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Social movements as learning spaces: the case of the defunct Anti-Privatisation Forum in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Social movements often become spaces for learning, although this type of learning has been overlooked by activists and scholars alike. Analysing the case of the collapsed Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the article submits that the APF was not only an organisation that challenged privatisation, but also a learning space for activists from middle-class and working-class backgrounds. Non-formal educational platforms, such as political education workshops, organisational and practical skill training sessions and campaigns organised by the APF and its partner organisations, were instrumental in transferring skills to community-based activists. After the demise of the APF, its activists applied the skills and competences they had acquired to continue advancing social and economic justice in other organisations. Furthermore, community-based activists educated middle-class activists about the conditions of working-class communities and the challenges of building working-class movements in post-apartheid South Africa.

Les mouvements sociaux en tant qu'espaces d'apprentissage : le cas du Forum anti-privatisation en Afrique du Sud aujourd'hui disparu

RÉSUMÉ


Les mouvements sociaux deviennent souvent des espaces d'apprentissage, bien que ce type d'apprentissage soit négligé par les militants comme par les universitaires. En analysant le cas du Forum anti-privatisation (APF), l'article soutient que l'APF était non seulement une organisation qui remettait en cause la privatisation, mais aussi un espace d'apprentissage pour les militants issus de la classe moyenne et de la classe ouvrière. Les plateformes éducatives non formelles, telles que les sessions de formation aux compétences organisationnelles et pratiques, les campagnes et les ateliers d'éducation politique organisés par l'APF et ses organisations partenaires, ont joué un rôle déterminant dans le transfert de compétences aux militants locaux. Après la disparition de l'APF, ses militants ont mis à profit les compétences acquises pour continuer à faire progresser la justice sociale et économique dans d'autres organisations. En

KEYWORDS

Social movements; Anti-Privatisation Forum; learning; skills; non-governmental organisation; activists

MOTS-CLÉS

Mouvements sociaux ; Forum anti-privatisation ; apprentissage ; compétences ; organisation non-gouvernementale ; militants

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outré, les militants locaux ont sensibilisé les militants de la classe moyenne aux conditions de vie des classes ouvrières et aux défis que représente la création de mouvements ouvriers dans l'Afrique du Sud post-apartheid.

Introduction

The legacy of social movements and what happens to activists after the movements collapse are questions that have, to some extent, been explored and debated by scholars who study national and global movements (Abron 1986; Brandt 2001; Cleaver and Katsiaficas 2014; Jones and Jeffries 2016; Umoja 1999). For instance, Taylor (1989, 761) disputes the traditional view that the American women's movement died after the suffrage victory in 1920 and was reborn in the 1960s. Taylor emphasises that movements do not 'die'; instead, they adapt to new conditions and contexts. For example, after the collapse in 1982 of the Black Panther Party (BPP), a radical, anti-racist political formation founded by activists Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in October 1966 in Oakland, California, many of its activists continued to advance the ideals of the party in their new roles as progressive academics, public speakers and activists.

The trajectory of the activists after the formal demise of the party is never linear. For example, the late former leading activist of the BPP, Eldridge Cleaver, who was a spokesman and Minister of Information for the BPP in the late 1960s and who spent years in exile to further the aims of the party, returned to the USA in 1975 to become a religious leader and a conservative member of the Republican Party (Hix 1996; Kifner 1998).

On the other hand, former activists of the BPP, such as Angela Davis, continue to be activists and radical academics and became part of struggles against racism and the oppression of black people in the USA in the 1990s and 2000s (Davis 2016). Similar to Taylor's argument (1989) that movements do not die but 'hibernate' and 'contract' to later re-emerge in a different form, these former leaders of the BPP continued to champion the founding ideas of the party long after its collapse. This shows some continuity between the ideals of the party and the political and activist lives of these activists, despite the non-existence of the BPP. Bobby Seale continues to produce films on the BPP, write about its history, and deliver speeches to preserve the legacy of the BPP and inspire young activists to take forward today's struggles for racial and social justice (Seale 1991).

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, scholarship on social movements has tended to decline, particularly in regard to movements that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Scholarship tends to focus on currently active movements that are involved in visible struggles, while no attention is given to activists of movements that were active in the 1990s and 2000s. There has been a general lack of interest in covering movements that no longer exist, such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). An exception, however, is Dale McKinley, a leading APF activist who remained in the APF until its formal dissolution in 2012. McKinley helped to archive the materials of the APF, conducted interviews on the history of the organisation and wrote a number of articles to preserve the memory of the APF (McKinley 2016).

