The Character and formation of intellectuals within the South African liberation movement*

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Who are intellectuals in the context of the ANC –led South African liberation struggle?

It is common for scholars to see themselves as representing what is covered by the notion of an intellectual and to restrict the scope of the word to those who contribute via accredited journals, within universities or recognised research institutes. Intellectual debate about various issues surround what are conventionally called ‘scholars’ and the ‘scholarly community’ (Codesria, 2003). The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1986, vol 1, 1089) speaks of the word intellectual, used as an adjective as ‘of, or belonging to, the intellect or understanding. That appeals to or engages the intellect….’ When used as a noun it refers to ‘…An intellectual being; a person having superior powers of intellect…’

In similar fashion, The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought identifies intellectuals as a self-designated group, which they say has become a social class and is distinguished by an allegedly disinterested pursuit of intellectual tasks:

In general, one can say that the intellectuals are the custodians of the tradition of creative and critical thinking about the normative problems of their society and the effort of men to relate themselves to symbols of meaning outside their immediate self-interest and experience. In social fact, however, an intellectual is often one who simply identifies himself as an intellectual, participates with other intellectuals in discussions of questions that are deemed intellectual, and is confirmed in that status by those who are recognised, informally, as the leaders of the intellectual world. Indeed, with the expansion of higher education in almost all industrial societies, and the growth of the cultural sectors

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These are very limited definitions of what constitutes an intellectual. Instead this paper has in mind a category of individuals who, following Gramsci, should be defined by the role they play, by the relationship they have to others. They are people who, broadly speaking, create for a class or people (in the South African case, the majority who were nationally oppressed under apartheid) a coherent and reasoned account of the world, as it appears from the position they occupy. Intellectuals are crucial to the process through which a major new culture, representing the world-view of an emerging class or people, comes into being. It is intellectuals who transform what may previously have been incoherent and fragmentary ‘feelings’ of those who live a particular class or nationally oppressed position, into a coherent account of the world. (Cf. Gramsci, 1971, 418, Crehan, 2002, 129-130.)

In a letter of 1931 Gramsci says his definition of an intellectual ‘is much broader than the usual concept of “the great intellectuals”’ (1979,204). In his Prison Notebooks, he writes:

What are the ‘maximum’ limits of acceptance of the term ‘intellectual’? Can one find a unitary criterion to characterise equally all the diverse and disparate activities of intellectuals and to distinguish these at the same time and in an essential way from the activities of other social groupings? The most widespread error of method seems to me that of having looked for this criterion of distinction in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations. (1971,8. Emphasis inserted)

In the same way a worker is not characterised by the manual or instrumental work that he or she carries out, but by ‘performing this work in specific conditions and in specific social relations.’ Under the capitalist mode of production, Gramsci claims, qualifications of an intellectual nature are needed to perform entrepreneurial functions. This is not to say that intellectual qualities determine the entrepreneur’s part in society, which is decided ‘by the general social relations which specifically characterise the position of the entrepreneur within industry.’ (ibid).

If we use such an approach and do not first set formal entry hurdles in the way of classifying people in this category, we need to broaden our investigation and examine the many ways of intellectual functioning as well as processes of intellectual formation that may be found in this continent, now and in the past, which go back to the pre-colonial past, though that is beyond the scope of this paper.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) It is well known that in every society strata existed who performed an intellectual role. Certain individuals were charged with various spiritual and ritual duties and other cultural functions that explained the meaning of life, gave explanations for disasters or prognosticated for the future. The accuracy or otherwise of what they did, measured by ‘contemporary science’ is unimportant. What is significant here is that this constituted an intellectual role, a way of making sense of the world for others, that there were people that performed such a role in all societies. (Cf Mamdani, 1995, for some reference to pre-colonial intelligentsias.)
This paper covers a very broad topic. On the level of theory it does not pretend to have exhaustively probed the implications of all the issues that arise, especially in the vast literature examining Gramsci’s theories. It is a beginning, towards providing a theoretical basis that is more adequate in explaining the categories of intellectuals found in the South African liberation movement, led by the ANC. At the level of data, a number of important experiences that bear on the formation of intellectuals are not dealt with, mainly for reasons of space and time constraints. These include the underground organisational experience, the open democratic phase of the late 1970s and 1980s, the more recent trade union experiences starting in the early 1970s, and the more recent input of the South African Communist Party into political education and intellectual formation. The choice has primarily been to opt for a chronological account, without assigning degrees of importance to experiences included or excluded.

ANC intellectuals come from a variety of sources

In the context of the ANC-led national liberation movement, the concept intellectual may be said to apply to individuals created through various processes, some inside the ANC and allied organisations, sometimes deriving from outside, through more conventional institutions, like universities. In deploying intellectual skills derived from these conventional institutions, it has not been a case of simply applying that knowledge and training. These professionals have needed to undergo various intellectual transformations within the organisation(s) in order to perform tasks related to national liberation, to give them the skills that are organisationally specific.

The term intellectual may be said to apply to people deriving from all of these processes who perform a specific role, that is, who provide meanings to situations, guidelines for escaping from oppression as well as visions of alternative social conditions, shown to be necessary, possible and potentially realisable. What that means is not determined for all times, but has a variety of meanings, determined by modified conditions and also by changes in the composition of the organisation.

What is conventionally termed ‘praise poetry’ may also be classified in this way. Archie Mafeje showed over 30 years ago that the role of bards in African rural communities is not simply to ‘praise’ but to provide explanations, including criticism and satire. (Mafeje, 1967). More recently, in the South African independent trade union movement, which emerged from the 1970s, this genre has been revived, to convey an anti-capitalist message. (See Qabula, Hlatshwayo and Malange, 1986).

Another significant feature of the period of colonial conquest, as a more or less universal phenomenon, was the periodic emergence of prophets in various societies on the continent, people offering a millenarian vision. In the early 19th century Eastern Cape, for example, two prophets, influenced in varying degrees by Christianity, manifested this in a dramatic form with contrasting visions. In the case of Ntsikana his vision was more accommodating of the colonial order, while Makana became a warrior-prophet and after leading an attack on the garrison on Grahamstown, was imprisoned on Robben Island. (Cf A.C. Jordan, 1973, ch 5)
The Liberation movement as `collective intellectual’

The concept intellectual, following Gramsci, is also applicable to political parties and by analogy to the national liberation movement itself. Gramsci argues that a political party plays an intellectual role and by that he ascribes various characteristics to the party as organisation, and in its relationship to intellectuals. Gramsci’s focus is on the institutions that produce knowledge rather than on individual intellectuals and he sees a party as being composed of intellectuals or as some writers have summarised him, as itself being a `collective intellectual’ or `collective organic intellectual’:

That all members of a political party should be regarded as intellectuals is an affirmation that can easily lend itself to mockery and caricature. But if one thinks about it nothing could be more exact. There are of course distinctions of level to be made. A party might have a greater or lesser proportion of members in the higher grades or in the lower, but this is not the point. What matters is the function, which is directive and organisational, i.e. educative, i.e. intellectual. (Gramsci, 1971,16).

The notion of a `collective intellectual’ is not analogous to ‘one individual writ large’, but comprises a multiplicity of individuals, unity and cohesion amongst whom is by no means automatic.

The intellectual role of the party or liberation movement like intellectual functioning generally is related to organisational tasks, qualities that are necessary in order to perform specific tasks. What this means is that those who already have qualities apply them in a particular way, or those without those qualities may develop them through various processes within the organisation. These qualities are directed towards achieving goals, and many of these Gramsci sees as inherent in a political party aiming to establish its hegemony. They have an intellectual character. By definition, these objectives cannot be achieved without an educational dimension.

The ANC-led liberation movement has played an intellectual role insofar as it welds together a variety of intellectuals in forming a common will, contributing towards the voicing of a new national popular will. (Cf Gramsci, 1971, 15-16). This is not a simple process but a product of struggle and contestation as well as creation of and transformation in the character of various categories of intellectuals. Its meaning was different in 1912 from what it was to be in the 1950s, 1960s and today. Who contributes towards that role and with what weight varies in different periods and conditions, including the influence carried by contributions from outside the organisation or in more recent times from allied organisations that may have overlapping membership4.

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2 In the context of this paper, I take this even wider and apply it to the alliance of the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP), when that becomes established and to some extent also the trade union ally, at first the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), later replaced by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

3 The term `collective intellectual’ or ‘collective organic intellectual’ may not have been used by Gramsci himself. The term `collective intellectual’ may have been first deployed by Togliatti (1979, e.g. at 155) and subsequently amongst others by Lawner, introduction to Gramsci (1979, at 44, 52.), Boggs, 1976, ch 5. Crehan speaks of ‘collective organic intellectual’ (2002, 150).

4 For some time members of the SACP have been able to simultaneously hold membership of the ANC, as has also been the case with SACTU and now COSATU.
But the political party or in this case national liberation movement, as collective intellectual, is also manifested in some of the products of its activities. Insofar as a consensus amongst its components results in interpretative documentation and media of various sorts, which are presented to its membership and the public at large, that is an intellectual function. It may be empowering insofar as it renders visible what was opaque. It may provide explanations for what is difficult to understand or what is intended by the oppressors/exploiters to be understood in a way that is disadvantageous to the oppressed and exploited people.

It is common knowledge that conquest is often accompanied by various mechanisms instituted in order to divert resistance or instil in the native peoples a sense that resistance is futile or too costly to risk. At various stages of the South African struggle, starting in the pre-conquest period a variety of forms of resistance were employed. These were based on analyses and estimations of what was at stake, what the threat of colonial rule or the fact of conquest meant, whatever the colonialists may have used to disguise it. These organic intellectuals of the liberation movement have in the first place sought to provide explanations of colonial/apartheid conquest and repression, to unmask it where it was disguised and to explain causality where that too was not evident. Some of these explanations have been very elaborate, relating as they have to fundamentally changed conditions.

Intellectual work has often provided hope of something different where everything was done to suggest that what existed was unalterable. (Cf Seme, 1972 [1911], Pallo Jordan, 1988). This was especially significant in periods of defeat, as was the case at the time of the Act of Union and more recently when the major leadership figures were sentenced in the Rivonia trial in 1964. Anyone reading the ANC strategy and tactics document of 1969 will be struck by the attempt to contest this notion of unchallengeability of apartheid oppression and point to the vulnerability of the regime. (See below and ANC, 1969.).

