

**By Ebrahim Fakir**

**Circling the Square of Protests:**

**Democracy, Development, Delivery and Discontent in Bekkersdal**

*“This squatter camp is 32 years. Since the start of democracy there has been no development here. We are protesting, Yes. There is no electrification, and we are still using the long pit toilets and bucket system in some parts. We are sharing two shacks to a toilet. We are supposed to be having something better like we were promised.”*

**- Sam Hlatshwayo; 15 July 2014, Silver City Informal Settlement**

*“South Africa is burning while our politicians navel gaze in self-admiration. Bekkersdal represents a microcosm of what is happening in our townships. This is a shocking indictment. But what do we really understand of the anger in the country? Do we properly grasp the very real meltdown happening before our eyes? Visit Bekkersdal, because it will break your heart. ”*

**- Jay Naidoo; 12 February 2014, Daily Maverick**

Quite so. I have tried to understand protest in post Apartheid South Africa by focusing on just one place – Bekkersdal, What I found was a disaster and a dystopia.

I also found a story which, whether representative of all sites of protest or not, might inform how we understand contemporary protests in our country.

Bekkersdaal is located on the richest seam of gold deposit in the world. It is surrounded by wealth and excess, yet it is etched in deprivation and discontent. In a series of places which have frequently had violent protests in politically liberated South Africa, Bekkersdal is not the first. Nor will it be the last. From Bushbuckridge in the North, Matatiele in the East. Khayalitsha in the South, Bekkersdal in the West and Ficksburg in between, it is estimated that there are currently about three hundred protests a year in South Africa.

What do such protests tell us about our democracy and our system of democratic government? Are the democratic institutions and frameworks created for voice, participation and inclusion failing? Is there a radical re-alignment underway in South African politics which is insurrectionary and counter hegemonic, that may result in an African Spring? Do protests imply a rejection of the ANC in Government in favour of another

party? Or are they simply a demand for an alternative set of policies to the perceived neo-liberal bent of the ANC in government?

This current wave of protest in post Apartheid South Africa started just after the second democratic elections in 1999. Coinciding with the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, we witnessed South Africa's most militantly anti-government protest since 1994, with 20 000 people protesting in the streets of Johannesburg. Since then, new forms of social activism have emerged - usually at the grassroots and seemingly uncoordinated. Agitating in opposition to government's plans for the privatisation of state assets and plans to liberalise the regulatory framework in which the energy, communications, transport, telecommunications and basic services, sectors functioned.

These protests unravelled the post-apartheid consensus, represented in part by the Reconstruction and Development Programme. New and surprising social and political contours emerged – increasing levels of social inequality, continuing poverty and unemployment, modest levels of economic growth with little widespread redistribution. In all of South Africa's cities, social movements arose to confront what were perceived as active attacks on the poor. The issues in Johannesburg centered on water and electricity cut-offs, giving rise to movements like the Anti-Igoli 2002 Movement, the Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Operation

Khanyisa Movement which encouraged illegal electricity connections and resisted the imposition of pre-paid water meters. Issues in Cape Town closely resembled those in Durban, where housing evictions for the non-payment of rents and rates were common giving rise to the Anti-Eviction Campaign and the shack dwellers movement Abahlali Base Mjondolo. They were often without an identifiable leadership, ideology or structured organisation. But it was not long before structured organisation took root. By 2005 the new social movements created better connections amongst themselves with an identifiable leadership emergent. This was most clear in the anti- demarcation protests in Khutsong, Balfour, Matatiele and Bushbuckridge.

The original protests in Bekkersdal were also sparked by a demarcation struggle, against a re-allocation of Bekkersdal from Gauteng to the North West Province in 2005. Unlike protests in Khutsong, Matatiele and Bushbuckridge which were quelled, protests in Bekkersdal continued, primarily led by the Greater Westonia Concerned Residents Association (GWCRA), originally established in 2005 as a multi-party and multi-constituency structure. It remains so - with the AZAPO, the DA, SOPA, the EFF and even members of the ANC, represented on it.

Since then, both the issues that drive protests in Bekkersdal and the mandate of the GWCRA that purports to represent the community have moved on. The protests now relate primarily to contestation over a R1.2 Billion Urban Renewal Project and accusations of corruption, malfeasance, maladministration and unaccountability associated with its implementation. In short the protests are against poor governance, a government seen as neither democratic, nor developmental.

