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**Sophie Dulucq** – Scientific Director

**Chloé Buire** – Senior Researcher, CNRS

**Line Relisieux** – Project Manager

**Dostin Lakika** – Research Secretary

**Werner Prinsloo** – Graphic Designer & Website

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*Lesedi* : Sesotho word meaning “knowledge”

The views and opinions expressed here remains the sole responsibility of their authors

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in South Africa**

Coordinated by *Léo Fortaillier*

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## Liberation and Looted Malls

### Fractured Urbanism and Suburban Nationalism in South Africa in the Time of Covid



#### Leslie Bank

*Professor of Anthropology and Strategic Lead in Education and Livelihoods  
Human Sciences Research Council*

In 2003, Ivor Chipkin (2003) published a study which found that the provision of improved physical infrastructure (taps, housing, new schools, etc.) did not necessarily improve social cohesion in communities with broken homes and gangsters. Physical infrastructure provision, he argued, was not the same as development. It did not on its own make communities more cohesive, democratic and tolerant. The South African concept of *ubuntu*, or human togetherness, he argued, did not come naturally; it had to be cultivated as part of a programme of social upliftment and empowerment. He used fieldwork from the Cape Flats in Cape Town to show that accommodating street gangsters and their families in better housing units had not stopped them from being gangsters. In fact, on the contrary, the housing programme seemed to be rewarding them for being gangsters. Chipkin contended that the belief that state housing and service delivery would create social cohesion based on “decent and virtuous citizenship”, as the policy documents seemed to suggest, was a mistaken assumption. He criticised the state-run housing programme for not attempting to address “how these products [housing units] might assist residents become ethical citizens in a position to sustain themselves virtuously” (Chipkin 2003: 74). He defined ethical and virtuous citizenship as tolerating social and cultural difference, acknowledging the rights and dignity of others, and encouraging social cohesion at family, street

and neighbourhood levels. In this regard, he was critical of the state’s decision to step away from the challenges of promoting social cohesion and a participatory democracy in favour of the delivery of physical assets, such as taps, houses and toilets, to the poor. He felt that the work of building a new society required much more (*Ibid*).

Several years later in 2011, Fiona Ross at the University of Cape Town published a book called *Raw Life, New Hope: Decency, Housing and Everyday Life in a Post-Apartheid Community*. In this volume, she explored the changes in the lives of members of a poor black community in Cape Town over a ten-year period. During this time, the neighbourhood, which had been a rough and ready shack settlement, was transformed by the arrival of free state housing under the government’s *Reconstruction and Development Plan* (RDP). Ross (2011) described the provision of the suburban-style RDP units as a potential game changer in the lives of the local residents and how they had believed that the houses they were to receive would wash away the pain and indignity of poverty and bring social advancement and decency (*ordentlikheid*). However, the book shows that while the houses provided by the state initially offered hope to the residents, the community continued to experience considerable difficulties and violence even after the houses had been delivered. In fact, the book concluded, the RDP housing programme had helped to create more



tensions, including xenophobic violence, than it had resolved. Families were no less dysfunctional by virtue of having a better standard of housing, nor was the community less divided by virtue of the gifts provided by the state. Ross's lament, like that of Ivor Chipkin, is that state-driven development should do more. It should result in less marginalisation and greater employment and should provide more opportunities for social inclusion and coherent family life.

In other work on the issue, Barolsky (2013; 2019) and her colleagues at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) provided a different perspective on cohesion and suburban desire in their exploration of the development model promoted by a European-funded non-governmental organisation (NGO), Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU), in the Khayelitsha township of Cape Town. Barolsky (2019) argued that the NGO failed to win sustained local support because it was perceived as too Euro-centric and neo-liberal in its approach, which was to offer access to modern bungalow housing as a solution to inter-personal and public violence. The NGO believed that new built forms would produce more modernist forms of family, identity and behaviour. In other words, it was another project based on the belief that the right kind of infrastructure can produce the right types of social relations, behaviour and citizenship and help create peaceful and cohesive communities. In the end, Barolsky argued, VPUU lost momentum because its models for development collided with local people's ideas of kinship and their fear of new forms of social control and community. The imaginary of an "ordered city" (reproduced by VPUU and the state) came into conflict with local forms of mutuality, social cohesion, and informality. This view is supported by the work of De Sagté and Watson (2018) on the history of modernist town planning regimes in the Langa township in Cape Town and why these planning models failed over a long period. Both these studies highlight the complex cultural contexts surrounding public housing delivery in Cape Town; but they also over-estimate African resistance to suburban-style homes and consumer lifestyles. In this regard, most studies of Cape Town pay too little attention to the fact that, although the long-term refusal of particular forms of urbanisation with services and land aimed at poor and marginalised African residents has

blocked suburban development, this has not suppressed suburban desire among this population.

