

A REFLECTION ON THE VON HOLDT-PLAUT DEBATE

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Debates around the political significance of COSATU, and more generally between 'workerists' and 'populists', have focused on two questions:

1) What organisational and class alliances contribute most effectively to the struggle against the apartheid state?

2) What organisational and class alliances ensure that the struggle against the state - the struggle for national liberation - will set in motion some kind of transition towards socialism?

Neglected, in my view, is a further question:

3) What organisational alliances will most effectively contribute to the building of a socialism that is genuinely democratic?

I think Von Holdt has successfully addressed questions (1) and (2), demonstrating that COSATU - its political style and alliances - is likely to significantly improve the strength of oppositional forces confronting the state and to increase the socialist content of the national liberation struggle of which it is part. In this respect I think that Von Holdt is, on the whole, on stronger ground than Plaut.

The merit of Plaut's 'rejoinder' (and less so of his original contribution) is that it raises question (3) - how do we ensure that the struggle for national liberation and socialism will also be a struggle for genuine democracy?

Now for those who regard the building of socialism as synonymous with the building of democracy, this is a non-issue. But historical experience has shown that substantial elements of socialism can be set in place without a society enjoying significant levels of democracy. In a number of countries - the USSR, in Eastern Europe, in parts of the Third World like Cuba, Vietnam, China and North Korea - a social ownership of the principal means of production has been established, there is substantial central economic planning, minimum living standards have been guaranteed (albeit at a low level) and the mobilisation of working people in political institutions at various levels, in the state, party and elsewhere, has been extended. Yet, these same societies have been characterised by one-party rule, the fusion of party and state bureaucracies, the suppression of political pluralism and civil liberties, and the subordination of organs of mass participation - including trade unions - to the overall dictates of the party leadership.

To demonstrate, then, that the advent of COSATU strengthens the national liberation movement's capacity to challenge the state, and the likelihood that a successful challenge will then be followed by the commencement of a transition to socialism, is not in itself to demonstrate that the transition to socialism will be democratic in character. Of course, no such guarantee can ever be given in advance, not in any struggle. The problem is that the issue of democratic socialism has either not been seriously discussed at all, or else it has been taken up in a far too narrow and restricted way.

This claim may, on the face of it, seem unfair. If the meanings of democracy and its relationship to socialism have been largely neglected by the proponents of popular democratic politics, the so-called 'workerists' have, by contrast, continually stressed the importance of establishing structures of mandate and accountability in the workplace, and have suggested that the presence of such structures in turn increases the likelihood that worker self-management will develop in future as a counterweight to bureaucratic domination in a future socialist-oriented state. More recently, during the height of the people's power movement in the townships during 1985-6, some writers associated with mainstream extra-parliamentary organisations themselves began to extol the creation of embryonic forms of direct democracy outside of the workplace. The trouble with this argument - whether applied to factories or townships - is twofold. Firstly, it mistakenly assumes that the workplace model of 'direct democracy' can serve as a model for political representation at all levels of government, and that the promotion of workplace (or some other form of direct) democracy is therefore a sufficient substitute for any discussion of the complexities of democratic representation in a future socialist-oriented society. In fact, one can raise serious doubts about the possibility and even the desirability of generalising the workplace model of representation throughout a future policy. It is not at all clear, even in principle, what such a generalisation of workplace-type direct democracy would involve - governing a country from the factory or neighbourhood? Election of representatives to a central assembly indirectly through local assemblies, rather than through direct election from the base? Exercising one's vote only as a member of a functional body or corporate unit rather than as an individual citizen? A class-restricted franchise? Or what?

There is not room here to engage in any kind of extended discussion of the limits of 'direct democracy'. But it may be worth just mentioning (without elaborating) some of the issues that are unlikely to be addressed adequately by any model of democracy derived exclusively from work-place or 'councillist' conceptions of organisation. These include problems about how to structure national-level political representation: how, for example, to ensure proportional and direct representation of the electorate at the centre,

and how to avoid leaving a vacuum at the centre that can be filled by authoritarian elites beyond the control of institutions best suited to encouraging local participation. They include the problem of how to democratise political decision-making at all levels as opposed to simply increasing participation in administration; how to ensure that popular political debates are open, public and conducted on a national level rather than parochial, localised and fragmentary. Then there is the problem of how to extend effective democratic participation beyond a restricted range of organised social groups located in the most politicised factories and townships; how to define the boundaries of electorates; how to define appropriate voting units (eg factories or neighbourhoods) and to deal with cases of voters located in more than one such unit, or voters located in neither; and generally how to accommodate the trans-situational character of political actors who may not define themselves exclusively as workers, producers, consumers, members of a profession, or according to any other one corporate identity, but as several of these simultaneously, or even simply as composite 'citizens'.

