

## INTRODUCTION

# The Question of Freedom

Democracy is not simply related to a set of institutions but is conceived in relation to a state of being: that of being *free*. It designates a certain category of people rather than a host of practices, possibilities, activities. One is free not when one acts freely, but when one most closely resembles a figure said to be in a state of freedom.

—Ivor Chipkin, “The South African Nation”

The revolution in South Africa that put an end to apartheid is widely celebrated as a triumph of liberal democracy. The images that captured the world’s attention in 1994 tell a set-piece tale: after decades of difficult struggle, the black majority queued up in long, snaking lines to cast their ballots in defiance of the minority white administration, elected Nelson Mandela to the presidency of the country’s first democratic government, and enshrined a constitution so progressive that it remains a model even for western European countries. When most people think about the liberation movement that preceded this moment, they tend to imagine the black majority united against the apartheid state, driven by the common goal of ushering forth a new era of liberalism. But in reality things were not quite that simple, and the battle lines were not so clearly drawn. As it turned out, not all black South Africans wanted to sign on to the vision of a liberal democratic future, and some were so repulsed by the prospect that they resorted to violence to defend themselves against it.

During the years leading up to and following the democratic transition, South Africa was torn apart by internal conflict. To the bewilderment of outside observers, instead of closing ranks against the apartheid regime, many Africans turned against each other in what the media

sensationalized as “black-on-black” violence—a prolonged civil war that claimed the lives of some 20,000 people and left tens of thousands more internally displaced. Around Johannesburg the conflict appeared to pit Zulus against other African ethnic groups—Xhosas, Sothos, and so on—leading the media to cast the pogroms as motivated by tribalism.<sup>1</sup> But events in the eastern province of Natal (now known as KwaZulu-Natal), the epicenter of the conflict, gave the lie to that theory, for antagonists on both sides self-identified as Zulu. There, the fault lines developed between the residents of planned urban townships, on the one hand, and migrant workers from rural Zululand who lived temporarily in adjacent settlements and labor hostels, on the other. Township residents generally supported the African National Congress (ANC), which symbolized the vanguard of the popular struggle for democracy. Rural migrants, by contrast, generally identified with an organization known as Inkatha and formed vigilante militias to sabotage the revolution that was developing in the townships.

While most of the violence of that turbulent period has subsided, the rural-urban divide remains a defining feature of popular politics in KwaZulu-Natal. I began fieldwork in 2007 with the purpose of understanding how these tensions play out in the labor movement, where it is common for migrant workers from rural areas to refuse affiliation with ANC-linked unions even when they are much more powerful than the alternatives. Interviewing workers in the sugar industry, I found that many migrants explained their resistance to the ANC on the basis that they rejected the version of democracy (*idemoklasi*) and rights (*amalungelo*) that the party promotes—or at least certain dimensions of it. While they embraced the principles of racial equality and universal franchise, they questioned the underlying idea that all individuals are autonomous and ontologically equal—especially in relation to gender and kinship hierarchies—and objected to what they perceived as a systematic attack on their values by the ANC and its allies.

Intigued, I decided to expand my inquiry more broadly, speaking with migrants who resided in labor hostels around Durban. I found the same anti-democracy sentiment crop up with remarkable frequency. Migrants who retain deep ties to homesteads in rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal—my definition of “rural migrant” as I use it in this book<sup>2</sup>—routinely complain that the ANC’s democracy, and the party’s platform of liberal rights, is “ruining” families and “killing” the country, causing misfortune on a massive scale that registers as declining marriage rates, rising unemployment, deepening poverty, and epidemic disease. My

interlocutors were often explicit about this. One hostel-dweller in Kwa-Mashu whom I grew to know well told me: “There is a problem with democracy. Relationships are changing within families, and things are topsy-turvy. It has become like a curse in the ears of the ancestors and brings about misfortunes that can lead even to death.” A resident of the hostel in Umlazi explained the matter to me by referring to *hlonipha*, the system of taboo and avoidance that governs respectful decorum across social hierarchies in rural areas: “The culture of the rural areas is based on *hlonipha* . . . But these days *hlonipha* is going down . . . This is why everything is falling apart in South Africa. It is because of democracy and the Bill of Rights.”

Migrants’ resistance to the ANC has softened somewhat since Jacob Zuma assumed the presidency in 2009, for they see him as embodying many of the values that they feel are otherwise under threat. Yet the anti-democracy stance persists, and operates as a powerful expression of what people think about how the process of “liberation” has unfolded in South Africa since 1994. Most of the migrants I engaged with were middle-aged males, since they predominated at the workplaces and hostels I visited. But I heard a similar critique just as often on the lips of female migrants, albeit with a slightly different twist.<sup>3</sup> Of course, not all migrants hold this view—some support aspects of the ANC’s liberal project for various reasons—but it is a very common perspective. In many cases it determines party allegiance and voting behavior, but this is not always true; some migrants who reject liberalism nonetheless vote for the ANC or join ANC-linked unions—a trend that has picked up significantly in the Zuma era. While I seek to account for these complexities, the focus of this study is the cultural logic of the anti-democracy stance itself. Why do the principles of individual liberty and equal rights appear so repugnant to so many rural migrants? How do we think about the connections that they draw between democracy and death?

In the following chapters I demonstrate that this stance makes sense according to the logic of a moral order common in rural Zululand that sees kinship hierarchies in homesteads as essential to the ritual processes of what I call “fruition.” Many rural migrants see the ANC’s liberal policies as threatening these hierarchies and therefore undermining the conditions for good fortune, social reproduction, and even development—a fear that has heightened as neoliberal structural adjustment renders family livelihoods ever more precarious. Yet this commitment to hierarchy is not a timeless or primordial element of social life in the countryside, and nor is the homestead in which it is rooted. Both have

developed through a difficult history of engagement with the tactics of state power in the realm of *kinship* and *houses*—tactics that have long treated rural areas and urban areas very differently. The differences that the apartheid state created between rural and urban homes shaped the liberation struggle during the 1980s and 1990s, and continue to inform popular politics in KwaZulu-Natal today. This is particularly true for migrant workers: in the process of traversing back and forth between rural and urban, migrants construct a vision of contrast that provides a powerful framework for their critique of liberal democracy.

But before I delve into these arguments let me zoom out to get a wider perspective on the question at hand—the issue of freedom.

