

## The Working class and Nation-building

JOE SLOVO

At its founding conference in 1912, the ANC issued a clarion call for **African** unity under the slogan, "WE ARE ONE PEOPLE". As head of the liberation alliance it is committed to working for the creation of one South Africa which, in the words of the Freedom Charter, "belongs to all its inhabitants, black and white".

Are we already "one people" or are we, as yet, only a nation in the making? In the light of the undoubted existence of ethnic differences, is the cementing of our diverse communities into a single South African nation both desirable and realisable? Does the colonial status of the dominated blacks lead us to the conclusion that there are already two nations in our country - the oppressed and the oppressor? What is the role of the working class in the struggle to constitute our nation? These are issues which go to the very root of our struggle against the racist autocracy.

The national question (including the question of what constitutes a nation) perhaps more than any other, illustrates the profound truth of Lenin's remarks to the Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East that 'you will not find the (complete) answer in any communist book'. (National Liberation and social emancipation. Progress Publishers. 1986. p.269)

Indeed, the marxist theory of the National Question is perhaps the least developed in our revolutionary science. It offers few propositions which can be used as starting points for an analysis of concrete situations. This is especially so for the underdeveloped world where, as we shall show, attempts to invoke European models and analogies completely fail to meet the needs of the real situation.

### Stalin's Contribution

The basic Marxist-Leninist approach to the question of what constitutes a nation was, for many years, guided generally by Stalin's well-known definition. Stalin defined the nation as a community of language, culture, territory and economy. Unfortunately, there have been tendencies to treat these categories (language, culture, etc.), as a mechanical set of criteria.



As a result, in defining "nations", questions of mother-tongue or of long-established traditional cultures have sometimes come to dominate and even displace the more significant class political and economic issues.

This post-Leninist tendency gave pride of place to cultural-linguistic (or ethnic) factors at the expense of a class approach. It infected some of our own earlier debates on the national question and came dangerously close to providing (albeit unintentionally) a rationale for ethnic separatism.

For example the Comintern in 1932 called on the Communist Party of South Africa, inter alia, to advance the slogans: "Complete and immediate national independence for the people of South Africa. For the right of the Zulu, Basuto, etc., **nations to form their own independent republics.** For the voluntary uniting of the **African nations in a Federation of Independent Native Republics.** the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government. Full guarantee of the rights of all national minorities, for the coloured, Indian and white toiling masses".

In the early 50's, Lionel Forman, with a bias in favour of Stalin's thesis, opened up an interesting debate on the national question which, after his untimely death, was never really followed up in the ranks of the Party. In a symposium in Cape Town in 1954, he spoke in favour of the long-term aim of "one single, united South African nation". But he insisted that "the only correct path towards (it) is through the creation of conditions by which the different national cultures in South Africa may first flower and then merge.....". And he posed the possibility of self-determination for the different ethnic communities.

"I think", he said, "the majority of communities which have common language and psychology in South Africa are not full nations, but national groups. That is, **I think they are aspirant nations, lacking their own territory and economic cohesion, but aspiring to achieve these**". (my emphasis).

Before returning to our own country let us touch on the general question of the genesis of Nations and the problem as viewed from African perspectives.

### The Nation and the Colonial Situation.

Stalin's thesis on the National Question may have had validity in the concrete reality of a Europe in the aftermath of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the national realignments which followed. It was obviously also of great relevance to the post-October advance in the solution of the National Question in the Soviet Union. **But its application to our conditions or, even, to most parts of the continent of Africa is, at best, questionable.**



Using Stalin's formula as a starting-point we would have great difficulty to find in our continent many state entities that could be described as 'nations'. Applying the formula mechanically we might even be tempted to lend theoretical respectability to neo-colonial-inspired secessionary tendencies and (as in the case of South Africa) play about with ethnic constitutional 'solutions' which would, in effect, perpetuate minority domination.

