'Embedded Autonomy' and the Re-Creation of Non-Racial South African Local Government

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Getting a grip on what is going on in local government is never an easy matter - so many different dynamics, so many local specificities. In post-apartheid South Africa, there are also rapid and somewhat unpredictable changes to contend with. This paper makes a stab at capturing the diverse processes that make up local governments in this time of change using the idea of "embedded autonomy" as a "tool". The analysis still awaits empirical detail; nonetheless, the author is hoping that she has left us with something to aid us in the incredibly difficult task of theorising and tracking change in local government.

Given the determination of the post-apartheid government to adopt a developmental stance, it is appropriate to turn to literature on states and development for some clues in this task. Sophie suggests that we follow a range of contemporary theorists in cutting across the kinds of dualistic categorisations which have long bedeviled state theory. The state-civil society divide is one; the local-central divide another, particularly pertinent to her interest in restructuring local government in South Africa. The final dualism - the strong-weak state distinction - is one which has come to limit understandings of the developmental state in particular. It has encouraged the imposition of prescriptions for states defined as "weak" which offer Western forms of governmental capacity as a solution. This for states which have followed a quite different historical trajectory and which have achieved a different form of state-ness (see Mamdani, 1995; Mbembe, 1992). In the initial explanation of the framework described in this paper and its potential applicability to the South African case, this particular dichotomy, and its essentialising effects, is important to bear in mind.

The South African state has had a particular history - similar to and yet different from that of both its Western (and East Asian) role models and its continental neighbours. Stories about the weakening of the nation-state as a context of contemporary development (apart from being vastly exaggerated and poorly theorised in general - see Sassen, 1996) need to be thought through in the South African situation quite specifically. What kind of state has been inherited? What are its capacities and limitations? How is the particular nature and timing of its enthusiastic placing in the international arena affecting this (unmeasurable) thing we call state capacity? How does this sit alongside the enormous increase in legitimacy and scope for intervention which has accompanied the transition from apartheid? Although this is only discussed as illustrative material in the first few pages of the paper, I would like to see a stronger attempt to apply the theory being proposed here at the national/international scale, prior

to developing it in relation to the local state. How is the South African state embedded in the international economy and in relation to international and local politics?

Before I get on to discussing the theoretical ideas developed here - the idea of locally embedded autonomy - I would like to point to an underlying set of political assumptions which seem to be guiding the analysis offered here, and in many commentaries on South Africa in transition. In this case, many sweeping claims are made about trends in local government - with little empirical evidence, despite the frequent observations about local complexity. Critical gloom merchants we anti-apartheid scholars may have been bred to be, but surely the diversity of local government experiences suggests that there must be many different things going on? Perpetuation of apartheid, increasing polarisation, unchanging local bureaucracies - are these the only stories we have to tell? No examples of opposing parties finding ways to work together? No cases where the complexity of local authorities means that some compromise has been made and different sections of local authorities have been managed by those most interested in their outcomes? No examples of former ANC activists and academics running key developmental bureaucracies? We do not need a major research grant to know that all of these have happened, and have made a difference. And if we blame non-developmental outcomes on lack of transformation in the local bureaucracy and lack of capacity, we also ensure we are not going to learn the very difficult lessons which need to be drawn out of the enormously complex dynamic relationship between state-actors and civil society - the network of locally embedded relations which are of theoretical interest here. Participation is not just something some people have and others don't (it certainly is unevenly distributed...but..): participation is also an almost impossible ideal. Developmental and democratic states fail. Development projects fail. And following the logic of the embedded autonomy approach, they fail not only because they're bad, but because being a state is very difficult and doing development is very difficult. And both state actions and development projects fail for many different reasons. In the case of the local state, making global assumptions about why "failures" have occurred in so many different contexts in the absence of detailed evidence seems to me a polemical and unconstructive political move which needs to be worried about more.

