

The Transition in South Africa, 1985-1995 and Beyond: Choice, Fate, or Recolonization?

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First, perhaps, a personal word about Harold Wolpe in honour of whom this Lecture Programme is named. Harold, as you all well know, came to London after his escape from prison here in South Africa, having decided, though a lawyer back home, to now retool himself professionally as the distinguished sociologist he was to become. In pursuit of this end he wound up, in the mid-60s, as a graduate student at the London School of Economics where I happened to be that year myself, en route from North America to my own first African stop, Tanzania - but with a year-long fellowship programme in London designed to bring me up to speed as an “Africanist” and a Swahili-speaker at LSE, SOAS and the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. And, as luck would have it (and because of our both being of “left” persuasion), we found ourselves together in Ralph Miliband’s lively grad seminar on Marxism.

We became friends that year, sparring in the class-room as we would do ever after but enjoying the experience. In fact, Harold was not the easiest of intellectual soul-mates: I can’t say I always agreed with him or that I was spared the lash of his assertive and critical style on many occasions that our paths and our “lines” crossed publicly. But I was a firm admirer of his commitment and of his writing over the years, from his early days here in South Africa (which I only knew of at a distance) right up to the time of his death. He and I were together in 1992, for example, at a Cape Town colloquium held, on the tenth anniversary of her assassination in Mozambique, in honour of Ruth First, our mutual friend and my valued Maputo colleague at the time of her death. Moreover, Harold and I had also been co-participants, in 1982, at that earlier conference at the University of Eduardo Mondlane which was

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organized by Ruth –the conclusion of which, the very next day in fact, saw her murdered by the apartheid state in her office at the University's Centre for African Studies, victim of a postal bomb that also injured Harold himself. Long ago and far away, yet so real that I can touch the memory. *Mazel tov*, comrade Harold.

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As for my proposed topic, I've already floated a version of my argument in Johannesburg last week at the conference on "*One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories and Democracy Today*" where my paper was entitled "The liberation of the liberation struggle: The success and failure of the 'thirty years war for southern African liberation' in South Africa and beyond." As it contains an argument that I'm eager to try out on comrades in Durban I will seek, in part, to also present it here. Let me only reiterate, in this same vein, that I come here not to present some rigid answer as to the true nature and meaning of this country's transition from apartheid - and certainly not to present an answer that I will seek to hector you into embracing. Rather, I'd like you to join me in thinking through some complex questions together ("questions for discussion" which I've taken the liberty of actually spelling out at various points in my text, below), aware that we are still living through the fall-out of the transition referred to in this paper's title and living with, as well, the choices then made, or excluded, or not considered as being immediately appropriate.

For starters, we can no doubt all agree that the move away from apartheid itself was important and entirely laudable and that, indeed, it constituted a considerable victory for the vast bulk of South Africans. Racism and discriminatory actions and attitudes are not dead in South Africa but they have been dealt a dramatic blow owing to the assertions of many brave and determined Africans. That said, however, let us confess that in many ways South Africa is not really so liberated as all that. Elsewhere, I have sought to define "liberation" as being pertinent on not only the racial/national liberation fronts but also as regards inequalities evident on the grounds of class, gender and the effective expression of democratic voice. For, as I have stated in that text,

choices have been made in southern Africa, and they have not, by and large, been choices favourable to the life chances of the

poorest of the poor or to their empowerment: to their liberation, in sum. After all, the facts are there,...including the unsettling reality that even if in South Africa the income gap between black and white has narrowed somewhat the gap between rich and poor has actually widened; that related gaps along similar lines could be readily documented in the spheres of health, education, food and the like; that democracy has become stalled, even in South Africa, at the level of a relatively passive act of voting rather than an active engagement of people in the transformation of their own lives; that the pace of a genuine levelling up of the role and status of women has slowed to a relative stand-still. So, in the end, the question is not merely “what is liberation” but...whether the glass of liberation is best considered as being half empty or half-full. And if, as I suspect to be the case, it is at best merely half-full, we must seek to identify and to encourage such social forces (and their organizations) as we can realistically expect to engage in a “next liberation struggle,” a struggle that will be necessary in order to further advance the cause of African liberation in its fullest, most multi-faceted and most meaningful sense.¹

Here, of course, I also rejoin a dominant intellectual trope of the 1960s in Africa, one that I well remember being under discussion during my time and Harold’s time at LSE - and even more under discussion in Tanzania where I lived for seven years upon leaving London. The trope was one that was forged, most notably, by Frantz Fanon, especially in his widely-cited text of the time, *The Wretched of the Earth* and, in particular, in that book’s chapter 3, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness.” There he put his famous critique of the “false decolonization” of Africa and of the key role within that process of the rising (and soon “triumphant”) African nationalist “liberators” (what he called “the national middle class”) in quite acerbic terms:

