

# IS SOCIALISM ON THE AGENDA?

## A LETTER TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN LEFT

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Now that Zambia Airways flight Q08 has finally taken off from Lusaka to New York, the separation I need from South Africa to begin this reflection is starting to impose itself. It is a strong impulse that tells me to write a letter, not an essay - even if it contains an argument, references to sources, footnotes. Writing it as a letter stresses my subjectivity, the strong feelings behind my intervention, the personal character of my impressions, their limitations to this individual and to his particular experience. And it reminds us that I do not write as an expert on South Africa. Above all, it allows me to shape this argument as I feel it, as an urgent appeal, on behalf of commitments I share with those to whom I write. After all, it is as an intellectual of the Left, a philosopher who has spent most of his energies thinking and acting in the tradition of Marx, Marcuse, and Sartre and towards the kind of social transformation we have always identified with the name of socialism, that I was invited to South Africa. I have visited out of a commitment to doing in South Africa what I have always tried to do at home, using theory to clarify action and action to test, clarify, alter and expand theory. A letter reminds us all that I am writing in the first instance to specific people, friends with whom I have had the several parts of this dialogue whose larger curves I am now able to present. And I am writing to those I have and have not met, comrades and colleagues who stretch across a broad but clearly defined political space.

I have been to South Africa two times now, in 1987 and 1990, to teach and lecture. Each time it has been an intense experience, each time a genuine interaction in which I gained as much as I gave. Each time I did not merely bring ideas worked out in Detroit, but have had to think in situation, developing thoughts with and against dozens of you in a serial way. Each time I have come to certain conclusions and presented them in South Africa or sent them back afterwards.

Inevitably, this second trip became more focused on specific issues than the first: I became more and more involved in debates on the Left over how to understand and act in the current situation, indeed on who the Left is and how it sees itself. At the same time your disagreements forced me to clarify and develop my own ways of thinking about politics in order to see how these might be relevant to your situation.

## I

Again and again I was asked: What has changed in the three years since your last visit? What are your impressions of South Africa today? Most generally, these are summed up by the simultaneous answer of two colleagues I hadn't seen for some time: 'Everything has changed/Nothing has changed.' *Everything* - foremost on people's minds is no longer the brutally enforced and seemingly endless stalemate with an unyielding state; the time of negotiations over the transformation is finally here; the key components of apartheid are going or gone. *Nothing* - in the cities and townships and countryside and bantustans the transformation seems slight indeed; the state is still firmly (and sometimes brutally) in command; none of the urgent problems has been solved. Let me describe the changes in my own experience of South Africa, as a visiting lecturer. In preparing for my trip in 1987 I had occasion to make several telephone calls from Detroit to Durban, and in some of them I found it necessary to inquire about the African National Congress' attitude towards the question of the academic boycott. I recall how struck I was to learn during one of these that international telephone calls were assumed to be routinely monitored by the state security police. This was the beginning of a series of experiences of learning what it was like to lecture, and live, under possible surveillance in a police state. My first visa, after all, was only granted after direct questioning and with the admonition, 'Remember, stay out of politics'.

At least five thousand people were in detention during that visit, and the state of emergency cast a pall on all political talk and activity. I felt that I toed an invisible line of what could and couldn't be said, and had to be careful, several times each day, to avoid stepping across that line. Anyone might be a police informer; certain things could be talked about openly and certain things not; political meetings of groups that had not been banned were assumed to be bugged. The word 'sanctions' could not be discussed publicly. Speaking in public, I learned a new skill: how to make my point by again and again attributing it to someone else - my American students, for example, or Americans in general. I recall how difficult it was to discuss openly the question of the boycott, and especially the contacts I had initiated with the ANC office in New York, even though it was vital for the local SANSCO activists to find out that I had done so. Questioned by one of their leaders at a meeting to determine what attitude they should take towards me, I had to express what they wanted to hear by a kind of lame circumlocution that any security agent would notice.

The mood was grim, but determined and defiant. Everyone knew of someone in detention, many had themselves been detained. The insurrectionary wave had been broken, the sense had collapsed that South Africa might be transformed

overnight. But the revolutionary optimism of 1984-86 was still on people's minds. Everyone knew that the fall of apartheid was inevitable, as was a massive transformation of social and political structures and daily life. Certainly the wave of state repression was postponing the transformation, perhaps for as many as ten or twenty years or longer. But it was inevitable, and would be sweeping, initiated by the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the ANC. The mood was grim but still deeply optimistic, reflecting the breadth of the mass movement, even if repressed, and the universal sense that the stalemate was temporary. No one accepted the current constitution, indeed including the Minister for Constitutional Affairs: South Africa was awaiting transformation.

Even the most negative side of the situation had its positive effect. No one knew who might be picked up next or when and this fear created a sense of unity. The clarity about who the enemy was - the state as personified by President Botha - created a focus and even optimism based on a sense both of moral certainty and of historical inevitability. In the Richard Turner memorial lecture I spoke about the paradox that an American comrade could find hope in South Africa; but it was true. In ironic counterpoint to this reflection we learned that the young man who had chaired the SANSKO meeting two weeks earlier was detained the day of that lecture.

Lecturing in 1990 was totally different. It was no longer necessary to walk on eggshells. One no longer felt under surveillance. We knew the security police had not been retired or laid off, but I no longer worried about who might be listening or what might happen to me. A handful of people were in detention (Yes, I had to get reading materials to one of my students who was detained: the reality of state power was undeniably real), but the enormous difference in quantity seemed to have become a difference in quality. The best word to describe the new mood was *open*. The stalemate was over, a period of transition had begun, the outcome of which no one could foresee. The sense of being embattled had lifted. It was possible to talk, to think, and above all, for so many of my friends, to organize. Just to be able to go to an ANC meeting was, for others as well as for myself, a remarkable event. So long vilified, so long tabooed, and now here was the ANC openly organizing demonstrations, selling literature, recruiting members. I now met the same SANSKO leader who had questioned me and was later detained at the ANC Women's League launch, decked out in a bright red Communist Party shirt and fez.

