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COMMUNISTS IN NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

- A talk dedicated to the life and work of Ruth First -

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Communist Theory

Communists are notoriously addicted to theory. Every member is expected to have more than a nodding acquaintance with a wide range of basic concepts. Among these are the conflicting interests of labour and capital, commonly called the class struggle; contradictions of capitalism as revealed, for instance, in recurring economic crises; modern imperialism and its offshoots - colonial rule, national oppression and war; prerequisites of social revolution, fundamentals of socialism and the content of workers' democracy, otherwise known as dictatorship of the proletariat.

When presented in the philosophical context of historical materialism and dialectical materialism, the items of a communist curriculum are more than enough for a full length university course in the social sciences. Yet only a handful of members have the good fortune to attend a party school. The rest must study the theory as best they can in between the daily round of making a living, raising families, attending branch meetings and carrying out assignments.

It is the duty of leading party units to organise study classes on current affairs as well as the basic concepts. The idea that members would be able to interpret events correctly

and relate them to party programmes, policy and pronouncements. Thus at the present time, while imperialist forces take up strategic positions around the globe in preparation for yet another world war, communist parties are bound to alert their members to the links between capitalist crisis and armed aggression, the aims of the Warsaw Pact peace policies, and the importance of strengthening peace movements everywhere.

Communists naturally vary a great deal in degree of experience, analytical capacity, theoretical understanding and readiness for prolonged study courses. Some members with only a rudimentary school education are able to absorb basic concepts like a sponge sucking up water, while a college degree is no guarantee of ability to grasp the abstract concepts of dialectics. Perhaps only a few succeed in mastering the theory of value and the intricacies of extended reproduction or the ideological difference between the numerous brands of radical thought: Marxist-Leninism,

neo-Marixism,

Trotskyism,

Maoism,

Euro-Communism,

African Socialism, and

Social Democracy.

Whatever their degree of understanding may be, however, communists are always under pressure to keep abreast with events and developments of the party line.

That obligation, I suggest, is largely peculiar to the communist party's style of work, pattern of organisation and cultural heritage bequeathed by the founding fathers Marx, Engels and Lenin, whose combined published works run to more than a hundred fat volumes of text, footnotes and biographical references. Apart from professional scholars, whose business it is to study this enormous output, few people other than communists are prepared to take up this daunting challenge.

European Social Democrats may have a traditional regard for the thoughts of Marx and Engels. In the present atmosphere of revisionism and capitulation to the American dollar, however, they also tend to identify attachment to Marxism-Leninism as the hallmark of Soviet agents. As for Britain's social democrats, they reputedly proceed no further than the first page of Das Kapital in disregard of Engels' admonition in his preface to the first English edition of this great work published in 1887. The country's industrial system, he wrote, had come to a dead stop; foreign industry "stares English production in the face everywhere", while, "the number of the unemployed keeps swelling from year to year....." Surely, at such a moment, the voice ought to be heard of a man whose whole theory is the result of a life-long study of the economic history and condition of England!

Engels' wise words fell on deaf ears. A large part of the English people seem to prefer the vulgar economic theory and aggressive chauvinism of Thatcherism. Marx thought that England was the only country in Europe where the inevitable social revolution might take place by peaceful means, but even this prospect has dimmed.

Marxism-Leninism is par excellence a theory of social change by way of revolution. Peoples and parties which have no stomach for revolution are bound to steer clear of the precepts contained in the Communist Manifesto and the collected works of Lenin, one of the great political strategists of all times. True enough, attention is commonly given to aspects of the **theory** in the social science curricula of Western Europe, but **never** as a unified doctrine or guide to action.

Yet communist theory comes closer than any other to an integrated, comprehensive and plausible explanation of social change, from one social formation to another. The theory may have a long way to go before it can justly claim that it is a science of society, but the approach is scientific. That is to say, communists are aware of the need to formulate hypotheses, look for casual explanations, compare their propositions with the empirical evidence and if necessary modify the conclusions.

There is admittedly a tendency, which exists in all branches of science, to turn concepts into stereotypes, theories into doctrine and hypotheses into established laws. Nowhere is this tendency more evident than in what is commonly called the 'national question'. It constitutes the second leg of my talk, to which I now direct attention.

#### Nations and Nationalities

"The workingmen have no country", declared Marx and Engels

(Manifesto of the Communist Party, part II, 1848). Nearly 30 years later in the Gotha Programme of 1875, Marx repeated the proposition - that the class struggle was national only in form but not in substance. Though it took place within the framework of the nation-state, it was essentially international in character, because workers everywhere had common interests against the owners of capital. Hence the concluding slogan of the Manifesto: 'Workingmen of all countries unite !'

The slogan met with little response in 1914 and again in 1939. Workers from Britain, Germany, France and elsewhere marched to die for their countries and to slaughter workingmen of the opposing side. In the absence of social revolutions, the fratricidal strife seems likely to recur in the next war between nations. An even more shattering refutation of the Marxist thesis, was the war of 1978-1979 between socialist states in south-east Asia.

