

# Article

## The strange death of liberated southern Africa<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In writing the present essay, I have poached my title from a highly regarded old book by George Dangerfield entitled *The Strange Death of Liberal England* – chosen mainly for the bleak but, as I shall argue, appropriate catchiness of the spin I've sought to give to the title here. But there's a substantive resonance to the link as well. Dangerfield writes of the period of proto-revolutionary upsurge in Britain on the eve of the First World War – encompassing actions by women, workers, the Irish – and of the role of the Liberal Party, caught up in the maelstrom of the time. The parallel is by no means entirely apposite, of course, but one sentence in the book's opening pages did catch my eye. The Liberals, Dangerfield writes, emerged from the fray 'flushed with one of the greatest victories of all time' yet, he adds, 'from that victory they never recovered' (1997:19). Something similar can be said of Frelimo, of the MPLA, of SWAPO, of ZANU and of the ANC. For these movements, although still 'in power', have come to preside over the death of the promise that they were once thought to epitomise and their victories, or at least the way they came about, are arguably ones from which they too may never recover. It is with this paradox in mind that I chose not only this title but that of one of my recent books – *The Next Liberation Struggle*. For such a 'next liberation struggle', I live in hope.

### Thinking about defeat

Before embarking on the grounding of such complex and controversial themes, however, let me posit a couple of the premises that underpins this presentation. What, to begin with, is liberation? I want to be perfectly clear: there is no intention whatsoever on my part to downgrade the importance of a liberation from white political domination per se – whether that be the palsied colonial Portuguese variant, the white-settler hegemony of an Ian Smith, or the mining and industry-driven but racialistically-centred

overlordship of the apartheid kind. And yet the promise of liberation might be thought to imply a future open not merely in the realm of the political sphere – an end to police bashing through doors at 04:00 to get at the inhabitants, for example, as important as freedom from this and other enormities like it surely is – but also to the hopes of people, all of the people, for a fundamental betterment of their material condition, and, closely linked to their material condition, their spiritual condition (for want of another phrase: I have no religious sensibility to speak of, but I have a humanist one). Henning Melber (2005:306) has put the relevant point neatly, suggesting that:

the anti-colonial movement's proclaimed goals and perspectives were not only about fighting the oppressive and exploitative system of apartheid colonialism. The liberation struggle was at the same time about creating conditions for a better life after apartheid – not only in terms of political and human rights but also with regard to the inextricably linked material dimensions to human well being and a decent living of those previously marginalized and excluded from the benefits of the wealth created (to a large extent by them).

It bears emphasising that this latter sentiment – implying a much expanded, even socialist, definition of liberation – was verbally professed by virtually all of the ultimately victorious liberation movements in southern Africa, even by SWAPO in Namibia but also, certainly, in Mozambique, in Angola and in Zimbabwe, and in South Africa too. True, during the liberation struggle itself the present President Thabo Mbeki was at some pains to distinguish the ANC's aspirations for 'freedom' from socialist ones: 'The ANC is not a socialist party. It has never pretended to be one, it has never said it was, and it is not trying to be. It will not become one by decree or for the purpose of pleasing its "left" critics' (1984:609). This is the same Mbeki who would note during the transition that the National Party's positions are 'not very different really from the position the movement has been advancing' (*Mayibuye* March 1991:2); and even on another occasion after liberation itself, cavalierly assert as regards his economic policies 'just call me a Thatcherite' (*Business Report* February 16, 2006). Yet such an a-socialist ethos was not the one that the movement had generally evoked in the past. Moreover, there were very many who felt even more strongly than this that not only were the region's movements themselves, including the ANC, more 'socialist' than Mbeki suggested, but that, in any case and especially in South Africa, there were just too many contradictions, given voice in the actions and intentions of COSATU and other social movements, that were

pulling people beyond racial contestation – although there was, of course, plenty of resonance at that level of contestation alone – and towards class consciousness and class action.

For there is also, I hasten to add, a second premise for my essay, albeit one that might well, from the outset, undermine for some the plausibility of the case it will argue. It is that southern Africa, like the rest of the continent in this respect, is unlikely to be liberated in any meaningful and adequately expansive sense under the aegis of capitalist globalisation or along neo-liberal lines, these latter descriptors defining the currently prevailing form of global capitalist domination. Again, President Mbeki, in his ‘just call me a Thatcherite’ mode, would probably not agree.

But there are, nonetheless, a number of reasons why the general diagnosis I have just offered seems accurate. There are, for one thing, the dubious moral claims on behalf of a full-blown capitalist, market-centric option (it is, after all, a system premised on aggressive individualism and inequality), but the doubtful developmental claims of such an option may be sufficient to emphasise here. For the fact is that southern Africa simply cannot compete with the more powerful capitalist centres at playing their game, the global capitalist game that such central players invented and continue to control. This is the premise at the core of several of my books, including the volume entitled *The Next Liberation Struggle*. In chapter one of that volume my co-author Colin Leys and I suggest that ‘marginalisation’ is at least as salient a likelihood for Africa as is its continued exploitation and that the continent’s fate, on its present trajectory, seems to be:

relegation to the margins of the global economy, with no visible prospect of continental development along capitalist lines. Population growth has outstripped production growth; the chance of significantly raising per capita output are falling, not rising; the infrastructure is increasingly inadequate; the market for high-value-added goods is miniscule. Global capital, in its constant search for new investment opportunities, finds them less and less in Africa. Which does not mean that nothing is happening, let alone that no alternative is possible. It simply means that Africa’s development, and the dynamics of global capitalism, are no longer convergent, if they ever were. (2005:21)

And yet, given such a decidedly mixed prognosis for capitalist development, just what has happened to the alternative socialist vocation that might have been expected to be attendant upon the liberation movements’ success? We will characterise briefly the track record of the various victorious movements in southern Africa and of their leaders shortly. But note that they have not

been alone in abandoning socialist aspiration and practice. Many on the left, more broadly, are equally demobilised as regards the promise of socialism. To be fair, these observers are less inclined to embrace the capitalist alternative itself quite so wholeheartedly as are those erstwhile ‘leftists’ who still head liberation movement-based governments in southern Africa. Nonetheless, I have written about such tendencies in my *Development After Globalization* (Saul 2006), referring specifically to such estimable writers on the left as Perry Anderson and my old friend (and also a one time ZAPU militant) Giovanni Arrighi, formerly author with me of texts that may remain of some interest to our present discussion.

