

## MARXISM IN SOUTH AFRICA: CONTEXT, THEMES AND CHALLENGES\*

Colin Bundy

Perhaps it seemed a good idea at the time - but if so, I cannot remember why. A few weeks ago I agreed to deliver something called a 'keynote address' to this conference, and ever since then have felt queasy, insecure and intimidated by that brief. It is not only that some events of the past few weeks have cast a peculiar, lurid glow over anyone's attempts to think broadly and historically about marxism, past, present and future. It is also that the very term 'keynote' promises, or threatens, so much. *Chamber's Dictionary* offers this daunting definition:

"*keynote*: the fundamental note ... any central principle or controlling thought".

Well: I am not bold enough to try, nor foolish enough to think I could provide the fundamental note for this weekend's conference, and I certainly have no intentions of prescribing any central principle or controlling thoughts. So, with your agreement, perhaps this session could be renamed. Let me suggest, instead, the term my son used. 'How is it going', he asked, 'your keyhole address?' I am much more comfortable with the perspective this implies: the restricted vision available to a single peering eye. Then, too, there is the function of a keyhole: it provides an opening into which others may insert and try their keys, so as to open up, to make accessible that which is locked away, hard to get at. If these comments can serve as a point of entry to some of the concerns of this conference, I shall be delighted.

The sub-title for this session is an 'Overview of context, themes and challenges of the conference'. Let us begin with the context. What is the broader political and intellectual backdrop of this gathering? In what historical setting does the conference take place?

Simply to ask this hints at an immediate paradox. Two very different answers suggest themselves, depending upon whether one evaluates the international or the national context. The international context for a conference on marxism is profoundly negative, dispiriting, demoralised. Regimes defining themselves as socialist, and claiming allegiance to marxism, have suffered ignominious

defeats, stumbling from disaster to debacle.

In Eastern Europe, half a dozen people's democracies were briskly toppled by a combination of strikes, mass demonstrations and armed insurgency - such ironic echoes of 1917! And now the Soviet Union's death-throes have been brought to you live, by CNN television. The post-mortem certificate may not have been signed yet, but we know its findings: 'systemic collapse brought about by economic and political sclerosis - attempts at emergency transplant of democracy failed, as body politic rejected perestroika'. Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, Afghanistan, and Cambodia remind us how insecure was their version of client socialism; Cuba, Vietnam, and Albania are small-state examples of actually surviving socialism. In China, a gerontocracy presides over what Kagarlitsky has dubbed 'market Stalinism': authoritarian party rule plus a not so stealthy embrace of capitalist norms and structures.

In advanced capitalist countries, the alienation of the working class from marxism-leninism is virtually total. Communist parties have turned green with shame or disbanded themselves. Advanced capitalism has emerged from the last two global recessions technologically more advanced and economically more powerful. The war in the Gulf was a dramatic display by imperialism of its power and self-confidence.

Accompanying, and to significant degree preceding these political developments, has been an intellectual or theoretical crisis of marxism. There has been a general retreat from socialism conceived of as a realisable alternative to capitalism, and more especially an abandonment of marxism as a source of explanation and as a guide for political action. In sum, it is patent that the international context could hardly be more inimical to the prospects of socialism or marxism.

But what is our more immediate, more local, context? A number of contrasts are apparent. Here the basic balance of forces, social and political, is less favourable to capital and more promising for an organised working class. Firstly, and central to any comprehension of the De Klerk era, South African capitalism did not share in the 1980s recovery evinced by the most industrialised and the newly industrialising economies. After decades during which the South African economy pulsed quite closely to the rhythms of boom and slump in metropolitan capitalism, during the 1980s it remained mired in a syndrome of slowed growth, falling investment, rising unemployment, chronic inflation, all compounded by an international credit squeeze, balance of payments and exchange rate pressures. It does not really matter whether one uses the influential new vocabulary of the Economic Trends Group or older concepts: an audience like this one scarcely needs to be informed that there is a deep-seated crisis of capital accumulation and of international competitiveness.

Secondly, and closely linked to the problems confronting the ruling class and the state, there is the social weight, militancy and mobilisation of the South African working class. Over the past 20 years, this class has displayed a dynamism, creating vibrant new institutions and a distinctive political culture of workplace self-organisation and participatory democracy. Compared to declining rates of union membership in most of the industrialised world, the independent trade unions and their federations have increased in numbers and in experience throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Almost half of all industrial workers are currently members of trade unions - historically and comparatively a very high proportion. Worker activism has expressed itself in a variety of ways, but perhaps in two main currents: struggles at the point of production over recognition, wages, and working conditions; and political strikes and mass demonstrations in the struggle to overthrow apartheid.