The ANC Led National Liberation movement as creator of intellectuals

Furthermore, a key element of the national liberation movement functioning as ‘collective intellectual’ that this paper wants to highlight, is its role in creating its own intellectuals through various processes. This is not to suggest, as Gramsci indicates, that all such intellectuals were of the same level and calibre. Some were simply inducted into the ANC or an allied organisation and became communicators of a vision and organisers in a more limited way. Others became major thinkers, after passing through the institutional structures of the ANC and/or allied organisations.

The job of intellectuals has been to try to contribute through theory to finding a way out, a way of escape from the dehumanisation of apartheid colonialism. The answer to that question has varied, as will be shown later in this paper. But all the enquiries, which may

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5 `Rivonia’ refers to the place where they were arrested, although Mandela, accused number one, was already in prison at the time.
be described as activities of organic intellectuals, have related to the question of how to resolve the status of the oppressed people in South Africa.

It is true, that some answers may have related to the class basis of the intellectuals who provided them, setting limits on what they advanced as ‘the possible or feasible or realistic’ (without necessarily using such words). It is not therefore only the situation of conquest, but also the historical development and composition and social basis of the liberation movement that has conditioned the role intellectuals have played at different times. And of course those are mediating factors that continue at this very moment. Some conditions led to a radical intellectual intervention as part of the collective intellectual input of the alliance as a whole in previous periods. These may now be under threat, under new conditions, which include the formation of an ANC led government and the possible creation of a new ruling bloc, where the weight of the working class is counter-balanced by a perceived demand of a globalised world for economic ‘fundamentals’ to be respected, simultaneously with the increasing strength of an emerging black bourgeoisie.

In focusing on the ANC and its allies I am not suggesting that they are the only movements that have performed a substantial intellectual role nor had an important intellectual component within their functioning. In fact, the Trotskyist, Unity Movement of South Africa gave primacy to educational tasks, though it may be that this was mainly in relation to people passing through formal educational institutions or in debates amongst an intelligentsia.⁶ I am however aware that many of these Unity Movement scholars made an insufficiently acknowledged intellectual contribution, rewriting history from the point of view of the oppressed people and the working class in particular. (E.g. Majekè, 1986, Mnguni, 1988).

**Intellectual role and processes of intellectual formation**

*Early ANC*

In the years prior to the Act of Union, the small stratum of British and American trained African intellectuals together with mission trained individuals and a limited number of self-trained intellectuals were very active in the emerging African press, the church and the small number of associations that were the forerunners of the ANC. (A.C. Jordan, 1973, Odendaal, 1984)

In a sense, these professionals were part of the transition and the interpretation of the transition from one form of struggle to another, from the ‘spear to the book’. (Kunene, 1968). In the type of politics inaugurated by the Act of Union it was clear that for the moment the time of the spear or other forms of military resistance was over. But opportunities to participate in parliamentary politics had been open in a marginal sense mainly in the Cape, from the mid 19th century and this was one of the key areas of intervention of intellectuals and much of the press interventions of this period related to

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⁶ The Trotskyist left did also for a period of time implement training programmes in a night school. Cf Bird (1980, 68-69)

With the Act of Union, it was a wider form of involvement that arose, requiring a conceptualisation of a new form of interaction with the white authorities. The ANC was first formed as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in Bloemfontein on January 8 1912. Its initial structure combined elements of continuity as well as rupture with what had preceded it. It included a House of Chiefs, modelled on the House of Lords, recognising the continuing authority of traditional leaders who had led the tribal resistance against Boer and British conquest in the 19th century. But its founders were faced with a completely new situation. Britain had handed the fate of black South Africans to the local white settlers through the formation of the Union of South Africa.

The earliest attempts at characterising the meaning of Union and the notion of a ‘native union’ embraced by the establishment of the ANC, were ambiguous but also had potentially revolutionary implications. In advancing, as Pixley ka Isaka Seme, a British and American trained advocate did, the notion of a ‘native union’ there appears what may have been the germs of a new nation. Writing in 1911, on the eve of the establishment of the ANC, Seme said he wanted to write on the ‘simple subject of Native Union, for after all, this is what the Congress shall be.’ (1972,72).

Seme spoke of the new Congress as the ‘voice in the wilderness’ aiming to bring together the ‘dark races’ in order to review the past and reject all things which ‘have retarded our progress, the things which poison the springs of our national life and virtue.’ The congress would enable ‘members of one household to talk and think loudly on our home problems and the solution of them.’

He therefore advances the notion of an alternative union to that of the white Union of South Africa, premised on unity within the Congress. But in order to achieve union, certain demons had to be exorcised, in particular, the divisions between African peoples that had not only prevented unity, but also facilitated colonial conquest:

The demon of racism, the aberrations of the Xosa-Fingo feud, the animosity that exists between the Zulus and the Tongaas, between the Basutos and every other Native must be buried and forgotten; it has shed among us sufficient blood! We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance today….(1972,72. Spelling as in original. Emphasis inserted.)

This message was immensely progressive, advancing as it did a fundamental alternative to the Union’s attempt to create a nation in South Africa that excluded the African people. This alternative aimed to overcome the animosities between different peoples, which had been exploited in the process of conquest, and also to build a unity between African people that could be the foundation for this new nation.
But in the context of the times the concept had its own limitations. It was a union of Africans only. It was a concept of the nation that implicitly excluded women, since they were not yet members of the ANC.

It was also a concept of unity, which may not only have excluded the use of difference to create divisions, but also denied the validity of distinct identities within this unity. In other words, within the overall progressive and even revolutionary character of this early response to conquest there were also the germs of a long term danger. This lay in the characteristic projection of a national liberation movement as representing the nation as a whole, declaring that the people are one and by implication seeing alternative conceptions of identity as divisive of that unity. While this was then understandable and indeed part of the alternative concept of the counter-nation, the conceptualisation was nevertheless potentially problematic, as it has been with all national liberation movements.

But the immediate problem confronting the fledgling organisation was to negotiate a way of operating in new conditions. For decades after the Act of Union, appeals to the authorities via deputations and petitions dominated the organisation’s methods. In order to conduct this type of strategy, a different type of leadership was required. Thus, the first executive was composed entirely of mission-trained professionals – lawyers, priests, teachers and self-taught intellectual and writer Sol Plaatje.

‘The teachers, ministers, editors, lawyers and doctors who founded the liberation movements,’ Jack and Ray Simons wrote, ‘were constitutionalists. They defended existing rights and resisted new discrimination in a constant struggle against aggressive white supremacists. African, Coloured and Indian leaders of the early period took their inspiration from liberal and humanitarian concepts….’ (Simons and Simons, 1969, 116.)

While the modes of struggle opened up after 1910 required new skills and practices, compared with the military struggle, they established patterns of behaviour, which marked organisational conceptions of itself, its relationship to the government as well as its own members.

Magubane writes:

Even if they entertained dreams of self-determination, they did not believe that it was a matter of practical politics in 1912. Nearly all of those who met in the first congress at Bloemfontein had lived through one phase or another of the turbulence that had toppled South Africa’s kingdoms and chiefdoms. They had either known or seen defeat, and their own lives had been affected by that. The use of “constitutional methods” was therefore the most logical at the time, and they called public meetings, made protests, organised demonstrations, passed resolutions, and made deputations. This gave them time to lick the wounds inflicted by defeat and to nurse the unity they were creating that would make the congress an effective force. While moving toward this goal, they were willing to do all they could to agitate for reforms without provoking a head-on collision with white power. (Magubane, 1979, 277-8)

And Professor Daniel Kunene articulates the new challenge that was confronted:
The African had just emerged from a prolonged battle which he had lost. While this battle raged, he had composed heroic lines for the warriors and kings upon whom he placed his trust…. This came to pass- the country perished. But the struggle was not over, it had only shifted from physical to intellectual plane. Education was the new weapon, the intellectual the new warrior. A correspondent of the Isigidimi… commenting on the African’s suffering under the white man’s rule, suggested that ‘the spear’ was not the solution. ‘No’, he said, ‘we have tried and failed. The only solution is learning and knowledge. By knowledge I do not mean just book knowledge. I mean that kind of knowledge that will make us realise that each one lives for all.’

The quotation concludes with a significant argument: `Nor must this knowledge be confined to the males. Our young women must have it too.’ (Kunene, 1968, 23-24)

In becoming a new leadership the ANC simultaneously started to weld together an organisation that performed the intellectual role that Gramsci attributes to a political party. This was to be a rough road with the present outcome, of the ANC as leading force in government, by no means preordained and at times seeming totally unlikely. There were periods where the organisation was close to nonexistent. Dubow writes:

The accession to power of the ANC in 1994 confirmed in many minds the sense that its victory had been historically ordained. The ANC itself has been keen to encourage this view, not least because it helps to legitimise its claim to be the natural custodian of liberation and freedom. Several accounts of the ANC have written its story in terms of successes and reverses, lessons learned, mistakes repaired. But there was no automatic progression and no certainty as regards the eventual outcome of the struggle. As the oldest and most enduring political organisation on the African continent, the ANC always maintained a special place in the nationalist movement. But on several occasions in its long history the ANC’s paramount position was rivalled by other political organisations; there were long periods during which it was effectively moribund; sometimes it was more of an onlooker than an active participant in events….(Dubow, 2000, xiv)

The new leadership tried to give meaning to the conditions that Africans encountered, particularly the imposition of a white union on the people of South Africa and a succession of new pieces of discriminatory legislation. Simultaneously, some individuals performed individual intellectual roles, organic to that of the liberation movement. What these intellectuals did was give meaning reflectively, actively and consequentially. Thus, Sol Plaatje famously documented the impact of the Land Act of 1913, and used his writings and research to campaign in Britain. (Plaatje, 1982 [1916]).

Essential to the period of petitioning and deputations that opened up after the founding of the ANC was a quest for inclusion within the civil rights constitutionally guaranteed to whites. In order to qualify for inclusion leaders of the time professed loyalty to the British crown and the Union constitution. This was something commonly found in liberation movements of the time. (Cf e.g. Kiernan, 1993, 89, Younis, 2000, Apter, 1964)

The early characterisation of the South African state, and social order and the strategic perspective of the ANC were articulated mainly by the small group of African intellectuals. Many commentators dwell on the photographs of this early leadership, in very formal dress supposedly as a marked contrast to the rise of later more ‘angry’
generations\textsuperscript{7}. There is also a tendency to ridicule their petitioning of local and British authorities. It has wrongly been construed as conservative or written off as ‘fawning’ (Mothlabi, 1984, 38) or going ‘cap in hand’ to their masters. Leaders of this period are often criticised for naivety in their appeals to British morality and Christianity, the values with which most of them had grown up.

