AROUND WHICH CORNER?:

Revolutionary theory and contemporary South Africa *

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Just thirty years ago, Julius Lewin wrote an article in *Africa South* entitled No Revolution Round the Corner. He criticised the fallacious logic which presumed that because South Africa was 'so obviously rotten with injustice' it must be 'ripe for revolution', and argued that 'certain well-defined circumstances have to be present in combination before an attempt at revolution is likely to succeed'. He proceeded to specify criteria proposed by Brinton (1937) in his comparative study of the English, American, French and Russian Revolutions. These were: a period of economic growth immediately before a revolution; the presence of bitter class antagonisms of a complicated kind; inefficiency in the machinery of government (especially when rapid change laid intolerable strains on governmental machinery adapted to simpler conditions); and in particular the relationship of government to its armed forces. Lewin quoted Brinton's dictum that 'no government has ever fallen before revolutionists until it has lost control over its armed forces or lost the ability to use them effectively'.

On this basis, concluded Lewin, 'the signs of discontent in South Africa, when all added up, do not amount to a serious situation in the sense of a prelude to revolution'. The system was likely to 'go on almost indefinitely'; the most likely source of change was 'the slow and difficult emergence of effective trade unions' offering 'the best hope that in due time collective action will produce social change'.

The article triggered a series of responses in the same publication, mainly from Marxist intellectuals. HJ Simons (1958) found Lewin's analysis 'surely correct, as far as it goes', but stressed the dynamics of social and political change. Urbanisation, industrial employment, and the spread of education for blacks meant that 'pressure on colour-class barriers will intensify'; that the position of the white oligarchy would weaken in the face of political radicalisation: 'as the town-bred youth comes into politics, an alliance between workers and intellectuals ... will take the initiative'. This

perspective (wrote Simons), while it did not refute Lewin's main point, gave 'reason to suppose that the position is more fluid than might appear'.

Eddie Roux (1959) and Michael Harmel (1959) both challenged Lewin's view that the status quo might persist almost indefinitely, and each suggested that a different kind of revolution, in South Africa, might be round a nearer corner than Lewin allowed. Roux ('a lot depends on what we mean by revolution') asserted flatly that 'we are not in the running for a classical revolution' but that South Africa might be a likely candidate for a revolution like those in postwar Indonesia, Kenya, and Algeria. Seizure of power by an insurgent majority was not at all likely in the conceivable future, but 'a crisis in racial conditions that would require drastic remedies for solution' was easily imaginable.

Harmel was influential in the SACP as a theorist and became first editor of *The African Communist*. But his response to Lewin proceeds confusingly; it combines sweeping assertions with dubious history, and links a declaratory determinism to a decidedly non-Marxist concept of revolution. While one could not 'exactly quarrel' with it, Lewin's position was 'quite unnecessarily pessimistic'. South Africa's existing set-up was 'as fundamentally unstable and unviable as it [was] unjust'; and (said Harmel) 'I am sure there must be substantial changes ... in the fairly near future'. He met Lewin's (and Brinton's) point about the state's control of its armed forces by querying whether a revolution need necessarily involve violence. Revolution meant 'fairly rapid and fundamental change in a society, involving the displacement of the ruling class, whether there is fighting or not' and there were 'plenty of examples in history where a combination of factors has been compelling enough to make a ruling class give way for urgent and overdue changes [without civil war]'.

Moreover, Harmel disputed that revolutions were exceptional or remarkable. 'During the past century practically every country in Europe has undergone a revolution — many of them through several. The same may be said of Central and South America'. Since 1945 a 'wave of revolutionary change and upheaval' had swept East Europe, Asia and part of Africa. Having virtually equated revolution with any rapid socio-political change, Harmel then hailed its imminence in South Africa. Industrialisation was incompatible with feudal despotism; factory production was 'invariably and inevitably' fatal to the authority of old absolute rulers; the type of despotism found in South Africa was 'a kind of freak, an anachronism which cannot hope much longer to survive'; and a revolution of 'pronounced similarity' to the Afro-Asian anti-colonial variety was 'certain'.

The *Africa South* exchange introduces several of the concerns of this paper: how a South African revolution has been conceived theoretically within the liberation movement; the analogies with anti-colonial struggles

elsewhere; and the whole question of the state's control over the armed forces as crucial to revolutionary outcomes. These are large topics, and cannot be rigorously explored in a short paper. Instead, much of what follows is focussed on a specific aspect of the broader issues: the relationship between revolutionary theory and revolutionary strategy . More concretely, it looks at a highly influential theoretical notion — 'Colonialism of a Special Type' (CST) — and asks what have been its implications for practice. What relationship (if any) was there between the theory of CST and the form of struggle adopted? Why, and how (if at all), has strategic thinking altered over the past quarter of a century?

CST and the form of struggle

In 1986, at the sixty-fifth anniversary of the formation of the South African Communist Party (SACP), Slovo looked back at the achievements of that party, and celebrated its record of struggle, its pioneering non-racialism, its efforts in the trade union field, and its internationalism. He singled out the indigenous elaboration of the theory of the South African revolution as one of its most important achievements.

It is with the revolutionary theory of the SACP that this paper is concerned. (Especially after 1969, it might equally be characterised as the theory of the SACP/ANC alliance.) This is not because no other theoretical positions exist — for they do; but because the SACP's thinking is older, more fully developed and objectively more influential than any other. Obviously, what follows is not a detailed account of that theory, far less an overall assessment of it; rather, it is a compressed statement of its main propositions and of their strategic implications. This section also attempts to identify and explain what appear to be quite significant readjustments of strategy.

