Chapter Nineteen

> The most profound loyalty can co-exist with a jealously critical attitude. Should loyalty be taught? Can it be taught? Or must it be learned? I don't know the answers to these questions, and perhaps they are too abstract ... C.L.R. James[1]

Exile Politics

The ANC's regional office in the UK was well established by the time I arrived in England at the end of the 1960s. Its official representatives in many countries often had more credibility than the consulate staff of the apartheid regime. By 1990 there were about 29 ANC offices (missions, as we called them), headed by a chief representative, mostly in the capital cities in Europe, the former USSR, Scandinavia, Africa, India, North America and Cuba. Unlike the ethnically separated Congress membership inside the country before 1960, the ANC in exile was multi-racial in composition, the result of a conference decision in 1969. Its National Executive Committee remained ethnically African, until the ANC's watershed conference at Kabwe in 1985, when Joe Slovo became its first "white" member.

In the Islington branch of the ANC in London, where I formally made contact with the ANC, I relished the opportunity of meeting fellow expatriates and hearing the reports of the progress of the struggle at home, cryptic and unspecific as the security constraints allowed them to be. Although the discussions in the branch were often volatile, they were largely free of the petty squabbles that were the misfortune of exiles from other countries. What was remarkable was the extraordinary identification of the members with the organization and its leaders. The ANC often described itself as the surrogate parent of the youth who had left their homes and found their way to the ANC in exile. While the ANC bore no parental responsibility to its adult expatriates, the organization was nonetheless their anchor. That this acceptance of the ANC should have fostered an uncritical loyalty is not surprising. C.L.R. James qualified his assertion that the most profound loyalty can coexist with a jealously critical attitude because he was struck by the nagging after-thought that his prescription for loyalty was perhaps too abstract, too definitive. The South African exiles had no doubt that their cause was right, but in the circumstances in which they found themselves their knowledge of the state of affairs "at home", and the tactics of the liberation movement abroad (under the aegis of the ANC) was necessarily limited. They had no alternative but to invest in the acumen of their leaders to do what

they thought was right. The outcome of the struggle depended on our trusting our leaders. But in the process did our unconditional acceptance of the judgment of the leadership provide the genesis of a culture of blind loyalty; an act of deference expected? We did not think of these questions then.

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Visits from Oliver Tambo, the ANC's national president, were infrequent, but always a fortifying experience. The motivation of the members had much to do with the sense of mission he inspired. Activists were always very busy, often unavailable socially because of their commitments to the liberation movement. They spoke at anti-apartheid rallies; represented the ANC at trade union meetings and attended conferences of the Labour and Communist parties in the UK. Some served on sub-committees of the ANC such as the committee responsible for alerting the British public to the plight of political prisoners in South Africa. A pamphlet I wrote for this committee in 1984 (entitled "Torture is Part of the System") depicted details of torture and death in detention, stressing the point that torture was not a practice that goes on unknown to those who ran the system, but that it was part of the system itself. The pamphlet was published by the ANC's publications department, efficiently headed by Gill Marcus, who in 1994 became a deputy Finance minister under Nelson Mandela, and later governor of the Reserve Bank, succeeding Tito Mboweni in this position. Tito and I collaborated on a series of study classes in London in the mid-1980s. This was given to a largely bewildered ANC and SACP audience, quite unfamiliar with the concept of the labour theory of value. Tito's view of the market today may be quite different from then, but nothing flustered him, and 25 years on, it did not surprise me that after reading Karl Marx he opted to head our central bank. If he could not beat the capitalist system at least he could make the capitalists dance to his tune!