Thirdly, there is an overt, explicit and established anticapitalist tendency in South African oppositional politics - both within organised labour and more broadly in 'popular democratic' extra-parliamentary movements. The dominant strand in the trade union movement (comments Eddie Webster) 'has from its beginnings been closely associated with socialism'. The preamble to COSATU's constitution (to take just one very obvious example) speaks of a 'unified democratic South Africa free of oppression and economic exploitation...this can only be achieved under the leadership of a united working class...' There can be absolutely no mistaking the level of popular enthusiasm in recent years for the SACP amongst sectors of the working class and youth organisations: indeed, at times it appears to enjoy more support than it quite knows how to handle. Then, too, there has been the role played by a radical intelligentsia in sustaining, spreading and debating socialist ideas. A generation of younger intellectuals played a role disproportionate to their modest numbers in the early years of labour resurgence and in political education. The number and quality of radical publications being read and debated in South Africa in recent years have made a real politico-intellectual contribution. In a number of academic disciplines, marxist scholarship has profoundly shaped analysis of this society's past and present.

In short: the international and the national perspectives just outlined seem to present quite startlingly different contexts for our conference. I have, of course, as you are already aware, deliberately polarised them, and overstated them. On the one hand, capitalism resurgent, labour defeated, socialism discredited, and marxism in headlong retreat. On the other hand, labour insurgent and capitalism in crisis, socialism accorded popular support and marxism with at least some intellectual purchase. Every one of these dichotomies would need at least to be nuanced, and in some cases quite severely qualified. But even presented as baldly

as they have been here, the basic discrepancy between the local and the global *mise en scene* seems to me to retain some validity, to provide a starting point for thinking about where we stand historically.

What I want to do now is to look a little more closely at aspects of the international and national contexts, to ask a couple of questions about both the broader and narrower context.

Let me begin with an obvious, even unavoidable question. How can we respond adequately, appropriately, *politically* to the collapse of late Stalinist governments in East Europe, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere? One possible response we might dub 'anti-stalinist bravado'. Those regimes never were socialist, it argues; they were deformations, negations of socialism; we should rejoice in their demise - hooray for the end of Stalinism, and forward with the construction of real socialism. This, in my opinion, simply will not do. However keen-sighted it may be in its critique of Stalinism, it is historically myopic. It fails to recognise that the events of 1989 and 1991 constitute a massive defeat for social, political and intellectual forces opposed to the rule of capital. As Robin Blackburn puts it:

As we enter the last decade of the twentieth century, the ruin of 'Marxist-Leninist' Communism has been sufficiently comprehensive to eliminate it as an alternative to capitalism and to compromise the very idea of socialism. The debacle of Stalinism has embraced reform-communism, and has brought no benefit to Trotskyism, or social democracy, or any socialist current.

A second possible response (again, all of you have surely encountered it in the recent past) I shall call 'post-stalinist fatalism'. Typically, but not necessarily, this is voiced by people who previously manifested some degree of loyalty to actually existing socialism and/or who pinned their hopes to reform-communism, perestroika, stalinism-with-a-human-face. Now, too honest to ignore mass opinion in East Berlin, Budapest, Maputo and Moscow, they distance themselves from discredited regimes by shifting to right-wing social democracy. Latter-day converts to bourgeois democracy - pluralism, human rights, religious freedom and proportional representation are 'In' - they are also born-again agnostics in quite a wide field of beliefs - nationalisation, class struggle, central planning and revolution are 'Out'.

More demanding than either of these responses is a third option: I have called it 'rearguard realism'. The phrase derives from Richard Levins, an American marxist. It is more demanding than the first because it confronts the epochal nature of the defeat; it is more demanding than the second, because it insists on the need to defend and recoup. The 'defeat of immense proportions' sustained by the left (he writes)

leaves us... in the role of a rearguard, defending the gains of 150

years of struggle, acknowledging the reality of the defeat and evaluating the reasons for it, regrouping and preparing for the second wave of revolutionary upsurge. It is an agenda of years and decades.

Acknowledging and explaining the defeat will involve more than historical accounts of how and why backwardness and isolation exacted their terrible price on the Russian Revolution; or of how and why the Soviet model of industrialisation plus coercion was replicated in China. Accurate analyses of the objective conditions experienced by the Soviet Union and other communist societies is necessary for an explanation, but not sufficient. Also needed is an awareness of deficiencies and lacunae in the body of classical marxist thought. We need (in Perry Anderson's formulation) to ask questions left unanswered by Lenin's generation and made impossible to answer in Stalin's epoch: what is the real nature and structure of bourgeois democracy? What would be the institutional forms of socialist democracy? Why and how do nationalism and ethnicity generate such strong fields of force?