The crux of the theory is an analysis of South Africa's social realities as a system of internal colonialism, or 'colonialism of a special type'. The theory of CST was fully enunciated, and adopted as official policy, in 1962; but its central tenets were arrived at 'by the end of the 1940s', and adumbrated in the Central Committee report to the 1950 CPSA conference. That report argued that 'the distinguishing feature of South Africa is that it combines the characteristics of both an imperialist state and a colony within a single, indivisible geographical, political and economic entity' (Davies et al, 1984).

The CPSA was dissolved in 1950; immediately before and after its reconstitution as the underground SACP (in 1953), this new theoretical line was debated between party members and others. Advocates of the 'colonial' or 'two nations' position were challenged by those who urged the national liberation movement 'to bring economic (or class) issues before the people' and who criticised the leadership of the movement as bourgeois. However, Harmel, and others, argued that 'the struggle should

(and can) be waged in such a way that the political aspects are given precedence', and acknowledged that 'the class struggle subordinates itself to and is for some time obscured by the national question'. [1]

By 1962, this position had been expanded into a major theoretical statement — which remains the Party's central policy document.[2] Race domination and oppression have their roots deep in South African history, but developed into their present extreme form in the era of monopoly capitalism. South Africa combines the worst features both of imperialism and colonialism in a single national frontier; indeed 'Non-White South Africa' is the colony of 'White South Africa'. The indigenous population experiences the features of a colony: national oppression, poverty, exploitation, and political rightlessness. This fosters strong national identity and the SACP held that there were no acute or antagonistic class divisions among the African people.

From this it followed that the Party's immediate task was to fight for the national liberation of the 'colonised' people, and for the attainment of a national democratic revolution which would overthrow the colonialist state of white supremacy and establish an independent state of National Democracy. Thus the main content of this revolution was upheld to be the national liberation of the African people. Although all classes among the black oppressed have an objective interest in national liberation, they did not share the same goal of the fundamental transformation of a liberated South Africa. It was further argued that for national liberation to be truly meaningful and guaranteed, the black working class had to be regarded as the leading revolutionary force in the united cross-class liberation front designed to secure the aims of the Freedom Charter. The revolution was thus conceived of as having distinct stages: the first for a national democratic state, to be followed by an advance to socialism.

But how, in 1962, did CST translate into tactics and strategy? What forms of struggle were proposed to secure national liberation? The programme appeared shortly after the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe and the commencement of a sabotage campaign in December 1961, and a section explained the adoption of armed struggle in place of non-violence. Tactics and strategy were discussed in generalised, even rhetorical terms: a situation was being arrived at in which patriots and democrats would take up arms to defend themselves, organise guerrilla armies and undertake various acts of armed resistance, culminating in a mass insurrection against white domination. Armed struggle would be accompanied and augmented by non-collaboration, strikes, boycotts and demonstrations. A non-violent transition to the democratic revolution was not ruled out; given armed and determined resistance the 'illusion' of white invulnerability might crack, opening up the possibility of a peaceful and negotiated transfer of power.

In practice, strategic thinking in the 1960s centered largely upon rurally-based guerrilla warfare. Operation Mayibuye — the strategic document central to the Rivonia trial — envisaged external training for a core group of 120 guerrillas who were then to return in secret; local recruitment by them of guerrilla platoons; the establishment of base areas and political/military support, and then the commencement of guerrilla campaigns. According to Karis and Carter, the actual details of Mayibuye appear to have split the underground leadership. Sisulu and Fischer were both highly critical, the latter dismissing the scheme as an 'entirely unrealistic brainchild of some youthful and adventurous imagination... If ever there was a plan which a Marxist could not approve in the then prevailing circumstances, this was such a one...' (Karis & Carter 1977:676-7). Guerrilla strategy was first implemented in 1967/8 when attempts were made to infiltrate trained soldiers into South Africa through Zimbabwe.

Several factors contributed to the model of rurally-launched guerrilla struggle at this time. There was some enthusiasm for Mao's campaigns during the final military phases of the Chinese Revolution; there was considerable store set by the Cuban experience and the guerrillas of the Sierra Maestra; awareness of the guerrilla struggle by the FNL in Algeria was heightened by direct contacts. But in addition to these exemplars, there was also a theoretical link between CST and guerrilla struggle.

A theory which specified the South African social formation as a variant of colonialism naturally directed the search for models to anti-colonial struggles. An analysis which viewed class conflict as subordinate to the national question looked to guerrilla action not only for its military gains but also for its contribution towards politicising and mobilising the masses. Slovo (1976), for example, staunchly defended guerrilla tactics, claiming that the broad conception behind the Mayibuye plan could not be faulted; that it was the pattern in Guine-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique, and also of the beginnings of armed conflict in Zimbabwe and Namibia. He drew a distinction between an uprising in advanced capitalist countries and the launching of armed struggle in a colonial context which he defined as 'the use of organised violence as part of a planned build-up towards protracted people's war'. Guerrilla struggle itself would help 'ripen' a revolutionary situation.

Guerrilla strategy received an important endorsement, with certain qualifications, at Morogoro in 1969. The ANC held a major consultative conference, largely in response to dissatisfaction amongst guerrilla rank and file elements in the wake of the abortive Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns.[3] Guerrilla warfare (according to the policy adopted at Morogoro) was declared to be the special, and indeed in the case of South Africa, the only form in which armed liberation struggle could be

launched. Guerrilla warfare was championed as the weapon of the
materially weak against the materially strong. Surprise, mobility and
tactical retreat were its hallmarks; it would stretch the resources of the
opposing conventional forces over vast areas; the very sophistication of the
South African economy made it potentially vulnerable to guerrilla attacks.
Even though South Africa might not contain a single impregnable
mountain or impenetrable jungle, the terrain was regarded as certainly no
less favourable for guerrilla operations than some of the terrain in which
other movements operated successfully. The primary theatre of guerrilla
warfare would be shifting bases in the countryside, but actions 'of a special
sort' in urban areas would be an important auxiliary.

