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SOUTH AFRICA: RECONSTRUCTING AN IMPERIAL STATE

Facing a Hazardous Future

It now seems highly likely that within the near future, some say within the coming year, a new constitution will be inaugurated in South Africa. For any new constitution to gain a semblance of legitimacy either locally or internationally, it will have to look something like a liberal democracy with social welfare ambitions; majority rule within a unified state. There should also be some system built into the constitution for preservation of "minority" rights, perhaps through geographical representation of communities, although there will not be any language in the document that recalls the "group rights" of apartheid. There will probably also be some system of strengthened regional government. Basic property rights of market capitalism will, in all likelihood, be sanctified as well.

In this same not-too-distant time, shortly after the ceremonies celebrating the inaugural government of the New South Africa, two events laden with historical irony will occur. A black South African president, probably Nelson Mandela, and his Minister for Police will order a predominantly Afrikaner security force to suppress radical Afrikaner nationalists. At about the same time, or shortly thereafter, the same leadership will order a crackdown on militant Africanist groups.

Similar circumstances arose in the early years of the Union of South Africa, when the Boer leaders called upon their former enemies the Imperial British troops to help suppress brother Afrikaner strikers and rebels. In the 1990s suppression of the diehard Boers and

Africanist revolutionaries is more or less inevitable, and may even suit the new regime as a way of demonstrating evenhandedness and statesmanship. More problematic for the new regime, however, will be repressing Zulu nationalism and the township youth. And more generally troubling will be the routine coercion brought to bear upon unauthorized "squatters" and illegal immigrants.

Zulu nationalism is, and will continue to be, a powerful political force in southern Africa. Most discussions of the extent of support, or lack of it, for the Inkatha Freedom party of Zulu chief Gatsha Buthelezi miss the point that in Zululand (and I use the colonial denotation advisedly) there are all the seeds of a powerful and divisive nationalism. It may not be a monolithic political ideology even within the rural areas of Natal where the Zulu kingdom has its heartland, but the Zulu nation is composed of many thousands of people who are prepared to die in its name. That this may not seem particularly rational to people who do not share such commitments is beside the point.

It is important to note that however much ideas about Zulu identity may be contested, there is a powerful commitment to nationhood among many Zulu-speaking people, which in a fundamental sense is culturally prior to the political representations of that nation in the Inkatha Freedom party. Zulu nationalism does not reduce to the Inkatha Freedom party, especially now that that group is so compromised by revelations of secret funding by the

South African Defense Force and the role of Inkatha warlords in factional violence. That is to say, Buthelezi and his cronies are in many ways captives of Zulu nationalism as well as creators of it. Any regime that attempts to suppress such nationalism in the name of the inclusivist vision of a South African nation that has animated much of the anti-apartheid struggle risks civil war. Any political movement that can mobilize support of Zulu-speakers throughout the country, the largest single ethnic group, is a force to be reckoned with. Currently Inkatha looks like it has failed in this ambition, but the more that group is seen to have disgraced the proud Zulu heritage, the more fertile the field for a resurgent nationalism.

Can a Singular Political Community Emerge?

Virtually all of the prescriptions for transforming social relations produced by the major parties in the south of Africa are framed in terms of a project of nation building. All of the proposals that can be entertained for constitution making presume the creation of a national civil society, even if some people are becoming more pessimistic that such a society can be legislated into existence. But is it possible to create within the boundaries of present-day South Africa a singular national political community? Can a nation be built, fashioned according to the Western European templates that overlaid the great nineteenth-century political ideologies of nationalism, liberalism, and socialism? One way to address these questions is to examine the geographies of state power and capitalism within the region. Another is to examine whether there are symbols around which all people living inside the boundaries can build a positive sense of identity as citizens of something called South Africa.

Fundamental to social transformation in the south of Africa are questions of boundaries: geopolitical, economic, and cultural. The first proposition of the Freedom Charter, the 1955 declaration of nonracial democracy embraced by the ANC (African National Congress) and others, is that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no

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government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people." Many radical Africanists have objected to this proposition on the grounds that it gives equal validity to whites' claims to the land. But few have raised serious questions about what "South Africa" or "the people" might mean in this context. South Africa is quite simply the territory bounded by the borders of the republic; the people are those who live there. Yet the Republic of South Africa is not simply a sovereign national state with racially restrictive voting laws and a history of institutionalized racism such as characterized the U.S. South.