#### ON “FREEDOM” AND DEMOCRACY

This book explores the politics of a group of people who regard many of the values of liberal democracy not as liberating but as morally repulsive and socially destructive. In this sense it speaks to a broader trend, with the recent rise of social movements such as right-wing nationalism in Europe and the Islamic Awakening (*al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*) across the Middle East. This trend has troubled modernist narratives popular in the West, which imagined that globalization, by opening international markets and expanding networks of communication, would facilitate the flow of enlightened liberal ideals around the world. According to this view, people will choose to embrace these ideals so long as they are free to do so—free, that is, from the grip of dictators, patriarchs, and the repressive norms of culture or tradition. As it turns out, however, globalization has not only failed to produce a world of liberal cosmopolitans, in many cases, it has done the opposite, inspiring reactionary and often violent waves of what Brigit Meyer and Peter Geschiere (1999) have called “cultural closure” and generating new longings for illiberal forms of social order, often expressed as nostalgia for an idealized past that has fallen apart as a consequence of liberal modernity. Even when people are free to exercise their franchise, in many cases they choose to support illiberal political organizations. For example, when parliamentary elections were held in Egypt a year after the 2011 revolution, voters overwhelmingly favored the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis over their various liberal opponents.<sup>4</sup> The same has been true of the rise of Hamas in Palestine and, earlier, the Taliban in Afghanistan. All of these cases have left Western analysts groping for explanations.

How are we to think about social movements that reject liberal values in this manner? Many progressives and leftists—including myself, when I first began to grapple with this question—tend to resort to explanations such as rigged elections, lack of education on the part of the people, or intervention by external interests, believing, in other words, that people do not *actually* make those decisions freely. These explanations are not without merit, but I have come to find them inadequate on the grounds that they assume that there is something intrinsic to humans that *should* predispose them to desire liberal freedoms. They ignore the possibility that people might actually find liberalism to run counter to their conceptions of the good and their ideas about human flourishing. To paraphrase the words of Saba Mahmood (2005, xi), we cannot arrogantly assume that liberal forms of life necessarily exhaust ways of living meaningfully and richly in this world; we have to be able to parochialize our own political certainty on this matter.

I should be clear that by “liberalism” I do not mean the political ideology that stands as the opposite of “conservatism,” as in the divide between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party in the United States. Rather, I mean the deeper set of ideas about personhood and freedom that are shared by people on both ends of this political spectrum and that ultimately underpin what we might refer to as modern Western culture. In lieu of trying to unpack this model in its entirety (see Asad 2003; Keane 2007; Mahmood 2005; and Taylor 1989 for efforts toward this end), I want to dwell briefly on the conception of liberation that lies at its core.

As Webb Keane has pointed out, ideas about modernity and historical progress in Europe and the United States are generally cast as a story of human liberation. “In this narrative,” he writes,

progress is not only a matter of improvements in technology, economic well-being, or health but is also, and perhaps above all, about human emancipation and *self-mastery*. If in the past, humans were in thrall to illegitimate rulers, rigid traditions, and unreal fetishes, as they become modern they realize the true character of human agency. Conversely, those who seem to persist in displacing their own agency onto such rulers, traditions, or fetishes are out of step with the times, anachronistic premoderns or anti-moderns. (Keane 2007, 6)

The long tradition of liberal thought—spanning thinkers as diverse as Heidegger, Voltaire, Emerson, and Nietzsche—holds that liberation (the emancipation of the individual) requires achieving distance of the self from the external world: the goal is to stand apart from the

arbitrary authority of others and recognize one's own agency, and to stand apart from one's own experience and know it for what it truly is.

This conception of liberation provides the logic that drives democratization projects in the postcolonial world. According to the narrative promoted by institutions such as the World Bank, the U.S. military, and all kinds of NGOs, democracy liberates individuals by restoring their supposedly innate autonomy and allowing them to find their way toward enlightened rationality and political self-interest. The model of personhood at the core of this thinking was recognized by Alexis de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century. He observed that democratic societies—such as the United States—were built on assumptions about underlying human equality: all individuals partake of a singular, abstract humanity such that every person, regardless of their social position, is just as good as anyone else. Endowed with this “imaginary equality” of substance—even in the face of significant inequalities of income and opportunity—each person is free to reason for themselves and express their ideas without constraint, for all opinions are equally valid and all have equal access to truth (de Tocqueville 2000). Tocqueville recognized this as a culturally particular model of personhood that contrasted sharply with that in aristocratic societies like his native France. Today, democratization projects around the world take this form of personhood for granted as natural and seek to “restore” it to people whose oppressors have denied it to them, even if this requires violence, as in the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Hierarchy becomes a particularly salient issue in this process, be it in the form of patriarchal kinship, ancestor cults, or feudalistic social forms based on the “clan” and “tribe.” Democracy is supposed to break the hold of hierarchies over the individual and liberate a public sphere wherein people might realize their own agency. This idea motivates U.S. interventions in the Middle East and Africa, specifically. Take for instance a 2003 article by John Tierney in the *New York Times* titled “Iraqi Family Ties Complicate American Efforts for Change.” Following the lead of conservative thinkers like Stanley Kurtz and Steve Sailer, Tierney blames Iraq's democracy deficit on patriarchal extended families and cousin marriage, which he says encourage cronyism, nepotism, feuding, and general political corruption. Tierney implies that liberal democracy will only be possible if Iraqis adopt “modern” kinship forms, such as the nuclear families and autonomous individualism that supposedly characterize the United States. These ideas hinge on a social evolutionary trajectory borrowed from nineteenth-century anthropol-

ogy, specifically Henry Maine's theory of "the movement of progressive societies" from status to contract, from patriarchy to egalitarianism, and from group to individual—a process that gradually separates the domain of kinship from the domain of politics and economics. As Susan McKinnon (2013) has put it, Maine's framework remains the "essential blueprint for narratives of modernity."<sup>5</sup>

Why should hierarchy pose a moral problem for moderns? Because to surrender one's autonomy to superior beings—be they patriarchs or ancestors—is to misplace one's agency, to abdicate responsibility, and therefore to diminish one's freedom. In other words, in a manner not dissimilar to the fetish objects that Keane describes, hierarchy appears as a source of political self-betrayal. True liberation requires abstracting the self from social entanglements to achieve the disembedded, objectified personhood that lies at the root of Western conceptions of the rights-bearing individual, the critical political subject, and the disinterested participant of the public sphere (Keane 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Warner 2002).<sup>6</sup> Individual autonomy along these lines is crucial to the process of enlightenment and self-realization that liberalism celebrates, whereby individuals come to realize and act upon their "true" desires, interests, and will (cf. Gray 1980).

According to this line of thinking, the individual and society are understood as fundamentally at odds. This assumption appears repeatedly in Western social science and liberal political movements alike (Sahlins 2008). In the founding myths that organize Marxian and Freudian scholarship, the individual is understood as natural and a priori, while society is understood as contrived—an assumption we might trace back to a sort of Hobbesian worldview.<sup>7</sup> In this schema, the individual has "inner" or "authentic" desires that exist prior to social norms and expectations, which are imagined as external constraints. As in Hegelian thought, the individual is regarded as the proper locus of reason, while "society" (or cultural values and beliefs), by overdetermining the desires of individuals, appears as a form of bondage—a form of false consciousness that precludes objective knowledge of the external world. The process of liberation involves excavating and asserting this creative autonomous will, as in the figure of the "strong poet" that Nietzsche championed against the "slave morality" of the masses.<sup>8</sup>

In Rousseau's words, man is born free but he is everywhere in chains. Following this logic, liberal democracy projects itself as a neutral political framework that removes the artificial restrictions of society and liberates individuals to realize and express their supposedly innate,

natural autonomy. The concept of democracy—like that of human rights—bears the aura of the natural, the inevitable, and the universally good, and it takes the form of a redemptive project that extends the offer of transcendence.

