



BASIC ANALYTICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF EMPOWERING THE PERIPHERY: THE TELLING EXPERIENCES OF SOUTH AFRICA AND REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of the global crises and the urgency it created, the authors attempt to problematise the pathways to empowering the peripheries of the world – the victimised, excluded, humiliated and entangled. As assumptions relevant for the empowerment of the peripheries they discuss: the need to re-read one's own history; “accurate reconnaissance” of the current local circumstances; understanding the “workings of the global neoliberal capitalism”; focusing on integrating, making use of new scientific insights, reinvigorating fundamental values and generating internal actors of change; establishing new transformative alliances of the peripheries. The assumptions are contextualized in relation to the process of transition taking place in post-apartheid South Africa and post-socialist Serbia.

KEY WORDS: periphery, transition, South Africa, Republic of Serbia, assumptions of empowerment, history, global capitalism, the New South.

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INTRODUCTION

The world has been engulfed by a “polycrisis”¹ with an apocalyptic potential. The crisis has many layers, parallel and interacting locations and a simple message. Namely, in spite of unprecedented progress in vast human domains, the human species has not eliminated the possibility of self-extinction. Unleashing an unprecedented arrogance of power, investing relentlessly into the development of increasingly destructive weapons, celebrating an economy of greed, cancelling out solidarity, has produced such geopolitical, social and environmental turbulences that reveal that survival in the 21st century is an unresolved dramatic challenge. This has created a transformative urgency amidst marginalized critical thinking, neutralized politics,² lack of compelling alternative visions and effective counter/hegemonic movements, underscoring the strategic importance of furthering diagnostic efforts and generating new actors of change. Beside reconsiderations leading to new insights, diagnostic efforts among else, include establishing active links between scattered knowledge and analyses, de-marginalising critical thinking. Generating actors of change, on the local and global plan, among else means listening carefully, in a radically sustained manner, to the excluded, to the global peripheries and their emerging voices, gestures of non-submission to the demands of the powerful.³

1 The term originally coined by Edgar Morin in the seventies has been resurrected by the historian Adam Tooze. Cf. A. Tooze, Chartbook #130, Defining polycrisis – from crisis picture to the crisis matrix, 24. 6. 2002. Available at: www.ze.substack.com

2 According to Bourdieu, ...”moralism that insinuates itself everywhere, through an ethical vision of politics”, leads “to a kind of a principled depoliticisation of social and political problem, thereby stripped of any reference to any kind of domination.” (42) Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1999, Vol. 16(1): 41–58.

3 According to two prominent African thinkers, “... Africa – and the global South in general – has seen its status continue to rise in importance as one of the principal theatres where in some distant point in time, the future of the planet will more than likely to play out” (Mbembe and Sarr 2022).

Peripheries⁴ have been residing for decades in a system marked by persistent (and growing) inequality,⁵ a system where the weak are still forced by conditionalities, coercion and disciplining “to do what they Must” (Tukidid). Experiences of decolonization on the one hand and socialism on the other have not suspended for the large part of the peripheries the “perpetual reoccurrence of the same” (Nietzsche), the lack of structural presuppositions for autonomous pathways of development.

Internal economic, political and social fissures and limited manoeuvring space for autonomous choice, high degree of vulnerability in relation to the external, global actors (international financial institutions, powerful states and their military/intelligence/media complexes) and processes,⁶ low self-esteem and self-confidence, requires rethinking paths of empowerment. In broad terms, empowering, to our mind entails several types of reconsideration. First, it demands re-examining responses to the internal challenges of the current crisis, above all to the inequality, poverty and mass (structural) unemployment, and evaluating the competences and responsibilities of key internal actors. In order to generate new internal transformative political energy, the rethinking has to be focused on strategies aimed at tending to the needs of the majority on the basis of affirming solidarity and redistribution, i.e., the common good. Second, empowering entails that in a disturbingly polarized world, facing the dangerous implications of the ongoing conflicts, particularly at this moment in Ukraine, new forceful voice of sanity and nonviolence, “New Common Sense” needs to appear. New voices that represent the victims of the current world order and have the will to responsibly consider/address the wellbeing of human

4 By peripheries we mean a category of states that between themselves have attained different economic degree of development but are on the whole distinct from the core due to the nature of their external victimization and minor role in the design of the global order. Wallerstein’s world system theory, on the basis of the difference in the level of income, distinguishes between semi-peripheries which are less developed than the Core countries but more than the least developed, low-income peripheral nations. We, of course, recognize the internal asymmetries between the countries of periphery, and that according to Wallerstein Serbia and South Africa would qualify as semi-peripheries. However, we do not insist on this differentiation because on the whole the more developed and less developed countries of the periphery, are limited in impacting the hierarchy of global structures of power and taking part on a sustained basis in shaping the global order. Furthermore, they all face a common challenge, how to implement new pathways to development that would increase the level of collective wellbeing.

5 Fernand Braudel, in *La dynamique du capitalisme*, Arthaud, Paris 1985 (Serbian edition: Fernan Brodel, *Dinamika Kapitalizma*, IK Zorana Stojanovića, Sremski Karlovci, 1989) states that “the basic principle of the organization of the world has not changed in the least, it is still, in its structure divided into those privileged and those that are not privileged.

6 That the influence of external actors and global processes can override the regional significance of individual countries will be exemplified by our two examples, particularly in the case of South Africa, for it enjoyed in the nineties a status of a regional if not a continental power.

species. Empowerment includes connecting distant neighbours sharing the similar fate amidst the fragmented reality, creating a new movement, project, by articulating alternatives which can transcend the dominant neo-liberal paradigm and the socio-economic dead ends and geopolitical turmoil that it produces.

