-subsidisation of rates bases

5 The periods are Pre-1991, 1991-1995, 1996-2000, 2001-2005, 2006-2010 and 2011-to date. The periods were categorised in this way to synchronise with the first local government elections that were held in 1996, and each subsequent period corresponds approximately to the term of the City's mayor. This paper emphasises the periods from 1996 onwards only.

6 The analysis was underway at the time of the writing this paper.

7 The first iteration was the formation of the central Transitional Metropolitan Council and the four Metropolitan Sub-Structures, followed by the Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metropolitan Council and the four metropolitan Local Councils, i.e. Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western with each entity autonomous from each other as well as other spheres of government.

from the wealthy and middle-class areas to low-income areas inherent in the state's message of 'one city, one tax base' (Pillay et al., 2006).

In this period, a handful of 'popcorn'⁸ protests burst into the streets in a seemingly spontaneous, unstructured and impulsive way, characterised the nature of toyi-toying⁹ street-based service delivery protests. Some of the very first popcorn protests – in the Inner City – indicated resistance to the City's development of Inner City¹⁰ informal street trading sector in 1997 and 1998. Street traders expressed dissatisfaction with the City's implementation process of Johannesburg's first democratic markets and enforcement of its first street trading by-laws as part of the state's clean-up of the Inner City. These and other infrequent early street protests in township areas against, for example, the raising of tariffs for services, were already the harbingers of the xenophobic attacks by black South Africans on black foreign Africans in later periods, especially after 2008.

However, the operations of the City seemed to have been hardly impacted at all by the demands of street protestors. The City declared the Inner City as a priority intervention zone in 1999, overriding the concerns of impoverished street traders and residents who rightly believed¹¹ that the special spatial interventions targeting gritty streets and 'bad buildings'¹² would drive them out of the Inner City and into further hardship. Data on protest action was not formally gathered in this period (Municipal IQ, 2012).

Consolidation: 2001 - 2005

The consolidation of the institutions of the municipality into a single 'unicity' structure kicked off in this period. Improved service delivery was the City's aim, in accordance with the corrective measures of *iGoli 2002*, the strategy created to deal with the causes and effects of

8 For this paper, I use the term 'popcorn protest' to designate the impromptu, spontaneous, explosive and unpredictable nature of the street-based service delivery protest. It is not used – as coined by Ngwane (2010) to signify ineffectual township protests in the 1990s. – in a pejorative manner.

9 A toyi-toyi is a form of protest dance in South Africa, involving singing and stamping of the feet.

10 The area known as the Inner City in Johannesburg comprises its central business district and adjacent medium-to-high density residential suburbs. The boundary of the Inner City has been formally designated and agreed at a political level.

11 In 2000, the City contracted the Red Ants, an evictions company, to assist in its clean-up efforts, and many poor people were evicted from slummed buildings.

12 'Bad buildings', according to the Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metropolitan Council's Inner City Committee, 12 March 1998, are those buildings that have been abandoned by their owners, need investment in upgrading to overcome significant squalor, owe considerable amounts in respect of council service charges, are inadequately managed and taken care of, inter alia.

the financial crisis experienced by the City. The appointment of the City's first executive mayor significantly placed accountability for service delivery firmly within the political domain. However, in reality, the difficulty of achieving integration between the different spheres of government for effective service delivery impacted adversely on performance. Possibly in response to popcorn protests, measures were implemented to facilitate the submission of petitions and to improve community participation to "*deepen democracy*"¹³ according to the Mayor (City of Johannesburg, 2004b). Noteworthy strides in service delivery were also made during this period, such as the tarring of 314 kilometres of roads in Soweto between 2003 and 2005.

Despite this and many other examples of successful service delivery, street protests accelerated in volume and vehemence¹⁴, but were still at a modest count of 44 protests across South Africa in this period (Municipal IQ, 2012). Toyi-toying protestors resisted the City's push for cost-recovery of services delivered by the City and the treatment of citizens as mere customers and consumers (although the latter is an issue that other states have also had to contend with (Box, 1998; 1999)). More street trading popcorn protests took place in the streets, with market traders now also participating. Other street-based anti-eviction popcorn protests stemming from Inner City improvement efforts, such as the Inner City Anti-Eviction Campaign in December 2002 and the Workers Library and Khanya College Anti-Eviction Protest in July 2004, also signalled the growing frustration of the poor at the shortage of affordable, low-income housing in the Inner City.

