



Social Dynamics

A journal of African studies

ISSN: 0253-3952 (Print) 1940-7874 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsdy20>

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To cite this article: Vanessa Barolsky (2012) 'A better life for all', social cohesion and the governance of life in post-apartheid South Africa, *Social Dynamics*, 38:1, 134-151, DOI: [10.1080/02533952.2012.698951](https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2012.698951)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2012.698951>



Published online: 02 Aug 2012.



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‘A better life for all’, social cohesion and the governance of life in post-apartheid South Africa

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Against the background of rising levels of anxiety around the state of the social fabric in South African society, this paper explores the disjuncture between the post-apartheid state’s policy discourse on social cohesion and the local discourses of South African residents in 24 focus groups held in townships around the country, which reveal significant levels of social fragmentation and intense contestation regarding the new regime of rights. The paper argues that the state’s policy discourse on social cohesion is part of an attempt to manage a complex social environment in terms of a project of developmental nation-state building that seeks to constitute the social domain as a normative realm of imagined homogeneity in which citizenship is premised on constitutional values. I argue that while the state’s concern with the ‘social’ relates to the critical question of solidarity in modern democracies, this has led, in the South African context, to the constitution of the social domain as a site of pathology, divorced from the broader political and economic relations of power in which this ‘pathology’ is embedded. At issue in this interaction between state and local discourses on the question of solidarity are the terms of membership in the political community. Who will and will not be part of the ‘new’ nation?

Keywords: social cohesion; solidarity; Ubuntu; biopolitics; citizenship; democracy

Introduction

In the wake of the killing of the leader of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB), Eugene Terre’Blanche, and in the weeks after the then president of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, was censured by the Johannesburg High Court for his use of the slogan ‘Kill the Boer’, President Zuma sought to reassure the nation:

Recent events have raised concerns in some quarters about social cohesion. Some people have spoken of heightened racial tension. We should not be dismissive of such concerns, and should be prepared to engage in dialogue to address them. But we must acknowledge that South Africans remain united in their support for the Constitution, the values it enshrines, and the democratic institutions it has established. South Africans are clearly committed to work together to address the legacy of our divided past. (Zuma 2010)

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In contrast to President Zuma's assertion that South Africans 'remain united in their support for the Constitution' – an assertion on which aspirations for a cohesive post-apartheid 'nationhood' are popularly premised – this paper attempts to explore the complexity of forging democratic solidarity in South Africa in a globalising postcolonial context. This is investigated here in terms of the disjuncture between the state's policy discourse of social cohesion and the 'raw' life of South African citizens (Ross 2009), as reflected in the discourses of participants in 24 focus groups that were held by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in townships in the three provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and Gauteng during 2008.

All of the focus groups took place in what would be officially defined as communities with a low living standard measure (LSM).¹ The focus groups were initially held to interrogate the contention in scholarship as well as government and policy discourse that there is a relationship between levels of social cohesion and violent crime. Focus groups therefore were conducted in two townships in each province, one with a high rate of violent crime and one with a low violent-crime rate relative to the national average as recorded by the South African Police Service (SAPS).

Focus groups were disaggregated according to gender and age.² Participants were asked a series of questions around a range of issues broadly related to the thematic of 'social cohesion', which included questions probing issues such as the nature of relationships in the area, both social and intimate, forms of collective association as well as levels of crime and violence and responses to these. The study was not intended to scientifically demonstrate causal relationships between 'strong' social cohesion and low crime rates, and vice versa, but to conduct an exploratory study on the nature of these relationships.

Although data from the focus groups did not appear to support causal relationships between crime and social cohesion, much valuable information emerged about the nature of social relationships in these communities, which is utilised in this paper to interrogate the nature of national solidarity and social cohesion. What was revealed in the study is a social life of enormous precariousness, insecurity and contestation, as the ethnographers Ross (2009), Ashforth (2005) and Hunter (2010) have also found. The grounds of sociality, in these environments, were often, literally, shifting,

In contrast, it is argued, the state seeks to 're-make' and 're-imagine' the social through the discourse of social cohesion in the image of an ultimately utopian ideal of sociality and individual agency. This discourse seeks to mediate conflict and violence in South African society through a project to build social ties and bonds based on constitutional values that will, as theorists such as Putnam (1993) and others such as Emmet (2002) have argued, act as the 'glue' that holds society together despite deepening inequality, racial and class fissures.

While the concern with social cohesion in the South African context is born of important insights regarding the significance of social relatedness and interconnection in society, it is argued here that there is a danger that this focus on 'society' as an object of analysis and site of intervention, becomes divorced from an acknowledgement of the extent to which what we call 'society' is shaped and constituted by power, and in particular the exercise and production of state sovereignty. The constitution of the social realm as a discrete entity, the sole site of social cohesion, separate from the political, economic and ideological contexts in which 'society' is

in fact located, makes it possible to constitute this domain as the major source of national ‘sickness’ and social disorder. This national ‘disorder’ thus becomes a pathology of the social rather than a ‘sickness’ fundamentally embedded in the political and economic matrices of the country. In this context, social relations are seen as both autonomous and causal in their own right, i.e. the cause of disorder can be located in the abstracted realm of ‘society’ separate from state, government and economy (Wolfe 1982, p. 9).

