

**Appendix****COLONIALISM OF A SPECIAL TYPE AND THE PERMANENT REVOLUTION****A Theory of a Very Special Type?**

During the 1950s and 1960s theoreticians of the South African Communist Party (SACP) described the social formation of South Africa as being one of 'internal colonialism'. This has always remained a description, or perhaps a rationalisation, rather than a theory, because it provided no base for understanding the relations of production in South Africa, yet it persisted, at least until recently, in the canons of the SACP. As time went on the description was rechristened 'colonialism of a special type' and that in turn was shortened to 'CST'. The description was not universally accepted inside the party and some preferred not to use it or, not having realized its significance in party theory, gave it little prominence. Among the latter was Francis Meli, who paid little attention to the concept in his book, *South Africa Belongs to Us*, which purports to tell the story of the ANC. Harold Wolpe,<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, examined the concept and found that it was only of significance in highlighting the cheap reproduction of black workers in the reserves. For this he was roundly condemned by party apparatchiks. But in all the heat of polemic little was done to provide flesh to the concept. I do not know where that description has advanced since February 1990. Perhaps it lurks in party literature, waiting to be revived if conditions make it necessary.

The 'theory', if it can be elevated to the realm of theory, was imposed on the CPSA at the Sixth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1928. Although I dealt with this in some detail in past copies of this journal, I summarize the salient points made there.<sup>2</sup> In 1928 the cabal that ruled in Moscow announced that the global class struggle was to be intensified. The workers were about to confront capitalism in a final set of battles, leading to the victory of socialism. The factors that led to that conclusion were complex, but were not connected with the situation in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the CPSA was instructed to drop its stress on the class struggle and work under the banner of an 'Independent Native Republic'. To justify the decision South Africa was defined as a country that stood midway between advanced capitalism and semi-colonial status. The African people, whose land had been seized by settlers, existed under conditions of semi-slavery. The task of the communists was to organize the 'native toiling masses' and participate in 'the embryonic national organizations, such as the ANC' which should be transformed 'into a fighting nationalist revolutionary organ'.

The adoption of this policy was a step backward into the debates in Russia before 1917. The stage theory that had once been the hallmark of the reformist wing of the Social Democratic movement was restored in its pristine glory in South Africa. The class struggle was jettisoned in favour of a bourgeois democratic or 'liberation' struggle and the 'two-stage' theory of revolution became the hallmark of Stalinism in South Africa. The CPSA was torn apart. Leading members were



denigrated, maligned, expelled and driven into isolation. The rank and file, dispirited and exhausted by the internal struggle, dropped out of politics.

In CPSA was almost extinguished: in other regions of the world the policies pursued by communists led to disaster. In Germany it led directly to the Nazis seizing power. This led to another violent U-turn. Every communist party was instructed to call for a 'Popular Front' against fascism. In South Africa the 'Independent Native Republic' was pigeonholed. The CPSA now sought allies among liberal or even right wing politicians. These were all white and, even though few if any would campaign with the communists, the party ceased talking about a Black Republic.

It was only in 1940 when the CPSA turned again to 'revolutionary' politics in its brief anti-war period. This time the fullblown 'Native Republic' slogan was not employed, but the old analysis was resurrected. South Africa it was said 'is at one time an exploiting imperialism and a semi-colony'.<sup>4</sup> Under these conditions, quite obviously, the CPSA opposed the war. Forgetting all about the Popular Front, and its previous anti-fascist slogans, the party saw merit in the Molotov-Ribbentrop peace accord, and called for the end of the war.