Granted, no one knew for sure how long this openness would last - and how much it would be punctuated, and controlled, by police action. This meant that some of the openness had to be restrained, and underground cadres and secret strategies had to be kept on the ready. Nevertheless, one of the clouds over South Africa since the banning of the SACP and the ANC, the systematic

political repression accompanying the imposition of apartheid, had largely lifted. A new freedom of speech and thought were now the order of the day.<sup>1</sup>

## II

Accordingly, with the state of emergency lifted, might not the mood be more relaxed, even optimistic? I, for one, felt more normal than on my first visit, walked around alone more frequently, talked less guardedly. Yet while walking in Durban or Johannesburg or Cape Town (which I did for a long time every day), in a very important sense I actually felt greater uneasiness than before. Yes, one could see that the great evil of apartheid was collapsing all around, but wasn't this happening in a way to generate anxiety rather than enthusiasm? A white man, out walking alone, say on the Berea in Durban, can feel this when encountering a black man. Typically, we would look at each other a bit uncertainly and indirectly, as if not knowing what to expect from each other, perhaps as if to figure out how to address each other. The clear roles of dominance and submission between people passing on the sidewalk that were still apparent three years ago (the Pass Laws had just been abolished) had eroded further, but new roles had not yet taken shape, imposing no clear relationships between strangers. Is he a middle-class black resident of this or a nearby neighborhood going grey? Or a 'garden boy' or other domestic worker? Or is he on his way to work elsewhere (from where, and why was he walking around here, in a white area)? Or, as so many whites around me worried, was he looking for someplace or someone to rob? It is hard not to be affected by elaborate alarm systems, endless gossip and newspaper stories about car theft and house theft and robberies and murder - all at a rate enormously higher than the violent United States. And so I wondered, how does he see whites who see him thus? What is he thinking? How much anger must be growing within the expanding yet frustrated consciousness of being the vast majority, and on the verge of some connection to political power, but still today being excluded from meaningful political participation, still today without sufficient or sufficiently high-paying work, still today a stranger to the splendid homes and cars of this neighborhood? The old deference has not been replaced by a new equality or any other new stable relationship, but rather seems to have given way to a new nervousness, based on mutual fear.

Yes the mood has indeed changed since 1987. But, surprisingly, I found little of what I had expected the most: optimism. Unexpectedly, the mood is decidedly less hopeful than three years earlier. The only enthusiastic statement I heard came, appropriately enough, from an American diplomat in Cape Town who sounded like a small-town Rotarian: 'they' were 'getting things sorted out', and if they kept on, they would have a wonderful future in a beautiful country.

Among South Africans, I encountered strikingly little optimism - a considerable amount of passive faith in leaders - in Mandela's and FW de Klerk's ability to work out global issues, but this was combined with a remarkable weight of pessimism about specifics.

During my first visit I looked hard at the main lines of South Africa in 1987, brushing by the reservations of those (mostly English-speaking) whites who opposed apartheid 'but' insisted on 'how complicated the situation is'. Inasmuch as the 'complications' had been mostly justifications for passively supporting Botha and resisting majority rule, I argued, and still believe, that they evaded the fundamental moral-political-constitutional issues concerning apartheid and majority rule. In response, I insisted on the utter simplicity and clarity of such issues, especially for as long as the state remained committed to minority rule and was enforcing it by making war on the vast majority of its people (Aronson, 1990). Three years later, as a second-time visitor, without abandoning this insistence on the moral need to rid the world of its last outpost of statutory white domination, I discovered myself, remarkably, stressing how complicated is the picture facing South Africans. Like everyone else, it seems, I have begun to focus away from the moral imperative to end apartheid as soon as possible and to move toward majority rule, and toward the thousand and one tasks that will have to be undertaken along the way and for years afterwards.

This was brought home by my second-year Politics class at the University of Natal, in response to my question about whether they anticipate that the world their children will grow up in will be better than the world their parents grew up in. Only one person in this half-black, half-white group of over fifty students raised a hand to say yes; a majority said no and a sizeable minority wanted to qualify their statements. But what about Mandela's release? What about the imminent end of apartheid? What about the coming advent of majority rule? None of these facts made my students any more cheerful about the problems their children would have to face. What about the fact that they were now, white and black, sitting next to each other at the same university, for most of them their first encounter with the other race as equals? While everyone seemed to admit that this marked significant social progress, it didn't really dent the grudging mood or make the tasks at hand seem any more positive.

The mood also stems from a second and related reality: the real balance of forces in South Africa today. De Klerk's brilliant maneuver was to release Mandela, unban the ANC, begin negotiations, and move to end apartheid *before he was forced to*. Today, on the one hand, the mass democratic movement can no longer be banned but, on the other hand, it is nowhere near being strong enough to impose its vision of a solution (whatever that might look like). On De Klerk's side the economy is still intact, white morale is still relatively high,

capital is still self-confident, the police and military are still in charge, loyalty to the state apparatus is still solid. On the movement side, mass political consciousness and organization are still at a relatively low level, the black working class is still relatively small and relatively recently organized, blacks are still largely lacking formal education and skills in running the economy and government. Of course, in 1989 the mass democratic movement decisively unbanned itself; but for the state to negotiate the future constitution of South Africa with its leaders means taking advantage of the current impasse between the movement and the white minority. A trade-union activist quoted by Steven Friedman in *Building Tomorrow Today* speaks of workers' organization in the mid-1980s, saying that in another ten or twenty years, the working class will be unstoppable - having grown, organized itself, practiced democracy, engaged in militant activity (Friedman, 1987). Clearly De Klerk and his advisers have looked ahead and pondered this - and have decided to act earlier, at eleven o'clock, while neither side can impose its terms on the other, rather than waiting until nearer to midnight, when their powers would have diminished, when all that might remain to be negotiated might be the terms of surrender.<sup>2</sup>

What this means for the movement is that the release of Mandela and unbanning of the ANC and SACP are elements of an overall strategy, conceded to be sure because of the movement's growing strength, and because of the demographic reality reflected by its indomitable will, but conceded now only *because of the movement's weakness vis à vis* the state and the forces it represents. The pessimism I encountered reflects the historical reality that De Klerk has grasped so well: any settlement at this point in history will be drawn to create a coalitional form of majority rule that protects the privileges and power of middle- and upper-class whites. Negotiations may be described by the movement as a 'terrain of struggle' - to the state they are rather ways of institutionalizing a new balance of forces. The notion of a 'terrain of struggle' tries to put a good face on the movement's weakness to impose its will in political or military terms. It acknowledges that negotiations will reflect neither side's victory over the other, but a new compromise. But it veils the fact that from De Klerk's point of view, this compromise is intended to institutionalize and stabilize new relations of power. Inasmuch as these new relations fall decisively short of majority power in a full political, economic, or social sense, it is absurd to expect the negotiations to *produce* this power. From the movement's point of view negotiations involve conceding how formidable white power still is. Yet the movement still gains the chance to consolidate positions already won and provide space for continuing the struggle for a more meaningful majority rule.