Belief in the nation would appear to be emotionally paramount, transcending loyalties to class, ethnicity, locality and religion on those occasions when jingoism prevails under the cloud of propaganda, sprayed in massive doses by politicians, papers, churches and other instruments of the media. A sad example, is the case of Michael Foot, author of the Unilateral Disarmament resolution who capitulated wholly to Thatcher's call to arms in the Falkland affair.

The episode was at least true to form in the annals of colonial wars. What interpretation should Marxists place, however, on the fighting in Chad between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, each backed by one or other Big Power, whose

whose allegiance to the rivals is liable to change according to local and global interests. Is the civil war in Chad a conflict between tribes, now fashionably called ethnicities, religious nationalities, or pawns of imperialism? Or is it a class struggle?

The terminology is important and not only for semantic reasons. Much of the debate on the question may appear to be semantic, being concerned with the meaning of such categories as:

- nation,
- nationality,
- national group,
- ethnicity,
- tribe,
- race, or
- sect.

The definitions, however, concern people who are almost certainly in conflict with other people. If there are communists about, it is certain that they would be involved in the conflict, and therefore impelled to take up a theoretical position.

Iran and Sri Lanka, are cases in point. In Iran, the overtly Marxist Tudeh party threw its weight behind the Ayatollah in the struggle against the Shah and his United States backers, only to be told that it was an agent of the Soviet Union. The Muslem priests who dominate the government outlawed the party and imprisoned thousands of its members allegedly for having supplied information to the Soviet Union. Marxist parties in Sri Lanka, both Communist and Trotskyist, also participated for years in the national

liberation movement before and after independence. They too have been banned by the predominantly Bhuddist government after the massacre of Tamil Hindu in Jaffna peninsula, seat of a secessionist Tamil United Liberation Front. President Jayawardene has said that there was no evidence of Communist involvement in the riots, but the Russians might have had a hand in them!

The ruling Singhalese party has changed the constitution so as to ban all separatist parties. Do communists approve the Tamil demand for secession and self rule in a separate sovereign state? Or do they endorse the determination of the Singhalese majority to maintain the territorial and political unity of Sri Lanka in defiance of the minority's national aspirations?

Similar questions triggered long and heated debates among pioneer Marxists. Communists ought to be familiar with Marx's dictum of 1869: 'No national can be free if it oppresses other nations'. He was thinking of Ireland, whose sufferings aroused the sympathy of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association in November of that year. In reply to followers of Bukunin who criticised the Council, he explained in a circular letter, that Ireland was the backbone of English landlordism and a constant source of low paid migrant workers, whose employment in England divided the workers into hostile camps. The English hated the Irish whose competition lowered wages and living standards while national and religious antipathies were nourished by the propertied class. Poor whites in America, had similar attitude to their black slaves, the Irish in that country

had only one passion - their hatred for England. The English government used Ireland as its only pretext for retaining a big standing army to be used, if needed against the English workers.

As these facts demonstrated, 'Any nation that oppresses another forges its own chains'. Hence the attitude of the International Association was very clear. 'Its first need was to encourage the social revolution in England. To this end a great blow must be struck in Ireland' (The General Council of the First International, 1868-1870. Minutes. Appendix, p. 403-5).

The blow was struck, liberating most of Ireland, but leaving the North in much the same kind of condition as that described by Marx more than a hundred years ago. Its topical relevance is not confined to Ireland; much of it has significance also for us in South Africa and vindicates the Marxist thesis concerning relations between class struggle and national liberation.

Marx and Engels were accused after 1870 of being inconsistent in their attitude to nationalism in South-east Europe. They favoured Polish separation from Tsarist Russia, while objecting to Czech and Slav demands for independence from the Austrian empire.

Some critics saw in this apparent contradiction, a trace of German chauvinism which revealed the patriotic strain in Marx and Engels. Lenin, however, rallied strongly to their defence. Writing in 1916, at the height of the first



world war, which brought to the surface the aspirations of different nations in Europe, he argued that they had been consistent in applying one and the same set of socialist principles in different 'concrete' situations. There was a clear difference between the case for Polish independence, which would strengthen the struggle for European democracy against the Tsarist autocracy, and the national demands of Czechs and Serbs, who at that time when Marx and Engels discussed their claims, were themselves, reactionary outposts of Tsarism.

Lenin drew two important conclusions from the debate. Firstly, the interests of big nations should have priority over those of smaller ones in liberation movements. Secondly, the demand for self determination is not an absolute, but 'only a small part of the general democratic (now: general socialist) world movement. In individual concrete cases, the part may contradict the whole; if so it must be rejected' ("The Discussion of Self-Determination Summed Up", 1916, Lenin C.W., v.22, p.340-41)

We do not need to look far for illustrations. Throughout Africa, small national groups assert claims to recognition and sometimes separation at the expense of a wider national integration. In such situations, the first of Lenin's principles applies. The interests of the liberation of the big nation rates higher than the interests of the movement for liberation of the small nation. The reasons for this preference will be examined later. For the present, let us take note of the imperialist strategy of promoting ethnic

separatism to undermine revolutionary governments, or, as in South Africa, to obstruct the national democratic revolution.