Perhaps the CPSA was not altogether convinced by its own propaganda, although its members managed to say remarkable things at its 1940 conference. Sam Kahn, a leading member, suggested that

Those Afrikaners whose sympathies seemed to lie with Nazi Germany, must view more sympathetically the communists: if it is possible for Hitler to cooperate with Russia, so it must affect the people here whose sympathies were with Hitler. We will be able to get more readily the ear of the Afrikaners to the line of the CP.<sup>5</sup>

This was political venality, born of opportunism if not ignorance. The Jewish lawyer, Kahn, wanting to put out his hand to rabid home-grown Nazis. Did he not know what Hitler was about? And how did this fit with a so-called Black Republic? Were the South African stormtroopers about to be convinced that a Black Republic was a desirable goal?

It did not matter. In August 1941 Germany invaded the USSR and everything was overturned again. The government, so recently lambasted for its participation in 'a terrible and disastrous imperialist war', was now to be supported.<sup>6</sup> The party journals carried articles calling on the workers 'to become the driving force behind the wholehearted war effort, and its most vigilant guarantors'.<sup>7</sup> Despite the indifference of the African people the CPSA backed the government, being critical only of its failure to arm black volunteers. Leading party members spoke confidently of great changes that would be introduced when the war ended. When the war was coming to a close a section that followed the US party leader, Earl Browder, called for the dissolution of the CPSA. In terms not very different from that of Kahn, Browder argued that if Stalin could sit down with Roosevelt at Yalta, then communists could sit down with capitalists in the US and plan a better society. In South Africa, no doubt, communists could also play the game of musical chairs. Yesterday they spoke of sitting down with the pro-Nazi Nationalists: tomorrow,



they would sit down with Smuts and Oppenheimer. The Independent Native Republic was a thing of the past, best buried and forgotten.

Policy took another turn when Churchill, in a declaration of war on communism, raised the spectre of the Iron Curtain descending on Europe. Also, in South Africa, with the victory of the National Party at the polls in 1948, there were fears of a government offensive against the CPSA. At the National Conference in 1950, party members returned to the notion of 'internal colonialism' in stating that:

The distinguishing feature of South Africa is that it combines the characteristic of both an imperialist state and a colony within a single, indivisible, geographical, political and economic entity. To the British, French, Belgian and Dutch imperialists, the colony is a territory some thousands of miles away, inhabited by an alien, non-white people of a different culture, who can be subjected to a system of exploitation and governed by autocratic methods that would not be tolerated in the home countries (*sic*). In South Africa, the Non-European population, while reduced to the status of a colonial people, has no territory of its own, no independent existence, but is almost wholly integrated in the political and economic institutions of the ruling class.<sup>8</sup>

The Black Republic was once again a convenient slogan to hold aloft. There is little purpose in recording successive statements on 'internal colonialism' in the speeches and writings of members of the CPSA (or the resurrected SACP), and its evolution into 'Colonialism of a special type'. The pattern is clear. When the occasion demanded it, the dual nature of South Africa was trotted out and from this, the two stage theory of change in South Africa was justified. However there was also an urgency in the way the slogan was formulated. After the party was banned in 1950 the formula provided a convenient justification for entering and working within the Congress movement<sup>9</sup>

Yet, after all these years the CPSA had not been able to encapsulate the notion of 'internal colonialism' in any theoretical statement. Nor had it been able to resurrect the 'Independent Native Republic' slogan in full. In fact, when its former members participated in the Congress of the People in 1956, they balked at an 'Africa for the Africans' type approach, and that cleared the ground for the Africanists to adopt the slogan as their own. The compromise programme, called the Freedom Charter, was couched in the mildest of liberal terms — and stood as a second plank in the armoury of the SACP. For the external world, and particularly the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the Freedom Charter was displayed as the objective of the 'liberation movement'. The reborn SACP had a reborn policy, now to be known as 'Colonialism of a Special Type', carrying with it the added, if unspoken, connotation of a Black Republic. These implications have never been spelt out — but that will undoubtedly happen if the SACP survives the current crisis in the Stalinist movement and requires a revamped programme.

