

SOME UNASKED QUESTIONS ON POLITICS: SOUTH AFRICAN SLOGANS AND DEBATES

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During the 1970's a body of writing on South African society, radical in its critique of the existing structures and original in its theoretical development, proceeded to influence a significant and large community of readers. This literature, most of which claimed to fall within the category of historical materialism, was highly considered internationally, where it has enjoyed an even broader influence insofar as its insights have been applied far beyond the frontiers of southern Africa. One major aspect of the writing of South African radicals, Marxists and neo-Marxists, is that it was done during a phase when actual opposition activity in the country was weak, if increasing. It was experience contemplated in repose.

By contrast, in recent years, intellectual ferment has been on the wane while political activity and resistance to the state in black communities has intensified. What accounts for such a disjuncture? One reason given is the sheer rush of events and the difficulty of keeping up with the pace of struggle. However, the necessity for assessment and theorisation is hardly obviated by this difficulty. Indeed, it ought to assist in understanding the reality of what is happening, the potential for change that exists, while the rush of events should make short work of the least relevant of ideas.

Another answer thrown out refers to the intensity of state repression. In part, the state of emergency proclaimed in mid-1985 has been associated with unprecedented repression. The deployment of soldiers in townships in much of the country has been accompanied by behaviour reminiscent of an army of occupation. The list of brutal unsolved murders, missing individuals and vigilantism at certain times and places suggest the application of methods made notorious by anti-revolutionary forces in countries such as Argentina (under military rule), Chile or Guatemala. However, it is equally true that this does not explain what is and what isn't being repressed. Nor does it explain other phenomena which reflect a definite liberalisation on the part of the regime both with regard to the availability

of ideas in written and visual forms and even with regard to organisation. Thus the United Democratic Front and the National Forum came into being openly in 1983, perhaps in part as a government experiment in legalising some kinds of opposition forces. The Freedom Charter, the prime ANC document, is available over the counter and more objective information about anti-state forces is not very difficult of access. Socialism has been raised openly as an issue by the National Forum, union leaders and elsewhere.² There is no reason to assume that open debate on politics and society in South Africa is practically impossible; on the contrary, conditions for it are more propitious than for a generation.

If one tries to examine the kind of ideas that now seem to be most evident in the market place of opposition, what is particularly remarkable is the revival of an untheorised and uncritical 'anti-apartheid' line trying to forge 'unity' through as little examination of this society as possible. There has been a revival of ideas, and to some extent practices, that belong in origin to the 1950s, the last period when they could be expressed as openly. Perhaps it is not unnatural or unsurprising to see a ball picked up where it was left, even if the passage of time has been considerable. However, the revival of this era and the accompanying romanticisation of the 1950s, is most problematic. At the most basic level, the politics of that time were a total failure in dislodging or indeed seriously challenging the state, however one wishes to treat respectfully the intentions of the protagonists of that period.³ There is little reason to justify that failure merely in terms of state power or repression. Actually the firepower, scale and effectiveness of state organs was extremely limited compared to the present day. It can certainly be argued that the opposition of the time engaged in tactical mistakes. However, there were more fundamentally basic weaknesses at the level of organisation and at the level of conceptualisation of the South African situation.

One conceptualisation that has been revived in a number of places is the notion of 'internal colonialism' as a means of⁴ analysing the particular social polarities of South Africa. Recent usage of the term has tended to lack any real definitional starting point and has ignored the history of

criticism the term generated. For this reason it is useful to return to the early work of Harold Wolpe in order to find such a starting point. Wolpe emphasised two points. Firstly, internal colonialism had been picked up from a mixture of intellectually inconsistent sources and, secondly, it contained within its kernel no clear-cut thorough-going assessment of the South African situation. Looking for a definition of this elusive idea, one sees Wolpe referring to the Communist Party as espousing the idea in 1962 because 'independence' after 1910 brought power in the hands only of white South Africa rather than the majority of the population. (Wolpe, 1970)

