

THIRD WORLDISM: THE ALBATROSS OF SOCIALISM

Once Again On The Colonial Question

One issue separates *Searchlight South Africa* from most other socialist journals focused on South Africa: the editors do not support the nationalist or 'populist' movements. This journal does not acclaim their 'armed struggle', rejects their programmes (whether couched in reformist or radical phrases) and argues the need for a movement which will rally that class in a struggle for socialism.

Against the ideologues who proclaim the end of Marxism, and all the Stalinists who use the word communism to mislead, it is still necessary to state that a more human world society will be achieved through socialism.

What then of the nationalist movements in South Africa? While defending their right to exist and protecting them against the attacks of the government, there can be no support for their political philosophy and no support for their intervention in the trade unions or any other working class movement. Any such attempt by these populist leaders can only lead to a betrayal of the workers. This conclusion is buttressed by the article on the AFL-CIO by Paul Trehwela in this issue. For Mr Mandela in New York to call upon an organization that was CIA funded, to assist in building a trade union movement in South Africa is unacceptable. For the vice president of Sactu, Chris Dhlamini, to echo that request would be inexplicable if it were not that he is one of the leaders of the Communist Party.

From this it must follow that defence of those movements does not, and cannot, imply support for their aims, their tactics or their strategy. To do so would mean the end of an independent socialist movement, the betrayal of the working class and the repudiation of Marxism. It also means that it is not possible to accept any proposal that socialist groups immerse themselves in the populist stream.

Elsewhere in this issue there is an obituary to I.B. Tabata, one of the founders and leaders of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) since 1943. Tabata's first commitment to the political struggle came when he joined the Workers Party of South Africa in 1935. In private he always claimed allegiance to socialism and internationalism and there is no reason to believe that he meant otherwise. However, by placing himself at the head of the NEUM, or its main section, the All African Convention, Tabata always appeared publicly as a nationalist. No matter how often he denied that he was a nationalist, or that his politics had not moved away from socialism, he remained in the groove of 'liberation politics'. Yet Tabata's association with the WP was well known and the NEUM was always described as a Trotskyist movement.

For nearly fifty years the South African Trotskyists were enmeshed in this dualism: a movement devoted ostensibly to internationalism and the working class that played nationalist politics, and nationalist politicians who were

condemned as Trotskyists. It was an albatross that hung around the neck of the anti-Stalinist left in South Africa. Tabata was not alone in pursuing his mythical socialism through a nationalist movement. Several of his co-leaders had the same philosophy and conducted the same dualist politics. Goolam Gool, Ben Kies, Janub Gool, to mention only a few, came from the Workers Party. Other smaller Trotskyist groups affiliated with the NEUM, explaining their move in entryist terms. The Labour Party was rejected as segregationist; consequently they would work inside the national movement and there find their way to a mass audience. Leading Trotskyists in Cape Town, like Hosea Jaffe of the Fourth International Organisation of South Africa (FIOSA), was elected to the executive of the NEUM.

Except for one group in the Transvaal, there is no evidence that before the late 1970s any Trotskyists worked inside the trade union movement or tried specifically to organize a working class movement. Thus far had they moved from Marxism. Only those who broke from the nationalist politics of the NEUM, but retained some of the Marxism they had first encountered (all so secretly) in that body, worked in the unions. But they did not have a Marxist movement behind them and when the time was obviously ripe for the emergence of a workers' movement, they were unable to offer a lead.

This criticism of Tabata is not meant to belittle the man. He devoted his life for the movement he helped create and he did not waver in his beliefs. The same must be said of others who believed (and some who still believe) in the correctness of their policy. Perhaps the historian will look back benignly on them and say that in failing there was some merit. Success would have bound all their adherents to that nationalist brand of petty bourgeois politics.

However, where members of the WP and FIOSA failed, the Stalinists succeeded. They worked inside the Congress movement, where they flaunted their ethnic origins and gave uncritical support to programme. Indeed, how could they do otherwise when they had drafted the main provisions of the 'Freedom Charter', and provided the theory of internal colonialism to underpin their control of the organization?

The Stalinists succeeded all too well because it was not possible to separate their policies from that of the ANC. It was meaningless asking who was a communist and who was a nationalist in the ANC. There was nothing to distinguish them even if an Africanist section finds it expedient to break away, in order to adapt more fluently to capital. A crystallization into separate elements is not only possible, it is inevitable and is already under way.