### III

This, then, is the new mood I found among blacks and anti-apartheid whites: that so much has to be changed, that so much is wrong, will still be wrong, the day or week or month or year after liberation. More, that no force or class or leader (or social or economic arrangement) seems powerful enough, or capable of, dealing with everything that needs attending to. I think the earlier hope that 'everything' will be better when apartheid is abolished, with the advent of majority rule, has hit the reef that everyone should have known was waiting for it. Where three years ago I found, and was myself nourished by, the unrepentant optimism defying the state of emergency, today that optimism seems all but vanished.

The community of resistance - always at best half myth and half reality - seems more fragmented today. Certainly part of the sense of disorientation and suspicion and bitterness is due to the fact that for a few, power and position seem to be getting close enough to touch. Negotiations will mean serving some interests and scuttling others, meeting some needs and ignoring others. No wonder suspicions and hostilities among onetime allies is growing: they will only increase. To the degree that the iron lid imposed by the apartheid state has been lifted, the shared resistance to repression can no longer serve to unite people. Can 'the movement' remain a single force especially inasmuch as its minimum goals, acceptable to some, are closer and closer to being met, and the current balance of forces precludes meeting its maximum goals? After all, isn't it inevitable that in any foreseeable settlement the dynamics of class within the movement will make themselves felt? Once apartheid is ended, won't the black petty bourgeoisie have genuinely different interests than the black working class? Won't blacks drawn into the governing coalition insist on restraining the more militant youth, perhaps repressing them as 'necessary'? And won't a full range of other differences begin to be felt within the ANC/UDF movement, including along ethnic and racial lines, revealing it to always have been an uneasy coalition of diverse interests one of whose greatest achievements was simply staying united?

### IV

Liberation will lead those who are brought into the seats of political power to become responsible for the economy's smooth functioning, and its continued integration in the world economic system. Won't this make them become equally preoccupied with preserving the privileges and power of the dominant economic interests as the surest path to safeguarding their own power? I am not even speaking of betrayal here - won't they perceive their ability to aid the masses as depending on stabilizing the economic system and its relations of

privilege and power? Isn't that already happening as the negotiators decide the future constitution, due to be submitted in the least democratic way - plebiscite-fashion, to voters at a referendum? These questions, heard again and again during my visit, inspire a profound and bitter helplessness among many, after years of equally profound and bitter struggle.

However these questions may be answered in the months and years ahead, those who regard ourselves as being on or sympathetic to the Left have a special stake in thinking about them clearly. After all, we distinguish ourselves by a dual commitment, not easily harmonizable, to realizing the most democratic and egalitarian possible transformation of South Africa, and to basing all steps in this process on the most realistic possible appreciation of the actual historical situation. Radical hope, which we all more or less share, entails keeping the vision of a genuinely humane alternative society alive, but it equally entails understanding and acting within the real-world limits and possibilities of achieving it. The Left's Scylla and Charybdis are a political despair that tries too little because it never finds that conditions are ready, and a reflexive optimism that sees everything as always possible, and accordingly either attempts too much or blames leaders who don't. Minimalist temperaments and maximalist temperaments will always exist. Sometimes the one sights the true curve of events, sometimes the other. And sometimes neither. The Left needs to be guided by a different stance: relating hope to a realistic assessment of what is possible. This means *founding* hope, keeping it alive but giving it a hard-headed basis. This passing through the eye of the needle is one of the most vital tasks a Left can give to itself, and one of an intellectual Left's great services to the rest of the movement.

At issue, first of all, is developing an appropriate perspective. After all, *how* we see things can be every bit as important as *what* we see - indeed, no serious school of thought, least of all Marxism, would any longer separate the one from the other. Resigned passivity may ignore genuine possibilities, just as activity founded on illusions of what is possible may lead to discouragement. A *reasoned hope* is one of the most vital principles of political action: knowing when to admit defeat, when to celebrate, when to continue struggling, are among the most essential of political traits.

And here is where I see a major problem on the South African Left today - not knowing what to expect, what to hope for. One encounters alternating minimalisms and maximalisms, neither genuinely founded on a serious study of just what is possible today. Most South Africans I talk to are hoping for too much, or despairing too quickly. They are defying what is really possible, or caving in to the narrowest definitions of reality. Some are doing both. Providing a clear sense of just what is possible and impossible, plausible and implausible in South



Africa today, connecting this to the actual forces in motion and their relationship - these are tasks not best left to 'our leaders' but that should be undertaken by all who read this. Doing so entails asking what kinds, and degrees, of transformation are on the agenda. What forces are required, what strategies necessary, what space is available, for precisely the kinds of democratic and socialist changes the Left may advocate?

As an outsider and as a non-specialist in South Africa, I want to suggest a perspective for thinking about these questions. I also want to present some of my impressions of what is possible, designed as provocations to further thought, based on my experience of South Africa in August and September, 1990.

## V

The question of what is possible in South Africa today can be best approached, I believe, by asking another question: Is socialism on the agenda in South Africa?

It is useful to begin this reflection from within the traditional Marxist perspective in order to assess the possible success of a traditional Marxist paradigm. From within Marxism, it seems to me, the answer is obvious: while it is an immensely powerful colonial export economy, South Africa's level of industrialization is still too low, its level of wealth and culture too low, its black working class still too small and young, the level of urbanization still too low, to seriously pose the prospect of socialism as Marx construed it. The balance of forces leading De Klerk to negotiate now only confirms this: if the (white) bourgeoisie will no longer have a world in its own image,<sup>3</sup> neither will the (black) working class, or indeed the democratic movement, be able to create a world in their image. As De Klerk must see it, white privilege and power can be maintained *within majority rule* because the majority does not have a single, coherent will, and/or lacks the power to exercise its will.

