Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest

Social Relationships to the Means and Ends of Protest in South Africa's Ongoing Rebellion of the Poor: The Balfour Insurrections

Peter Alexander & Peter Pfaffe

South African Research Chair in Social Change, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, South Africa

Published online: 02 Aug 2013.

To cite this article: Peter Alexander & Peter Pfaffe, Social Movement Studies (2013): Social Relationships to the Means and Ends of Protest in South Africa's Ongoing Rebellion of the Poor: The Balfour Insurrections, Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2013.820904

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.820904

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &
Social Relationships to the Means and Ends of Protest in South Africa’s Ongoing Rebellion of the Poor: The Balfour Insurrections

PETER ALEXANDER & PETER PFAFFE
South African Research Chair in Social Change, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, South Africa

ABSTRACT Since 2004, South Africa has experienced thousands of local protests, many of them popular insurrections, which, taken together, represent a rebellion of the poor. Lack of service delivery has been the main issue, but protesting communities have also demanded the removal of corrupt officials, re-demarcation of political boundaries and employment. In terms of endurance and geographical spread, the movement is unprecedented. The article presents findings from a case study undertaken in Balfour, a small town outside Johannesburg. It argues for bridging studies of social class and social movements, justifies the concept ‘rebellion of the poor’ and proposes that the divide between employed workers and ‘the poor’ is best understood in terms of different relationships to the means and ends of protest.

KEY WORDS: Rebellion, protest, poor, service delivery, Balfour, South Africa

From 19 July 2009 township residents in the small South African town of Balfour participated in an insurrection that lasted three days and nights. There were no formal expressions of support from the labour movement. A week later, when striking municipal workers protested outside the Balfour town hall, there was no sign of solidarity from leaders of the revolt, who joined government ministers for a meeting in a different part of the same building.¹ This anecdote is emblematic of a broader phenomenon. From 2004 onwards, South Africa has experienced a level of ongoing urban unrest that is arguably greater than anywhere in the world, and its strike statistics reveal the highest number of days lost per capita per annum (Alexander, 2012a, 2012b, p. 63).² Although there is widespread sympathy between actors in these two movements, evidence of unity is minimal.

Focusing on the township unrest, specifically events in Balfour, we propose that this phenomenon might valuably be explained in terms of different social relationships to the means and ends of protest.³ In arguing that division between workers and the poor should be understood in this way, we wish to convey the following. When workers protest against their conditions, they organise at work, engage in strike action, build unions and, perhaps,
develop a federation that provides a political voice. None of this involves the unemployed and underemployed, who are neither needed nor, in most cases, wanted. The poor, especially poor youth, have other sources of strength. They have time to organise and the ability to mobilise in the name of a community as a whole; they have the capacity to win backing from workers and to mount dramatic protests that threaten the rule of the state; and they can unseat politicians and undermine the legitimacy of established politics. In the uprisings, workers are marginal and sometimes disparaged. In immediate terms, the poor can be victims of strikes or excluded from jobs by workers from other areas, and workers might be worried that a stay-away will lead to their dismissal or loss of pay. Moreover, the rhythms of struggle are different, with workers, at least in South Africa, tending to follow time-consuming statutory procedures and community action determined with little or no formality and enacted without delay. While strikes often cover many workplaces, sometimes across the country, and may be sustained for weeks, perhaps months, community protests have all been local in their scope and limited in duration (usually a day and rarely more than three days). While community protests target the state (normally the local state), demanding what it can deliver (mostly services), the focus of workers’ actions are employers, usually capitalists (though sometimes the state), demanding what these can provide (critically higher pay). In a sense, for the poor, the capitalist lies beyond the state, and for workers, it is the other way around.

However, as we will show, disunity is not inevitable, and we are not positing the presence of an antagonistic class difference. The similarity with, yet distinction from, the notion that class divisions arise from conflicting relations to the means of production is intentional. While different means or forms of protest, and their targets and ends, are linked to different relations with production (employed workers, the unemployed and so on), the longer term interests of the poor—at least in South Africa—are nearly always bound up with those of workers (principally through sources of survival), and workers benefit from victories arising out of the rebellion.

Balfour actually experienced two insurrections: the one in 2009 and a second, very similar to the first, which started on 7 February 2010. As with all such events, a rounded assessment would require attention to specific histories, and our brief account takes cognisance of this. However, Balfour’s uprisings fit a general pattern, and it is precisely because this likeness exists despite historical variation that we regard its protests as illustrative and indicative of the broader phenomenon we seek to explain. We begin by highlighting propositions that have advanced our thinking and then contextualise and clarify key concepts such as ‘poor’. After a brief note on methodology, we move to two sections on Balfour: the first describing the insurrections, including their background, and the second examining responses by different actors. We pay particular attention to expectations among protest activists that workers participate in the uprisings by observing ‘stay-away’ strikes. The conclusion summarises our argument.

Disruption, Hinges and Trenches

A central tenet of resource mobilisation theory (RMT) is that a social movement’s capacity to expand depends on ‘discretionary resources’, a term originally defined as ‘money and time’ (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p. 1224). In our view, RMT is strengthened by adding a third resource, what Piven (2006, p. 20) calls ‘disruptive power’. Piven and
Cloward (1979, p. 23) summarised the disruptive power of workers and the unemployed as follows:

workers protest by striking. They are able to do so because they are drawn together in the factory setting, and their protests consist mainly in defying the rules and authorities associated with the workplace. The unemployed do not and cannot strike, even when they perceive that those who own the factories and businesses are to blame for their troubles. Instead, they riot in the streets where they are forced to linger [... and it is difficult to imagine them doing otherwise.]