This constitution of the social, and increasingly the ‘individual’, as the source of ‘pathology’ creates a form of epistemological violence by refusing to acknowledge the conditions of structural and literal violence in which people live. In reality socio-economic conditions make the realisation of the Presidency’s ‘equal opportunity society’ as articulated in the latest National Development Plan (The Presidency 2011) largely unattainable for the majority of citizens. In this way, normative discourses around a ‘capabilities approach to development’, which can ostensibly ‘nullify such factors as gender, ethnicity, place of birth and family background, so that these do not influence life chances’ (ibid., p. 415), reproduce new forms of marginalisation.

Individuals ‘internalise a normative model of the good life and a liberal model of decency’ (Ross 2009, p. 210) and desperately seek to achieve this against enormous daily material odds. However, when they fail this is explained as a consequence of individual failure, which does not ‘acknowledge the erosion of the grounds on which social worlds are built, or how they are shaped by historical processes’ (ibid., p. 207). Thus, the constitution of the ‘social’ as a realm discrete from power leads to a fundamental de-politicisation of the conditions of life in post-apartheid South Africa by positing the problem as one of individual and social pathology. While structural and historical disadvantage is recognised rhetorically, the actual impact of these factors in shaping the ontological conditions of life and possibilities for ‘self-making’ and ‘self-empowerment’ are not recognised in state policies. Paradoxically, this casting of the problem in terms of the individual is in fact a deeply political move, which seeks to recast the social itself in terms of the global discourse of neo-liberalism in which all social relations are ‘economised’ and ‘rationalised’.

At stake in these discourses around the social are in fact the terms of a political community founded on the principle of solidarity, or ‘fraternity’, which has been one of the conditions of modern democracy since the time of the French Revolution. As Chipkin, drawing on the work of Derrida, observes, what marks the French Revolution is the transformation of the *populace* of the nation as a simple datum living within a particular territory into a *people* bound together other as a fraternity (Chipkin 2007, p. 203). Etienne Balibar argues that:

The very essence of politics is at stake, since politics is not a mere ‘superstructure’ above the social and natural conditions of life, communication, and culture. The true concept of politics already concerns the very possibility of a community among humans, establishing a space for encounter, for the expression and dialectical resolution of antagonisms among its various constitutive parts and groups. (Balibar 2001, p. 18)

Crucially, the principle of the sovereignty of ‘the people’ introduces a critical uncertainty into democratic systems, which requires a constant process of definition and redefinition of the boundaries of ‘the people’ in whom sovereignty will be vested,

based on a distinction between ‘us and them’, bare life (excluded from the *polis*) and political life, which ‘has to redefine and purify itself continuously according to exclusion, language, blood and territory’ (Agamben 2000, p. 32.3). The question then is who will and will not be included in the new South African polity and in the definition of the ‘new’ South African people? Will the lives of the residents who participated in the focus groups run by the HSRC remain constituted as bare life, disempowered and ostensibly ‘marginal’ to society but in fact critical to its reproduction through for example the provision of cheap labour?

Methodology

The methodology utilised here attempts to expose the production of knowledge about the domain of the social in terms of the concept of social cohesion as deeply implicated in processes of power and in particular the exercise and constitution of state sovereignty. This is achieved by counter-posing formal political discourse with the ‘informal’ discourses of focus group participants. In order to understand how the construction of knowledge about the social produces power, this paper seeks to locate this production of knowledge about the social in relation to its external conditions of constitution. This is a post-apartheid project of nation building and practical governance, which seeks to establish a social cohesiveness and homogeneity that will both reflect this reified nation and actively facilitate its practical governance.

The analysis of government discourse here relies substantively on policy documentation produced by the Presidency’s office in South Africa. Although a more detailed examination of the totality of government discourse and practice is required, the policy documents produced by the Presidency are crucial instruments used by the state to set the political and social agenda for the nation it seeks to build. These policy documents are used as a central reference point for understanding high-level conceptualisations of the state’s nation-building project.

On the other hand, the analysis of the discourses of township residents in the focus groups conducted by the HSRC around social relatedness and connection, seeks to free what Michel Foucault has called ‘subjugated knowledges’, in particular ‘popular knowledges’ (Foucault 2003 [1976], p. 80), which refuse the totalising discourse of the state. The focus group as a tool to access the domain of social relations is clearly an imperfect instrument. The stratification of focus groups according to categorical attributes such as gender and age can lead to the reification of certain types of social relations, freezing them within the framework of an orchestrated 90-minute conversation between participants. In addition, as the HSRC focus-group sessions were transcribed and translated from a variety of languages there is no doubt that many subtleties of interaction were lost during this process.

Despite these limitations, however, focus groups do make it possible to access, however crudely, processes of interaction between group participants that remain inaccessible through other methodologies such as individual interviews. By placing an ‘issue’ in front of a group of people for ‘focused’ discussion, such as, in this case, social relations within the particular communities in which participants live, a double relatedness is created, where participants reflect on social relations in their community in direct interaction with other focus-group participants. What is exposed in these interactions are critical moments of both consensus and discord

that reveal much about participants' experience of social relations in their community, either explicitly articulated or implied in structures of thought.

Moments of spontaneous consensus among focus group participants make critical points of social tension explicit and tangible. For example, older women in Nyanga collectively exclaimed 'We are not in good terms because of our children, we are also quarrelling and fighting because of our children' and young men's exasperated collective denial of rape in another focus group. Discussions on other topics such as the merits of violent punishment elicit contestation among young men but concordance among older men. Recurring phrases across focus groups evoke symbolic motifs about the state of the social fabric ('there is no truth in our community'), or the quality of social relations (crime is done by people who 'know your moves'), or the ubiquitous motif of 'jealousy', which signs a world of fierce competition. Repetitive stereotypes about women as the source of 'social disorder' evoke relations of power and the fear of power potentially lost. The tenor of interaction in focus groups elucidates modes of social relation: young women's shy pauses and hesitations contrast with the brash bravado of young men boasting of their exploits. The gathering of older people evokes historical memories of apartheid and of changing contemporary social relations, the past in relation to the present. The 'future' shimmers variously 'bright' and 'bleak' in the words of both young and old.

