

## ON NATIONAL-DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION: A reply to Cronin

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Jeremy Cronin's comments (Cronin, 1986) on my article (Hudson 1986) are, naturally very welcome. Replying to them, will, moreover afford me the opportunity of reiterating and clarifying at least some aspects of my argument in the article in question. On the other hand it must be said that Cronin has unfortunately read my article carelessly and as a consequence frequently misconstrues and misrepresents what I say. Moreover, and more importantly, Cronin fails to address the argument I advance concerning the relationship between the concept 'national-democracy' and the classical marxist theory of the transition from capitalism to socialism and communism.

My objective was firstly to identify and then to examine critically the conceptual bases of the national-democratic strategy. Central to the theory of national-democratic revolution is the assertion that a national democracy is non-capitalist, socialist-oriented and transitional (see South African Communist Party, 1963 and Chirkin and Yudin, 1978).

I dispute, at the conclusion of my examination, this claim. Rejecting the theory of national-democratic revolution as a theory of social transformation does not, it is perhaps worth pointing out, entail the adoption of an ultra-leftist, workerist, narrow economic or Trotskyist position on the South African revolution. It does however have important implications for the way in which the contemporary struggle against apartheid, based, and correctly, on a broad alliance of classes and sectors, is conceived. No number of allusions, soaked in innuendo, to 'academic' and 'scholastic preconceptions' (Cronin, 1986:77) will ever alter the fact that the way in which the articulation of national and class struggles is conceived in the labour movement and in the workers' party is an issue of vital political importance.

This is the issue I examined: the theory informing the practice and transformation of the Liberation Alliance. I did so in the belief - (which, in spite of the tenor and tone of some of Cronin's comments, I still hold) - that such theoretical debate is taken seriously by all who are committed to the liberation of our country, and thus, in particular, by the leading organisations of the liberation struggle. It is of course the movement of the working class and of the people that always pays the price

when marxist theory is allowed to petrify into a dogma insulated from an ongoing and critical theoretical scrutiny.

Cronin, I fear, comes perilously close to eclipsing the specifically theoretical, to treat marxist theory as nothing more than a reflection of current political practice and as an instrument to be used in it (see Balibar, 1977 on this 'historicist tendency' in Marxist theory). As long as theoretical analysis is subordinated to current strategical objectives and is not accorded its proper degree of autonomy, marxist theory will never be able to fulfil its potential role in the working class and popular movement. Amongst other things, it will never be possible to elucidate the status and evaluate the coherence of the concept national democracy.

It is thus not surprising that Cronin fails to grasp the specific object of my criticism. This is the theory of national-democratic revolution, itself inscribed in a broader theory of social transformation, and not, as he seems to think, the Freedom Charter or a strategy of broad alliance *per se*. His concluding paragraph in fact merely replicates, in tones admittedly somewhat more florid than those I employ, what I stress near the beginning of my article (Hudson, 1986:7). In order to put the record straight let me briefly reiterate what I say there: there is an imperative need for the constitution and maintenance of a broad alliance in the struggle against Apartheid and capitalism in South Africa; the Freedom Charter plays an extremely important articulating and unifying role in the struggle against Apartheid; the realisation of the demands of the Freedom Charter are not irrelevant to socialist transformation in South Africa but are in fact a necessary condition of it. On the other hand, contrary to the theory of national-democratic revolution, and to the argument advanced by Cronin and Suttner in their book *Thirty Years of the Freedom Charter* (Cronin and Suttner, 1986) the struggle for national liberation is not, I argue, intrinsically anti-capitalist and therefore already revolutionary. The struggle for national liberation may be articulated with the struggle against capitalism. This latter struggle may itself, under certain conditions, derive an extra 'charge of negativity' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:132) from such an articulation, or it may develop into it, but it is not in and of itself anti-capitalist.

Cronin is by the way quite wrong to claim that I ignore 'the specific South African history' of the national-democratic strategy (Cronin, 1986:73). I cite a number of texts which are precisely attempts to elaborate and refine this strategy in the South African context. On the other hand, no matter what Cronin may think, the national-democratic strategy is not peculiarly South African and its logic is likely to remain opaque as long as this is not realised. Cronin's own failure to grasp the defining

characteristics of the national-democratic strategy is testimony to this.

## 2.

Let me begin my response to the specific points made by Cronin by considering his comments on the word 'must', as he seems to attach a great importance to the role he claims this word plays in my discussion of the theory of national democratic revolution. Cronin asserts that I have misunderstood the concept of necessity informing the national-democratic strategy. In my exposition of it, I have, as a consequence, illicitly substituted *must* qua 'logical necessity' (Cronin, 1986:74), which he illustrates with the example 'We must all die sometime' (Cronin, 1986:74), for what is in reality an injunction as expressed in his example, 'Comrades you really must do this'(Cronin, 1986:74). The latter he describes as "must 2" and the former as 'must 1' (Cronin 1986:74).

Although examples of 'must' in the former sense, ie as fatalistic necessity, are, easily shown to be present in the national-democratic literature (see eg Mzala, 1985) neither Cronin's 'must 1' Nor 'must 2' really comes to grips with the type of necessity present in the theory of national-democratic revolution. This, it seems to me, is best understood as a conditional necessity which can be expressed in an 'if ... then' statement of the following sort: 'under the specific conditions obtaining in certain capitalist social formations - such as the level of development of the productive forces, the (colonial) social structure and the corresponding forms of social consciousness - any project of socialist transformation must, if it is to be successful, assume in the first instance the form of a struggle to create a national democracy.'

