

BOOK REVIEW

The Crisis in South Africa: Class Defense, Class Revolution. John S. Saul and Stephen Gelb. *Monthly Review* 33, #3 (1981). Monthly Review Press; pp. 156.

The contours of South Africa's racial-capitalist system are etched in sharp simplicity: four and a half million whites (16% of the population) monopolise political and economic power, obtain 64% of the national income, and retain exclusive domain over 87% of the country's land while twenty-one million Africans (72% of the population) obtain 26% of national income, "own" 13% of the country's land, and are denied the basic human rights to adequate shelter, sustenance, education, and health care, to say nothing of rights to free speech, association, or to vote. The struggle which has arisen against this grossly inequitable system and the repression required to maintain it draws a clear line between progressive forces the world over who seek a transformation of the racial-capitalist system and those who, while making ritual denunciations of aspects of the apartheid system, would seek to legitimate and perpetuate it in a mildly altered form. The lines are drawn perhaps more clearly in South Africa than anywhere else in the world today.

Yet beneath this surface simplicity lie complex questions as to the nature, pace, and direction of the process of change which is occurring in South Africa. For proponents of peaceful and gradual change the key question is the extent to which the apartheid system can be reformed: Can the racial aspect of racial-capitalism be excised and a more rational, liberal, and meritocratic form of capitalism be instituted? For those having fewer illusions in the rulers of the apartheid state handing over power or developing a non-racial form of society the pertinent questions are very different: Will the process of liberation in South Africa follow the "national liberation movement" patterns of Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe or will the significantly different level of economic development (specifically its greater levels of industrial development and proletarianization) demand new forms and loci of struggle? What relationship will (should) develop between working class and trade union struggles at the point of production and struggles in the communities, the rural areas, and of the guerrilla movement? And what will the relation be between the socialist and nationalist struggles, how will they intersect and transform each other, and which forces and modes of struggle will play the dominant role in the social transformation which will take place?

The fundamental importance of the Saul/Gelb book is to place these and other key questions within the context of the

historical development of racial-capitalism in South Africa and within the framework of the balance of forces of the dominant and dominated classes within the apartheid state. Its strength lies in the authors' willingness to confront the complexity of the struggle being waged in South Africa and to raise crucial questions regarding its future development and direction.

The Saul/Gelb analysis of the apartheid system begins by confronting the notion that the form of racial capitalism developed in South Africa was aberrant and arose from the particular atavistic, racial views, and ideology of the Afrikaner population. They argue that far from being "illogical" or dysfunction from an economic standpoint, the racial form of capitalism provided a particularly appropriate basis for surplus extraction under the existing historical conditions. However, there are deep structural contradictions which impede economic development within a system based on racial separation and exclusion: where wages paid to Africans barely reach subsistence and skilled labour is restricted to whites, racial capitalism confronts barriers to the development of the internal consumer market and of the productive forces. In addition, the international economic crisis since the early 1970s has compounded the internal contradictions leading to high rates of inflation, increasing (black) unemployment, rising import costs, a fall in real growth, and balance of payment deficits.

South Africa's economic crisis (belied only in appearance by the "gold boom" of the late 1970s and early 1980s) has led the more advanced sectors of the capitalist class (domestic and international) to confront the task of transforming the economic system, in the words of Harry Oppenheimer, chairman of the Anglo-American Corporation, "from a labour-intensive, low-wage, low-productivity economic system--typical of industrial development in its earliest stage--to the capital-intensive, high-wage, high-productivity system which characterizes the advanced industrialized countries" (p. 27). And yet such a project, limited as it is both in relation to African aspirations and regarding its potential for success, poses significant threats to sections of the white population, especially smaller, more labour-intensive businesses which depend for their profits on payment of low wages, and white workers who feel threatened by African competition for jobs. The arguments of the two sides of the white population--the "enlightened" (verligtes) and the reactionaries (verkrampes)--can be counterposed thus: the latter argue that "reform merely opens the floodgates to revolution"; the former argue that there may be "revolution in white-minority-ruled South Africa in five years unless blacks get major concessions" (Oppenheimer). Both sides acknowledge the potential for revolution though there are deep divisions over the means to stave it off.

But what of the reform project itself--the attempt to rationalise the racial-capitalist system in South Africa by getting rid of the more noxious elements of discrimination, allowing African trade unionism (within limits), and easing up on the influx-control laws and thus accepting (again within limits) Africans as a permanent and stable part of the labour force in "white" areas? Is this merely an attempt to restructure the basis of the apartheid system in order to maintain the fundamentals of the capitalist system intact? Clearly, this is the case and yet, as the authors argue, it would be mistaken to view these changes as irrelevant to the liberation process, as mere window dressing. For they arise from deep structural and systemic contradictions which force sections of the dominant class to seek solutions which entail risks to themselves and, potentially, open up areas within which the forces of liberation can operate. The "organic crisis" of the South African state, then, forces powerful sections of the capitalist class to counter-ance reform both as the basis for rationalizing the socio-economic system and for staving off the revolutionary upheaval which they acknowledge is underway.

The reason the reforms must be taken seriously is not that their proponents really desire significant change, nor that their motives are any better than those of their less "enlightened" white opponents, nor that the reforms could possibly be successful, but rather that they define (in part) the terrain on which the struggle between the dominant and dominated classes will be contested. It is precisely such questions as the liberalization of the influx-control laws and the acceptance of African rights to organize in trade unions which will open up deep cleavages within the white population and, potentially, allow the space within which the forces of liberation can organize. It is to this question--the terrain of revolutionary struggle--that Saul and Gelb turn in the second part of their analysis.

