

A CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL ORTHODOXIES

CHANGING SOUTH AFRICA: Political Consideration by SAM C NOLUTSHUNGU, Manchester University Press, 1982, David Philip (paperback), 1983.

Nolutshungu's unassumingly entitled book presents a significant array of challenges to liberal orthodoxies concerning political reform. This is not least because this book is about politics rather than economics and hence is directed to those issues about which reformist prescriptions are most deficient — in particular those problems associated with the preservation of capitalism within a democratic political order.

The book has three sections. The first consists of a diagnosis of the essential features of liberal and Marxist perspectives on the possibilities of political change in South Africa. The second is concerned with whether strategies of elite incorporation have the capacity to legitimise successfully the rule of a substantially unaltered state. Finally there is an evaluation of the social and political significance of nationalist strategies with particular reference to the Black Consciousness movement.

Nolutshungu sees several assumptions (sometimes explicit, often implicit) as common to all South African liberal standpoints. The first is that capitalism itself is not responsible for the main barriers to political democratisation; the second is that the reordering of race relations need not involve a drastic revision of property relations, and the third is that capitalism provides better chances for black material prosperity and political freedom than any alternative. These assumptions arise from a belief that capitalism and liberal democracy are normal corollaries of each other, a belief that is, Nolutshungu argues, empirically unfounded. Liberal democracies are the exception rather than the rule among capitalist societies and are on the whole confined to older capitalist states whose political institutions evolved in circumstances which are unlikely to re-occur. The economic reductionism of reformist predictions that democracy's emergence is conditioned by a certain level of economic and social achievement usually avoids the question of just how political structures will be made more democratic. Consociational or even federal proposals are usually more concerned with preserving existing minority privileges than with the extension of political freedom and economic benefits to the majority. They are in any case highly unlikely to work in the context of a society which though racially diverse is geographically integrated.

MORE SUBTLE UNDERSTANDING

Contrasting with the vulgar economism of South African liberal/reformist analyses is the more subtle understanding

of the relationship between economy and society which Nolutshungu claims is provided by Marxism. A Marxian concept of the economic relations which form the 'base' of society in any case already contains elements which are social or political: only in the abstractions of theory is it possible to totally distinguish these from each other. A state, while it may be the means through which a dominant class exercises its power, can never merely reflect the interests of that class. Classes emerge historically in conditions which are specific to each society and may depend for their political domination on the support or at least acquiescence of sections of other classes. Political forces, therefore, seldom represent the undiluted interests of one class:

It is simply impossible to make sense of the ideological and political effectiveness of class divisions, or to understand the real boundaries of classes outside the immediate site of production, unless one recognises that politics and ideology also have important effects on the meaning of class.

In a colonial context the relationship of political institutions to class structure will be especially complex. In South Africa capitalism developed through colonial political institutions, shaping and being shaped by them. In consequence 'class oppression tended to be obscured by the racial discrimination of colonialism while the role of racialism itself in the ordering of class relations was also obfuscated'. What Nolutshungu is arguing is that the politics of racial discrimination are not just epiphenomena that can be jettisoned by a modernising capitalism; rather they are intrinsic to that capitalism's modernisation. An attack on political forms in such a society has inevitably revolutionary implications even if these are not clearly understood by those directing the attack.

NO SERIOUS INITIATIVES

There is little enough evidence in any case of serious initiatives by South African capitalism in the area of social reform. Certainly there is rhetoric in both business and government circles of the need to create a 'black bourgeoisie' but financial resources to cultivate black entrepreneurship remain meagre (and recede into insignificance when contrasted with the subsidies offered to white investment into the homelands). The policy of black embourgeoisement is qualified by the extent to which capitalism in

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South Africa is state capitalism: deracialising capitalism would necessitate the 'class suicide' of the Afrikaner 'bureaucratic bourgeoisie'. Even if the black middle classes were accommodated at least economically this would achieve little, contends Nolutshungu. The black salariat represents less than one per cent of the black population – too small in itself to exercise any political weight even in the unlikely event of its political aspirations being blunted by higher levels of consumption. It could hardly exert an ideological hegemony over the rest of the population without real political power. Bribing the industrial working class into acquiescence would require the equalisation of white and black wage scales. This would have to be a process of 'equalling up' which bearing in mind contemporary inequalities would be impossibly costly.

The final section of the book contains an analysis of Black Consciousness, the purpose of which is to demonstrate the proposition that:

Nationalism is primarily related to the terms of domination rather than its economic aims: yet it may, by obstructing certain economically necessary patterns of domination, disrupt the order of exploitation as well, creating the opportunity for its overthrow by direct class action'.

Nolutshungu's treatment accentuates a revolutionary theme in Black Consciousness which is missing from the accounts of the movement both by its liberal apologists⁽¹⁾ and marxist detractors⁽²⁾. He first examines its ideology which he argues was essentially fluid and disorganised and finds in it 'a radical unease with capitalism' as well as a developing 'gravitation to marxism' leading to the conclusion that the movement, though initially isolated socially from the working class, was nevertheless not hostile to the latter's interests. Turning to strategic questions he pays more

attention than previous commentators to the willingness of at least part of its leadership to accept the inevitability of armed struggle. Finally, in the efforts of the Black Consciousness movement to mobilise workers through both the Black Allied Workers' Union and-more importantly-the Black Workers' Project, Nolutshungu finds a significant 'commitment to identify with the working class'. All this leads him to reject the liberal view of Black Consciousness as 'moderate' (a perception not shared by all liberals) as well as some marxists' criticism of the movement as a vehicle for petty bourgeois ideas. More generally the development of a radical current within Black Consciousness testifies to the fact that there is an inevitable trajectory in any genuine effort to mobilise blacks nationally: the impossibility for the state to legitimise itself to blacks makes any black popular movement subversive of the existing order. The destruction of the contemporary political framework within which South African capitalism functions makes the latter's survival at least questionable.

DELICATE ARGUMENT

The book's argument is considerably more delicate than it appears from this short review: Nolutshungu's baroque prose style and gentle understatement are impossible to do justice to in a summary. The theoretical and historical underpinning of the argument is elaborate and impressive. This is by far the most sophisticated analysis of black political responses that has been published to date. This reviewer's main reservation concerns the treatment of Black Consciousness. Certainly Nolutshungu's has drawn attention to important currents within the movement which others have been unwilling to see. And left to itself it is possible that Black Consciousness might have succeeded in transforming itself into a popularly-based and popularly-oriented movement. But, as he describes it, Black Consciousness is at best populist rather than socialist. Both black workers and black middle class have a common interest in the dismantling of present state structures, but nothing in Nolutshungu's analysis suggests that the étatism of the present would not be replaced with étatism in another form. Workerist rhetoric and the advocacy of communalism have characterised the emergence of 'bureaucratic bourgeoisies' elsewhere in Africa. If the movement had been more successful in its efforts to mobilise workers as workers one might have more justification for attributing to it a more definite socialist character, but the evidence provided by its endeavours in this field are suggestive more of confusion than commitment. Though part of Nolutshungu's case is based on contemporary documentation it is possible that his impression of the movement's radicalism has been reinforced by the later radicalisation of those of its members whom he interviewed in exile. Such testimonies could be balanced by those from a more conservative group who have remained inside the country. However the major point of the case study is incontestable: no political solution which does not involve the total removal of political power from the governing minority can deflect black political aspirations. Given the intimate association between state and capital, black democratic aspirations are revolutionary in terms of the existing economic and social structure.

REFERENCES:

1. For example: Donald Woods, *Biko*, London: Paddington Press, 1979.
2. For example: Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, London: Zed Press, 1979. □