

'At the Point of a Needle'

The South African Communist Party and the dilemma of the National Democratic
Revolution in South Africa, 1994 to date

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Honourable Deputy Vice Chancellors, guests, fellow academics, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for attending this inaugural lecture. I am acutely aware of the fact that the subject of this lecture, and especially the angle I am taking in the analysis, may ruffle feathers, especially among those with ideological commitments. The lecture re-opens old debates – they were never settled anyway, except that at one point we were all caught by the ‘thrill of the Mandela moment’. Now that the thrill is over, old questions and old tension are making way to the fore – the example is the nationalisation debate which I will address later. Let me state from the outset that I respect people’s political commitments, but they don’t worry me much. I am a scholar and my position in these issues is scholarly. Apart from Claude Ake, a Nigerian scholar, I also draw inspiration, lately, from the work of Vaclav Havel who in one of his writings says, “the intellectual should constantly disturb; should bear witness to the misery of the world; should be provocative by being independent” (Havel 1992) – he proceeds and says the intellectual “stands as an irritant wherever he is”. By implication an intellectual is not a coward in his/her search for truth. It is therefore my job to irritate and disturb grand standing political ideological positions. At the end of the day, even if, as a result of my critical scholarship, I may have nowhere to belong, the struggle for ‘the justice to come’ (Derrida 1997) will always be my home; I will always belong to wherever the unconditionality of critical intellectual pursuit is supported and given space to thrive – I serve the eternity of truth.

‘At the point of the needle’, is a phrase which basically infers a precarious situation; a moment of crisis and an opportunity for reconstruction. It takes leadership of high calibre to seize the crisis moment and turn it into an opportunity for regeneration; it takes careful and correct diagnosis of the crisis to turn the precariousness of crisis into opportunity and turn opportunity

into strengths. *'At the point of the needle'* probably captures the state we are in as a country today. The country is no longer going through a fragile transition; it is beyond it. We can no longer rationalise the current state of mediocrity and the reproduction of social injustices using the term 'transition'.

The issue we need to grapple with is the direction and character of change in the context of a negotiated settlement. How do we comprehend theoretically, the nature and character of change and prospects for future changes in South Africa? Two concepts are important to me, in understanding the South African situation, especially the dilemma underlying the National Democratic Revolution; the first of these concepts is about the *'heteronomy'*¹ of democratic politics since the end of cold war; the second, the *'autochthony'* of the liberal democratic state in South Africa. The former infers a concentrated pragmatism which set into politics, post 1989 and the latter infers the 'limits' of sovereignty. The two concepts help one understand why we have the kind of politics and the kind of SACP we have today; this is an SACP in which (unlike pre-1994), theory and intellectual reflection is being eclipsed by the politics of pragmatism. This politics, despite the rationalisations, is not always good; self-interest and ambition are a problem. This is the kind of politics in which emphasis is less on thinking but on doing. One can argue that unless the SACP rises above the kind of heteronomy one finds in our politics to chart an alternative paradigm, it will never be able to be 'different from them' and will hardly even disturb, let alone push, the sovereign limits of the liberal democratic state. So is the muted National Democratic Revolution, which is deficient in both revolution and democracy.

¹ See Balibar, E (2002): Politics and the Other Scene. Verso. London. New York

In this lecture I seek to provide a critical overview of some of the ideas of the SACP and even though inadvertently, also debate whether the SACP is a viable option or just a flat spare-tyre of the ANC. Is there more to expect from the SACP or has it run full-cycle?

