

Populisme et nature politique des Combattants pour la liberté économique (EFF) - point de vue d'une section

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Résumé

Les nombreux débats contemporains au sujet des Combattants pour la liberté économique (Economic Freedom Fighters - EFF) sont souvent fortement polarisés, certains les traitant péjorativement de populistes ou de fascistes, alors que pour d'autres, ils représentent une cruciale option de gauche. Cet article confronte la question de la nature politique du parti EFF en appliquant la notion de populisme d'Ernesto Laclau. Ce qui permet d'affirmer que les EFF bâtissent une subjectivité populaire et mobilisent une vaste coalition en constituant un « peuple »; et construisent une subjectivité collective à partir d'un antagonisme subversif envers l'ANC. Toutefois, puisqu'il y existe certaines limites à l'utilisation empirique de Laclau pour la compréhension d'un contenu politique, l'article poursuit avec une étude empirique des politiques particulières d'une section des EFF à Marikana. Cette étude montre que la nature des EFF est souvent complexe et comprend des éléments de caractère nettement ouvrier qui entrecroisent les identités de genre et d'âge au sein du parti. La section étudiée a aussi utilisé différentes approches décisionnelles à différents moments – quoique tendant plutôt vers une forme de démocratie ouverte. De cette façon, l'article s'efforce de comprendre le contexte tant empirique que théorique d'une section locale des EFF.

Populism and the Political Character of the Economic Freedom Fighters - a View from the Branch

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Abstract

Contemporary debates about the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have taken numerous forms, oftentimes in deeply polarised ways - from those who argue that the EFF is pejoratively populist or fascist to arguments that the party is a crucial left alternative. Within the context of these debates, this research paper grapples with the question of the political character of the EFF. The paper applies Ernesto Laclau's formulation of populism to the new political party and illustrates how an argument that the EFF is populist might use this particular theoretical framework to deepen its analysis. Use of Laclau's framework allowed us to assert that the EFF builds a popular subjectivity and mobilises a broad coalition in constituting a 'people'. The EFF also constructs collective subjectivity out of subversive antagonism to the ANC. Given certain limitations in making empirical use of Laclau for understanding political content, however, the paper moves on to an empirical study of specific politics in one branch in Marikana. This showed that the character of the EFF is often complex. Whilst it has elements of a distinctively working class character there are intersecting gender and age identities in the party. The branch studied also utilised different decision-making practices at different stages - though mostly tending towards an open form of democracy. In this way, this paper works to understand both the empirical and the theoretical context of a local branch of the EFF.

Introduction

The establishment of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in July 2013 ushered in a new period in mainstream South African politics. The EFF has significantly changed the political landscape in the country, presenting a new challenge to the ruling African National Congress (ANC). At its formation the EFF characterised itself as a

radical and militant organisation. At the centre of its platform was the idea that the transition from apartheid in 1994 had only secured political freedom, necessitating a new ‘generational mission’ in the form of intensified struggle for economic liberation (EFF, 2013a). In the last General elections, held on the 7th of May 2014, this basis helped the EFF secure over 1.2 million votes, garnering just over 6.35% of the national vote (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2014). As a consequence it also became the official opposition to the ANC in two provinces – the North West and Limpopo (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2014).

At the time the party was less than a year old and had been launched without any clearly defined branch and regional structures. And while the ANC maintained its resounding majority across most parts of the country, the election results pointed to very real popular support for the EFF (especially in areas such as the platinum belt in the North West and mining areas in general). It has continued to play an important role in the daily political life of the country since then.

Importantly, the EFF emerged within a particular social and political climate that was shaped by significant events in the country including the Marikana Massacre - the brutal gunning down of 34 striking mineworkers by the South African Police Service during the platinum sector strike in August 2012. The emergence of new formations on the left, such as the United Front and the EFF, can be traced in the aftermath of the Massacre – one of the most grim failures of the ANC in government – and has been a firm part of new political struggles (Naidoo, 2015: 436; McKinley, 2015: 457; Gentle, 2014; Veriava, 2015: 437). The EFF as a new political party has maintained a strong emphasis on the Massacre and a link to the Marikana community. This article addresses the political reconfiguration in South Africa and provides an understanding of the EFF from Marikana by delving into branch politics in that area.

Part of the interest in the EFF within the South African political landscape stems from the notion that they occupy a different political space from the ANC and other large opposition parties. The EFF is not the first political party to split from the ANC and find a party base as well as some electoral support, but it does have a different political project, even if only in principle, to a variety of the other political parties. The party has also been touted as a youth led and driven organisation and is one of the most important breaks in South African youth politics largely dominated by the ANCYL and

other ANC-affiliated youth and student movements (Nieftagodien, 2015; Mafatshe, 2015: 11).

A number of important questions and debates have emerged in relation to the EFF – who and what it represents, why it has had the impact it has and how to characterise it. In grappling with these questions, this paper undertakes an analysis that unfolds on two levels, both grounded in empirical work. At its core this paper represents a study of a branch of the EFF in Marikana in the North West. In this sense, it presents a preliminary analysis that begins to fill gaps in research and debate that have failed to take into account the actual practices of the EFF ‘on the ground’. The Marikana Branch of the EFF, despite being atypical in certain respects, was identified as an important one to study for a number of reasons. These include the symbolic importance of Marikana to the EFF, the tangible electoral support for the party in the area and finally, the fact that the EFF had already established local structures in the area from very early on.

