Ronit Frenkel in conversation with Dale McKinley

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Ronit Frenkel (RF): We're going to be discussing mostly your last two books today, but before we start, maybe you can tell me a little bit about your background?

Dale McKinley (DM): Sure. I was born and raised in Zimbabwe, with parents who had come from the United States as teachers. I grew up in the 1960s and 70s during the Liberation War in Zimbabwe. I left to go and study in the United States in the 1980s, and eventually received a PhD in International Political Economy through the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. I then returned back home in 1990, arriving in South Africa in early 1991 to do my dissertation.

Eventually, I opened a political left-wing bookshop here called Phambili Books, which I ran for 5 or 6 years, and which was a great thing to do in that time period, the pre-1994 period. It was a sort of clearing house for activists and debates and other things – it was an amazing experience. And during that time, I got heavily involved in the ANC and the Communist Party in particular, in politics, but from the left, and I was elected as a branch and district level leader in the Communist Party and then also became part of the Gauteng Provincial Executive. Long story short, I clashed very heavily with the leadership of the Communist Party over the ideological and political direction that they were taking in the embracing of the ANC's capitalist, neo-liberal policies.

I was expelled in 2000 as a result of those disagreements, and then – for the last 20 years, professionally – I've been an independent researcher, occasional lecturer, writer, and so forth, and I've continued with my activism at various points, particularly in helping to found and build social movements like the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and the Right2Know Campaign, so I've remained what I would call an activist-intellectual, in that sense. I've written quite extensively, academically as well as politically, on a range of topics, but particularly on issues of liberation politics, political economy, issues in Sub-Saharan Africa, xenophobia and nationalism, and now particularly around media-related issues and freedom of expression, as a result of my work in social movements. So that, in a nutshell, is my trajectory. And I'm 58 years old now, it's hard to believe!

RF: Your background covers some of the themes in your books. I know you've written four books, and looking at your last two mostly – starting with South Africa's Corporatised Liberation: A Critical Analysis of the ANC in Power (2017), which is, as far as I can tell, is sort of a Marxist critique of the ANC's rise to power, and how it became a government/a political party, rather than a liberation movement as such. I would describe it as appealing to a broad audience. What was your aim in writing this book?

DM: This book was a sequel, in many ways, to the first book I wrote on the ANC in 1997, and that book was called The ANC and the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Political Biography. What I did in that book was to trace the ANC from the time it was formed in 1912, all the way to 1994, just as it came into power. I looked at its strategies and tactics and its trajectory, and basically my thesis – which I then picked up in the new book – was that the ANC had always been a party, at least at the leadership level, not necessarily at the rank and file level, but at the leadership level, of what I call accession and incorporation. In other words, one that was not fundamentally interested in revolutionising power and changing the system, but in accessing the system, for a de-racialised capitalism, basically.

So, capitalism was never something that was off the cards. The socialist side, the Communist Party, a lot of the more radical elements, were products of the times and there were the necessary tactical manoeuvres that had to take place, given the exile, the armed struggle, the support of the Soviet Union, and so forth. But it (the ANC) was never ideologically, I argue, part of that. So, as a result, what happened during the negotiations and the ANC's rise to power should have been quite predictable, which was that the ANC did not agree to any fundamental socio-economic changes in terms of land, in terms of ownership of capital, in terms of the mining sector and these kinds of things. They essentially bought into the existing system, and then basically said what we're going to do is de-racialise it as much as we can, and particularly from the top, in other words the Black Economic Empowerment programme.

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You mentioned the Marxist analysis – this is where it comes in and which is very specific to that particular analytical angle - which was to say that the class politics of the ANC leadership has always been one of what I would call petty bourgeois nationalism. It's never been fundamentally interested in revolutionary politics in the sense of socio-economic transformation. It's been revolutionary in the sense of getting rid of racial oppression, yes, and that cannot be underestimated.