These are the key ideas that came to underwrite the mainstream liberation struggle in South Africa. The National Democratic Revolution (NDR) that gained traction in the 1980s was committed to the principles of liberal democracy, supported the concept of individual rights, and stood against gender hierarchy and the notion of ascribed status (at least in theory; in reality the movement was deeply patriarchal and clientelistic, and this remains true of the ANC today).<sup>9</sup> In addition, since it was mobilized in part through labor unions and the South African Communist Party,<sup>10</sup> the movement drew on a reading of Marx that saw the revolutionary class as a class in and for itself, separated from contrived affiliations of clan or tribe and free from the fetishes of animism and ancestors. These values became crucial to the conception of freedom that underwrote the revolution: only people who matched up with these values—namely, urban individuals—could be considered revolutionary subjects. It was not always this way. The anti-apartheid movement had a history of including, and indeed relying on, rural activists (see, e.g., Delius 1989; Sitas 1996; Gibbs 2014). But by the 1980s the movement's vanguard began to reject people who hinged their beings on chiefdoms, patriarchs, and the will of ancestors, all of which were thought to restrict the moral and political autonomy of the subject. Like Marxist and modernist movements elsewhere in the world, it tended to regard peasants as intrinsically apolitical, too mired in “culture” to realize and act on their true political agency.<sup>11</sup>

Rural Zulus bore the brunt of this critique during the revolution. They were considered backward and counterrevolutionary because they failed to embody the values of the free, revolutionary subject (Chipkin 2003). Supposedly shackled by the false consciousness of tribalism and tied down by feudalistic hierarchies, rural Zulus appeared as obstacles to the achievement of liberal democracy. In its struggle for national liberation, then, the ANC crafted a story of rupture from a traditional past and progress into a modern future. In the process, they projected the negation of modern freedom onto rural Zulus, who came to embody the figure of the backward Other—a symbol freighted with ideas about hierarchical kinship, ancestor cults, and the absence of authentic agency. This furnished the logic that justified violence against the latter in the



form of what Bruno Latour has called “purification,” the separation of distinct ontological zones: free, rational human beings, on the one hand, and obstacles or traitors to the cause of freedom, on the other (Latour 1993, 10–11). Today the ANC continues this project of purification by pushing policies geared toward reforming the hierarchical family in a manner not dissimilar to the civilizing mission that characterized certain aspects of colonialism.

### DEMOCRACY THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The migrants I grew to know rejected this narrative outright, and many rejected the idea of liberal democracy along with it. This reaction opens up an interesting ethnographic opportunity. The temptation—to which many analysts have succumbed—is to dismiss this perspective on democracy not only because it runs against the grain of progressive politics and liberation narratives but because it runs against Euro-American assumptions about moral personhood and the social good. This tension is precisely where anthropology promises to find traction. Migrants’ concerns jar us into recognizing the contingency of our assumptions about progressive politics; they help us see the democratic project with new eyes and understand things about it that we normally take for granted. One of the goals of this book is to leverage the perspectives of liberalism’s subalterns to illuminate important truths about contemporary political economy.

To return to the question with which I opened this chapter: How do we make sense of the connection that many rural migrants draw between democracy and death? I first stumbled upon answers to these questions by thinking about ritual. In addition to learning the ropes of everyday life in rural Zululand, I also participated in the full spectrum of ritual activity—weddings, funerals, rites of passage, cleansing ceremonies, and countless cattle sacrifices. While each of these ceremonies has a different goal, all are geared toward establishing the proper order of persons and things and thereby establishing the conditions for health, reproduction, and good fortune, or what we might call “fruition” (van Dijk et al. 2000). According to my informants, the state of nature is one of sameness, disorder, and sterility, and fruition can only be realized by properly ordering the social world. As they see it, this requires the meticulous *differentiation* of social elements into sets of hierarchical oppositions—oppositions that are considered crucial to establishing a kind of integrated wholeness or unity. This is what ritual does (Bell

1992). To apply an insight from Roy Wagner's (1977) essay on "analogic kinship," the imperative to differentiate is experienced as a moral obligation, specifically by men. Without differences between categories of persons, society becomes unthinkable, and the morass of sameness appears as a kind of moral degeneracy.

A moral code known in IsiZulu as *umthetho* polices this hierarchical social order by governing the correct practice of ritual and enforcing the elaborate rules of respect, taboo, and avoidance mentioned by the hostel-dweller I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The ancestors are said to mediate between *umthetho* and fruition. When *umthetho* is upheld and order is intact, they are pleased; they protect their descendants from the chaos of the surrounding world and deliver fertility and good fortune. When the order is breached, they "turn their backs," leaving their descendants at the mercy of *amashwa*, or "misfortunes," which register as glitches in productive and reproductive processes and manifest as failure, infertility, joblessness, illness, and death—the opposite of fruition. In Zululand, an entire industry of traditional healing operates according to this theory of *amashwa*. For example, if a man is unable to secure a job, or cannot find a wife, he might consult a diviner to help him identify the sources of his misfortune. More often than not, the diviner will assert that the patient's ancestors are angry with him for violating *umthetho* and have communicated as much by allowing misfortunes to beset him.

These ideas pertain not only to personal and family well-being. They also extend to the realm of politics: leaders are expected to govern in such a way as to ensure the conditions for fruition. Drawing on these ideas, many people object to the ANC's egalitarian project, specifically policies that permit abortion and homosexuality, support single mothers, promote female home-ownership, and grant equal rights to women and children—all of which alter the terrain of relatedness and reproduction. They see these policies—which they lump together under the rubric of "democracy"—as culturally retrograde: democracy undoes the ritual work of differentiating persons, dismantles the hierarchical structure of kinship, and returns the world to a state of sterile sameness. By equalizing all persons across boundaries of gender, generation, and genealogy, democracy threatens the foundations of fruition and dissolves the social differences essential to reproduction. Extending the theory of *amashwa* to the state of the nation, many regard democracy as causing rising rates of poverty, crime, sexual violence, HIV transmission, and unemployment—re/productive misfortune on a mass scale.<sup>12</sup>