In contrast, recent social movement theorists have pointed to the importance of community, friendship and family identities in the mobilisation of social movements (Crossley, 2002, pp. 93–102; Opp, 2009, pp. 208–215). While this is a valuable insight, its implications are not immediately apparent. Let us take the case of South Africa. On the one hand, friendships cement relationships between workmates and differentiate them from unemployed youth, who, in turn, develop distinct identities. On the other hand, families re-distribute resources from those who are working to those who are not, and the separation of townships from formerly white urban areas contributes to community identity. That is, identities, and the deeper structural conditions in which they are embedded, may reflect and reinforce the distinction presented by Piven and Cloward, or they may intersect and soften the contrast.

Social movement theory is, in our view, enhanced when utilised to comprehend what might be termed a hinged contrast—the contrasting responses of two forces linked to a single core—as attempted in this article in relation to workers and the poor. Most social movement theorising avoids engagement with workers’ organisations and classed categories and, indeed, eschews a serious analysis of capitalism (Hetland & Goodwin, 2013). However, a parallel literature—on ‘class formation’—helps to show the way in which class acts as a hinge that both links and separates the identities of workers and the poor. Katzenelson (1982, p. 19), generalising about US history, distinguished between ‘work and community based conflicts’, concluding that ‘the links between [them] have been unusually tenuous’. He continues:

Each kind of conflict has had its own separate vocabulary and set of institutions [...]. Class, in short, has been lived and fought as a series of partial relationships, and it has therefore been experienced and talked about as only one of a number of competing bases of social life.

For Castells (1983, p. 216), writing about ‘the largest [... urban movement in Europe since 1945’, in Spain in the 1970s, the two components were the labour movement and neighbourhood associations. Providing a similar argument to Katzenelson, he writes: the two ‘fought separate battles, even if they often clashed with the same police and exchanged messages of solidarity. [... T]hey were allies not comrades’ (Castells, 1983, p. 268, our emphasis). He concluded (1983, p. 269) that the Citizen Movement, which co-ordinated the neighbourhood associations, was a ‘non-class social movement challenging the structure of a class society’. Seen in this light, our South African case appears as yet another species within the same genus as the US and Spanish examples, and, indeed, there are similar dynamics at work.
However, Katznelson insists that the ‘patternning of class’ varies from country to country, shaped, in particular, by different histories of class formation and classed culture. He uses Gramsci’s metaphor of First World War ‘trenches’ (from which an ongoing ‘war of position’ was fought) to argue that the ‘trenches’ of workplaces, the streets and ‘normal’ political channels provide a base for different kinds of anti-systemic resistance. The configuration of these trenches ‘defines the terrain of battle and thus imparts a logic to the war itself’ (Katznelson, 1982, p. 19). Katznelson wishes to emphasise that each country has a unique configuration of trenches, with this defining what is special about its history of class and politics. While Castells places greater weight on the structure of capitalism, his conclusion on this point is similar: the labour–neighbourhood relationship plays out differently in the various places he considers. The logic, then, is that we must also consider specificities of the South African rebellion—its character as an urban movement and location within a particular pattern of class.

The ‘Poor’ and ‘Rebellion’ in South Africa

South Africa’s first democratic government, elected in 1994, was brought into being through the unification of worker and community struggles. For a moment, the hinge had closed. This was a major political victory, but the structure of capitalism changed little (and, in some respects, for the worse). Many black people, including some workers, prospered, but most did not. Unemployment and inequality increased, and indicators for both are among the highest in the world. The hinge re-opened (with this reflected in scholarly literature that separated movement and industrial research). The early 2000s witnessed a brief flowering of social movements based largely in poor communities, and just as these began to subside, around 2004, the township revolt picked up pace (Beinart & Dawson, 2010; Dawson & Sinwell, 2012). At the same time, there has been an increase in industrial action, with this including the two largest stoppages in South African history (the public sector worker disputes of 2007 and 2012) and recent wildcat strikes in the mining industry (the best known of which occurred at Marikana, where the police massacred 34 workers) (Alexander, Lekgowa, Mmope, Sinwell, & Xezwi, 2012; Ceruti, 2012).

The media have tended to characterise South Africa’s urban unrest as a series of ‘service delivery protests’. However, in our view, and that of other commentators, it amounts to a ‘rebellion of the poor’ (Alexander, 2010; and see also Burns, 2010; Pithouse, 2011; Unemployed People’s Movement, 2011).\footnote{What is at stake in making the distinction? Firstly, although lack of basic services (such as sanitation, drainage, sewage, water, electricity and street lighting) has fuelled most demands, many other issues have been raised. The latter include grievances around housing, quality of roads, electricity pricing and disconnections, schooling, uncaring or corrupt politicians (mostly local councillors), demarcation (mainly people wanting to be moved into another province), and also jobs (with some demands placed at the door of particular mines). Protests frequently mix claims about services with other issues. Slow response to long-standing complaints and failure of officials to attend meetings have often acted as triggers. Heavy-handed policing has led to, or worsened, violent confrontations. Secondly, the protests reveal strong similarities in forms of contention (burning barricades being common), geographical space (most emerge from townships and informal settlements), organisation (community meetings are typical) and demographics (generally speaking ‘the poor’, particularly those...}
regarded as ‘youth’), indicating that we are dealing with a broad process, rather than merely a set of discreet events (see media reports and photographs; Alexander, 2010, 2012b; Booyzen, 2007, 2012; Von Holdt et al., 2011). These characteristics are undergirded by the legacy of apartheid—in particular, townships are still places of black residences separated off from most formal workplaces and from the suburbs (now racially mixed)—so that resemblances between our protests (and between present and past struggles) are not surprising. Thirdly, given the scale and intensity of the contemporary movement—with more than a thousand unrest incidents per annum for the years 2009–2012—the term ‘rebellion’ seems appropriate.