It would be a mistake to read too much into this approach. (Marks and Trapido, 1987, 6.) Peter Limb has shown that a careful reading of the texts demonstrates that many of these interventions were heavily laden with irony. The idioms and values of the Empire were used partly with subversive intent.\textsuperscript{8} Also, there was an attempt in these appeals to pit the former colonial power against the main enemy, the white settlers, (Limb, 2003). In a sense they may have tried to practise ‘divide and rule’ in reverse. (See also Saunders, 2000).

\textbf{Official politics and parallel politics of a less formal kind}

Even where one speaks of ANC politics of a particular time being dominated by particular practices, there has always been contestation, difference over direction, different meanings given to oppression and the nation and ways of contesting apartheid colonial structures.

At the same time as the ‘elite’ leadership of the ANC pursued one type of politics there were simultaneously various manifestations of more radical ideas and organisation, within the ANC itself in the Transvaal (cf Bonner, 1982), amongst the women (Wells, 1993, Ginwala, 1992), in the union movement, especially in the early years of the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) (Cf Bradford, 1987) and in the activities of the Communist Party. (Cf e.g. Simons and Simons, 1969).

Thus, while men were engaged in moderately building a counter-union, they did not at first include women as members of the ANC and, by implication, the future nation was masculine.\textsuperscript{9} It was only in 1943 that women achieved the right to full membership. Excluded from the organisation, women were not under the same constraints of ‘deputation politics’. From an early period, they were freed for what was often a more radical, mass politics where demands were made rather than petitioning the authorities. In Bloemfontein protesting against the extension of passes in 1913, women marched under the radical banner, declaring ‘We have done with pleading. We now demand!’ (Wells, 1993)

It is also clear that the degree of exclusion of ANC women, in practice, was less absolute than the constitution appeared to declare. Prior to the establishment of the ANC itself,

\textsuperscript{7} The dress and class composition of the ‘angry’ generation of the Youth League was in the main very similar to that of the founders of the ANC.
\textsuperscript{8} Cf Ernest Mandel’s remark that ‘the exploited will, as a rule, tend to formulate the first phases of the class struggle in terms of the formulas, ideal and ideologies of the exploiters.’ (1978, 82. Emphasis in the original)
\textsuperscript{9} Natasha Erlank argues that this was a continuous trend (Erlank, unpub, 2001).
women in some areas like the Orange Free State were involved in congresses and subsequent to the establishment of the ANC women regularly attended national gatherings. In fact, Congress made provision for the organisation of women without their actually being full members. The formulations on the role of women however tended to correspond to traditional gender roles, with women providing hospitality and similar functions. The history shows, however, that the women inside and outside the formal structures continued to transcend these designated functions and played active political roles.

A striking example is in the course of a disputed election for the presidency in 1933, when the Speaker declared the votes for Seme unconstitutional. 22 of those who voted for him were women, but the irregularity was not declared to have any bearing on women having voted. (Ginwala, 199?)

The involvement of women illustrates that there was sometimes a disjuncture between the discourse of the organisation and its practice, but also that in the case of women this introduced a more radical discourse and practice.

**Communist night schools and early newspapers as intellectual interventions and creators of intellectuals**

The Communist Party was to have an uneasy relationship with the ANC for some decades after its establishment. On the side of the ANC there was suspicion of Communists as being purveyors of a radical ideology that threatened chiefs and others with interests perceived as antagonistic to the communist vision. On the side of the Communists, there was some contempt for the ANC, which was seen as comprising primarily petit-bourgeois intellectuals and having little interest in organising the masses. Thus Sidney Bunting in addressing the Comintern in the 1920s declared that the ANC had `had its day. It was moribund’. Some of these criticisms had validity, for the activities of the ANC were initially primarily related to an annual conference and little else. Equally, on the side of the Communist Party they at first failed to give adequate weight to dispossession and the importance of addressing the national question. But gradually the Communists came to believe that there could be neither liberation nor socialism in South Africa without leadership by the African majority. (Simons and Simons, 1969).

The early Communist Party played an important intellectual role, through training of new members as well as publication of newspapers, especially in the African languages. The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was formed in 1921. Initially it looked to white workers, who were more established in industry and unionised, as the core element in its organisation. Africans had only recently become proletarianised and were not seen

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10 The Communist International (Comintern) was a worldwide organisation of Communist Parties, located in Moscow from 1919 until its dissolution in 1943. During its existence every Communist Party was described as a ‘section’ of the Communist International. On various occasions the Comintern intervened in the affairs of Communist Parties of various countries, including that of South Africa. (See further, Introduction, Davidson et al, 2003, at 1).
as constituting an adequate base for building socialism. Gradually, however, the Party turned towards the African masses, and in this respect the Comintern often played a significant and constructive role in relation to the national question, though it did entail imposition of decisions against the will of the then mainly white local Party. Its most important intervention was to insist in 1928 on the implementation of the slogan calling for the establishment of an ‘independent Native Republic’. This was the precursor of the later analytical framework, characterising apartheid South Africa as entailing ‘colonialism of a special type’, a formulation initiated by the Communist Party, but later adopted by the ANC as well. (Cf Pallo Jordan, 1988, 123ff and Simons and Simons, 1969, regarding the positive character of the Comintern’s insistence on the slogan calling for an independent Native Republic.).

In its turn towards the African working class, the Party confronted workers who were very often illiterate or with only a smattering of literacy. Eddie Roux, a leading figure in the development of the night schools, who was later expelled from the Communist Party during a period of extensive discord during the 1930s, claimed that members had a vague idea of what membership entailed, and the gradual influx of Africans created further difficulties in a party already finding it difficult to build ideological cohesion. (Roux, 1964 and See below).

This was one of the reasons leading to the development of night schools. The provision of elementary education to people who were hungry for learning, made a considerable impact. (Cf Roux, 1964, 1970, 1993, Bird, 1980, Johns, 1995, Drew, 2000).

While night schools established by the Communist Party would equip people better in the world in which they found themselves, it simultaneously sought to impart some knowledge of communism. Many who passed through these schools became acquainted not only with the written word in general, but Marxist texts. In some cases, the products of these schools were to become famous leaders and theoreticians, like Edwin Mofutsanyana, later General Secretary and Moses Kotane, also later General Secretary of the Communist Party and Treasurer-General of the ANC, trade unionist, Gana Makabeni, and the first Communist martyr, Johannes Nkosi. (Drew, 78, Edgar, unpub 2003). Kotane believed that the early night schools had been a formative influence for him and had been responsible for his own political initiation. (Bunting, 1998,44).

Adrienne Bird writes that the Communist Party started the first ‘effective night school movement- effective primarily in that those that passed through it were not simply given the tools with which to better survive in the existing society…[T]he CP night schools trained many of the blacks who were later to lead the black resistance movement.’ (Bird, 1980, 64).

Eddie Roux describes the first school:

This had been started in 1925 in the Ferreirastown slum, in a Native Church building hired on week nights for the purpose. The building had no electric light. There enthusiastic white communists bent their energies to teaching by candle-light, semi-literate Africans to read involved passages in
Bukharin’s *ABC of Communism*. The organiser of this school and general factotum in Native work was T.W. Thibedi…For years he had been only black man in the party. (Roux, 1964, 203)

In 1926 a simplified *Communist Primer for South Africa* was developed and printed serially in the Party newspaper, *The South African Worker* as a substitute for the Bukharin text. At the same time continuous consideration was being given to publishing a newspaper in African languages, but abandoned because of lack of funds. Nevertheless, *The South African Worker* began to print articles in African languages and in late 1925 its price was lowered ‘in a conscious effort to attract African readers.’ (Johns, 1995, 186-7).

When the Party moved its headquarters from the Old Trades Hall to the site of the party school in Ferreirastown in mid-1927, Johns interprets this also as a ‘severing of the links with the white trade unions and a conscious identification with the non-white workers. The new party office rapidly became a centre for social activities among Africans, for trade union organisation, and for party education among Africans.’ (Johns, 1995, 188).

A few years later, the school was further developed, though still under very difficult circumstances:

The school…was moved to the party office …. Now on the ground floor of a slum tenement [Charles Baker, a former school teacher] ran this night school for adult Africans. There were not enough desks to go round: the pupils sat on the floor. Blackboards there were none: the comrades blackened the walls. Lessons, given by inexperienced but enthusiastic teachers, were interrupted by intermittent incursions of the curious. Night passes were a nuisance. Every adult African, if he wished to avoid arrest after nine in the evening, must carry a special pass signed from day to day by his employer. Many employers would not sign passes for their workers to attend a communist school. The teachers had to make out passes for all pupils, a laborious business and time-wasting. Later special forms were printed to ease this difficulty. (Roux, 1964, 204-5)

On February 17, 1928, the *South African Worker* reported enrolment in the school as being close to 100. Three months later it had risen to 150

In an effort to emulate the success of Johannesburg, the Cape Town comrades established an African labour College at their party office. The newer party branches in Vereeniging and Potchefstroom also established more rudimentary schools.

The schools were a valuable device for generating support and sympathy for the CPSA. The fact that the curricula of the schools do not seem to have been overly oriented to exclusively communist propaganda must have brought the communists respect for the job which they were doing within the African community to give elementary education to illiterate and semi-literate African workers. At the same time the nature of part of the curriculum, and more particularly, the example of the white communist teachers, must have brought new adherents into the party –both out of personal respect for the white communist teachers and out of sympathy with the teachings of part of the curriculum. (Johns, 1995, 195)

The continued work through the schools was complemented by revival of the party newspaper, which had collapsed for six months and reappeared in February 1928. This
time it was even more consciously directed at black workers. ‘Half of the pages of the newspaper were written in African languages and the remaining pages of the newspaper carried more news of South African non-white affairs than had previously been the case….’(Johns, 1995, 195).

The party began to expand its presence out of the white areas and in some cases, like Vereeniging also established new schools. (Johns, 1995, 196). This period saw the party claim an overwhelmingly black membership, some 1,600 out of 1700 in mid 1928. (Johns, 1995, 197).

Drew confirms the development of the Communist night schools as part of the transformation into an overwhelmingly African organisation in the 1920s:

Many of those who rose up the hierarchy came from a background that valued education; a number, including Thibedi, John B Marks and Albert Nzula, had been teachers. Gana Makabeni, Johannes Nkosi and Moses Kotane, however, were workers who acquired their education in the Party night school. The majority of blacks who joined the Party, particularly in the Transvaal, were workers from small semi-rural locations. (Drew 77–8, Bunting, 1998).

The influx of large numbers of Africans in this way created problems for the party in developing ideological cohesion and understanding.

