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South Africa

What Does It Mean to be a South African Marxist, 100 Years after the Russian Revolution?

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It is not too much to say that the Russian Revolution made South African Marxism possible. There were Marxists in South Africa before the Russian Revolution, and Marxist organizations. But there was nothing that could have been recognized as specifically South African Marxism.

This was partly because of the way a working-class, dependent on wage-labour, had been created in South Africa, and partly because of the ethnic and linguistic diversity of a settler-colonial society. Early socialist organisations after 1900 were mainly white (and male). They reflected the dominance of white wage-labour then. These organisations drew on different national backgrounds, including Britain, Australia and the United States. They conducted their business in different languages, including Yiddish, German and Italian. There was no common set of problems and assumptions that bound them together, although the question of mobilising black workers – the most oppressed section of the workforce – became increasingly prominent for all of them.

By the time of the revolution, there was a Marxist organization with a national presence, called the International Socialist League (ISL). It had structures in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. It had emerged from a split from the South African Labour Party (SALP) in 1915, motivated by the SALP's support of Britain in World War I.

The ISL was the first political organisation in South Africa to recruit members without regard to race and gender. Its members were at first mainly white. Its position on the racial question was progressive, but abstract: "Labour cannot emancipate itself in a white skin while it is branded in a black skin." It's an important perspective, but doesn't tell us much about how emancipation can happen in the conditions of the time.

The emergence of South African Marxism

We can see the emergence of a distinctive South African Marxism in the period from the formation of the Communist Party in South Africa (CPSA) in 1921 to the Black Republic thesis adopted at the sixth congress of the Communist International in 1928. The Marxism of the ISL (and CPSA until about 1928) was displaced by the ideas and practice of the CPSA and South African Marxism more generally. I will outline three elements of that displacement.

First, the ISL (and the CPSA until 1928) prided itself on its diversity of outlook. It saw Marxism as a "living growth", developing through open discussion, in the light of fresh experience. Against this, the Comintern imposed the idea of "iron discipline" as the hallmark of the party member and the essential link between party and class through the twenty-one conditions drafted by Lenin for joining the Comintern. The conditions were aimed at creating a clean break from the reformist Second International. It called for expulsion of numerous, but badly defined, categories of party members: reformists and centrists, those who did not agitate within the military; "untrustworthy half reformists" and "unreliable elements" and for regular "clearance" of members "in order systematically to disembarass the party from the petty bourgeois elements that may penetrate it." It also called for expelling those who disagreed with these expulsions.

Second, the ISL prided itself on its "harmony of spirit", its "devotion to the cause of International Socialism and the whole empire of ideas which that implies" and had "the most interesting diversity of outlook and opinion" within its ranks. There is no sign that it sought to establish a single theoretical framework to which all members would subscribe. Instead, each would learn and teach as they could, and engage with others. Increasingly, after 1917,

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ISL/CPSA politics were animated by the achievement of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. But the terms of this orientation were to change dramatically.

The CPSA newspaper, *The International* – still writing in the ISL tradition – described Lenin on his death as “the greatest of Marxian philosophers . . . the outstanding intellectual who, all the more because he was such, penetrated and assimilated and lived in the feelings and ideas of the masses and them only.” Lenin was a model for Marxists to learn from, rather than an infallible source.

In place of this somewhat open-ended conception of Marxist internationalism, the SACP instilled an idea of Marxism as a complete and final doctrine, requiring only correct application in its local context; put differently, an idea of Marxism in which theory is separated from practice, and theoretical credentials decide practical questions.

Third, the ISL/CPSA was committed to internationalism. This did not exclude mobilising black workers in South Africa. That mobilisation was its main focus, along with political education through night schools, and the majority of CPSA members were black. Its aim in all this was to heighten class consciousness.

But this was to be replaced after 1928 by a focus on the strategy of seeking alliances with African nationalism. This strategy was motivated partly by Stalin’s wish to build support in British dominions, including South Africa, as a potential counter to a possible British invasion of the Soviet Union. Its meaning changed as Comintern policy shifted, along with Stalin’s calculation of the diplomatic needs of the Soviet Union, mainly in relation to Europe.

Frequently, this led to CPSA strategies aimed at appealing to conservative sections of the African middle class. Thus, Moses Kotane argued in his Cradock letter of 1934 that the party should recognize that “Africa is culturally or economically backward” and “the majority of the African population are more national conscious than class conscious.”

The CPSA’s Stalinism was not the only current of Marxism in South Africa by then. Its main rival, Trotskyism, was also a product of the Russian Revolution. It relied on a rival (far more intelligent) account of Lenin’s thought and practice as the key source of political insight. Trotsky’s famous letter on the draft theses of the Workers Party of South Africa rejects the CPSA slogan of a Black Republic. But he has no choice but to contest the CPSA programme in its own terms. He argues that “the historical weapon of national liberation can only be the Class Struggle.” He rejects the Comintern’s transformation of the “national liberation of colonial people into an empty democratic abstraction elevated above the reality of class relations.” But he has to find better ways of answering the same questions, and ensure that he is not outflanked on any issue by his rivals, even accepting the “complete and unconditional right of the blacks to independence” in a separate state.

