H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Glenn Adler, Eddie Webster, eds. *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985-1997.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. xvii + 238 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-22253-6.

Reviewed by Franco Barchiesi (Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg)

Published on H-SAfrica (February, 2002)

This collection of essays represents the most comprehensive attempt so far to systematize and contextualize a line of argument that during the past decade has become quite influential in debates in South African labor studies and in analyses of labor's contribution to the transition towards post-apartheid democracy. The editors of the book are, on the other hand, well known for their contributions on these topics, which also influenced trade union politics and strategy.

The aims and rationale for the book can be grasped in the interaction of two interpretative keys. First, the editors want to provide an analysis of the role of organized labor in the transition to democracy in South Africa, and an assessment of the challenges faced by South African trade unions in the muted scenarios of globalization and macroeconomic liberalization. The contextualization of such "challenges" as a shift from "resistance" against an oppressive racist regime towards socio-economic "reconstruction" under democracy provides the second interpretative "key". This refers to the programmatic and ideological stance that is openly advocated and advanced by the editors, and it can be captured in their outline of the approach of the book, which "acknowledges the radical potential and independence of labour and the possibilities of an alliance with its supporters in parliament and the state. We have referred this as radical reform, where by virtue of its independent power base labour is able to mobilize outside state structures, yet through its alliance with the ANC [African National Congress] it is able to influence state policy. By being both "inside" and "outside" the state, labour does not inevitably become captured by capital and the state, but has the potential to transform the direction of the transition process in more radical directions" (p. 10).

The editors assert such a possibility on the basis of the crucial, and in the African post-colonial context, rather unique, role played by organized labor in the collapse of apartheid. This role has been translated into a formal alliance between the main union federation in the country, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the ANC as the ruling party that emerged out of the 1994 elections. At the same time, organized labor has gained access to tripartite negotiating organs, institutionalized policy-making bargaining, and legal recognition of its independent power. This has defined trade unions as crucial actors in socio-economic restructuring policies and in the redefinition of the country's industrial relations legislation. On this basis, the editors understand South African trade unions as "a collective actor capable of shaping the character of democratization through the disciplined and strategic use of power" (p. 3).

"Disciplined and strategic use of power" is precisely what in this opinion has ultimately produced a strategy of "radical reform," which allegedly provides an alternative to "revolutionary ruptures" aimed at establishing a socialist alternative. This is, conversely, deemed "unfeasible" and in danger "to take the country down the path of renewed ungovernability" (p. 18). At the same time, "radical reform" would allow unions to "engage" the democratic institutions of the state, preventing the possibility of "co-optation" of labor organizations and protecting them against an authoritarian, repressive containment, which would also be extremely costly for the transition. The way in which the editors suggest that such a strategy can practically operate is

"to reconfigure democratization through participa-

tion in negotiated compromises. These compromises have the potential to extract concessions from the other side, discipline capital and ensure the social costs of adjustment are not borne by workers alone. 'Pacting' should not be seen simply as functional to the consolidation of democracy, but as a conflictual process of class compromise, the results of which may produce workers' loyalty to democratization" (p. 3).

This perspective is presented as a criticism of the functionalist bias present in mainstream theories of "democratic transition." These praise pacting and negotiated solutions mainly in the form of interactions between political elites, therefore marginalizing the role of social actors like labor (which are recommended to exercise restraint on their members), and narrowing the range of possible policy outcomes. At the same time, however, the whole book is extremely vague on conceptualizing these possible outcomes in the South African case. Little is said, for example, on what the minimum substantive content of "class compromises" should be in order for labor not to bear "the social costs of adjustment alone," avoid being marginalized and reap some benefits in the process. Which "concessions from the other side" the editors realistically expect at this stage remains unclear, in the same way as a definition of how "conflictual" a process of class compromise can be. Actually, the meaning that "conflict" can assume in this context remains unexplained, apart from the editors' recognition that a "strategic" use of power implies that unions retain their independent potential for mobilization. What is clear from the book is that a culture of compromise and trade-offs should, in a stark departure from the past, *replace* to a large degree a historical emphasis on class conflict. This would be the only way of producing workers' "loyalty" to the institutions of the democratic state to ensure the viability of the post-apartheid political dispensation.

The editors' indeterminacy and inconclusiveness on the substantive aspects of the process they advocate is not necessarily to be taken as a limitation of this book. Indeed it is quite coherent with the conclusion of the introductory chapter that the whole question of labor's ability to use democratic institutions should be looked at pragmatically, as a possibility whose further realization depends on a careful assessment of power relations that change over time and are multi layered across different locales and economic sectors. The editors frankly recognize that, as a matter of fact, important problems exist for the accomplishment of their vision. These refer mainly to the fact that the ANC government is adopting a rather orthodox, market-oriented view of economic growth which, particularly following the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, leads to dangers of subordination and irrelevance for organized labor.