Therefore while the state attempts to economise and instrumentalise the domain of the social in a project of developmental state building, South African residents grapple with the uncertainties and challenges as well as the hopes for a 'better life for all', promised by the advent of democracy in 1994. At the same time the advent of democracy and the introduction of a rights regime has introduced new expectations of the state in terms of its role in the 'governance' of not only the state but of life itself, which leads to critical disappointments when the state fails to deliver a 'decent' quality of life. What these focus groups reveal is an intense contestation over how life is to be lived in post-apartheid South Africa, expressed particularly in tensions over the regime of rights and its impact on daily life in conditions of lack and deprivation. As a focus group participant argued, 'in our new society we have a new challenge of democracy where talk are things like human rights and children's rights' (older men, Nyanga 2008).

The governance of life

This article explores the way in which the state is responding to these problems and complexities of 'life' through the deployment of the concept of social cohesion. The discourse of social cohesion conceptualises the social realm as a normative domain, which can be diagnosed as 'sick' and in need of curative intervention on a variety of levels from the moral to the economic. For example, one of the first major studies on social cohesion commissioned by the Department of Arts and Culture on behalf of the Social Cluster of Cabinet in 2004, framed its analysis as a discussion of the 'social health of the nation' (The Presidency 2004, p. i).

This 'curative' intervention in the social realm is far from neutral and can be understood as a technique of governmentality, a way of arranging 'the correct disposition of things' (Foucault 1991, p. 93) for the most economic and effective government. As Foucault has argued, what marks modern government is a new concern with the management of life as part of the art of statecraft, what he terms

‘biopolitics’, a politics that is not merely juridical but also concerns ‘the concrete ways in which power penetrates subjects’ very bodies and forms of life’ (cited Agamben 1998, p. 5). In biopolitical government, the concern of the state is not merely administration, but extends to include government of all aspects of social life, including the way in which people ‘govern’ themselves. The aim is to ‘introduce economy and order from the top of the state down through all aspects of social life’ (Rabinow 1991, p. 15). In this vein a report on macro-social trends produced by the Presidency in 2006 argued that ‘state leverage should be employed where appropriate’ (The Presidency 2006, p. 99) in order to ‘restore’ normative forms of social and family life. In this way the Presidency implicitly frames rapidly changing forms of social relations as irregular and as deviating from a reified notion of the nuclear family, ‘encourag[ing] forms of social organisation at the basic level that promote social cohesion, especially better household environments and communities for the upbringing of children such as the strengthening of nuclear family households’ (The Presidency 2006, p. 99). By 2008, the state maintained that the initiatives it had undertaken in pursuit of social cohesion involved both a ‘material’ endeavour that focused on ‘human development’ as well as a ‘spiritual’ enterprise related to nation-building. The latter ‘seeks to promote pride in being South African, a sense of belonging, values, caring for one another and solidarity among South Africans’ (The Presidency 2008b, p. 42).

This governance of all aspects of social life involves two techniques, on the one hand what Foucault has called ‘totalising’ forms of power, which render the social ‘knowable’ in an unprecedented way through statistics and demographics, for example, as well as a particular disciplinary relationship with citizens themselves. Citizens are made subject through, for example, their organisation and control within institutional settings such as the school, prison and so on. Critically also individuals subjectify *themselves* within a social regime, which specifies what is ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’. This leads individuals to bind themselves to an identity ‘by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (Rabinow 1991, p. 21).

Thus individuals take responsibility for managing themselves in the most ‘economic’ manner in the modern state, and particularly the neo-liberal state, which seeks to constitute the social domain as an economic realm. As Lemke argues (2001, p. 20), ‘The key feature of the neo-liberal rationality is the congruence it endeavours to achieve between a responsible and moral individual and an economic-rational actor’. This individual is ‘*Homo oeconomicus*’ who is no longer simply the generic labour unit Marx envisaged but becomes his or her own form of ‘human capital’. A combination of unique individual traits, which include genetic inheritance, nutrition, schooling and skills, among others, enables the individual to become ‘the entrepreneur’ of themselves, empowered to make rational, cost-benefit analyses and decisions in all aspects of life, from the family to the professional domain (ibid., p. 199).

In the neo-liberal state, where ‘individualising and totalising forms of power’ intersect so powerfully, the political sovereignty of the state and its maintenance of social cohesion depends on the production of *Homo oeconomicus*: ‘[A] cohesive society whose citizens are well-endowed with human capital is both a goal and a driver of development. For that reason, attending to the stresses in social cohesion that have become evident needs to be given priority’ (The Presidency 2008a, p. 117). In the South African post-apartheid context, *Homo oeconomicus* is critically also a democratic subject who orders his or her moral behaviour in prudent and

responsible ways, guided by constitutional values. Foucault has argued that in the context of a modern state, it is the citizen carrying the norm in personal conscience who becomes the guarantor of the state's power and capacity to govern, rather than the punitive force of law alone. Thus the South African *homo oeconomicus* is both industrious, 'well-endowed with human capital' (Lemke 2001, p. 117) and democratic, the type of moral citizen required to build a new national democratic state. It is this type of citizen that the state needs to (re)produce for the most effective and efficient government of state and society. The critical question is how can this be done nearly two decades into a new democratic dispensation?