At first many of the new adherents were rather vague as to the nature of C.P. membership. Asked to prove that they were members of the party, they would produce a trade union card or night school pass. It was all very shocking to some of the Comintern purists, but as time went on things began to sort themselves out. (Roux, 1964, 207).

While there were these initial problems, there is no doubt that this introduction was an essential basis that made possible the later emergence of many African theorists within the Party and the liberation movement as a whole. The schools also helped create the cohesion that was initially lacking.

Another contributing factor towards the development of a core of African intellectuals was the role of the Comintern, which provided education in Party schools as well as a special university directed at students from the colonised world. Many leading figures were sent there for courses. About 14 South African Communists were educated in Comintern schools or Universities (Filatova, 1999, 54–55 and Davidson et al, 2003, introduction). Amongst those trained were leading ANC/SACP figures like Moses Kotane and JB Marks and Communist trade unionist, Betty du Toit. (Davidson et al, vol 1, introduction, 2003, at 6). Whatever the dogmatism that may have prevailed, leading non-Communist scholars argue that the approach adopted to African studies was advanced for its time. (Filatova, 1999)

Although education at the Comintern’s schools was highly ideological it still offered a valid and in some respects advanced training of the kind that students could not get in their own countries. In Moscow they were specifically educated and trained as professional politicians and exposed to a broader international scene. Their fellow students came from many countries and from various backgrounds. There were personalities of significance among them, not all necessarily communists,
such as Jomo Kenyatta, the future first president of Kenya, and George Padmore, editor-in-chief of The Negro Worker and the future ideologue of the Pan-African movement.

The Comintern’s schools gave South African students opportunities to publish, first of all, in The Negro Worker but also in other journals. In 1933 Albert Nzula, the first black secretary of the CPSA published a book about conditions of labour and the labour movement in Africa, co-authored with Potekhin and Zusmanovich [scholars who taught at Comintern schools]…More often than not even the authors themselves saw these publications as propaganda materials or at least as ‘applied’ studies useful to the cause-rather than as the result of serious academic research. However, they contributed a lot to the emergence of new approaches in African studies far beyond Moscow. Suffice it to say that it was at KUTV \[superscript 11\] that the debate on the existence of an African bourgeoisie and, more broadly, on the nature of social structures of contemporary African societies, began. (Davidson, et al, 2003, 7-8)

**Early ANC/CPSA relations and tensions**

This was a period of contrasting visions and practices of the ANC and CPSA, which were in the main far apart from one another, in no sense seeming likely future partners, which they were to become after the ANC’s banning. It was a period where the ANC’s practice of petitioning ran its course without success and where what organisation there had been was practically non-existent by the 1930s. For a short period during the presidency of Josiah Gumede the organisation appeared headed for a more radical direction, only for him to be ousted and the organisation to sink into steady decline. (Van Diemel, 2002, Simons and Simons, 1969). Karis and Gerhart write:

> By the mid-1930s, during the presidency of the conservative Pixley ka I. Seme, the founder of Congress, …the African National Congress became nearly moribund. Unlike the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union in the 1920s, the ANC had failed to win a mass following, nor had it built an effective organisation or an independent financial base. The All African Convention meetings, which Seme was urged to call jointly with Professor D. D. T. Jabavu [a leading intellectual and political figure, who was hostile to the ANC], who had kept aloof from the ANC, attracted such wide representation and enthusiasm that the ANC seemed to be in serious danger of being declared dead in order to make way for a new organisation…. (Karis and Gerhart, 1973,81).

It was only in the late 1930s with Rev James Calata becoming Secretary-General and in the early 1940s with Dr AB Xuma becoming President that the organisation started to revive. This was modest and based on attempts to build administration on a sound footing and establish a carefully monitored membership base. (Walshe, 1970). But this was nevertheless an organisational foundation that would make realisable some of the interventions that are generally credited purely to the rise of the Youth League alone.

The interventions of the Youth League may have remained in the realm of ideas alone had they not also found organisational expression, whose basis was provided in the period of Xuma and Calata

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\[superscript 11\] Russian acronym for Communist University of Toilers of the East. (Davidson et al, 2003, at lv).
Another important achievement of the Xuma presidency was the preparation and adoption of *African Claims in South Africa*, demands drawn up by a committee of leading intellectuals, based on the Atlantic Charter adapted to South Africa. It described itself as a restatement of the Charter `from the standpoint of Africans within the Union of South Africa’ and also contained a `Bill of Rights’. This was regarded as the most authoritative statement of ANC aims since the 1919 constitution. (The document is in Karis and Gerhart, 1973,209ff). In many ways this was a precursor of the Freedom Charter, adopted in 1955, though it did not involve the popular process entailed in the creation of the latter. On the development of the Claims, see Karis and Gerhart, 1973, 88ff. On the process leading to the creation of the Freedom Charter, see Suttner and Cronin, 1986).

The emphasis on the organisational basis from which it benefited was not intended to detract from the importance of the rise of the Youth League in the mid 1940s. It was a profound expression of the anger of the youth with the failure of previous moderate policies of the ANC and a call for a new direction and vision. Led by a brilliant lawyer/philosopher, Anton Lembede, who unfortunately died very young, he drove the process together with Mandela, Tambo and Sisulu, later to become giants of the ANC.

The Youth League had an Africanist messages, not addressing itself to the people of South Africa in general, but stressing the notions of African nationalism and self-determination and Africans taking charge of their own destiny (Cf Gerhart, 1978). Not only did the Youth League resist cooperation with non-Africans, but it also was initially anti-Communist, with people like Mandela known for breaking up Communist Party meetings.

Gradually however a degree of convergence developed with the Communists based on common militancy and developing appreciation on the side of the youth league for organisation.

**Political education in the 1950s**

One lesson of ANC history is that the leadership from the 1950s was never able to simply embark on any course of action purely because they considered it wise and desirable. The organisation was developing a mass following and the consciousness of its members, what it was willing to do, could not be ignored. Mandela explains how important the earlier Indian passive resistance campaign was in influencing the ANC to adopt its Defiance campaign of 1952. Until then, Africans had considered imprisonment as imposing a stigma and it was only gradually that they could be persuaded to move towards breaking the law and incurring imprisonment. (Mandela, 1994). The meaning of imprisonment had to be redefined as being an honour in certain contexts.

Furthermore, there is a further careful choice of words. ‘Defiance’ was consciously used instead of `passive resistance’ the word used in the Indian Congress campaign. Sisulu indicated, this was a specific intervention aimed at driving the struggle towards a
higher plane, and indeed the notion of contestation conveyed by the words ‘defy’ was new to the vocabulary of South African politics. Sisulu says:

The name ‘Defiance’ was deliberately used to make a difference between passive resistance and defiance. The aim here was to incite the people to action so that they should be militant and no longer fear jail. They must go willingly to jail. That was the aim, to arouse the whole nation. (Sisulu, 2001, 76)

The Defiance campaign was conceived as a break with the past, even part of a revolutionary break.

It had the effect of making the people confident and fearless, prepared to defy the laws, to be prepared to go to jail and meet any situation. That was the importance of it. It was the beginning of a new situation which led even to a person facing the death penalty with confidence. The Campaign brought about a situation in which people were not arrested just by chance, but by plan. This meant organisation…The movement called for volunteers. In the Eastern Cape, it was called ‘Amadela Kufa’, ‘defiers of death’. You can see from this that a revolutionary situation was emerging. (Sisulu, 2001, 79).

During the 1950s the ANC anticipated the possibility of banning in the light of action against the Communist Party, which dissolved in 1950 and later reconstituted underground. (Suttner 2004). The ANC developed the M-Plan, to undertake street level organisation, as a preparation for future banning and underground operation. One of the elements of this plan was extensive political education. (Anon, 1984, Interviews Mtshali, Nair, 2003, Lambert, unpub 1988, Everatt, unpub 1990. Mandela, 1994, 135, Suttner, 2003a).

Very many people appear to have gone through some form of internal education during the 1950s, where a common understanding of ‘Congress politics’ was developed, through lectures and discussion. Those who participated at one level were expected to give the lectures at another.

Mandela explains:

As part of the M-plan, the ANC introduced an elementary course of political lectures for its members throughout the country. These lectures were meant not only to educate but to hold the organisation together. They were given in secret by branch leaders. Those members in attendance would in turn give the same lectures to others in their homes and communities. In the beginning, the lectures were not systematised, but within a number of months there was a set curriculum.

There were three courses, “The World We Live In”, “How We Are Governed” and “The Need for Change”. In the first course, we discussed the different types of political and economic systems around the world as well as in South Africa. It was an overview of the growth of capitalism as well as socialism. We discussed, for example, how blacks in South Africa were oppressed both as a race and an economic class. The lecturers were mostly banned members, and I myself frequently gave
lectures in the evening. This arrangement had the virtue of keeping banned individuals active as well as keeping the membership in touch with these leaders. (1994, 135. Emphasis inserted)

Inside and outside these structures and within this overall perspective, many cadres saw political education as their key task during this period. Elias Motsoaledi recalls:

We took those who understood into a house and continued with political classes in order to give the movement its impetus; you must have real members not only paper members. People did not know the history of the ANC so we had to impart this knowledge to them. Secondly, they needed to know the day-to-day issues which affected them; to make him understand exactly why he was treated the way he was treated. I had so many people from all over Soweto who came to me for political classes. I remember trying to impart this knowledge to someone who was far older than I was. I outlined the difficulties and then he looked at me and said, ‘This is what I wanted to tell you, you can’t tell me that.’ In other words, you struck the chord and gained the respect of these people because you were able to interpret their aspirations. You were able to articulate all their problems. Then they started to respect you. (Quoted Bonner and Segal, 1998, 50. Emphasis inserted).

One significant aspect of the political education is that much of its content seemed to have been informed by a Marxist orientation. (Anon, 1984, Interviews, Nair, Cleopas Ndlovu, 2003. See Suttner, 2003a). Ben Turok claims that Chief Albert Luthuli, then President of the ANC and senior leader, Professor Z.K. Matthews objected to this orientation. (2003, 67). Generally, the widespread diffusion of Marxist thinking within the ANC today, tends to be attributed to the exile experience, where some cadres were sent to Communist Party schools and much of the political education had a Marxist orientation. (Cf Interview Nat Serache, 2002. See Sparg, Schreiner and Ansell, 2001, Suttner, 2003). But clearly these Congress Alliance courses indicate that the modes of analysis were already within that paradigm long before the period of exile.