Debates within the public realm and existing literature on the EFF provide the terms taken up at the first level of analysis. As I show, the EFF has been the subject of wide ranging characterisations – from those that see it as negatively populist and fascist, to others that insist that the EFF ought to be seen as a new leftist movement. In this paper I argue that one of the limitations of many such interventions is their theoretical shallowness. Part of what the paper tries to do then, is to place the debate over the EFF onto firmer theoretical ground. In so doing I shift away from contemporary discourse in which the EFF is either seen as a crucial and necessary representation of leftist demands, or as a degenerative and socially regressive organisation. Like some others, I argue that the EFF should be seen as populist. Drawing on the work of Laclau, however, I show how, rather than a pejorative characterisation, seeing the EFF as populist allows us to better understand the forms of political identification and subjectivity taking shape within the party.

There are however limitations to using Laclau’s framework for understanding populism. Whilst providing a useful analysis of populism it also constrains judgments we are able to make about the EFF. Further research is thus presented to fill in gaps in the analysis in order to open up a wider discussion on the political character of the EFF. The paper focuses specifically on the Marikana Branch for the second level of analysis. I elaborate on the historical political allegiances of its membership base, decision making practices at

branch level and in relation to the broader EFF collective, local political and social alliances and the branch's commitment to electoral politics. In so doing I present a detailed profile of the organisation 'on the ground' in Marikana that deepens our understanding of the political character of the party.

The Emergence of the EFF

The development of the EFF is ultimately intertwined with both the recent history of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) and the political figure of Malema. What happened in the years prior to the formation of the EFF set the stage and opened space for a new party to be established. Much of the analysis of the EFF begins at the point of the formation of the new party, neglecting to probe the impact of the ANCYL on the development of the new party platform.

There are three lines of enquiry that are important in this sense, the first is based on the trajectories of Julius Malema and other leaders of the EFF from their leading the ANCYL to their expulsions and the founding of the EFF. The second is to understand policies and political positions formed in the ANCYL that have had a bearing on the EFF. Thirdly, an assessment must be made of how the political traditions of the ANCYL also carry through in various ways into the EFF – this includes forms of mobilisation as well as democratic and organisational practices.

As the radical youth wing of the ANC, the ANCYL has commonly been understood as having played a historical role in the struggle against the Apartheid regime. The organisation pushed for more militant and radical forms of action whilst maintaining its relationship to the ANC (Glaser, 2012; Mafatshe, 2015). In 2008, this radicalism was carried through, under the leadership of Malema and his National Executive Committee, by affirmation of the slogan 'economic freedom in our lifetime'. This represented a conceptual break from the earlier period between 1994 to 2008, largely focused on mobilising the youth behind the vision of the ANC in the post-apartheid dispensation. After 2008, the ANCYL adopted public policy positions that urged radical transformation both socially and economically – this included discussions on nationalisation of mines and land redistribution. Many of these policy positions and political catchphrases have been replicated or refined in the EFF.

It was also after 2008 that Malema's own political presence was secured, both within the party and outside of it. The 23rd National

Congress of the ANCYL in 2008 had been heavily contested, but by the 24th National Congress, Malema emerged unopposed and uncontested as the Youth League's President for a second term with a strong support base and popular appeal (Crowell, 2012: 48). While Malema gained a significant amount of personal support during this time, the debate around his leadership was also polarised. Many argued that his leadership was characterised by an authoritarian style or that the ANCYL had become negatively populist and even pseudo-fascist (Forde, 2011: 211; Bell, 2014; Duncan 2011; Grootes, 2011; Bloom, 2010).

In the mainstream media Malema was often described as a demagogue and a 'racial populist'. Commentators noted the hypocrisy of a rhetoric that spoke to the poor and disenfranchised whilst the leadership of the ANCYL enjoyed lavish lifestyles (Posel, 2014; Kotze, 2012: 259). At the same time, there were numerous allegations of corruption against Malema.

Despite his popularity and the rise of the ANCYL at this time, then, Malema and many others in the top leadership of the youth organisation were expelled from the ANC, in a well-documented disciplinary process, on charges of bringing the party into disrepute. Following this final battle in the ANC, Malema together with some of the other expelled members, including high profile figures from within and outside of the ANC and leaders of smaller organisations, proceeded to form the EFF, carrying forward major political and ideological points from the ANCYL. Most importantly the EFF maintained the goal of radical economic transformation and took over key political positions related to its attainment.

In the first declaration of the EFF, drafted on the 27th of July 2013, seven 'cardinal pillars' of the movement are outlined. These form its basis and foundation (EFF, 2013a: 1). Whilst these pillars differ slightly from the 'seven cardinal pillars' of the ANCYL's Programme of Action (2011), similar ideological currents run through them both. The EFF thus places itself, through its founding documents, within the broad tradition of an anti-colonial 'culture of resistance' in South Africa. The ultimate intent is to overthrow white monopoly capital and the economic status quo upheld by the current ANC government (EFF, 2013b: 1 -2).