South Africa is an imperial state. By this I do not just mean that it is a product of European imperialism, nor just that the Boers have been colonialists in Namibia and destabilizing aggressors in the region. Nor am I just restating the now-discredited theory of "internal colonialism" with its emphases on modes of production and economic exploitation (although I would suggest that the notion of colonialism is worth revisiting, especially in

regard to the experiences of people subject to the South African state). And I certainly do not mean to give credence to the stupid "separate development" fantasies of Afrikaner nationalism, the doctrines of apartheid, or the repellent lunacies of the white right wing.

The South African state is imperial in at least two important senses. First, the geographical core of state power, the populations and resources that form its primary fiscal base, is not coincident with the range of coercive reach. The majority of people living inside the boundaries of the republic (including the so-called "Independent National States") are superfluous to the requirements of capital and state power. Put crudely, they will never be called upon to work for wages or to face death in the name of the state (or offer their sons and brothers to do so). Second, the republic claims dominion over territories wherein reside people with potentially strong claims to separate nationhood. There are numerous groups of people living under the South African state who could exercise a claim to nationhood in the face of central power. At present the Boers and the Zulus are the most insistent of these peoples. But it would be very foolish to presume that there are not others who could resurrect memories of precolonial identities, or that such claims are merely a product or legacy of apartheid that can be easily dismissed. Moreover, the symbols available celebrating a positive sense of difference in this context are generally more powerful than those proclaiming an inclusive identity.

Only the African National Congress and its Communist Party (SACP) allies have a tradition of inclusive nationalism, dating from the 1940s (the SACP was first with its "Native Republic" manifesto). The ANC is currently the most popular political movement in South Africa; it is also the most popular South African political movement outside that country. If the ANC gained office within the state, however, the leadership would still have to reconcile its inclusivist claims with those nations upholding a strongly particularist and exclusivist vision of their identity.

Most popular readings of South African history tend to underestimate the precarious-

ness of the system of domination that was forged into the Union of South Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, the structures of which remain largely in place today. There is a widespread tendency, too, to view the establishment of capitalism in the region as inevitable and to presume that the geographies of capital are coincident with the geographies of power within the state. In retrospect it may appear that white domination in a unified national state was inevitable. Yet even with the backing of Imperial Britain the early rulers did not have the resources to subject all Africans within the region to their power. The sociospatial distributions that became fixed at the end of the nineteenth century into a framework of colonies, reserves, and protectorates represented the outcome of a long history of wars, alliances, treaties, deals, and dirty tricks. There was nothing inevitable about the emergence of a national South Africa.

Some African kingdoms were better able to protect their territories during the nineteenth-century conquest of the interior than others. The Basotho under King Moshoeshoe, for instance, through skillful warfare and diplomacy were able to gain recognition from the British and "Protectorate" status. Thus the tiny mountain country of Lesotho is an independent state, even as it is totally dependent economically upon exporting labor to South African industry and totally at the mercy of the South African military. Similarly, the Swazi kingdom retained its sovereignty under British protection while the more powerful Zulu kingdom was conquered by the imperial armies. Until the 1950s, there was a presumption amongst the South African ruling classes that these territorial enclaves of Basutoland (Lesotho) and Swaziland, along with Bechuanaland, would be incorporated into the union. In many ways they served as models for the Afrikaner nationalists' schemes of apartheid. By the 1960s, however, they were granted independence because, contrary to original intentions, the British were compelled to accede to the wishes of their inhabitants.

Until the late nineteenth century, much of southern African history could be told as a

story of complex and protracted turf wars. But diamond and gold mining changed all of that. By the end of the century, the region was far too important to the global capitalist economy to be left to the locals. In a final and brutal exercise of coercive power (known by the British as the "Boer War," by the Boers as the "Second War of Freedom," and by others as the "South African War"), the British imperial government set about subordinating all political communities in the region and constructing a central state.

Creating this state required both a practical negotiation of central power with the existing power centers in the region, political as well as economic, African as well as settler. Boers were incorporated with British into a single (more-or-less) democratic political community. African kingdoms were incorporated into the governing structures through a modified scheme of indirect rule and recognition of certain political authorities within the "tribal system." Under this scheme the Crown, acting through local commissioners, assumed an overlordship in the name of a fictional "Supreme Chief." The mining industry was the power behind the throne.

If those parts of the African population that were progressively integrated into the capitalist economy had been incorporated into the political community in the ways working classes were elsewhere, a fully national state might have been created in South Africa. They were not. A division of citizenship and sovereignty marked by race and serving to justify coercive labor practices and white supremacist racism was created instead. Yet the dreams of political and social segregationists have always foundered on the rocks of economic integration. The resulting state that has been formed over the last century or so in the south of Africa is part imperial and part national. And the experiences of those subject to its various aspects are fundamentally different. The vast majority of Africans in the region have experienced central state power as an alien imposition. The imperial state has excluded and brutalized its subject African populations, fostering a sense of alienation and a desire to destroy its structures.