This perspective has found traction in the realities of recent economic history. During the negotiations to end apartheid, the ANC made a number of moves that hampered its future power over economic policy. The party retreated from its position on nationalization, signed up to the GATT, and accepted an IMF deal that deregulated the financial sector and clamped down on wage increases.<sup>13</sup> The central bank, left in the hands of the old apartheid bosses, was insulated from democratic politics and its mandate limited to targeting inflation instead of employment or growth (Padayachee 2013). In 1996, the cabinet implemented a neoliberal economic policy framework that promoted privatization, reduced trade tariffs, and loosened financial controls, despite significant resistance from within the ranks of the unions that had given such force to the anti-apartheid struggle (Bond 2000). Instead of creating jobs, as its proponents claimed it would, this approach nearly doubled the unemployment rate, which now (in 2013) stands at 37 percent.<sup>14</sup> Of those who do have secure employment, many nonetheless live precarious lives: some two-thirds of full-time workers earn less than the poverty threshold (Barchiesi 2010). About 62 percent of the black population lives below the poverty line, while in the rural areas of the former homelands this figure rises to 79 percent.<sup>15</sup>

For people in rural Zululand, this translates into what some scholars have called a “crisis of social reproduction” (cf. Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006; Fakier and Cock 2009; Hunter 2011; Von Holdt and Webster 2005). The rural homestead, which has long relied on migrant wage labor, can no longer operate as it did under late colonialism and most of apartheid. One crucial factor is that as men’s access to income diminishes, they become increasingly unable to pay for bridewealth (*ilobolo*), to the point where marriage rates have plummeted over the past few decades (Hunter 2010). Without legitimate bridewealth transactions, it becomes almost impossible to create and sustain the kinship structure, hierarchical relationships, gender roles, and division of labor that defines the kind of homestead to which most aspire. To some extent, this process of change was well under way before the end of apartheid: formal employment began to decline during the 1980s—a consequence of both the National Party’s early experiments with economic liberalization and the impact of international sanctions (see Habib and Padayachee 2000)—just at the same time that employers began to reject rural migrants in favor of higher-skilled, better-educated urban workers. But the conditions for homestead reproduction have become even more precarious since the ANC’s turn to neoliberalism—a downward spiral that

is all the more difficult to bear given the widespread optimism that accompanied the end of minority rule.

Yet most of my interlocutors had very little to say about neoliberalism. It was liberal democracy that worried them. To be charitable to this perspective, we might grant that it is not entirely incorrect. After all, liberal democracy and neoliberal economics draw a great deal from the same pool of values: both are promoted under the banner of individual freedom. So migrants are correct to point out that democracy is bringing decline, but only because the type of democracy that the ANC has established is complicit with a form of capitalism that leverages the logic of freedom to justify the financial and economic deregulation that has generated the crisis of social reproduction that they find so troubling. But my interlocutors rarely drew this connection themselves. For them, the crisis of social reproduction is a consequence of democracy's apparent attack on social differentiation and hierarchical kinship, and the new forms of personhood and desire that it has brought about.

This perspective may seem jarring, but that is exactly what enables us to gain critical distance from a number of very common assumptions about liberal democracy. The chapters that follow will show that rural migrants' critique of the ANC illuminates three in particular.

The first is that democracy is a project of freedom, that it removes "artificial" social restraints that prevent individuals from realizing their "natural" autonomy. In the discourse of migrants, democracy is understood as exactly the opposite: it extracts persons from their natural context of social encompassment and artificially reifies them as autonomous, disembedded monads with discrete individual interests. From this perspective, democracy does not liberate. It destroys. It dismantles the proper order of persons and erases the hierarchical differences that supply the conditions for human flourishing. Indeed, rural migrants perceive the *disciplinary* nature of democratic ideology. They realize that, far from being a neutral lifting of restrictions, democracy attempts to produce and standardize a particular state of being—the state of being an individual. This point resonates with Michel Foucault's (1975, 1991) argument that liberalism comprises a subject-making project. Liberal democracy does not abandon the will to govern but serves the interests of states seeking to manage their subjects more efficiently. Democracy conceives of citizens as subjects of individual responsibility, autonomy, agency, and choice, acts upon them through shaping and utilizing their freedom, and trains them to participate in their own gov-

ernance (cf. Barry et al. 1996; Burchell et al. 1991; Englund 2006; Harvey 2005; Mitchell 1991; Rose 1996, 1999; Scott 1999).

The second assumption about liberal democracy that many migrants question is the idea that democracy signifies progress, modernity, and development. Against this narrative, they regard democracy as a signifier of decline, decay, and degeneration; it obliterates the principles of respect and taboo that govern social relations and reduces people to “raw,” unrefined and uncultured creatures, more like primordial beasts than properly socialized human beings. And herein lies a fascinating reversal of trajectories: just as township residents regard rural migrants as backward on an evolutionary trajectory that runs from traditional to modern, rural migrants regard township residents as undoing culture and unraveling society toward a state of nature and of amoral, animalistic disorder. In this sense, migrants *also* sense a need to “purify”—to use Latour’s term again—by separating the properly human from the subhuman or nonhuman. In sum, they see nothing normal or good or inevitable about egalitarian individualism. On the contrary, they want to *restore* hierarchies, and in this it appears that they have common cause with many of the other right-wing social movements that have sprung up around the world in reaction to the onslaught of cultural globalization (Friedman 2002; Kalb 2005; Meyer and Geschiere 1999). As it turns out, not everyone wants to be “free.”

The third point worth making here is that while liberal democracy may individualize, it does not necessarily liberate people from hierarchy. It simply replaces one kind of hierarchy with another. It does not eliminate repression so much as alter its style. This critique is common among autonomists who argue that real democracy has never existed in modern state societies, where elite domination is simply dressed up in the guise of popular representation (see Graeber 2004, 2013). As we shall see, rural migrants articulate a similar argument. They claim that the new democratic regime leaves them feeling *less* represented in the political sphere and *less* in control of their destinies, not more. Indeed, migrants describe their own norms of homestead autonomy and representation-by-encompassment as more democratic than the ANC’s version of democracy. In this sense, their politics questions the very basis of the dichotomy between liberalism and illiberalism: the liberal government relies on undemocratic forms of power, while its illiberal subalterns make demands for more democratic forms of representation (cf. Zibechi 2005).

What becomes clear here is that democracy is best analyzed, not as a universal political form (as international agencies such as USAID and

the World Bank would have it), but as a malleable signifier replete with local meanings. This is consistent with existing literature in the anthropology of democracy (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 334; Gutmann 2002, 11; Verdery 1996). As Julia Paley, a leader in this field, has put it: “the meanings attributed to democracy in various contexts and struggles do not necessarily match hegemonic definitions in actually-existing systems or even normative liberal democracy ideals” (2002, 485). In South Africa, this is true of both the ANC and its detractors. This book is not about democracy itself but about the *ideas* about democracy that people leverage as they construct competing visions for the postapartheid order.

### COLONIAL POWER AND THE POLITICS OF HOME

Space is fundamental in any exercise of power.

—Michel Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, and Power”

Both democracy and the social movements that reject it must be understood as culturally particular phenomena. Yet one has to be careful to avoid reifying these cultural orientations as somehow bounded and static, as the popular “clash of civilizations” schema does when it pits modern secular-liberal values against those of “non-Western cultures,” be it according to an evolutionary model or simply as opposing typological categories (see, e.g., Huntington 1996; Tierney 2003). As with all instances of cultural reification, history offers the best antidote to this tendency. This leads me to a second main goal of this book, namely, to demonstrate the historical contingency of both liberal and anti-liberal politics in South Africa, and to show that both tendencies emerged from the exigencies of the colonial encounter.