The SACP is one role player which to a large extent is under-examined, but very significant in the constitution of the moment we are in as a country. This is an organisation with a shining track record of sacrifice and intellectual leadership in the Alliance (see Maloka 2002). Emerging, as it did from the International Socialist League, (which also broke out of the South African Labour party in 1915), the SACP was initially constituted as the Communist Party of South Africa in 1921 and later re-emerged after banishment as the South African Communist in 1952. The very moment of its foundation was the moment of its crisis. I am arguing that the Communist Party of South Africa (the forerunner of the SACP) was born under siege; it was besieged from the outset by a rather inchoate Leninist revolutionary ideology and the politics of national resistance in South Africa. The questions of legitimacy and relevance in an African context had to be addressed – but this had to be done without negating the Marxist-Leninist framework. On the one hand, the Party's challenge was to frame a programme which resonates with the nationalist concerns of the African majority and simultaneously change the 'settler' appearance of the party by recruiting more Africans and absorb them into leadership structures (Mafeje 1990). On the other hand, the party needed to remain faithful Not Only to the ideological tenets of Marxism-Leninism, but adhere to the marching-orders of the Soviet Union and the Comintern.

The influence of the Soviet Union on the thinking of the Communist Party of South Africa can be traced as far back as the late 1920s and as recent as the 1986 Soviet-Africa conference and the 1987 Harare conference; at both these conferences, the Soviet Union warned the alliance to reduce the talk about socialism and to work out comprehensive guarantees for the white population (Mafeje 1992).

In the late 1920s a resolution on the 'Native Republic' of South Africa, drafted during LaGuma's visit to the Soviet Union, divided the CPSA and the internal ideological warfare which occurred during the 1930s led to the establishment of the Marty Commission in 1935 (Edgar 2005:25). This marked the beginnings of the development of relations of dependence between the Communists of South Africa and the Soviet Union. The pronouncements of the Marty Commission on the ideological direction of the CPSA were presented as final and the entire strategic orientation of the SACP from 1953 to date still revolves around the Marty Commission paradigm. I call it a paradigm, ladies and gentlemen, not a set of instructions. The recommendations included the following: that "ideological and factional disputes" must cease, an action plan which appeals to both blacks and whites must be developed; the party must concentrate on trade union organising and must select leadership that came from African movements and trade unions and most importantly Communists of South Africa should lessen dependence on Eastern European born Jewish members and "actively recruit South African born whites into its ranks" (Edgar 2005:28).

The reality of deep racial divisions in South Africa and how to resolve them as part of the solution to the national question, posed an intractable challenge to the Communist Party of

South Africa. In an attempt to resolve this, the Party came up, in 1962, with a problematic thesis of “Two-Stages of the revolution”. I argue that this theory is the worst blunder in the SACP’s intellectual history. The theory mixes dubious history with political and ideological commitments. The fact that the alliance today is struggling to resolve the socio-economic questions, stems not only from the ‘capitulations’ made at Kempton Park during negotiations, but also from the dichotomisation of the struggle into two stages and a lack of clarity on the exact points of entry to pull the struggle to the second stage.

After 1994 communists started being absorbed into the bureaucratic machinery of the government. It is not clear how being part of government contributes to the long-term socialist agenda of the party. The impression so far is that it opens spaces for the advancement of personal ambitions. Now the party has growing tensions and simmering divisions, some inherited by virtue of its position in the alliance and also due to the Party’s reluctance to move out of the alliance and run a project of its own. Factional splits and internal purges in the SACP have been reported in newspapers. What I find interesting is that, theoretically the party has also stagnated – I get a sense that it is sliding towards an eclecticism which fetishises a multi-class struggle and the centrality of the working-class. This is tired rhetoric no well informed capitalist is really bothered by this.

Let me interrogate in a summary form, what I find to be the sources of weaknesses in the intellectual history of the SACP, from the time it was formed to date. Of course this is a compressed analysis of elaborate issues spanning a period of 90 years. I am reminded at this point of Eric Hobsbawm’s article, titled “*Socialism has failed; now capitalism is bankrupt-so*

what comes next?" This is an important question which the SACP, if it has any intellectual leadership, should be responding to.