A revolutionary process is underway in South Africa and few who are aware of the history of decolonization in Africa in the past three decades would doubt its outcome--"independence" and "black majority rule" will come in the not distant future though it would be rash to estimate its precise timing. But though the overthrow of the white minority and the transition to black majority rule is the immediate and central question it is by no means the only fundamental question. What must also be posed is: a transformation to what? Clearly the experience of Mozambique and Angola differs radically from that of Zaïre and the Central African Republic--though all attained "independence" and "majority rule"--and raises the question of the type of liberation to be attained and the relationship of the independent state to the majority of its population and to the international capitalist system. And this, in turn, raises questions of the classes which will play the dominant role in

the struggle, the dominant mode(s) of struggle against the white minority regime, the nature of the program or project of liberation, and the main beneficiaries of the liberation struggle.

The key question (and in the recent period the most controversial question) posed--against the background of high levels of industrialization and proletarianization and militant workers' struggles for political and trade union rights--is the role which the working class in South Africa will play in the coming social transformation. Will working class struggles in the workplace (and the communities) be one aspect of a broader nationalist struggle led by a party-cum-movement (the African National Congress?) as was the case in Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe? Or do the particular conditions in South Africa and its much greater level of capitalist development pose the potential of the working class playing a leading (dominant) role in the struggle? Put another way, is a "classical" working class revolution on the agenda in South Africa? Underpinning these questions are others which involve the relationship between the struggle for socialism and the struggle for "national liberation" (are they separate processes or can they form part of an integrated project of liberation?); the relationship of the working class to other sectors of society (the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie); and the relationship of the working class to the party (ANC) which is leading the political and military struggle against the racial-capitalist state.

These, of course, are not questions for which there are ready-made answers and their resolution will come from the revolutionary practice of the social forces struggling for social transformation in South Africa. What can be done, and what Saul and Gelb successfully do, is to examine the complex interplay "between nationalist and socialist projects in South Africa" (p. 8) and between the increasingly militant and conscious working class movement and the party which is the dominant expression of the struggle for national liberation--the ANC.

The arguments of Saul and Gelb can be summarised schematically as follows:

(1) Given the high levels of proletarianization in South Africa--urban African workers constitute some 60% of the total African workforce--and their central role within the racial-capitalist economy as well as their willingness and potential to confront the structures of the apartheid state, the role of the African working class in the struggle for liberation will clearly be crucial.

(2) Necessarily, other social forces--the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie, students, intellectuals--must be included in a broad alliance which can confront the South African state

but if leadership of the movement falls to petty bourgeois forces the nature and direction of the process of social transformation may be called into question.

(3) The ANC, due to the legitimacy it has attained in seven decades of struggle against the racial-capitalist state, will continue to play a leading role in the ensuing struggle for liberation.

(4) "The national liberation' format remains, under South African conditions, a valid blueprint for socialist revolution, even though it is a format within which the working class must become an ever more important and self-conscious component; and that the African National Congress of South Africa demands support as best providing of this format, although it seems likely that the ANC which ultimately wins the struggle in South Africa will be rather different from the movement as we know it today" (p. 8).

This last formulation--the strategic conclusion of the Saul/Gelb analysis--captures much of the complex dialectic involved in the relationship between party/movement and class in the South African revolution. But it is not an uncontentious conclusion. The authors' emphasis is on a revolution led by a nationalist movement with significant working class input and involvement. But what may be counterposed to this is a working class revolution with a significant nationalist component. Though the difference may appear to be merely one of emphasis, the modes of organization and perspectives on the nature of the revolutionary process in South Africa adopted by the forces of liberation will be of significance to the ways in which the revolution unfolds and to its outcome. Specifically, the following arguments may be made in relation to the Saul/Gelb analysis:

- The authors' "blueprint" for revolution in South Africa leans too heavily on a model which proved successful (in broad terms) in societies where the productive forces were far less developed and the economic and social weight of the working class far less significant (i.e., in predominantly agrarian societies: Angola, Mozambique, and to a lesser extent Zimbabwe).

- The potential appears to exist in South Africa for a revolution of a type not hitherto seen on the African continent --a revolution within which the working class has sufficient weight to lead a struggle which is both nationalist, in the sense of leading a struggle to overthrow the apartheid state, and socialist, in that out of the struggle against the employers and the state, institutions and organisms of workers' control of the economy and the state can be created.

- Though Saul and Gelb are scrupulous in their analysis of

the relation between socialist and nationalist projects, their formulation appears to underplay the potential for the development of a project of national and social liberation led by the working class, in which working class self-activity and self-organization provide the mechanism both for the overthrow of the apartheid state and the tasks of creating a socialist society. Needless to say, these goals will not be achieved without the active support of other sectors of society and the use of other forms of struggle--particularly the armed guerrilla struggle. But the question in the end comes down to where control of the process lies. Is it the party/movement which directs the class within a broader social project, in which the working class has a role of "first among equals"? Or is it the working class--and the organs of power thrown up from its struggle against the apartheid state--which will determine the direction and strategy of the national movement?

Framed in this way, the counter-position is overly mechanical, too "either/or," but it does point to different conceptions of the revolutionary process unfolding in South Africa.

The argument is not about prediction (in all likelihood the "national liberation" format will provide the model for the revolutionary process in South Africa at least in the short-term) but about the potential for going beyond the "national liberation" movement model. Despite some disagreement in this respect with the strategic conclusion of Saul and Gelb, it must be said that their analysis lays out clearly, sensitively, and undogmatically, the complexity of the revolutionary struggle being waged in South Africa. It is a book which must be read, and its arguments digested, by activists working in support of liberation in South Africa. As the authors state: "The crisis in South Africa is still a long way from being resolved in favor of the popular classes, or in socialist terms. Nonetheless, the struggle is joined as never before" (p. 146). In development this analysis the authors have performed a significant service to the movement.

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