The political conflict that has divided KwaZulu-Natal for most of the past few decades offers a useful entry into this issue. If we understand the conflict as developing between a moral order organized around principles of hierarchical difference and a moral order organized around principles of individual egalitarianism, then we must ask: How did these two cultural tendencies—these two divergent ideologies of personhood—emerge from within the same self-identifying ethnic group? These moral orientations are not timeless or essential, and nor do they represent two different ends of a teleological trajectory running from “traditional” to “modern,” as many accounts of the conflict would have it. I argue that what appears to be most traditional about rural migrants’ political perspective derives from their long and difficult engagement with colonial

modernity as much as from anything that we might call indigenous. By the same token, the liberal ideas that underpinned the revolution did not just emerge from nowhere, as if humans were universally predisposed to recognizing their superiority over “traditional” ontologies. We have to be able to explain what made it possible for this ideology to gain mass traction in KwaZulu-Natal in the late twentieth century, and why it happened specifically in urban townships.

Taking a historical approach, I argue that the emergence of these two political cosmologies can be traced in part to the influence of Native Administration policies under colonialism and apartheid. The colonial state entrenched deep distinctions between rural and urban and governed each with different techniques, relying on indirect rule in rural areas and deploying direct rule in urban areas. Both strategies sought to control Africans by organizing domestic social life, but in different ways: indirect rule organized a hierarchical social order in rural spaces, and direct rule organized an egalitarian social order in urban spaces. These divergent domestic governmentalities created the conditions for the development of competing political visions that came to be rooted in ideas about the home. As we shall see, domestic dwellings operate as potent symbols at the center of popular politics in KwaZulu-Natal today.

Yet while the history of segregation helps us understand the tensions between the political logics of rural and urban, the two sides are not as dichotomous as this might lead us to assume. Rather, they inhabit a continuum characterized by syncretism and flows (cf. Amselle 1998), not least because of the migrant labor system that keeps workers moving back and forth between the two, as Peter Delius (1996) has pointed out. Since a basic understanding of this system is necessary to understanding many of the arguments I make in this book, a brief overview is in order.

Colonial administrators had to reconcile two competing aims when it came to governing South Africa: maintaining racial separateness while supplying a steady flow of cheap black labor to the cities for industry. This was the core contradiction that the apartheid system had to face. Strict segregation would not suffice, since it would keep African labor away from white-owned farms, mines, and factories. But integration was equally undesirable—not only because of fears of miscegenation but because it would produce an urbanized proletariat liable to coalesce around a unified class or national identity. To solve this problem, administrators developed a system of internal migrancy that maintained racial separateness while still ensuring access to labor. African residence was

restricted to a set of rural “native reserves,” or “homelands,” such as KwaZulu. While Africans would support themselves primarily through subsistence agriculture, the state imposed taxes and manipulated the size and arability of the reserves so that they would have to seek additional income in the form of wages. Black males were ferried between the reserves and the cities for work according to a system of “pass laws” that determined how many Africans could enter white areas and how long they could stay. Under this system, Africans in urban areas were subject to a condition of forced impermanence—migrants in their own country—compelled to live in labor hostels and expelled back to their rural homesteads when they were no longer needed (Crush et al. 1991).

This carefully contrived system came with significant benefits. It allowed Europeans to pay African workers a “bachelor wage” below that which any settled proletarian would require to support a family, since subsistence activities in the rural reserves—managed by the unpaid labor of African women—subsidized the costs of maintenance and reproduction (Meillassoux 1975). In addition, once workers’ bodies were used up, sick, or disabled, they could be ejected back to the reserves, where the cost of caring for them would fall on their wives and children. The state did not have to take responsibility for the provision of welfare and social services in the reserves, and it was therefore spared considerable expense (Wolpe 1972). Finally, and most important for the purposes of statecraft, preventing full proletarianization forestalled the development of a militant African working class, and the division of the reserves according to “tribe” prevented Africans from uniting in opposition to the colonial regime (Mamdani 1996). The objective of the migrant labor system, then, was to leverage uneven development as a strategy of control—to maintain the peasant status of Africans, to keep them “backward” and “pre-political” (Hobsbawm 1958) so that they would not develop critical consciousness, and to do so while *still* using them as industrial laborers. The result was what scholars have called a “peasant-proletariat”: industrial wage workers who inhabit the realm of the peasant.

In rural areas, Africans were governed by chiefs who—while appointed and controlled by the state—provided a semblance of legitimacy to colonial overrule and supplied leadership for much cheaper than it would cost to govern directly. This system, known as “indirect rule,” was pioneered in Natal by Theophilus Shepstone well before Frederick Lugard’s experiments in Nigeria, and became the blueprint for similar strategies across the colonial world (Guy 2013). The key to this strategy lay in the codification of “customary law,” which bolstered patriarchal authority



in the homestead as a way of extending the reach of state power. As early as 1878, the colony of Natal instated a set of customary rules known as the Natal Code of Native Law, which sought to expand the power of chiefs and patriarchs and control rural Africans by ossifying and standardizing what were previously flexible systems of privilege and status into a rigidly hierarchical form (Welsh 1971; Mamdani 1996; Meyers 2008). Today, after more than a century of operation, the rules of the Code bear the aura of “tradition,” and social life remains shot through with hierarchy. This is particularly true of the domestic context—the rural homestead—which was the primary focus of the Code.

As with the houses famously discussed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1979), homesteads act like cosmological maps, inscribing in their spatial layout the hierarchical principles that organize social relations according to male/female, senior/junior, and sacred/common oppositions—oppositions that are organized according to the logic of encompassment. Within this system, the senior unit represents the whole to its constitutive parts, so that persons are constituted as fractals of the relationships that encompass them rather than as discrete individuals (cf. Wagner 1991). For rural Zulus, these arrangements need to be upheld in order to protect the conditions necessary for collective well-being. I argue that this morally charged domestic order organizes rural migrants’ political consciousness and informs their resistance to liberal democracy. But their political consciousness does not emerge as an automatic entailment of domestic structure. Rather, it is mediated by what Paul Silverstein (2009) has termed “structural nostalgia.” As migrants move back and forth between rural and urban, they come to fetishize an ideal vision of the ordered homestead that does not necessarily match the crumbling, contested reality of actually-existing homestead life (cf. Bank 1999). This vision serves as a powerful counterpoint to what they perceive as the dangerous disorder of urban sociality and provides a touchstone for their political discontent.