During this period and even earlier a great deal of political education was conducted in some ANC and Communist-aligned trade unions. (Suttner, 2003a). If one examines the 1940s and 1950s in the province of Natal, now called KwaZulu Natal, with the embryonic establishment of nonracial trade unions, an elaborate system of internal education was in place, conducted in the main by Communists. Through these courses, sometimes called ‘social theory’, sometimes called Marxism, numbers of people received training in a Marxist analysis of social relations.

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12 ‘Banned members’ refers to the practice of the regime in restricting individuals under the Suppression of Communism Act. They were usually prohibited from carrying out any political activity or to belong to any organisation. Ostensibly aimed at Communists, it was applied to a wide range of opponents.

13 This raises an interesting contemporary question. Given this Marxist orientation during the 1950s and the apparent popularity of socialism during the exile period and within the country in the 1980s, what has happened to that tradition within the ANC in the present period? Has it simply been obliterated from peoples’ minds and if so, how was that achieved, or does it mean that the conviction and training was in fact very superficial? (Cf Interview with Petros ‘Shoes’ Mashigo, 2003, who indicates some of the limitations). Alternatively, is this orientation in abeyance, yet a potential basis for socialist support? If so, under what conditions can it be mobilised? Or, is Marxism now primarily a rhetorical device within the ANC, used to defend sometimes conservative macroeconomic policies and deployed against the left? (Cf Moleketi and Jele, 2002). Some of these questions are revisited in considering the operation of the ANC-led alliance as a ‘collective intellectual’.
In one set of interviews Eric Mtshali, a veteran MK member and now a member of the SACP\(^{14}\) Central Committee, went through such training. (Interview, Mtshali, 2003). In a later interview with Cleopas Ndlovu one hears that he went through a similar course at a later stage. When he was moved from the general class to a more advanced course with smaller numbers, his lecturer was Eric Mtshali. (Interview Cleopas Ndlovu, 2003). What this means is that through the process of internal education within the unions and the Communist Party of which Mtshali was then a member, Mtshali was transformed from a student into a lecturer and in Gramscian terms, into a person performing an intellectual role.\(^{15}\)

**Political training in exile and especially in the military camps**

During the 1950s there was increasing discussion about ‘fighting back’, the need to respond to the violence of the regime with armed force. After the banning of the ANC in 1960, this took concrete shape with the formation of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, initially independent of the ANC. Early theorisation of armed struggle was contested, between those seeking limited acts of sabotage without loss of life, in order to force the regime to negotiate, and others foreseeing and wanting concrete steps towards a more protracted war. The status of specific documentation found at Rivonia related to this dispute, remains contested. (Cf Elinor Sisulu, 2002, Govan Mbeki, 1992,1996).

With the defeat of early sabotage, activities shifted mainly towards more formalised military training outside the country, and gradually also towards the initiation of guerrilla warfare.

Throughout the ANC’s exile period, despite the increased emphasis on liberation through warfare, political education was taken very seriously. That is not to say it was uniform and all carefully planned. In fact, much of the exile period was unplanned. The first group of exiles had in the main expected to return to the country as trained soldiers within six months. (Cf e.g. Mtshali interview, 2003). Many were in fact unable to return for almost 30 years. The level of political education received initially was much extended over the years. (Cf Sparg et al, 2001).

Even where soldiers were expected to be returned quickly, the emphasis had always been that the political should dominate the military and that what mattered was not holding a gun but who was behind the gun, what understanding that person had.

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\(^{14}\) When the Communist Party was reconstituted underground in 1953, it was renamed as the South African Communist Party (SACP). (Cf Suttner, 2004)

\(^{15}\) At a later stage, with the re-emergence of the independent worker movement in the early 1970s large-scale attention was paid to worker education through a variety of courses and media in the years that followed. The concept of worker education was considered very broadly, including skills and knowledge learnt on the job and transmitted to others, cultural forms of education, in particular plays, poetry and songs. It was nevertheless a site of intense contestation relating to differing ideas as to the relationship between the workers’ movement and the national liberation movement. (Cooper et al, 2002).
This is a repeated theme in political education and seems to have almost been a cliché, that the ANC’s army was not merely soldiers in a conventional sense, but bearers of a message, ambassadors for a particular vision of society. This is a constant pattern in initial contacts between youth who left the country after 1976, wanting to pick up the gun, and the ANC leadership and cadres whom they met. (Cf Interview, Phumla Tshabalala, 2003). The late ANC Treasurer-General Thomas Nkobi, interviewed by Hilda Bernstein, remarked

Then came the exodus of young people who had no political experience or understanding. Some of them left home not because they were political. For some of them it was the question of adventure. Others committed some crimes of some kind. But they were not politically grounded with the policy of the ANC. They were interested in training in the art of war; they were not interested in school.

One of our policies which we were trying to teach was that education is essential. There’s this new phrase: ‘Liberation first! Education afterwards.’ We said: That is wrong. Education is the root, because without education you can never be a good solder. A soldier, we were telling them, a soldier is not the one who just shoot and kill. A soldier is the one who is mentally alert. There are a lot of things in the army which needs well-educated people. We are dealing with machines which need sciences, which need mathematics—not just shoot. (In Bernstein, 1994, 17-18)

The tendency seems generally to have been to restrain tendencies towards militarism and place emphasis on understanding the struggle and its goals. A body of scholarship, argues that, in practice, militarism was dominant or at least that there was not adequate political control and direction of military activity and there was not even an adequate connection between the two. (Barrell, unpub, 1993). It is beyond the scope of this contribution to evaluate that. All that is intended here is to stress that political education was considered important amongst others because of these professed aims to emphasis the political character of the struggle, which may or may not have been realised or fully realised in practice.

Cadres needed to understand exactly what they were doing and in selecting targets to be able to understand what was especially political significant and which attacks would have particular symbolic importance, because of the specific ways in which apartheid oppression impacted on the people. It was intended that such action should be seen as piercing the apparent invincibility of the enemy. Petros ‘Shoes’ Mashigo, originally sentenced to death for MK activities, explains why his MK unit decided to attack the Soekmekaar police station, due to its association with forced removals. (Interview, 2003, and Solly Shoke explains the choice of Soweto police stations for attack. Interview, 2003).

Just as it was not planned that the initial group of MK volunteers should have remained outside the country for so long, equally, the influx of thousands of new recruits after the 1976 rising was unplanned. While underground operatives within the country reported in general terms of a restive atmosphere, and embryonic signs of resistance, the scale and intensity of the rising was unexpected.
The need for political education of the new recruits was urgent. Many were relatively ignorant of the struggle and its objectives and had a militaristic inclination. Hilda Bernstein may exaggerate the extent to which historical memory of previous struggle may have been absent from their consciousness (cf Suttner, unpub 2003, though many interviewees do confirm this absence of historical consciousness. Cf Thandi Modise in Curnow, 2000). But Bernstein does capture some of the problems that had to be dealt with through political training:

Each wave brought out its own type of people. Those who left in the late fifties and early sixties were mainly adult, often middle-aged, and highly political, with a history of engaging in public political struggle. Those of the seventies, and specifically of the huge exile wave after 1976, were overwhelmingly young, largely male; and though fired with political passion, they were often without real ideology or political programmes. They were of a generation who had been cut off from access to information about their own country, their own history, and from political theory and the history of struggle. The ‘elders’ who might have passed on this knowledge were either themselves in exile, or on Robben Island or Pretoria Central prison. Or perhaps keeping discreetly quiet. ‘Mandela’ was a remote name, used by some parents as a warning of what happens to those who follow the path of resistance to law and authority. The 1976 Soweto rebels came out with no history in their heads. They believed themselves to be the first revolutionaries, the first to confront the apartheid state; and their anger was often without political objective. They learned the history of their country only when they had left it—the long story of struggle, oppression and resistance. (At xvii)

The young people who erupted from the township schools in 1976 went out fired by anger, seeking revenge, their intention to get a gun and to shoot those who had been shooting them. Once outside they became subject to a very positive political education. They were given books to read—books prohibited in South Africa. They were told the history of their own immediate past. The continuity of their lives had been fractured under apartheid, the history of their parents’ lives obliterated. If memory is the continuity principle for people, then history is the continuity principle for nations. By erasing essential areas of history the development of a nation is halted, distorted. Memory and history must merge and reinforce each other so that humans can recognise and understand their lives. ‘The Movement’—that vaguely defined but concretely existing body—gave back to these young people their own history, and with it an understanding of the nature of society. The anger remains, but the racial direction of it has changed. They speak of radical change, but not of revenge. For all its failings and omissions, this is the gift bestowed by the ANC on the future of South Africa. (Bernstein, 1994, xviii).

Consequently, the ANC embarked on careful training at various levels. Every cadre was meant to be equipped with a broad understanding of the character of the struggle, and its history. They were connected to the strands of resistance history that the regime had tried to obliterate from public consciousness.

But the process of training, as it evolved, was also intended and did produce trainers and also new intellectuals. One of the most famous teachers in the camps was Professor Jack Simons, a former leading scholar who provided general tuition and courses, but also trained a body of more advanced cadres who were to be able to perform Simons’s function. (Cf Sparg et al, 2001). Passing through this process were some of the most

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16 Ralph Mgijima indicates however that this negative exhortation was one of the ways that he was made aware of ANC in the face of a public silence about its existence. (Interview, 2003).
17 Simons was a leading scholar in African customary law and a major contributor to political theory in South Africa for some years. His later work included *Class and Colour*, written together with his wife, Ray Alexander (1969).
famous intellectuals in the struggle, amongst them, Cde Mzala, the pseudonym for the late Jabulani Nobleman Nxumalo. He was the author of a classic book on Gatsha Buthelezi and many, many articles, (cf Mzala, 1988).

Political Education on Robben Island

The prison experience has had a very definite impact on the nature and fortunes of the ANC. Training on Robben Island served to cement a particular conception of history and understanding of the character of the organisation. Although prisoners were held in a variety of different prisons, it is the impact of Robben Island that undoubtedly had a decisive influence on the political development of large numbers of people inside the prison, and after release, on those with whom former prisoners interacted. Although there was political education in most prisons, the Robben Island experience was by far the most important in terms of its long-term impact. Purely for quantitative reasons we are dealing with quite different phenomena. Numbers are important in prison, even for practical matters like facilitating smuggling of political material and other activities relevant to political education. They needed to transcribe and hide documents used for political education and the more prisoners, the easier it was to develop a body of resources for the courses conducted.\(^\text{18}\)

With the arrest of thousands of people during the states of emergency of the 1980s. Political education did take place in some of these detention centres. In Pretoria, for example, philosophy lecturer Louis Mnguni conducted classes on Dialectical and Historical Materialism. It still needs to be investigated how enduring the influence of these courses was.