The manifesto of the EFF describes the party as a Marxist-Leninist and Fanonian organisation, drawing inspiration from broad ideological frameworks to converge so a mandate for socialism and

anti-colonialism (EFF, 2013b: 1). Whilst many organisations of the Congress movement have mobilised Marxist-Leninist political discourse - this includes the South African Communist Party and numerous trade unions – the ideological triad of the EFF marks an important political shift.

Populism and the EFF

A wide range of arguments have characterised the EFF as an organisation. It is often described as taking a ‘populist’ stance. For the most part, the notion of populism is used in a pejorative sense, viewing it as a negative and regressive form of politics (see Posel, 2014; Friedman, 2014 ; Munusamy, 2013 ; Sosiba, 2014). Their positions are posed somewhat differently by these authors, but they share common ground in arguing that the EFF is not a truly a leftist organisation but rather one that pursues a dangerous nationalism with a problematic leader at the heart of the organisation. Arguments about fascism in the EFF take this a step further, often urging that the EFF is not only regressive but also politically dangerous with a fundamentally volatile social composition (for arguments relate to fascism in the EFF see Baccus, 2013; Donaldson, 2014; Mantashe, 2014; Bell, 2013; Van Onselen, 2013).

The research presented herein aims to find a way to understand the EFF without following lines of analysis that are often based on reactions to the EFF’s ‘style’ of politics. The paper is based on research carried out between mid-2014 and mid-2015 that used both participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Over a period of about 4 months of participant observation, twenty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with branch members of the EFF in the Marikana area. In choosing participants various factors were considered including age, gender, leadership positions, employment status and the role that particular individuals played in the community. The participants were active members of the EFF.

In this section, I tie together this empirical data with a theoretical framework for populism presented by Laclau. It is perhaps important to note that this work focuses on Laclau’s later writing on the concept of populism – this includes *On Populist Reason* (2005), *Populism: What’s in a Name?* (2005) and *Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics* (2006). These pieces present a well-developed account of the development of populism and its constitutive elements. Laclau’s most recent

(2006) essay also enables our understanding of collective political subjectivity within populism.

At its base, Laclau's theory deals with two problems in the study of populism. Firstly, it moves away from analyses that dismiss populism as an irrational form of politics and, secondly, it provides a coherent theory that shifts understandings of populism from characterisations so broad that the concept loses any definite character. Laclau's primary conceptual starting point posits that populism must be understood in terms of its *form* rather than its *content* (2005a, 2005b, 2006).

Using Laclau's theory, this paper argues on the basis of my interview evidence that the EFF is populist with a 'popular' collective subjectivity. The ways in which participants articulate their identification with the EFF indicate the creation of a collective 'we' in the EFF. Engagement in their political project is thus married to a populist subjectivity. I begin by clustering responses of participants into several themes – the demand, the centrality of Malema, the impact of the platinum industry strikes associated with the Marikana Massacre, and perceptions of the ANC. These are then integrated with Laclau's theory of populism to present a reading of the EFF within this framework.

The demand

The demand - a social, cultural, economic or political claim - often forms the basis of ones entry into a political space. Therefore, the demand is predominantly, as it is for Laclau, the basic building block of a political formation. It is the motivating force that stands at the very foundation of political and social movements. Participants in this research provided rich information about the primacy of certain demands for their own affiliation with the EFF. These demands vary but are crucially important for each participant respectively. The content of the demands ranged from service delivery concerns (the area is primarily made up of informal settlements characterised by poor provision of basic services), to broader issues facing individuals and the Marikana community at large, including the R12,500 wage demand by mineworkers.

Many participants spoke about a need for the provision of housing, roads and infrastructure, water and electricity. These demands often related directly to their lived experiences. In addition, elderly members of the EFF often spoke about a need for increased

social grants from the government whilst those with children spoke of demands relating to basic education. Although such demands often came across in interviews, it was equally apparent that many participants had only a vague sense of the EFF's actual political position on many of their demands.

Despite this lack of precision, participants believed that the EFF, if elected into government, would deliver on their demands. A further point that stood out from the interviews was a striking lack of reference to some of the major rallying points of the EFF. Crucial items such as the nationalisation of mines and the appropriation of land without compensation – both of which are key EFF political goals more broadly – were hardly ever referred to during the interviews.

The only demand that was spoken about at length and with considerable frequency was the demand for a R12500 wage for mineworkers. It has been at the centre of major labour struggles in the platinum mining industry. This demand grew organically among mineworkers who had been independently organising before the strike in 2012 and it has since become an important material and symbolic issue (Chinguno, 2013: 29). Responses of participants and specific explanations around this demand confirm its overall significance in the area. In addition, this particular wage demand has indeed become part of the central platform of the EFF.