Moreover, an exclusive focus on workplace direct democracy results in a neglect of any discussion of the conditions under which mass participation in political and economic management becomes, or ceases to be, genuinely democratic. In fact, many of the bureaucratic and authoritarian regimes associated with orthodox communism have elaborated a plethora of institutions and movements through which they have attempted to increase popular mobilisation in the 'administration of things'. These include neighbourhood and district assemblies, unions and factory committees, elected courts and national and regional assemblies, and women's and youth movements. The problem is that the advent of these bodies has not been accompanied by an extension of political pluralism and civil liberties; on the contrary, it has been accompanied by their diminution. There is little freedom of association and no inter-party competition within these bodies; all of their activities are subject to the control from above by a single entrenched ruling party. Under these circumstances mass participation becomes either localised or apolitical in scope or serves a purely ritualistic and ratificatory function. It enables authoritarian one-party states to mobilise popular energies for the chosen projects and to legitimise their rule. In most cases it has generated cynicism and apathy rather than any genuine release of the creative potential of the masses.

The elaboration of organs of self-management through which citizens can exercise one or another kind of direct democracy is, of course, an absolutely crucial component of building socialist democracy. But it can never exhaust the meaning of socialist democracy. It cannot, for example, serve as a substitute for the development of national-level institutions of representative democracy, based on direct election from the base to the centre, universal

franchise and secret ballot. But more importantly, to enjoy any real democratic meaning, it must be accompanied by an extension, rather than contraction, of political pluralism and civil liberties. Multi-party democracy and freedom of expression and association do not exist only for the enjoyment of ruling classes and elites. There can be no proletarian democracy as long as poor and working people are not free to join and vote for parties of their choice.

There is no single direction that socialism always takes and no one party has a monopoly on the wisdom needed to determine the 'correct' direction; moreover, not every worker is a 'born' socialist. A socialist path can never be democratic, and is unlikely to enjoy legitimacy in the working class, where workers do not have the freedom to choose between socialist and non-socialist options, as well as between different, and potentially highly divergent, socialist models and policies. Of still more immediate importance, there can be no such democracy for as long as workers are denied the freedom to establish and join trade unions, and to exercise, through unions, a genuine independence from the state.

For the fact of the matter is that no societies building socialism - and indeed no envisagable developed socialist society of the future - is likely to be contradiction-free, socially homogeneous or without distinctive interests. Nor is the working class itself likely to be above sectionalism, reducible to a common world view or to one set of material interests. Workers in particular plants or industries may have strongly felt differences with, or feel alienated from, factory managers (even elected ones), or state economic policy-makers, or they may harbour political grievances. To suppress these distinctive interests - even where they generate a combative opposition to the state - would be to violate basic democratic principles of representivity and free association, and to risk the disaffection of large sections of the working class. The existence of trade unions which are independent of the state, and which are free to strike and adopt a militant stance in defence of their members' interests, is one of the crucial indices of genuine democracy in a socialist (or any other kind of) political order. It is therefore very much to Plaut's credit that he posed the issue of trade union independence from a post-apartheid state, and that he seeks to situate his discussion of COSATU and its alliances in relation to it.

I would go further than Plaut: I would say that the principal issue in discussing COSATU today should no longer be whether the federation deepens socialist content per se - or expands 'working class hegemony' - within the national liberation movement. I think 'socialism' in one or another vaguely defined sense has now - for a variety of historical reasons - won widespread acceptance (in some cases an almost utopian devotion) in most sections of the liberation movement. The movement's critics on the far left are mistaken, and missing the point, in denying that this is so.

Further, the key issue in discussing COSATU today should not be whether it can overcome the strategic limits imposed by FOSATU's alleged 'reformism' and 'economism'. That older style of unionism, which was, as Von Holdt convincingly argues, in many respects divorced from the struggle for national liberation, is today a thing of the past. (Today, if anything, the problem is the opposite: how to deal with the tactical and strategic fall-out of a high-profile, massively politicised brand of trade unionism.) It is one of the limitations of Von Holdt's 'reply' that he confines his contribution to these rather shopworn issues.

At least as important as (and certainly less resolved than) these questions, is whether COSATU's political and organisational style contributes to the building of a future society which is both socialist in orientation and democratic. As indicated above, democratic socialism must entail, on the one hand, the extension of popular participation in political and economic management, coupled to high levels of mass mobilisation. At the same time it must involve a guarantee of political pluralism and civil liberties, of freedom of expression and association, including the right of trade unions to exist outside of state control. Without these, popular participation and mass mobilisation are themselves devalued and are unlikely to acquire anything more than a limited symbolic content.