Following this trail, in the article we will expound in more detail several diagnostic assumptions we consider to be among the relevant ones for the empowering of modern peripheries. They include the following. Taking notice of all the findings that reaffirm nonlinearity, richness and diversity and contributions of non-Western culture to the human civilization,⁷ and rereading one's own history. This entails reconsidering those chapters of own past that offer an inspiring impetus or contain hindering structural matrixes of *longue durée* that are replicated in the entanglements of the present, or even in the visions of the future (In other words, the need is not to cancel out/reject the past as a historical humiliation, nor romanticise it as a new universalism). Rereading would be in the function of thinking about the present and the avenues of its transformation in a different manner. Assumptions presuppose critical self-examination of the current local framework, as well as understanding the nature of the neoliberal global capitalism, its movements, instruments and locations of power. It presupposes further, learning from own experience, as well as from experiences of others, establishing productive links in the function of rational acts of resistance. Recognition of the need for new alliances that would be based on non-hegemonic principles, on principles of cooperation and nonviolence, generating in perspective effective counter forces, that is, "emancipatory realism" (to borrow the term of K. Booth).

In expounding further, the noted assumptions we relate them to the transitional processes in South African (1994–) and Serbia (1989–). Choosing these two countries for a more concrete contextualization of the problem of empowerment is not part of an exotic academic exercise, but an attempt to demonstrate the legitimacy of extending the concept of South beyond the strictly geographical boundaries, recognizing fundamental links transcending the racial, cultural, historical differences. Both countries share a colonial past, similar aspirations within their regions, a troubled ("prolonged") transition, and their paths have already crossed in the previous attempts to frame beyond the block division, a constructive presence of the voice of the South in the global affairs.

7 Howard French for instance in his book *Born in Blackness* (2021), depicts the trivialization of African history and the systematic erasure of the achievements of its peoples from modern history.

The shared traumatic experiences of colonialism,⁸ while unevenly recognised and confronted in the two countries, have left profound structural imprints that still cast their shadow in the present, in the reproduction of economic, political and social entanglements (Berand 2001,17).⁹

The two types of recent processes of transitions, from the apartheid to a “delicate democracy” and from socialism to neoliberal capitalism¹⁰, have exposed some similar profound failures (dysfunctional state institutions, economic instability, widespread crime and corruption, further social and

8 The imperial history of the Ottoman empire is a contested one, especially in relation to the nature of its “imperial/colonial project”. The last few decades witnessed the expansion and enrichment of the Ottoman studies. Historians have been trying to view the history of the Ottoman empire through the lens of the postcolonial studies and there seems to be a consensus among the major historians of the Empire (Makdisi, Deringl, Kuhn...) that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ottoman elite adopted the ways of thinking of their enemies, the great European colonial powers, and began to conceive of their boundaries as a part of the colonial setting. This periphery was made up essentially of the Arab countries within the Ottoman Empire, and the Ottoman elites started expressing the “metropolitan arrogance” in order to legitimise modernisation of the periphery. Despite exploring and applying various concepts from the postcolonial studies, like “Ottoman colonialism”, “ottoman orientalism”, Orientalism *alla turca*, “the Ottoman man’s burden”, “the Ottoman civilising mission”, there is an underlying assumption in all this studies that despite its imperial ambitions, the Ottoman empire didn’t really have colonies, and that the Ottoman elite “borrowed” a particular discourse as a part of its “survival strategy”. This “defensive imperialism” were supposed to protect them from being colonised by the Great European powers. The Ottoman occupation of the Balkans has therefore not been addressed in this studies since by the twentieth century, most of the Balkan states gained their independence. Thus, the Balkan colonial experience is overwhelmingly if not denied than neglected or reduced to the concept of “metaphoric colonialism”. The same can be applied to the scholars of the Balkans. We argue that the Ottoman occupation of the Balkan did have all the main elements of the colonial rule. The Ottoman empire was a multiethnic, multidimensional and most importantly “non-consensual” empire (Karsh 2006). From historical and comparative perspective, the Ottoman empire exercised its own model of colonisation that shared similarities with European empires. The rule was mediated through various regional power holders and settlement colonialism, there was a gradual conversion over the course of generations to Islam and near constant military campaigns during the late medieval and early modern periods, over time the Empire developed various and quite sophisticated modes of economic exploitation, while the “center” exercised the “metropolitan arrogance” over its peripheries. Ottoman Empire tends to be excluded from most “imperial histories”, as well as postcolonial studies that emerged from various parts of the Global South in the second half of the twentieth century. We argue that the reason for this exclusion doesn’t lie in the fundamentally different nature of the “Ottoman colonial project”, but in the non-European and non-Christian character of the Empire, which, quite inconveniently reveals predominantly Euro-centric framing and reading of its (colonial) past.

9 In relation to Serbia, it is worth paraphrasing I. Berand, who points out that after a century of rebellion against backwardness, after a number of different revolutions, moving from capitalism to socialism and back to capitalism in the end this has not resulted in the transcendence of the position of the Western Balkan as a European periphery. In relation to South Africa, the present racial and social divides testify to the continuous reproduction of fundamental strands of the colonial order, regardless of the particular form that that order took in the past and was taking now.

10 Serbia (unwillingly) became an independent state because of the violent break-up of socialist, federal Yugoslavia that attempted to create a homeland for diverse ethnic groups based on “brotherhood and unity”.

economic polarization) and generated widespread internal disenchantment with both the internal and external actors. In short, both countries, in spite of their attempts to modernize, develop, stabilize, and in spite of their economic and human potential, have remained crisis ridden societies that continue residing in the circle of the (semi)periphery. As such in the international arena they are still more objects of external processes, than subjects actively participating in shaping the global order.

Finally, Serbia and South Africa have already crossed paths¹¹ taken part in constituting the Global South as a recognizable international actor, Serbia as part of Yugoslavia, one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and South Africa as a regional power, “a leading voice in the Global South” articulating Southern concerns in a number of multilateral forums, from the UN to BRICS, in the search for “African solutions to African problems (SAIIA 2019).

Following these introductory notes the article proceeds with a brief summary of the double movements, contradictions characterizing contemporary globalization, followed by a reminder of the profound significance of imposing external interventions in the narrative concerning the peripheries. The third part of the article deals in a general way with diagnostic presuppositions we consider to be relevant for the empowering of the peripheries. The last part of the article contextualizes the outlined assumptions in the South African and Serbian context.

