The Double Lives of South African Marxism

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The implosion of South African Marxism

In April 1986, Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff (1986a) introduced a special issue of *Monthly Review* by describing the struggle against apartheid as 'crucial to the whole history of our time.' South Africa was unique, they argued, because:

> It is so far the only country with a well-developed, modern capitalist structure which is not only objectively ripe for revolution but has actually entered a stage of overt and seemingly irreversible revolutionary struggle. . . . There is no other country in the world that has anything like the material and symbolic significance of South Africa for both sides of the conflict that rends the world today. A victory for revolution, i.e., a genuine and lasting change in basic power relations in South Africa, could have an impact on the balance of global forces comparable to that of the revolutionary wave that followed World War II. On the other hand, a victory for counter-revolution—the stabilization of capitalist relations in South Africa, even if in somewhat altered form—would be a stunning defeat for the world revolution (Sweezy and Magdoff 1986b: 5–6).

At that time, South Africa had the fastest-growing labour movement in the world, led by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which from its inception in 1985 had committed itself openly to the struggle for socialism. In townships, informal settlements, rural villages, schools and universities, millions of people were mobilized in a struggle which sought to liberate these areas and institutions from capital and the state. Among the various organizations of the liberation movement, there were none that openly supported capitalism. All spoke, in different registers, of bringing about fundamental social and economic change. The exiled African National Congress (ANC) was formally allied to the South African Communist

Party (SACP), which at that time stood openly for the revolutionary overthrow of the apartheid state. Major SACP theorists argued that this required the destruction of the existing capitalist order as well—an argument that had found echoes in ANC policy documents since 1969, much amplified in the mass struggles of the 1980s.

At many South African universities, Marxism was a significant and sometimes even dominant presence in the social sciences, humanities and creative arts. Marxist historians, both in South Africa and abroad, were developing a major reinterpretation of South African history. Their project provided an example to an ever-wider range of disciplines and practices, from art history to theatre to rural development. A wide range of illegal, semi-legal and legal publications provided a platform for radical ideas: community and student newspapers, analytical journals, photocopied discussion papers, and more. Students and youth, hungry for Marxist ideas, circulated illegal or semi-legal writings, formed study groups, and envisaged a future free of exploitation, in which working people would play an active role in reshaping social life in accordance with their needs and aspirations.

This upsurge of Marxist theory and practice had its beginnings in the context of exile and repression in the 1960s, emerged as a factor in South African political and intellectual life in the 1970s, and grew rapidly after the Soweto uprising of 1976. It brought together analysis and action, high ideals and extraordinary sacrifice. It was sometimes slowed by state repression, but continued to grow through the 1980s, along with the growth of the wider struggle against apartheid. Throughout these decades, international support for the overthrow of apartheid grew, culminating in global celebration of the release of Mandela in February 1990. For a moment, it seemed that the radical hopes set out by Sweezy and Magdoff would be realized. But that moment did not last.

After 1994, it quickly became apparent that Mandela's ANC government aimed to secure the 'stabilization of capitalist relations in South Africa' which Sweezy and Magdoff had described as 'a stunning defeat for the world revolution'. Communist cabinet ministers played a leading role

in creating policies favourable to the major banks and corporations, and participated more generally in stabilizing the capitalist order in South Africa. COSATU and the SACP were brought into line when the ANC's neoliberal macroeconomic policy, GEAR, was introduced in 1996. The huge array of militant organizations in townships, villages, educational institutions and the like were dismantled or reduced to getting out the vote on election days. Universities were restructured, with management being given far greater control, and academic disciplines subjected to the ideal of excellence and the needs of the marketplace. The study of history declined dramatically, often turning to heritage studies to survive and forfeiting its influence on other disciplines. Student politics all but disappeared, except for recurrent flare-ups around fee increases, financial exclusions and the budget for parties.

The major short-term beneficiary of this implosion was the long-banned South African Communist Party, which had often been critical, while in exile, of the radicalism of the labour movement and the universities. At the 1989 SACP congress in Cuba—chaired by Thabo Mbeki, who was at the same time involved in secret negotiations with the apartheid regime—the party called for the seizure of power through mass insurrection (Gevisser 2007: 527-28). After 1990 Mbeki and many other leading figures quietly left the party; its remaining leadership was prominent in finding a compromise with capitalism. At its 1989 congress the SACP claimed 5,000 members—reflecting what was then a major increase in support. The SACP relaunch in Soweto in July 1990 saw a massive influx of new members and its first rallies attracted huge numbers around the country, including 140,000 in Port Elizabeth (Adams 1997: 117, 120).

In 1990, in his discussion of the relaunch of the SACP within South Africa, Jeremy Cronin captured the determination of the leading organization claiming an allegiance to Marxism to defer to the needs of capitalism: 'There is a necessity to keep the red flag flying during this period, but at the same time not to make it seem like the major present confrontation is between the red flag and the flag of free enterprise' (Cronin 1990: 11).

The editors of *Debate*—a Johannesburg-based magazine seeking to fill the gap left by the closure of a whole range of radical publications in the early 1990s—described the impact of these developments on Marxism in South Africa, bemoaning 'the lack of intellectual leadership from the previous generation'. It was not just that the leading lights of this generation were no longer providing leadership at the time when the Marxist project was most in need of it; many of them were scrambling to offer their services to capitalism, either directly or through policy advice to an ANC government that was tending increasingly towards neoliberalism.