The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary. Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission lines between the nation and a capitalism, rampant

1. John S. Saul, “Four Terrains of Liberation Struggle: Race, Class, Gender and Voice,” *Review of African Political Economy*, # 123 (March, 2010), pp. 67-8, and as chapter 1, in my *Liberation Lite: The Roots of Recolonization in Southern Africa* (Delhi and Trenton, N.J.: Three Essays Collective and Africa World Press, 2011).

though camouflaged, which today put on the masque of neo-colonialism. The national bourgeoisie will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie's business agent, and it will play its part without any complexes in a most dignified manner. But the same lucrative role, this cheap-jack's function, this meanness of outlook and this absence of all ambition symbolize the incapability of the national middle class to fulfil its historic role of bourgeoisie.²

In Fanon's view, these new elites came merely to wield virtually unchecked local power - but to little or no positive and transformative effect in terms of any real popular social and economic national advance. They merely brandish, Fanon states, the single party state and effective class dictatorship (even when there was more than one party) to supervise the pacification of the people, feeding the latter only a diet of ethnic division and cruel overlordship - rather than encouraging them to have any on-going sense of their own possible empowerment. In fact, Fanon's litany of the shortfalls, the "pitfalls," of the post-colonial African history was formidable, one that premisses a grim interrogation of the colonial aftermath of African decolonization and independence virtually unmatched by any analyst since.

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It is the case that those of us who were politically active and alert at the time, in Tanzania and elsewhere, sensed that Southern Africa might be different from the continental pattern so clearly identified and criticized by Fanon. Why? For starters, the liberation movements were unlikely easily to offer a false decolonization, we thought. The white colonizers, in particular the white settler minorities, in Rhodesia, Namibia or South Africa, would not concede any such compromise, one that would not be easily controlled in the interests of continuing white skin privilege. Moreover, the Portuguese "imperialist mission" in Mozambique and Angola was, for reasons of its own, equally intractable as regards prospective change in the terms of Portugal's overrule. Moreover capital - especially mining and related capital, and both domestic and foreign-owned - was quite comfortable with the overall framework of racial rule and quite willing to compromise over any relatively minor

2. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 122.

contradictions that might exist in the fine-tuning of racist and capitalist logics, this in deference to its more crucial interest in ensuring the supply of labour, cheap and pacified, that South Africa's settler/apartheid rule guaranteed.

There was also a very real counter-logic that many concerned to see progressive outcomes in southern Africa could draw inspiration from: the very intransigence of white-minority rule tended to radicalize such opposition to it as began to grope its way forward. This meant, for example, that armed struggle of some kind would be necessary and, also and especially in South Africa, a high level of popular mobilization and action on the ground. The "positive" implications of the need actually to organize to fight are (in and of themselves and pace Fanon and his chapter 1: "Concerning Violence") not entirely obvious, reinforcing as they tend to do the hierarchical and undemocratic pressure upon politics inflicted by "armed struggle." And they further strengthened the *realpolitik* of tough, no-nonsense, vanguardism that the "liberation movements" (and the governments they would eventually create) were also learning from both their autocratic hosts in the front-line African states bordering on the conflict zone itself and also from their Stalinist allies of the East.

But such struggle also tended to imply the need to mobilize people to a more committed – albeit more dangerous – level of involvement than in a situation where the nationalist leadership would, in the end, merely be ushered into power by the departing colonialists. Certainly in South Africa the actual motor-force of real resistance was less the force of arms than the rising tide of assertion at workplaces and township, in Durban and Soweto in the 70s, and ever more generally as the wave of resistance crested in the 1980s. And this gave hope that even if (as many of us feared at the time) the ANC would itself hesitate to sustain its struggle towards ensuring a more expansive outcome its feet would be held to the fire of revolutionary purpose and democratic practice by the popular energies unleashed into a post-apartheid milieu by the nature of anti-apartheid struggle itself. In so arguing, I don't think those of us who glimpsed such a possibility were merely – or even mainly – being naïve. Instead, we were being hopeful.

Nonetheless, this perspective was unrealistic, as events were to prove. For the sober fact remains that the leadership of many of the southern

African liberation movements proved to be perfectly comfortable with the general pattern marked out by previous continental decolonization – and perfectly prepared to defend their own stake in it. After all, as elsewhere, such leaderships, were comprised primarily of a would-be “national middle-class” (Fanon) - aspirant *men* (emphasis added) on the make, prepared to face up to the somewhat harder path to power that intransigent white hierarchies forced upon them but in the end quite willing to conform (in pursuit of their own nascent class interests) to the global status quo. And even to the local status quo, albeit one suitably modified to remove race as the major barrier to this new elite’s own preferment.