However, it is precisely the strict consequentiality, relentlessly stated by the editors, between labor's adoption of "class compromises," "consolidation of democracy," and progressive socio- economic change that turns the above considerations into serious problems for the coherence and the explanatory power of the whole book. In fact, much of the evidence presented contradicts or denies such consequentiality in ways that remain unexplained. Therefore, the book ultimately fails to link its diverse, and often valuable, empirical contributions to a satisfactory theoretical and analytical framework of the different possibilities facing South African labor under democratization. On the contrary, even the enumeration of this range of possibilities is radically constrained and narrowed down by the way the editors encase the book's empirical research inside their own political-ideological agenda.

At the most immediate level, it is quite apparent that the editors' "criticism" of "transition theory" shares decisive epistemological preconditions of that very theory. Predominant among these is the insistence on an institution-centred view that considers trade unions only as structured organizations, which are rather arbitrarily identified with the concept of "labor movements" *tout court*. At the same time, formal institutions are regarded as the nearly exclusive horizon and arena of contestation among social actors, and the unique condition of visibility for collective militancy and mobilization. This orientation excludes entirely any possibility to analyze or to consider other decisive determinants of labor movements, besides formal organizations and institutional presence such as the multiple processes of construction of grassroots workers' subjectivities– inside the workplace and in broader ambits of life–in relation to socio-economic expectations, perceived impediments created by central and local state policies, transformations in the meanings of waged employment in relation to household needs, the definition of worker collective power inside multiple areas of engagement and social movements, the ways in which power relations internal to the unions are informally shaped by dynamics of gender, race, education, and locality and how this enables or constrains militancy and mobilizing potentials.

It is a general weakness in the contributions for this book to substantially neglect these factors in the defi-

nition of a concept of "trade unionism" that is rather taken for granted. The editors' total lack of consideration for such aspects makes the reader silent when faced with the question of how these broader determinants of "labor movements" shape organizations' capacity and potentiality to advance progressive outcomes. Moreover, the reification operated by the editors of the concept of "democratization" and its "consolidation"– intended in conventional formalist terms as a set of institutional protections and procedures guaranteed by a representative government– whose maintenance is what ultimately legitimizes the demands of social actors as "non-disruptive," constitutes a further obstacle. In fact this view hampers from the start any possible inquiry on how labor's grassroots subjectivities, militancy and action actually question and problematize the very notions of "representative democracy" and of "feasibility" of policies defined by state institutions in relation to their self-imposed policy constraints.

Militancy (a concept often invoked but hardly clarified by the editors themselves) implies a capacity to "put into question," or a reappropriation by a political community[1] of the prerogative to define what is feasible and legitimate against the borders of what is codified by the constituted powers. "Compromise" in this sense represents only one of the possible, and by no means optimal, outcomes, and it appears indeed arbitrary to assume it as necessarily *the best* method in a purely normative way. The contested nature of the notion of militancy is invisible in the book, or it is captured by oversimplified binary ideological oppositions between "organization" and "anarchy" that leads to extremely problematic and moralistic concepts such as "ungovernability" (as in the chapter by Karl Von Holdt).

On the other hand, it is not difficult to see how the need to define a more sophisticated understanding of labor in the South African context is not merely a matter of doctrinary abstraction. That need actually derives largely from the problem of analyzing the irruption of new constituencies, vulnerabilities and demands *inside* labor, as in the case of flexible, casual, "atypical" workers, long-term unemployed, weak social groups in "informal" occupations, migrant workers. These demands and needs tend in fact to be far more radical and comprehensive than those of historically unionized constituencies. This is because their expectations for a dignified wage-income nexus interrogate the very foundation of the notion of citizenship and are based on much broader claims for social rights, social security and protection. These are also more easily at variance with what is defined as "economically feasible" by the policies of representative institutions of a democratic state from which the voices of these subjects are often either absent or marginalized. It comes as no surprise then if in this book as well these subjects and demands for citizenship are nowhere to be found.

The actual mutilation operated by the book of a notion of "militancy" to which the editors and many contributors still pay homage is what ultimately makes the whole concept of "radical reform" seriously flawed in relation to the stated aim of understanding the impact of labor in consolidating democracy. Faced with the complexities and the diversity of the demands of the working class in liberalizing South Africa, the editors' polarity between "revolution" and "co-optation" of labor–intended to legitimize their compromise-based "third way"– becomes a caricature, but a highly functional one. It in fact allows them to skip entirely the crucial question of how can South African trade unions balance their institutional responsibilities and compatibilities inside a liberalizing state with the increasingly deeper radicalism of demands from their own constituencies.