The Russian Revolution opened up a perspective of world revolution. But it was the distortion of this perspective, in the decades that followed, that made possible a distinctive form for South African Marxism. This became our common framework for debate and contestation. Its legacy still defines large swathes of socialist and nationalist politics in South Africa, although now distorted as much by neoliberalism as by Stalinism. But that framework has effectively become a barrier to fundamental renewal within South African revolutionary politics, which remains caught within its terms.

The legacy of the revolution today in South Africa

How we see the Russian Revolution depends on the context from which we look at it. In South Africa, in recent decades, that context has changed dramatically, and further dramatic changes are very likely, although we can't be certain of their direction.

For the past decade or more, we have seen a new movement emerging in working class struggles against the conditions perpetuated by the ANC government. But this new movement has depended, implicitly or explicitly, on political perspectives taken from the struggle against racial domination before 1994, protesting against broken promises, but not developing new perspectives.

The new movement has different component parts, and its composition is much contested. At its core is a wave of community protest against poor living conditions, failed social services and infrastructure, increased fees and tariffs, unemployment and the like. All of these are attributed to neoliberal policies, corruption and a ruling class focused on self-enrichment. These protests have grown over time from sporadic beginnings, and gained momentum since 2004, with an estimated 2 million people involved in such protests each year, thousands of arrests, vast damage to property and some deaths.

These struggles often have a local focus, which may prevent them from developing larger perspectives. The result is that, instead of speaking for itself, the country-wide upheaval is described variously by analysts and officials as service delivery protest, illegal demonstration, land occupation or wildcat strike.

Since the Marikana massacre of 2012, the rift between the black working class and poor and the ruling elite has been evident for all to see. In response to that widening rift, new organisational initiatives have emerged—most prominently, the Economic Freedom Fighters and NUMSA initiatives such as the United Front and the new trade union federation SAFTU; and in some ways also #FeesMustFall.

These initiatives seek to draw on the militant mood and energies of the new movement, based largely in informal settlements and among casualised workers. Their perspectives and symbols are drawn from the 1950s and 1970s: the Freedom Charter, national democratic revolution, colonialism of a special type, decolonisation, black consciousness. They have been given new décor, new energy and sometimes new slogans, but they have not been reinterpreted or developed for their new context.

How do we explain this paradox of a new anti-capitalist movement emerging in South Africa, but failing to develop new collective perspectives that define its character, identity and goals, and comes to be spoken for in the language of that was used to betray its aspirations? At what point does the movement ask what brought that betrayal about? Even if it is understandable to demand that the perspectives of the past should now be upheld, the world has changed since the old perspectives were formulated. The collective task of developing new perspectives still lies ahead.

Look at the process, not the product

In this, we have more to learn from the process of developing perspectives in the context of the Russian Revolution than from the outcome of that process. That is to say, there is nothing that can simply be cut-and-paste from their context to ours. Even when we come to the same conclusions as our comrades did a century ago, we have to reach those conclusions afresh. And, if we do, we will probably find that their meaning has changed.

In that spirit, I offer some thoughts on that process of forming perspectives for a renewed Marxism in South Africa,

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which can inform the struggles that lie ahead.

First, it is necessary to recognize the reality of the present. Is it enough still to condemn neoliberal capitalism, as if capitalism has a way back to social democracy? The reality is that capitalism, especially as the effects of climate change become more severe, is entering a phase of exterminism¹ in the term Peter Frase has borrowed and repurposed from E.P. Thompson. If that is so, then it has implications for all of the analyses, demands and strategies of the working-class movement.

Second, developing a perspective means seeing the present as part of a long historical process. The longer the period, the broader the perspective. We cannot go back only to the Russian Revolution, for example; we need to see it as a sequel to the Paris Commune of 1871, which Lenin celebrated after 1917. The language of decoloniality has reminded us that we need to extend our perspectives further back than that, to the world-historical turning point of 1492, when the process of Western global domination took off. The threat of climate change may require a perspective that extends even further back, to a time when human societies cohabited with nature rather than seeking to dominate it completely.

Third, all of this requires of Marxists a certain modesty about our own perspectives, and patience about historical outcomes. It may seem counter-intuitive to suggest this, when the challenges are so urgent. Marxists are sometimes accused of arrogance by feminists, ecologists and others, and there is some truth to the accusation. We can uphold revolutionary perspectives without claiming to have all the answers. We stand in a tradition which goes back 150 years or more and extends around the world. Individually and collectively, we can contribute modestly to developing it, making it accessible and making its aspirations a reality.

The disasters of Stalinism are a reminder of the damage done by forcing the pace of history. Reformists have the illusion that they can force the pace of history by working within the framework of capitalism, with the hope that a kinder, gentler form of exploitation will result. But we cannot know what the eventual results of our actions will be. Better to do the work well, to do what we can, and hope that others will build further on those foundations. They will do it in the way that seems right to them.

Recognizing reality; seeing the present as part of a long historical process; cultivating modesty of outlook and patience about outcomes: these are ways in which we can recognize the world-changing revolutionary struggles of a hundred years ago.

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