### Self Determination

South Africa's apartheidists, are adept in the art of political camouflage. The use double-speak words to describe the opposite of their real meaning. A law to intensify the oppression of pass laws is called the Abolition of Passes Act. Sex and marriage between black and white persons are declared immoral and made illegal. Race inequalities are said to be forms of 'separate development'. The first of the many laws enacted to exclude Africans from the Union of South Africa was the Promotion of Bantu Self-government Act of 1959. In similar fashion, the racists appropriated the noble concepts of self determination and secession, to cover up the vicious nature of Bantustan segregation, appease white conscience and hoodwink outsiders who take words at their face value. The South African case amply demonstrates the validity of Lenin's contention that the right of self determination is contingent and not absolute.

It is, nevertheless, a universal right. It applies to all nations, big and small. One of Lenin's important contributions to the theory arose out of his insistence that colonised people were not just 'tribes' but nations in process of formation. In a rebuke of socialists who sought to excuse colonialism at the Second International Congress, held in Stuttgart in 1907, he traced their opportunism to the profits derived from colonial exploitation. "In certain countries", he explained, "this provides the material and economic basis

for infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism". ('The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart', 1907, C.W., v.13, p.77). The evil had to be recognised, and the causes understood if socialists were to rally the workers of all countries for the struggle against opportunism.

Seven years later, after the outbreak of war, he declared that the proletarian revolution called for "a prolonged education of the workers in the spirit of the fullest national equality and brotherhood". ('On the National Pride of the Great Russians', 1914, C.W., v.21, p.105). Later in the war he urged socialists to demand "the unconditional and immediate liberation of the colonies without compensation - and this demand in its political expression signifies nothing else than the recognition of the right to self-determination". ('The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination', 1916, C.W., v.22, p.151).

It needs to be said that the Bolshevik Party - now celebrating the 80th anniversary of its formation - arrived at a firm, principled position on the national and colonial question long before the Great October Revolution required it as the ruling party to formulate a policy suited to the national interests of the infant Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. The manner in which the policy was put into effect cannot be examined here within the time available, but two observations bearing on our theme should be made.

Firstly, the Bolshevik government applied the policy of self determination in spite of the great dangers and

difficulties that resulted from the civil war and armed intervention. Independence was granted to Armenia, the Ukraine and Finland in December, 1917; and to Russian Poland, the Baltic states and Byelorussia in 1918-19.

Secondly, the consequences of independence varied according to the relative strength of the capitalist and revolutionary forces involved in the struggle. Western armies defeated the revolution and installed capitalist governments in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland. The workers and peasants of other border nations, led by the Bolsheviks and with Red Army aid, defeated the national bourgeoisie and their Western allies, established socialist republics and entered the Soviet Union on terms of formal equality with the Russian Socialist Federation of Soviet Republics (RSFSR).

The conclusion to be drawn is that self-determination in practice, serves progressive ends when used to dismantle the institutions of feudalism, colonial rule and oppressor nations; but serves counter-revolutionary interests when it becomes an instrument of disruption and dissent against the forces of national liberation and socialism. Lenin's basic principle applies: the right of self-determination is not an absolute, but operates subject to the interests of the national democratic and social revolution which are paramount.

Judged by these criteria, the fictitious grant of a spurious right of self-determination and independence to Bantustan traditionalists in South Africa is resisted for a number of related reasons:

- \* it is imposed by the oppressor nation from above;
- \* serves the oppressor's interests;

- \* contradicts the general-democratic content of the liberation movement;
- \* disrupts the unity of the emergent South African nation;
- \* violates the right of Africans to determine their national destiny; and
- \* denies the revolution's aims of achieving unity and equality.

Self-determination describes the capacity of a nationality to develop its language, arts, style of life, religion and traditions in freedom and on a basis of equality with other nationalities. Communists favour the concept of self-determination for ethical reasons of justice, freedom and equality and in the pursuit of the goal of a classless socialist society. Inequalities between nations - as between races and the sexes - breeds resentment in the repressed group, arrogance in the dominant group and diverts attention from the struggle for a classless society.

National arrogance, racism, tribalism, religious intolerance, overbearing masculinity are manifestations of what Lenin called chauvinism. According to Everyman's Encyclopedia, the word chauvinism describes 'unreasonable and exaggerated patriotism and pride in one's own country, with a corresponding contempt towards other nations'; and is derived from the name of Nicolas Chauvin, a veteran of Napoleon's army, who symbolised the blind worship given by Frenchmen to the Emperor. In essays written after the outbreak of the 1914 war, Lenin distinguished between social-chauvinists who supported their governments in the imperialist war and the justifiable sense of national pride in class-conscious workers who preached and practised complete equality between all nations oppressed by the Great Russians. "We love our

language and our country" he declared, and "are doing our very utmost to raise her toiling masses (i.e. nine-tenths of her population) to the level of a democratic and socialist consciousness" ('On the National Pride of the Great Russians', C.W., v.21, p.103).