For the most part the focus of my work was in education. Exile politics in the UK were often more political than personal. Before I arrived they had been robust with some major conflicts between the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). There was also a spate of expulsions from the ANC in connection with the "Gang of Eight" – a vocal group of ANC nationalists and later the "Gang of Four", a group active in the trade union movement, which referred to itself as the Marxist Tendency. A "gang" was the description given to critics of the Party and government in the USSR and Eastern Europe during the Soviet period, and subsequently appropriated for general use by the Left in many countries. The term denoted "dissidents" from party policies, but also imputed criminal motives (subversion, collusion with "enemy elements" or foreign powers or just simply destructiveness) rather than honest disagreements over policy – which they usually were. The CPSA had adopted the nomenclature of the "gang" in the 1930s to describe

factionalist tendencies in its ranks. Later, the ANC in exile sometimes found it a convenient term to describe its own critics.

The only dispute that I was involved in was relatively minor. It was over educational policy at the ANC's school in Tanzania. It was really a difference of opinion between the London Education Committee (LEC) and the school's National Education Council. Though we were not referred to as a "gang", we were seen as "dissidents". The difference of opinion was over the educational orientation of the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College. The school had been established in 1978 and continued until 1992, but it was named only in 1985, in memory of Solomon Mahlangu, a young MK cadre sentenced to death in 1977 for his part in an armed battle with the police in Johannesburg.[2] Soon after the school's formation, regional education committees were established in London, New York, Dar es Salaam and Lusaka. All of them contributed to the development of the school's curriculum. They collected resources and to some extent participated in the debates on the educational bearing of the school. At the time that I joined the LEC in 1979, there was still much discussion on this topic. Harold Wolpe was the committee's convener. By the early 1980s the orientation of the school had changed from being a place for the training of ANC cadres to a school "where children would get the best possible tuition [and] be free to learn the culture of their own people and … have the opportunity to take up scholarships in universities and colleges in different parts of the world".[3] The protagonists of this view (in effect, the ANC leadership at the school) pressed for the development of a model school that would offer the best that its resources would allow.

The London Committee, especially Harold Wolpe, rejected the ethos of an Eton on African soil and hoped to develop a school with an alternative intellectual tradition, where service to the struggle was the ideal. Wolpe never relented in insisting that SOMAFCO should primarily serve the liberation movement and concern itself with the preparation of cadres for the "armed phase of the struggle, as the school's original mandate suggested".[4] A heated discussion on this topic took place at one of the National Education Council meetings in 1984, at which I was present. The LEC had submitted a paper that dwelt on the discussions in 1978/9 on the nature of the school and referred to various transgressions from the school's original purpose. At the drafting stage I supported the LEC's stance, but once I had seen the school and the students, most of them children scarred by Bantu education, seeking an education that would give them an entrée to the professions, I found it difficult to argue for anything narrower than that.

Yet there were aspects of the curriculum that were being marginalized that I did not want to abandon. These were the non-traditional, "social" courses, concerned with the history of the struggle and the development of societies.[5] The "dispute" went on for some years, but the argument was essentially one-sided because the SOMAFCO leadership had ceased to listen to the London committee by the mid-1980s. By then the "London"

approach to the school's educational philosophy was the antithesis of the ANC's aspirations for its youth, who since the 1976 Soweto uprising, had joined the struggle in large numbers. Oliver Tambo, himself a former teacher, was the foremost protagonist of the broader vision of the school as a preparation for further education. The arguments advanced in the London submission (typed on green foolscap paper, which the LEC's opponents dubbed the "Green Mamba") eventually led to the alienation of the London committee from the SOMAFCO mainstream. But so deft was the response of the school's leadership to the LEC's complaints, that I think the committee was largely unaware of their "dissident" status.[6]

I remained on the LEC and concentrated on obtaining scholarships for the students at SOMAFCO, as well as others in the military camps and in the frontline states in Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and Botswana. I knew that most of the students had hurriedly left their homes in South Africa (their distraught parents being largely unaware of their whereabouts) and that even the most intellectually indifferent of them were desperate to come home with qualifications that would justify their militant rejection of the Bantu education system. I also knew they were anxious to succeed but I could never be certain how they would fare in a strange culture or guarantee that they would cope with the standard of English, maths, science and "stats" that the universities required. Yet I knew that it was important to press their cases to the funding agents to whom I sent their bursary applications. Fortunately, for the most part, the students excelled in their studies. When they returned to South Africa in the 1990s many of them formed the nucleus of the new post-apartheid public service or obtained responsible jobs in the corporate concerns and state owned enterprises. Others who were more politically minded became members of the provincial and national legislatures under Mandela's government. Had they been trained primarily to serve in the armed struggle, the country would have been the poorer for the loss of their skills and their abundant talents.