Rearguard realism does not only consist of this critical stocktaking. It also involves defending what has been gained, making the fullest use of what theoretical and organisational strengths are intact, and recharting the way ahead. And like any rearguard action, it means accurate assessment of the strength of the enemy. I have already quoted Blackburn's sobering estimate of how much collateral damage has been sustained by socialists of all hues in the collapse of the Soviet bloc. But, he adds, in viewing the death-throes of the former Communist world, 'we should not forget the different, but very serious, ills of the capitalist world'.

Indeed, several of the conference papers direct our attention to those ills. Martin Legassick and Jack Lewis, for instance, take some measure of the record of contemporary capitalism at the level of the world economy. They emphasise how lop-sided and uneven have been the benefits of capitalist growth since 1945.

Not only are advanced capitalist societies scarred by their own inequalities and public squalor, but above all it is in third world capitalism that the record of misery, neglect, destruction and exploitation is laid bare. Legassick quotes Trotsky: 'The highly civilised nations block the road to those in the process of civilisation'.

Hillel Ticktin's paper is less concerned with the price exacted by the grip of global capital accumulation, and offers an analysis of its contradictions. The fundamental contradiction between socialised production and private ownership is now expressed on an international rather than at the national level (I hope he will forgive my bowdlerised summary). Since 1973, finance capital has been the dominant faction within capitalism internationally, and its strategies in the

advanced economies has been de-industrialisation or the massive export of capital. The world economy is in stalemate, an international crisis of capitalism obscured by the end of the Cold War.

Fred Halliday, writing in *New Left Review*, is less convinced that capitalism is in crisis. On the contrary, he characterises the present epoch as one in which the 'superior strength of western capitalism forces open societies partly closed to it for four decades', and identifies as the central failing of contemporary marxism its underestimation of capitalism itself. But the lesson he draws from this is very much in the rearguard realism mould:

A critique of capital was the starting point of marxism and socialism and is the point to which, quite properly, the tradition can now return... After its long and painful detour, the communist tradition can now return to its point of origin, the critique of and challenge to capitalist political economy...

Another way of identifying potential weaknesses in contemporary capitalism crops up more fleetingly in a couple of conference papers. This approach asks: where have substantial working class challenges been to challenge capital's resilience in the 1980s, and where might they be expected to do so in the 1990s? Alex Callinicos speaks of the 'explosive growth' of new workers' movements in Poland, Brazil and South Korea. There have also been important expressions of militancy and the creation of new left formations in Spain, Turkey, and Finland. Giovanni Arrighi has suggested that it is precisely in the semi-periphery that 'the future has begun'. He sees a family resemblance between worker movements in South Africa, Brazil, South Korea and Poland during the 1980s; these presented important common features, comparable with the wave of militancy in Europe between 1968 and 1973 or in the USA in the 1930s - industrial action largely based on the self-mobilisation and self-organisation of the rank and file of the working class.

Let me use this as a bridge, leaving the international context and returning to the South African scene. You will remember that my highly selective sketch highlighted the structural crisis of South African capitalism, the vitality and social weight of worker organisation, and - at the level of consciousness - a potential mass base for socialist politics.

A preliminary observation must be about a virtual silence at this conference: the shortage of papers on working class politics, on trade unions, and on proletarian consciousness. The CRIC paper on the politics of the strike wave of 1990 is an exception; it poses important questions about the relationship of intense industrial action and broader political developments. And a considerable gap has been left in our initial programme by the non-availability of what promised to be an intriguing contribution by *Learning Nation*. Tantalisingly, the

abstract noted the shift by left-wing and union-linked intellectuals from socialism to social democracy, and the claim by these theorists that 'Marxism is not voluntarily accepted by the working class'. Their experience (the abstract told us) was very different. On the basis of correspondence to *Learning Nation* and of fieldwork, they argued that 'the working class wants socialism and recognises the need to understand marxist political theory'.

The shortage of contributions on such a central topic of concern to marxist intellectuals may reflect a broader theoretical inadequacy. How much do marxists - activists and academics - know about the temper and content of working class politics? Marxist historians and sociologists have told us a good deal as to how the South African working class was constituted, and how it was located within the relations of production - but much less on the proletariat as agency, its self-assessment of its capacities, its attachment to class interests. Eddie Webster's conference paper explores two areas of concentration in industrial sociology: on the one hand, studies of the labour process and the workplace, and on the other hand 'working class cultural formations and the powerful political traditions that shape the attitudes and political behaviour of organised workers'. But perhaps he would agree that much of this latter work placed culture rather than politics at the centre of its concerns.