Managing the social through social cohesion

It is in this context that the concept of social cohesion has come to the fore in South African policy discourse as a way to manage the social and produce the types of citizenship required in the post-1994 context. Following the 2004 report commissioned by the Social Cluster of Cabinet, the 2006 Presidency report on macro-social trends provided evidence of the significance being accorded to the concept of social cohesion in government thinking. The report looked at the impact of inequality, unemployment, rapid migration and changing family structures on the networks of cohesion and trust between people and the social consequences of these rapid changes. The report argued that these factors led to 'low levels of mutual respect, common decency, social solidarity and other behaviours that reflect a spirit of community' (The Presidency 2008b, p. 43). It further argued that 'social fragmentation at the level of communities' – among the poor – was the main constraint to 'social cohesion and nation-building efforts' (ibid., p. 43). In response to this lack or absence the Presidency posits the restoration of 'social cohesion', although it acknowledges in its 'Fifteen Year Review' that 'a comprehensive and integrated approach to enhancing social cohesion' still has to take shape (The Presidency 2008a, p. 82).

What however, is social cohesion? How can the domains of sociality it refers to be defined, mapped and intervened upon? Policy and research³ in South Africa has defined social cohesion in unambiguously positive terms. The 2004 study commissioned by the Social Cluster of Cabinet defines social cohesion as, 'the extent to which a society is coherent, united and functional, providing an environment within which its citizens can flourish' (The Presidency 2004, p. i). By 2008, the definition of social cohesion had taken on a more instrumental tone, linking it directly to the needs of a developmental state, in which 'it is vital for effective state action in conditions which might require trade-offs' (The Presidency 2008a, p. 103).

Genealogy of social cohesion

The use of the concept of social cohesion as a response to social fragmentation in the South African context has undoubtedly been influenced by international thinking and policy developments around the concept. Social cohesion has gained increasing traction since the new millennium as a response to the fragmenting effects of globalisation and neo-liberal economic development in key policy institutions around the world. These include organisations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU), the World Bank and the Club of Rome as well as the Canadian Federal government (The Presidency

2004, p. iii). Social cohesion as it has developed internationally draws on a Durkheimian tradition that seeks to conceptualise how to restore order in contexts of flux and transition. It tends to posit solidarity in the realm of social values as a response to social disorder. More specifically it emphasises the importance of *consensus* on values, rather than recognising fundamental conflicts of interest such as class divisions. No doubt this inflection was influenced by the ‘third way’ thinking that dominated international policy discourse at the time of the development of the concept. This ‘consensus-based’, ‘post-political’ vision emerged at the end of the Cold War, which ostensibly ushered in a period where consensus-based politics was possible, primarily as a result of the global hegemony of neo-liberalism.

The Presidency’s ‘Fifteen Year Review’ attests to the difficulties of forging this ‘consensus’-based society in a context of deepening inequality, rapid social change and intense competition. This is interpreted in the South African context as a ‘caring’ society, informed by the African philosophy of *ubuntu*:

There is a need to more effectively focus on the tension between, on the one hand, the values of solidarity and caring, which define the kind of society we are seeking to build and, on the other, the assertive individualism that emanates from a competitive economic and social system. Militating against social cohesion are values and attitudes generated both by the possibilities of rapid acquisition of wealth for those who occupy positions of power or influence and also by the stressful conditions of extreme poverty among the marginalised. (The Presidency 2008a, p. 118)

This ‘tension between the values of a caring society and those generated by an economic system that rewards competitive behaviour’ (ibid., p. 106) lies at the heart of the contradiction that the state faces in its ‘management of life’. South Africans themselves are grappling with this contradiction in their own processes of subjectification within the post-apartheid state, which requires of them a series of normative values and dispositions oriented towards the constitution, while the conditions of life remain brutal and the economy continues to be a domain of vicious competition for small advantage. How in this context to become a ‘caring’ citizen?

The tensions which the state refers to in the Fifteen Year Review recall, in many ways, the dilemmas faced by German *Ordo*-liberalism⁴ in the immediate post-Second World War context. This was a context that was defined, as in South Africa, by the need to *create* a state based on the principles of economic liberty rather than to limit an extant state and secure a realm of unfettered economic liberty, which was classic liberalism’s primary concern. For the *Ordo*-liberals the conditions for the market can only be achieved through direct political intervention. Social policy (*Gesellschaftspolitik*) becomes crucial for creating the environment in which the market can function effectively.

While *Ordo*-liberalism, like later forms of neo-liberalism, sought to economise social relations through the spread of ‘enterprise’, it saw the economic and social realms as operating in terms of two different rationalities, in which the social offsets the worst effects of capitalist competition. This is a society characterised by a core ambiguity, working both for and against the market, ‘a society that compensates for the market in the realm of values and existence’ (Foucault 2008, p. 242). *Vitalpolitik* (vital policy), like South Africa’s policies around social cohesion, was the social policy introduced to meet Germany’s needs for both an effectively functioning market economy and social integration. The fragmenting effects of competition would be countered by a ‘political and moral framework’ that would ensure ‘a community

which is not fragmented' and 'guarantee competition between men who are naturally rooted and socially integrated' (Röpke cited in Foucault 2008, p. 243).