Four decades ago, Arrighi and I (1973) argued the unique importance of a socialist-development strategy for overcoming the situation of economic underdevelopment in Africa. Nearly three decades later, Arrighi was still arguing along similar lines, asserting the existence of a:

seemingly ‘iron law’ of a global hierarchy of wealth that stays in place no matter what the governments on the lower rungs of the hierarchy do or do not do – regardless, that is, of whether they delink or do not delink from the global circuits of capital, pursue or do not pursue power and status in the interstate system, eliminate or do not eliminate inequalities among their subjects. It seems to me that a necessary step in the direction [of a plausible explanation of this] is to acknowledge that the standards of wealth enjoyed by the West correspond to what Roy Harrod once defined as ‘oligarchic wealth’ in opposition to ‘democratic wealth’. (1991:64)

Arrighi went on to argue that only a process of global socialist emancipation could hope to permit the development game to start over with all players on the kind of equal footing that would permit the otherwise ‘wretched of the earth’ to stand a fair chance; only then, in short, could ‘a process that has developed to legitimate and enforce world inequalities be turned into a means to the end of promoting greater world equality and solidarity’ (1991:64).

Yet only a short decade later, Arrighi and others (2003) would restate firmly much the same carefully-documented position regarding the dominance of a capitalist-induced, still largely geographically-defined, global hierarchy, but without even once referring to socialism as a possible antidote to a western capitalist stranglehold on the global South. Instead, the sole hope for shaking western economic hegemony (particularly that of the United States) and global white dominance lay, for them, with the rise, on firmly

capitalist foundations, of China. (Note, however, that there is actually little sign of how the rest of the global South might benefit from the presumed rise of China [or at least the Chinese elite] within the ranks of the globally privileged.)

How much more resigned, and singularly depressing, however, is his view in an article on the same continent published in 2002 that ‘there may be little that most states can do to upgrade their economies in the global hierarchy of wealth’, suggesting only that ‘there is always something they could do to increase (or decrease) the well-being of the citizenry at any given level of poverty or wealth’ (2002:35-36). Conceding that even in such relatively narrow terms ‘African ruling groups have probably done far less than was in their power to do’ (Ibid), Arrighi, nonetheless, concludes on what is apparently intended to be an up-beat note: ‘But it is not clear whether and to what extent they have on the whole been more deficient than the ruling groups of other countries and regions, the United States included. Indeed, if we take into account differentials in wealth and power, it seems likely that they have been comparatively less so’ (2002). But, even if this were true, it would still stand as a very modest accomplishment for a destitute continent within the overall global scenario Arrighi is assuming.

This seems to me very much like acknowledgment of a defeat for the left – stoic resignation in place of once self-confident transformative assertion – that I myself cannot share. Nonetheless, such a response will perhaps not seem unusual. For the ever more dramatic ascendancy of capitalist logic accurately mirrors the sharp decline of socialist aspiration in many other quarters, one that finds reflection, for example, in numerous other writings by former stalwarts of the intellectual left. Not that the case for mounting a socialist alternative to currently ascendant capitalism can be said to be an obvious one. In fact, no such outcome has sustained itself anywhere – except possibly here and there, presently, in Latin America (Venezuela? Bolivia? Ecuador?). And it may even seem almost old-fashioned to hark back to that goal at all. Of course, there are strong criticisms of the apparent hegemony of global capitalism that can be made, both from a left-pressing forward on the worldwide anti-capitalist-globalisation front, and from some other points on the political compass than the left per se (the quarter of Islamic fundamentalism, for example). And there are even more nationally-based ‘lefts’, including those right here in South Africa, to which we will return. But the focus for today is on a left that never happened: the claimed vocation of southern African liberation movements to make revolutionary

claims upon and against global capitalism that would be part of an emerging counterweight to its worldwide ascendancy. As stated, it has not happened and it is worth, first, considering this fact. We can then, in a final section, itemise the possible reasons for what appears to me to be a terribly dispiriting outcome.

### **Evidence of defeat**

So why has this ‘defeat’ taken place not merely on the left in the centres of global capitalism but also on the periphery of the global capitalist system? After all, the real victims of global inequality are to be found in southern Africa as disclosed by the grim statistics that reveal, for South Africa for example, that more, not fewer, of the impoverished (still largely racially-defined, it should be noted) reside here than ever before. For if, here in South Africa for example, racial distinctions in income have declined somewhat those marking class differences have become, if anything, even wider. Under such circumstances, how strange is the death of the promise of more than a ‘merely’ political liberation in southern Africa (and I emphasise that ‘merely’ is firmly set in scare-quotes so as not to give the impression that I trivialise the latter accomplishment)?

Let us look at the regional record, beginning with Mozambique, a country where I have lived and worked and know well. The reversal of Mozambique’s direction is widely known and I have written about it at length elsewhere. Consider too, though, the words of another recent scholar of Mozambican developments, one who has written of a ‘rapid unraveling of the Mozambican revolution and [not so long ago] the onset of a large-scale human catastrophe’ (Dinerman 2006). She continues:

Once considered a virtually peerless pioneer in forging a socialist pathway in Africa, Mozambique now enjoys an equally exceptional, if dialectically opposed, status: today the country is, in the eyes of the IMF and the World Bank, a flagship of neoliberal principles ... predictably, many of the leading government and party officials rank among the primary beneficiaries of the new political and economic dispensation. Those who enthusiastically promised that Mozambique would turn into a graveyard of capitalism are now the leading advocates of, and avid accumulators in, capitalism’s recent, full-blown resurrection. (Dinerman 2006)

Similarly, two other close observers note the rapid growth of corruption (more or less unknown in the initial days of independence) in Mozambique and the ‘pursuit of individual profit [that has undermined] much of the

legitimacy of Frelimo party leaders, who [have taken] advantage of market-based opportunities, like privatization, to enrich themselves' (Bauer and Taylor 2005:134-5). As they conclude 'the election of Guebuza [as the new President in 2002], holder of an expansive business network and one of the richest men in Mozambique, hardly signals that Frelimo will attempt to run on anything but a globalist, neoliberal agenda – regardless of the abject poverty suffered by most of its electorate' (2005:134-5).