I chose Bekkersdal to explore these issues because it is the one area in the country in which there have been sustained protests since 2005. Its roots in a demarcation dispute are shared with at least five other sites of protest. Bekkersdal also shares features with more sporadic protests in other parts of the country for public service from representatives and service delivery from the state. People in Bekkersdal appear also to be opposing perceived corruption and what they see as an increasingly securocratic approach from the state, to dealing with their concerns. It thus aggregates every possible reason attributed for why people protest.

Over the past few months, I conducted in-depth interviews with government officials and politicians, with activists in social movements and organised civil formations as well as the police. This was complemented by community interviews in Bekkersdal. I also reviewed

the relevant national and local government documents. There are of course, inherent limitations in conducting work of this kind. Key among them is the extent to which we can make generalisations based on one case study. In addition, where there are continuing investigations of corruption and maladministration, access to certain information is limited but the name Ruth First, I discovered, opens avenues for access to information in government and in communities, which may otherwise be closed.

Bekkersdal is a township situated 7 km east of Westonaria and 14 km south of Randfontein in the Gauteng province. Established in 1945 to house black workers for the growing mining industry, mine shafts cluster the horizon. The area was granted municipal status in 1983 and was administered by a black town council. For most of its existence, the area was part of a fragmented and unequal governmental system. Since the year 2000, with the transformation of the local government sector, Bekkersdal has been a constituent part of the Greater Westonaria District Municipality.

Greater Westonaria has close to 500 000 people, with 300 000 living in overpopulated Bekkersdal. The majority live in the squalor and insecurity of informal settlements. There is an unemployment rate of 70%. It is 80% amongst the youth. Of the nearly 19 000 households counted in the

last census in Bekkersdal, less than 7 000 had flushing toilets connected to a sewerage system. People who work in the mines and who may have lost their jobs, as well as those who have become casualties of businesses closing down do not return to the places from which they came, usually the rural hinterland of the Eastern Cape, or the former Bantustan areas of the Ciskei and Transkei. Waves of migration beginning 1983 have seen a constant and rapidly increasing demand for services on an already over-stretched set of resources.

Unusually for the cosmopolitan Gauteng Province, Bekkersdal is almost 90% Xhosa speaking. This itself introduces, latent fissures in the community. As one respondent put it to me:

*People born and bred in Bekkersdal feel the people put in charge of things for running Westonaria and Bekkersdal are mostly from the Eastern Cape resulting to some in-fighting. There are no Bona-Fides who are in political control of this area. None of the political leadership of this area in the ANC are Bona Fides. (Bona Fides is a local term used to describe those that are not born in Bekkersdal, or who are second generation descendants from migrants)*

In recognition of the deep historical roots of poverty and underdevelopment wrought by Apartheid neglect, the Mbeki administration designated Bekkersdal as one of the Presidential Lead Projects in 2001. The urban renewal project for Bekkersdal was

launched in 2003 with a budget of R1.2 billion under the management and administration of then Gauteng Premier, Mbhazima Shilowa. In the first 3 years of the project about R200 million was spent. A Report by the Portfolio Committee on Housing following an oversight visit in October 2004, records that the “taxi rank upgrade, transit camp development for migrants, the sewerage and water reticulation, clinic, and Police Station upgrades were all inspected and in progress.”

Twelve years later the Provincial Budget Vote for the Department of Local Government and Housing 2012/2013, states that “Most of our road construction projects are already completed... projects such as upgrading of Bekkersdal Police Station, Bulk Services and electrification were completed and handed over to their respective departments and the local municipality”.

But much of the actual financial reporting and accounting is reported under consolidated expenditure headlined “Infrastructure, Human Settlements or Administration and Co-operative Government”. This makes expenditure tied to specific projects untraceable.

Thirteen years later, only about R500 million of actual expenditure can be accounted for.



As in many disputes around protests, information and facts are heavily contested. The municipality claims it was never in receipt of the R1.2 Billion. The Urban Renewal Project was administered and budgeted for from the Provincial budget. The Province, for its part, claims that it never received any transfers from the National Government. It says that it mostly funded the renewal project from capital allocations from provincial resources.