The argument of this paper is that it would be difficult to understand the recent nationwide mall riots and looting which took place in South Africa in July 2021 outside the deepening economic crisis of employment in the country and an appreciation of how embedded consumer culture and suburban aspirations has become in South Africa since apartheid. Since the 1990s, popular notions of citizenship have come to pivot on the possibility of a suburban transition, even in peripheral location. Therefore, those who are unable to build suburban homes in the city due to limited access to land or the costs of building and services, often build such homes in the rural areas, where there is more space – and they can show their communities how they have progressed as a family (Bank 2015). Our inability to be able to see the urban and the rural in the same frame blinds us to the extent to which citizenship is today connected to the expression of suburbanised living in South Africa. To be sure, ethnic building styles and homegrown cultural styles have not been abandoned but have been combined with globalised sub-urban forms. In fact, globally, there is a large body of literature to suggest that the desire for suburbanisation continues to grow across the world as cities sprawl and consumer culture deepens in diverse, complex ways (Berger & Kotkin 2017; Calderia 2017; Keil 2018). There is also an assertion of a close connection between imaginations of urban citizenship and the promise of infrastructure, including housing and suburban style services (Anand, Gupta & Appel 2018). Lemanski (2019) uses the term "infrastructural citizenship" to explore how poor people in cities interact with the state and with one another around infrastructure provision.

In this paper, I argue that it is difficult to dismiss the deficits of state service delivery failures and the unfulfilled promise of suburban desire as fundamental causes of the looting of malls and supermarkets across the country in July 2021. The creation of over 17 million square metres of retail, supermarket and mall space in South African since democracy bears testament to the materiality and physical presence of the machinery of suburban desire as fundamental infrastructures of post-apartheid South Africa. They are examples of the "the

gross material of materiality”, as Amin and Thrift (2018) would say. In their book *Seeing like a City*, they view infrastructures as “moments of standardisation, technical compatibility, professional rivalry, bureaucratic imperatives, regulatory competences and general disposition” that literally hold the city together (2018: 34). The argument of this paper is that access to suburban infrastructure is considered an essential component of urban citizenship and post-apartheid African nationalism in a society, where so many still look in on this dream from the outside with envy. It was Franz Fanon (1961) who warned that, it was not only the filthy and overcrowded “native towns” of colonialism that needed to change after liberation, but settler town and its culture too (Fanon 1961). In the many interviews aired on television of those involved in the violence mall looting, there appeared to be an air of entitlement in the

justification of the action take, almost as if the citizens of the townships were taking for themselves what the state had promised with liberation and failed to deliver.

### Service-delivery protests and cultivated suburban desire

Lizette Lancaster (2018) produced a statistical account of popular protests over five years from 2013 to 2017 in South Africa, using multiple sources of information. Her findings provide an important context for the discussion below. Lancaster (2018) found evidence of almost 5,000 protests over this period, with the highest numbers recorded in 2013 and 2014. There was a slump in protest activity in 2015 and 2016, but a rise again in 2017, which seems to have continued

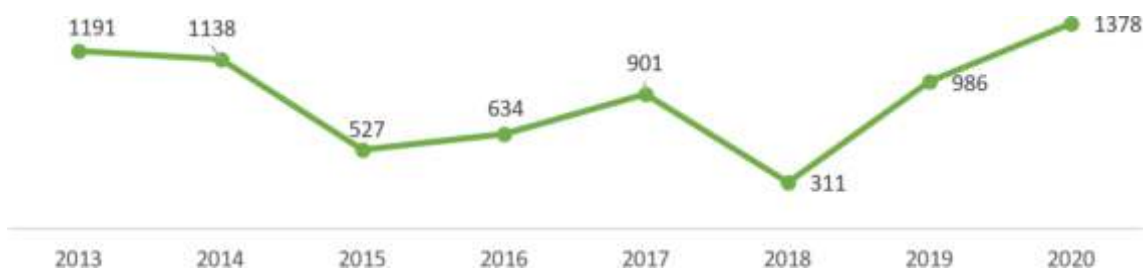


Figure 1: Number of protests in South Africa, 2013-2020  
 Source: ISS Protest and Public Violence Monitor (2020) <https://issafrica.org/crimehub/maps/public-protest-and-violence-stats>

