

## Review Article

# THE ANTIMONIES OF NEO-MARXISM

A Critique of Harold Wolpe's *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* (London: James Currey, with OAU, UNESCO, 1988, pp 1-118)

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In the 1970's Harold Wolpe played an important role in putting Marxism back onto the map of South African scholarship. Along with other so-called 'neo-Marxist' writers, Wolpe critiqued the prevailing neo-classical view (which he calls liberal-modernization theory) that the racial order in South Africa was irrational as far as capitalist development was concerned. He argued that there was a functional - though changing - relation between capital and the racist superstructure of segregation and apartheid and he sought to infuse african nationalism with a more socialist content which took cognizance of the class content of racialism. For the development of South African Marxism, Wolpe's contribution remains a major resource.

In his recent book on *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* Wolpe reviews and revises the ideas which he espoused a decade or more earlier. He does so in the light of the practical and theoretical development of the liberation struggle. This is not in my view the most successful of Wolpe's writings. It seems to me to lack the conceptual rigour and historical supports necessary for the realization of his task. In this review, however, I shall concentrate on the content rather than the form of his argument.<sup>1</sup>

A major focus of this work comprises Wolpe's wrestling anew with the longstanding and at one time furious conflict between neo-classicism and neo-Marxism. His general method is to criticize both paradigms in turn before seeking to construct a new synthesis. The question which I shall address concerns the nature and adequacy of Wolpe's synthesis: what kind of amendments to traditional neo-Marxism does he offer? how far does he succeed in transcending the limitations of the old paradigms? How should we assess the theoretical and political direction now taken.

## Race and class

Wolpe criticizes race-based theories which 'conceive of race... as the irreducible constituent and determinant of social structure' and treat social relations within and between racial groups as 'exclusively governed by racial categories' (1988:12). He argues (rightly in my view) that 'the form of the

state is not reducible to its racial content' and that racial motivations are not 'prior to and autonomous of other social structures and processes'.

On the other hand, Wolpe also criticizes 'reductionist Marxism' which, having conceptualized class as a purely economic relation, goes on to derive the interests of actual class entities from this economic relation alone. He argues that the concept of 'class' defines the *economic* relation between capital and labour but omits ideological, cultural and political qualities. As such the concept of 'class' for Wolpe is 'abstract' and not helpful as 'an empirical description of concrete classes' (1988:50). At the abstract level, Wolpe argues, 'both capital and labour are necessarily conceptualized as unitary and homogenous classes'; at the concrete level, however, class unities are always fragmented by racial and other non-economic distinctions. On the basis of this twofold critique, Wolpe offers the conclusion that, to escape the snares of race and class reductionism, it is necessary to analyze 'the complex intersection of these struggles in the political arena' (1988:15).

What I take Wolpe to be saying is either that class and race have equal analytic status as scientific categories (rather than see race for what it is, no more than the ideological expression of alienated social relations); or that in the South African context class is merely an abstraction while race is a concrete social reality. What we find in this argument is that Wolpe's economic conception of class - which reduces the relation between capital and labour to a merely economic relation removed from all juridic, cultural, sexual and political dimensions - leads directly to a reification of race despite all warnings against 'race reductionism'. It is through an economist theory of class that Wolpe prepares the ground for Marxists to endorse nationalism.

What I am wishing to say here is that in South Africa the very idea of 'race' is the crucial ideological glue which holds together the social order and underwrites the exercise of power. People have to live as if race is not merely a phantasma - the ideological expression of social relations of alienation and exploitation - but is real. The state demands that people behave as if race is, whatever they actually believe in their heart of hearts. Because of this, life in the apartheid system is permeated with hypocrisy and lies. Whenever individuals reproduce the lie as reality - declaring that race is real rather than that the illusion of race has been turned into the reality of power - they become not just oppressed by apartheid but reproduce apartheid in the texture of their everyday lives. The dividing line between apartheid and liberation is not only one between a group of white oppressors and a larger group of black oppressed, but is a line which necessarily runs through each individual. Everyone is object and subject, victim and supporter of the system.

