Benita Parry

THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA
The revolution postponed,
internationalism deferred

Within the constraints of an aversion to the autobiographies of bit players in epic events, I attempt to trace my intellectual formation in 1950s South Africa. I go on to suggest that the experience of participation in a far-left political movement indelibly marked my subsequent work within and against the grain of postcolonial studies where the critical embrace of a “reconciliatory” ideology displaced the explanatory category of conflict and struggle in situations of domination. Arguing against a politics of accommodation, I foreground the necessity of casting a cold eye on South Africa’s arrested revolution at a time when too much writing and commentary is directed at mythologizing the transition and justifying the conduct of the present regime.

Keywords left intellectual formation; dissidence; hazards of conciliatory ideology

You have given me brotherhood
Towards the man I do not
know

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You have given me the added
strength of all those living

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You showed me how one person’s
pain could die in the victory of
all

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You have made me indestructible,
for I no longer end in myself.

(Pablo Neruda: “To My Party” [A mi partido, from Canto General] c.1945)

Dictionaries describe both exiles and émigrés as those whose acts against the status quo have resulted in banishment or expulsion. In usage, however, émigré, together with refugee, implies the escape from political, ethnic or religious persecution; it also has affinities with the altogether more prosaic “expatriate”, a word that is without resonances of either heroism or suffering, intimating a voluntary rather than an enforced
departure that may be driven by principle, need, ambition or whim. What all these terms share with the yet more mundane "migration" is the inferred uprooting from a native soil, a notion presupposing a bond with a land, sometimes with the land. But some of us who through a recent historical accident had been born in South Africa knew from an early age that we were latecomers to our place of habitation, and, as we grew up, came to feel multiply displaced—alienated ideologically, ethically and existentially from the white communities, separated institutionally and socially from the indigenous and long-established populations. Perhaps this is why we were visited by pagan awe at the metaphysical physicality of the blandly and insufficiently named Table Mountain; so that when we much later read of the Australian schoolgirls and a teacher in Picnic at Hanging Rock sacrificing themselves to the unspoken call from an ancient outcrop, or the English visitors to Caves in A Passage to India deranged by an invisible and voiceless presence of an antique geological formation, we recognized that the strangers’ possession by transcendental forces was a sign of cultural deracination and psychic bewilderment (see Parry).

Perhaps too this is why we accepted rootlessness as our destiny and sought to belong within borderless communities, near and far. But although we were never “at home” in South Africa, as expatriates—for this is how I see myself—we remember it with something more than nostalgia for its sublime landscapes and turbulent social variety. Which is why, at a time when anticipations of a realistic utopia have been postponed but not forgotten, those of us who had identified ourselves with the liberation struggles still look to South Africa’s uncertain present—even if with diminishing hope—as holding out the modest but not insignificant promise of redistributing material resources where mass immiseration still pertains, and offering social satisfactions to those, still a vast majority, whose untold potential remains thwarted. Such an expectation avoids the twin errors of euphoria about the “miracle” of the new South Africa, and a doctrinaire refusal to acknowledge that the installation of liberal democracy, albeit as a polity retaining a reconfigured capitalist class at the helm, did indeed constitute a momentous event in the country’s history. A disenchanted perspective—for that is what I will be advancing—is not the same as a demoralized one, and I must trust that my insistence on the necessity of casting a cold eye on an arrested revolution will not make me appear as a spectre at the feast. So to ward off any such perception let me refer to Neville Alexander, academic and political activist, graduate of the Universities of Cape Town, Tübingen and Robben Island, who in his indispensable book An Ordinary Country urges the necessity of critical analysis at a time when too much writing and commentary about South Africa is directed at mythologizing the transition and justifying the conduct of the present regime.

