

Our South African Freedom Dreams

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When Nana Osei-Opare asked to reprint my article, “The Third International and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa,” I balked. I was only twenty-three when I wrote it for a graduate seminar at UCLA, and like most preliminary research projects it was based on a slim body of primary sources since I had no access to South African archives. I had just settled on an ambitious and unrealistic dissertation project comparing the histories of the Black Left in South Africa and the U.S. South—unrealistic because I had no prospect of getting into South Africa. In 1985, President P. W. Botha declared a state of emergency, and my participation in protests at the South African Consulate in Beverly Hills did not bode well for my visa application. Looking back at the essay three decades later, I find some of it downright embarrassing—particularly the occasional flights into rigid Marxist language, and the limited sources available to me. Of course, in 1986, the Soviet Union was three years from collapse and the Soviet Archives were several years from opening. But considering these constraints, and the audacity of youth, there are things about the article of which I’m proud.

Taking a page from Cedric Robinson, whose book *Black Marxism* had just appeared in 1983, I suggest that a Black radical tradition rooted in earlier notions of African redemption, rural opposition culminating in resistance to the *Land Act* of 1913, and expressions of working-class and petit bourgeois African nationalism had already produced a vision of self-determination. These movements preceded the formation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), whose initial orientation was toward the white working class. Imagine a Communist Party anywhere backing striking miners under the banner, “Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a WHITE SOUTH AFRICA!” When African trade unionists, as well as officials of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow, criticized Party leaders for their uncritical support of the Rand Revolt in 1922, to the exclusion of the more numerous African miners’ struggles, white South African

Communists made the absurd argument that the “advanced” white proletariat must win the fight for socialism first in order to free the entire working class.

Predictably, the Comintern directed the CPSA to orient its work “toward the African masses,” which generated tumultuous internal splits in the Party and sharp debates over what this meant. For Africans and so-called Coloureds, who now dominated the Party numerically, the goal was to take their land back and live in a state where the indigenous majority ruled. White Communists saw as their task to educate a backwards African working class to support a white-led proletarian revolution. Of course, the latter was a failed strategy from the beginning. And while the majority of the African, Coloured, and Indian comrades knew this, they depended on the Comintern to lay down the law, as it were. Although I conclude that the Comintern played a key role in enforcing the demand for African self-determination, the essay’s central contribution, I think, is to turn the usual claim that the Communists infiltrated the African nationalist movement on its head. Rather, the nationalists infiltrated the Communist Party, adopted a radical vision of self-determination that recognized South Africa as a settler colonial state, and demanded the return of land and black majority rule, expressed as an “independent native South African Republic with full equal rights for all races.”

It took extraordinary chutzpah for an exclusively white delegation of South African Communists to travel to Moscow in 1928 in order to oppose this policy. Not surprisingly, they were summarily dismissed and sent back to defend the Native Republic thesis. The backing of the Comintern mattered, but what mattered more was the fact that the CPSA had become a largely African organization and the thesis had been widely adopted by Party branches all over the country. Nevertheless, Sidney Bunting, the long-time socialist and Communist leader, who led the all-white delegation to Moscow to argue against the thesis, did win one concession—an important one on which I should have elaborated. He succeeded in changing the language to “a native republic as a stage toward a workers’ and peasants’ republic,” to further underscore that the ultimate objective was a multiracial, democratic, socialist South Africa.

Politics, not merely youthful curiosity, drove me to this topic. Like many of my fellow students, I was involved in the

antiapartheid movement on campus. I was also on the editorial board of *Ufahamu* and, during the preceding year, served as president of the African Activists Association (AAA). In those days, we considered *Ufahamu* to be the theoretical arm of the AAA, not a dispassionate scholarly journal. It stood for the kind of radical Africana studies we were groping toward—recognizing, of course, that such groping required sharp debate, disagreements, and contradictions. One must imagine what it meant to us to inherit a journal that not only published new scholarship, but poetry, polemics, and political insights from the likes of Walter Rodney, Amilcar Cabral, and Ngugi Wa-Thiongo, among others.

Evidence of my own political orientation at the time can be found in the first two essays I published in *Ufahamu*. One examined the challenges of socialist transformation in the People's Republic of the Congo, with an eye toward the lessons we might take for future revolutions; the other discussed the role of the international sports boycott of South Africa in anticipation of the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.¹ Both issues were at the forefront of my political work. I was both active in a left-wing party, actively pursuing dreams of socialist revolution, and chair of the Los Angeles Ad Hoc Committee to Keep South Africa Out of the Olympics. The latter, of course, was more urgent, practical, and effective. We were part of a broad coalition of students calling on the University of California to divest its holdings from South Africa. This was my generation's "Boycott, Sanctions, Divestment" moment, and many of us put our bodies on the line, building makeshift shanty towns on campus and sitting in at the South African Consulate. Taking leadership from Tim Ngubeni, stalwart South African activist and first director of UCLA's Community Programs Department, we supported the call for boycott and divestment, educated our community, built momentum, and by the summer of 1986, succeeded in persuading the U.C. Regents to divest \$3.1 billion worth of holdings from South Africa and Namibia. Although it took nine years, and the University of California took longer to divest than most major banks (including Citibank, Chase Manhattan, and Barclays), its leaders ultimately decided to abide by the wishes of the students and faculty and take an ethical stance against apartheid.

