

South African Communist Party 1991

A Survey of the South African Debate on the Decline of Socialism in Eastern Europe

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Socialism, as it was understood by Marx and Engels, would be the first phase in the process of creating a society that would have no need for repression and oppression because it had overcome economic scarcity. Marx and Engels envisaged a society in which the social productive forces had developed to a point that they would be capable of producing such a surplus of goods and services that the majority of people would no longer have to spend the greater part of their lives in work. The planned allocation of resources and human labour, in such a future society, would also ensure that no one would have to degrade themselves by working for another human being in order to survive. Instead of work being something we all try to avoid, it would gradually be transformed into one of a wide range of creative activities people engage in to make their lives meaningful.

For centuries the wisest human minds and the most far-sighted of our thinkers had thought about and tried to work out plans for a human society not dominated by exploiters, be they slave-owners or captains of industry: A society in which human beings could enjoy the fullness of life without the need to make others their servants, or to be servants of others. Marx and Engels predicted that the development of the productive forces under industrial capitalism would for the first time in human history build the material basis for such a fundamental transformation of society.

Marxists have always stood opposed to the proposition that it is the destiny of most human beings to live an unfulfilled life. For example, Marx in his essay, "The Future Results of British Rule in India" wrote: "When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan god, who would not drink the nectar except from the skulls of the slain. "

Marx's statement implies that human progress has until our day relied on the grossest forms of oppression and misery. But it also says that such economic exploitation, oppression and repression, though regrettable, are unavoidable features of human history as long as the combined output of human labour, science, the machines and technology people have created, is not large enough to provide sufficient food, shelter, recreation, education and necessary luxuries for everyone. Socialists call this condition "economic scarcity." Economic exploitation, oppression and repression, to the Marxists, therefore, pose not an unchanging human problem, but are historical problems which could disappear when our productive forces have developed to an extent that nobody goes without what they need for a fully human life.

The realization of that vision today seems even more remote after the collapse of “existing socialism” in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Its deep crisis in China, Cuba and the post capitalist states in Asia means there is an increasing likelihood that it might completely disappear. There are many enemies of socialism who hope it will destroy itself because of its internal contradictions. One cannot however rule out the possibility of imperialist intervention, tempted by the crisis of socialism, especially in the case of Cuba, to bring down socialist governments.

Unusually, it was from a non-governing Communist Party in the third world that the most searching critical appraisal of this crisis has emerged. The work in question has excited a great deal of comment precisely because it was produced by the General Secretary of the South African Communist Party, Joe Slovo.

Joe Slovo’s intervention is important in other ways as well. The SACP is among the oldest Communist Parties, founded in 1921, four years after the October Revolution. The SACP is a highly respected ally in the national liberation alliance, in marked contrast to the discrediting of both socialism and Communist Parties in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. As one reporter remarked, as fast as red flags come down in Eastern Europe, an equal number are raised in South Africa. At the very moment of the decline and collapse of its sister parties in Europe the SACP appears to be on the verge of success. The White liberal press might make nasty jokes about it as the “last Marxist-Leninist Party.” But, unlike the trend in most other capitalist countries, in South Africa the Communist Party is not irrelevant, it is in fact a political force that cannot be ignored. In this article I shall be addressing the responses to Joe Slovo’s pamphlet, “Has Socialism Failed?,” especially among writers in this region and the debate his intervention has initiated about both the crisis of socialism and the nature of socialism itself.

Slovo called for “ an unsparing critique” of existing socialism so that socialists could “draw the necessary lessons.” Frankly, though his pamphlet was a refreshing breeze, Slovo did not live up to his words in his analysis of the Soviet experience. This does not merely reflect subjective weaknesses but suggests an unfortunate underestimation of the severe damage Stalinism has inflicted on both the ideals of socialism and the societies on which it was imposed. This shortcoming is the result of too long an association with the least attractive traditions in Marxism which discouraged a critical look at “existing socialism,” above all, as it was practiced in the Soviet Union.