The significance of the research and methodological issues

The collapse of the APF can be ascribed to several factors. First, after receiving substantial funding from international donors, the APF tended to have an internal focus that resulted in elaborate organisational processes and structures. More resources went into sustaining and supporting the activities of committees and subcommittees. For example, there was an increase in international travel and participation in meetings. These activities were detached from community struggles happening in Gauteng and other provinces. Second, several unemployed activists from communities wanted to control the resources of the organisation for purposes of petty corruption. Linked to these is the third factor, namely that the APF failed to devise strategies for dealing with unemployment among its community-based activists, who had no alternative sources of income (McKinley 2016; Runciman 2012, 2015; Sinwell 2012). After the demise of the APF, community-based activists joined the African National Congress (ANC) and other political formations (Runciman 2015, 974).

Although the APF was a significant movement in the post-apartheid era, Von Holdt and Naidoo (2019, 170) argue correctly that after the end of formal apartheid, activism on the part of social movements has not led to the formation of organisations that have challenged the ANC's political dominance. One of the weaknesses of the literature is that it does not engage with the learning processes that occurred inside the APF, or with their implications for activists after the collapse of the movement. The aim of this article is therefore to explore the following questions: what did the activists learn from the APF? And how do key learnings from the APF help them in the new roles they assumed after the collapse of the APF?

To obtain answers to these questions, in 2021 I conducted in-depth interviews with eight activists who had been part of the APF. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically to find answers to the research questions, which referred to their activities after the collapse of the APF. The interviewees comprised a sample of former activists who had become researchers, academics, trade unionists and employees of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). All the interviewees lived in working-class and middle-class areas. They were selected because they had influence and tended to be involved in most of the organisations. I had also been an activist of the APF and kept in contact with many of the people who were involved in the organisation at the same time. The research was about the roles they played after the collapse of the organisation they had led. The obvious limitation of this research is that it excluded members of organisations that were affiliated to the APF and did not participate in APF structures. This could provide a topic for future research.

Most of the interviews were conducted via the platforms WhatsApp and Zoom, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and its related research protocols.¹ The activists interviewed for this research refused to have their names anonymised, because they strongly believed anonymisation would strip them of their identity as activists and as public intellectuals engaging in public and open debate, posing no ethical issue.

In agreement with Choudry and Kapoor (2010), I believe that knowledge produced by social movements during struggles for social justice tends to be ignored by researchers and activists. In South Africa, the overwhelming majority of the black population received inferior education during the apartheid era, as part of a political strategy to

confine black people to unskilled and low-paid jobs. For this reason, the learning processes within social movements were particularly important in South Africa. Within the APF, working-class community activists not only learned political theory, but developed analytical, media, writing and research skills in workshops and other activities. The lessons learned and the skills gained in the APF have helped former activists to perform later roles as activists and professionals. The skills they gained can be categorised as soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, work ethic, empathy and collaboration. Political knowledge included key concepts like neoliberalism, globalisation, capitalism, privatisation, gender issues and international solidarity. Practical skills included writing, public speaking, organising, working with media, conducting research and employing methods of popular education. All these skills were transferrable from middle-class activists to those from working-class communities, and vice versa. While some former APF activists have continued to preserve the legacy and ideals of the APF in their current roles as activists and as professionals, the role of APF as a space for learning has not been explored by social movement scholarship in South Africa (Dawson 2019; Dawson and Sinwell 2012; Runciman 2015) – a gap that this paper aims to fill.

Learning in social movements

Learning in social movements has been theorised by Freire (1996), who conceptualises education in social movements as tending to be dialogical and collective, since educators also learn from their students, and in the process, knowledge is co-created. Education in social movements, in the final analysis, is about radically transforming social relations to attain social and economic justice for the oppressed groups. A popular education approach, as espoused by Freire, continues to be used by the Landless Workers Movement (MST), a Brazilian landless people's movement, to educate its members in the form of workshops, writing retreats and other forms of learning. The assumption of the popular education approach is that activists come to organisations with knowledge, but their skills and knowledge can be advanced by deepening their analytical, political and practical skills via ensuring that organisations become spaces for radical pedagogies that transform individuals and organisations for the better (Leher and Vittoria 2015). This radical pedagogical approach to popular education is not without contradictions. It is possible for middle-class activists and left-wing political groupings to use this approach to advance their predetermined views and ideologies, wittingly or unwittingly undermining the views of the grassroots activists who are supposed to be their teachers in the first instance (McKinley 2016; Runciman 2015). Although social movements stand for social and economic justice, they are also composed of working-class and middle-class activists, who may have different approaches to and understandings of the direction of the struggle.

