

CONCLUSION

Old Wine in New Bottles

As had been the case in previous years, 1993 proved to be a study in how to pursue the idea of national unity at almost any cost. While the by-now commonplace political violence and arrogant power plays by the de Klerk regime continued, the ANC leadership displayed a consistent pre-occupation with what were perceived as serious threats to the transition coming from the far-right.¹ In its annual statement the ANC NEC highlighted the rationale for further compromise by pointing to the need to 'neutralise dangerous opposition and ... assist in curbing counter-revolution' (ANC, 1993). Strategically this meant the prioritisation of a negotiated terrain of struggle that would gain a measure of democracy, limited by the objective conditions under which it was being pursued. This process would then hopefully be radically transformed after the ANC was in power.

The sense that, once the ANC had come to possess a degree of power, major problem areas (for example, monopoly control of the economy) would be addressed and sorted out, came to represent the 'official' response to the so-viewed unrealistic expectations of the organisation's mass base. The ANC leadership now argued that it was impossible to confront such problems at the present; to do so would endanger the negotiations process. Put another way, the very demands that had driven South Africa's struggle for liberation and around which the vast majority of the 'people's' struggles had coalesced, were no longer

viewed as necessary to achieve the (more immediate) transformation of South Africa. Like the ANC's approach to the possibilities of a right-wing counter-revolution, this was predicated on a one-sided strategic interpretation of the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions.

As this book has argued, this kind of perspective is infused with a petite bourgeois politics that privileges the power of the dominant class (inclusive of the existing state) over the power of the broad mass in the struggle for liberation. This thus leads to the struggles of the people being viewed as *ad hoc* requirements to a more important, instrumentalist structural access to power (that is, control of the form not the content). The same kind of perspective has been dominant among the leadership of many national liberation movements.² Indeed, the global landscape of post-independence political practice by these movements only confirms the triumph of the narrow sureties of structural access to power over the fluid possibilities of popular struggle. It then becomes clear why the ANC's strategic conduct of the liberation struggle (despite all the favourable elements for a more radically transformative outcome) came to represent the effective separation of political leadership and organisation from the people.

Implicit in such a perspective is a completely undialectical approach to the ways in which political struggle is conducted. Despite the ANC's stated recognition of the need for a dialectical approach to struggle,³ the practical politics of the ANC served seriously to undermine the possibilities of people's victories that might have propelled the dialectic in a radically different direction. It is as if both the compromises themselves and the grassroots struggles of the majority had no effect beyond their immediate transitional context and that future

possibilities were not linked to present and ongoing political (strategic) choices. Looking at the broader historical framework of the ANC's liberation struggle in which this perspective was regularly applied, it becomes clear why there emerged a gradual disempowerment of the masses and ultimately an increasingly truncated liberation. To this end, the ANC leadership continued to prioritise closed-door talks in the hope that further deals and guarantees would safeguard the stated aim of a transition to 'national democracy'.

The insistence on placing the strategic centre of struggle squarely within the parameters of an ultimately narrow and elite-managed political process of negotiation catalysed a growing frustration that was being felt by many of the ANC-led Alliance's own mass constituency. Writing in the pages of the ANC mouthpiece *Mayibuye* in April 1993, an 'ordinary' ANC member posed a searching question:

It seems fitting to ask: Are we going to increasingly see the ANC beat one retreat after another in the face of the intransigence of the extreme right, and, indeed, of the NP itself? The position adopted by the NEC of the ANC ... points in the direction of a chain of retreats, although they might be sugared by some rhetoric of victory.

It was while such sentiments were being openly expressed by the movement's rank and file that the immensely popular leader of the SACP, Chris Hani, was gunned down by a right-wing assassin in April 1993. The resultant outpouring of anger and frustration - by millions of workers and unemployed - provided the Alliance leadership with a tragic but welcome weapon which they could wield in the negotiation-centric battle for moral supremacy. Once again, though, the

leadership channelled the actual and potential militancy of the Alliance's base constituency into stage-managed mass action.