Responses to Slovo’s invitation varied in both their general thrust and in quality. A number of Marxists not associated with the SACP, who are active in the democratic and the labour movement came forward to engage him specifically on the distortions of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. A considerable number of writers in the Trotskyist tradition saw this as a long awaited opportunity to reopen the old debates, not only about the nature of socialism but also the line of march of the liberation movement. One or two writers, among them supporters of the SACP, came to the defence of the time worn empty phrases of orthodoxy, while a few others seized the occasion to vent their anger on the SACP and all its doings.

Slovo himself was afforded the opportunity to respond to these critics on the occasion of the Monthly Review anniversary in November 1990. He has also developed and

elaborated on his views in a number of interviews carried in left-wing magazines such as “New Era,” “The South African Labour Bulletin” and “Work in Progress.”

The hardest hitting among Slovo’s critics was Professor Archie M. Mafeje, an Oxbridge trained South African social scientist, who has become a regular contributor to “Southern Africa Political and Economic Monthly” (SAPEM), a regional journal published in Harare.

Mafeje unfortunately did not engage with Slovo, choosing instead to scold the SACP and its ally, the ANC, about the policies they are pursuing to bring down apartheid. Although Professor Mafeje could have made a number of valid points, these got lost because of the Africanist stance he adopted. This was unfortunate because South African Marxism has an extremely under-developed theoretical tradition to which Mafeje might have made a more substantial contribution if he had contained his bad temper. In this instance his eagerness to settle accounts with ideological opponents got the better of him. He was even tempted into making factually incorrect assertions, that are easily be disproved, that the SACP is a White party.

Few other writers followed Mafeje down this ill-chosen path, the overwhelming majority chose to conduct their arguments with restraint.

Defenders of Orthodoxy.

Given the traditions of the SACP, Slovo’s essay must have arrived as a major shock to a number of the old-guard Communists and former party members. Slovo was ready to drop a number of ideas and criticise many practices that had been considered beyond reproach in the Communist Party. His pamphlet, however, was published as a “discussion document,” explicitly not as a document representing the SACP’s collective views. This perhaps reflects the reluctance of the majority of the leadership to come to grips with the true character of the crisis and the implications it has for the cause of socialism in South Africa and the world.

In the past South African Communists had usually explained away the glaring shortcomings of Soviet socialism by appealing to the fact that the Soviet Union was the first ever socialist society. No road-maps, so we were told, had been provided to assist the young socialist republic to find its way on the unknown terrain it had ventured into.

This is the main line of argument in an apologetic article written by Harry Gwala, a veteran SACP leader from the Natal Midlands, published in the “African Communist” (No. 123. Last Quarter, 1990.)

Relying on the standard arguments, Gwala urges Slovo to “Look at History in the Round,” suggesting that he has focused too narrowly on one aspect of a complex process. Gwala argues that Slovo is being wiser after the event and moreover is overlooking the economic and political circumstances under which socialism had to be built in the Soviet Union. Economic backwardness was bound to lead to a backward form of socialism, Gwala asserts.

A similar line of reasoning is followed by Mike Neocosmos, who ironically joined the debate with a view to defend Slovo against two of his critics. The Communist Parties, Neocosmos claims, cannot be held accountable for “the muck of ages” which resulted in the bureaucratic degeneration of socialist countries and their institutions. Neocosmos gives us a clue to his political preferences by permitting himself a rather vicious swipe at the Workers’ Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA), a Trotskyist group. The most hardline defence of orthodoxy came from a very unlikely source, David Kitson, a former member of the SACP underground during the 1960’s who served a 20 year sentence for his role in the activities of Umkhonto weSizwe. Writing in the Johannesburg based monthly, “Work in Progress,” (No 73, April 1991) Kitson asks: “Is the SACP Really Communist?”

