

REVOLUTION: FURTHER REFLECTIONS

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It is extremely difficult to conduct a really profound and comprehensive discussion on revolution in South Africa today. Frank, open and unrestricted analysis is just not possible. The participants in the discussion who are fully aware of all the inhibiting factors tend to leave much unsaid that could be said, especially if they do not themselves believe in the permanence of the Establishment. And the Statute Book is so strewn with broken glass, one must walk carefully not to cut one's feet.

Certainly it would seem as if the first essential in the discussion is to make an attempt to attach a more precise meaning to the word 'revolution'. Briefly a revolution is a rapid redistribution of power which is caused by the growing disproportion between the real strength of a new and rising class, and the amount of political power allotted to it. And it is a change in economic conditions (a change in the methods of production, that is) which first shifts the balance of strength in favour of this new force. Thus a revolution always involves the displacement of a ruling class by another class which does not have its rightful share of power.

Furthermore, the new class that is destined to replace the old one in authority unites around it all other classes and interests, constituting the vast majority of the population, that have an interest in the replacement of the ruling class. The revolution, in other words, must be in the interests of the mass of the people.

The above description would exclude such phenomena as the fascist dictatorships in Germany, Italy and elsewhere. These dictatorships left the fundamental economic structure intact and sought to preserve the existing relationships between the classes. Their purpose was counter-revolutionary.

Examining the South African situation in the light of the above definition of revolution, what do we find? What classes are competing for power in South Africa? What are the prospects of revolution? Is it round the corner?

In considering revolution in the South African context, we should beware of the racial approach—no matter how difficult this may be. In other words, the blithe assumption that the

revolution will be a simple Black versus White affair must not be accepted without much more thorough research. History knows of examples where White persons fought one another under the compelling pressure of economic forces despite the presence of a huge depressed non-White group in the same country. One example that springs immediately to mind is the American Civil War. There is also our own 1922 rebellion. In both the above instances it must be admitted that the oppressed racial groups played a negative, neutralist role. Still, this should serve as a warning against the simple racist thesis of revolution. Racism *per se* cannot be the main vehicle of revolution. It can only be one of the objective factors that might have to be borne in mind.

It is true that looking at the situation to-day it is hard to see how any sizable section of the European group will side with the oppressed. But there—at the moment—conditions are “normal”. Revolutionary situations are not normal.

I have not had an opportunity to study the work by Prof. Brinton, “The Anatomy of Revolution”. Nevertheless I think that, with a few qualifications, the features of revolution which he regards as essential can be conveniently used, even if just as a basis of discussion.

It may be a complete misunderstanding of Prof. Brinton, but from glimpses of his work gathered in the article by Julius Lewin which began this series,¹ my impression is that the characteristic features of revolution are not treated dialectically.

To say that certain well-defined circumstances must be present in combination before an attempt at revolution is likely to succeed is not enough. The circumstances may not for instance be contemporaneous. The factor of economic development takes generations, and revolution may mark its climax. On the other hand, the factor of armed force may play no direct part during revolution and a great part in the consolidation of the changes that result. Furthermore, there is the question of the vital relationship between the factors that constitute a revolutionary situation. They interact, each affecting the other, and the role of each will not be equal. It is thus not simply the coming together of four or five factors that produces a revolutionary situation. It is a complex, many-sided phenomenon.

In our country the industrial revolution has considerably accelerated the growth of those classes that will eventually have

1 “Revolution round the corner?” *Africa South*, Vol. III No. 1.

to struggle for mastery. True enough the whole country has benefited from the prosperity of industrialisation. But in what proportions have they benefited? Has the percentage share of the wealth of the country risen uniformly for all classes? No one can deny that the actual earnings of African workers, for instance, have increased during the last ten years. Yet, when considered in relation to the wealth produced and the contribution they have made to its production, their position is worse than before. It is equally true that developments in the last ten years have created tremendous potential opportunities for the middle and working classes among the oppressed people, but these classes have been shut off from sharing in and utilising those opportunities.

One very wealthy African medical practitioner, on being asked why he was so fond of buying expensive American cars every year, replied, "a car is the only real home of an African which belongs to him". What he meant, of course, was that this was the only way of utilising the money available to him. The facilities for investment in real estate hardly exist for an African in South Africa. The aspiring African middle class cannot accumulate the capital necessary to develop an entrepreneur class. And it must be remembered that real estate is fundamental to the development of a middle class.