Just as liberation starts when the individual at great cost overcomes his or

her alienation by confronting the appearance of race with reality, by refusing to live according to the logic of race, so the theorist of liberation has a particular duty: not to treat the 'as if' of race as real but rather to reveal the truth behind the lie, the human being behind the racial archetype. Race and class are not equivalent categories. Race is not the 'concrete' truth of life, but the illusion of those who exercise power and seek profit at the expense of life. It is the triumph of abstraction over reality, the lie over truth. In our theoretical practice, we must fight against the apartheid aspect of our own being. We must give bodily shape to our refusal: perhaps by no longer giving capital letters to the racial concepts of the state (african, asian, coloured, black, afrikaner and white), no longer treat race as an independent variable, no longer allow ourselves to live within the theoretical system of apartheid.

### **The problem of functionalism**

Wolpe rejects the 'liberal-modernization' (or neo-classical) view that 'the racial order operates in contradiction to the rational modernizing tendencies of the economy' and its conclusion that 'capitalism left to its own devices would dissolve white domination'. He also criticizes as reductionist the neo-Marxist argument that white domination is 'a necessary and inescapable condition of the survival of capitalism in South Africa'. Wolpe argues that the relation between capital and apartheid is 'always simultaneously functional and contradictory' and that 'which pole of the relation will be dominant depends on the historically specific conditions of the social formation' (1988:76).

The problem is, however, that the defects of functionalism are not resolved by appending dysfunctions (or contradictions) to the functions of apartheid for capital. We remain thereby in the same discourse. The language of functionalism is that of functions and dysfunctions. The defect of functionalism lies not in the subordination of dysfunction to function, but rather of form to function. It seeks to explain the apartheid state exclusively through its functions and dysfunctions for capital (or economic growth more generally in its non-Marxist variants) without explaining the form of the apartheid state itself.

Marxist functionalism has the virtue from my standpoint of relating apartheid to capital, but the functional link it constructs between them abstracts the dynamics of state formation from social relations between the classes, that is, from social relations of production. Neo-Marxism treats capital as a thing rather than as a social relation to labour. The working class (with the exception of white workers who are treated fundamentally as whites) appears as victim and opponent of state power but not as an active determinant of the form of state: an image which reflects the juridic forms of life in South

Africa - in as much as they are defined by the political rightness of all black people - but which reproduces the state's own illusions of autonomy from society.

In his historiography, Wolpe argues that 'despite certain contradictory effects' white domination was a fundamental condition of the reproduction of capitalism in the period in which mining and farming were dominant, because of their dependency on cheap labour, but that 'the development of capitalism itself produced conditions such that the positive effects of white domination... began increasingly to become subordinate to negative or contradictory effects' (1988:28). Wolpe identifies the conditions which transformed the positive functions of racism into negative dysfunctions as the expansion of industry, the growth in the demand for more stable and skilled labour and the importance of the home market. In this regard his analysis is identical to that of liberal-modernization theory. He concludes that in the present period for 'certain white class fractions' - notably sections of manufacturing capital - white domination has become an obstacle to the pursuit of their economic interests.

What I wish to say here is that in order to understand the class content of apartheid, it is insufficient to enumerate its adequacies and inadequacies in serving the interests or meeting the needs of capital. Capital does not live in a vacuum but in a definite relation to the other classes of capitalist society. Fascism, democracy and apartheid are all forms of state which may serve the interest of capital in general; what distinguishes these forms, however, are the relations between capital, labour and the intermediary classes and not merely the needs of capital in isolation.

### **Class struggle and reaction**

Take for instance the crucial historical question of the rise of the apartheid state. Wolpe, endorsing the account offered by Dan O'Meara (which is also similar to that of Saul and Gelb), argues that the HNP came to power as a result of two related factors: the fierce class struggles of the 1940's waged by the expanding black proletariat and the radicalized black middle classes; and the crisis of the state which arose from the inability of the SAP government to satisfy the needs of mining and agriculture for cheap labour, since it 'took cognizance of the interests of the fast growing manufacturing sector for a stable, urbanized labour force... an expanded home market... and the ending of the migrant labour system' (1988:65).

In Wolpe's view, the rise of apartheid was designed - even if it failed - to 'suppress the emergent black opposition which threatened the reproduction of white domination' (1988:66). This hypothesis, however, leaves the central question unanswered: if there was such a powerful escalation of working class

militancy in the 1940's, why was the labour movement unable to carve out a more democratic future of South Africa?; why could it not compel the ruling classes to recognize the interests of labour and come to terms with its demands?; if it did not have the strength to overthrow the state, why did it fail to push the rulers of South Africa into some form of accommodation, as was favoured by the liberal wing of the ruling class, rather than see the state captured by its mortal foes?