Kitson’s answer is implicit in the question. To prove his assertion, Kitson subjects Slovo’s pamphlet to a comparison with certain writings of Lenin. Kitson says that by abandoning the concept “the dictatorship of the proletariat” Slovo has joined the revisionists and class traitors who have given up the fight for socialism. He rests a large part of his argument on Slovo’s use of Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of the Bolshevik Party, which Rosa Luxemburg wrote shortly after the October Revolution, “The Russian Revolution.” In that book, while recognising the achievement of the Russian working class movement, Rosa Luxemburg, referring to the banning of free political debate during the Civil War, criticises the Bolsheviks for arguing that such an unpleasant necessity is a good thing. This, Kitson charges, demonstrates that like Rosa Luxemburg, Slovo (and by implication the SACP) has abandoned a class approach to the question of freedom.

The defence of orthodoxy amounted a plea for understanding of the vast discrepancies between the original vision and the reality of existing socialism. Gwala reminded us of the continued presence of an armed enemy at the gates of all socialist countries. In 1918 there came first of the nine capitalist powers that invaded to assist the old ruling classes of Russia. Then in 1941 the Nazi hordes invaded the USSR. After that war and until quite recently, the socialist countries were ringed with aggressive alliances — NATO, SEATO, CENTO and the other arms of US world hegemony. The socialist countries, Gwala argues, lived under an unrelenting state of siege and therefore never experienced stability. It escapes these apologists that this permanent state of emergency might have been relieved had the Communist Parties taken the working class into their confidence and not tried to force them to support socialism. That would have proved its most effective line of defence. That the methods they prescribe have in fact failed has taught the orthodox nothing. At best they will concede that the CPs administered too much of it, but they insist the medicine they were applying is good. .

The Left Oppositionist Critique.

Trotskyism, as in most countries, is a minority trend among democratic activists of the left. Crises in the Soviet bloc have inevitably made many who resisted it in the past, rethink what the Trotskyists have said in their criticisms of Soviet political practice. For instance, after the uprisings in Poland and Hungary in 1956, Trotskyism attracted a number of left students. Those who escaped imprisonment during the repression that followed the Rivonia Trial in 1964, gradually drifted out of active politics. The crude repression of left and right wing critics in the Soviet Union at the height of the Brezhnev

era drove most of the rising left intellectuals who came into the movement during those years away from socialism.

South African Trotskyists had been forced into an uncomfortable silence during the 1980s as the SACP's influence and visibility grew within the mass democratic movement. Slovo's intervention helped to make it legitimate to criticise the Soviet Union in the eyes of many activists and the Trotskyists were not slow to seize the opportunity.

Since the mid 1980's the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA), led by Neville Alexander, has provided a political home for those Trotskyists operating outside the Charterist camp, while the so-called "Marxist Workers' Tendency" has been the rallying point for those within it. Writing in the non-sectarian "South African Labour Bulletin" (SALB Vol. 15. No 3.) WOSA linked the degeneration of socialism in the Soviet Union, to Stalin's policy of building "Socialism in One Country." This, WOSA argued, was the result of a counter-revolution in the Soviet CP and marked a crucial retreat from Leninist principles and practice, which led to a lack of commitment to proletarian internationalism, on the part of the Soviet leadership, if not outright appeasement of international imperialism for the sake of peace.

After the defeat of the Left Opposition (in 1927), so WOSA argues, the Soviet Union became a country which was not prepared to upset the international order and became more concerned to secure its own international boundaries and was therefore prepared to buy peace with imperialism by discouraging revolutions in other countries. WOSA relates this to the SACP's own strategic line, the theory of Colonial of a Special Type (CST), adopted by the SACP after the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928. This, they argue, is the South African face of Stalinist appeasement of the bourgeoisie as it committed the SACP to the pursuing of bourgeois-democratic goals, — such as the franchise, redistribution of the land, the right to trade anywhere, etc — rather than posing a socialist alternative to apartheid capitalism. Only by abandoning this theory will the SACP demonstrate its turning away from Stalinism, they say.

A more thoughtful critique from the Trotskyist perspective came from the pens of Themba and Mathole, two writers who pose the question: "Has Socialism as Yet Come into Being?" published in SAPEM alongside Archie Mafeje.