Use of the poor as a key concept requires comment. As Simmel (1971, p. 175) once explained, ‘the poor, as a sociological category, are not those who suffer specific deficiencies and deprivations’. They are not necessarily those who are poorest in terms of income. As an identity, ‘the poor’ can be a named category (such as the recipients of poor relief), but it can also be claimed, perhaps ‘mobilised strategically’ (Naidoo, 2010, p. 17). Usage of the term varies from country to country, reflecting different realities. In Indian studies, the concept of ‘the poor’ or ‘labouring poor’ connotes those who survive through ‘informal’ employment and subsistence self-employment, commonly working very long hours (Breman, 2003; Gooptu, 2001). For Iran, Bayat (1997) shows how a self-identified poor exists as a visible ‘underclass’, physically and politically marginalised, and only occasionally engaging in open conflict with the state. South Africa differs from both these cases. In contrast to India, state grants and relatively higher wages make it possible to sustain a large proportion of adults who are fully unemployed, while many other people, the underemployed, work intermittently or for just a few hours per week. In contrast to Iran, those we define as ‘poor’ live, for the most part, cheek by jowl with regularly employed workers, even in informal settlements, and democracy provides greater space for public mobilisation against different levels of government. Despite differences, the examples highlight a general need to integrate a distinct ‘poor’ into a global account of the ‘patterning of class’ and ‘urban movements’.

Our understanding of ‘the poor’ was clarified by parallel research conducted in Soweto, Johannesburg’s main township (Alexander, Ceruti, Motseke, Phadi, & Wale, 2013). This revealed that self-identification with ‘working class’ was virtually synonymous with those who had regular work (mostly as employed workers), and those who described themselves as ‘poor’ came from households that, in material terms, were generally worse-off (Phadi & Ceruti, 2012; Phadi & Manda, 2010). The match was far from perfect (closer to Ortelius’s sixteenth-century maps than the latest satellite images, Alexander suggested), and the majority of the population labelled themselves ‘middle class’, whatever their employment status and whether or not they also described themselves as working class or poor. As understood in this article, ‘the poor’ includes those categorised in the Soweto project as unemployed, underemployed (as partial workers or survivalist self-employed) and nearly all those defined as ‘not in the labour force’. Delineated thus, ‘the poor’ are akin to the ‘relative surplus population’ as defined by Marx in Capital Volume One. In Soweto, these poor categories comprised 69% of the population aged 16 and over, and 24% were the regularly employed workers. However, Ceruti (2013) showed that the poor and workers live together in the same households, that neighbourhoods and housing types are socially mixed, and that people move from one employment category to another. That is, Soweto today had much in common with Marx’s London. ‘Poor’ may not be an elegant term, but there are no synonyms, and it avoids the implications of class separation.
suggested by comparable terms like ‘lower class’ or ‘precariat’ (Saul, 2012; Seekings, 2008; Standing, 2011). 14

Methods

Evidence for the case study derives from four periods of fieldwork. Initial research was undertaken about a week after the first uprising (Pfaffe, 2009; Sinwell et al., 2009); further work, which forms the main basis for this article, began towards the end of the second uprising; a third phase, related to the municipal elections, took place in May 2011 (Alexander, 2012b); and telephone interviews aimed at filling gaps in our knowledge were conducted in March 2012. We interviewed the mayor and two other councillors, major employers, community leaders, trade unionists, a school principal and some of his staff, local business owners, non-South Africans forced out of their shops, and numerous ordinary residents (stratified by gender, age and class), many of whom had been active participants in the insurrections. In conducting interviews around the township we might start with one person but often others would join the discussion; in other instances we would work with a group from the outset. Interviews were conducted in English and various local languages (mainly isiZulu) and lasted from 20 minutes to more than two hours. The bulk of the fieldwork for this article was conducted by the second author (Pfaffe), sometimes assisted by two fieldworkers/translators. 15 Observation and informal conversation were also useful sources, and presence at community meetings enabled us to witness interaction between individuals representing different social and political interests. The latter approach was especially valuable and is a method that remains underutilised in studies of this kind (Barker, 2009, pp. 40–59; Gluckman, 1940). Because some of our informants might be open to victimisation, we took the decision to refrain from naming any of them.

Balfour and Its Uprisings

Balfour, established as a rural market town in 1898, is located on the main railway line between Johannesburg and Durban (Smit, 1998). In 1951, Springfield Colliery, the principal supplier of coal to Klip, the largest power station in the southern hemisphere, relocated its operations to Grootvlei, close to Balfour, and in 1969 Eskom (the electricity parastatal) opened a new power plant right above the colliery (Eskom, 2010; Wellington, 1955, p. 176). The local economy boomed. Labour was recruited from nearby farms and further afield, and much of the new workforce settled in Siyathemba, Balfour’s township. But social development lagged behind: Siyathemba had no high school of its own, and its teenagers attended those in two neighbouring towns, both 30 km away. In 1985, these schools were overflowing with local children, and those from Balfour were ‘chased away’. According to a Balfour pastor, who later represented the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) on the local council, the protest that followed was a key moment in Siyathemba’s struggle against apartheid. By 1990, Eskom was producing a surfeit of electricity and it decided to mothball Grootvlei power station. With its major client gone, the colliery also closed. There were few well-paid jobs for blacks in the area, and Siyathemba—never wealthy—stagnated.