Whatever the reality, the short chronology of events is that on 6 August 2013, the GWCRA convened a public meeting to address deficiencies in service delivery and the inability to get answers to what had occurred with the Urban Renewal Project. At that meeting, they accused the municipality of being riddled with corruption and being unable to explain the impediments on the Urban Renewal Project. In addition they noted the retarded pace of service delivery and the fact that politicians and councillors appeared to be unresponsive to concerns raised by the GWCRA, after several attempts to meet with the Council.

Ten days later, the GWCRA formally requested the Gauteng Province to place the Municipality under Administration. Some opposition parties agreed. The DA's MPL Fred Nel suggested that the "Westonaria municipality was one of the two worst-run in the Province"

In response to these demands, officials from the Department of Human Settlements started meeting with the GWCRA. This culminated in the repeated demand by the GWCRA for the Municipality to be placed under Administration. In September last year, the GWCRA held a meeting with the Executive Mayor of the District Municipality. Unsatisfied with their engagements with both Officials and the District Mayor, who did not have the Constitutional Authority to place a Municipality under Administration, the GWCRA called for a march. A series of protests ensued over September and October 2013.

Eventually the MEC for Human Settlements Ntombi Mekgwe and the Provincial Premier Nomvula Mokonyane met with the Community from 23 to 25 October 2013. They attempted to respond to the issues raised by the community as well as explain why the Municipality could not be placed under Administration. The GWCRA found working with Mekgwe and Mokonyane unsatisfactory and so the issues remained unresolved. The GWCRA further alleged that Premier Mokonyane was herself complicit in corrupt practices when she served as the MEC for Housing at the time that the renewal project was launched, prompting a respondent from the GWCRA to say:

***“Apart from being arrogant and dismissive, they acted like they got something to hide”***

Clearly, the GWCRA used dual strategies, to engage with the formal processes of government and engage in direct collective action to pressure for their claims. The protests resulted in R11 Million worth of damage. By 27 October 2013 the Chairperson of the ANC in Gauteng, Paul Mashatile and the Secretary of the SACP in the Province, Jacob Mamabolo had to move to intervene to stabilise the situation. The intervention came from the political structures of the ANC alliance rather than the ANC government. It may also be worth noting that Mashatile, in the internecine factionalised politics of the ANC - is from a different provincial faction of the governing ANC.

Through this intervention, five months later on 19 March 2014, the GWCRA's complaints were directed to the office of the Auditor General, and one informant confirmed that this included a dossier containing allegations of corruption against local leaders, and the then Gauteng Premier and former MEC for Housing, Nomvula Mokonyane.

Matters thus appeared resolved, but not before the violent disruption of the voter registration weekend of 7 February 2014 and threats of a boycott of the 7 May 2014 elections. On the eve of the 2014 elections two IEC tents were burnt in Bekkersdal. Regardless, the election days themselves flowed smoothly with the ANC retaining its support in all voting stations, though with a reduced majority. The DA performed

slightly better - increasing its vote from 0.65% in 2009 to 6% in 2014 and the advent of the EFF saw its support in Bekkersdal average 11.4%. There was thus is no wholesale rejection of the ANC, though I found widespread speculation amongst residents and the GWCRA that the results were rigged, pointing to creeping and generalised distrust of the formal political system.

After the elections there were continued political interventions by the ANC and its Alliance partners, led by Jacob Mamabolo, the SACP provincial secretary who was appointed as a facilitator. By 19 June 2014 there was a resolution to refer certain issues to the Auditor-General for investigation, and others to law-enforcement and anti corruption agencies. In addition a revised process of drawing up housing waiting lists was also agreed on.

Lets hear SACP facilitator Jacob Mambolo – now the MEC for Human Settlements - on protests:

*“Issues in Bekkersdal are grounded in the halting of the urban renewal programme which saw huge amounts of government capital expenditure for renewal projects, through contracts and subcontracts. This proved lucrative for many contractors and businessmen, many of whom are connected to the ANC or themselves local ANC representatives. When this dried up, it meant a cash cow was no longer alive. The projects were riddled with perceived*

*corruption. It is alleged that high profile ANC politicians nationally and government officials in the province are beneficiaries. Political and business conflicts between them filter in to Government”*

What Jacob Mamabolo is drawing attention to is the fractious factional battles within the governing party in the province and the complexities of the provincial political structures of the ANC Alliances relationships with its national Political structures. Mamabolo’s frankness brings to pointed attention the effects of crony capitalism, in which the fusion of economic interests with political interests breed practices of corruption in the party, the state and society. This incentivises local power brokers who don’t get their way on tenders and contracts, to manipulate and capriciously exploit local communities with genuine grievances and demands.