There were complexities of course, even beyond those imposed by white intransigence, complexities worth specifying on a case-by-case basis for each of the territorial fronts of struggle across the region, a reality I have specified elsewhere and also in a volume I am presently working on for Cambridge University Press, one entitled “The thirty years for southern African liberation, 1960-1990” (or, perhaps, in case of South Africa: “the long thirty years war, 1960-1994.”). For South Africa itself demonstrates, I would say, both the triumph and the taming of the Southern African liberation movement broadly defined with particular clarity. Of course, again, the importance of the victory achieved over apartheid itself - in terms of the racial and national self-assertion manifested through the liberation struggle – bears very strong positive emphasis. Nonetheless, as noted above, with regard to any more broadly defined liberation (including parallel advances in terms of class, gender and democratic voice) the answer is far less reassuring.³ For in South Africa, as elsewhere in the region, the victors have been, unequivocally, (a) global capitalism, (b) this capitalism’s principal protagonists in the private and public sectors (including their white indigenous-class counterparts in South Africa itself), and (c) the “new class” of black businessmen, politicians and professionals who had now consolidated themselves in positions of intermediary power and privilege in the several countries of apparent “liberation.”

The fact is that what we have witnessed is, in many ways, a very pallid liberation indeed. I’ve sought to draw attention to this grim fact in several recent writings, alluding both to “the strange death of liberated

3. John S. Saul, “Four Terrains of Liberation Struggle: Race, Class, Gender and Voice” (*op. cit.*).

southern Africa” and to what I’ve termed “liberation lite.”⁴ Indeed, as I’ve noted in a volume exploring the latter formulation,

I have also chosen the title *Liberation Lite*, advisedly - and perhaps a word of explanation is due a non-North American audience (in, say, India [where the book was first published], and to all those who enjoy, as their beverage of choice, a splendid and full-bodied Kingfisher or Kalyani or Royal Challenge). For, in North America, much is made of “light beer”: less alcohol and fewer calories, it is argued. But, I would add, proffering a much less satisfactory taste and substance: providing, in short, a much less satisfying experience. Such choices in beer are then presented as, say, “Miller Lite” or “Molson Light.” Similarly with liberation - if you’ll forgive me a pun that may appear as too trivializing of something very real and very important. For what we have experienced in Africa - notably in southern Africa (the part of the continent I know best) - is a flavourless adaptation and conformity, post-liberation, to an aggressive, recolonizing “empire of capital.” Liberation lite, indeed.

“Liberation lite” = global capitalism wins. As simple as that, one fears. Obviously, in order to qualify that otherwise heady sense of triumph that accompanied such success - one so real in its trumping of the arrogance of the erstwhile white holders of power across the region - certain additional arguments are necessary. That, for example, the movement up the socio-economic ladder of privilege by a relatively small stratum of black people does not represent any genuine “liberation” of the large majority who remain behind, as statistics bear out, at least as impoverished as ever they were previously; that any genuine empowerment, democratically, of the latter “majority” is not really visible; that gender relationships have scarcely altered despite the euphoria as regards this issue that immediately attended the transition to “independence” and that found some real expression in the constitution⁵; that capitalism offers for the victimized of Africa no meaningful development worthy of the name. As a recent series of articles on the erstwhile states of liberation struggle, edited by the

4. See John S. Saul, “The Strange Death of Liberated Southern Africa”, *Transformation* #64 (2007), pp. 1-26, and *Liberation Lite* (*op. cit.*).

5. Shireen Hassim, *Women’s Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

present author, documents, case by case, that capitalism and the local elites win - but the majority of the population loses.⁶

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And this, to repeat, is certainly true of South Africa. How, then, are we to interpret such an outcome? One option would be to merely celebrate capitalism, its present and its ostensibly promising future – although this is a difficult position for an African to take, one might think, unless (s)he is one of the privileged few, or an employee of one or other of the International Financial Institutions. But in elevated circles in South Africa it is simply common-sense. Mandela, for one and despite an apparently alternative vision immediately on his release from prison, came to accept GEAR in such a “common-sensical” manner.⁷ And Trevor Manuel, Tito Mboweni, Thabo Mbeki (who had already played a role in creating such a future in the 1980s when meeting with South African businessmen in exile) and others joined right in (with many erstwhile ANC activists also moving briskly into the private sector as well⁸). Indeed, they now crafted the firmly neo-liberal GEAR strategy - said, by Mandela himself, to be “non-negotiable” - to replace the mildly more radical RDP.

Yet it is hard to believe – it cuts against almost all the evidence - that this is really a way to continue to liberate the future for the vast mass of South Africans? But some do so believe: consider, in this regard, the volume, *Season of Hope*, authored by government economist Alan Hirsch (who is identified on the book’s cover as “Chief Director of Economic Policy at the Presidency, South Africa”): “The ANC’s approach is sometimes summarized as elements of a northern European approach to social development combined with elements of Asian approaches within conservative macroeconomic parameters. This remains the intellectual paradigm within which the ANC operates.”