The indefatigable 'war for water'¹⁵ protest was started by the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee in 2000 and is unique in its sustained decade-long opposition to the City. The 'war for water' included a string of related orchestrated protests of different types about the cost and availability of water services, such as the Kensington 87 incident, the Women and Water Campaign, and a bloody underpants demonstration at the mayoral offices. It set the stage for the establishment of similar organisations such as the Orange Farm Crisis

13 Likewise, poor state-society communication was also to be improved through the implementation of the draft National Policy Framework for Public Participation, the Gauteng Petitions Act, and the City's own community participation and petitions measures.

14 According to Municipal IQ, "Urgent messages in the clattering stones of delivery protests", undated press release, available at http://www.municipaliq.co.za/index.php?site_page=article.php&id=24, accessed on 29 April 2012.

15 The term 'war for water' has been used internationally in various accounts (add sources) and is used here to encapsulate all water-related struggles.

Committee¹⁶. Increasingly, community groupings in other poor informal settlement areas also began militating for better quality neighbourhoods or housing, such as the Concerned Kliptown Concerned Residents Campaign, and the residents of Zevenfontein, although the City was generally unwelcoming.

In other instances though, the City seemed to have been more open to protest, as long as structured channels were used. It even asked for objections to its proposed tariff increases in 2002. The City's Social Package introduced in 2004 and the write-off of arrears incurred by indigent households appeared to signal that the voices of disadvantaged citizens were to be heard at last. However, in practice, the City's actions were still inconsistent. Protestors were discredited when, according to the City's press release, the mayor is reported to have referred to members of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee "... as 'odd individuals' who articulate 'strange views and habitually oppose any project the City undertakes'" in his first mid-term address (City of Johannesburg, 2003c).

In the Inner City, the City seems to have largely ignored impoverished protestors' pleas by continuing regeneration efforts through the launch of the Better Buildings Programme, thus further intensifying the evictions of illegal and destitute inhabitants from slummed 'bad buildings'. But the City was simultaneously also very proud of the establishment of its petitions management system and its political counterfoil of the Petitions and Public Participation Committee, to the extent it was showcased as a City strength in its first international bond offering (City of Johannesburg, 2004a). Clearly, the petitions mechanism as a protest channel of choice was at the forefront of the City's agenda as the topic took up fifteen per cent of the mayor's first mid-term address in 2003 (2003b). However, despite the potential of the Petitions Unit and its Committee to drive improvements in metropolitan governance and community participation, it was slow to take off as an alternative channel for street protestors. Over the period, it received about a hundred petitions, increasing to about 150 petitions per year with approximately half of these calling for traffic calming measures in localised areas (2003b, p. 5; 2003a, p. 26).

16 The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee was later joined by the Orange Farm Crisis Committee in the 'war for water'.

Maturation: 2006 - 2010

The effects of the particularly cold winter of 2007 and the first recession experienced by South Africans may have contributed to the persistence and escalation of service delivery street protests in this period. But the most notable blaze of dissent took place against foreigners in May 2008. The xenophobic protests sparked initially in the established north-eastern township of Alexandra and spread like brushfire across the townships and informal settlements of Johannesburg, then the rest of South Africa, resulting in over sixty deaths. The viciousness of these anti-foreigner protests have tended to overshadow the other less forceful but nonetheless passionate service delivery street protests occurring across Johannesburg almost every year since then. There have been significant street protests in Soweto generally—Protea South, Meadowlands, and Kliptown—as well as other townships such as Alexandra and Eldorado Park, and in informal settlements like Themb'elihle, Diepsloot, Lion Park, Orange Farm, Lakeside, and Poortjie, with many service delivery protests continuing to also contain elements of anti-foreigner sentiment. This period saw 279 protests incidents across South Africa (Municipal IQ, 2012) – six times more than the previous five-year period.

Some destabilisation of communities in this period might have been attributed to leadership changes at political and administrative levels. As Christine Walters, a councillor for the African National Congress and member of the mayoral committee holding a variety of portfolios in the City since 1994, put it, *“... you had a change in political guard ... and you had a disturbance in the political environment”* (Interview 003). Up till then, she had a sense that *“... the ANC with the alliance has always managed the space ... including civil society, in many ways, ... some didn't support ANC, but they behaved in their environment. There was a toeing of the line, of communities, because it was cohesively managed politically ... There would be broad consultation of the mass democratic movement, of sectors ... and then people in the alliance ... And they would then¹⁷ make the decision. ... So there was cohesiveness in many ways”* (Interview 003).