Whenever I read Auden’s line on Yeats (“In Memory of W.B. Yeats”)—“mad Ireland hurt you into poetry”—I am reminded of the outpouring of fiction, poetry, autobiography, analyses and polemics—good, bad and indifferent—that has come from another afflicted country. For whoever grew up in the South has been indelibly marked by an intellectual formation within its febrile tensions and exorbitant paradoxes, and of these many, too many, believed they could transform their autobiographies into art. This urge was shared by those who brought their own experiences into exegetical writing, and because not all expatriate critics occupy the same place on the theoretical and political spectrum I want to trace the route that led me to the sort of work I subsequently and late in my life tried to do.
Amongst those of us born during the 1930s into a household of lower middle-class Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, it was probable that we would be acquainted with left-wing sentiments. These reached us through family reminiscences about teachers, pharmacists and autodidact artisans in Lithuania and Poland, heroic in their pursuit of knowledge and high culture, generous in their solidarity with all the dispossessed, to whom the unlimited horizons of socialism offered a way out of the constraints of anti-Semitism and the provincialism of small towns in Eastern Europe. Parental affiliation with the conduct and sentiments of such figures could but did not necessarily extend to a rage against South Africa’s egregiously inequitable and repressive regime—about which too many of our left-leaning mothers and fathers had remained inert, as if infected by the pervasive miasma of racism, and habituated to the ignominy of living within a wall built by a punitive state, maintained by law and reinforced by custom. We, the children, were then nursed on inconsistency and nurtured on contradiction.

What we also inevitably overheard was the adults’ alarm at the advance of fascism across Europe, and their confusion at learning about the persecution of the old Bolsheviks and the Hitler–Stalin Pact—although their faith in the Soviet Union was to be restored by Russia’s victories over Nazism. Soon after, we were to witness the elders’ grief at news of the camps in which sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews had died. And because we had listened or partly listened, we at that moment in the mid- to late 1940s were inevitably drawn towards left-Zionist movements, where we were simultaneously introduced to an exclusionist Zionism and an expansive Marxism. In time this bizarre incompatibility troubled us into understanding that although the Jewish immigrants to Palestine at that time were themselves truly the wretched of the earth, Zionism, including Zionist-socialism, was committed to building yet another settler society, and that the proper object of our socialist inclinations and aspirations was South Africa.

By this time we were at university, although many of my circle were without professional ambitions or scholastic appetites. But whatever the disappointments of what was on offer in lecture hall or office, for some of us there was the surprise, which to later generations must seem incomprehensible, of being able to meet students from across frontiers erected by regulation and policed by convention. This opened a door on experiences from which we on both sides of the divide had been shut off; it brought new perceptions of the condition which we all differentially lived, issued in unexpected friendships, and for white students provided an escape from an environment of compliance and conformity vis-à-vis racism’s rules—regulations that were simultaneously pragmatic in their obdurate defence of a minority’s privileges and paranoid in the accompanying anxiety, recoil and fright. In District Six we came across a heady Bohemia of forbidden hedonistic delights, and we found our way to radical clubs and revolutionary political parties. Here we received another kind of higher education, one which taught us that the beginnings, institutions and ethos of a disordered South Africa needed to be made public through political discourse and political activity, if a situation which we found socially outrageous, intellectually disgraceful, and morally repugnant was to be contested and overcome.

That such Marxist forums had existed in South Africa since the late 1920s and early 1930s was in part due to the very small number of Africans, Asians and Coloureds who had attended overseas universities and returned as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and communists of one or other persuasion. Moreover, a programme for increasing the
white population had furthered the growth of this miniscule radical community by accidentally extending citizenship to supporters of either Stalin or Trotsky who had entered without detection amongst the quota of Eastern European Jews of all classes allowed into the country during the earlier decades of the 20th century—later this came to include a limited number of Western European refugees from Nazism. Similarly, membership of the left had inadvertently been increased by a white immigration policy unknowingly admitting a scattering of trade union militants, radical academics and other professionals from abroad. These convergences then meant that Marxism was embedded in the intellectual culture of liberation movements.

