

# The poverty of THEORY

**In the face of utter disillusionment with socialism in Eastern Europe, certain notions doggedly adhered to on the left in South Africa face serious challenges. Political scientist DARYL GLASER argues for a third way between the mechanical theories of the populists' "two-stage revolution" and the workerists' notion of "permanent revolution". His views are summarised in this report.**

South Africa has entered waters poorly charted in revolutionary theory. After years of debate between those who wanted the immediate introduction of socialism in a new South Africa and those who argued that armed insurrection or "national democracy" was a priority, there is a third option developing. That is of negotiations between former enemies of relatively equal strength which might issue in something less than the fully unitary and majority-ruled state that both "workerists" and "populists" took for granted.

Those on the left who are "mired in the categories of debates past", respond in two ways, says Glaser.

One camp says this is what happens to a revolutionary struggle that is not pursued resolutely to its socialist conclusion. The other says this is simply a stage on the long road to socialism.

Glaser says the terms of such disagreements must be rethought.

This does not mean that the socialist project must be abandoned, as "pessimists" and "new realists" argue. But it does mean casting aside all mechanical theories of revolutionary time and historical direction; all notions that revolutions only go forward in linear fashion, and that the only question is whether they proceed fast or slowly, in stages or perpetual motion.

The two-stage theory of revolution (first a struggle for national democracy, then socialism) appears to take democracy seriously, he says. But even a cursory examination of the theory's career in other countries reveals how tenuous is the thread connecting it to any kind of democracy.

The "national democratic stage" does clear the decks of certain obstacles to democratisation – colonial overlordship, military occupation or institutionalised minority rule. But it also provides a cloak for autocratic elites, scornful of the most basic "bourgeois democratic" rights.

The second or "socialist" stage has tended to see the disappearance of such freedoms and rights which survived the first stage.

Glaser raises serious doubts about whether the theory can serve as a base for "the urgently needed recombination of democracy and socialism".

He advances three reasons for his reservations:

- The two-stage theory rests on notions of both "the people" and "the working class" as homogeneous groups whose interests can be represented by a single national liberation movement and its allies. Such movements tend to emphasise the importance of unity, are intolerant of dissent, and are wary of devolving power to local or grassroots bod-

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ies whose activities might contradict the "unifying" role of the leadership.

- The theory licenses the view that democracy is merely a stage to be passed through on the way to socialism. It also sanctions second-stage abandonment of elementary forms of pluralism and basic human rights.

- It sanctions attempts by "national democratic" elites to regulate the timing and direction of the building of socialism from above. The result is "bureaucratic paternalism".

So much for the two-stage theory. Glaser then asks the question whether the theory of permanent revolution offers an escape from these difficulties?

Again, he argues there are grounds for doubt. Like the two-stage theory, the idea of a workers' revolution offers a formula for the

timing and direction of socialist change which could become rigid and prescriptive, neglectful of democratic preparation and intolerant of disagreement.

Both theories, in summary, run the risk of substituting for democratic practice the supposed strategic wisdom of supposedly far-seeing revolutionary elites.

The remedy, says Glaser, is "a logic of democratic preparation" – commitment to democracy and socialism must be pursued together, each as a precondition of the other's fullest and richest development.

It would keep alive the ideals of socialism, making every effort to stimulate, rather than silence or defer, discussion of its possibilities and prospects.

He envisages a community "thick with parties, unions, newspapers, new social movements of feminists, ecologists and so on", in which socialists would contend for democratic control of the state.

Glaser spells out (the long-held liberal view) that, if an electorate voted for one socialist party rather than another, the defeated socialists must accept the verdict.

Further, that if an electorate "votes for a pro-capitalist party, the whole socialist camp would have to agree to go into a democratic and legal opposition.

Unlike the two-stage or permanent revolution theories, the logic of "democratic preparation" allows for going backwards too.

He suggests that while negotiations continue, the left should use the time to learn to live with each other as well as political organisations outside the left.

"At the very least socialists must seek the widest possible acceptance of basic democratic ground rules

These rules and their common acceptance are especially vital in South Africa, given its history of violent organisational rivalry and the current civil war in Natal which threatens to spread elsewhere.

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