This is Jacob Mamabolo again:

*“It may turn out that sub contractors and others who did not get out of the contracts what they thought they would get sparked this unhappy lot to exploit underlying community issues. ...not that communities don’t have a right to protest. We have seen the conditions they are bad. How is it possible to think that people won’t protest. They will. But let’s not lose sight of the fact that you can also have a protest of aggrieved friends”*

As recently as March 2014, allegations surfaced, first in a report in a local newspaper, the Randfontein Herald, that community leaders in the GWCRA were themselves implicated in corruption in the Urban Renewal Programme.

The grounds of dispute evidently, are continually shifting.

The latest of these shifts was announced on 29 October 2013 by Nomvula Mokonyane, to make Bekkersdal a part of the Randfontein Municipality in an attempt to resolve the Bekkersdal crisis. Since 1994 there have been four different changes to the political authority and administrative arrangements for Bekkersdal. This constant reconfiguration of the relationship between state and society, government and citizen, undermines both processes of service delivery and accountability. As one respondent explained:

*Things are changing a lot. From 1994, it is one municipality, then in 1998 another thing. One year we are to fall under North West, now we remain in Gauteng. I don't know what will happen if we have to be with Randfontien because for an RDP house in Westonaria it is R295 and in Randfontein I know it is R495. I have paid mine already. I don't know if I will have to pay again.*

The relationship between political representatives, government structures and citizens consequently remain temporal, without the traditions and stability required for predictability in government and for regulation to take root. This is one problem, and is cited as one reason for why there are protests.

There are several other problems and reasons cited for protests in Bekkersdal. Many of which are ascribed to protests generally. One view suggests that they are the work of a “third force”. I found no evidence for this.

Interestingly I found some veracity in another theory that has been punted, but not given much credence. This is that the protests are sparked and sustained not by poor service delivery, but by good service delivery - the “relative deprivation” theory which suggests that marginalised areas are angry about the lack of government-provided services compared to adjacent areas that have seen development. Respondents regularly pointed to neighbouring areas and improvements in developments:

*“People are angry when see developments taking place in Mohlakeng, Simunye and surrounding areas yet nothing is happening in Bekkersdal”*

Though the substantive issue of why there is no service delivery in Bekkersdal remains. In an unintended way, this “relative deprivation theory” acknowledges at best, the failures of the instrumental delivery model, and at worst defers them to a future date for delivery.

The most prolific short hand, as we have been relentlessly informed by the grist of the popular media mill, locates protests as a demand for “service delivery”. A slightly more nuanced view disputes the “service delivery” orientation. Steven Friedman argues that “People are demanding public service, not service delivery”. These explanations point to a weak local state, uneven and inadequate service delivery to the most needy in society, or local state failure characterised by poor political oversight over officials and a lack of responsiveness and accountability by political representatives to communities. These arguments have merit, but are inadequate in explaining the protests. Another view suggests that protest are expressions of dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities for influencing decision making and resource allocation that meets people’s needs, suggesting both a crisis of political representation, as well as deficiencies in participatory decision making. This argument extends the political representation function to one that cultivates political support through a patronage



network of nepotism and active acts of corruption. There is some merit in this view too. Two respondents pointed towards this:

*“At ward council meetings or report back sessions, the counsellor never gives feedback on issues that affect the community, even when we ask. We now rely on The Concerned Residents Association for feedback. We trust them. Not the counsellor. I even used to attend meetings of the ANC, but in branch elections it’s a show of hands. If you didn’t vote like me, for the guy who is now the branch chair and counsellor, he remembers. When cleaning works programme jobs come, I don’t get it. I don’t go to the branch no more”*

In the words of a second respondent:

*“Political turf wars are what takes place at ward committees and such forums and they affect the way the administration work. This is why we have been asking for the municipality to be under administration”*

This view obscures the actual usefulness of expanded or more intensive participatory fora. By definition, participatory fora are vulnerable to political and factional capture, or capture by special interests.