Critically, however, in contemporary South Africa, the state's efforts to counter the fragmenting effects of capitalist competition through a social policy focused on values are shot through with contradiction. The post-apartheid state has inherited from the colonial project a bifurcated conception of the individual as both communitarian,⁵ i.e. loyal to the collective whole, and simultaneously as the autonomous individual agent of the liberal imagination, which it is paradoxically re-inscribing in its own governance of the post-apartheid state. It thus expects its citizens to be both 'caring' and steeped in the communitarian values of *ubuntu*,⁶ as well as being 'self-motivated' economic rational actors. However the actual conditions which could support either a communitarian ethos or the economic rational actor are in fact under severe strain in a context of rapid transition, migration and globalisation. These factors on the one hand damage the networks of interdependency that underpin a communitarian ethos and simultaneously close off opportunities for economic advancement and in particular employment, which make possible the economic rational actor.

'Are we building our nation here in Shoshanguve?'

Unfortunately, we lack too much on that account. (young men, Shoshanguve 2008)

The focus groups conducted by the HSRC reveal a complex and difficult engagement with the values, ethos and ontology of both liberalism and communitarianism in a rapidly changing political economy marked by the paradox of rising inequality and the structural violence of economic exclusion, combined with access to new liberal political freedoms and the impact of globalisation. This both produces and is shaped by an environment of 'insecurity that shapes all else' (Ashforth 2005, p. xiv). As one focus-group respondent explained, 'Nowadays, even when you leave your home you are prepared for anything, you are even ready that you might not even come back home to your family. But when you leave you don't say I will not come back, you just say I will, you see?' (older women, Shoshanguve 2008).

While the law stands at the centre of the liberal imaginary as a principle of universality, neutrality and fairness, in fact in South Africa, 'everyday injustices have to be suffered without reference to a meaningful idea of Law standing above all' (Ashforth 2005, p. xii). In the narratives of focus-group respondents the state and in particular its institutions of justice appear as corrupt, antagonistic, lazy and drunk, 'eish, the people working for the government there is something in them that is not good. They do not want to help ... eish there is poison [a problem] there' (young women, Shoshanguve 2008). The police are 'wrong, they are doing wrong things' (young women, Atteridgeville 2008).

However, as social anthropologist Lars Buur (2006, p. 4) has argued, difficult engagements with the law are not only the consequence of the failures of the *application* of the law but is also a critique of the 'moral and ethical foundations of the law' and the assertion of an 'alternative moral and ethical framework around the control of women and youth, thus challenging the foundation of human rights and the state's monopoly on violence by applying corporal punishment'. While state discourse envisages a society based on context-transcending universal human rights

mediated and enforced through law (an essentially juridical conception of sociality), communities themselves engage in complex mediations and appropriations of the discourse of rights, particularly in relation to the overturning of generational and gendered hierarchies, which the rights discourse appears to imply.

Frequently it is the body, particularly the gendered as well as the youthful body, which is the site of these contestations, as well as the site where these contestations are policed through violence in various forms of 'disciplinary' practice, whether the beating of children, the rape of women or violence against the transgendered other.⁷ This authority structure therefore stands outside state law and is policed with private violence, 'the real parents were our grandparents who could use corporal punishment' (older men, Shoshanguve 2008).

In a society like this, the place of the subject is defined in terms of a predetermined hierarchy, particularly based on gender and generational divisions, rather than individual volition and self-making. These are not contractual relationships between equal legal subjects, as the state envisages in its efforts to legally govern relationships between parent and child, man and woman; but are bond relationships 'embodied in inequality' (Van Zyl 1990, p. 7) and include the 'right to violence in the interests of nurture' (ibid., p. 9). The attempt to apply state law and in particular the 'law of rights' to the bond relationship is seen as having unleashed unnatural forms of social disorder: 'When we were growing up it was tough because of apartheid but at least there was order, discipline and respect' (older women, Atteridgeville 2008).

As Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) has pointed out, postcolonial liberalism relies on a binary opposition between the autological subject (autonomous, self-determining) and the genealogical society of the past (where the subject is bound by various types of inheritances and hierarchies). The autological *subject* of the present is constructed in opposition to the genealogical *society* of the past, which is posited as a realm of social constraint and 'tradition'. However, the lived socialities of communities such as those in South Africa demonstrate a far more complex form that is at once lived through a collective sociality of obligation and kinship but which at the same time contests the genealogical society that this 'community' implies through the appropriation of the discourse of individual rights, often in strategic deployments. Thus young people declare their 'right to consume', and young women assert 'the right' to have multiple partners (Hunter 2010). As Hunter argues, 'South Africans always exceed this tradition/rights binary in revealing ways' (ibid., p. 9).

While women may deploy the discourse of rights to assert new spaces of autonomy and self-making, the focus groups canvassed here attest to the vehement defence of gender hierarchies, precipitated by these assertions of rights. As one focus group participant put it, 'We also have the problem in which women are in this affirmative action in which results in lot of problems because they think that they are bosses of the whole world' (older men, KwaMashu 2008). There are attempts, particularly by older men, to re-assert modalities of 'decency' and respectability related to the place of women in the home. 'Women have lost the respect for the community they no longer respect themselves, they drink and act recklessly' (older men, KwaMashu 2008). Women are also widely blamed for the loss of control over children: 'mothers are the ones that spoil kids because you will find that a kid smokes even if it is a girl. The mother will not tell the father, she will keep it until the child is totally out of control' (older men, Shoshanguve 2008).