If this involvement in populist politics had been only a South African phenomenon it might have been possible to ascribe it to the political backwardness of the country. However, in country after country, particularly in the former colonies, leftist groups have tended to move in the same trajectory; and in the metropolitan countries, socialists of all hues have adopted an approach that leaves them indistinguishable from the nationalists.

There is little purpose in listing all the nationalist movements that have called themselves socialist, or flirted with one of the international tendencies. Nor would it be enlightening to list the organizations or the many prominent socialists (of all tendencies) in the west who have lent their names to the

nationalist cause. Readers of this journal can draw up a list, starting perhaps with C L R James, George Padmore, Frantz Fanon, or less well known individuals such as the Trotskyist spokesman Pablo (Michel Raptis). They might know organizations like the Lanka Sama Samaja in Sri Lanka, the FLN of Algeria, the CPP of Ghana, or the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. This would make a good parlour game but might divide the players by generation. The heroes of the fifties and sixties now lie forgotten, the victors of the seventies are no longer with us; and those who survive are all too often an embarrassment. Yet new names keep appearing, and socialists keep raising the flag aloft for new champions.

The movement with the longest popular support in the west is probably the ANC. Endless energy, and even more money, has gone into bolstering it. Support for the ANC has been drummed up by Stalinists and Trotskyists; by US Senators, Commonwealth Prime Ministers; churches, sports associations, and so on. But the ANC is unique. Most such love-stories are usually of shorter duration. There is little purpose in listing all those ephemeral attachments, but a few reminders might help. There were few socialists in the west who did not support at some stage: Nkrumah or Ben Bella; Neguib or Nasser; Nehru or Mahatma Gandhi; Sukarno; Ho Chi Minh or even Pol Pot in south east Asia.

Those who championed one or other of these 'Third World' leaders always had a catalogue of reasons: these men and their movements had to be supported because: they were anti-imperialist, they fought colonial oppression, their victory would weaken western capitalism. There were also always escape-clauses: it was granted that these people might not be socialists, or at least socialists as understood in the west, and when trade unions were suppressed this was overlooked or justified because of the weakness of the new state. When stories of oppression were publicised, these were rejected as inventions of western propaganda, or of imperialist intrigues — and of course some were. Other reports were hushed up because it was not politic to undermine these newly-liberated countries.

There were other rationalisations. These politicians would take their countries into the first stage of liberation if not socialism; they would enlarge the political opportunities by giving everybody the vote; they would nationalize the main assets — or at least take away control from western finance capital; they would break down colonial boundaries. They would strengthen the 'socialist bloc' said some; they would join the peace-loving people said others; they would join a new socialist international concluded those who neither believed there was a 'socialist bloc' nor an independent peace movement.

The Conflict in the Gulf

Little more than a decade ago sections of the left in Europe discovered the liberating impact of Islam on the people of Iran. The followers of Khomeini, they proclaimed, had removed the instrument of the CIA in Iran and a better society would emerge. Even if Khomeini could not, or would not, usher in a more just society, he would provide a transitional stage for new, more progressive struggles. In their arguments, socialists who expressed such sentiments,

negated every tenet of Marxism. Some were Trotskyists, but they had relegated the struggle for socialism to the back benches, replacing it with a two-stage, or multi-stage, theory of social struggle.

During the long and bloody destruction of all opposition in Iran, the 'progressiveness' of Khomeini was forgotten. But there is no indication that there was any reassessment of what had gone wrong, no serious attempt at reappraisal of theories that had failed them. If only they would have said, openly and honestly, that they had erred, but search their publications as one can, the subject is forgotten. They might not have been right, but they never make mistakes. One adventure over, leftists looked elsewhere in their search for causes to support. There was Afghanistan, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Palestine, Argentine and Chile. There were shooting wars everywhere and the left press found much to occupy itself in the battle for the 'Third World'.

Now at last, since 2 August, when Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, there is a cause about which these left groups have found agreement. In unison they call 'Hands off Iraq' and some even declare that in the event of an invasion they will give their full support to Saddam Hussein's regime. Once again there are the same arguments, the same escape-clauses and the same rationalisations: This is an imperialist venture in order to keep control of oil; this is western capitalism protecting its investments; this is a move to preserve boundaries established by the imperialists when the Ottoman empire collapsed.