¹⁷ *Speaker's emphasis*

In the build-up to the 2011 local government elections, state respondents – all politicians – pointed the blame for street protests in every direction: at themselves, at the ruling party, and at the government and the administration, as if each entity of the state were entirely separate elements of the system of governance of the country. Examples of the breakdown of cohesion, and confusion between the party, state and administrative roles played by political leaders were demonstrated in national government's criticism of the ineffectiveness and irresponsibility of local government (South African Press Association, 2009). However, no consideration of their own role in attaining effective governance through the integration of spheres of government was offered. The President also insisted that the state get tough on government managers (South African Government News Agency, 2010) as if to distance the ruling party from poorly performing officials, yet avoiding the reality that a significant number of senior officials were political appointees.

It is around this time that Councillor Walters observed that the City's focus turned inwards. She recalled that initially, in the Consolidation phase, *"... we saw an energy, a high level of energy, and the type of leadership that was really exemplary ... you saw the energy and people. And we saw people started having hope. You started seeing people getting excited. You know, there was a man, who was seventy years old. He said, in his lifetime, he'd never believed he would ever see a tarred road in front of his home, you know, or a bus shelter and so on."* But the vitality to serve communities seemed to have flagged during the Mayor's second five-term which started in this period. She says, *"... we started seeing people becoming tired ... the impact of all of these changes, and you started seeing the organisation having fatigue, and [it] became deeply bureaucratic ..."*¹⁸ (Interview 003).

When the state did look outwards, its views at different levels of government were contradictory. On one hand, a national minister condemned violent protestors that *"... use illegal means to achieve their objective ..."*¹⁹, but on the other hand, protestors seemed to have been able to attack foreigners without fear of consequences from the state. Indeed, on-going villianisation of foreigners by local politicians through their provocation and support of certain protests in pursuit of leadership positions at ward level did little to

¹⁸ All underlined text indicates emphasis by the speaker.

¹⁹ BBC News, "South Africa vows to stop riots", 23 July 2009, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8164956.stm>, accessed 9 June 2013

mitigate the severe attacks against them, according to a report by the International Organisation for Migration (2009).

The functioning of the City, including that of the Petitions Unit and the Petitions and Public Participation Committee, matured steadily during this period. Petitions increased to about 250 per year by the end of the period. The concept of petitioning as a channel to protest, formerly a middle-class protest mechanism, seems to have gained currency in low-income areas. Between July 2010 and June 2011, 44 per cent of all petitions had come from citizens of Region D, the location of South Africa's biggest township, Soweto²⁰. But a third of all petitions, about 31 per cent, raised complex and costly issues to resolve such as large-scale service delivery issues dealing with housing shortages, evictions and poor living conditions, especially in low-income areas, and other tangential issues that are critically related to service delivery on the ground, such as corruption²¹.

The Petitions Unit realised some successes in the adoption of a *"walking with them"* approach as Peter Kute, the assistant director of the Petitions Unit, put it (Interview 001); working side-by-side with petitioners to resolve the issues that had been raised. But in practice, the potential turnaround time for some of the more knotty problems could be as long as seven years, as in the case with housing demands made by petitioners from Kya Sands, an informal settlement, due to budgetary constraints faced by the City (Interview 001).

The City demonstrated that it *can* change its modus operandi arising from its interactions with protestors. Hard lessons were learnt by City officials from conflictual interactions with taxi operators during the first two-year phase of implementation of the Rea Vaya Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system. Lisa Seftel, the City's Executive Director of Transportation (Interview 024), explained how the City has developed deliberate and more sophisticated codified systems to manage situations of conflict, and its associated risks, for the next phase of the project it was about to embark on. The City has devised a *"... very elaborate methodology to determine who's affected; looking at criteria; agreeing the methodology..."* before applying it

²⁰ Derived from the author's analysis of the Petitions Register for the 2010-11 year provided by the City.

²¹ Derived from the author's analysis of the Petitions Register for the 2010-11 year provided by the City.

with the affected operators. Further, her department has negotiated “... *a dispute resolution procedure. So we've really tried to codify the conflict. It doesn't mean to say that we won't have conflict or violence.*” To manage the possibility of such a scenario however, Seftel has ensured capacity is in place within the City to do so. The Rea Vaya BRT has a Deputy Director of Safety “... *who meets regularly with the law enforcement officers; does a security analysis; so we've also internalised that risk ... we manage our risks proactively ...*” (Interview 024).