In sixteen tightly argued theses Themba and Mathole subject the practice of both the SACP and the Soviet Union to a searching critique. They generously acknowledge that the SACP's newssheet, "Umsebenzi" has begun to break out of the Stalinist mould but nonetheless point up the SACP's decades-long record of abject apologetics for the CPSU and former Soviet bloc countries.

"The Party and its press," they jeer, "imposed silence on those who wished to voice their reservations about all these."

The main points of their argument are that it was incorrect to refer to the eastern European countries, China, North Korea, Cuba and the Soviet Union as socialist because socialism had not been realised by any of these countries. Socialism, Themba and Mathole assert,

“... would be a society of free producers, working under a rationally planned economy and no longer made up of buyers and sellers trading products through the market, but a community of people who turn out goods for society at large and receive them for personal consumption from society’s common pool, This vision posited a society so wealthy, so educated, so cultured that there would be no need or necessity for instruments of direct or indirect coercion. “Socialism, ... would thus be a post industrial society.”

Communist-led revolutions, however, came first in under-developed and semi-colonial countries and led to the creation of “post-capitalist” societies in places which lacked the industrial infra-structure capitalist development would have created. The task of primitive accumulation — that is, assembling the material and human resources for industrial development — consequently had to be undertaken by these post-capitalist societies, resulting in the betrayal of the working class and other working people whose struggles had brought about change.

In an innovative departure from the orthodox Trotskyist approach, they cite three contradictions within the post-capitalist societies, using Russia, China and Cuba as their examples. The first is the requirement, imposed by economic backwardness, that the working class party and state supervise the extraction of surplus value from the workers. The second, deriving from the first, is the role the workers’ state assumed as the central player in the economy. The third, they say, derives from the character of the working class itself, which is a constantly changing class made up of persons from a number of different backgrounds . The consciousness of the working class, as a result, is always altering, and this fact makes it necessary that a vanguard party assume the role of custodian of its revolutionary role.

Like many others, Themba and Mathole, charge that Slovo’s account of the roots of Stalinism is inadequate, personalized and not consistent with historical materialism. At the end of their article they pose a challenging question: Is the Soviet Union (and by implication, similar social formations) deserving of the international solidarity of the working class?

They answer their question in the affirmative, invoking Trotsky’s defence of the Soviet Union on the eve of World War II. Trotsky had argued that despite Stalinism, it was the duty of the international proletariat to defend the Soviet Union because, deformed though it was, it was the only existing alternative to the barbarism of imperialism.

Unlike WOSA, Themba and Mathole do not draw negative conclusions about the SACP’s programme on the basis of their critique of the CPSU. By concentrating on the silences and the weaknesses they detect in Slovo’s pamphlet they do, indirectly, pose serious questions about the real possibilities of the socialist revolution in South Africa. They make out a strong case to demonstrate that in the absence of an industrial base plus the experience of the economic and political struggles of a modern proletariat, it is well-nigh impossible to construct socialism. It is a pity they did not follow this up by looking at the implications this has for the prospects of socialism in South Africa itself.

WOSA, on the other hand, appears to treat the notion of Socialism in One Country as an original sin, which led to a fall from grace in every other respect. CST, and many other

'sins' are thus attributable to it. But this is rather hard to understand because WOSA itself presently advances the immediate strategic objective of a democratic revolution with a socialist transformation growing out of it. Leon Trotsky, from whom WOSA presumably derive their inspiration, in his letter to South Africa written in the 1930s, warmly commended the 1928 Black Republic, the basis of CST, to his followers in South Africa. One is left wondering what immediate strategic tasks WOSA wishes to pose for the South African left.

Themba and Mathole, on the other hand, leave the distinct impression that they support the idea that Stalinism was inevitable, when one takes account of all the circumstances surrounding the Russian Revolution. Citing the fictitious character, Boxer, created by George Orwell in his satire "Animal Farm," they claim:

"... the working class is betrayed, and has to be betrayed in this process, because in order to create a better tomorrow, it must be deprived today..."

If there is indeed this element of inevitability, does this not imply that socialism was indeed a failure?