Despite the aforementioned challenges in executing radical education, this article will demonstrate to some extent that a set of transferrable basic skills, such as basic literacy and organisation of meetings and protests, as well as popular education and organisation-building skills like public speaking, helped the organisation to live on, through its former activists and employees, even after its ostensible demise. In South Africa, with few exceptions (Choudry and Vally 2017; Cooper 2005), organisational skills

such as chairing meetings, facilitating workshops, creating networks and running community projects are on the back burner when intellectuals and scholars discuss social movements; and yet, as this research will show, it is these skills, learned in a non-formal manner, that build the confidence of activists, who, in turn, use their knowledge and skills to contribute to the development of their organisations.

Radical organisations in Latin American and South Africa in the 1970s and the 1980s, ranging from trade union to community organisations, were non-formal schools operating along the lines of popular education as articulated by Freire (1996). In a similar vein, Welton (1991) points out that ‘schools of labour’ are about workers learning to do their jobs in the context of the workplace, and this is a dominant view on skills in South Africa. In other words, the formal, mainstream education system tends to conceptualise skills as education and training for the capitalist market. However, ‘labour’s schools’, as discussed by Welton (1991), refers to workers’ education that seeks to advance the interests of workers and other marginalised sections within society. Without seeking to glorify the 1980s, it must be mentioned that trade unions and community organisations became ‘schools’ in the sense that non-formal learning, provided through literacy programmes, reading groups, *siyalalas* (workshops held at night in factories), drama, poetry and other activities, taught activists organisational and conceptual skills (Cooper 2005).

Pithouse (2006) also conceptualises the organisation of *Abahlali BaseMjondolo*, a social movement of shack dwellers, as a learning space where activists learn through campaigns and struggles. Actually, education and learning activities in the form of workshops, reading groups, lectures, writing skills development and political education take place on a regular basis within social movements such as *Abahlali BaseMjondolo*. Social movements, such as the APF, *Abahlali BaseMjondolo* and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), created links with NGOs and left-wing academics and other intellectuals to facilitate a process of co-creating new knowledge, promoting learning by both social movements and intellectuals from the formal universities (McKinley 2016; Ray, Madzimbamuto, and Fonn 2012). Whilst learning in social movements is structured and organised consciously and collectively by activists, NGOs and academics, there are no certificates, formal assessments and evaluations such as examinations and tests, or graduation ceremonies. Meetings and workshops act as monitoring and evaluation processes of the performance of an organisation and its activists. Although the APF no longer exists, some activists used knowledge and skills learned from the APF to advance the ideals of the APF in newly formed organisations and campaigns. In addition, transferrable skills and knowledge gained from the APF helped former activists execute their tasks in other organisations in which they became active after the collapse of the APF. In the following sections, I will explore the process of learning within the APF through data collected in interviews with eight APF activists, who were asked to reflect on what they learned from the APF.

The rise and fall of the APF: campaigns and structures

Social movements, such as the APF, emerged because the ANC in the 1990s intensified the neoliberal agenda that was initiated by the apartheid regime in the 1980s. Working-class communities were faced with evictions, water and electricity cut-offs and poor provisioning of other basic services by local governments. What worsened the situation for

working-class communities, as also stated by Buhlungu (2004), was that organisations aligned to the ANC were not willing to organise resistance to oppose attacks on working-class communities, leading to the formation of a local organisation that initiated struggles against neoliberalism in working-class residential areas.

What propelled the formation of the APF in 2000 was the growing resistance by students, workers and working-class communities to privatisation initiatives of the City of Johannesburg and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), situated in Johannesburg. Both the city and the university were implementing various types of neoliberal restructuring reforms, which included privatisation of basic services and the outsourcing of workers, at Wits in particular. Initially, the APF was constituted by organisations aligned to the ANC and other structures independent of the ANC. The APF was not affiliated to any political formation, but accepted all those opposed to privatisation regardless of their political affiliation (Buhlungu 2004; McKinley 2016).

At its very early stage, the APF was led by middle-class activists who would often meet on Monday evenings at the Johannesburg headquarters of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). This excluded many activists who lived in working-class areas that had poor access to transport, and it was subsequently changed by democratising decision-making in the organisation. Resources were mobilised to ensure that meetings were held during the day on Saturdays and Sundays, and activists from communities were provided with financial support for food and transport, as many of them were unemployed. To sustain itself, the APF relied on donations from individuals and NGOs. As the APF intensified its struggles against evictions and privatisation, it became clear that the affiliates who were aligned to the ANC were pressured by the ANC leadership and its allies to leave the APF a year after its formation. Subsequently, in June 2003, COSATU evicted the APF from its headquarters, signalling a further distancing of COSATU from the consistent struggles against privatisation waged by the APF (Buhlungu 2004).