### **The Theory of Permanent Revolution**

The distinguishing feature of the Trotskyist groups in South Africa has been their adherence to the theory of 'permanent revolution', first enunciated by



Leon Trotsky in 1904–1906. From his analysis of capitalist investment in Russia by foreign finance capital, and the highly concentrated working class in large-scale industrial plants, Trotsky maintained that the workers would provide the leadership in the forthcoming revolution that would topple the Tsar, fulfilling the task that the bourgeoisie was incapable of completing. The revolution would be made continuous (or ‘permanent’) by the workers who would take power in alliance with the peasants. Crudely called the one-stage theory, this conception of the revolution was always associated with Trotsky’s name.

There were two additional points that are seemingly less well known. Firstly, Trotsky believed that the workers would have to transform themselves after the seizure of power, if a socialist society was to become a reality. Secondly, as an internationalist, Trotsky never conceived of socialism being established in one country, and most certainly not in a backward country like Russia. The workers of Russia could seize power but, for a socialist society to come into being, the revolution had to be extended to the more advanced countries of Europe. It was this appraisal of the revolution in Russia that led to a convergence of interests between Lenin and Trotsky in 1917. They worked together to seize power in the name of the working class, and they proclaimed their belief in the international solidarity of the proletariat.

It was only in later formulations of the permanent revolution that its scope was extended to cover the struggles in the colonial countries. Unlike his earlier work, in which he provided an analysis of the impact of foreign capital on the Russian social formation, Trotsky never gave much attention to the political economy, or to the class forces, in the individual colonies. He maintained that only a working class revolution could lead those countries to freedom, and in the process they, and they alone would solve the social problems left by a parasitic imperialism.

This was not borne out in practice. Nonetheless large sections of the left, without ever adhering to the Trotskyist position, believed that the communists in China, Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia had moved in one continuous process to the establishment of socialist societies. They never queried the claims that Mao, Ho Chi Minh and even Pol Pot were building socialist countries. They had moved so far from Marxism that they failed to ask why the proletariat took no part in establishing the new societies, nor why the workers took no part in controlling these so-called socialist states. Quite obviously they never raised the question of internationalism. Consequently, the belief that socialism could be established through guerilla armies, and that the working class could be bypassed in the process, exercised a powerful grip on many socialist groups.

The Trotskyists went through paroxysms of anguish in trying to determine what had happened. They got it wrong all too often, but failed to ask why Trotsky had erred in his writings on the colonial question. What indeed came of his predictions, for example, that India could not achieve independence but would be subjected to ever greater exploitation after the war?<sup>10</sup> Like automatons they either tried to justify his statements, or to reinterpret them. In the process critical judgment became impossible.



### **The Theory in South Africa**

It is not certain whether the many fractions within the Trotskyist movement had or have a consistent line on the Black Republic. The first left oppositionists in the country, in Johannesburg and in Cape Town, opposed the Comintern's resolutions of 1928 vigorously. The 'Independent Native Republic' slogan was condemned, and the theses drawn up in Cape Town by the group that became the Worker's Party of South Africa (WPSA) rejected it out of hand. However Trotsky, whose approval had been sought, declared in his reply that it was wrong to reject the Black Republic. He said that the blacks might wish to form their own separate state and that revolutionaries had to support the right of oppressed nationalities of self-determination, including the right of separation. Also, in his letter his formulations were close to that of the Comintern. For example when he claimed that:

The South African possessions of Great Britain form a dominion only from the point of a view of the white minority. From the point of view of the black majority South Africa is a Slave Colony.<sup>11</sup>

Trotsky had said that he knew little about the local situation and was incorrect in his analysis. He was equally wrong when, in a parallel discussion, he approved of the Comintern's proposal that the blacks in the USA should be granted the right to form a republic of their own. However his position differed from that of the Comintern: firstly in saying that the struggle against national subordination could only be consummated through a proletarian revolution, and secondly that the support given to oppressed nationalities was the only effective way in which the revolution in South Africa could be brought to fruition. Looking back at Comintern policy he was of the opinion that:

The historical weapon of national liberation can be only the class struggle. The Comintern, beginning in 1924, transformed the programme of national liberation of colonial people into an empty democratic abstraction which it elevated above the reality of the class relations.<sup>12</sup>

The WPSA accepted Trotsky's criticism, agreeing that they had been over-polemical in rejecting the Black Republic, but they never used the slogan in their publication. Despite this a significant section of the group inclined increasingly to nationalist politics and they assumed the leadership of the Non-European Unity Movement at its inception in 1943. They never spoke of blacks forming a separate state, ignored the slogan calling for the right of self-determination, but nevertheless acted in the spirit of Trotsky's position paper. They put their emphasis on the land question (as had the Worker's Party in its main thesis), ignored the working class, and their pronouncements were little different from those of the CPSA during the height of the 'third period'. The only exception before 1940 was the small section working in Johannesburg, and Max Gordon in particular, who set out to organize the African working class.<sup>13</sup> Gordon gave lip service to the WPSA thesis but in effect he ignored its implications. He concentrated on work in the trade unions and could be criticized only in being over immersed in economic activity.



The Fourth International Organization of South Africa (FIOSA), while accepting Trotsky's arguments, rejected the Black Republic slogan. They said of the WPSA that the logical development of their stress on the land question should have led them to an acceptance of that slogan. They ascribed Trotsky's position to the misleading facts provided by the WPSA in their thesis. The problems raised by this polemic were never resolved, partly because such discussions did not seem relevant during the war years. The Workers International League (WIL) in the Transvaal, after 1944, was involved in trade union and black community struggles. It affiliated with the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), but this was of little consequence because that movement never established itself in the Transvaal.

In so far as policies can be discerned, members of the WIL followed the first formulation of the permanent revolution, as stated by Trotsky in 1904–06. That is, in the absence of a black bourgeoisie, the democratic struggle could only be concluded by the black working class. This, they said, had to be in alliance with the white workers, who would ultimately place class allegiance above ethnic domination.<sup>14</sup> The Worker's Party chose to work underground and no more was heard about it as an organization after 1939. Its members only appeared openly as founders of the NEUM, and there they acted as leaders of a nationalist movement. They claimed to be more revolutionary, at least in policy, than the ANC, but they stayed aloof from active campaigns. In their propaganda there was no trace of Trotsky's policies, either in respect to the permanent revolution or the Black Republic. Only FIOSA operated openly in Cape Town, mainly as a propaganda group: they affiliated with the NEUM and, although they put work in the national movement as central to their activities, that involved little more than attendance at annual conferences.

The WIL in Johannesburg imploded in early 1946, and FIOSA dissolved itself in 1948 or 1949. Thereafter, outside the Unity Movement, which vigorously denied its Trotskyist connection, the tradition of the old left opposition was carried by small groups in Cape Town and Johannesburg.<sup>15</sup>

It is no longer clear who is, or claims to be, Trotskyists in South Africa. In line with events in Europe and the US, the followers of Trotsky have splintered. Most tendencies adhere to the theory of 'permanent revolution', although interpretations vary from group to group. The Marxist Workers Tendency (MWT), whose members claim to work inside the ANC, although it was expelled from that body many years ago, has a position that is not very different from that of third-period Stalinism. As quoted above, the CPSA claimed that the ANC would be transformed 'into a fighting nationalist revolutionary organ'. The MWT advances the same notion today. Other tendencies are more circumspect although most operate inside the ANC, overtly or covertly.

However, the facts contradict, or call for the modification of, almost all the old theories, whether emanating from Stalinist or Trotskyist groups. The current situation is one in which legislative apartheid is all but dead, and the ANC/SACP/PAC alliance intends negotiating with the government over the constitution of a bourgeois democratic state. This implies: inside a state that all recognize as being



unitary, Colonialism of a Special Type has no further currency; that the establishment of an Independent Native Republic will not take place; and that the removal of formal colour discrimination has not been brought about by a proletarian revolution.