The challenges Themba and Mathole address to Slovo at the end of their article will be with us for a long time. These are the dilemmas every left movement has had to grapple with in assessing not only the Soviet bloc, but also the newly independent ex-colonial states and revolutionary movements that are still engaged in the struggle for power. They correctly warn against the trend to treat all dictatorial regimes as if they are one and the same and the adoption of "a plague upon both your houses" as impractical options in a world where imperialism seeks to establish global dominance. Though there are no easy choices, choices have to be made.

The Independent and New Left.

I was among the few members of the ANC who took up Slovo's challenge to debate the issues raised by his pamphlet, in an article titled "Crisis of Conscience in the SACP," published first in "Transformation" and SAPEM and later republished in both Work in Progress and the SALB.

My line of argument was that though Slovo's pamphlet signalled the emergence of a refreshing critical spirit in the ranks of the SACP, he offered an incomplete explanation of the root causes of Stalinism. I reminded readers of a long tradition within Marxism that was critical of Stalinism, dating back to the writings of Soviet leaders such as Trotsky, Rakovsky and Zinoviev during the 1920s, down to those of Rudolf Bahro, from the former GDR, in our day. These writers had sought to explain the phenomenon in terms of the material conditions in Soviet Russia after the Civil War, especially the need to industrialize and, given the insufficient numbers of personnel possessing managerial skills, the growth of a class of bureaucrats who took charge of the state and the economy. I stressed the dispersal of the working class in the chaos occasioned by the civil society and the political crisis the Bolsheviks faced in the cities in the early 1920s when some of most revolutionary workers and sailors refused to recognise the party's leadership.

I said the Bolsheviks faced dilemma. They took decisions which they hoped would be short-term expedients, but because the international situation did not change were forced to adapt these to long-term policies. I suggested that this was perhaps one of the elements that made them lose sight of their original goal. An extreme pragmatism, that took little account of principles, was one of the hallmarks of Stalinism. I specifically challenged the argument put forward by the liberals that Stalinism was the logical outcome of Marxism-Leninism and invited the South African Communists to have a second look at the work of anti- Stalinist Marxist writers.

Karl Holdt, one of the editors of the SALB, approached the problem from a different direction, the thrust of his argument being that Lenin and the Bolsheviks had a rather weak conception of civil society and consequently tended to regard the party as the principle active element of society. In Holdt's view, this encouraged the trend to vest too much authority in the party.

Ironically, when Slovo was afforded the opportunity to respond to his critics he appeared to ignore all the others to concentrate only on mine. Even here, however, he excluded the greater part of my arguments from consideration choosing the unfortunate course of challenging me that a critique of Stalinism from a Trotskyist perspective is less than useless since Trotsky himself was not committed to democracy. This gave the impression that my point of departure was Trotskyist. While Trotsky was one of the many Communist opponents of Stalinism I cited, there were others, such as Bukharin, Djilas, Kuron and Bahro, to name a few.

The weakness of Slovo's reply is that it raises even more questions than his original pamphlet. He seems to base a large part of his argument on a quick reading of Isaac Deutscher's "The Prophet Armed" and a less than certain grasp of the issues involved in the Trade Union Debate which took place in the Soviet Union between 1920 and 1921.

Slovo suggests that the seeds of Stalinism were in fact sown by the future oppositionists themselves — and he specifically names Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev and Radek as among those responsible for sowing them long before Stalin was in the saddle. The barbs he directs against the opponents of Stalin amount to petty debating points when one considers that the terror of the mid-1930s would probably have descended on the Soviet Union at least a decade earlier had these Bolshevik leaders not been there to frustrate Stalin's plans. I find it strange that Slovo cannot give them credit for trying to defend what was best in Lenin's party.

None of Slovo's critics, let alone I, suggested that Stalinism appeared like mushrooms after the rains during the 1930s. But the question must be posed: by seeking to spread the blame, is Slovo not indirectly letting Stalin, its chief architect, off the hook?