On the other hand, particularly among younger men, there are aggressive declarations, which attempt to dispute the integrity of women's assertions of their 'rights' to sexual autonomy and bodily integrity. A group of young men in Atteridgeville exclaimed in relation to a discussion of rape in the township, 'Hai you, there's no such [talking among themselves]. There's no rape here "wena" [you]. These people agree "is maar net" [is just that] these girls ...' (young men, Atteridgeville 2008). Both older and younger men concur that women in their immediate social circles are making 'false' claims of rape. In a context where more and more women are acquiring more than one partner to meet different material and emotional needs, women are seen as brazenly exploiting their relationships for material gain by making false claims of rape in order to blackmail men. Thus, rape in local communities is not 'actual rape' (young men, Atteridgeville; older men, Shoshanguve 2008). 'Real rape is the one you read in the papers' (older men, Shoshanguve 2008).

As Hunter has argued, intense gendered conflict, what he calls 'structural distrust' between genders, has been precipitated by rapid changes in the political economy, which have led to a 'generational shift' from 'mostly men earning a living and supporting a wife to many men and women making a living in multifarious ways' (Hunter 2010, p. 5). Unemployment's destabilisation of gendered expectations has driven 'what can be only described as extreme levels of hostility between men and women' (*ibid.*, p. 131).

While state law is seen as 'interfering' in relationships of intimacy in the realm of the private, it is also seen as an intruder in the 'public' domain, particularly in relation to the policing of social bonds based on a communitarian as opposed to legal ethic. As Hund and Koto-Rammopo have noted in their study of justice in the township of Mamelodi:

punishment and the resolution of disputes will lay emphasis upon law as expressing the will and traditions of the community. There is no distinction between legal and moral issues. ... The person at the bar of judgment is there, in principle, as a whole man, bringing with him his status, occupation, and the entire history of all his social relations. Justice is substantive and is directed to a particular case in a particular social context and not to the creation of a general rule or precedent. Punishment, as Foucault has stressed, is a social drama, symbolising the awesome power of the group over the individual – there is a sharp dichotomy of reconciliation and *outlawry*. (Hund and Koto-Rammopo 1983, p. 201, original emphasis)

While Hund and Koto-Rammopo were writing during the 1980s, ongoing and pervasive challenges to security in everyday life in post-apartheid South Africa – and the apparent impotence of an overarching state law to mitigate this insecurity – continue to lead to enactments of justice oriented to the protection of increasingly parochial communities. In this context, the law of the state is not the law of the people, 'when gangs attack one of our friends we group ourselves to discipline them, but according to *South African Law* we are regarded as people who are taking law into own hands' (older men, Nyanga 2008, my emphasis).

The rapid movement of people to the urban areas, a process which began with the introduction of reform measures by the apartheid state in the 1980s, but which has accelerated since 1994 and has been exacerbated by the opening up of South Africa's borders to immigrants from the continent, has generated a variety of forms of defensive 'othering' in increasingly parochial terms as residents attempt to define and locate the source of threat and disorder. 'Foreigners' are widely blamed for

crime and drugs; 'I think if all these foreigners could be deported, our situation would improve because it is not safe any more in our community. There is too much crime' (older women, Atteridgeville 2008).

However, 'foreigners' are not the only boundary against which the other is constructed. In the Western Cape, the influx of people from the Eastern Cape has caused tensions as informal settlements have rapidly expanded. This influx has disturbed long-established patterns of sociability that previously existed between people from 'the Location', who are 'like family' (older women, Langa 2008). Tensions arise between 'Cape borners', those born in Cape Town, and people who have migrated from the Eastern Cape, "'Cape borners" usually refer to Eastern Cape people as *amagoduka* [people who are in the cities because of employment purposes] and *amaqaba* [uneducated people]' (young women, Nyanga 2008). Migrants from the Eastern Cape are accused of 'making us lose our jobs as they accept cheap wages' (young men, Nyanga 2008) and of taking unfair advantage of housing allocation in the township.

In this unanchored environment, the 'criminal' functions as a metaphor for various forms of social disorder and becomes the alibi against which the boundaries of the community can be defined (Hansen and Stepputat 2005, p. 15). This 'bare life', outside law, can be killed with impunity: 'Now, there are vigilante groups, they meet night times to look around for whoever is robbing night time, if they find one, they take their guns and shoot them' (older men, Nyanga 2008). State law is seen as 'interfering' in the defence of community. 'Residents decided to do community patrols, but were stopped by police, since they would kill a person found committing crime, but they really helped reduce crime in the area. It was peaceful in the community when they were in operation' (young women, Langa 2008).

The community therefore 'coheres' not in 'caring' forms of solidarity as envisaged by the state but in immediate defence of its 'life', both literal and metaphoric, 'The community is united because when they hear a scream the community comes in numbers even though they take the law into their own hands to protect each other' (older women, KwaMashu 2008). While the community adheres in defence against 'the criminal', these solidarities appear to be fleeting responses to danger. Generally life is characterised by 'too much competition' (older women, Atteridgeville 2008). Residents lament a lack of 'care' and 'cooperation' (older women, Atteridgeville 2008).

Whereas the state envisages forms of caring based on the communitarian ethos of *ubuntu*, the ontology of *ubuntu* has a darker underside which Ashforth (2002, p. 123) has extensively investigated in terms of a 'paradigm of witchcraft', which assumes that people have capacities for causing harm to others by supernatural means. In this world, the power of witchcraft relates to the intimacy of community. People who are affected are generally believed to be in an intimate relationship with the perpetrators, 'lovers, relatives, neighbours, schoolmates and workmates top the list of usual suspects' (ibid., p. 126).

