

INSIDE WHICH CIRCLE?

A reply to Colin Bundy

In a recent article in *Transformation* Colin Bundy (1989) usefully considers the objective challenges facing the liberation movement in our country. Many of the points he makes are relevant, valuable and, indeed, reflect ongoing concerns and debates within the national liberation movement. However, one central thrust of his argument, in which he questions the strategic usefulness of the concept of colonialism of a special type (CST), is seriously off the mark and requires a rejoinder.

Bundy, in essence, argues that the CST approach implies a protracted, largely rurally-based guerrilla strategy - as opposed to a more urban-based insurrectionary approach. He notes that the CST approach, first developed programmatically by the SACP, now enjoys wide currency within the broader ANC-led revolutionary alliance. At the same time Bundy also detects a growing interest in an insurrectionary strategy in ANC ranks. It is an interest he finds reflected in a number of discussion articles in the journals of the revolutionary alliance. He concludes that, while CST 'remains theoretically inviolate' within ANC ranks, 'a number of positions' (favouring the insurrectionary approach) 'seem to stretch, if not contradict, CST... Observance of orthodoxy, in short, has become somewhat ritualistic' (1989:9).

As it happens, not long after the appearance of Bundy's article in *Transformation*, the SACP published its new Party Programme, *The Path to Power (PTP)*. The new programme reaffirms and develops the CST approach (section 3). At the same time (and for the first time in an official programmatic document) it advances as most probable an *insurrectionary* perspective for the seizure of power in South African conditions (section 6). What, then, are we to make of Bundy's claim that the concept CST implies a protracted, largely rurally-based guerrilla struggle? In this rejoinder I intend to show that Bundy is wrong - doubly wrong.

The abstract and the concrete

In the first place there is simply no direct connection between a relatively abstract, general concept like CST and a particular, concrete strategy developed for a specific time and place. In the 20th century, to confine ourselves to these last nine decades, there has been a great variety of *different* strategies deployed in situations that are of the *same* general type. And conversely, there have been *similar* strategies in societies belonging to *very different* general types. Had he stopped to consider, an historian as astute and wide-ranging in his interests as Bundy would have had no problem in recognising this basic fact. Colonial countries have seen both armed and unarmed national liberation struggles. Rural guerrilla wars have been fought in many non-colonial situations - Cuba, Nicaragua and the Phillipines (to mention a few of the most notable). In Vietnam rural guerrilla warfare and urban insurrection featured in the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-neocolonial phases of struggle. Rural guerrilla warfare

has even been waged in the unevenly developed pockets of relatively advanced capitalist countries (eg the anti-fascist partisan resistance in France and Italy in the course of the Second World War).

In short, and without multiplying examples, there is no way that a particular revolutionary or resistance strategy can simply be deduced more or less abstractly from a general concept like colonialism or colonialism of a special type.

However, and this is where Bundy is doubly wrong, this is *not* to say that there is no connection whatsoever between a concept like CST and specific strategies. But the elaboration of appropriate strategies requires the concrete, historical unpacking of CST at a particular time. After all, CST has been maintained and perpetuated in its essential features since 1910. But its perpetuation (as *PTP* notes, see SACP, 1989:22) has been maintained under changing conditions and by varying mechanisms. South African capitalism has developed from a typical extractive, colonial economy, whose core was gold mining based on cheap migrant labour, and agriculture based on cheap forced labour to a relatively advanced capitalist society with the most developed infrastructure on the African continent. It is now an economy in which monopoly capital dominates every single sector (see SACP, 1989:22).

Both the continuity of CST, and the 'changing conditions' and 'varying mechanisms' of its perpetuation must be taken carefully into account when developing and assessing a specific strategy. With proper attention to these specifics, the appropriateness of the insurrectionary approach relying on mass mobilisation and combined with a protracted armed struggle is *underlined* (not undermined) by the CST analysis. But, to repeat, one cannot simply read this off abstractly from the concept. We need to grasp both the colonial *and* special type features in their dialectical interconnection.

