

Bernard M. Magubane. The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa

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Magubane has written a book that ought to be read by all Africanist scholars and political activists, especially those with interest in seeing an end to the status quo in South Africa. The book is well-researched and theoretically well grounded, and those with a need for a good understanding of the South African situation and its historical roots will find it valuable.

The book deals with themes on the class basis of social inequality in South Africa. This alone enhances our knowledge of the South African situation, because studies of racism in South Africa that place "socio-economic relations at the heart of the problem and shows how underdevelopment and racial inequalities developed together" are extremely few and far between. The author uses the historical materialist perspective to order and analyse the key events in South Africa's turbulent history beginning from the period of first contact with the European invaders.

Events in Southern Africa as a whole since 1974, such as the dismantling of Portuguese colonialism in Angola and Mozambique; the victory of MPLA over the FNLA and UNITA; the Soweto uprisings; the recent institution of black rule in Zimbabwe; and the systematic escalation of the armed struggle and gains scored by the liberation movements in South Africa and Namibia, have woken the perpetrators of social injustice in the area up from their false consciousness that "nothing will change for a long to come". But this awakening is not matched by any scientific appraisal of the changing events. The history-making events are received with shock and treated as "disturbances" caused by "terrorists", "anarchists", "misguided" or Communist (and therefore "evil") elements who can be prevented from causing further "harm" if only they could be dealt with more effectively! Hence, counter-insurgency is the solution sought, leaving aside the real causes of the problem. The dialectic escapes the white supremacist "authorities" and their intellectual articulators.

It is in the light of the above that one can judge the value of Magubane's path-breaking book. He states the problem in clear terms and discusses it within its wider political economic matrix. There are two aspects to this: firstly, he states that "to understand the social inequality in South

Africa, we must take into account the inequality between a small handful of advanced capitalist countries (considered thus from the point of view of capital accumulation and industrialisation) and the so-called underdevelopment (colonial and semi-colonial) countries, where the majority of humanity lives. Not only are different economic functions assigned to different people within countries, but they are also assigned to the countries themselves within the world system". The role of imperialism and colonialism as well as the development of capitalism in South Africa therefore form the pivots around which the problems of race and class are analysed. Racial inequality is conceptualised "as an aspect of imperialism and colonialism" and since "the colonialism of the last five centuries (in South Africa) is closely associated with the birth and maturation of the capitalist socio-economic system", the study of the "development of capitalism is thus the best way to study race inequality ...". Further, the author points out that "the seemingly 'autonomous' existence of racism (in South Africa) today does not lessen the fact that it was initiated by the needs of capitalist development or that these needs remain in the dominant factor in racist societies".

Secondly, the problem is situated in a historical context, and the key concept here is "historical specificity" - the idea that social phenomena and laws can only be valid in the context of particular historical periods since they are generally specific to them. Therefore, "instead of employing timeless categories to house social phenomena of different epochs we must understand the dynamics of racism under specific conditions". Further, while "a theory of racially based inequality must first grasp the general character of the epoch opened by the so-called voyages of discovery during the mercantile order", the concrete difference between one country and another within the same political epoch must (also) be taken into account and explained" since "each society so touched exhibits a particular blend of diverse 'racial' groups, a particular mix of their activities, and a particular patterning of their socio-economic relationships.

The purpose of the book is therefore simple and clear: "To integrate sociological, economic, historical, and political approaches in an effort to comprehend the development on inequality and racism during South Africa's tragic and complex history". This is a holistic approach that nevertheless avoids the pitfalls of theoretical eclectism.

What does the book contain? The first chapter deals with the theoretical and methodological issues mentioned above, and chapters 2 and 3 take a synoptic look at South African

societies before the European contact and the impact of the European settlers' conquest and cultural domination of the African peoples from the 17th century on. The development of capitalist agriculture, emergence of the so-called "native reserves" and the migrant labour system are taken up in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 deals with the discovery of diamond in 1864 and gold in 1884 and the impact of these, especially the latter, on South African economy and society. The inhuman rape of South Africa's human and natural resources that begun with these discoveries is given lucid discussion with illustrative quotes from official and newspaper sources. Chapter 6 discusses urbanisation. Titled "The Political Economy of the City in South Africa", this is a very refreshing and important chapter because the phenomenal demographic and spatial growth of cities currently taking place in the third world, which many scholars have analysed as if it was unrelated to the dynamics of modes of production and standing above class struggles, is here given a total treatment. As the author states, "... the phenomenon of urbanisation cannot be understood without reference to the overall structure and functioning of the political economy (in this case, the capitalist mode of production) as it is articulated in the South African social formation".