Of Mozambique's initial promise, Norrie MacQueen (1997) has written eloquently and I hope I may be forgiven for quoting him at some length:

Amidst the human and material holocaust suffered by Mozambique and Angola and the violent factionalism of Guiné, the destruction of an idea was completed. The Afro-Marxism of Frelimo, the MPLA and the PAIGC withered and died in the 1980s...But it is one thing for a political idea to have been tested and to fail (and perhaps leave a residue of genuine improvement in its passing); it is quite another for it to disintegrate amidst the externally contrived destruction of people and state. How inapplicable to African realities the schemes of Portugal's guerilla enemies might eventually prove, they did offer a clear alternative to the cynical manipulation of ethnicity and the neo-colonial complaisance of the kleptocratic elites who increasingly defined African governance in the 1970s and 1980s. Whatever their fate, the projects of the post-independence regimes of lusophone Africa were probably the most principled and decent ever proposed for the continent. They have not been superseded in this regard and seem unlikely to be. (1997:235-6)

This squares exactly with my own observation of developments in Mozambique over many years. True, MacQueen does qualify his praise by commenting pungently that 'external destabilization and cold war manipulation do not provide a sufficient alibi for the failure of centralist Marxism in lusophone Africa, whatever the well-intentioned claims of its foreign enthusiasts. The revolutionary experiment would assuredly have unraveled anyway among the cultural contradictions it provoked' (1997:235-6).

'Centralist Marxism', yes: certainly there were severe shortcomings within the Frelimo project itself – as I saw for myself when teaching at the FRELIMO party school in the post-independence period – and these do bear further discussion. As to the rest of that second passage I am not so sure. But MacQueen's initially-cited overall conclusion is certainly very close to the truth for present purposes.

As is the conclusion of Bill Minter who argues:

If one considers Angola and Mozambique at the time of the Portuguese coup in 1974 – imagining away both the regional southern African and Cold War conflicts – what kinds of wars, if any, might have resulted from internal factors alone, with an external environment similar to those of other African states? The most likely answer: no war in Mozambique and a war in Angola both shorter and more decisive than the one which occurred...It is unlikely that [internal] factors alone would have generated the prolonged and destructive wars of the 1980s. (1994:283)

But even if this is, as I believe it to be, a plausible interpretation, the result – of whatever combination of inherited ‘backwardness’, destabilization and the domestic shortcomings of an all too bald ‘leftism’ – has been the stark reversal of direction in Mozambique epitomised above by Dinerman: a thorough-going shift from left to right and a stark abandonment of promises once made by Frelimo to the Mozambican people. The dream thus ‘killed’<sup>2</sup> has become, in short, a neo-capitalist nightmare, if not for the Mozambican elite at least for those many Mozambicans, probably the vast majority, left at the bottom of the neo-liberal pecking order – who have as yet, truth be told, offered too little significant resistance to the tyranny of the market-place and its government!

Similarly for the even more fleeting promise of Angola, albeit to a lesser extent since MPLA seemed from the outset to embody a much less liberatory prospect than did Frelimo in Mozambique: its leftist promise a much more ‘Stalinist’, top-down and unimaginative proposition. Yet, as with Mozambique, it is virtually impossible to hold realities of the region and of the wider war constant and to assess Angola’s prospects more abstractly – although, interestingly, Bill Minter has attempted to do so for Angola too.

For Angola – if one puts aside the possibly decisive influence of the external environment in promoting nationalist disunity before independence, as well as Cold War and South African intervention – a purely non-violent resolution of nationalist rivalries in 1974-6 would have been improbable. Nevertheless, it is likely that the MPLA, with its implantation in the capital, the widest national outreach across ethnic lines and its edge in skilled personnel, would have gained military victory and international recognition. And there is a good chance that Unita, with few military prospects, would have succumbed to marginalisation and defections as did the FNLA. Without significant external involvement, Unita might have maintained a small-scale counter-insurgency. But it is unlikely that it could have posed a major threat, much less the transition to conventional combat (1994:283).

Opinions may differ as to precise weighting to be given diverse causal factors, of course, but the result, unfortunately, has been less debatable. The Angola situation was to curdle ever more disastrously into a bloody, brutal and tremendously wasteful war that saw degeneration on both the MPLA and UNITA sides and eventually producing ‘a conflict’, as Tony Hodges has well described it, which ‘became a raw struggle between rival elites for the control of resources generated by oil...and diamonds’ (2004: 204). In short, a sadly-transformed MPLA, its state now bankrolled by oil revenues, confronted Unita, led by the power-hungry Jonas Savimbi, a movement whose revenues were premised on illegal diamond sales. There were, by the end (with, amongst other things, Savimbi’s death), few if any redeeming features on either side. Here was a true war of ‘loot-seeking’, Hodges argues:

In its final years, the war has neither a real social basis, even in terms of ethnicity nor substantive ideological motives... [and] it was no longer fuelled by external strategic interests. Rather it was a war driven by personal ambition, mutual suspicion and the prize of winning or retaining control of the state and the resources to which it gave access. (2004:18)

For, as Barry Munslow also describes the situation, as time went on ‘the MPLA government policy [came to ensure] a redistribution strategy from the poor to the rich’ with the war offering ‘the excuse for the government to resist economic reform’. In addition ‘war also presented lucrative economic opportunities for the military leaders to enrich themselves’ (2005:90). In such a context the words of the old Swahili homily sound soberingly apt: when the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled. Moreover, the elephants stand to get rich as well. And if now, with Savimbi’s death, a somewhat more placid scene exists, the legacy of MPLA’s authoritarian history, a ‘petro-stalinism’ that is also rooted in the hierarchical legacy of sustained warfare (state war not people’s war!), continues to resound. For the latter legacy, embodied in the MPLA in power, threatens merely to stifle the voices of a civil society that might otherwise promise the rebuilding of a different and more positive kind of politics from below – as well-informed observers like Cristine Messiant (2001) and others have ably argued.