Other Marxist analyses have been harsher and perhaps require reiteration. Martin Legassick has written that 'the post-1962 attempt to describe the system as characterized by 'internal colonialism' fostered by international and South African 'imperialist' monopoly capital and largescale agriculturalists is vague, inconsistent and unsatisfactory in explaining the origins, functions or dynamics of the society.' (Legassick, 1974:255) According to Dan O'Meara, 'the theory ... rests finally on a racial polarity and as such is a descriptive device rather than a theoretical concept ... In the most recent elaboration ... the primacy of 'race' is taken as 'obvious' ... that is, given the empirical world. This begins at the wrong level and again begs the most important question. For Marxist analysis, the starting point is not the independence of 'racial factors', but the relations of production.' (O'Meara, 1983:19) Initially, Wolpe felt that it would be possible to articulate a theory of internal colonialism satisfactorily, little though this had been done. However, by the middle 1970s, he seems to have come around to the conclusion that it was obfusatory to any kind of genuine class analysis. (Wolpe, 1975)

Along the way, the main method that he tried to develop to push internal colonialism out of a crude nationalist box was his important consideration of the survival and persistence in South Africa of non-capitalist forms of production, primarily in the bantustans. His well-known theory of 'cheap labour-power' depended on theorising this persistence in terms of a deliberately maintained subsidy of the capitalist wage by the non-capitalist mode of production which gave South African

capitalism certain specific competitive advantages. In a number of ways, the theory is problematic, First, while he uses it to try to explain the repression and rigidity of apartheid policy after 1948 in response to the decline of the bantustans, it is not clear how African workers survived that decline and reproduced themselves thereafter from his analysis. Particularly in the past ten to twenty years, the role of migrant labour in the overall economy has tended to become less crucial and the migrant labourers tend more and more to become the mainstays of the bantustans rather than vice versa. In addition, it may be argued that all capitalist production depends on a significant amount of social and economic activity outside the strictly capitalist sphere in any event. This reduces the theoretical need for characterising the South African case as somehow unique. Yet the 'internal colonialism' thesis is superficially seductive because it seems to both generalise the South African situation to other African countries with a colonial background and at the same time specify South Africa's uniqueness.

What indeed is colonialism and what do we gain by insisting that South Africa is in some way colonial? South African society can be viewed with justice as colonial in various ways (for instance, in the aping of American consumerism by the middle class of all colours). Nonetheless it is important to point out that colonialism, even capitalist colonialism, does not lead to any single determinate social type. The USA, New Zealand, India, British Somaliland and Bermuda have all, like South Africa, been British colonies but this tells us very little about basic social process or political organisation in these countries. Appending the term 'internal colonialism' to this country therefore does not explain either the economic history of South Africa or the special relationships imbedded in that history.

References to internal colonialism (or colonialism 'of a special type' or such-like variants) don't really comprehend the identity of the coloniser and colonised or how 'colonisation' really operates. They avoid looking at the social transformation that it can bring with it, irreversibly creating a completely new kind of society. If a society is suffering from being 'colonial' we have to assume that the response

necessary is 'decolonisation'. However, if one cannot simply peel off the colonial layer like a skin, what sort of liberation does this actually amount to and to whose benefit would it be? Which of the nations listed in the paragraph above has been decolonised and by what criteria? Without a searching further development, the couplet colonisation/decolonisation remains an attractive mystification. It lacks any concrete plans for a future democratic South Africa except through negatives - no racism, no apartheid, etc.