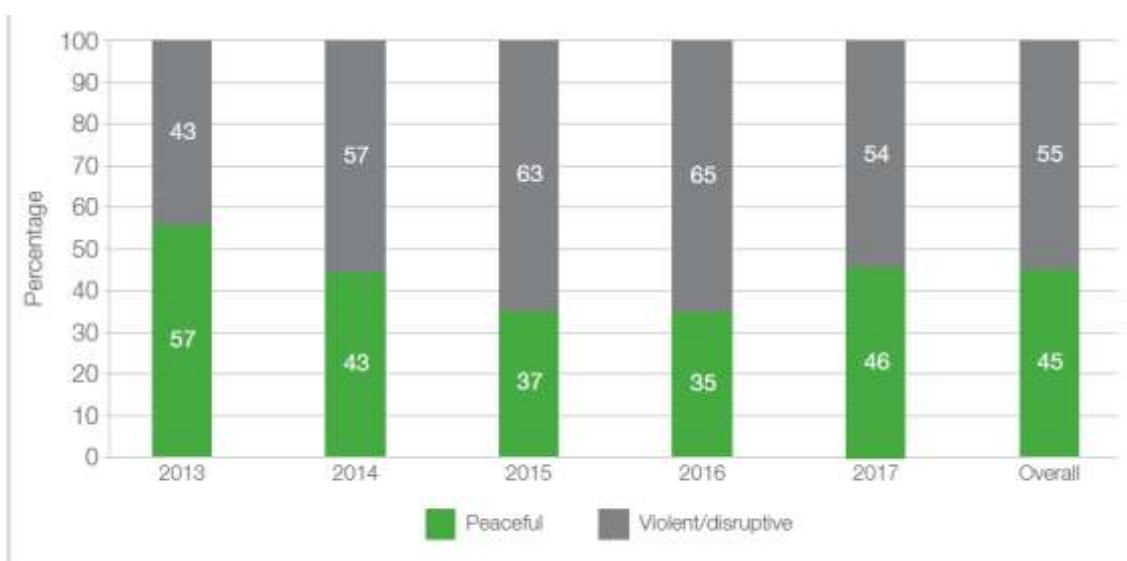


Figure 2: Peaceful or violent nature of the protests, 2013-2017  
 Source: Lancaster (2018: 40)

through to the mall riots of 2021. The protests occurred mainly in large urban areas, with 31% recorded in Gauteng and 20% in the Western Cape. Another 30% occurred in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

In her analysis, Lancaster noted that the spatial distribution of the violent protests suggested that they tended to occur around large informal settlements in major metropolitan areas. The research suggested that labour disputes were the most common reason for protest action, followed by issues of crime and safety (often related to the inadequate performance of the South African Police Service [SAPS]). The next most common source of unrest was the government's failure to deliver basic municipal services, such as sanitation, water provision and electricity, which accounted for almost 700 protests between 2013 and 2017.<sup>1</sup> Lack of access to education or conflicts at schools accounted for 520 protests, while disputes among political parties accounted for 466 protests over this period. The next most frequent basis for protest action was housing, which could include the non-delivery of houses that the municipalities had promised, as well as the inadequacy of the houses delivered by the state. The anger around service delivery and housing is indicative of how poor urban populations have internalised expectations about the provision of these services, such that they are considered to constitute basic urban rights. In rural areas, for example, there were hardly any service-delivery protests and communities seemed to regard many of the services that urban residents took for granted as privileges or luxuries. In parts of the rural Eastern Cape, for example, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) is lauded for providing communal taps and running water, or free water storage tanks, when in the cities the provision of such amenities would be regarded as a basic right. The meaning and the nature of the demand for infrastructure thus varies according to context. However, the data clearly shows the level of anger and impatience among urban residents, whose disappointment over the broken post-liberation promise of a better life appears to be the greatest.

In Johannesburg, Diepsloot is a dense, complex and diverse post-apartheid settlement with multiple, small housing and service-delivery ecologies. Parts are evolving into new forms of suburbia, while others comprise highly compressed shack settlements. Diepsloot has also been the site of many service-delivery protests and a number of outbreaks of criminal and xenophobic violence. In his ethnography of life in the Diepsloot shack lands, Anton Harber (2011) described the complicated plans, processes, and expectations of state housing in the settlement. He showed how the many layers of government work with and against each other in response to the demands for state housing among the residents. He noted how people working in the built environment sector understood what needed to change but were prevented from acting on their innovative plans and schemes because of the expectations of local residents and housing department officials. In one instance, he described how an NGO forwarded a set of well-considered plans to improve the settlement through the upgrading of public spaces to increase safety and pedestrian and transport flows. However, residents objected to the proposed intervention on the grounds that it could delay the delivery of RDP houses, which was their priority. Meanwhile, the authorities could not reconcile the public-space focus of the NGO's plan with their interest in *in situ* upgrading and the delivery of RDP housing (2011: 180).