Whatever faults in Bolshevik theory and practice assisted Stalin's rise to a leading position in the Party, there was a point at which a crucial transformation — a qualitative change occurred — separating Stalinism from all that preceded it. That critical point entailed, among other horrors, the slaughter of precisely the oppositionists Slovo suggests should now share the blame with their murderer!

None of Slovo's critics played down the responsibility that the old Bolsheviks bore for that outcome. On the contrary, I stress the grave error they all committed by supporting the outlawing of the ideas of the Workers' Opposition in 1921. Unless Slovo wishes to suggest that Stalinism was latent in Bolshevism, his arguments on this score are extremely shaky.

Slovo evades the most important points of my argument, which he dismisses as "class reductionism." In opposition he argues that since economic rewards under socialism are still determined by the contribution the individual makes rather than need, those who contribute more will receive more and that is bound to lead to some being more privileged than others. This is uncontested by myself or others. More to the point, however, a distinction must be drawn between a system that recognises the unavoidable and unpleasant necessity of such differences in incomes and power and one that glorifies it, as Stalinism did.

Slovo does not even mention the empowerment of factory directors (beneath whose feet Kaganovich expected the earth to tremble) and their superiors (before whom the planets presumably trembled), at the expense of the working class, with a glibness that I find alarming. It is evident that these state and government officials were not merely persons who received larger pay packets because of the value of their contribution. They had in fact been transformed into petty tyrants with great powers over the working class.

According to Bahro, members of this stratum could pass these privileges on to their children from generation to generation, just as rich people pass on their property to their children under capitalism. The wide gulf between them and the working class can be measured by their showy, privileged life style — the hunting lodges, exclusive suburbs, holiday homes, special shops, limousines. But more importantly, I pointed up the position they occupied, as early as the 1920s, within the CPSU itself, as indicated by the census of party membership for 1927!

The way in which this caste functioned, the manner in which its members related to each other and the rest of society are not the small matters Slovo seeks to reduce them to. They lie at the root of the mass dissatisfaction with socialism that finally persuaded millions of east German workers that it was preferable to be governed by Kohl, the Conservative Prime Minister of West Germany, rather than by the Communists, Erich Honnecker or Egon Krenz.

In the Soviet Union itself the "unthinkable" has happened. Socialism, in whatever shape or form, is totally discredited and pro-capitalist, nationalist and Russian chauvinist elements have acquired the upper hand. The democratic version of socialism, let alone the views of the Bolshevik opposition to Stalinism, has been completely marginalised and receives very little hearing. For the time being, it can be said that socialism has been defeated in the former socialist countries of Europe.

By the early 1990s Perestroika had failed and existed only in name. The social and political forces whom Gorbachev had welded into a winning coalition in the CPSU had all but abandoned it or were exhausted. The liberal intelligentsia, oddly dubbed the

“left” by the western media, had become explicitly pro-capitalist and their leader, Boris Yelstin, had taken up the banner of Russian nationalism.

Part of the explanation for this reverse is that in Eastern Europe, with the exceptions of Yugoslavia and Albania where it had won wide spread popular support through the anti-Nazi war of liberation, “communism” was regarded as an imposition by a much hated foreign country. It had never been a popular cause. Ordinary people’s view that communism came from outside was reinforced especially by the events of 1956 in Poland and Hungary and yet again in 1968 with the suppression of the Prague Spring. Communists could be portrayed as collaborators who persecuted their countrymen to please a foreign government. The right-wing, including rabid anti-Semites and racists, and anti-Communist liberals were cast in the role of patriots. Continued reference to these pro-marketeters and laissez faire capitalists as the “left” also helped to obscure the fact that in western countries the views they hold are associated with politicians on the far right — Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Even the harshest critics of Stalinism had not expected such an outcome in the Soviet Union. But the true extent of the degeneration of “communism” became evident when a tiny group of narrow-minded government officials, this time identified as “Communist hardliners” by the western media, attempted a coup to get rid of Gorbachev in August 1991. Not only did the CPSU prove powerless against these would-be coup-makers, no one in the entire country came out onto the streets in opposition to the junta to defend socialism, let alone the CPSU. It was the explicitly pro-capitalist Yelstin and his supporters who organised demonstrations and were able to mount any mass resistance to the coup. The public’s participation in these events was uneven and it would appear most Soviet citizens were too confused to react, except passively. After the coup was crushed and Gorbachev returned to Moscow, his first action was to resign as General Secretary of the CPSU then to shut down the CPSU’s entire central apparatus. On November 7th, the anniversary of the October Revolution, Yelstin banned the CPSU in the Russian Federation!