But not all state-citizen engagements have resulted in such positive and ‘agonist’ outcomes. Consider the City’s hosting of the outreach session for community inputs into the Regional Spatial Development Framework (RSDF) for Orange Farm in early 2009. Liana Strijdom (Interview 013), a senior planner in the City’s Development Planning and Urban Management department, is responsible for strategic planning in the southern regions of the metropolis. She explained that the outreach session is a regularly organised, annual participation event in most parts of Johannesburg. These planning sessions are important as the resultant RSDF plans feed into the City’s five-year Integrated Development Plans which form the basis of the City’s budgeting processes for capital investment. The session in Orange Farm was unusual as it had not been held for a number of years, since about 2005. It was anticipated that the far higher than normal turnout of eager stakeholders would materialise in robust and helpful discussions about Orange Farm’s future. She says, “... *it was really a full hall ... it was the biggest meeting we've ever had, there were probably around five-, six-hundred people in that hall ... so it was quite an opportunity for us to speak to people.*”

However, a militant group of demonstrators cut in on the session. In consternation, she said that “... *we were actually interrupted by protesters from the landless community, which is mostly related to the Themb'elihle community, but it's basically people that are in informal settlements, have been on waiting lists ... have been promised to move somewhere but they haven't moved in a couple of years ... we were literally interrupted by a group of about 200 very upset people ... it was almost like a physical violence threat, people were blocking, they came into the room, they were really upset, waving stuff around.*”

Strijdom says that the session delegates themselves “... *were also upset by these intruders ... but the intruders were literally singing, screaming, it was absolutely, just, you couldn't communicate.*” Her colleague, employed in the City's Regional office, managed to quell the protestors briefly and he told the 200 “intruders” that they had raised their concern in the wrong forum and that there “... are rules on how you engage and how, even if you are protesting, about where you do it and to whom you speak ...”

Notwithstanding this, after several abortive attempts to put the RSDF planning discussion back on track, the protestors became so combative that officials became “... *actually scared because ... we were physically threatened, we felt threatened ...*” She conveyed her discomfort with comments made about officials by the protestors, such as “... *'if they don't listen we'll just hit them until they do and we don't care'*.” In the end, the persistent interruptions meant that the City's officials had no option but to close the meeting, with apologies “... *to the people that are there that want to engage with us...*” Ultimately the RSDF plan had to be prepared in isolation by the City, and the plan was approved by the council, despite it having had minimal input from the public (Interview 013)²².

In this case, it would have been vital for the state to have pre-empted the antagonistic take-over of the RSDF session by the “intruders” so that the 500 to 600 willing stakeholders could have participated in the formulation of the RSDF plan.

But, perhaps, the job of the state is not always to transform Mouffeian ‘antagonism’ into ‘agonism’ (Mouffe, 2000; Wingenbach, 2011) through the provision of channels of expression that allow enemies to become, or to act as, adversaries and to work towards consensus together – such as the petitions system.

Indeed, maybe the conversion of a particular ‘antagonist’ engagement between the state and its citizens to an ‘agonist’ one is not always possible. In the case of advocacy groups exhorting for rights to state-supplied Inner City housing for the poor, Jak Koseff (Interview 019) as the City's Director of Social Assistance within the Community Development department expressed frustration that their campaign is based on “*a set of rights-based*”

²² All underlined text indicates emphasis by the speaker.

challenges that place an inexhaustible claim upon the state....” He recognises that the “...rights-based, left approach ... has some ... complementarity with the idea that there is a progressive consensus in South Africa, from a policy-government point of view, and the poor are a priority, and therefore must be treated as such ... you got us in the centre, trying to practically realise the rights-balancing, the prioritisation, the transformation, the redistribution, all the things that upset everybody, and don’t help the people they’re meant to help – not as much as they should - but are the realities you deal with.”

But Koseff says that practicalities are just as important as rights-based arguments, as it is the state’s resources that realise the very rights that are being battled for. But that is not the view of the judiciary, he claims. Talking about the advocacy groups’ channelling their protest by means of litigation and the courts, he says the City needs to “...*speak in the language of rights. You cannot speak in the language of commerce. The state tried it and it got its ass kicked, saying ‘no-no-no, there are ... the logistical practicalities, this, that, the other.’ The court’s answer’s basically, ‘tough! Find a way to organise your resources such that the right is realised ...’”²³ (Interview 019). To date there has been no consensus on this issue between the City and the housing rights advocates.*

Not every battle can be amicably resolved and citizens likely can continue to spar ‘antagonistically’ indefinitely. Indeed, perhaps ‘agonism’ is not always the desired method of engagement. Sometimes it is ‘antagonism’ that drives change, rather than co-operation. As Sean Dinat, the former head of the City's Informal Trading programme located in the Economic Development Unit and well versed in dealing with the protests of both formal and informal traders expresses it, “... *you need conflict to move on. You need conflict to cause change, and cause change to move forward*” (Interview 026).