The origins of intellectual errors of the SACP can be traced, first, to the superficial economic analysis of the South African situation. Not even once, did the party examine, comprehensively the history of political-economy of the market- I refer her to the market , as both a system and a mechanism; this needed to be done in order to theorise the economics of transition properly. Even on the eve of negotiations, the SACP had not come up with a well thought out, integrated concept of how the organisation of the post-apartheid economy should look like, in order to create a terrain which will advance the party's long-term agenda. Its positions remained broad and rhetorical. The alliance, of which the SACP is a member advanced the rhetoric of mixed economy and focused on redistributive aspects of the economic policy. The alliance negotiated with its back against the wall because it lacked feasible economics for an alternative path. We now are all living the consequences. Hence the country is now shuttling between pathways without a groundbreaking idea. The alliance led government started with Reconstruction and Development Programme, shifted to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Policy (which the party criticised), now it's the New Growth Path and the Developmental State project; nationalisation is also being debated. The question is what intellectual leadership did the party provide; what is the value-add of SACP in the alliance? How has the party dealt with questions implied in its model of revolution: The question is how should the economics of the 'first stage of the revolution' be like in order to ensure sustainable development of productive forces, 'the emancipation of labour' (Selucky 1991) and ultimately the transformation of the internal

structure of the economy, at both 'material and technical levels'? Existing Industrial Policy perspectives lack nuance and as a result respond in hushed tones to these questions.

Since 1994, considerations of economic policy have largely been on redistributive deficiencies of the market economy and have left relatively untouched the cornerstones of exploitation, i.e. the nature of labour, its social division and appropriation of value. The fundamental problem, as far as I am concerned, is not necessarily the market – the market pre-exists capitalist economic relations - the problem can be traced back to 'the nature of labour', the manner of social division of labour and most importantly, 'the entrenched logic of value appropriation' (Mafeje 1992; Selucky 1990). Use-value is subordinated to an exchange value which even though generated by labour is appropriated by the owners of capital. A vanguard party which champions the cause of the working class is supposed to provide theoretical leadership to grapple with these questions. Instead, informed by the prescripts of two-stages of revolution the party literally found refuge in the post 1994 bourgeoisie project – the party has consistently argued that it's not its role to lead in this phase of 'revolution'. But what influence and impact is it having? To be honest, there is very little. The ANC's choice of the capitalist path of transformation will not even deliver a developmental state which will free labour from exploitation. The SACP's acquiescence to this choice makes it appear like an accomplice rather than a torch bearer of hope and alternative solutions. Hence the friction that is now evident between the party and the very class which it claims to be its vanguard.

Perhaps the party is correct to question nationalisation. Nationalisation is not ultimately a solution to the problems of marginalisation and labour exploitation – it is merely a resort to

power politics without confronting key issues such as the logic of value appropriation inherent to the internal structure of the economic system. The social division of labour is also getting more complex and complicated given the growing specialisation of labour. The appropriation of value, on the other hand, is also getting complicated by labour's stakes in capitalist ventures. There is also a rising 'continental bourgeoisie alliance' (Nabudere 1990) in Africa and this has implications for economic policy choices in our country. If this is the first stage of the revolution, then there is still a need for theoretical elaboration of **how** the 'motive force' of revolution, led by the vanguard party will pull it together to the next phase.

The SACP's sacrilegious commitment to the Leninist theory of the vanguard party is another foundational problem. The notion of the vanguard party is based on an awkward proposition that an elite organisation of revolutionary intellectuals (some from the working-class) can both theorise the experience of the working class and also infuse from outside the ordinary working-class, a new consciousness which will turn the workers into instruments of revolution. The assumption is that revolutionary consciousness and theory are derived from without, i.e. outside the mundane experiences of the daily lives of working people – outside the local and specific contexts of relations between labour and capital. This sounds awkward and just too theoretical. But the accountability of the vanguard party and the nature of its connections to the experiential realities of the working people is a grey area which is not defined. It is this grey area which created problems for the Soviet Union just 5 years after the victory of Bolsheviks. It is this grey area which is creating a gap between the SACP and the organised working class and under-classes. There is a gap between where the party is, theoretically and strategically, and where the ordinary working-class majority and the masses stand.