The coming into being of an entity which can be described as a nation has a variety of historic roots. Its genesis is not necessarily connected with a single class. The modern Nation-State is not always the creation of the bourgeoisie. Nor can it be claimed, as a **universal proposition**, that "a nation is a historical category belonging (only) to the epoch of rising capitalism." (Stalin). In the post-October period some national entities (e.g. Mongolia which skipped the capitalist stage altogether) have only come into being under socialist power. **Most of the world's nation-states emerged in the post-war period and it cannot be argued that they all had their origins in a new wave of rising capitalism.**

In the colonial world generally, nation-formation was deliberately stilted, retarded and underdeveloped by imperial policy. But, despite this policy, the very spread of the capitalist mode of production made for objective tendencies towards the breaking-down of ethnic, cultural and tribal divisions. This process was also subjectively advanced by the need for the dominated people to create a common front in the struggle against a common colonial oppression.

FRELIMO's approach to the question of nation-formation is illustrated by Marcelino dos Santos in an interview with me in 1973. We must bear in mind that Mocambique is a vast country with a multitude of diverse tribal and cultural groupings. Even today it could be said that the Makonde in Cabo Delgado have more in common with the Makonde of Southern Tanzania than with the Shangaans of Gaza Province who, in turn, have a close affinity to the Shangaan people of the Eastern Transvaal. Dos Santos said:

'The main conditions for (the) successful rejection (of tribalism) are present. On the general point of whether we have already moulded a nation in the true sense of the word, I want to say that a nation is based on concrete realities. And the most important reality in the present stage in Mocambique is the fight against against Portuguese colonialism.



It is our common fight against our common oppressor which plays an outstanding role in creating a national bond between all the diverse groups and cultures . . . . Of course a nation is a product of history and its formation goes through different phases. In this sense the work for the final achievement of nationhood will continue even after independence although the fundamental elements of nationhood are already in existence and in the process of being further developed in Mocambique.' (African Communist 4th quarter 1973).

There is no absolute ethic about nation formation. The consolidation or fragmentation of disparate ethnic groups into one or into several sovereign entities cannot be judged by any **universal** formulas as to what constitutes a nation. The answer for a revolutionary is influenced by far more complex political considerations than can be contained in an enumeration of catalogues of common 'national' qualities.

In Africa (more especially below the Sahara) the concrete realities were dominated by a specific form of colonisation. Administrative entities were created which had little, if anything, to do with a common culture, language, economy, and so on. The colonial units which Imperialism created were, in most cases, determined solely by inter-imperialist power relationships and were made up of an arbitrary mixture of completely distinct socio-economic formations. The 1885 Berlin Conference was one of the high points of this process.

These administrative entities gradually acquired distinct economies. Meanwhile, however, the imperialist powers employed various mechanisms to deliberately perpetuate regional and ethnic differences in the interests of more effective control. Tribalism, indirect rule, playing off one region against the other, and preventing the emergence of a national consciousness or cohesion; these were the prime weapons in the armoury of imperialist domination.

In other words, whereas the economic functions of the nation-state created at the dawn of the capitalist era were served by the breaking-down of ethnic, regional, language and cultural divisions, in most of Africa, the colonial masters were served by a very opposite process. Colonial control for purposes of economic exploitation **demanded ethnic fragmentation and inter-ethnic hostility.**

The encouragement of a national awareness and cohesion became the major response from the colonised peoples. Beginning with the ANC in 1912, the creation of a national, rather than an ethnic or tribal consciousness became a key rallying cry of virtually every liberation movement in Africa. Where a sizable working class emerged, its work and living conditions helped undermine rural ethnic exclusiveness.



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In summary, it could be said that the historic process of **spreading a national (as opposed to ethnic or tribal) consciousness and the national consolidation of existing State entities** is, in the modern African era, **generally a weapon of liberation and social advance**. Conversely, the emphasis on regional and cultural exceptionalism (including claims to secession of ethnic regions from existing State entities) is generally designed to serve both internal and international reaction and is, in most cases, an instrument of colonial, neo-colonial or minority domination.

The struggle for national cohesion in multi-ethnic communities does not imply the imposition of cultural uniformity. **Cultural diversity does not stand in contradiction to a national unity**. Such a unity can be made up of a totality of both distinct and intermingling cultures which "in their totality constitute the culture of the . . . people as a whole." (Interview with Lucio Lara; African Communist, third quarter, 1978.)