In some journals the argument goes further. Kuwait is an artificial city-state, created as a western haven, the possessor of oil and capital that is tied to Europe. Its existence cannot be justified and its defence is inexcusable. Thus sayeth the new Mercators as they peer at the map. Precisely which state can claim a right to separate existence, particularly in the middle East is left unsaid. Is it a matter of size? the nature of its government? or perhaps the number of persons per square mile of desert? How the predatory actions of colonial empires are to be undone and the pristine purity of the old era restored is not stated: but Kuwait has no right to exist. This is a venture into cloud-cuckoo-land. Socialists recognize that states must go, but in a capitalist world national sovereignty cannot be decided in a London back-room. The iniquities of the colonial past, and the post-colonial present need urgent attention, but that must be left to the people, all the people who live and work there: in Kuwait, in Kurdistan, east Timor, Kashmir, Tibet, Palestine, and so on. Only after they voice an opinion, and the people of adjacent territories are consulted, can such issues be resolved — at least for the present.

The reservations expressed by the left, in the case of Iraq, are stronger than usual. Saddam is described (correctly) as a tyrant, an executioner of trade unionists and communists, a man guilty of genocide. Nonetheless, they say, the Iraqi workers who dare not speak, the Kurds who are gassed into silence, and the students who are muzzled must defend Saddam Hussein, because he is fighting a 'just war'. It is called dialectics, no doubt — if by dialectics is meant finding an argument to justify the unjustifiable, to twist all logic to reach a prejudged conclusion.

Among all the reservations voiced by the defenders of Saddam there are few expressions of concern for the millions of 'gastarbeiters' who have been driven out — because presumably they had no right to be in a non-state. Nor was there recoil from the mass looting of Kuwait city — that had no right to be there. Perhaps the accounts of pillage and looting, of executions and repression are only western (and Egyptian? and Syrian?) propaganda. There might be exaggerations but they are not incompatible with what the Iraqi troops have done elsewhere. Or perhaps these are not of concern to socialists who know only that Kuwait is a non-state. After all, a non-state cannot be annexed.

Trenches in the Sand

To state this does not imply support for the war-mongers. That the hawks of America should beat the war drums is understandable: they have to prove that they are the one and only superpower. They alone can maintain the *status quo ante* in the Middle East. That Britain should wave the Union Jack needs no comment. Britain's subservience to the US is now a fact of history. Together they will fight — to maintain the hegemony of the Atlantic powers.

That the sheiks of the desert should call for the defence of their oil-wells is equally obvious: there lies their wealth and their power and it is their sacred duty to protect it. The Kuwaiti desert-lords demand war yesterday — and they will consider democracy tomorrow. The Saudi lords-of-the-holy-places demand war tomorrow and pump oil today.

Also, the demand that Germany and Japan pay millions into the war coffers makes sense. They must pay for the show of strength because ultimately it is they who will benefit from the smooth flow of oil. It is less obvious why the smaller European states blow the same war trumpets, but that is the price for backing an alliance, which alone holds the purse strings they need to open.

When it comes to the USSR and China, there are no words to describe the perfidy of men who would like to walk with big brother, but can do no more than crawl with a begging bowl. Gone is the demand for the defeat of 'predatory imperialism' or of 'paper tigers'. Those who support the warring parties are beneath contempt and readers of *Searchlight South Africa* will undoubtedly have come to this position long before they read this article.

What then are the slogans for which people are being asked to fight, and die? There are few leftists who believed that the promises of World War II would be kept, but there was a grandeur in the proclamations of Roosevelt and Churchill: in their Four Freedoms, and the Atlantic Charter. They would conquer evil and usher in the era of the common man. Millions did believe them. Stalin made no such promises. He called for a 'holy war' in the name of Mother Russia — and for that the Stalinists everywhere raised cheers, and not unlike today, worked for the 'holy' cause.

By way of contrast there are no such slogans today. But how could there be promises of Freedom? There is no freedom or democracy, no popular participation in the governments of those despotic states in the Arabian peninsula which, overnight, been joined the ranks of the alliance. What

freedoms can be offered to the people of the middle East when the fighting forces are drawn from the armies of Syrians and Saudi Arabia and Israel might be called in, or when the object is to restore the ruling caste of Kuwait? Although the language of WWII is used, it is the negatives that are employed: there are warnings of the dangers of appeasement, Saddam is likened to Hitler, and there is talk of Nuremberg trials. Just cheap jibes against the opponent and threats of retribution – and this against the men they financed and armed to stop the advance of Iran (now a 'holy ally'). Against a man who did their work for them by destroying the left (even if much of it was Stalinist). It is for this that troops have been drafted and asked to lay down their lives.

