

From the National Question to the Social Question

Introduction

Let me first thank the Harold Wolpe Trust and the organisers of the seminar for inviting me to give this lecture in honour of a man whom I have held in the highest esteem. I never met Harold Wolpe but, like many members of my generation, I knew of his Scarlet Pimpernel escapades not as a rescuer of the aristocracy but as a champion of the downtrodden, his deep commitment to liberation, and his prodigious and rigorous intellectual work. I do not know what he would think about what I will be saying, but the underlying theme of my paper—the tensions between race and class, between vertical and horizontal inequalities, between the “national” and “social” questions—would be familiar terrain for him, and one that he definitely addressed with greater rigour than I am able to.

I am aware that the questions I am addressing are very old-fashioned. Nationalism and its questions do not enjoy as much favourable attention as they did only four decades ago. The many civil wars, genocides and “ethnic cleansing”, the gross mismanagement of national affairs by erstwhile national heroes and the weakening of the capacity of the nation-state have conspired to severely tarnish the image of nationalism. In addition, cosmopolitan ideologies, the emergence of new transnational actors and new social movements suggest that nationalism and the movements it inspired belong to museums, if not in the dustbins of history. We have been told that concerns relating to the “national question” have been replaced by weighty “discourses” on such weighty issues as transnationalism, borderlands, globalization, ethnoscares, diversity, diasporas, marginality and even “rainbows”. Some argue that even the very idea of posing the “national” or “social” questions is wrong-headed *ab initio* because (a) it is premised on the enlightenment ideas of progress and other associated totalizing meta-narratives that deny diversity, difference contingency, etc.; (b) it essentialises social categories by attributing to them or posing to them questions they are presumably predestined to ask; and (c) finally since nationalism was “invented” or “imagined” and was thus highly contingent and unpredictable, it did not warrant much attention beyond its deconstruction.

It is quite obvious that I hold a different view and that I find much this scholarship, with both its feet firmly off the ground, aloof, cynical and patronising. By its cynicism, such scholarship tends to occlude political economy and, a fortiori, does not help us in mapping the way forward. I was therefore relieved to see these questions occupy pride of place in the

National Question 2

seminars and conferences thus far held in honour of Harold Wolpe. One factor behind my choice of the topic for this meeting held in South Africa was the alarming despondency that one detects in the literature on the country. For years, many observers of Africa have been afflicted by Afropessimism, captured by the title of a recent journalistic account of the post-independence saga: *The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair* (Meredith 2005). The “heart of darkness” had transmogrified into the “heart of despair”. I somehow felt the disease was spreading fast towards the south, especially to South Africa. This is captured in a more academic vein by John Saul whose *cris de coeur* is poignant in this respect:

A tragedy is being enacted in South Africa, as much a metaphor for our times as Rwanda and Yugoslavia and, even if not so immediately searing of the spirit, it is perhaps a more revealing one. For in the teeth of high expectations arising from the successful struggle against a malignant apartheid state, a very large percentage of the population—among them many of the most desperately poor in the world—are being sacrificed on the altar of the neo-liberal logic of global capitalism (Saul 2001).

A surprising number of other publications have made the same point.

Because of the failure of African nationalism even on its own terms and its mystification in official historiography, there is a whole literature deconstructing and demystifying nationalist struggles. This is of course a useful exercise, especially if it also happens to be well-informed, which it rarely is. I am not a historian, but from what I read about the few cases with which I am familiar, I believe the more recent accounts of nationalism do not do justice to the complexities of the post-colonial history of nationalism. I will suggest that part of the problem stems either from the conflation of the two questions or simply a preference for answering only one of them and eliding the question deemed uninteresting. In much of this writing, nationalist movements are discussed in terms of not what they were or said, but in terms of what they were not and did not say. I also suspect teleology has a lot to do with despondency.

