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Debate

Daring to Question the Tripartite Alliance A Response to Southall and Wood

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Edward Said, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York City, best noted for his role as a Palestinian activist and critic of the current peace process between Israel and Palestine, once remarked that the role of an intellectual is to 'be a rebel against power and against prevailing ideas ... to raise doubts about the illusions of the status quo' (Said 1995:196). By this definitional yardstick, South Africa's coterie of intellectuals has shrunk dramatically in the post-apartheid era. Many of the academics and organic intellectuals, once noted for their brave critical stance against apartheid, have in the contemporary period tended to lose their critical insight and become comfortable with expounding mere dogma. And in particular, a group of left intellectuals associated with the trade union movement have since the early 1990s developed their own left-wing dogma, one that holds that the tripartite alliance and corporatist networks are sacrosanct and should not be challenged.

Southall and Wood's recent critique of our article entitled 'Parliamentary Opposition and Democratic Consolidation in South Africa' (Habib and Taylor 1999:261-7) is one such example. Even in the face of mounting evidence that the tripartite alliance undermines the interests of organised workers and the poor, these academics continue to defend the alliance. Describing the recommendation for a break in the alliance as 'artificial, dangerous and premature' (Southall and Wood 1999:80), they continue to espouse what by now has become a weary and hollow argument that calls for the need to fight for the heart and soul of the ANC. Southall and Wood's critique of our article rests on three pillars: first, COSATU has on balance benefited from the alliance and has been able to influence post-apartheid government policy; second, that a 1998 opinion survey of COSATU members provides empirical evidence that workers do not favour a break-

up of the alliance; and finally, a break in the alliance would split the worker movement and undermine the cause of worker unity. We address each of these issues in turn.

The benefits of the tripartite alliance

We originally maintained that the tripartite alliance, while successful at maximising opposition against apartheid, was not an effective mechanism to enable COSATU to influence ANC and government policies. Marshalling government's Growth, Employment, and Redistribution strategy (GEAR) as evidence, we argued that it represents an anti-poor macroeconomic policy and that COSATU was pointedly excluded from the process that led to its adoption. Southall and Wood, however, using Maree as a reference, maintain that by supporting corporatist and parliamentary initiatives with 'key instances of mass mobilisation... COSATU has made significant strides in advancing workers rights and interests in parliament' (1999:74). In support of their argument, they point to successes around the adoption of the Labour Relations Act (LRA), labour-friendly clauses in the constitution, and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

Two problems exist with this argument. First, it equates GEAR with other legislation suggesting that the loss of the one can effectively be made up by successes on other legislative fronts. This, however, is misleading. Macroeconomic policy reflects the soul of a society; it establishes the parameters of all other policies, and therefore defines the substantive character of the democratic transition. COSATU's loss on the macroeconomic policy front cannot be simply neutralised by other legislative wins as is intimated by Maree, Southall and Wood. Indeed, the post-apartheid government's failure effectively to address the fundamental problems confronting contemporary South African society, namely, the slow pace of socio-economic delivery, the failure to stem the tide of job losses, and the high rates of crime, are directly related to its adoption of a regressive macroeconomic policy (Habib and Padayachee forthcoming). How then Maree, Southall and Wood can actually argue that COSATU has on balance succeeded in advancing worker rights in parliament is hard to understand.

Of course, this argument can be maintained if the apartheid system is used as the yardstick by which to measure progress. But is this a legitimate reference point? Can the post-apartheid government honestly compare its socio-economic record with that of a political system that was regarded as

a crime against humanity, and then claim victory when it is assessed as being better? Or, should such a government be measured against the promises it made and the developmentalist vision it portrayed to the South African electorate?

Second, it needs to be noted that ever since its adoption the LRA has co-existed uneasily with the government's GEAR strategy. Sooner or later the LRA would have had to be revised to fit in with the government's macroeconomic commitments. Indeed, in an effort to address the concerns of the business community about the rigidity of the South African labour market, the Ministry of Labour has recently opened an investigation into the provisions of the LRA. This, in all likelihood, will eventually result in a watering down of the LRA, and a corresponding weakening of worker rights, even though there is significant evidence attesting to the flexibility of the labour market (Standing 1996). Southall and Wood should thus be careful of raising the banner of the LRA as evidence of COSATU's influence on the ANC government's policies.

In fact, the government's investigation into the possible revision of the LRA is evidence of COSATU's waning influence on the ANC. This became even more apparent in August 1999 when the government stood firm on its wage offer to public sector unions and then unilaterally imposed its decision when it deadlocked with the unions in the bargaining chamber. To make matters worse, the leadership of the ANC in the form of Patrick Lekota heaped further humiliation on their alliance partner by publicly berating the COSATU leadership for their 'revolutionary indiscipline' at the federation's own special congress (*Business Day*, August 19, 1999). This moved the popular columnist Hogarth to ponder in the nation's largest weekly newspaper whether the COSATU leadership might be prone to a bout of political sadomasochism (*Sunday Times*, August 15, 1999). In the light of this, it is difficult to see why progressive and union-aligned scholars of the likes of Southall and Wood continue to punt for a tripartite alliance that clearly undermines, weakens and humiliates the largest union federation in the country.