Bekkersdal illustrates this point where fora for enabling citizen and community agency appear to be captured by local elites.

The most explicitly ideological critique of the current state and policy trajectory since 1994, suggests that the protests are a reaction to the ill

effects of a neo-liberal turn at the local level, enabled by the restructuring of municipal entities, public private partnerships and the outsourcing of service delivery at local level. These, the argument goes, have resulted in the commercialisation of basic public services resulting in mass home evictions and water and electricity cut offs. The most pernicious effects of it being felt by poor households. The effects of this have been extensively documented in several different studies. While this may have currency in explaining a limited set of cases, it certainly was not the primary problem in Bekkersdal, where I found that the real problem was the inability of local councillors to facilitate the entry of poor households onto the indigence register.

If neo-liberal policy and its consequences were a cause for protests, or if most protests are driven by an underlying ideological demand for an alternative policy regime, the mapping of protests would display a different topography to the one that it currently does. Protests are currently concentrated in the urban townships of cities and the informal settlements on their margins. The consequences of a neo liberal policy bent as a cause of protest should see more protests in other parts of the country, where poverty and unemployment are more endemic. In any event, where policy is contested, the demand for change comes from a self declared left, such the social movements, the EFF and NUMSA, *and*

from the right, the DA and Institute for Race Relations who, impose a politically interested reading of the protests, rather than provide an explanation for them.

In addition to economic demands embedded in the protests, I suggest that there is also a political demand for recognition.

For workers engaged in strikes it is the legal recognition of the right to strike and the social recognition from employers and society at large, that their demands are legitimate in the face of woeful wage income inequality. In communities such as Bekkersdal there is a demand for recognition as citizens. Recognition is the first step to being heard as a popular sovereign, a citizen imbued with rights - not merely the subject of the state or the object of its service delivery. Violent forms of protest action appear to be the only way in which people feel they are both recognised and heard. As a respondent in Bekkersdal said:

*“No one listens when you talk. Everyone listens when you burn”*

## **SO WHAT LESSONS DO WE DRAW FROM BEKKERSDAL?**

Instead of the virtuous governance circle of oversight, accountability and transparency, facilitating the democratic virtue of responsiveness and accountability, we found a vicious cycle of stonewalling, arrogance,

obfuscation and manipulation. This situation was only resolved through a less arrogant leadership willing to engage the community seriously.

This failure in Government has led to a contestation for control of the local state as a site of capital accumulation. A real, rather than an imagined crisis of representation, responsiveness and accountability, together with ethical erosion and the deepening cancer of corruption at all levels of state management has seen the state emerging as a key site of accumulation. In this logic the state is subordinated to political interests, and both the state and political interests are subordinated to economic ones.

There is little evidence in the Bekkersdal case study that the protests are a counter hegemonic insurrection. If anything, the protests, are a demand for a better quality democracy with more robust representation and responsiveness, as well as, ethical government. By asking to have the municipality placed under administration the GW CRA and the community are seeking more (and better) Government, not less

As to demands for alternative policy, there *is* a demand for policy reform, but there has been a tendency to conflate the particularist claims of early turn-of-the-century social movements – like those of the Anti Igoli 2002, Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and Anti-Privatisation Forum - and lump them together with the rise of the EFF and NUMSA's putative

break with the ANC alliance - with the protests. These are separate and distinct phenomena. Some social movements, NUMSA and the EFF may alert us to the fact that there may be mobilisation for an alternative political project. The organic protests as a whole though, do not articulate this.

It does not even appear as if there is a rejection of the ANC at the polls. Results even in Bekkersdal, demonstrates that support for the ANC remains strong with little meaningful variance or decline from the previous general election in 2009. Nor was there a boycott factor - Average turnout for Bekkersdal in 2009 was 59.9%. The Average turnout for Bekkersdal in 2014 58.7%. In any case protests occur in local governments not governed by the ANC. Cape Town being one such example.

While there may be no insurrectionary impulse or significantly strenuous demands for an alternative policy trajectory, nor a rejection of the ANC at the polls, there are nevertheless subtle but significant shifts taking place in the political system.