With the end of apartheid, South Africa was demarcated into nine provinces, including Gauteng and Mpumulanga. The former, which included Johannesburg and Pretoria, was compact and wealthy; the latter was mostly rural and poor. The commercial and public life
of Balfour had been tied to centres in Gauteng, notably Heidelberg, one of the towns 30 km to the north. Nelspruit, the capital of Mpumulanga, was 350 km away. The proposal to include Balfour in Mpumulanga was greeted by public outrage. However, inclusion in Gauteng would have required loss of municipal status, and thus was detrimental to African National Congress (ANC) members running the local council, and it was they who won the day. The people of Dipaleseng municipality, which has Balfour as its centre fared poorly under the new order, and it’s comparative poverty is reflected in Table 1. This includes data for Lesedi, the neighbouring Gauteng municipality located around the town of Heidelberg. Refrigerators and cellular phones are important markers of poverty in contemporary South Africa. The proportion of informal dwellings in Dipaleseng is astonishing, especially because, bucking the trend elsewhere, the figure is higher than that recorded in the 2001 census (and this despite a small decline in total population).

There was growing discontent. Siyathemba residents began by using official channels to raise service issues, including demands for street lighting and upgrading of the township stadium (Dipaleseng Municipality, 2004). In 2004, protests over school fees radicalised some who would lead the 2009/2010 revolt, and in 2006 there was a militant march over incorporation into Gauteng, land for housing and nepotistic hiring of municipal employees. There were further marches in 2007 and 2008.

If the story of Balfour ended here, it could be read as a simple narrative of resistance against poverty and self-serving councillors. But there is more. In 2007, a Canadian-owned company began work on a gold mine and processing plant just outside Siyathemba, and by July 2010 it employed nearly 2200 permanent workers and contractors, though less than 30% of these were locals. Moreover, South Africa’s 2008 power crisis led to the reopening of Grootvlei power station, and the construction of an oil pipeline brought further jobs (Carte, 2010; Thakali, 2008). In 2010, Pfaffe noted:

I realised that Balfour is far from being a sleepy dorpie [small town]. Residents confirmed that there had been a major influx of groups of contract workers […] both black and white […] There are now about 13 guesthouses, many recently built or expanded […] and] many new houses, including some small four-unit gated complexes and large houses with 4–5 bedrooms.

However, as a local Indian businessman explained, economic expansion did not filter through to Siyathemba, which actually suffered some decline, including the closure of a supermarket. In addition, it seemed the population had grown in recent years, with the incomers including contract labourers and refugees from elsewhere in Africa.

### Table 1. Percentages of households with refrigerators and cellphones and living in informal dwellings, 2007, Dipaleseng contrasted with Mpumalanga, Lesedi, Gauteng and South Africa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dipaleseng (municipality)</th>
<th>Mpumalanga (province)</th>
<th>Lesedi (municipality)</th>
<th>Gauteng (province)</th>
<th>South Africa (national)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refrigerator</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellphone</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal dwelling</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Community Survey, 2007 (Statistics South Africa, 2007).*
With poor housing and services, high unemployment despite economic growth, and municipal leaders who were uncaring and probably corrupt, and with all this against the backdrop of a growing rebellion nationally, an explosive concoction was in place. On 8 July 2009, the Dipaleseng Youth Forum (DYF) led a peaceful march to the municipal offices and delivered a memorandum that included 23 demands (Sinwell et al., 2009, p. 12). Many were old issues, ranging from incorporation into Gauteng to lighting and the stadium. One demand just read: ‘houses’. Youth problems and unemployment were often connected. The first requirement was ‘Training centres—to develop skills’, and the second, which relates to hiring by the mine and municipality, specified: ‘Dipaleseng youth must have first preference’. Some demands had broader appeal and would benefit workers as well as the poor. These included: ‘police station in Siyathemba’, ‘mini-hospital’ and ‘paving of all roads and storm water drainage’.

The mayor was given seven days to respond. When he failed to do so, the DYF convened a general meeting for Siyathemba, which has a population of about 30,000. The gathering, which involved up to a thousand people, agreed to a community protest, including a stay-away strike by workers and school students. The events that followed—attacks by police, blockading of roads, torching of buildings, attacks on foreign-owned shops, etc.—have been described elsewhere (Pfaffe, 2009, pp. 41–43; Sinwell et al., 2009). As under apartheid, there was a major barricade at the entrance to the township, and we saw shops that were burnt down in the 1980s and burnt down again now (then they were owned by locals and now by foreigners). Following the uprising, the Presidency included Balfour as one of its priorities—a hotspot—and an official task team, with community and local union representatives on board, set about addressing the DYF’s demands. The deputy minister present at the meeting which established the task team was insistent that as many trade unionists as possible should be included.

Yet, six months later, there were no visible signs of progress. One of the DYF leaders told us: ‘The Task Team was just a strategy to keep us occupied [...] officials leading [it] ended up not coming to meetings’. He and his comrades now established the Dipaleseng Residents Forum, explaining that the new name acknowledged ‘[a need] to accommodate the needs of the entire community’ (Pfaffe, 2010). On 7 February 2010, another mass general meeting agreed to a second community protest. This time the demands were narrowed. As one resident put it (composite of two reports by Masinga, 2010):

One: We want this mine to remain true to its employment policy [...] More than 50 percent of locals are unemployed and the mine has instead employed people from other provinces. Two: we demand the resignation of the councillors [starting] with the mayor and the municipal manager. Three: we also demand the immediate redemarcation of Balfour to Gauteng, because Mpumalanga s**** when it comes to service delivery. (Asterisks in original)

The uprising that followed was similar in duration, scale and form to its predecessor, although this time the township library was looted of computers (in front of TV cameras) and later destroyed by fire. Fearing for their safety, leaders of the protests went into hiding or, as they put it, ‘into exile’. The state’s repression did seem greater this time, aimed perhaps at instilling fear.

