

IDEOLOGY AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN PREDICAMENT

by Peter Walshe

South Africa's parliamentary opposition continues to maintain a remarkable ideological consensus—faith in an open political system and private competition in a market economy. The deeply entrenched American equivalent is often referred to as the 'liberal consensus.' Centre and right-of-centre parties in Western Europe share a comparable ideological predilection. Visions of personal advancement and the white South African experience of material betterment have left this ideological orientation largely unexamined. Although established privilege will be determined to leave matters this way, the re-examination of this ideological consensus is a matter of the utmost importance.

In America, and Western Europe too, the threshold of critical analysis has been raised by the convergence of high rates of inflation, escalating crime, power shortages and the related prospect of unusually high unemployment. In addition there are environmental restraints on gross national products, and in the case of America, the recognition of serious limitations in foreign policy, plus Watergate's unusually clear exposure of economic power dictating the responses of the political system. Among white South Africans these pressures are, as yet, relatively muted. On the other hand, the increased tensions of racial confrontation in Southern Africa are now providing a climate for more serious debate. As a result it may be possible to separate the two strands of ideology that have been consistently tangled together by the elites of modern capitalism. What is at issue is not simply racial discrimination. More fundamental in establishing the basis for justice and peace is the need to re-examine class privilege and the starkly unequal distribution of resources. At this basic level, South Africa's problems are not unique.

What are the two strands of ideology that have been consistently tangled together? An open political system with the vigorous participation of citizens in political organisation, public debate and the exercise of their franchise, must no longer be confused with a competitive free enterprise market economy. It has been too readily assumed that the former depends upon the latter. That this is not the case needs to be clearly articulated.

Indeed, a "competitive market economy" is a figment of the imagination, a fragment of worn-out political mythology. The "competitive market economy" has evolved into a structure of large corporate units within which some may achieve rapid personal advancement; but these are not the patterns of individual and personal economic freedom assumed by that resilient liberal/conservative ideology.

In what sense is the concept of a competitive market economy a worn-out political mythology? The mechanism which permits corporate survival, growth and diversification is the profit system. A variety of motives drive men to seek positions of esteem and power within modern industry, but corporations require profits and security through the predictability of their markets. The maintenance of demand is crucial for the maintenance of profits—both consumer demand and the rapidly expanding demand of government. With growth and diversification, and often in close co-operation with government, corporations have set about controlling their markets. In short, the competition of small units of production, disciplined by price competition and goaded to innovation and efficiency by the discipline of the market, does not exist. The liberal/conservative ideology would have us believe otherwise, but a decentralized economic system that underpins the political freedom of citizens is gone. Industrialization has produced concentrations of economic power that seriously erode the tenuous control of citizens over the organs of political authority.

It may well be that the vision of a decentralized competitive economy, automatically linking self-interest to the common good, was an unreal one from the start. Certainly there have been intermittent crises—the most spectacular to date being the great depression of the 1930's. At that time, and with Stalinist Russia supposedly offering the only alternative system, the new Keynesian economics merely established the responsibility of government to sustain the private system which could clearly not maintain itself through the workings of the market. Fiscal and monetary policies, plus public works, were accepted to maintain the economic context within which a vigorous private sector was expected to operate under the old competitive ethic.

Forty years later, the tensions between the political and economic strands of the liberal/conservative consensus are again mounting. A significant minority throughout Europe and America questions the relevance of the individualistic competitive ethic and rejects it as the basis for a just and culturally diverse society. South Africans too must enter this debate. The need to openly co-ordinate the activities of giant corporations; the distortion of democratic electioneering by the weight of private fortunes and corporate donations; the insanity of producing without sensitivity to environmental constraints; and the era of labour unrest which stretches out before us, all indicate the urgent need to re-examine economic structures. It is necessary to reassess patterns of ownership, inherited wealth and the

distribution of income—and do so in South Africa with a vigorous logic that will cut across economic and race privileges to focus on the essential dignity of each and every human being.

There is no other way. Should the blatant privilege of apartheid structures be dismantled, the dilemmas of distributing resources will not go away and they cannot be “automatically” solved by the market. To rely on that defunct mechanism would be to turn our backs on the issues of distribution and to condone further polarization in society and the continuation of grotesque injustice.

The essential value of a modern parliamentary constitution is the personal dignity of all individuals. This is what leads to equality before the law, access to the franchise, the right to organize politically, open public debate, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet this prime value of personal dignity is ignored in the debasing scramble for economic privilege, the determined defence of established interests, and the mirage of happiness in higher and higher levels of personal consumption.

The implications of a commitment to respect the dignity of all men by providing comparable economic resources for the development of their personalities would devastate past assumptions and present practice. Children with particularly low IQs would have to receive comparable educational resources to those lavished on the young genius. No longer could inherited wealth be a major determinant of quality education or health services. Rather than **expecting** wage differentials and the inheritance of privilege in the form of unearned fortunes, the central economic concern would become a movement toward an equal distribution of income. Differentials might be granted for dependents, especially long hours, or onerous responsibility; but the **expectation** of equality would have been established. In all this, race would be an irrelevancy—although every man’s equal access to resources would permit groups to maintain and develop their own subcultures.

There is a secondary but important economic insight that supports this moral stance. Modern economic orders are so complex, so interdependent in their processes of production, that it is meaningless to speak of individual productivity, or even group productivity—Yet our system of rewards is posited on such judgments.

The “Productivity” of an auto-worker on an assembly line, or that of his executive colleague, is a function of capital, technology, their skills and those of their colleagues throughout the auto corporation. Moreover, that corporation is in turn dependent on a host of other corporations, from the chemical and plastics industry to steel, power and electronics. All these productive units survive on revenue generated from the sale of their output, the value of which results from prices determined by almost everything except price competition. To argue as if our present wage differentials are rational, as if they related reward to effort and enshrined a moral code, is absurd.