The participant quoted below is employed by a company that is sub-contracted by Lonmin and was involved in the strike of 2014. He details why the R12500 wage for those working in the mining sector is important to him as a member of the EFF:

Participant 7: If you check the EFF, they told us that we need the mining workers to reach R12500. If you check the ANC, they didn't promise us that much. As a mining worker, we need money because we are struggling; we are working hard under in difficult conditions underground. So when you go home with empty hands, you see, you get diseased, you get injured, but for what? For R4000? That's painful. Then came the EFF, then they sing the song that the people want to sing, they join the song, so that is good for me.

In this response, the participant links the demand to the EFF in spite of the fact that the R12500 demand was not one that originated

from the EFF but was taken up at a later stage by the organisation as part of its political project and goals. In this sense, the EFF sings ‘the song that the people want to sing’. Such appropriation of the demands and desires of different groups of people, represents a key aspect of Laclau’s understanding of populism.

The Marikana Massacre and strike action

The wage demand that emerged during the strike of 2012, links to a theme that picks up on the importance of the strikes and the Marikana Massacre. Given the sheer gravity of these events, they lay at the core of the support for the EFF from the Marikana community and played a critical role in reshaping political allegiances in the area. The Marikana Massacre can certainly be seen as a political turning point on the national level. At the same time, it is clear that, for the majority of the members of the EFF in Marikana, the Massacre shifted their own political affiliations and allegiances.

The quote below, from one of the leaders of the Branch Command Team (BCT) and a prominent member of the community, speaks to this identification and how it shaped the commitment to the EFF:

Participant 23: So from that point [Marikana Massacre] I told myself that I am leaving the ANC then and there and I am going to join any other political organisation because of what the ANC was doing in this area. But luckily the EFF was formed as it was not there prior and there were no other political organisations that I could see myself as part of.

Such responses illustrate the commitment of participants to the EFF in light of the Massacre. The party represents political and social aspirations of the members while at the same time allowing them space to express deep disgruntlement with the ruling party. In a similar manner to their identification with the R12,500 living wage demand, the Massacre has become a central material and symbolic point for members of the EFF in this region.

The protracted platinum strike of 2014 was also mentioned by some participants when discussing their identification with the EFF. The support the EFF provided for mineworkers and their community during that strike – by then the EFF had been officially launched and was campaigning for the 2014 General Elections –

was seen as vital and decisive. The EFF's support for the workers ranged from symbolic and political identification to more tangible monetary and resource support. During the 6-month period of the strike, communities around the Rustenburg platinum mines suffered economically from the lost income of mineworkers (estimated to be around R10 billion in wages) (Business Report, 2014; SAPA, 2014). The EFF displayed vocal support for the mineworkers and their demands but also played a role in fundraising for those economically affected by the strike and donating money during collection efforts (SAPA, 2014). This tangible support from the EFF did not go unnoticed by the community and the members of the EFF; indeed it had an impact on their perceptions of the organisation.

The centrality of the leader

During participant observation, one member said emphatically at an EFF meeting 'you are only here for Julius, I am also only here for Julius'. This quote illustrated how important the person of Julius Malema is for identification with the EFF as a whole. For many of the participants, Malema was central to their own political involvement. He was mentioned in an overwhelming number of the interviews, mostly without prompting.

Unsurprisingly, perceptions of Malema by members of the EFF were exceptionally positive, often in direct contradiction to opinions expressed about him in the popular media. Whilst Malema has been described as a deceitful demagogue, a corrupt politician and an elitist who manipulates the genuine experiences of the poor, participants described him as a trustworthy and honest leader, one of the only politicians who showed genuine care for the people of Marikana and South Africa. This polarisation is not a new feature of discussions about Malema. Some participants outlined perceptions of Malema that shed light on the ways in which individuals who support the EFF relate to him and why they believe he is the best leader for them. Participant 2, a younger member of the EFF, who works outside the mining industry, describes Malema in terms of his positive leadership and personal characteristics:

Participant 2: Julius Malema is a great man, he hates the liars, he does not fix the truth, and everything still is there. That's why I love the EFF...I need to look for change, to look for purpose. Because Julius Malema and the other mineworkers hate liars. I support Julius Malema because

I need to look at our country and see some change.

This participant reveals a number of important points about perceptions of Malema's character, especially his sincerity and ability to bring change. Participants share a sense that Malema is honest about problems facing the area and the country and that he can deliver real and tangible change. Even though this particular participant was not a mineworker, the response spoke to a perceived affinity between Malema and 'the mineworkers'. Throughout this research, and in many elements of the public discourse, there has emerged a particular romantic construction of 'mineworkers' who are, to an extent, mythologised as heroic figures upholding central values of worker and community struggles. Malema has been associated with this mineworker myth in a way that lends additional force to his claim to heroic status.

Finally, there was a noticeable conflation of the EFF and Malema. In the responses, little distinction was made between the EFF as a wider organisation and Malema as the leader of the EFF. There was a clear sense that the EFF, as an organisation, does not stand on its own but is intertwined with the personality of its leader. Participants did not argue that the EFF is an honest, trustworthy, caring or reliable organisation, indeed most of them did not describe the EFF in terms of characteristics of the party as a whole, but rather lauded the personality of Malema as the leader and transferred this praise to the party as a whole.