An obvious point of departure is the definition of the principal terms of the paper—namely, the national question and the social question. The national question has always been closely associated with the history of oppressed or colonised peoples. For much of the twentieth century, the national question involved first, simply asserting one’s humanity or the *presence africaine* as the title of the main outlet of Negritude writing suggested; second, the acquisition of independence, and third, maintaining the unity and territorial integrity of the

National Question 3

new state. National identity, whether based on ethnicity or not, always contains a territorial component. It does not matter how the borders of that territory were drawn. In the post-colonial period the problem was simply “how to hold the country together” (Wallerstein 1961: 95). The central premise of African nationalism was that national independence could be achieved within the confines of the colonial delimited territory. In its full sense, the social question addresses problems engendered by social differentiation along class, ethnicity, gender and other social cleavages that arise or are unresolved within a nation. In the nineteenth century, the social question, or *Die Soziale Frage* as the German called it, was how to secure economic progress in light of the political and moral threat posed by the condition of the working class. Not surprisingly, it was mainly concerned with living and working conditions, and labour organizations and their political and organizational capacity (Beck 1995; McClelland 1973).

There are certain affinities between the nation building and social policies intended to address the respective questions. Perhaps the most widely cited case of the affinity is the Bismarkian welfare state which was intended to pre-empt the radicalisation of the labour movement and strengthen the recent unification of Germany by establishing the superiority of the Prussian state over other institutions such as the church. Significantly the intellectuals behind this welfare project were students of Hegel, who advocated giving the state a pre-eminent role in the construction of the nation.¹ This should remind us that there is nothing radical with focusing on the social question. It may be a conservative intention to pre-empt social unrest—a kind teleological foresight. In Germany conservative thought played an important role because, at the core of its understanding of the social question, were fears of an organisational breakdown of society (Beck 1995). And today, a considerable amount of attention paid to the social question (for example, poverty reduction strategies and the new focus on social security in developing countries) is driven by security concerns about “failed states” as potential havens of terrorism. As I will suggest below, a number of policies aimed at addressing either of these questions may seem similar. However, it is important to bear in

¹ It is often forgotten that it was Hegel who laid the theoretical foundations for the German discourse on the social embedding of the markets. Hegel’s fear was that the emerging marketing system would be destructive and create a “rabble” that would be a threat to social order. These ideas were taken up by the Young Hegelians under the influence of the German historicist school. They argued that social reforms were essential for pre-empting social revolutions and that only institutions that stood above the contending classes—the bureaucracy in their case—would take up the challenge. The basic concern was the social question and the reconciliation of economic dynamism and social cohesion (Ebner 2006; Lehmbuch 2001).

mind the normative bases of these policies because these bases establish the political salience and social resonance of the policies.

Implicit in the title of my lecture is the need to look beyond the national question.² Given the chequered history of nationalism, suggesting that one go beyond it must seem an easy and obvious option. And in any case in this age of “posts”, one more “post”—post-nationalism—would not be totally out of place. Transcending nationalism does not necessarily always promise better things. In the African case, the many alternatives to nationalism have been disastrous—whether these take the form of ethnic sub-nationalism, idiosyncratic socialism or mimetic internationalism, religious particularism or neoliberal globalism. We are all now familiar enough with the rather protean notion of failed states to appreciate that failure to address key aspects of the national question can lead to disaster. The greatest disasters in Africa have been when elites have failed to resolve or simply compounded the national question. Therefore, before going beyond the national question, it is necessary to take stock of the actual agenda of the nationalist movements and to identify items of the agenda that are still relevant or have a progressive thrust.

A Betrayal Foretold?

There is today a steady flow of writing that is bitterly critical of the nationalists who have assumed office in countries of Southern Africa during the last two decades. Much of this criticism of “comrades in power” (if not in business) is not new. An earlier critique of nationalists came from the fiery pen of Frantz Fanon. The “pitfalls of national consciousness”, as Fanon (Fanon 1966) termed them, is a recurring theme in much of African literature. African novels such as *A Wreath for Udomo*, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Petals of Blood* or *Les Soleils des indépendances*, to name a few, tell the story with passion. To Nkrumah’s injunction, “Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all else shall be added unto you”, Chinua Achebe retorted 30 years later, “We sought the ‘political kingdom’ and nothing has been added unto us; a lot has been taken away”. In earlier unofficial Marxist and neo-Marxist literature, nationalists were seen essentially as petty bourgeoisie who had mobilised the masses for their own good or who were condemned to the pursuit of tawdry “developmentalism”, if that. In

² The theme of going beyond the national question is not a new one. In the 1980s, many African scholars, such as Anyang (Nyong’o 1987), Mamdani, Mkandawire and [Wambia dia Wamba \(Mamdani, Mkandawire, and Wambia Dia Wamba 1988\)](#) began to raise issues of social movements and democratisation in a quest for “the second independence”  (Is there a citation to go into the parentheses? Otherwise delete).