And a middle class must be distinguished from the comprador stooge class that the Nationalist Government is trying to bring into existence. Servile chiefs in the employ of the Government, civil servants, traders whose progress depends entirely on Government favours, patronage and hand-outs from the Bantu Corporation, these can hardly be said to constitute a middle class.

Similar frustrations afflict the working class. The bulk of this enormous group consists of Africans who produce more *per capita* than their brothers elsewhere on the continent. But their advance into skills is taking place in spite of, not because of, the policies of the South African ruling class.

The proletariat and other labouring classes, together with the middle class, are broadly speaking the classes that are emerging and destined to combine for the ousting of the present ruling class. Examination of trends will indicate this, although it must be admitted that pressure from them has not reached dimensions that present any immediate challenge. And yet pressure is daily building up. This fact is not altered by pessi-

mism, or the failure of this or that campaign conducted by the liberatory organisations of the oppressed. To base the prospects of revolution on the outcome of a single strike or campaign betrays a clear superficiality of outlook.

It is worthy of mention that the Freedom Charter adopted by the Congress Movement reflects precisely the aspirations of all the striving classes for democratic change. That is why it is so ridiculous to describe the Freedom Charter as a Socialist or Communist programme. As to which of these classes will be the leading force in a democratic revolution, it is difficult to predict.

In the typical colonial situation, members of the foreign imperialist nation do not settle in large numbers in the colony. A small caste of officials and businessmen take up temporary residence; and much of the actual administration of the country, with its coercive machinery in the army, the police, and the courts, is manned by the indigenous peoples. Naturally as the clamour for independence grows louder, the imperialist power finds a vast section of the machinery of rule in its colony becoming increasingly unreliable.

In South Africa, on the other hand, the "foreigners" settled in large numbers and made the country their home. Because of this, it is possible to establish a complete monopoly of government, including all the machinery of coercion, in the hands of the settlers. This appears to place the South African ruling class in an unassailable position as long as the Whites are united. And it is this factor which causes Julius Lewin to rule out revolution indefinitely.

Closer scrutiny will show that this circumstance is only partly an advantage. A metropolitan power has generally a secure home base. Any difficulties in the colony do not result in direct disturbances at home. The enemy—the colonial people—remain a danger at a distance. Let us take, say, the situation in Algeria, which is not necessarily the best example. There, the metropolitan power has poured in half-a-million troops to suppress the freedom struggle. The war is financed by the French from a relatively undisturbed economy in France itself.

In South Africa, however, the situation is totally different. A single integrated economy dependent on the labour of what may be called the colonial people has been erected. The colonial people rub shoulders with their local imperialists to an ever-growing degree; they are everywhere and in everything.

The imperialists have no base from which operations can be conducted in relative security.

And that is the nightmare of the strategists of White supremacy. One can almost see the general staff of apartheid arguing in favour of the creation of secure White bases in which there are no Africans present; which do not depend on the Africans for labour; which are not part of a mixed society. Is not this perhaps the real reason for the suggested balkanisation of South Africa into White and Black areas, despite the clearly fantastic nature of the whole concept?

The close juxtaposition of the imperialists and the colonial people they rule within the bounds of a single state poses problems as much for the adherents of freedom as for those of oppression.

Inefficient government as a revolutionary factor can only mean one that ceases to obtain the co-operation, willing or unwilling, of the population. It cannot mean inefficiency in a merely technical sense. It is probably best expressed in the word "disintegration" used by Prof. G. D. H. Cole in his article on this subject.²

The question still remains as to whether or not revolution in South Africa is round the corner. In the life of a people ten years is a very brief period. Is that what is meant by the expression, "round the corner"? Or is it fifteen years?

No date can be fixed for a revolutionary outbreak, nor is it profitable to speculate on when it is likely to occur. Revolutions are not made to order.

The true task of the democrat is to analyse the main features of our socio-economic structure and to trace its development. For from this will emerge the changes needed in our society; and this in turn will raise the question of the forces that will have to co-operate in order to make possible the re-organization of society on a different basis. Only from such an analysis will flow the tasks and activities of the democratic forces in the country today.

Faithful participation by all democratic forces in those tasks and activities which face the freedom movement now is more profitable than idealistic speculation as to whether or not revolution is around the corner.

² 'The Anatomy of Revolution', Africa South, Vol. III No. 3.