He fought the social cancer of chauvinism to the end of his days. In a memorandum of 6 October, 1922 to the Political Bureau, he wrote "I declare war to the death on dominant national chauvinism... It must be absolutely insisted that the Union Central Executive Committee should be presided over in turn by a Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, etc. Absolutely!" (C.W., v.33, p.372). In December of the same year, he complained of the failure to defend non-Russians against "the truly Russian bully" and chauvinist, "in substance a rascal and a tyrant, such as is the typical Russian bureaucrat" ('The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomisation' ', (C.W., v.36, p.606).

In Africa, the chauvinist is typically a racist, usually white - the Mzungu of Central Africa - who finds compensation for his fears and sense of inadequacy, by bossing and bullying blacks. Chauvinism is not confined however to relations between black and white. There are also tribal chauvinists and male chauvinists on both sides of the colour line. The communist code is explicit on this point. Members are required to fight to the death against all forms of chauvinism. The positive side of the fight is the struggle for national equality.

National Democratic Revolution

The theoretical groundwork of communist participation in national movements was prepared early in the century during debates in the Second International on colonial policies. I commented earlier on the 1907 Congress and Lenin's conclusion that profits extracted from the colonies provided the means for infecting Western workers with colonial chauvinism. He sharpened his criticisms after the outbreak of war. "Any socialist belonging to an oppressor nation", he said, "was a chauvinist and not a socialist if he failed to struggle for the right of oppressed nations to self-determination and secession" ('The Question of Peace', 1915, C.W., v.21, p.291).

The Russian Revolution radically changed the world balance of forces, transformed relations between imperialist states and the colonies, set in action the process leading after World War II, to wholesale decolonisation, and brought millions of colonised people a prospect of liberation. In Lenin's words, "the struggle against capital in advanced industrial countries would combine with the struggle of oppressed nations. The communists' task was to carry the message of liberation to every country in a language the people understood". ('Address to the Second 'All-Russia Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East', 1919, C.W., v.30, p.162

Communist parties that emerged in several countries after the Revolution assembled in Moscow in March, 1919 to form the Communist International, soon to be known as the Comintern, or Third International. Its second congress, held in 1920 discussed Lenin's draft thesis on the national and

colonial question and referred them to a special commission. In communicating its findings to the plenary session, Lenin said:

"We came to the conclusion that the bourgeois-democratic parties of the oppressed nationalities are of various kinds. Some of them have adopted reformist tactics and are adapting themselves to the political regime existing in their countries and harmonising their activities with the interests of the ruling countries. Of course we shall not give support to such parties... Communists should support the national-revolutionary movements, but only when these are really revolutionary". (cit. in Communism in South East Asia by J.H. Brimmell, O.U.P. 1959, p.40)

Among the commission's members were the Indian Marxist Manabendra Nath Roy, who had organised a communist party in Mexico, and the Dutch Marxist Hendricus Sneevliet (alias Maring) who had done the same in Java. At their insistence the commission substituted the term 'national revolutionary' for 'bourgeois democratic' - the words used in Lenin's draft. The significance of the change, he explained, is that "we, as communists, should and will support bourgeois-liberation movements in the colonies only when they are genuinely revolutionary and when their exponents do not hinder our work of educating and organising in a revolutionary spirit the peasantry and the masses of the exploited. If these conditions do not exist, the communists in these countries must combat the reformist bourgeoisie, to whom the heroes of the Second International also belong. Reformist parties already exist in the colonial countries, and in some cases their spokesmen call themselves Social-Democrats and Socialists".



('Report of the Commission on the National and the Colonial Questions', July 26, 1920. C.W., v.32, p.240-45).

The resolution finally adopted drew a line between oppressor and oppressed nations and:

- \* called on communists in the oppressor nations to give direct aid to the revolutionary movements of oppressed nations such as Ireland, American Negroes and in the colonies;
- \* directed Communist parties to assist national-revolutionary movements in peasant countries;
- \* instructed the Comintern to support such movements but not to enter into an alliance with them pending the formation of proletarian parties; and
- \* required communists to retain the independence of proletarian parties even if they were in an most embryonic stage.

('Preliminary Draft Thesis on the National and the Colonial Questions', 1920, C.W., vol.31, p.144-51).

Communist parties generally followed the guidelines as best they could until the threats posed by Nazi militarism and Japanese imperialism in the 1930's precipitated the formation of popular movements against fascism and war. The Comintern held its last congress in 1935 and formally dissolved in 1943. Before looking at the effect of the dissolution on communist involvement in national liberation movements, we ought to take note of the Comintern's influence on the South African party, the only party on the continent affiliated at any time to the Communist International.

