ROUNDTABLE

Coffee House Conversations: Historians on the Current Moment

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Widespread civil unrest erupted in South Africa, in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, between 9 to 18 July 2021. It appeared to ensue from the incarceration of former President Jacob Zuma. Zuma was found guilty of contempt of court and sentenced to 15 months, after his failure to testify at the Zondo Commission into state corruption that occurred during his term as president. The unrest involved public violence, arson and unprecedented levels of looting. These acts were initially described as protests by Zuma supporters, but can be be understood in the bigger context of desperately high unemployment and inequality, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Finally, the army was called in to quell the violence and plundering. Approximately R10 billion rand was lost in plundered consumer goods, and vehicles and property destroyed by arson.[2] Over 3 000 people were arrested, and it is estimated that 342 people were killed during the crisis.[3]

The *South African Historical Journal* put together a panel to gain deeper perspective on these events in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng – exploring them from an historical perspective. As we noted in an earlier article in this journal, historians should not "disengage ourselves from the purportedly dangerous effects of 'relevance'. … The retreat of professional historians from the formation of public understanding … is both result of and reason for our current dangerous short-termism. Short-termism is a doomed and desperate way to understand modernity. The long view allows us to ask questions about – and find better answers to explain – the rise of long-term things (be they issues, phenomena, structures, cultures) over time – be it decades, centuries or millennia."[4] We called for historically-minded scholars to insert themselves into contemporary controversy and hot-button public debates. Because those who make policy should ground their initiatives on history, to avoid past mistakes and mere makeshift plans. Our roundtables on current events, seen through an historical lens, seek to recreate the coffeehouses that arose from sixteenth century[5] – places of unrestricted debate and intellectual argument. They began in the Ottoman Empire, where they offered space to converse at will. "The idea that you could go and sit next to someone as an equal was radical," as Markman Ellis, who wrote *The*

[1] Guy Lamb, "Why have South Africans been on a looting rampage? Research offers insights", *The Conversation*, 15 July 2021, https: theconversation.com/why-have-south-africans-been-on-a-looting-rampage-research-offers-insights-164571

[2] What caused South Africa's week of rioting?, AfricaNews, 21 July 2021, https://www.africanews.com/2021/07/21/explainer-what-caused-south-africa-s-week-of-rioting//

[3] Paddy Harper, "Phoenix killings: 22 suspects held". *Mail & Guardian*, 3 August 2021.

[4] Sandra Swart, "'Dangerous People' or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love being an Historian", *South African Historical Journal*, 68:3, 2016, 249-266, DOI: 10.1080/02582473.2016.1239966.

[5] B. Cowan, "The Rise Of The Coffeehouse Reconsidered". *The Historical Journal*, 47(1), 2004, 21-46. doi:10.1017/S0018246X03003492

Coffee House: A Cultural History. English coffee houses were shared tables bestrewn with newspapers where guests would converge to consume and create ideas. We see **Coffee house Conversations: Historians on the Current Moment** in much the same way. History is the caffeine of such conversations, keeping us awake to the simple truth that *change only happens when we understand why and how change happens.*

"July 2021" – Writing in the Aftermath

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In analysing the 1857 episode of political unrest in British India, Rochona Majumdar and Dipesh Chakrabarty warned of the difficulty of naming a multi-faceted set of events. What had initially started as an uprising of soldiers against the British East India Company grew to become a widespread rebellion which threatened colonialism in the subcontinent, drawing in a wide variety of different actors. The episode has since come to be variously known as "the Mutiny", "the First War of Independence", "a people's war", or "a peasant uprising". "There were no doubt particular elements in the events that partially justify such attempts at classification", Majumdar and Chakrabarty wrote, "but we believe that, taken as a whole, what happened was no one thing". In order to avoid the dangers of analytical closure, they offered a solution: "after the fashion of calling the events of September 11, 2001, simply "9/11", we will call the events of 1857, '1857'".[6]

Following the incarceration of Jacob Zuma on 7 July 2021, images of burning trucks, blocked highways, looted shopping malls and billowing smoke streamed across television screens, Twitter timelines and Facebook posts. As events continued to unfold, numerous explanations emerged in the public sphere, which tried to give shape and legibility to the chaotic developments. In the ecosystem of intense debate that emerged, these attempts at classification, and the acts of naming they involved, were repeatedly challenged by new facts as they arose and new events as they unfolded.

