

Left: 'There is no extra-state terrain in society...the state's legal, administrative and coercive capacities affect most daily activities'.

Right: Churches came out strongly against participation.



More great participation debates

The October municipal elections are over - but the debate over participation is not. Three contributors respond to Guy Berger's article, 'The Great Participation Debate', published in *WIP 55*.

Ivor Sarakinsky:

Guy Berger's constructive comments on my analysis of the state and possible strategic responses are most welcome. Such debate is far too important for polemics.

Berger is correct to argue that it would be difficult for the extra-parliamentary opposition to change its strategy after advocating non-participation over the last few years.

Although this does not mean that the possibility of participation need not be raised, it does suggest that the state has put severe constraints on the activities of the extra-parliamentary opposition.

Berger acknowledges this by stating that 'given the dislocation currently experienced by the mass democratic movement, with so many leaders in detention, and so many organisations struggling to re-build in difficult semi-underground conditions, could a major about-turn in

policy realistically be debated and democratically adopted?' Given the state's resolve to continue with its assault on the extra-parliamentary opposition, Berger needs to demonstrate rather than merely assert that the 'political initiative remains with the broad liberation movement'.

In my *WIP 52* article, I argued that in the light of the state's sophisticated and multi-faceted counter-revolutionary programme, participation in the tricameral parliament and local authorities could provide a space for organisational consolidation and growth.

In stating that 'the state determines the arena in which the extra-parliamentary opposition operates', I was making a general point that there is no extra-state terrain in society, and that there is no distinction between state and civil society.

The fact that the state's legal, administrative and coercive capacities affect most daily activities

illustrates this point.

My argument attempted to show how the state, as a political actor, can redefine the political terrain to its advantage.

This did not imply that the state acts in a linear way, with opposition having no effect on its initiatives. But I was suggesting that from the state's perspective the state of emergency had been effective and opposition organisations had become vulnerable. These points are made more concretely in my *WIP 55* article.

Berger misunderstands my argument when he suggests that I accept the state's good faith in negotiation. Indeed, my argument for some form of strategic intervention is premised precisely on the state's bad faith in negotiations - illustrated by the events around the EPG mission of May 1986.

My point was that negotiations were occurring at local level between



consolidate the gains of the 1983-6 period.

Finally, Berger overlooks the long history of the liberation movements' participation in state-created structures. The ANC participated in the Native Representatives Council from its inception in 1936 until 1948.

At the same time the Communist Party and the ANC participated in Advisory Board elections from the late 1930s. The ANC continued to do so until the mid-1950s. The Communist Party put forward candidates for election onto provincial and city councils as well as the senate with some success. After it disbanded in 1950, former members successfully stood for election to parliament in the Cape Western constituency (under the amended Cape Native Franchise Act of 1936) while others either stood in Advisory Board elections or elections for the senate. These interventions in existing state structures were justified in terms of the opportunities for mobilisation and consolidation that they would provide for elected representatives.

Mark Swilling:

In his contribution to the participation debate, Guy Berger accuses me of holding positions I have never articulated and have publicly opposed.

In responding, I will refer to my writings in general. This is necessary because although Berger claims his critique is based on what I supposedly said in *WIP 50*, there is nothing in that article to support his accusations. His critique, therefore, is levelled at a general position he presumes I adhere to.

According to Berger, my so-called 'new realism' is supposed to imply that I believe 'the present period is one of retreat for the mass democratic movement'. Yet in *WIP 50*, under the sub-title 'The survival of the internal opposition', I argue that the democratic movement has 'strengthened and consolidated its political and organisational structures'. To back this up, I refer to the formation of Sayco, Cosatu's 'hands-off' campaign, several union congresses that passed political resolutions, the UDF's ability to hold a consultative conference in semi-clandestine conditions, the May 5-6

stayaway, the persistence of rent boycotts and various other initiatives.

I am accused of arguing that the democratic movement has elevated the boycott tactic to the status of a strategy that 'has obliterated any area for manoeuvre'. Yet a *Weekly Mail* article I wrote - which could not be published because of the February restrictions - noted: 'The history of the democratic movement shows unambiguously that strategies are selected for their tactical value, not simply because they flow from an abstract principle'. An article of mine in the *Monitor* maps out an anatomy of township protest and describes in some detail the creative and highly 'manoeuvrable' strategies that were implemented by community organisations during the 1980s. An article on the UDF, published in *Popular Struggles in South Africa*, edited by William Cobbett and Robin Cohen, makes the same point.

The most severe criticism is the allegation that I maintain that by participating, the splits in the state will be deepened. Nothing could be further from the truth. On page 22 of *WIP 50* I argue that 'the pressure of black resistance together with debilitating divisions in the white power bloc may steadily isolate the securocrats'. But nowhere do I come close to suggesting that this resistance should take a participatory form. I do not even mention the word 'participation' in that article.

I do suggest that local negotiations in the context of dual power can be effective, but have never argued that negotiations should be pursued to deepen division in the state.