National Question 5

the dependency school or neo-Marxism, the central criticism was focused on the failure to deepen economic independence. In the less generous views, nationalists were seen as unwitting agents of the colonialists with the “decolonisation” project seen as something stage-managed to produce neocolonial states.

This Fanonian criticism of nationalism has been evoked in more recent years with respect to the latecomers of South Africa and Namibia. But, as Neil Lazarus (Lazarus) rightly points out, Fanon’s critique of “bourgeois nationalism” was itself delivered from an alternative nationalist standpoint. It never degenerated into the kind of ontological despair akin to the Afropessimism of the 1990s. Similarly, much of the neo-Marxist criticism, especially the dependency theory, drew its inspiration from nationalism, earning itself the derisive sobriquet of “radical nationalism” among the more orthodox Marxists. If the earlier criticisms of nationalism were a reflection of revolutionary voluntarism, the new one seems informed by either a debilitating ontological despair or a teleological mindset which obliges researchers to spend considerable time trying to untangle the self-imposed puzzle of why various social classes invariably fail to play their historically assigned roles.

In the case of much of Africa, we were faced with two teleologies: one propagated by the nationalists in power who argued, often in hagiographical form, that every anticolonial movement presaged their ascendancy to power and was a logical and inevitable step towards the nation-state. Often this has involved retrofitting the nationalist agenda to conform to the current agenda. The other teleology suggested that the real subaltern agenda of nationalism was populist, “grassroot democratic” or radical. Nationalism is seen as an essentialising and totalising ideology that rode roughshod over all putatively more democratically anchored movements. In this narrative, before independence there were many social movements that had strong popular roots and that posed a challenge to the entire colonial order. Sometimes there was the unstated presumption that the original nationalist coalitions had placed society on some historical path from which it was subsequently derailed by cunning petty bourgeois elements, and that the heterogeneity of the nationalist movements meant that there were a multiplicity of alternative futures. The current crisis of the state is simply evidence that, underneath the artificially constructed “unity”, there were different and conflicting agendas. The differences highlighted include ethnicity, age, gender, class and religion. In the more extreme versions, the nationalists in power are seen as merely having struggled for the

assumption of state power—deracialising it rather than transforming, let alone dismantling, it. In the “rational choice” version, nationalism was merely a camouflage of the emergent urban interests who, in pursuit of future rents, rose against the colonialists who they felt were blocking their access to such rents (Bates 1981). This view of nationalist coalitions as simply cabals of rent-seekers was then used to explain post-colonial dirigisme and economic crisis of the 1980s. Such a perspective is not historically tenable simply because the groups that were to benefit from the policies pursued by the nationalists did not exist in any significant numbers at the time of independence and were largely spawned by the process of post-colonial industrialisation. A new position in response to this was that the nationalists were fallen angels, initially decent but later corrupted by power.

Nationalist movements and their respective agendas were not entirely progressive or reactionary. They were creations of an excruciatingly slow process that sometimes lasted decades and were not merely used by the elites as a manipulative tool. The masses were not merely pawns in the nationalist project. The resonance of nationalism came from the fact that it addressed some of their grievances and pointed to their commonality and pervasiveness in both the country as defined by the colonial masters and beyond. Colonialism as a conquering force was initially resisted by various nationalities and kingdoms as foreign domination. Some of these struggles continued in one form or another even after “pacification”. Some were later to become the cornerstones of the nationalist struggle. The emerging indigenous elites expressed initial signs of nationalism through protests against the non-recognition of their newly acquired knowledge and capabilities by the colonial powers. Thus, early forms of urban protest were essentially what Charles Taylor refers to as the “politics of recognition” (Taylor 1994), aimed at the acquisition of civil rights and the rights for autonomous spaces for self-organisation. The incipient modern elite demanded special treatment and the end of colour bar. Failure by these groups to have their grievances addressed by colonial rule and their recognition of the oxymoronic aspiration of status equality with one’s colonial masters, forced them to widen their recruitment base and take on more issues. In the settler economy, the “race question” and the “land question” were to occupy a central role in the national question.³

³ Or as Sam Moyo, for instance, has argued: “Land reform is a fundamental dimension of the agrarian question, while the agrarian question is a fundamental dimension of the national question” (Moyo 2004).