Swapo and Namibia provide a cautionary tale as well, with young Namibians who might have forced a more radical programme onto the table cut down, early on, in exile, by Sam Nujoma and the Swapo old-guard (and their front-line supporters: Kaunda, Nyerere, Dos Santos) in both Zambia and in Angola. In turn, this ensured – as Colin Leys and I have sought to document

in detail elsewhere (1995) – the continued top-heavy and notably unimaginative hegemony of Nujoma and his attendants in that small but significant country – and little of any more expansive kind of liberation. Indeed, ‘reality’ settled in early, as Lauren Dobell noted in chapter nine of this volume, a few short years after independence, herself expressing little surprise that this ‘erstwhile liberation movement [had] shed the ‘scientific socialist’ philosophy which has ostensibly guided its struggle for liberation, to adopt, with little apparent regret, the capitalist orthodoxies of the post-Cold War global economy’ (Leys and Saul 1995:171). This despite the fact that, as Melber (2005:307) confirms from a wide variety of sources, ‘the luxury of the elite contrasts with the abject poverty of the majority of the people’ – Namibian official sources themselves confirming that ‘the wealthiest fifth of the population controls an income share of 78.7 per cent, [while] the poorest fifth has to live on a mere 1.4 per cent’.

Indeed, as Melber continues his careful analysis, we see that ‘fifteen years into Namibian post-colonial reality, the visible results of the state’s policy direction are not really indicating a political will to serve the poor. It’s not about redistribution of (relative) wealth, not [about] tackling chronic poverty by means of social protection, but it’s all about self-enrichment, capitalism and class. In other words, it’s business as usual... (2005:317).

True, there has been some resistance: one thinks of the efforts of Sam Ndeikwila and others to counter-mobilise, in the name of the many erstwhile victims of Swapo’s heavy-handedness in exile, around a much truer history of the liberation struggle (Leys and Saul 2005:ch5) and there was also the momentary flare-up of Ben Ulenga as a possible alternative in Namibia; otherwise, there is not as yet, under Swapo’s close monitoring and assiduous steering of the situation, an active legacy of earlier promising moments (see Saul and Leys:1998).

Something of the same story might be told for Zimbabwe, albeit with more assertive resistance to ‘business as usual’ coming from below. In Zimbabwe the victorious ZANU, although admittedly forced by Britain to bear the difficult cross of Lancaster House and all its ‘guarantees’, nonetheless never looked like offering much more than a tactical ‘leftism’ as part of its rather narrowly nationalist (and party-bounded) rise to power. This trajectory had only been briefly challenged, in the years of struggle, by the ZIPA moment<sup>3</sup> that seemed, momentarily, to offer a possible promise of something more radical. Nonetheless, in his own writing of the time Ibbo Mandaza (1986) presented a strong early critique of the newly ascendant African

petty-bourgeoisie whom he saw as all too decorously taking power in their own interests and that of international capital:

At the end of the day, the new state has become an apparent mediator between capital and labour, between the aspirations of mass of the people for the 'future of independence' and the role of international capital in its quest for more profit. With time, however, the state would become weighted in favour of the latter, inclined towards controlling these popular demands, if only to appease capital in the name of 'stability', peace and security. (1986:50)

Mandaza and certain other Zimbabweans have been more enthusiastic about Mugabe's recent rebirth – after an extended period in power as one-sided 'mediator' on behalf of capital and architect of an apparently enthusiastic embrace of an IFI (International Financial Institutions)-facilitated 'structural-adjustment' programme/ESAP – as a radical, especially around the land issue. But I myself – as is also true for Patrick Bond and Masimba Manyanya (2003) and Brain Raftopolous and Ian Phimister (2004) – cannot see this latter policy initiative taken by Mugabe as anything more than a tactical move against whites to gain domestic legitimacy rather than a long overdue initiative to right a historic wrong. For it is merely one aspect of a more general offensive, one viciously complemented by an even more noteworthy and blindingly fierce domestic repression of African opponents, to cordon off and quell the threat that the political opposition and a range of civic organisations have offered to his rule.

As a well-organised opposition, grounded in impressive trade-union support and active urban-based resistance, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) represented for a time, the most promising example we have yet seen of a progressive post-'liberation movement' political initiative in southern Africa.<sup>4</sup> However, Mugabe and company have now battered the MDC to the ground, encouraging the latter's own weaknesses and contradictions to surface as well. Nonetheless, the semi-support of the present South African government for such a regime in Zimbabwe as ZANU currently offers (as analysed, once again, by Phimister and Raftopoulos [2004]) seems to me only understandable as a cruel response to the kind of threat the MDC-type initiative offers to the entrenched nationalist elites elsewhere in the region. Indeed, the story of the recent seizure, torture and near murder of MDC leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, and the relatively passive reception of this event elsewhere in the region – news of which reaches me only as I conclude this paper – merely underscores this point.

There is a defeat, then, of the ideal of a genuinely-liberated Zimbabwe – although not, of course, of ZANU and its leaders in any absolutely definitive sense since they remain in power. True, their leadership cabal have now had to face a renewed challenge from below, one of continuing popular struggle for, at least in part, something of the progressive agenda of liberation struggle days, although now also for something even more immediate and urgent: liberation from a cruel authoritarianism per se. But the odds against those who would challenge such power are steep, as Nzimande (cited in Raftopoulos 2005:10) has argued of Zimbabwe, where:

the demagogic appropriation of a progressive nationalist discourse by a bureaucratic stratum invariably drives a wedge between radical third world nationalism and democracy. It ends up leaving former elites as the active champions of democracy. We need to challenge the monopoly of the nationalist discourse enjoyed by this stratum, just as we need (certainly here in South Africa) to challenge the dominance of discourse on human rights by conservative ethnic minority forces who use the discourse to defend ill-begotten wealth from the past. A working class appropriation of both [the] national and [the] democratic is critical.