These events that changed the shape of the world, have their roots embedded deep in the history of the Soviet Union and the countries of eastern Europe after World War Two. Socialists are called upon to study and analyse this Stalinist past without fear or favour. This is a task we must approach with the utmost seriousness and we cannot shrink from what such study discloses because it might ruffle feathers in certain high places. Slovo’s reluctance to rise to the demands of the occasion was not of service to the South African Communist movement.

Spin-Off and Derivative Critiques.

The majority of liberal and right wing social scientists did not bother to address the issues raised by Slovo. The media and spokespersons of big business crowded with satisfaction because they thought these events demonstrated the bankruptcy of socialism. The pro-capitalist politicians waxed eloquent about the virtues of the free market. Among the liberal scholars, Heribert Adam, a visiting professor from the University of British Columbia, Canada, entered the debate.

Herbert Adam is a German sociologist. He has written extensively on South Africa since the early 1970s and though he is an outspoken opponent of racism, has also been a severe critic of the national liberation movement and seems more comfortable in the company of the liberal opposition.

Adam appears to be opposed to socialism as such rather than being a critical partisan. He criticises Slovo from the point of view of one who is fundamentally opposed to what Slovo stands for. Though many of his points are well taken, — for example, the sense of betrayal felt by the common people of eastern Europe, — he is off the mark on other counts.

Adam charges that Slovo's argument boils down to that there was essentially nothing wrong with the socialist system except for the persons placed in charge of it, i. e. Joseph Stalin and the men who followed him. As Adam would have it, pilot error and not the design of the craft was responsible for the disaster.

From this point Adam goes on to criticise the SACP and the ANC's policies for South Africa's future. He even seems reluctant to defend the principle of state intervention in the economy, which has been extensively applied in even the most devoutly "free enterprise" systems, lest someone accuse him of secret Bolshevik sympathies. He does however agree that affirmative action, to redress the racial imbalances produced by decades of White privilege, is necessary. But in the next breath he reduces the true significance of affirmative action by suggesting that it is a clever way to secure the plums of public office for a Black petit bourgeoisie. That affirmative action, which has only been tentatively applied in the US, could be extended to make more meaningful inroads into areas of White privilege and thus benefit not only the Black poor but all disadvantaged people, does not occur to him. Adam also suggests that the leadership of the national liberation movement must inevitably sell-out its poor constituency in order to reach agreement with the White ruling class. Indeed, if he sees any use in the SACP, it is that it could more easily persuade the young militants, the working class and the poor to accept such a sell out because they have faith in the SACP.

Quite a startling lesson to draw from the experience of Stalinism!

Stalinism and the unfortunate tradition among many Communists, including the SACP, to extol it as "existing socialism" have, certainly, made socialism an easy target for attack by liberals, social democrats and, nowadays, even by the right. Nothing Adam says distinguishes him from this chorus of complacent fat cats who seem to feel the demise of the Soviet Union vindicates their own short-sighted contempt for the most elementary principles of social justice.

Adam, unfortunately, added nothing to our understanding of either the phenomenon of Stalinism or the movement that had spawned and embraced it. He does not offer serious criticism, on which one could build and improve the national liberation movement, but chooses instead to find fault. As a result his criticisms contributed nothing to the search for solutions which could assist socialists in South Africa in creatively recasting communism in a democratic mould.

In Lieu of a Conclusion.