Provided we pay due attention to all these factors, then the CST approach becomes a very useful theoretical tool. Amongst other things it enables us:

- to explain more adequately the SADF factor;
- to clarify the character of the South African countryside in regard to the liberation struggle;
- to highlight the principal strategic features of the major mass revolutionary base in our country - the township; and
- to clarify the character and strategic challenges of the present sustained mass offensive.

The SADF

One typical feature, perhaps one of the defining features of colonialism, is the marked and deliberate ethnic differentiation between the oppressor bloc and the oppressed peoples. In a colonial situation, where the armed struggle is on the agenda, this marked differentiation presents certain military challenges to the liberation movement. The personnel in the commanding heights of the colonial army and in its key sectors (artillery, airforce, tank corps, palace guards, etc) are, characteristically, drawn exclusively from the colonisers. The possibility of significant and key sections of the colonial army going over to the side of the insurgents is markedly less than in non-colonial situations - eg the popular,

anti-autocratic insurrections in Petrograd or Moscow in 1917, or Tehran in 1979.

This is not to say that colonial armies do not include personnel drawn from the colonially oppressed peoples. These sectors are obviously much more liable to demoralisation and desertion in insurrectionary moments. It is a point hinted at in his own inimitable way by Major-General Bert Wandrag, Head of SAP Riot Control:

It is notable that [in South Africa] the rioters are usually blacks. The South African Police are seldom confronted by white rioters. Considering the present explosive political climate, this situation also has a detrimental effect on black police who have to act against their own people (Wandrag, 1985:12).

The general monopolisation of military skills and weaponry in the hands of a largely ethnically-distinct colonial army tends, also, to make a *protracted* armed struggle more likely in colonial situations in which the liberation movement has chosen the armed path. Protracted struggle acts as a training ground and a means, over time, to accumulate weaponry. These are all points made in regard to South Africa in *PTP*. But it immediately adds that, given the *special type* characteristics of colonialism as they have evolved in South Africa, this protracted struggle cannot be a classical guerrilla war primarily based on the winning, over time, of more and more liberated territory (1989:53). I will return to this problem shortly.

It is not just the *colonial*, but also the South African *special type*, features which have a direct effect on the conduct of the apartheid armed forces. The apartheid armed forces represent a colonial army, but one that is rooted in the country itself. The South African liberation movement has, therefore, in this regard a double challenge. In classical colonial situations victory is usually obtained not with the total defeat of the colonial army, but with its localised defeat, or often just a degrading stalemate that compels negotiation and withdrawal back to the metropolitan country. In South Africa we can anticipate neither large-scale desertion, still less the withdrawal of the SADF to another country.

Nevertheless, precisely because it is rooted within South Africa, and because it is a largely conscript army, the SADF is subjected directly to the political and strategic crises increasingly affecting apartheid colonialism. The army can hardly fail to reflect the stresses and strains within the white community, and the developing indecision and lack of consensus among this community on how to respond to the struggle of the oppressed majority. In particular, disaffection among white middle strata is at a high level, and these are precisely the strata from which the bulk of the officer corps is drawn. The SADF's major reliance on a white manpower base also increasingly impacts directly on the skills shortage in the economy and further deepens the all-round crisis. The growth in the number of bantustan armed forces, another specific product of CST, also presents a much less reliable underbelly within the totality of apartheid armed forces.

Notwithstanding these contradictory features, Bundy is quite right to single out the apartheid army as a major question-mark in South Africa when our situation is measured up against the classical indicators of an immediate revolutionary situation. *However, what underlines and emphasises this more ade-*

quately than the CST approach?

The South African countryside

What does the CST approach tell us about the South African countryside? According to Bundy, the countryside is the favoured strategic direction to which the CST analysis should point us. In the majority of underdeveloped countries (and not just underdeveloped colonised countries) in which revolutionary armed struggles have been waged, the countryside has indeed been the major theatre of guerrilla struggle. The regime controls the cities and towns, while the hinterland, often remote, economically undeveloped and lacking in communications networks, presents greater prospects for protracted guerrilla struggle. This is a pattern which has become very familiar in the 20th century.