At this point I should open a brief parenthetical about the ethnonym “Zulu.” By using this term I do not intend to reify a timeless cultural entity. On the contrary, I intend to emphasize its contingency. “Zuluness” is a recent construct that owes its being to a number of key forces, the most prominent of which has been indirect rule.<sup>16</sup> The ethnonym continues to enjoy widespread currency today, even though there are many IsiZulu-speaking people who resist it and claim alternative identities in their clan histories. With this in mind, I use the term “rural Zulu” in this book to describe the people who were subject over most of the

past century to pass laws that restricted them to the native reserve of KwaZulu, and who were governed by a system that sought to organize them under a single set of customary rules. In other words, my use of the term Zulu self-consciously refers to the colonial production of the category, which proceeds from the same strategies of governance that generated the urban-rural conflict that I examine in this book. As we shall see, Zuluness was never intended to function simply as an identity. It was intended to inscribe a hierarchical social structure and a set of moral commitments that would be useful to the state. It is this aspect of Zuluness that informs the politics of rural migrants today.

If the politics of rural migrants can be explained in part by looking at the history of colonial governance over domestic spaces, the same can be said of the politics of urban dwellers. Despite the best efforts of the state to maintain segregation, African populations did eventually take root in “white” urban areas, outside the purview of indirect rule. As these communities grew during the industrial boom of World War II, the state set out to regain control by forcibly relocating them into segregated planned townships where they could be “civilized” and domesticated. As part of this process, planners sought to resocialize urban Africans according to a model of European domesticity centered on the detached, nuclear single-family house headed by a male bread-winner. This project coercively restructured Zulu kinship by breaking the family into its nuclear components, reorganizing gender roles, legislating monogamy, and disembedding the individual. The “modernization” of the family was not a natural process of development, as many liberal theorists like to believe, but required extreme violence.

I argue that the forced relocations reoriented normative conceptions of family, gender, and authority, altered the ancestor cult and taboo system, and therefore contributed to changing conceptions of misfortune and causality. Having departed from the social structure of the homestead and its corresponding moral order, the new townships opened the door for new forms of consciousness, rendering the urban African population amenable to ideas about individual liberty, equal rights, and class politics in a way that their rural counterparts never were. The youth who were born and raised in this new cultural context overdetermined revolutionary discourse along these lines in the mid 1980s, and when the ANC assumed power in 1994, it normalized these values on a national scale under the banner of “democracy.” Of course, townships have never been characterized by a purely liberal ethos—they are rife with their own hierarchies and mysticisms—and in most cases

they have never been clearly bounded from rural cultures. Yet the township has nonetheless come to stand as the categorical opposite of the homestead—particularly in the eyes of migrants.

The point I wish to underline here has to do with the intimate but violent relationship between the colonial state and the domestic realms that Africans inhabited. With a view of the history of homesteads and townships, it becomes clear that colonial power exerted itself forcefully over the lives of Africans at the level of domestic organization. In Natal, colonialism's dual form of rule was a single technology of power (viz., domestic manipulation) with two distinct manifestations: "modern" township and "traditional" homestead. The key division between direct and indirect rule, then, was not only between the legal categories of "citizen" and "subject," as Mahmood Mamdani (1996) has claimed, but between two forms of social organization and their concomitant moral orders. The division, in short, was a cosmological one. Divergent modes of governmentality produced the conditions for the emergence of different political subjectivities that came into conflict in the 1980s when influx controls were abolished and rural/urban boundaries were broken down. These differences are real in important respects, even though they are by no means absolute. But they are also imagined—reified by both sides in the process of constructing the moral oppositions around which people organize their political visions.

In sum, the rural-urban tensions that mark popular politics in Kwa-Zulu-Natal can be understood as diagnostic of colonial power, as a product of the specific technologies of domination that Europeans exercised over Africans. As Partha Chatterjee has observed, popular politics are "conditioned by the functions and activities of modern governmental systems" (2004, 3). Just as colonialism in South Africa was a colonialism of the home, so too popular politics in South Africa are a politics of the home.<sup>17</sup>

## A CRITIQUE

Postcolonial scholarship is committed, almost by definition, to engaging the universals—such as the abstract figure of the human or that of Reason—that were forged in eighteenth century Europe and that underlie the human sciences.

—Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*

The account I offer here both departs from and offers a critique of the ways that Western social science tends to explain anti-liberal movements.

Existing scholarship generally tries to excavate the rational economic and political interests of such movements—a tendency epitomized in the growing field of so-called terrorism studies.<sup>18</sup> One of this book’s contributions is to criticize the model of interest that informs this literature. For this I draw on the insights of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, which emphasize the importance of disrupting the Eurocentric epistemological categories that underwrite social scientific thought (cf. Guha 1983; Nandy 1983; Mudimbe 1988; Chakrabarty 1989, 2000; Chatterjee 1993; Bhabha 1994). Scholarly accounts of the Inkatha movement in the 1980s and 1990s provide an excellent case study, for they tend to gravitate toward familiar interpretations.

One thread of this scholarship focuses on identity politics in its various guises. As I have pointed out, some have read Zulu identity through the lens of primordial essentialism. Others, attempting to get past the evolutionary or racial typologies that primordialist accounts presuppose, rely instead on instrumentalist perspectives. One type of instrumentalist approach points to the role of political leaders such as Inkatha’s Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who has cleverly manipulated symbols, myths, and memories of “Zulu tradition” in order to galvanize a mass base to underwrite his personal struggle for political power. Another type of instrumentalist approach focuses on the motives of everyday actors, suggesting that they appeal pragmatically to concepts of culture and ethnic solidarity in a strategic bid for a more secure hold on resources – such as wages and houses – in a context of scarcity. In both cases, “Zulu culture” is understood as a means to an end, invoked as a site of mass mobilization in competition for power and resources.

These explanations help us understand important things about how the conflict was mobilized. But they also have their limitations. By claiming that people invoke the idea of cultural difference instrumentally, they ignore the possibility that real cultural difference might actually be at stake (Handler 1994). These accounts make the perpetrators more comprehensible to us, and perhaps even more palatable, by claiming that they are ultimately driven by a rational, end-maximizing logic that we can relate to. This gloss relies on a universal model of human nature—what MacPherson (1962) has called “possessive individualism”—that presupposes the cultural logic of interest and agency that is native to Euro-American capitalism. But what is lost when we as analysts project our own common sense into a universal theory? When we dress up our own particular culture as generic human nature? Clifford Geertz’s observation remains important here: “men unmodified by the

customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist. . . . There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture” (1973, 35).

A second type of explanation for rural migrants’ politics focuses on gender. Most accounts see migrant males as driven by an interest in preserving the system of patriarchal privilege that underwrites their power in rural areas. I shared this perspective when I first began my research; it appeared self-evident to me that migrants were defending hierarchy because it allows them to exploit the labor of women. The division between men and women appeared to me as a class antagonism in the Marxist sense, and to the extent that women supported the ideology of hierarchy—which I found they generally did—I decided it could be explained away as false consciousness. Operating within this framework, Marxist and feminist scholars seek to expose the power interests that lie behind hierarchical kinship rules, rituals, and belief systems.