At the same time, the Morogoro conference drew directly on the lessons
learnt by the Luthuli Brigade. It warned that guerrilla war was not
conducted in a vacuum, and stressed the primacy of the political struggle.
Mass mobilisation would not flow as a sudden natural and automatic
consequence of guerrilla clashes. Hence, the movement was exhorted to
reject all manifestations of militarism which separated armed people's
struggle from its political context. According to a recent assessment from
within the ANC[4], the Morogoro conference deliberately decided to
change the previous approach of sending into the country armed groups of
persons to 'spark off' guerrilla warfare. Instead it emphasized the prior
need to extend and consolidate ANC underground machinery.

Slovo's robust advocacy of guerrilla strategy appeared in 1976. By then a
number of developments were combining to shift the emphasis and to
introduce other tactical and strategic considerations. In particular, the
wave of strikes in 1973, the militancy of youth mobilised under Black
Consciousness, and the uprisings of 1976 all raised the prospect of greater
internal dynamism in the national liberation struggle. Increasingly in the
1970s, according to one account (Trevor, 1984) in the *African Communist*,
the SACP began to stress the major importance of (black) workers and
peasants; and also use the term 'people's power'. This, it was claimed,
undoubtedly involved a certain shift in its understanding of the character of
the South African revolution in the direction of a 'people's revolution'. A
parallel shift of emphasis saw greater weight being accorded to divisions
within the black population (especially with the acceleration of the
Bantustan programme). In 1976 the Central Committee warned that
sections of the emerging black middle class were antagonistic to the more
radical aims of the liberation movement.

Reservations about protracted guerrilla war as 'the only form' of armed
struggle appear to have deepened further with the study tour in 1978 by a
high level delegation of the ANC leadership to Vietnam. The Vietnamese
leadership had mounted a critique of Mao's 'protracted people's war'

(rural guerrilla war) as the more or less exclusive form of struggle — and this was echoed in an article in *Dawn* , the MK journal.[5]

An ANC analyst (Mzala 1987) drew a direct connection between the visit and strategic reformulations stressing that the Vietnamese experience tended to confirm the belief that the armed struggle had to be based on, and grow out of, mass political support, eventually involving all the people. Therefore all military activities, at all times, had to be guided and determined by the need to generate political mobilisation, organisation and resistance. The alternative was to consider revolutionary violence merely from the point of view of military struggle, in which case mistakes would inevitably occur. ANC leadership, therefore, resolved that a proper commencement of people's war required three years of active political mobilisation and organisation. Consequently they had concentrated on systematically creating the necessary political machinery, as well as training political cadres to begin a determined and single-minded campaign of political organisation inside South Africa, rather than engaging in armed confrontation or sabotage.

Debate within the liberation movement over the merits of guerrilla war as against a more broadly based pattern of armed resistance surfaced between 1981 and 1984 in an exchange in *The African Communist*.[6] Briefly, those advocating 'arming the people' argued that during 1980 'retaliatory violence' by youths and students had become a feature of popular resistance and that potential units of a 'revolutionary people's army' were springing up. The main strategic task of the liberation movement must be to support, organise, train and arm people inside the country. Combat units of 'part-time guerrillas' should be formed. Political and armed forms of struggle must be combined. The 'arming the people' line was, however, challenged. A response in 1984 said that while the articles indicated that the youth in the liberation movement could make important contributions to tactical discussions, they reflected a 'certain measure of uncertainty' with respect to tactics and strategy. They took too narrow and 'military-technical' a view of arming the people; they gave insufficient weight to the role of peasant revolt, nor did they recognise the role of strikes — large-scale strikes being the necessary build-up to insurrection. To call for an immediate insurrection was premature; militarily, the liberation movement was still weak; and there was no widespread mass upsurge on which insurrection could be based.[7]

By 1984 the CPSA had 'come out strongly against the insurrectionist strategies advocated by some of its critics' and continued to base its strategy on 'armed struggle waged by MK' (Davies et al, 1984, II:291). Presumably, one of the factors strengthening the hand of those pursuing a guerrilla strategy was the possibility that states bordering on South Africa might serve as rear bases or platforms to incursions. If so, the implications

of the Nkomati Accord (plus pressure by Pretoria on other states) would have been a major factor in tilting the argument back in favour of the 'insurrectionists'. Equally, the other major development which impinged upon the debate within the movement was the eruption of popular protest and resistance — strikes, boycotts, rallies, attacks on state officials and informers, street-fighting behind impromptu barricades, and the creation of organs of 'people's power' — from September 1984.

Between 1985 and 1987, there was a distinct changing of strategic gears. At the Kabwe Consultative Conference of mid-1985, the NEC political report spoke of its perspective of 'people's war', and heralded the emergence, albeit in a rudimentary way, of 'mass revolutionary bases'. In theoretical exchanges, strikingly confident positions were adopted by those who considered armed insurrection to be on the agenda. Thus, in April 1987 one of the foremost protagonists in the strategic debate declared roundly that the contemporary situation contained the seeds and concrete possibility for an insurrection. Protagonists of protracted guerrilla war were behind the times. They were reiterating old approaches which they had senselessly learned by heart, instead of studying the specific features of the new and living reality. In his view insurrection had already become a possibility, transferred from the realm of theory into the realm of practicality by the struggle itself. He warned against a conservative approach to armed struggle. This he characterised as manifesting itself in the inability to accept this new development, as well as the failure to reckon with the fact that the possibility existed of preparing both for protracted guerrilla warfare and armed insurrection (Mzala, 1987).