The idea of a vanguard party was the brainchild of Lenin. One gets the impression that Lenin was grappling with the question of transition in the context of the political economy of Russia. In so doing, he down-played the unclear concept of organic evolution into socialism he found in Marx's work. Lenin's conceptualisation of transition inferred possibilities of violence where socialism would emerge from "the ashes of the capitalist order destroyed in the flames of the class struggle" (Parkin 1979:147). The eventual collapse of Soviet socialism can be traced, in the final analysis, to the inappropriateness of Lenin's vanguardist notion. But unfortunately Lenin's position was accepted as orthodox by many Communist Parties all over the world. Joe Slovo's powerful article titled '*Has Socialism Failed*' (1990), instead of getting to the nuts and bolts of foundational sources of the crisis of socialism, and the theoretical shifts implied for the SACP, chose to skirt the surface of issues. In a defensive tone, Slovo argued that "if we are looking for culprits, we must look at ourselves and not at the founders of Marxism" (1990:10). Well my view is that we need not look for culprits but we need to expose freaks of intellectual fashion, and to do this we need to get to the foundations. The unmasking of the flaws in Leninist thinking is important for the reinvigoration of today's SACP. It's time for the SACP to shift towards a "post-vanguard discourse" and a 'post-class discourse' (Eagleton 2003) to help us understand better some of the miseries in our country and in the end understand the sorrow of the world. The salvation of our human world, most probably doesn't even lie in the resolutions of class struggles; it probably lies in 'the human heart, in the human power to reflect', in humility, meekness and responsibility (Havel 1992).

It is not entirely clear why the SACP continues to stick to this model and conception of revolution. What is the source of this essentialist fixity with the classic concept of revolution,

cast in a Bolshevik mode? I would have no problems if the SACP restates its agenda to say it does not seek to renounce liberal democracy but instead seeks to deepen and expand it 'in the direction of a radical and plural democracy' (Laclau & Mouffe 2001). The SACP still sees itself as "the vanguard of the main 'motive force' of the National Democratic Revolution – the working-class" (SACP 2004:2). The 'motive forces' of the NDR are defined by the SACP as "a block of class forces among the historically oppressed with the working class playing a leading role" (SACP 2004). This leads the SACP to a theoretical quagmire. The working class in South Africa is so heterogeneous; it has its own internal divisions. The activities of the working class itself have resulted in the development of an 'elite' within the working class. Added to this is the "dialogue between social being and social consciousness" (debated by EP Thompson (1979), an issue which relates to constructions of identity in South Africa. When all these are added together, they blunt the pivotal idea of class and class struggle.

One thing we need to understand, based on what history has taught us, is that class and class struggle are but a single element of a much complex game of power. The constitution of power; the biology of power, 'the microphysics of power' (Foucault 2002), the language of power are all very complex, such that the vintage point of class and class struggle has been proved long ago as very insufficient. Power is determined by "thousands of interactions between the world of the powerful and that of the powerless, all the more so because these worlds are never divided by a sharp line: everyone has a small part of himself in both" (Havel 1992). Hence Terry Eagleton argues "we need to imagine new forms of belonging, which in our kind of world are bound to be multiple rather than monolithic" (Eagleton 2003:21)

This is what the concept of the National Democratic Revolution in South Africa seems to have missed and continues to miss – there is failure to comprehend, precisely, the constitution, dynamics and the diffuse nodal points of the entire power structure the ANC inherited and how to design a feasible transformation project which is not only pervasive but edifying and organic in nature. There is a difference, obviously, between an organic approach to change and commandist or state-centric approaches– the former is society led and enlists local capacity and initiatives (Williams 2008); the state comes as a partner not leader or owner. In commandist or state centric approaches, the ideas and plans for change come from above – from the leadership of the vanguard party, trade union elites and state bureaucrats. This is South Africa’s approach to change at the moment – it is so despite the saying which goes, “if history is made from above, then it is undone from below; that for every dominating centre, there is a subversive margin” (Roy 2007:vii).