This precludes socialism as *Marx construed it*: this is the objective prognosis to be drawn from this subjective and objective reality. But what if socialism could somehow be imposed, through a minority seizure of power? The fact remains that high levels of wealth and culture are not remotely foreseeable under any imaginable form of socialization. Rather what would lie ahead is repeating under socialism 'the old filthy business' decried by Marx in *The German Ideology* - scarcity, the struggle for survival, inequality, domination, classes.

Certainly there are those Marxists who, regarding themselves under the influence of Lenin or Trotsky (the first moved by a willingness to anticipate revolutions elsewhere and the second by an unreasonably optimistic theory of 'permanent revolution'), imagine that some form of socialism might be achievable at a relatively low level of industrialization. But what do these theories tell

us? Given the relationship between classes, it might be possible to 'seize power' before the working class is sufficiently large, sufficiently experienced in industrial struggles, and the economy sufficiently developed, to make possible the kind of advanced industrial socialism anticipated by Marx. 'Readiness' in this sense is a more subjective matter than I have been making it, and some argue that to deny it of South African workers is to demean them, to belittle ordinary people's widely demonstrated capacity to intervene in history. Certainly, it can be argued, one historical example after another - the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, - proves that such a seizure of power is possible in conditions of underdevelopment.

We may recall Trotsky's famous words to Martov, as the great Menshevik walked out of the Congress of Soviets after denouncing the Bolshevik seizure of power as premature: 'Go out, into the dustbin of history'. It has since been the classic reproach to all those who would hesitate at a revolutionary moment because their fidelity to theory was stronger than to the proletariat. But 70 years later, as communism unravels, its party-dominated and oppressive ('Stalinist') forms explainable by Russia's low level of development and extremely small working class at the moment of revolution,<sup>4</sup> no amount of reference to revolutions in Cuba or Yugoslavia or other underdeveloped countries can reassure South Africans (Löwy 1981). As it has turned out, the 'seizure of power' is not to be confused with the building of a socialism capable of retaining the support of its people. Engels once commented (in another context):

The worst thing that can befall the leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents, and for the realization of the measures which the domination implies. . . . Thus he necessarily finds himself in an unsolvable dilemma. What he can do contradicts all his previous actions, principles and immediate interests of his party, and what he *ought* to do cannot be done. . . . Whoever is put into this awkward position is irretrievably doomed (Lewin, 1976).

Irretrievably doomed: it turns out this has meant not necessarily doomed to be swept from power, but to betray his party's goals *while remaining in power in the name of these very goals*. Bringing Engels into twentieth-century history, such seizures of power in circumstances of underdevelopment have not led to a socialism worthy of the name. And we need not be the ones to pass such judgement: such socialisms seem fated to receive the harshest judgement of their own people, being swept from power once free expression is permitted. History is vindicating not Lenin and Trotsky's boldness in seizing power, but Martov's Marxist caution about needing to wait until the productive forces are sufficiently mature.

## VI

There is yet another difficulty with the insistence that socialism is on the agenda in South Africa, namely, that no one, especially we on the Left, is quite sure what socialism is anymore. Anyone talking about 'the socialist revolution' in 1990, as de Klerk knows only too well, hasn't been listening to the rest of the world. Not only have popular revolutions been undoing many of the historical examples of socialism, but they have passed decisive judgement on one whole model, that of a one-party state which centrally controls most or all of the means of production and sets as its primary task the 'primitive accumulation' Marx saw taking place under capitalism. 'Stalinist' forms used to be rationalized by their most sophisticated apologists as dispensing with democratic processes *in order to* - preserve the party, overthrow capitalism, industrialize, create or protect socialism. In other words, certain structural, developmental and institutional changes were so decisive that pursuing them justified authoritarian practices and structures. But look at what those changes have come to. The 'socialism' thereby created not only never evolved in a democratic way and instead created its own privileged ruling class; it has been totally discredited by the revolutionary actions of its own people. It is not just that this and other ideas of socialism have been repudiated: as I have argued elsewhere (Aronson 1990), those of us inspired by Marxism have become idealists because, 100 years after Marx's death, we have no historically viable example of the alternative we favor.

To say, as tentatively as we now must, that we favor a social system that *might be* more humane, productive, and democratic than capitalism, is to confess to the crisis of socialism today. Of course we can say, militantly, that we favor increasing equality, democracy, human rights, and public responsibility for appropriate areas of social life. And we can argue, plausibly, that only social ownership of the means of production and a concomitant transformation of social life, can fully realize each of these. But it is devilishly difficult to say, today, what shape this process would have, except that we know what shape it would *not* have: communism.

Anyone who speaks confidently as if he or she knows what socialism is *after communism*, in fact, is only posturing. Short of much more practice, much more spelling out, considerable political education and debate, we must admit that we simply cannot say. To be sure, anyone talking to ordinary black people in South Africa will carry away a strong sense of their sympathy for socialism. But if one presses hard what this means, what they have in mind by redistributing or sharing wealth, one is left with the vaguest of ideas. This mood is important, and I will return to it, but to argue that South Africa is ripe for socialism because of it is to fall into a sentimentalist populism that does no one any credit.

## VII

If objective, subjective, and world-historical factors all conspire to force us to speak of socialism with question marks and perhaps even between quotation marks, there are urgencies built into the current situation, tasks for the Left, that do not have to be spoken of so tentatively and uncertainly. One of these involves moving South Africa towards democracy. Many people argue that one of South Africa's great priorities of the moment is to build a democratic political culture - a climate of discussion and respect and tolerance and personal security in which important questions can be resolved by majorities and without violence. Obviously any steps in this direction would be as important to the internal functioning of organizations and parties as it would be to the society as a whole - police-state practices in the one cannot help but lead to police-state practices in the other. And certainly a major goal is creating a climate where differences can be aired openly, where struggles for power can take place with a minimum of violence, within an agreed-upon framework in which the will of the majority prevails. If ending apartheid and achieving majority rule has been the main goal of the democratic movement in its various incarnations, an intimately related question is whether these changes will be accomplished *democratically* and lead to *democratic* processes.