This took the form of tightly controlled marches and rallies in which the leadership continuously stressed the need for people to remain calm and to show maturity in the face of the incessant violence of the police and army. For instance, when thousands of youths and workers took to the streets in an outpouring of anger soon after Hani's death, their violent confrontations with the apartheid security forces were condemned as unruly behaviour which would hamper the compromise-seeking efforts of the leadership. It was as if the leadership had returned to the 1950s, demanding that movement supporters act as though the intervening 35 years were now a distant memory. This does not imply that there was no need for disciplined struggle; however, the way in which the Alliance leadership perceived such discipline turned the positive dialectic of revolutionary struggle on its head. Instead of seeing and believing in the possibilities of active mass struggle to undermine the power of both the apartheid state and capital through the parallel expression of people's power, the approach of the Alliance substantively undermined its radical potentialities.

In spite of this it was through such channelling that the Alliance leadership was able to wave the threat of this militancy, like a sword of Damocles, over the head of de Klerk and the white population in general. In doing so it sought at least three specific outcomes:

- to pressure de Klerk to finally make good on his promises of meeting the ANC's basic demands which it had set down in 1990;

- to frighten intransigent whites (particularly in the business sector) into accepting the ANC as the best guarantor of peace and stability;
- to control the militancy within the movement that itself posed a potential threat to the strategic centrality of accommodative negotiation.

On all three objectives there was enough success to ensure the solidification of the Alliance's chosen strategic path: an all-inclusive negotiated settlement culminating in national elections for a government of national unity.

Unquestionably though, the price of such unity was high.

Searching for Unity in the Face of Contradiction

For three decades the dominant theoretical basis for the ANC's liberation struggle had been cast within the necessity for the revolutionary seizure of power. Whether applied to the smashing of apartheid and the attainment of majority rule or as a springboard to a transition to socialism, the revolutionary seizure of power was presented as a necessary pre-condition for movement forward. Years earlier, Joe Slovo had put it this way:

Thus there is a distinction between the creation of the new state form and the building of a new socialist economic formation. The former is made possible by a revolutionary seizure of power; the latter, through the exercise of that political power by a class whose interests are unconditionally served by a socialist order (Slovo, 1976, pp.146-147).

Many liberal and neo-Marxist academics, as well as numerous Alliance intellectuals, have historically conceptualised arguments for a revolutionary seizure of power in narrowly statist terms. As a result, the (autonomous) state is

given the status of the struggle 'throne', leaving revolutionary (purposive) struggle cast in terms of a fight for a specific form (structure) of power rather than its foundation. If such an approach is adopted, either theoretically or practically, there emerges a false dichotomy between the political and the economic 'sides' of revolutionary struggle. Thus political control of the state can be achieved with no corresponding transformation of the economic sphere; and we only have to take one quick glance at the contemporary results of most third world political revolutions to see what kind of national liberation has been delivered. In the historical context of the South African struggle such approaches have provided the basis from which to lend both revolutionary credence to purely political change and ammunition for bourgeois critics of any revolutionary struggle.

There is nothing implicitly statist in any struggle for revolutionary change. What is implicit though, is that there must be a fundamental attack on the entrenched economic and political interests of capital (in whatever form) in order for there to be meaningful liberation. As the ANC had put this quite clearly in the 1970s:

It is therefore a fundamental feature of our strategy that victory must embrace more than formal political democracy. To allow the existing economic forces to retain their interests intact is to feed the root of racial supremacy and does not represent even a shadow of liberation (Slovo, 1976, p.111).

And yet the cumulative effect of the strategic and tactical programme of the ANC, consummated in the post-1990 transitional period, has been to demobilise gradually the only constituency capable of leading and carrying through such a revolutionary struggle - that class of South Africa's workers and unemployed. The strategic primacy given to the achievement of a narrowly conceived national

democracy has allowed for a fundamental contradiction to permeate the South African liberation struggle: the ANC's own base constituency have ultimately had to be fellow-travellers in the liberation struggle with a whole host of powerful social forces whose fundamental interests are inimical to revolutionary transformation.

From a peculiarly romanticised attachment to classic guerrilla warfare, to a rhetorically heavy notion of insurrectionary people's power, to social and political contracts with capital, the strategic thrust of the ANC's struggle for national liberation has consistently underestimated and seriously undermined the potential and actual struggle of the people themselves. More specifically, the political strategies of the liberation movement have led to a lack of recognition and incorporation of actual struggles on the ground.

What has made this cumulative strategy all the more removed from the possibilities of attaining a genuine transfer of power to the people has been the false separation, both theoretically and practically, between political and socio-economic change. Because of this, processes such as democratisation have taken on a narrow petite bourgeois, nationalist and predominantly political meaning and context. Under such an approach there can be no real analytical or strategic distinction between national liberation struggles and socialist revolution. This perspective is thus left with no other option than to see socio-economic change as secondary to the necessarily parallel struggle for political change (that is, it privileges the economic *status quo* - capitalism).