However, this is not the main question I want to pose about working class consciousness. Rather, I want to revisit the issue touched on in the *Learning Nation* abstract, the level of popular attachment or openness to socialist ideas amongst the working class. It was frequently remarked during the struggles of the 1980s that strong anti-capitalist sentiments permeated youth, community and union politics. Typically, this was expressed in the same breath as opposition to apartheid: an early consumer boycott pamphlet was headed 'Industry and government - two sides of the same bloody coin'. The slogan very crisply encapsulated the central social reality that black workers are subjected to a dual exploitation as blacks and as workers. So far, so familiar.

But how does this translate into political practice? What are the strategic implications? Mike Morris has written a fascinating account of the 1990 conference in New York on the theme 'What is the future of socialism?' During its course, two South African speakers (both prominent members of the ANC/SACP alliance) gave partial and quite different answers to these questions. Joe Slovo mentioned South Africa's exceptionality - as one of few countries in the world where the communist party and socialist ideas are not reviled - and quoted the statistic (from, I think, a *Financial Mail* survey) that a majority of Africans expressed support for a socialist future. He later spoke about post-apartheid society:

The post-apartheid state... will move towards redressing the im-

balances between the racial groups. This explains why the task is easier than elsewhere, and why the SACP and socialism has popularity in South Africa. One does not have to be a Marxist or a socialist to support this. All one has to be is an honest black patriot to believe that there cannot be liberation in South Africa without a fundamental redistribution of wealth.

Mzala (whose death has robbed South Africa of an important marxist thinker) sounded a rather different note. Having commented that the SACP has failed historically to 'give sufficient theoretical and practical contribution to the development of [a] socialist perspective', he also cited surveys showing that a majority of South African workers 'are actually for socialism'. But, he continued, was this simply an anti-apartheid sentiment or based on a proper understanding of socialism? He answered his own question thus: 'This is precisely the task - to translate this populism about socialism into something that can be organised, something that will be reliable', a real force for the building and defence of socialism.

Slovo, in orthodox fashion, and Mzala much more ambiguously, both were expressing current SACP thinking on the relationship between national liberation and socialist construction. This is a position that has been characterised recently by Bob Fine and Dennis Davis as a 'decision of socialists to put off the battle for socialist ideas,... through the notion... that the development of nationalism provides the necessary foundations for the future development of socialism'. This subsumption of socialism in nationalism ducks the question, they argue, of 'whether to confront racism in a socialist or a nationalist way'.

The papers at this conference include studies by Jawoodeen, Lalu and White of aspects of the SACP's history (as well as others dealing with other socialist groupings), and three that mount robust critiques of its theoretical legacy. Adam Habib finds that CST is not an adequate depiction of the South African social formation, and that national democratic struggle is not a promising vehicle for the transition to socialism. Patrick Msimanga analyses the extent to which recent Party theoretical statements represent breaks or continuities with older orthodoxies. Gareth Coleman contests Brian Bunting's censorious reading of the *Learning Nation* articles on East European stalinism. Personally, I think it is a pity that there is no contribution to the conference that defends or develops - or tests - current Party thinking.

Had there been such a contribution, it would surely have had to reflect upon the question of broad front and alliance politics. In an instance of 'theory from below', the whole question of the South African party's relationship with the ANC and with COSATU has been raised by rank and file members in all three alliance partners. The particularities of this discussion sometimes obscure the



extent to which it runs in parallel with debates in communist parties and amongst socialists elsewhere. Much of the reassessment of strategy amongst marxists in Europe and north America has centred upon the need to forge effective links with contemporary forms of resistance, often summed up as 'new social movements' - with feminism, with anti-militarism, with the ecology lobby, and so on. Halliday, in the article already cited, sees the need to build or establish such alliances as crucial:

If the end of the Cold War does nothing else but clarify the question [of strategic links with non-marxist forms of resistance] and emancipate socialism from false and determinate answers and doomed loyalties, it will have prepared a substantial agenda for the 21st century.

Marxism's relationship with feminism is not merely a strategic question, but also a complex theoretical issue. Many feminists, arguing that the social domination of men over women is as old as human history, are impatient with the shortcomings of classical marxist writings on gender inequalities. Pat Horn's conference paper draws together some of these critiques, and also examines approaches to the Woman Question in the USSR and the PRC. She ends with a call for a single struggle 'for the transformation to a non-sexist and socialist political economy in South Africa'. Another paper in the same plenary session - by Claire Ceruti - is dismissive of patriarchy theory ('inappropriate, insufficient, idealist') and argues that marxism provides an adequate materialist explanation for women's oppression.