In the white section of Pretoria Prison, male prisoners serving sentences were continuously engaged in political discussions and `seminars', though these were intended to be unknown to the authorities. In contrast to the situation on Robben Island, most of these prisoners were already graduates. (Suttner, 2001). It is not clear, from existing literature, to what extent political education was conducted amongst women prisoners. Running against this was the smallness of their numbers and in the case of white prisoners, in the first intake, their relatively short sentences.

A large number of young people received much of their political education about the ANC on Robben Island. (Sisulu, 2001,162, Joseph Faniso Mati in Coetzee et al, 2002) Some people first learnt to read and write on the island or acquired advanced education and became seasoned political thinkers or analysts there. Mati reports, when he arrived in the early 1960s,

\(^{18}\) Transcription was important because books obtained from libraries were sometimes very important to the prisoners but had to be returned. There was no guarantee that these would be allowed into the prison again, where for some reason they had passed the censor unwittingly. In those cases, the book would either be hidden somewhere in the prison or more likely transcribed completely. Consequently over time a body of `classic' revolutionary texts became part of the `holdings' in some prisons.
Fortunately, when we got to Robben Island we found that the ANC was already organised. There were group leaders and a structure…. (Coetzee et al., 2002, 38)

‘People must study’, the ANC would repeatedly say. If you got a matric, you had to teach others how to read and write, had to teach those who were attempting standard six or the junior certificate. Every person on the Island knew that he had an obligation to teach others. Later on when we managed to get study rights the teaching was more formal, but initially we specifically tried to help those who couldn’t read or write. (At 45. See also interview with Monde Colin Mkunqwana, in Coetzee et al., 2002, at 87)

No-one who spent time on the Island can say that he hadn’t been strengthened politically. …Ours were serious discussions-no applauding, no clapping of hands. It was a serious affair-organised by the political committee for when we were locked up in the cells…. (At 49-50)

One of the key teachers on the Island was the late Walter Sisulu, who at the time of his imprisonment had not progressed beyond primary education at school. Nelson Mandela at one point, referred to him as the greatest living historian of the ANC and in this regard Mandela can be taken to refer primarily to oral communication (though Sisulu was also an occasional writer). The notion of an ‘oral intellectual’ may be a very underrated phenomenon in South Africa. Some of the most important political leaders, like Elias Motsoaledi, had very little formal education and conducted their teachings mainly orally and this was the case with Sisulu. While the need to acquire literacy was stressed, the notion of being a thinker and an intellectual could definitely not be equated with literacy. That is clearly not a lesson of South African history alone, but one that we derive from all peoples, including the famous Greek philosophers and poets, many of whom were not literate.

Walter Sisulu explains his role:

When we settled down in Robben Island…we had to create machinery for all prisoners, not necessarily the ANC alone, for discipline and all. And in that situation …one of my tasks was to educate people about the history of the ANC and that is what I did.

We were working at the quarry. Now we worked there as groups. So those of us who were taking particular classes would group together, work together. Then a lecture takes place there while we are working. (Sisulu, 2001, 162-3. See also Dingake, 1987, 214)

Some of the ideas of the leadership were reduced to writing (and some have now been published, cf Mbeki, 1991, Maharaj, 2001). This was all strictly illegal and carried out in secret. (Cf Harry Gwala, quoted by Buntman, 1996, at 106)

The Island was decisive in the political education of the young generation of 1976, consolidating their understanding of the history of resistance and in many or most cases, ‘converting’ them to ANC. (Cf Buntman, 2003). Daniel Montsisi, a leader of the 1976 rising in Soweto records:

The Island was a political education for me. Firstly, we developed a deep comradeship through discussion with the older leaders, and a deep respect. Before I went to the Island my understanding of the Freedom Charter was not thorough. There I had the time to look back at
history…It was like putting together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which had been missing all along. We delved into our history. We discovered that we young people were not the first to take up the fight against apartheid, but a new part of a developing process. (Johnson, 1988, 107)

In order to ensure maximum benefit of political education, it was necessary to tackle illiteracy. According to Harry Gwala, one of the most famous educators on the Island, literacy was needed in order to conduct the political theory classes that he and Stephen Dlamini\(^\text{19}\) started on the Island. Gwala explained that people who were illiterate could not understand the abstract concepts they were teaching and using. ‘So we organised…literacy education.’ (Buntman, 1996, 112-113). One of the beneficiaries of this literacy training was the current Deputy-President of the country, Jacob Zuma.

The programmes of political education on the Island were not conceived purely to keep prisoners occupied and avoid idleness, though that may have been a factor, since idleness could lead to demoralisation. There was, additionally, a very self-conscious motivation, to prepare prisoners to play a significant political role after release. Fran Buntman writes:

> [T]he inmates on Robben Island had always regarded it as their duty to produce capable activists who would eventually go back into their communities. The youth of ’76 represented the future of the movements and the liberation struggle. These were the future activists, leaders, and soldiers, and so their recruitment was a necessity. Recruitment was, of course, a starting point for the critical process of training activists, teaching them organisational histories, ideologies and strategies, and preparing them for their political obligations and mandates upon release…

(Buntman, 2001,156. See also at 168, 170)

Time spent on the Island appeared to have been a way of crystallising thinking and developing common positions on various issues. The Island graduates entry into United Democratic Front (UDF)\(^\text{20}\) organisations in the 1980s usually connoted arrival of people who were seen as having much political maturity, and able to advance non-sectarian and unifying positions. This may not always have been the case, and some of these individuals were in the centre of division. But the overall experience brought by many who became active in the UDF appears to have been valued. (Cf Mufson, 1990)

It should be remembered that after the arrest of the ANC leadership at Rivonia in 1964, there had been a rupture in the tradition of Congress organisation and consciousness of what it represented. While it did continue to have an underground presence, many people grew up without systematic exposure to the ideas, principles and ways of organisation of the ANC and its allies. Those released from prison became bearers of a tradition of struggle in the same way as older comrades in exile, helped connect a new generation to the history and policies of the past. (Cf Buntman, 2003).

\(^\text{19}\) Dlamini was also crucial in developing the union education courses in Natal, referred to earlier. He was badly tortured and this had long-term physical and psychological effects.

\(^\text{20}\) The United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in 1983, drawing under one banner, some 600 affiliated organisations, representing over two million members. Although legally prevented from open identification with the ANC, the UDF affiliates tended to view themselves as carrying out the strategies and tactics of the ANC. (See Suttner, unpub 2003a)
Pravin Gordhan speaks of the impact of released political prisoners on the thinking and culture of young activists in mid-1970s Natal:

They were bearers of history, bearers of experiences, bearers of anecdotes, bearers of the Congress culture, ‘this is how you do things, this is how you say things, this is how you analyse things’, they were bearers of inspiration, because you could relate to them as heroes, and there were not many heroes at the time, and each of them had a different quality because they each played a different role…. (Interview, 2003)

Certainly there was an element of romanticism attached to being in prison. It carried considerable authority, feeding into the hierarchical character of the ANC and especially underground. There was often an assumption that activists in the 1980s could not rely on their own judgment, but needed to buttress this with appeal to a higher authority. (Cf Suttner, unpub 2003a regarding the UDF’s ‘B team mentality’.). The ANC official leadership in exile was not easily accessible (although many people listened illegally to the ANC’s Radio Freedom broadcast from Lusaka and other countries on the continent). The next best may have been to consult with a prison veteran. In that sense, their role would have been less intellectual in the sense defined in this paper and more the communication of ideas through effecting a line of command, an essentially hierarchical concept of knowledge.

Each generation that came together on Robben Island possessed distinct knowledge and experience drawn from the different ways and periods of involvement. The time spent on the Island helped bridge inter-generational gaps, in a way that would impact on the struggle outside:

The Islanders’ resistance also fulfilled another function, of facilitating cross-generational communication between different age-sets of activists who were thrown into prison. At times relationships could be tense, especially in the post-1976 period, but generally the prisoners worked to understand each other and build their organisations from the perspective of different generations. This meant, inter alia, that former prisoners leaving the Island to resume activism would carry with them the knowledge and insights of multiple periods of struggle, as well as the ideology and histories of the outlawed organisations. (Buntman, 1996, at 135. Emphasis.inserted).

This is not to suggest that those from any one generation had uncontested versions of what the ANC represented. There were divergent perceptions amongst the leadership, with Govan Mbeki and Harry Gwala challenging the ideas and leadership of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. (Cf Buntman, 1996,125). Amongst the 1976 generation, political positions were often less crystallised and the years of contact with the older generation saw many ‘cross over’ to the ANC but a core remained in the BCM (Black Consciousness Movement).

One of the important features of intellectual evolution of individuals within prisons was the combination of individual and collective work. Many did formal courses, but the main process of development was collective. Political education courses have been emphasised here but the collective influence was wider. In prison one did not read a
newspaper alone but in dialogue with others. Sometimes it was a formal session, often called 'news analysis', found also in military situations. (Cf Interview, Victor Moche, 2002). It is in interpreting such data that many people have the opportunity to grow. In fact in these interactions one often finds wholly new ways of interpreting events.

Party/National liberation movement as `collective intellectual’

The concepts `collective intellectual’ or `collective organic intellectual’ in referring to a political party, we have noted, are ascribed to Gramsci, though he does not appear to have actually used these specific terms. Gramsci speaks of the party playing a coordinating role in regard to intellectuals:

The political party, for all groups is precisely the mechanism which carries out in civil society the same function as the state carries out, more synthetically and over a larger scale, in political society. In other words it is responsible for welding together the organic intellectuals of a given group-the dominant one-and the traditional intellectuals. The party carries out this function in strict dependence on its basic function, which is that of elaborating its own component parts-those elements of a social group which has been born and developed as an `economic group'- and of turning them into qualified political intellectuals, leaders and organisers of all the activities and functions inherent in the organic development of an integral society, both civil and political. Indeed it can be said that within its field the political party accomplishes its function more completely and organically than the state does within its admittedly far larger field. An intellectual who joins the political party of a particular social group is merged with the organic intellectuals of the group itself, and is linked tightly with the group. This takes place through participation in the life of the state only to a limited degree and often not at all…. (1971, 15-16)

Throughout the history of the liberation movement intellectuals trained through conventional means have been drawn into the ANC and SACP. That one is trained as a priest or a lawyer or teacher does not mean that one is automatically equipped to contribute intellectually to the development of the political party or national liberation movement in the various terrains on which it operates. The processes of interaction between these intellectuals in the structures of the organisation is one way in which book knowledge drawn from formal institutions is transformed into political understanding, which in combination and debate with others becomes part of the intellectual input of the organisation. What is required varies from time to time. Thus Joe Slovo and Joe Matthews (who later left the ANC and SACP) were trained as lawyers and were theorists in the Communist Party, and became theorists of guerrilla warfare. In the period of negotiations, Slovo had again to convert his theoretical expertise into settlements and transition.