Fundamentally internal colonialism fails to come to grips with a central reality which was so powerfully argued in the revisionist scholarship of the 1970s, the fact of South African industrialisation and the creation in South Africa of a class society that follows classic capitalist lines in some respects. Wolpe's pursuit of the internal colonialism paradigm relied on the emphasis he placed on migrant labour, compounds and influx control. It is particularly clear today that, whatever the intentions of the state, particularly after 1948, it failed to prevent the formation of a very substantial settled industrial proletariat in the urban townships. Furthermore, it is the youth in those townships cut off from rural life, not the migrant workers and compound dwellers, who have formed the most militant and intense resistance to the state in recent years. If we privilege too much the history of migrant labour, 'homelands' and influx control, we are in danger of pushing aside and ignoring the crucial impact of the creation of a relatively bounded and urbanised working class. Doug Hindson's recent critique of the cheap labour hypothesis is one major study concerned to remedy this situation. (Hindson, 1983) If we follow through on his line of analysis, internal colonialism tends to fall right away from any economic assessment of South African development.

It lands in very treacherous and uncharted waters indeed: the 'national question' as it applies to South Africa. One recent contribution on internal colonialism considers this to be 'an integral part of historical materialism' ('Colonialism of a Special Kind', 1983). Most writers of radical views, however, tend to agree that Marxism has dealt very inadequately with this issue. Thus Benedict Anderson, in a recent and highly-regarded

anomaly for Marxist theory and, precisely for that reason, has been largely elided, rather than confronted.' (Anderson, 1983), 13). In South Africa, it is not an issue which we dare to elide, it is central. Struggle over who actually constitutes the South African nation - whites, Africans of Bantu speech, all people of colour considered to be 'blacks', Afrikaners, non-Africans - has been one constant element in the political conflicts that have marked South African history and continues to be a fundamental political issue. The majority of South Africans feel marginalised and dehumanised by the present national culture. They are attracted to 'internal colonialism' and other theories that give priority to national issues more or less overtly. There is no set of Marxist formulae (and these include the well-known formulae of Stalin) which provide much of an answer for them. Stating glibly that the resolution of the national question in South Africa will be resolved in struggle is no answer either. Such a general phrase remains unsatisfactory. Does the 'struggle' not contain within it debate and does not that debate inevitably involve considerations of compromise and communication? It does if we understand struggle to be something other than military engagement that operates as well in the realm of ideas.

Logically the constitution of the South African nation can take three forms. One would be the exclusion of some at the expense of others following a national civil war in which the winner takes all. A second would be along the lines laid out by the National Party and the state, which would base itself on the continued inviolate integrity of ethnic-cum-racial groups, perhaps renegotiated away from the present survival of white supremacy. Finally, one can in abstract envision the creation of a South African nation which would genuinely transcend both white and black national sentiments as they stand. Although the second perspective is most often identified with state policy, it is important to point out, as No Sizwe has written, that this corporatist view of the population has been very widely prevalent and was in fact part of the approach of the ANC when it functioned as a legal organisation in South Africa. (No Sizwe, 1979). If that kind of pluralism is to be viewed as unsatisfactory, one must consider how a transformation could take place at the national level rather than just leave it to

the workings of a 'struggle'. How could one win over substantial sectors of the white population to something that went beyond pluralism? If one fails to do this, how could one hope strategically to defeat the white police and army? Can one really expect that the present national character and culture of South Africa will simply be totally marginalised or effaced? Precisely where one might hope that they would have something pivotal to add the internal colonialists instead duck the most fundamental issue that they do raise.

At the same time, they have generally pushed to backstage the question of class in South African society. Those who do not have too easily been dismissed as 'workerists'. It certainly would be short-sighted to imagine that workers in isolation can bring about change in South Africa. However, class alliances and united action over particular campaigns and circumstances need not preclude distinctive working class institutions and organisations that keep their autonomy and are alone able to sustain and make public the actual social and political programmes that workers need and want (not necessarily trade unions). 'Unity' that goes beyond this can only reflect the dominance of other classes, more articulate, more affluent, more technologically skilful and with their own interests and outlook. The point here is not to drive a wedge between different classes in the black population which, undoubtedly, share oppressive conditions and deep feelings of national affinity, but rather to suggest that only working class organisations, politically conscious and distinctive, have an interest in pressing forward with socialist demands meaningfully, whatever the other contradictions or particularities of consciousness within that society might be. It is the stock in trade of many eloquent anti-apartheid speakers that, if only you abolished apartheid, most of South Africa's problems would go away. This is in fact nonsense. If you abolished apartheid, most South Africans would remain poor and lead lives of material deprivation. Unless a significant social and economic restructuring occurs based on a developed notion of redistribution, only a small proportion of those who now feel oppressed would be able to benefit substantially.

