The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa

Andrew Nash

The Rise and Fall of "The Generation of the 1970s"

Any attempt to build a South African left which is both militant and rational — capable both of engaging with the struggles of the oppressed majority and developing analyses and arguments which depend on argument and evidence rather than faith — had better be aware that history is against it. We build on an activist culture pervaded by sectarianism and dogma, and an intellectual culture in which the assimilation of radical ideas has reproduced patterns of intellectual dependence and fragmentation. This legacy will not be overcome except to the extent that we understand the forces that produced it. Indeed, to the extent that we do not understand those forces, the more vigorously we seek to distance ourselves from that legacy, the more likely we are to reinforce it instead.

This is a real prospect for the South African left today, after the demise of the generation of Marxist intellectuals and activists that emerged in the 1970s. Their Marxism sought to overcome the dogma and reductionism of Stalinism and Trotskyism, to engage with history as a living process rather than a mechanical formula, to found a historical consciousness linking local struggles to global processes, and implant itself in a working-class movement which sought to control its own destiny, openly and democratically, rather than submitting to the authority of nationalism or pseudo-science.

Beginning with a few dozen intellectuals and activists in the 1960s, this generation came to maturity in the late 1970s, and were a powerful presence in South African political and intellectual life throughout the 1980s. Their ideas and analyses reshaped social and political studies at South African universities, established themselves at the heart of the curriculum of many academic departments, and gave impetus to conferences, journals and other publications. They played a crucial role in guiding student, women's and civic organizations, and above all the trade union movement which they had helped to build — half a million strong at the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985, and a crucial force in a mass movement which drew millions of oppressed people into active struggle for the overthrow of the state. In a global context, this generation of South African Marxists played a vital role in interpreting for the Western left, in the terms of their own thought, a struggle which had come to be "crucial to the whole history of our time" (Sweezy and Magdoff, 1986).

And yet, after keeping alive for two decades a critique of the capacity for class compromise within the liberation struggle, the leading figures of this generation capitulated almost without exception to the imperatives of the market and the crudest forms of bourgeois ideology. The most conspicuous emblem of this capitulation, Alec Erwin, once a strategist of revolutionary socialism in the trade union movement, is now a leading proponent of neo-liberalism as a minister in Mandela's and Mbeki's governments. If a Marxism which developed in such propitious circumstances could be so rapidly and decisively undone, the prospects of rebuilding a Marxist culture today must seem bleak indeed.

But to speak of this capitulation as the work of "the generation of the 1970s" already conveys a certain lack of clarity about what it involves. What were the politics that gave this generation a distinctive identity? Or was it only in their capitulation of the 1990s that they found themselves at one? We cannot think of them as betraying a cause, until we can say what they stood for. It is not enough to say that they abandoned Marxism as a mode of analysis, and socialism as a political commitment. For this obscures their self-conscious and even self-defining opposition to the South African Communist Party (SACP), above all, with its very different ideas of Marxism and socialism, as well as their differences with the various currents of Trotskyism in South Africa.

This paper seeks to grasp the rise and fall of that distinctive form of Marxism in South Africa, primarily by examining its philosophical premises in their relation to larger South African and global historical processes. These premises are described here as the product of the assimilation of Western Marxism in South Africa. (By Western Marxism I mean the tradition of Marxist thought which developed mainly in Western Europe — from Lukacs, Gramsci and Korsch in the 1920s through the Frankfurt School in the 1930s and 1940s to the work of Marcuse, Sartre and Althusser which, in different registers, provided major impulses to the student and worker uprisings of the 1960s.)[1] I wish to argue that the peculiarities of this process of assimilation, rather than the ideas which influenced specific individuals, determined the form of this moment of Western

Marxism, and in order to make this argument I have concentrated mainly on the initial stages of this process. It is only if we grasp the limits of this moment, I believe that we can recover its radical possibilities and avoid reproducing its inherent weaknesses.

Can the generation of the 1970s be described as Western Marxist? The difficulty is that it is not clear that they can be described in terms of their philosophical commitments at all. But to the extent that they have a generational identity, it is clear that its emergence must be located in the context of South Africa after the police massacre of Africans protesting pass laws at Sharpeville in 1960, and the subsequent crushing of African political organization.

The recently published fifth volume of "From Protest to Challenge," edited by Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart, provides a compelling picture of this period. They describe the way in which "gaps and spaces where the iron control of the security establishment had yet to penetrate" had to be "found and utilized" so that the oppressed majority could once again be "rallied to the liberation cause" (Karis and Gerhart, 1997:17). They show how the context of defeat and humiliation served to define the resources and strategies that made possible new forms of resistance. In particular, they show that the repression of the 1960s could not prevent "liberal and radical whites from helping to midwife the two most potent organizational innovations among blacks, the black consciousness movement and the independent trade unions" (Karis and Gerhart, 1997:85).

Three major strategic innovations were crucial in reviving the struggle against apartheid. First, a flexible approach to leadership emphasized continual recruitment and training of new layers of leadership. This took the place of an entrenchment of leadership, acceptance of hierarchy and dependence on authority, which had characterized the struggle for generations. Second, the ideal of non-racialism shifted from the tokenism implicit in liberal "color-blindness" to become compatible with the recognition of concrete differences of local context. This made it possible to address the real conditions of a racially divided society, rather than seeking a racial inclusivity which was in reality available only to an elite. Third, a conception of grassroots organization emerged as both accountable to its members in their local context, and yet linked to a larger struggle — indeed, linked to that struggle through its local accountability (Karis and Gerhart, 1997:68-70, 75, 112-114). Organizing in response to the concrete needs of people's daily lives, and only secondarily around a program for political reform at a national level, also created new possibilities for renewal of leadership and for giving priority to the concrete experience of the people being organized.

These strategic innovations were by no means specifically Marxist in inspiration. Their most frequent source was probably the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, where the idea of organizing "at the grassroots" was popularized by the Students Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee (Branch, 1988:518-519; cf. Buhle, 1991:231). They were initiated in South Africa by student and church organizations — the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), the University Christian Movement and the Christian Institute — thrust into prominence by the crushing of black opposition. Students, in particular, had constantly to recruit and train new leaders, and to relate to an often apolitical constituency. But these innovations made themselves felt far beyond that original context, as they were adopted in the late 1960s by Black Consciousness groupings, which developed out of the student movement and came to face severe repression. They were also central to the emerging trade union movement in the 1970s, which sought to avoid the strategy followed by the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in the 1950s of subordinating worker organization to the needs of African nationalist politics. In the aftermath of the Soweto uprisings of 1976-1977, these strategic conceptions made possible widespread organization of civic and youth associations in the cities and later even in rural towns (Karis and Gerhart, 1997:214-216, 327-328, 338-339).

At the same time, however, these emerging strategies depended on a larger account of the process of social transformation to which they contributed. This was provided increasingly by a radical critique of South African capitalism, which developed in constant interaction with the strategies of grassroots/factory floor organization outlined above. At the heart of the politics of the "generation of the 1970s" was the articulation of these new strategies of resistance with the radical critique of capitalism.

The Emergence of the Critique of Racial Capitalism

The term "racial capitalism" was probably only coined by the end of the 1970s. But it summed up the thrust of an analysis of apartheid which was crucial for the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa from its inception. The fundamental premise of this analysis was the insight that apartheid was not simply a survival from pre-modern times — "a museum piece in our time, a hangover from the dark past of mankind" as Luthuli called it in his Nobel Prize speech (Karis and Carter, 1977:708) — but was integral to capitalist modernization in South Africa. Apartheid was not simply an external defense of capitalism in South Africa; it was the distinctive form taken by capitalism in that context. There was no "normal" society waiting to be freed from the abnormalities of the racial order, for that order had itself reconstituted all social norms.

For this reason, capitalism did not simply exploit human beings whose fundamental identity was left otherwise untouched by their experience of class exploitation. In one way or another, the whole of their experience — including their racial identity — was constituted by the class character of capitalist society. The critique of South African capitalism which emerged in the 1970s was radical, in this sense, in a way which had no real precedent here: it had the potential to call into question all structures of authority and identity, and treat them as the outcome of struggles which had no natural stopping point.