The Communist Party of South Africa came into being on 30 July, 1921 with an all-white executive and applied successfully for affiliation to the Communist International. Its 6th congress, held in 1928, urged the Party to 'put forward the slogan for the creation of an independent native

South African Republic as a stage towards a Workers' and Peasants' Republic with full equal rights for all races'. Following the congress, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) adopted a strongly worded resolution criticising the South African Communist party for its "stubborn opposition to the correct slogan proposed by the Comintern". The resolution went on to spell out the ECCI's version of the policy to be pursued in Africa. The Party should:

- \* combat chauvinism;
- \* transform the embryonic nationalist movement into a revolutionary struggle against the white bourgeoisie and foreign imperialists;
- \* emphasise class differences between white capitalists and white workers who were also exploited as wage slaves though better paid than the natives;
- \* struggle for unity between black and white workers and introduce a correct class content into the idea of cooperation between blacks and whites in general; and
- \* explain that black and white workers were leaders of the revolutionary struggle of the native masses against the white bourgeoisie and British imperialism.

(South African Communists Speak, 1915-1980. ed. Brian Bunting, Inkulukeko Publications, London. 1981, p.90-7).

A paragraph in the ECCI resolution which concerned the Party's approach to the African National Congress has an important bearing on our theme and is reproduced here in full. The text reads:

The Party should pay particular attention to the embryonic national organisations among the natives, such as the African National Congress. The Party, while retaining its full independence, should participate in these organisations, should

seek to broaden and extend their activity, Our  
Our aim should be to transform the African National  
Congress into a fighting nationalist revolutionary  
organisation against the white bourgeoisie and the  
British imperialists, based upon the the trade  
unions, peasant organisations, etc., developing  
systematically the leadership of the workers and  
the Communist Party in this organisation. The Party  
should seek to weaken the influence of the native  
chiefs corrupted by the white bourgeoisie over the  
existing native tribal organisations by developing  
peasants' organisations and spreading among them  
the influence of the Communist Party. The development  
of a national-revolutionary movement of toilers of  
South Africa against the white bourgeoisie and  
British imperialism, constitutes one of the major  
tasks of the Communist Party of South Africa ' (Ibid. p.96)

At least one ANC leader agreed with the ECCI formula.  
Josiah Tshangana Gumede, President of the ANC between 1927 and  
1930, returned in 1928 from a visit to the Soviet Union with  
a message: "I have seen the new world to come, where it has  
already begun. I have been to the new Jerusalem". In his  
presidential address to Congress, he said that "Soviet Russia  
was the only real friend of all subjected races"; and urged  
Congress "to demand a South African Native Republic with equal  
rights for all and free from foreign and local domination".  
The militants rallied behind him, but the conservatives won  
the day and ousted him from the presidency in April 1930.  
(Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950, Penguin,  
1969, ch.17).

Gumede's message seemed to have misfired. It came to life, however, thirty years later in a firm and enduring alliance between the ANC and the Communist Party. The alliance has been cemented by the blood of our martyrs, the hardships of political prisoners, the tears of widows and children and the suffering of unnumbered members of the resistance movement. Gumede's call for a South African Back Republic with equal rights for all continues to ring true, and is closer to becoming a reality than even he could have imagined.

#### Diversity and Continuity

Communism took a big leap forward internationally after the defeat in 1945 of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperialist Japan. Communist parties came to power in several European countries and in China, North Korea, Indo-China and Cuba. There were two outstanding consequences of this expansion. It met with relentless hostility, often accompanied by armed aggression, economic blockade, subversion and sabotage by the big capitalist powers. Secondly, the expansion into countries with different national characteristics naturally produced a wide range of strategies and ideologies adjusted to the special conditions of each. A factor contributing to the process of diversification was the absence of a coordinating administrative and ideological centre such as the Communist International had provided.

Flexibility, adaptation to national characteristics, experimentation and innovations in theory have many advantages over a highly centralised, monolithic structure.

Decentralisation should therefore be welcomed provided that it takes place within an acceptable parameter of a socialist formation. Before discussing such a parameter, I should explain that it is not my intention to examine the discord and real conflicts within the world communist community, notably between the Soviet Union on the one hand and China, Yugoslavia, Albania or Euro-communist revisionists on the other hand. They are important but we simply have no time to discuss them. The most we can do is to note that Communist parties and governments actually collide with one another over issues that have generated disputes between nations throughout the ages:

territorial boundaries;  
natural resources;  
strategic positions; and  
national pride.