**National self-determination correctly remains part of the holy grail of Marxist learning.** But, for most parts of Africa, the invocation of this right for regional or ethnic entities (either for secessionary purposes or for creating ethnically-defined political groupings) usually serves to undermine rather than to advance the right to National self-determination. **And nowhere is this more so than in the context of the South African struggle.**

#### The South African Case

In the South African case it is certainly the emerging proletariat which has become the key class force for nation-building. As the most politically-conscious and advanced social force in our revolution, our black working class is, at the same time the most internationalist and the most committed to national cohesion.

Despite the existence of cultural and racial diversity, South Africa is not a multi-national country. It is a nation in the making; a process which is increasingly being advanced in struggle and one which can only be finally completed after the racist tyranny is defeated. The concept of one united nation, embracing all our ethnic communities, remains the virtually undisputed liberation objective.

Conversely, colonial domination in our country has, throughout its history, employed political and administrative devices to facilitate its policy of "divide and rule" by impeding the process of nation-formation. Apartheid is only the most recent and ideologically developed variant of a policy which has been practiced from the very beginning of the conquest. It was preceded by the British colonial strategies of Reserves and Segregation.



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The pre-apartheid strategies failed to stem the tendencies towards the emergence and continued growth of an African national consciousness. Economic imperatives (including the very important factor of permanent urbanisation), and revolutionary nationalist activity combined to undermine these strategies.

The threat posed to race domination by the growing unity within the liberation camp was becoming more evident in the late 40's. To ensure its survival the ruling class sought a way of turning the clock back. Against the background of a heightened level of terror against the people and their organisations, they declared themselves to be the new champions of "National Self-determination" and launched their Bantustan programme.

Twelve "Homelands" were proclaimed and offered "independent" statehood. South Africa, so it was claimed, was now following Europe and proceeding apace with its own "decolonisation" process. But (as the regime itself has been forced to concede) this Verwoerdian plunge into the 'final solution' has demonstrably failed. Irreversible economic processes and mass struggle and resistance, once again dashed the hopes of those who plotted to reverse the nation-building momentum of the Liberation Alliance.

Despite the substantial failure of its Bantustan strategy, our ruling class continues to cling to the rationale which underpinned it. The growing demand for democracy and majority rule in a united South Africa continues to be met by the diabolically simple answer that "South Africa is a multi-national country". There is no majority. There are only minorities all of whom must retain their economic, geographic and cultural "heritage". RSA radio made all this very plain in a BBC-monitored broadcast on the 28-1-87:

"The government's preparation for power-sharing is a clear indication of post-apartheid South Africa. **Majority rule is nonsense in South Africa as there is no majority.** The key issue is the protection of minority rights. **there are ten African nations plus whites, colours and Indians, and all insist on their right to self-determination.** Negotiations for such power sharing are under way."

We know what this kind of "multi-nationalism" implies. It is the prime device for continued national domination. Presented in its crude form this 'multi national' approach has little chance of misleading our people. But we must be on guard against some of its more sophisticated variants.



Among these variants are the Buthelezi-backed Kwa-Natal proposals, the Tri-cameral parliament (with a possible extension of a fourth Chamber to represent Africans), and federal arrangements which give constitutional recognition to ethnic entities and 'traditional' ethnic leaders. We can expect a host of other devices designed to provide group (as opposed to individual) rights and to give veto rights to ethnic communities in multi-racial legislative organs claiming to represent 'national' entities. **These are all nuances of the same recipe; power-sharing without giving up control.**

The more recent models of 'multi-nationalism' are based on four broad 'racial' or 'national' categories; African, White, Coloured and Indian. It can hardly be disputed that, at present, the members of each category (to whatever class they belong) share a definable position as a colour group on the political and economic ladder, with the Africans occupying its lowest rung.

The three black groups suffer varying degrees of discrimination; a reality which, ironically enough, is continually exploited by the very perpetrators of the crime of discrimination. Endless attempts are made to persuade the Coloured and Indian communities to cling to their more 'privileged' position in the league table of oppression and discrimination. Fear is spread among them of majority African 'domination', in the hope that they will opt for 'the devil they know'.

