Final preparations for our 2013 Thinking Africa colloquium are currently underway. The colloquium is on the theme Violence In/And The Great Lakes: The Thought of V.Y. Mudimbe and Beyond and will be held from the 7th to the 9th of August at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. This year’s colloquium is being organised in collaboration with Grant Farred from Cornell University and uses the work of VY Mudimbe to reflect upon the current situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Updates on the colloquium will be made available on our Thinking Africa resource centre and on our new Thinking Africa webpage.

VY Mudimbe’s latest book On African Faultlines: Medications on Alterity Politics, which forms part of the Thinking Africa book series, will be launched at the 2013 Thinking Africa colloquium.

We are very pleased to announce that Gillian Hart will be giving this year’s Thinking Africa Public Lecture on the 15th of August. Gillian Hart is Professor of Geography and Co-Chair of Development Studies, University of California, Berkeley, and Honorary Professor, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Gillian Hart’s forthcoming book (pictured below) is about to come out with UKZN Press. The publishers describe the book as follows:

“Rethinking the South African Crisis revisits longstanding debates to shed new light on the transition from apartheid. Drawing on nearly twenty years of ethnographic research, Gillian Hart argues that local government has become the key site of contradictions. Local practices, conflicts and struggles in the arenas of everyday life, feed into and are shaped by simultaneous processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation. Together they are key to understanding the erosion of ANC domination, and the proliferation of populist politics.

This book provides an innovative and forceful dialectical analysis of the ongoing, unstable and unresolved processes through which the crisis in South Africa is playing out. It also suggests how Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution, adapted and translated in relation to present circumstances, can do useful analytical and political work in South Africa and beyond.”
Rethinking the Transition from Apartheid

By Gillian Hart

This is an extract from the first chapter of Gillian Hart’s latest book Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony which will be released in August 2013.

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In Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa (2002a) I argued that local government was emerging as a key site of contractions in the first phase of post-apartheid restructuring (1994–2000). Over the decade of the 2000s, I maintain in this book, it has become the key site of contradictions. Broadly speaking, local government has become the impossible terrain of official efforts to manage poverty and deprivation in a racially inflected capitalist society marked by massive inequalities and increasingly precarious livelihoods for the large majority of the population. Ironically, attempts to render technical that which is inherently political are feeding into and amplifying the proliferation of populist politics.

While local government contradictions have their own specificities, they cannot be understood simply in local terms. ‘Neoliberalism’ – understood as a class project and manifestation of global economic forces, as well as a rationality of rule – has become the dominant frame for many critical understandings of post-apartheid South Africa, but it is inadequate to the task. In this book I suggest that the turbulent, shifting forces taking shape in the arenas of everyday life need to be situated in relation to simultaneous practices and processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation. Deeply in tension with each other, de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation enable new angles of understanding the transition from apartheid.

At the moment when former president F.W. de Klerk unbanned the ANC and other liberation movements in 1990, the ‘South African nation’ was deeply in question. Quite literally, it had to be conjured into existence from the rubble of a deeply divided past. At precisely that moment, powerful South African conglomerates were straining at the leash to break away from confines of any sort of national economy and reconnect with the increasingly financialised global economy, from which they had been partially excluded during the 1980s by the heightening crisis of the apartheid state.

De-nationalisation refers to alliances through which corporate capital defined the terms of reconnection with the global economy, as well as to the forces unleashed in the process. As such, it encompasses but extends beyond the extremely conservative package of neoliberal macro-economic policies set in place in 1996. The most compelling analysis of changing relations between corporate capital, the global economy and the South African state highlights what Ben Fine and others call the minerals energy complex that has shaped capitalist accumulation in South Africa since the minerals discoveries in the second half of the nineteenth century, and that remains in force today. This analysis, as we shall see, directs attention to the heavily concentrated character of South African corporate capital; the highly advantageous terms on which these conglomerates engineered their re-engagement with the global economy after the fall of apartheid through their relations with strategically placed forces in the ANC; how the conglomerates have restructured and de-nationalised their operations; massive and escalating capital flight; the formation of a small but powerful black capitalist class allied with white corporate capital; understandings of the ‘economy’ fostered through these alliances; their ongoing influence over ANC government policy; and multiple ways these forces continue to play into and intensify brutal inequalities and the degradation of livelihoods of a large proportion of the black South African population.

It is important to emphasise that de-nationalisation does not refer to political intervention in the ‘economy’ conceived as a separate sphere. It signals instead the simultaneously economic, political and cultural practices and processes that are generating ongoing inequality and ‘surplus’ populations, and the conflicts that surround them. De-nationalisation focuses attention on the historical and geographical specificities of southern African racial capitalism and settler colonialism, their interconnections with forces at play in other parts of the world, and their modes of reconnecting with the increasingly financialised global political economy in the post-apartheid period. The forces of de-nationalisation continue to shape the present – but they can only be understood in relation to, and deeply entangled with, practices and processes of re-nationalisation.