It is not surprising then that many movement leaders and intellectuals have claimed that the political changes brought about after the April 1994 elections (even if initially in the form of temporary co-governance with the

National Party), have laid the foundation for fundamental social and economic change.⁴ Indeed, the Alliance's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)⁵ is pointed to as an example of ongoing policy formation that can deliver, at the very least, basic material needs to the people. And yet if analysed in the general context of the ANC's strategic path (both past and present), it is not difficult to see that the potentialities of the RDP are inherently bounded by the very same logic and practice that infused previous phases of liberation struggle. Indeed, since April 1994 the ANC-led government has managed to turn the RDP into another tool of consensus politics, and in the process gut its radical potential in favour of a more 'realistic' free-market' political economy that has little to offer South Africa's workers and poor.⁶

A major contradiction that has permeated ANC politics is the unwillingness and/or inability to recognise that revolutionary struggle cannot be advanced by attempting to reconcile the priorities of the people with the priorities of capital. Indeed, the same critique can be applied to many of the national liberation movements that have struggled over the last 30 years. What makes a critical appraisal of the ANC's liberation struggle so important though is the enduring (mis)perception that the character of the South African liberation struggle supercedes such contradictions. It is time this bubble is burst.

The macro-nationalist approach to struggle that has characterised Alliance politics to date has virtually institutionalised the above-mentioned contradiction. This approach has led to the subordination of class organisation and politics. In turn, this has allowed the struggle for liberation to be infused by, and to accept, all those 'antithetical forms of social unity' under capitalism (Marx, 1973, p.159). Under these circumstances the mass struggles for revolutionary

nationalist transformation are turned into little more than a struggle for petite bourgeois reformism. As Lenin argued in response to the economists of his day who wanted to divide political and economic struggles, the point of all revolutionary struggle is to integrate the two under revolutionary working-class leadership (Lenin, 1969, pp.54-65). Only then can the rich possibilities for fundamental transformation in society be realised.

Indeed, since April 1994, the ANC leadership has shown clearly its petite bourgeois pedigree. Constantly prioritising the search for false unity between antagonistic class and social forces, it has managed to achieve, in less than three years, what it took most other post-independence liberation movements over a decade to accomplish. It has used its newly acquired political power to:

- substantively demobilise (and/or demoralise) much of its mass base;
- provide the foundation for the accumulative needs of a (corrupt) new elite;
- pave the way for international capital to exercise increased imperialist influence and control over the economic, cultural and social life of the country;
- reinforce class, racial and gender inequality.

True to its past the ANC leadership has rationalised all of this in terms of the need to build 'national unity', to be 'pragmatic' and above all, by reference to the lack of any 'alternative'. In simple terms, the ANC has been trying to have its cake and eat it.

The Distorted Dialectics of Struggle

Soon after signing the Declaration of Intent with President de Klerk at the beginning of 1993, Nelson Mandela wondered out loud:

Who would have thought that as a result of these discussions, the State of Emergency would be lifted, political prisoners released, exiles allowed to return, a climate of free political activity in the greater part of South Africa would prevail, and repressive legislation would either be amended or repealed ... [providing] a basis for movement towards a united, non-racial, democratic and non-sexist South Africa? (*Mayibuye*, February 1993, p.9).

Unfortunately, there was no one immediately to answer Mandela's implicitly leading query. However, it could well be imagined that the response from a majority of South Africans would have been to wonder whether the 'result' of the 'discussions' (negotiations) represented a solid basis for movement towards a revolutionary and fundamental transformation of South Africa. Indeed, Mandela's 'thoughts' encapsulate one of the central contradictions inherent in the dialectic of struggle which this book has attempted to grasp: that the ANC has historically given excessive, and often misdirected, strategic weight to the objective conditions (balance of forces) under which they have pursued the (subjective) goals and aspirations of national liberation.

Through a critical historical analysis of the ANC's struggle for national liberation in South Africa this book has argued that the way in which this dialectic of struggle has been realised has substantively undermined the possibilities for a genuinely transformative liberation. At the heart of this historic contradiction in the South African context (and applicable to many other twentieth century liberation struggles), has been the failure strategically to prioritise the will and

leading role of the base constituency within the liberation movement. Simply put, the ANC (guided by its leading members) has been unwilling to trust the very people it claims to represent; it has, in effect, been unable to trust real democracy.