There has, however, been a tendency to consider this countryside, the major theatre of guerrilla struggle, in purely geophysical terms. This then sets off a hunt for inaccessible jungles, mountains and swamps. It is a great error to approach matters in this purely topographical way. The countryside must also, and above all, be understood in terms of population settlement patterns and in terms of a socio-economic perspective. Virtually uninhabited terrains, it is true, have often played an important role as rear bases in guerrilla struggles. Where, however, insurgent forces are confined to such terrains they have had little prospect of success - see Malaya, Bolivia, and the first years of the Zimbabwean guerrilla struggle (Reid-Daly, 1989:153ff).

Writing of Vietnam, Le Duan distinguishes not one but *two* essential types of strategic area in the countryside - what he calls the 'hill forest' (the classic, virtually uninhabited terrain) and the 'rural' (1968:222ff). The defining feature of the 'rural' is socio-economic. It is essentially the terrain of the peasantry:

In South Vietnam, as the vast countryside has a natural economy not very dependent on the towns and an almost exclusively peasant population living on agriculture, the aggressors and their henchmen ruling in urban centres cannot establish a strict control over the rural areas. That is why, when conditions are ripe for revolution, the villages constitute the weakest spot where the puppet administration becomes shaky and sinks into a crisis, hence the possibility of most rapidly starting *local insurrections* and of destroying the enemy's power apparatus considerably (Le Duan, 1986:223).

With few alterations, this description of the 'rural' would apply to the major terrain of most of the rurally-based guerrilla struggles of the 20th century. The existence of a relatively self-sufficient peasantry is the foundation-stone for the positive features of such a terrain. It is the peasantry that supplies the revolutionary army with food, shelter and the bulk of its fighting forces. The peasantry also contributes important skills - survival skills, self-sufficiency, knowledge of the terrain.

Turning to the South African countryside in the 1980s what do we discover? In the first place, relatively inaccessible 'hill forest' terrain is virtually, although not entirely, absent. But more importantly, a matured, late-CST has left us with a very specific countryside in terms of population settlement patterns and

socio-economic activity. A black peasantry is potentially only present in less than 13% of the terrain (and it is a highly scattered 13%). Even within this 13% the peasantry has been virtually decimated as a social class. One recent figure for the number of people in the reserves who, today, could be described as peasant farmers estimates 'no more than half a million, and I think such a figure is high' (Marcus, 1988:24).

This is not to say that the reserves cannot be, or indeed have not been, the sites of significant political mobilisation and organisation. The last major *peasant* based uprisings in the reserves occurred in the 1950s and early 1960s - Witziesshoek, Zeerust, Sekhukhuniland and Pondoland. Writing shortly after these struggles, Govan Mbeki noted the already relatively exceptional character of these particular areas when compared to most other areas in the reserves. He also underlined the fundamental strategic difficulty these struggles encountered. The reserves, a central component of CST domination, cram nationally oppressed peoples together in the most inhuman conditions and, therefore, create the soil for counter-mobilisation. But the highly fragmented balkanised spatial character of the reserves has tended to allow the regime to encircle and contain major insurgency within them with relative ease, particularly when insurgency in different areas is not co-ordinated (Mbeki, 1964).

In the 1980s there have again been some notable uprisings within the reserves (KwaNdebele, Lebowa, Venda, Bophutswana). The character of these uprisings has been very different from the earlier peasant revolts. These uprisings have, in fact, been similar in tactical content (school and transport boycotts, stayaways, mass funerals, no-go areas) and in their social support base to the urban insurrectionary struggles occurring at the same time. It has been youth organisations that have often played the catalysing role. Local political organisations, regional crisis committees, civics, women's organisations and, crucially, retrenched unionised workers have also been centrally involved (see Keenan, 1988). At the same time, in a number of cases, bantustan administrative staff and even armed forces have been drawn into popular struggles.