Evolution: 2011 to date

The death of Andries Tatane in Ficksburg in 2011 seemed to be the trigger for additional and much more violent street protests. The count of protests in these two years so far have

²³ All underlined text indicates emphasis by the speaker.

amounted to 255 protests across South Africa (Municipal IQ, 2012) – nearly the same as experienced in the five receding years.

Conflagrations flared up in new areas in Johannesburg such as Zandspruit, Rietfontein, Protea and Chiawelo in Soweto, Pennyville, Finetown, Hospital Hill, and Kya Sands, plus – in solidarity with Eldorado Park - Noordgesig, Newclare, Westbury, and Riverlea. The prolonged ‘war for water’ that started back in the early days of the City’s transformation, seems to have ended with the City claiming victory²⁴ (so far) and there seems to be no settlement in sight for other service delivery campaigners, who have increasingly turned to additional violence and property damage in the streets of Johannesburg in order to get the attention of the state. Street traders, too, continued with intermittent popcorn protests, such as the Hawkers Anti-marginalisation march in 2011, on the Inner City streets as well as the submission of petitions²⁵ to the City.

Despite widespread anti-police sentiment due to its allegedly unduly forceful action against toyi-toying protestors, the Public Order Policing unit of the South African Police Services reminded citizens of its paradoxical role to be both “*nasty and nice*” in the case of street protests²⁶. The mayor of Johannesburg had called for “*swift and decisive action*”²⁷ against violent street protestors and proclaimed that the damage of government assets was tantamount to an “*act of sabotage*”²⁸. The Minister of Police had warned, too, that “*violence in ... protests will be punished*” and there shall be “*no leniency*” expressed towards protestors, no “*violent, barbaric and intolerant behaviour*” allowed with “*law-abiding citizens to be protected.*”²⁹ The Gauteng Provincial Government seemed to have been in a state of denial, by not acknowledging the unrest at all at a media briefing in 2011 but

24 In the form of the overruling of previous court resolutions by the Constitutional Court in 2011 in favour of the City.

25 As referred to in “*One Voice Hawkers' march purely opportunistic*”, City of Johannesburg, 13 April 2011, available at http://www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6503&catid=209&Itemid=114, accessed on 9 June 2013

26 According to www.defenceweb.co.za in 2011, accessed on 24 April 2012.

27 According to a press release on 6 July 2011, available at http://www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6853&catid=88&Itemid=266, accessed on 30 April 2012.

28 Ibid.

29 “*Mthethwa warns against strike, protest violence*”, 16 February 2011, available from <http://signalfire.org/?p=7484>, accessed on 30 April 2012.

announced that the municipality is “‘doing well’ and delivering services to ‘all’ residents” and that the mayors had done a “good job”³⁰.

At the same time, the City had called for more participation and support for ward committee and petitions processes in its Growth and Development Strategy, *GDS 2040*, and it also emphasised the ideal of “social inclusion” in its Integrated Development Plan of 2012-2016 (City of Johannesburg, 2012), certainly on paper at least. In practice though, the Petitions and Public Participation Committee expressed frustration that the petitions system was often undermined not just by officials but by uncooperative ward councillors. Closure on some petitions had taken multiple years, with many more petitions still requiring resolution (Peter Kute, Interview 001).

Even when the City had tried to respond to the issue of housing shortages for poor citizens in the Inner City, it unexpectedly boomeranged on citizens and the City.

Even when the City had tried to respond to the protestors about housing shortages in the Inner City, the attempt unexpectedly boomeranged on citizens and the City.

An anonymous respondent, let us call him Themba Ngubeni, is an experienced legal advisor to the City. He recounts frustration with the particular case of the MOTH Hall³¹ initiative, a historic building but run-down building in the city centre. It was originally made available by the City to the national and provincial governments for their intended relocation of foreign nationals from a temporary home at the Central Methodist Church. However, the Gauteng Provincial Government and the City could not agree on the terms of its management. The building was then repurposed by the City as a transitional housing facility to provide temporary shelter to homeless people and evictees from Inner City buildings targeted for redevelopment. The City’s Johannesburg Property Company and Johannesburg Development Agency persuaded a private property development company to fund the operating costs of the halfway house for a one-year period in part-exchange for a complex development rights deal for land elsewhere in the Inner City.

³⁰ “Gauteng delivering services to ‘all’”, 24 March 2011, available at <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Gauteng-delivering-services-to-all-20110324>, accessed on 30 April 2012.

