

# Taking Slovo to task

Joe Slovo's paper "Has Socialism Failed?" is the first indication of a democratic renewal within SACP ranks, but it does not go nearly far enough, argues political sociologist Heribert Adam.

By Shauna Westcott

**IT IS** only in the apartheid state that the hammer and sickle emblem still flies proudly at mass rallies. This is among the realities that give a "special importance" to South African Communist Party pronouncements and strategy, Heribert Adam asserts in a paper titled "Eastern Europe and South African Socialism: Engaging Joe Slovo".

In fact, Adam goes so far as to say that SACP members are "the major force that dominates theoretical debates and strategies within the broad anti-apartheid opposition", arguing that the style of the whole liberation movement must therefore be influenced by the SACP's own practice of internal democracy.

Adam is hopeful that pressure for democracy from below, particularly in the unions, may compel a final departure from the relics of Stalinism both in theory and in practice. He hails Slovo's "thoughtful" paper as the first indication of a democratic renewal. But he remains sceptical.

The major reason for doubt, it hardly needs saying, is the Stalinist past of the SACP, and Adam accuses Slovo of not going far enough in his attempt to come to terms with it. Specifically, his failure lies in blaming Stalinist tyranny on human error rather than on fundamental Leninist tenets, for it was Lenin who abolished independent unions and introduced the one-party state.

Noting that the SACP defended the Stalinist show trials of the 1930s and supported the Soviet invasions of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan, Adam asks: "Why do people with such an acute sense of injustice in their homeland become blinded to oppression elsewhere?"

Noting also that Slovo claims to have had personal doubts about Stalinist practices since the mid-1950s, Adam asserts that the only explanation for his 30-year silence on the matter - and for SACP endorsement of Stalinism - is expedience.

He quotes an October 1988 interview in Leverkusen in which Slovo admitted as much, saying: "It became almost risky and counter-productive to battle this issue out in our party. It would have caused an enormous split, and it had less and less bearing on our work."

Adam concedes that SACP reliance on aid from the Soviet Union placed the party in the apparent predicament of having to

choose between "the political goal of opposing apartheid and the ethical necessity of denouncing Stalinism". He concedes also that some members left the party with troubled consciences.

However, not only were other dissenters hunted out of the party, but it spoke with one Stalinist voice. No debate, not the slightest qualm was reflected in party publications about "what developed at the very least into a great taboo".

It is understandable, says Adam, that the SACP opted for organisational clout rather than the moral high ground. But what is not understandable is that they went beyond political necessity in their enthusiastic endorsement of tyranny and terror, romanticising and glorifying the Soviet Union against all criticism. In so doing they also discredited the anti-apartheid cause which was their avowed first priority. "For this



Slovo: guilty of expedience?



Adam: reasons for doubt.

politically foolish but, above all, morally reprehensible position, the party ought to be held responsible," Adam asserts, adding that the choice for expediency "must be difficult to rationalise for a party of self-claimed moral superiority". He also takes Slovo to task for being unable to resist "the usual praise of the Soviet Union and Cuba in terms of material achievements".

The Soviet Union may have more medical doctors per head than Western Europe but it is "the only modern society where life expectancy is declining". It may produce more steel, fuel and energy than any other country but it has to import food and lacks basic consumer goods. Cuba may have the best health system in the world but it also quarantines all Aids carriers.

It is all very well for Slovo to praise the socialist world for "ending cultural backwardness", says Adam, but what does this mean "when after 70 years of socialism in the Soviet Union, the country is wracked by

ethnic riots, religious intolerance and virulent anti-semitism?"

"When Western Europe de-nationalises, the socialist East re-nationalises with the worst kind of 19th century chauvinism. When women finally approach their equal share and spiritual emancipation in the capitalist West, the East has not yet spawned a feminist movement against socialist patriarchy. How is 'cultural backwardness' measured?"

But Adam's harshest criticism turns around Slovo's failure to confront Stalinist tyranny head-on. Slovo hides behind euphemisms like "judicial distortions", says Adam, which is tantamount to "an unwitting rationalisation of the show trials".