We cannot answer these questions as long as the rise of apartheid is seen only as a 'response' to class struggle but not itself as an effect of class struggle. We might make sense of this history better if we reverse the conventional wisdom: let us open our eyes to the historical fact that the rise of apartheid was not a response to the strength and militancy of labour and to the crisis of the state, but rather was the terrible consequence of the defeat of the working class movement in the 1940's at the hands of Smuts' decisively repressive government. If this was so, then the riddle of apartheid lies not only in explicating its functions for capital but also in explaining the defeat of labour in the 1940's.

### **Class struggle and reform**

Wolpe's analysis of reform represents the other side of this same methodological coin. He explains the reform policies pursued by the government in the 1980's on the one hand as a result of 'pressures within the white community' (which derived from the growth of modern industry) to generate a more stable, better trained and more consuming black workforce; on the other hand, as a response to the potential of 'the mass democratic movement... to put into question the entire system of white domination' (1988:94), that is, as the state's alternative to revolution. Wolpe assesses the reform strategy of the government in the following terms: 'a collection of measures which are aimed at allowing political activity but limiting the objective which may be pursued and at privileging to some extent selected classes or categories or black subjects with the intention of either creating divisions among the black masses, by creating a 'third force', or co-opting section of the population into working with the regime or both' (1988:94).

Wolpe's analysis is devoted to showing that the rulers' reform strategy failed. He argues for instance that the reform of labour law was meant to secure 'the institutionalization of industrial conflict' and 'the isolation of the black trade union movement from broader political movements' (1988:91), but that it failed to realize its intention since COSATU involved itself from the start in the national liberation struggle (1988:99).

Wolpe argues similarly that the bantustan policy was aimed at the institution of subordinate states which would 'act as agents for the regime... and

establish the conditions for the development of a black bureaucratic bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie' (1988:91), committed to ethnic and free market policies and divided from the national liberation movement. He sees this too as having failed since even the most powerful bantustan leaders, like Chief Buthelezi of KwaZulu, are in his view confined to their ethnic base and 'marginal to the struggles of the mass democratic organizations' (1988:96).

Again Wolpe argues that the government's policy of building an urban black petty bourgeoisie, by 'economizing' the demands of urban black business people, has failed because 'there is no mass following for those sections of the petit bourgeoisie', like the National African Chamber of Commerce, 'who are prepared to collaborate with the regime' and because even NAFCO appears 'tentatively to be moving closer to the ANC' (1988:97).

Wolpe argues that the reform of representative institutions, especially through the creation of the tri-cameral parliament and community councils, failed in its aim of creating a 'third force', since those individuals and organizations which participated in them 'have very little popular support'.

Wolpe's particular message is that, although state reforms have either been merely cosmetic or designed to divide, control and co-opt the black opposition, they nonetheless have 'called forth apparatuses... which are new and different' and 'opened new fields of struggle': boycott campaigns, legal actions and resistance to co-optation as well as repression. He sees the mass resistance of the mid-1980's as revealing 'the failure of the regime's reformist strategy to divide and displace the major thrust of the opposition' (1988:102).

There are immediate empirical problems with this analysis of reform in the 1980's. Wolpe does not mention the positive repeal of the Pass Laws, the Immorality Act, the Mixed Marriages Act, etc.; he does not mention the negative repeal of many of the Wiehahn reforms under the Labour Reform Act; he does not mention the bloody havoc caused by divisions between Inkatha and the Mass Democratic Movement in Natal; he does not mention any of the real defeats inflicted on the liberation movement by the state in the 1980's. The deeper problem with this analysis, however, lies in its very conception of 'reform'.

At first sight the neo-classical and neo-Marxist schools draw polar opposite conclusions about the nature of reform in South Africa. According to liberal modernization theorists, the need for reform grows as the antagonisms between apartheid and capital sharpen with the expansion of the market; and the forces of reform grow stronger with the development of industrial capital and labour. I cannot agree with Wolpe's contention that liberal modernization theory entails political indifference or abstention. Rather it is based on an analysis according to which capitalists and workers have a common interest in winning reform of apartheid, whatever other differences divide

them, and a political strategy designed to cement an alliance between progressive capital, organized labour and liberal-nationalist politicians around a consensual programme of reform from above and self-restraint from below.