The book shows how the emphasis on the promise of the suburban house as the source of a better life has led to the privatisation and individualisation of the concept of development at the local level. Harber's ethnography also indicates how the focus on specific products, such as RDP houses, can distract people from investing in the places and dwellings which they currently inhabit. Residents who were surveyed for the book expressed the view that the current built environment was transitory, which is how the state also sees it, and thus not worthy of improvement through the upgrading of shacks or streets.

In his writing on the "native towns" of colonial Africa,

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1. This rationale for protests is so widely known in South Africa that all relatively small-scale protest actions in informal settlements and townships are now generally termed "service delivery protests".

Frantz Fanon spoke extensively of this kind of state of mind. He argued that the inequalities produced under colonialism had caused Africans to dream of settler suburbia, desiring a form of freedom that would liberate them from the misery and poverty of their dilapidated neighbourhoods. Fanon wrote of how the colonised man would lie awake; filled with desire, lust, and anger as he compared his hovel to the luxury of life in the settler suburbs. This is how Fanon expressed it in 1961:

*“The look that the native turns on the settler town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession: to sit at the settler table, to sleep in the settler bed, with his wife if possible. The colonised man is an envious man. And this the settler knows well; when their glances meet, he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, “They want to take our place”. It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place.” (1961: 64).*

In Diepsloot, Harber quoted the lyrics of shack-town rappers which expressed similar dreams, fears and fantasies. As one song has it:

*“I wish I would wake up one morning,  
And find myself in the suburbs,  
Dressed like a king,  
My wife with a ring on a finger...  
But now every time I wake, I’m in forest,  
My eyes can’t see clearly,  
The Devil is here taking people away,  
Leading them to danger.” (2011: 69)*

The notion that the better life is out there, far away, in the new suburbs, imposes a kind of temporality on everyday life, with residents ever hopeful of escape. People feel they need to bear the drudgery of the here and now as they wait for the better life that the government will deliver. Being on the housing list offers such hope for the future. It means that the individual concerned has not been forgotten; that they are standing in line for the gifts of freedom, especially the free-standing RDP house on a pavilion plot. There is thus no need to invest in incremental improvements in the local neighbourhood, because these do not represent the future. Harber (2011) lamented this attitude and suggested that it was limiting the capacity of people to embrace *in situ* upgrading. In this sense, it seems that the

utopian thinking of the government in relation to the built environment has been internalised by residents, creating a life of anticipating the moment when everything will change with the gift of domestic infrastructure. In the meantime, it is necessary to engage in insurgency, in *toyitoyi* (protest dancing), to ensure one is not forgotten. For the rappers, this is a world of waiting where death is close at hand. It seems that: “There is no future in this land, People are unemployed, Poverty is stubborn, Death attacks everyone” (2011: 71) and relief is only temporary in this vale of sorrows: “After tears, we dance and dance, After tears we party and party, After tears we drink and drink, After tears” (*Ibid*). Meanwhile, there are no intermediate horizons in everyday life, only an elusive future, which may bring the gift of suburbia and security, and an immediate moment with death and danger always just around the corner. The imaginaries of the here and now, and the “better life” hereafter, as many of the Diepsloot rappers imagined the suburbs, define the structure of feeling for many residents of post-apartheid shack settlements, where the RDP house is the ultimate gift of liberation.

The socio-economic significance of the RDP house and its promise of a new, better life in the city should also be considered in the historical context of Africa’s national independence struggles against colonialism. Thomas Hodgkin (1956) conveys a vivid sense of the connection between African urbanisation and the continent’s liberation efforts in his classic book, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, written on the eve of independence across Africa:

*For the truth is that this crystallisation toward nation-states is not simply a choice, a fashion, a passing political tactic. On the contrary, it is the product of all those many factors which have combined, these many years, into the African awakening of our day [...] It is the product of the growth of towns and cities, up and down Africa, into which the disturbed and dispossessed could pour: so that there is scarcely a great conurbation in Africa south of the Sahara that has failed to double and quadruple its pathetic “native slums” over the past few years. It is the product, in short, of the detribalisation and the urbanisation (and, increasingly, now, of the industrialisation) of many million Africans, driven out of the world of their fathers into the world of Europeans, but*



*not admitted to that new world except on terms of helotry and hunger. (in Davidson 1957:71)*