Slovo, who, a decade earlier, had insisted that guerrillas fought in colonies, and insurrectionists in the metropolis, in July 1986 also concurred with this view. Now he asserted that the possibility of breakthrough on the part of the mass of the people was growing stronger by the day. It, therefore, followed that, while continuing to focus their sights on a protracted conflict, they had also to prepare and be ready to adjust to a much swifter transformation which would involve insurrectionary ingredients (Slovo, 1986).

Perhaps the clearest break with the 'guerrilla orthodoxy' of the 1960s and 1970s appears in the latest publication by the veteran analyst of the South African left, Harold Wolpe (1988). The 'core of the opposition to apartheid is in the mass political struggle and trade union struggles'; the presence and actions of the military wing of the ANC are 'an extremely important support for these actions in terms of "armed propaganda" and as part of the assault on the regime'; but 'the insurrectionary movement remains the major mode of struggle'. A few pages later, Wolpe underlines this brisk dismissal of guerrilla warfare as 'the special form' of armed struggle. The 'South African army is probably too strong to be defeated in

a direct military confrontation by a guerrilla force. That, however, does not at once arise in the South African situation for the mass insurrectionary political movement is the principal agent of the struggle for national liberation'. It's a long way from Morogoro.

CST and political tactics

The previous section tried to trace one aspect of the SACP's theory of the South African revolution: to ask what was the relationship between the formulation of CST and the form of struggle. It argued that between 1962 and the early 1980s there was a .MDUL/theoretical complementarity between the colonial analogy and the emphasis upon guerrilla war as the appropriate form of armed struggle. This linkage was sometimes made explicit, but perhaps operated more generally as an unspoken premise. In recent years, however, strategic thinking has been significantly realigned, largely in response to the course of events inside South Africa. The theoretical link between CST and guerrilla struggle has been strained to breaking point, both by the loss of guerrilla bases and by the surge of popular militancy inside the country. Guerrilla war has been displaced as the 'special' form of armed struggle by a more insurrectionist, more urban, but still essentially military strategy. Does this in turn have implications for the wider theoretical authority of analysis in terms of colonialism of a special type? Theory, after all, is 'transformed into practice, vitalized by practice, corrected by practice, tested by practice'.[8]

If one begins by asking whether other aspects of the CST thesis are being rethought, or need to be rethought, and seeks an answer in the official publications of the national liberation movement, two things are apparent. Firstly, CST remains theoretically inviolate, a touchstone of orthodoxy. Secondly, even among theorists professing to recognise its theoretical authority, a number of positions are being adopted which seem to stretch, if not to contradict, CST as it has been theorised in the past. Observance of orthodoxy, in short, has become somewhat ritualistic.

Broadly, it seems that to remain intact the theory of colonialism of a special type must respond to two lines of criticism: methodological and historical. It is over a decade since Harold Wolpe (1975) published a rigorous and thoughtful critique of the methodological weaknesses of various models of internal colonialism, including the SACP programme. He maintained that while the thesis

> purports to rest on class relations of capitalist exploitation,
> in fact it treats such relations as residual. That is to say, the
> conceptualisation of class relations, which is present in the
> theory, is accorded little or no role in the analysis of
> relations of dominance and exploitation, which are, instead,

> conceived of as occurring between 'racial', 'ethnic', and
> 'national' categories.

Moreover, insofar as internal colonialism accorded relevance to relations of capitalist exploitation, it did so in a manner which denuded the analysis of historical specificity.

> The theory of internal colonialism is unable to explain the
> relationship between class relations and race or ethnic, etc.,
> relations. As a consequence, the latter relations come once
> more to be treated as autonomous and in isolation from the
> class relations.

In short, the thesis proceeds essentially by analogy and yields explanation of dubious utility for anyone seeking to comprehend simultaneously the class *and* racial character of the social formation(1975:230-4).

More recently, Wolpe has very substantially softened his critique. Conventional theoretical accounts of South African society are either 'race or class reductionist'. While CST 'refuses these reductionisms', it suffers from an assumption of 'inevitable and functional relationship' between racial domination and capitalism and 'is unable to exploit to the full the conception of the interlinkages between race and class'. He also warns against 'the over-emphasis sometimes given to the contention within the internal colonialism thesis, that racial domination serves to bind the classes within each racial group to a common struggle'. Such an emphasis opens a 'radical separation' between national and class struggle and submerges 'the question of the class content of the national struggle' (Wolpe 1988:32-3).

Freund (1986) has usefully surveyed Wolpe's earlier writings on CST, and linked these with criticisms made by Legassick and O'Meara. He sums up:

> What indeed is colonialism and what do we gain by insisting
> that South Africa is in some way colonial? ... It is important
> to point out that colonialism, even capitalist colonialism,
> does not lead to any single determinate social type. The
> USA, New Zealand, India, British Somaliland and Bermuda
> have all, like South Africa, been British colonies but this tells
> us very little about basic social processes or political
> organisation in these countries. Appending the term
> 'internal colonialism' to this country does not explain either
> the *economic history of South Africa or the* special
> relationships imbedded in that history (1986:118-21).

What I have called 'historical' criticisms of CST draw attention to the origins of the theory, and query its applicability to South Africa. Hudson (1986), for example, locates the theory within a broader intellectual 'genealogy': he traces the notion of 'national democratic revolution' back through shifting attempts by Comintern and Soviet theorists to specify the terms of support for 'third world' struggles. He concludes that the

concepts were 'initially developed to deal with the problems confronting revolutionary class struggle in contexts very different to South Africa'(1986:24).