This problem is particularly serious considering that many of the most recent examples of worker militancy (as in the case of municipal workers' struggles against privatization of basic services) have responded to deep-seated community outrage directed both at the government economic policies and at the lack of adequately radical responses by COSATU leaders. At the same time, the editors' choice of Volkswagen South Africa as a case of successful class compromise of a "co-determinist" kind is rather unfortunate, considering that this experiment has collapsed in 2001 amidst renewed waves of wildcat strikes in direct opposition to the co-operative and compromisory policy of the unions' leadership. Furthermore, for many areas of working class poverty, vulnerability and exclusion the possibility of a permanently waged occupation is becoming increasingly remote and unions are often considered as distant and detached from immediate social needs. The radicalism of these "flexible" workers is therefore expressed in highly conflictual and confrontational social movements. These–as Ashwin Desai[2] has shown in his remarkable study–find their main way of expression in direct action against state policies of privatization, coercive enforcement of market rates for services and eviction for defaulters.

The crucial question of how the representative capacity of the unions is affected by diversified constituencies and demands is largely missing in the book, apart from Ian Macun's chapter. This is, however, mainly quantita-

tive in nature and reads the question of diversification as totally internal to the unions rather than as a matter of relationships with broader social subjects. Conversely, these aspects have been dealt with in far more conceptually sophisticated terms in recent studies that emphasize the actual crisis of trade unions faced with the social fragmentation and diversification produced not by mere structural labor market dynamics, but by the radicalization of agency in the struggle against global neoliberalism. Here the explosion of the myth of "homogeneity" of the working class on which institutionalization, social control and class compromises have been built in "Fordist" industrialized capitalism[3] appears much more insightful than this book's theoretical framework in locating the South African context.

Similarly, a dubious usefulness, to say the least, can be noticed in a kind of comparative analysis (especially in the chapter by Derek de Villiers and Mark Anstey) that places South Africa on a par with other semi-industrialized recent democracies, such as Brazil and Spain. Surely these cases show how uncomfortable the realities of negotiated transitions can be for trade unions under conditions of neoliberal adjustment. However, privileging, as the authors do, the level of economic development, the timing and institutional nature of democratization obscures other important characteristics that, in the South African case, should be read with a more careful attention to processes of African working class formation.[4] In this context, in fact, unionization has not only reflected a conscious strategy to advance grassroots demands through institutionalized and formalized bargaining. Rather, unions should here be understood in the broader spectrum of devices used by workers to resist the imposition of the discipline of waged labor. The highly unstable consolidation of wage labor under the illegitimate racist regime was translated under apartheid into unsurmontable problems in the construction of a capitalist labor market faced with permanent worker insurgency. The same process of establishing a modern capitalist labor market still proves problematic for the new democratic government, as shown by the continuous high level of community activism and direct action of working class constituencies.

On the other hand, it was precisely due to these dynamics that during the 1980s unions were radicalized in the context of black townships' insurgency. The process overtly assumed the features of a revolt against wage labor and factory discipline, albeit not necessarily in a-according to the book's easy characterizations– "revolutionary" direction (which is in itself a controversial expression, open to multiple meanings). Rather that phase of the struggle was about expressing a radical desire of access to broad, decommodified social citizenship rights (housing, education, basic services). These could not be guaranteed by a negotiating strategy that was merely inserted in the context of productivity pacts and wage bargaining, a theme that is also resurfacing in recent struggles. Von Holdt's chapter, with all the limitations noticed above, explores this link between lack of legitimacy and worker insurgency at the point of production through a notion of "apartheid workplace regime." However, it is not clear why a similar line of argument cannot be extended to the plane of the whole society, where heavy socio-economic continuities with the apartheid past are still today translated into massive inequality and exclusion in the new democracy.

The obfuscation of crucial influences in the recent history of South African labor struggles, and the neglect of the often interrupted paths of militancy they generated, are characteristic of a whole trend of nationalist-orientated and ANC-aligned historiography which started at least with Jeremy Baskin's 1991 work, *Striking Back*. This current has read the history of South African trade unions largely as a linear trajectory towards its eventual political outcome (the insertion of the majority of the labor movement in the "national liberation struggle" led by the ANC) and the allegedly desirable and inevitable programmatic results (the adoption of a corporatist approach to the democratic transition and the ultimate predominance of a productivist agenda of national development and modernization). Not only has this trend marginalized radical "diversions" in the grassroots history of South African labor, whose story still needs to be told. It has also, and especially, caused a total lack of critical analysis of the challenges rising for trade unions from current struggles against neoliberalism, privatization and marketization.