The departure of organisations aligned to the ANC was accompanied by the entry of other independent community organisations involved in campaigns against evictions and privatisation in Gauteng province. This meant that the APF had to re-energise its structures in order to maintain resistance and support more communities facing evictions and other social injustices. The APF had become a working-class organisation, operating on mandates from structures consisting largely of activists from working-class communities; however, this is not to say that they had no influence on the organisation. The APF was not based on individual membership, but on organisational affiliation. In 2008, the APF had 30 working-class, community-based affiliates in Gauteng, with about 6000 members in total, as well as 100 members of political groups and middle-class activists who participated as individuals (Dale McKinley, 17 June 2021, email communication).

Funding was sourced from international and local donors, enabling the APF to co-ordinate struggles in Gauteng, albeit with some constraints. The democratically elected executive committee was a very small core composed of five activists, who were responsible for the daily running and management of the organisation. The full-time organiser and administrator were paid officials, accountable to the Executive Committee which made up the leadership of the organisation. Sub-committees such as those concerned with education, research, media, housing and labour had co-ordinators who were

responsible for ensuring that activists and community structures participated in designing programmes. The work of the APF was, to a very large extent, driven by a programme of action adopted in its co-ordinating committee largely comprised by its affiliates from communities and other structures. This is the structure that was central in formulating demands, which included an end to electricity and water cut-offs and evictions; free basic water, health, electricity, education and housing for all; cancelling all service-related arrears in working-class communities; an end to unfair labour practices in jobs; and community participation in policy formulation and implementation. The APF became the 'home of struggle' in the sense that the programme of action involved the use of popular education for affiliates and communities, marches to offices of government, media work involving community activists, and organisational and individual skills development. Although most of the activities were led by middle-class activists, attempts were made to deliberately develop a layer of community activists who were able to assume organisational and intellectual leadership of the organisation (McKinley 2016; Runciman 2015). In 2003, struggles for access to water were given a boost when the APF and other organisations formed the Coalition Against Water Privatisation (CAWP), which sought to unite communities, NGOs and academics who were fighting the intense privatisation of water and the installation of pre-paid water meters in some working-class areas in the south of Johannesburg (Buhlungu 2004).

From 2001 up to its demise in 2007, the APF used international events, such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and the World Social Forum (WSF), to highlight the plight of working-class people in South Africa and pledge solidarity with other oppressed communities globally. In the same period, the APF also became a leading organisation in networks and campaigns that sought to bring together organisations fighting against xenophobia and social injustice in general. However, gender was not on the agenda of the organisation, leading to some women activists organising women in the APF. After a series of discussions, in 2007 a platform formulated by women in the APF emerged, and one of its aims was to support women activists in the APF (McKinley 2016).

By 2005, it became clear that the organisation was faced with an internal organisational crisis resulting from too much emphasis on political and ideological debates, led largely by middle-class activists, at the expense of building community struggles. This was accompanied by the organisation paying attention to large events, international trips for leading activists and media coverage. There was also the view that left-wing political groups in the APF were using the organisation and its resources to build their work structures and strengthen their dominance in the APF. On the other hand, those groupings felt that their activities were about building the APF and contributing to its 'ideological clarity'. Some affiliates of the APF were also experiencing internal 'fractures' and division, which were often caused by personalities and leadership styles. Parallel to that, and something that was never interrogated comprehensively by the APF, was the fact that only a tiny minority of activists of the APF were employed. Resources of the APF and participation in the APF were seen as a source of income by many unemployed activists. This manifested itself in the inflation of prices for transport and events, and the pocketing of organisational funds for personal needs. As the crisis in the APF deepened, many middle-class activists simply left the organisation for 'greener pastures', and largely focused on their academic careers and NGO work. Probably only two middle-class

activists who were also leaders of the APF remained as leaders, until they had to leave after the organisation was ‘captured’ in 2010 by some individuals who were interested in its resources. The new office bearers could not sustain the organisation, leading to its eventual collapse a few months afterwards. The collapse of the organisation happened in a context where community protests were becoming common, and this meant that the internal focus of the organisation undermined any possibility of connecting with these protests (Runciman 2015).