³¹ “MOTH” is an acronym for the organisation known as the Memorable Order of the Tin Hats that was established to assist ex-World War II veterans, and they often built MOTH halls to house various club activities.

The first batch of residents came from Carr Street in 2010. They were relocated from the Chestnut Hill development in terms of a court ruling³² that bound the City to finding them alternative accommodation when they were evicted. Ngubeni explains that *"... the evictees from Carr Street, they moved there ... The court said they are staying temporarily, they have a lease agreement, and if they don't comply with the lease agreement they [meaning the City] can come to court immediately and the court will assist with the processing of the evictions."*

The City had tried to retain some control of the facility by requesting that the court include a provision in the initial court order that, if occupants did not move out when the year was up, the City would *"... have the right to evict without a further court order being required."* The court however indicated that it was not in a position to do so. Weakening the City's position to manage the facility still further, on the day that truckloads of Chestnut Hill residents and their belongings arrived at the MOTH Hall to move in, the would-be occupants had still not signed their leases and refused to do so, under advisement from their legal representatives. When Ngubeni is asked what has subsequently happened with the MOTH Hall, he says the occupants have neither signed leases nor paid the nominal rental of R25 per month which was intended to cover part of the operating costs of the facility. They *"...are staying there now for the third year [2013] and they haven't paid. The building is falling apart again..."* and has been substantially vandalised.

Coming full circle in the case of the MOTH Hall, Ngubeni confirms that the City would have to apply to the court again if its occupants are to be evicted. Moreover, ironically, the City's Senior Counsel advised the City that *"... if you want to evict people from temporary accommodation, you have to provide alternative accommodation again"*. (Interview 015)

EARLY INSIGHTS

Five early insights from an agonist perspective have been derived from the research to date about the attitudes and practices of the state, and the nature and effect of the different

³² South Gauteng High Court, Chestnut Hill, Judgement, August 2009.

types of protests over time, in respect of the local government of the Johannesburg metropolis. These insights will be tested through further doctoral interpretation in 2013.

City strife is a constant and takes many forms

Mouffeian 'agonism' advocates that a healthy democracy needs clashes. Without them, tension will materialise in other forms elsewhere and will likely be dangerous to the state as shared mistrusts solidify around insurmountable issues (Mouffe, 2000). City strife is a constant theme of service delivery in Johannesburg since 1994, perhaps less prevalent in the earlier periods but increasing until now. The data indicates that service delivery protests targeting the City originate from both poor and middle-class citizens, and can take many forms according to the type of income group, the intensity of protest, their location and the channels employed.

Protest-with-pickets, on the streets of the city, is a channel employed largely by poor communities. They are inclined to carry out popcorn protests about basic service delivery and other services in the streets of low-income, under-served neighbourhoods; or popcorn protests about informal trading issues usually on Inner City streets. More rarely, a deprived community might undertake a sustained basic service delivery protest over a long period of time with resources provided by advocacy groups, in the streets but also employing other channels. On the other hand, protest-with-pockets is a channel employed largely by wealthier rate-paying and relatively well-capacitated middle-class communities. They are likely to carry out either intermittent and/or long-lasting protests using a number of channels (but generally not that of street protests) about a variety of state services, and have resources to underwrite their protests.

Over time, even though the state largely signals an anti-protest stance, the City has increased its range of formal protest channels, such as instituting the Petitions Unit, and diverse planning and project processes. In some instances, the City has demonstrated an awareness of the value of measured approaches and built some expertise to cope with conflict; from pacifying an angry crowd to creating sophisticated engagement systems for complex and tricky projects, such as that seen in the case of the BRT system project.

Not all channels of protest can be 'agonist'

The default reaction of disadvantaged communities that are frustrated about service delivery seems to have become street-based protests that are anti-state in general, possibly not directed specifically at the City. However, violent street-based protests are seen as generally 'antagonist' by the state and not conducive to 'agonist' interaction, unless protestors can become calmer, or 'agonist' in their outlook. There are other potentially 'agonist' channels which some officials consider safer and more effective than street-based protests, such as ward committee meetings, community-based ward-level planning and interactive Integrated Development Plan processes, that low-income wards could use to voice objections instead, even if they seem to be neither popular or adequate³³, in the face of perceived systematic and widespread service delivery failure and poverty.