The attitude of residents also hardened. When President Zuma visited Balfour in August 2009 he was well received, but when he returned in May 2010, to provide a
‘progress report’, the mood had changed. In a meeting held in the township stadium he
greeted by placards with critical messages, many about demarcation, and people
disobeyed his request for them to be lowered. Some of his fellow speakers were ‘heckled
wildly’ (Times Live, 2010). In 2009, the community wanted to give the national
government a chance to put things right, but, now, it too was being held responsible for
the problems.

Returning to Balfour in 2011, we found that many demands had not yet been addressed,
and some services had worsened. Nevertheless, there had been considerable progress. The
municipality was seeking land for new housing and half-finished state-subsidised houses
had been completed, roads had been improved, a special bursary been introduced for
Balfour’s students, skills-development ‘learnerships’ had been made available in large
number, street lighting had been installed, and a clinic had been opened nearby. Most cases
against arrested protesters had been abandoned by the police. Moreover, according to the
(much-despised) mayor, the Siyathemba library was insured and would be rebuilt.
Furthermore, the ANC used the municipal election to remove the mayor from office, and
in the course of the campaign the government announced that Dipaleseng would be
integrated into Gauteng. In addition, there were clear signs of radicalisation. Just prior to
the 2011 municipal election, a new left-wing party, the Socialist Civic Movement (SCM),
led a 2000-strong peaceful ‘Right to Work’ march from the township to the mine (i.e. it
symbolically shifted the target from the state to capital). In the election, the ANC
dropped from 10 out of 11 councillors to 7 out of 12, with two positions being won by the
SCM, one by a former-ANC independent and two by the Democratic Alliance. It does
seem that, at least in Balfour, ‘protest works’ (Booyse, 2007)!

The history of Balfour is different from that of other protest sites, but, then, all townships
have a unique past. The duration of the uprisings was typical of major protests, and the
number of people involved was not exceptional. Repeat protests and the destruction of
libraries have occurred elsewhere. In short, in using Balfour as a lens through which to
explore a significant, yet unnoticed, feature of the protests—poor/worker relations—we are
suggesting that our account has broader relevance for an analysis of the rebellion.

Balfour’s Fractured Unity

So, what did we learn about the inner dynamics of the uprising, its sociology? Through an
iterative process, our research allowed us to identify various social groupings. However, in
clarifying the different perspectives that existed, we should not lose sight of the history and
public poverty that were shared by the community at large.

Leaders

The revolt was led by 20-year-olds. Regarding themselves as community leaders, as well
as youth, they struck us as responsible and had a strong sense of strategy and tactics. While
not all had passed matric (the school leaving examination), the spokesperson was a
university student. Most of the DYF committee were men, but at least 2 out of about 10
were women. In response to a question about why young people now led the community,
one of them explained that the older generation of leaders, ‘are looking out for their
interest—which means tenders […] you have to compromise the outcome of the community’.
Youth

The notion of ‘youth’ was captured by a 29-year-old man living with his mother, grandmother, wife, son and two brothers. He told us: ‘I’m a youth of here—I don’t have any house’. He explained that because he was not working he was able to attend most community meetings. We often heard expressions of self-sacrifice, and righteousness and bravery were common. In a group interview with young men, one expressed himself as follows:

You want something to be better, you don’t care what is going to happen tomorrow [...]. If ever you get arrested maybe something will be better in the location [i.e. the township]. [...] We people of Balfour we have to sacrifice.

A 33-year-old man, who was arrested and charged with public violence, responded to the question ‘did you help build barricades?’ with ‘Be siba nyisa [we made shit for them]’. Explaining the protests he said: ‘We are not working, no RDP [state subsidised] houses and no nothing. [...] We were shocked [...] the mine came with its own people while we are here without jobs’. On the ANC Council he was similarly harsh: ‘Yi zinja lezo [they are dogs]. They don’t give a damn about our living conditions’.

Some youth formed militias in different sections of Siyathemba. These young people, mostly men, were sometimes described as ‘comrades’, a use of the word carried through from the 1980s. It was they, in particular, who led the building of barricades, enforced the stay-away and fought the police. It seems likely, however, that most street-level action was condoned by the wider community that had agreed to the protest, as if, implicitly (or complicity), it had provided a ‘mandate’ (Von Holdt & Langa, 2010, p. 9, for use of this term). But, as we have found elsewhere, attitudes can be contradictory, with criticism of ‘comrades’ combined with a grudging recognition that, to use a different language, their behaviour was part of solving the ‘free rider’ problem.

It was probably some comrades, possibly on the basis of a collective decision, who burnt the library. This event was hugely controversial. None of the men in our group interview was sorry. One said:

If ever there is something you are not using then throw it away. [...] We thought that maybe they [...] do something as they can see [our anger]. [...] When you go to the library, the only thing that you will find there are old text books.

In contrast, ironically, a 35-year-old man who ‘did crime’ opposed the burning of public buildings, commenting ‘some of the things were right and others were wrong’. We discussed the issue with two sisters, aged 16 and 19, who lived in a house without toilets, water or electricity and who strongly supported the protest. They criticised the burning of the library, with one adding: ‘They were supposed to just concentrate on their demands’.17

We asked most interviewees about the relationship between the employed and unemployed. In response, the 29-year-old man commented, chillingly: ‘if [a worker] can walk here at night, you don’t survive without getting stabbed or getting shot, and losing your cellphone or whatsoever clothes you are wearing’. Yet, reflecting on media coverage of the public sector strike, in progress at the time, the 33-year-old man opined: ‘We are all
homeboys and we don’t hate one another. [ ... although] the strike affects poor people, the government should just give them the 8.6% [the main demand]. The government [spent] billions on the useless [soccer] World Cup’.