Slovo chooses to speak of "damage wrought to the whole Soviet social fabric (including its army) by the authoritarian bureaucracy" when what he means is that many of the Russian officer corps were systematically murdered by a paranoid Stalinist clique before the German invasion.

"Nowhere in Slovo's account does one find proper conceptualisations, let alone some moral outrage about the Stalinist holocaust. The paper amounts to the distancing of the SACP chairman from an embarrassing past without addressing the causes of the crime," Adam says.

It is worth noting that this reluctance to fully acknowledge, mourn and repent past atrocities is not peculiar to the SACP. In fact it might be argued that the SACP has gone further than most in this difficult but profoundly necessary direction.

Athol Fugard commented in the last issue of *Democracy in Action* on the breathtaking ease with which National Party cabinet ministers now declare that the time has come to forget the past. Such glibness speaks more of opportunism than of a change of heart, he observed.

Adam observes that "the victims of Auschwitz, the Gulags and apartheid are not concerned in whose name they were killed and maimed" and cites Canadian sociologist Frederick Johnstone as "almost alone among the voices on the left" in his insistence that "the Gulag is about apartheid, that Auschwitz is about Cambodia".

Again it is worth noting in passing that Adam's view of Johnstone as a solitary voice betrays a lamentable ignorance of the growing body of feminist analysis that draws exactly this connection, among others, in its understanding of domination as one of the key laws of the patriarchy.

## Slovo taken to task

However, the point Adam makes is that the tyranny of Leninism - the almost magical justification of evil under the rubric of "the people's cause" - is worse than any other because of its pretences.

"The Leninists glorified higher productivity as the patriotic duty of selfless brigades. The apartheid labourer at least knows of his exploitation and grudgingly complies because alternatives are lacking. The Leninist/Stalinists betrayed their victims in addition to exploiting them. Hence the magnitude of the fury for revenge when set free.

"Blacks in South Africa, on the other hand, always knew that racial rule was for the benefit of the ruling race. They do not feel cheated as the hardworking party member did when the luxurious corruption of the people's representatives was finally revealed."

Adam also criticises Slovo for his orthodox assertion of the scientific nature of Marxism, an attitude long abandoned by leading historians and critical theorists who stress the interpretative task of analysts.

Reliance on the determinism implicit in Slovo's view of human behaviour denies "the infinitely varied subjectivity through which people perceive, interpret and mediate their world". It also "results in a crude reductionism or economic approach that neglects the fact that people not only have material interests but ideal interests as well".

If a theory is inadequate to the reality of individual human beings, it follows that its conceptualisations involving groups of human beings will also be inadequate. When inadequate concepts are held not only as articles of faith, but exalted beyond doubt as "science", mayhem results. Thus, says Adam, one must ask who are "the people"? Who are "the working class"? Who are "society as a whole" that Slovo sees assuming control?

**QUOTING** Mervyn Frost quoting Robert Michels and Max Weber, he says: "In modern states control by 'society as a whole' means in practice bureaucratic rule. Those who say 'organisation' inevitably say 'oligarchy'. Oligarchic tendencies can only be counteracted by a democratic culture below, not by Leninist 'democratisation from above'."

Looking specifically at Slovo's (and Marx's) conceptualisation of an abstract working class, Adam notes that it "misses the crucial social texture".

"The working class is comprised of blacks and whites, women and men, religious adherents and agnostics, homosexuals and heterosexuals, skilled and unskilled workers who live in urban and rural settings. Above all there are employed and unemployed.

"To expect solidarity because of common exploitation lingers as a long-standing illusion. Yet it is precisely such a self-deception on which the ANC and SACP bases its strategy. Working-class unity and solidarity has failed throughout the history of the left around the world," Adam says. Beyond this false assumption about working-class solidarity, there is also a neglect of the split in the labour movement between the employed and the unemployed.

Adam notes: "Neither the ANC nor Cosatu has devised a strategy for coping with the one third of the workforce who are unemployed. The unions are increasingly representative of the employed only. Mere employment in South Africa almost qualifies one for membership in a labour aristocracy... Those millions outside the formal economy - in the backyards of townships, in the ring of shacks around the cities and in desolate huts in the barren countryside - form a permanent underclass."

