

Introduction

Syriyasi, Advo, these capitalists have removed the cables. Ever since we voted for them they don't give a fuck about us anymore," said Zero, anger registering in his face. "They claim that we are stealing their electricity. To get reconnected we need to pay one thousand five hundred bucks. That's why there's an urgent meeting today. The residents are angry, Advo. I've never seen people as angry with the government."

—Niq Mhlongo, *After Tears*

Back from Cape Town, where he has failed to complete his law studies, Avo, the main character in *After Tears*, rediscovers Soweto, the township of his childhood, and resumes a life made up of odd jobs to make day-to-day life a bit easier. As he witnesses more and more of the social discontent that seems to be brewing in the poor and working-class neighborhoods, the young man is carried away by curiosity and joins some five hundred angry residents massed on the football pitch of the local team. There, perched on a barrel and framed by banners with the slogans of the "Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee," a young woman harangues the crowd:

Water is life, comrades! We used to pay cheaper flat rates for water and electricity during apartheid. Why do we have to have this expensive prepaid with a black ANC government? Why are we, the poor people, discriminated against by our own government? [. . .] We must go house by house [. . .] and pull out the newly installed meters. (Mhlongo, 152–153)

Singing and clapping their hands, the crowd followed the woman as she turned into the street that led toward the Old Potchefstroom Road. The police vans followed them with sirens blaring.

It is not only the imagination of Niq Mhlongo that is at work in these few lines. From the late 1990s onward, for nearly fifteen years, South Africa was the scene of almost daily protests against the poor living conditions endured by several million people. From Grahamstown to Alexandra, from the streets of Kayelitsha to those of Diepsloot or Durban, scenes similar to that described by the novelist were frequently repeated, and they mobilized dozens, sometimes hundreds, of women and men from the poor neighborhoods of South Africa. In an analysis of police statistics, sociologist Peter Alexander concluded that his country had become the world's "protest capital" during the 2000s, as no other nation at the time was witnessing such a level of social unrest (Alexander 2012). For example, during the 2004–2005 period alone, when Thabo Mbeki was re-elected as head of the State, no fewer than 5,900 demonstrations were recorded by the police (Bond and Dugard 2008). Whether they were peaceful or violent, these protest actions quickly found their place in the contemporary social landscape and the way the majority of South Africans viewed it: the makeshift roadblocks mounted hastily on the main roads bordering the townships and squatter camps, the noisy rallies in front of government buildings and banks, the torching or looting of houses belonging to local elected officials, the invasions of property, the physical opposition to evictions ordered by town councils and financial institutions, and the marches dispersed with tear gas and rubber bullets—all made their way into the pages of newspapers printed in hundreds of thousands of copies. The apparent homogeneity of their demands also led to a decline in the diversity of these demonstrations; so much so, indeed, that a generic term—"service delivery protests"—quickly established itself in press reports and academic studies. This term was used to designate and gather together all the collective mobilizations protesting against the lack of housing, the failure to provide access to certain basic goods and services (water, electricity, sanitation, health) and resisting the sanctions (expulsion, disconnections) imposed on households unable to pay the bills for those services.

It is this protest—and perhaps more importantly, the organizations that have sought to supervise and "frame" it—that my book discusses. Emerging in the course of the 2000s, the Anti-Privatisation Forum, the Landless People's Movement, the Concerned Citizens Group, the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, Abahlali baseMjondolo, and the Unemployed People's Movement, to name only the organizations most visible in public space, have met with mixed fortunes. Most collapsed at the beginning of the 2010s. But up until then, they had spoken out on behalf of those women and men whose lives did not seem to have been greatly transformed by the advent of democracy. We can now see, without

idealizing things, that their actions helped shape an entire segment of the still recent history of the “New South Africa.” It is this stretch of history, at the intersection of the social and the political spheres, on which this book will focus.