Perceptions of the ANC

As members of a competing political party, the participants would naturally have had an oppositional relationship to the ANC. In fact, this research revealed a particularly antagonistic understanding of the ANC. Perceptions of the ANC as an 'enemy' and not simply an opposing political party will be outlined later in this paper since this emphasises the role of antagonism in the construction of populism. What is immediately crucial, however, is that this antagonism was based on more than the Massacre or democratic manifestations of political opposition, but rather was rooted in a wide variety of claims and disgruntlements.

The large majority of those interviewed in the course of this research had previously been members or supporters of the ANC. They had shifted their political allegiance following the Marikana

Massacre. The Massacre however was not the only ANC failure referred to. Responses ranged from general complaints about the ANC in terms of corruption or nepotism, service delivery failures and/or the critique that the ANC provided no possibilities for socio-economic or political change. Generally speaking, sentiments around the ANC were particularly negative.

Indeed, one of the suggestions made was that the ANC has been complicit in the continued forms of exploitation and other forms of oppression under the post-apartheid dispensation. Many participants, while willing to acknowledge the historic role the ANC has played in South Africa, believe that the ruling party is either complicit or directly involved in their oppression – often using that term to describe their circumstances. Given the mining context, discussions around exploitation related to how the ANC has failed to transform the lives or experiences of those working in the mining sector and for other workers:

Participant 16: EFF is very much a help to us and it is important to me because ANC and the things that they did was to exploit us here.

In addition to this sense that the ANC is part of continued ‘oppression’ and ‘exploitation’, the participants referred to many other problems with the ANC, which, coupled with the Massacre, constructed a particular image of the ANC as the enemy. In short, the discussions on the ruling party were cast within the terms of the ANC as an enemy. Interestingly, other constructions of “enemies” - common in South African struggles - did not come up in interviews with participants. For example, despite the labour struggles in the area, the mines or mine management were not described in similarly antagonist terms. In sum, for the participants, they had not simply made a political choice to shift away from a particular party. There was a deep significance to the way the ANC was perceived.

Laclau and the EFF

Our attention must now turn from the content of responses from participants to theoretical analysis. I show here that in terms of the work of Laclau, an argument can be made that the EFF is indeed a populist organisation. For Laclau, populism is characterised by its form and not just its content; it is a political logic and a way of constituting the political rather than merely a particular ideology

(2005a ; 2005b).

Laclau argues that the ‘unmet demand’ is the basic unit of analysis (2005b: 72). A demand is made by some kind of ‘underdog’ against the system - born out of some deprivation (2005b: 125). The demand constitutes the floor for populism so that a number of unmet demands come to re-aggregate in a populist formation ultimately forming an ‘equivalential chain’ that builds an internal frontier for a populist movement.

The lists of demands presented by the participants, and their broad content, hints at institutional breakdown and an inability to ensure that demands are met. There was also a compounding of demands that immediately indicated collective solidarity. The demands of the participants and how they link together into Laclau’s equivalential chain is fairly self-evident. Two points require further elucidation, however. The first is vagueness in the articulation of the demands and the second is the specificity of the emphasis on R12,500, given that Laclau argues for re-aggregation of demands.

On the first point, Laclau’s framework accounts for vaguely explained demands and the lists of demands, even as the participants actually presented them. The central factor here is ‘re-aggregation’ and the solidarity that is part of how populism is constituted. Rather than excluding unexplained or briefly mentioned demands, populist politics weakens the emphasis on each individual demand and makes the collective far more prominent. For Laclau, ‘vagueness’ and ‘imprecision’ are part and parcel of the equivalential bond (2005b: 99). With this in mind in relation to the EFF, individual claims or requests become subsumed into a larger political project such that the emphasis is no longer on each particular claim but rather on sets of social claims that apply more broadly.

Demands already prominent on the ground prior to the development of populist politics are appropriated. In other words, demands of the participants and members were not necessarily demands of the EFF, but preceded its establishment as a political party. Creating an equivalence and aggregation, the EFF appropriates these already popular demands and represents them for participants. Hence, when participants mention housing, education, social grants and the provision of water all at once, it is not because of lack of understanding of the EFF manifesto or policies but rather is based on the fact that these demands are perceived as being ‘equivalential’. The demands have similar meaning for the collective politics of the

EFF. In this instance, most of the demands that are mentioned speak to an EFF that is perceived as being pro-poor and working class and providing much needed support for them.

Moving to the second key consideration then, Laclau (2005a: 6) does not foreclose the possibility of a particular demand standing out from the process of equivalence if that demand comes to be representative of a broader set of political and social claims. In this instance, the wage demand has broad implications and political significance both to the Marikana community and beyond it. Due to its history and its formulation as an aspect of the Marikana Massacre and the 2014 strike, this demand has come to represent more than a wage dispute.

The R12,500 wage demand is also a significant part of the EFFs political positioning. There is a representative significance to the demand for a R12,500 wage for mineworkers. In other words, there is a re-aggregation of a chain of demands in which the R12,500 wage demand represents larger sections of this chain. The key representative role for Laclau however, is played by the ‘empty signifier’; a part that stands for the whole. The construction of a ‘popular identity’ is premised on this notion of the empty signifier and the ability for it both to constitute and represent a chain of demands (2005b: 96). Generally in populism, the empty signifier comes in the form of the leader, as is the case with the EFF. In other words, the leader does not emerge by chance, based on political posturing but rather as a necessary part of the representation of a chain of unmet demands.