So it came about much later that most of my politically minded peers gravitated towards the Communist Party and its affiliate the African National Congress; while a few, a very few, found their way to the Unity Movement, many of whose most active and articulate members were associated with the Trotskyist Internationals. About this tendency it remains to be told how an association of such theoretical sophistication, high principle and austere political standards was overtaken by the Congress movement whose broad-based programmes, organizational skills, manifest ability to act and demonstrations of great personal courage ensured popular appeal, gained it recognition at home and abroad as the official opposition, and culminated with its personnel forming the first post-apartheid government. Nevertheless, the thinking of the currently less prominent, since relegated to a footnote in recent official histories of the South African resistance, survives in the critiques now being made of the neo-liberal doctrine and free-market practice to which the new South African state is ideologically committed and practically bound.

In their tracts and pamphlets, theorists of the Unity Movement argued that social revolution in South Africa could be initiated only through a national liberation struggle, which without disjunctive stages would move into a socialist revolution—the notion of “permanent revolution”. This was the one organization that, in line with the thinking of other Marxists in overwhelmingly rural societies, paid proper attention to the vast and impoverished peasantry whose long tradition of resistance to the expropriation of their land had never ceased, who continued to fight agrarian policies calculated to ensure a land-hungry population as a pool of cheap, defenceless and mobile labour (Tabata). Sensitivity to the land problem and awareness that peasant militancy was fed by migrants commuting between village and city was joined to analysis of evolving class formations and interests, and it was as Marxists that the intelligentsia of the Unity Movement undertook to examine these developments within the larger context of an imperialist world system. Hence a pathological white South Africa locked into an obsessive racism and seemingly isolated from events outside was understood as tied by a thousand threads to the metropolitan centres of capitalist power. These had cynically allowed a comprador regime to pursue phobic theories of biological difference and cultural hierarchy enabling—and indeed benefiting—segregation policies, which for long had been profitable to domestic and overseas capital. Once such strategies became a constraint on an increasingly industrialized and technological economy, the entrenched representatives of capitalism’s interests were forced to the negotiation table, a move accelerated by the intensification of the struggle and assisted by the imposition of divestment and sanctions by countries whose capitalist class held a large stake in South Africa’s mines and industries, and whose entrepreneurs were significant purchasers of its raw materials and agricultural products.
The Unity Movement produced no Marti, Césaire, Fanon, Cabral or C.L.R. James; all the same, the intellectuals, only a handful of whom had been educated in the metropoles or had travelled beyond South Africa, were internationalists versed in the classical texts that had declared war on capitalism’s oppressions, and all were familiar with cognate anti-colonial writings. Allison Drew has done a great service in her edited collection of documents relating to the national liberation movements of South Africa. These serve as a corrective to the notion that the process of liberation began with the campaigns of the ANC during the 1950s and ended with the political compromise that brought the New South Africa into being. For what this official story occludes is the intense discussion conducted over many decades amongst Marxists, both communist and Trotskyist, about the colonial project in Southern Africa, the nature of South Africa’s racist capitalism, the relative revolutionary potential of the peasantry and the then small proletariat, the class interests and the class aspirations of both the leaderships and the constituencies of the different national movements, and the necessity and limitations of anti-colonial struggles in the fight for socialism.

What I especially remember about my mentors, some of whom died in disappointed exile, while others continue to play the role of dissenters in the new South Africa, is their commitment to a universalism at that time undreamed of by the selective citizenry in a backward outpost of imperialism. An intellectual apprenticeship amongst this segment of the radical political community—to whose researches and discussions I in my ignorance contributed nothing—would necessarily predispose anyone who later attempted the work of a critic to look at colonialism and the postcolonial in ways that went—and go—against the grain of the prevailing orthodoxies, whether contrived by neo-imperialists, liberal apologists, or those postcolonialists desperate to displace a narrative of past and still existing conflict with one of complicity.