Coercing African Labor

One of the primary preoccupations of policy-makers throughout the twentieth-century history of the South African state has been the question of securing African labor. Indeed, legitimating the coercion and control of African people as a source of labor has been a fundamental factor in structuring the South African state. The concern with labor generally had three aspects: first, devising strategies and justifications for coercing and inducing Africans to sell their labor in the capitalist economy; second, controlling the allocation of labor between sectors of production; and third, ensuring the exploitability and reducing the cost of labor.

For most of the time until the 1970s, these policies were devised in a context of generalized labor shortage. Since the 1960s, and increasingly throughout the 1980s, there have been more people seeking to labor in South African capitalism than the number of available jobs. Throughout this period, structures of state power such as the "Homelands," which had originally been understood in terms of strategies for extracting cheap labor supplies from indigenous African societies, were transformed into dumping grounds for people deemed "surplus" to the requirements of South African capitalism.

Apartheid was pre-eminently a racist system of controls on movement and residence, framed in a state ideology interpreting political and social rights in terms of nationalist principles relating people to places. According to this scheme, different nations were entitled to sovereignty over their own homelands, and members of these nations were entitled to rights only in these homelands. In international terms, apartheid is the norm, not the exception. The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, for example, with its myriad of largely unaccountable (from the perspective of those subject to it) and frequently demeaning procedures, rules, and paperwork and its network of offices and operatives resembles nothing so much as the pass system of apartheid. More than a million illegal immigrants are apprehended and removed each year; all others who would seek to enter and work in

the United States must have their passports stamped and are subject to a system of control over movement and residence.

For more than a century labor migration to South Africa, especially to the mines, has been an integral feature of life in the southern African region as far north as present-day Tanzania. In 1960 there were some 486,400 registered "foreign" migrants from neighboring states into South Africa on short-term labor contracts. By 1984, this figure had dropped to 79,025. This drop is explained in large part because the mining industry, by far the biggest employer of migrants, "internalized" its labor force while neighboring "frontline" states started restricting recruitment of their citizens. In the 1990s employment within the mining sector is contracting, with low-grade mines being closed and migrant workers being laid off. At the same time as the figures for "registered" labor migrants are falling, arrests and deportations of "illegal" migrants and refugees are soaring. Even for very poor people in South Africa, the opportunities are greater than for many other Africans outside the republic. Refugees and migrants could start moving into a free democratic and nonracial South Africa in numbers heretofore undreamed of.

In the world's wealthiest states of Western Europe, Japan, and the United States ever increasing numbers of "illegal" immigrants are forming a subproletariat that does not have, and never will have, the political, social, and economic rights of citizens. And although the militaristic nationalism of the wealthiest states is perhaps diminishing, the economic boundaries distinguishing their full citizens from impoverished outsiders are being strengthened. Even while the Berlin Wall was falling, the United States government was building an iron wall along its southern border with Mexico. And the declaration that refugees from the turmoil in Haiti are "economic" is considered grounds for forced removal of tens of thousands of people back to a precarious fate on that island. The irony of nation building in South Africa is that the most powerful appeal to a sense of national commonality may rest on the naked self-interest of excluding other

Africans from the capitalist heartlands of the republic.

The apartheid system both controlled and obscured patterns of movement that had been in existence for many generations over the last century. Most of the repressive structures of the apartheid state originated in schemes to limit and control the urbanization of African workers. In recent years, however, the urbanization of Africans has been taking place at an extremely rapid rate. In the absence of repressive controls, large-scale movements of population can take place across national boundaries as well as within the republic. Most of the present populations of Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and Zambia have at least the language skills necessary to seek work in the urban areas of South Africa. Many can enter pre-existing networks of migrant communities. But many will encounter the run-of-the-mill ethnic conflicts over jobs and scarce resources that abound in urban areas everywhere. Immigrants from Mozambique can look forward to a very tough time in places like Soweto, where the minority Shangaan-speaking population already occupies the bottom of the pile of ethnic stereotypes.

Whatever constitutional arrangements are ultimately worked out for the political system in South Africa, there are certain structures of political and cultural power that will persist. These will either have to be incorporated into any future state, thereby compromising the appearances of a decisive break with the apartheid past, or will have to be sidelined, thereby compromising the effectiveness of policymaking in the rural areas or creating nodes of resistance that could become expressed in terms of nationalism. Among the most complicated of these are those connected with the "traditional leaders" in the homelands.