COMPLEX CONTRADICTIONS

*“To believe in the possibility of change is something very precise. It means that we believe in the reality of choice. That there are choices. That we have the power to choose in the hope of altering society for the greater good”. (John Ralston Saul. 2005. *The Collapse of Globalism*).*

Rethinking assumptions of empowerment by relating to the experiences of transitions in South Africa and Serbia, is at this point in time, caught up in an intricate web of chronic and acute global uncertainties created by the compounding crisis, which has produced contradictory reactions, reflecting sharp divisions between beneficiaries and victims of global capitalism. Thus, hand in hand march doomsday fears and arrogance, unrestrained greed and “moral amnesia”, disillusionment/anger and “radical indifference”, bewildering feelings of impotence and reckless acts of

¹¹ This includes the collaboration between the Yugoslav Truth and Reconciliation Commission (established in 2001, in the aftermath of the violent conflicts) and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

violence, stubborn adherence to the TINA (*There is No Alternative*) creed and signs of reviving voices of the Global South, seeking alternatives.

Which direction will the contesting voices take, therefore heavily depends, on their strategy of dealing with complex global contradictions, their will and capacity to fortify critical (or even radical?) thinking and coherent transformative actions, facing new locations and structures of power, and extreme degree of inconsistencies between political proclamations, (international) legal norms, and practices.

That this is not an unsolicited task is demonstrated by the fact that in spite of widespread dismay and dissatisfaction, some authors advocate an optimistic assessment of the global state of affairs on the basis of statistics¹² which, for instance, point to a historic decrease of the number of conflicts between states. But such an assessment is incomplete and misguided if it does not address the systematic, uninterrupted investment into the development of instruments of war, that is, the continued presence of the “infinite preparation for war” (Virilio and Lotringer 1983, 31, 91–95, 157) since the end of WWII. The current all time high of global military expenditure (now more than two billion dollars), the sophistication of weapons of mass destruction, the “normalization” of the idea of “limited nuclear war”, the fact that in spite of fewer conflicts, humanity has never been closer to a nuclear annihilation, as the current war in Ukraine demonstrates, indicates the illusions of uncritical, but seductive, optimism. In other words, peacefulness is not necessarily expressed by the numerical decrease of violent conflicts.¹³ For, just one war between nuclear powers armed with the last generations of super destructive weapons, is sufficient to end life as such. Moreover, optimism concerning increased peacefulness of the 21st century is based on an even more deeply misplaced praise. For as the historian Howard Zinn¹⁴ points out, the fact that wars are still waged after so much suffering and destruction in human history, is a shameful fact. A tragic testimony that the logic of sanctity of life and rationality have not (yet!) prevailed.

Returning to the global contradictions, or what could be defined as “double movements” (K. Polany) we note the following:

The creation of material wealth securing an improved material standard of life for the majority of humankind (as S. Pinker states human beings have never had it better, historically the present is the best of times)

¹² Cf. Pinker, Steven. 2011. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Viking.

¹³ Paul Krugman indicates how statistic can be misleading, stating: “Anyone who has seen how economic statistics are constructed knows that they are really a sub-genre of science fiction”. Quoted by John Ralston Saul, in: *The Collapse of Globalism*, Viking Canada, 2005, p.50.

¹⁴ Cf. Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of American Empire*, Metropolitan Books, 2008.

cannot but be acknowledged. But in order for the impressive growth to be socially contextualised, unprecedented, brutal social inequalities colouring the present¹⁵ as well as the extreme poverty of 860 million citizens¹⁶ has to be addressed in the same breath.¹⁷ Furthermore, the environmental consequences of material growth, the unrestrained logic of consumerism, equally has to be noted as a serious shadow overarching the “best of times”.

Technological developments are an impressive testimony of creative human capacities and achievements spanning, as A.C. Grayling notes from the tiniest world of atoms to the world of infiniteness – space (Grayling 2021, 1). But the lack of their embeddedness in clear and strong ethical foundations, particularly concerning the relation of intelligent machines and man,¹⁸ their continues contribution to the development of the war machine, as well as the emerging practice of digital disciplining and repression is a testimony of new dangers and traps. Therefore, the reach of technological achievements on the one hand, and their destructive potential on the other, their capacity to advance common good and their alienating power, require careful and active ethical and political considerations. This may even include efforts to initiate the will and courage to set aside, consciously curtail some of the technical achievements and possibilities, wisely pre-empting their dangerous consequences.

Celebration of democracy, protection of human rights, goes hand in hand with the growing unaccountability of new power structures, and limited or no capacity for collective action of citizens (Streeck 2016, 20, 37). Furthermore, the efficient protection of citizens amidst fragmented, polarised societies devoid of solidarity, has been heavily eroded. The sense

15 “The richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of the global income, whereas the poorest half of the population earns 8.5% of it. Global wealth inequalities are even more pronounced than income inequalities. The poorest half of the population barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2% of the total. In contrast, the richest 10% of the global population own 76% of all wealth” (World Inequality Report 2022, available at: <https://wir2022.wid.world>).

16 <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/terrifying-prospect-over-quarter-billion-more-people-crashing-extreme-levels-poverty>

17 N. Mandela spoke about poverty on Trafalgar Square 2005. “Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times – times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation – they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils. John Ralston Saul, *The Collapse of Globalism*, Viking Canada, 2005, p. 23.

During 2022 due to a four-year drought, the pandemic and war in Ukraine, 22 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia were facing harrowing starvation. At the same time millions of dollars are poured into weapons fuelling, escalating ongoing conflicts. Agency France-Press, *The Guardian*, “Horn of Africa drought places 22 million people at risk of starvation, says UN”, 19th August 2022.

18 A bizarre illustration of this relation is depicted in an article of *The Guardian*, Chess robot grabs and breaks finger of seven-year-old opponent, www.theguardian.com, 24 July 2022.

of community has been to a large extent replaced by unrestrained egotism. Democracy has little bearing on the existential predicament of citizens, redistributive functions of the state having been severely limited and a number of its tasks taken over by private, profit seeking actors.¹⁹ Democracy has not only distanced itself from the economic realm (or better yet, become subservient to economy), but also from the legal one as well.²⁰ Selective application of the rule of law for instance in foreign policy, and unconvincing, but imposed, moral justifications of military interventions in the name of democracy, together with the “policing of the media”, speak of a substantial erosion of freedom, as well as of the calculated diminishment of the capacity of citizens to recognize links between internal and external authoritarian tendencies, see through inhibiting moral hypocrisy and respond, contest constructively.