Some might object that there is no lack of work on this post-apartheid protest, some of it particularly well informed (McKinley and Veriava 2005; Ballard, Habib, and Valodia 2006; Pithouse 2006; Brown 2015; Paret, Runciman, and Sinwell 2017). The special feature of the present book, however, lies in the way it turns from the monographic approaches usually adopted and provides, instead, an overview of this phenomenon within its historical dimension. In addition, an entire swathe of work in the human and social sciences often tends to interpret the revolts and resistance of the poorest strata of society, whether they live in Africa or elsewhere, in the light of concepts forged by great “radical” thinkers, or in terms of some grand narrative (the fight against the “evils of neoliberalism,” for example). Though the political interest of such approaches is appreciable, the fact is that they generate severe biases that this book will try to avoid. To begin with, they run the risk of indulging in a certain aestheticization of poverty. They also “cover all protests with the same, presumably progressive, mantle” (Auyero 2003, 193). But above all, they make it difficult to see what is actually happening *in the field*. My approach is different: I try to be sensitive to the most concrete aspects of the practices and interrelations involved, and endeavor to vary the scales of analysis by linking the different contexts (macro-, meso-, and micro-sociological) in which protest took shape. This approach makes it possible to focus on more than just those moments “in which people gathered to make vigorous, visible, public claims, acted on those claims in one way or another, then turned to other business” (Tilly 1995, 32). It is an approach that also allows us to take into account the ordinary social relations and apparently innocuous moments that make up daily life in the townships and help us understand the dynamics of protest movements.

A Better Life for All?

Emerging from the most disadvantaged areas of the townships, and taking shape in the shanty towns spreading across contemporary South Africa, these mobilizations are at first glance easy to fit into the category of “movements of the poor”: they involve socially dominated populations, devoid of apparent power and relegated to the social and spatial margins of society. Whether we are talking about the unemployed, workers in insecure jobs, landless or homeless people, or squatters, the “movements of the poor”

(Piven and Cloward 1977) have been closely studied by the contemporary social sciences, especially when these movements have taken shape in the societies of the South (Oxhorn 1995; Auyero 2000; Holston 2009). The publics potentially concerned by the South African protest—"the poor"—are far from being a numerical minority in a society in which poverty is commonly shared. According to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), in 2015, nearly 54 percent of South Africans lived under the poverty line and more than 21 percent lived in extreme poverty (StatsSA 2015). Behind these figures we can glimpse the faces of particular individuals: Black pensioners whose pension is often the main source of income for households in which three generations are crammed together; young unemployed people unable to leave home; parents living on allowances paid by the state to raise children; and women and men of a certain age subsisting thanks only to the informal economy. The system of social protection pays little attention to the unemployed and those who have never had the opportunity to work in the formal economy (Seekings and Natrass 2006, 306), and this poverty was so flagrant in the early twenty-first century that some figures, more or less official,¹ regularly put the unemployment rate at around 40 percent of the population of working age.²

While these features can be quite varied, poverty has its own color and its own dwelling places. Admittedly, villages of caravans and tents inhabited by Whites living below the poverty threshold have been increasingly visible since the mid-2000s.³ But this problem more seriously affects Black, "Coloured," and sometimes Indian populations confined to townships or informal settlements. It was to these populations that African National Congress-led governments turned in 1994, after the first democratic elections. Twelve million South Africans⁴ were at the time deprived of access to drinking water, twenty-one million had no sanitation, and nearly the same number were reduced to living without electricity (African National Congress 1994, 28). These data reflected, in the crudest possible way, the injustices produced by apartheid and, more concretely, resulted from financial disinvestment in the apartheid state after the 1970s. The promise of a "better life for all," to quote the slogan of the first African National Congress (ANC) campaign, thus justified the active commitments set out at the heart of the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP), a political manifesto transformed into the official roadmap of the first post-apartheid governments after the 1994 elections. The policies approved by the RDP initially produced encouraging results. In 1999, the government announced that two million households were now connected to the water supply (McDonald and Pape 2002, 4) and that nearly a million and half houses had been built. Three years later, its spokespersons claimed to have finally

provided a total of seven million people with access to drinking water, and three and a half million with access to electricity. In the same period, however, 38 percent of South African households still had no access to at least four of the seven basic services (health, energy, sanitation, education, communications, housing, and drinking water) (Terreblanche 2004, 33). In 2003, nearly 30 percent of urban Black citizens lived in informal housing or, to be more precise, in shacks built out of various bits of recycled material (McKinley and Veriava 2005).