This “helotry and hunger” in a world still “dominated by Europeans” or, in the post-colonial world, by political leaders who take for themselves and their allies but do not share with the masses, incubates nationalist awakening. Such nationalism is felt and expressed strongly in South Africa’s informal settlements, as the above service-delivery protest data suggests. Such settlements and their residents are defined as being “on the outside”, engaged in a perpetual struggle for access to the city. This narrative of an incomplete, yet-to-be-won fight is even invoked in the way in which these townships and informal settlements are named after icons of the struggle against apartheid: Joe Slovo, Chris Hani, OR Tambo, etc. The under-serviced and poorly housed sometimes describe fighting for freedom, for entry into the post-colonial world. They deploy the ethos of *ubuntu* to illustrate their common plight and their capacity to cooperate. They depict themselves as living in alien conditions and in places where they are unwelcome and hounded, where they “struggle together”, working collectively “for success” and “helping each other” to survive. The struggle has a nationalist tenor, making the informal settlements volatile spaces for political activism, sites of protest and seedbeds for oppositional forms of African nationalism. It is in these areas that the promise of the gift of public housing strengthens the desire for access to the city and secure the illusive “cargo” of suburban life, which has been promised for so long but never delivered.

## Fractured Urbanism and Citizenship in Cape Town

In the nationalist struggle on the urban edge, where the post-colonial state is implored to liberate the poor, not through the market, but through the provision of a serviced house and a better suburban life, residents can be reduced to inertia, waiting and unwilling to act until they receive what they are due (Oldfield & Greyling 2015). “Why,” they ask, “should we improve this shack or settlement” when it is the job of the government to bring housing? Meanwhile, those who receive such housing and the accompanying services tend to claim that that they

are now citizens with rights, and, as such, have more right to the city than those who are still waiting. All of which can lead to tensions within townships and informal settlements. The sense of belonging and entitlement associated with access to urban infrastructure is called “infrastructural citizenship” by Lemanski (2020), while Bank (2011) has described how unequal access to infrastructure fractured urbanism, with communities at the margins being moulded in competition with each other as they struggled for “access to the city”.

Both perspectives seem relevant in understanding the politics of service-delivery struggles and divisions within informal settlements and RDP housing estates in Cape Town where terms such as *umhlali* (resident), *abaxusi* (tenant), *abemi* (citizen), and *umi* (temporary) were used to differentiate urban residents and their rights to the city. Issue of infrastructures and access to housing have been central to these classifications. These terms create social divisions that are often also coupled with racialised stereotypes in the discourse relating to conflicts over government houses and services. In several places, such conflicts have been exacerbated by delays in the delivery of housing by the provincial government; increased congestion; shifting plans and policies; delayed service delivery; and claims by “Coloured” residents that their lives and livelihoods are being compromised by the government crowding in African migrants from the Eastern Cape in their areas. Similar dynamics applied in areas where settled communities of Xhosa-speaking Africans are densely settled. Those with houses called their tenants and those in informal settlements, *umhlali* (meaning “resident” or “visitor”). This stirred up anger and discontent because they reject being called “temporary” just because they live in shacks. In this context, the term *abemi*, or “citizens”, which is used to describe so-called “permanent” or city-born residents, has increasingly been taken to mean “first to settle” – which, many tenants say, does not necessarily entail being able to claim a birth-right. In a similar vein, the terms *umi* and *umhlali* which are supposed to indicate a less valid claim to residency are widely applied to South Africa citizens who have every right to call themselves Capetonians (see Bank, Ndinda & Hart 2018).

In Cape Town, many of those who were born in South Africa and had lived in the city for a long time but were

not spoken of as “citizens” felt an abiding sense of resentment. They complained that those using terms such as *umi* and *umhlali* to describe them failed to recognise their histories in the city or, in some cases, their credentials in the struggle. In Duncan Village in East London in the Eastern Cape, a similar divide was noted between the *inzalelwane* (people who were born there) and *abantu bofufika* (newcomers), or “outsiders” (see Bank 2015, 2017). The *inzalelwane*, many of whom live in the backyards, claimed that the municipality favoured newcomers. They said that “this has left those who actually won freedom through the struggle” at the back of queue. They argued that it was time that the proven “struggle families” were rewarded, campaigning for a moratorium on scarce state resources flowing into the hands of *abantu bofufika*. A comparable dynamic was noted in Cape Town where *inzalelwane* families in the yards of historical townships such as Langa argued that the city should ignore the freestanding shacks and only develop housing for families in the backyards. They demanded that a politics of restitution be implemented, under which those who had been there the longest and could prove that they had contributed to the struggle for freedom should be given priority (see Bank, Ndinda & Hart 2018).