The minimally acceptable change, of course, is an end to racial rule, and I would insist that *no matter how this is achieved, no matter what the shape of post-apartheid society or its government*, the end of colonialism in Southern Africa will be a major historical achievement. But everyone agrees that this alone will not be enough and is indeed inseparable from broader political, social and economic changes. Even if it is conceivable apart from such other changes, the lifting of apartheid by itself does not deserve the name democracy. Besides removing every last racial law, the most minimal definition of democracy would entail a government constitutionally responsible to all the people, elected by the majority in free elections after open campaigning featuring free public debate of all issues. What many on the Left have long derided as 'bourgeois' democracy includes all the protections of open discussion - a free press, access to the media, guaranteeing and protecting individual rights and liberties.

This is, obviously, far more than a narrow class project, and in fact represents an achievement or goal of mass popular movements everywhere, including working-class movements. It entails a political culture in which it is possible to speak out freely and openly without being assassinated, arrested, detained, bullied, or intimidated. It entails habits of restraint and mutual respect that have simply not been part of South African political culture. It means creating a situation where even enemies can find bases for compromise. This means developing new ground rules, mutually agreed upon, in which the bitterest of

opponents agree to disagree within a political and legal framework that protects their right to do so.

Is it possible to imagine such a democratic culture being achieved without both a revolution and a long process of social and economic development that genuinely establishes new ground rules by sweeping away the more ruthless and violent forms of exploitation and repression? It is worth stressing that violence has been a decisive weapon for arriving at relatively nonviolent structures - the United States, France, Britain and Germany all attained a certain degree of consensus (and the capacity for 'moderation') only after revolutions, civil wars, extended wars, or other protracted struggles (Barrington Moore, 1966). Moreover, such societies permit a range of dissent that remains more or less narrow, and still employ violence to maintain the status quo (as well as continuing to engage in neo-imperial rule, terrorism or violence beyond their borders). I agree that none of them is qualified to preach peaceful change to South Africans. Still, even after chronicling the bloody American labor struggles of the 1930s, counting the deaths in our civil rights movement of the 1960s, or showing how state force continues to sanction breaking labor struggles to this very day, I would argue that improving South Africa's political climate need not await another hundred years of political development - it is possible to take concrete steps toward a more tolerant, more open, more democratic, and less violent society, even while working for and awaiting its transformation.

In reply, it can be argued, correctly, that violence is intrinsic to class society and must be any state's last resort to the degree that it enforces and legitimizes privilege, domination and exploitation. And further, that violence and intolerance are inseparable from colonialism, which after all, is able to sustain minority rule in no other way. Moreover, I would agree that South Africa is a society undergoing a revolutionary transformation, which above all lacks consensus on its future shape and structures. Until this is hammered out, even if provisionally, competing demands will be made in the only way suitable to a revolutionary situation, by force. Indeed, in the long run, whoever prevails will do so only by force. But certainly if these qualifications suggest limits constraining any movement towards a more democratic political culture, the Left can help test and critically evaluate each and every restraint on democracy - and can decide to systematically press for its widest extension and its deepest rooting. The Left can advocate the fullest possible discussion of every alternative, demand the widest possible public participation in decision-making. It can criticize intolerance everywhere on the political spectrum, and insist on respect for opposing positions. It can uphold processes of deliberation and election that effectively enfranchise the greatest number of people. It can seek to keep the masses active rather than passive. It can reject political bullying and intimidat-

tion. In short, it can promote an internal climate of democracy that will add force to the demand that South Africa's future be decided by South Africa's people.

## VIII

It is obvious that a democratic culture has been allowed to develop only within the narrowest limits among white South Africans - up to the internal boundaries of tolerance, dissent, criticism, and democratic decision making that a privileged minority oppressing the great mass has been able to tolerate. More important, this has been wholly denied to black South Africa; since rule by force is of the essence of colonialism, open discussion among the majority is incompatible with minority rule. Creating itself literally under siege, the internal democratic movement has never had the opportunity to develop an internal democratic culture - this is virtually prohibited by definition to an anti-colonial resistance - although it has developed a variety of forms for rooting itself in, and remaining responsible to, the masses who created it. Moreover, when an exile leadership has to function abroad, under constant threat, and as a leadership, this situation is obviously inimical to developing practices of open, public debate. Underground conditions do not encourage democratic processes; they must breed in-group loyalty and coherence, along with suspicion towards those who threaten these. Under such conditions, disputed issues cannot be submitted to constituencies for a decision; habits of leadership decision-making by a small group, once they sink roots, are hard to overcome even when objective conditions appear to change. After all, hasn't there always been, won't there continue to be, a mortal enemy threatening to undermine the movement? Doesn't the state keep its police apparatus alive and functioning, deliberately keeping the movement off balance and unable to organize itself in conditions of security? In these circumstances internal opposition and open public criticism easily become labeled as treason.

The danger, and perhaps the historical logic, is that this particular legacy of apartheid will continue to poison South African political life into the future. Indeed, looking down the road, will the rulers of post-apartheid 'democratic' South Africa continue to repress and control the people in ways reminiscent of apartheid? Granted that there are powerful objective reasons leading in this direction, it is important to stress that the movement need not compound its problems by its own actions and attitudes. After the collapse of Eastern European communism, it should be clear to all that contempt for 'bourgeois' forms of democracy (as if they inherently deny the 'will of the masses'), sneers for 'parliamentary democracy' (as if it necessarily reflects 'class domination'), sound more and more transparently like arguments for domination by a new

elite than commitment to a more authentic, more radical form of democracy. The fact is that free elections, free discussion, the protection of civil rights and civil liberties - the political components of the bourgeois-democratic or liberal heritage - are vital accomplishments of all humanity, and not just a facade for concealing class power. They do not exhaust the entire range of democratic processes and structures, but only stipulate the bare minimum. Still, in South Africa they would represent ways of consolidating the struggle against apartheid and become necessary starting points for more radical democratic projects.