Major socioeconomic inequalities completed this social picture. These inequalities rose between 1994 and the mid-2000s, though they had remained stable during the last years of apartheid. The Gini coefficient, an instrument for measuring the degree of inequality in income distribution in a society, actually increased from 0.65 in 1995 to around 0.7 in 2000 and 0.76 in 2006 (Saul and Bond 2014, 155),⁵ giving South Africa a chance to rival Brazil as the most unequal country in the world. Inequality in South Africa, which long lay at the heart of relations between Whites and non-Whites, did, however, undergo certain transformations in the early twenty-first century. It even inveigled its way into “racial” groups, especially within the Black population. Over the period between 1995 and 1998, the Gini coefficient for this group alone (over 75% of all South Africans) rose from 0.7 to 0.81 (Lodge 2001, 12). The trend was subsequently confirmed, lasting until the mid-2000s. Several economists have detected in this situation the culmination of a more general transformation of South African social stratification, with “racial orientation turning into class distinction” in the last thirty years of the twentieth century (Terreblanche 2004, 26). This process mainly ensured the consolidation of a multiracial elite in which a Black minority had found its place (Seekings and Nattrass 2002; Southall 2016). A few figures prove the point: the share of national income held by the White population fell from 71 percent to 52 percent between 1970 and 1996, while, at the same time, the share held by Blacks rose from 20 percent to 36 percent. Further, whereas in 1990 only 2 percent of the 20 percent of South Africans with the highest incomes were Black, the proportion of these rose to 10 percent in 2001 (Gumede 2007, 222). This “continuing deracialization of the upper classes” (Seekings and Nattrass 2015, 115) needs to be seen in connection with the political desire to “deracialize” the education system and the labor market. However, the principles and *dispositifs* that were developed with this in mind—Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), the promotion of equality on the labor market,⁶ and the more general *dispositifs* of affirmative action—have benefited only the best qualified, marginalizing what some people explicitly present as an “underclass,” albeit one that, in the early twenty-first century, encompasses 30 to 40 percent of South African households.

“Tambo, things are bad. We are being sold out.”⁷

From the early 2000s onward, protest slogans established a direct link between the social situation described above and the guidelines followed by governments since the advent of democracy. Anxious above all to meet the expectations of foreign investors, post-apartheid governments gradually opted for a certain orthodoxy, and set the country on the path of “normalization.” The most obvious proof of such an undertaking could be found in the economic strategy adopted in 1996: Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR). Seen by its many detractors as an IMF-requested structural adjustment (Naidoo and Veriava 2004, 69), GEAR was meant to combine labor market deregulation with the development of privatization, deficit reduction, and trade liberalization, so as to generate an annual growth of 6 percent by 2000. But this was in vain.⁸ The establishment of this economic strategy was inevitably read by most observers as a *coup de grâce* to the long-promised “social revolution.” It was, to an even greater degree, the idea that the ANC elite had decided to promote “neoliberalism,” which gradually spread both within the political and intellectual Left and in much of the media world.