One can, I suggest, discern three key dimensions in which re-nationalising practices and processes have taken place. First are inclusive discourses of the ‘rainbow nation’ associated with Nelson Mandela that Ari Sitas

www.ru.ac.za/politics/thinkingafrica
(2010) calls ‘indigenerality’ – the liberal, ecclesiastical discourse of forgiveness that made possible the negotiations to end apartheid, and found further expression in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Discourses of inclusion were not just imposed from above – like the ‘national question’ discussed below they had (and to some degree still have) popular appeal. Yet, as Sitas argues, they abstracted from and papered over historical geographies of racial oppression, exploitation and racialised dispossession – and were falling apart by the end of the ‘Mandela decade’.

A second key dimension of official post-apartheid re-nationalisation is found in the ANC government’s immigration policies and practices. Indigenerality and rainbowism coincided with what Jonathan Crush (1999a) calls ‘Fortress South Africa’ – the ANC government’s latching onto apartheid-era immigration legislation premised on control, exclusion and expulsion. The Aliens Control Act was repealed in 2002, but the bounding of the nation through immigration policy and practices – as well as popular vigilantism, abuses by police and brutal detention of ‘aliens’ – have ramped up and fed into xenophobia.

Third, the most important elements of post-apartheid nationalism are embodied in the keywords of the ANC Alliance: the ‘national question’ and the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). The NDR refers to the first stage in a two-stage theory of revolution adopted by the South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1962 and subsequently by the ANC, in which the overthrow of the apartheid state would inaugurate a phase of bourgeois national democracy that would pave the way for the second-stage socialist revolution. This aspect of re-nationalisation highlights that it is not a separable ‘political’ process, but is crucially about making the case for accommodation of the inequalities of post-apartheid capitalism as a transitory phenomenon, to be superseded by the (ever-retreating) second phase. Forged in the context of fierce debates over race, class and nationalism since the first part of the twentieth century; elaborated during the anti-apartheid struggle; and reworked in the context of the transition, these terms carry deep popular resonance. Within the ANC Alliance, the NDR has become an increasingly vociferous site of contestation in which articulations of race, class, sexuality, gender, custom and tradition figure prominently.

Practices and processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation, understood in relation to one another, are crucial to comprehending the amplifying tensions and contradictions through which the ANC’s hegemonic project has been unravelling over the past decade. ANC hegemony hinges crucially on official articulations of nationalism and claims to moral authority through leadership of the liberation movement – an authority that has severely eroded over the decade of the 2000s. At the same time, many popular struggles over the material conditions of life and livelihood that erupt in local arenas are simultaneously struggles over the meanings of the nation and liberation, now rooted in a profound sense of betrayal – struggles that can and do move in dramatically different directions.

Taken together, the dialectics of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation define the contours of post-apartheid South Africa’s passive revolution. This concept comes from Antonio Gramsci, the Italian scholar-revolutionary jailed by Mussolini in 1926 until shortly before his death in 1937. Gramsci initially used it to interpret how the Risorgimento (the national unification of Italy in the latter part of the nineteenth century) played into the rise of fascism. In the course of his Prison Notebooks he extended and elaborated the concept, and suggested its wider relevance. Passive revolution refers not just to a top-down seizure of power by the bourgeoisie in the face of challenges from below. Rather, it involves the overthrow of some older social forms and the institution of new ones, combined with a deliberate and structural pacification of subaltern classes – it combines, in other words, both a ‘progressive’ or ‘modernising’ revolution of sorts, and its passive deformation (Thomas 2012: 35–6).

Part of what is illuminating about the concept of passive revolution is its deeply spatio-historical and comparative character that is helpful in thinking about forces at play in South Africa in relation to those in other regions of the world – in terms of their specificities and interconnections. For Gramsci, passive revolution was not an abstract model that can simply be applied or against which specific ‘cases’ can be measured. The challenge, both analytical and political, is to rework – or as Gramsci might have said ‘translate’ – it in relation to the forces thrown up by a different set of circumstances. I will suggest that developing a concept of passive revolution that is adequate to contemporary challenges requires building on Gramsci’s work, but also moving beyond it with the help of Franz Fanon (2005 [1963]), Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), and strands of feminist theory, as well as in conversation with debates over post-colonial nationalisms.