Let me try to gather together some of the threads. I began with a starkly posed contrast between the international and the South African contexts. Much of what followed - I hope - has suggested that the gulf between the two was not as yawning as in the original, polarised depiction. Marxists the world over quite properly reject the right triumphalism of Fukuyama's 'end of history', or Bush's 'next American century' - and I have sketched some of the grounds on which such a rejection can be based. Equally, there is no room whatsoever for any kind of left triumphalism in South Africa. The notion of any kind of socialist transformation emerging naturally or logically from a post-apartheid political order is an article of faith rather than a political programme. The ruling class is negotiating but it has not capitulated.

And I have already entered some doubts as to the depth and embeddedness of a frequently expressed for socialism - what Mzala called 'this populism about socialism'. But I want to end by returning to some fairly basic concerns of marxism and of this conference. I'm sure that a number of sessions will pose similar questions. What is the relation between theory and practice, between the intelligentsia and the working class, between structural conditions and human

agency? And here perhaps we can apply fairly directly international or comparative perspectives to the South African case.

Many of us have found Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism* a luminous account of how marxist theory has developed historically, in relation to class struggle. Indeed, his study of marxist thought in Europe between 1918 and 1968 is effectively constructed around the proposition that 'Marxist theory... acquires its proper contours only in direct relation to a mass revolutionary movement. When the latter is effectively absent of defeat, the former is inevitably deformed or eclipsed'. Between the wars, the European working class was scattered, destroyed and immobilised by fascism and stalinism. Consequently, argues Anderson, a deep fissure opened between theoretical production and political engagement.

It was only with the great wave of strike activity that began in 1968 that the chance was recreated 'of a revolutionary circuit reopening between marxist theory and mass practice, looped through the real struggles of an industrial working class'. Today - as Anderson would be the first to note - this optimism has a hollow ring. The reunification of marxist theory and mass struggles signally failed to materialise. Metropolitan marxism won some important battles in the halls of the academy, but beat an increasingly ragged retreat from the fields of politics.

Now how does all this relate to marxism in South Africa, past, present and future? Firstly, there is a direct correlation between the re-emergence of working class activism and protest in the 1970s and the buoyancy and verve of marxist enquiry in that decade and at least the early years of the 1980s. Secondly, there is an internal intellectual history that has not yet been written of a generalised shift to the right in the second half of the 1980s. This was manifest in a whole range of ways: in the ascendancy of social historians over social theorists; in the different registers used by FOSATU and COSATU; in economic policy workshops; and in the recondite vocabulary of post-structuralism. The still-to-be-written history of that shift will have to measure the impact of the state's repression on mass mobilisation and the defeats suffered by the labour movement in 1987; the importation of doubt and hesitancy from overseas; the part played by hostility to 'ultra-leftism' within mainstream politics; and of course the shift of visions from insurrectionary to negotiated outcomes.

Whoever writes that history must not overstate the case. Compared with the Anglo-American abandonment of marxism (summed up in the 1990 *Socialist Register* title 'The Retreat of the Intellectuals') what took place locally was a nervous shuffle rather than a stampede. But it did strain the links between marxist theorising and working class politics. In September 1991 this connection is more tentative and less assured than it was in, say, 1985.

And what of the future? Let us be absolutely clear. The unity of theory and practice is not achieved merely by the recognition that it is desirable. It does not happen because intellectuals read Lenin, slap their foreheads, and dash off to address mass meetings. It is a political and historical possibility yielded up by specific conditions. It requires that major sectors of the working class - because of shared circumstances and social experience - are consciously hostile to capitalism, that they do not believe that their most basic interests can be met within existing social relations. It requires too that there is an intelligentsia that supports working class aspirations. And it requires a political vehicle through which intellectuals can reach workers and through which workers can reach intellectuals.

To say that these conditions cannot be wished into existence is *not* to say that they are simply a product of impersonal historical forces, there or not, irrespective of struggle or politics. For marxists, the challenge is to assess to what extent these conditions are present or potentially present - by using the critical and self-critical methods of social analysis central to a marxist approach - and, secondly or simultaneously, to intervene politically in ways derived from the analysis. To put that more formally: Marxism involves a 'search for subjective agencies capable of effective strategies for the dislodgement of objective structures' (Anderson).

The point is made less formally, more directly, by Gramsci. I had planned to end by reminding you of the maxim that the Italian marxist borrowed from Roman Holland and made peculiarly his own: 'Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will'. But on one of the occasions he used the phrase, Gramsci preceded it with this sentence: 'It is necessary to direct one's attention violently towards the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it'.

• NOTE

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