The idea of an ideological shift among ANC leaders and their allies is, indeed, persuasive. Further evidence can be found in the way many of them did U-turns during the 1990s. After all, Nelson Mandela, on his release from prison, did not exclude the possibility of nationalizations—and then, once elected President, he asserted that the RDP, a platform on which the ANC had just been elected, did not in any case involve this procedure.⁹ Over time, privatizations were even presented as a fundamental pillar of any government policy (Lodge 1999, 25), as the market was transformed, meanwhile, into a “magic potion” equated with freedom and equality for all (Mandela, quoted in Saul 2001, 43). The position adopted by Thabo Mbeki, a rising star of the Communist Party in the 1970s, would follow this line. In 1996, on the occasion of the press conference to set out the main lines of GEAR, Mbeki, then Vice President of the Republic, would also find the least ambiguous words to define his political orientation: “Just call me a Thatcherite” (quoted in Gumede 2005, 89). One of the authors of GEAR, the economist Stephen Gelb, was more verbose, admitting that one of the first objectives of the new economic strategy was simply to “signal to potential investors the government’s commitment to the prevailing orthodoxy” (Gumede 2005, 88). The essayist Hein Marais, who frequently expressed his scorn for the ANC elite, believed that “the evolution of ANC economic policy [from 1990 to 1994 was] a short walk to orthodoxy” (Marais 1998, 122). This was reflected, in the early 1990s, by the regular visits to South

Africa of emissaries from the World Bank anxious to ensure the “good will” of its future leaders.¹⁰ But if we interpret this as a sudden, brutal conversion to neoliberalism, we will fail to fully grasp what was really at stake in the development of an economic policy in tune with certain international standards. Such an analysis does suggest the existence of completely homogeneous ANC ruling groups united around a single coherent project. But this would be to disregard the nature of the ANC as it had always been. In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, this party primarily ensured that disparate groups which nonetheless shared the same commitment against apartheid could come together. In this same big tent, individuals that, in other places, could have been connected with political families as diverse as Christian democracy, nationalism, social democracy, liberalism, and communism, could be gathered together. Furthermore, and without underestimating the presence even within the ANC elite of real supporters of the “Washington consensus,” the guidelines incorporated within GEAR, particularly those referring to the compression of public deficits, seemed particularly sensible to a large number of officials paralyzed by the budgetary constraints inherited from apartheid and stunned by the economic collapse of certain “socialist” neighbors such as Tanzania and Zambia, as they had observed during their years of exile (Cling 2000, 96). GEAR, and whatever could in some way be associated with it, were as much a matter of common sense as of an ideological commitment whose depth it is still difficult to ascertain.

The Local Economic Situation

Of the main guidelines brought in by GEAR, it was certainly the severe cuts in public spending to which the government devoted its most sustained efforts. With the notable exception of health, most of the RDP’s areas of intervention were affected by this movement. In particular, the restrictions contributed to an in-depth reshaping of the way local authorities operated. The amount of state grants allocated to them fell more than 55 percent between 1997 and 2000 (McDonald and Pape 2002). The municipal authorities then had to find 90 percent of the resources to finance their budgets. Such developments obviously hastened the financial meltdown of many municipalities already weakened by the amalgamation of townships and “White” towns in 1993—witness the example of Johannesburg. Having been plunged into serious financial difficulties in the mid-1990s, the municipality had nonetheless attempted to remedy the disparities between its most affluent neighborhoods and the townships. The gap was significant: before 1995, the Johannesburg City Council was spending three thousand

rand per year on a resident of the affluent suburbs in the north of the city, while allocating only five hundred rand to his neighbor in Soweto (Lodge 2001). During the fiscal crisis of 1997, the municipality was obliged to accept the intervention of the provincial government. However, this operated under certain conditions, including the freezing of municipal employment and a more frequent use of contracts and public-private partnerships. A commission was also set up to consider, with the help of PricewaterhouseCoopers, plans for restructuring the city's services (Barchiesi 2007, 60). This resulted in the transfer of certain services, first and foremost the management of water, electricity, and waste, to autonomous agencies of which the city became the sole proprietor without, however, being required to subsidize budgets. The 1999 strike of the twenty thousand city workers in the SAMWU union (affiliated to COSATU) would change nothing in the movement thereby initiated.