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A break from exile politics was a welcome reminder that there was a world outside. By far the most challenging – and daunting – of my activities in exile were the series of seminars and "technical" workshops I was invited to give to South African trade unionists brought to Zambia and Zimbabwe by the Equality of Rights Branch of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The head of this programme at the ILO, Baldwin Sjollema, had been given my name by a fellow academic for an earlier seminar on the subject of migrant labour, which I was unable to attend. However, I attended several of these later. The seminars (or workshops, as they were called) offered a rare opportunity to make contact with trade unionists in South Africa, many of them involved in the informal underground structures of the ANC.

Although there was nothing illegal in the ILO's initiative in providing "technical assistance" to trade unionists who came from South Africa to participate in these programmes, a certain degree of caution was necessary to protect participants from prosecution when they returned to South Africa. Many of them made contact with the ANC or SACTU while they were in Lusaka, briefed them about events at home, and probably returned with advice and messages. The meetings I had with these trade unionists, many of them involved in the wider struggle, were the closest I came to getting a sense of the overwhelming pace of political mobilization in South Africa since the 1960s. The participants, mostly trade union officials and activists, were often knowledgeable about the problems their members encountered, but did not always have the time to assess the trends beyond the factory floor – or to acquire a wider perspective of the sector and its role in the economy. The background studies were intended to fill this gap. One of the background papers I presented was on "discriminatory labour practices in the field of farm labour". I hesitated before undertaking this assignment as it was more wide-ranging than any previous work I had done and was not directly concerned with migrant labour, a subject which I had researched extensively. But for the persuasion of Baldwin Sjollema, I would not have accepted this challenge.

I worked hard to make the paper as comprehensive as possible and found the workshops extraordinarily rewarding. But it was obvious during the very first seminar on farm labour, that for all the research I had done on law, regulation, and discriminatory practice, the participants were closer and more emotionally involved in the topic than I could ever be. They were quick to provide graphic descriptions of either their own or their parents' experiences on the land. They had no difficulty in relating how these practices were contrary to all the benchmarks of the ILO conventions and spoke emotionally about the antagonistic relations between white farmers and black labourers, the personal power of employers, the horror of forced labour and the subjection of women. I could offer the bare facts and figures of the declining share of agriculture in the GDP, the absence of black commercial agriculture or talk about rural poverty, but I could hardly have been more remote from what seemed to be the plain experience of every African in the room. Their personal accounts were more graphic than the disturbing images of the slides I had brought to illustrate the topic.

Their stories were harrowing. One participant, in particular, referred to his conviction under the influx control regulations. He had been "sold" (in 1958) to a poultry farmer in the East London area. There the men were forced to carry leaking buckets of slops on their heads. Surveillance was close and continuous. At night they were locked up without being able to wash their hands, their bodies stinking of the slops that had leaked from the buckets. "It was better to be in prison," he said. He quite literally meant this, and late one night escaped from the farm to surrender himself to the local jail. There he made

a statement about the conditions under which he had been held, but far from receiving any sympathy, he was beaten up by the warders and told not to move until his “employer” arrived. When the latter appeared, he denied the allegations made against him, but for some reason the prisoner was not sent back to the poultry farm, but “released” to another farmer on whose land he worked with two other prisoners for nine-pence per day. The incident still affected him badly and all I could do to ease the tension in the room was to ask for other recollections.