At the younger end of the spectrum, many school students participated in the protest—marching, toyi-toying,\(^\text{18}\) constructing barricades, fighting the police, looting shops and even being arrested. Some of these learners were very young, from the primary schools. ‘They enjoyed to be part’, commented one of the teachers.

Unemployed

Most of ‘the youths’ were unemployed, or, if not, did ‘piece jobs’ (occasional casual labour) or engaged in petty trade, but there was also a distinct group who identified themselves as ‘unemployed’. These were men who, in the second protest, formed the Dipaleseng Unemployed People’s Organization (DUPO). They claimed to represent 500 people across the municipality. Pfaffe noted: ‘About 30 men, probably between 20 and 40 years in age, can be seen […] behind the municipal offices on a daily basis, [they] wear workman’s clothes and overalls as well as heavy boots’. Most had work experience and skills but lacked formal qualifications, and some had previously worked at the power station so were aggrieved about not being re-hired. On other occasions, we found people using the term ‘unemployed’ as if it meant ‘formerly employed’ (that is, at some point in receipt of payments from the Unemployment Insurance Fund). The focus of DUPO’s agitation was narrow. ‘We do not care about service delivery, and we do not care about demarcation […] we [just] want employment’ said one representative. Community leaders were dismissive, complaining that DUPU lacked ‘basic political skills and experience’.

Older residents

Two of the key issues—jobs and housing—concerned younger people in particular. So how did older residents respond? While there were nuances, the balance of opinion was sympathetic. A 48-year-old woman, who had been ‘staying in the bush’ because she was homeless, told us ‘I was part of the action’, adding: ‘I couldn’t watch my children fighting alone […] Those police, they fired rubber bullets and pepper sprays into us. It was painful, but worth fighting’. A 56-year-old woman living in a relatively better-quality house said: ‘our children […] must fight. If the ANC doesn’t listen, we will make them listen’.

Old and young shared the same pitiful housing and the same run-down township. An older shack-dweller complained: ‘[Since] before 1994 the location is still the same. […] you can see the dusty streets of 1976—they are still the same. But one thing has changed—the councillors—they are living now in those white suburbs’. Another female shack dweller offered the following: ‘the president was here and he [promises, but] he does nothing’. This view was echoed by others, and it seemed that attitudes had turned decisively against the government.

There were different explanations of social divisions. A former boilermaker in his fifties emphasised that the relationship between workers and the unemployed was fraught because the latter would demand things like bread, cigarettes and beer from the former and would be upset by refusal—which often lead to fights in the taverns. The 48-year-old
woman was forthright: ‘people who are working no longer want to participate in the struggle. They think they have made it’. And a man who was ‘roughly 48’ was particularly unsympathetic to the striking teachers: ‘Ehh my brother [...it] is them [the teachers] who are delaying the education of our children’.

**Business People**

There were two kinds of people who were better off than the majority: businesses owners and regularly employed workers. Among the former, opinions varied. There was a bus and taxi owner who gave donations to assist community protests. He explained: ‘As a businessman you must always be with the people, otherwise you are in trouble’. He was very firm on demarcation, mainly because renewing permits meant a long trip to Nelspruit. In contrast, there was the owner of the largest of nine township undertakers, who felt politics could lead to trouble and was best avoided. He gave donations to the needy, not organisations. Then, there was the owner of a small ‘spazza’ shop run from the side of his house. He complained bitterly about teachers, but his venom was reserved for foreign shop owners, and he only supported the protest to the extent it was directed against them. He was more clearly xenophobic than any other interviewees and demanded the forced removal of the foreigners.

**Workers**

The major employers in the area—the mine, an abattoir, a fruit processing factory and the largest supermarket—all confirmed that stay-aways had affected production, especially on the first day of each strike. Managers at the mine recalled workers gradually trickling in, finding circuitous routes through the bush, and at work they ‘had difficulty concentrating’. Employers agreed that intimidation had been a problem. A young human resources (HR) manager at the fruit factory was particularly credible because she lived in Siyathemba and sympathised with the protest. According to her: ‘the roads were closed with tyres, wood and all that, and the fires were burning, and they would beat you if you went to work’.

We heard similar stories from workers—though now combined with mention of police brutality. For instance, an abattoir worker explained:

> I think anyone or everyone who grew up in a township [knows that] if you don’t cooperate with the comrades [... ] Either they burn you or they beat you up. [...] The police also shot at people because they couldn’t tell if you were really going to work or you were only one of the comrades.

This same worker once attended community meetings, but that was before she got a job, and now she finds she is too tired to participate (this was a sentiment echoed by other workers). This abattoir worker’s analysis was that, ‘the people who were strong about this strike are the people who are unemployed. [...] For them they have nothing to lose’. The union shop steward at the fruit factory confirmed that beatings took place. Her explanation for why people came to work despite risks was simple: ‘Some of the workers were afraid of losing their jobs’.

Ambivalence among workers is more profound than simply being ‘piggy in the middle’. As during the apartheid years, there was a tendency to box off two parts of one’s life: home and work. Thus, in 2009 and again in 2010, we found workers who would say that they were part of the community and so, of course, they backed the protest, but it did not occur
to them to raise township issues within their union. For one fruit worker the matter was straightforward: ‘No, the union never said nothing, because it’s [about] the location’. A strength of unions can be their commitment to democracy and due procedure, but this produces different ‘lead times’ to those of community protest mobilisation. In a classic response, the fruit factory shop steward complained: ‘They never have formal meetings. [...] If they would contact us [as the union] we would get involved’.