Unusual in its scope, the case of Johannesburg nevertheless captures some of the logics that, in the late 1990s, were imposed on most towns. Many municipalities, presented at the time as "the arms and legs of the RDP" by Jay Naidoo, the short-lived Minister of the RDP, started to outsource the management of various services. In Durban, for example, the bus service was entrusted to a private service provider. Rainwater drainage suffered the same fate in Middleburg, as did vehicle registration in the Northern Cape Province and street maintenance in Cape Town (McDonald and Pape 2002, 6). But, apart from these efforts, it was mainly a cost-recovery logic deemed the only way to restore the balance of finances: the consumer was expected to pay the full price for the service provided.¹¹ This movement, often interpreted as a simple commodification of public services, had a repressive element, with almost automatic sanctions being imposed on "poor payers." In Cape Town, nearly 160,000 households were deprived of water between 1999 and 2001 (Dugard 2010, 78). In Soweto, at the beginning of 2001, up to twenty thousand households were being disconnected each month (Fiil-Flynn 2001, 2). One of the main leaders of Eskom, the company distributing electricity in this urban zone, even announced his intention to disconnect "at least 75% of households" in the township (McKinley 2004). The scale of the problem could be verified across the entire country. In one article published in 2002 and regularly quoted by the leaders of the social protest, economist David McDonald believed that, since the end of apartheid, ten million South Africans had seen their access to water removed, and the same number had lost their electricity. More than two million people had lost their homes as a result of nonpayment of their various bills, rent, or drafts (McDonald 2002, 22).

The (Relative) Cracks in the Government Alliance

While GEAR may have been introduced with apparent ease, insofar as it was, in Nelson Mandela's words, not "negotiable," the process did nonetheless emphasize and exacerbate imbalances in the government alliance, which included former allies from the years of struggle against apartheid—the ANC, obviously, but also the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Access to power involved sometimes painful compromises for trade unionists and communists who supposedly embodied the "Left" of the coalition. Charged by ANC leaders with the task of encouraging workers to remain patient (McKinley 2002), the federation had, in return, pledged its full weight in the drafting of the RDP and its redistributive momentum. The drawing up of GEAR by fifteen economists mainly from the National Bank, the Development Bank, and the academic world, and its adoption without discussion in 1996, therefore represented a real disappointment. Representatives of the "Left" of the alliance, present in local governments and in national legislative and executive branches, nevertheless seemed quite able to adapt to this situation. The most intense criticisms were invariably punished, resulting in a call to order and the stigmatization and exclusion of those who had voiced them—who were systematically accused of contributing "to the political defeat of the popular forces and destruction of the economic base necessary for the continuous improvement in the living conditions of ordinary workers" (ANC 1996, 17). Locally, this often placed militants and elected officials in a difficult position: caught between the anger of the residents and competition from the new voices of protest. If this protest was not gagged, it was at least tightly supervised during the first months of the democratic regime; it appeared to have been reincarnated in the late 1990s and has since continued to spread, becoming a key element in the rivalries, the wheelings and dealings, of the political world.¹² It is estimated that, for the period 1994 to 2000 alone, between 15 and 25 percent of Black South Africans took part, in one way or another (signing petitions, marches, participation in rallies, painting slogans on the walls, etc.), in this "contentious politics" focused on housing, education, health, and public services (Klandermans, Roefs, and Olivier 2001, 215)

On the Borders

What exactly is social protest in post-apartheid South Africa, that is to say, in a country that, since 1994, has claimed to be a liberal democracy? This

question really has meaning only if it is appreciated in the light of the very particular status enjoyed by protest in South African society. Whereas, in many Western democracies, protest movements are often perceived as an illegitimate challenge to the monopoly of professionals, there is, in principle, no reason for this suspicion in the South African context. The history of this country has indeed contributed to turning protest into a means of political participation just like any other (or almost) in the view of a great number of South Africans: as the institutional political space was, under apartheid, prohibited to non-Whites, it was within protest that much of the political expression of these populations was crystallized. This world consolidated itself over the twentieth century through protest, gaining independence through the assertion of forms of legitimacy, of different logics, or indeed of its own reference points. The parameters for this situation, nevertheless, changed from the mid-1990s onward, even as the “social movement” provided the young “Rainbow Nation” with several of its leaders. It was indeed a particularity of the new regime that it offered other forms of participation and representation to the non-White population.

