

Book review

Securocrat repression and 'Protest nation' resistance

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2413-3108/2017/i62a3430>

Review of:

Jane Duncan, *The rise of the securocrats*, Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2014
ISBN-10: 1431410756

Jane Duncan, *Protest nation: The right to protest in South Africa*, Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2016
ISBN-10: 186914323X

Jane Duncan is a national treasure, and for at least two decades – initially at the Freedom of Expression Institute, then Rhodes University and now University of Johannesburg (UJ), as well as within the Right2Know movement – she has played a leading public intellectual role in questioning society's direction. She is a trusted and sincere analyst, and although her academic and research focus has mostly removed her from the media commentary circuit (to the regret of so many who relied on her sound, eloquent articulation of dissident views), it nevertheless gave her the space and scope to think and write well beyond the terrain of journalism. Duncan's two recent books on repression and resistance – *The rise of the securocrats* (2014) and what she terms the sequel, *Protest nation* (2016)¹ – allow her to grapple with the richest contemporary cases of social conflict and state malevolence. Today, the latter book

remains the finest overview of the nature and scale of dissent – although her colleagues Peter Alexander, Trevor Ngwane, Carin Runciman and Luke Sinwell at UJ's Centre for Social Change are doing updates based upon tens of thousands of even more detailed protest cases – while the first is now joined by Ronnie Kasrils's 2017 book, *A simple man* and Jacques Pauw's *The president's keepers*.

Duncan was way ahead of her time in linking the crony-capitalist state to the growing security apparatus. Examples from the early 2000s showed clearly that protests could beat repression. In 2001, at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism in Durban, there were the first inklings of mass protest against Thabo Mbeki's regime and against mega-events. As Duncan points out, a year later, at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, the paranoia came into full view with repressive policing tactics. In late 2003 ANC leaders sided with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and instructed Mbeki to stand down on his claims that the United

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States' Central Intelligence Agency was working alongside Big Pharma multinational corporations to manipulate the TAC against the South African government – thereby forcefully reversing AIDS-denialist policies and increasing life expectancy from 52 then to 64 today.

Paranoia was also evident when in May 2008, four months before his forced departure, Mbeki and even Kasrils (then minister of intelligence) announced that xenophobic attacks that had left hundreds of thousands of immigrants displaced were the result of an artificial 'Third Force'; Mbeki had openly denied the possibility of xenophobia six months earlier when the African Peer Review Mechanism pointed out the dangers. In mid-2010, state paranoia about mass unrest, inherited and amplified by Jacob Zuma, led to an initial ban on protest anywhere near the main soccer stadiums. As Duncan recalls in *The rise of the securocrats*, 'The fact that a number of marches were subsequently allowed during the World Cup period could be attributed to the negative publicity generated by the ban on the quality public education march [led by the NGO Equal Education]; what is not known is the extent to which the ban remained in effect in other parts of the country, and how many gatherings were affected.' Still, anti-Fifa protests prior to the World Cup gave the government a scare: informal traders facing restrictions, displaced Durban fisherfolk, forcibly removed Cape Town residents of the N2 Gateway project, construction workers, AIDS activists prevented from distributing condoms, environmentalists concerned about the World Cup's offset 'greenwashing', Mbombela students who had lost access to schools, disability rights advocates, poor towns' residents demanding provincial rezoning, SA Transport and Allied Workers and Numsa members at Eskom who won major wage struggles just before the Cup began, and, on the first days of play, Stallion Security workers protesting against labour broking and opaque payments.

Paranoia was by now hard-wired into the securocrat mentality, and by August 2012, when 34 miners were murdered by police at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine while on a wildcat strike – as Duncan notes, 'some allegedly in a much more premeditated fashion than the official account suggested' – proof existed; not only in the now-notorious email from Cyril Ramaphosa describing the strikers as 'dastardly criminal' and requesting 'concomitant action' from the cops (in 2017 he apologised for the wording but the stain of complicity remains). In addition, as one police general finally revealed, the main concern was the sudden surge in the popularity of Julius Malema, who had just been expelled as ANC Youth League leader (by a committee Ramaphosa led) and who would soon launch a political party to the ANC's left, resulting in the 2016 ouster of the ANC from its rule in the Johannesburg and Tshwane municipalities.