In its initial phases at least, this critique of capitalism in South Africa was developed almost entirely by white students from the English-speaking campuses. For the most part, this critique was drawn from the social upheavals of the advanced capitalist countries and the Third World rather than the Soviet Union (Karis and Gerhart, 1997:70, 74-75,

104). Three poles of this process — white student radical-
ism, the philosophical texts of Western Marxism, the de-
feated black working class in South Africa — are neatly
captured in a passage from a paper by Rob Davies on the
future of NUSAS, quoted at length by the infamous Schle-
busch Commission:

> The urbanized workers…are at present leaderless, dvided
> and demoralized… But the aware white student who has per-
> haps due to his greater contact with ideas from overseas, etc.
> the most to offer is prevented by a variety of laws from get-
> ting to the worker… African students, though a privileged
> group, are usually in very good contact with African work-
> ers…and therefore they provide a unique vehicle for raising
> the level of the political consciousness of the proletariat. Re-
> grettably, however, and through no fault of their own, the Af-
> rican student is not as familiar with new ideas and tactics of
> overseas student groups, e.g. SDS [Students for a Democratic
> Society], and overseas thinkers and philosophers, e.g. Mar-
> cuse and Sartre… Therefore the white student has a role —
> indirect and elitist though it may seem — in raising the level
> of political consciousness of the proletariat (Republic of
> South Africa, 1974:466).

Several of the leading figures in NUSAS continued thier
studies overseas in the 1960s, at a time when Western
Marxist ideas were being assimilated into student move-
ments and the New Left. Although the Western Marxist
tradition can be traced back to the 1920s, it was only in the
1960s that it really became recognizable as a distinct tradi-
tion within Marxism, in contrast to the competing traditions
of Stalinism and Trotskyism. A range of related developp-
ments in the advanced capitalist countries made possible the
emergence of a New Left, ready to draw on its resources:
opposition to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956; the
campaign for nuclear disarmament; support for Cuba and
opposition to the American war in Vietnam; massive expan-
sion of university education; the development of a youth
culture, with its own distinctive forms of dress, music, atti-
tudes to gender, etc. The Paris uprising of May 1968 was
perhaps the high point of this rebellion against bourgeois
values, with its promise of "all power to the imagination."

The initial assimilation of these ideas in South Africa is
shown most clearly in papers presented at NUSAS confer-
ences, and in the journal *Radical*, published by students at
the University of Cape Town from 1965 to 1970. The
sources quoted there — Marx's 1844 manuscripts, Marcuse,
Sartre, Fanon, *New Left Review* — would have been un-
known to previous generations of South African socialists,
and often incompatible with their theoretical ideas. The
philosophical conceptions which would have been familiar
to an earlier generation — of the laws of history, the Soviet
Union as model and bastion, the vanguard party and its dis-
cipline — are entirely absent from their writings. Instead,
the arguments of this new generation depend on concep-
tions of freedom as conscious agency, ideology as psycho-
logical adaptation to the realities of capitalism, conscious-
ness as inherently changeable and dynamic.

This directly philosophical mode of assimilating Wes t-
ern Marxism was to prove inconclusive, however. In the
South African context, there was no philosophical culture,
comparable to that of Western Europe, on which such a
philosophical project could draw. Can this generation then

be described as Western Marxist in anything more than its
origins? A range of theoretical sources, a style of argument,
a basis in the universities, an orientation towards the West-
ern left — all of these run through the events discussed in
the rest of this paper.

But the description is justified, above all, for the con-
trast it establishes with Soviet Marxism.[2] For Western
Marxism — in Europe and in South Africa — was premised
on a belief that those whom capitalism had exploited and
degraded (workers, above all, but not only workers) could
learn to see for themselves the need to overthrow its struc-
tures, and that human liberation could not take place with-
out this process. Soviet Marxism gave much greater weight
to the ways in which people's insight was limited by class
interest, tradition, propaganda and prejudice, and relied on a
party leadership to bring diverse social forces together in
common action, without necessarily challenging the limits
of their insight. Western Marxism was given its own dis-
tinctive character in the South African context by its emer-
gence not so much in the shadow of Soviet Marxism as in
the vacuum created by the effective repression after Shar-
peville of its foremost standard-bearer in South Africa, the
SACP.

The participants in this philosophical exploration of the
1960s, who were to remain in academic life were, with few
exceptions, to move towards the social sciences. Their cri-
tique of capitalism was to be shifted into new fields by the
practical demands of the burgeoning trade union movement,
on the one hand, and by the independent development of a
new Marxist historiography of South Africa, on the other.

Five Premises of Turner's "Eye of the Needle"

The crucial figure in the emergence of this new radical-
ism was Richard Turner, one of the very few radical stu-
dents of this generation who was to remain in the discipline
of philosophy (cf. Karis and Gerhart, 1997:71). He was
active in NUSAS as a student in Cape Town in the early
1960s, then studied in France in 1964-1966, where he wrote
his doctoral thesis on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. He initi-
ated the first Wages and Economics Commission formed by
NUSAS in 1971, played a central role in establishing the
Institute of Industrial Education and the *South African La-
bour Bulletin*, and his students were in the forefront of or-
ganizing independent black trade unions after the Durban
strikes of 1973. His mercurial career — interrupted by a
banning order in 1973 and then cut short by assassination in
1978 — created an inspiring, yet strangely ill-defined, leg-
acy.

Turner's main political text, "The Eye of the Needle,"
first published in 1972, transposed onto South African poli-
tics a Sartrean view of society as constituted essentially by
individual choices. It argued for these choices to overcome
the limits of accepted custom. "Unless we think in utopian
terms about South African society, we will not really under-
stand how it works today" (Turner, 1980:5). Its final chapter
seeks to rebut "realism" — that is, the argument "that the
change in consciousness that would replace competing ego-
tists by individuals seeking loving communication with
their fellows will not occur; that therefore we must place all
our hopes and articulate all our strategies within the present

social and political framework; that we must try to ensure simply that within a consumption-oriented capitalist society, the extremes of wealth and poverty do not grow too great" (1980:96).

The main problem in understanding Turner's historical role is the apparent discrepancy between his philosophical utopianism and the strategic realism of the trade union movement in whose beginnings he played so active and widely-acknowledged a role. But this discrepancy is best understood against the background of an essential continuity with the five premises of Turner's work set out briefly here. For ease of exposition, these five premises are first set out here as they occur in Turner's work, before discussing their continuation and development in the politics of FOSATU.

First, for Turner, "politics is the realization of identity." At the center of Turner's political thought was a Sartrean conception of individual choice with no theoretical limits. Human beings, he argues, "can choose about anything… They can't always get what they choose, but that is a different question" (Turner, 1980:7-8). Above all, they can choose the "human model" according to which they will live; they can choose what it is that they wish to become. Politics is a process of deciding which human model most fully accommodates your identity as a human being. In making this choice, we then discover that "we all need to learn to live differently, to live in a way that embodies our preference for people over things. We must realize that love and truth are more important than possessions. We must do this to be human" (1980:92).

Second, within this conception of the political, "identity is the product of ethical choice." For Turner, identity is not fixed by national or class origins: it is dynamic, rather than static; free, rather than determined; and it tends ideally towards the widest range of possibilities, "the excitement of self-discovery, the excitement of shattered certainties, the thrill of freedom" (1980:92). How is that identity to be realized? Turner describes the process — again in Sartrean terms — as one of ethical choice. Individuals remain trapped within the confines of the capitalist human model, for as long as they accept an "internal morality" — that is, an ethical system which "accepts the predominant human model, and tries to rationalize it, to smooth the edges." In contrast, a transcendent morality constantly questions accepted convention, and confronts its underlying assumptions (1980:16-17). Only on this basis can we recognize other individuals, and indeed ourselves. In capitalism, "I am not free to be open to the other as a person. I have to manipulate the other in such a way as to obtain things. And to manipulate the other I have to manipulate myself. This is my essential degradation, for in manipulating myself I finally lose my freedom" (1980:21; cf. 34).

Third, Turner's emphasis on individual choice produces a limited sense of the historical context in which such choices are made. He argues as if socialist thought and — more particularly Marxism — is a ready-made object of choice; that is, as if "Marxism has no history." Writing in 1972, as part of the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (Spro-cas), Turner argued for socialism as the consequence of what he called the Christian human model. This veiled argument was partly the product of conditions of extreme repression, but was also related to the ahistorical bias in his own thought. For him, each individual is faced with the choice between adherence to a capitalist or a Christian human model, and the choice must be made afresh on each occasion. There is no sense of a cumulative development of a tradition, or of the capacity for rival traditions to absorb and give their own meaning to each other's terms. Nor is there any real recognition of the ways in which socialist ideas have been integrated into regimes of repression. Significantly, his contrast between a caring (Christian) and an acquisitive (capitalist) human model casts no light on phenomena such as nationalism, in which that choice is obscured by being tied to complex contexts of belonging, which can seldom be the subject of individual choice.

Fourth, in Turner's political vision, "organization is reduced to the role of catalyst." The moment of Western Marxism in South Africa began with the recognition among white radical students that they were not part of the social force which would bring about revolutionary change. Fundamental social change could not result from radical white students organizing themselves, nor could they claim to speak for the oppressed majority. The idea of organization as a catalyst in the process of transforming class consciousness was shaped by their need to define a political role in that context. Turner drew what was most coherent from this experience in his account of the "intimate relationship between change in consciousness and organization." He argued, in brief, that organization enabled people to see the world in a new way by involving them in action to change it, and prefiguring the future they sought to achieve (1980: 85, 93-94).