Because protest is particularly malleable, the question of its definition and role in contemporary South Africa must, if it is to gain in precision, draw on other considerations. The first of these may seem very elementary, since it amounts to asking *who* is protesting. Determining the identity of the protesters, however, is far from trivial, especially because this approach, as will be seen, highlights the impact of some of the transformations that have affected politics since the mid-1990s. Another consideration involves asking *how* protest is carried out in post-apartheid South Africa, after years of struggle against segregation that regularly saw thousands of men and women gathering to protest. In seeking to answer such a question, we must not focus *only* on the forms assumed by current protest, but also isolate the targets of social discontent. In other words, how does one protest against measures and policies usually defined and embodied by the representatives of the African National Congress (ANC)? In power since 1994, this party enjoys an impressive political capital, largely based on its status as a “liberator,” a situation that is also reminiscent of that of the Indian National Congress in postcolonial India.¹³ The ANC has headed an overwhelming majority of municipalities¹⁴ and most provinces,¹⁵ and has dominated all elections—local and national—since the end of apartheid,¹⁶ even if the increase in abstention and nonregistration on the electoral lists since 2000 means that these successes need to be relativized.¹⁷ In addition to this electoral power, the ANC has developed a strategy for deploying its elite (national and local) across sectors other than politics, such as communications, industry, energy, public enterprises, and justice.¹⁸ So it was the policies and guidelines defined by a

party that was almost omnipresent in South African society that protesters were attacking—more or less directly, as we shall see. These attacks were also built up out of a “material” that the Western reader might well find intriguing. Joining rallies or protesting in the streets, singing songs of anger or complaint, would indeed comprise one very particular form of politics: “popular politics.” This designation obviously draws more on a process of intellectual and academic conceptualization (Karis and Carter 1972; Beinart and Dawson 2010) than on the words of the first witnesses and actors in the process. This way of looking at things tends to overlook certain social realities and, perhaps even more, to “project into the ‘consciousness’ of the agents a representation of their practices which is that of the expert subject studying them” (Bourdieu 2015, 265). It presupposes that the inhabitants of poor and working-class neighborhoods systematically and knowingly give a political dimension to what they do. The presence of some people at a community meeting is nonetheless a form of habit, whereby they rely on a certain routinization of these moments without actually showing any real conviction. For others, attendance at a gathering organized to discuss housing problems is primarily motivated by the need to finally access information not vouchsafed by elected officials, who are regularly accused of keeping the latest things they know (or have learned) for the sole use of militants in their own party. More simply, the sources of participation can sometimes lie in a certain social conformity, as evidenced during interviews or conversations by the recurring and relentless words “*Everyone does it. . .*” However, despite the various exaggerations and idealizations to which it gives rise (that of an individual systematically giving meaning to his actions and knowingly certifying them), this designation—“popular politics”—covers a series of acts, moments, discourses, prescriptions, and representations, all of which combine to organize and, more simply, to guide life in the “communities,” those neighborhoods that make up the townships and shanty towns where most “non-Whites” live. The consistency of all these elements is also ensured by the guardians required by this political form (community leaders, social activists, and other members of street and neighborhood committees). The latter are constantly updating this political form and giving meaning to it, presenting it as a political culture in itself, naturally incorporated by the locals and set within the context of popular traditions—quite unlike the *other* politics. Though it cannot be denied a certain historical depth (the sociabilities of neighborhood in the Black and mixed-race worlds that appeared at the end of the nineteenth century), popular politics became particularly strong in the middle of the twentieth century, under the influence of the institutionalization of segregation and the formal prohibition against non-Whites participating in formal politics.