Consequently, a perception of the class nature of South African society is the only way to understand what might be

meant by its transformation without coming asunder on the national question. Socialism should be a bridge between people, not a vehicle in a national struggle.

Instead, socialism and nationalism have frequently been integrated in the form of the 'two stage' theory of social revolution which meshes with the idea of 'internal colonialism'. This theory has been widely current in the literature of the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. It proposes that broad front policies, which unites as wide a range of opponents of the South African state apparatus as possible, must lead towards the creation of a 'national democracy'. Once this is established, socialists or working class organisations could then militate for a second transformation at a later historic stage.

It is curious that Communists propound this kind of stagist view so strongly. During the Soviet revolution, there was a first revolutionary stage during the year 1917 but it lasted only a matter of months due to its extreme instability. Stalin was among those Bolsheviks who favoured co-operating with the Kerensky regime and its pursuit of the allied war against the Germans. Lenin really set the seal on his own leadership position precisely by attacking this stance and moving towards a rapid conclusion of the revolution in October. 'National democracy' and revolutionary change were in fact incompatible. The Chinese revolution also involved a deliberate rejection by socialists of the nationalist stage, at least in the decisive phase after World War II.

The African continent is full of 'national democratic' regimes but twenty years of experience do not suggest that socialism has readily been able to emerge from the 'national democratic' cocoon on this continent even where this has been the proclaimed goal of the ruling party. In Zimbabwe a 'Marxist-Lennist' presides over a society with less claim to socialist structures than most countries in western Europe. Given the effectiveness of nationalist populism in capturing the thrust of a revolutionary movement, seizing political power in 1980 and establishing thorough intellectual hegemony, socialists in Zimbabwe lack the possibility to formulate an alternative approach however disabused they may feel. Democracy in the Zimbabwean context is defined very largely in terms of promoting the 'majority'

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population and thus reversing and effacing the racism of 'minority' rule. This yields a certain democratisation of the society in the form of improved welfare facilities at the base and an end to discrimination. However, it contains few elements for building a socialist potential, and excludes democratic decision-making that would allow for the future development of critical thought and seems as well to be establishing a long-term status quo. Despite its obvious relevance, proximity and accessibility, the Zimbabwean model, with its positive and negative features, lacks the serious discussion that it deserves in South Africa. It is by no means a failed model but its successes rely on the combination of economic power remaining in the hands of an efficient 'settler' bourgeoisie on capitalist terms together with the expansion of peasant agriculture and a state able to create clientalist networks reaching into the black countryside. One wonders how much of this would be possible, let alone desirable, in South Africa.

Let us turn briefly to a second contemporary model of social and political change that has at times been applied to South Africa, that which might be called the Mediterranean model. During the 1970s, Portugal, Spain and Greece all moved from being dictatorships towards genuinely democratic (not just 'national democratic') regimes. Democracy there has been primarily about the infusion of bourgeois legal norms, liberalisation of the press and other individual rights, establishment of free elections and the supremacy of parliament as well as the institution of enlightened social legislation. It has not meant the establishment of one-party rule and the intensification of state central authority. At first glance, it does look like, and has sometimes been defended as a potential first stage towards socialism.