So, what I did in the second book was I took up that story in 1994, once the ANC had accessed power, and I

said okay, let's apply that critique that I made and let's see what's happened over the last 20 years. To see if, first of all, that has played itself out, in the way that I expected it to, in the way that many of us did and argued a long time ago, or is there something else here that is at play? And as I argue in the book, the best way that I could use to analytically describe that process was the corporatisation, not just of the ANC as a political party, but of society itself, of the politics of the ANC and in many cases of South African society as a whole.

And what I mean by corporatisation is basically that having accepted a capitalist system, having taken off the table real fundamental revolutionary or socialist change in any meaningful way, the ANC was basically like a corporation – in the way in which it governed and exercised power; which is to essentially say that the political economy is fundamentally about making money, it's about profit, it's about accumulation. It's not fundamentally about servicing, it's not fundamentally about meeting basic needs and equality and justice and all of these things that are in the Constitution and in the Freedom Charter, these are just sort of props in many ways.

What I then did was to show – in empirical terms, and through a lot of deep research that I've done over the past 25 years into various aspects of the ANC's rule – what that means for basic services such as water, electricity, housing, healthcare. If you look at those, then you also look at what the corporatised model does in terms of governance, and the corruption, and the patronage, and all of the other kinds of things that have come up as a result of that kind of politics. And then also at the way in which dissent is treated, the way in which people who then begin to respond – organisations, the working class, unions, workers, and others – and how then one deals with dissent and opposition, and how that politics then plays itself out, in a very intolerant way, and the increasing use of narrow nationalism in order to justify that, in order to basically try to cover up failures.

That leads to a range of other kinds of politics which is very – I would argue – socially reactionary, which is the other aspect which I don't think has been fundamentally approached in terms of understanding the ANC's rule; i.e., the rise of social conservativism. So, it's not just the politics, it's not just the big question, it's the ways in which our moral and social values have been turned around, and actually the ANC has begun to champion a very narrow, I would say, social relations in many ways. So that is, in a nutshell, what I did in the book and what I then tried to show, and I would say – with all due humbleness in the context of my argument – that I think it is a strong case that has been made and backed up with empirical facts, it's not just an analytical or ideological argument. I would argue that it gives a large degree of explanation to why what's happened has happened, because people continue to ask: how is it that the ANC ended up here, vs. 25 years ago? And I'm saying there is a trajectory, for the last 100 years, that one can follow, that explains the ANC's strategies and tactics, and how when it accessed power it understood that power.

The fundamental conclusion here is that the ANC never trusted democracy, and democracy – fundamentally – is the people, is the role of the people in governance, in self-organisation, in pushing things, and it's never trusted that. So, it sees the state as the way to access power, and then you see exactly the same things happening as what we've seen in many post-liberation societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the liberation party turns into a very top-down, anti-democratic, intolerant, narrowly nationalist kind of party, which is ridden with corruption and patronage, and which is far from the ideals of what the liberation movement stood for. So, in a nutshell, that's my argument.

RF: So, essentially, you are offering an alternative analysis to the two dominant narratives in terms of the ANC government. The one narrative makes the argument that, due to our negotiated settlement and the sunset clauses, the ANC's hands were tied in terms of how much economic transformation they could enact in the country, and it was part of that sort of so-called peaceful transition. That's on the one hand, and then, on the other hand, people – and a lot of narratives today – position what's happened in the ANC as a result of Jacob Zuma removing more left-wing forces from the party and putting his own people there in order to reinforce the mechanisms of corruption that happened over his tenure. So, you really seem to be offering an alternative critical analysis to both of these dominant understandings?

DM: Absolutely, and let me just deal with both of

those, and I do in the book. The first one – which I call the 'balance of forces' argument – is that the balance of forces were so against the ANC, internationally neo-liberalism was so triumphant, all the strictures, there was no way that the ANC could move in a left direction or a radical direction, its hands were tied, plus it was not prepared in any meaningful way for governing an economy such as this, and did not have the capacity to do so, and understood that, so therefore made these particular kind of tactical choices: the government of national unity, the acceptance of the property clause in the Constitution, and so forth. And basically, my argument there is that yes, one has to recognise that there was an unfavourable balance of forces, but that has never – in history, in any kind of situation – ever stopped people from acting in the natural way that they want.