It then tended to merge with the principle of “people’s power” and its logic of bypassing the institutions imposed by apartheid, and crystallized around specific beliefs, including that of being shaped *by* and *for* residents. Even today, it therefore plays a fundamental role in the midst of anything that helps to reify the “community,” turning it into a collective actor endowed with reason and the power to act. Public meetings, community leadership, and other bodies charged with resolving disputes between neighbors are supposed to remember that it is *from* the community that the answers to its ills must emerge. This perception is all the stronger as it draws on the different borders crisscrossing South Africa. These are physical boundaries first and foremost, such as those that lie between the working-class districts and other city areas. Traced by the history of apartheid, these boundaries clearly have not been challenged by democratic current affairs, as the racial segregation of bygone days has *simply* been turned into social exclusion. They contribute, in addition, to consolidating a dual representation of South African society in the shared *imaginaire* of many inhabitants from the poorest neighborhoods: a society in which two worlds (that of the “rich” and that of the “non-White” poor) with mutually exclusive values and standards evolve in complete otherness. This perception then allows the lines of demarcation to be more symbolic. It is they, for example, that slip between a world of social protest claiming roots in the urban margins and a right to popular legitimacy on the one hand, and a sphere of institutions guaranteeing the more official and orthodox forms of *politics* on the other hand.

A Search for Meaning

To these two questions (*who?* and *how?*), we may add a third: *why?* Why do people protest in post-apartheid South Africa? Why do women and men so frequently congregate in the streets of South African communities? It is always a little risky to try to answer such questions, since they usually lead to a remorseless investigation of the “grounds,” the “origin,” and/or the “sources” of the phenomenon under study. If we are to believe a majority of observers of the case that interests us here, it would all seem quite clear: the miserable living conditions of millions of South Africans bear the seeds of revolt within them, just as the cloud bears the storm. In the same vein, we should also emphasize the frustration certainly felt by many residents in poor districts, convinced that, for them, and despite the ANC’s promises, nothing has changed since 1994.¹⁹ Even if they are obviously far from absurd, these elements often underlie a hasty and unhelpful “pretence at explanation” (Dobry 1992, 49), one that is not sensitive enough to “little” events,

to the micro-transformations and dynamic processes that underlie what is being analyzed. Their authors and supporters also forget that, throughout the world, people often have good reason to rebel and yet do not always do so. If this reasoning were entirely valid, the world would be in a permanent state of bloody havoc. These reservations, however, should not jeopardize the interest of the question “why?” This is indeed a question I have often asked the women and men at the heart of this work—not so much to track down the causes of their commitment as to try to grasp the significance they gave to their presence when they joined protest marches. It was, more specifically, a matter of laying bare the worlds of representations, attitudes, and norms that individuals employ to assess the situations in which they act (and to which they react). This type of information is a reminder that social protest is not just a matter of the material issues or subsistence imperatives that monopolize the slogans on placards and banners. The sense of what is *just* and *unjust* developed by individuals, even without their knowing it, on the basis of their own living conditions and various “expectations” (Honneth 1995), such as recognition, imbue what proves to be, ultimately, a complex social phenomenon (Aminzade and McAdam 2001, 16). All of this obviously does not mean that we have to confer a decisive explanatory role on values, standards, and principles or affects and emotions that are staged or that cannot be repressed by activists in an interview or while speaking at a general meeting. They should nevertheless be taken seriously enough for us to develop a broader view of what really matters in people’s lives (Lutz and White 1986), what lies at the heart of their experience: placed end to end, these elements may not explain in detail why thousands of women and men have *rebelled* (Gurr 1970) since the late 1990s, but they help us to understand what individuals rely on in order to act. In other words, they provide information on what, in the eyes of these women and these men, makes protest legitimate and gives meaning to their actions.