In opposition to claims that the unrest was a "pro-Zuma protest" interlaced with significant elements of "criminality", for instance, some commentators insisted that what we were witnessing was a "bread riot", a spontaneous uprising of the poor appropriating the basic necessities of life following years of state neglect and, more recently, the punishing effects of pandemic lockdowns. The incarceration of Zuma, it was argued, merely set the match to a ticking time bomb of South Africa's crisis of unemployment and poverty. As events continued to take unexpected twists in the subsequent days, it became clear that what we were witnessing was not one thing, however, but many moving parts.

The targeting of key infrastructure in the days that followed, including water purification plants, supply depots and cellphone towers seemed to suggest more sinister forces at play. Evidence quickly emerged which suggested a far greater degree of organisation than could be explained by the "rebellion of the poor" hypothesis - an instigating hand linked directly to the Zuma faction. Concepts with far darker overtones (and eerily familiar to South Africa's recent apartheid history) came into play: "insurrection", "agent provocateurs", "third force".

[6] Rochona Majumdar and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Mangal Pandey: Film and History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.42 No.9, 2007, p. 1771. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4419583.

Yet those who foreground these concepts have also been subject to criticism, accused of bending the stick too far in the opposite direction and failing to give spontaneity and autonomy their due influence within the crowds.

Notwithstanding the sense of certainty with which these explanations were often advanced, each offered only glimpses of the whole. Each concept showed only aspects of a multi-faceted form. Ryan Brunette compared this to the parable of the blind men and the elephant: each held a part while none were capable of conceiving the whole.[7] Majumdar and Chakrabarty might put it another way: what happened in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, as in colonial India in 1857, defies containment under a single name, except perhaps 'July 2021'.

A Shift to the Local

Building knowledge is an iterative process, testing hypotheses with new evidence, evolving a new synthesis. And this has been demonstrated to largely good effect over the last few weeks. The rapidity with which the public conversation evolved is a testament to the liveliness of South Africa's intellectual landscape. Sweeping assertions have been challenged, broad brushstrokes significantly refined. Key concepts have surfaced which provide the anchors for meaningful debate.

Yet the debate has largely remained tethered to analysis at a particular scale, the national level, a bird's eye view which only dives down to the ground momentarily for a sliver of evidence to furnish overarching narratives. We argue that we have reached something of a saturation point in this mode of high level conceptualisation. What is now required are far deeper ethnographic studies which prioritise empirical complexity over ready-at-hand theory, and resist simple comparisons with previous historical episodes. The rapid analysis of the last few weeks must now give way to slower, more patient work. And national frames must be tested against the messy realities of the local.

This has been the starting point of our own work in understanding apartheid-era political struggles, and we believe it may be usefully deployed here. The particularly contentious debate that has emerged among the Left around relative levels of spontaneity and organisation, for instance - a longstanding subject of theoretical contention - is one that can only be answered through grounded research.

Some important locally focused work has already emerged. Tshabalira Lebakeng wrote about dynamics as they unfolded in Orlando, Soweto.[8] Dennis Webster's work gave a view of events from inside an Alexandra household, and considered what was happening in a number of townships across Gauteng as the clean-up got

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[7] Ryan Brunette, "No Two Elephants Are Alike", *Africa is a Country,* 4 August 2021. Available at: https://africasacountry.com/2021/08/no-elephants-are-alike

[8] Tshabalira Lebakeng, 'Fighting to stay alive in a broken country: no jobs, no food breed contempt for the law', *Daily Maverick,* 14 July 2021. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-07-14-fighting-to-stay-alive-in-a-broken-country-no-jobs-no-food-breed-contempt-for-the-law/;

Tshabalira Lebakeng, 'Life after looting: "God left South Africa long ago"', *Daily Maverick,* 19 July 2021. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-07-19-life-after-looting-god-left-south-africa-long-ago/

underway.[9] Niren Tolsi provided a detailed personal account from his parents' home in Stanger (KwaDukuza).[10] While Monica Laganparsad, as well as *Daily Maverick* journalists Rebecca Davis, Greg Nicolson and Bheki Simelane, explored events in Phoenix.[11]

These and other works of local journalism begin to show just how differently things unfolded in different places, how spectacular occurrences converged with everyday life and its web of thick relationships, and how they were interpreted and framed by ordinary people. We are told of the many and varied reasons, which drew people to malls in these areas, and why others stayed at home. We see how the age and gender of those on the streets shifted over the course of events. We see how events were shaped by different backdrops of apartheid geography. We are offered vastly different perceptions of the figure of Zuma. We meet some of those who were involved in organising #FreeJacobZuma protests, and those who lead the fight back (in Yeoville, Webster shows how these contradictory roles were even carried out by the same local ANC politician).[12] And we see how memories of 1949, or the transitional violence of the 1990s, remain alive in those facing present challenges.