The noted examples of simultaneous movements in different directions within key human domains, indicate that an “accurate reconnaissance”, (A. Gramsci), inventory/diagnosis of internal and external context is a continues task. In addition, the present moment desperately requires sustained re-dedication to elementary values “liberty, equality, brotherhood”²¹ (injured now by policed liberty, continuously worsening inequality, violent fraternity), enriched by the intellectual traditions and conceptual categories from the Global South, for example, *satyagraha* and *ubuntu*.²² It also entails furthering diagnostic capacities that are able to incorporate new knowledge, insights across relevant disciplines²³ (Graeber and

19 Cf. Ivor Chipkin, “From democracy as political system to democracy as government”, in: *Transformation*, Vol. 105, 2021, pp. 1–25.

20 Sabine Frerichs in her article “Karl Polany and the Law of Market Society” distinguishes two types of law: 1. the law as a commodity serving private interest, and 2. the law as an institution promoting public interest. Cf. *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 01/01/2019 44:197–208, <https://research.wu.atc.at>

21 What might belong to the notion of “New Common Sense”. Cf. Mark Engler and Paul Engler. 2023. Lessons from Gramsci for Today’s Social Movements, August 7, 2023. [www. Counterpunch.org](http://www.Counterpunch.org)

22 *Ubuntu* is often understood as an African, humanist philosophy, way of thinking about what it means to be human, and how we, as humans, should behave towards others as members of a community (Thompson, 2019). The principle of togetherness, compassion, empathy is embodied in the Ubuntu principle: “I am because we are”. *Satyagraha* is a concept introduced by Mahatma Gandhi to designate a determined, active but nonviolent resistance to evil. In other words, resisting evil with good. According to this philosophy, *satyagrahis* (those practicing *satyagraha*) achieve correct insight into the real nature of the evil situation by observing a nonviolence of the mind, by seeking truth in a spirit of peace and love and by undergoing a rigorous process of self-scrutiny (Stefon 2023).

23 Among else, archaeology, anthropology have accumulated evidence that is contributing to the non-linear understanding of human evolution, shedding light on communities based on alternative forms of social organisation evolving in different phases and cultures, having

Wengrow 2021), in order to extend the realm of choices, sphere of freedom. In other words, transcending unnatural (cultural) distances and borders and universalising aspirations, analytically and prescriptively affirming the common good are potent instruments for generating emancipatory practices, cutting through widespread apathy, anger, indifference.

It is also important to emphasise that a critical articulation of present contradictions presupposes evading, what J. Galtung calls the “tyranny of number two”, the “iron law” of either/or (Good vs. Evil, heroes vs. villain, etc.). Transcending the either/or logic, implies convincing, accurate presentations of the multi-sources and depths of dangers, transforming “militant despair” into a creative new will for exploring and identifying the new “possibles” (Sarr 2019).

To summarise, for the peripheries(s) of the world, the depth of the existing drama requires battling through the disfigured history and the fog of current complexity in the search for internal wisdom, “new common sense” and a new social contract. The task for the marginalised, humiliated is to provide the basis for clearer responses to the questions “what kind of society are we striving for”, amidst the economic, environmental uncertainties and the “real relationships of power” (Saul 2005, 11, 61) within in a system at this moment to many looks like an order that can neither be “rectified nor replaced” (Streeck 2016, 35, 59).

EMPOWERMENT AND TRANSCENDING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE

Clearing the path toward identifying and defining some of the key dimensions of a strategy of empowerment requires critical unpacking some of the dominant narratives that have intervened in the self-perception, self-understanding²⁴ and the confidence of the peripheries.

Peripheries have frequently been viewed, defined, through the eyes of the Centre. Reversing the gaze will, among other things, help redefine the dominant narrative that has been reproducing itself over time, usually reducing vast and diverse spaces to a single story(ies) made of “treacherous clichés, stereotypes and pseudo-certitudes” (Sarr 2019). The Centre (West) had and still has the power to frame, explain away the consequences of historical circumstances and reduce structural problems of development of peripheries to innate insufficiencies. Complex social structures and processes are treated as they were purely technical matters, waiting

their own notions of freedom and equality. Cf. Graeber, David and David Wengrow, 2021. *The Dawn of Everything*, Allen Lane.

24 Peter Wagner, problematises modernity as self-understanding, cantering on collective “interpretative actions” and autonomy. Cf. *Modernity*. Polity, 2012.

to be solved by the Western experts, while the human subjects implicated in these dramas have no histories (Mbembe 2019), or in the case of *Homo Balkanicus*, “more history than they can consume”.

The Balkans, as well as Africa, are ghosts “haunting Western culture” (Todorova 2009). They have been commonly associated with “backwardness” and “violence”, and described as places without future or hope, “an outside worlds deemed to translation, mutation, conversion and catching up” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Implications of this in terms of self-perception, self-confidence were devastating and long lasting, contributing to an interiorized inferiority complex which, among other things, reduced the ability of these two regions to reflect on their present situation and envision the future for themselves. The West became the supreme authority whose tutelage and (informal and formal) recognition they are pursuing and celebrating.

At the same time, these peripheral regions have served as laboratories for experimentation and solutions developed elsewhere, primarily in the West. The non-West has been long treated “primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means; above all, of unprocessed data. These other worlds, in short, are treated less as sources of refined knowledge than as reservoirs of facts” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 1), and thus solutions to the problems of these “crises-prone entities” will have to come from the outside.

Unfortunately, representation of the Balkans in the African imaginary and Africa’s in this “non-European” part of Europe, is almost equally discomfoting, despite the similarities between postcolonial societies and the certain societies in Europe. The concept of balkanisation is often used by the African political²⁵ and intellectual elite to label the nature of tendencies toward the violent territorial fragmentation, or the inability to build a functioning state,²⁶ while Africa is represented within collective Balkan imaginary in the form of ultimate failure. It is treated as an entity that has nothing to do (and nothing to offer to) with the Balkans, sharing no similarities with the distinctly more developed Balkans. Reduced to an insult, prime criterion of negative comparison, for the Balkans are (at least geographically) part of Europe, nonetheless.