Malema comes to stand for the whole of the EFF and is representative of the demands and aspirations of ‘the people’. Malema is not a crucially central figure due only to his charisma or leadership qualities but also because of the particular role he plays in the populist framework of the EFF. In the constitution of ‘the people’ for populism, Malema becomes a unifying symbol that represents the totality of aggregated and equivalent demands.

One final point must be made with regards to the construction of the category of ‘the people’ and popular subjectivity. That is the ‘dichotomisation of the social’ inherent in populism. Populism requires an antagonistic dichotomisation of society. Society is split into two camps, one of which is the ‘enemy’. Hence there is an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ structure (Harrison, 2014: 55). The construction of an antagonistic camp is crucial to the very constitution of popular

subjectivity. Laclau argues that a ‘discursive construction of power as an antagonistic force’ (2005b: 118) is fundamental. The key to populism is in antagonism and subversive interpellations against a dominant ideology (Laclau, 1977: 172). Antagonism towards an enemy is fundamental to the construction of ‘a people’ in populism.

In this case study, the question to ask is who or what is constituted as the enemy and how? The obvious answer is the ANC as an organisation. This is certainly consistent with the broader rhetoric and narrative of the EFF. The particular construction of the ANC by the participants I interviewed speaks precisely to this dichotomisation of society and their discursive construction of an enemy. Not only do participants directly refer to the ANC as the ‘enemy’ in their responses but they also speak to this as a split between the ANC and the EFF. In particular ‘the leader’ is used to make this distinction more explicit.

There thus is a subversive character to the political identity constructed in the EFF. The creation of a popular subjectivity grounded in forms of discursive antagonism is the crucial point here. In other words, the EFF would not be a populist formation without polarisation of social space and the construction of the ANC as an enemy. This popular subjectivity means that members or supporters of the EFF identify with the leader as representative of their equivalential demands but are also constituted into a collective through antagonism. The ‘we’ in the EFF is based on this representation, identification and antagonism.

The limits of Laclau and the character of the EFF

What has been argued is a broad understanding of the political logic at play in the EFF. This is crucial on two accounts. Firstly, Laclau’s account of populism allows us to better understand the overall political character of the EFF – the construction of a particular type of collective subjectivity and the constitution of ‘the people’ within an antagonistic or subversive arrangement. Secondly, his argument enables us to address some of the problematic assertions made about the EFF in the broader literature.

However, there are limitations to this argument that confine the meaningfulness of the analysis. Some of key critiques of Laclau’s position include, firstly, the limitations of using the ‘demand’ as a minimal unit of analysis, secondly, that Laclau does not pay attention to how populist formations perform politics and

use distinctively populist forms of mobilisation or organising (see Mouzelis, 1978) and, finally, that Laclau ‘expunges class’ as a key concept in populism (see Hart, 2013: 304). Harrison (2014) points out that Laclau is concerned with the hegemonic constitution of ‘a people’ but that there is nothing intrinsically either progressive or regressive about the people. The political subjectivity at the heart of Laclau’s work limits our ability to engage with political movements on a practical and moral level.

Laclau’s framework is unable to account fully for the political nature of the EFF. That Laclau’s understanding can take us only so far in understanding the politics the EFF represents, is precisely because he argues that populism is a ‘form’ and does not address ‘content’. This means that a populist formation can be anything from a leftist movement to a right-wing one. Even if we are to disagree with Zizek’s (2006) critique that populism and revolutionary subjectivity are conceptually inconsistent or that the left cannot be populist, the question remains: once we have established that the EFF is populist in Laclau’s terms, what further judgments are we able to make about the EFF?

A further empirical aspect of this research project aimed to understand other aspects of the organisation in order to fill in gaps of analysis. Using a branch of the EFF and researching various elements of the organisation also enables us to undertake the task of finding out more about how the EFF *does* politics. This is not to suggest that looking only at one branch can provide a holistic account of the organisation but it does allow us to find a starting point for judgments about how the EFF does politics. My research project also enabled me to provide some detail about the politics of the Marikana branch.

I outline below key points that emerged in the course of my research regarding branch politics (a more detailed account can be found in my longer unpublished research report on the EFF in Marikana). This summarised version will shed some light on the organisational practices and politics in the Marikana branch. Three main topics are addressed. The first deals with age, class and gender, the second with democratic practices and the final one with the EFF in relation to electoral politics.

Looking into the membership base of the EFF in Marikana as well as acting as a participant observer provided valuable information about the basic make-up of the organisation. This extended into

considerations around class and gender. While acknowledging the context specific nature of this research (based in a mining area with a very specific recent history) and hence obvious limits with regard to representivity, this branch can nonetheless still tell us more about the EFF than we already know. In the literature on the EFF, the organisation is set out as attracting the youth, in particular black and disenfranchised youth (Nieftagodien, 2015: 450). The party is also assumed to have a significant amount of support from the unemployed. My work on the Marikana branch should at least raise questions about such assumptions.