The arrival of new theoretical models in South African historiography has been attributed to the political transition of the 1980s and 1990s, when the ANC government-in-waiting was working towards a negotiated settlement, the first democratic elections took place, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was conceived, conducted its proceedings and published its findings. It is then possible to account for this shift in perspective on South Africa’s long and traumatic history of military and political struggles by focusing on that moment when the new regime and its academic spokespersons regarded it as imperative to consolidate the political compromise made not only with the white ruling class of South Africa but also with national and transnational capital. Yet despite sufficient local circumstances congenial to the critical embrace of a “reconciliatory” ideology and a politics of accommodation, I want to suggest that this turn was also influenced by the theoretical paradigms prevalent within postcolonial studies, where some participants had devised a strategy of denigration to discredit those who retained class antagonism and class struggle as a necessary conceptual category in understanding history and society.

What then are the implications of rewriting a project of invasion, dispossession and exploitation as one of collusion? And here I must make clear that my question is not insensible to the exchanges, coerced and voluntary, that have always taken place between conqueror and conquered, oppressor and oppressed, mistress/master and servant. Nor does it overlook the certainty that in all settler societies, as well as in territories subject to imperial rule, liaisons, voluntary and coerced, between the incomers and the indigenous peoples produced populations variously and usually known
disparagingly as mestizo, métis, creole, half-caste, mulatto or coloured. Some of these terms have been adapted to celebrate the making of new formations by theorists of hybridity or métissage, who, I suggest, make a category error in conflating such intimacies with structural and institutional relationships. My question then is whether this intercourse, whether sexual or economic or cultural, undermined entrenched inequalities or altered the distribution of power, and hence whether the term “reciprocity” is ever appropriate under situations of duress.

I want therefore to refer to two pieces of work produced by South Africans now working in the United States, one a joint work of anthropology, the other a literary/cultural study. I will not pretend to have read Jean and John Comaroff’s two-volumed study on the encounter between missionaries and the Tswana people from the early years of the 19th century until 1920, entitled _Of Revelation and Revolution_ and published in 1991 and 1997, respectively. However, a joint essay by the authors in an issue of the journal _Interventions_ (2001) devoted to a discussion of their work condenses the substance of the theoretical premises underpinning the latter volume where a previous concern with concepts of “hegemony and ideology” had shifted to a preoccupation with hybridity. Hence having conceded that the southern Tswana were indeed colonized and ruled by the British, the authors’ concern is to locate the middle ground on which “both parties acted on and reacted to the other”, thereby demonstrating the reciprocal impact of colonizer and colonized and contesting the idea of the colonial encounter as “reducible to a simple equation of domination” (116).

Although no amount of quantifying “the long conversation” between the Tswana and the missionaries can hide the fact that by the authors’ own account this appears as a sadly attenuated affair, their thesis has been welcomed by many in the anthropological community, which is a sign of the conciliatory ideology that has seeped into the social sciences as well as the humanities. So let us examine the Comoroffs’ case: on the one hand they insist that “the cultural world of the evangelists” was changed by “the reactive Africanization […] of their own architecture and attire, their agriculture and medicine, not to mention their religious rites” (116). On the other hand they acknowledge that the colonizers’ “unyielding assumptions about universal truth” shut them off “both from the possibility of new knowledges and all but the most superficial understanding of African signs and practices” (119). So it appears that the real beneficiaries of this exchange were the colonized: “the strong relativist emphasis” of southern Tswana epistemology, the Comoroffs maintain “proved more subtle in dealing with the colonial encounter than did its British counterpart”, and it was this that facilitated “the selective appropriation of sekgoa” (European ways and means). Had the Comoroffs been less preoccupied with making a case for “reciprocity” they could also have shown how the missionaries, whatever their kindly or authoritarian individual dispositions, were agents of capitalism’s penetration into a pre-capitalist world, accelerating a process whereby the native peoples became subject to a money economy, existing social relations and ancient social bonds were undermined, and new forms of consciousness and modes of resistance were generated.