25 What is surprising is the negative connotation that balkanisation has among the African nationalists, as if they completely overlooked the fact that European balkanisation liberated many peoples from colonial rule.

26 According to Achille Mbembe (2000, 261) “The colonial boundaries are also said to have opened the way to the balkanisation of the continent by cutting it up into a maze of micro-states that were not economically viable and were linked more to Europe than to their environment”.

In essence Euro-American approaches, and the vision of the Other through the eyes, stereotypes formed by the Centre has led to a vision of the single “common” future in which all “outside” voices were silenced. The “end of history” narrative fundamentally affected the transformative strategies after the fall of the apartheid rule and end of socialism. Radical transformation was traded for seemingly endless transition(s), with (isomorphic) mimicry at its core, guided and supervised from the Centre. Insecure and vulnerable, post-apartheid South Africa and the countries that emerged after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, turned to well-known prescriptions developed and promoted by the (un)holy trinity of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation, while in the case of the Balkans, the leading if not decisive role was reserved for the European Union.

The indicated structural and narrative challenges facing peripheries lead to the question of defining assumptions of empowering strategies.

ASSUMPTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT

A strategy of empowering should encompass two aims. First, to transcend the lack of effective creative and transformative initiatives, i.e., answers to the crisis, problems created by the undertaken transitions, in South Africa from apartheid to a post-apartheid, democratic system, in Serbia from socialism to neoliberal capitalism, that is, from authoritarianism and planned economy to “democracy and free market”. Second, to recreate a new the voice of the South, of the world peripheries in the shaping of the global order. Reinventing alternative assumptions on these two levels can contribute to the modification of the dominant paradigm of economic and political power, transform, or enable constructive resistance to the reach of new locations of power.

The assumptions of empowerment thus presuppose the following:

1. A re-reading of own history, striving for accuracy²⁷ beyond prevailing stereotypes, imprisoning concepts formulated by others, concepts created in specific historical circumstances yet striving for universalism. Rehabilitating own principles and practices of community building, economic functioning, relating to others, to nature that are relevant for the present transformative aims. Recognising the processes of *longue durée* that perpetuate internal division, submis-

27 Cf. Adom Getachew. 2023. History's Presence, *The New York Review*, nybooks.com August 2, 2023.

According to A. Getachew, “history can denaturalize what we take to be given and inevitable political settlements” and “revisiting the way people in the past formulated central questions or their political projects... can shake up how we think in the present”. In short, reconsidering history can “make us see the present differently”.

- sion and conflict, and require systematic, collective engagement from politics to cultures in order to be transformed.
2. Understanding the “workings of prevailing system of global capitalism” (Robinson 2014), its current crisis and reach. Meaning, the hierarchy it imposes, the power it wields, the boundaries of economic and political autonomy it conditions, the erosions of the normative standards (unrestrained application of double standard, selective application of self-serving rules instead of laws) and democratic practices as well as the media malpractices²⁸ it imposes, leading to the creation of the post-democratic, post-truth world.
 3. Diagnosing, i.e., achieving as noted “accurate reconnaissance” of own failures, achievements along the path of transition, as well as the transformative potentiality in the present. Diagnosis should affirm the imperative of finding the balance between dwelling in a distorted and/or oversimplified past and a misunderstood present, between individual and collective interests, defining the measure of global integration and de-linking through the participation of citizens in shaping the vision of desired society. More to the point, three tasks are particularly important: a) recognising historical structural patterns that are recreated in spite of all that was attempted and achieved, politically and economically; b) contextualising the development of institutional patterns (form of government, recruitment of the bureaucracy) in the local-global matrix; c) revealing the possibilities of expanding the manoeuvring space for autonomy, choice, de-legitimisation of the TINA creed, providing internal cohesion, democratic participation are attained.
 4. Filtering the relevant, successful experiences of Others in domains important for building a functional and capable state and an inclusive society. For example, relevant experiences of Others could include becoming acquainted with the Finnish educational system, Cuban health system, Chinese system of recruitment civil servants, New Zealand’s attempt to “re-regulate where deregulation had gone too far” (Saul 2005, 214), etc. In other words, filtering would be a project of linking one’s own valuable experiences with the practices of others in accordance with the search for pathways to a good society. A transformative synthesis could be in the function of zero corruption tolerance, equality and care, participatory democracy, respect for own identity, devising an articulate ethical codex helping the navigation through the world of technological developments.

28 Stephen F. Cohen. 2019. *War with Russia?* Hot Books.

5. Seeking new alliances within and beyond the regional framework, i.e., taking in consideration the shared history of subjugation and exploitation, colonisation, and the present disadvantages position. This among other paths, may lead to the revitalisation Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in some form, or expansion of the rising regional organisations (BRICS – plus for example, could be a “meeting point” providing it does not replicate the existing exploitative and hegemonic aspirations in the South-South context?).²⁹ Whatever the paths, alliances need to increase the potential for acting with a **higher** degree of sovereignty and autonomy. The emergence of the New South as a project/movement could be a step towards the creation of a moral, political and economic corrective, the **missing link** between achievements and disasters created by the current neoliberal western formula of development. But it is not a given, rather it is a struggle and a choice.

Empowering in short, requires a new round of captivating/convincing, energising, diagnostic attempts leading to a enabling a transformative historical contestation of present mass victimisation, violation, exclusion and inspiring alternative visions of future, of new forms of institutional collaborations and realistic emancipatory practices.

In this spirit we will further reflect on the assumptions of empowerment in relations to the present challenges facing South Africa and Serbia.