As regards the parameter, one was formulated in November, 1957 at the Moscow Conference of 81 Communist Parties which discussed the extent of permissible divergences from an agreed model based on the essential laws of socialist construction. Stated in point form, the laws or principles are:

- \* guidance of the working people by a Marxist-Leninist Party;
- \* establishment of the proletarian dictatorship in one or other form;
- \* alliance of the working class and peasantry;
- \* abolition of capitalist ownership and the introduction of public ownership of the means of production;
- \* a planned economy aimed at raising living standards and building socialism;
- \* development of socialist outlook among all sections of the population;

- \* abolition of national oppression and the establishment of equality for all; and
- \* solidarity with workers of all countries in the interests of proletarian internationalism.

(Donald S. Zagoria, 'Some Comparisons between the Russian and Chinese Models', Communist Strategies in Asia, ed. by A. Doak Barnett, London, 1963, p.12-13).

This set of principles might serve as a political litmus paper enabling one to distinguish between parties that are red, slightly pink or merely yellow, but I shall not take on such an invidious task as sticking labels. Does African Socialism, Ujamaa, or Humanism Through Socialism fall within the boundaries of the socialist parameter? I leave the question to be answered by other students and hasten to discuss the interaction between communists and national liberation movements in Africa. A useful starting point is the formation of classes.

### Classes in Africa

Ruth First, in whose memory I have the honour to address this distinguished gathering of her friends, comrades, fellow workers and admirers, has set for us all a splendid example of a communist writer who scrupulously tests theoretical propositions against the relevant empirical evidence. Fact and theory go hand in hand in: *South West Africa* (1963), *The Barrel of a Gun* (1972) and her last book, *Black Gold*, published posthumously, as they did in the works of the masters Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Her scrutiny of army coups in Africa revealed the fragility of post-independence governments throughout the continent

and the apparent ease with which small groups of armed men could seize power. She also showed that the great majority - peasants, wage earners, even business people - obtained no benefit from the resulting disorder, loss of life and suffering, usually accompanied by plundering of public wealth by a handful of officers and their civilian associates.

Being a good Marxist sociologist, Ruth took careful note of the class forces involved. Her conclusions remain valid, fifteen years after she wrote her seminal work. The ruling parties, politicians, public servants and parastatal managers who moved into commanding positions after independence were not, in her words 'a distinct social class....anchored in economic ownership and control. Neither the governing parties nor the opposition were, in general, class based'. (The Barrel of a Gun, 1970, p.96-7).

It is probably correct to say even now that the people who took control of the state after independence have not been able to sink the roots and form the links that establish a culture characteristic of a dominant class. The quickest way of upward mobility is to enter the public services and public corporations or to become an associate of an external-based business enterprise. Members of the salaried bureaucracy may have a standard of living well above that of the majority, but only a few hundred in most countries accumulate enough wealth to constitute the nucleus of a propertied class.

As for the working class, it seldom appears in the annals of conflict between competing groups of elites, the word that

Ruth used to describe top-ranking people in the power structure. The absence of a mature working class is still evident in all but a few African countries in which the rural population forms up to 80 per cent and more of the whole. Marx's axiom, that social classes appear at historical phases in the development of production applies. Firstly, industrialism, from which a working class emerges, made very slow progress in the absence of large mining enterprises. Secondly, workers acquire an awareness of themselves as a distinct class through conflict with employers and government, and through mobilising activities of working class parties. Colonial governments however obstructed the growth of trade unions, and provided only a small degree of participation in the system of government. Consequently, class conscious workers appeared in all but a few countries in Africa only since independence, which is less than 30 years of a generation cycle. Trade unions abound, but workers' parties are few and far between.

Ruth drew attention to some other important features of the working class. It is small - only 10 per cent of the labour force is in wage employment; governments everywhere are the biggest employers; the number of wage earners has actually declined in manufacturing and the service sector in some countries since independence (Ibid. p.455) These characteristics have become more pronounced during the past decade of the world crisis of capitalism. Finance capital, operating through multinational banks, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, suck debtor nations dry of meagre financial resources; while conditions of trade with advanced capitalism force Africa to pay ever increasing



quantities of raw products for imported manufactured goods and technological services.

Secondary schools and university graduates were in short supply scarcely more than ten years ago. Today they find that entry has been blocked into overcrowded public services and that job opportunities are few and far between in the shrinking private sector. The slowing down of economic growth has similarly given rise to high rates of unemployment among wage earners and accelerated the movement of job seekers from the villages.

#### The African Communist

How ought communists to work under these conditions?. Marx's advice conforms to the spirit of the Communist League of 1847: go out to agitate and educate. In reply to a correspondent, he wrote in 1871:

"Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organisation to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power, i.e. the political power of the ruling classes, it must at any rate be trained for this by continual agitation against and a hostile attitude towards the policy of the ruling class. Otherwise it will remain a plaything in their hands....."

(Letter to A. Bolte, 23 November, 1871, in Karl Marx, S.W., v.2, 1942, p.618).

Marx assumed that these ingredients would be readily available - communist agitators and a receptive working class;

but neither existed in Africa before the first world war. Communist parties appeared only in the early 1920s in South Africa and Egypt; while sections of the French Party were set up in North Africa also in the 'twenties'. These became independent parties several years later: Algeria, in 1936, Tunisia, in 1939 and Morocco, in 1943.