6. See the series of articles, on Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe (by David Sogge, John Saul, Henning Melber, Patrick Bond and Richard Saunders respectively) grouped under the general title “Theme: Southern Africa – the Liberation Struggle Continues,” in *ROAPE*, #127 (*op. cit.*), pp. 77-134.

7. Recall his hailing, in 1994, of the free market as a “magic elixir” in his speech to the joint session of the Houses of Congress in Washington.

8. Indeed, some of these latter were also to be involved in the breakaway COPE movement that, in the wake of Mbeki overthrow and in a [hostile but largely false] anticipation of Zuma’s radicalization of the ANC project, launched itself in 2008 - and contested the 2009 election, not very successfully, as a possible alternative to the right of ANC.

In broad terms, the argument of this book is that the ANC government followed a consistent economic policy that had the following elements: at the centre is a social democratic approach to social reform – it is the state’s job to underwrite the improvement in the quality of life of the poor and to reduce inequalities, but with a firmly entrenched fear of the risk of personal dependency on the state and the emergence of entitlement attitudes[!]. The state exists within a market economy that depends on the private sector and therefore a successful state creates an environment that supports high levels of private investment. This does not require the state simply to step aside for business, but rather it should work with business and labour to develop growth-oriented strategies. The expectation was that because of the limitations of the domestic and regional markets, much of the growth would be driven by exports to major foreign markets. This required by measured trade liberalisation and effective industrial development strategies.⁹

And on it goes. As it happens, of course, social-democracy generally has not been faring very well in the currently prevailing context of an ever more extreme globalization of capital and capital-logic. Can a Hirschian view – one that is positive, even quite optimistic - on such matters be viewed as harbouring any more promise in Africa?

Is this not instead a straightforward case, a la Fanon, of yet another sell-out by the African elite as it follows the easy (and personally profitable) way out - and abandons its people to the untender (*pace* Hirsch) mercies of the global market-place? Should we be surprised if this is indeed the case? Veteran SACP and ANC militant Rusty Bernstein, writing shortly before his death in 2001, was, rather surprisingly, not. Indeed he then claimed to have seen it coming, saying, with respect to the question of “what is going wrong, and why,” that an “understanding” of this was, “the essential precondition for any rectification, and thus for any return to optimism about South Africa’s democratic future.” His summary of the answer:

9. Alan Hirsch, *Season of Hope: Economic Reform Under Mandela and Mbeki* (Scottsville, S.A.: University of Natal Press, 2005), pp. 3-4. It would be difficult to find a more revealing statement of the rose-tinted consensus that premised economic thinking in the Mandela and Mbeki years than this book.

The drive towards power has corrupted the political equation in various ways. In the late 1980s, when popular resistance revived again inside the country led by the UDF, it led the ANC to see the UDF as an undesirable factor in the struggle for power, and to fatally undermine it as a rival focus for mass mobilization. It has undermined the ANC's adherence to the path of mass resistance as a way to liberation, and substituted instead a reliance on manipulation of the levers of administrative power. It has paved the way to a steady decline of a mass-membership ANC as an organizer of the people, and turned it into a career opening to public sector employment and the administrative "grave train." It has reduced the tripartite ANC-COSATU-CP alliance from the centrifugal centre of national political mobilization to an electoral pact between parties who are constantly constrained to subordinate their constituents' fundamental interests to the overriding purpose of holding on to administrative power. It has impoverished the soil in which ideas leaning towards socialist solutions once flourished and allowed the weed of "free market" ideology to take hold.¹⁰

But what of other ways, a la Hirsch say, to think of this outcome? Note that Pippa Green's biography of Trevor Manuel, one of the chief architect's of the ANC's economic strategy, is entitled, boldly, *Choice, Not Fate*.¹¹ And that is the official line, certainly: a firm choice, for the market-place both local and global, made by the ANC - and a good one, it says. Yet mere fate is, in fact, another possible explanation of the government's opting unapologetically for capitalism (however much such capitalism might be presented as being social-democratically-tinged) - such is the "fatalism" offered up by many ANC pundits. The essence of the position: Africa and Africans have no choice; whatever the outcome of the present tack, "there is no alternative," as Margaret Thatcher so often reiterated. Small wonder that South African President Thabo Mbeki, poised somewhere between confident conviction as to capitalism's apparent promise and a fatalistic acceptance of "the

10. Quoted from Rusty Bernstein, "Letter from Rusty Bernstein to John S. Saul." *Transformation*, 64 (2007), a letter that is also included as an appendix to my *Liberation Lite* (op. cit., pp. 105-111).