By 2014, Duncan could argue with plenty of evidence in *The rise of the securocrats* that the new securocrats had wormed their way deep into the state, in 'a growing and unhealthy bureaucratisation' of repression. Duncan was at the time studying, more carefully than nearly anyone, how police were mischaracterising protests and 'Gatherings Act Incidents'. At the time, mid-2013, Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa announced that there had been 46 180 'protests' (his word) from 2009–13, and 'all were successfully stabilised, with 14 843 arrests effected'. (Does 'successfully stabilised' also apply to Marikana?)

More worrying than police mangling of information concerning protests is the extent of overkill tactics when repressing demonstrators. As Duncan points out in *The rise of the securocrats*, the Public Order Policing division desired 'an armoured fleet of 200 Nyalas (the infantry mobility vehicle); pyrotechnic weaponry, including tear gas and stun grenades; more

water cannons, equipped with red and blue dye; video cameras for recording protests and other surveillance equipment; and Long-Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs). Commonly known as “sound cannons”, LRADs emit sounds that are painful to the human ear and can even cause deafness.’ With appropriate cynicism she comments, ‘In making their arguments for more resources, the police pointed to the spike in violent service delivery protests in the 2013/14 financial year.’

Bearing in mind this context, Duncan focuses her more recent book – *Protest nation* – on ‘one facet of protest in South Africa: namely, the right to do so’, including municipal bureaucratic reactions, the national policy and legislative milieu, and national-to-local dissent management by the police and politicians. Some of these top-down strategies leave Duncan bemused and outraged, such as Johannesburg’s pay-to-protest systems and Rustenburg’s protest prohibition instincts. Some relate to specific turf battles within the ruling party. Some are based on petty corruption, such as councillors’ ability to profit from housing waiting lists and sales. The list of micro-grievances appears endless, and it will take a much wider scan to allot tendencies to the protests. Still, using several databases, including media reports, Duncan skilfully recalls the diverse representations of many of the higher-profile protests during 2009–13. One of her concerns is how journalists flit from one to the other in search of drama; her penultimate chapter on ‘riot porn’ reporting is a vital antidote to what passes for news coverage of these grievances.

Protest nation considers thousands of protests in a dozen sites: the Eastern Cape’s Nelson Mandela Bay (Port Elizabeth), Lukhanji, Makana and Blue Crane Route municipalities, the Western Cape Winelands (in part because of impressive farmworker protests in early 2013),

Mpumalanga’s capital of Mbombela (Nelspruit), KwaZulu-Natal’s eThekweni (Durban) metro, and Johannesburg. Duncan’s *Protest nation* research teams at Rhodes and UJ pored over rationales, strategies and tactics adopted by protesters, and agreed on a typology of ‘non-violent, disruptive and violent’. This requires a further disaggregation of data, since the South African Police Service’s Incident Registration Information System (IRIS) database is much clumsier and inconsistent in identifying protests only as ‘peaceful’ or ‘unrest-related’. It transpires that both municipal and national police have quirky modes of data collection, undermining those of us who have argued for an interpretation of IRIS Big Data to reflect South Africa as ‘protest capital of the world’. That may be the case, but we will need a more critical approach when citing IRIS as evidence, Duncan warns in *Protest nation*.

Duncan’s *Protest nation* literature review is cursory, but in search of a new theoretical frame for South African protest, she not only explores a fusion of ‘Tarrow, McAdam and Tilly’s typology of political opportunities and Della Porta and Reiter’s categories affecting policing styles’ but also makes a case for much wider thinking: ‘Applying traditional social movement theorising to the South African case is difficult as this body of theory typically displays a Northern bias. This is because it is often synthesised from the study of Northern-based movements, which have often been conceptualised as large unitary structures.’