These were not long in forthcoming. One of the participants described how he had walked 15 kilometers to school and 15 kilometres back every day. Classes were held under a tree and a single teacher rotated among 100 pupils. His story was supported by half-a-dozen others. What was I to tell them that they did not already know? Lamely, I responded with the abstraction that there were 4 865 farm schools in 1979 for half a million pupils, most of whom did not remain at school longer than three years. But this was hardly news to them. At the end of the session, one of the participants handed me a poem that he had written while watching the images from the slides I had brought with me. The poem evoked his childhood and the plight of his mother and the hardships of other women who worked in the fields. For years I kept the piece of ruled paper it was written on (illustrated with some sketches of women cutting wheat stalks), but unfortunately the poem seems to have disappeared from among my papers. The poet was Petika Ntuli.

One of the objects of these workshops was for the participants to share news of developments in the labour movement with each other as well as with exiled members of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). The organization had continued its work in exile, always revered by the new trade unionists, but because of its virtual banning was no longer a functioning trade union federation.[7] Unlike the ANC and the other congresses, SACTU was not formally outlawed by the apartheid government, but its structures were systematically decimated between 1956 and 1962 and its members arrested in large numbers.[8] This was the government’s preferred way of countering international criticism of its suppression of black trade unions. Consequently, it was a contrasting group of trade union activists that attended the ILO workshops: the seasoned SACTU stalwarts now in exile, who had confronted the regime in the 1950s and a new generation of cadres, militant and perhaps more prudent in evading arrest than their predecessor had been. In the space between the 1960s and the mid-1980s the labour movement had developed beyond the experience of almost all the former SACTU members. In preparing the background studies for these workshops I realized that the country had in many respects become unrecognizable.

This was particularly evident when I met the young secretaries and organizers from the transport unions. This sector had increased enormously in size, importance,

complexity and bureaucratic regulation since the early 1960s. Migrant labour had taken a different form over the past 20 years, whereby workers commuted in buses, trains and microbuses over the long distances to the labour markets of urban industry. The state had engineered the development of whole new centres of population and relocated large numbers of people who commuted long distances daily to and from their work. In less than two decades, almost a million people commuted an average of 24 kilometers a day to their workplaces. In the process new boundaries and new rural-urban towns were created. These "rural" centres increased their populations from 4.7 million people in 1960 to 11.3 million in 1980 and more than doubled them in the 20 years between 1960 and 1980.[9] Hence the rise of unions for road transport outside the state owned railways. Just as before, the movement of people from home to work was rough, costly and complex. Only now it was on a larger scale and the regular long-distance transportation of workers had become essential for the sustainability of the apartheid system.[10] Conflict between the bus owners, taxis and the trade unions was fierce and bloody. Commuter strikes were frequent and the commuters often caught in the cross-fire and sometimes held hostage by the Bantustan authorities. It was one thing to read about these developments in articles and the newspapers, but quite another to hear them directly from these young trade unionists.

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Although it was three years before the unbanning of the ANC, it was evident from the restlessness of intellectuals, business and religious groups in South Africa that the apartheid state was losing what appeared to be its monolithic character. The ruling party had in fact never been monolithic as there were always factions and rifts of more ardent racist conservatives within its ranks. These tensions were exacerbated in the mid-1980s by a groundswell of civic and trade union mobilization that was met with intense state repression. The regime had reached an impasse. Force and diplomacy alternated as the government responded with a state of emergency and held its own tentative discussions first with Mandela and then (secretly) with representatives of the ANC.[11] Meanwhile, Afrikaner intellectuals and individuals with corporate interests realized that the writing was on the wall and journeyed to Lusaka to test the political temperature and demonstrate that their future lay more with the ANC than the regime. The ANC responded to these events by increasing its readiness to enter negotiations and, indeed, to govern. While there had been internal ANC discussions on the economy, health, the constitution and the agrarian situation throughout the 1980s, concrete policy documents were now developed by task teams on these topics. They would assist the ANC in the event of a negotiated settlement or in the wake of the collapse of the regime. In the late 1980s I was asked to undertake a profile of population, education, manpower distribution and skills training in South Africa. The project was requested by the research committee of the ANC in