Indeed one finds, as Raftopoulos adds, a ‘growing reactionary nationalism that threatens to enclose our political structures within the narrow agendas of our ruling elites...[Indeed] much of anger of [such] embattled nationalism is channeled against the citizens of our states and the nationalism that presents itself as the nation’s shield is often the suffocating embrace of murderous regimes’ (2005:14). This, in other words, is one very negative possible consequence in the region of triumphant liberation nationalism, whatever other victories it may have had: a stultifying closure of discussion, one that demands that there be found instead ‘new collective discourses that build on a broad participation, and deep commitment to critical discussion and debate’ (2005:14).

And what, finally, of South Africa itself, offering, as it does and from several angles, the most disappointing of all cases of apparent ‘false decolonization’ in southern Africa. Of course, many of us in the global anti-apartheid movement were suspicious enough of the ANC in exile – although we supported it vigorously – because of the Soviet-style rhetoric that echoed, rather leadenly and formulaically, through its publications and even its practices. This was true of SACTU as well, a movement more visible, it sometimes seemed, in places like Canada (where, for example, it specialised in denouncing COSATU and all its works) than in South Africa itself. Such leftist suspicions – of the ANC, the SACP and SACTU – were also

passionately voiced to me, right here in Durban, by no less a figure than Alec Erwin himself (and by his then banned house-mate Johnny Copelyn) when I first visited Durban in 1978. But I do not think any of us (beyond a few Trotskyists who, on first principles, are sufficiently dismissive of the promise of most struggles that they are rarely entirely wrong!) really thought that the popular energies on evidence in the work-place and the townships of South Africa could ever be so easily harnessed by the returning exile movement, the ANC, as to occasion the marked right-turn away from any real leftward project and from any active popular mobilisation for socio-economic transformation that we have witnessed.

For we are left with the paradox of the ANC's continuing power and the questions it must inevitably raise:

How was democratic capitalism accomplished, given that white supremacy had prevented much support for democratic capitalism from developing among blacks and had taken extreme measures to prevent democratic organizations from developing? ... And why has capitalism, which was blamed for apartheid by much of the anti-apartheid movement, become taken for granted, unchallenged and unchallengeable by its erstwhile enemies, now that democracy prevails? (MacDonald 2006:186)<sup>5</sup>

The same is true of the markedly inegalitarian outcomes this capitalism has served to only deepen. Seekings and Natrass modestly assert that 'the poor, overall, did not prosper in the decade following democratization', but then back that up with powerful evidence which demonstrates that 'inequality remained high and perhaps grew, while poverty probably deepened' (2005: 261).

But of such things many are all well aware and perhaps they are already sympathetic with Sampie Terreblanche's conclusion, based on a survey of South Africa's past and present:

Most poor people are already morally fractured by the present burden of debt and destitution, and the absence of a better future. The argument that South Africa cannot afford the BIG or dramatically improved social welfare and social insurance system to supply the impoverished majority with a safety net is fallacious. What South Africans cannot afford is the coexistence of the conspicuous consumption of the few and destitution of the many. (2002:470)

Small wonder, then, that – perhaps in anticipation of such eventual developments along the lines he himself envisaged – Mbeki could find

himself, as early as the late 1980s ‘privately telling friends that he believed the ANC alliance with the Communist Party would have to be broken at some point, especially if the ANC gained power in a post-apartheid South Africa. In Mbeki’s scenario, the ANC would govern as a centre-left party, keeping some remnants of trade union and SACP support, while the bulk of the alliance would form a left-wing workers’ party’ (cited in Gumede 2005:38).

For as I myself was to assert a few years ago: ‘A tragedy is being enacted in South Africa...[I]n the teeth of high expectations arising from the successful struggle against a malignant apartheid state, a very large percentage of the population – amongst them many of the most desperately poor in the world – are being sacrificed.... on the altar of the marketplace’ (Saul 2005: 195). But I also should note that I was nonetheless tempted to see a new and more promising reality being born in South Africa in response to such sobering realities when I was a participant, in 2002, in the counter-conference to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Mine was a visit that began with the firing of stun-grenades by police into a small march of conference-goers, one grenade badly burning a young Canadian comrade who was just in front of me in the march. Nonetheless, the visit ended with a large march (well over 20,000 people) from Alexandra township to Sandton, a momentary culmination of the efforts of a diversity of movements hard at work in South Africa – from the anti-Privatization Forum to the Landless People’s Movement and well beyond. Indeed, it was tempting to foresee, in the headiness of the moment, a new movement as set to gain increased and ineluctable focus and strength. The truth, needless to say, is that it has not happened yet – despite the wide array of demands beginning to find expression on the ground, around issues like AIDS, water, land, women, electricity and more in South Africa.

How much inspiration can those of us who hold out hopes of a ‘next liberation struggle’ draw from such initiatives and from whispered possibilities that they may be beginning to draw together ever more effectively? or from continuing rumours (along the lines we have seen Mbeki himself to have sketched above) of other possible realignments to the left said to involve the SACP and/or COSATU? Or has there been, instead, a victory for post-liberation sobriety and ‘realism’, another victory, in short, for the ANC leadership and its conception of the ‘centre-left’ – whatever that may be thought to mean? We will return to such questions for they must preoccupy all of us who care to reflect on such matters.