National Question 7

Most movements claimed to draw lessons from past attempts to overthrow colonial rule. One lesson was that it was necessary to have as broad an agenda as possible and eschew what they considered “parochial” interests. They were thus pushed towards a more nationalist direction, bringing the various ethnic grievances into one national programme. In addition, there were two other imperatives. The first was the understanding in the post–World War II period that much of the decolonisation would involve general elections. Since the nationalists had championed “one man one vote”, the peasant vote would be decisive. Second, the colonialists claimed that they were prolonging colonial rule because the “natives” were divided, and handing independence to such a divided society would be tantamount to criminal dereliction of duty. The nationalists therefore had to demonstrate that they were united. It was thus that liberal democracy was added to the nationalist agenda.

When colonial rule was intransigent and did not concede to the liberal agenda, nationalist movements resorted to armed struggle where appeals to mass support were important. The more prolonged the struggle, the sharper the link between capitalism and colonial and racial manifestations—an articulation poignantly formalised by Wolpe in his many works. This, in turn, led to a more radical and progressive agenda. In this last phase, the nationalist movements may have been closely linked with Leftist or Marxist movements, but such a link was tenuous.

The point here is not to argue that nationalist movements did not pay much attention to the social question: they did. First, colonial rule tended to result in both questions being raised quite strongly, and second, nationalism always has had a social dimension. However, the social question was seen as secondary to the national question. It is important to bear in mind that class analysis was never fully embraced by nationalist movements. Nationalism more often sought to separate the national from the social question. In general, nationalist movements everywhere have, for strategic and tactical reasons, avoided posing the problem in a manner that might pit one group against another, the belief being that it could be divisive and only distract and destabilize the nationalist movement.⁴ The national struggle required the allegiance of every possible sector of society and that, as Nkrumah had argued, only after the “political kingdom” had been won could other social issues be addressed.

⁴ This, of course, not a peculiarly African trait. On the similar stance taken by the Irish nationalists, see Nelson (Nelson 2004).

Implementing the Agenda

By the time of independence the nationalists had drawn up a long agenda, as could be seen from the election manifestos and party programmes. How was this agenda to be addressed? Let me borrow from the language of inventory accounting. Two methods of recording inventory are often contrasted: the “first in, first out” (FIFO) method and “last in, first out” (LIFO) method. In the FIFO method, the first items purchased are the first ones sold, while in the LIFO method, the last items purchased are the first to go. The nationalists seemed to work on the LIFO method of keeping inventory. The last item that entered the nationalist agenda—democracy or socialism—was the first to go, not because of class treachery but partly because it was the least firmly embedded in the nationalist agenda. Second, the item may have had a muted resonance, accounting for its tenuous position on the agenda. The third reason was, quite frankly, that it was the elite that put it on the agenda in the first place. With respect to socialism, Amílcar Cabral had expressed the hope that, after independence, the elite would “commit class suicide” as part of their commitment to socialism. However, this was so sociologically implausible that it ought not to have been given much attention.

No sooner had the flag been raised that the new states were faced with new aspects of the national question and clear signs of the social question. Odinga’s *Not Yet Uburu* (Odinga 1967) and René Dumont’s *False Start in Africa* (Dumont 1969) were the more popular expressions of the emerging social question. The new social question in post-colonial Africa included as key elements, the problem of growing inequality; the persistence of the scourge of what the nationalists referred to as the “unholy trinity of ignorance, poverty and disease”; growing urban poverty in the face of capital-intensive industrialization; an “agrarian crisis” that was wrongly described as the “food crisis”; and growing ethnic tension exacerbated by processes of uneven development and political manipulation. In countries of Southern Africa, the race divide remained a significant social problem. It was also clear from experiences in other countries, especially those of Asia and Latin America, that these social problems would become more acute.