11. Pippa Green, *Choice, Not Fate: The Life and Times of Trevor Manuel* (Rosebank, S.A.: Penguin Books, 2008); the book itself is a startling example of hagiography (both as regards Manuel and also the ANC at its most conservative) but the lead title is also an arresting short-hand advertisement for the way in which the ANC would apparently like to present itself to right-thinking readers!

inevitable,” could himself, famously and quite specifically state (and with some glee), “Just call me a Thatcherite.”¹²

Indeed, as Mark Gevisser argues in his much-cited biography of Mbeki, by as early as 1985 Mbeki had concluded that “a negotiated settlement [required] a far more liberal approach to economic policy” than had been the ANC position up to that time, and that, by 1994, “he and his government [felt] forced to acquiesce to the Washington Consensus on macro-economic policy when they implemented their controversial GEAR programme in 1996.”¹³ Choice or fate? Something of both in Gevisser’s eyes it would seem. Whatever the case in that respect, Gevisser reports that Mbeki’s first instructions to Trevor Manuel, upon the latter’s taking over as Finance Minister in 1996, was for a policy that “called precisely for the kind of fiscal discipline and investment-friendly tax incentives that the international financial institutions loved and that Manuel already believed in”!¹⁴

But others who accepted their country’s apparently capitalist fate were less sanguine than Mbeki appeared to be about the uncritical donning of a “Thatcherite” mantle. Thus, Ben Turok – an old ANC warrior of some standing - explicitly agreed with and vocally supported the Gevisser position as to the “necessary” nature of the deviation to the right that the ANC had been forced to take. But he could not be quite comfortable with this and soon was looking, especially after Polokwane and the fall of Mbeki himself, to find another more liberating perspective. For he has remained far too honest not to see the limitations of many of the ANC’s “new” strategies, set as they were firmly within an overall capitalist framework - and with the ANC’s “Black Economic Empowerment” mantra, for example, actually more likely to produce black middle class empowerment than any meaningful mass (and hence black) empowerment. Were not such policies actually the mechanisms of further class formation and, in effect, of a neo-colonial solution, a la Fanon, in South Africa? Has the state, Turok now asks, “given equal

12. Thabo Mbeki, as cited in William Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2005), p. 89, in speaking at the June 1996 launching of the GEAR programme; see also Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2007), ch. 10: “Democracy Born in Chains: South Africa’s Constricted Freedom.”

13. Gevisser, 2007, as quoted in Turok, *From the Freedom Charter to Polokwane: The Evolution of the ANC’s Economic Policy*, (Cape Town: New Agenda, 2008), pp. 57-8.

14. Mark Gevisser, *A Legacy of Liberation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

attention to empowering the masses as to the elite? And why has the insistence of parliament on broad-based empowerment brought so little success?"¹⁵

Yet he knows the answer to such questions. Indeed, it can come as no surprise to find Turok in the later chapters of his book backing away rather uneasily from the "new" ANC's hard-line capitalist position, and ultimately coming to "the irresistible conclusion...that the ANC government has lost a great deal of its earlier focus on the fundamental transformation of the inherited social system." He then advocates for such initiatives as a "developmental society" and some kind of revival of the RDP, stating further that "much depends on whether enough momentum can be built to overcome the caution that has marked the ANC government since 1994. This in turn depends on whether the determination to achieve an equitable society can be revived." In the end, Turok is just too loyal an ANC cadre either to push the critique of the movement/party back into an interrogation of its pre-liberation days or to assail unequivocally its present practice. It is fortunate, then, that such a task has been taken up by others.

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For there are, of course, South Africans who do continue to protest the ANC "choice" in much more outspoken terms. Paradoxically, the very South African electorate that can continue to produce electoral majorities for the ANC has, in recent years, increasingly been engaged in forthright protests to register their anger – as Peter Alexander has underscored in a recent analysis of South Africa's "Rebellion of the Poor" in arguing that

Since 2004 South Africa has experienced a movement of local protests amounting to a rebellion of the poor. This has been widespread and intense, reaching insurrectionary proportions in some cases. On the surface, the protests have been about service delivery and against uncaring, self-serving a corrupt leaders of the municipalities. A key feature has been mass participation by a new generation of fighters, especially unemployed youth but also

15. Turok, (*op. cit.*) p. 174.

school students. Many issues that underpinned the [initial] ascendancy of Jacob Zuma also fuel the present action, including a sense of injustice arising from the realities of persistent inequality¹⁶...[Moreover,] while the inter-connections between the local protest, and between the local protests and militant action involving other elements of civil society, are limited, it is suggested that this is likely to change.

Ironically, Mbeki's own brother, Moeletsi Mbeki, ever idiosyncratically left-speaking but now very much capitalist-inclined, develops this broad point even further, seeing in recent events in Tunisia intimations of wider import:

I can predict when SA's "Tunisia Day" will arrive. Tunisia Day is when the masses rise against the powers that be, as happened recently in Tunisia. The year will be 2020, give or take a couple of years. The year 2020 is when China estimates that its current minerals-intensive industrialisation phase will be concluded.