Outside of the reserves the bulk of the 85-million hectares of rural land is owned by fewer than 58 000 white farmers. There are approximately 1.3-million black farm workers, over half of whom have now been transformed into itinerant labourers. They and their families have been forced off the farms and into the reserves or small rural townships from where they are drawn as 'migrants' or sessional and casual workers as and when white farmers need their labour (Marcus, 1988:14-16). Social conditions of farm labourers are notorious, and reflect strong colonial features. White farm owners and managers practice a harsh and highly paternalistic, racist pattern of control. It is no accident that farm labour is, in terms of trade unions, one of the least organised sectors. With some notable exceptions, farm labourers are scattered, isolated and under close supervision.

In short, in South African conditions we certainly cannot echo Le Duan in speaking of a countryside with 'a natural economy not very dependent on the towns and an almost exclusively peasant population living on agriculture', or of a general countryside in which the ruling bloc 'cannot establish a strict control'. But nor can we regard the South African countryside as simply typical of *any*

relatively advanced capitalist country. A serious attempt to develop political strategies for the South African countryside must surely use as its starting point the specific character of that terrain, a character that is directly shaped and marked by the variant of bourgeois domination prevailing in our country - CST. Such a strategy must, I would suggest, focus primarily on the rural townships and resettlement camps. It needs to grasp the strategic characteristics of these localities, and it needs to understand the thousand threads that link rural townships to the urban areas, and to the industrial proletariat.

The township

This brings me to what is, I think, the most essential point about CST and the insurrectionary perspective. Understanding the development of the particular form of colonial domination in our country provides a very incisive grasp of the major strategic strength and weakness of the semi-insurrectionary struggles of the last decade. It does so by drawing our attention to the special character of the main locality of these struggles - *the South African township* (both urban and rural).

The township is, essentially, a deliberate construct of CST. While exhibiting certain features in common with other settlements of working class and oppressed groups (the North American ghetto, the barrios of Latin America, the red belt suburbs of some of the main industrial cities in France, Italy, etc), the South African township has its own distinctive character. It exhibits in an acute form the essence of this variant of bourgeois domination, namely the racial and spatial exclusion of the African majority, and their simultaneous inclusion within the fabric of an advanced capitalist economy (Molapo, 1988). The township, a racially defined entity, housing a range of oppressed classes and strata, has emerged as the major South African mass revolutionary base. Usually dominated by the industrial proletariat, it is the base from which this class has begun to exert its organised leadership over the other oppressed classes and strata in national democratic struggle.

As 'foreign terrain' for the ruling colonial bloc, the control and administration of the township requires a special apparatus depending, in its lower echelons, on collaborative structures. This collaborative apparatus within the township has proved to be one of the regime's most vulnerable points in moments of mass uprising. The relative compactness and the ethnic distinctiveness of the township has made it a very powerful site for political mobilisation and organisation. In Mike Hough's JMC-speak:

Encapsulation: populations or groups forced close together by residential circumstances have a higher propensity to collective dissidence and protest than groups intermingled with others in heterogeneous circumstances. The clearest illustration of this is among encapsulated workers (dockers, miners, etc), but the principle also applies to segregated and ghetto populations (Hough, 1989: 390).

However, the insurrectionary strengths and possibilities of the township, so clearly demonstrated in the period of emergent rudimentary organs of popular power in 1985-6, must always be correlated with its major strategic weakness.

Characteristically, within commuting range, the township is nevertheless deliberately isolated from the nerve centres of the apartheid capitalist system - by distance, and by major obstacles like freeways and railway lines. The township has been deliberately planned and sited for surveillance, encirclement and containment. The organised mass power that was generated in 1985-6 was mostly contained within its revolutionary base, and its impact upon the apartheid citadel was limited. The maximum weapon of the working class deployed in this period, the general strike or stayaway, while having major effects, nonetheless served in the end to reinforce this pattern of encirclement and containment.

In other capitalist formations, in which the masses also live, to be sure, largely in distinct working class quarters, the spatial separation tends to be much less marked. For instance, in Moscow and Petrograd in 1905/7 and again in 1917, or in Tehran in 1979, the general strike brings the masses onto the streets and quite rapidly into the very hub of these cities. As the insurrection progresses, the masses on the streets interact and increasingly fuse with the special insurrectionary combat units (proletarian red guards, or the mojaheddin, or insurgent and deserting detachments from the army, etc) (Neuberg, 1970; and Hobsbawm, 1977).