While we won that battle, none of my comrades in the AAA or involved with *Ufahamu* was naïve enough to believe

divestment, alone, would topple apartheid and birth a new democratic state founded on the principles of the Freedom Charter. We knew that the struggle on the ground, inside South Africa mattered. And given the experiences of Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Angola, and Namibia, many of us believed it would be bloody. The struggle was, indeed, bloody, but it was the apartheid state that shed most of the blood. The United Democratic Front and the ANC demonstrated the power of massive popular resistance, strikes, and civil disobedience, the power of people to stop South Africa's racial regime from functioning. We rejoiced when Mandela was finally released, and looked upon the elections of 1994 with great optimism.

I should point out here that I never pursued my ambitious dissertation topic, opting instead to focus on the U.S. South, and become an Americanist. I continued to maintain a political and scholarly interest in Africa, but I can claim no special expertise. Nevertheless, I think it is safe to say that many of us involved in the struggle to end apartheid did not expect a democratic South Africa to take a neoliberal turn, or to abandon the principles of the Freedom Charter many people in South Africa and around the world hold dear. But perhaps more surprising, in light of my essay on South African Communists and National Liberation, was the degree to which the Communist Party *survived as part of the ruling coalition*. This is one of the great ironies of the moment—one I could not have anticipated. Even as the ANC under Thabo Mbeki promoted neoliberal reforms to privatize public assets and attract multinational capital—at the expense of working people, the poor, and the sick—the South African Communist Party (SACP) never left the governing alliance, nor was it driven out. In 1996, the SACP sharply criticized the ANC for promoting policies on behalf of the wealthy and rising middle class, and accused it of pursuing “a deliberate strategy to marginalize” Communists and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).² And it continues to criticize state policies that undermine labor, generate unemployment, deepen inequality, and weaken democracy.

So why does the SACP remain in the governing alliance? Because it understands neoliberal restructuring as a global process imposed by international finance capital on the South African state, potentially undermining its sovereignty. A very recent statement issued by the SACP's Political Bureau minced no words:

“The past 20 years have seen a massive monopoly capitalist-driven dismantling of our productive economy. The restructuring of the work-place has been monopoly capital’s counter-offensive in the face of the important democratic advances made through working class struggle and the post-1994 democratisation process. Casualisation, labour-brokering, increasing capital intensity, growing monopoly domination at the expense of more labour-intensive, medium-scale enterprises have been some of the key features that have hollowed out important working class gains achieved through legislation. Massive disinvestment out of our country, tax avoidance through tax havens, transfer pricing, collusive behaviour, and an investment strike have played a major role in the sustained crisis levels of domestic unemployment and under-employment. This is the strategic agenda that must be fought and defeated.”³ The strategic agenda to which they refer comes not from the ANC but from multinational capital, the IMF, the World Bank, and the like. They view the ANC-led government as deeply flawed but also under attack, while giving the regime credit for leading “a major and progressive fiscal redistributive programme.”⁴

Perhaps this is the real meaning of an “independent native republic,” a conception of national liberation in which the consolidation of a multiracial democratic state takes precedence? “One Azania, one Nation,” as the slogan once went. (Indeed, the Communist Party of South Africa changed its name to the South African Communist Party in 1953, after it was forced underground, to signal its unwavering support for a united struggle for national liberation.) I think there may be an important lesson here for all the Left critics who see the SACP’s refusal to break entirely with the state as a capitulation to neoliberalism. The mere fact that the South African Left is strong and the unions are well organized and militant—especially compared to the nations of the global north, where austerity and growing inequality are the order of the day—is striking evidence of an unusually high level of debate and political participation throughout the country. For many South African Leftists, maintaining a democratic united front is vital in order to withstand any potential intervention—they don’t want to become another Chile.

And yet, how do we understand the rise of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a Marxist-Leninist, nationalist, populist

movement critical of the ANC's neoliberal turn and government corruption, dismissive of the SACP for its collaboration, and calling for massive land redistribution, nationalization of major industries, and massive state investments in housing, education, employment, and infrastructure? Whatever we might think about the EFF and the critique of the cult of personality surrounding Julius Malema, its agenda and orientation more closely resemble those of the Communists in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. The EFF's 2013 Founding Manifesto argues that "the political freedom attained symbolically in 1994 through inclusive elections [has] not translated into economic freedom, which must empower and assist the oppressed and exploited people of South Africa to be liberated from economic and social bondage. This feature of South Africa justifies our struggle for economic freedom and is also directed at the emancipation of the African continent."⁵ In other words, does the EFF represent what Sidney P. Bunting ironically imagined to be the final stage in the struggle for a "Native Republic," i.e., "a workers' and peasants' republic"? Does this mean that the struggle for self-determination, as envisioned by James La Guma and the first generation of South African Communists, has yet to be achieved? And, finally, does the challenge from the EFF expose the limits of national liberation without considering the larger continental or global struggle for sovereignty, social justice, and the dismantling of racial capitalism?

Endnotes

¹ "Problems of Socialist Transformation in Africa: The Congolese Experience," *Ufahamu* 13, nos. 2 and 3 (1984): 259-282; "The Role of the International Sports Boycott in the Anti-Apartheid Movement," *Ufahamu* 13, nos. 2 and 3 (1984): 26-39.

² Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (New York: Verso Books, 2013), p. 171.

³ SACP Political Bureau, "Unity in Diversity: Not Insults, Scapegoating, Polarisation," (November 11, 2014), <http://www.sacp.org.za/main.php?ID=4549>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Economic Freedom Fighters Founding Manifesto (2013), <http://efffighters.org.za/documents/economic-freedom-fighters-founding-manifesto/>