Despite this, I do think that the path Sophie has set us off on is worth developing further. She suggests that we think about the autonomy and actions of local governments as embedded variously in relations with other layers of the state, with non-state actors, with national and international economic processes (and perhaps also in relation to discourses about

development, the various practices of the diverse centres of state bureaucracies, the political culture of the local state, governing ideas about good cities, class and ethnic political imaginations). But we could ask whether local states can necessarily be thought of as autonomous at all. There are many historical and theoretical reasons why national states have (a constrained) autonomy. It is quite easy to make a theoretical case that local states have no necessary autonomy at all (and anyway, it is quite hard to make a theoretical case for state autonomy of any kind, as Bob Jessop's many writings (eg 1985; 1990) for one indicate). In the case of local government, "autonomy" (or perhaps independence is what is meant in this paper?) is entirely dependent on the national legislation governing local state capacity. The legislation this paper describes does seem to presume and enable certain measures of autonomy, especially financial and political. Also, in South Africa there is a history of autonomous institutional action at the local level in relation to land use, development and service delivery which means that the theory is certainly helpful in this context. But if there is no necessary autonomy for a local state, then how useful is the development of a general theory on locally embedded autonomy? Is state-ness an empirical and historically variable feature, rather than a theoretical given? Since the main achievement of this paper is to apply the theory of embedded autonomy to the local level, I think that this question is one which needs thinking about.

Directing our attention to the web of relationships in which local states are embedded is certainly a most useful achievement of this paper. And it also takes us through some of these relationships in terms of recent legislative developments in South Africa covering themes of public-private partnerships, local development initiatives, financial decentralisation and redistribution, as well as complex local politics, participation and integration (the last three in less detail). In all cases, the comments are speculative, circling around the diverse and complex social relations in different localities, the unknown responses of local authorities to deregulation in the financial sphere, the unknown impact of this web of developmental relationships on spatial and political inequalities. There is, as I said, and despite the lack of empirical evidence, a gloomy edge to all of these. For example, that financial deregulation will lead to destructive competition amongst cities; that inequalities in access to the state will lead to a perpetuation of apartheid inequalities.

The first of these claims needs some comparative and historical context - how have South African local authorities managed their finances in earlier periods when there were lower levels of financial regulation? And we also need to emphasise why local authorities are in debt.

It is not because they followed some crazy development path, but because the central government has lumbered them with decades of local apartheid debt incurred through reckless central government spending on housing and infrastructure with low capacities for cost recovery. The campaign to have the central government refuse to be accountable for apartheid debt would do well to take up the cause of local government as well. Crippling the key service delivery agency with the accumulated debt of the past, a debt incurred to sustain one of the key elements of apartheid, segregation of a controlled urban workforce, seems to be a very poor calculation on the part of central government. Part of the lesson may well be that the extensive housing provision of the apartheid years really wasn't sustainable at the local level - given that it is the management of these estates which has generated the debt. And what does that suggest for a developmental state which has started to "gear" down more and more responsibility for development to local government? Indeed, it may well be the financial acumen of local (conservative) treasurers and those who kept local authorities solvent for decades (albeit under relatively generous conditions) which we should be looking to? Perhaps there are things about our inherited local councils, about the apartheid past and the compromised future which we can look to with hope. Not gloom. The idea that financial liberalisation could lead to irresponsible and runaway competition between cities is not impossible - but it also needs to take account of the conflicts and balance of forces within local authorities, including the power of bureaucrats and the inherited practices of government which they embody.

The second set of questions which assumes some persistence in economic, spatial and political inequalities constituted in the apartheid period also deserves further thought. There are so many different reasons why the apartheid landscape took the form it did. And many of these reasons have nothing whatsoever to do with apartheid per se. Or are not only to do with apartheid. It is not surprising in the slightest that since only apartheid has gone, there should continue to be certain similarities with the past. Suggestions regarding the persistence of political identities along the lines of the "racial tags" of apartheid (p.18) does not do justice to the complexities of post-apartheid politics. Nor to the different reasons why people of previously defined racial groups may choose to support certain political platforms. We simply cannot assume that political positions mean the same thing because they are adopted by the same people. Coloured political organisations, Inkatha, the UDM - indeed, the ANC itself - all change in meaning and intent, not always dependent upon narrow racial tags. South Africa is not a predictable society. We seriously limit our understanding of the powerful new processes shaping our society if we simply assume nothing has changed.

The paper offers a way of conceptualising the dynamic and complex web of relationships which shape local government, and I found this a useful heuristic tool. I feel the need to ask some questions about the relation between theory and empirical dynamics; to raise some concern that the "web" of relations leaves the uneven-ness of the different forces shaping the local state unspecified; and to wonder why we should be trying to promote (or theorise) local autonomy. I am not convinced that this is a theory of local autonomy, but it is a sophisticated and useful map of the dense relations that constrain and enable local state actions and institutions.

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