Fifth, in Turner's work and throughout the initial assimilation of Western Marxism in South Africa, a specific "point of view of analysis" is maintained. The removal of white radicals from the mainstream of struggle resulted also in a conception of theory and practice that was most often unconsciously held, or held in conflict with their conscious beliefs. This was a conception of political analysis as the product of an independent or external point of view, requiring ethical constancy, but making possible the greatest degree of strategic mobility. This conception reproduces the Sartrean focus on the authenticity of the individual's perspective. It follows from the idea of historical options being available for individual choice, as objects external to the one who is choosing. It is perhaps most evident in Turner's postscript to "The Eye of the Needle," in which he assesses the viability of many different strategic options for change in South Africa — from building trade unions to cultivating homeland leaders. The only form of agency which these options have in common is that of the "free-floating" intellectual.

All of these assumptions are best explained, however, not on the basis of Turner's own individual commitments, but rather as the product of the peculiar historical conditions in which Western Marxist ideas were assimilated in South Africa. The crushing of African political organizations after Sharpeville had given increased significance to

white student politics. In that context, white students were in many ways able to choose their own identities, with the one limitation that they could do so only as ethical individuals, with no living history of struggle to draw on and no enduring role for their organizations. For as long as those conditions lasted, intellectual engagement could plausibly be equated with political agency.

From "The Eye of the Needle" to the Politics of FOSATU

Turner's five premises provide an essential starting point for understanding the politics of the independent trade union movement which was given impetus by the strikes in Durban, and consolidated in 1979 by the establishment of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). The development of each of them in that context is traced briefly here.

Politics as identity: In "The Eye of the Needle," Turner had treated the movement of consciousness towards identity primarily from the point of view of the individual. In a later article published under the name of his wife, while Turner himself was prevented from publishing by a banning order, a similar path is outlined for the movement of class consciousness — beginning with a common set of beliefs shared with other members of a class, and culminating in a "clear concept of an alternative society to be reached through struggle with one's opponent" (Fisher, 1978:222). These terms are central to Joe Foster's address to the FOSATU Congress of 1982 — the major statement of the politics of the independent trade unions, and the focus of controversy for many years to come. There the tasks of FOSATU are defined by a working class whose "power is only a potential power since it has no definite social identity of itself as working class" (Foster, 1982:70). In order to "ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters," FOSATU must "create an identity, confidence and political presence for worker organization" (Foster, 1982:77, 78; cf. 82). FOSATU is "built up from the factory floor" and its worker leadership "do battle every day" (Foster, 1982:79). Without an independent organizational base, "we will be destroyed since workers will be entirely swamped by the powerful tradition of popular politics." Far from avoiding politics, this concern with clarifying class identities is, according to Foster, "the very essence of politics" (1982:82, 83). This conception is crucial to Foster's much-contested argument that there had never been a working-class movement in South African politics, and that FOSATU must work towards the establishment of such a movement.

The same idea of clear working-class identity as the precondition for socialist politics recurs in the response of independent unions to pressures on them to affiliate to the newly-formed United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983. Thus, the General Workers Union describes the accusation of economism made against the unions as "a very narrow, formalistic notion of what politics is." The "key aspect of union's political work" is to give workers "an awareness of their own power" (General Workers Union, 1984:161, 163). Alec Erwin's paper on unity in the struggle — which takes

up Foster's argument where it left off — follows the same logic in seeking to show (1985: 58, cf. 60, 69) that a liberation movement is likely to "defer or suppress" class interests and avoid a "clear-cut" program. Perhaps this sense of conception of politics as the realization of identity survived longest in the field of education. As FOSATU Education Officer, Erwin (1984) described his task in these terms: "In FOSATU's eyes, education is class-based: it is designed to reinforce a sense of working class identity, to reinforce working class confidence and counter the kind of anti-worker propaganda that prevails in general education and the media."

Identity as ethical choice: Turner's treatment of politics as ethical choice was first explicitly transposed to the context of the trade union movement in a powerful critique of the idea of economic growth developed by Erwin (1974), or at least published under his name: "Economic growth measured in monetary terms says remarkably little about society's evaluation of the goods produced;" instead, it "reflects the wants of a particular social structure, a structure within which the rich are relatively powerful and the poor weak." The choice between affirming that social structure through the pursuit of economic growth as an end in itself, or contesting it through the building of an independent identity for the working class, is cast in essentially ethical terms here. (Erwin's commitment to the market 20 years later requires a complete denial that there is any such choice to be made.)

The trade union movement's interpretation of democracy as a process in which the real choices, values and experiences of workers must be heard is of a piece with this. One of the basic policy resolutions adopted at the formation of FOSATU in 1979 expresses this concern by warning against "structures":

> Structures can be a dangerous thing [sic]. They can be powerful and be used in such a way as to confuse workers and hide things from them. Officials and committee members can hide behind a constitution and say things are unconstitutional or that some committee has to decide on things… It is very important that structures are built up which do not entrench the position of people either as committee members or officials (Karis and Gerhart, 1997:625).

Indeed, so grave were the dangers of structures that some of the leading independent unions of the time — most notably, the Food and Canning Workers Union and General Workers Union — choose to stay out of FOSATU. But they shared with FOSATU the idea of worker identity as that which results from the real choices of workers, when unconstrained by tradition or structure. This concern with organizational structures as obstacles to the expression of a worker identity is also central, again, to debates on whether trade unions should affiliate to the UDF (cf. General Workers Union, 1984:158-160).

Marxism without a history: FOSATU had no alternative but to take account of the existing currents of political thought among African workers, in a way which Turner never did. But in doing this, it seldom went further than examining the limits of African nationalism. In the global context, FOSATU never identified its commitment to socialism with support for the Soviet Union. "The fact that a

country is said to be socialist does not guarantee that workers control their own destiny" (Foster, 1982:70). It took a sympathetic interest in the struggles of Solidarity in Poland and in the Brazilian Workers' Party at a time when the Soviet Union and the SACP were clearly hostile to them (cf. Nhere, 1984:78). FOSATU's international policy statement (1984:188) warns against "being caught in the web of international politics rather than building effective worker solidarity." Erwin (1985:57-58) describes the need for liberation movements to seek international legitimacy as a source of programmatic confusion. In general, FOSATU followed the pattern of Western Marxism in distancing themselves from Soviet Marxism, while never developing a clear critique of it.

Instead of tracing their own theoretical roots historically, the intellectuals of this generation treated Marxism as if it had no history — as if it had sprung ready-made from the texts of the theorist who was favored at that moment. This meant that there could be discussion about the way in which Marxist ideas could be disseminated, or implemented. But there could never be a coherent way of posing the question of how a Marxist tradition — that is, a developing body of thought, argument and practice — was to be built in the South African context.

Organization as catalyst: A conception of organization very similar to Turner's took root in the trade union movement soon after the strikes of 1973. By 1974, the argument which prevailed was that "union membership should be reluctantly extended" and "training, discussion and organizing should precede membership" (Friedman, 1987:93). In a sense, this is the other side of the coin of pointing out the "danger of structures": structures will come to dominate members, unless all the members of a structure know exactly why they belong to it. This conception of organization took on a crucial role in defining FOSATU's relationship to nationalist politics in the early 1980s. Thus, Foster (1982:69) describes FOSATU's political role not in relation to its own members only, but the working class "more widely." The "danger that the unions become preoccupied with their members and ignore workers generally" must be avoided by "establishing a clear political direction" (1982:82). Its main task is the "building of a larger working class movement in South Africa," but it is not itself that movement. Instead, the unions are to serve as a catalyst: by defining more clearly the identity of the working-class, they make this identity available within a movement which is still to come into being. But this conception produced no criteria which could tell when the moment of the "larger" movement would come.

Point of view of analysis: On the face of it, the FOSATU tradition, with its emphasis on the agency of the working-class seems poles apart from the hothouse atmosphere of radical student politics. But the mechanisms of mandate and accountability which were intended to ensure that workers remained active participants in the making of their own struggles prevented any deeper reflection on the way in which their agency was defined. In particular, these procedures precluded any questioning of the terms in which debates were formulated, mandates were given, etc. Insistence

that worker organization be consolidated on the factory floor was, however, not only a way of keeping intellectuals from taking decisions for them, but also a way of ensuring that those intellectuals and activists who defined the debates were not subject to any kind of intellectual scrutiny. Wide participation in open debate is, of course, an essential precondition for critical reflection on the terms of such debate. But the two are by no means identical. Maree (1984:77; cf 1989) shows, for example, how disputes about union control over education "boiled down to whether intellectuals outside the unions or organically linked with the unions" should exercise that control. In this sense, through its overstatement of the meaning of the procedures of mandate and report-back, the FOSATU tradition continued the historical unreflectiveness which was an essential feature of Turner's utopianism.