Other factors can inhibit solidarity. For the National Union of Mineworkers’ official responsible for the mine, sympathy for people in Siyathemba was complicated by his acceptance that it was standard practice to recruit most of a mine’s labour force outside the local area (though it is possible that the union was also securing work for members retrenched by mines elsewhere). We heard from the HR manager at the abattoir that in the wake of a 2006 strike, the union ceased to exist on the premises, and, one assumes, without a union workers would have been more vulnerable to victimisation and unlikely to act collectively as part of a protest. Teachers working in the township told us they supported the protests, but most lived in neighbouring towns and so did not participate in the action.

When workers went onto the streets as part of their own struggle, there was still a separation from community protesters. In 2009, during the meeting establishing the Task Team, members of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) were on strike and toyi-toyied outside the same town hall where the meeting was taking place; yet, there was no interaction between the events. In 2010, the public sector workers’ strike occurred in the aftermath of the February uprising, but there was no evidence of any common action involving strikers and the protesters.

Assessment

This sketch reveals much unevenness within a single small township. The existence of an unemployed grouping separate from the youth was a surprise. The former appeared to understand ‘unemployed’ as ‘formerly employed’ and ‘available to work’. The ‘youth’ also emphasised the importance of work, but placed this within a wider context that enabled them to think and act more politically. We were also taken aback by the gulf between, on the one hand, the youth and older residents and, on the other, workers living in the township. The image of lumpen youth attacking workers is haunting. In the eyes of many residents, the workers were fortunate and should have been doing more to assist the struggle. In contrast, the workers viewed themselves as attempting to hang on to precarious jobs and objected strongly to intimidation. Although some wanted to participate in community activities, involvement was limited by time constraints.

Despite all this, there are references to ‘homeboys’ and being ‘part of the community’. Moreover, one wonders what might have happened if the young rebels had contacted the shop steward. In 2012, while revising this article, we asked a youth leader with whom we had a trusting relationship, why the steward had not been contacted. He knew the woman and thought her genuinely sympathetic, but said: ‘different ways of organising was a stumbling block’. He explained that if unions want to strike or march they follow set legal procedures, but he and his colleagues wanted maximum participation and impact with minimal delay, and, moreover, their protest would not be authorised. His own point of reference was the 1980s, when, he said, workers joined stay-aways without the unions providing official support (which might have exposed them to legal sanction). Offering a positive example, he said that the SAMWU had been invited to meetings, and its members joined the protests and, later, dragged
their feet in removing barricades. This explanation is particularly valuable because it shows that despite tensions over life style, income and immediate benefits, there can also be recognition of common interests and an informal practice of united action.

Conclusion

Scattered through our account of Balfour, there are several references back to the 1980s: the same dusty streets, similar positioning of barricades, ‘comrades’ playing an equivalent role and so on. Clearly, some trenches had barely moved. However, because of its focus on a particular set of relationships, our analysis has occluded Katznelson’s other major trench: politics. The election of a democratic government, and the preceding struggle, brought an end to racial domination of politics, but economic and social gains have been distributed unevenly. Anger and frustration among the losers has been accompanied by strategic and tactical problems for those challenging the authority of a ‘legitimate’ government. However, we cannot envisage the present position continuing a great deal longer. From our ongoing research—not reported here—during 2012 and 2013 there has been an increase in the frequency and spread of protests and, probably, an expansion in the range of demands and greater willingness to cause ‘havoc’ (mainly by destroying buildings). We anticipate that at some point, there will be a ‘scale shift’, which McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, p. 331) define as ‘a change in the number and level of co-ordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging [of] their claims and identities’. We cannot predict the form this will take, but agree with Von Holdt (2012, p. 111) that when it does occur ‘real repression is likely to be unleashed’.

This is the context for our conclusions. We hope to have shown that while there is social distance between workers and the poor, there is too much intermingling, family loyalty, life style fluidity and shared experience for it to be helpful to explain this distinction, or something proximate, through a theory of class separation—at least for now. Katznelson and Castells offer an alternative approach that emphasises structural logics. Yet, we feel the need to go further. Piven and Cloward point to the linkage between daily experiences, grievances, targets and forms of protests; the last of these is conditioned by, to put it theoretically, ‘resource mobilisation’. Our formulation—social relationships to the means and ends of protest—encapsulates, deepens and generalises the analysis they present.

We end by linking our abstraction to the context summarised above, which finished on a cautionary note. Here and there we find moments of genuine solidarity between workers and the poor. In Balfour, SAMWU members backed the uprising; in 2010, in Standerton, less than 40 km from Balfour, we came across a community march to a workers’ picket line and workers solidarity with a community protest; in 2011, in Ficksburg, Free State, the police union deplored the killing of a protest leader by a fellow officer; and in 2012 there was considerable community solidarity with platinum miners’ strikes in the district around Rustenburg, Northwest, with workers and youth building barricades together on one occasion and women backing their partners after the Marikana massacre (Alexander, 2010, p. 36; POPCRU, 2011). We are reminded, too, of the scale shift that emerged in fits and starts through the 1970s and 1980s. This was a period in which ‘ways of organising’ became less a ‘stumbling block’ and more a division of labour. Behind the trenches there were then, and are now, family and community networks and shared interests, and, ahead of them, there is a possibility, though only a possibility, that the hinge will close and, as Castells might put it, allies become comrades.
Notes

1. Authors’ observations and discussion with various actors.

2. China has also experienced a high level of localised protest in recent years, but trawling through the literature, it becomes clear that on a per capita basis, there have been more protests in South Africa (Chinaworker.info, 2009; Soong, 2006; Tong & Lei, 2010, p. 488; see also Freeman, 2010). The size and intensity of mobilisation in the Middle East has been greater, but the spread and number of insurrectionary protests in South Africa is almost certainly higher.