The condition found in Cape Town have become typical across the country as service delivery is limited as demands escalated. Local people have invented new ways to create social differentiation and assert their rights as insiders or citizens over others. The conditions that prevailed under the Covid 19 lockdowns appear to have suspended and defused some of these rivalries and fractures, as those confined to the margins felt a strong sense of unity. Landlords gradually acknowledged that tenants could not always pay their rents and in-fighting over access to housing and infrastructure subsided as families regrouped and the poor felt less divided. This sense of united and marginalisation appears to have resulted in a more outwardly looking orientation and a stronger sense of relative deprivation between those in

the genuine suburbs and those in the townships and shack areas.<sup>2</sup>

## Covid-19, Lockdown and the Malls

In July 2021, after more than a year of government lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, widespread rioting, which resulted in the looting of more than 200 malls in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, erupted. Many of these shopping centres were stripped bare and set alight by youths, men and women, who burst out of urban townships and informal settlements to pillage from supermarkets and malls in their own areas and in neighbouring white suburbs. Three days of looting and burning were followed by further violence as communities reacted to the unrest by setting up vigilante groups to defend their neighbourhoods from gangs of looters. Some vigilante groups killed and beat innocent people as they took the law into their own hands and administered mob justice. It was the worst violence and destruction of property since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994.

To understand the violence, it is necessary to recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused losses of jobs and livelihoods, producing record unemployment figures of 34.4% especially among black youth in South Africa, of whom three in four are without work. Moreover, the failure of the state to provide care and protection to poor families when new lockdown measures were introduced in July 2021 added to the anxiety at the urban edge, where many months of lockdown in compressed conditions had taken its toll on local communities, especially among women. The mobilisation of the violence was also triggered by the allies and supporters of Zulu patriarch and former president Jacob Zuma who were seeking to mount a rear-guard action after their leader was shamed and imprisoned for contempt of court. In all of this, social media played a crucial role in both sparking and driving forward the looting.

2. The author would like to thank Ndiphiwe Mkuzo, an HSRC intern, for his contribution to the fieldwork in this part of the paper, and his insight and assistance with deciphering the different categorizations of citizens, migrants and tenants in the three settlements discussed here.

One way of seeing the mall looting, outside the framework of elite party-political machinations, is to view it essentially as a series of service-delivery protests. Under this view, the services or infrastructure targeted by the rioters in the pursuit of a better life and suburban citizenship were the malls. In line with this perspective, Mark Swilling (2021) argued that South Africa's political transition has been marked by a dramatic shift in the economy from a model based on production to one based on consumerism and financialisation. He noted that politicians have supported the establishment of malls and supermarkets as a primary way of producing local economic development, in the process promoting a "phantasmagorical consumer culture that has become the secular religion of the new debt-ridden, car-based, multi-racial middle class that loves to 'drive to park-n-shop'" (2021: 3). Swilling claimed that the state was seeking to "herd the urban poor (employed or not) into the proliferating 'township malls' (promoted as local economic development)"; with monopoly capital having joined the state in making the transition to a suburban, consumer-based model of economic development as ubiquitous and convenient as possible. Swilling noted that total retail space in South Africa, which in 1970 covered an estimated 27,000m<sup>2</sup>, had ballooned to 5 million square metres by 2002 and 18.5 million square metres by 2019. He also noted that the amount of food sold via large supermarket chains had risen from 10% of the total in 1992, to 75% by 2017, as part of the socio-economic process of "mallification" (see Swilling 2021).

But it was not only the liberation movement that promised the colonised access to suburban life. The suburban dream was first cultivated in the 1950s, when the apartheid state tantalisingly offered African urban "insiders" (or "city-borers") in the townships special rights, or citizenship which would allow them to emerge as a racially defined working class, capable of productive labour and a modern urban life – although without the benefits of upward mobility and suburban luxuries and privileges, which would remain restricted to whites. The economic and social historian, Bill Freund (1996) called the township model of the apartheid years "sub-suburban" because it offered only the most basic forms of sanitary, segmented modern family life to support industrial labour. In this context, one way to read the

youth uprisings of 1976 in South Africa, which, significantly, started in the heart of Johannesburg at Soweto, would be as a quest for greater access to the suburban opportunities which whites enjoyed and from which blacks were excluded in their improved "native towns". The focus on education and the removal of Afrikaans may be interpreted as a cry from the youth for better access to the modern economy and the wages and upward mobility that such would provide. From this point of view, Soweto 76 was one of the first coherent expressions of suburban nationalism in the sense that those who protested wanted more than political rights and equal education. They wanted to elevate their place in the city.