Without imputing them to Hudson, the implications of his analysis might be summarised rather baldly in the following questions: has a thesis formulated nearly forty years ago been adapted sufficiently to take account of social and economic changes in South Africa since the late 1940s? How is it affected by the accelerated accumulation and centralisation of capital of the 1960s? Or by the attendant urbanisation and class formation of those decades? How much more distinct are class divisions between proletarianised blacks (whether housed in townships or bantustans) and a black petty bourgeoisie (whether commercial, administrative, or professional)? Do such divisions, if one thinks they are significantly deeper than they were, have implications for a strategy firmly based upon a cross-class or all-class political opposition? To put it generally: how effectively does CST address a South Africa with NAFCOC, COSATU, tricameralism, Inkatha and the other bantustan bureaucracies?

The 1962 programme declared that there were no acute or antagonistic class divisions at present among the African people. Slovo, in 1976, reiterated this position: As Wolpe (1988:31) comments:

> This has profound political consequences for it grounds the contention that the anti-racial or national struggle must have primacy in the South African context.

As recently as 1987, Turok restated this orthodoxy — and hammered home its political and tactical implications:

> The primary aspect of the system is its colonial character, which means that this governs the whole question of strategy and tactics. This is the decisive question. If the forces of liberation or the forces of struggle ignore the colonial aspect and think only of the class aspect, they will make the most catastrophic blunders... it is because the movement of national liberation, headed by the ANC, has correctly evaluated the structure of that society and made the correct conclusions from that analysis, that the movement is steaming ahead to the point where we can say that revolution is on the agenda, if not insurrection itself (Turok 1987).

'Mature Marxists' in South Africa (Turok continued) have concluded that it would be 'suicidal to disrupt the alliance of classes in the liberation movement, in the national movement', because of a belief that class is primary.

> There is a national movement and internal colonialism and if they disrupt and rupture the unity of the national movement,

which consists of a range of classes ... that would lead to disaster.

At the same time, there is evidence – in the pages of *The African Communist* and *Sechaba* – of a rather different emphasis: upon the capitalist nature of South African society, upon the class content of revolutionary struggle, and upon working class leadership. (I am not overlooking that both the 1962 programme of the SACP, and the 1969 *Strategy and Tactics* of the ANC accord a leading role in the struggle to the black working class; but they do so in the context of an all-class national alliance. I think that the differences between the overall thrust of those documents and some more recent analyses is clear enough.)

Thus, Mashinini in April 1986 argued that the highly developed capitalism of South Africa (a feature he stressed was not found in any other colonial situation) has given rise to a large black working class, relatively highly organised and class-conscious, with a political experience and maturity arising from half a century of mass political mobilisation. He emphasised that this, 'as it could be conceived of in any highly developed capitalist country', brought to the fore of the struggle the issue of insurrection.[9]

The same writer, in May 1987, concluded that this posed the question of those class forces which should be in the leadership of the people's committees, as well as the need to wage a principled ideological struggle within them. These committees seemed to be composed of a broad structural representation of oppressed black South Africans. But, he warned, as microcosms of a united front, they represented the widest political interests, and their contradictory nature could not be overlooked. Therefore, the argument ran, the guiding approach towards these committees should be that a strong working class content always be sought for their activities.[10]

Likewise Mzala, in January 1987, stressed as a priority the organisation of the working class. South Africa's level of social development, corresponding to the stage of monopoly capitalism, had nurtured an army for the destruction of apartheid. This level of development had objectively unified the very combat weapon for its own destruction – namely, the working class.[11]

It is not at all clear whether any 'approved' theoretical position has modified the earlier position that there were no acute antagonisms within the black 'colonised' nation. Contradictory formulations abound. Here, for instance, are excerpts from two passages on Inkatha and Natal. On the one hand, the SACP Central Committee referred to 'backward, counter-revolutionary elements' in the black population, and said that the rural masses should turn against all those who represent their continued oppression and exploitation, be they black or white.[12] On the other hand, a

theorist who writes in both ANC and SACP publications insisted that irrespective of class, 'the colonised people' as a whole, with the exception of what he termed 'quislings and other traitors', supported the 'decolonisation war'.[13] Well, — *Is* there a class dimension to Inkatha's rule, or is Buthelezi simply and individually a quisling?

Revolutionary situations, seizure of power, and armed forces

It may be recalled that in the *Africa South* debate in 1958/9 Lewin outlined certain prerequisites for a revolution, and that he identified as a crucial variable the loss of control by the state over its armed forces. This section centres upon these two related issues: the concept of a 'revolutionary situation', and the question of to what extent South African revolutionary theorists have grappled with the military dimension to any successful revolution. Ideally, such commentary should be located within fuller discussion of what constitutes a revolution, and of how revolutions are most effectively analysed. I have tried to outline my position on these questions elsewhere, and shall not repeat it here (Bundy, 1987).

Hobsbawm (1986) reminds historians that they must grapple with two major qualities of revolutions. First, there is their 'general character as phenomena of historic rupture', as products of impersonal, historically engendered social-structural pressures and imbalances. Secondly, revolutions are also episodes in which large numbers of men and women engage in conscious, active political struggle. Both aspects — long-term and short-term, structure and struggle — must be explored if we are to comprehend or explain revolutions. These two 'levels' of explanation, very roughly, correspond with the difference between notions of crisis and of revolutionary situation.

Historical crisis is a longer term, contextual and structural concept: it asks whether the international system is in a phase of restructuring; what major developments have taken place in a country's economy, social structure and political order; if the tensions generated by these changes have been absorbed or accommodated — or, alternatively, whether they have become acute due to the failure or absence of institutional adaptation. Gramsci's characterisation of an 'organic' crisis has been applied to South Africa by Saul and Gelb (1986) amongst others. They have argued that South Africa entered a multi-faceted crisis in the mid-1970s, which precipitated both a search for new solutions by the dominant classes and intensified opposition by the dominated classes.