The sustained mass offensive

Generally urban insurrections are of relatively brief duration, short and powerful uprisings that result in popular victory or defeat (however temporary). Popular urban masses in a modern city, after all, have no alternative 'natural economy' upon which to fall back. It is difficult to sustain prolonged major disruptions to civic and economic life (education, transport, services, wage earning and shopping). But in South Africa since 1976, and more recently in the Israeli occupied territories, the popular masses have been deploying a significant revolutionary strategy - relatively protracted waves of mass struggle using insurrectionary means in pre-insurrectionary conjunctures.

We should obviously guard against facile parallels, but in both the South African and Palestinian liberation struggles, there are a number of obvious similarities. Both confront a form of bourgeois domination that has special type colonial features. In both cases, guerrilla struggle has, as it were, carried the flag over a number of years, epitomising popular aspirations and the will to resist. But in both cases it is a guerrilla struggle that has had to contend with difficult terrain and efficient, highly aggressive military and security apparatuses which have carried out systematic destabilisation and invasion of their respective regions. The protracted waves of mass uprising have now projected both these struggles onto a qualitatively new plane.

These mass uprisings, in which entire civilian populations are involved, serve also to undermine the coherence and morale of elite armies and to estrange them from their social base. It is in this regard, in particular, that the relatively prolonged or wave-like application of insurrectionary means becomes important. Given the difficulties of building up large, rurally based liberation armies in both cases; given the unlikelihood of large-scale desertion of an ethnically distinct army in a sudden insurrectionary moment; and given the impossibility of the withdrawal of the army to a distant colonial metropolis - a protracted

uprising that saps the morale and deepens the political, psychological and economic crises and isolation of the ruling bloc is critical. The protracted mass offensive based on a national democratic alliance of oppressed peoples also lends itself to combination with broad front strategies that reach into the ranks of the colonial ruling bloc itself. In this way, and at one level, the encirclement and containment imposed by CST starts to be broken.

In both cases the international factor plays an important supportive role. Considerable international solidarity has been won for the inherent justness of these respective struggles - and the solidarity relates directly to the *colonial* character of the oppression experienced by the Palestinian and South African peoples. Again, the international factor offers possibilities for a wider counter-encirclement of the regimes.

There is at least one other major strategic feature that neutralises the military imbalance in these protracted uprisings. It is a factor that applies most especially to South Africa and it goes to the heart of CST in the stage of advanced monopoly capitalism. The townships, the main mass revolutionary bases, are not remote stretches of countryside involved in their own subsistence economy. These localities house the very work force of the economy that sustains the colonial army. This imposes major strategic limitations on the ruling bloc's ability to unleash its full fire-power.

What is more, the black working class, some 6-million strong, is carried daily like a Trojan Horse, from the township into a very citadel of the ruling bloc. The CST approach is always maligned by its left critics for underrating the significance of the working class. But, if anything, it underlines the great strategic significance of this working class. And it is a strategic significance that is more than that which is general to any capitalist formation. The CST approach underlines the centrality of a working class that daily travels into the nerve centres of apartheid colonialism in the *special conditions* of South Africa in which the masses have to overcome the spatial disadvantage of their townships.

The major strategic difficulty confronting the South African popular masses is to overcome encirclement and containment. This involves, essentially, a double task. It requires the ability to *co-ordinate* actions in a wide range of popular townships and other localities, so that the colonial encirclement itself is extended and encircled. And it requires the ability to project, in an organised and sustained manner, popular power from its township bases into the colonial citadels.

Obviously, all of the above remains limited and sketchy. But I believe it is enough to begin to indicate that understanding the particular character of CST domination in our country, enables us to highlight the specific advantages and strategic challenges confronting the liberation struggle. It enables us to do this with some precision and theoretical rigour. In the end I am left wondering whether it is not appropriate to turn Bundy's own imputation around. It is not, perhaps, these constantly repeated sallies against the concept of CST which are now becoming 'somewhat ritualistic'?

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