The large South African social movements that did emerge during the early 2000s have been analysed at length (e.g. in the well-known 2006 edited collection *Voices of protest* by Ballard, Habib and Valodia), in part because many drew directly upon prior (anti-apartheid era) community or sectoral organising traditions: the TAC (founded in late 1998), Durban’s Concerned Citizens Forum (1999), the Johannesburg Anti-Privatisation Forum (2000), and the Landless People’s Movement (LPM, 2001). In two

cases – Durban’s activists and the LPM – their brief rise and subsequent decline reflect processes observed elsewhere (e.g. in *The city and the grassroots* by Manuel Castells, the major scholar of 20th century urban social movements), in which movements are either successful and dissolve, or fail, leaving a major void.

In *Protest nation* Duncan offers these conclusions:

If protestors have the knowledge to defend their rights, are located in areas where the intensity of struggle is low and media knowledge of protests is high, are known entities whose grievances are understood and even shared by state actors, and the state regulates protests administratively rather than politically and embraces more democratic policing models, then protests are more likely to be facilitated. Conversely, if protestors lack the knowledge to defend their rights, are located in areas where struggles are intense and media knowledge of protest rights is also low, are considered to be unknown entities by state actors who do not share their grievances and engage in political decision making while embracing authoritarian police models, then protests are more likely to be repressed. However, if repression weakens support for the ruling hegemonic bloc and hastens support for subaltern groups, then state actors will avoid using overt violence against protestors, shifting instead to risk-based pre-emptive measures designed to reduce the transformative potential of protests.

These aside, what Duncan’s book confirms is the difficulty of generalisation about South African community protests. The dozen municipalities she examines over the 2009–13 period in *Protest nation* suffered a litany of

unique, ‘localistic’ problems, and only a few processes can be termed universal. The latter included the replacement of politicians and bureaucrats close to the old Mbeki order with those aligned to the new order, the onset of recession in 2009, and the rise of two new parties – the Congress of the People’s centre-right breakaway from the ANC in 2008 (taking 9% of the national vote in 2009 before melting down in internecine conflict) and the leftist Economic Freedom Fighters breakaway in 2013 (taking 6% of the vote in 2014 elections, rising to 8% in 2016). There was also a sense that under Zuma, municipalities might be caught in greater patrimonial politics, procurement fraud and illiberal populism than under Mbeki – although it must be acknowledged that Transparency International’s records of South African corruption perceptions indicate much more rapid worsening during two prior periods: 1996–99 (from 23rd least corrupt to 35th) under Nelson Mandela, and 2003–2008 under Mbeki (from 35th to 55th). Both Mbeki and Mandela adopted national economic policies considered exceedingly friendly to business, e.g., dropping crucial exchange controls, casualising the labour market and lowering the corporate tax rate from 56% to 28%.

The fine-toothed comb Duncan and her *Protest nation* research team use to explore reasons for protests in the dozen case sites – drawing on local municipal data – reveals extremely diverse causes. In just one case, the 1990s decision to cut back the national-to-local subsidies (what was later termed the ‘Equitable Share’ grant), does Duncan resort to a national-level explanation. Yet unmentioned is the dilemma of electricity protesters everywhere, whether to get their first connections to the grid, or to prevent disconnections, or to get a larger lifeline (the norm is a merely tokenistic 50 kWh/household/month), or to lower prices. From 2008–13, the 350% increase in electricity prices imposed by Eskom on both its direct customers and

municipalities would surely have amplified the desperation of electricity protesters?