Most of the participants interviewed for this research indicated that they had previously been members of the ANC and that they had left the organisation following the Marikana Massacre. Furthermore, it was particularly difficult to find members who might be considered ‘youth’ (the accepted South African norm for this category is between the ages of 15 and 35) in the organisation. The EFF in Marikana in the area was largely made up of active members older than 35, some of whom were over the age of 60.

There was a strong presence of mineworkers in the organisation and it was immediately clear that there was a relationship between the EFF and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). There were overlaps in the leadership of both organisations in the area and all of the mineworkers that formed part of this research were simultaneously members of AMCU. Despite AMCU’s insistence that it is a ‘non-partisan’ trade union, in this region there was certainly a visible convergence between it and the EFF.

The strong presence of AMCU in the area meant that a large portion of the EFF branch was made up of those considered to be members of the organised working class. The branch therefore has a very specific class character and make-up. In Marikana, rather than the branch being a youth organisation that attracts predominantly the unemployed, the organisation is made up of many older members and many that are formally employed and unionised.

Moreover, a large portion of the members participating in this research were women and the women’s group Sikhala Sonke had a significant influence in the Marikana branch. Sikhala Sonke was set up after the Marikana Massacre to provide support for the community and to urge for stability in the area. Given this influence, at many EFF events and meetings there was a solid representation of

women. Furthermore, it was a core group of women who appeared to do most of the administrative, logistical and political work in the organisation. The presence of active women members, however, does not dispute the claims that the EFF is a masculinist organisation (see Magadla, 2013, Pithouse, 2013, Davis, 2014), as this would require a much wider scope of analysis, but it does complicate perceptions of the role of women in the EFF.

There are thus clear contradictions between the profile of this branch at least and assertions made about the make-up of the EFF. These contradictions are deepened in analysing branch practices and organisational elements. Through participant observation a number of these contradictions became clear. I pick up here one main point around branch meetings and decision-making in the branch. There was a distinct disjuncture between the meeting that officially launched the branch in September 2014 – overseen by a regional official -- and standard branch meetings held after that. The former, termed the Branch People's Assembly (BPA), was characterised by formal meeting procedures, low levels of participation from members and questionable commitment to broadly open democratic practices. The latter however was characterised by high levels of participation and consensus-based decision-making.

The organisational process at the BPA of the EFF in Marikana seems to have evinced a familiar process that had characterised practices in similar elective meetings of the ANC. One of the striking features of this particular meeting however was when nominations for the leadership positions opened up. A written list was presented to the regional employee (who was officiating at the meeting) stating who would occupy each position. There was no questioning of this list and it went through as a simple process of nomination and election.

As a note, a few months after all of the EFF branches were officially launched, the EFF held its first National People's Assembly to discuss the policies of the party and elect an official leadership. During the National Assembly, many dissatisfied members of the EFF accused the party leadership of simply formulating a leadership slate to be elected and not allowing for open and transparent contestation of elections (Letsoalo & Zwane, 2014). Similar complaints were made at a number of Provincial Assemblies where reports of 'arbitrary disqualifications' from standing for elections were levelled against the party's top leadership (Pillay, 2014).

Events at the National Assembly thus seemed to confirm practices at the launch of the Marikana branch that hinted at lack of open democratic process in the party.

One of the key contradictions in the branch, however, emerged when observing standard branch meetings. These were entirely different from the BPA. Typically, branch meetings were relatively informal and allowed ample space for discussion and decision-making based on gaining consensus rather than an outright majority. The meetings did not follow strict protocols but flowed according to points that needed to be discussed in the meeting. It was evident from interviews with participants that members of the organisation felt that they had space to raise their views and that decision-making would take their views into consideration. One of the participants outlined their sentiments around the branch meetings and how they were conducted:

Participant 18: What I can say is that, when I do go to the meetings, we do discuss things and I can see that the things that we discuss in the meetings, some of them are going ahead and some of them are doing better than expected... if I raise something to be discussed in the meeting, it is discussed and we try to convince each other of finding a way through. That is how I feel as though my suggestions are being taken because they are being discussed and we do convince each other with different ideas and ways of doing things.

The meetings of the branch are indicative of extensive participation and broadly democratic practices and consensus building. Part of this difference in the running of meetings can be pinned down to the background of organisational politics in the area. Elements such as independent worker organisations (see Sinwell, 2013) and strong ties to community-based civil society organisations (see the papers by Nkomo, Mnwana and Mujere in this issue) have influenced the way decisions are made in the branch.

The final point for discussion is the EFF and electoral politics versus the EFF as a ‘protest movement’. At the launch of the EFF in 2013, Malema described the EFF as a ‘protest movement’ that would be rooted in being a ‘people’s organisation’ (SAPA, 2013). This view of the EFF is bolstered in the party’s *Founding Manifesto* (2013b) wherein the EFF is located in the broader history

of ‘resistance’ in the country and as part of historic and ongoing struggles. This characterisation of the EFF is inconsistent with the types of campaigns and events that were carried out by the branch, as well as the participant’s observations on the work the EFF does.