A revolutionary situation, on the other hand, is a shorter term, more concentrated phenomenon, occurring within a structural or organic crisis; it is 'that variant of short-term crisis within a system with long-term internal tensions which offers good chances of a revolutionary outcome'

(Hobsbawm 1986:19). Good chances – but not a foregone conclusion. It is precisely in a revolutionary situation that revolutionary leadership and revolutionary theory assume heightened historical significance. Hobsbawm's lucid relation of structure to situation is worth quoting:

> One must not exaggerate structure and devalue situation. Ordinary cost of living riots, which for most participants imply no intended or immediate challenge to the existing order, may become the starting-point for revolution when they occur in 1917... Structure and situation interact, and determine the limits of decision and action, but what determines the possibility of action is primarily situation. At this point the analysis of forces capable of mobilizing, organizing and moving into action groups of people on a politically decisive scale becomes relevant...(1986:17).

Lenin defined a revolutionary situation as a nation-wide crisis that affected both the dominant and subordinate elements in society. Many academic definitions of revolutionary crisis are in effect elaborate restatements of a formulation that has retained its cutting edge over the decades. The core of Lenin's analysis is the simultaneity and interaction of mass political action on an unprecedented scale and a crisis of the regime; it is the conjuncture of the two that gives the concept of revolutionary situation its dynamism and explanatory power. Here, I propose simply to expand both elements and to integrate them with various other factors to arrive at an eclectic definition of a revolutionary situation.

The first crucial precondition of revolution – 'the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny' (Trotsky, 1980,I:xvii) – may be divided analytically into two linked processes.

> 1) A rupture at the ideological level: this is a central theme in Gramsci's writings on crisis and revolution, as in the proposition 'If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e., is no longer "leading" but only "dominant", exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously'. Similarly, Barrington Moore considered 'an outpouring of new thought articulating objectives incompatible with the continuation of an existing polity' the single most reliable indicator 'that the first conditions of a revolutionary situation is being fulfilled'.[14]
>
> 2) An explosion of new forms of political activism among members of the subordinate classes– – the sudden passage of the masses 'from a state of political passivity to a certain activity' (Gramsci, 1971:210). The phenomenon is

quantitative — the mass character, in numerical terms —
and qualitative — the volcanic release of collective energies
and creativity.

If that develops Lenin's first major requirement, then similarly his second
can be sub-divided:

3) The presence of deep-seated dilemmas for the ruling
class and its regime,and splits or conflicts over how to
resolve them. presence of deep-seated dilemmas for the
ruling class and its regime, and splits or conflicts over how to
resolve them . This might typically include the defection of
erstwhile supportive elites; the collapse of consensus around
the ideologies of the regime; and difficulties in carrying out
administrative functions.

4) Especially, the loss by the regime of its undisputed and
unified control over the instruments of violence:loss by the
regime of its undisputed and unified control over the
instruments of violence : in a modern industrial society this
means essentially the armed forces and police.

5) With the loss or deterioration of administrative and
coercive capacities by the regime, there arise alternative
claimants to arise alternative claimants to authority , with
competing administrative, judicial, revenue-raising and
ideological structures.

Then in addition to the two central conditions one might add:

6) The presence of a political party or movement capable of
directing and leading presence of a political party or
movement capable of directing and leading struggles ; 'a
party is necessary as an instrument of political centralisation.
Without some such instrument, all the fragmentary
struggles, sectional experiences and partial perspectives of
the different layers of the masses cannot be
combined'(Geras, 1986:183). This supposes too that a
revolutionary party possesses a theory capable of specifying
appropriate strategy and tactics.

7) A coincidence of widespread rural instability or even
rebellion with urban unrest. . As this is largely empirically
derived, from the comparative study of modern revolutions,
it is worth noting the single major exception: the revolution
in Iran, in a fairly highly developed economy, took place
almost entirely in the cities, and the means of struggle were
close to classic conceptions of mass strike.

8) An international context in which one or more factors
disadvantage the nation-state in que stion. This frequently
but not necessarily, involves military pressure on the regime.

How far did South Africa, during the upsurge of mass-based resistance in
the mid-1980s, correspond to the notion of revolutionary situation thus
outlined? Some commentators saw South Africa as having entered a
decisive pre-revolutionary phase. 'South Africa today is approaching one
of those brief but decisive moments of historical and social contradictions',
ran a representative judgement; 'today all the elements necessary for the
success of the revolution are definitely coming together' (Magubane,
1986). And shading off from this one could trace a spectrum of opinions
through to those which found little or no prospect of revolutionary change
at all.[15]

With respect to components 1 and 2, it hardly needs confirmation that
these indicators were fully evident. There was a massive withdrawal of
support from the official ideology, and a quite different moral and political
order was envisioned. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of South
Africans made the passage from political passivity to activism.

On several of the components (numbers 3, 5, and 6), an answer would
take the form 'Yes, but only partly'. The inability of the ruling classes to
'carry on in the old way' was not clear-cut. The regime faced sharp
difficulties, but the cohesion and capacities of the state remained largely
intact. Fissures and defections there certainly were: parliamentary
politicians opted to work in extra-parliamentary fora; capitalists parleyed
with the ANC; previously pro-regime intellectuals defected from the ruling
party and, in some cases, broke more decisively with dominant beliefs.
While the administrative capacity of the state has not been substantially
breached it has been pried loose here and there: emigration drains
managerial and professional skills; the rent boycotts led to the effective
collapse of one revenue-raising apparatus; and structures of black local
government are not yet back in place.

Equally, the eroding moral authority of the state saw in 1985 an
unprecedented emergence of alternative structures, alongside and in
competition with those of the state. This was the historical significance of
the creation of street committees, people's courts, and of popular organs
which took over the role of local government in Cradock, Mamelodi, and
elsewhere. It is also the reason that these structures have been among the
main targets of state violence since 1985.