There is no room here for *Debate*'s (1997: 3-4) catalogue of capitulation and betrayal. What stands out is how directly knowledge and expertise acquired largely as trusted insiders in the labour movement or in socialist politics more broadly was put at the disposal of capital and its interests. *Debate* cites Marxist critics of the urban planning strategies of corporate think-tanks becoming strategists for the very same think-tanks; a Marxist economist endorsing Taiwan as a model for post-apartheid South Africa and co-authoring a neoliberal economic policy for the ANC government; others recommending cuts in child maintenance grants or arguing against a minimum wage.

The move of mainly white Marxist intellectuals into lucrative consultancies and the like was followed by that of mainly black activists and unionists into government and business, with several former unionists becoming multi-millionaires. The rise of former Marxists—along with former radicals in the Black Consciousness movement—within the universities was more gradual, but in the first decade of the twenty-first century many of them were bringing academic life into line with business principles and taming campus radicalism.

The new social movements which emerged after 1994 to challenge neoliberal capitalism— resisting evictions, water cutoffs, privatisation and the like—have not been much influenced by Marxism, and have often been openly sceptical of it. Within the universities, the critique of capitalism has all but been forgotten, and free market economics is not seriously challenged. Some recent historical analyses treat the Marxist current that emerged in the 1970s as

primarily an evasive response by white, English-speaking intellectuals to the critique of their role by the Black Consciousness movement (cf. Ally 2005; Ally and Ally 2008; Desai and Bohmke 1997). The argument is implausible, but the practical result is much the same: a society in which the very idea of politics has been discredited as nothing more than a vehicle for individual advancement or enrichment or both.

In short, where Marxism had become a major presence in South African political and intellectual life over some decades until the 1980s, by the mid-1990s it had effectively disappeared from the South African landscape. Short of wholesale imprisonment and indeed slaughter—as in Hitler's Germany, Suharto's Indonesia or Allende's Chile—it is hard to think of a historical parallel for a reversal on this scale.

In South Africa today, it is as if the moment of Marxism's greatest impact never happened, or as if it was simply stage-managed. In South Africa it was not repression that brought Marxism to this pass, but abandonment. Its basic principles and commitments were betrayed, or—if this is too difficult to believe—they never existed, except as a youthful fantasy.

Understanding South African Marxism historically

No attempt to take stock of the situation of Marxism in South Africa can avoid this moment of implosion. A movement destroyed by repression can be revived; but a movement abandoned by its own followers seems to condemn itself to a special kind of oblivion, in which even those who remain true to its principles are included. Any interpretation of South African Marxism requires historical explanation of this implosion.

The immediate temptation is to find that explanation in the mistaken ideas of the Marxists themselves, emphasizing either the errors of those who capitulated or those who did not. But this temptation may itself be a sign of the deeper problem: a context in which Marxism could seem to be self-sufficient to its South African adherents—a set of 'universal truths of Marxism-

Leninism', for example, requiring only the right formula for 'indigenous application' (Bunting 1998: 7). This chapter seeks to avoid this temptation, by treating South African Marxism not as a finite set of propositions and practices, which must be judged as truth or error, but as a living resource, constantly in need of development and constantly overcoming its own internal tensions as it engages with a recalcitrant reality.

Throughout its history, Marxism has always had these two strands. This dual character runs through almost every question of Marxist theory and practice, but is always related to the duality of Marxism as self-enclosed system and as critical engagement with many spheres of social practice. This duality explains, for example, Marx's own assertion that he was not a Marxist, and Lenin's claim (1976 [1913]: 44) that Marxism is both 'the direct and immediate *continuation* of the teachings of the greatest representatives of philosophy, political economy and socialism' and at the same time 'omnipotent because it is true'.

At times the contrast between these two characters of Marxism is so stark that Marxism itself comes to lead a double life. This was historically most evident in the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) after the repeal of Bismarck's anti-socialist laws in 1890. The SPD continued to praise the legacy of Marx and Engels, but its actual politics assumed that capitalism could be reformed through parliamentary elections and labour reforms. This internal division led to the revisionism dispute between Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg. The dispute was papered over by the SPD leadership, but resolved in practice by the parties of the Second International siding with their capitalist classes in the First World War; by the murder of Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, her fellow-leader of the Spartacus League, in Berlin in 1919, carried out on the instructions of their former comrades in the SPD; and by the rise of Nazism.

Marxism became a presence in South African political life at the time that the Second International was tearing itself apart, and in response to the events that destroyed it and largely discredited its legacy. Second International Marxism has never had declared supporters in South Africa. And yet, from a certain perspective, the history of Marxism in South Africa can

be seen as a century-long recapitulation of the same double lives that characterized the Marxism of the Second International, leading to the SACP calling for insurrection while its leaders negotiated a settlement with the apartheid state and Marxist trade unionists discovering that their true commitment was to capitalist profitability.

Olive Schreiner's critique of monopoly capitalism in South Africa

In the years in which the contradictions of the Marxism of the Second International emerged, the first critiques of capitalism were being formulated in South Africa. The critique of capitalism with the greatest affinities to Marxism was developed by Olive Schreiner, beginning with her break with Cecil Rhodes in 1895.