As the Public Protector puts it, citizens need to empower themselves as to how government works and to *"ask the right questions to the right people via the right channels"*³⁴. Preferred protest channels employed more by middle-class communities, rather than low-income ones, are those of litigation, media campaigns, lobbying and advocacy, rents and rates boycotts, and voting stayaways. Such channels seem to offer more prospects for 'agonist' state-citizen engagement. There are many channels, and it is important to pick the right parts of the state to do battle with, and the appropriate mode of engagement.

Protest sometimes leads to consensus, sometimes not

Agonist democrats believe that there must always be consensus even if it is a conflictual, provisional or temporary consensus. Agreement can never remain static and is part and parcel of 'agonist' processes that constantly recalibrate the state-society relationship in the pursuit of democratic ideals. Sometimes protest in Johannesburg did lead to consensus, whether accidentally, implicitly or by intention. For instance, the 'war for water' protest – despite other aspects of water service delivery still under contention – did lead to the

³³ Ward committees are intended to provide an alternative constructive conduit for addressing local issues, providing the community has not lost hope in the process, that it trusts and respects its ward councillor and that the councillor is appropriately skilled enough to manage the process but it seems that is not likely to be the case according to the City's Petitions Unit (Interview 001).

³⁴ "Hold govt accountable, says Madonsela", 23 March 2012, available at <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Hold-govt-accountable-says-Madonsela-20120323>, accessed on 30 April 2012.

redesign of the prepaid water meter that was accepted by the community. Too, angry Meadowlands petitioners received the support of the City in the form of the installation of traffic-calming measures outside a local school, to prevent children being killed by speeding motorists.

The vignette of the MOTH Hall transitional housing facility depicts the City's implicit partial recognition of the need for some Inner City housing for the poor, even if not advertised as such. However, the unintended consequence of its effort to provide relief to evictees has left the City as slumlord and residents in poor living conditions, and can hardly be the kind of outcome sought by either party. The 200 protestors, in interrupting the Regional Spatial Development Framework session in Orange Farm for its 500 to 600 delegates, effectively hijacked a critical engagement that may have led to consensus about the trajectory of the future development of the Orange Farm area.

State 'politics' indicates ambivalence about 'the political'

In Mouffeian (2000) agonist terms, 'politics' is the collection of government entities, their dialogues, systems and conventions that make up governance of the state, and any of its parts. This assemblage must be designed to create stability for society in conditions that are impacted by 'the political'. 'The political' is the 'antagonism' inherent in all human dealings arising from human differences that informs the diversity of interests, and Mouffe says that this ultimately leads to the formations of notions of 'them' and 'us' and ensures conflict (2000, pp. 31 and 101).

However, the responses of the City and other parts of the state that are responsible for service delivery, to protest – especially street-based, toyi-toying protest that has been the subject of much media coverage – over time are inconsistent, contradictory and confusing. Responses have ranged from denial, condemnation, and anger to – infrequently – respect.

If an effective agonist relationship is reliant on a deep Mouffeian respect for the protestors – the 'them' – then the state's erraticism and ongoing repudiation of street protests is not conducive to building the necessary stability required to manage conflictual processes in an 'agonist' manner.

Some deliberate efforts by the City to ensure the consistency of a positive attitude to protest as needed to drive fruitful 'agonist' processes have been made. These can be seen in initiatives such as the Petitions Unit, project-based engagements, and planning processes for the Integrated Development Plan that have been put in place.

However, the processes of maturation and consolidation of the City and political changes therein have engendered lethargy, possibly reducing the City's ability and willingness to experiment in an 'agonist' manner. Christine Walters's insight into the erosion of the extent of common ground between the City and its citizens over time might explain why there may be an increased propensity for 'antagonism', rather than 'agonism', between the state and its citizens.

In cases where the City does interact with protestors in a more overtly 'agonist' fashion displaying a deep respect towards them, such as in the implementation of the Rea Vaya BRT system and the establishment of the Petitions Unit, these formal channels of interaction tended to have more positive outcomes than those where protestors have been repudiated, such as the Mayor's condemnation of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee.

If the job of the state is to convert 'antagonism' into 'agonism', outcomes are erratic

The theory of 'agonism' puts forward that the main task of democracy is to convert 'antagonism' into 'agonism'. 'Antagonism' is the expression of great hostility based on diametrically opposed differences between an 'antagonist' and his opponent - the 'antagonist' being thus a deadly enemy that must be destroyed. On the other hand, 'agonism'—although also an expression of hostility—is voiced by an adversary or a sort of 'friendly enemy' who shares common values with his opponent.