These five continuities between Turner and FOSATU were at least as important in the assimilation of Western Marxism in South Africa as were the differences that emerged — primarily in the Institute for Industrial Education — before Turner's death. These differences turned primarily on the extent to which educational programs should be subordinated to the practical needs of the trade union movement. Turner's conception of worker education as part of a broader process of politicization was not to endure (cf. Maree, 1984). Whether more broadly or narrowly focused, however, the terms of the argument were largely provided by him.

Western Marxism and the Historians

The "generation of the 1970s" is at least as readily identified with the challenge to the liberal historiography of South Africa as with the politics of FOSATU. The same generation of white students, radicalized by their involvement with NUSAS in the aftermath of Sharpeville, also provided many of the leading figures who challenged liberal assumptions about the relationship of economic growth and racial domination.[3] In some cases, the same individuals were active both in the rewriting of South African history and in the trade union movement. The historians came to be known variously as Marxist, neo-Marxist, radical or revisionist — partly, but not entirely, to evade the provisions of the Suppression of Communism Act — before the still looser description of "the new school" was attached by Frederick Johnstone (1978, 1982), just as their controversies with liberalism came to be overtaken by political events.

From the perspective of their discipline, given their differences in theoretical background and approach, it is difficult even to think of these historians as constituting a single generation (cf. Bozzoli and Delius, 1990). The crucial break with the earlier Marxist view of racial domination as a relic from the past was made by Harold Wolpe (1980:292), an older activist who moved from law to sociology after going into exile. Along with Wolpe, Frederick Johnstone (a Canadian) and three other South Africans, Martin Legassick, Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, who were all in Britain by the late 1960s, initiated the new Marxist interpretation of South African history. The next cohort, also mainly based in Britain in the 1970s, included a number who sought to develop a structuralist analysis of South Africa on the basis of

the work of Poulantzas, those who turned towards a more empirical focus on culture and community, often inspired by E. P. Thompson, and others who did not fit neatly into either camp. By the end of the 1970s, a third, much broader group were graduating from South African universities, often in other disciplines which were now increasingly informed by a Marxist interpretation of South African history. Marxism had entered the broader intellectual and political culture, and its idiom could be heard in the most diverse parts of it.

This generation of radical historians and trade unionists shared a broad orientation towards Western rather than Soviet Marxism. In many cases, they shared a political stance, broadly defined, which was critical of the SACP's strategic reliance on African nationalism, and the reading of history which suggested that this was the crucial force of the liberation struggle. The most important exceptions tended to confirm the rule: Legassick's role in the Marxist Workers Tendency of the ANC corresponded with a hiatus in his historical scholarship; Wolpe's theoretical work was widely recognized within academic circles while it was "simply ignored" or "actively denigrated" in the party to which he belonged, the SACP (O'Meara, 1997:4). Those who encountered Marxist historiography in South Africa in the late 1970s often felt less need to distinguish their positions vigorously from those of liberalism. Many of them also moved towards the ANC and the SACP in the 1980s, as this tradition found new political resonance in the mass struggles of the time.

Veterans of the trade union movement continue to acknowledge the contribution and influence of Turner (e.g., Two Trade Unionists, 1987:66; Webster, 1984, 1993). There is no visible sign of his influence among the historians. Indeed, the new historiography was already being developed by the time Turner arrived in Durban in 1970. And yet the continuity between FOSATU and the historians cannot be brought into view except by describing the dependence of both on the philosophical premises which come to the fore in Turner's work. This is not because of Turner's originality, or his influence. Turner's originality lay in a kind of theoretical guilelessness; a capacity to reflect the simplest needs of the moment in the medium of a complex social theory. For this reason, his work reveals most clearly the specific character of the process of assimilation of Western Marxist ideas in South Africa, and enables us to grasp the role of FOSATU and the historians in that process.

In the radical historiography of the 1970s, this continuity is clearest in what I have described as the Western Marxist point of view of analysis. The radical challenge depended for its coherence on a stark contrast between two methodological paradigms — liberal and radical — between which the individual historian must make a choice. The paradigm chosen by the historian would then be decisive for their historical work. To convey this contrast, it was necessary to assume for the historian a point of view essentially external to the historical process, and linked to it through the individual's ethical choice. The radical challenge was premised on a peculiar methodologism — a belief in the decisive role of the paradigm — which was

probably reinforced the academic ethos of the time.

The other side of the coin was that the contrast between the earlier Communist historiography of South Africa (Simons and Simons, 1969; cf. Roux, 1964) and that influenced by Western Marxism was effectively silenced. The distinction between liberal and radical historiography was given such exclusive prominence that this crucial development within radical historiography went unnoticed. As for Turner and the activists of FOSATU, so too for the radical historians, it is not too much to say that Marxism had no history. Its history had been brought to an end by the arrival of that instant of paradigmatic choice. One of the major themes of the historians was the dynamic nature of consciousness. They constantly emphasized that racial prejudice had to be explained rather than merely taken as the unchanging explanation of the character of South African history. In this they differed from the Communist historians, who treated the consciousness of the African masses as inevitably nationalist. But the radical historians of the 1970s could never extend this insight to themselves.

If they had done so, they would have found that their contrast of paradigms owed far more to liberalism than they realized. It turned an essentially liberal moralism against the liberal historians. Where liberals had "blamed" racial domination on Afrikaner prejudice revisionist historians attributed it to the needs of capitalist accumulation. The doyen of the liberal historians, Leonard Thompson (1962), had prepared the trap for himself in linking Afrikaner nationalist historiography and the policy of apartheid, and it was sprung by radical historians making the same link between liberal historiography and the racial order. The appearance of a "choice" between capitalism and socialism facing South Africa (and the Third World) was the product of a Cold War ideology which the radical historians rejected at the same time as they depended on it. Indeed, the intensity of the historical debate was in some ways a product of that moment of the Cold War: expanding university education in the West, new interest in studies of the Third World after the end of formal colonialism, the increasing incorporation of Marxism into the academic mainstream. These features of the Marxist historiography of South Africa became less conspicuous as time went by, but remained deeply embedded in it.

Ambiguities of Western Marxism in South Africa

Western Marxism provided powerful resources for analysis and activism in South Africa. But it produced its own variant of the confusion and ambiguities it displaced. Its ambiguities were evident both in the critique of racial capitalism developed by this generation, and especially in the political arguments and strategies which were motivated by this critique.

Historically, the radical critique of racial capitalism focused on the complicity of capitalism with racial domination in South Africa. Subsequent historical work drew out the many forgotten modes of resistance of oppressed people, discovering a political agency among them which liberal (and often nationalist) historians had limited to elites. Its conception of itself as a pole of paradigmatic conflict meant that it reproduced the basic strategies of the moral-

ism it sought to overcome, in spite of its emphasis on the structural determinants of South African politics.

Sociologically, that critique emphasized the ways in which capitalism naturalized domination and denied the autonomy of ordinary people, and especially workers. Against that background, it also sought to demonstrate the many ways in which the victims of that process were also active participants in the making of their own destiny. These emphases gave the new critique of racial capitalism its potentially radical and open-ended character. But without any clear philosophical conception of the autonomy denied by capitalism or reclaimed in resistance to it, this radical potential could never be realized in the realm of political strategy and struggle.

Philosophically, that critique was informed by an essentially moralizing conception of history as a process in which individuals, communities and classes could align themselves with the cause of progress or against it. As the critique came to be more influential, so its philosophical premises became less stable. Russell Jacoby (1982:38,57) has argued that the character of distinctive national traditions within Marxism can be understood largely as a product of the distinctive Hegelian traditions which were available in each national context. The colonial variant of Hegelianism which emerged in South Africa around the time of unification had no enduring presence (cf. Nash, 1985). Increasingly, the critique of racial capitalism established on the basis of the ideas of Western Marxism was absorbed into a philosophical framework derived from liberalism, Christianity or Soviet Marxism.