With respect to the presence of a party or movement able to direct and
coordinate political actions, clearly the ANC/SACP alliance fulfils this role
in some degree. The breadth and level of its support nation-wide, the
broad appeal of its basic programme of fundamental human rights, and its
increasingly evident identity as the major opponent of the regime are

wholly apparent. At the same time, as the ANC itself acknowledged in October 1986, it had 'not come anywhere near the achievement of the objectives' it had set itself: underground structures were still weak; links between trained cadres and 'mass combat groups' had not been established, and there was a need to reassess 'military perspectives'.[16]

Preconditions 7 and 8 were neither unambiguously present nor entirely absent. In 1985 the small towns of the Karroo and Eastern Cape saw some of the most concerted expressions of resistance; events in KwaNdebele and Lebowa suggest how precarious local elites are and how tinder-dry the grass roots of politics in these rural ghettoes; yet, overall, the forces of stability in the countryside are still stronger than those of change. Similarly, the international context has not swung decisively to the regime's disadvantage. The continued weakness of the front line states and the support on crucial issues by the imperialist powers outweigh the altered geopolitics of the region and the campaigns for sanctions and isolation.

Which leaves component 4: the state's monopoly of control over the instruments of coercion. Theoretical and empirical findings converge on this score. Marxist, liberal and conservative analysts all agree that unless the armed forces of a regime exhibit substantial erosion or defection then no modern revolution (which involves seizure of state power) can take place. The postulate is borne out by the evidence of all revolutionary episodes since 1789. Studies of South Africa have pointed to the high degree of regime loyalty displayed by police and army. The most detailed study of this issue was by Russell (1974:81-2), and she concluded emphatically that the armed forces would remain loyal to the regime no matter how much upheaval and turmoil there was. In 1989 such a finding is almost totally intact. The South African state continues to be insulated against an indispensable prerequisite of revolution.

Yet even this apparently granitic pillar of the status quo may on closer inspection exhibit hairline cracks which, under certain conditions, could ramify. Not many South African soldiers have broken ranks and given assistance or information to the official enemy; but there have been a few. There has not yet been evidence of large-scale infiltration of the black police and armed forces; but there has been some. The South African anti-conscription movement is still tiny; but a few years ago it did not even exist. Each of the Bantustans now sports its own armed forces; but recent events indicate that these carry their own threats of fission and defection. The state continues to expand its police and military capacities; but recent events suggest that neither *kitskonstabels* nor SWATF troops are as reliable as conventional forces. And for that matter, how much of a problem might it be for the state if large segments of the police force identify politically with elements well to the right of the government?

Equally, are there credible scenarios whereby South African armed forces find themselves fighting outside the country — not on derring-do cross-border raids, but bogged down in protracted guerrilla war? Perhaps defending clients, or involved in an escalated war in Namibia, or drawn through destabilisation tactics into military encounters elsewhere in the sub-continent? If any of these is possible, it is worth recalling Johnson's speculative comments of a decade ago: were South Africa to become involved in extra-territorial adventures

> The military strength of the state would be worn away in foreign wars; the wars would constitute a large extra strain on the economy... dislike of war would help trigger insurrection at home; and the state's repressive apparatus would be neither intact nor in place to meet such a threat. Large-scale military intervention by Pretoria [elsewhere in the region] is a recipe for social revolution in South Africa (1977:310).

Finally, the question of the armed forces as a critical factor in shaping revolutionary outcomes — has recently received far more sustained and thoughtful analysis in ANC and SACP publications than previously. In the ANC's *Strategy and Tactics* (1969) the question of police and army loyalty to the state was not addressed at all in the section 'The Enemy: His Strength and Weaknesses'. Although there was speculation that 'in a different situation' the white working class or sections of it might align themselves with black workers.

In some cases, there is little more than argument-by-assertion. For example, statements like 'when the revolution progresses, some individuals from the army and police will desert and seek refuge among the people'. But elswhere the issue is explored more systematically. Kasrils (1986) defines a revolutionary people's army as one made up of organised advance detachments; a revolutionary armed people; and elements of the enemy force which may be won over to the side of the revolution. Acknowledging that this latter may be difficult to organise, he insists that it remains a vital ingredient and is extremely important. To this end he envisages agitating amongst the uniformed forces through an organisation like the Armed Forces Movement in Portugal, both to detach some black soldiers and police, and to weaken the morale of white soldiers.[17]

Mashinini (1985), in more uncompromising terms bases his argument on the maxim that 'the unconditional breakdown of the armed forces is the universal law of any revolution'. Because, in South Africa, blacks are not conscripted revolutionary demands and aspirations do not evoke a response from within the armed forces. This he regards as one of the greatest deficiencies in the South African revolution.

Instead of conclusions

This paper has not sought to be prescriptive, and proffers no sweeping conclusions. It has revisited questions posed in Africa South a generation ago, and indicated some of the ways in which answers have been sought. It ends by posing slightly different questions — about which *kind* of revolution is historically feasible in South Africa — prompted by some of the comparative literature on revolutions.