National movements led by intellectuals and members of the middle class arose between the world wars in the French West Africa dependencies, Nigeria, Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, but for the most part limited their demands to partial constitutional reforms. In this period, communist parties and groups worked in semi-illegal conditions under the colonial administration and concentrated on building an anti-imperialist united front in alliance with the liberation movement.

The victories of the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War, the spread of socialism and the decline in the strength of imperialism in Europe facilitated the growth of a radical movement. Political parties and national organisations took shape in most countries during the immediate post-war years. Communists took leading part in the struggles of the National Liberation Front (FLN) of Algeria, the Independence Party (Istaqlal) in Morocco, and the National Unionist Party in Sudan.

As the struggle intensified, the colonial governments introduced repressive measures, banning Communist parties, trade unions and national liberation movements. The troops

were brought in to suppress the struggle in Kenya, Cameroun and Algeria. But the decolonisation process accelerated. Egypt's revolt in 1952 set the pace. The tide of liberation swept through the continent from north to south and west to east. Only five countries were independent in 1955: Egypt, Liberia, Ethiopia and Libya, the fifth being the Union of South Africa where the black population was conducting a bitter struggle against the entrenched white autocracy. In 1968, no fewer than 40 countries had gained independence.

Lenin's prediction was being verified. He told the Congress of Communist Organisations of the East in 1919 that:

"the socialist revolution will not be solely, or chiefly, a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against their bourgeoisie - no, it will be a struggle of all the imperialist-oppressed colonies and countries, of all dependent countries, against international imperialism" (Lenin, C.W., v.30, p.159).

So it was in Africa, with one important qualification. The socialist component of the national revolution suffered severe blows at the hands of the middle class leaders to whose rise to power the communists had made an important contribution.

Prior to the Mozambique and Angolan revolutions in the 1970s, the trend was sufficiently general to justify the proposition that parties or groups which come into power under the banner of national liberation invariably

destroy the communist component of the revolution. Here too, I can only submit a few cases for scrutiny, but consider them adequately representative.

Army officers overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in 1952. The new government banned all political parties including the communists in 1953. Egypt and Syria formed the United Arab Republic in 1958 and founded a National Union which claimed to exclude parties of the extreme right and extreme left. The union was dissolved in 1962 and replaced by the Arab Socialist Union (ASU). Three years later in 1965, the illegal Communist party dissolved itself to join the ASU which, according to the Party 'was the only political organisation capable of organising political action in in Egypt' (The African Communist, 1965, no.22, p.60). Khaled El-Din optimistically declared that the leadership of the revolution was in reliable hands and socialism had become the country's national cause, 'the citadel of its independence' (Ibid., 1966, no.27, p.54)

Morocco became independent in 1956. Two years later a Royal Charter guaranteed freedom of association, assembly and opinion. Within a year of its adoption, the monarchy outlawed the Communist party. In 1965 the government declared a state of emergency, dissolved all parties and concentrated power in the hands of King Hassan. Ali Yata, general secretary of the outlawed Communist party, wrote that the national democratic revolution was in its second phase, marked by the predominance of the 'national interest'. In the next stage the transition to the socialist revolution would forge

close links between the working class and the national interest. The immediate aim was to ensure the triumph of the national democratic revolution through the union of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal forces in a coalition which would include the outlawed Communist party, the Moroccan Labour Union and the National Union of Popular Forces. (Ali Yata, Present-Day Problems of the National Democratic Revolution in Morocco, reviewed in the African Communist, 1967, no.31, p.82-3). Unhappily, the third stage, brushed aside by the patriotic fervour of the war against the Polisario Front, has yet to appear on the horizon.

The Algerian Communist party, the first in North Africa to set up on its own, suffered the same repression as that inflicted on progressive trade unions and the Algerian People's Party in 1938-9 after the collapse of the Popular Front in France and the outbreak of war. Legality was restored in 1943 by De Gaulle's French committee of National Liberation. In 1943 the Party played an important role in the formation of the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the armed struggle against French imperialism. Algeria gained its independence in 1962 under a two-pronged arrangement that put Ben Bella at the head of the political structure and Boumediene of the military. In elections of the same year to the constituent assembly, the Party was dropped from the list of FLN candidates; nevertheless, it urged people to vote for the National Liberation Front. The new government introduced a one-party system excluding the Communist and other parties from the legitimate political process which became the monopoly of the FLN.

An army coup took place in 1965. It ousted Ben Bella and installed Boumedienne as head of state and government. It ordered the arrest of many militants belonging to the resistance movement. Among the detained leaders was Bachir Ali, former secretary of the Algerian Communist party and members of the FLN central committee. Henri Alleg reported a reign of terror, involving arbitrary arrests, plundering of apartments, assaults and torture of detainees ('Political Detainees in Algeria', African Communist, 1966, no.24, p.46). He accused the new FLN of failing to define a programme. They rejected Ben Bella's socialism 'But in fact what they have rejected is the analysis of Algerian society with its different classes and the definition of Algeria's path to socialism, based on Marxist principles, as reflected in the Charter of Algiers' ('Algeria: Behind the Silence' Ibid., no. 25, p.62).