However, the uprisings of 1976 were ruthlessly suppressed and the murder in police custody of the black consciousness icon Steve Biko stands out from that period as a key event. The largely pro-capitalist, black consciousness-inspired struggle for better education and urban opportunity faltered; and hope turned to despair, anger and rage at the state's ruthless repression. As the popular mood shifted, nothing short of the destruction of apartheid and racial capitalism seemed desirable. The townships no longer needed to be improved but rather made "ungovernable"; and liberation would no longer come *through* education but *before* education. Township socialism eradicated pro-capitalist sentiment; and the consolidation of civic power through branch and street committees enforced the adoption of the credo, "an injury to one is an injury to all". Anyone who broke ranks would face the wrath of the people's courts, while consumer boycotts became a key component of the struggle against the apartheid regime. To defeat white power, communities were encouraged to support local businesses and stay away from the supermarkets. In this era, the comrades of the United Democratic Front (UDF) called the shots, accusing the older generation of fearing resistance and being co-opted by the false promises of a system that did not have their interests at heart.

Against this background, the ANC government which was voted into power in 1994 turned back the clock to an earlier version of the struggle by embracing consumer capitalism and refusing the united front politics of the UDF and others that demanded socialism. Instead, the

African National Congress explicitly committed itself to reconstructing the dreams of the generation of 1976 who had sought to extend the benefits of suburbia into the townships and expand the realm of black suburbia and economic opportunity. Within the minds of the ruling class, this was to be a state-assisted dream which would be realised in the cities, where, the government imagined, the industrial base would continue to grow and employ workers, spurred by the arrival of foreign capital with the dismantling of the international economic and trade boycott against apartheid. As part of this dream, supermarket and chain-store capital would drive the establishment of shopping malls across the country, not only in cities and townships, or close to informal settlements, but throughout the former homelands too, where citizens would be encouraged to consume and build modern suburban houses. The secular religion of suburban consumption was to be offered everywhere and to all; the citizenship of the supermarket was not to be confined to the leafy middle-class suburbs in this new consumer democracy.

In laying out its own spatial infrastructure of post-apartheid modernity, capital amplified the state policies and directives that supported suburban development by making malls and shopping centres the new cathedrals of liberation; places where ordinary people could access a “better life”. The supermarket conglomerates and major chain-stores provided the stuff and the spaces for consumption across the country in both urban and rural areas, allowing families to pursue their suburban dreams in places far from the serviced RDP sites provided by the state in parts of the cities. Indeed, so prevalent did the opportunities for realising the suburban dream become, many migrants decided to try and pursue it in two places at once. In the city, they responded to the difficulties and inefficiencies of service delivery by joining protests; while in their home villages in the rural areas, they spent their surplus or saved earnings on developing suburban-style family accommodation. In this regard, it is quite possible that black South Africans have built more suburban homes with their own money and social grants in rural areas than the state has built RDP houses with taxpayers’ money in the cities. In all of this, the presence and influence of the shopping mall as an essential aspect of suburbia has been central, shaping the nature of local

advertising, offering a key location for the dramatic action in television “soaps” and influencing the tenor and direction of government policy in several significant ways, including in the latest iteration of the fantasy of suburbia in government policy: the mega-city. This mode of development, which is always anchored around a mega-mall and others shopping complexes, depends almost entirely on investment commitments provided by retailers, rather than any evidence of significant investment in the productive economy or decentralised business parks which are supposed to support the 50,000-plus new suburban homes to be built in these new cities (see Bank, Ndinda & Hart 2018).

For people who have been on housing lists for decades, waiting for half-decent suburban homes and services on pavilion-style plots to be provided by a government they no longer trust, the extended lockdown and residential entrapment in urban townships, shack lands and informal settlements has proved taxing, especially in marginal areas where the denial of citizenship is experienced through the pain of “waithood”. This is a structure of feeling shaped by envy and a desire for change which has been continuously frustrated by the failure to get a decent job; purchase necessities or occasionally even a few luxuries at the mall; or receive an RDP house and services as promised decades ago. So, when the pandemic started, there was already a pall of disappointment hanging over the lives of many urban residents. Then, when the government announced that it would manage Covid-19 scientifically and provide appropriate medical and material support to everyone who needed it, poor city dwellers felt renewed hope that the state had perhaps turned a corner and was taking its public-service responsibilities more seriously. However, cynicism soon mounted in relation to the government’s response amid mounting economic hardship under lockdown and continuing corruption scandals, which included cases of the theft of state funds intended for relief grants and basic medicines for the poor. Hope was dampened and combined with continuous bouts of xenophobic violence and racial skirmishes, which seemed to keep generalised revolt and violence at bay. But then the arrest and imprisonment of Jacob Zuma, who was perceived as a patron and patriarch of the Zulu nation, was leveraged to fuel unrest,



unlocking the door to the mall violence that took place across KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