I think that COSATU probably does contribute to the building of a future that is democratic according to these criteria. Its traditions of shop-floor democracy and its general size and strength are likely to counteract any tendency in a future post-apartheid society for the federation to evolve into a passive and bureaucratised 'transmission belt' between the the ruling party and the masses. But I think that Plaut is correct in discerning grounds for worry. The history elsewhere of relations between trade unions (on the one hand) and nationalist movements and orthodox socialist parties (on the other) has not been a particularly happy one, as the experience of post-independence Africa, or for that matter the repression of Solidarity in Poland in 1981, illustrate. To the extent, then, that COSATU is less critical of nationalism (or of bureaucratic dictatorship in Eastern Europe) than was its predecessor, there may indeed be some grounds for debate about the direction of its development.

And this is not because co-operation with nationalist movements and orthodox socialist parties is itself undesirable. On the contrary, Von Holdt has effectively argued that trade unions cannot themselves 'lead' the national liberation struggle, but that union co-operation with political groupings is likely to strengthen both the organisational resources and socialist content of the wider struggle for change. Nor is it a question of whether the 'working class' can maintain 'its' independence by avoiding alliances with community, political and nationalist organisations. Von Holdt has successfully demonstrated that the unions are not synonymous with the working class,

and that this class is present also in the various affiliates of the UDF and other non-union groupings. The question (to repeat once again) is rather whether trade unions - not as 'the' working class, but as the organisational representatives of potentially large numbers of workers employed in enterprises will, in a future society building socialism, enjoy freedom from direct control by the state and ruling party, freedom to articulate and, if necessary, aggressively to defend the demands of their (working class) members. Whether or not this principle is established affects not only COSATU but trade unions generally; the trade union current represented by COSATU is the main, but not the only, current in the trade union movement, and it is the 'independence' of all wings of the union movement from a future state and ruling party which is at stake. While a post-apartheid state is not immediately in prospect - may not be for a long time to come - Plaut is justified in asking whether the terms of relations between unions and political groupings in the present period advance, or retard, the development of a tradition of trade union autonomy within South Africa's culture of political opposition.

In light of the issues raised here, there may also be grounds for concern about what appeared, until recently, to be an increasing ideological homogenisation in COSATU, and in particular a less accommodating stance towards divergent tendencies and positions within its ranks. Provided it secures its members' consent for doing so, and intensively debates its course of action, a trade union federation can quite democratically choose to align itself to one movement or party rather than another, as, say, the British unions have done vis-a-vis the Labour Party. It is a moot point whether or not these provisos were satisfied in the case of COSATU. But even if they were, a decision in favour of a specific political alignment should not be at the cost of the free expression and association within the federation of those favouring different political alignments (or for that matter no alignments). That the 1970s wave of 'independent' trade unionism developed outside the rubric of existing political organisations was in part - as Von Holdt demonstrates - a source of its weakness. But it was also one of its strengths. Those unions spiritedly defended the right of representatives of all political tendencies (provided they subscribe to certain basic principles) to join the unions and even to organise and recruit among the union rank and file. This may have reflected a concern to avoid divisions among its members, or a quasi-syndicalist reluctance to intervene in politics beyond the factory floor, rather than a commitment to political pluralism in union ranks. Nonetheless, it did have the advantage of acting as a hedge against domination of the unions by any one external political party or movement. It is this *de facto* pluralism which has appeared to be at risk in the years subsequent to the founding of COSATU in 1985.

Against this worrying backdrop the decision by COSATU at its 1988 special congress to initiate a united anti-apartheid front extending beyond its main allies, is an event of signal importance, and very much one to be welcomed. Not only does it hold out the prospect of a more co-operative relationship with NACTU and rival political groupings; the adoption of this proposal is also an index of a greater diversity and balance of political tendencies within COSATU itself. The consolidation of this trend can only benefit the labour movement as a whole.

Some might argue that the concerns being expressed here are removed from the burning tactical and strategic questions of the day, that the question of how to ensure a democratic socialist society in the future is less important than - in particular - the question of how to counter the present regime's mounting attack on COSATU. In fact, the two questions are closely connected: a labour movement able to accommodate divergent tendencies is much more likely to withstand repressive blows than one hidebound by sectarian conflicts. But more importantly, a preoccupation with immediate political considerations should not be used to exclude debates about the longer term destination of the struggle and how existing political and organisational strategies affect our chances of getting there. Unless the issue of democratic socialism is placed at its core, the 'workerism' - 'populism' debate is likely to become increasingly sterile, repetitive and even (for those concerned about a future that is both socialist and democratic) beside the point.