Anti-Apartheid, Anti-Capitalism, and Anti-Imperialism: Liberation in South Africa

The first Mandela was Jesus Christ. The Second was Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The third Nelson Mandela are the poor people of the world.

(S’bu Zikode, a leader of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the South African shack dwellers movement, quoted in Gibson 2006: 12)

Introduction

On 16 August 2012, heavily armed South African police ambushed and hunted down striking mine workers. They killed 34 miners, wounded another 78 and then arrested a further 177 strikers, incredibly charging them with murder. The miners worked at Marikana platinum mine owned by British company Lonmin, and were on strike for a living wage (Alexander et al. 2012). A tough hand had been called for by Cyril Ramaphosa, once a leader of the miners union, but now a multi-millionaire and a Lonmin shareholder. The Marikana Massacre was a turning point, demonstrating beyond reasonable doubt that the ANC Government sides with big business against the workers.

Little over a year later, on 5 December 2013, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, the personification of dignified resistance to apartheid, and his country's first democratically elected president, died aged 94 years. The world’s media recalled Mandela’s role in leading the ANC liberation struggle, his 27 years in prison, and dwelt at length on the generosity of his spirit in the reconciliation with his former oppressors. Honouring a great man whom they had spent decades fighting was not simple hypocrisy; we do not cover vital related topics including especially the struggle experiences of the African masses, South Africa’s occupation of Namibia, and wars against the Frontline States, the impact of the divestment movement led by African Americans, and the role of the US and international finance in apartheid’s end game, all of which are needed for a rounded picture.

To bracket the Marikana Massacre with Mandela’s passing captures the deep ambiguities of contemporary South Africa, where apartheid has gone but capitalism seems as entrenched as ever. What had the liberation struggled achieved? Where did it go wrong? What still needs to be done? Those who see Mandela as untouchable locate the problem as a post-Mandela degeneration in presidents Mbeki and Zuma. Others see the deal that Mandela struck as the source of the problem, delivering an end to apartheid but on terms that guaranteed private ownership of the means of production. In the early 1990s, the ANC leaders certainly felt faced with a stark choice between a pragmatic peace and revolutionary war. Was the ANC’s strategy wrong, or was it just as far as it could get given the balance of forces?

This essay takes the long view on these questions, outlining a series of critical debates concerning the relations between apartheid, capitalism, and imperialism. We focus on the connections between theoretical perspectives and movement strategies, with special reference to the nexus between British imperialism and capitalism in South Africa. Our lens excludes as it magnifies; we do not cover vital related topics including especially the struggle experiences of the African masses, South Africa’s occupation of Namibia, and wars against the Frontline States, the impact of the divestment movement led by African Americans, and the role of the US and international finance in apartheid’s end game, all of which are needed for a rounded picture.

The theoretical perspectives considered are successively anti-imperialist, anti-apartheid, and anti-capitalist. The essay argues that a new synthesis of these perspectives is possible and necessary. The nub of the debate is the dominant, orthodox, communist strategy of transition summed up in the term ‘national democratic revolution’. We will see ‘national democratic revolution’ had two distinct versions rooted, ultimately, in distinct class interests, and that the concept needs to be rescued from the pro-bourgeois, orthodox communist version. The essay concludes that South Africa today is a particular case of neo-colonial capitalism generating particular forms of resistance that involve fighting racism and imperialism on class terms.

South Africa and theories of imperialism

The conquest and domination of African peoples in southern Africa feature in the classical Marxist theories of imperialism. Beyond the direct reportage and commentary by Hobson (1900; 1988/1902), the Marxists Hilferding...