These insights begin to reveal the importance of geographical particularities, local social relations and historical memory in shaping the trajectory of events. It is only by extending this kind of situated research to some of the many other different areas drawn into the events of July 2021 that we can begin to develop a more accurate picture of what it all signifies.

The turn to the local need not signify a collapse into parochialism. It is certainly not coincidental that similar activities unfolded across such a broad swathe of the country, and it is crucial to identify the common determinants. Yet radical geographers have long emphasised that it is precisely through studying the messy realities of the local that we can begin to understand the whole in its fullest dimensions. We believe that the kind of situated research into the events of July 2021 we are advocating can begin to address many of the questions unresolved by the national debates, and sharpen the concepts we use to guide strategy.

Records of a National Trauma

Our call to foreground local experiences is not only of immediate instrumental importance: it is also guided by a longer range concern of what will be remembered in public historical memory and, inevitably, what will be

[9] Dennis Webster, 'Fear and Loving in Alexandra', *New Frame,* 14 July 2021. Available at: https://www.newframe.com/fear-and-loving-in-alexandra/;
Dennis Webster, 'After Gauteng's riots, how can the province rebuild?', *New Frame,* 19 July 2021. Available at: https://www.newframe.com/after-gautengs-riots-how-can-the-province-rebuild/.

[10] Niren Tolsi, 'KwaZulu Natal races back to 1949', *New Frame,* 15 July 2021. Available at: https://www.newframe.com/kwazulu-natal-races-back-to-1949/

[11] Monica Laganparsad, 'Past and Present push Phoenix over the edge', *New Frame,* 29 July 2021. Available at: https://www.newframe.com/long-read-past-and-present-push-phoenix-over-edge/. Rebecca Davis, Greg Nicolson and Bheki Simelane, 'July Unrest: what really happened in Phoenix?', *Daily Maverick,* 8 August 2021. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-08-08-july-unrest-what-really-happened-in-phoenix/.

[12] Webster, 'After Gauteng's Riots'.

forgotten. Chakrabarty argued that one kind of memory of 1857 that was irretrievably lost in retellings of the episode was "the past as personal grief". What could never be retrieved was "the history of the pain" of those who lived through the horrors of 1857.[13]

What we witnessed was in many senses an episode of national trauma, which accentuated the weight of collective emotional turmoil that the country has been reeling under since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The events of July might be considered a point of concentration which brought together many strands of history. The way that individuals who experienced the July events frame their own experiences and consider the future can tell us a great deal about the divisions that still afflict our society, and the difficult road that lies ahead for our democracy. For some of the young people interviewed by Lebakeng, for instance, the moment merely sharpened a longstanding crisis of hope: "God left South Africa long ago".[14]

These sentiments are not inconsequential to understanding the long-term implications of recent events, yet they are at risk of becoming "lost objects of representation" if our analyses of the moment remain trapped in high-level attempts to discern the causes of the events, structural or otherwise. Without this work, our understanding of the personal meanings beyond the spectacular images of July 2021 may amount, as Chakrabarty put it, to "precious little".[15]

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Living through 'an assault on democracy' (or was it 'an insurrection'?) forces the mind of an historian to reflect on one's craft. It certainly reminds one of the complexities of historical reconstruction and the difficulties inherent in explanation as one lives through the debate in real time. I entered discussions with a *Business Day* op-ed that valorised internal ANC politics and (playing on von Clausewitz's dictum) explained events in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in terms of 'Politics by other Means'. The gun had been loaded by Ramaphosa's desperate opponents, but it was the incarceration of Jacob Zuma that provided an opportunity for the trigger to be pulled. This sort of assessment is typical of journalese: leaks and rumours without hard evidence. And yet, narratives are set by contemporary commentators and shape if not point the way for historians.