In other words, that is to say that if we fought for a particular kind of goal, which is the transformation of apartheid capitalism, not just apartheid but apartheid capitalism as a socio-economic system, then we're going to have to find ways, and it doesn't mean it's going to happen in the way we thought it would, it's not about a military victory over the apartheid state, that we're going to take a revolutionary military victory, no. But here's the crux of the matter: if one believes in one's own constituency, if your entire liberation movement is composed of people who – you believe in their agency and the revolutionary possibilities – then that's what you follow, you don't turn towards what I call existent power, and the ANC turned towards existent power.

What I mean by that is the institutional power of the state and the power of capital, and they said, 'this is where power lies, and we're going to bow to that power', and then the power of the people gets lost. The power of the people gets completely forgotten and the excuses are, well, it's not feasible, it's not possible, we can't do these things. So, you're always playing down the agency, you're always playing down the people, and in the process what you do is you pivot towards where existent power is, and when you do that, well then it's natural that you're going to make certain kinds of decisions and compromises.

The analogy that I use in the book is the metaphor of the house, which explains it in much simpler terms. If you conceptualise South Africa as a house: pre-

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1994, the National Party was running the house, the apartheid state had big security walls, the ANC and the people were outside attacking the house, trying to basically engage in a war of liberation. It comes to some degree of a stalemate, nobody's looking like they're going to win this war outright, so you have these negotiations. What happens as a result of these negotiations is that the National Party walks out of the house and the ANC walks into the house, and the landlords change. But the house remains the same.

So the ANC, instead of looking at the house and saying, 'this house is pretty rotten and we need to fundamentally look at the foundations of this house, we need to begin a reconstruction program here', instead what they say is, 'we're not going to mess with the foundations of the house, what we're going to do is we're going to build some new rooms, we're going to do a new paint job, we're going to make it look nicer, we're going to make it look bigger, we're going to make it look more inclusive, but we're fundamentally not going to change the structure.' And as a result, over time, what happens is that initially it looks good, of course, there's more people in the house, now it's not racialised – legally and otherwise – but over time the landlords basically act as landlords, as the bosses. They begin to start taking the best rooms, they begin to have all-night parties while people get crammed into the rooms below and the outhouses. One can then play with that metaphor, which I do in the book, but I think that captures the sense of what I'm trying to argue, on the first point that you make.

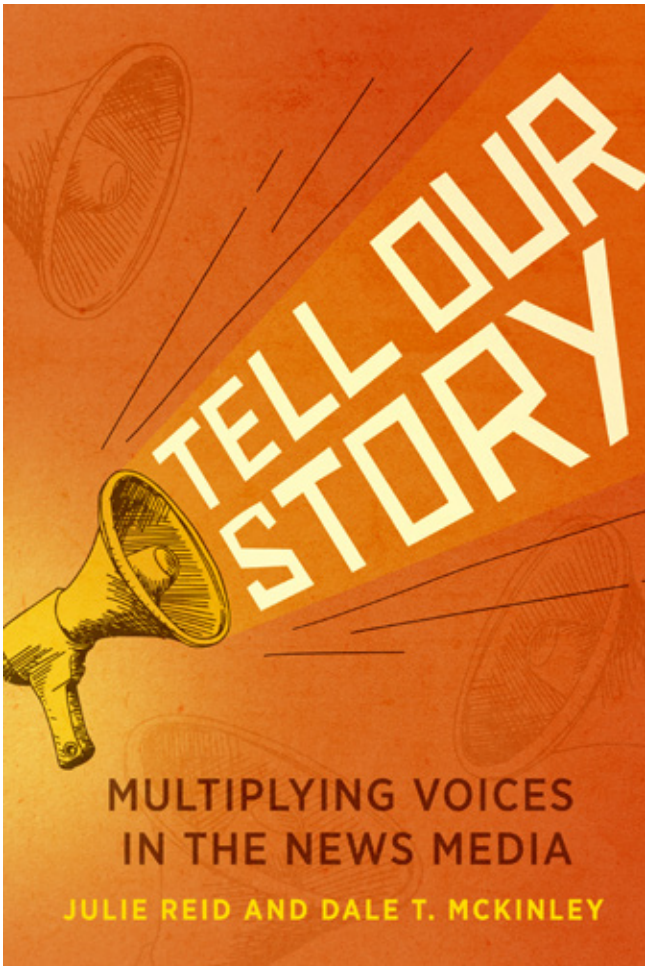
On the second point, which is essentially the argument that you have bad people in the ANC, that Zuma was a bad person, that his crew were really bad, that Mandela and the liberation heroes were the good people, and they got lost along the way. This argument is so weak