Slovo's pamphlet, with all its weaknesses and faults, was able to initiate a much-needed dialogue among South African socialists. Few others enjoy the moral and political authority to have done this. No one suggests that the debate about the character of socialism and the impact Stalinism has had on it has now been completed. But the seriousness with which the subject was approached is indicative of the profound questions which the experience of 1989, 1990 and 1991 has raised in the minds of those activists who see socialism as the future of our country.

Despite the differences in emphasis and the awkward defense of orthodoxy, all the participants showed a concern to learn from the errors of the past and to get to the root of the problems of socialism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. They appear to agree that a socialism that is not democratic ceases to be socialism. They differ among themselves on the exact character of the democratic institutions that should be the basis of a socialist society. While none of the contributors dismiss parliamentary democracy, few of the contributors regard it as the ultimate solution to the problem. They agree that there must be a role for an autonomous civil society and democratic accountability to the working class, written into the law, in a socialist society.

With the exception of the left oppositional critics, the other authors tend to down-play the dangers of the emergence of a "new class" or bureaucratic caste and the new contradictions this generates in a society that is attempting to build an egalitarian socio-economic order. This is rather ironic because in almost every newly independent African state the class of people who acquired control of government used it as their chief means of accumulating wealth and becoming capitalists. This bureaucratic bourgeoisie has become the bane of African countries, and many liberation alliances (including those that say they are socialist) have produced one. In South Africa, where the majority of the working class are deliberately under-educated, kept unskilled and denied basic knowledge about the world because of racial oppression, extreme concentrations of power, knowledge and skill in the hands of an elite is very likely. When we add to this that the best educated, most articulate and skilled, even in the liberation alliance, are likely to be Whites rather than Blacks, the gap between those who lead and those who are led is likely to be even wider.

South Africa moved to become an industrial capitalist country one hundred years ago. But by world standards it still needs to develop much, much more than it has up to now. Primitive accumulation will remain among the many tasks a democratic or socialist regime in South Africa will have to undertake. The existence of a White South Africa, that looks and lives like an advanced capitalist country, cheek by jowl with a Black South Africa, that lives and looks like any third world country, will act as a spur to solve these problems by the fastest possible route. Under such circumstances, leaders will be tempted to cut corners and to silence critical voices that insist on counting the costs. These dangers should not be played down. An historical materialist analysis of the sources and class forces responsible for Stalinism could assist us to avoid them.

Is There a Way Forward?

The decline and the fall of “existing socialism” has been a severe setback for the forces of socialism internationally. The worst defeat suffered by socialism this century was the crushing of the working class movement in Germany and Austria by the Nazi juggernaut. The disintegration of socialism in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union are probably the second only to that. Yet it would be foolish to abandon hope in the promise held out to humanity by the socialism of Marx and Engels. Even in the leading capitalist countries, such as the USA, Japan and Germany, late monopoly capitalism has proved incapable of solving even the basics of human existence — such as decent housing, health-care, schooling and work — for all citizens. Few Black working people in South Africa have any illusions about the benefits of capitalism. The idea that it shall dominate the entire world can only fill one with dread.

Socialism must be saved from what the CPSU and its sister parties throughout the world reduced it to. There seems little likelihood that such a revival could come from the small and discredited Communist parties of Europe and north America. As the one country in which the working class still has faith and hope in the party, the SACP could take the lead in restoring the original vision to socialism. But in order to do this the SACP will have to look back over its own political record and that of the Soviet party from which it took its inspiration.

I would therefore repeat my challenge to the SACP to begin a thorough re- examination of the meaning of socialism that draws in all South African socialists. Such an exercise will assist the SACP to discard those aspects of Stalinism it still carries and put new zest into its intellectual life. Those socialists who saw and spoke up about the shocking shortcomings of “existing socialism” never lost hope that socialism can be achieved, despite the stinging criticisms we made of the Soviet Union, China or the eastern European countries. The collapse of Stalinism offers all socialists, including those who blindly followed Stalin and his successors, to make a new beginning. Hopefully this time no one will demand that they show “solidarity” with the “vanguard of vanguards.”

<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/sacp/1991/socialism.htm>