For SA, this will mean the African National Congress (ANC) government will have to cut back on social grants, which it uses to placate the black poor and to get their votes. China's current industrialisation phase has forced up the prices of SA's minerals, which has enabled the government to finance social welfare programmes.

The ANC inherited a flawed, complex society it barely understood; its tinkering with it are turning it into an explosive cocktail. The ANC leaders are like a group of children playing with a hand grenade. One day one of them will figure out how to pull out the pin and everyone will be killed.¹⁷

Of course, this position, however evocative, is not a critique of the ANC government from the left. Indeed, Moeletsi Mbeki, a rising capitalist himself (although also a fierce critic of the specific workings of the governments' Black Economic Empowerment programme), is quick to add that "We all accept that a socialist model, along the lines of the

16. Peter Alexander, "Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests - a preliminary analysis," *Review of African Political Economy*, # 123 (March, 2010).

17. Moeletsi Mbeki, "Wealth creation: Only a matter of time before the hand grenade explodes," *Business Day* (February 10, 2011).

Soviet Union [sic], is not workable for SA today. The creation of a state-owned economy is not a formula that is an option for SA or for many parts of the world...[No,] if we want to develop SA instead of shuffling pre-existing wealth, we have to create new entrepreneurs, and we need to support existing entrepreneurs to diversify into new economic sectors.”

An even more instructive move, therefore, and one more left in provenance and intent, was that defined by an intervention of Zwelinzima Vavi in late 2010. For Vavi is the head of COSATU, South Africa’s leading trade union central (itself a partner to the supposed Tri-Partite Alliance between itself, the ANC and the SACP) and, in November 2010, he called together a workshop in order to meet formally with a number of potential civil society partners, many of them from organizations that have been quite critical of ANC policies. Moreover, Vavi did so, quite self-consciously, without inviting the participation of either the ANC or the SACP. In addressing the meeting he stated:

Inspired by the African proverb that says “If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together,” we gather here - as the progressive trade unions, social movements, NGOs, progressive academics, small business and street vendor associations, taxi associations, religious bodies, youth organisations, environmental groups, indigenous peoples’ groups and other progressive formations - to say to ourselves that we have the capacity to make a decisive contribution in changing our current situation for the better.

Internationally, globalisation and neoliberalism have launched assaults on the working class, which include, but are not limited to: informalisation, flexibilisation, regionalisation of states, deregulation, marketisation, financialisation, and securitisation. The global governance, commercial and trade system is supported by political and ideological institutions, rules and enforcement mechanisms that only broad civil society coalitions have historically been able to challenge successfully.

In South Africa, the GEAR strategy epitomised the dominance of the neoliberal ideology within the leading sections of the government. The neoliberal logic still continues to be dominant, in

spite of some talk about a developmental state. Increasingly though it has taken a more crude political expression and there are some emerging elements that tend to perceive the working class and active elements of civil society as merely being a nuisance that must be crushed with the might of the state apparatus.

Today, as we gather here, there is panic in the ranks of the predatory elite, which is a new coalition of the tenderpreneurs. Paranoia elsewhere is deepening with the political elite, convincing itself that any gathering of independent civil society formations to confront our challenges is a threat to them.¹⁸

The meeting at which this address was presented was strongly condemned by the ANC itself, of course. But this did not stop Vavi, a few months later (in addressing, the South African Conference of Bishops' Justice and Peace in February 2011) from beginning a somewhat parallel address with the assertion that "clearly we do not live in a society where everyone is happily living in peace. And the underlying reason is the continuation of poverty and inequality. Which brings me to my topic tonight – the poor." As he continued:

We have a constitution which grants people certain rights. Yet in practice millions are denied those rights, especially socio-economic rights, in what has become the most unequal nation in the world.

The rich elite earn millions by exploiting the labour of the working class. A minority, including some of our former comrades in public office, make their millions by corruptly manipulating opportunities to win tenders, bribing officials or using political connections. Meanwhile the mainly black poor majority suffer from deep and widespread poverty, huge levels of unemployment, pathetic levels of service delivery in healthcare and education, housing and transport, and little hope of escaping from a life of struggling to survive from day to day. We are one of the most unequal countries in the world, and unless we mobilize for changes, the levels of inequality will become entrenched.