We can point to four:

- Apart from the disappearance from view of some social movements, such as the APF, the SECC and Anti-Eviction Campaign, there is the simultaneous rise of other single issue movements, such as Equal Education, NdifunaUkwazi, My Vote Counts and Section27, They use the triple strategies of mass mobilisation and alliance building, engagement with government as well as court action, but these do not yet fully tap into the current set of local community protests nor do they use violence as a strategy.
- There is the absorption of some social movements within the political frame. The Bushbuckridge Residents Association contested specific policy decisions of demarcation but have now started a political party. The African Independent Congress, which followed the same trajectory in Matatiele, have followed suit. Both now have seats in Parliament. Even the Abahlali movement, which for a decade maintained a stance of non participation in elections evidenced by its “no land, no house, no vote” slogan, made a volte-face in 2014 to embrace the political system and endorse a political party, the DA.

- NUMSA's investigation into the viability of a Workers Party, as well as the rise of independent unions such as AMCU have seen claims about the pursuit of a different policy path. While NUMSA articulates this politically, AMCU shows no discernable underlying ideological or political orientation.
- Lastly there have been small but noticeable shifts in electoral support, with incremental increases for the DA over the last few elections as well as the emergence of the EFF.

These shifts however, belie any symmetry that might be ascribed to them. What we witness is a proliferation of sporadic local protests and the rise of single issue social movements. Amongst political parties there is greater fragmentation rather than rapprochement. Proliferating fractures to the Left of the ANC Alliance seem much more acute than they are to its consolidating Right. For instance, there is no love lost between the EFF and NUMSA, witnessed by the EFF's 6 August 2014 stern rebuff of NUMSA's invitation to the "International Symposium of the Left". The spectrum to the left of the ANC alliance appears littered with no less than 8 different fractions (AZAPO, SOPA, EFF, NUMSA, DLF, WOZA, WASP, DSP). These re-alignments on the left might leave us with little or nothing left, of the Left. In any event, the functioning of the

GWCRA in Bekkersdal, shows that on issues of local concern there is no competition or conflict amongst different political parties and political formations, but co-operation instead. Where there is competition, it appears to be factional, or a fight of “aggrieved friends” in Jacob Mamabolo’s earlier words.

Viewed collectively, there has been an assumption that these alignments combined with the level of community protests may altogether result in a radical re-alignment of the political landscape. The most significant realignment may result in a rebellion of the poor which may lead to an “African Spring”, akin to the “Arab Spring”. This view seems unfounded. Here, the legitimacy of government is not in question. It is the credibility of its operation that is at stake. It is about the Government’s ability to function, not its right to rule. Some public discussion, equally misplaced has tried to draw a linkage between the protests and the AMCU miners strike on the Platinum Belt. The miners strike too, is a distinctive phenomenon. While the underlying roots might be same - political and social inequality and the lack of social power - the drivers are very different, many of the local protests are sporadic uprisings, leaderless, ambiguous and flash in the pan, what the Marxist theorist Raymond Williams refers to as “militant particularisms”. The AMCU strike had organised, co-ordinated and specific dimensions, such as the inter-union



rivalry, identifiable leaders, specific demands and a level of formal organisation through a Union, unconnected to the myriad protests around the country, all of which vary significantly over time and pace.

In a context where regular free and fair elections have become a feature of our society, the protests precipitate not radical political re-alignment, but limited and sometimes contained periods of potential political, governmental and social instability. Without co-ordination, connection and articulation into a political project they are unlikely to result in any fundamental political realignment.

Protests are best understood as a way of resolving the contradiction in instances where democracy works to facilitate citizen agency for voice and choice, but does not work in terms of the form of a democratic government adequately addressing the concerns of poor, black and marginalised communities.

The protests are therefore a disruption to politicians who listen but don't hear, and governments that fail to account. In the words of the now classic study of American Social Movements conducted by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward: "The poor have few resources for regular political influence, their ability to create social change depends on the

disruptive power of militancy, they gain real leverage only by causing commotion among bureaucrats, excitement in the media, dismay among influential segments of the community, and strain for political leaders.”<sup>1</sup>

The current wave of protests I argue, are simply a demand for Democratic Government to actually work.

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<sup>1</sup> Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward. *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. Vol. 697. Random House LLC, 1979.