After stigmatising me as a 'new realist' I am then charged with 'misreading the present'. Berger claims that despite fluctuations in the intensity of struggle, the 'basic features' of the current 'unstable equilibrium' involves 'the relative military and economic power of the government on the one hand, and its considerable political weakness on the other'. Yet I have frequently advanced this very view. To quote from my talk to a Five Freedoms Forum meeting in Cape Town earlier this year: 'The state is militarily strong, but politically weak'.

I am then accused of not explaining why the government is

certain state departments and representatives of opposition community organisations who were vulnerable to the actions of the security apparatuses. In this context, I suggested that an organisational space 'could' (not would) be secured 'by, for example', putting candidates forward for election onto state structures. I did not exclude any other means of organisational consolidation, nor did I intimate that participation would necessarily succeed as an oppositional strategy.

My argument is that it is possible for state structures to have unintended consequences, and this allows for the possible tactical use of institutions and procedures by the opposition for its own ends. Berger is incorrect that this assumes it is possible 'to transform apartheid through its own institutions'.

In my article I insisted that 'meaningful social change will only be achieved by a strong, organised and democratic mass-based movement'. At the same time, I suggested that some form of tactical intervention in state structures could



The contradiction between white minority intentions and the majority's demands finally ruptured into full blown confrontation

politically weak. Berger says this weakness is due to 'the wholesale rejection and boycotting' of state structures.

But an article authored by a colleague and I - and presented at a recent sociology conference - makes a similar point: '...constitutional reform provided the focus for national organisation and resistance on a scale not seen since the 1950s'. All these manifestations of resistance and opposition short-circuited key state strategies - including, of course, the desire for what Berger calls an 'extensive bloc of black support'.

Berger raises the question of who has the political initiative. He says this still lies with the 'liberation movement'. According to my *Weekly Mail* article, 'The most that state strategy may achieve is compliance, not the spontaneous consent required to legitimise state structures'. Not even Berger is as confident as this. He contradicts his own questioning of the 'new realist' assumption by describing the current conjuncture as an 'unstable equilibrium'. Surely this means he thinks no-one has the initiative. Berger then completes his circle of contradictions by arguing that debating participation is not viable precisely because of the current weakness of the democratic movement. This is what I call 'new confusion'.

The absurdity of Berger's criticism is most obvious when he says I believe local state institutions can be used against the state. My writings on this subject over the years have constantly reiterated the essence of

the argument contained in the following quote: 'In the final analysis, the contradiction between the intentions of the white minority regime and the demands of the majority of people that has always plagued local government, have finally ruptured into a full-blown confrontation between the "organs of people's power" and the reformed local government structures being introduced by the state' ('Taking power from below', in *Government by the People?*, edited by Heymans and Totemeyer, p 193).

Berger is totally incorrect when he accuses me of 'conflation between the strategies of negotiation and participation'. Negotiations in the context of dual power, not participation in the local organs of minority rule, is a position I have consistently argued in the past.

When Berger claims that I 'overestimate the organisational and tactical flexibility of the mass democratic movement', he ignores my *Weekly Mail* article which concludes that 'given the state's refusal to countenance any real dissent and given the general repressive conditions, participation would serve to legitimise rather than undermine state structures'.

Berger's article is a perfect example of how not to engage in open and democratic debate. Using classic academic tactics of distortion, manipulation and misrepresentation, he has issued a warning to all writers who want to explore new ways of analysing terrains of struggle: 'don't do it!' This method of debate is roundly rejected in the

democratic movement. Hopefully this will mute Berger's anti-democratic warning and prepare the way for 'the careful examination of the broad conjuncture' he calls for.

Tom Lodge:

Guy Berger's closely-reasoned critique of the advocacy of electoral participation is most welcome. When I wrote the talk published as 'State power and the politics of resistance' it was partly with the intention of encouraging a debate of more thoughtful quality than appeared to be taking place at the time.

The most important point Berger makes is that at this stage the advocacy of electoral participation is simply impractical for most sections of the democratic movement. As he quite rightly says, conditions do not exist in which 'a major about-turn in policy could be debated and democratically adopted'.

As he contends, a crucial consideration in any move towards participation is the extent to which institutions retain some popular legitimacy. This is the strongest argument favouring the support of 'anti-apartheid' candidates in white municipal polls which was advanced by a section of the Five Freedoms Forum. This, presumably was the reason why the ANC continued to participate in Advisory Board elections through the 1950s. It is not the case, though, that the ANC after 1946 'explicitly refused to participate in the Native Representative Council or the other limited platforms that were available for participation'. Indeed, both the ANC and the Communist Party contested the NRC elections in 1948.

I am not sure that the present phase of repression is merely, as Berger believes, no more than a shift, fluctuation or momentary alternation in the balance of forces engaged in an 'unstable equilibrium'. I hope he is right but it would be dangerous to take this for granted.

In general, though, I am in agreement with the essentials of Berger's argument: for the time being, participation is not on the agenda. But as he concedes, it would not be 'unthinkable under every circumstance' - and to represent those arguments which favour it as 'treachery' is neither useful nor illuminating.