Fields(s) and Aim(s) of This Research

Although initial observations were made in Cape Town in 2002, 2003, and 2005, the essential data directly produced for this survey were gathered between 2009 and 2015. In what is basically a traditional way, the demarcation of the field and the aim of my study was the result of intersecting choices and constraints. It was, first of all, a matter of studying the protest organizations that were active during this period, and whose practices were therefore observable in great detail. The research that I will set out in the following pages thus mainly drew on the study of the Unemployed People’s

Movement in Grahamstown, Abahlali baseMjondolo in Cape Town, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, and to a lesser extent, Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban and the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Johannesburg. The days spent alongside militants, at their headquarters, while traveling to neighborhoods or on the occasion of demonstrations, allowed me to conduct some sixty semi-structured interviews. Above all, this immersion made it possible for me to witness militancy on a day-to-day basis—not the “everyday activism” described by Jane Mansbridge, those individual actions and words inspired by a social movement and consciously oriented to produce the change that it defends (Mansbridge 2013), but rather the tasks, moments, and interactions, seemingly trivial, nonconfrontational, and disconnected from protest action in the strict sense of the term,²⁰ that work to maintain things over the life of the organization: either because they maintain visibility, and thus the potential to attract new members, or because they are involved in the integration of militants in the collective by giving them a role that convinces them of their social utility.

Some twenty interviews were also conducted with representatives of various groups that have regular contact with social activists: local elected officials, trade unionists, NGO officials, the committed intellectuals working with them, and one member of the government (who is also an official in the Communist Party). This helped me, step by step, to reconstruct the environment in which protest organizations operate.

The conditions in which the choice of organizations to be studied was made were therefore largely influenced by the actual state of protest in the later years of the first decade of the 2000s. But this does not diminish the representativeness of the communities finally selected. The latter are, first and foremost, active in poor and working-class areas, on the outskirts of large and medium conurbations, where the main waves of service delivery protests had been observable since the early 2000s. By focusing on these, I can also take into account the main social bases of post-apartheid protest, those publics that demonstrate regularly, from Cape Town to Durban, and whose characteristics accurately reflect the terms of the contemporary social question—a social question mainly based on housing (what is demanded is primarily decent housing, along with access to water and electricity). If both branches of Abahlali baseMjondolo (in the provinces of Western Cape and KwaZulu Natal) are squatters’ movements, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee is in part composed of women and men living in formal housing areas but stricken by evictions, disconnections, and faulty or unaffordable access to essential services. As for the UPM, it combines activists living in often dilapidated houses and others living in shacks made from recycled materials.

An Outline of the Book's Contents

The first chapter aims to set out the sociohistorical context of this book, linking the first signs of the emergence of post-apartheid protest in the late 1990s and the demobilization that affected its key actors a decade later. It is a matter of understanding how the world of protest, neutralized and downgraded when the ANC and its allies came to power, was filled by new collectives, which gradually nurtured the idea of a “renewal” of the social movement. It is partly to the sociology of these same collectives that chapter 2 is dedicated. It analyzes the sources of the commitment of the different social groups involved more or less directly in the shaping of discontent: the women and men who supervised it, the “ordinary people” who formed its social base and also its external support (the “city-based comrades”)—a support located mostly at the intersection of different intellectual, militant, and political worlds.

Chapter 3 endeavors to dissect the behaviors—the ways of doing things (*manières de faire*)—of the actors of protest. These behaviors are spread over a continuum primarily marked by the claim of rights as against the law, and of legitimacy as against legality. Similarly, if the practices and slogans of post-apartheid protest refer primarily to very material and concrete things (shelter, access to water, electricity, etc.), they also fit into a moral economy on which the contemporary history of South Africa sheds light.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore one of the key issues of the sociology of social movements: the relationship between protest and institutionalized politics. The focus is initially on the place occupied by protest and its actors on the map of South African society as it was drawn after the fall of apartheid and the establishment of a liberal democracy. Part of the social order was reorganized in terms of a desire for “civil society” and the gradual closure of the political world. It is within this framework that a tense and contradictory opposition arose between the “social movement” and the ruling alliance. This situation, however, did not prevent the creation of more or less explicit partnerships between trade unionists and protesters, with the aim of seeing the emergence of a united front of the nongovernmental Left. As shown in chapter 6, these rapprochements helped consolidate an intermediate political space: a certain number of activities, actions and institutions shaped the borders of a world in itself, caught between the worlds of protest and official politics. It is particularly within this world that attempts were organized to alter the direction of the social movement by bringing it within the sphere of political competition.