that it doesn't hold water, because fundamentally it ignores what I call the DNA of the ANC. So let's look, for example, at what was accepted, even before '94, in terms of what gave rise to all the patronage, all the corruption, all the running away from the people, the treating of individuals as enemies. When it was, for example, poor people who were simply trying to access basic services, there is a mentality and an approach which basically says, again, that we have the power, within the state and within the institutions of power and capital itself, as opposed to the people. So, what you then have is no problem with doing an arms deal. People forget this. The first and fundamental foundation of the corruption of South African society started with Mbeki and Joe Modise and Trevor Manuel and all of the rest of them who completely turned a blind eye, or facilitated, the most corrupt deal ever, in the history of South Africa, at the time not in terms of big numbers and money, but in terms of what it did, and it inculcated a sense of, 'this is the way we're going to do things'.

The adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) network, in 1996, this was not forced onto the ANC, and this was often the argument, that 'it was forced, otherwise we would have had to accept the IMF and a World Bank structural adjustment package'. Nonsense – the choice was a political and ideological choice to turn towards existent power, which was neo-liberal capitalism, and as a result, what do you do? You start cutting off your own constituents because they can't pay for water or electricity. You start corporatising and privatising things, and you basically set the scene for the commodification of politics, or the patronage system, or the corruption, for all of the things that Zuma comes in and basically takes on to another level, sure, but essentially and fundamentally the ANC and all of those who tried to then separate these out, now you have Trevor Manuel coming 30 years later trying to act like some moral saint. I won't use the words that I'm thinking of – but it's so opportunistic and trying to wipe the history out of the role that the ANC itself, and those people who now claim to be sort of taking the moral high ground against state capture and everything else, this was part and parcel of the ANC's politics and those that were running the show. I think Ronnie Kasrils came the closest to admitting this in a more honest and real way when he basically, in the book that he wrote, was talking about the Faustian pact and the way in which they basically just gave it up, and they turned away from the people. I think that's the much truer, and much more objectively verifiable story.

RF: Thank you. Definitely an alternative critical analysis of how we got to where we are today. Which brings me to your new book – Tell Our Story: Multiplying voices in the news media (2020) – which is co-written with Julie Reid. At first glance, the book seems to be a different trajectory, but your essential themes are still there in terms of looking at the agency of ordinary people and where that gets squashed in different scenarios. So, this book, in my mind, is essentially about media justice, to put it simply. Can you tell us a bit more about the book?

DM: So, the impetus for this book was that many of us who have been activists – particularly with the Right2Know Campaign – who have dealt with freedom



of expression issues, with dissent, with communities that were trying to access information, that were trying to basically use media and communications to tell a particular story, their stories, and how that then played itself out in relation to the media landscape in South Africa. And particularly trying to look at this over a longer period of time, so it's not just looking at an incident, for example.

We chose particular communities that have had struggles since 1994, almost similar kinds of struggles, in different ways, so one was an urban community – Thembelihle – which is sort of the epitome of a community that's been struggling against eviction and housing and land issues, where they're being pushed further out, and taken away for development purposes, and they're holding firm, and this is almost a microcosm of post-1994 urban South Africa, of poor communities struggling, so that was the one aspect.