Lusaka, headed by Pallo Jordan. Its primary aim was to provide the ANC (and its personnel in a future post-apartheid government) with a broad perspective of the structural defects in key sectors of industry, to be used to inform the ANC's policies on the dearth of skills in South Africa.[12] There was a great deal of number crunching, especially in the dense appendix providing tables on the demographic distribution of the population, its location in the key industrial sectors and an analysis of employment, education, and skills training in the sectors addressed in the project. The report was intended to provide an overview of the labour market and an accurate picture of the racially skewed economy. This it did. But I am not sure that the study ever received the attention we expected once Mandela took office or whether a similar survey has since been undertaken. However, it was an exhausting and fatiguing assignment, which I was able to follow up partially by devising frameworks for affirmative action when I returned to South Africa at the end of 1990. But the dearth of skills and the need for education and training continues to affect the growth path of the country's economy.

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A lighter moment followed. On my return to London from Lusaka in October 1986, after one of the more arduous workshops on this project, I came home to two telephone messages. The one was from a student incongruously named "Lucky" who had been stranded at London-Heathrow airport, and the other from a professor named Carole Silver, whose surname I did not recognise. It was too late for me to contact Lucky, who had already been repatriated to the USSR, where he was studying. I called the telephone number of the professor who conveyed greetings from a mutual colleague in California. Thinking that she was "political" (her Californian colleague knew of my leftist background and was not unsympathetic and I thought she might also be a "leftist") I asked her whether she was at a conference in London. Her reply baffled me and at the same time left me in no doubt that she was not from the South African security police, who were known to be active in the UK. She said she was on sabbatical leave – doing research at the British Library on the Victorian fascination with fairies. Yes, she was writing a book on the fairies! I was mystified and wondered how I would explain what sort of work I did, but suggested we meet "sometime". This was clearly too vague for her, as she was leaving for New York in a few day's time.

So we met the following Friday at the bus terminal at the Finsbury Park station. There are four exits to the train station in addition to the bus terminal. I had forgotten where precisely I had arranged to meet her and ran frantically from one end of the train station to the other until I had covered all four exits. What could someone who was engaged in research on fairies in the British Library possibly look like? She said she had blonde hair and would be wearing a black suit. That was hardly sufficient to identify her,

but it would be a start. Unfortunately, there was no-one I saw that resembled that description. In desperation I tried the bus terminal and noticed a striking woman in her forties, waiting in the doorway of a dress shop. Yes, she had fair hair and was wearing black, but her features hardly matched my image of anyone interested in fairies. “You must be Carole Silver,” I tried. “You must be Norman Levy,” she answered quickly, in no mood for pleasantries.

I was half an hour late and she was about to leave. As it happened to be the opening night of my daughter Deborah’s play, I suggested that we go to the theatre in Bloomsbury and have dinner later. There was little likelihood that we would enjoy the play, least of all concentrate, in view of the discouraging dynamics on the way to the theatre. I had asked her about her work, about her university, about other books she might have written, about her friendship with our mutual acquaintance in California, about herself … “Was this the inquisition?” she asked, and promptly interrogated me in similar fashion. The evening was not a disaster, however, and we relaxed over dinner and behaved quite amicably towards each other. Already friends, we parted and remained in frequent touch with each other by telephone.

In the following year (November 1987) I almost visited her after a conference in Denver, Colorado but my ignorance of the vast geographical distances in the US made me realize only when I got there that this was logistically impossible. Fortunately, our trans-Atlantic relationship was not meant to end: I travelled to New York whenever I could, and she came to London during university vacations. After a (commuting) courtship between the two cities, during which she met my children and got to know the family, we all married her in February 1991, two months before I returned to South Africa. She is still located in New York and I in Cape Town, and we still love each other.