The opinions of COSATU members

Southall and Wood's second criticism of our article is based on an opinion survey of COSATU members conducted in 1998. This survey indicated that COSATU members believed that the ANC government had delivered in a wide variety of areas. In addition, the vast majority of them were

supportive of the tripartite alliance and COSATU's decision to second leadership figures to the ANC electoral slate. These findings then led Southall and Wood to conclude that our original recommendation for a fracturing of the alliance was unrealistic and inappropriate in particular because it was not founded on the current political attitudes of COSATU workers. In particular, they stress that 'almost two-thirds of respondents felt that the Alliance should continue and contest the 2004 elections, and only ten percent felt that COSATU should form an independent workers party' (1999:76).

The important point to make here though is that, from a left perspective, analysis of opinion survey data must endeavour to uncover the immanent tendencies and forces which point towards a better, more socially just world, a world in which the interests of the working class and the poor are better served by economic development. That is, the survey findings must be placed in the context of a critical analysis of the existing order, in which the task is to reveal the progressive tendencies towards which they point by assessing their consistency with material realities (Adorno 1976, Pollack 1976, Sayers 1998).

In this regard, the first point to make is that Southall and Wood fail to see how the GEAR strategy that the ANC adopted in June 1996 reflects a changing balance of class forces in South Africa whereby capital has gained the upper hand over the country's reconstruction and development needs. In effect, the ANC's earlier strategic alliance with labour has now been supplanted with a strategic alliance with capital. Rejecting overtly redistributive strategies, the ANC puts its faith in domestic private sector investment as the path to growth (Department of Finance 1996). Thus, the working class and the poor face a state which is out to cut state spending and enforce wage restraint, whilst foreign investors and big business are eagerly embraced so as to fulfil the aspirations of an emerging 'patriotic bourgeoisie'.

The ANC's present macroeconomic policy, enforced through executive predominance, stands in contradiction to the emancipatory impulse of COSATU and the South African Communist Party to address the plight of the working class and the poor. This impulse found expression in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which was conceived as a people-driven project to alleviate poverty and meet people's basic needs, and which was the ticket on which the ANC was elected to power in 1994 (ANC 1994).

In the three years before the June 1999 election this contradiction was skilfully papered over by the politics of co-option, symbolism and rhetoric, with COSATU being able to live with the fact that it could both reject and support GEAR (*The Star*, February 22, 1998). To a large extent, this was due to claims that GEAR did not undermine commitment to the RDP; that it was simply 'an elaboration of one of its facets, fiscal policy', or at worst represented a technocratic 'class neutral' approach (consider John Mattison, 'How the ANC battled to balance the ideological books', *Mail & Guardian*, November 6-12, 1998, and 'Taking a stand, but how could the ANC deliver?', *Mail & Guardian*, November 13-19, 1998; Lodge 1999). Such claims, however, do not withstand rigorous scrutiny. GEAR is not compatible with the RDP; it has superseded it. Today, the Reconstruction and Development Programme is virtually dead; the RDP Office was closed in 1996, many RDP forums (through which people participated in local level decision making) have lost momentum and faded away, and the RDP portfolio committee in the National Assembly is to be abolished. In truth there is a fundamental contradiction between GEAR and the RDP.

Once the COSATU survey findings are placed in this context, they take on different meaning. For what emerges is that support for the alliance is simultaneously very much linked to a wide knowledge of the RDP – a programme well understood and widely supported within COSATU – and a lack of knowledge of GEAR. In the 1998 survey, the vast majority of workers (81.4 per cent) said that they knew what the RDP was, with 52.7 per cent of respondents describing it as 'upliftment of the poor and redistribution of resources' and significantly for the analysis being presented here, 65 per cent believed that the RDP still existed. As far as GEAR is concerned, however, only 32.7 per cent of workers indicated that they knew what it is, moreover 40.9 per cent were doubtful over GEAR's objectives and 19 per cent were prepared to condemn it an outright failure. Only 10.8 per cent of respondents were able to accurately describe GEAR as a 'strategy for economic growth'.

It also emerges from the COSATU survey that very high up on the list of what workers felt was of most direct importance to their lives was 'workers want to receive higher wages'. In an earlier 1994 survey of COSATU members 79 per cent of workers were satisfied on this score, but in the 1998 survey this fell to 41 per cent – a dramatic decline. Similarly in the area of housing, the percentage of those satisfied fell from 91 to 55. So, expectations in these two crucial areas are not being met. Most telling of all,

in answer to the question of 'What will workers do if the new government elected in 1999 does not deliver?' as many as 33 per cent of respondents stated that they would 'Form an alternative party that will provide these benefits to workers', and 37 per cent would 'Vote for another party in the next election' (Psoulis 1999:29, table 4). In fact, the situation is likely to be worse than indicated, in that the survey findings are clearly skewed in favour of shop stewards and skilled workers in industrial urban areas; as representation of respondents in the 'unskilled' occupational category was only 18.3 per cent (compared to 30.3 per cent in the 1994 survey) the voice of the most lowly paid is marginalised.