The historical and contemporary roots of urbanisation are therefore examined, and the various phases it transcended as the forms of capitalist development varied are also discussed. There is also a discussion of the ignominious Pass System and its role as a mechanism for stabilising African labour supply. A well-researched section on the relative quantitative deployment of the different racial groups (Africans, Whites, Coloured, Indians) in the South African urban labour market completes the chapter.

The seventh Chapter follows the preceding one in dealing with the development of urban-based industry, commerce and intensification of capitalist agriculture by the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois Afrikaners who have had to use all manner of nationalist and political means in their conflict with British imperial capital since the beginning of this century.

The ways in which the Afrikaner bourgeoisie, through the Nationalist Party, has manipulated white working class sentiments against black workers is discussed to show the kinds of service to which racism can be put in class society. The deliberate obfuscation of class and class struggle squares with the purposes of the Nationalist Party, namely, advancing Afrikaner capital accumulation; protecting white workers' interests; and protecting the capitalist economy. The author touches the heart of the matter in these words: "The Nationa-

list Party mediates class and nation ... it exploits nationalist aspirations to seduce working class aspirations".

Up until this point, the author has analysed what we may call the "internal situation". Chapter 8 therefore takes up the role of imperialism in forming the foundation for racism and class exploitation. The history of imperialist exploitation in the area is recounted, Anglo-American imperialist rivalries and accommodations are also illustratively discussed, and the contemporary role of Western industrial and finance capital in maintaining the racist status quo is subsequently examined. The final part of the chapter identifies the political implications of capital investment, since "the export of capital (always) raises the question of the political control of the country in which the capital is invested". In the South African case, it is noted that "Western world's political strategy ... since the collapse of Portuguese colonialism has been to diffuse the possibility of revolutionary change and to work out a negotiated, neo-colonial settlement". The role of the Western advanced countries which have big stakes in South Africa, in this scheme is therefore not overlooked.

Chapter 9, which seems to be misplaced, covers apartheid dogmas and Afrikaner nationalism. It makes an interesting reading but one wonders whether parts of it (e.g. the section of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid) are not simply elaborations of previous sections and chapters, and should therefore have been developed when the issues they deal with were first raised.

The last two chapters consider the African reaction to the conditions of domination and exploitation. How has the African reacted to conquest and oppression?. And what are the forms and content of the contemporary struggles for liberation?. These are the kinds of questions covered here. It is shown that the African has not been a passive and willing sufferer and that "resistance to white conquest is almost as old as the first colonial settlement". The famous Zulu resistance wars against the invaders; the early forms of political struggles; the formation of the ANC and later the ICU and other forms of organised struggle are all documented in Chapter 10. The final chapter is devoted to the ANC in its new, contemporary phase and other organisations, and how the national and class struggles have escalated since 1948.

The final chapters of the book are important for they demonstrate that the oppressed and exploited African majority have not been asleep, and that they are neither foolish nor primitive and immature about politics, as the advocates of so-called "separate development" love to believe. They also

debunk the view that things are getting better, or are better already for the black South African. The age-old black resistance, the recent Soweto uprising and "unrests", as well as sabotage actions by underground groups are enough testimony that the South African situation is far from improving; on the contrary, it is being entrenched in numerous, subtle ways with every passing moment.

This review should not leave the potential reader of the book with the impression that the book is faultless. The author himself shows an awareness of its limitations: "It suffers from the shortcomings of work done with a sense of urgency and in not altogether favourable circumstances". Hence, the book is silent on some of the questions that the outside observer of the South African situation might consider important; for example, what is the relation between migrant workers from Mozambique, Swaziland, Malawi, etc., and South African black workers?, what is happening to relations between Cape Coloured people and Africans?, what is the relation between the black petty-bourgeoisie (tiny as it may be) and the black masses?, etc. Also, As I indicated before, the last four chapters would seem to need some re-arrangement. And there is no bibliography, only reference notes, which makes quick cross-referencing difficult. But set against book's richness and freshness, these shortcomings seem minor.

Magubane is a South African exile, whose book should make all who read it question the social injustices that compel some African scholars to live in exile. The intellectual loss Africa suffers from this situation is immense indeed, and it is a depressing thought. But for those with optimism about the future and a commitment to struggle wherever they are, it is clear that a just and classless society, which is cherished in the depraved continent, will emerge from the ashes of the decadent but yet to be transcended present. Magubane's book is another intellectual contribution to that necessary task.

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