Sudan, the last of my case studies, has the most complicated history of all. Its Communist party was formed in 1946, but operated under the name of the Sudan Movement for National Liberation. It organised a campaign for trade union rights, took a leading part in the struggle for independence, and after the grant of independence in 1956, called for national unity between the deeply divided Islamic North and the South, with a population of Christians and traditional religionists.

An army coup of November 1958 installed a military regime under General Abboud which banned all political parties

and trade unions, suspended the constitution and dissolved parliament. In following years, the government harshly repressed all opponents who called for the restoration of democratic rights. Tigani Babiker estimated that in terms of prison years, the communists served tens of times as much as all other political prisoners put together ('The Sudanese Communist Party will Survive', African Communist, 1967, no.29, p.38).

A United National Front was formed in 1959 with the Communist party's active participation. It gained increasing support, and by 1964 had brought together parties, trade unions, students and women's organisations. The UNF called a general strike in October 24th of that year and ousted the government. The new government, headed by Khalim Al-Khalefa, included several communist ministers, and was supported by some army officers.

Reactionary forces mobilised sufficient support to obtain a majority of seats in the 1965 elections. The Constituent Assembly passed a law banning the Communist party and expelling its eight deputies. In 1967, however, the Party's 4th Congress declared that a Western type of parliamentary regime no longer served Sudan's needs. (African Communist, 1970, no.40, p.78).

Yet another coup led by Colonel Niemery installed a National Revolutionary Council in office which included some communist ministers. The constitution was annulled and political parties were dissolved. The Communist party at first

condemned the coup, claiming that it had no mass base and served only the interests of the bourgeoisie. Two months later, after another set of officers had organised a counter-coup, the Party said that it had no alternative but to rally progressive forces behind the regime and call for a National Democratic Front government. The campaign met with great popular response on July 19th 1969. Two days later, another coup put Numeiry back in power and ruthlessly conducted a campaign of extermination against the progressive nationalists, democrats and communists. Thousands were detained in concentration camps, many were killed (El Madawi, 'Dark Days in the Sudan' African Communist, 1971, no.47, p.67).

The South African Communist Party Central Committee denounced 'the campaign of savage and brutal repression against the leaders of the Sudanese working class and democratic movements', the execution by hanging of leading party members and trade unionists after sentence by military tribunals in secret trials, and the shooting of patriotic army leaders. The South Africa communists repeated their confidence in the ability of the Sudan party to survive the latest act of cruel repression as it had survived previous attempts. ('The Sudan events: a blow at African Freedom and Unity' African Communist, 1971, no.47, p.70-72).



### The Communist Contribution

Communists face the danger of being murdered or imprisoned because of deep-seated convictions, a sense of an historical mission, hatred of the oppressor nation and exploiting class, inspiration drawn from the lives of heroes and martyrs like Ruth and Solomon Mahlangu, and their knowledge of socialist theory.

The roll of honour is long. It lists names from countries throughout the world and struggles of many ages. I shall cite only one of these - the massacre of members of the Paris Commune and the workers of Paris in 1871. Writing on behalf of the General Council of the First International, Marx wrote these unforgettable lines:

"Wherever, in whatever shape, and under whatever conditions the class struggle obtains any consistency, it is but natural that members of our Association should stand in the foreground. The soil out of which it grows is modern society itself. It cannot be stamped out by any amount of carnage. To stamp it out, the governments would have to stamp out the despotism of capital over labour - the conditions of their own parasitical existence".

In a final concluding passage, he paid tribute to the workers of Paris. "Working men's Paris", he wrote "will for ever be celebrated as the glorious forerunner of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class".

So also is the memory of communists who died at the hands of the class enemy in Africa.

African communists may have a limited range of choices for their political work. Only a few countries provide multi-party systems under which communists can freely organise and carry on the activities of Marxist-Leninist parties. Most states have one-party systems or are governed by military councils. In such countries, communists must lay the basis for a party of a new type by working in trade unions, study circles and other organisations that provide opportunities for discussing socialist theories in relation to domestic and world events.

An important role is played by the circulation and study of such journals as the African Communist which was started by the South African Communist Party in 1959 with the avowed aim 'to defend and spread the inspiring and liberating ideas of Communism in our great continent, and to apply the brilliant scientific method of Marxism to the solutions of its problems'

Communists are singularly well equipped by training and discipline to cope with many of these problems including the struggle against capitalist exploitation, imperialist aggression, the divisive effects of tribalism and national chauvinism. Where one-party systems operate, communists will join the national party to promote socialist principles and strengthen the fight against the forces of capitalism and other obstacles that impede the movement for peace and progress.