As Ashwin Desai acutely notices, often such struggles no longer recognize waged labor as a unifying social institution, the carrier of a universal emancipatory promise and a privileged organizational interlocutor. In a context where South African social movements are just starting to relate to the waves of mobilization against corporate globalization, nowhere was this contradiction more evident, and at a more significant place, than in the 1999 Seattle round of WTO negotiations. There COSATU, as part of the official South African delegation, was calling for an "equitable reform" of a global institution whose very legitimacy was successfully contested by a host of insurgent social actors on the streets.

While Adler and Webster's book rhetorically recognizes the importance for the unions to relate to social movements, the implications and potential contradictions of this relation remain unexamined. Surely they would hardly fit the book's criterion of validity for the evidence it presents. This comes, in fact, to depend on a set of purely normative assumptions (mainly captured under the heading of "class compromise") whose functionality to the "liberalization with a worker's face" advocated by the editors remains substantially unproven.

This method of legitimating arguments through leaps of faith rather than balancing of evidence is what ultimately determines in the book the dramatic, unresolved tension– already noticed for the introduction–between its "programmatic" chapters (those by Jeremy Baskin, Steven Friedman and Mark Shaw) and other, more "analytical" contributions. The former basically restate at a mainly ideological level the promotion of a "conflict reduction" strategy for the sake of "co- operation, compromise, national interest and so on" (p. 54). This is presented as the only way for the unions to avoid being "marginalized themselves" which could "provoke a backlash which may undermined the democratization process" (p. 55). The latter chapters (particularly those by Graeme Goetz and Phil Eidelberg), which are the most valuable and empirically grounded, emphasize the ways in which the increasing subordination of COSATU inside the ANC-led Alliance has had the effect of taming labor's opposition to the adoption of neoliberal orthodoxy. This has produced a use of negotiating institutions to emasculate unions' grassroots militancy and has ultimately created enormous obstacles towards a broadening of labor's possibility to exercise a meaningful autonomous power. Goetz's chapter, in particular, is a reconstruction of how COSATU's expectations for a new democracy– initially translated into the ambitious agenda of reforms contained in the Reconstruction and Development Programme adopted by the ANC–have been progressively diluted in the circuits of the ANC's own *realpolitik* and techniques of "governmentality." These have easily insulated economic policy-making from any meaningful influence from COSATU's institutional location in corporatist decision-making bodies. Eidelberg's chapter explores how the institutionalization of the unions has led to further marginalization, rather than more promising avenues for "engaging" the state, through a careful examination of the relations between COSATU, the ANC and the SACP, which concludes with the apparently ironic observation that

"[t]he prospects for radical reform, ironically, where probably brighter in the 1980s, under the old regime, than they are today. In the 1980s, when the unions had been negotiating with an apartheid state increasingly under siege from the international capitalist world, they had been able to exploit this conflict to their own advantage .... By the 1990s, on the other hand, this window of opportunity was contracting. The new ANC state, in obvious and sharp contrast to its apartheid predecessor, owes its coming to power to a considerable degree to the support of overseas capital and, since officially coming to power, is, if anything, increasingly under capital's influence" (p. 155).

These important insights carry the need for further research that explains the reasons for COSATU's inability to challenge the ANC on the terrain of the definition of the policies and priorities of democratization. Moreover, as Hein Marais[5] recently notices, this especially requires an understanding of the ways in which the ANC has managed to maintain its legitimacy in the sphere of the organization and expression of popular desires, in spite of policies that directly contradict those desires. This analysis will probably have to look at the incapacity of the South African "left" to impact meaningfully to legitimize more radical, anti-systemic expectations while broadening the range of the "admissible" and "feasible." Probably the strategy of co-operation with the state and class compromise accepted so far in large strata of labor leadership will not come out innocent of such an analysis. Surely this book does not help even in starting to think along this line of inquiry.

Notes

[1]. I am using this term in the sense adopted in Jean-Luc Nancy (1988), *L'experience de la liberte'* (Paris: Galilee), and Roberto Esposito (1998), *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunita'* (Turin: Einaudi) as sharing visions, projects and experiences of emancipation, rather than as a pre-existent, immanent affiliation or as the result of intersubjective, organizational agreements of a contractual kind.

[2]. Ashwin Desai (2000), *The Poors of Chatsworth* (Durban: Madiba Publishers). An American edition of this book is announced for Monthly Review Press.

[3]. See Peter Waterman (1999), *Globalization, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms* (London: Mansell) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

[4]. See Frederick Cooper (1996), *Decolonization and*

African Society. The Labour Question in French and British Africa (Cambridge University Press) and Yann Moulier-Boutang (1998) *De l'esclavage au salariat: economie historique du salariat bride'* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France) for analyses of working class activism as reflecting the difficulties and contestation over the imposition of wage labor discipline in a context of endemic worker defection.

[5]. Hein Marais (2001), *South Africa: Limits of Change. The Political Economy of Transformation.* Second edition (Cape Town: UCT Press; London: Zed Books).