Since at least the 1920s, chiefs have been drawn increasingly into the government of African people in the rural areas. With the Bantu Authorities system instigated in the 1960s, the position of chief became ever more regulated and dependent on the authorities in the Native Affairs Department in Pretoria. Many chiefs were deposed by the apartheid government and replaced with stooges who

could be relied upon to carry out government edicts. But many of the chiefs were struggling to make the best out of a bad situation and retained the loyalty and support of their subjects. The bureaucrats and official ethnologists who had to deal with these leaders were, and are, constantly negotiating the necessity of recognizing their authority while at the same time trying to control it.

Political Authority and Traditional Leaders

There are many people in rural South Africa who feel a profound sense of allegiance to traditional leaders. There are also many self-serving impostors in positions of chief who have little legitimacy among their subjects. This situation is extraordinarily complex around the country, and contestation over the authority of chiefs in some instances involves generations-old struggles. In 1989 the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) was established by a group of activists involved with the United Democratic Front. Contralesa is now an ANC-aligned body attempting to garner support for the democratic movement while countering the claims of Inkatha and similar movements for chiefly loyalties. Contralesa's strategy for democratizing the chieftainship is to combine recognition of hereditary chiefs with popularly elected advisory councils and build them into a system of local government in the rural areas.

The ANC's rising interest in homeland leaders and traditional chiefs was well illustrated last year at the June 16th Uprising commemoration rally in Soweto. Unlike the previous year, when the first June 16th rally since the unbanning of the liberation movements saw a celebration of rambunctious youthful militancy, the 1991 rally was a sedate affair bringing to the platform an array of chiefs and homeland leaders. Nelson Mandela, a son of the royal house of the Tembu, arrived at the First National Bank Stadium in his red Mercedes Benz (a gift from workers at the Mercedes plant in East London) accompanied by Xhosa praise-singers in a Cadillac limousine. His circuit of the arena was accompanied by amplified praises in traditional style. The whole performance of the rally, as well as the speeches, sought to emphasize the African roots of the congress movement.

The ANC is increasingly presenting itself as the umbrella organization for homeland leaders and chiefs in contradistinction to Inkatha, which is portrayed as sectional and tribalistic. But this is a difficult and dangerous strategy, and while most of the homeland rulers are pledging allegiance to the ANC and its policy of dismantling the homelands, many of them are at the same time building up the political movements through which they mobilize support locally. In this they follow the lead of Chief Buthelezi. Some, namely Lucas Mangope in Bophutatswana and Oupa Gqozo in the Ciskei (who was initially greeted as a savior when he toppled the Sebe regime) are girding their forces to go it alone.

The situation with "traditional leaders" is especially complex because in practically every instance where there is an official incumbent in the position of "chief" there is often one or more challenger. Incumbents are backed by the financial and coercive power of Pretoria and the particular homeland government (buttressed by the authority of the official ethnologists' readings of lineage and domain). Challengers draw chiefly on the authority of oral traditions, resistance to apartheid, and popular support. Last year in Lebowa, for example, impoverished villagers in Sekhukuneland managed to risk hundreds of thousands of rands in legal fees in order to mount a court challenge to the individual installed as "Paramount Chief" of the Pedi by the Lebowa Government. Fortunately they won their challenge, thus avoiding financial catastrophe.

It is frequently forgotten in discussions of the "new South Africa" that half of the population lives in those rural areas that were once called "Native Reserves," then "Bantustans," then "Homelands," then "Black States," then "National States." Fifty-seven percent of South African women live in these regions. These rural people are the poorest, least powerful, and most vulnerable section of the population. They are for the most part dependent on remittances of wages from migrant workers in urban areas and mines. They are easily

ignored. In the mostly desperate conditions of the so-called "Homelands," access to the resources necessary to sustain life has for generations been governed by corruption and patronage. These relationships will not disappear overnight. Moreover, the danger is that new and possibly corrupt forms of local power will arise in the rural areas to fill the gap left by the old.

Structurally speaking, the rural peoples of southern Africa can have but little power within any state. They do not control productive resources or capital. Their labor is surplus to the needs of the formal economy. They live subject to repressive regimes whose capacities for coercion are economically dependent upon the central state. Their only source of power comes from the creation of a sense of commonality between themselves and those who do control the productive and destructive resources within the state. Or they can mobilize that power which comes from people who are prepared to face death in the name of a political community.