I am arguing, then, that ending apartheid demands extending parliamentary democracy and its accompanying conditions, both formal and informal, to all South Africans. But can this process be led by organizations that are themselves not accustomed to functioning democratically? Creating a democratic culture requires that the ANC and the SACP (to the extent that the latter remains central to the process of South Africa's transformation) metamorphose into above-ground, mass-based democratic organizations in which debate, discussion and criticism are open and free, where proponents of opposing points of view are not harassed and bullied, and which even develop new practices of reflection and deliberation that encourage controversy and active mass participation. Otherwise these organizations will find it inviting to consolidate themselves as cadre organizations with a passive mass base of supporters - those who carry out and support policies arrived at by the center, and in return expect jobs and privileges or other material rewards in the future. Needless to say, we are talking about faithful cogs of a future political machine, not active citizens of a future democracy.

I do not speak in condemning tones. One should not expect a former exile leadership, still subject to a repressive apparatus, to initiate, or even to welcome, the kinds of mass participation and democratization that would restrict their room for maneuver and limit their authority. Holding tight to existing organizational reins, identifying the leadership's own wisdom with the organization's (and thus the movement's) survival, has played an important historical role; it certainly does not imply corruption. It rather reflects the accustomed - and until now necessary - state of affairs, especially given the difficult conditions of struggle. Open and legal functioning can change all this, and to be meaningful must result in organizations that function openly. Perhaps this can only be initiated at the base, and will have to be fought for at the base and against the top, against old habits, old structures of command, old routines of authority. And placing this on the agenda will depend on a successful campaign for the end of all remaining state harassments, detentions, and repressions.

## IX

I began by talking pessimistically about the prospects for socialism, and then turned to stress a more urgent task - creating a democratic culture in South Africa. If I have so far avoided economic issues it is not because they come second to the political, but because I am arguing that the fall of communism in Eastern Europe teaches us that the *spirit* and *processes* through which economic issues are approached, as well as the *structures* that are created, are decisive. Who decides? And how do they decide? These are the overriding questions.

Does this mean that if socialist policies and structures cannot solve South Africa's pressing needs, they can be best addressed through the most rapid possible economic expansion under capitalism? The democratically expressed voice of the people of South Africa would probably agree that economic growth is important, but it would probably insist on asking, 'Growth for whom?' and 'Controlled by whom?' It would probably insist that the future human shape of South Africa must not be sacrificed to economic growth that benefits primarily those who are already well off. When we look at some of the country's most pressing material needs, we see how these questions are further intertwined, and we see equally that 'economic growth' by itself will not solve them.

It is obvious that 'socialization of the means of production' on the one hand or the determination to produce as much (and as profitably) as possible on the other may have little positive effect in dealing with South Africa's most immediate questions - for example, with the education, health care, or housing crises. The decisive issues in each case do not turn around capitalism or socialism. They are not matters of how the process of production is organized, or even according to what priorities. They will not be solved by more profits or productivity, or by social control over the economy. Rather, the crises are linked with the deep historical processes of transformation of South Africa, from the *beginning of colonialism to the current rampant urbanization*. Instead of a structural solution or more growth, they demand dozens, perhaps hundreds of different approaches at dozens, perhaps hundreds of different sites and levels.

Yes, democratic availability of and control over resources is one of the keys, but I would first point to another, one equally related to the question of democracy. I am talking about the need for massive mobilization of the energies of hundreds of thousands of people - to learn, to organize, to construct. These problems can be best addressed not by any single structural change, but by a series of campaigns to overcome the heritage of the past and meet people's needs, by developing their skills and by mobilizing their activity. It will be necessary to create the mood that these are truly national causes, people's causes, and that they can be approached only by the large-scale self-organization of as many people as possible to build and train, to impart and learn skills.



Democracy means far more than parliamentary democracy: it includes collective self-organization, inconceivable under apartheid, and attempted usually only by revolutionary governments. Local forms of democracy have already been developed significantly, in the struggles of the 1980s - in civic organizations, constituency organizations, and in trade unions. Such self-organization can be encouraged and set free to take its own directions, within broad national parameters. Considering the depth of the various crises, and considering that housing, education, and health-care problems might best be addressed through mass efforts, such an activist approach of mass mobilization holds out considerable promise. It will be best encouraged, and set free to follow its own paths, by a government that sees itself both as expressing a national movement and as committed to developing the most democratic possible processes in the future South Africa.

## X

I am arguing that the Left should abandon fantasies about how close South Africa might be to a socialist transformation, and that we not waste time lamenting how far the new dispensation will be from some abstract concept of socialism. And I am suggesting that within the current situation, a close study of real prospects and possibilities yields significant tasks for the Left: arguing and struggling on behalf of the most democratic possible transformation of South Africa led by the most democratic possible ANC, and mobilizing the democratic energies of the masses of people as active participants in meeting some of their most pressing needs. I am urging that the Left abandon its preoccupation with ends and structures, yes, with socialism, in order to struggle for democracy on many levels. It is imperative that post-apartheid South Africa learn to allow political struggles without murder and intimidation, to allow people to express their will openly, and to be governed by that will. *The maximum possible democracy* - this is a goal worth pursuing for its own sake, and should draw the attention of all those on the Left who are not so fixated on the end, socialism, to ignore one of its major defining traits, democracy. Those on the Left who are willing to postpone everything else until the achievement of what they call socialism, or are willing to bend everything to this magical goal, have learned nothing from the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. They would eagerly reconstitute in South Africa the attitudes, practices, and structures that have so justly been overthrown. Indeed, what more can be said about those who invoke a transcendent end which no longer has a common meaning, and would justify undemocratic practices on behalf of it? If we accept that democratic practices are paramount, we can see that those who would dismiss or minimize them risk poisoning South African politics with attitudes

and practices that should have finally gone into history's dustbin.

There is yet another reason for putting democracy in the center of, rather than as an afterthought to, the Left's politics. The most democratic possible settlement would invariably be one that would have the best chance of harvesting the fruits of the past seven years of popular struggle. A democratic non-racial government genuinely responsive to those who have struggled during these years could not permit existing discrepancies of wealth and poverty to stand. It would strive for *the maximum possible racial reconciliation*, yes, but its genuinely democratic commitments and functioning would drive it to place this reconciliation *within the framework of the maximum possible social change*, given the current balance of forces. It could not permit a tiny minority to continue to control the wealth of South Africa. It could not allow the economic future of the country to be presided over by a handful of white men.