In Britain and elsewhere, Schreiner was known for giving voice to the hopes and frustrations of women. In South Africa, she was a celebrated public figure, and she did not hesitate to address the public issues of the day. Often hers was a lone voice speaking truths that no-one else would dare to say. Inevitably, this brought her into conflict with Cecil Rhodes, not long after her return to South Africa in 1890. For Schreiner (Cronwright-Schreiner 1924: 179), Rhodes was 'the only great man and man of genius South Africa possesses'. But their friendship soon turned into enmity. Their differences are captured in an exchange reported in Plomer's chapter, when Schreiner asked Rhodes why he 'made friends' of certain corrupt and self-promoting politicians. '*Those* men my friends!' he replied. 'They are not my *friends*! They are my tools, and when I have done with them I throw them away!' (Plumer 1984: 120-21).

Rhodes' policies can be interpreted as expressing a similar instrumentalism. What is good for the population is what enables them to contribute to the larger economic and political goals he upholds: capitalist expansion and the imperialist power. Schreiner's critique of Rhodes's policies was first set out in a speech given by her husband, S.C. Cronwright Schreiner, in August 1895—just months before the Jameson Raid—and published under both their names as *The Political Situation* in 1896. The text constantly stresses the human results of 'monopolist' policies. These

policies prevent the organic development of social bonds, treating people 'merely as a means for acquiring wealth' and creating a 'diseased' political life.

Rhodes' racial attitudes matched his sense of the English-speaking peoples as destined to rule the planet, and his project of developing large-scale (mainly extractive) industry in South Africa, which required major supplies of low-wage labour. The fact that South Africa's industrialization was based on mining also meant that it did not require an internal market; diamonds and gold are not perishable, are not household necessities and are sold on a world market. From this fact, much of Rhodes' ideas, and much of the pattern of South African development since his time, follows.

Schreiner shared with Rhodes a conception of the gradual and beneficial spread of Western institutions, technology and values. But she thought the process justified only if it led to greater individual freedom, relative equality in economic condition and morally better human beings. The question of the kind of human being produced by specific forms of society was central to her critique of both capitalism and patriarchy. She saw capitalism as essentially parasitic and 'not healthy, either for the man who lives to accumulate for himself the results of others' ill-paid labours, or for the worker the profit of whose labour is taken' (Cronwright-Schreiner 1924: 386). She argued against race and gender discrimination on the grounds that a healthy society 'should depend entirely on the desire and ability of the individual citizen to make use of' its resources (Cronwright-Schreiner 1924: 396).

For Schreiner (1896: 26), then, the 'Native Question' was 'only the Labour Question', although 'complicated by a difference of race and colour between the employing and propertied, and the employed and poorer classes'. Schreiner's commitment to non-racialism was inseparable from her hostility to class domination.

The contrast with Rhodes stands out in a later text by Schreiner, written years after Rhodes' death. In her *Closer Union*, she provides a vision of a future South Africa whose 'greatness' is

measured not by territorial size or wealth, but by the justice and wisdom of its citizens (Schreiner n.d. [1908]: 20-22). Where Rhodes saw racial domination as essential to economic expansion, Schreiner sees non-racialism enabling everyone to 'take their share in the higher duties of life and citizenship' (28).

Schreiner's feminism and her socialism were of a piece, both of them developed through her close friendship with Eleanor Marx. She mourned Luxemburg's death, writing in 1919 (1924: 364) after reading a volume of Liebknecht's anti-war speeches: 'What a brave great soul. . . . I have such a wish some day to stand at the spot where he and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered—but I don't suppose it will ever be.'

Schreiner has been on the conscience of subsequent generations of South African Marxists, across the ideological spectrum, without any of them really acknowledging her as their predecessor. Dora Taylor (2002 [1942]: 37) wrote of Schreiner as the 'Cassandra of South Africa'—a prophet rather than a political thinker. Michael Harmel (1955: 7) gives a moving account of Schreiner's heroines but faults them for their 'single-handed struggle within the ranks of the middle-class'. Ruth First's co-authored biography of Schreiner did pioneering work on Schreiner's links with British socialists, but never asks about her meaning for socialist struggles in South Africa.

Schreiner did not deal with the questions that preoccupied South African Marxism in the decades after her. South African Marxism assumed it had no need for the questions that Schreiner raised. But the question of what kind of human being would take the place of the class divisions of capitalism did not disappear just because it was not acknowledged.

In the shadow of the Russian Revolution

The history of Marxism in South Africa is usually treated as beginning in 1915, when the International Socialist League (ISL) was established. Other socialist groups were formed before

the ISL, beginning with the Social Democratic Federation, established in Cape Town in 1903. But the ISL was national in scope and vision and it could be seen as a predecessor of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), founded in 1921.

Socialist groups in South Africa during the early decades of the twentieth century were divided by country of origin (including Britain, Australia and the United States), language (including Yiddish, German and Italian) and ideological history and conviction. However, none of them had a stake in the war in Europe, which had split the Second International. The ISL explicitly supported the resolutions of the Zimmerwald conference of 1915, calling for proletarian revolution instead of imperialist war (Bunting 1981: 14-15, 25). What brought them together was the impact of the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917.

The CPSA was established on the basis of the twenty-one conditions for joining the Third International (or Communist International, shortened to Comintern). These conditions were adopted as an appendix to the constitution of the CPSA. The twenty-one conditions reflect the vehement internal splits within European Marxism after 1914.