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[13] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Remembering 1857: An Introductory Note', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2007, Vol. 42, No. 19, p. 1692. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4419571.

[14] Lebakeng, 'Life After Looting'.

[15] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Remembering 1857', p. 1692.

I was struck by the change of language in Ramaphosa's second 'fireside' chat to the nation in the wake of the 'insurrection'. Instead of framing the carnage as 'nothing less than a deliberate, coordinated and well-planned attack on our democracy', he shifted to 'deliberate, planned and co-ordinated acts of violence designed to create the conditions for unrest'. This appeared significant. His shift in language spoke to an understanding of a different set of objectives on the part of the planners and raised the prospect of a different goal. Democracy was not under assault. Rather, the President was. Simply put, it seemed to me that 'faceless' planners were seeking a political or 'negotiated solution' to their problems. They wanted to work within the ANC and ultimately to recapture the party and the state. Ramaphosa stood in the way. He had to be removed. Over and over again his opponents had been blocked in the ANC's National Executive Committee. This is a matter of record.

The planners knew that the noose was tightening and were desperate. They had no stomach for a coup and the South African constitution was not their concern. Nor were they opposed to democracy, at least as understood by the ANC. The planners wanted power. Democracy had not precluded enrichment in the past and it would not do so in the future. State capture, in other words, was what they sought, and towards that end chaos was their *modus operandi*. It was the road to power. If the insurrection was spontaneous and the product of abject poverty and a sense of hopelessness, it would not have been restricted to two provinces, maintained former Minister of Intelligence, Ronnie Kasrils. All this pointed to careful planning.

Here we are reminded of Ramaphosa's initial claim of ethnic mobilization. This was indeed part of the equation. The planners knew the incarceration of the '100 % Zulu boy' Jacob Zuma had the potential to unleash violence within Zulu strongholds in KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Gauteng. Zuma's seeming desire to go to gaol was not accidental. 'I will be a prisoner of conscience', he said. Inevitably his incarceration (with all the surrounding drama) would detonate anger and calls for a Presidential pardon. It would allow for a 'Free Zuma' campaign - a convenient mantra around which to foment unrest and a timely opportunity for the planners.

It was simply wrong to explain the uprising and mayhem as a failure on the part of the security cluster. We needed to move away from 'incapacity' and 'bungling' as explanatory terms. Of course, it cannot be denied that rot had set into the security cluster; but there was method in the madness. Appalling security lapses and weak responses to the chaos were not because of ham-handedness or of ANC factional infighting. Quite the opposite. The planning of those at the upper levels of the security cluster had been exquisite.

Of course all of this is conjecture, and one has to acknowledge that focusing on day-to-day events obscures as much as it enlightens. As historians we know that deeper structural or latent issues and political trends underpinned the carnage. Causation is always multi-layered. What about the history of violence in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng during and before the transition to democracy? What about the inadequacy of policing? What about the instrumentalising of intelligence over decades? But, as AJP Taylor explained decades ago, in analysing an event we need also to dig into the granular detail. Taylor reminded us that situations within

the same broader structures do not always change - at least not with great speed. In this sense understanding is akin to what financial wizards refer to as 'timing the market'. Historical reconstruction attempts to account for the precise moment for change. To understand when and why is the explanatory test. It always has been so in history.

Ultimately, however, the only explanatory balm to account for events is the passage of time – and even then (*pace* Pieter Geyl), without finality. With time we encounter more information to facilitate reconstruction and explanation. Broader structures and interconnected processes - invariably not visible at the time - lose their opacity. We can then appreciate (as the *Annales* school taught us) the weakness of *l'histoire événementielle*.

Jacob Zuma's populist insurrection?

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If most of the looting that took place in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal was fuelled by South Africa's shockingly high rates of unemployment, poverty and inequality; the events, nonetheless, were detonated by political militants close to Jacob Zuma attempting an insurrection. A number of commentators have observed that the insurrection was the boiling over of tensions that had been bubbling-up inside the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal for years. Indeed, judging from the text messages released to the media, it seems that a good number of ANC cadres organising the violence thought they were an insurgent movement reliving the mid-1980s urban revolts against 'white monopoly capital', rather than a governing party that has been in power for more than a generation.