There is already a gap between the organisation’s self-framing as a protest movement and that of the EFF as a ‘government in waiting’ as the election catchphrase for the party indicated. If we are to assume that the EFF intends on performing both of these tasks simultaneously – be both a protest movement and campaign for access to state power – it would seem that the latter takes greater priority in the campaigning of the branch that was studied. During the 2014 National Elections prior to the official launch of the branch, the Ward Command Team focused specifically on campaigning for the elections. There were a number of door-to-door campaigns as well as visibility campaigns before the elections that aimed to recruit members and gain voters for the EFF. The EFF nationally affirmed this principle in their Guidelines Towards the National People’s Assembly of the EFF (2014b) wherein it was stated that ‘the first phase of the EFF’s formation was establishment with the immediate task of contesting the 2014 General elections’.

After the launch of the organisation in Marikana and a conclusion to the elections, an emphasis on the 2016 Local Government Elections became apparent. The participants claimed that the branch was active in community issues as well as a land occupation campaign that was taking place in the nearby Rustenburg area. However, participant observation revealed that the major campaigns were still door-to-door recruitment drives for the branch. Perhaps even more revealing was the emphasis that participants themselves placed on the Local Government Elections and the prospects of gaining an EFF Ward Councillor in the area:

Participant 17: I can’t clearly say at this point in time, but with time going forward and with local elections coming up I can say that if we have a Councillor that is an EFF person, there will be more service delivery. More things will be able to be done in this area for the people. So we will see that things are changing and getting better when we have a Councillor that is EFF because now it is still not our Councillor in the area.

This participant illustrates the ways in which winning electoral support and seats in various state institutions, both local and national, continue to be of fundamental importance. Many other participants echoed the sentiment that an EFF ward councillor would be able to bring about better service delivery and positive changes. In this branch, at least, there was a clear focus on winning electoral support rather than being merely a protest movement, despite the fact that the area has become synonymous with strike action in the past few years.

Conclusion

At its core, this paper aimed to throw light on the EFF and its political character. My starting point in this regard was to trace the trajectory of the party and to provide a discussion of its self-representation and framing. Here I also provided background for the EFF and a discussion of its emergence out of the ANCYL. From this point it was also possible to begin to outline gaps and problems in the literature on the EFF. The two main sections aimed to provide an analysis of populism in the EFF, using both Laclau's theoretical insights and my own empirical research, and then gave an overview of the content of branch politics in order to address a major problem with applying Laclau's conceptualisation of populism to the EFF.

The paper applied Laclau's formulation of 'populism' to the EFF and illustrated how an argument that the EFF is populist might use this particular theoretical framework. This analysis allowed us to assert that the EFF builds popular subjectivity and mobilises a broad coalition in constituting a 'people'. The EFF emerges out of a prolonged social crisis and, importantly, constitutes a point of rupture at the point of the Marikana Massacre. Finally, there is a fundamentally subversive nature to the EFF that constructs a collective subjectivity out of an antagonism against the ANC.

I did not attempt to present Laclau as an infallible framework for analysing the EFF, but rather tried to show that his body of theoretical work on populism helps to make a valuable contribution to analysis of the South African political context. Based on limitations in making empirical use of Laclau for understanding political content, however, I moved on to discuss specific politics in the branch I studied.

The organisation in Marikana does appear to be made up of a broad coalition of different class groups despite a fundamentally

populist identity. Whilst it has elements of a distinctively working class character there are intersecting gender and age identities in the party. The branch also utilised different decision-making practices at different stages - though mostly tending towards an open form of democracy. In general, and even outside the Marikana branch, the party, at the very least, insists on formal democratic procedures. These are often complicated by informal practices that alter the meaningfulness of such formalities. Taking account of this on the local level should allow us to expand both our analytical and our empirical understanding of the EFF. This paper represents precisely this kind of effort to build on analyses of the EFF and its importance in our contemporary political space.

Postscript

This article was written and submitted for review prior to the Local Government Elections that took place on the 3rd of August 2016. The EFF took 8.31% of the total vote (including the ward and public representation votes) in these elections. In Marikana, the EFF performed reasonably well, securing victory in Ward 26 (this includes Wonderkop, the Nkaneng informal settlement and the site of Marikana Massacre). The EFF won the ward with 57.59% with the ANC at 34.32% of the vote. The new Ward Councillor in the area, Councillor Wendy Pretorius, was one of the key woman leaders. In Ward 32 (part of which is the Marikana town area and the other part Segwaelane, about 10 kilometres from Wonderkop), the EFF secured 39.49% of the vote with the ANC winning that ward with 51.74%, mainly owing to the Segwaelane area still being a strong, but declining, ANC area. In the previous Local Government Elections, in 2011, the ANC had secured a 93% victory in Ward 26 and 89% victory in Ward 32. Similarly, the EFF made inroads in Madibeng Municipality where the Marikana wards are located, and Rustenburg Municipality (the Marikana area borders the formal boundary with Rustenburg) taking just over 17% of the vote in Madibeng and 26% in Rustenburg.

Endnotes

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