In response to the weaknesses of reformism in South Africa, the view developed on the neo-Marxist left has been to discount 'reforms' as a means of ideological subterfuge, social control or co-optation. The impossibility of genuine reform under apartheid is so frequent a refrain in this discourse that the very idea of 'reform' is bound by inverted commas. It may be acknowledged, as Wolpe does, that certain 'reforms' change the terrain of struggle, but neo-Marxism rules out the possibility of real democratic reforms being forced upon the apartheid state from below.

Wolpe breaks from extreme formulations of this discourse when he recognizes that trade union struggles have led to democratic concessions on the part of capital and the state. Yet he then tends to reify the separation of the economic from the political, arguing that 'struggles within the political system and the economy may be different and clearly distinguishable... mediated by distinct organizational and institutional matrices' (1988:55). It may be true to say that 'relations between the sphere of production and the sphere of politics may be complementary, contradictory or both' (1988:55), but it does not help to identify the relations more substantively.

Looking back a decade, the important point in my view about the majority trade union response to the Wiehahn reforms lay in its recognition that they represented a real concession in the face of the struggles of the working class and intelligentsia. The readiness of most unions to register under the reformed industrial conciliation machinery represented a major break from the prevailing neo-Marxist paradigm. The break however was only partial. The response of FOSATU was reactive in the face of liberalization from above and not the result of conscious political action from below. Following registration there was little by way of political action (though there were may well-fought legal cases) to win more thorough-going state recognition of the unions, a less fettered right to strike, a shorter working week, minimum pay legislation, etc. The possibility of winning social and democratic reforms in areas other than that of trade unionism through political campaigns directed at the state was largely ruled out. To the extent that battles for state reform were pursued, they were largely piecemeal, negative and mediated through pressures on capitalists who, it was hoped, would in turn pressurize the government.

The field of exceptions introduced through the trade unions represented a vital chink in the armour of the orthodox left paradigm but did not challenge it as a whole. The revolution in left thinking represented by the independent

unions was halted, as it were, half way. Wolpe's theoretical separation of the economic and the political tends to reify this unfortunate caesura.

To rule out the theoretical possibility of forcing the apartheid state to make democratic concessions is no less a dogma than the neo-classical illusion in the inevitability of reform. The rejection of reform is the product of methodology which insulates the state from the impact of class struggle and which insulates the class struggle from any measures of its impact on the state (until the final moment of liberation). Sometimes the very savagery of state repression appears as an index of the effectivity of the liberation struggle. To wait for a state reform which does not seek to entrap the very forces to which concessions are made is to wait for ever. What I think we need is a major discourse shift on how we conceive of reform in South Africa, mindful that the people do not exist for liberation but rather that liberation exists for the people.

### Nationalism and socialism

In defining his politics Wolpe starts with a threefold critique. The defect of liberal modernization theory, Wolpe argues, is that it affords to politics 'no role to play in the process of social transformation', offering instead 'a recipe for non-intervention in the political struggle' (1988:27) - in my view a wrong interpretation of liberal modernization politics and one which obscures its thinking. Second, Wolpe distances himself from the view associated with trotskysant theorists of permanent revolution (like Neville Alexander and Martin Legassick) that in South Africa 'capitalist relations are by definition inescapably... racial' (1988:31) and that therefore true national liberation is inescapably anti-capitalist.

Wolpe adds a third critique: against a 'workerism' which holds that 'the national struggle cannot be an ingredient of the workers' struggle... since national liberation and socialism stand in contradiction' and which posits instead that 'the correct political perspective is a 'pure' class struggle with the working class alone going for socialism' (1988:33). He equates the socialist critique of nationalism with 'workerism'.