Ideologically, the growing influence of Western Marxism in South Africa was bound to bring it into conflict with African nationalism. Turner's contrast between Christian and capitalist human models in South Africa simply avoided the question of nationalism. FOSATU activists developed a critique of African nationalism, which was implicitly supported by the radical historians' denial of any kind of nationalist teleology in their accounts of South African history. But the Western Marxist critique of nationalism was fundamentally ambiguous. On the one hand, it could be made from the left, focusing on the petit-bourgeois leadership of African nationalism, the absence of a clear-cut commitment to the working class, and its need to conform to the requirements of international diplomacy (the clearest version of this critique is probably Foster, 1982). On the other hand, the same critique could easily be made from the right, suggesting that African nationalism sacrificed the cause of African workers by drawing them into struggle for the overthrow of the apartheid state, in such a way as to prevent them building their capacity to win incremental reforms within the context of racial capitalism (e.g., Friedman, 1987). Most often, the critique of African nationalism remained politically ambiguous: pointing to its limitations, while suggesting at the same time that a nationalist movement with precisely those ideological limitations was essential for the broader struggle against apartheid (e.g., Erwin, 1985). The ambiguity of this critique of nationalism was to be exploited to the full in the SACP attack on the Western Marxists.

Strategically, this ambiguity translated into a fatal aporia. The Western Marxist critique of racial capitalism had the effect of constantly preparing the working class and its allies for political struggle, yet never fully engaging in it. The resulting radicalism recognized the dynamic nature of consciousness and its capacity to be changed through action. It rejected vanguardist models of organization and struggle precisely because it did not respect the autonomy of individuals and communities within this process. Instead, this critique sought to enable them to participate in a movement which had not yet come into being. It differed from vanguardism in that it took as its basic premise that such a movement could come into being only through the autonomous and freely chosen commitment of oppressed people. Crucially, however, it could develop no criteria by which it was possible to tell when that movement could be called into being. Indeed, any attempt to develop such criteria would have conflicted with the basic premise of respect for the autonomy of those who formed the movement. And without such criteria, the radicalism inspired by Western Marxism would necessarily draw oppressed people towards a struggle that would be guided largely by the opposing model of liberation, upheld by the SACP.

The SACP Strikes Back

The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) disbanded in 1950, at the time of the Suppression of Communism Act, and had revived itself as the SACP in 1953. It kept its existence secret until after the killings at Sharpeville, when it distributed its first illegal leaflets. After the arrest and imprisonment of Bram Fischer in 1965, the SACP underground was effectively destroyed and the Party survived in exile, in close alliance with the ANC. It depended on the support of the Soviet bloc for its survival, and in return gave uncritical support to every twist and turn of Soviet policy.

The SACP had little sympathy for Western Marxism. Its leading author on philosophical topics — the British academic John Hoffman, who contributed regularly to *African Communist* under the pen-name Dialego — was also the author of a book-length attack on the ideas of Western Marxism (Hoffman, 1975). The SACP was also at best ambivalent about legal trade union work in South Africa (Lerumo, 1987:174). SACTU, the trade union wing of the ANC-led alliance, developed their basic argument in 1977:

> SACTU recognizes that there are ultimately only two options open to legal African trade unions: either to advance, taking up political as well as economic questions, and eventually being crushed or driven underground; or for the leadership to become co-opted and the unions emasculated — tools in the hands of the employers and the registered unions… Repression of trade union activity means that in the long run, meaningful advances can only be made on an underground basis (quoted in Plaut, 1984:117).

After the formation of FOSATU in 1979 and the Council of South African Unions (aligned to the black consciousness movement) in 1980, there was a degree of conflict between these federations and SACTU, which had been in exile since 1964, over the question of international links. The British Anti-Apartheid Movement resolved in 1981 that links between British and South African labor

movements should take place "through SACTU" and re-jected "direct links" between unions. SACTU attacked di-rect links as an attempt to "bypass the people's revolution-ary organizations" (Plaut, 1984:121). But it was only after Joe Foster's paper on the workers' struggle had been adopted as FOSATU policy at its second congress in 1982, that this conflict really came into the open and the SACP came into the fray.[4]

Between 1983 and 1985, *African Communist* published at least six contributions containing extensive attacks on Foster's speech in particular, and also the policies of FOSATU, the influence of white intellectuals, legal Marx-ism and Western Marxism in general. There are four main themes which emerge from this response to the politics of FOSATU, and the Marxism on which it drew.

First, the SACP authors argued that Foster had ignored the real history of the workers' struggle in South Africa, placing before FOSATU "a clean slate, on which they may write anything at all, without any suspicion of what has been written by others, and without any need to consider it" (Toussaint, 1983:37). The history which had been ignored was a history, above all, in which the SACP loomed large:

> There has been and *is* a political party of the working class…
> The existence and achievements of the Communist Party are
> well known to everybody. Its members today are in the front
> line of struggle. Dare FOSATU ignore this? And dare it ig-
> nore the confusion and division it will sow in the ranks of the
> working class if it sets up a new "workers' movement' in
> competition with or alongside the still living Communist
> Party (Toussaint, 1983:45-46).

Similarly, Vuk'ayimbambe (1985:98) invokes the "he-roic example and tradition" of SACTU — the exiled trade union ally of the ANC and SACP — as "an embodiment of revolutionary trade unionism in our country." Nyawuza (1985:54) emphasizes "'the unbroken record' and militant tradition of resistance to colonialism — a struggle which began with colonialism itself and was fought at different times 'by all the African people.'"

Second, the SACP authors argued that Foster had over-estimated the historical role of the trade union as a form of organization. Foster's contention that there is no workers' movement in South Africa suggests a leading role for FOSATU in building such a movement. There are various estimates of the role that FOSATU envisages for itself (Toussaint, 1983:36; Nhere, 1984:78; Comrades in Africa, 1984:107). But there is complete agreement about the po-litical role which trade unions should play. According to Vuk'ayimbambe (1985:95, 97; cf. Nhere, 1984:77):

> Class consciousness cannot develop spontaneously within the
> trade union movement. The Communist Party, armed with the
> scientific theory of Marxism-Leninism, has the task of infus-
> ing political and class consciousness into the trade union
> movement. Only the Party can fulfil this function… As Lenin
> showed clearly, trade unions can function properly *only* under
> the leadership and guidance of the Party. Attempts to reduce
> the leadership role of the Party can only serve the interests of
> the enemies of the working class.

This call for the subordination of the trade unions to the Communist Party quickly reveals its underlying scorn for ordinary workers: "The problem with people advocating 'socialism now,'" says Nyawuza (1985:58), "is that they

expect those Blacks who cannot read or write to run social-ist industries and mines."

Third, the politics of FOSATU are not those of "Marx-ism-Leninism" or "real Marxism." Marxism-Leninism, in this conception, is no more than the distillation of "the ac-cumulated experience of the working class — both in our own country and in many others" (Toussaint, 1983:40-41). According to Comrades in Africa (1984:107), Foster's ar-guments are aimed at "the denial of Marxist-Leninist prin-ciples of the revolutionary process and the rejection of cor-rect forms of struggle." Nhere (1984:79) is still more straightforward: "After all, real Marxism is illegal." Ny-awuza (1985:50) relates the shortcomings of FOSATU to their failure to study "Marxist-Leninist texts;" instead, "the new 'Marxists' seem to depend much more on 'Marxist' literature published in the West."

Fourth, and finally, this conception of Marxism-Leninism is given an anti-intellectual and then a racist twist: these "dogmas taken over unthinkingly from the arm-chairs of Europe" (Toussaint, 1983:43) are defended by intellectuals and, worst of all, by white intellectuals. A "dis-proportionate national balance" within the intelligentsia has led to the study of Western Marxists rather than "the clas-sics of Marx, Engels and Lenin" (Nhere, 1984:79). Their mistakes arise from their "rejection of the rigours and disci-pline required of a vanguard revolutionary movement" (Comrades in Africa, 1985:110). Nyawuza (1985:61) warns that "the struggle will not be won in libraries." Nyawuza's examination of Belinda Bozzoli's book on manufacturing ideology in South Africa reveals that she acknowledges the help of two African women with the care of her children, which leads to the conclusion that "these 'Marxists' talk 'on behalf' of the black working class; but their relationship to the black workers is suspect" (Nyawuza, 1985:49).

In each case, the SACP response is essentially circular. There is some substance to their charge that Foster ignores the history of the workers' struggle in South Africa, but his critics are on no firmer ground in their intensely ideological reconstruction of that history. This reconstruction assumes that the working class has always and inevitably been part of a seamless national unity of the oppressed, born at the moment of colonization, in order to demonstrate that they can have no distinctive class interests. Similarly, the SACP authors point to a real weakness in the conception of or-ganization involved in the politics of FOSATU. But by de-fining the role of the trade union as one of subordination to the Communist Party, they do equally little to address the question. The same circularity is evident in their invocation of Marxism-Leninism: it assumes the correctness and final-ity of whatever happens at the time to be blessed with its authority in order to demonstrate the falsity of any alterna-tive perspective. And the rejection of FOSATU's critique of vanguardism in the name of the "rigours and discipline" of the vanguard misses the point once again.