A number of policies were adopted that addressed some of these issues. However, it is important to bear in mind that the normative basis of such policies was fundamentally nationalist. Not surprisingly, the items of the social question that were addressed were ones

related to the national question. A number of factors prevented the social question to take on a more pronounced role. In the context of emerging African nations, three major preoccupations coloured the agenda: the need to end past forms of racial and horizontal inequalities spawned by the uneven development during the colonial period, the need to maintain national sovereignty and dignity, and the need for nation building and development.

The Politics of Recognition Redux

We should recall that one of the earliest items on the nationalist agenda was an opposition to the colour bar. Many of the critics of the nationalists in power tend to mention race rather perfunctorily and almost as a minor irritant, so that even its removal is treated pejoratively as “mere deracialisation” of colonialism. In such work the racists simply disappear. When race does show up, it is merely a brief interlude in a process of continued apartheid which, while hiding its true colours, remains even after the nationalists have assumed power. Deracialising anything in Africa would have been an important step. But this is to forget that the shelf-life of this particular item is long. The “politics of recognition” has a number of implications. The first is that nationalism will tend to favour forms of redistribution that underplay the growing social differentiation within the nation while stressing differences or inequalities between citizens and foreigners or groups that have lorded over them in the past. Indeed this can encourage a focus on inter-national or inter-racial levelling while tolerating or even enhancing intra-racial or intra-national differences. In such a context, social policy is less likely to deal with class distributional issues than with race relational issues. This is a common feature of the politics of recognitions (Fraser 2000). Solidarity with one’s group might support a redistributive posture, but this will be attenuated by the larger issues of equality between one’s group and the hitherto dominant and privileged one. It does not help much to argue that the redistribution is not socialist or that it is creating a national bourgeoisie—that may indeed be the whole point! Most of the indigenisation programmes were carried out in full recognition that they could lead to inequality among the “indigenes”. In South Africa, the Black Empowerment programme is premised on this acceptance of intra-racial inequality. Mbeki justifies the support for a Black bourgeoisie thus:

As part of the realization of the aim to eradicate racism in our country, we must strive to create and strengthen a black capitalist class. ... I would like to urge, very strongly, that we abandon our embarrassment about the possibility of the emergence of successful and therefore prosperous black owners of productive property and think and act in a manner consistent with a realistic response to the real world. As part of our continuing struggle to wipe out the legacy of racism, we must work to ensure that there emerges a black bourgeoisie, whose presence within our economy and society will be part of the process of the deracialisation of the economy and society (Thabo Mbeki 1999).

Neo Simutanya may be right when he argues that “the promotion of the BEE and its vehement defence by the government exposes the class nature of the South African state and schisms within the tripartite alliance”(Simutanyi 2006), but it could just as well be simply a genuine reflection of nationalist aspirations. It is important to recall that the item he is evoking here has always been on the nationalist agenda. He is not conjuring something out of thin air. Mbeki had noted in 1984, when he was a rising star in the South African Communist Party (SACP) as well as the African National Congress (ANC), “The ANC is not a socialist party. It has never pretended to be one, it has never said it was, and it is not trying to be” (cited in MacDonald). What follows from this statement is that the society would be a class society—non-racial, yes, but classless no. It is interesting to note that in much of Africa, even the case for socialism was advanced not so much to solve the social question as to deal with the question of decolonisation of the post-colonial economy. Nyerere stated the problem most clearly in the following terms:

The question is not whether nationals control their economy but how they do so. The real ideological choice is between controlling the economy through domestic private enterprise, and doing so through some state or other collective institution.

But although this is an ideological choice, it is extremely doubtful whether it is a practical choice for African nationalists. The pragmatist in Africa will find that the real choice is a different one. He will find that the choice is between foreign ownership on the one hand and local collective ownership on the other. For I do not think there is a free state in Africa where there is sufficient local capital, or a sufficient number of entrepreneurs for locally based capitalism to dominate the economy. Private investment in Africa means overwhelmingly foreign private investment (cited in Saul 1973).