The conditions are written in a language of rupture from the Second International, calling for removal of reformists or centrists from the party, the labour movement and parliamentary delegations, condemning failure to agitate within the military as treason against the revolutionary cause, calling for the exclusion and denunciation of 'untrustworthy half reformists' and 'unreliable elements' and for regular 'clearance' of members 'in order systematically to disembarrass the party from the petty bourgeois elements that may penetrate it'. Somewhat redundantly, it calls for the exclusion of all who disagree with these multiple modes of exclusion (Bunting 1981: 58-62). In a sense, the twenty-one conditions called for the party to declare war on itself, and this war was not long in coming.

There was considerable continuity between the ISL and CPSA into the mid-1920, followed by constant disruption, initiated from Moscow, after 1928. But the 'rupture' within South African

Marxism did not take the form anticipated in the twenty-one conditions, as the legacy of the Second International had little purchase in South Africa. The position of the ISL and early CPSA (for the sake of convenience, I'll speak of the ISL to include both) differed significantly from that of the CPSA after 1928.

First, the ISL conceived of Marxism as a 'living growth unfolding itself into ever newer and finer conceptions', interpreted 'in the light of fresh experience' through free discussion (Bunting 1981: 5). This conception made way for the 'iron discipline' proposed by the twenty-one conditions, with the party centre endowed by its members 'with complete power, authority and ample rights' (Bunting 1981: 60).

Second, along with this changed conception of Marxism went a change in organizational ethos. The ISL prided itself on its 'harmony of spirit', its 'devotion to the cause of International Socialism and the whole empire of ideas which that implies' and 'the most interesting diversity of outlook and opinion' within its ranks (Bunting 1981: 22). The twenty-one conditions warned against treason, infiltration and unreliability as constant dangers and the catalogue of such errors was to grow. By 1932 the Comintern's representative concluded that the 'main task' of the party was 'to root out the remnants of Buntingism' which was variously equated with 'social fascism, reformism, Trotskyism, chauvinism and imperialism' (Bunting 1998: 67-68). By 1935, the 'immediate task' of the party was 'to set about liquidating these left sectarian tendencies' which had been responsible for the 'rooting out' of a few years before, but were now denounced for 'tending to isolate the party from the toiling masses' (Bunting 1998: 81-82).

Third, a new orientation towards African nationalism resulted, largely in response to the Comintern's Black Republic thesis of 1928. This is sometimes presented as a South African initiative, which has the effect of presenting the SACP alliance with the ANC as unrelated to the Stalinist idea of 'socialism in one country' and the SACP's slavish defence of dictatorship in the Soviet bloc. But this orientation towards nationalism went along with a changed conception of internationalism as loyalty to the Soviet line.

The ISL explicitly rejected the idea of socialism in one country long before Stalin pronounced it (Bunting 1981: 13). The ISL critique of 'watertight compartments' was aimed at the Second International, now 'submerged by a more immense upheaval of national hate, prejudice, fear, jealousy and slaughter'. The ISL believed that 'national sentiment' would give way to 'the vaster constellation of international working class unity' (Bunting 1981: 12). Like Schreiner, they described the 'native problem' as essentially the problem of the emancipation of labour (Bunting 1981: 30).

This can be reformulated to mean that according to the ISL `there was no national question in South Africa; that the national oppression of the majority of people in our country was not really very worthy of consideration' (Cronin 1991: 12). But the question is not whether racial oppression should be considered, but how, including the question of what national aspirations were repressed in the process and how nationalist politics related to the struggle for socialism.

The ISL's internationalism had a somewhat abstract and even Eurocentric character. Its non-racialism relied on Marx's (1976: 414) formulation that 'labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where it is branded in a black skin'. This is surely no more than a starting point, but a starting point on a road not to be taken. But that does not mean that South African Marxism could only be made more concrete by subordination to the needs of Soviet policy and alignment with African nationalism—the road taken after 1928.

Locating Marxism in Africa

The most detailed account of the origins of the Black Republic thesis, adopted by the Comintern in 1928, shows that it was the answer to a question which kept on changing, and was largely formulated on spurious grounds. Its rhetoric was stabilised only by gratuitous accusations of racism, majority vote in a packed commission and threats of expulsion—in short, by ideological fiat. Sheridan Johns (1995: 208-9) describes how the Comintern's involvement arose initially

from the 'Negro problem' which came to be considered 'as an important part of the Eastern question'. In turn 'American Negroes were seen as the most revolutionary Negroes and thus the logical agents of communism to the Negroes of the rest of the world'. Stalin himself believed that 'the Negroes' should be considered as a nationality, in accordance with his own theory (Johns 1995: 213-14).

Stalin became interested in the question after the Shanghai massacre in 1927 of Chinese communists ordered by the Soviet leadership to hand over their weapons to the Kuomintang. To silence Trotsky's criticism of Stalin's policy on China, it was necessary to demand discipline on this issue. African-Americans and South African blacks were also seen as potential counters to any war threats from the United States or Britain.

The thesis itself is routinely celebrated by SACP supporters as the only alternative to it was a denial of the central role of the oppressed black majority in the struggle for freedom. In fact, the move toward Africanisation of the CPSA was initiated some years before 1928, largely through S.P. Bunting, the main opponent of the thesis. At the 1921 Comintern congress, the CPSA emphasized the importance of mobilizing black (African) workers. The CPSA actively recruited African workers who became a majority of its membership; active new branches were formed in Sophiatown and in worker compounds; it started night schools for African workers in 1925; its newspaper gave more extensive coverage to issues affecting African workers, often in African languages; it formed industrial unions for African workers, which came together in 1928 as the Native Federation of Trade Unions; it moved its offices from the building they shared with the white trade unions to the site of the party school in 1927 (cf. Johns 1995: 186-88). These steps surely did not put an immediate end to white paternalism, or resolve all strategic questions. But they represented clear steps towards a South African Marxism committed to overcoming divisions of race.