The case for _mutual_ hybridization made by the Comoroffs is no more convincing than the notion of “transculturation” as a product of the contact zone once mooted by Mary Louise Pratt (6). For having convincingly established that the peripheries appropriated and imaginatively redeployed materials from the centre, Pratt is obliged to allow that the centre was _unable_ to recognize the peripheries as producers of valid cognitive systems. As Fredric Jameson has remarked:
what the First World thinks and dreams about the Third can have nothing whatsoever in common, formally or epistemologically, with what the Third World has to know every day about the First. Subalternity carries the possibility of knowledge with it, domination that of forgetfulness and repression. (199)

The revisionist model of colonial discourse as structured by conversation between ruler and ruled is a radical departure from the stance of scholars such as Johannes Fabian who maintain that colonialism’s denial of contemporality to the colonized removed them from a dialogic situation, since “the condition for a truly dialectical confrontation between persons as well as societies” (86) is dependent on the recognition of “coevalness” (154). So too from his study of the colonial library, V.Y Mudimbe has concluded that because the African was an object to be studied and defined, and not a participant in a discussion, European disquisition about African knowledge was not a philosophical conversation with Africans but a white monologue (4, 20, 22). Noting that the scramble for Africa took place in an atmosphere of Christian revival, that the missionaries played an essential role in the expropriation of land and the exploitation of labour and resources, and that it was their representations which “shaped subsequent anthropological studies”, Mudimbe notes how the language of derision and refutation they employed ensured that their discourses did “not enter into dialogue with pagans and ‘savages’” (81).

At this point I want to ask: how many South Africans of European origin spoke or even now speak an African language other than Afrikaans?—and here I do not include familiarity with the idioms of street patois. How many were or are acquainted with the different cognitive traditions of the non-European peoples? Recent scholarship from South Africa and beyond is a reminder, as the philosopher Paulin J. Hountondji points out, that most of the people in Africa still depend on the resources of indigenous knowledge systems, whether in health or agriculture or handicraft (23). What, according to Hountondji, is absent is a “fruitful exchange of methods, a dialogue about heuristic procedures” between endogenous know-how and exogenous or imported science, the result being the marginalization of indigenous knowledge in relation to imported knowledge, and its exclusion from both scientific enquiry and philosophical discourse. Cautioning against any tendency to overvalue this heritage, Hountondji locates its undervaluing in the context of colonial domination within which local peoples internalized the colonizers’ “denigrating views of African ways of life and modes of thought” (25).

The urge to discover the third space, the middle ground, suggests the extent to which historiography can defer to transitory hegemonic critical models. This is nowhere more obvious than in a book by Mark Sanders titled: Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid. Early in the 1990s he writes:

notions of resistance, subversion and the building of alternative grassroots structures were still the order of the day in anti-apartheid politics and, in turn, set the agenda for left literary and cultural studies. But with the negotiations to end apartheid, the non-racial election of 1994, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which began its work in 1996, what emerged at the forefront of public discourse was the question of complicity. (ix)

If Sanders perceives this paradigm as determined by a particular moment in a specified place, he also seeks to ground it in the “key concern of deconstruction” as elaborated
by Derrida—that is complicity understood as “the foldedness or ‘contamination’ of oppositional pairs” (9). Hence Sanders’ reiteration of the dictum which I have always found otiose and bankrupt: “Specific acts of opposition [ … ] remain complicit in what they oppose” (10). Not only is this adamantine statement empirically wrong—as can be established by a cursory look at the forms that class and anti-colonial struggles have taken and the rhetorics these wars generated—but it is indifferent both to the divisions within communities that were racially oppressed, and to those other entanglements that exploited peoples have formed and continue to form not with their opponents but with other dispossessed constituencies outside their immediate geographical and social situations. These are evident in the long and still living traditions of Pan-Africanism and internationalism, and the more recent broad-based contemporary movements such as the World Social Forum. In pursuit of uncovering face-to-face complicities within the enclosed space of ruler and ruled, Sanders forgets distant and far-reaching solidarities.