The APF as a space for learning

The analysis of the interview reveals that ex-activists identify two key areas of learning in the APF: the sphere of political and analytical learning, and the sphere involving the development of transferable skills, such as basic literacy, digital literacy and media skills, debating and organising.

Political and analytical lessons are those key learnings that assist activists in gaining new knowledge and political insight that can be useful in better understanding the tasks of building radical organisations in the future (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2008). Regarding political lessons learned in the APF, Dale McKinley, a founding activist of the APF and a long-serving office bearer of the organisation, spoke frankly about the political lessons he learned during his activism in the APF. McKinley said:

I wrote about this on quite a number of occasions, that organising and maintaining a cohesive collective organisation was very difficult in a context where a large amount of people are very poor, and materially desperate as well. And so their situations are not stable like workers or ordinary people who might be employed, so it is very difficult to organise under those conditions. (McKinley, interview, 2021)

Concurring with McKinley’s point about class differentiation in the APF, Nina Benjamin, who was also an activist of the APF and is currently a researcher at an NGO, stated:

Ja [Yes], and I also think that speaks to some of the class positions. I can be in the APF, you know, I have got a job, I am relatively middle class, so I can struggle quite differently to someone who is unemployed and who’s got more responsibilities than me. And so it’s critical when we bring people together in the movement to acknowledge the class differences. My conditions as a middle-class person are different, but I am also opposed to privatisation. I can’t then be the person who is leading [the struggle] because of my role. What I am bringing in is quite different, and my conditions and my issues are quite different, but I am also against privatisation; I also need to recognise that my class position gives me a lot more power than other people. (Benjamin, interview, 2021)

Class differentiation was one of the main issues that was always present in meetings and activities of the APF. Middle-class activists, regardless of their colour, wielded power and influence because formal intellectual work was their preserve. They were formally and academically trained in reading, writing and public speaking. The fact that most politics is conducted in English – which is the first language for less than 10% of the population – excludes many working-class activists from public discourse even in their own organisations (Alexander 2008).

Middle-class activists, who occupied formal professional positions and lived in affluent areas, had the resources and time to conduct workshops, write organisational

positions and speak to the media on behalf of working-class communities and activists who lived in informal settlements and other working-class areas (Steyn 2016). The argument here is that middle-class activists have a role to play in any progressive struggle, but there has to be an understanding that there must be some skills transfer to ensure that community activists and members of communities become leaders and narrators of their struggle. That is precisely why the APF leadership conducted dialogical educational activities, the aim of which was to build a layer of activists who had organic links with working-class communities. Dialogical education is predicated on the epistemological assumption that new knowledge that can help strengthen collective struggles in particular is co-created by educators and activists who bring their lived experiences in the learning process. In practical terms, the learning activity is rooted in the experiences of activists, which is elaborated upon with the aid of theoretical knowledge from books, other publications and educators.

Choudry (2015) makes an important observation about class and knowledge production in social movements. Middle-class intellectuals and activists who belong to movements, Choudry (2015) posits, must not be blind to their privileges in the form of access to resources that give them power and influence in social movements. Drawing from a Freirian notion of knowledge production, which assumes that knowledge is co-created by middle-class intellectuals and those who are oppressed in the process of struggles, middle-class activists have to realise that learning is a dual process involving the co-creation of knowledge by both middle-class activists and community activists (Freire 1996). In the final analysis, the drivers of social change are those who are directly affected by social and economic oppression, such as poor rural and urban women, peasants, and workers. In other words, education and learning should be directed towards ensuring that the oppressed groups are able to speak for themselves.

To some extent, attempts were made by the APF to train activists from working-class communities and give them the confidence to speak up for their communities. Political education at the APF – which took the form of study groups, workshops, meetings and debates – tended to be based on principles of popular education or a belief that activists from communities were also sources of knowledge and that political education had to be dialogical in the sense that educators were also learning from community activists. The education programmes of the APF were often conducted in collaboration with NGOs such as Khanya College, the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) and the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC). Some of the topics covered by the APF's non-formal curricula included neoliberalism, globalisation, privatisation, electoral politics and socialism. Besides political topics, activists from working-class communities were taught reading and writing, public speaking, media skills, research skills and popular education methods. Education in movements is always riddled with contradictions, because it tends to be led by middle-class activists who may have explicit political agendas. However, this fact does not negate the view that activists from communities found political education transformative. Dipuo Segakweng, who joined the APF in 2007 and was part of a struggle against the undemocratic incorporation of Khutsong (a working-class township in the west of Gauteng) into an extremely poorly run province of the North West, had this to say about political education at the APF and its sister organisations:

As a movement I learnt that they are not just some ‘anarchist’, anti-capitalist movement but that they actually care about implementing social changes. I learnt that the struggle of the working class is a universal problem and that they [the APF] wanted to implement change by binding together other organisations that represent the interests of the working class. I learnt the value of solidarity within the class, the working class as it is. (Segakweng, interview, 2021)

At the same time, unemployment and poverty make it extremely difficult to build a dynamic movement because working-class activists have to lead the struggle in a context where they have no access to basic needs such as food, water, electricity and transport. These social and economic difficulties led some activists to inflate prices for food for workshops, transport and other activities to personally pocket some funds so that they could access food and other basic needs. This is in no way meant to condone any form of corruption in social movements. The question of the survival of activists is one of the issues that was not adequately addressed by the APF (McKinley, interview, 2021).

Another lesson mentioned by Benjamin (interview, 2021) concerns the role of women and gender struggles in the context of struggles against neoliberalism and privatisation. Benjamin elaborates: ‘I think that the unequal gender relations exist in social movements like it exists in society, and I think a social movement needs to be consistently working towards addressing its own gender relations.’

Social movements such as the APF provided black working-class women with the platform to resist water and electricity cut-offs and evictions. Because women bear the burden of social reproduction duties such as looking after members of working-class households, cooking, cleaning and providing general relative comfort to members of households, women are directly affected by a lack of service delivery and evictions. As a result, women are at the forefront of resistance when it comes to the suspension of social services. However, leading struggles against evictions, for example, did not translate into women being leaders of movements such as the APF (Benjamin 2007; Hlatshwayo 2015). Nonetheless, as women in the APF began to organise, their voices, to some extent, were heard, and some women became leaders of other organisations following internal struggles led by women in the APF. Nompumelelo Cebekhulu, who works as an assistant researcher at the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT), a University of Johannesburg-based affiliated research centre, mentioned that she learned about gender and women’s oppression in the APF. Cebekhulu explained:

The formation of Remmoho Women’s Forum, an organisation that was formed by women in the APF, was for me a progressive initiative that looked at gender-related issues. This platform was useful to me as it enlightened me about issues around gender-based violence, inequality, understanding how patriarchy affects women and the importance of unity; it dealt with issues around migrant women and many other issues I felt I was ignorant about. (Cebekhulu, interview, 2021)

Besides the explicitly political curricula, the APF also positioned itself as a space for learning as practical skills. Thabang Moilola, who participated in research, writing and popular history workshops organised by Khanya College and the APF, elaborated:

I also met Khanya College through the APF and they assisted our organisation with workshops like ‘Build Your Own Organisation’ [and] leadership skills development. Khanya

College also assisted us with ‘Writing Our Own History’ workshops. These are skills I received there; I am using them [reading, research and writing skills] even today because I am now a part-time researcher, transcriber and translator. (Moilola, interview, 2021)

NGOs associated with the APF were also instrumental in transferring practical skills to activists such as Moilola. Left-wing NGOs with employees belonging and sympathetic to the APF, namely Khanya College and the Education Policy Unit (based at Wits University), designed non-formal courses on media, research and writing local histories. Most of these workshops were residential and ran over five days.

Moilola’s testimony shows that movements such as MST and the APF in particular not only provided space for their activists to analyse the land and political developments in Brazil and South Africa, respectively. In fact, workshops and other training activities of these organisations were used to develop individuals’ practical skills, to enable them to read, write, and use the Internet and email (Plummer 2008). In agreeing with the point made by Moilola’s narrative, McKinley, who also saw the APF as a platform that enabled the skills development of its individual activists, commented:

I think the issue of skills development is very, very important as you have mentioned and I have watched over the last 15–20 years as many comrades including people ... for example, if you talk to someone like Virginia Setsedi She is now a leader within civil society organisations and LGBTIQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer] organisations in particular. (McKinley, interview, 2021)

Some of the APF activists from working-class communities acquired skills that enabled them to access professional positions in government institutions, NGOs, trade unions and research organisations. According to McKinley, the intense training and skills development that took place in the APF, its subcommittees and its sister organisations helped not only to build and sharpen activists’ practical skills, but also to develop conceptual skills that enabled them to design and implement projects and campaigns in their professional capacities, after the collapse of the APF (McKinley, interview, 2021).

Where are they now?

After the collapse of a movement, activists continue with their personal, organisational and work lives. For example, activists of the BPP became academics, public intellectuals engaged in public speaking activities and politicians, among other roles (Cunningham 2020). Similarly, activists who were members of the APF affiliates drifted in different directions and became academics, NGO activists and politicians. Skills and knowledge learned from the APF, according to the activists, became useful in their current professional and activist roles.