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Despite the disappointment of not visiting Carole in New York, the conference in Denver, was exciting. It was sponsored by the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars to mark the 30th annual meeting of the Africa Studies Association. The occasion was memorable for the plethora of papers presented by US scholars and the detailed revisionist histories that challenged the conventional perceptions of the popular responses to crises in Africa. I have never ceased to admire those scholars who have devoted their lives to the study of the liberation struggles in Africa.

With me at the conference were Pallo Jordan, already a public intellectual; Harold Wolpe, known internationally for his analysis of the shift from segregation to apartheid; Laurence Harris, an economist at that time with the Open University in the UK; and John Saul who was based in Toronto, Canada. Harold, Lawrence, Pallo and I each presented a paper and John was the discussant. The wordy title linking our respective contributions

(described in the conference papers as “Research on the Contemporary Conjuncture in South Africa”) was not exactly exciting, but the debate in the end turned out to be lively and serious. The topics stretched from an analysis of the State in South Africa to the economy, wages, work and “the progress of the struggle”.[13] The irony was that while we conjured up different scenarios of political change, we could not then know that the final negotiations were only a few years away.

Chapter 19

1 C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1983) (my emphasis).

2 I remember considering two other names for the school. One of these was Chief Albert Luthuli and the other Hector Pieterson, who was fatally shot by the police during the 1976 Soweto student uprising. The name of Solomon Mahlangu was chosen for its resonance with the youth, and for its linkage with the freedom struggle.

3 Statement by Henry Makghoti, ANC secretary for education at the official opening of SOMAFCO in 1985. Cited in Sean Morrow, Brown Maaba and Loyiso Pulumani, *Education in Exile: SOMAFCO, the African National Congress School in Tanzania, 1978 to 1992* (HSRC Press, Cape Town 2004), p. 18.

4 The element of the earlier decision that the school would prepare the students to be cadres for the armed phase of the struggle) read:“[The students] would be practically and intellectually equipped to make their contribution to the present phase of the struggle”: Morrow, Maaba and Pulumani, *Education in Exile*, p. 18.

5 These were retained but as they fell outside the GCE public examinations, they were jointly examined by the teachers at SOMAFCO and a few members of staff at the University of Zambia.

6 The paper presented by the LEC, to which much exception was taken was labelled the Green Mamba, for its appearance on green paper and, I expect, for its vehemence. The paper stood by the earlier idea of the school as a place for the training of cadres for the struggle.

7 In addition to Mark Shope (then in his seventies), the SACTU activists in exile were John Nkadimeng (formerly SACTU’s national organizer and now secretary of SACTU in exile), Kay Moonsamy and Steven Dlamini. The latter two were trade union officials from Durban and fellow treason trialists. They were now prominent in SACTU’s leadership.

8 The state’s assault on this non-racial trade union federation was already apparent in 1956 from the disproportionate number of its members charged with treason. In all, 23 of its national and local leaders were initially immobilized by the trial, including its national president, Leon Levy, and its general secretary, Leslie Massina. Both of them were subsequently banned in 1957 for five years from leaving the magisterial district of Johannesburg and attending meetings. See Ken Luckhart and Brenda Wall, *Organize … or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1980), p. 404.

9 See Norman Levy, Proceedings of the workshop on Equality of Opportunity and Treatment in the South African Railway and Transport Sectors (road passenger and railways), Kabwe, 25–29 November 1985 (ILO, Equality of Rights Branch, Geneva), p. 4.

10 For the context of the discussion, see Norman Levy, Working paper and proceedings of the workshop on Equality of Opportunity and Treatment in the South African Railway and Transport Sectors (road passenger and railways), Kabwe, 25–29 November 1985.

11 See chapter 20 below.

12 The project submitted was entitled N. Levy and P. Mbali, *A Profile of Population, Education, Manpower Distribution and Skills' Training in South Africa* (ILO, Equality of Rights Branch, Geneva, 1987).

13 See Norman Levy, Special Collection, for a selection of papers (by N. Levy, L. Harris, G. Adler and D.S. Will) presented to the AGM of the African Studies Association, Denver, Colorado, 19–23 November 1987.