An argument has been advanced by various theorists and comparative historians of revolution: namely, that it may be historically impossible for contemporary revolutions to resemble those of earlier epochs. Skocpol suggests that the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions occurred in certain kinds of societies — societies that were overwhelmingly agrarian; where capitalist relations of production were only partially developed; and where pre-modern state forms were crippled or paralysed by internal breakdown and external pressures. 'If a social revolution were to transform an advanced industrial nation, it would ... have to take a very different form, and occur under quite different international conditions from the great historical social revolutions' (Skopcol 1979:292-3). Other scholars have developed comparative models and/or critical analyses of 'third world revolutions', 'wars of national liberation' and 'national revolts' — and in each case distinguishing between those which achieve social transformation and those which do not.[18]

Related questions arise if one pursues the notion of 'waves' of revolutionary activity or 'simultaneous ruptures'. In the twentieth century there have been four periods of system-wide shock: 1914-18, 1929-33, 1939-45, and the 1970s. Each produced a crop of revolutions and regime changes. What, if any, are the implications for the South African case of revolutions in South-East Asia, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Angola, Mozambique, Guine-Bissau, and Iran? Fred Halliday (1983:94) has pointed to the heavily agrarian and socially backward character of all these cases — with the exception of Iran. There, the overthrow of the Shah took place in the context of rapid capitalist transformation and substantial political independence. However regressive one might consider the leadership and ideology of the Iranian revolution, its social content was 'modern', he argues. Revolution took place almost exclusively in the cities; the means of struggle — massive demonstrations and political general strikes — were those normally associated with conflict in developed capitalist societies.

To put the comparative or world-historical question rather crudely: does one, in South Africa, imagine a classic social revolution, or a war of national liberation, or some intermediate form of contemporary revolution? Which outcome is historically possible? If the South African state and socio-economic system are in deep or organic crisis, if it seems

that some restructuring is unavoidable, the question remains: what form will it take? Schematically, several possibilities present themselves as historically imaginable:

    i) Restructuring might come by *authoritarian reform* or successful 'formative action' by the ruling classes and regime: a blend of co-optations, concessions and selective repression will lead to a reordered state permitting wider political participation while preserving the fundamental features of South African capitalism.

    ii) Restructuring might come through *negotiated settlement*: presumably after an intensification of regional and domestic conflict, military stalemate matched by economic deterioration, the liberation movement and the regime might be brought to a negotiating table under the aegis of external powers (the 'Zimbabwean model').

    iii) Negative restructuring might witness *long-term unstable equilibrium*: the analogies most frequently cited are Lebanon or Northern Ireland; a more convincing comparison might be drawn with the three decades known as la violencia in Colombia; uneven economic decline, persistent but inconclusive civil conflict, and high levels of social trauma (the 'Colombian model').

    iv) Restructuring might take the form of *violent counter-revolution*: capture of the state machinery by rightwing armed forces and their political allies; massive escalation of repression and uniformed terrorism; a frontal assault on working class organisations (the 'Chilean model').

    v) Restructuring might be achieved through *revolutionary seizure of power*: this will happen only if those who seek transformation from below can construct organisational means to their ends, so as to link mass actions and effective leadership; if appropriate strategies are devised in the interplay between theory and practice, and if the armed forces of the state can to a degree be neutralised.

The central question — what are the prospects for revolutionary change in contemporary South Africa? — remains unanswered. Unanswered, not merely in the obvious sense that different analysts come up with different answers, but more importantly unresolved in the spheres of political theory and practice. Any attempt to answer it will be affected by what one perceives as the connection between revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice.

John Dunn noted in his *Modern Revolutions* 'an inescapable necessity in all revolutions for both mass action and responsible and effective

leadership' (1972:16). That necessity is peculiarly important at times of systemic crisis and at moments that have some or all of the features of a revolutionary situation. How effective any leadership or party can be depends upon its ability to comprehend and to respond theoretically to events. Theory, in this sense, is not an activity taking place independently or separately from practice. Struggle shapes theory; theory in turn shapes struggle. Without their constant interplay, even the possibility of revolution is denied.

NOTES

(* This is an edited version of a seminar paper presented by the author at the Centre for African Studies, UCT, September 1988. For more detail, particularly on the quotations, readers are referred to this unpublished paper. *Editors*)

1. Some of these debates can be followed in *Viewpoints and Perspectives*, a publication of the Johannesburg Discussion Club. Vol I(1) appeared in March 1953, and included talks given in 1952. Particularly relevant to the debate over internal colonialism is the editorial to Vol I(3) (February 1954), which outlines various positions on the relative salience of class and race.

2. The precis is from *The Road to South African Freedom*, adopted as the programme of the SACP in 1962.

3 J Pampallis (nd:201). See *ibid*, 257-78, for *Strategy and Tactics of the ANC (1969)*. And, for a discussion of the adoption, pursuit and theorising of guerrilla war in the 1960s see S Johns (1973:267-303).

4. Mzala, 'Umkhonto we Sizwe: Building People's Forces for Combat War & Insurrection', 2-part article, *Sechaba* (Dec 1986 & Jan 1987), part 2, 21.

5 By Mzala in April 1982.

6 See: Mzala (1980:65-73); Mzala (1981:83-94); K Migwe (1982:77-87); Trevor (1984)

7. The composite advocacy of 'arming the people' uses quotations from Mzala (1981) and Migwe (1982); the response is by Trevor (1984).

8. VI Lenin, 'How to organize competition', *Collected Works, vol 26, 413.*

9. A Mashinini, in *Sechaba, April 1986.*

10. Mashinini, *Sechaba*, May 1987.

11. Mzala, *Sechaba, January 1987.*

12. Statement by CC, SACP, March 1986

13. C Theodoropolous, *Sechaba*, June 1987.

14. Gramsci (1971:275-6); Moore is quoted in Tilly (1978:204).

15. Cf the more cautious formulation in a SACP statement: 'the masses ... have engaged in struggles which have resulted in the emergence in some areas of the country of what has been described as an insurrectionary situation' (*African Communist*, 105 (2nd quarter, 1986), 7).

16. '1987: What is to be done', ANC NEC and Politico-Military Council, Lusaka, 1986. This document was released for publication by the Bureau for Information, and quoted in the *Financial Mail* 28.12.87.

17. See Mzala (1986) who calls for the need to work politically within the South African armed forces with the aim of neutralising, or even winning over, significant sections of it.
18. See Miller & Aya (1971); Chaliand (1977); Walton (1984).

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