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21 Initially political prisoners were denied legal access to newspapers. Prisoners on Robben Island were fairly successful in smuggling these. In the late 1970s the white political prisoners in Pretoria brought an unsuccessful court action to secure access to newspapers, but after losing the case repeatedly right up to the Appellate Division, all the political prisoners gradually ‘won the war’. Access to more and more news was allowed, culminating in access to all newspapers. But when the present writer was held on a second occasion, under the state of emergency from 1986 to 1988, newspapers were again banned, though being located in a prison where there were ordinary criminals, made smuggling fairly easy. (Cf Suttner, 2001).
The process of acquiring a university qualification is in the main an individual process. A student sits in the library and at home, attends classes and writes examinations as an individual. If the person passes an examination that means he or she has a certificate or degree and conforms to the conventional characterisation of an intellectual. For a political party something more than this is required and it can only be acquired through collective work. Many of the qualities required for obtaining formal qualifications remain applicable—the need to read and study. But there is a much greater collective involvement and the idea is to make the insights derived, not part of the body of organic intellectuals alone, but the membership as a whole. Gramsci writes:

One should stress the importance and significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world, because essentially what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and act as it were as their historical ‘laboratory’. The parties recruit individuals out of the working mass, and the selection is made on practical and theoretical criteria at the same time. The relation between theory and practice becomes even closer the more the conception is vitally and radically innovatory and opposed to old ways of thinking. For this reason one can say that the parties are the elaborators of a new integral and totalitarian intelligentsias and the crucibles where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place. It is clear from this that the parties should be formed by individual memberships and not on the pattern of the British Labour Party, because, if it is a question of providing an organic leadership for the entire economically active mass, this leadership should not follow old schemas but should innovate. But innovation cannot come from the mass, at least at the beginning, except through the mediation of an elite for whom the conception implicit in human activity has already become to a certain degree a coherent and systematic ever-present awareness and a precise and decisive will. (1971, 335)

Referring to the ‘modern Prince’ or communist party, Gramsci sees the organisation as

the proclaimers and organisers of an intellectual and moral reformation, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realisation of a superior, total form of modern civilization.

These two basic points—the formation of a national-popular collective will, of which the modern Prince is at once and the same time the organiser and the active, operative expression; and intellectual and moral reformation should structure the entire work. (1971,132-3)

In this passage one can see an emphasis especially relevant to a movement, which proclaimed its task as unifying a broad range of people behind a common programme in order to end apartheid. It accords with the early sentiments of Seme prior to the founding of the ANC and later attempts of the ANC to depict itself as the embodiment of the nation in the making.

But the argument presented here is that a political party can perform the role of a ‘collective intellectual’ in another sense and that has special importance in the context of the South African liberation struggle. This is where a political party or national liberation movement periodically intervenes and—as a collective—performs an intellectual

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22 Gramsci uses the word ‘totalitarian’ not ‘in its modern sense, but as meaning simultaneously “unified” and “all-absorbing”. (Editor’s footnotes, 1971,335, note 20).
role. This may be through collectively generated policy documents or strategic interventions or radio broadcasts and other media. What is essentially intellectual about these interventions is that they give meaning to events, conditions, situations, that may appear to be fairly settled or alternatively, to have suddenly changed. The intervention generally also tends to provide direction as to what can be done or should be done in relation to this set of conditions. This is at once a conjunctural analysis and usually also a tactical and strategic intervention. (Cf for example, ANC, 169).

The intervention may be directed at the organisation’s membership and followers or the public at large. It is meant to be an interpretation as well as a guide. It is a consensus of the body of intellectuals within the party or of a party that has become a body of intellectuals. But that does not signify an unproblematic intervention starting from within the party itself. Every consensus represents a result of struggle, not a simple translation of what is already there. Consensus is not the same as absolute agreement and most products of consensus are themselves subject to further struggle.

**ANC acting as ‘collective intellectual’ through its strategy and tactics document of 1969**

It has been argued that the ANC and its allies through interventions via documentation and other media, from time to time initiated or entered into debates, gave meaning to situations and through this acted as a ‘collective intellectual’. One important illustration of this phenomenon was at the time of the Morogoro consultative conference in Tanzania, called at a time of crisis and demoralisation in 1969. The crisis related not only to events immediately preceding the conference but also to the entire situation following the banning of the ANC and its hasty organisation underground, initiation of armed struggle and the subsequent arrest of much of its top leadership.

The re-establishment of the organisation in exile was a slow process, partly because the ANC was at first over-optimistic in its expectations of a return to South Africa. It was only in 1967 that the ANC headquarters was acknowledged to be outside the country.

The immediate result of the Rivonia arrests and subsequent ‘mopping up’ trials of less senior operatives were to create an atmosphere of overwhelming power on the part of the apartheid state. Very faltering steps to re-establish a presence inside and outside the country on the part of the liberation movement did not initially have great impact. This perception of state invincibility was partly exaggerated but nevertheless corresponded to what many of the organisation’s supporters believed to be the case. They did not see much hope of a way out of the apparent defeat of the liberation movement.

Outside, with many cadres receiving advanced military training, there was some impatience in just waiting. Military action was initiated through engaging Rhodesian forces, together with ZAPU\(^\text{23}\), with a view to fighting their way through to South Africa.

\(^{23}\) The Zimbabwe African Peoples’ Union, under the leadership of then imprisoned Joshua Nkomo, later to merge with ZANU (PF), under Robert Mugabe.
This was in two campaigns in 1967 and 1968, where despite some impressive showings, the overall impact was limited or even negative. This was partly because the ZAPU guerrillas with whom MK fought were themselves unfamiliar with the local terrain in the part of Rhodesia where they entered.

In their retreat from the battlefield, many cadres sought refuge in Botswana but were arrested and sentenced to some years in prison. On their return to Dar-es-Salaam there was considerable anger and dissatisfaction and a memorandum (known as the ‘Chris Hani memorandum’ was produced criticising the leadership for over-emphasising diplomacy at the expense of armed struggle. (Cf Shubin, 1999).

At the same time, the ANC and other southern African liberation movements experienced a serious diplomatic reverse with the adoption of the Lusaka manifesto –decided by states of the region, over the heads of and without consulting the liberation movements themselves and calling for negotiations with the apartheid regime as a way of solving the conflict. (Karis and Gerhart, 1997). This was at a time when the emphasis of the liberation movements themselves was on the necessity to show their strength through military and other struggles.

The conference met in an atmosphere of considerable demoralisation and some division amongst the exiled community as well as some despondency within the country. The Strategy and Tactics document sought to address that situation. Many of its formulations may have been superseded by events or proven to be wrong. But it was nevertheless an intellectual intervention by an organisation, an intervention that served to empower people, to instil in them a sense that the enemy was not invincible and could in fact be defeated –albeit through a protracted struggle on many fronts.

The document sets the scene by answering the question whether it had embarked on armed struggle too late. There had been talk of ‘fighting back’ and taking up arms since the early 1950s, with Nelson Mandela secretly asking Walter Sisulu to sound out the Chinese during an overseas visit over the possible supply of arms. (Mandela, 1994, Elinor Sisulu, 2002). Likewise, people in the Northern Transvaal spent much time discussing the Kenyan guerrilla experience (Delius, 1996, and interview with John Nkadimeng (interview, 2003) and others in the Eastern Cape were talking some time before 1961 of taking up arms. (Cf Mhlaba, 2001) In fact, many did `jump the gun’ and started burning down the cane fields in then Natal, in the late 1950s. (Bonner et al, unpub 2003). Why then did the ANC delay its decision until 1961:

Why was the decision for armed struggle taken in 1961? Why not 1951 or 1941 or 1931? Is it that the character of the state had so altered fundamentally that only in 1961 did armed struggle become the only alternative? Not at all. There has never been a moment in the history of South Africa since 1952 in which the White ruling class would have given privileges without a physical battle. Why then did organisations like the African National Congress not call for armed struggle? Was it perhaps that they were not really revolutionary or that it was only in the early ’60s that they began to appreciate the

24 Regarding successes, cf Karis and Gerhart, 1997, 27
25 Hani refers to the assassinated MK commander and leader of the SACP, who faced the possibility of being sentenced to death after submitting this memorandum. (Cf Shubin, 1999)
correct strategy? Is there substance in the accusations by some of our detractors that until the early
sixties the liberation movement was lacking in military fervour and the desire for radical change? In
other words was its policy not a revolutionary one? What is our measuring rod for revolutionary
policy? 

To ignore the real situation and to play about with imaginary forces, concepts and ideals is to invite
failure. The art of revolutionary leadership consists in providing leadership to the masses and not just
to its most advanced elements: it consists of setting a pace which accords with objective conditions
and the real possibilities at hand. The revolutionary-sounding phrase does not always reflect
revolutionary policy, and revolutionary-sounding policy is not always the spring-board for revolutionary advance. Indeed, what appears to be ’militant’ and ’revolutionary’ can often be
counter-revolutionary. It is surely a question of whether, in the given concrete situation, the course or
policy advocated will aid or impede the prospects of the conquest of power. In this-the only test, the
advocacy of armed struggle can, in some situations, be as counter-revolutionary as the advocacy of its
opposite in other situations. Ultimately, ill planned or premature manifestations of violence impede
and do not advance the prospect for revolutionary change and are clearly counter-
revolutionary…. (ANC, 1969)

The document proceeds to outline the then current approach to guerrilla warfare. What is
important for our present purposes is how it then speaks into the question of the strength
and weaknesses of the enemy’. This is important because it had been some decades
since the oppressed people of South Africa had faced colonial conquerors in warfare. Now it was facing a modern state, well equipped with a relatively advanced, industrial base.

On the face of it the enemy is in stable command of a rich and varied economy which, even at this
stage when it is not required to extend itself, can afford an enormous military budget. He has a
relatively well-trained and efficient army and police force. He can draw on fairly large manpower
resources. In addition the major imperialist powers…who have an enormous stake in the economy of
our country constitute a formidable support for the Apartheid regime. Already now before the crisis
depens the imperialist partners of South Africa have done much to develop the economy and
armament programme of South Africa. In a situation of crisis they may pass over from support to
active intervention to save the racist regime.