In 1985 FOSATU unions became part of the new Con-gress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which rapidly aligned itself with the ANC, which was itself in-creasingly assuming a position of leadership within the in-tensifying struggles of the time. The battle for supremacy

within that movement was not decided by the weight of argument, but rather by the ability of SACP supporters to marginalize and exclude those who opposed their line within the trade unions and other organizations.

There is still no real account of the ways in which this was done, and the materials for such an account would not be easy to collect and verify. Jan Theron's detailed account of the undermining of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) by elements within its own leadership in 1986-1990 concludes that the example of FAWU shows "how easily a union can fall prey to an organized faction operating clandestinely" (Theron, 1990:63-64). He then asks how workers can prevent this "without falling into the same practices as the faction to which they are opposed." His question indicates that the demise of the FOSATU tradition owes as much to its own internal contradictions as to the onslaught of the SACP.

Cronin's Defense and Dissolution of Dialectics

A handful of SACP activists in exile had moved away from the theoretical framework of Soviet Marxism as early as the 1970s. Wolpe (1975) had called into question the coherence of the SACP's analysis of South African society as colonialism of a special type, and Ruth First (1978:97-98) had called for the rejection of the two-stage theory of revolution. But they paid a price for this, and were increasingly marginalized within the SACP, in spite of their exemplary records of struggle and sacrifice.

Some intellectuals close to the SACP made the same circular critique of FOSATU in the 1980s as *African Communist*, but in more measured tones. Thus, Davies and O'Meara (1984:116; cf. O'Meara, 1985) decry the sectarian assumption that "it is only in FOSATU that a 'working class political perspective' is being developed." But for the most part, the SACP responded to the assimilation of Western Marxism in South Africa by drawing a line between their own, Soviet-inspired Marxism and the whole body of Western Marxism. Having drawn such a line, contributors to *African Communist* developed ever more dramatic labels for this "ideological enemy" (Comrades in Africa, 1984:108), until eventually satisfying themselves that their ultra-left petit-bourgeois opportunism played into the hands of the ultra-right (Zuma, 1987).

Sometime in the mid-1980s, however, a different approach emerged. The SACP's dividing line between the "real Marxism" of the Soviet Union and the "armchair" theorizing of Western Marxism was breached, initially perhaps by the winds of *glasnost* blowing in from the Soviet Union, and then by political events within South Africa. The upsurge in mass struggles after September 1984, the launch of the UDF in 1983 and COSATU in 1985, the collapse of Botha's reform initiatives and the withdrawal of support for the apartheid regime by the world's major banks — all of these developments gave priority to struggles within South Africa, rather than the positions taken by SACP leaders in exile. By 1988, Toussaint, who had led the charge against FOSATU, was disowning "the dogmatic 'two stage theory,'" calling for unity among socialists, and "for the debate between 'workerist' and 'populist' to be resolved and transformed from words into combined ac-

tion" (1988:32, 35). The main initiative in recasting the Marxism of the SACP also came from within South Africa. In its initial phase, this was nowhere more evident than in the writings of Jeremy Cronin.

Cronin became active in the UDF after his release from prison in 1983, served as its education officer in the Western Cape, and edited its short-lived theoretical journal, *Isizwe*. Under his own name, he published at least three responses to left critiques of ANC and SACP strategies and their theoretical underpinnings — by Erwin, Peter Hudson and Colin Bundy. His line of argument is clearly discernible in *Isizwe's* discussions of "workerism." Cronin remained active in South Africa, while being hunted by the police, in 1986-1987, and went into exile in late 1987. A two-part treatment of SACP analysis and strategy in *African Communist* in 1988, under the name of Ben Molapo, continues many of the themes of his other work.

In these interventions, the characteristic resources and claims of Western Marxism are mobilized in support of analyses and strategies drawn from the opposing tradition of Soviet Marxism. Cronin's Marxism — that is, the innovations in SACP argument in which he played a central part — had three main characteristics.[5]

First, it developed a conception of the relationship of theory and practice, which did not rely on appeals to the dogmatic authority of Marxism-Leninism. It presented itself as open to debate; indeed, as positively welcoming critical engagement. At the same time, however, it relied on a specific — though never clearly articulated — conception of the practical needs of the present as the basis for debate, as setting the limits for debate that was practically useful rather than mere theoretical indulgence.

In that present, the main practical necessity was always to unify the oppressed under the most readily-accepted banners in struggle against apartheid. To do this, it was necessary also to draw on the past — on its symbols, sacrifices, heroes (Cronin, 1986a:31; 1986b: 73; 1989:71); "the struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting" (Suttner and Cronin, 1986:4-5). But it is a struggle only for the recovery of the past, never for its critical interrogation; it seeks inspiration, and never self-knowledge. The argument for drawing on the symbolism of the past excludes any historical and theoretical examination of how the needs of struggle have been conceptualized. These are "scholastic preoccupations" or questions which are "simply academic" (Cronin, 1986b: 77, 73; cf. *Isizwe Collective*, 1987a:52). In a similar way, South African history is located in world-historical context when recognizing the prestige of the Soviet Union and the historical significance of state socialist regimes (*Isizwe Collective*, 1987b:73-74), but examining the meaning of political concepts in this context becomes an unnecessary "genealogical trip eastward" (Cronin, 1986b:75).

Second, Cronin's Marxism develops a polemical defense of the SACP analysis of South Africa as a colonial society of a special type (CST) which collapses the distinction between CST and racial capitalism. The contributors to *African Communist* of the early 1980s had seen this as a crucial dividing line: the attack on CST was an attack on

"the two stage theory of our revolution" and an attempt to "change the orientation of our movement and all that we stand for" (Nyawuza, 1985:51; cf. Zuma, 1987:85-86). In contrast, Cronin (e.g., 1986a:33) writes as if the argument for a two-stage revolution had never been made. For Suttner and Cronin (1986:129), similarly, "national oppression and capitalist exploitation are inextricably interlinked." In Molapo's account (1988a:69), CST is presented as a form of class domination. Its "contradictory essence" lies in a "constant dialectic of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion" of the black working class. In contrast to the traditional arguments of the SACP, Molapo asserts: "This is a contradiction *within* the workings of South African capitalism itself, between the social forces of production and the mode of domination whereby private ownership and appropriation is secured. It is not a contradiction between 'modern' capitalism and a backward feudal ideology (racism)." Until then, the main purpose of the CST thesis had been to demonstrate that colonial domination must be overthrown *before* the workings of capitalism could be challenged.

Cronin thus inverted the terms of the controversy as it had been conducted until then. FOSATU had distinguished vigorously between nationalism and socialism, in order to warn against the dangers of nationalism for the working class. The SACP made the same distinction, in order to warn against a struggle for socialism which bypassed the essential stage of national liberation. Cronin consistently supports the SACP argument that working class struggles should be subordinated to the goal of national liberation. But in contrast to both FOSATU and earlier SACP positions, he plays down the distinction between nationalism and socialism, describing it as abstract, undialectical and mechanical.

This is the third and crucial characteristic of Cronin's Marxism: the defense of a dialectical, concrete and historical Marxism, which is opposed to that which is abstract, one-sided and mechanical. According to Cronin (1986a:33, cf. 29,37), Erwin's distinction between liberation politics and transformation politics is mechanical because it creates an opposition "in theory where none need exist in practice." Hudson's analysis of the theory of national democratic revolution is "scholastic" because it examines the logic of the arguments for that theory while "in the real world a great many things are not guaranteed" (Cronin, 1986b:77, cf. 73, 74, 78). Bundy's arguments that ANC and SACP strategies have diverged from those entailed by its CST analysis of South Africa is mistaken "because one cannot read [strategy] off abstractly from the concept [of CST]," but must "grasp both the colonial and special type features in their dialectical interconnection" (Cronin, 1989:71). Here and elsewhere (cf. *Isizwe Collective*, 1987a:51; 1987b:75), a dialectical Marxism allows conceptual distinctions only when their objects can never overlap or articulate in practice.

Where does this conception of dialectic come from? It is not to be found in the SACP's philosophical primer — a crude rehash of Stalin's "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," making use of South African examples and giving the direction of history a suitably nationalist twist (Dialego,

n.d.). Rather, it drew on the more open-ended and historical usage of the concept in Western Marxism. But it served an entirely different function from that of the concept of dialectic in Western Marxism.

The concept of dialectic plays a distinctive role within Western Marxism, from Lukacs and Gramsci to the Frankfurt School and Sartre. Put simply, the concept is essential to a materialist account of how consciousness can be transformed in capitalist society. For if Western Marxism had not been able to develop a distinctive account of the contradictions of consciousness in capitalist society, and the potential for movement of such contradictions, and a distinctive mode of analysis of that dialectical movement, their entire project could not have distinguished itself from Soviet Marxism as it did. The concept of dialectic provides a tool for analyzing the movement of its contradictions, as these are embedded in the contradictions of the society itself. The Western Marxist concept of dialectic, in other words, has the task of calling into question — indeed, of making redundant — the Soviet Marxist approach of aligning social forces on the basis that their ideological commitments are fixed by class interest, tradition and the like. In the context of Soviet Marxism, the dialectic legitimates the strategic approach of the party to these differing social forces, and does not entail any real movement within them (cf. Westoby, 1989:195).