The irony is that Jacob Zuma was not originally an incendiary populist. Rather, he established ANC dominance in KwaZulu-Natal in the mid-1990s and 2000s by making the party the harbinger of reconstruction and development in the aftermath of the civil war. At the same time as Truth and Reconciliation investigations uncovered Inkatha weapons dumps and removed apartheid hit squads from the political stage, Zuma also defeated the powerful militant wing of the ANC. Harry Gwala was pushed into retirement; spying allegations chased Sifiso Nkabinde out of the ANC and towards a violent death; judicial investigations eventually jailed ANC prison boss and POPCRU trade unionist, Russel Ngubo, who had once run a hit-squad out from a Pietermaritzburg prison. Then, Zuma described himself as a 'man who fights fire with water.'

All the same, reconciliation also required pragmatic accommodation of many militants, strongmen and taxi bosses. '[We] brought them in from the cold and looked after them business-wise', explained one ANC strategist. For a time, the tactic sometimes worked. In the mid-2000s, the Durban/eThekwini city hall built a political machine that Huey Long (the populist governor of 1930s Louisiana) would have been proud of: building a huge number of RDP houses to an ANC voting public, whilst distributing contracts to politically connected business families. The most famous of the tenderpreneurs were Shauwn and S'bu Mpisane: the former, the sister of the slain ANC hero Sibusiso 'Billy the Kid' Mkhize; the latter, an ex-policeman with alleged connections to the minibus-taxi underworld. Despite tax evasion, their company won R 1.1 Billion in contracts across the province. Civic leaders that crossed the machine were liable to get killed. Abahlali Shackdwellers Association, for instance, ran into trouble when they signed a deal with officials that would have had them upgrade their own informal settlements – i.e. cutting the tenderpreneurs and ward bosses out of lucrative construction projects.

This was the political machine that carried Jacob Zuma to victory at Polokwane in 2007. As the strongest region in KwaZulu-Natal – both in terms of caucus votes and financial clout – Durban/eThekwini won support for Zuma across the province, then reached out to delegates across the country. KwaZulu-Natal was

riding high. With public and private infrastructure investments doubling during a decade of economic growth and in the build up to the 2010 World Cup, ANC officials believed they had built a service delivery machine that grew party membership and delivered electoral victories. The high point was the 2011 local elections when the ANC smashed Inkatha dominance, taking municipalities inside Zululand. The spectacle was impressive. Kwaito group Big NUZ brought out young people, who voted in record numbers. ANC politicians made promises of service delivery and a shopping mall for every small town. A better life for all.

Yet, in retrospect, this model of what James Ferguson calls post-industrial 'distributional politics' was broken. First, infrastructure investments slumped in a decade of austerity that followed the 2008 global financial crash. Second, Local Economic Development seemed increasingly focused on building shopping malls everywhere – a policy that offered lucrative sub-contracts and shareholdings to local political players, but one that strangled fragile local economies. Third, service delivery slackened – just measure the declining number of RDP government houses built each year. Plenty has already been written about the popular protest that follows when government housing crumbles and water pipes run dry; it was also a sign of degrading bureaucratic 'capacity' and political sclerosis. The political machine was running on empty.

The run up to the 2016 local elections was murderous in KwaZulu-Natal. By now, there were just 'too many spokes in the wheel', one former municipal official told me. Rivalries once directed against Inkatha now turned inwards, as ANC factions squabbled for positions inside bloated party structures. In Durban/eThekwini, Zandile Gumede, soon dubbed the 'Gangster Mayor', came to power by promising 'Radical Economic Transformation' to a much wider grouping of aspirant tenderpreneurs, hustling a living in a post-industrial economy. Whatever the merits of the theoretical case for RET – certainly, South Africa remains the most unequal country in the world – the scramble for tenders spread chaos. The Delangokubona Business Forum forced its way onto highway project outside Durban, with muscle provided by a local taxi association. The MK Veterans Association 'grabbed' a housing project at Cato Ridge. Pit latrines overflowed as newly appointed contractors failed to operate their 'Honey Sucker' trucks. Durban/eThekwini's municipal manager was even blockaded into his offices by disgruntled SMME waste contractors claiming Zandile Gumede had broken campaign promises to them. The new factions inside the governing party were not so much demanding their 'turn to eat' as eating themselves.