The dilemma of the National Democratic Revolution is that it is conceptualised from above. It is characterised by the beneficial involvement of elites in projects meant for the poor. But the dilemma of this revolution begins at the level of intellectual capacity to grapple with and analyse to the core, the character of the diffuse but deeply embedded power in our social formation, a social formation whose surface has only been dented by the 1994 settlement. The documents upon which the National Democratic Revolution is based, including the very idea of a National Democratic Society, are very superficial, inchoate and wobbly. Before and after each and every ANC national policy conference, scholars examine and critique these documents, but they hardly improve; they are recycled time and time again.

Ladies and gentlemen, fellow academics, 'the point of the needle' and the dilemma of the National Democratic Revolution in South Africa is this:- The NDR is generally weak to deal with the unyielding character of liberal democratic ideas and institutions. The capacity of liberal institutions for internal reform; the flexibility of these institutions to allow for radical transformation from within; their capability to change and develop disarms revolutionaries and steals the thunder of revolution.(Bernstein 1909; Kautsky 1946; Fukuyama 1999).

One persistent question is: why a National Democratic Revolution after we negotiated, agreed on a settlement and even embarked on a reconciliation and nation-building path? How does one agree on a peaceful settlement and still embark on a revolution afterwards? What kind of revolution is the National Democratic Revolution and how does it fit with the social cohesion priority of government? These are the kinds of questions which have not received exhaustive responses from scholars. What is the basis of revolution in SA post 1994? The fact that there is rampant discontent about service delivery and unemployment doesn't make South African ripe for revolution. As Lewin (1958) in (Bundy n.d) once argued, "certain well defined circumstances have to be present in combination before an attempt at revolution" occurs. These include unity around a common agenda and purpose, as well as effective leadership.

If a revolution will ever occur in South Africa it will, most likely, assume the Iranian model. By this I mean, it will be a revolution in which "class dynamics, social divisions, a vanguard party, or political ideology" (Rabinow 1994: xxii) will be hard to identify as the driving force. Instead, South Africa could be headed for a 'populist rupture' spurred by the inability of existing state institutional systems to respond to popular demands. Material suffering, frustration with unfulfilled promises and complete disappointment with political parties is likely to lead to the crystallisation of a new populist identity, a new subaltern collective will and an awakening to the fact that another new order is possible. Theoretically this will confirm Laclau's 'chain of equivalences' (1996). This infers a situation in which the intensity of popular dissatisfaction persistently coexists with the inability of institutional systems to absorb popular demands. This is what Iran experienced in the late seventies and this is what South Africa could experience in the not too distant future.

The country is likely not to have the classic type of revolution advocated in the official documents of the SACP. The theory of a Colonialism of a Special Type and the Two-Stages of the South African revolution misled the entire liberation movement. The prioritisation of the 'political' over the 'social and economic' is a by product of the two-stage theory. This has led the black majority into a cul-de-sack – the inherited state is not easy to transform into an instrument of the National Democratic Revolution. Instead the state has become a site of competing interests and agendas. The capture of state power by the meanest of all political interests is one of the dilemmas we need to carefully examine – it has several implications for the prospects of democratic stability in South Africa.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, let me make it clear that I am not here to provide a defence or apology for capitalism. As system created of men, it will one day disappear and will be replaced by another system. I fully agree with WEB Du Bois (1968) that in the end capitalism is 'doomed to self-destruction' – 'no universal selfishness can bring social good to all'. But this does not answer the question about the prospects of revolutionary change or the character of 'change and transformation' under post 1994 conditions in our country.

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