One of the ironies of the fighting between migrant workers in urban hostels and township residents on the Witwatersrand in recent years is that it made plausible one of the last-ditch strategies of the era of apartheid, that of dividing the urban and rural populations. Many urban dwellers have completely lost contact with the rural areas from whence their ancestors migrated; many others are themselves recent arrivals from the rural areas. Culturally, the urban-rural divide is fraught with all the misunderstanding, resentment, and arrogance that urbanites heap on provincials the world over.

As Africans in the urban townships experience increasing levels of unemployment, the plight of rural people, which is frequently more dire, can seem unimportant. For instance, the vigor with which many township residents on the Witwatersrand were prepared to call for the dismantling of the hostels and removal of the migrants back to Natal revealed how easily the antipathies between urban and rural could be aggravated, especially among urban youths with little understanding of conditions in the rural areas. Many of the young men I talked with during the first bout of warfare in Soweto

were determined to defend their community by burning the hostels and forcing the "Zulus back to Kwa Zulu." They were little aware or concerned about the fact that remittances from these men's pitiful wages are most often the difference between life and death for rural families.

Complexities

The complexity of the new settlement and movement patterns that have emerged in the last half dozen or so years since the pass system and antisquatting regulations broke down in the republic are very poorly understood. In the Witwatersrand, the area around Johannesburg, it is estimated that nearly half of the population lives in shacks. Outside Durban there is a huge sprawling shack city known as Inanda with a population exceeding half a million and probably approaching one million people. Nationally the number of people living in shacks or "informal housing" probably exceeds the total number of white people in the country.

Within these "informal" settlements, control over access to space and essential resources such as water quickly becomes subject to the patronage of people who control the means of violence and who can establish links with outside authorities to protect the settlement and draw resources to it. With the exception of Inkatha, none of the political movements has made much headway in the complex mire of squatter politics. Inkatha has done this only by forming alliances with the corrupt controllers of black local governments.

Young men in the established, or "formal," black townships, the principal combatants in the battles with apartheid's repressive machinery, have a different story. They have come of age within a culture of anti-apartheid struggle and resistance. Any new regime will have to incorporate them in more or less formal and bureaucratized political structures where they will discover the limitations of local branch meetings. The glory days of "the Struggle" are already over. Many young people are actively participating in branches of the Youth League, writing reports, passing motions, and recording minutes. But I also know young comrades who are in the business of stealing weapons from

policemen; for them the war with Inkatha was an exciting and dangerous adventure.

Half of the population of South Africa is under the age of fifteen. Only 20 percent of black children of secondary school age are attending school. The vast majority of these are receiving an education inadequate for the requirements of the twentieth-century global economy. They attend schools that are over-crowded and run by teachers who are them-selves poorly educated and demoralized by the conditions of their work. Students are poorly supplied with facilities and textbooks, nor are their home environments typically conducive to quiet study.

Employment prospects are grim. Between 40 and 50 percent of the work force is unem-ployed; the number is increasing as more young people enter the work force competing for fewer jobs. In the absence of miraculous economic growth rates (in excess of 10 percent per year) most young people will not be able to contemplate a life of even badly paid wage labor, let alone the dreams of better things for the children that have been the staple of working life all around the globe. For some time now these people have been spoken of as the "lost generation."

The contradictions of coercion in a reconsti-tuted South Africa, then, will be twofold. First, creation of an inclusive political community within a unified democratic state will require repression of those who would foster exclusiv-ist nationalisms, but such repression only furthers the cause of nationalism. Second, protection of the fiscal base of the state, the capitalist economy, will require repressing many of the claims of those who are currently excluded from the formal economy. Some ameliorative measures are likely to be put in place, but no large-scale and fundamental redistribution can occur without the agreement of big capital. That is not likely to be forthcoming. But repression of such demands can foster the emergence of destabilizing revolutionary movements.

South Africa's moment of truth in the liberation struggle comes also at a time when it is becoming increasingly apparent that the great achievements of liberal democracy and the welfare state in the West, particularly the enfranchisement of the working classes and the provision of a minimum social security, are things of the past. Socially, politically, and economically disenfranchised underclasses, particularly of "illegal" laboring immigrants are becoming the norm in the wealthier democracies. In most of the third world, the old visions of modernization, development, and democracy have foundered on shoals of poverty and debt. Globally, state power more often resembles a big protection racket than a means to security, justice, and welfare.

Over the past couple of years it has been quite common in South Africa to encounter analogies drawn between Presidents de Klerk and Gorbachev: two bald reformers on a roll. Today the Soviet Union has passed from the map. What once seemed like an enormously powerful monolithic state has fractured into dozens of pieces, and the imperial state has retreated to the Russian heartland amid eco-nomic collapse. The South African imperium could collapse just as fast.   □