This analytical move has been useful in denouncing the abuses of patriarchy in South Africa. One can validly argue, from an etic perspective, that hierarchies have extractive and oppressive entailments. But this does not explain why people might be for or against hierarchy. We have to be cautious that we do not simply rationalize institutions of social hierarchy according to our own cultural (and moral) logic, assuming that the only reason anyone might support such institutions is to extract some kind of personal gain. In addition to relying once again on a form of methodological individualism, this kind of explanation also presupposes a duality between individual and society (or culture): women are “dominated by” society, which is controlled by men who wield culture and tradition as instruments of false consciousness. This should sound familiar. Here again the idea of culture is reduced to a kind of ruse. The point I wish to emphasize is that the democratizing project and the social science that attempts to explain people’s resistance to it *both* presuppose the liberal individual as the natural (or desired) state of human ontology and see hierarchy as a system of hegemony: of society over individuals, of elders over juniors, or of men over women.

While recognizing the value of existing accounts, this book seeks to recover the cultural logic behind a movement that has been largely misapprehended by Western intellectuals. I argue that because Western social scientific categories—be they from rational choice theory, structural-functionalism, or Marxist-feminist analysis—derive from a culturally specific model of the individual, they cannot be readily applied to

the case of rural African migrants. I take my cue here from Marilyn Strathern (1988), who has shown that categories like “society,” “agency,” “domination,” and “inequality” are deeply informed by Euro-American metaphors about property and commodities, and thus fail to explain behavior among people who constitute personhood and relationships differently (in her case, Melanesians). I aim to rethink notions of power, agency, and gender in the Zululand context, showing that people construct “interest” not as individual utility but in terms of collective well-being that hinges on the maintenance and reproduction of hierarchical relationships. In rural Zululand, most persons are not the autonomous individuals that much of social scientific theory would have us believe. Persons cannot be considered apart from the community of relationships in which they have their being—nor can their individual interests and properties be abstracted out (see Piot 1999, 17; Jackson and Karp 1990; Riesman 1986). If there are no individuals as such, then standard interest-based models of social behavior and social inequality break down.

As Chatterjee has put it, subaltern political motivations do “not fit into the grid of ‘interests’ and ‘aggregation of interests’ that constitute the world of bourgeois representative politics” (1993, 159). To write Eurocentric forms of personhood and interest into subaltern contexts is to do violence to the realities of local subjectivity, to force the Other into a familiar mold. Instead of imputing bourgeois motives to subaltern subjects, then, my approach takes seriously rural migrants’ particular awareness of their own world and the cultural logic that frames their politics. Of course, none of this is to say that migrants do not act in rational, end-maximizing ways. They may well do so. My point is that, as with all people, their rationality and their ends are culturally situated (cf. Sahlins 1976). To paraphrase Daniel Rosenblatt (2003), without some idea of culture, we can only understand the political lives of others in terms of our own projects.

Rural African migrants are bent on defending hierarchy, yes. But their reasons for doing so are quite different from what Westerners might think. It is not about accumulating power in the sense that political theory assumes. To say that migrants are driven by an individual interest in power would be to exactly miss the important part of their perspective, which is a critique of the very paradigm within which we denounce patriarchy, a paradigm that posits the primacy of the possessive individual. I argue in the following chapters that migrants seek to defend their hierarchies *not* to retain their grip on power over women

and minors but to defend an overarching moral order that, despite being contested and variable, is nonetheless regarded as crucial to collective well-being. Sometimes this defense is highly conscious, and at others it plays out according to unconscious symbolic schemes. In any case, in defending hierarchy they seek to restore a totality, not assert private, individual interests; or, to the extent that they *are* asserting private interests, they are doing so according to the logic of a totality that potentiates different conceptions of interest altogether. Indeed, it is self-interested individualism itself that migrants are reacting against.

### A POSITION

I want to acknowledge up front that the critique I have outlined above runs the risk of appearing politically problematic. It appears to undermine the democratic project that brought about the end of colonialism in South Africa, and seems to grant legitimacy to the forms of patriarchal conservatism that resist the principles of liberalism. I want to be clear that I am not articulating an argument against the project of democracy and individual rights. I do not intend to trivialize the freedoms that the liberation struggle has won, or to hail Inkatha against the ANC. I concur with the accounts that have painted Buthelezi as corrupt and power-hungry, and denounce him for accepting the military support of the apartheid state and for manipulating the discontent of his constituents for his own political ends. But these claims are not new; they have been the subject of many books. I am not interested in Buthelezi and Inkatha as such, which in any case is quickly falling out of favor in KwaZulu-Natal. Rather, I am interested instead in the reasons for which so many rural migrants express discontent with the ANC's democracy. It is their sense of moral panic that interests me. I seek to understand the cultural order within which their anti-liberal politics make sense to them.

To the extent that this endeavor requires an empathetic perspective on rural Zulu forms of social hierarchy, I also run the risk of appearing to undermine the Marxist-feminist critique that was so central to the liberation struggle, and which has led to some of the most progressive gender legislation in the world (Walsh 2010). Questioning the assumptions that lie at the heart of critical theory creates a difficult conundrum, since it appears to undercut the foundations upon which progressive politics rely. As Strathern has put it, "academic radicalism often appears to result in otherwise conservative action or nonaction. Radical politics,

in turn, has to be conceptually conservative. That is, its job is to operationalize already understood concepts or categories” (1988, 27). In other words, by pointing out the cultural contingencies of political values (such as “rights,” “exploitation,” etc.), radical scholarship often seems to undermine radical politics. This is the question that plagues subaltern studies and has brought the group to a point of palpable political ambivalence (cf. Chibber 2013). A similar conundrum haunts post-modern liberalism more broadly: do we promote the project of human rights, or do we deconstruct the assumptions at the center of that project? How do we negotiate the tension between the political project of progressivism (which depends on claims about transcendental values) and the intellectual project of deconstruction (which questions all values identified as transcendental)?<sup>19</sup>

I do not wish to minimize the role of democratic politics in ending apartheid and introducing equal rights. Rather, I want to make the democratic project strange, to see it with new eyes, to render it unfamiliar by illuminating it from the perspective of its others. This process is not only analytically important, it also yields incisive critiques of the modernizing project—and of individualism and neoliberalism—that come not from the Right or from the Left, but from a discourse that, because it lies beyond the logic of this political plane entirely, has access to truly radical insights. Such scrutiny is crucial to ensuring that the bourgeois values of South Africa’s National Democratic Revolution do not assume the status of cultural hegemony, as the ideology of apartheid did before it. We do not have to accept the whole package, of course—the patriarchy, the apparent misogyny, and so on—but we can find in the subaltern perspectives that I highlight in this book the seeds of an important critique from the voices of those who have been subjugated by modernity.