In fact we have inherited wage structures established by the ruthless use of economic and political power, ossified by tradition and backed up by racial discrimination. The resulting

differentials are not only an affront to the basic dignity of all men irrespective of their particular talents; they also deny our essential communality within the modern economic order.

If the principle of equality in income distribution were to be accepted, there would have to be a gradual adaptation of society in that direction—and directions are vital. Vested interests would have to be challenged and the pace of change might be debated; but a new convergence of political and economic values would have been embarked upon.

It is precisely the unwillingness to establish long-term goals in the restructuring of Europe’s and America’s economic orders that lies at the root of much of their present inability to ease social tensions and check political cynicism. In South Africa such a re-orientation of social priorities would begin to lay the foundations for racial harmony and the establishment of legitimate government—government with a residual moral authority for all South Africans.

While there is no Utopian blueprint to go by, institutional structures would have to be examined in the light of a commitment to income equality, vigorous limitations on inherited wealth, public accountability of large corporations and the co-ordination of policies in such key sectors as health, education, transportation, steel, chemicals and electronics.

If in the long run the distribution of resources in society would be profoundly altered, the process need not be culturally levelling. Indeed a commitment to eliminate privilege in access to communal and personal goods and services would permit the flowering of that rich cultural diversity already present in South African society. Various lifestyles should persistently reflect different traditions and varied faiths. At best we may stand on the brink of a new tolerance for diversity. But the prerequisite for this cultural flowering, the essential basis for the new political consensus, must be a separation of the political and economic strands of the liberal/conservative consensus. The goal should be an open political system and the rule of law; but let there be a vigorous debate on the implications of equality within the economic system. The basic prerequisite is not the illusion of “equal opportunity”, but a steady commitment to ensure each South African’s equal access to the resources of society. It is not being an alarmist to suggest that the alternative is a continuation of present directions which may well lead to the disintegration of the remnants of parliamentary democracy. This in turn will involve the reassertion of privilege and economic power through military rule.

All this implies that White South Africans would have to accept increasingly severe limitations on their standards of living—and, indeed, like the elites of Europe and America, they may not be prepared to do so voluntarily. However, as pressures for justice increase in Southern Africa, compromises will be forced upon the privileged. In this early stage of such pressures, the initial response of the power structure has been the vigorous defence of white privilege, increased authoritarianism, and a decline in the rule of law. However, longer term perspectives must be persistently articulated. SPROCAS has taken a giant step forward in this regard; Leo Marquard’s **A Federation of Southern Africa** is a useful contribution; and Black South African’s growing leverage, and increasingly determined focus on economic justice, makes it clear that white

initiatives for change can be constructive but will now be essentially secondary.

If South Africa can avoid the disaster of increasing repressive violence and counter-violence, if it can engineer a transition in ideology, the way will have been opened for a profound renewal of society. What is involved is nothing less than the efficiency of political consciousness and the deliberate articulation of values as a major factor in human evolution. The alternative is the violent defence of privilege and the pursuit of justice with the sword.

In other words, Marxist insights which rely on economic determinism and outline the processes of class friction need to be taken very seriously. In South Africa, class privilege is clearly central and vigorously bolstered by racism. Most Marxists would therefore project the inevitable grinding out of class frictions amidst increasing violence. Yet it is just possible that

this underestimates the immensely important role of social consciousness in history—a consciousness on which Marx, at times, placed great emphasis, but which many of his followers underplayed or ignored. This social awareness has a new potency in a society blessed (not always cursed!) with the opportunities of modern communications. If South Africans can rearticulate their values under bold leadership, then the social consciousness of men will have become a counterweight to the almost overwhelming elements of economic determinism within history.

Man, created in the likeness of a loving God, has the invitation to be co-creator of history—but the invitation has to be accepted. In striving for the fulfillment of this potential we need to shake ourselves loose from the fierce grip of economic interests and the ideology that defends them. The challenge will then be to pursue the full logic of our highest ideal—the dignity of each human being.□

SOLIDARITY AS A MEANS TO PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE

GANDHI MEMORIAL LECTURE. PHOENIX 13.10.74

by Manas Buthelezi

Memorial days are occasions on which we are taken back to the historical roots of our heritage. We are enabled to see our struggle in the light of the invaluable contribution of those whose memory we treasure. Today we celebrate the memory of Mahatma Gandhi, a man who was able to combine political action with religious and philosophical reflection. His life of self-denial and commitment to non-violence, which has turned all of us who feel called upon to continue his struggle, into his spiritual heirs, demonstrates how a moral vision nurtured in the quiet of religious meditation can shape a political career, such as Gandhi's which was studded with intermittent prison spells and crowned with the salute of the assassin's bullet. He died in far-away India, but his spirit continues to haunt the dark corridors of the prejudices and injustices of a South Africa which he did so much to enrich during his life time.

We are gathered at this Durban outpost under the impulse of the living spirit of Gandhi. It is because today Gandhi is more than a memory that we have all converged at this place that incarnates what Gandhi was and still is to our history. At what point in our history do we commemorate Gandhi? It is a time during which a growing number of forward looking Indians, Africans and Coloureds are beginning to discover that, as black people, they have a common purpose of which they have to become increasingly aware if they can hope to continue and complete the struggle which men like Gandhi initiated. It is a time when they are beginning to rebel against the "non-white" label that has been used to describe their corporate identity. Some of our Indian, African and Coloured young people are banned or are enduring one form of physical hardship or the other simply because, among other things, they have dared to suggest