

Conference Concept

The Crisis of Politics | The Politics of Crisis

Wednesday 15 – Saturday 18 March 2017

Cape Town – South Africa

Conference overview

The conference will be structured as a three-day (March 16–18) meeting of around 60 researchers, public intellectuals and social and political activists from around the world, preceded by a series of decentralised workshops hosted by local South African organisations (March 15). The agenda of the conference will consist of thematic sessions that will start with a few and brief introductory remarks, followed by open debate. The conference will be held on the basis of non-sectarian and uncensored discussion in a friendly environment, designed to encourage free and constructive exchange.

The conference is conceived as a component of an ongoing process of joint knowledge production, which includes the production of a series of briefing papers, short documentaries, journalistic pieces, podcasts and books. The presentations will be recorded in video and audio, as well as live-streamed on the New Politics website and social media.

The conference will not be focused on diagnosing the nature of the multi-dimensional global crises that are rapidly unfolding around the world, but rather on exchanging ideas on collective strategies for resistance and towards the development of counter-hegemonic alternatives.

Context and rationale

The rise of the right and the growing difficulties faced by national progressive projects, including the apparent end of the cycle of left governments in Latin America and the challenges encountered by the Syriza-led administration in Greece, brings the issue of strategy into central focus. The election of Donald Trump, a right-wing populist, as the US President, combined with the resurgence of extreme-right forces in Europe, makes the rethinking and renewal of emancipatory politics that more urgent.

Clearly, the crisis of politics has its roots in profound changes that have taken place in recent years within the capitalist system internationally. Neoliberalism, globalisation and financialisation, together with a changing global division of labour, have shaped a new geo-political balance of forces that redefine both the opportunities and the challenges for radical transformation.

Moreover, the multifaceted nature of the global crisis, being at once economic, social, political, ecological and civilisational, has given rise to new struggles and new agencies.

The crises intersect and reinforce each other and redefine the role of the nation state. They also remould social classes, pauperising and marginalising large segments of the population while elevating and co-opting others. They also profoundly redefine questions of identity and culture. Mass unemployment, the rise of precarious forms of labour, the growing pressures on the peasantry and the reduction of the weight of the industrial proletariat, redefine urban and rural spaces, restructure the reproductive role of women and bring into sharp relief our environment and the human species' relation to the biosphere and nature in general.

Hence, emancipatory projects are confronted with a series of new questions to which there are few clear-cut answers and certainties. In many countries, traversing these challenges while at the same time building a new political project within an increasingly divided and polarised society (current South Africa being a sharp example), has proven difficult. Doing so in a context of fragmentation and isolation, with little dialogue and interaction between different initiatives, would require much more time and efforts. The depth of the crises we face makes everything urgent and undermines the time needed for theoretical and intellectual work.

This in part constitutes a significant element of what we refer to as the *crisis of politics*. Furthermore, the crisis refers to how the conventional 'solutions' (left political programmes) hardly match the changed realities we face today. Clearly, the power of globalised finance capital, and its capacity to disrupt national economies, makes taking institutional power and implementing radical reforms very difficult, outside of a generalised confrontation with capital nationally, regionally and globally.

At the same time, recent developments bring inspiration about new forms of political organisation and action. The new municipalist and commons-driven experiences in Spain, the Women's Marches, the Black Lives Matter movement and the Standing Rock resistance in the United States, and the initiative to build an international treaty to hold transnational corporations accountable for their human rights violations in the context of the UN system – among many other inspiring examples – show that there are strategies we can learn from, nationally and globally. Moreover, these experiences set new questions in the way emancipatory movements relate with the traditional media, but also in how to use new communication tools that are breaking a historical monopoly of production and dissemination of information.

The 2017 New Politics conference in South Africa is thus confronted with many critical questions. The agenda of the conference will be organised around the following nine themes:

1. The rise of the right and the spaces of the left: the changing meaning of New Politics
2. The social crisis of neoliberalism and the challenges for emancipatory politics
3. The global crisis and the current restructuring of capitalism: implications for New Politics

4. Identity: gender, race and class. How to develop non-Eurocentric politics?
5. Strategy, power and counter-power: pre-figurative experiences and strategies for emancipation
6. The questions of organisation and agency: labour, urban and rural politics
7. The Anthropocene and the meaning(s) of 'development': implications for New Politics
8. What about the state? Lessons from the left in government: constraints and possibilities
9. The way(s) forward: building convergences and closer collaboration in dangerous times

The conference will be preceded by eight simultaneous workshops co-organised by South African organisations in partnership with visiting conference participants. These will focus on:

- a. Energy Democracy
- b. Labour and New Politics
- c. The student movement and New Politics
- d. Towards a radical political media syndicate
- e. The Right to the City and transformative urban politics
- f. The state, public enterprises and New Politics
- g. The shrinking space for social and political dissent. How to reclaim democracy?
- h. Extractivism, rural movements and New Politics

Objectives and intended outcomes

The conference will provide a space to progressive thinkers and social and political activists to meet, analyse and share their perspectives on the crisis of politics and the politics of crisis.

The objectives of the conference are:

- to create a space for the exchange of distinct and open perspectives on the current political conjuncture and the challenges and opportunities for the development of counter-hegemonic alternatives;
- to disseminate to a Southern African audience the work developed by the New Politics platform;
- to promote synergies and collaboration between the New Politics Platform and similar international initiatives;
- to gain external support for the implementation of the research agenda of the New Political Platform; and
- to produce a substantial report for widespread dissemination in different languages regions of the world.

Enquiries about the conference and the New Politics Platform should be addressed to:

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