29 Warnings about the possibility for BRICS to become a motor of constituting “neoliberalism with southern characteristics” (V.Prashad: Neoliberalism with Southern characteristics, The rise of the BRICS”, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, www.rosaluxnzc.org) have been forcefully articulated. Here we note several. Vijay Prashad, states: “The entire BRICS project is centered around the question of whether countries at the nether end of the neo-colonial system can break out of that system through mutual trade and cooperation, or whether the larger countries (including those in the BRICS) will inevitably enjoy asymmetries of power and scale against smaller countries and therefore reproduce inequalities rather than transcend them.” Cf. BRICS and World Balance, Consortium News, Vol. 29, No 225, August 17, 2003, <https://consortiumnews.com> In the article Western Imperialism and the Role of Sub-imperialism in the Global South, by Patrick Bond, Alexandra Garcia, Miguel Borba (Cadm.org, 13 January 2021) the authors “question whether BRICS is capable of reversing historical, unequal relations of trade and investment between the ‘core’ and ‘peripheries’, and we identify in some cases, an uncomfortable middle ground ‘sub-imperialism’”. William Robinson, in the article The Unbearable Manichaeism of the “Anti-Imperialist” left (The philosophical Salon, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com> August 2023) criticizes BRICS for obscuring internal class contradictions along with the web of transnational class relations into which they are enmeshed. BRICS according to him “do not represent an alternative to global capitalism and the domination of transnational capital, but they *do* signal the shift towards a more multipolar and balanced *inter-state system* within the global capitalist order. But such a multipolar inter-state system remains part of a brutal, exploitative, global capitalist world in which the BRICS capitalist and states are as much committed to control and exploitation of the global working and popular classes as are their Northern counterparts”.

1. RE-READING ONE'S OWN HISTORY

In the case of South Africa re-reading should include three historical sequences: pre-colonial, apartheid, and the anti-apartheid struggle.

a) Pre-colonial past of South Africa has been, by and large, discarded as being irrelevant (or lately, by some African intellectuals uncritically upheld as the only foundation of identity) for the present predicaments. The relevancy of history for the understanding the present seems to begin with the onset of colonialism. The pre-colonial period is either locally invoked uncritically as a romanticised past without conflict and injustice, or it tends to be filed, by dominant external readers, into a backward historical phase in line with the paradigm of linear progress. However, following new advances/evidence in archaeology and anthropology the moment has come to take in consideration beyond the linear matrix, the pre-colonial past of South Africa as an expression of diversity (even progressive and sophisticated practices) in the realm of economy, organisation of community, relationship toward nature that requires attention and research.³⁰

„If we compare, for example, European society at the Cape in the 18th and early 19th century with Nguni societies before Shaka, what is striking is their political sophistication by modern standards. Whereas Company rule in the Cape did not know the rule of law, Nguni society was rule/bound. Whereas European society was riddled with race-thinking and with racism, Nguni societies easily integrated strangers, even white ones. Whereas Cape society was a slave-owning and trading one, this was a practice largely unknown among Mthetwas, the Zulus and the Ndwandwe” (Chipkin 2022).

All this shows that exploring the variety of answers, the specificities that are not culturally and historically treated in a hierarchal manner, broaden the learning framework. In other words, carefully considering the relevancy, creative implications of the experiences of the past, sustains and strengthens the legitimacy of seeking alternatives in the present. Based on critical analyses of the past additional sources of inspiration and self-confidence can evolve.

b) The colonial past in its brutal apartheid form has to a large degree been analytically depicted. What remains to be done is to reveal its anomalies that are relevant for understanding the ambivalent threads of the

30 Graeber and Wengrow provide evidence that a linear understanding of the human evolution prevents us from recognising the diversity of social organisation, flexible arrangements that were not necessarily based on domination and subordination. Nor does it allow us to perceive forms of dealing with differences, modes of coexistence based on hospitality, care, creativity. They argue that not all good things came from Europe, and that both the social thoughts and human institutions that came from outside of Europe need to be taken seriously. Graeber, David. and David Wengrow. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything*. Allen Lane. Pp. 5, 140.

system in the present. For instance, one striking anomaly is the combination of extreme racial divisions and discrimination and elements of an exceptional welfare system. The question that thus needs to be answered is how this has sustained racial divisions and inequalities in the present and at the same time enabled strands of development. The apartheid state was, of course, brutally oppressive and it viciously discriminated on the basis of race, denying its African subjects equal political, social, or economic rights. But, at the same time, by 1994, for example, each of three pillars of post/apartheid redistribution were in place: a very high proportion of poor children were enrolled in secondary school, the tax system was progressive and poor men and women enjoyed generous old age pensions in retirement” (Seekings 2002).

c) The struggle against apartheid is an extremely important historical chapter of liberation. However, the romanticised aspects of the struggle, implications of policies that have been overlooked or simply abandoned but have been constitutive for some of the present transformative practices, limitations, and require scrutiny as well. This needs to be done particularly, in the realm of economics, i.e., Unveiling the roots, foundations of creeping neo-liberalism, of sustained social (racial) and economic (structural) inequalities that were enabled by the decisions made during the period of post-apartheid state building.

In the case of Serbia, the re-readings of history we suggest, should encompass the ignored colonial past, and the achievements and failures of the socialist project that ended in the violent breakup of Yugoslavia.

a) Serbia, the Balkans altogether, in its self-understanding has not historically situated some of the enduring structural patterns that have survived great turbulences in the design of the state(s), and their breakups. None of the “new beginnings” despite advances, have developed the capability to transcend in an enduring, irrevocable manner the status of a periphery rooted in the colonial past. Europe, the Balkan region, including Serbia has resisted labelling its past as ‘colonial’, as a way of clinging to its European identity, for colonisation is a phenomenon that belongs to the non-European space as M. Todorova argues.³¹ What is interesting is that analysts of colonial endeavours in the Orient, like the famed E. Said, have evaded this issue as well, omitting to take in consideration that the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian rule in the Balkans shares some of the fundamental features and outcomes with colonial practices in the non-European world. This evasiveness, among else is part of the “awkwardness”, to put it mildly, that Western Europe demonstrates towards the Balkans,

31 On the other hand, when Russia began to be examined within the framework of colonisation, “internal colonization” was applied to bridge the gap between previous understandings of colonisation and the Russian practice towards non-Russian groups.

treating its southern parts (“Western Balkan”) as a non-European part of Europe. And it is part of Serbia’s own unease with its complex identity that it cannot fit fully and neatly into the East-West divide, nor into the European/non-European divide.