Some years ago, Moeletsi Mbeki apparently compared South Africa's brutally high rates of unemployment and inequality to the forces that had fuelled the 'Arab Spring' uprisings in places like Tunisia and Egypt. A somewhat different analogy closer to home might be the implosion of Kenya's governing party in the 1980s, when a brutal, zero-sum form of clientelistic politics engulfed local party structures during a decade of austerity and economic reversal. Just as Kenyan historians turned their attention from questions of 'resistance'

to ‘governance’ during their times of trouble, maybe the recent insurrection might encourage us to take a closer look at South African politics in this post-industrial era of high unemployment.

"Operation Show Your Receipts"

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Sometimes, the meaning of an event is not determined by what happens during it, but instead by the ways in which the state responds to it. South Africa's history is unfortunately rich both in such events and such reactions. We all know the obvious examples: in 1960, a peaceful protest at Sharpeville was met with violence, and used to justify a crackdown on extra-parliamentary politics, the banning of opposition movements, and the criminalisation of thousands of people.[16] In 1976, a march of students in Soweto was met with violence – and sparked an insurrection, one that reshaped the country.[17] More recently, in 2012, a wildcat strike at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana was met with violence – a reaction that hs accelerated the collapse of the post-Apartheid state's moral authority.[18]

It is in this light that the words and actions of the Minister of Police, Bheki Cele, during the events of this July seem particularly important. In a televised interview on Wednesday 14 July, Cele set out the police's approach. He said that after the police had stabilised the situation they would immediately act against all apparent "looters". "They must know that this is beginning," he said. The police would treat them as criminals. Officers would go door-to-door and search for stolen goods: "Everybody will have to be able to show us the receipt. Those flatscreens, those fridges and all that. That is a call we make right now. Prepare the receipts."

He continued, spelling out the implicit threat: "Because if we come there and there is no receipt… life is still going to be tough… If it's not a receipt, it's what you looted, and we [will] also loot you… we [will] loot yourself out of your house."[19]

Cele was echoing the initial assessment of President Ramaphosa – that the events were merely "opportunistic acts of criminality".[20] Although President Ramaphosa soon disavowed his initial analysis – and suggested that we were instead witnessing the product of "a deliberate, coordinated and well-planned attack on our democracy" and its "constitutional order"- this neither slowed nor stopped the police action. [21] In the days

[16] Philip Frankel, *An Ordinary Atrocity: Sharpeville and its Massacre* (New Haven, Yale University Press: 2001); Tom Lodge, *Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences* (Oxford, OUP: 2011).

[17] Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto revolt: Roots of a revolution* (London, Zed: 1979); Julian Brown, *The Road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising of 1976* (Oxford, James Currey: 2016).

[18] Peter Alexander, Thapelo Lekgowa, Botsang Mmope, Luke Sinwell, and Bongani Xezwi, *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer* (Johannesburg, Jacana: 2012); Julian Brown, *Marikana: A People's History* (Oxford, James Currey: 2022).

[19] "'We are launching operation show your receipts' – Police Minister Bheki Cele,' *Newzroom Africa*, 14 July 2021, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJ3vsvGUJ6M

[20] "Address by President Cyril Ramaphosa on acts of violence and destruction of property," 12 July 2021. http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/speeches/address-president-cyril-ramaphosa-acts-violence-and-destruction-property

[21] [21] "Update by President Cyril Ramaphosa on security situation in the country," 16 July 2021. http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/speeches/update-president-cyril-ramaphosa-security-situation-country

that followed, the so-called "Operation Show Your Receipts" rolled out to great fanfare in the urban areas most affected by July's events – in particular, the townships and informal settlements in and around Durban and Johannesburg. Reporters were invited to witness raids on township homes, the confiscation of goods, and the arrest of alleged "looters".