In other words, out of a commitment to the most democratic possible settlement, the issue of socialism's relevance will pose itself all over again, and in a new way. Another way to put the goal of a democratic non-racial government would be to avoid an 'American solution' - where blacks achieve political rights without corresponding changes in their social or economic power. Black rule in cities like Detroit allows a modicum of black power and pride, the building up of a black bureaucracy and political class, and creating the conditions for the rise of a small number of blacks in businesses affected by government contracts. But the real levers of power, corporate levers, national-political levers, remain firmly where they always were, outside of the purview of any conceivable black (or indeed working-class) power. The majority of blacks, deprived of their traditional leadership - those one-time pillars of ghetto cohesion, inspiration and discipline - by new possibilities of social, economic, and residential mobility, only sink deeper, and displace their despondency onto drugs, internalized violence, and crime.

I am talking about the built-in limits to 'equal opportunity' in a society systematically built on class privilege that has historically evolved intertwined with racial oppression: poverty and inequality become 'hereditary.' This, and the accompanying intensification of an ever-narrowing black nationalism, have been the spontaneous American responses flowing from a narrow, 'political' solution: it has been possible to talk about 'equal rights' and 'equal opportunity' in the abstract but not to talk about a concrete right to adequate housing, health care, schooling or employment. Such a non-bourgeois conception of human rights, and the economic policies to implement it, are of the essence of a non-racial democracy. Otherwise, political equality becomes swallowed up by economic inequality.

The American lesson is a painful but simple one: because we have failed to

make these universal rights available to everybody regardless of race, class or national origin, the heritage of racial domination continues to perpetuate itself 'on its own.' And it leads in turn to race-specific demands by blacks, who see no other path out of their inherited and structural poverty, and to backlash by poor and working whites, *unable* to conceive of these rights belonging to them, who thus hear blacks demanding special preference. In the United States this impasse has stemmed from the minority position of American blacks and their consequent inability to contest the hegemony of formalistic bourgeois solutions to social problems. Without vigorous political action on the national level, without social transformations stretching far beyond 'affirmative action' and 'equal opportunity,' South Africa's black majority will follow in the pattern of America's black minority, reproducing itself 'spontaneously' in a hereditary poverty.

South Africa, however, is not the United States: it has a black majority, and struggles in South Africa have ideologically leaped far beyond the narrow bourgeois boundaries of the American struggles. When Mandela speaks of non-racialism he has in mind these expansions of human rights as universal demands, and the *Freedom Charter* has always seen them as being an intrinsic part of a non-racial vision. There is a wide sympathy for 'socialism' and a wide identification of capitalism with apartheid. Social needs are urgent, and *any* post-apartheid government will feel enormous pressure to move towards meeting them.

Moreover, symbolic political questions will loom as important as material ones: demonstrating that a genuinely post-apartheid South Africa is being built entails both non-racialism and the strong demand for economic, as well as political, action that ministers to the needs of the long-oppressed majority. A strong sense of economic and social as well as political justice has grown with the movement, and a meaningful non-racial future demands concrete steps toward greater material equality between white and black, as well as government action to demonstrate that the economic apparatus, built by the people, belongs to, and can be controlled by the people. All of these reasons have only strengthened the ideological attraction to socialism of workers' organizations. And they add up to significant pressures to move a democratic post-apartheid South Africa away from institutionalizing a settlement firmly within the economic and social status quo.

What should we call this necessarily exploratory direction, radical insofar as it rests on the needs of, and will of, the overwhelming majority? How to describe a social-political-economic direction that remains committed to democracy in traditional as well as new forms, that must mobilize great masses of people in order to address some of their most crying social needs, that will have to continue

the democratic movement's initiatives in creating new local governing structures to replace the discredited apartheid institutions, that has no ideological attachment to the wholesale nationalization of industry or to other of the now-discredited strategies of communism, that sees the end of apartheid in terms of social and economic as well as political justice but is not powerful enough or focused enough (or clear enough how to do it) to overthrow capitalism, but that will insist on at least symbolically asserting social control over the economy and a redistribution of wealth? I have strongly insisted that socialism in the Marxian sense is not on the agenda and that we cannot even be clear what its meanings and structures are. But it is equally true that any South African government that tries to base itself on, and seeks to reflect, the will of the masses will be impelled in a direction traditionally associated with socialism. The best way to describe this direction, I would argue, is as *democratic socialism*.

Yes, the term is ill-defined and open-ended. Yes, none of us knows precisely what it means. But this is part of its attraction. I emphasize such an ill-defined term for two reasons: the stress it puts on democracy, and the very fact that no one knows exactly what it means. First, it has no historical baggage to overcome, unlike communism and social democracy - this means that democratic socialism will have to be defined as it is developed. It is intended as a term that is intrinsically exploratory, indefinite, open-ended. Democratic socialism projects a direction that is clearly not Marxist-Leninist, but is clearly not social-democratic - that is, on the one hand its focus is not on party power or a state-controlled and centrally planned economy, and on the other hand, its focus is not on creating a welfare net for softening the harshness of the capitalist economy.

If we are not sure precisely what it means, the meaning of democratic socialism will have to be debated, created, described, and explored, in theory and practice. *This is why I suggest it.* The Left here as well as everywhere else in the world has had a new historical task imposed on it by the overthrow of communism - to redefine its project, to spell out meaningful new directions, to articulate new visions. Nothing is clear, nothing is given - except that there *is* a Left, that it exists for good reason, and its various struggles have achieved important victories.

Democratic socialism is the best rubric under which to articulate a new direction for South Africa - because it demands consolidating some of the gains of the struggle and yet disavows communism. At the same time, it expresses a radical commitment to democracy. It acknowledges that the balance of forces does not favor a full-scale revolutionary transformation, and that we do not even know what that would look like. It acknowledges that building a democratic culture is one of the very great priorities for post-apartheid South Africa. It

allows such measures as the partial nationalizations of the major monopolies, in the name of democracy and need, but also acknowledges that the new South Africa will respect fundamental human rights.