Adam records the sombre fact that it is from the desperate ranks of the unemployed that the state recruits *kitskonstabels* and warlord vigilantes. He accuses orthodox Marxism of "traditionally writing off this lumpenproletariat", abandoning them to the fundamentalist church cults, drug peddlers and petty criminals who "vie for the souls and the pockets of the downtrodden".

On the positive side of Adam's engagement with Slovo, is approval for the SACP chairperson's "sensible, pragmatic assessment that the South African economy cannot be transformed by edict without risking economic collapse". Adam hails Slovo's backing for a mixed economy and public control through effective democratic participation by "producers at all levels".

However, he does not give Slovo credit for a courageous attempt at theoretical accommodation of the chaos exposed by the collapse of Eastern European state socialism. Rather he chooses to note with an almost audible sneer that "not much of economic orthodoxy is left among former Leninists".

It seems necessary to observe, therefore, that the people of South Africa could only benefit if those adhering to other fixed positions took a leaf out of the SACP book. It was Lenin who remarked that the mark of a serious party was its willingness to acknowledge error.

More justly, Adam concludes his paper by noting that SACP recognition of union independence, a multi-party system and traditional liberal freedom "bodes well for South African democracy".

He notes that at present, security reasons can be invoked legitimately for the SACP's secret membership and strategic infiltration of unions and other political organisations. But he asks whether this will change when "a more democratic climate allows and requires less clandestine behaviour".

He is nervous about the fact that Slovo was authorised by the party to circulate his discussion paper, saying this procedure makes the SACP look more like "an authoritarian Jesuit order for the organic intelligentsia" than "an open, broad-based vehicle for the self-critical exploration of feasible socialism".

Nevertheless, he construes Slovo's self-critical paper as a hopeful first sign of "democratic renewal" that "may lay to rest Pierre van den Berghe's sceptical comment that 'South Africa, which has already spawned the world's last official racists, may also see its last Stalinists'."

**Shauna Westcott works in Idasa's publications division.**

*(Heribert Adam's full text will be published shortly by Idasa as an occasional paper.)*

## Research a waste of time, money?

By Ian Liebenberg

**MOST** research findings are either never implemented or are implemented without planning, resulting in an enormous waste of money, time and energy.

This was the problem addressed by an interdisciplinary conference of the Human Sciences Research Council held in Pretoria at the end of April and attended by over 400 people.

One of the main obstacles to the implementation of research was found to be an organisational style lacking in planning for implementation, long-term strategies, flexibility and responsiveness to change.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation in terms of carefully formulated objectives would obviously be a vital part of the process of implementation.

While most participants found the conference informative and useful, there were some weaknesses. The international isolation of South Africa was evident in the fact that there were very few foreign participants (mostly British and Taiwanese).

Also, while the interdisciplinary approach was valuable, the attempt to include both natural and social sciences on the same panel or platform demanded an unrealistic level of dual expertise from participants.

More importantly, perhaps, the conference gave no attention to research as an instrument of liberation, or to the uses and abuses of science in the interests of ideology and the state.

However, the understanding reached at the conference, that research and its implementation should be planned as a single process, with continuous evaluation as an integral part, is clearly of value.

Ian Liebenberg is Idasa's Director of Research

## Harms should inquire further

**THE** brief of the Harms Commission of Inquiry should be extended to include all political murders, not only those committed in South Africa.

This was the unanimous view of a May meeting of 500 people organised by the Stellenbosch branch of Lawyers for Human Rights and the Northern suburbs' Veldtog vir 'n Geregtelike Ondersoek na Moordbendes (Campaign for a Judicial Inquiry into Hit Squads).

Unless this was done, the Harms Commission could be seen as a mere whitewash job.

One of the speakers, End Conscription Campaign chairperson Laurie Nathan, pointed out that more than 300 people were involved in the Civil Co-operation bureau (CCB), which had not been disbanded. It had merely been suspended.

Vrye Weekblad editor Max du Preez accused the government of playing host to terrorists and stressed the need for action against the "free-for-all paranoia" that had led to political murder.