The second one was Glebelands, the largest hostel complex in South Africa, in south Durban, which in some ways gives an urban perspective, but also a mixture – a large number of rural people coming in, the role of hostels in the context of the conflicts of the late 1980s and early 90s, and how that then played itself out in the post-1994 situation. And of course, Glebelands being the classic example, where this kind of violence and murder and dealing with the violence of politics then migrated from pre- to post-1994, when you had hundreds of people being killed, and hit squads. The nature of KZN politics then begins to show itself through a Glebelands perspective, and then that kind of gives you another angle and all sorts of other urban/rural kinds of dynamics, the single-sex hostels, the migratory labour system, everything, so making the connection between how that's played itself out over the last 25 years.

And then a third, deep rural community – Xolobeni, Amadiba, in the Eastern Cape along the Wild Coast – here fighting against development in the form of mining coming in, trying to basically mine the community as well as the construction of the national highway, the N2, coming through, and environmental concerns, land issues, ownership. These go a long way back to the Pondoland revolt, all the way back to the 1960s, so again a historical continuum.

So, the idea was then to say OK, let's take these three and see the ways in which their stories and struggles have played themselves out in the media, and how they've been reported on, how they've been conceptualised, how they've been presented, and what impact that has had in the sense of the conflict itself and the community, and so forth. So, what we did was field research and talking to people in the communities to get their stories. The one thing was to prove this form of what we call a listening journalism, a way in which you go and you actually get people to tell you their story – without any preconceived notions of what you're trying to do. You're just trying to say, 'tell us your story', and however that story gets told, then you begin to relate that, as opposed to what the media often does, what we call the dominant media, those owned by capital, not necessarily NGOs and small media outlets and others that are alternative media or community media, but commercialised media, and how they have then responded to that and how they've told the story.

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So, we juxtapose these things in the book. We first show that we have this story and here it is, and we do that by doing a content analysis, so we looked at all the major print and television media, and we chose up to 100 articles, or as many as there were, as we could find, articles or broadcasts that dealt with these communities, and then we did a content analysis. Who do they speak to? Who do they quote? What stories are they telling? How is the analysis? Did they go back and follow up on something they reported? So it was a very in-depth content analysis of the media, and then we compare that to the stories being told by the people themselves and how they experience the media, and how they then have felt that their stories have been manipulated or not told or whatever, and that becomes the meat of this book, which is then essentially put into a larger political economy context,

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which is not to just say that the media is not telling these stories, but that it's constructing a dominant narrative, so that the dominant media and dominant narrative that then derives from that is one that fundamentally shapes the entire approach of the state and of society to these communities.

So, to give an example of Thembelihle, they're predominantly seen as – because the media projects them as – a violent, disgruntled, angry community that is bent on anarchy and this is how people see them: there they are, they're causing shit again, they're out on the streets again, they're burning things. There's no sense of any history there, of why people are doing these things, of the role of the police and institutions, the failures of the state, all of these other kinds of things, that maybe get mentioned very briefly but is not part of the dominant narrative. And therefore, the state then responds to this community as part of that dominant narrative, which is, 'let's crush them, let's control them, let's manage it, let's not listen.' And this has been going on for 30 years.

And then we do the same with Amadiba, we do the same with Glebelands, which is to show how the dominant political economy and the narrative that is constructed is part of a dominance model of capital and the state, in this particular case, which can then explain – even though we don't go into much detail about this in the book – but which can provide a foundational analytical, as well as conceptual, foundation for once again explaining why what's happened in South Africa has happened. In this case, with a focus on the role of the media, the dominant media, how they have constructed that narrative and how we think about what we see in front of us, what we read in the papers, what we see on our screens, everything, and therefore how the response begins to happen, by the state, by society, to these conflicts and demands from these communities.

RF: So, if we think about this as a sort of textualisation of information, what would you position as being an alternative to that? How do we get to hear those voices?

DM: Sure. In the book Julie deals with this, particularly in the last chapter. There's two parts to answering that question: the one is that we understand that the mainstream commercial media is going to be with us, in whatever form, even if it's in a digitalised form or otherwise, and not necessarily the dominant print media, but it's there. And the one thing there that can begin to change and begin to impact positively is for journalists and editors themselves to understand that it is in their best interests – and we would argue even commercially possibly, if one is to look at the bottom line here – to begin to do their actual jobs, which is to tell stories through listening to people, whoever it is.