If there is one lesson that the history of guerrilla struggle has taught it is that the material strength and
resources of the enemy is by no means a decisive factor. Guerrilla warfare almost by definition
presents a situation in which there is a vast imbalance of material and military resource between the
opposing sides. It is designed to cope with the situation in which the enemy is infinitely superior in
relation to every conventional factor of warfare. It is par excellence the weapon of the materially
weak against the materially strong. Given its popular character and given a population which
increasingly sides with and shields the guerrilla whilst at the same time opposing and exposing the
enemy, the survival and growth of a people’ army is assured by the skilful exercise of tactics.
Surprise, mobility and tactical retreat should make it difficult for the enemy to bring into play its
superior fire-power in any decisive battles. No individual battle is fought in circumstances favourable
to the enemy. Superior forces can thus be harassed, weakened and, in the end, destroyed. The absence
of an orthodox front, of fighting lines; the need of the enemy to attenuate his resources and lines of
communication over vast areas; the need to protect the widely scattered installations on which its
economy is dependent; these are among the factors which serve in the long run to compensate in
favour of the guerrilla for the disparity in the starting strength of the adversaries. The words ’in the
long run’ must be stressed because it would be idle to dispute the considerable military advantages to
the enemy of his high level industrialisation, his ready-to hand reserves of white manpower and his
excellent roads, railways and air transport which facilitate swift manoeuvres and speedy concentration
of personnel. But we must not overlook the fact that over a period of time many of these unfavourable factors will begin to operate in favour of the liberation forces. (150-51)

The document elaborates further, but it is not necessary for our purposes to pursue this. What is important for the argument presented here is that this is an intellectual intervention, it gives meaning to a series of events, situations and a range of forces in a way that empowers the popular masses or, given what was known and believed at the time, it made sense. It may well be that many of these formulations were modified or had to be abandoned, but it remains an intervention of a liberation movement acting as a collective intellectual.

The intervention served as an antidote to those who saw no hope, who analysed the power relationship between oppressor and oppressed as one that could never be reversed. It was a basis for many people to have their commitment to struggle reinvigorated. Others joined the organisation on the basis of this analysis because it was seen as providing a meaningful and convincing appraisal of how the struggle might unfold and that joining the ranks might not be futile.

Over the years that followed there were many such interventions, though this may have been one of the more powerful. The later interventions had significance mainly because they spoke into changed situations and new possibilities. One of the most famous interventions was when the ANC leadership called on the people of South Africa to make apartheid ‘unworkable’ and South Africa ‘ungovernable’. Much of this reached activists through the ANC’s illegally broadcast Radio Freedom, on the air every evening at 7 p.m. For a while there was ungovernability and one of the reasons why a negotiated settlement became possible was because, while the forces of resistance could not defeat the apartheid regime, governability was not possible or sustainable.

The importance of these interventions, which can all be characterised as intellectual interventions, was that they sensed the mood of the masses, the disarray in the ranks of the regime and offered arguments and slogans that could be realised. In some cases, like the call for establishment of embryonic organs of ‘People’s Power’, the action on the ground took shape in a way that could not be envisaged in Lusaka. Nevertheless, the ANC provided the overall strategic direction within which these cadres acted.

This was done with especial potency in the annual January 8 statement of the ANC, delivered by its president on the day of the organisation’s anniversary, providing a conjunctural analysis as well as ‘tasks’ for various sectors.

The Communist Party throughout this period was also producing literature of various sorts, underground publications, illegal journals and various statements. Some of these made a direct impact on the ANC, as can be seen by the latter’s adoption of the ‘Colonialism of a Special Type’ thesis as a way of explaining the South African social formation.
Consensus and contestation in producing an intellectual product

The intellectual products of the liberation movement were a result of debate and contestation. It is true that the degree of debate amongst the membership may not always have filtered through into decision-making and policy formulation at a leadership level. There was debate at all levels, sometimes starting in Maputo, passing on to Angola, then to Lusaka and so on (Interview Pallo Jordan, 2003). But having debate is obviously not the same as debate that feeds into a decision. The degree to which the membership has been involved has varied, depending on the conditions of the time. In the exile period, where there was a considerable security threat, the tendency was for decisions to be made at the top and communicated downwards. But in crisis situations, dissatisfaction or ‘rumblings’ amongst the membership resulted on occasions in general meetings and consultative conferences with de facto powers to make decisions. This was the case in 1969 and again in 1985 after a mutiny had been suppressed.

That decisions may have been made at the top did not mean the consensus that was formed was unproblematically achieved or that it represented a decision or statement or viewpoint that was open to only one interpretation. The ANC speaks of itself as a broad church embracing various tendencies and it has for some time had within its ranks people with a variety of political tendencies. In ANC matters, it is not however uncommon for some who are supposed to come from the same tendency to disagree with one another when ‘wearing their ANC hat’. Thus Communists did not always speak with one voice, though it appears this was the case at one stage when operating underground in the 1950s. (Interview Kathrada, Mtshali, Billy Nair, 2003. See also Turok, 2003).

At some stages there were important differences in emphasis related to the extent to which the Party saw itself as an independent organisation or whether it lost much of its independent existence in relation to the ANC (Cf Suttner 2004).

But there were divergences over how to conduct the struggle throughout the ANC’s history and in the exile period over the type of military campaign to wage, how it should be combined with political struggle, and what the organisational implications should be

New conjuncture after 1990 and again after 1994

The character of organisational inputs into debates, the documentation that was produced was generally a result of a consensus that emerged within the ANC itself and in consultation with its ‘revolutionary alliance’ partners, SACP and SACTU (later replaced by COSATU). In the period prior to 1990 there was not significant divergence in the perspectives of the three partners.

The unbanning of the ANC and SACP created conditions, which placed strain on the relationships within and between the organisations. In the first place the ANC had to re-establish itself inside the country combining elements from a variety of different traditions. (Suttner, 2003). And the conditions under which negotiations were conducted caused tensions, especially amongst the military who were not all convinced
of the need to suspend armed action, and also amongst the mass democratic movement who resisted attempts at demobilisation or curbing mass-based activity.

The election of the ANC as leading force in government again created new relationships. The distinction between government and organisation became blurred. GEAR, (the acronym referring to the government’s conservative macro-economic policy, adopted in 1996), for example, was announced by government, but declared to be ANC policy before going through any process within the organisation or within the alliance. The ANC as organisation appeared to be less of a factor than the ANC in government and the membership appeared to have a very limited role between elections.

In the case of the alliance, increasingly the post 1994 period has seen the development of tensions over the relationship between its components. One of the reasons may be a blurring between the notion of ANC as government and ANC as organisation. It is not clear whether the SACP and COSATU are relating, in the alliance, to government or to an equal partner, as fellow organisations. If it is a relationship to government, as it increasingly appears to be, the SACP and COSATU may be cast more in the role of petitioners rather than equal partners.

The period has also seen volatility deriving from electoral politics. Who are enemies and who are allies has reflected a degree of fluidity that was unimaginable some years back. The ANC formed an alliance with the Inkatha Freedom Party, responsible for many deaths of ANC/UDF supporters –but motivated by a much-needed desire for peace in the province. The organisation later also formed an alliance with the NNP, the former ruling party of the apartheid regime, (enabling it to share power in the Western Cape Province). This was depicted as part of a nation building process.

At the same time tensions between its alliance partners –the SACP and COSATU descended into public attacks. Documents were issued calling the SACP and COSATU ultra left and attacking their left credentials (Cf e.g. Moleketi and Jele, 2002). A minister commended Lenin’s Left Wing Communism-an infantile disorder, to COSATU. Ironically, and showing some of the complexity of the South African political scene, the particular minister was at that time a leader of the Communist Party.

But the trend is for yesterday’s allies to sometimes become opponents or be cast that way and yesterday’s enemies becoming allies. Significantly the discourse used by the ANC remains primarily Marxist or Brezhnevite Marxism in its attacks on its allies. Paradoxically it is the classic texts of Marx and Lenin that are deployed to defend the government’s macro-economic policies. The differences within the tripartite alliance are not irreparable, but they do indicate that there is no longer a sense of equality and the conditions of the relationship have been fundamentally altered.

What this also means is that the notion of a collective intellectual function may be restricted to the utterances of the ANC/government and insofar as SACP and Cosatu

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26 Many current ANC leaders, who have left the SACP, passed through the Lenin School during the Brezhnev period.
perform such functions it may tend to be more independently of the ANC, than in the past.

The theoretical basis for this collapse of the alliance as collective intellectual is interesting. The ANC depicts itself as a broad church, meaning that it is open to people from a variety of political tendencies –Christians, Communists, African nationalists, capitalists and so on. But the notion of a broad church or any church also implies priesthood, often with superior powers of scriptural interpretation. That notion may symbolically be represented by the President or whoever is a leading theoretician, though that function may be dormant in certain phases and more prominent in others.

What has tended to happen in the post 1994 period however, is that statements of the leadership have often been presented as fait accompli or interpretations of leadership have not met with much challenge. This is partly because rightly or wrongly, powers of leadership are now associated with powers to make appointments that may carry prestige or high remuneration.

Consequently the authoritative statements of certain leadership figures may limit debate within the ‘broad church’. The President himself, Thabo Mbeki is a leading intellectual, whose speeches have now been published in two books and appear regularly on the ANC website along with a weekly letter that he writes. (Mbeki, 1998, 2002). At the same time, these interventions do not appear to be part of a broad debate. They are more in the nature of ‘authoritative pronouncements’, carrying the weight of leadership.

Conclusion

There are many issues that preoccupy intellectuals on this continent that are important, but are not part of this enquiry. The paper does not seek to say anything about such issues as ‘speaking truth to power’, the relationship that individual intellectuals should have to a liberation movement or political party, how they should exercise an independent role and so on. These are different types of questions from those that have been examined.

The object of this paper has been to describe a relatively neglected process of intellectual formation and output, within the framework of a Gramscian paradigm. The value of Gramsci is that he redefines notions of education and intellectuals in a way that enable us to recognise such processes in experiences that normally do not ‘qualify’.

Much of the data presented demonstrates these intellectual and educational processes occurring, though it happens in an uneven way. The Robben Island Prison experience was obviously much more structured as a process of intellectual creation and intellectual production than the period that preceded it and many others that followed, though all are examples of such processes. The prison experience is unique for it is inherently more structured and concentrated than any processes can be in ‘normal life’. This meant that

27 I am indebted to David Masondo for raising this at a seminar I presented in 2002
some educational objectives could be achieved there, possibly much more easily than outside.

There is much more to be added and developed, and it is hoped that the discussion will help take this contribution further.

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