As it happens, off in Canada I can myself only return, not to the barricades, but to my computer – playing out the years that are left to me by trying to write a history of what I have come to call the ‘Thirty Years War for Southern African Liberation’ (and, of course, of its aftermath). Moreover, the bleak conclusions I have been tempted to reach about the current state of liberatory energy afoot in the region make a particularly sobering point of reference for writing such a manuscript. Indeed, in sketching an outline and working away on it I have come to entitle the final chapter ‘Who Won?’ And I confess that I do not know. At the same time, I understand perfectly well that it would be far too glib to belittle the accomplishment of southern African liberation struggles – to have lived in Dar-es-Salaam for much of the 1960s and early 1970s and to be surrounded by activists from virtually all the southern African liberation movements was to grasp something real about the dreams and aspirations, for themselves and for the vast mass of their own people, that drove them on. To also have hosted many of such militants in Canada over the years of our engagement there in the liberation support movement was similarly instructive.

Nonetheless, the sobering positions I have, up to now, felt forced to arrive at have scarcely been popular ones to take – even assuming, for a moment, they are more correct than not. I have already tangled in print and in public with such admirable warriors in the cause of liberation as Jeremy Cronin and Raymond Suttner.<sup>6</sup> I have also been sparred with by an ANC minister, Lindiwe Sisulu (2004), who both graciously acknowledges me, quite specifically, as an ‘ally’ but also notes of my seeing ‘something all too anti-climactic’ in the ANC-led transition that ‘even those we deem our allies can be just as wrong as some of the liberals who only recently, in the aftermath of the April 2004 elections, propounded the view that the social movements should act as an opposition that would counter-balance the power of the African National Congress’.

More recently, I discovered a less friendly opinion of my book and its argument in a speech by Barney Pityana (2006) which, again, I quote at some length since it captures something of the flavour of many of the responses I have had:

There are many though who argue that the ANC in government has not done enough to attack the prevailing economic consensus which is based on market fundamentals. John S Saul, a Canadian political scientist, is particularly scathing in his attack on ANC in government of running with the hares and hunting with the hounds, pandering to Western

interests in the hope that its role as the acknowledged spokesperson for third world interests can be acknowledged, he calls this 'the post-apartheid neo-liberal apostasy'. Saul harbours the forlorn hope that the failure of African governments like that of the ANC would spawn radical grassroots movements which could pose a challenge to African governments which have been incorporated into the Western capitalist project. In this regard Saul appears to reject the notion of a 'unifying conception of society and transformation' in favour of 'workable sense of cohesion to emerge out of...modes of resistance waged from below...' Perhaps I can advise Prof Saul to get real. The truth is that many ordinary poor people in our country have never followed the dictates of the radical elements in election after election. At each election, the ANC has increased its majority. My sense is that there is greater appreciation than many would concede that the government is serious about eradication of poverty, the provision of basic services to people like fresh water, education and health services. The reversal of the RDP and the institution of GEAR since 1996 are hotly contested in South Africa but nobody has been able to show that an RDP project was a workable proposition at the time when the economy itself was in doldrums.

Of course, Mr Pityana, does admit to there being some problems:

What actively militates against the social cohesion project though are crime and corruption, the persistent apartheid spatial geography, racism, ethnicity and xenophobia. Crime is a worry to all South Africans. There is enormous public support for the police and for the efforts of the National Directorate of Public Prosecutions in addressing the all-pervasive culture of crime and criminality. South Africans want to live in peace. The enormous investment in private security services that ordinary South Africans have to indulge in in order to protect their meager possessions and for their own safety and security, may well signal a lack of confidence in the capacity of the official security forces to protect people. Crime inveighs against all elements of our cherished democracy and our system of human rights. Corruption is theft against the common wealth, especially public resources due to meet the needs of the poor. Crime undermines the project of social cohesion.

Get real? And send for a beefed up police force rather than recasting in any more fundamental way the entire project of social cohesion' itself? Forgive me if I prefer, instead, to 'get real' with Rusty Bernstein, born and schooled in Durban and a lion of the South African liberation struggle for over fifty years, who wrote to me only shortly before his death, and in response to my original *Monthly Review* article, 'Cry for the beloved country: the post-

apartheid denouement’ that was to first spark such negative reactions as those mentioned above. Suggesting he agreed ‘with almost every word of [that article]’, he gave an extended analysis of ‘what is going wrong, and why’, an understanding of this being, in his words, ‘the essential precondition for any rectification, and thus for any return to optimism about South Africa’s democratic future’. He concludes:

The drive towards power has corrupted the political equation in various ways. In the late 1980s, when popular resistance revived again inside the country led by the UDF, it led the ANC to see the UDF as an undesirable factor in the struggle for power, and to fatally undermine it as a rival focus for mass mobilization. It has undermined the ANC’s adherence to the path of mass resistance as a way to liberation, and substituted instead a reliance on manipulation of the levers of administrative power. It has paved the way to a steady decline of a mass-membership ANC as an organizer of the people, and turned it into a career opening to public sector employment and the administrative ‘grave train’. It has reduced the tripartite ANC-COSATU-CP alliance from the centrifugal centre of national political mobilization to an electoral pact between parties who are constantly constrained to subordinate their constituents fundamental interests to the overriding purpose of holding on to administrative power. It has impoverished the soil in which ideas leaning towards socialist solutions once flourished and allowed the weed of ‘free market’ ideology to take hold. (2001)<sup>7</sup>

### **Explaining defeat?**

Let us come to our concluding arguments, then, by first conceding that there is plenty of room for honest disagreement on such matters, both as to what has happened and why it has happened as it has. But let us agree too that, at the very least, the outcome of the liberation struggle has not been quite what we had expected or what many of us had hoped for. If I choose to call it a defeat so be it: the matter is too important to be allowed to dissolve into semantic wrangles. At the very least can we merely say that, in the end, something rather strange has happened to our struggle?

And yet, just how ‘strange’ has this ‘defeat’, if such I will continue to call it, actually been? The apparent fate of southern African countries vis-à-vis global capitalism has not, after all, been so very different from the fate of the ‘false decolonization’ predicted for most African countries by Frantz Fanon (1967). Cannot much the same be said of the southern part of the continent as well? Many of us, both here in this region and around the world, had hoped for more, while pinning our hopes, as suggested, on sociological possibilities

(an organised and insistent proletariat, a highly mobilised and increasingly articulate general populace, especially in the large urban areas), not merely on good intentions. We have been disappointed. Why?