18. Zwelinzima Vavi, "Keynote address to the Civil Society Conference," October 27 October 2010, at the COSATU web-site.

There is no official poverty line for South Africa, yet even the Minister of Finance has acknowledged that 50% of the population lives on 8% of the national income in South Africa. In 1995, the Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, stood at 0.64 but had increased to 0.68 in 2008. The workers' share of income was 56% in 1995 but by 2009 it has declined to 51%. On the other hand the number of South African billionaires nearly doubled, from 16 in 2009 to 31 in 2010 and the country's 20 richest men enjoyed a 45% increase in wealth.¹⁹

Just what effect the addressing of such strong words by labour and civil society (to, in effect, the ANC and in criticism of its policies) were intended to have is not entirely clear - in terms of any practical steps to be recommended or of any new socialist practices to be undertaken.²⁰ Nor was there were there signs of some possible break from the Tripartite Alliance by COSATU - whatever the future may hold in this respect. A mere straw in the wind, then? But, at the same time, when seen in the context of other promising initiatives that are afoot and of the critical perspectives and concrete initiatives that are embedded in the recent history of dawning resistance to the ANC's post-apartheid trek to the right, such a "straw in the wind" may yet prove to have significant weight.

There are other kinds of "straws in the wind," of course. A mass populace denied (or actively not encouraged to seek) the kind of liberation that the articulation of a sense of genuinely liberating social purpose - like "socialism," tangible communal endeavour or genuine democratic self-assertion - might deliver can merely become a very sour "mass" indeed. Did one catch a strong whiff of this kind of social decay in South Africa in the kind of xenophobia that swept through the country's townships not so very long ago? And if Zuma's temporarily fed

19. "Zwelinzima Vavi's keynote address to the SACBC Justice and Peace AGM," COSATU Press Release (Feb. 26, 2011).

20. The reportage by Bukezela Phakathi (entitled "Cosatu launches UDF to Rescue Country," *Business Day* [October 28, 2010]), on the COSATU-civil society conference mentioned is of interest here precisely in its reflection of the studied ambiguity of the Vavi/COSATU approach: "Warning that SA faced a 'national catastrophe,' Cosatu yesterday launched a major civil society effort to tackle corruption, poverty and unemployment. COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, in his address to the Civil Society Conference, evoked the landmark formation of the anti-apartheid United Democratic Front in 1983, but was at pains to stress that it was 'not an anti-African National Congress and anti-government coalition...The challenges we face today are different but nonetheless very major and require a similar mobilisation of the democratic forces as we saw in those years'!"

off such distemper in surging past Mbeki in 2008, does Julius Malema now promise/threaten to play the same card even more fiercely and intemperately? Such at least is the apparent charge – crudely nationalistic, even racist - of his recent, apparently popular and potentially quite explosive bombast. Thus, in June, 2011, the *Economist* headlined its account of the continuing “rise” of the outspoken Malema – a rise most recently visible in his unopposed re-election as leader of the ANC Youth League – with the comment that “the black man who is rude about whites is doing rather well.” The article itself then continued:

Mr Malema is no fool. He has proved himself a master at politics and at tapping into the anger of his young black audiences. More than half of black youths under 25 are officially unemployed; the real figure is much higher. Two-thirds leave school without any qualifications. Most live in poor black townships or shanty towns, ineligible for state welfare. Seventeen years after the ANC came to power promising a better life for all, many can look forward only to a career of crime and drugs or to early death through AIDS. How good, then, to be told by Mr Malema that they are in no way to blame for their plight. Scapegoats are at hand: the new greedy black elite with their hands in the public till, lazy self-seeking politicians, but most of all selfish whites — the 9% of the population who, thanks to the imperialist racist exploitation of blacks over the past 350 years, still have most of the country’s land, wealth and top jobs.²¹

Much of this latter “analysis,” however heavy may be the sarcasm of the *Economist’s* tone when so reporting Malema’s preoccupations, is uncomfortably close to the truth of course, even if not, as presented by Malema, anywhere close to being as sober and thoughtful as Vavi’s pronouncements reported earlier. Nor is Malema’s demagoguery likely to key any liberating programme of social transformation of any likely positive consequence. Quite the contrary, in fact.

But are there not perspectives and initiatives more radical than the pronouncements of either a Vavi or a Melema seem likely to premise? Fortunately there have been a number of them over the past decade,²²

21. “The Rise of Julius Malema: The black man who is rude about whites in doing rather well,” *The Economist*, June 30, 2011.

22. Take, for example, the promising, but, as proved ultimately to be the case, somewhat illusory herald of novel left prospects visible in the counter-demonstration to the ANC-hosted World Summit

although I will only cite one recent one of promise here. For when a “national convening conference” was held of a presumptive “Democratic Left Front” on January 20-23, 2011 in Johannesburg the conditions seemed particularly ripe for the launching, in a practical way, of a next liberation struggle. Thus the 84 page document, growing out of the conference and entitled *Another South Africa and World is Possible: 1st Democratic Left Conference Report*, a document that summarized the conference’s discussions and outcomes and set out the premises for the kind of innovative collective action its initiators had in mind, was notably impressive. As its introduction stated:

Post-apartheid South Africa is experiencing a social crisis due to neoliberal globalization. The old apartheid pattern of development has continued with a few elites (and now Black elites) benefiting while the majority are enduring profound suffering. Deepening poverty, inequality, hunger, homelessness, unemployment and ecological destruction are affecting the working class and the poor the most. We believe this has to be confronted to ensure our post apartheid democracy works for all. Moreover, we refuse to accept that the workers and the poor of South Africa need to carry the cost for the current global crisis that has come to our shores.