Trevor Ngwane, now an academic at the University of Johannesburg, said:

In the academy I define myself as a scholar activist ... because there isn’t really a strong mass movement, so we are kind of doing work which we hope will prepare and support the development of a mass movement against capitalism in South Africa. So we simply conduct research and write books, but scholar activists also try and maintain their activism. So for me, for 20–30 years I was what is called a full-timer: I was working for the APF and when I stopped working for APF I was working for SECC [Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee], so I was a full-timer; but now when you are in an academy you are now a part-timer

in a sense that you squeeze your activism after lectures you know, after work. (Ngwane, interview, 2021)

The decline of the APF led to some activists deciding to join universities as academics who conduct research and teach about social movements. Ngwane outlines the challenges of being an activist scholar by stating that academics have to teach large classes and publish articles in peer-reviewed publications, obligations that limit time spent in explicit activist work. Despite the limitations noted by Ngwane, academics who were activists of the APF supported struggles waged by outsourced workers and students who were demanding free higher education and an end to outsourcing of university services at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg. Solidarity in the form of organising workshops, mobilising material resources, ‘behind the scenes’ work and taking public stances in support of students and workers in the context of struggles dubbed ‘outsourcing must fall’ and ‘fees must fall’ (Hlatshwayo 2020) were some of the activities conducted by academics who were previously activists of the APF.

The departure of many middle-class activists from the APF when the organisation was faced with internal struggles, such as the control of funds, issues related to sexual violence and other internal issues, was an indication of a lack of resilience amongst these activists. Furthermore, middle-class activists, unlike many community-based activists, have many options when organisations do not fulfil their desires. Opting out of the APF and entering the academy was one of the choices exercised by those activists who could not deal with the organisational challenges of the APF. McKinley elaborated on what he called the ‘lack of revolutionary patience when things were tough in the APF’: ‘When those criticisms came and when there was a lot of tension they ran out of the room; they were like “no, I can’t deal with this”, “I can’t deal with this anymore”, “it’s too much” ...’

Other activists focused on working for progressive NGOs advancing the rights of migrants, workers, women and other oppressed groups after the collapse of the APF. NGO work tends to be professionalised and requires technical skills such as the ability to write, report and use a computer. Teboho Mashego, a woman activist, spoke about how working for the APF, where she learned technical skills, made it easier for her to join an NGO as a professional helping to advance and defend the rights of women and migrants from other African countries. Mashego, who joined the APF during her teenage years, commented:

Now I am located with a human rights organisation. ... The APF taught me to manage an office; I learned bookkeeping; I wrote reports; I learned how to use computers. As part of a selection process, I was given a computer exercise and I excelled in it. That is why I find myself working for a human rights NGO. (Mashego, interview, 2021)

Ben Ntoloane and Moeketsi Monkhe, who founded Rekaofela Youth Development Organisation (RYDO) in 2009, were leaders of the South African Unemployed Youth Forum (SAUYF), an organisation that campaigned for youth employment in the 2000s. SAUYF was an affiliate of the APF and participated in campaigns against evictions and for access to social services. During the campaigns, young people participated in educational events that helped them to acquire writing, networking and other organisational skills (Ntoloane 2005). On its Facebook page, the RYDO clarifies its objectives: ‘Rekaofela Youth Development centre is a non-profit organisation providing developmental programmes for out-of-school youth in Sebokeng and neighbouring townships’

(RYDO 2019). Although the project has managed to secure jobs for some young people in the Vaal, the challenge is that it does not address structural issues such as unemployment and poverty, which require mass mobilisation similar to that initiated by the APF.

The General Industrial Workers Union of South Africa (GIWUSA), a union organising manufacturing and other workers in South Africa, employed as organiser one of the former activists of the APF, Siphon Magudulela, after the demise of the organisation. Magudulela spoke about skills gained from the APF and their usage in the union:

Organising is the skill I gained from the APF. I was employed by the union [GIWUSA] and became one of its effective organisers, recruiting workers belonging to big companies. Workers who had been dismissed would be re-employed, because of my ability to organise and unite workers. (Magudulela, interview, 2021)

Some of those who were activists and organisers of the APF joined the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the third largest political party in the South African parliament, when it was formed in 2013. Subsequently, two former organisers of the APF and its associated organisations became councillors and one became a member of parliament representing the EFF. Although they denied it, an accusation of rape has been levelled against the three former organisers of the APF and the organisation's partner, CAWP. This is an indication that sexual violence and gender relations are issues that definitely require explicit discussions by movements in the future, and practical steps will have to be taken to ensure that women feel safe in movements and in society (Davis 2013).