There is, first, the possibility that there has been, in fact, no real defeat at all, that the liberation movement leaders once in power (and African populations more generally?) have, like their counterparts elsewhere on the continent, simply come to their senses, now realizing, if they did not before, that capitalism holds the key to African development and to, in effect, 'liberation' that it once held for material progress in the North Atlantic part of the world. And that the mass of the people has, as Pityana would apparently claim, accepted both their leaders' arguments and their *bona fides* in this regard. And yet, as Colin Leys and I have argued (as also cited above), this seems simply not plausible.

But if this developmental argument is not sufficiently proven (and is, in any case, sufficiently counter-intuitive) to provide an easy answer to our question, we could speculate, secondly, that the sheer overwhelming strength of the global economy provides, nonetheless, an adequate explanation in and of itself of the recolonisation process afoot in southern Africa. Was it not, in short, simply expecting too much from Africa (including southern Africa), warped as it has been by colonialism, to play a subordinate service role in that global economy, to step out on the bold new path defined by the likes of Fanon and his once substantial number of progeny in southern Africa?

It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man [sic], a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity...Let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something from us other than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature. If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe and America into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us. But if we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries...For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man. (Fanon 1967:254-5)

For as Roger Murray (1967: 39) was to write, not long after Fanon and more bleakly, of Nkrumah's failed dreams in Ghana: 'The historically necessary [for genuine, truly emancipatory, development] should not be confounded with the historically possible'. Perhaps Arrighi, as quoted above, would agree with this.

As a sub-theme to this second explanation, there is, of course, the social-democratic delusion: that you can have your capitalist cake and eat your humane and equitable social outcomes, by means of reforms (read: various social programmes) that enrich people's lives. Of course, this may have been possible – admittedly within very severe limits – in certain advanced capitalist centres (and to a greater degree before the coming of full-blooded 'capitalist globalisation' than it is presently) – but it is much less plausible now, especially on the periphery of the global capitalism system. But perhaps South Africa, as a continental sub-imperial power, might hope to reap sufficient spoils from that exercise to embark, as Trevor Manuel sometimes claims his government to be doing, on a mildly reformist exercise too?

There are two other plausible corollaries to this second explanation, however, constituting, together, a third possible explanation. This strand of argument seeks to epitomise the tactical calculation, on the part of relatively well-intentioned leaders, that the cost to be paid for resisting the logic of subordination to capitalism would have been/would still be just too high, and not merely too high for such leaders as sought to counter-balance the weight of capital by popular mobilisation. For it would also be too high – or so the argument runs – for the populations themselves: the cost of economic disruption and sabotage which would be inflicted by capital (and its network of imperial states and IFIs) if it were driven by defiance towards its powerful global system to strike back against it. And this would be true, it might be argued, both of any defiance towards the power represented, especially in South Africa, by the continuing stranglehold upon major economic activities held by resident (white) capitalists and also, more broadly, of any broader radical defiance towards a powerful global capitalism that could not/would not readily abide recalcitrant left/populist 'jackals' nipping at its flanks.

Fanon, of course, has provided another, quite different, way of looking at such choices, this amounting to a fourth explanation of a not-so-strange defeat of liberation in Africa: the sell-out of the new elite, the 'national bourgeoisie'. Indeed, in analysing what he considers to be the uninspiring, neo-colonial denouement in Namibia, Henning Melber (2005:306) has recently

and specifically invoked Fanon, noting that ‘almost half a century ago Frantz Fanon expressed already in no uncertain terms his disgust about the self-enrichment tendencies he witnessed in (West) African countries’. Melber proceeds to quote Fanon directly as follows: “‘During the struggle for liberation the leader awakened the people and promised them a forward march, heroic but unmitigated. Today, he uses every means to put them back to sleep, and three or four times a year asks them to remember what a long way they have come since then’” (2005:306).

Melber then continues: ‘Though one cannot make direct comparisons between the cases witnessed by Fanon during the late 1950s and the experiences in the previous settler societies in Southern Africa, it is worrying to take note of the effects of the latter’s socio-economic strategies as part of the post-colonial efforts to overcome [or not] the structural legacies’ (2005:317). For in commenting on Zimbabwe’s ‘escalating polarization’ and on the results of state policy direction in Namibia that ‘are not really indicating a political will to serve the poor’ (Ibid), Melber indicts the entire region. ‘[I]t’s all about self-enrichment, capitalism and class. In other words, it’s business as usual’ (2005:317). In short, it’s false decolonisation, precisely as Fanon feared.

There is, of course, a fifth possibility, one arising from deep within the fastnesses of orthodox Marxism, one suggesting that the social contradictions just do not cut deeply enough in southern Africa, are not deeply enough felt, to be formative in terms of consciousness, especially in terms of class consciousness and its translation into effective class struggle. True, much of the southern African experience, especially the experience of South African struggles, seems to belie this conclusion. Nonetheless, one could argue that for all that racial consciousness (the consciousness of resistance to white racism!) was felt by many to fold over easily into class consciousness under southern African conditions, it actually trumped class consciousness every time - and that we are still living under a set of circumstances where the ideology, and the bearer, of achieved nationalism (the ANC in the South Africa case) still retain a legitimacy not warranted by its record (or promise) of liberating people in any more expansive sense of that word.

