

## Abstract

### THE 'POLITICS OF THE QUEUE': PLHA POLITICISATION AND AIDS ACTIVISM IN TANZANIA

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This presentation draws on work already submitted for publication<sup>1</sup>, but takes a slightly different angle. At issue is the mobilisation of People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLHA) in Africa, in the context of the rolling out of 'free' Anti Retroviral drugs which have allowed the dying to live again. This paper looks at the contrast between the mass movement led by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in South Africa (challenging both the state and giant pharmaceuticals), and what appears at first sight to be a similar phenomenon in Tanzania, but where PLHA mobilisation is actually politically weak, competitive and to a large degree co-opted by state and international aid agencies into depoliticised service delivery. Our own research focussed on Tanzania. There is a broad question here about how we recognise 'social movements' in terms of a distinctive politics, social base or practice. It is also vital (in terms of political practice) to discern the complexity and contradictions that mark processes of political activism. We tried to capture some of this in our phrase 'the politics of the queue' to characterise the way in which PLHA mobilisation in Tanzania was largely a matter of marshalling the sick for treatment, but that within this process people became conscious of injustices and began to organise to address them.

The South African case can be taken as an empirical contrast, but it is also notable for the way in which it has been theoretically framed within a debate concerning the phenomenon of people organising collectively on the basis of their biomedical status – '*biological citizenship*' (see eg Robins). Deriving from Foucault and drawing on the work of Rose and Novas, Diedrich, Appadurai and others, the focus is on an emergent global movement of patients demanding to be included in medical decision making and transforming themselves from 'victims' into 'survivors'. The very terms of what the state owed to citizens around 'life itself' is challenged, and the process of joining support groups becomes a *learning process in 'becoming political'* – i.e. engaging, challenging and negotiating with authorities, creating alliances of solidarity with others, making a larger case which eventually goes global. Whilst this argument appears to elucidate the case of South Africa, it does not encompass what is happening in Tanzania.

The case of TAC in South Africa definitely shows the potential for collective action in terms of health status, but the framing theory leaves us with questions about the class and gender composition of the movement as well as the issue of leadership and how they may have contributed to its success. There are many reasons for the success of the South African movement and the weakness of PLHA mobilisation in Tanzania – one is that PLHA in Tanzania did not themselves have to struggle for ARVs – the politicising work was already done in SA. But we also need to ask about the class basis for such a struggle in South Africa – the way it drew on pre-existing organisational skills and languages of resistance honed in the struggle against apartheid, borrowing strength from unions and political parties, gay activism etc. The class basis for such a movement is lacking in Tanzania where only a minority is in wage employment and unions were co-opted by the state after independence and are only now emerging from that stranglehold (Shivji 2007). The mass base of PLHA activism is found amongst those (especially women) who eke out an existence in the 'informal economy' and have no experience of organised politics. In Tanzania grassroots PLHA groupings exhibit a patron-client mode of politics rather than one based on the solidarity of common interests or organisational capacity

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developed through past struggles. This returns us to old debates about the political volatility of what Marx and Engels imprecisely called the lumpen-proletariat and the way in which they can be co-opted to the causes of others. Class struggles may proceed within social movements.