The point here is to not come and think 'we're going to tell this story through a particular lens', or 'we're going to please the advertisers by leaving out certain things', and the editor then starts cutting out all sorts of things that are controversial. In other words, for journalists to be true to their profession, which is to tell stories. To tell the truth. And we're not naïve, there's obviously political and economic pressures that fundamentally impact on that, but we want people to try and apply this model, and not to undermine the possibilities of that. So, you know, if a newspaper has got those kinds of principles and values, then it will adopt a model of journalism that begins to do that, while still being able to make a profit and make money in doing so, but where profit and money is not the number one consideration.

In other words, when you cut your staff to such an extent that all you have is junior reporters who have no idea, and have not necessarily been trained properly, and you juniorise your staff to such an extent that there's no investigative journalism, there's no capacity to go and do in-depth reporting, there's nothing. So, essentially what you do is exactly the same as the privatisation of basic services, you run down the public infrastructure to such an extent that you say, 'well, there's only one option now and that's to privatise it and make it commercially viable.' And

then it's a fait accompli, and it's the same with the media. And so, what we're arguing is that we need to get back to some of those basics, which were there, even with the mainstream media, to a certain extent, and that kind of formed journalism.

The second part of it is where there's been a massive failure in South Africa – and we would argue in most places – is in the development of alternative media, of community media. We had all of this on paper in 1994 with community radio stations, community newspapers. There was a rich heritage and a huge reservoir of skills and capacity there which has been basically mostly wasted and left to dry out in the desert somewhere. We worked, for example, with community radio stations which have become totally commercialised because they're not supported by the public sector and they're not given the necessary support and capacity building. So, you don't have that media which is non-commercialised, which then actually doesn't have to worry about the bottom line all the time and can tell these stories.

And when we talk to people – for example, in Xolobeni – they were saying to us that the best things they've ever read about themselves came from community media, from the people who were in the area, local journalists, people who understood and who have a much better connection. This is understandable. And so, it's the dearth of community media, of alternative forms of media, and of people's media, which was there in the 1980s to a certain extent, obviously within a particular context, and then which was just fundamentally abandoned.

I mean, if one looks at the MDDA, the Media Development and Diversity Agency, it has been captured itself, it's playing no fundamentally positive role in developing that voice. And in fact, what you have is a situation where when community media exposes corruption, it's attacked by the state, they try to undermine it, to do away with it, this is the response. So again, there's a double-barrelled sort of response here: one is on the ground, community media, the people, and the voice of people being able to find those vehicles; and the other is the commercial media itself and that model of journalism practice.

RF: Thank you. You're a very prolific writer and analyst. What's next in terms of your work?

DM: That's a good question – I'm not quite sure! I've begun to work with the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) and part of my work has been turning towards workers and particularly looking at the changing nature of the working class. And I've just finished a research report, which is not going to be a book, but a booklet – a sort of mini-book – called 'Mapping the World of Casualised Work'. So, essentially what we have is a working class that's fundamentally been casualised in various ways – outsourced, part-time labour, labour brokers, and so on. This is where the majority of workers are, so the permanent, industrial proletariat is a minority, and we need to analytically understand that process historically. We also need to begin, as activists and progressives, if we're saying that workers are always part of those social forces that can change society, then we need to understand what's going on, what people are experiencing, how that's playing itself out politically and socially, so I'm beginning to turn my attention towards that. The booklet will come out soon, in the next 3 or 4 months it'll be launched, and maybe that'll turn into a larger project. I think it's an important way of looking at it.

And then, further down the road, I have my eyes on telling a more personal story. For a long time, I've wanted to use my own life story as a sort of metaphor for a range of things, and I've just wanted to do that in a way that I thought might be interesting and accessible to people to read, so that's a possibility. I'm not getting any younger, and so I think it might soon be time for me to turn my attention to doing something like that.