Cebekhulu, who currently works as an assistant researcher in CERT at the University of Johannesburg, highlighted the research skills she gained when she was an activist with an APF affiliate and explained that working for Khanya College helped her to build community and literacy structures in the Vaal area after the demise of the APF. Cebekhulu explained:

In my current work, as an assistant researcher, these skills are very helpful to me, because of the experience I got from the study we did in Orange Farm [a township situated in the south of Johannesburg], which was actually my first experience in research. APF had an affiliation with around 26 social movements from various places that supported each other. This was also a good exercise in terms of networking, knowing and learning about struggles from other communities; the contacts became very useful to me when I did some work with community literacy and numeracy groups in the Vaal. (Cebekhulu, interview, 2021)

Working closely with NGOs such as Khanya College, ILRIG, AIDC and other NGOs, the APF was able to produce and nurture activists who later served as resources for various organisations after the collapse of the APF. Many of these former APF activists are now working in constrained environments, such as NGOs and universities. These organisations do not provide activists with adequate space to organise and run campaigns, as was the case with the APF, which managed to have some flexibility, enabling it to co-ordinate campaigns and struggles that were not entirely constrained by funding prescripts of donors. The limitation of donor-funded NGOs – the new space in which some former activists of the APF find themselves – is that activists in these organisations tend to spend time doing work that has far less to do with campaigns and organisation. For example, they have to write funding proposals, account to the donors who have very strict reporting guidelines, and make sure that funds are spent according to project plans. On the other hand, activists at universities are kept away from mobilising and

organising by being compelled to write and publish peer-reviewed publications and teach large classes. This means that, as alluded to by academics who were activists in movements, activists in universities do not have enough time to help organise in communities and within institutions of higher learning (Glasser and Roy 2014).

Conclusion

Although the APF has ceased to exist as a formal organisation, its former activists continue to advance radical politics through various organisations and platforms. Political lessons learned from the APF have, in some ways, humbled the former activists of the APF. They now realise that building a movement that can challenge the power of the ruling ANC requires a long-term strategy driven largely by activists from working-class communities. My analysis has shown the long-term legacy of APF as a space for learning. As argued by Steyn (2016), social movements, despite claiming to be progressive, are also a microcosm where racial, class and gender discriminations that exist in society at large can be observed. This investigation of the internal dynamics faced by APF activists in terms of class, race and gender issues shows that these must be confronted by movements in the future, because there must be a direct relationship between the progressive ideas and the daily practice of activists. For example, male activists must constantly be aware of the fact that patriarchy is reproduced in movements and has to be tackled organisationally and practically.

Furthermore, APF as a learning space was not only about learning political theory on movement-building, but also about providing activists from working-class communities with education to sharpen and develop their practical skills – an important issue in the South African context where the black majority has been denied access to quality basic education. Skills gained in the APF have helped some of its former activists from working-class communities to be employed by progressive NGOs and trade unions. Although in a different context, this form of employment enabled these activists to continue to advance the ideals and goals of the APF, such as defending and advancing the rights of workers and working-class communities.

On the other hand, many middle-class activists left the organisation when it was about to collapse and became academics at universities in Johannesburg. The ease with which they were able to transition from APF activists to academics indicates that they had privileges as members of the middle class that were not accessed by or available to working-class activists from working-class communities. However, the academics who were activists of the APF continued with their activism under the constraints of the universities and linked up with the struggles of workers and students. Consistent with the argument advanced by Taylor (1989), this study demonstrates that organisations may cease to exist as formal structures, but their ideas continue to be reproduced by individual activists in different spaces. It must be conceded that the collapse of the APF was a setback, as it was regarded as the ‘home of struggle’ and was able to wage battles against privatisation and the lack of basic services. This research, in some ways, calls for social movement studies not to focus only on existing movements, as it is also important to gain a scholarly understanding of what happens to movements after they cease to exist formally. Lessons from the movements that have collapsed may help existing movements to learn from the history of those that have come before.

Note

1. A full list of interviews, giving the date and interview platform for each interviewee, is included at the end of the article, after the references.

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I dedicate this article to my late brother, comrade and mentor, Aziz Choudry, who wrote extensively on learning in social movements and passed on, untimely, in May this year. Comrade Aziz, through his writing and active participation in concrete struggles for social and economic justice, touched many souls and hearts in the United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa and the rest of the world.

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