By way of explanation, it is important to delineate the meaning of democracy which has become such a commonplace term that it is now used to describe anything short of fascism. At its most basic foundation democracy is a set of social, economic and political relationships in which the broad mass of people take control of their own lives. Placed within the context of institutionalised capitalist class power it then implies the need for oppressed classes to shape the content (not merely to participate in the various forms) of democratic society. There surely can be no pre-determined conceptualisation or practice of democracy given the present uneven capacities for exercising power, under conditions where access to, and possession of, capital is a means of political and economic class control (McKinley, 1994, pp.44-65).

In South Africa there can be little argument that the broad mass of people are the workers and unemployed, both urban and rural (and predominantly black). And yet the cumulative history of ANC practice reveals a weighted strategic tendency to emasculate the self-activity and self-emancipation of that base constituency. The dialectical relationship between the objective balance of forces in a given social milieu and the activity of those seeking to liberate themselves and fundamentally alter that balance is part of a historically fluid social process in which there are no absolutes nor impenetrable barriers. While the structural characteristics of apartheid capitalism have necessarily shaped the

strategic approach of the ANC, the potentiality of transforming that structure rests squarely with the practical struggles of the broad mass.

This book has thus applied a framework of analysis that views both the structural conditions and the activities of those who are attempting to change those conditions as fluid expressions of the political and socio-economic reality of apartheid and capitalism. In other words, a lens for viewing the dialectic of the ongoing South African revolution. By showing the interrelatedness of elements that constitute a revolutionary theory and practice (for example, the state, imperialism and class struggle) this book avoids the trap into which other studies of revolution have fallen; that is, attempting to isolate a singular referential point for analysing and explaining revolutionary periods and revolutionary action. Whether it is a state-centric, structuralist interpretation or one based on a purely subjective, organisational/value competition, unilinear theories of revolution end up atomising the complexities of revolution itself.

What this book has tried to make clear is that the struggle for the liberation of South Africa, as practiced by the ANC, has failed to place the revolutionary struggles of the oppressed at the strategic centre of its revolutionary practice and to locate itself firmly within the broad mass as a means to the desired end - liberation for a full transfer of power to the people. Until such time the majority of South Africans, who continue to suffer under the ravages of capitalism in whatever 'new' international or national form, will continue struggling to realise a truly new vision of society - *a luta continua!*

NOTES

¹The 'far-right' in this case denotes the white right (although Inkhata was also considered to pose a substantial threat), which consisted of an amazing range of groups from the 'respectable' Conservative Party, to the neo-nazi AWB, to small 'ultra-right' organisations like the World Apartheid Movement.

²These would include (among others), the FLN of Algeria, the PAIGC of Guinea Bissau/Cape Verde, ZANU/ZAPU of Zimbabwe, the MPLA of Angola and the FSLN of Nicaragua. As in the case of the ANC, there were no doubt, many within the movements that did not share this perspective - but reference here is to the leadership.

³The ANC's Strategic Perspectives Document, under the sub-heading of 'Phases of the Democratic Revolution' stated:

Our strategic perspective should take into account that the democratic revolution - for the attainment of majority rule - will proceed in various phases. Our possibilities relevant to each phase should not be pursued in a manner that produces defeats later because of a failure to recognise the dialectical inter-connection between various phases.

⁴For examples see the last two issues (No.'s 95 and 96) of *Work in Progress* as well as Saul (1991).

⁵The RDP - initially a COSATU-inspired programme - is designed to wed an ANC government to a more radical commitment to policies that would address the needs of workers and the unemployed. Since its first draft in late 1993, many of the most important issues addressed in the RDP (such as housing) have literally been hijacked by representatives of big capital. All such 'social forces' (mentioned in the text), no doubt fully recognise the benefits of being fellow-travelers in reconstructing and developing the new South Africa.

⁶In early 1996 the government unveiled a 'new' economic strategy - called the 'Growth, Equality and Redistribution' macro-economic strategy - which commits the government to a growth-first, monetarist and trickle-down programme. Despite its misleading title, it represents a clear abandonment of any radical restructuring and redistribution in favour of the majority of South Africans while enhancing the already massive economic power of domestic and international monopoly capital.