We have a different approach, arguing that the geographical definition of colonization is a matter of convention (solidified by the establishment of international law), and that the task is to acknowledge that there are different forms of colonization³² irrespective of geography and to recognize that Balkan was exposed to one form of it. Thus, for Serbia, still searching for a path to stable, irreversible development, the challenge is to fully accept its complex historical identity, among else, understanding the antagonisms colonialism (Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian) managed to plant (manifesting itself in „nesting orientalism”), the structural obstacles/limits to economic development it created and the internal forces that is released disrupting several attempts to create a community of southern Slavs.

b) The Yugoslav brand of socialism was perceived as a “Third Way, ‘socialism with a humane face’. However, while its federal arrangements attempted to work out the ethnic diversity equation (fair representation of majority and minority groups), they failed to constitute a Yugoslav nation. The self-management system was a form of reaching out to democratic forms of government, but hindered by the party bureaucracy, while the opening of the economic system to the logics of the market proved unable to survive the international turbulences and resulted in a debt crisis (Woodward 1995). Industrialisation, economic growth, and a strong an extensive welfare state together with open borders and a liberal political and intellectual situation compared to other communist countries, the prestige of the country as one of the leaders of NAM, its bilateral relations with the European Economic Community, all suggested that if the Cold war was to be transcended, Yugoslavia would be at the head of the line to join European integrative processes. Instead, it violently broke up, with Serbia labelled as the main culprit, reduced to a pariah state. The rational, careful evaluation of the socialist legacy, the dimensions that needed to be preserved, others that needed to be reformed or discarded were never carried out in Serbia. Together with the shocking break-up of the Yugoslav state, the (never-ending) transition based on shock therapy was initiated when the regime of Slobodan Milosevic was toppled. Without the process of filtering, the crisis of the neo-liberal turnabout cannot be resolved, i.e., visions of a post neo-liberal order cannot surface.

32 J. Burbank and F. Cooper show that different forms of colonization are related to multiple histories of Empire. See: Jane Burbank and Fred Cooper. 2010. *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE WORKINGS OF THE PREVAILING SYSTEM OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

Globalisation in its neoliberal form, as a process and a network of actors, is often a decisive force in moulding the internal path of economic and political transformation in countries of the periphery (Robinson 2014; 2020). Besides connecting the world, contributing to material wealth, technological advances, globalisation has become a force that has transformed the nation state, its functions and reach particularly in the realm of redistribution, welfare, security. By pushing for privatisation (of everything), austerity, reducing the power of union protection, cancelling out solidarity and eroding social cohesion by celebrating greed and “possessive individualism” it has become an obstacle to emancipatory practices, to the autonomy of choice. The main actors of these process – the transnational class (incorporating fragments of the local elites), TNC that often dispose with financial assets bigger than the budget of some of the states, financial institutions, and digital industries that participate together with intelligence complexes in the disciplining and control of citizens, are not fully transparent nor accountable. Therefore, understanding the positive and negative dimensions of globalisation opens up the following questions for a focused internal debate: where is the nexus of national and transnational classes located in Serbia and South Africa, how has privatization/economic liberalisation been carried out, which TNC have entered the local scene, which policies were conditioned by the international financial institutions and who benefited the most from them? What were the social costs of externally imposed dimensions of transition? To what extent has the state retained its redistributive capacities? Is the state captured by local actors (ruling party, big business...), or by transnational capital and its agencies, or both. By understanding the nature, contradictions, crisis of global neoliberal capitalism, that is, the internal-external dynamics, a realistic vision, strategy of transformation and new internal actors of resistance may emerge.

3. DIAGNOSING OWN FAILURES, ACHIEVEMENTS, POTENTIALITY IN THE PRESENT

The problems and achievements of both societies do not offer a clear definition of their status. Therefore, they are variously depicted as states on the verge of failure, fragile states, captured states, weak states. The different designation indicate that the transition processes have accomplished some achievements, but far from optimal, that they have not attained functionality and stability that satisfies most of their citizens and surmounts the

internal crisis as well as the consequences of the compounding global crisis.

Serbia for example is a deeply polarised society, politically, socially and economically, operating without an achieved internal consensus about the key national goals (interests), without a sense of community. Social indicators show growing inequalities,³³ between classes and the urban and rural areas, large segments of the population living below the poverty line (or even in absolute poverty) or being at risk of poverty³⁴ (A11 Initiative 2022), high mortality rate, dramatic brain drain,³⁵ high index of corruption,³⁶ criminalisation, increased domestic violence. The process of privatization, one of the core axes of the transition from socialism to neo-liberalism, has been described as an unprecedented mode of plundering social and state property by the new capitalist class, and allowing for foreign, transnational capital to take over, land, water, ores, banks, and media resources, all crucial for autonomous development, economic and political sovereignty.

The present state of South Africa is described as “incompetent government leading a state about to fail” (Rahman 2022), based on rampant corruption, a high crime rate as well as mass structural unemployment. Although South Africa is considered a middle-income country, many of its citizens still live under conditions of moderate to extreme poverty. Fifty percent of South Africans live below the poverty line, while around 30% of the population lives in households defined as ultra-poor (Seekings and Nattrass 2015). Poverty persisted after 1994 because economic growth was neither rapid enough nor sufficiently inclusive to create work for low skilled, unemployed men and women. The racial divide has tran-

33 20 percent of the richest have ten times the equivalent income (household income distributed to household members) than 20 percent of the poorest. According to the Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index, Serbia is at the bottom of Europe and 84th on the list of 154 countries in the world. “Serbia is Among the Countries with the Highest Inequality in Europe, while the Burden of the Crisis is paid by the Poorest” <https://www.a11initiative.org>, 17. October 2020.

34 According to the statistics 450.000 thousand (6,9% of the population) live in absolute poverty and approx. 2 million are at poverty risk (29,8% of the population). Centre for democracy: “In Serbia an increasing number of poor”, www.oz1.rs 19/02/2022.

35 According to the Human flight and brain drain index, Serbia in 2022 has 6 index points (0 is low, 10 is high). www.Globaleconomy.com, 2022. According to a survey carried out by the National Youth Council of Serbia in August 2022, 50% of the young want to emigrate. It is estimated that between 2007–2019, about 500.000 thousand left. In an article by Tanja Vidovic, “Brain Drain” and Serbia: How to retain them, she cites the European statistical bureau according to which in 2019 about 4.000 people were leaving Serbia per month. *Danas*, 10. 09. 2019, danas.rs. Covid-19 has somewhat slowed down and even reversed somewhat this trend. Nevertheless, half of the young still wish to leave.