But, on the whole, these minority black communities have not been taken in. The word 'Black' is increasingly adopted by them to describe their political and national affinity with Africans. The massive rejection of the Tri-cameral parliament and joint participation in the major struggles against racism, are among the signs of togetherness. Thus, although the process is by no means complete, the national bond between the three black groups is growing closer and closer.

#### The White Community.

A combination of economic factors, common responses to domination and ideological activity, have taken the process of nation-formation some distance among the dominated. However, the national bonds which are being cemented in our country have not yet greatly affected the whites. The overwhelming majority regard themselves as a national entity not only completely separate from the blacks but also superior to them. And the Afrikaner stands out as the most hard-line partisan of this approach.

This is not the place to trace the complex factors (cultural, ideological, religious, etc.) which have served to entrench white chauvinism and Herrenvolkism deeply into the psyche of this community. But, essentially, the process had its main roots in economic privileges built on the foundation of the intense exploitation of black (especially African) labour. These privileges accrue, in different degrees, to all members of the white community to whatever class they belong.



The basic objectives of liberation cannot be achieved without undermining the accumulated political, social, cultural and economic white privileges. The moulding of our nation will be advanced in direct proportion to the elimination of these accumulated privileges. The winning over of an increasing number of whites to the side of democracy is an essential part of our policy. **But we cannot accept constitutional schemes which are designed or calculated to perpetuate a 'multi-national' framework in order to retain the separate national identity and, therefore, the power of white racism.**

Our approach is clear and we must spread it ever more widely. The cultures and languages of the white group (like the cultures and languages of all the other groups) will have a safe haven in a South Africa which, in the words of the Freedom Charter, 'belongs to all its peoples, black and white'; a South Africa which will ultimately realise the idea of common nationhood in its full meaning.

#### Colonialism of a Special Type and "Two-Nations" Thesis

Neville Alexander\* believes that our Party's thesis of "colonialism of a special type" (CST) obstructs the drive towards single nationhood. He maintains that it necessarily implies a two-nations thesis (white and black) which "holds within it the twin dangers of anti-white black chauvinism and ethnic separatism".\* The thesis has also been criticised on the related ground that it allegedly encourages an approach which underplays or ignores class divisions within the black and white communities and tends to place "populist" rather than class objectives before the working class.

CST does not imply a two-nations thesis, nor does it ignore the class divisions within the communities. The CST thesis correctly describes the reality that, in the post-1910 period, the **substance of the colonial status of the blacks has remained intact even though its form may have altered.** It is this reality which provides a correct starting-point for grappling with the complex problem of the relationship between national and class struggle. **It is obvious that until the colonial status of blacks is ended the process building one nation cannot be completed.**

The CST thesis neither ignores class divisions within the dominant and dominated communities nor does it postulate the existence of two fully-formed "nations" - white and black. It does not define the ruling class as consisting of the whole white population.

\* "Approaches To the National Question in South Africa", in Transformations 1 (1986) p.83.



It is not the CST thesis which fuels the danger of anti-white black chauvinism; it is the **fact** that the overwhelming majority of the white community (irrespective of class) benefits from and, therefore, supports race rule. Alexander speculates that the liberation struggle can become "ideologically insulated" against the dangers of black anti-white chauvinism and ethnic separatism if "the revolutionary classes accept that they are part and parcel of a single nation". But even "revolutionary classes" would surely find it difficult (and the masses on whom they rely even more so) to accept that this is already so.

Anti-white chauvinism cannot be mitigated by spreading an idea based on a myth. The "revolutionary classes" can best advance the struggle for the achievement of single nationhood if they recognise (and act on) the reality that we are not yet one nation. The strategy and tactics of the struggle to create one united South African nation can neither ignore the significance of the present white-black divide nor the different levels of oppression to which the dominated majority are subjected.

Organisational structures of the constituents of the ANC-led liberation camp and the shape of its alliances at specific historical moments, have always been guided by such factors. For example, the Congress alliance of the late 40's and 50's, consisted of the separate historically-evolved organisations representing the African, Coloured, Indian people and, later, white democrats.