High Noon in the Middle East

The roots of the present crisis in the Gulf, as in all the areas of the Middle East, are complex. Historically it can be traced to the dismemberment of the crumbling Ottoman Empire after a century of rivalry between the Russian Tsar in the east, and France and Britain in the west. With the removal of Russia as a serious contender (after the revolution of 1917) the carving up of that once powerful empire was completed.

Britain and France took control and emerged as the hegemonic powers in the region. Their concern was with strategic placement and with oil. From the Mediterranean through the Red Sea and into the Gulf they aimed (separately) to secure their imperial interests. Suez was the one prize and this was secured by the British, at the head of an international consortium. A compliant monarchy was kept on the throne and the British presence was always obvious. Together, but with scarcely concealed rivalry, the French and the British drew lines in the desert to mark out the new 'protected' states. Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, the Emirates to the east of Suez, the north African states to the west. Some were historically defined, although borders were hotly disputed and a cause of great tension. There was no place for sentiment and people like the Kurds found themselves incorporated into one or more state. None of these territories were economically viable, despite a flourishing agriculture in restricted regions. They were without transport systems, without industry, and without a bourgeoisie. A ruling class was moulded from the Arab sheikdoms and arbitrary city states were set up to protect oil interests.

'Favourite sons' were placed in power, drawn from the traditional tribal leadership. They were encouraged by the administrators to transform communal land into private property, and by means of tax relief were able to build up these land holdings into considerable estates. The only other group of people that exercised power were the young officers. They were the visible support for the ruling group and they were the ones who controlled changes of government.

England and France drew the borders, but they were eclipsed by the US, and the latter demanded its place in the sun. The wielders of economic power were the international petrochemical companies: they determined the extent of exploration, decided which fields to develop, what refineries to build. The only

economic development in the region was in real estate or in the market. Other developments before the second world war were negligible.

The infusion of capital into the oil fields and the growing need for commodities from Europe introduced new tensions into the region. No panoramic picture can depict the struggle to find exports to finance the newly desired imports, nor provide the background to strikes, riots, revolts or coups. In each case they arose from the local pattern of conflicting interests: of army against the monarchy—and of both against the metropolitan power; of fellaheen against effendi (translated through the cash nexus into peasant against landowner) and of both against France, Britain and then the US, or against a neighbouring territory. To this was added new rivalries, with war between Christians and Muslims, Sunnis against Shiites, Berbers against Arabs, Arabs against Jews. That is, local and national rivalries loomed larger than struggles against imperialism: religious leaders rallied supporters around their sects, war-lords fought for control of provinces, countries like Yemen broke apart, Iraq was at daggers drawn with Syria and engaged in a disastrous ten-year war with Iran. And the European powers played one group against the other.

There had to be change, partly because of growing disaffection in the middle east, but mainly because the balance of power in the world was altering. The European states weakened—and welcomed fresh capital investment from the oil-Sheiks. The oil that had once brought such vast profits to Europe and allowed Britain and France to manipulate regimes, had passed to other masters. The inheritors were the men who controlled the governments of these middle Eastern states. The rulers had become a rentier class, with vast real estate and commercial ventures in Europe or America, but the progress was uneven. Iraq, under the Ba'ath Socialist Party, undertook a programme of industrialization. This introduced new tensions which led to the massive repression of both workers and peasants, and workers' organizations were silenced. In a state controlled by the security force, Kurds and Shiites were persecuted or exterminated, and ultimately the country was plunged into a war in which hundreds of thousands were killed.

All of this is common knowledge and there can be no support for those who wish to maintain the *status quo*, or those who seek only to build their own fortunes. But the answer does not lie in the slogan: Hands off Iraq! Nor any other that can only usher in a new, equally iniquitous, equilibrium. Until socialists learn to direct their slogans to the working class, and find a response from that class they will be impotent. Their task is to call for the international solidarity of the workers of all lands; their specific call is for a confederation of the middle east and the overthrow of the sheikdoms and governing cliques. The toilers of the Middle East will only gain their liberty through joining with workers everywhere in the struggle for socialism.

The *Ancient Mariner* who could not call off the curse of the *Albatross* was doomed to destruction. Socialists who persist in wearing the Albatross of Third Worldism deserve no better fate.

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