Electricity price hikes by Eskom are just one of several national considerations when theorising protest in a Polanyian manner, i.e. following Karl Polanyi's 'double movement' in which stresses caused by excessive 'market' expansion in turn create resistance. In *Protest nation*, Duncan cites parallel national concerns of the 'National Intelligence Coordinating Committee, which coordinates the work of the various intelligence agencies and interprets intelligence for use by the state and cabinet. NICOC identified labour issues, political intolerance, service delivery protests and anti-foreigner sentiment.' In the same vein, Duncan looks for a universal process:

the 'micro-mobilisations' that protests represent are not isolated phenomena: they can be related to broader processes of social change. More specifically, in expansionary periods, when political and economic elites can afford democracy, they will tolerate higher levels of dissent, including protests. In such periods, they are likely to promote a negotiated management of protests, where protesting is recognised as a right within clearly circumscribed legal and institutional frameworks ...

But since 1994 – especially since 2011, at the peak moment of the commodity super-cycle – the macroeconomic conditions have degenerated, she observes in *Protest nation*:

In recessionary periods, when profits decline, these elites are more likely to resort to coercion than negotiation, and to circumscribe the right to protest. At the same time, protests are likely to increase in frequency and intensity, as it is less possible for society to be held in equilibrium through consensus, and as a result social relations become more

conflictual. South Africa is in just such a recessionary period.

And South Africa is not alone, Duncan argues in *Protest nation*: '[T]he neoliberal phase of capitalism precipitated a wave of protests reacting to the massive inequalities it produced, either explicitly or implicitly, around the world. While this wave has ebbed and flowed, it has been sustained for over three decades.'

It is here, indeed, that the next layer of correlation research might be directed. The Polanyian challenge in South Africa is not just in tracking the myriad of grievances and, where appropriate, correlating these to political-economic processes so as to promote more linkage in analysis. More profoundly, analytical and strategic lacunae are obvious, correlating to Frantz Fanon's critique of protests elsewhere on the continent: 'For my part the deeper I enter into the cultures and the political circles, the surer I am that the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology.' Admits Duncan in *Protest nation*, 'The ideological character of many of the protests remains unclear from the data.'

That absence is the main reason that the term 'popcorn protest' is valuable, in my view, i.e., (what I've defined as) the 'tendency to flare up and settle down immediately; indeed, while "up in the air", protesters were often subject to the prevailing winds, and if these were from the right the protests could – and often did – become xenophobic.' Duncan disagrees, worrying that if 'popcorn protests' are 'used to describe seemingly sporadic, spontaneous protests', this 'ignores the extent of organisation that actually exists'. True, courageous and often sustained community organising is often undertaken prior to these service delivery protests (what Ngwane terms 'all protocol observed'), but still: if there is no analysis, strategy and intra-protester alliance, then popcorn is still an appropriate concept, I'm afraid. Duncan's hope in concluding

Protest nation is that, '[w]hile there is little evidence of these protests coalescing into more generalised political demands, they have the potential to do so if a national political movement comes into being that links together these different struggles'.

Nevertheless, Duncan does not fully grapple with the dangers of localism, when far too many activists and analysts discuss grievances in a way that begins and ends with the municipal councillor, city manager or mayor. This limited perspective on state failure partly reflects how too many turf-conscious leaders look inward, failing to grasp golden opportunities to link labour, community and environmental grievances and protests, and to think globally while acting locally. They see solutions mainly through 'quadruple-C' demands: ending municipal corruption, improving delivery capacity, restoring competence and raising the level of consultation. Ignored in such demands are the over-determining national neoliberal policies (such as outsourcing and cost-recovery) and the inadequate national-to-local financing provisions.

Duncan is straightforward in her *Protest nation* objective: 'My practical and research work on the right to protest has convinced me that there needs to be a mass movement against police violence and state repression and in the defence of democratic space more generally', to which one should obviously add, *and in pursuit of economic, social and environmental justice*. But she is cautious about the period ahead: 'The question of whether protests, including those in South Africa, are part of a revolutionary wave, rather than being isolated, single-country protest cycles, is an important one, as it speaks to whether the protests will fizzle out in time or escalate into fundamental and transformative challenges to the system on a worldwide scale.'



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Notes

- 1 The two books were reviewed pre-publication; consequently the quotes and extracts from the books are not given page references in this review.