The significance of the Black Republic thesis, in that context, was not its emphasis on the role of the African majority. It was opposed by South African communists mainly because it promoted

racial division of the working class and reliance on a tiny and largely conservative African middle class. In the longer term, its significance lay it is introduction of the idea of a two-stage (or multi-stage) revolution. The idea of stages also promoted a culture of authoritarianism within the party, and in the party's role in society, as the party's manipulation of class alliances took the place of opening ever more radical horizons for human liberation.

The same manipulation undercut internal democracy, even when a democratic façade was maintained. This was apparent at the Comintern congress itself, where the sub-commission that approved the South African thesis had seven American and nine Russian members, but only one South African. The immediate effect on South African Marxism of the Black Republic thesis, and the way in which it was imposed upon the SACP, was a rise of sectarianism and dogma, and passivity among members and even leaders, who never knew when they might walk into the next ideological trap. Moses Kotane, one of the black leaders of the SACP during this second phase of Africanisation, describes how Douglas Wolton, the new CPSA general secretary 'spoke a language none of us understood'; how members would be expelled for asking the reasons for earlier expulsions; how a central committee in which 19 of 23 members were Africans was still dominated by Wolton and Lazar Bach, while 'most of the Africans were dummies, they never spoke at meetings' (Bunting 1998: 61-64).

The third phase was initiated by Kotane himself, after his Cradock letter of 1934, calling yet again for Africanisation in the party, and thereby precipitating a conflict with Lazar Bach. The call may have been made necessary by the massive loss of membership after the expulsion of Bunting and others, leaving a core of white loyalists in the majority. Kotane began by complaining of party members—'especially the whites'—whose hobbies were 'the German situation and the Comintern, Stalin and Trotsky and the errors of various Communist parties'. According to Kotane, these issues were made redundant by the fact that 'we are living in a culturally backward Africa' (Bunting 1981: 120-21)—a claim that, among communists, only an African could have made without repercussions!

Kotane's Cradock letter is a peculiar document. At its core is an important insight, but one which it should not have been so difficult to discover: 'The CPSA must pay special attention to S Africa, study the conditions in this country and concretise the demands of the toiling masses from first hand information' (Bunting 1981: 122). But when Kotane himself studies South African conditions, what he sees there is remarkably shallow. For example: 'Socialism, the proletarian revolution to our rural population (the majority) is bit a vague expression which sounds more as a dream than a reality, to them it sounds like the "land of Canaan" which can be attained only after death' (Bunting 1981: 121). This observation does not lead him to think further about how socialists could articulate demands or perspective that provide rural people with a better understanding of capitalism or a way of contesting it.

Despite this placid shallowness of vision, Kotane's letter was enduring in its consequences, setting a framework for forty years at the helm of the CPSA and SACP. It was as if he never questioned the virtues of the Tswana homestead of his childhood and they could sustain him through to his death in Moscow in 1978. At his funeral, Oliver Tambo spoke of the Soviet Union as 'Moses Kotane's second and beloved home. He loved the Soviet people dearly and regarded the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as his own party' (Bunting 1998: 295). His account of Soviet reality must surely have been as much the product of a rigidly empirical temper and good-hearted naivety as his observation of rural Africans in 1934.

Dora Taylor's critique of national cultures in South Africa

The Trotskyist current that emerged in South Africa in the early 1930s—mainly in Cape Town, where the Lenin Club was formed in 1933, and soon after the Workers' Party of South Africa (WPSA)—built on independent strands of socialist thought in the Western Cape (cf. Hirson 2001). It became the dominant current of Marxism in the Western Cape, but remained somewhat marginal within South African Marxism more generally. The WPSA initially formed the core of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM, later Unity Movement of South Africa), formed in 1943.

NEUM figures such as Ben Kies, Kenny Jordaan and I.B. Tabata played an important role in developing Marxist historical scholarship in South Africa. It is in a less well-known area of NEUM-inspired work, however, that we can look for a preliminary answer to the question: What was the alternative to the direction taken by the CPSA after 1928? What was the road not taken when the remnants of the ISL tradition were summarily dismantled in favour of alignment with African nationalism? A brief sketch of the work of a less well-known figure in the NEUM tradition, Dora Taylor, may help to provide an answer.

Taylor was born in Scotland and arrived in Cape Town in 1926. She and her husband became involved in socialist discussion circles in which University of Cape Town academics like Lancelot Hogben and Ben Farrington were prominent, and later in the Lenin Club. Taylor became active in the WPSA, and collaborated closely with I.B. Tabata, who arrived in Cape Town from the Eastern Cape in 1931. Their partnership continued until Taylor's death in exile in 1976 (cf. Rassool 2004; Sandwith 2002).

Apart from her collaboration with Tabata, Taylor was a prolific literary critic and political commentator, writing regularly in the magazine *Trek* from 1939 to 1946. She also wrote plays, short stories and two novels, which remained unpublished in her lifetime. In her work, she develops an approach to questions of culture and nationality in South Africa sharply at variance with the dominant thrust of South African Marxism.