3. As used here, ‘township’ includes informal settlements. Settlements, which grew up close to and sometimes within formal townships, are comprised mainly of shacks. While some are being formalised and upgraded, many lack the most basic services.

4. Owing to marginalisation, oppression and resistance—both historical and contemporary—there is a palpable sense of ‘community’ associated with townships and informal settlements. The precise meaning of ‘community’ is always ambivalent and contested, but should be understood as something broader than ‘the poor’.

5. ‘Insurrections’, as defined here, are protests that exclude the police from a given area (such as a township) through the erection and physical defence of barricades. Not all protests are insurrections. The ‘rebellion’ consists of ‘protests’ and the associated activity and organisation. ‘Uprising’ is used as synonym for ‘insurrection’.

6. These ‘stay-aways’ are rarely mentioned in press reports or secondary literature, but in a survey of protest leaders, conducted by Alexander at an ‘academics and activists workshop’ held at the University of Johannesburg in 2011, it was found that the tactic was used in 10 cases out of 22.

7. In a discussion of the welfare rights movement of the later 1960s, Piven & Cloward (1979, p. 265) comment that ‘the great rise in relief insurgency can be understood as a rebellion of the poor’. As far as one can tell, the extent and militancy of this movement did not match South Africa’s current rebellion.

8. The phrase has also used been by Zwelinzima Vavi, general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, and in a debate with Alexander on the Sunday Live TV show, Gwede Mantashe, secretary general of the ruling ANC, acknowledged that it was ‘academically’ acceptable.

9. In the survey mentioned in note 7, it transpired that barricades were erected in 14 protests, compared to 10 cases where they had not been used, and 14 of the protests had been led by people who were jobless, compared to 5 cases with a mixture of employed and unemployed leaders. Similarities between protests exist despite an absence of co-ordination.

10. The figure comes from Minister of Police (2012). Police statistics distinguish between crowd management (peaceful) and crowd management (unrest). For 2007–2009, the Minister of Police stated that most of the former were related to pay and most of the latter were about service delivery (Alexander, 2012a). On the meaning of ‘rebellion’, see Boswell and Dixon (1990, p. 540).

11. The research included a large representative survey conducted in 2006.

12. The remaining 7% consisted of a petty bourgeoisie (including shopkeepers), a small number of managers (generally junior) and less than 0.1% defined as capitalists. Our use of the term ‘poor’ is wider than those who self-identified as poor in the survey, who comprised 39% of the population.

13. There is no similar study for Siyathemba, Balfour’s township, but most available indicators suggest that Dipaleseng, the municipality both fall under, is poorer than Soweto (see Ceruti, 2013; Statistics South Africa, 2007). South Africa has nine provinces. These are divided into municipalities, of which there are three types. Most of the country is separated into (1) local municipalities, such as Dipaleseng, which are contained within (2) district municipalities. The exception is the eight largest cities (including Johannesburg), which are run by (3) ‘metros’, that combine responsibilities assigned to local and district municipalities.

14. Ceruti (2013) uses the concept ‘proletarian community of fate’ to capture the idea that workers and the poor generally have common interests. Arguing along similar lines to ourselves, Legassick (personal communication, April 12, 2011) states:

There is a disjuncture between struggles by employed workers and struggles in the townships (by mainly casually employed workers and the unemployed). All are part of the working class [… ] those in the township protests tend to identify themselves as […] poor.

It follows that we reject temptations to inject a ‘labour aristocracy’ (Lehurulele, 2005) or a ‘rapid process of class formation’ (Von Holdt et al., 2011, p. 6) into our analysis.
15. We are grateful to Lufuno Gogoro and Lifu Nhlapo for their assistance. Translation of quotes used in this article was checked by colleagues whose first language was the relevant vernacular.

16. The SCM was initiated by PAC activists, including the pastor mentioned previously, but its base was broader and a new orientation was signalled by the selection of the colour red for its supporters’ t-shirts and baseball caps. See Alexander (2012b) for analysis of the election campaign in Balfour.

17. Similarly, commenting on the 1980s, Zunes (1999, p. 229; see also Ngwane, 2011, p. 79) observed: ‘Often the targets of black rioters were public facilities for Africans, which created rifts within black populations’.

18. Toyi-toying is a form of vigorous and collective dancing accompanied by rhythmic slogans and sometimes the brandishing of sticks. The term has taken on a broader meaning equivalent to militant and possibly insurrectionary protest.

19. He explained: ‘Unions in most cases don’t like to involve themselves. [. . .] In the Task Team, the unions [failed to assist us]’. He also recalled that when the PAC activists had tried mobilising community support for abattoir strikers in 2006, they were accused by ANC and the unions of canvassing for the election, and had been forced to stop.

References


Freeman, W. (2010, March 2). The accuracy of China’s ‘mass incidents’. FT.com


**Peter Alexander** is a professor of sociology at the University of Johannesburg. He holds the South African Research Chair in Social Change, which is funded by the Department of Science and Technology and administered by the National Research Foundation. His interests include global labour history and the sociology of class.

**Peter Pfaffe** is a research associate at the South African Research Chair in Social Change at the University of Johannesburg. He was previously a student and an assistant researcher at the university, and now lives in Germany. Email: peter.pfaffe@gmail.com