And it presses the SACP, in a comradely way, on two of its most vulnerable flanks: Will the Party follow Joe Slovo's critique of Stalinism by democratizing itself, beginning with carrying through the same kinds of transformations as the German and Italian Communist Parties (now the Party of Democratic Socialism and the Party of the Democratic Left)? Will it openly discuss and debate its vision of the task at hand, perhaps committing itself, at the behest of its membership, to the kinds of radical changes I have been suggesting? Or will it rather see its role as occupying a key position in a limited transfer of power that essentially abandons the struggle for a social transformation of South Africa?

## XI

As I draw this letter to a close, it is with the bitter-sweet awareness that something is probably passing from the scene among South Africans at home and abroad, as well as among those of us who have become involved in your struggle over the years. The conditions are passing which led some of us to discover South Africa and to so powerfully love it, you, and your struggle. These conditions will, we know, be replaced by new ones, in which some of the oppressions of the past will be removed, some will continue, and some will be transformed into new oppressions. The absolute moral character of the struggle against the absolute evil of apartheid is being replaced - by a series of ever-more-complex grey-on-grey struggles to find the most democratic possible direction for overcoming the negative effects of the three hundred year-old colonial encounter. I said earlier that the community of resistance, developed under the world's most brutal social system, intensified by police-state conditions, is beginning to fragment. Many, in South Africa as well as overseas, will probably become disillusioned and discouraged by this process, as the space widens between one-time comrades. But we can console ourselves that not only is it inevitable, but it is the sure sign of a movement's success.

Those who refuse disillusionment and continue to struggle will have to find new resources in themselves, based on new ways of grasping what they have always sought: a society characterized by democracy, equality, and social justice. I remain hopeful about South Africa, because a number of important positive changes are definitely on the agenda. I remain hopeful because of the deep and principled non-racialism of the movement, which can teach black and white Americans so much about what post-colonial race relations might be like. There is no reason to bewail the fact that the current balance of forces does not favor a deeper social transformation, because it is premature to be arguing, let

alone struggling, for structures that none of us can define with great clarity or self-confidence. Paradoxically enough, the other hand, perhaps the very impasse which has led de Klerk to propose negotiations earlier rather than later may improve the chances for creating a democratic culture - for the simple reason that no party can now impose its will on any other. Accommodation, toleration, compromise - developing these habits, and the processes to encourage them, will be the order of the day, for whites as well as blacks, for all social classes. No force can win a total victory under current conditions, and this may impose a willingness to follow democratic procedures on all sides. Perhaps, just perhaps, this will lead to a spirit of self-restraint and tolerance on all sides that will have long-run benefits for South Africa's future.<sup>5</sup>

So I do not find reason to lament that the tasks are not maximalist or revolutionary in traditional terms. What is to be done is of the utmost importance for the fate of South Africa, tasks worth pursuing for their own sake and because the struggle for social transformation begins with the struggle for democracy. The specific goals spring from this particular moment in South African history: to build a democratic culture, to demand the maximum possible democracy, to strive for the maximum possible racial reconciliation within the maximum possible social change. For the Left this is a full and pressing agenda.

#### Notes

1. I should add that my recent visa application, unlike the first, was referred to Pretoria. Between the first and the second application I had published numerous articles (in the *Washington Post*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and the *Yale Review*), as well as a book (Aronson, 1990). So my politics were on record. Although I applied two months before departure date, I had not received my visa two weeks before I was supposed to leave; only emergency telephone calls to the SRC, and subsequent calls to Pretoria, produced a visa ten days before my departure.

2. From this point of view, De Klerk has clearly answered the questions I posed in *Stay Out of Politics*: 'When, if ever, will realistic strategic calculation prevail among whites? Or will hysteria and siege mentality win out?' In terms of my analysis there, what De Klerk and his Afrikaans-speaking constituency have succeeded in doing is to free themselves from the myth of Afrikaner identity and to assert instead a class identity, reaching out to English-speakers to create a broad white constituency of those who have capital, skills, political power, and education. Uniting the white bourgeoisie, upper-middle, and middle classes, De Klerk has effectively cut himself loose from the millstone around his neck - that large number of Afrikaners whose well-being depends on their Afrikaner identity or the color of their skins. They will oppose the settlement, perhaps to the death, screaming about identity and betrayal, but being cut adrift as a lower-middle and working class to take their chances under majority rule. Indeed, they are the ones who are likely to lose the most under majority rule - jobs, status, a sense of belonging, petty privileges. Lacking the skills, power, self-confidence, and capital of their Afrikaner brethren, they will have to compete against more able blacks for the jobs they now hold as a benefit from being part of the Afrikaner cross-class coalition. That coalition is now being shattered inasmuch as it has performed its historical function for the Afrikaner bourgeoisie, and now stands in the way of a new consolidation and stabilization. The historical origins of this process are presented by Dan O'Meara (1983).

3. It would say 'not yet,' arguing that unrestricted free enterprise is the answer for South Africa. Apartheid, and the Afrikaner determination that the state intervene in the economy in other decisive ways, are argued as being *contrary* to the modern, capitalist spirit, the free flow of labor

and capital, the process of genuine economic freedom and competition. And this lies *ahead*. This position obscures the early capitalist stake in apartheid (particularly mining capital) as well as subsequent capitalist complicity with apartheid. For the capitalist arguments see Merle Lipton (1985); for my criticism of this position see Aronson (1990:105-26).

4. This is one theme of Pallo Jordan's critique of Joe Slovo's 'Has Socialism Failed' in *Transformation*, 10. I have explored the question at length in Aronson (1984).

5. Just as (another heresy on the Left) SWAPO's failure to win a two-thirds majority in the elections for a constituent assembly may be a long-term blessing for Namibia?

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## TRANSFORMATION WORKSHOP

Research in the social sciences in South Africa, inside and outside the universities, has had a major effect on both the maintenance of apartheid and attempts to dismantle it.

TRANSFORMATION proposes to hold a workshop late in 1991 on the role of such research. Areas to be covered would include:

- \* the historical role of research;
- \* state research institutions;
- \* servicing the research needs of organisations;
- \* research for and in a post-apartheid South Africa.

IDRC, who are funding the workshop, aims to bring participants from Latin America and Africa to contribute a comparative dimension.

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