The real difference with South Africa, though, is that the Mediterranean model suggests an emphasis on political and social democratisation with a de-emphasis on national issues. This is therefore almost the reverse of what the champions of the 'internal colonialism' thesis are arguing for. In truth, it is only possible to make the comparisons above precisely because the national democracy model is as vague and ambiguous as the internal colonialism one. It allows an apparently convenient and simple nationalist assessment to cover up all kinds of

crucial questions about democracy and about the nation as well as obscuring the awesome difficulty involved in finding an effective strategy for the South African situation which does not easily bear effective comparisons with others on this continent or outside.

From the vantage point of early 1986, political lines have apparently hardened substantially in South Africa. Reform has run much of its course while a generalised rising of township youth has spread throughout the country. At the same time it may be that one can describe the situation as one of stalemate. That generalised rising has not been stanchd but nor has it shown a capacity to dent state power either. The intensity of conflict and the brutal force that has frequently been manifested against resistance makes it tempting to accept an easy anti-apartheid position and relies on not thinking through alternatives thoroughly. Thus far, 'national democracy' and 'colonialism of a special type' have been used more as slogans than real programmes that could break the stalemate. This essay does not propose alternatives but it does mean to suggest that there is a great need to develop debate and discussion on the altering conditions of state and society in South Africa. Without creating any illusions about the process of state-generated reform, we need to come to grips with its political, social and economic ramifications and implications. What kind of society is emerging in the bantustans? What are the possibilities raised by the creation of COSATU and the strength of the new trade union movement? How can best use be made of the easing of censorship and certain forms of control? How can community organisations develop? What does South African business want and what is it up to? Such time-honoured and apparently powerful concepts as white supremacy and cheap labour-based industrialisation no longer seem to encompass the workings of the system entirely, if ever they were wholly accurate. For this last reason, one must call into question 'racial capitalism' as an alternative slogan to the ones examined above as well. While superficially it appears to suggest a more penetrating approach to South African society, it actually is questionable to what extent one can simply so marry racism and capitalism. Moreover, it can lead to a fancy way of talking about racism without taking the problem of capitalist

values and forms seriously.

Even beyond the question of stalemate, which is in the end a tactical one, it is suggested here that the very strong traditions of boycott and non-participation in South Africa may be double-edged even when things seem to be advancing. They can lead to ignoring opportunities within the 'system' for pursuing progressive changes that themselves are the product of a changing situation and they tend to become morally satisfactory but rather sterile actions if they are not linked to a theory and programme of transition.

One of the most interesting developments in 1985 that took place was the attempt by sections of capital to make contact with the ANC through visits to Lusaka. It is doubtful that the businessmen who have been keen on such contacts are thinking primarily about democracy or even the creation of a more open society; most likely, they are thinking about a new set of political collaborators, to ward off any questions of change moving in a socialist direction in South Africa. For them, the watchword of the day is the abolition of influx control and the hoped-for cheapening of the value of black labour power (Gilliomae & Schlemmer, 1985). But what is the correct response? It is inadequate either to welcome them to the legions of enemies of apartheid or to hurl imprecations and ward off with non-participatory gestures. We need to investigate instead what is going on and debate the real terms of the situation rather than to resurrect slogans from a romanticised past. This is the danger of looking for unity and non-controversy at the expense of addressing the hard questions.⁵

FOOTNOTES

- 1 In particular, one thinks of the work of Wolpe, Legassick, Johnstone, the generation of scholars associated with the University of Sussex such as Morris, Innes, Kaplan, Bozzoli and O'Meara and the historical work of van Onselen, Bundy, Marks and Trapido.
- 2 How one would define socialism in the South African context is another issue but it seems best here to take the word on its own valuation by various authors.
- 3 For a recent study, see Dennis Davis & Bob Fine, "Political

Strategies and the State: Some Historical Observations", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, XII(1), 1985.

4 'Colonialism of a Special Type' (1983).

5 I am grateful for criticism of the ideas in this essay, especially from Mike Morris.

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