## Conclusion

This paper began by returning to the classic work of Franz Fanon (1961) on the mood in the native towns ahead of the fight for liberation. It noted how the residents of segregated, impoverished, unserved and filthy native towns envied the lives and luxuries that the colonisers enjoyed in the leafy suburbs of their settler cities. Fanon wrote of the desires associated with dreams of liberation, the wish to cross town and occupy the colonial villas and bungalows of the settler class, frolicking in luxury and even bedding the masters' wives. Fanon also gave warning of how easily the revolution and liberation could be betrayed if a small group of educated elites who were willing to adopt the cultural trappings of the former colonial masters took over the suburbs and the state and refashioned it to serve only their needs, leaving the oppressed majority in the native towns where they had been placed by the former settler class. In Fanon's perspective the quest for suburban citizenship is sharply defined in the minds of the colonised because of the way it was used to define their exclusion. Suburban nationalism is thus perhaps not a surprising post-independence aspiration, especially where it is articulate as one of the goals of the liberation struggle.

This paper has argued that, against this background of a desire to inhabit the settler town, the democratic South African state established in 1994 promised liberated citizens a transition away from the compressed and improvised life of the native towns through the creation of decent new suburbs for the urban poor, which were

to be funded by a national housing and infrastructure improvement programme. The promise was well-received, and the expectations of suburban transition were widely expressed at the urban edge. However, the process for delivering the promised improvements and services was to prove partial and flawed, giving rise to widespread frustrations and the creation of new forms of fractured urbanism and socio-spatial sub-divisions. The urban poor started to compete with one another for access to the city and the limited infrastructural improvements on offer from the state. In Cape Town, residents of densely settled informal settlements and townships confirmed the importance of infrastructural citizenship by shaping their own social and political



Figure 1: Imizamo Yethu Township, Cape Town. © Diriye Amey, Wikimedia Commons

identities around access to services. It was found that those who had benefited most from the state housing and service delivery programmes tended to use ideas of infrastructural citizenship to exclude others, while those without access spoke passionately about their histories struggle for the city, which required that they be granted a right to the city, meaning access to suburban citizenship there.

So, there appears to have been two main, quite different responses to the ways in which the Covid-19



pandemic and the government's response to it have exacerbated conditions among deprived urban residents. In Cape Town, it appears that urban divisions at the margins have remained entrenched as the marginalised are still forced out if they cannot pay to stay, which is perhaps why there were more than 1,000 land invasions of various magnitude in Cape Town during lockdown. By contrast, there has been fewer exclusion and evictions in KwaZulu-Natal over the lockdown period, partly because of local activism and popular organisations, including *Abahali baseMjondolo*, a shack dwellers movement that mediates in urban communities across Durban and KwaZulu Natal. There appears to have been less urban fracture in these Zulu-speaking communities on the edges of Durban and surrounding areas than in Cape Town. This together with the provocation of the arrest and imprisonment of the former president, Zulu patriarch and African nationalist, Jacob Zuma; and populist messages which were posted giving warning of the negative impacts of the power shifts among the regional elite in the wake of his imprisonment, seemed to galvanise and embolden the urban poor to storm the malls. These very institutions also deprived local neighbourhood stores and spaza ('corner') shops of

business, while at the same time feeding residents' appetite for mass market consumption. In Cape Town, I asked residents of the Imizamo Yethu informal settlement in Hout Bay why they did not loot the local malls in July. Many respondents said that they were angered by the KZN looting and destruction, especially when they thought about how much assistance they had received from NGOs and the broader community in Hout Bay during lockdown. The humanitarian response of the middle classes in the different cities might have played a role.

Nevertheless, the attitude of many of those interviewed after the mall lootings was not so much one of shame or an acknowledgement of any wrongdoing, but rather one of self-justification, similar to the mood expressed in the wake of ordinary service-delivery protests at which residents assert their right to basic services they claim to have been denied. The view of many of those living in the unreformed "native town", to borrow Fanon's term and image, was that their actions were warranted and comprised a legitimate response to the state's larger failure to fulfil its promise of delivering the infrastructures needed to realise their suburban dreams.

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Decoration of the Youth Café on the Cape Flats © Chloé Buire, 2015

## IFAS-Research

62 Juta Street, Braamfontein  
PO Box 31551, Braamfontein, 2017  
Johannesburg

+27 (0)11 403 0458  
[research@frenchinstitute.org.za](mailto:research@frenchinstitute.org.za)  
[www.ifas.org.za/research](http://www.ifas.org.za/research)

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