The City has not defined the distinction between 'antagonism' and 'agonism' in respect of street protest. Indeed, references to toyi-toying protestors that damage state property as criminals imply that the City would consider such objectors as 'antagonists' rather than 'agonists'. There is evidence that the City has adopted an overtly 'agonist' approach to *other* forms of protest, such as the case of the 'walking together' approach adopted by the Petitions Unit.

Perhaps though, in some instances, such as the rights-versus-resources battles of the Inner City housing conundrum, an 'agonist' approach may not be in the best interest of citizens as it is the conflict itself that seems to provoke the change. Hence, how can it be the state's job in this situation to convert 'antagonism' to 'agonism'?

IN CLOSING

The question asked in this paper is whether Mouffe's (2000) model of agonism can cast light on how states might engage with their citizens in situations of conflict in an 'agonist' manner

The answer as to whether and how conflictual processes can be managed by the state in an 'agonist' way to produce more democratic outcomes appears to be a complicated one.

Initially, the answer seems to be 'yes', but 'yes' in principle, or 'yes, maybe'.

The story of Johannesburg shows that city strife takes many forms over time. Assessing the context and state responses to strife provides the one exemplar of the petitions process as a channel for citizen protest in Johannesburg. The data provides evidence that conflictual processes related to service delivery by the City might indeed be recast in some cases pointing to a different, more productive state-society relationship with citizens deriving the benefits. In consideration of the channel of petitioning however, its slowness and insufficient harmonisation with other processes within the City can, at best, ensure variable outcomes only. Petitioning seems currently to be a measure that is effective at addressing localised, reasonably straightforward problems. In the case of widespread street-based protests about service delivery and Inner City housing for the poor, where solutions will require coordinated and sophisticated inputs from multiple state respondents, it seems that the state including the City cannot, or will not at this moment, expressly or systematically embrace conflictual processes as a potentially creative and constructive part of service delivery.

Also, then, part of the answer must be a 'no' in instances where the messaging of the state indicates its resistance to addressing protest, especially street-based service delivery protests whether violent or not.

In spite of the state's reluctance to embrace conflict, there is nonetheless some evidence that conflictual processes between the state and its citizens in Johannesburg can lead to changes in the operations of the City with positive outcomes for citizens. For example, the redesigned pre-paid meter as an upshot of the 'war for water' has aligned the City's services closer to the needs of citizens – a partial 'agonist' consensus. However, such outcomes are not designed as part of state-society interactions as the state's responses to the hostility expressed by its citizens are more likely to be of the knee-jerk variety. An agonist state-society relationship would ideally be characterised by for instance, the City's expression of deep respect towards its citizens, even at times of dissensus and the proactive brokerage of engagements to identify solutions together for the benefit of the citizens of Johannesburg.

On the other hand, the example of the contestation around Inner City housing shows that sometimes it is not possible, or even appropriate, for the state and citizens to engage 'agonistically'.

In closing, the state can demonstrate clear-cut instances of an 'agonist' state-society relationship in respect of service delivery as manifested in the petitions and other processes of the City, which processes themselves are still evolving and have their limitations. Nonetheless, these efforts can be considered as a small but vital contribution to 'agonist' state-society interactions that have materialised in constructive outcomes that have bettered the lives of ordinary citizens. However, acknowledgement and appreciation of the potentially positive aspects of 'agonist' protest by the local state, and other spheres of government, is largely uneven. At best the positive outcomes are embryonic in nature, and at worst they are minimal.

About 7 850 words

Thank you to those City officials, politicians and affiliates for sharing their stories with me, and to the NRF SARCHI programme under Professor Philip Harrison's leadership for making this paper possible.

INTERVIEWS

- Interview **001**: 21 June 2012, Peter Kute, assistant director of the Petitions Unit
- Interview **002**: 28 August 2012, Anna Cox, a journalist at The Star and lead of MetroWatch, a consumer watchdog dealing with local government matters
- Interview **003**: 31 August 2012, Christine Walters, a councillor for the African National Congress and member of the mayoral committee holding a variety of political portfolios in the City since 1994
- Interview **013**: 18 October 2012, Liana Strijdom, senior planner in the City's Development Planning and Urban Management department responsible for planning in Regions D, E and G
- Interview **015**: 26 October 2012, an anonymous respondent (pseudonym Themba Ngubeni) a legal advisor to the City
- Interview **019**: 8 November 2012, Jak Koseff, the City's Director of Social Assistance within the Community Development department
- Interview **024**: 15 November 2012, Lisa Seftel, the City's Executive Director of Transportation
- Interview **026**: 16 November 2012, Sean Dinat, former head of the City's Informal Trading programme in the Economic Development Unit

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