Yet without a consciousness of these shared global oppressions, discussion of South Africa’s history and present will remain isolated from its proper imperialist context within which the new regime fulfils the role of capitalism’s agents. Hence, in a register that addresses class rather than ethnicity or race, I want to refer to manifestations of antagonism that have survived the transition in South Africa. For while politicians, scholars and commentators may speak about reconciliation not only as a desire but also as a social fact, many others in and beyond South Africa have eschewed hagiography in the interest of “truth”. In an article published in the New Left Review in 2003 Trevor Ngwane, a spokesperson of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and the Anti-Privatization Forum, writes: “Basically the ANC was granted formal, administrative independence, while the wealth of the country was retained in the hands of the white capitalist elite [ … ] Mandela’s role was decisive in stabilizing the new dispensation; by all accounts, a daring gamble on the part of the bourgeoisie.” A similar position is taken by Neville Alexander who, pointing to the continuities between the apartheid and the post-apartheid state, observes that because of its adherence to a neo-liberal economic strategy “the ANC government, first and foremost, serves the interests of the capitalist class” (48, 49), while John Saul has written that the present leadership of the ANC tends to present itself not “as the reluctant slave of the imperatives of the global marketplace but rather as its enthusiastic, born-again protagonist” (20).

Perhaps the memories of apartheid are still too painful and recollection of the struggle too potent for some to accept the necessity of critical analysis if we are to begin to understand the continuing social tensions and political protest under the current dispensation. Ironically it is the existence of a democracy which has enabled the mobilization of civil society against the regime’s; and while the administration claims the success of its Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy, a plethora of community movements are making known their discontent with the privatization of public utilities and social services, the policy of outsourcing and the deployment of labour brokers: consider the Electricity Crisis movement, the Anti-capitalist front calling itself the Social Movement Indaba (SMI), the Anti-Privatization Forum, efforts to set up a Campaign Against Neo-liberalism, Concerned Citizens, Jubilee South Africa, Youth for Work—a reminder of the growing population of unemployed; the Landless Peoples Movement—a reminder of the 13 million impoverished and land-hungry people in the rural areas.
Let me end with another citation from Neville Alexander:

In the formal sense, there is very little danger of a left-wing revolutionary upsurge in the short to medium term. As in most other countries in the world, the credibility of a socialist alternative, whatever name is used to label it, will have to be fought for tenaciously in post-apartheid South Africa. Traditions are of the greatest significance in matters of this kind. Consequently, it would be a grave mistake to believe that, except for the rhetoric, the belief in and the desire for a socialist alternative is dead in South Africa. Real capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa manifests itself in such barbaric forms that there is no doubt, that, as in many semi-industrialised South American and East Asian countries which have developed beyond mere monocultural primary export economics, a reincarnation of socialist thought, mass organisation and mass action will take place sooner rather than later. (167)

And to quote myself, our best hope for universal emancipation is that we remain unconciled to a past of conquest, oppression and exploitation, and unconsolled by a disgraceful present.

Notes

1 That his preference is congenial to other South African critics can be seen in a recent review of his book that wholly embraces his thesis. See Sarah Nuttall (135–38).
2 Ngwane also comments:

Without detracting from those twenty-seven years in jail—what that cost him, what he stood for—Mandela has been the real sell-out, the biggest betrayer of his people. When it came to the crunch, he used his status to camouflage the actual agreement that the ANC was forging with the South African elite under the sugar-coating of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. (41–42)

3 The full context is:

The Thatcherian argument that “There is no Alternative” (to the neo-liberal macro-economic strategy) [...] wielded by the moderate leadership, and the failure of the left-wingers to come forward with a viable alternative strategy that would not alienate the national and the international bourgeoisie, have resulted in a situation where it can be said [...] that the ANC government, first and foremost, serves the interests of the capitalist class. (48, 49)

4 Saul writes that the option to adopt neo-liberal economic policies was primarily “an ideological one”, and he goes on to compare the South African transition with “Frantz Fanon’s notion of a false decolonization: the rising African middle-class, both entrepreneurial and bureaucratic in provenance, merely sliding comfortably into their political positions as, yes, the intermediaries of global Empire” (20, 22, 24).
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