36 Serbia ranks the 96 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries its corruption index being 38.00, according to the 2021 Corruption perceptions Index reported by Transparency International. [Serbia, www.Transparency.org](http://Serbia.www.Transparency.org).

spired, in the form of planetary distances between the wealth, style of life in the white gated communities³⁷ and the impoverished majority of the black South Africans. Civil unrest is not uncommon in the face of poverty, dysfunctional state institutions and corrupt political actors (ANC is now depicted as a “criminal organization”).³⁸ From 2008, the pattern of conflict started to change and internal contestation in the African National Congress became a debilitating source of violent political conflict (Chipkin and Vidojevic 2022). Like in Serbia, South Africa is also confronted with an insufficient capacity to retain the wealthy citizens and the educated young.³⁹ On the other hand, South Africa is in spite of all its deficiencies a “regional powerhouse” (Rahman 2022), and attractive location for migrants from the Southern African region trapped in economic crisis and political tensions of their own, with a comparatively better infrastructure and a relatively vibrant economy.

4. LEARNING FROM AND APPROPRIATING SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS

Self-reflection requires developing capacities for learning from others, appropriating principles of successful practices in the most important domains – education, judiciary, public administration, health. This is a strategy of choice, based on clear visions of which needs are primary, and how the state can preserve its capacities to protect, care for its citizens and their environment. In reality, foreign (predominantly Western) models are imposed upon the countries undergoing transition, often reducing their outcome to uncritical mimicry. Thus, foreign experts of all sorts have come for example, to Serbia to reform the (still inefficient) administration, the education system is constantly under reform in the search for an adequate model, none of the judiciary reforms have resulted in eradication

37 See Chipkin, Ivor. 2020. *Middle-Classing in Roodepoort: Unexpected Sites of Post-apartheid “Community”* in: Rosich, Gerard and Peter Wagner (eds.). 2022. *The Trouble with Democracy*. Edinburg University Press.

38 Ibid.

39 Safety concerns, rolling blackouts, corruption, and economic stagnation are just some of the motives behind high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs) choosing to leave for overseas. Data from New World Wealth and Henley & Partners shows approximately 4 500 HNWIs have left South Africa over the past decade. 6. svi 2022. *Wealthy South Africans are leaving in droves* – Moneyweb <https://www.moneyweb.co.za> >

“Here’s how many South African’s are leaving for Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom”, According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs’ 2020 International Migrant Stock report, there were 914,000 taking up residency outside the country, up significantly from 2015 (786,000). [Businessstech.co.za](https://www.businessstech.co.za)

of corruption and inefficiency, and the health system has been ruined by the brain drain, corruption, privatization.

In South Africa the situation is different, but the results are to a large extent similar.

South Africa in the 1990s, for example, became preoccupied with and pursued practices and models increasingly rooted internationally. One of these was the taking over, of what has been called the New Public Management in the reorganisation of the post-apartheid civil service. Public sector reform in post-apartheid South Africa took a particular form, since public administration, due to its links to the apartheid state, was regarded as illegitimate by those involved in anti-apartheid struggle. The central issue for the new post-apartheid government was not how to improve the efficiencies of the government and the public sector, but how to “smash” it Lenin-like or at least transform it according to the ANC's Strategy and Tactics (Chipkin and Lipietz 2012, 5).

At the same time, in some areas South Africa offers a sneak peek into the (dystopian?) future with its highly securitised (and more and more self-sustainable) townhouse complexes for (upper) middle class on one hand and poorly serviced informal settlements for the poor on the other hand.

Therefore, if the common good as the main signpost was taken seriously, it would include in both countries developing a careful strategy of learning and creatively appropriating (not imitating, or mechanically applying) relevant experiences from the outside. In fact, the key to strategic success is to master a fine-tuned combination of past and present, national, and international experiences and lessons.

5. SEEKING NEW ALLIANCES

Part of the collective memory of Serbia, as heir of ex-Yugoslavia, is the Non-Alignment Movement it co-founded, as a constructive response of the Third World to superpower polarisation and confrontation. South Africa, as soon as it overthrew the apartheid regime, joined the NAM in 1994. Although the movement was at that time waning, the gesture was together with the dismantling of South Africa's nuclear power, an expression of the continuous need to foster, nurture alliances of those smaller, less developed but independence seeking countries. The present moment, marked by the war between Ukraine, the West and Russia, and the pressure for the countries of the Global South to choose sides, i.e., support the West and its military alliance, without questions, has rekindled the need for new alliances, new solidarities, reaffirmations of peaceful coexistence, for the constitution of the New South. South Africa has abstained from supporting the UN resolutions condemning Russia and implementing

sanctions. Serbia has voted for the UN General Assembly Resolutions but has not accepted to implement sanctions against Russia and is under heavy pressure from the European Union and U.S., that may be economically and politically very costly. Although war in Ukraine is one serious episode prompting new interconnections, to create space for autonomous foreign policy despite the vulnerabilities, it is not the only incentive. Some form of transcending, delinking from a world order dominated by hegemonic powers, developing alternative institutions, particularly financial ones, is on the agenda, and the two countries could be mutually supporting in extending their autonomy and pooling the energy of resistance to the dominant paradigm of world order.

CONCLUSION

In a moment of profound global crisis, new forms of “historical interventions” are needed both in terms of alternative visions and transformative practices. The global peripheries, residing between the imposed *Musts* and internally produced fractures and contradictions, are confronting a double task. One the one hand, how deal with the global power structures, their varied instruments and locations, and the other how to find their own path towards collective well-being. In the article, using the example of South Africa and Serbia, we attempted to point out to some of the assumptions that we consider to be crucial for embarking on such a transformative process, process of empowerment. They entail, among else, re-reading one’s own past, accurate diagnosing of the present internal entanglements and the inner workings of neoliberal capitalism, integrating new scientific evidence, insights, existing threads of emancipatory practices, and creating new alliances of solidarity across geographical boundaries. If the logic of the assumptions can lead to new (or reinventing the existing ones?) global and local transformative visions and practices i.e., “New common sense”, the voice and will of the New South could become increasingly relevant, if not crucial for the survival of the living world.

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