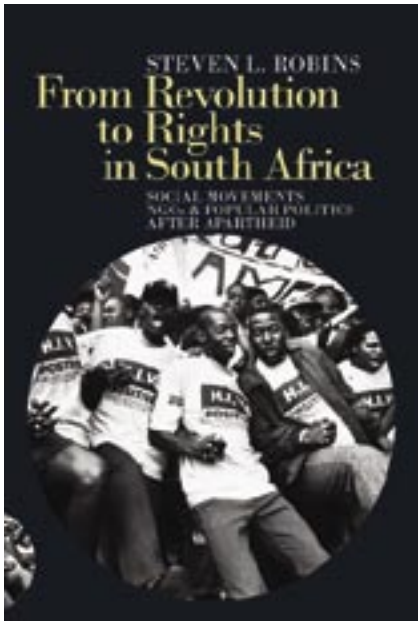


From Revolution to Rights in South Africa

Social Movements, NGOs and Popular Politics after Apartheid

Reviewed by **Ben Turok**

Steven L Robins
UKZN Press: Scottsville
2009. 208 pp



This is a remarkable and original book. Robins, a social anthropologist with a deep interest in politics, uses studies of grassroots activity and organisation to identify the dynamics of political struggle and to draw lessons which might apply to a larger arena. The analysis is based on detailed case studies from many areas of South Africa, including remote rural areas, but this reviewer is more interested in the wider issues raised.

The book starts with a discourse on Western socio-political theories which seeks to explain widespread popular alienation from formal politics, and the role of NGOs and civil society in

rights-based actions. The analysis expands to the Third World and distinguishes rights-based organisations from those that are community based. Turning to South Africa, Robins finds complex and hybrid struggles that include rights issues, community organisations and NGOs, as well as engagement with the state and its various institutions. Undoubtedly, state-society relations remain an important terrain of struggle. South African post-apartheid experiences lead to a different view of this relationship, bringing into question “the Western taken-for-granted assumptions about the individualising, fragmented and depoliticising nature of rights discourses... Instead they suggest the need for the recognition of the complex, hybrid and ambiguous relationships between civil society and the state that involve new negotiations around citizenship, identity and political subjectivity in particular contexts.”

Robins argues that the post-apartheid movements have not become docile consumer groups but retain a wider agenda. Urban and rural poor struggles “straddle multiple nodes of belonging and affiliation that could include participation in democratic programmes of nation-building, rights and citizenship, alongside membership of global social movements and/or neighbourhood gangs, anti-crime vigilante groups, religious movements and neo-traditional authority structures.” In South Africa, as in some parts of Latin America, “activists and citizens do not seem to believe that one form of political engagement (e.g. rights) should replace other forms”.

More controversially, Robins suggests that the ANC has changed from a movement driven by the liberation politics of the national democratic revolution into a promoter of liberal democracy. The problem lies in his depiction of the organisation as a “liberal modernist struggle for democratic rights that began in 1912”. A more historical view would recognise that the founding of the ANC had intrinsic values of national liberation, even if these were couched in terms of liberal democracy.

The fact is that the ANC has always placed the struggle for human rights at the centre of its objectives. When it became apparent that this struggle would require a fundamental battle with apartheid, the ANC became increasingly revolutionary in intent, ultimately positing the armed overthrow of the system. In the event, the negotiated settlement changed the terms of that struggle, but the ANC vision remains transformational and not confined to human rights alone.

The weakness of this section of the book is an almost total absence of reference to ANC documents. If Robins had consulted these more carefully, he would have found answers to the theoretical issues that bother him. Of course, it could be argued that the ANC has neglected to engage with scholars in these debates, but this does not absolve the scholars from doing the research.