While Cronin's use of the term constantly suggests a historical open-endedness, it comes into play only in considering strategical questions, and always takes as its point of departure the popular legitimacy of the ANC/SACP alliance. Within his conception of dialectic, a ceaseless unrest and instability take the place of any intelligible dialectical movement. Indeed, the space between the real and the conceptual, from which any such dialectical movement originates, has been closed down.[6] This has been done by a critique of abstraction, which turns out to be a critique — or rather, a rejection — of all conceptual categories except those of SACP orthodoxy, which alone are legitimated by their circular inclusion in the realm of practical necessity.

Cronin's Marxism filled the gap which was left by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of its Marxism. It did away with the crude dogmatism of Soviet Marxism, but preserved its instrumentalism. His critique of abstraction was elaborated philosophically by the author of the primer of a decade before (Dialego, 1987:64; cf. SACP, 1991). Cronin himself was elected to the Central Committee of the SACP in 1989, and became editor of *African Communist* on its re-location to South Africa in 1990.

Perhaps more than any of the left critics of the SACP in the 1980s, Cronin articulated the basic conception underlying the complex tradition of Western Marxism: of a Marxism which "is not a monolithic and closed dogma simply awaiting application" but a body of theory which "constantly needs to be tried out in practice, developed and revised"(1991:26). But he articulated it only to preserve the essential content of Soviet Marxism. More sure-footed than Joe Slovo — whose denunciation of Stalinism was more widely-acclaimed[7] — Cronin's Marxism enabled the SACP to deny anything more than "mild Stalinism" (Cronin,

1990b:100), and hold on to the banner of Marxism-Leninism, while denying it all theoretical content (e.g., SACP, 1998:75-76).

The success of this philosophical stratagem within the SACP is not so hard to understand as is the extent to which it disarmed the Western Marxist critics of the SACP. For by the end of the 1980s, these critics of the SACP were preparing to lay down their own theoretical premises.

The End of the Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa

A year after de Klerk's unbanning of the ANC and SACP, Mike Morris (1991b:16) wrote about "strange events" as the new South Africa began to take shape:

> One of them is the rapid movement into the SACP of a large grouping of leftists who traditionally were its strongest left wing critics… The independent unions had become the organizational base and rallying ground of a strong grouping of organizationally astute and politically articulate democratic socialists. Their intellectual roots lay in the new Western Marxism of the 1970s rather than in the Stalinist tradition of Russian Bolshevism. Their political focus on a particular style of organizing (i.e. union autonomy, democratic organization, mass accountability) was often bitterly opposed by those, including many in the unions, who sided with the SACP.

After 30 years of growth and development, the current of Marxism in South Africa, which had defined itself by its willingness to subject all existing conditions to critique, had effectively disappeared. Space does not allow us to examine its development and dissolution in the later 1980s in any detail. But there are three questions which, it seems to me, must be posed in conclusion.

When did the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa come to an end?: Morris identifies the process which most conspicuously signaled the end of the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa: the absorption of leading figures from that tradition into the SACP. He discusses this development as if the future of the "democratic left" is still in the balance. Can they still "ensure a new socialist direction for the left in South Africa?," he asks (1991b:17). But it soon appears that all that remains for them is to settle the terms on which they will be absorbed into the SACP. In July 1990, when the SACP announced its internal leadership group, it included leading figures of the independent trade union movement — Moses Mayekiso, John Gomomo from NUMSA; Chris Dlamini of FAWU, who had been elected president of FOSATU at the same 1982 congress at which Foster's paper had been adopted (cf. Pillay, 1990). Alec Erwin joined the party. And the SACP committed itself firmly to a compromise with capitalism. Cronin (1990a:11) explained: "There is a necessity to keep the red flag flying during this period, but at the same time not to make it seem like the major present confrontation is between the red flag and the flag of free enterprise."

Desai and Bohmke (1997) provide an illuminating account of Marxist (or formerly Marxist) intellectuals in the 1990s, which describes the shift of the leading figures of this generation from radical critique of capitalism to arguments that there is no alternative to working within its limits to activism on behalf of big capital and demonization of

radical critics (1997:14, 18, 23, 25). Their account locates the demise of their Marxism in the ANC's accommodation with capital, engineered during the transition process with the assistance of the Macro-economic Research Group (MERG), the Industrial Strategy Project at UCT and the Sociology of Work Project (SWOP) at Wits, and culminating in the ANC's acceptance in 1996 of a neo-liberal economic policy (GEAR) co-authored by a prominent Marxist of the 1980s, Stephen Gelb (Desai and Bohmke, 1997:15-24).

This paper suggests a different interpretation. It has sought to show the philosophical continuities and discontinuities that shaped the assimilation of Western Marxism in South Africa, which developed out of the peculiar conditions of the 1960s. The philosophical synthesis on which that process depended, began to come apart as the conditions which gave rise to it came to an end, with the upsurge of mass resistance in the 1980s. A Marxism which sought to prepare the oppressed majority for participation in a movement which recognized and upheld their autonomous choices could neither bring such a movement into being nor could it limit itself to a more restricted context. There is no single event or process in which the end of the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa can be located. But this interpretation suggests that its demise began well before the unbanning of the ANC and SACP in 1990.

Perhaps a crucial episode was the adoption of the Freedom Charter by the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) at its foundation congress in May 1987, "thus attempting to imprint on the Freedom Charter the strategy of the shop floor tradition" (Pillay and Webster, 1991:33; cf. Obery, 1987). At the same time, NUMSA called for a Workers' Charter — a call that was seen at the COSATU congress as an alternative to the Freedom Charter, and was accepted only in 1989 (cf. Baskin, 1991:353). NUMSA was the organizational stronghold of the socialist left outside of the SACP, and its willingness to submerge itself into the dominant ideology "on the grounds that it was dominant" (cf. NUMSA, 1987) struck away the basic understanding of politics on which that left had been built. NUMSA's attempt to initiate a working-class charterism was a political dead-end as well. The idea was supported by the ANC, SACP and SACTU and the campaign for a workers' charter soon faltered over "lack of clarity over what to do with the demands" (Baskin, 1991:442-443). Did it set out rights that were to be accommodated within a capitalist order, or a vision of a socialist society? By its very nature, the charter was open to ambiguity, confusion and manipulation on this central question.

Why did the moment of Western Marxism end?: For some commentators, that moment ended once its insights had been vindicated by the negotiated settlement of the 1990s. This is the thrust of Eddie Webster's account of Turner as the apostle of "gradualism, flexibility and compromise" in the trade union movement, and the strategy of "radical reform" in South African politics, rather than the "Leninist notion of revolutionary rupture" (Webster, 1993:7, 9, 11). Webster recognizes the legacy of Turner in such corporatist institutions as the National Manpower

Commission and the National Economic Forum, and in arguments for socialists to give priority to creating a "more humane and more dynamic" capitalist order (1993:10). He regrets only that Turner did not recognize from the beginning the strength of the "national movement" — that is, the ANC (1993:8). In mitigation, he surmises that Turner would have sided with populists against workerists in the 1980s, and explains that his closeness to Buthelezi "needs to be placed in its context" of ANC links with Inkatha (1993:13, 5).

Where Turner argued for individuals to make ethical choices unconstrained by prevailing relations of power, Webster's concern is to locate him — and through Turner, Webster himself — as far as possible on the winning side. And what Webster does for Turner, Maree does for COSATU, arguing tortuously that its tradition of participatory democracy is upheld in the new parliamentarianism, in spite of the small detail that this is not done in the way "envisaged by rank and file members of COSATU, but rather by recognizing that the political terrain is more complex and that more sophisticated strategies are required" (Maree, 1998:50). This strategy of siding retrospectively with the those from whom you have most to gain is taken to its logical conclusion by Turner's first wife, now a Labor MP in Britain, who simply invents for him a past as a "key ANC leader" (*Sunday Independent*, May 4, 1997).

Morris' account of the influx of left intellectuals and activists into the SACP is more honest in recognizing the divisions of the past. He denounces the SACP's culture of "political thuggery, dogmatism, slander, slavishness," and calls for it to be "confronted, undone and replaced with a fresh, democratic and open political culture" (Morris, 1991b:16, 32; cf. Jordan, 1990:88). But the source of these differing political cultures remains unclear, so that the argument suggests that the ideal of democratic socialism, upheld on both sides, has been vindicated by events.