First, though, let me situate this book (and its title) in a longer lineage of debate and analysis of South African conditions that draws on Gramsci. In 1981 John Saul and Stephen Gelb published The Crisis in South Africa (updated by Saul in 1986), which represented the first Marxist analysis of the reformist thrust by the Botha regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Serious economic difficulties in the 1970s had, they argued, deepened into an
organic crisis, forcing capital and the apartheid state into a desperate search for palliative measures. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s (1981) reading of Gramsci, they anticipated that capital’s ‘formative action’ would run aground because co-optation was far too limited and exclusionary to pre-empt the demands of the mass of the population. Reformism did, however, provide new space for political organisation and opposition, and new grievances around which to organise. The result would be growing coalescence of community and workplace struggles against a system with no claim to legitimacy. At the same time, the closeness of the exiled liberation movement to mass struggles in the townships meant that the ANC was unlikely to accept anything short of a fundamental redistribution of political and economic power.

What Saul and Gelb did not foresee, as Sitas (2010: 35) points out, was how the corporate bourgeoisie would fight for their own ‘revolution within the revolution’—aided, of course, by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the global triumph of neoliberal forms of capitalism. Revisiting Saul and Gelb’s arguments, Carolyn Bassett (2008) focuses on how South African corporate capital wrung concessions out of the ANC in the early 1990s, as well as shaping understandings of the economy, and defining the terms of their re-engagement with the global economy—an account that is broadly in accordance with that of a number of other analysts discussed more fully in Chapter 4. Corporate capital, she maintains, has been too successful, winning so many concessions and giving up so little in terms of supporting reforms to benefit the majority that the reform programme is inherently unstable. Bassett also invokes Gramsci’s theory of passive revolution—which she defines as ‘change imposed from above designed to maintain the economic and political system’ with only passive consent from the masses—to argue that the ANC has been forced to rely on ‘domination’ rather than ‘hegemony’ to consolidate the new order (2008: 185–6).

In a broadly similar analysis published at the same time as Bassett’s, Vishwas Satgar (2008) drew on passive revolution—which he defined as ‘a non-hegemonic form of class rule’—to argue that what he calls an Afro-neoliberal class project within the ANC has used restructuring and globalisation of the South African economy to advance its interests, while at the same time demobilising popular forces and blocking fundamental transformation. Hein Marais sharply contests this analysis, arguing that the ‘“passive revolution” schema paints a tantalising but simplistic picture’ (2011: 398). Maintaining that ‘one of the great feats of the transition has been the marshalling of sufficient consent to avoid social instability’ (2011: 399), he insists as well that seeing the South African transition as an example of reform from above ‘plays down the extent to which popular energies and organisations eventually helped to shape the terms of the political settlement and bring about key new arrangements’ (2011: 399).

This debate turns around an excessively narrow understanding of passive revolution in terms of domination as opposed to hegemony. In Chapter 6 I address these and other issues related to passive revolution, pointing to the uses as well as the limits of the concept, and suggesting how it needs to be translated in relation to post-apartheid South Africa.

In addition, along with a number of other critics of the post-apartheid order, Bassett’s and Satgar’s focus is on what I am calling de-nationalisation. The dynamics of de-nationalisation are crucially important but insufficient for grasping the turbulent forces driving the ongoing crisis in contemporary South Africa. Of great importance as well are multi-dimensional practices and processes of re-nationalisation that, operating in relation to de-nationalisation, are linked to the erosion of ANC hegemony and the ramping up of populist politics.

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i Elsewhere (Hart 2008) I have argued that analyses of neoliberalism in terms of class project, economic policy and governementality remain necessarily partial, since they take hold on terrains that always exceed them.

ii With the crisis of apartheid in the 1980s, the combination of sanctions and exchange controls ‘gave rise both to conglomeration across the economy . . . and the expansion of a huge and sophisticated financial system as cause and consequence of the internationally confined, but domestically spread, reach of South African conglomerates with Anglo-American in the lead’ (Fine 2008: 2). See Ashman, Fine and Newman (2011: 12) for a fuller discussion of this process. In 1990 when the ANC was unbanned, five colossal conglomerates—encompassing mining and related manufacturing, banking, retail and insurance operations—controlled 84 per cent of the capitalisation of the JSE (Chabane, Goldstein and Roberts 2006: 553).

iii As discussed more fully below, I am using the term ‘articulation’ here in the dual sense of ‘linking together’ and ‘giving expression to’ in a way that is closely attentive to issues of language and translation (Hart 2007; Kipfer and Hart 2013).

iv In recent years there has been a surge of renewed interest in passive revolution in different regions of the world, along with some intense debate over its contemporary relevance that I reference in Chapter 6.

v This argument builds on and elaborates work with Stefan Kipfer (Kipfer and Hart 2013), as well as an earlier formulation (Hart 2008).