This has led to what Ashforth calls 'a presumption of malice in community life' that supplements another more sinister dimension to the principle of interdependence underlying the philosophy of *ubuntu*, that a 'person is only a person through other persons' with the rider 'because they can kill you' (Ashforth 2005, p. 1). This does not mean that people in general openly accuse each other of witchcraft but that the belief in the potential of underlying malice in community life is a constant subtext to everyday life.

Knowledge of witchcraft is borne on the intimate circuits of gossip and its prime motivation is envy and jealousy. Envy and jealousy are based on comparison between those in relatively close connection with each other in social networks. In the 'world of witches' it must be assumed that those who are jealous, have the power to do serious harm. Thus misfortune is not the result of random chance but is the consequence of the malicious intent of others, generally in intimate relation to the victims, who deploy invisible forces to harm them. In the post-apartheid context, which promises a 'better life for all' but which has in fact delivered rising levels of inequality and continued poverty, witchcraft has become a key interpretive framework to make sense of this continued social injustice, in which it is asserted that 'we are being held back and are suffering because of other people's malice' (Ashforth 2005, p. 96). In other words, those who do achieve are maliciously preventing others around them from achieving similar success.

Thus in contrast to the 'caring' society that the state envisages and attempts to create, the world that emerges from these focus groups evidence all the hallmarks of a society under significant strain. Severe overcrowding in townships and informal settlement breeds suffocating and malicious, rather than caring, forms of sociability: 'There is a lot of gossip and there is no privacy. Everyone knows about everyone's life. Houses here are built close to each other, so some don't get along because of gossip. ... What you do in your own yard is known by everybody' (young women, Soshanguve 2008). Jealousy, the motive force for witchcraft and malicious harm, permeates social relationships. People steal from each other because they are 'jealous' (older women, Atteridgeville 2008). Neighbours don't get along because '[t]hey are very jealous of what others have' (young men, Atteridgeville 2008). Those who achieve are not celebrated but regarded with suspicion: 'They become jealous if you are progressing. They say you think you are better than others. They don't appreciate or congratulate your success' (young men, KwaMashu 2008). 'YA!!! Jealousy, we don't want other people to succeed, we don't want to be beaten by others who do better than us' (young women, Atteridgeville 2008).

Jealousy and competition have been exacerbated by a decline in the solidarity generated during the period of resistance to apartheid. 'Before 1994, we had one common goal that bind us all which was to do away with apartheid government, after 1994 we were faced with challenges such as drugs and lack of infrastructure' (older men, Nyanga 2008). Previous networks of sociability have dissipated: 'The times have changed and the people have changed like we used to have the neighbours checking on each other after a storm or something but not any more' (older men, KwaMashu 2008).

In a post-apartheid environment where failure to achieve material success is increasingly being socially framed and subjectively internalised as the consequence of individual failure, to show poverty is to expose personal failure and to shame oneself. People, who are living in environments of close physical proximity and dense networks of neighbourly surveillance are particularly vulnerable to such public shame. Therefore every effort is made to maintain appearances and adhere to social norms in order to remain part of 'decent' society. As one young man put it, 'The way I see it people here do not live their *real* life. They are too boastful even if they struggle' (young man, Atteridgeville 2008, original emphasis). 'The majority just live okay and they don't show that they are suffering. They pretend like they are okay. They are too proud to show that they are unemployed and that they don't have money. They don't want people to undermine them' (young women,

Shoshanguve 2008). However, maintaining appearances can cut one off from networks of support: 'Pride kills us' (young women, Shoshanguve 2008).

For young men in particular, consumer goods, gained either legally or illegally, are overt markers of success, providing access to 'status' and 'style'. As a young man in Atteridgeville explained, 'People here are very competitive they want to be seen [show off]. They like expensive brands' (young men, Atteridgeville 2008). Deborah Posel (2002, p. 16) has noted, in relation to the particular form that modernity has taken in post-apartheid South Africa, the significance of accumulation as a 'marker of social advancement and improvement, as much as a goal and accomplishment in itself'. In this context consumption becomes, 'an affirmation of life and marker of progress' (ibid., p. 17).

If consumption is an affirmation of life, what then of those who do not have the power to consume? Relationships become increasingly instrumental. While 'everybody wants to have money', most are unemployed, 'and the only short cut to reach there is to commit criminal act' (young men, KwaMashu 2008). Suren Pillay (2008) and Nthabiseng Motsemme (2007) have both noted the 'philosophy' of *ukuphanda*, essentially a strategy of survival used by both young men and women in urban townships to secure some of the basic conditions of life, often through illegal or 'unconventional' means. As a young man in Nyanga township explained, 'The majority of people are unemployed in Nyanga, so, there is generally high rate of unemployment and that also make youth resort on *ukuphanda*, a term associated with activities like robbery and stealing in order to make living' (young men, Nyanga 2008).

For young men *ukuphanda* is integrally bound up with notions of masculinity, which valorises young men who 'make a plan', acquire cash and goods and are able to distribute them to family and girlfriends. It marks them as 'independent' in an environment where employment as a marker of the transition to adulthood is unlikely. Young women *phanda* by shoplifting but also by utilising sexual relationships to extract material benefits from their partners (Motsemme 2007, p. 389). In this context relationships become utilitarian, 'The attitude here is "if you don't have a car I don't mix with you". ... People here only like to be around people who can help them with something' (young men, Atteridgeville 2008).