If Webster, Maree and (to a lesser extent) Morris treat the end of the Western Marxist moment as its vindication, Desai and Bohmke write as if its demise proved that it was a deceit and betrayal from the beginning. "Was it not their fling with radicalism which was the aberration?," they ask of this generation. "Whilst some of the sons and daughters of the ruling classes rushed to the border to fill in the breach, a few others…volunteered for a stint of sleeping with the enemy." With the ending of apartheid and the stabilization of capitalism, they "have been recalled from their far out points of reconnaissance in Left politics and have been reassigned more domestic tasks" (1997:26, 28, 29). Such military metaphor can take no account of the complex development of the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa. It denies that it ever happened, rather than grasping its inherent weaknesses and strengths.

Again, this paper suggests a different interpretation. It has stressed the peculiar conditions that ensured that Western Marxism in South Africa was at the same time dependent on a capacity for critical reflection and yet unable to develop that capacity. Again, there is no single event in which this failure can be located, but there is one that has a peculiar poignancy. For the one sustained philosophical engagement with the theory and practice of Marxism which occurred in South Africa during those decades was interrupted by the assassination of Richard Turner. After his banning in 1973, Turner completed substantial parts of a philosophical enquiry, provisionally entitled "From Rousseau to Sartre," which critically interrogated the premises of his own earlier work and sought to establish the conditions for a materialist dialectic.[8] These texts were never published, and played no part in deciding the character and direction of Marxism in South Africa in the decades that followed.

That is not to say that any one text would have created the philosophical culture that could have sustained Western Marxism in South Africa. Indeed, its fate was decided by larger forces — not only by the tempo of mass struggle in South Africa, and the international isolation of the apartheid regime — but also by the trajectory of Western Marxism in the advanced capitalist countries in which it was most well-established. This is not the occasion for a (long overdue) examination of how theoretical developments in the West affected the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. But the end of the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa cannot be fully understood without grasping the way in which the political weakness of Western Marxism in the advanced capitalist countries impacted on its interpretation of the struggle against apartheid, and in turn on the ways in which participants in that struggle interpreted their own role.

The crucial figure in the interpretation of that struggle for the Western left, in the English-speaking world at least, was almost certainly John Saul, whose writings appeared regularly over three decades in *New Left Review, Monthly Review, Socialist Register* and the Toronto-based *Southern Africa Report*. Saul's ambivalence towards Soviet Marxism in the Third World reflected the dilemmas of Western Marxism. On the one hand, Saul (1985:138, 143, 139) describes the "pre-packaged Marxist-Leninist pedagogy" upheld, for example, by FRELIMO in Mozambique as "mechanical and lifeless," "frozen," and "a rationalization and legitimation of a bureaucratic, technocratic and authoritarian status quo." On the other, Mozambique "continues to inject the vitality of its own experience into the Marxist tradition," and FRELIMO has "deepened [Marxism] theoretically" beyond the "brilliant formulations" of its leaders, and especially Samora Machel (Saul, 1985:27-29).

This dichotomy enables Saul to keep alive his glowing admiration for the leaders of African liberation movements who are the most conspicuous symbols of African resistance in the West. In the South African context, he notes that the SACP "has not been one of the most open and independent of Communist Parties" (Saul, 1986:17). At the same time, he deploys the theoretical resources of Western Marxism (Gramsci, Luxemburg) to demonstrate the centrality of the ANC strategies drawn precisely from the Marxism of the SACP. "Just as the ANC is at the center of things, so the center of things is increasingly within the ANC: the continuing dialectic between this movement and the considerable revolutionary energies at play within the society has become the single most important process at work in

South Africa's political economy" (Saul and Gelb, 1981:146). The need of the Western left to find a clear focus for their support of the struggle against apartheid gradually erodes the capacity of Western Marxism in South Africa to sustain an alternative conception of struggle to that of the ANC and SACP. Once his revolutionary hopes had been thwarted, it was Saul (1991) who developed the main theoretical arguments for radical reform, and Gelb (1991), the co-author of the influential "Crisis in South Africa," who told the South African left that "there is no alternative" to capitalism.

Finally, *what can be learned from the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa?:* For those who regard the moment of Western Marxism as having ended in triumphant vindication, its lessons have already been learned. For those who regard that moment as an elaborate deception of the oppressed majority, there never was anything to be learned. I do not wish to argue for a return to Western Marxism. Its moment has passed. But there are lessons still to be learned from its demise, and these three lessons stand out most clearly.

First, the basic philosophical division between Soviet and Western Marxism has not disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union or the displacement of Marxism from the central role it occupied in Western intellectual life in the 1970s. There remain two fundamentally different philosophies of human liberation. Those who upheld the Soviet model of liberation as improved levels of consumption, based on increased economic production, guided by superior insight of managers and policy-makers have often slipped easily into the similar claims of capitalist ideology. The alternative model of liberation as active engagement of ordinary people in deciding the conditions of their lives on the basis of conscious and rational understanding of their condition provides the only foundation for building a Marxist tradition in South Africa.

Second, if Marxism is to be renewed in South Africa, this will not happen simply through winning support for a "correct" or "truly Marxist" political strategy. The strategic conflicts of the 1980s were often so sterile because of the limited theoretical resources on which those debates could draw. A new generation of Marxist intellectuals will not be drawn from disenchanted white youth, as happened in the 1960s; but nor will it bypass the universities. In particular, it will not come into being without the hard work of developing perspectives and arguments that provide the basis for a fundamental re-orientation of South African politics and intellectual life.

Third, a renewed Marxism in South Africa will depend on, and will have to contribute towards, a new kind of internationalism. The struggle against apartheid became at times a focus of the hopes of the revolutionary left around the world. It represents a missed opportunity for the left not only in the more obvious sense that it did not result in a real challenge to the power of global capitalism. It was also an opportunity to transform the historical relationship of Marxist theory and working class politics, and overcome the division which allows a dialectical Marxism to flourish in the universities and journals, while working class politics are dominated by the managerialism of Soviet Marxism or social-democracy. The opportunity will not come again without developing an understanding, locally and internationally, of what was lost with the end of the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa.

Notes

[1] For detailed accounts of the tradition of Western Marxism, see Anderson 1979 and Jacoby 1982. The character of this tradition, as it came to bear on the South African context, is more fully discussed in sections three, seven and nine of this paper.

[2] I use the term Soviet Marxism rather than Stalinism or Marxism-Leninism for three reasons. It seems to me the least polemical term available for a body of thought whose description often begs the main questions. Many of its key philosophical features are shared with Trotskyism. The contrast between Lenin's own thought and Western Marxism depends on a narrow view of Lenin, which ignores crucial parts of his thought after 1914 (cf. Anderson 1995; Nash 1990).

[3] There was an earlier intersection of trade unionism and radical historiography in South Africa, which took place outside the domain of Communist politics and Soviet Marxism. Solly Sachs, then general secretary of the Garment Workers Union and expelled from the CPSA in 1931, invited Basil Davidson to visit South Africa in 1951, after Davidson had been refused entry to Eastern Europe. The visit was a turning point for Davidson, who was to play a crucial role in the development of radical approaches to African Studies. These approaches, in turn, powerfully influenced the radical historians of South Africa in the 1970s.

[4] SACP attacks on FOSATU and the radical historians sometimes linked them to the members of the SACTU editorial board who had been suspended from the ANC in 1979 and expelled in 1985, after forming the Marxist Workers Tendency (MWT) of the ANC. The MWT was Trotskyist in inspiration, and allied to the Militant Tendency in the British Labour Party. Their ideas are by no means irrelevant to the argument of this paper, but are not discussed in the limited space available here.

[5] This does not imply that Cronin was necessarily the author (or sole author) of articles published under the name of the Isizwe Collective or Ben Molapo.

[6] "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy" (Adorno, 1990:5).

[7] To some extent, Slovo represented the face that the SACP wished to show the Western left (and Western capital) after 1989. In keeping with this role, his most vigorous denunciation of Stalinism — describing the SACP's "so-called Leninism" as "repackaged Stalinism…in search of legitimation" (1991:10) — was made at a conference organized by *Monthly Review* in New York. Morris (1991a:45) comments on the "surprising adulation" with which Slovo's contribution was received. Cronin and other SACP leaders sensed, correctly, that Soviet Marxism had not been discredited among militant workers and youth in South Africa. Slovo never really gave any other content to Marxism, with the result that his critique of Stalinism became an abandonment of Marxism as anything more than a broad ethical stance.

[8] Turner completed five texts as part of this project, amounting to about 500 pages of typescript. The longest single text draws substantially on his earlier work on Sartre, and would probably have been extensively revised or shortened. Turner himself only circulated one part of this project while still alive — an untitled text on dialectics (92 pages). A brief and provisional sketch of the larger project is provided in Turner 1973.

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