At the same time, the organisations of the working class and the poor have been weakened, divided and have generally found themselves in a state of desperation. An effective transformative politics advancing anti-capitalist alternatives for the country has not been able to come to the fore. This represents a strategic defeat for the South African anti-capitalist left as a whole.

However, through the 1st Conference of the Democratic Left, held from 2023 January 2011 at Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, South Africa, we are making a call to the workers, the poor and the anti-capitalist left to draw the line and to fight back. Our conference was an important milestone in a long

on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and the substantial march of protestors from Alexandra township to the conference centre in salubrious Sandton; I have recounted this moment in my “Starting from Scratch: A Debate” which is chapter 10 of *The Next Liberation Struggle: Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy in Southern Africa* (Toronto, Scottsville, S.A., New York and London: Between the Lines, University of Kwa-Zulu/Natal, Monthly Review Press and Merlin Press, 2005),

journey to regroup anti-capitalist forces and to reclaim lost ground.

Our crucial challenge is to build the Democratic Left Front and process as part of on-going struggles and in a bottom up way. We seek to defend our democratic freedoms, open democratic space as we advance democratic left alternatives to our crisis ridden society and the current ruling forces.

We have taken an important first step at the 1st national conference, but let us move forward united as anti-capitalist forces against the rifts that capitalism imposes upon us as humans and between us and nature.²³

Concretely this conference also led, as noted, to the establishment of a new and promising Democratic Left Front (DLF). As to the future prospects of any any such initiative only time will tell.²⁴

In sum, liberation as defined in the “first” liberation struggle has led ineluctably, throughout the region, to recolonization by the Empire of Capital. So the DLF and other critical observers of the southern African scene both in South Africa and beyond seem to be asserting. What then,

23. Democratic Left Front, *1st Democratic Left Conference Report* (Killarney, SA: 2011). As two of the organizers, Mazibuko Jara and Vishwas Satgar, also wrote, convincingly and promisingly, of the DLF initiative in a *Mail and Guardian* article, “New times require new democratic left” (*Mail and Guardian* On-line, Feb 7, 2011), pegged to the DLF launch: “One conference is merely a milestone in a long journey that has to do with trying to reimagine a left politics through ethical practice. Our ethical compass is about living and inventing democracy inside this process (definitely through heated debates, differences and new ways of thinking about consensus), plurality as strength, collective intellectual practice, self-education and building transformative power through struggles. This is a process without preconceived outcomes and thus is unique in South Africa. Such a process means abandoning the illusions of a vanguardist left committed to a violent overthrow of capitalism or a reformist left seeking to make capitalism more humane. More importantly, we are about strengthening and advancing grassroots struggles through opposition but, at the same time, advancing transformative alternatives from below. This is illustrated by the ideas, proposals and campaigns that were adopted as part of our common platform of action dealing with ecological resources, unemployment, food sovereignty, education and public services.”

24. On this whole issue, of the context and content of possibly emergent new left initiative in South Africa see both my “On Taming a Revolution: The ANC and the Bleak Denouement to the Anti-Apartheid Struggle,” forthcoming in *Socialist Register 2013*, and my chapter 5, “Liberating Liberation: The Struggle Against Recolonization in South Africa “ in John S. Saul and Patrick Bond, *South Africa: The Present as History*, to be published by James Currey Publishers in 2012.

finally, of any “next” or on-going liberation struggle, of any attempt to “liberate” the meaning and practice of liberation so that it might exemplify in practice a far wider range of achieved freedoms than those inherent in “merely” overcoming the institutionalized racism of the apartheid variety. As we have suggested, any on-going struggle for a more meaningful liberation would have to deal ever more effectively with class, gender and democratic empowerment issues (even if we were assume, for the moment, that the “first” liberation struggle did subdue, at some level, the grim reality of racial and national oppression). A next liberation struggle, then? This is, self-evidently, a sobering question to pose and the mere posing of it provided, last week, a sobering note upon which to conclude a presentation to a conference that focussed precisely on that first liberation struggle. It is not, however, a note that Rusty Bernstein shirked from sounding in his own final days and I suspect that Harold Wolpe, the dedicatee of this paper, might have done so too had he lived long enough to confront the present reality of South Africa. For it is not, I fear, an inappropriate concern to sound.