## RETHINKING FREEDOM AND AGENCY

This brings me full circle, back to the question of freedom with which I began. I noted above that the theory of personhood that lies at the center of both progressive politics and social science sees the individual as the locus of authentic desire and will, and sees society as a series of repressive constraints and inhibitions. This tradition seeks to excavate the agency of the subject and celebrate its capacity for resistance against repressive external forces such as social norms (see Abu-Lughod 1990). This is particularly true of politics and scholarship since the emergence of the New



Left in the late 1960s, when the figure of the authentic individual subverting the normative constraints of mass society gained popular traction and came to inform thinkers who otherwise inhabited opposite ends of the political spectrum, such as Herbert Marcuse and Milton Friedman.<sup>20</sup> The assumption here is that the subject somehow precedes power relations, and that those power relations are somehow external to it.

This assumption is incorrect. The subject does not precede power relations (or society, or social norms), but is in fact *formed through* those relations. Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are often credited for pointing this out, but it is an observation that is nearly as old as anthropology itself: persons do not exist outside of culture. The same can be said of desire: desire is always the product of discipline and socialization. If this is the case, then the idea of agency has to be completely rethought (cf. Mahmood 2005). The subject's capacity for agency does not inhere in some authentic inner self or a prior substratum of personhood. To paraphrase Geertz, there is no "backstage" to which a person can retreat to cast off the constraints of social norms and act on some hidden kernel of desire. In this sense, there can be no resistance against norms that is not also at the same time normative. Rather, the subject's capacity for agency is a product of the processes—such as the disciplinary power of social norms—that produce the subject in the first place.

If this is true, then it means we need to relativize our understanding of norms. We have to accept that cultural artifacts such as hierarchical kinship, beliefs about ancestors, and ritual activity are no more norm-like, restrictive, or repressive than liberal individualism, nuclear families, and gender egalitarianism. It also means that we need to relativize our understanding of agency. We have to accept that a subject's capacity for particular forms of resistance is an effect of governmentality, as I argue in the following chapters. But why should we think of resistance as the only expression of agency? Following Mahmood (2005, 29), we need to broaden our definition of agency to encompass all the capacities and skills sedimented in persons through specific disciplines or operations of power that enable them to undertake particular kinds of moral actions. As Charles Taylor has argued, human agency is what is possible within some given moral orientation, rather than, as the liberal and social scientific positions would have it, some absolute freedom from orientations (1989, 33).

This broader definition of agency makes it possible to think of the anti-liberal politics of rural migrants without stigmatizing them as backward, reactionary, counterrevolutionary, and so on. In other words, it

allows us to stop thinking of them as unfree. Mahmood's (2005, 31) words are worth quoting here: "How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality?" Indeed, in the Zululand case, it appears that people seek to reestablish the conditions for what they consider to be justice, well-being, and full human flourishing by *reconstituting* hierarchies rather than by seeking to abolish them. Once again, this reassertion of hierarchy seems to be part of a broader trend, which I argue has something to do with the impact that neoliberal economic policy has had over the past decades. As unemployment skyrockets and livelihoods become increasingly precarious, people appear to long for and fetishize older forms of law and order, such as sharia in the Islamic Middle East and *umthetho* in rural KwaZulu-Natal (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). In this sense, the decay brought on by liberal *economic* policy has sparked a reaction against liberal *social* policy. Neoliberalism heralds the death of liberalism.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The chapters that follow can be divided roughly into two parts. The first three offer an historical ethnography of the main forces that have shaped KwaZulu-Natal's political landscape.

Chapter 1 traces the ANC-Inkatha conflict as it played out in Natal, providing the necessary background for understanding contemporary politics in the region. While scholars have usefully explained the real-politik dimensions of this conflict, I argue that we still need to unpack the culturally distinctive values and desires that rural migrants draw on. This is a tricky argument to make in South Africa, where social analysts are wary of overemphasizing otherness. While I acknowledge these concerns, I build a case for taking cultural difference seriously, while still foregrounding the relationship between culture and history.

Chapter 2 shifts attention to the rural homesteads to which migrants are tied. I look at the structure of kinship and domestic space in homesteads with emphasis on the principles that organize hierarchy, and I trace the history of these forms through indirect rule and the codification of customary law under colonialism. I show how migrant workers construct an idealized vision of the hierarchical homestead that contrasts starkly with the apparently dangerous disorder of urban social-

ity—a form of structural nostalgia that organizes their political discontent. Yet while homestead culture is an *idea* in this respect—conditioned by colonialism and based on an overdrawn dichotomy with townships—I argue that it nonetheless informs common understandings about personhood, misfortune, and causality.

Chapter 3 moves from the homestead to its symbolic antithesis, the township—the space wherein the mass democratic movement gained traction in KwaZulu-Natal. I show that the values that underpinned the revolution were in large part the product of the apartheid state’s efforts to control urban Africans through social engineering in planned townships, which transformed kinship structure and the ancestor cult in a manner that allowed for liberal ideas about personhood and causality to take root. This history helps us understand why people in KwaZulu-Natal—and particularly migrants—imagine there to be such a rigid moral opposition between township and homestead, despite the fact that the two forms exist on a relatively fluid continuum.

If the first three chapters offer a sort of bird’s-eye view, the next three provide a much richer feeling of the social field, zooming in on family dramas and personal narratives. In chapter 4, I explore the aversion that migrants have to the ANC’s democratic project. I argue that they interpret “democracy”—and township culture—as socially destructive because it appears to dismantle hierarchies and obliterate the social differences that they hold to be crucial to fruition, particularly in a context where neoliberal policy has led to a crisis of social reproduction. This critique is organized largely around houses: migrants from the Zululand countryside regard township houses—with their stand-alone four-room plan—as inverting the physical (and moral) order of the homestead. To them, the house becomes the material embodiment of all that is immoral about liberalism.

Chapter 5 explores the sacrificial rites that families in rural Zululand perform in their attempts to restore hierarchies and reestablish the conditions for social reproduction. I focus specifically on mortuary ritual, which leverages the symbolic dimensions of bovine anatomy to reorder kinship, reincorporate the wild ghosts of lost ancestors, and cure families of misfortunes. This ritual work reestablishes a moral terrain that helps mitigate the abjection that defines rural KwaZulu-Natal: people seek to build the foundations for a prosperous future not by rejecting the past but by returning to it to establish good relationships with the dead. These rituals offer a poignant call for justice from a people who have been excluded from the promises of liberation.

Chapter 6 goes back to the townships to explore the story of a woman who tries to make sense of why her family's fortunes have taken a turn for the worse. Her narrative reflects a deep sense of disappointment with modernity that has many urban residents nostalgic for the social order of the 1960s townships at the same time as they seek to learn the ancestral rituals that they once denounced as backward, spurring a resurgence of "tradition" in townships as a reaction to neoliberal decay. These trends illustrate the syncretism and flow that links urban and rural worlds, and they help explain the surprising outpouring of support in urban areas for Jacob Zuma.

The concluding chapter pulls together and reflects on some of the main threads of the book's argument. I build on this to return to the question of freedom by exploring the apparent tension between reason and culture—a dialectic that troubles scholarly debates in South Africa and gets refracted through the dilemmas faced by the country's constitutional legal system.