Wolpe endorses the theory of 'colonialism of a special type' associated with the Communist Party and the ANC on the grounds that it captures the contingent nature of the link between the racial superstructure and the capitalist economy in South Africa. Wolpe's originality lies in stressing further the question of contingency. Joe Slovo saw the dissociation of capital and apartheid as *theoretically* possible but given the real balance of forces *politically* impossible. Wolpe puts on the agenda the *real* political possibility of a future de-racialised capitalism replacing apartheid. For Wolpe the good point about the internal colonialism theory is that it 'grounds the contention



that the anti-racial or national struggle must have primacy'; its defect is its tendency to 'close off analysis of the class content of national struggles' and 'its failure to recognize that the national struggle... may incorporate alternative class objectives' (1988:32-33).

Wolpe endorses the marriage of nationalism and socialism under the banner of African nationalism, only seeking to affirm the socialist wing of nationalism. The important point for him is that we should not assume that 'a national struggle is necessarily also a struggle against the capitalist order'.

Despite this theoretical criticism of the weaknesses of the internal colonial thesis, empirically Wolpe draws the conclusion that 'no section of the national liberation movement is committed to a struggle for what may be termed a bourgeois national democratic revolution' (1988:33). He cites as evidence an ANC statement affirming that it regards the working class as the leading force in the struggle for a national democratic state, an SACP statement committing the party to 'profound agrarian transformation' and 'the socialization of those sectors of the economy in the grip of monopoly capital' (1988:34), and a socialistic interpretation by Wolpe himself of the economic clauses of the Freedom Charter.

It is improbable that Wolpe could sustain the assertion that 'no section' of the liberation movement is for a deracialised capitalism. The more important question, though, concerns Wolpe's endorsement as a Marxist of the primacy of nationalism in the South African struggle. The contention that African or some other form of nationalism represent the natural political form of opposition to the racism of the Afrikaner nationalists - and the converse argument that socialist class politics are inappropriate in the context of the battle against apartheid - these ideas constitute in my view the irrational core of this approach. They account for the conceptual headaches suffered when seeking to metamorphosis Marxism into nationalism. In general, South African Marxists (Communist and Trotskyist) have acceded far too readily to the appeals of nationalism. To affirm socialism rather than nationalism is not to subordinate the race question; it is to address the race question in a socialist rather than a nationalist way. Is it not time to stop painting nationalism red and to drop the assumption that nationalism is the 'natural' response to race.

### **Strategy and structural determination**

For Wolpe the benefits of structuralism are that it addresses the ways in which 'struggles are structured by the specific form of political terrain and the state'. He argues that 'structural conditions ... mark the character of a period and provide the specific context in which the content and direction of political conflicts can be understood'. Wolpe criticizes authors like myself

and Dennis Davis - and identifies the historical school associated with Charles Van Onselen as revealing the same problem - whom he believes to 'make no serious attempt in the evaluation of strategy either to specify those objective condition or to indicate how they are to be taken into account' (1988:21).

He criticizes our alleged belief that 'class struggle alone will determine the specific effectivity or otherwise' (1988:60) of the state and our explanation of liberation strategies in terms of 'the movement's composition, organisation and leadership' (1988:21) at the expense of 'the conditions which make one strategy rather than another plausible' (1988:61). Wolpe conceded that 'the form of the state is not the single determinant of the nature of the struggle' and that he does not mean 'that other forms of struggle could not or should not have been undertaken' by the liberation organisations. Against what he sees as the defects of voluntarism, however, he insists that 'the form of state is one albeit extremely important condition of the struggle' and that 'struggles and structures must be understood in relation to one another' (1988:67).

Wolpe couples his theory of structural determination to a theory of 'periodisation' which recognizes 'discontinuity' and 'structural transformations' between one period and the next. He identifies three periods with the overall dominance of apartheid: 1948-1960, 1961-1972 and 1973 to the present. In the period 1948 to 1960 he argues that the structural conditions for mass struggle were present. He identifies two sets of factors: the 'form of the state' which he says was characterized by the subordination of the executive to the legislature and by a considerable degree of judicial independence, and the 'political terrain' which he says was characterized by 'deeply rooted extra-parliamentary mass organisations which were in the process of radicalising themselves' (1988:65).

In the course of the period of the 1950's Wolpe argues that the 'powerful mass struggles' of the liberation movement induced the government to 'narrow the space for legal political action' and 'enhance the power of the executive... at the expense of the judiciary' (1988:67). The regime found, however, that it was 'incapable of subordinating... the political opposition on the basis of its existing normal powers', so leading into the next period.