To some extent, Taylor built on the account of the interconnected destinies of black and white in South Africa developed by Olive Schreiner, who Taylor admired. For Schreiner, national identity was not fixed and immutable, but the product of ongoing interaction. In the South African context, she argued that 'in the end the subjected people write their features on the face of the conquerors' (Schreiner 1908: 31). Taylor's treatment of this process—developed largely through critical examination of South African literature, but also in her fiction—is well captured by Driver (2008: 288), who describes Taylor's conflicting themes as 'on the one hand

white greed, selfishness and myopia, on the other black entrapment, enforced complicity and impotent fury . . . rendered with a passionate conviction that this is not the way to be human, not the way to the future'. Taylor seeks a way out of the impossible contradictions created by such racialised cultures, analyzing in her literary essays and her fiction 'the last kicks of a moribund culture, white capitalism in crisis, and the possibilities of a growing consciousness among blacks of their exploitation and oppression, and the possibilities of power'.

The implication of the argument is that the formulation of the 'national question' at the heart of much South African Marxism is at the same time an ahistorical and incoherent invention, and also a perpetuation of the human damage done by conquest and dispossession. It is a false resolution of a real tension within Marxism, between the privileged place Marxism gives to the industrialized West in its conception of world history, on the one hand, and its claim to provide a vision of global emancipation, in which the most oppressed and exploited have a leading role to play, on the other. This resolution affirms a logic of identity which is 'always and everywhere entangled with the logic of hierarchy' (Graeber 2011: 111), cutting short the question of how a free society could enable the free development of all.

The ISL scoffed at the 'black coated respectables of the Congress' and regretted that the black worker 'sees in his economic exploiters the champions of his civil rights' (Bunting 1981: 53). The CPSA were persuaded by Stalin's view, or had it imposed on them, with the result the nation led by the 'respectables' of the black middle class came to serve as a proxy for the black working class. Taylor (2002a [1942]: 67) makes clear that the absence of black national culture in South Africa is not the doing of black South Africa, but rather a sign that 'there is something wrong with the civilization that nourishes them physically and spiritually, or rather withholds nourishment from them'. For `a people disintegrated and disunited as the Africans have been by conquest and economic exploitation that wrenched them out of their former ways of living, cannot produce a culture' .

Instead 'to create a culture worthy of the name he must first strive to liberate himself. . . And to liberate himself he must first see clearly the great forces that oppress him' (Taylor 2002b [1942]: 70, 72). The resulting culture will be not be racially exclusive, or require a wholesale rejection of European culture. 'Great cultures have grown by finding nourishment from old cultures, but the African is a pariah and an outcast from the civilization that has conquered him'. The African struggle against oppression and exploitation 'will most surely express itself in the growth of a new culture' (Taylor 2002b [1942]: 74-75).

Taylor's argument draws on a study of black writing in South Africa, but applies more broadly. Her best-known work *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*—published under the pseudonym Nosipho Majeke in 1952—extends the argument by demonstrating that the sources which formed the modern African elite were part of the process of conquest and dispossession.

Taylor's work is no more than a starting point, from which it is possible to explore the dialectic forming the identities of oppressor and oppressed—an exploration which cannot be undertaken once the 'national question' is placed at the centre of socialist politics, ignoring the ways in which nationality provides cover for an educated elite to speak for the black masses and for socialist internationalism to become an instrument of Soviet foreign policy.

Taylor's work formed part of the often contradictory politics of the Unity Movement. Its project was overwhelmed by the predominantly pedagogical thrust of those politics and its often justified but excessively rigid dismissal of 'careerists and opportunists' who do not learn their lessons well (e.g. Tabata 1997 [1948]: 9). The Unity Movement tradition limited itself through a type of revolutionary purism, often focused on the strategy of non-collaboration, which grew into hostility to political action considered 'adventurist' or premature. Their response to the wave of mass struggles that began with the Soweto uprisings of 1976 left them isolated and marginalized, reprimanding the larger process of history rather than participating in it.

Trotskyism has a longer trajectory in South Africa than can be described here. Ted Grant, born in Germiston, left for London in 1934 and became a leading figure in the Militant Tendency of the British Labour Party. The Militant Tendency helped form the Marxist Workers Tendency of the ANC in 1979, after Martin Legassick and other exiles were suspended, and later expelled, from the ANC. Neville Alexander and others left the Unity Movement to form the Yu Chi Chan Club in 1962, were imprisoned and became prominent in Robben Island debates from 1964. After their release they brought community organizations together into the Cape Action League in 1983, to oppose Botha's tricameral parliament. Some from this tradition are active in the Democratic Left Front today. They include people of extraordinary integrity and sense of principle; many have fled the pedagogical stance of the NEUM through activism, but few have truly escaped it.

The Theory of National Democratic Revolution, from Decolonisation to Neoliberalism

The last major report produced by the CPSA before their banning by the National Party government in 1950 provided a hesitant and provisional formulation of the idea that South African society could be understood as colonialism of a special type (CST): 'it combines the characteristics of both an imperialist state and a colony within a single, indivisible, geographical, political and economic entity' (Bunting 1981: 201). It did not attempt to develop this metaphor into a theory, or draw definite strategic implications from it. Indeed, the report quoted Stalin's warning against the nationalism that the metaphor may imply. For the most part, the report characterizes South Africa as fascist or Nazi, as do other CPSA documents of that time.