Not that any such perceived shortfall in ‘consciousness’ should be understood mechanistically or deterministically, as being merely the by-product of unpropitious or underdeveloped ‘objective conditions’. For it would be an arrogance to underestimate the extent to which people are aware of their own poverty and deprivation, both absolutely and in relationship to

more privileged others. To be sure, many may not be fully and precisely aware of the systemic roots of their own personal mal-conditions, this then suggesting a political challenge: that of ‘consciousness raising’. Yet one of the secrets of the successes of both liberalism and neo-liberalism as cast in a capitalist mould suggests a rather different challenge, one to be found at the level of consciousness. For what is involved here has been a dramatic recasting of the very terms of common-sense themselves, namely a radical individualisation – via the deep penetration of market-place values, of ‘consumerism’, and the like – of consciousness itself. In short, this new brand of ‘common-sense’ is now set over and against any broader sense of entitlement, against the claims of any conceivable collective, and against any more expansive vision of what life has to offer. Just as important is a second possible reaction to the ascendancy of neo-liberal culture and the powerful global (capitalist) forces that drive it: that of fatalism, a resignation in the face of the apparent ineluctability, and overwhelming strength, of the engine of global capitalism as it invades ever more expanded spheres of human activity.

Finally, the latter formulation begins to slide into a sixth possible explanation of a less than revolutionary outcome to liberation struggle in southern Africa: the possibility that the people ‘at the bottom’, although comprising the majority of their populations and potentially radically conscious of the unacceptability of their subordination, have not yet quite figured out how (not ‘whether’, as suggested by the previous point) to reverse the process of ‘false decolonization’. Moreover, indigenous ‘intellectuals’, in the expansive sense of the term employed by Gramsci, have not yet helped them adequately to do so. To so argue would not be simply to score points against a left that has, up to now, ‘failed’ but to admit that the challenge that confronts the left is a daunting one. For a reactivated challenge from below would mean, I would suggest, literally ‘starting from scratch’ in order to rebuild new local initiatives, new national movements, new regional/continental undertakings of genuine promise – and also to reinforce global initiatives currently in train. I do think this is happening, I hasten to add, with numerous positive signs, both in South Africa and beyond, of its beginning to do so.<sup>8</sup> But, needless to say, it will continue to be formidably hard work, daunting up-hill work. Then again, so was the original liberation struggle itself.

\* \* \*

A sobering story, then. As stated earlier: as I now attempt to write my own history of the 30 years war for southern African liberation, I move my draft towards a final chapter and seek, somewhat forlornly, to shift the title (and rather grey mood) of that chapter from that implied by the title I first gave it, albeit in a rather bleak moment. For in my initial outline the chapter was (as I previously suggested) entitled ‘who won?’ and I fear that, for me at least, the question stands. We know who lost, of course: the white minorities in positions of formal political power (whether colonially in the Portuguese colonies or quasi-independently here and perhaps in Zimbabwe). And thank fortune, and hard and brave work, for that. But who, in contrast, has won? At least for the time being, global capitalism, the West and the IFIs, and the local elites, of state and private sector and both white and black. But how about the mass of southern African populations, both urban and rural and largely black? Not so obviously the winners, I would suggest, and certainly not in any very expansive sense. Has it not been a kind of defeat for them too – albeit perhaps not so very strange a one after all. Besides, it ain’t over ‘til it’s over. As we used to say in Mozambique: *a luta continua*. The struggle continues, continues against the recolonisation of southern Africa by the ‘new empire’ that is being driven by global capitalism and its local minions. But does the struggle continue? Who, where, how, and for what?: agency, site, imaginary! Yes, the struggle continues, but so too do the challenges to our creativity, our intelligence, our commitment.

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some years before, at the conference at the University of Eduardo Mondlane that First herself had organised and that immediately preceded her death). My link to Harold also included our time together as fellow graduate students at the University of London in the early 1960s where Harold, newly escaped from police custody here, had begun to retool himself as the distinguished sociologist he was to become by attending, along with me and a number of others, Ralph Miliband's graduate seminar at the LSE. Long ago and far way, yet so real that I can touch the memory. So, *mazel tov*, comrade'.

## Notes

1. Note that I am using the term 'southern Africa' primarily with reference to those territories that had the shared fate of having had aggressively to contest especially recalcitrant white-minority rule (fuelled by both recidivist colonialism and white settler domination) As for the other countries in the region, granted less centrality in this essay, they are either small and had their decolonisations linked, somewhat earlier and more or less by historical accident, to the general processes of British decolonisation on the continent (Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho). Or they were situated on the borders of the region (Malawi and Zambia) where their own, relatively 'non-violent' decolonizations marked an early phase in the complex process that would eventually produce Zimbabwe (as experienced within the Central African Federation, for example).
2. What Minter gives us are the lineaments not so much of a feckless initial project on the part of Frelimo as of the material and military groundings of a defeat, the destruction of an idea, 'the killing of a dream' as a Swedish film-maker, Anders Nilsson, once titled his powerful film on the apartheid-sponsored siege of Mozambique.
3. On Zipa, see David Moore's exemplary doctoral dissertation (1990).
4. On the initial promise of what he called a new and promising 'post-nationalist/post-neoliberal' politics as exemplified by the MDC, see Patrick Bond (1999); for Bond's more recent reflections on Zimbabwe and on the MDC see both the book he has co-authored with Masimba Manyanya (2003), and an article co-written with Richard Saunders (2005). See, as well, Saunders writing with the present author, 'Mugabe, Gramsci and Zimbabwe at Twenty-Five', being chapter 6 of my *The Next Liberation Struggle* (Saul 2005). On the MDC, Brian Raftopoulos' two exemplary reports are especially notable (although I have myself seen them only in mimeographed form), namely, *Reflections on Opposition Politics in Zimbabwe: The Politics of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)* and *Political Actors in Democratic Politics in Zimbabwe*.
5. Note, however, that MacDonald then adds: '[C]riticism must acknowledge the fact that capital has a strong hand, that capital is mobile and scarce whereas labour is stationary and plentiful, and that the power of the democratic state is narrowed by the terms of transition and confined by the imperatives of the global economy' (2006:186).

6. See Jeremy Cronin (2002), with my response; and Raymond Suttner (2003), also with my response.
7. The full text of Lionel ‘Rusty’ Bernstein’s letter is reproduced in the debate section of this journal.
8. On this subject, see the concluding sections of my *Decolonization and Empire* (2006:ch4).

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