These raids were marked by a deep-rooted disdain for – and suspicion of – the poor. The police forced men and women onto the street and made them watch as their homes were searched for any goods that seemed out of place – that seemed to be worth more than the occupants could apparently afford. The police confiscated appliances, clothes, and food. According to one journalist's account, during a typical raid, "police fling open a refrigerator door and toss out packets of vegetables and milk…" These food items are put in "the back of a white van" alongside "sofas", "a bed" and even "a blue child's quad bike…."[22]

Those subject to these raids experienced them as callous and cruel. One said: "They came in and took our mealie meal and oil. They broke handles on cupboards, took things out and left the place in a mess … They told us to show them receipts, but who keeps receipts for food?" Another asked: "What is the point of breaking into homes and taking everything – even food that has already been opened?"[23]

In addition to the confiscation of food and other goods, the police also arrested many people. By 18 July, 3 407 people had been arrested on various charges – including those of possessing stolen goods. The police also suggested that they would begin to arrest those who received allegedly stolen goods – even if they had not been involved in the "looting" themselves.[24] Although further figures are not readily available, it is clear the operations did not quickly cease. On 20 July, for example, police in the North West held an "Asserting Authority of the State Showcase" to "prevent possible looting", and on 24 July, police in Gauteng announced that they "continue to arrest suspects and recover looted items" in Katlehong – including "more than ten brooms" found in one man's house.[25]

The effect of these raids – and of the rhetoric that accompanies them in both police statements and media reporting – has been to criminalise the residents of townships and informal settlements in the areas that have been most directly affected by July's events. In doing so, these raids feed into a long-standing tension between South Africa's law enforcement institutions and the poorer residents of the country's cities.[26] They also feed into more recent tensions, exacerbated by the over-diligent enforcement of the COVID-19 lockdown

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[22] "'No receipt, hard luck' - Police seize suspected loot in Joburg," *News24*, 17 July 2021. https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/no-receipt-hard-luck-police-seize-suspected-loot-in-joburg-20210717

[23] Masego Mafata, "Operation Show Your Receipt: 'They came and took or mealie meal and oil'", *GroundUp*, 29 July 2021, https://www.groundup.org.za/article/unrest-aftermath-they-took-everything-there-was-no-morality-and-no-verification-of-goods/

[24] Media Statement, NATJOINT, 18 July 2021, https://www.saps.gov.za/newsroom/msspeechdetail.php?nid=33763

[25] Media Statement, Provincial Commission North West, 20 July 2021, https://www.saps.gov.za/newsroom/msspeechdetail.php?nid=33763; Media Statement, Provincial Commissioner Gauteng, 24 July 2021, https://www.saps.gov.za/newsroom/msspeechdetail.php?nid=33763.

[26] Julian Brown, *South Africa's Insurgent Citizens: On Dissent and the Possibility of Politics* (London, Zed: 2015)

regulations – which has itself resulted in the arrest and criminalisation of several hundred thousand South African residents.[27]

It is possible, too, that these raids are themselves weakening the "constitutional order" of the country. At the time of writing, the police have not disclosed any legal authority that permits them to raid individual homes without individual warrants. The only legislation that would have ordinarily permitted warrantless raids of a home (section 13(7)(c) of the South African Police Services Act, 68 of 1995) has recently been ruled to be unconstitutional.[28]

And so, if the meaning of July's events is likely to be at least in part determined by the state's responses to them, then there is much still to be concerned about.

Although we have avoided the violence that characterised the state reactions in Sharpeville, and Soweto, and Marikana, the raids that followed July's disruptions are unlikely to bolster either South Africa's democracy or its constitutional order. Instead, they suggest that the state has readily incorporated the violence and unrest of these days in July into an existing narrative about the lawlessness of the poor – and, in doing so, they have led to actions that are likely to further strain the fragile relationship between the institutions of the state and ordinary South Africans. They may even themselves be illegal, and so demonstrate the ease with which the state and the police forces can discard their constitutional duties in a moment of crisis.

If all of this is true, then the significance of these events will not lie in the tragedies that took place during July – not in the loss of life, not in the destruction of livelihoods and security. Instead, these events may yet come to stand as one more moment in the fraying of the relationship between South Africans and our state.

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[27] "Speech: Minister Bheki Cele: Coronavirus Coivd-19 regulations levels of compliance and adherence," 22 May 2020, https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-bheki-cele-coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-levels-compliance-and-adherence-22-may suggests that 230,000 criminal cases were open at that moment.

[28] *Residents of Industry House, 5 Davies Street, New Doornfontein, Johannesburg and Others v Minister of Police and Others* (18205/2018) [2020] 3 All SA 902 (GJ) This was confirmed by the Constitutional Court in October: (CCT 136/20) [2021] ZACC 37 (22 October 2021).