The CPSA dissolved itself in 1950, secretly reconstituted itself as the South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1953, and announced its existence in 1960. In 1962 it adopted *The Road to South African Freedom* as its programme, setting out its characterization of South Africa as a colonial society of a special type, its commitment to the theory of national-democratic revolution (NDR) as a stage in the transition to socialism and its 'unqualified support' for the

Freedom Charter of 1955 as 'the indispensable basis for the advance of our country along non-capitalist lines to a socialist and communist future' (Bunting 1981: 314).

For the fifty years since then, these three elements have been linked together at the core of SACP ideology. Since the Morogoro conference of 1969, they have played a major role in the politics of the ANC as well—often making use of phrases taken directly from the 1962 programme, although with slightly different meanings and implications. For much of that time—and especially since the contest for hegemony within the liberation struggle began in earnest after the Soweto uprising of 1976—it would be fair to say that the theory of NDR, or the 'two-stage revolution', has been at the heart of Marxist political debate in South Africa.

The metaphor of South Africa as a colonial society had been in circulation for some time by 1962, as decolonization called racial domination into question on a global scale. It was never a good fit with the realities of South Africa. As Jack and Ray Simons (1968: 611) commented: 'The model fits in broad outline'. However, 'The country has in fact advanced well beyond the limits of primitive colonialism. . . South Africans have merged into a single, indivisible society'. It is worth speculating, then, about why CST and NDR should have become central to SACP politics, and why this happened at that specific moment.

First and most obviously, developments in Soviet Marxism impacted on the SACP. Hudson (1986: 18) describes how the growing links between the Soviet Union and the Third World were given a doctrinal basis in the era of decolonization: 'In the declaration of the meeting of 81 Communist and workers parties in Moscow in 1960 the term "national democracy" was formally introduced into the theoretical repertoire of the international communist movement in order to designate that category of ex-colonial countries which could be identified as engaged in a non-capitalist path of development in opposition to imperialism and towards national autonomy'. The terminology of the 1960 declaration found its way into the SACP programme of 1962, as if it had always existed. To some extent CST/NDR was simply an updating of the Black Republic thesis of 1928. To make the SACP's commitment to NDR

compatible with the theory, however, it was necessary to define South Africa as a colonial society—albeit of a 'special type'.

Second, the condition of illegality and exile made the SACP especially dependent on funding from the Soviet bloc. The banning of the ANC in 1960 and imprisonment of its leaders in the years thereafter, and the move towards armed struggle in 1961, gave the SACP a potentially vital role as facilitator for Soviet bloc funding and military training and supplies. It enabled the SACP to present itself as an authentic and legitimate voice of the African majority in South Africa, in a period when racial domination was becoming indefensible in the West.

Third, the shift to CST/NDR took place in the aftermath of the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, at which Khrushchev had condemned the crimes of Stalin—described as 'glaring violations of revolutionary legality'—sending shock waves through the international communist movement. The SACP existed at that time only an underground nucleus and had no need to consider these revelations. Harmel wrote in *New Age* soon after the congress that Stalin's 'place in history remains secure'; it was necessary only to correct the false picture of him as 'an infallible miracle-worker, standing above and separate from his Party and his colleagues' (Bunting 1981: 244). South African Marxism bypassed the global reckoning with Stalinism that followed Khrushchev's revelations. CST/NDR was a way of avoiding that legacy, by locating the SACP within the struggle for national independence rather than the struggle for socialism. At the same time the SACP could continue its adherence to the foreign policy needs of the Soviet Union to the end, priding itself on being first to welcome every Soviet act of repression, invasion or occupation.

In each of these contexts, we see the SACP rooting Marxism in an attempt to obfuscate and create ambiguity about its own political role. Indeed, the central place given to class alliances in South African Marxism has required that social reality be presented in the terms best suited to this strategy and the strategy itself requires the classes be mobilized in manipulative and systematically misleading ways. This pattern is central to CST/NDR which attributes a role to the

SACP which is at once invisible and indispensable. The SACP need never contest openly for leadership within the ANC-led alliance; its leaders speak now for the alliance and now for the party, just as they choose; they rely on different classes to hear the messages intended for them and to ignore the contradictory message intended for others.

Above all, the distinction between the first (national democratic) stage of their revolution and the second (socialist) stage is opaque to all but themselves. Even when the SACP argues that the two stages take place simultaneously, their exact proportions remain a mystery to all but the leadership. According to the 1962 programme, it is only under the leadership of the working class that the full aims of the revolution can be achieved, and for this purpose workers have 'founded and built their own political party', the SACP (Bunting 1981: 311). In practice, however, working-class aspirations can be either too radical for their class allies or not radical enough for the party leadership. As Slovo (1976: 149) puts it: 'The continuing role of an independent class-based movement as part of the revolutionary front is thus historically vital, despite the absence of any basic policy divergence between the ANC and the SACP on the main strategy and thrust of liberation aims. Revolutionary leadership by a movement experienced in struggle is therefore the precondition for real victory'.

The whole 'theory of the South African revolution' which Slovo develops can be given clear meaning only by this 'revolutionary leadership' and only by assuming that it is provided by the SACP. Revolutionary leadership is no longer about enabling the broadest mass of oppressed people to clarify their own aims and aspirations for themselves. Instead, the leadership keeps those aspirations ambiguous, or holds them in check, or directs them at specific targets, often related to leadership struggles.