Yet the situation is still explosive, and the basic transformation of South Africa has not taken place. Apartheid is dead, but colour differences still divide the country as solidly as ever before. Except that now the division is more obviously a class division, even though aspects of ethnic domination are still in place. If the permanent revolution has any meaning today it rests not on an analysis of the forces capable of transforming South Africa. That task clearly rests with the working class. Nor is it a matter of stages: that argument is dead. The one factor that asserts itself even more than ever, and divides Trotskyism from Stalinism is the understanding that socialism cannot be built in one country. Only through the spreading of the revolution to the advanced countries is there any hope for socialism in South Africa.

The internationalisation of socialism is a necessary condition: only that will ensure that there are enough goods available to satisfy the needs of the population. And only by that means will it be possible to stop the spread of subversion by the forces of counter-revolution. But it will not be sufficient. The socialist movement, if it is to be involved in building a world in which new values prevail will have to be the guardian of a socialist democracy in which the methods of Stalinism are finally rooted out. There can be no one-party state, no secret 'security department', no police or armed force that is the exclusive property of the government that takes power, no central control that denies small groups the right to self direction. That has never been achieved under capitalism. Methods of working class control will have to be discovered which will offer the producers ways through which they can innovate while providing the basic needs of the society of which they are an integral part. Finally, as long as government continues, and until methods of central control can be abolished, ways will have to be found to protect the rights of every individual from the tyranny of cabals, sects, groups and parties.

These were problems to which the Conference on Marxism should have given more time. The fact that so little attention was paid to them indicates that Marxists have not come to grips with the theoretical and practical problems that need understanding before there can be any thought of transforming society.

## Notes

1. See Wolpe (1975).
2. See *Searchlight South Africa*, Nos 3 and 4, for a discussion of the Black Republic slogan.
3. The factors leading to the adoption of the new Comintern policy included: the need to explain away the massacre of the communists in China, the fight against the left opposition in the USSR and the resolution of the faction struggle in the CP of the USA. South Africa would have been involved willy-nilly, but was specifically affected by events in the committee that decided the policy for the CPUSA.
4. 'The Communist Party's Policy on the War Now!', a statement of the Political Bureau of the CPSA, 1940, reprinted in Brian Bunting (ed) (1981), *South African Communists Speak*, London., p 160.
5. This statement taken from the unpublished minutes of the 1940 CPSA conference, is quoted in B Hirson (1989), *Yours for the Union*, p 80. Other pronouncements were almost equally bizarre.



6. Ibid, p 84.
7. Ray Alexander (Simons), 'On the Production Front: Winning the Workers for an All-in Effort', *Freedom*, No 9, April 1942.
8. Printed in Bunting, op cit, p 201. There are many similarities between my account and that of Dirk Kotzé, 'Revisiting Colonialism of a Special Type'.
9. There was an added factor in the early 1950s when Moscow changed its line on the national leaders in Asia. This coincided with the imminent calling of the Bandung Conference in 1955, when the Cominform (that is, the Communist Information Bureau) sought allies among the former colonial people in the Cold War. This is documented in Fine and Davis (1991), but their 'discovery' that the slogan had its origins in a speech by Michael Harmel in 1953 is obviously incorrect.
10. See B Hirson, 'Colonialism and Imperialism', *Searchlight South Africa*, No 7, for further details.
11. Reprinted in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 4, February 1990.
12. But see Mick Cox, 'The National and Colonial Question: The First Five Years of the Comintern, 1919-24', in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 4. He suggests that the errors on the National Question in the colonies can be traced back to the early days of the Comintern and not after 1924. However, the rest of the quotation is not invalidated by this fact.
13. See Hirson, *Yours for the Union*.
14. I quote here from memory.
15. In Cape Town the group that was probably closest to Trotskyism was the Forum Club. In the Transvaal the tradition was ultimately carried by the Socialist League of Africa.

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