1960-1973 was marked according to Wolpe by the 'obliteration' of the extra-parliamentary political terrain and within the state the supremacy of the military and the executive over parliament and the judiciary. As a result of these structural transformations, Wolpe argues, severe constraints were imposed on the possibility of mass action. The issue, therefore, was armed struggle and battle for state power, since 'the space for political campaigns and even illegal political work among the masses was virtually sealed off' (1988:71).

Wolpe explains the re-emergence of the mass extra-parliamentary political terrain in the 1970's not as a result in change in the form of state - on the contrary he argues there was a continuing expansion of executive and military power - but of the growth of modern industry. This led to 'pressures within the white community for the reform of apartheid' (1988:83), particularly on the part of manufacturing capital, and to the growth of the black working class.

The historiographical effect of this theory of structural determination is to rationalize the strategic history of the liberation movement. The strategies of the liberation organisations appear to be dictated by constraints from above, notably the form of state, and by the prevailing consciousness of the masses below. The liberation organisations themselves appear to have been left little or no choice but to adopt the strategies which they did.

In this approach, the diversity of political views over what was to be done in a given situation is ironed out in favour of the apparent inevitability and immanent rationality of the decisions reached. We are reconciled to the idea that there were no serious alternatives and no real choices, since the leadership did what any rational leadership would have to do. Such a conception of strategy conceals the nature of strategic choices as the tangible expression of particular parties seeking as best they can and in accordance with their own history and social character to make sense of their situation and act upon it. It generates (or expresses) a language of moral absolutes - a discourse of ideality on the one side and betrayal on the other - rather than a language of political debate and diversity.

The problem is particularly evident when confronting the defeats suffered by the liberation movement. Wolpe's theory tends toward a normalization of failure taking a number of forms. The reality of defeat may simply be ignored; defeats may be rationalized as the exclusive result of external factors on the assumption that there was nothing which the liberation organisations could have done differently; defeat may be presented as only an apparent failure disguising a real advance; or finally defeat may be naturalized as a necessary moment in the progress of every revolutionary movement to its ultimate goal.

The tendency to normalize failure is accompanied in this discourse by a tendency to presuppose the progressiveness of the strategic turns which followed defeat. The strategic history of the liberation movement is then understood as a sequence of distinct phases, each one representing a higher stage of political consciousness than the last. We find the period of petitions and deputations coming to a close at the end of the 1940's; then an advance to the period of mass struggle in the 1950's; a further advance to the period of armed struggle in the 1960's; then the combination of mass and armed struggle taking off in the 1970's. History appears as a rational progression as

each phase plays its part in setting the stage for the new approach. Rather than question the teleological assumptions of liberation historiography, Wolpe reifies them in his theory of periodisation.

It is this method which underlies Wolpe's analysis of the current situation. He sees it as one of unstable equilibrium, marked by the inability of the regime to suppress the mass opposition and the inability of the mass opposition yet to overthrow the regime. Wolpe discounts the possibility of a negotiated settlement, in spite of international pressures, citing on the one hand the government's antipathy to negotiations and the 'extremely severe constraints' it faces from its social base; and on the other radicalism of the liberation movement's minimum political and economic demands. He discounts the possibility of a 'Chilean solution', that is, the physical obliteration of the liberation movement through terroristic methods, citing both the capacity of the mass movement to withstand repression and the obstacles in the way of the regime attempting such a solution. He discounts a 'reformist solution' on the ground that the extensive reforms needed to satisfy the liberation movement would be incompatible with the power base of the government.

The solution Wolpe offers lies in finding the true synthesis, as he sees it, of armed and mass struggle: in the form of an escalation of the armed struggle of the ANC into a people's war and an escalation of the mass struggle into an insurrectionary movement. This ideal conjuncture, as Wolpe presents it, 'remains to be achieved by the liberation movement'. It seems to me, however, that this implausible scenario has less to do with putting socialism back onto the map of the anti-apartheid struggle than with turning Marxism into the extreme wing of the nationalist movement. This is not a road the liberation movement should go down.

**Note**

1. Some of the arguments mentioned in this review are derived from and developed further in Robert Fine and Dennis Davis (1990) - *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa* (London: Pluto)