There were always voices of dissent, even within the SACP, about the basic framework of CST/NDR. Perhaps the most important of them was Ruth First (1970), whose critique of the politics of post-independence Africa undermined the myths of decolonisation on which the theory depended. In a polemic with Archie Mafeje after Soweto, First (1978: 97) spoke of the

notion of two-stage revolution as 'long overdue for rejection'. By then, however, debates within South African Marxism were structured along essentially sectarian lines. It was not so much that NDR ever won out in a genuine contest of ideas within South African Marxism, but rather that it kept the field of debate sufficiently incoherent that all alternative positions came to seem alike, first in their opposition to apartheid and capitalism and after 1990 in their adjustment to the global context established by the fall of the Soviet Union.

The rhetoric of NDR has a central role in the ANC's *Strategy and Tactics*, adopted at Morogoro in 1969. Thereafter it becomes less conspicuous in ANC official documents until 1997, when the term re-emerges at the heart of ANC policy discourse under Mbeki and Zuma (Kramer 2010). In this reincarnation, NDR maintains only its functions of mystification and pretence, seeking to imply that there is something revolutionary about the enrichment of a black capitalist elite and the scramble for ministerial posts. The language of NDR is restricted to political insiders, and even they can no longer give it a more broadly intelligible meaning.

Three critiques of NDR

The implosion of South African Marxism around 1990 can be seen not simply as the impact of sudden and unexpected global events, but also as a failure to establish a philosophical basis for Marxist ideas in a South African context or even a culture of critical reflection on ideas and assumptions. There was always more urgent need to find agreement on practical issues. In a society with derivative philosophical traditions, why would Marxists feel the need for clarification of their own assumptions?

This emphasis on practicality is evident in the Communist tradition, which has done so much to form South African Marxism. When Eddie Roux was under attack at the Comintern congress of 1928, he decided to accept the Black Republic thesis against his own judgement on the basis that 'the South Africans were weak in the theory from which the program had been deduced' (Johns 1995: 224). S.P. Bunting replied to criticism of 'Buntingism' around 1930 in a similar vein:

'I have no theoretical differences with the present Political Bureau. I am indeed not a profound reader or theoretician (Bunting 1998: 66). As a student in the Lenin School in the 1930s, Moses Kotane 'was reading everything he could lay his hands on—except philosophy for which he had little taste' (Bunting 1998: 66). The SACP's major treatment of Marxist philosophy (Dialego 1987) was a rehash of Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, fifty years after the event.

In this context, it is worth asking about the philosophical assumptions that have animated the Marxist critique of SACP perspectives and NDR in particular. For it is not enough simply to reject NDR; it is also necessary to be clear on what grounds you do so. Three critiques of NDR can be distinguished, which do not necessarily exclude each other.

The first is a historical and textual critique of NDR, demonstrating that it falsifies, distorts or misunderstands the ideas of Marx, Lenin and the Bolsheviks. There is surely considerable value in reconstructing these ideas and arguments. But this line of critique remains within the sphere of strategy and does not necessarily clarify the basis of various strategic options.

The second is a critique of the class intentions of NDR, arguing that its ambiguity favours the middle classes, who are more likely to avoid state repression, often better educated and capable of speaking for the larger movement and able to divide the multi-class alliance at crucial moments. There is a long history of class alliances leading to the betrayal of workers to support this critique, going back at least to the Shanghai massacre of 1927. But we can never know the intentions behind a specific political idea with certainty, and a political focus on hidden intentions leads to essentially conspiratorial politics.

The third is a critique of an idea of socialism based on deception or manipulation of those who struggle to achieve it, or any socialism which is not based on the fullest possible engagement of the oppressed and exploited, promoting their activity and enabling them to give direction to history. This critique captures much of the impulse behind the radicalism of the 1970s and 80s, in student movements and the beginnings of the independent labour movement and the

community struggles that grew out of the Soweto uprising of 1976. Farid Esack (1999: 191), a veteran of these struggles, recalls this critique of the two-stage theory of the SACP as 'the dishonesty of getting people to board a bus whose destination is known to only the driver and a select few passengers'.

But this third critique goes potentially deeper, addressing the basic instrumentalism of any political thought and practice that gives priority to strategic gains. The idea of freedom as coming to conscious selfhood through engagement in collective struggle was central to the political thinkers who defined the radicalism of the 1970s: Steve Biko and Rick Turner, both killed in their thirties before the decade was over. For them, the politics of human liberation could not escape such philosophical self-clarification. Their ideas had existentialist roots, emerged in a moment of crisis, and could not adequately address the question of state power as it presented itself in the 1980s and early 90s. In that moment, they seized upon an idea central also to the work of Marx (1976: 172): a future in which 'the social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labour and the products of their labour, are transparent in their simplicity, in production as in distribution'.

Transparency of social relations cannot be created by a politics of concealment and obfuscation. The quest for transparency is also a quest for inclusion. Liberalism and nationalism may achieve a certain success through systematic self-deceit, but Marxism is more ambitious, in relation both to the understanding it aims to provide and the freedom it hopes to make possible. Many people may resist such freedom or exclude themselves from it. Marxism cannot itself make a principle of such exclusion. But this is what the politics of concealment has achieved in South Africa today—perhaps not as visibly, but just as surely, as did racial exclusion before 1994.

'There is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory', in the words of Aimé Césaire. That rendezvous takes place only where we can see each other and be seen as equals in our humanity and in our political and social agency.

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