This approach laid the foundation for inter-black unity in action which, more than any other factor, helped to erode ethnic political separatism. It also prepared the conditions which made it possible for the ANC to open its ranks to the other groups. In sharp contrast, the former Unity Movement acted with ostrich-like disregard of ethnic factors. In the process, it may have insulated its own small band against the dangers to which Alexander refers, but it also succeeded to insulate them from advancing the process of unity in the real world.

#### Group Rights.

The very strength of racist state power, the deeply-ingrained nature of white national exclusiveness, and the occasional outbreaks of inter-ethnic strife, have influenced some external academic circles, sympathetic to our cause, to raise the possibility of the liberation movement agreeing to constitutional provisions for group rights in the post-apartheid phase. This thinking is also partly influenced by the belief that there is, in any case, no great prospect of welding South Africa's diverse ethnic groups into one nation.



For example, Dr. Gleb Starushenko, a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, told the 1986 Soviet-African conference that, in his personal opinion, a parliament which accommodated group rights should be considered for the post-apartheid period. This parliament would consist of two chambers; one on the basis of proportional representation and the other, **"possessing the right of minority veto"**, which could operate on the basis of "equal representation of the four communities". Dr. Starushenko (whose pro-liberation intentions are not in dispute) would also like to see the ANC work out **"comprehensive guarantees for the white population"** and "programmes" which give our "bourgeoisie the ....guarantee" that there will be no broad nationalisation of capitalist property". \*

If this package is motivated by a search for the kind of compromise which would tempt the racists to come to the negotiating table, it is certainly not an acceptable starting point for a negotiating agenda for our liberation movement. Apart from other considerations, the racist's own insistence on "group rights" is undoubtedly linked to the preservation of control over the means of production. If this control is maintained, through the grant of minority veto powers, the most fundamental features of race domination would be perpetuated, a result which Dr. Starushenko would clearly find unacceptable.

The idea of ethnic parliaments may have an additional rationale - a belief that South Africa is, and is likely to remain, a multi-national country, and that future constitutional arrangements must make provision for this reality. In this connection, the soviet experience of the solution of the national question in the post-Czarist period, understandably informs the thinking of Soviet scholars. But to be guided by this experience in our conditions is in fact to risk bringing about very opposite results to those which were achieved in the Soviet Union..

**In the Soviet Union a recognition of multi-nationalism was the very foundation of national liberation and self-determination; it led to the creation of autonomous and self-governing national republics originally linked to each other in a federation and later in a union. In our case multi-nationalism, whether in the form of independent ethnic "homelands" or parliaments based on colour-group rights constitutes the main racist recipe for the continuation of national domination by other means.**

\* Weekly Mail January 9-15, 1987.



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This is not to say that all traces of ethnic exclusiveness have already been effectively erased from the political arena and that we have already become one nation. The battle is still joined to prevent ethnic separatism from making advances from positions it continues to hold under government patronage. In particular we must not allow the regime to get away with its claims to be the main champion of ethnic languages and cultures under the guise of its 'homelands' policies and its dishonest brand of "multi-nationalism". It is our duty not only to proclaim but also to ensure that in a unitary democratic South Africa the language and other positive cultural heritages of the diverse groups will really flower and find effective expression.

We stand for one united democratic South Africa based on universal adult suffrage. This strategic approach is inviolable. We cannot, at this stage, allow ourselves to be diverted by speculations about future justifiable compromises in the interests of revolutionary advance. **It is clearly in struggle that we will succeed in forging our one South African nation which is already in the making.**

Forging one sovereign South African nation is an integral part of the objectives of the national democratic revolution. Our national liberation movement, welding together millions of South Africans in every corner of our country, is already a major dynamising factor in the struggle to build a unified South Africa.

The winning of the objectives of the national democratic revolution will, in turn, lay the basis for a steady advance in the direction of deepening our national unity on all fronts, economic, political and cultural, and towards a socialist transformation. For our working class nation-building means, among other things, unifying themselves nationally as the leading class whose culture, aspirations and economic interests become increasingly those of the overwhelming majority of our people.