This is not a social realm that will mitigate the worst excesses of the market, but a world that actively perpetuates and reproduces its norms and values. Citizens who have been structurally marginalised from the economy compete for small material advantage and relationships become increasingly economised, the market form impinging on the realm of the intimate as relationships are utilised as networks for material acquisition. As such, 'inequality becomes embodied among marginalized South Africans' (Hunter 2010, p. 4.)

Conclusion

What does this embodiment of marginalisation mean for the nation-building project in South Africa? By juxtaposing the fractured account of lived socialities with the policy discourse of the state on 'social cohesion', this paper has attempted to trouble a nation-building discourse that is itself shot through with contradiction and 'trouble'. This national discourse draws from a global discourse of neo-liberalism and attempts to inscribe this in its conceptions of South African citizenship and belonging at the same time as it strategically plucks from the lived socialities and

history of the citizens it seeks to govern, vignettes of ‘culture’, an ethos of *ubuntu*. With this material the state hopes to sew together the nation at the same time as the very grounds of sociality are shifting and slipping under the weight of the impact of global capitalism and the inequality it has engendered.

The discourse of South Africans describing their lived realities, which are included in this article, troubles the state’s nation-building discourse by briefly making visible life-worlds that are not commensurate with or reducible to the national discourse, but which in fact pose a profound challenge to a nation that would imagine itself as an expression of a homogeneous identity founded on the law, constitution and human rights. Governance in the modern era, as Foucault has decisively shown, concerns the governance and production of life itself and for this reason we need to be concerned with the way in which the state ‘states’ or speaks this life, either investing it with wealth and purpose or ‘crippling’ and ‘rotting’ it (as Povinelli [2006, p. 8] has argued of aboriginal lives in Australia).

The ‘new’ South African state was not founded on a *tabula rasa* despite the prodigious social work to divide the present from the past. Therefore, if we are to constitute the ‘new’ based on a solidarity between equals, which as Arendt (cited Butler and Spivak 2007, p. 56) and others such as Butler (Butler and Spivak 2007, p. 56) have argued is the condition of ‘freedom’, it will be necessary to find ways to engage with, rather than attempting to incorporate or normalise or create as a permanent alterity; forms of living and thinking that existed prior to the project of neo-liberal nation-state building and that continue to complicate and interrogate that project.

Notes

1. The specific townships where focus groups took place included, in the Western Cape, Nyanga township (high levels of violent crime according to SAPS statistics) and Langa township (relatively low levels of violent crime according to SAPS statistics); in Gauteng groups were held in Shoshanguve (‘high crime’) and Atteridgeville (‘low crime’) townships. Focus groups in KwaZulu-Natal were held in KwaMashu (high levels of crime) and Mbumbulu (low levels of crime).
2. The focus groups were very roughly divided into groups denoted in this paper as ‘young’ (18–25) and ‘older’ (above 25). Although these demarcations are extremely broad, particularly the above-25 category, the content of the conversations that took place in these different age groupings do evidence significant differences between the discourses of people participating in these groups, which indicate world views shaped by different age locations and therefore can be reasonably argued to verify this rough demarcation.
3. A study by Emmet defines social capital (which he appears to use interchangeably with social cohesion) as the ‘the “glue” that holds a society together, or alternatively as a “lubricant” that facilitates or eases social interactions, so that people may work together towards common goals ... the central issue is that social capital is productive in that it facilitates cooperation and makes possible the attainment of goals that could not otherwise be achieved, or at least at some cost’ (Emmet 2002, p. 11).
4. ‘The theoretical foundations for German post-war liberalism were drawn up by jurists and economists who in the years 1928–30 had belonged to the ‘Freiburg School’ or had been associated with it and later published in the journal *Ordo*’ (Lemke 2001, p. 192).
5. The concept of communitarianism is used with caution here as denoting a far more complex domain of social relations, for which this term serves as shorthand.
6. *Ubuntu*, an Nguni word, signifies an extremely complex concept, which is not easily translated into English but nevertheless has a profound impact on African ontology across the continent. It can be described as evoking a ‘communal’ or communitarian

ethic (Bohler-Muller 2005, p. 4) in which the very meaning of being human is located in one's relation to others. The essence of *ubuntu* is that an individual owes his or her existence to the existence of others. 'I am' because 'you are' and you are because 'I am'. Unlike the discourse of rights, which emphasises individual entitlement, *ubuntu* tends to emphasise mutual obligation and duty to support the welfare of the community. As Bohler-Muller has noted, its incorporation in South African constitutional discourse has made it malleable to both conservative and transformative interpretations. Its meanings continue to be a site of contestation but its deployment in nationalist discourse tends to render the concept as a homogenised, romanticised, transcendental value that signifies a 'traditional', caring and cohesive African past.

7. South Africa has one of the highest rates of reported rape in the world, recorded as 113.5 incidents per 100,000 of the population in 2002 to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Harrendorf *et al.* 2010, p. 39). While comparative statistics may be affected by higher reporting rates in South Africa than other countries, various forms of sexual violence are extremely high. In 2010/11 the South African police recorded a total of 56,272 cases of rape and sexual assault and a ratio of 132.4 incidents of sexual offences per 100,000 of the population (South African Police Service 2011, p. 10). South Africa has also been increasingly affected by violent attacks against gay South Africans, in particular by a phenomenon called 'corrective rape', usually against lesbian women, allegedly carried out to 'correct' these women's sexual orientation. In March 2011 it was reported that activists who had collected 170,000 signatures from 163 countries demanding that corrective rape be recognised as a 'hate crime' met with senior officials of the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional development who undertook to address the matter (IRIN 2011).

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