Surely it is not hard to understand what this all means; that without the RDP, that without delivery on workers day-to-day material concerns, the alliance would be hollow. And yet the material reality is that the developmental thrust of the RDP is no more, and even GEAR's own stated targets are not being met. Thus what the survey findings indicate is that workers' opinions are lagging behind material realities, that progressive political vision has been reigned in by a tendency to take ANC rhetoric on the RDP and delivery at face-value.

The ANC's neo-liberal economic policies are not revitalizing the economy and are not hastening a better future for all; the real rate of growth of private sector investment has fallen over the last three years, increased capital inflows have fallen short, and employment levels in the targeted sectors have been negative (Habib and Padayachee forthcoming). In fact, as is the case elsewhere in the world, neo-liberal policies have led to greater socio-economic inequality (Marais 1998, Giddens 1998). As John Pilger has observed, what is happening in South Africa is that 'inequality among blacks has increased sharply as the new black elite gets richer and the majority gets poorer. The new apartheid is one of class, not race' ('The betrayal of South Africa's revolution', in *Mail & Guardian*, April 17-23, 1998; also consider Asghar Adelzadeh 'Our RDP goals can still be achieved', in *The Sunday Independent, Reconstruct*, April 25, 1999). In sum, between the aims of the post-apartheid government and those of an emancipatory politics there is an ever-widening abyss. As the illusion propagated by the ANC that the RDP and GEAR can be reconciled falls apart, the ANC will increasingly find itself in antagonism with COSATU. Already, relations are becoming 'very tense' and 'cracks' can be 'seen in the tripartite alliance' (*Mail & Guardian*, August 13-19, 1999; *The Star*, August 19, 1999).

The dangers of fracturing the tripartite alliance

Our original recommendation for a break-up of the alliance was motivated on the grounds that it might facilitate the establishment of a viable non-racial opposition party, thereby enhancing the prospects for democratic consolidation. Southall and Wood, however, contest this analysis suggesting instead that such a fracturing would lead to the marginalisation of COSATU. This, in their view, would result from 'the ANC play[ing] the populist card, accus[ing] COSATU of ignoring the plight of the unemployed, and accus[ing] it of betraying the liberation struggle' leading to 'some combination of a split within COSATU and within its individual affiliates, bitter struggles of ownership of union assets in extremely expensive court room battles, and the formation by the ANC of a rival union federation' (1999:78-79). In addition, Southall and Wood maintain that we underestimate the practical difficulties associated with developing an electoral alternative given the fact that such a party would find it difficult to attract the financial support required to make a viable political challenge to the ANC. They thus recommend that the labour movement 'should not sacrifice its present relatively advantageous position in the political spectrum', but should rather concentrate on how [it] can struggle to keep the ANC on track to deliver to its popular constituencies' (1999:79-80).

Southall and Wood's position is less than frank, for they must be all too aware of the fact that the worker movement in South Africa is currently divided. A large proportion of workers, even if they are not a majority, are located in a range of alternative union formations like the National Congress of Trade Unions, the Federation of Unions of South Africa, and other independent unions. To tar all such unions with the brush of 'reactionary' as is intimated by Southall and Wood is both unfair and irresponsible. Moreover, both Southall and Wood are aware that one of the major obstacles to uniting these various worker organisations is precisely COSATU's strategic relationship with the ANC and SACP. From this perspective, the tripartite alliance is thus not a facilitative mechanism, but rather an obstacle to the cause of worker unity. While it is true that the ANC could play the populist card and try and split COSATU in the event of a fracture, this alone cannot be a reason for avoiding a break-up in the alliance.

There is also very little merit in Southall and Wood's argument that we have not considered the practical difficulties associated with launching an

electoral challenge to the ANC. In fact, it is precisely because of such considerations that we have recommended that the electoral challenge emerge from the ranks of the labour movement. First, this movement has the policies that could sustain an electoral challenge. Second, it has the liberation identity and the non-racial membership required to legitimise such an electoral challenge. Third, the labour movement is the only institution in South African society, other than capital, with the financial resources (or the leverage over such resources) to facilitate the funding of an electoral challenge. This is not unique to South Africa. Internationally, most viable opposition parties in the contemporary era have had their roots in the labour movement precisely because it has the potential to provide the organisational and financial muscle required in the initial stages of building an opposition political party.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that Southall and Wood's argument has weak motivational ethical substance and lacks any sense of political vision. In particular, it is not clear what part of a marxist theoretical framework Southall and Wood would seek to retain. They seem to have lost sight of how South Africa continues to be marked by class conflict, and of the need for the left to confront and transcend the 'limitations of capitalism' (Giddens 1998:3). Instead of leading us into a new South Africa in which the exploitation of the working class and the plight of the poor is seriously addressed, Southall and Wood would lead us into a *Brave New World* where any critical thought which might provoke doubt and discontent is seen to be 'extremely dangerous' and has to be suppressed (Huxley 1966).

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