Here national democratic struggle is seen as a necessary causal condition, under certain circumstances, of socialist transformation. That is all. This is not the same as the type of necessity embodied in Cronin's 'must 1' - viz 'we must all die someday'. There is nothing rigidly pre-deterministic here. Neither, however, is this type of necessity reducible to an injunction of the sort expressed in Cronin's 'must 2'. Cronin has read my article very cursorily, (especially the passages he cites), for it contains nothing 'metaphysical' (Cronin, 1986:73). If he thinks it does then this is only because his own analysis of the semantic resources of the word 'must' is so crude.

Instead of engaging directly with my interrogation of the claim that the conditions obtaining in South Africa are such that socialism can only be attained via national democracy, Cronin simply pretends that no such claim is made by those who, in the South African context, adhere to the theory and strategy of national-democratic revolution. Needless to say he refers

to no-one but himself in support of this contention. In my article I cite Denga (1985) as advancing the thesis that the South African social structure is such that, even within the working class, national consciousness is dominant vis-a-vis class consciousness, and that, consequently, the national-democratic strategy is to be pursued in South Africa. I could have cited others (eg Toussaint 1984). It is therefore very misleading for Cronin to suggest that I attribute to 'the CST approach' a 'simplistic theory of social identity' (Cronin, 1986:76).

In fact it is adherents of 'the CST approach' who have themselves advanced an analysis of political subjectivity in South Africa according to which national consciousness dominates class consciousness in order to justify the pursuit of the national-democratic strategy of South Africa. Similarly, when Cronin argues that talk of a 'colonial screen' structuring the experience of social agents in South Africa is 'naive in the extreme' (Cronin, 1986:77), he ought to have made it very clear that, if this formulation is naive, then this naivety is not mine but that of an author who adheres to an orthodox CST approach (see Denga, 1985). This theory of subjectivity is one which I clearly reject in my article.

I now turn to what Cronin has to say about my treatment of the book he co-authored with Raymond Suttner *Thirty Years of the Freedom Charter*. Cronin complains, firstly, that my 'rendering of the CST position' is 'clumsy' (Cronin, 1987:77). But I was not at this point in my article attempting to expound the 'colonialism-of-a-special-type' thesis at all. I briefly discuss this later, after having considered the theory of national-democratic revolution. Here Cronin conflates the theory of national-democratic revolution with that of 'colonialism-of-a-special-type'. Although related, these are nonetheless quite distinct. At this point I was simply following closely the argument of Cronin and Suttner which I found (and still find) wanting.

In their book they state that 'national oppression and capitalist exploitation are inextricably interlinked' (Cronin and Suttner, 1986:129). Now this means that the elimination of national oppression in South Africa will have anti-capitalist effects, that - national liberation and the maintenance of capitalism are incompatible. I argued that, even if national liberation is construed along the lines of the theory of national-democratic revolution as going beyond political liberation narrowly defined, including the re-appropriation by the hitherto oppressed nation, via nationalisation, of its wealth and natural resources, it may not, for all that, be anti-capitalist. It may of course be argued that there is something specific about the nature of South African capitalism which makes it dependent for its very existence on national oppression. In this case

national liberation would be anti-capitalist. But Cronin and Suttner do not argue this. They merely state, quite baldly, that capitalism and national oppression are 'inextricably interlinked'. In his comments on my article Cronin seems to suggest that they are not so 'inextricably interlinked' after all and that he never intended to suggest that they are (Cronin, 1987:77). In that case he should, quite simply, not have said that they are.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Returning to the theory of national-democratic revolution itself, the most striking feature of Cronin's intervention is his obvious lack of familiarity with this theory. In his hands national democratic struggle is reduced to a liberation struggle by an oppressed nation which may, or may not, ultimately involve a break with capitalist development. What he ignores, and what is in fact the defining characteristic of this theory, is the claim that the establishment of a national democracy is itself already a break with capitalism. It defines a national democracy as transitional and as socialist-oriented although not socialist in the full sense (see eg Chirkin and Yudin, 1978).

In my article I attempted to show that underpinning this schema of transition are conceptions of capitalism and socialism which differ from the classical schema. In the latter socialism is itself conceived as a period (which may be very long and arduous) of transition. It is defined as the period during which communist relations of production progressively replace capitalist relations of production and it therefore comprises elements of both (see Marx, 1974; Lenin, 1963; and Althusser, 1977). I argued that it is only on an excessively narrow definition of capitalism that the measures undertaken by a national-democratic state (as specified in the theory) can be characterised as anti-capitalist and as therefore inaugurating a transitional social structure. This argument should not be construed as implying that all forms of capitalism are identical, nor that the position of the working class and its allies in the popular movement could not significantly change under a 'national-democratic' regime. It does however imply that the conceptions of capitalism and socialism informing the theory of national-democratic revolution need to be critically scrutinised.

In order to defend this theory Cronin could have challenged the classical conceptions of capitalism and socialism on which I rely in my article. Unlike him I think such a debate may have been fruitful. In this he could have drawn on interesting theoretical work being undertaken in the East and the West (see eg Bus, 1985; and Poulantzas, 1980). Cronin however does not choose this or any other route of theoretical defense. He appears to

believe that all that remains to be done is to think of ways of improving mobilisation around the Freedom Charter. He is quite right to stress the importance of this, but he is also, in my view, very wrong to dismiss so peremptorily the theoretical questions raised in my article.

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