Nyerere was more explicit on the racial dimension of his socialism:

When asked in June 1997 about nationalization policies that his government had implemented during the 1970s, Nyerere replied that he had no choice. If he had left the country to the private sector, he argued, it would have become entirely Asian and this would have produced unacceptable racial conflicts (Aminzade 2003: 47).⁵

Orthodox class-based analyses often have problems reconciling the adherence to the nationalist agenda by workers and peasants. The failure to factor nationalism into the concrete consciousness of the social classes and how this ultimately shapes their concrete praxis is suggested by some of the responses to the assertion of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) that the “principal contradiction remains the national question” (Andreasson 2006).⁶ Presumably the intertwining of race and race/ethnic issues, a central features of all forms of racial domination, is somehow attributed to the national movements who are then blamed for distracting attention from “straightforward class focus” (Andreasson 2006: 315).⁷ Part of this criticism retrospectively downplays the centrality of the struggle against colonialism or racism in many class-based movements. It also involves a unilateral declaration of the end of struggle even when the key social actors have good reasons to believe those questions are unresolved.

Policies such as “indigenisation”, “Black Empowerment” and “Africanisation”, while exacerbating inequality, may be widely applauded because they address a historical injustice (racism). One should recall how the Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” tended to condone inequality “because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson 1983: 7). The policies may also be

⁵ For some nationalists, doing good was equated to doing well for oneself. President Jomo Kenyatta attacked one of his socialist detractors? by rhetorically saying: “We were together with Paul Ngei in jail. If you go to Ngei’s home, he has planted a lot of coffee and other crops. What have you done for yourself? If you go to Kubai’s home, he has a big house and has a nice shamba (farm). Kaggia, what have you done for yourself? We were together with Kungu Karumba in jail, now he is running his own buses. What have you done for yourself?” (cited in Kariuki 1974: 45)

⁶ As Andreasson (2006) insists “This sort of argumentation, which prioritizes national or racial/ethnic struggle over class struggle, is at the very least theoretically problematic for an ostensibly socialist organization”.

⁷ The remarks for Avineri may be appropriate here: “Socialism has thus been burdened with an anti-national bias, which, drawing on the universalist ideas of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, did not make it especially capable of meeting the challenges of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this blindness and in a very profound sense, Marxism shares this poverty with its rival, classical liberalism. Both, being offspring of the universalist ideas of the Enlightenment, have difficulties in perceiving and granting legitimacy to historical entities which cannot be subsumed under purely universal criteria” (Avineri 1991: 654-5).

popular because they raise the hopes of even those who do not immediately stand to gain. Albert Hirschman refers to this phenomenon as the “tunnel effect”. According to this, people tolerate increasing inequality because they interpret the rising of others’ incomes as simply signalling social mobility, and so they choose to patiently await their turn. But this cannot last forever. As Albert Hirschman notes:

As long as the tunnel effect lasts everybody thinks they are doing better, both those who have got rich and those who have not. ... But this tolerance is a loan which eventually expires. It is granted in the expectation that, with time, the disparities will grow smaller. But if this does not happen there will undoubtedly be problems and maybe even disaster (Hirschman and Rothschild 1973).

This caveat is important because it points to the limits of people’s patience. Reference is often made to the Malaysian case as one way of handling horizontal inequality, thereby reducing the China/Bumiputra income disparate ratio from 2.29 to 1.74. However often ignored is that the government simultaneously addressed issues of poverty through developmental policies that ensured growth and redistribution. The GINI coefficient, which had been .51 in 1970, was reduced to .44 by 1999. In this respect the data suggesting that for the countries of Africa for which data was available South Africa was the only country in which the percentage of people living under the one dollar increased (from 6 percent to 10 per cent) is a frightening reading.

One response to such policies has stressed the growing intra-national or intra-racial inequality. Some of this rhetoric produces something tantamount to “socialism for one race” or “Bantustan socialism”, when more concern is expressed about growing intra-racial inequality, while the measures for bridging the racial divide are dismissed merely as benefiting the new elite.⁸ Many “socialist” African governments like Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Zambia went through a phase of segmented socialism when populist injunctions against illicit enrichment were largely addressed to the Black elites who were restrained through such things as “leadership codes” that did not apply to White capitalists. In Tanzania such a code prohibited government and party officials from engaging in “capitalist activities”, including renting houses, earning more than one salary, owning shares in private companies, or serving

⁸ One has only to read some of the complaints in conservative British newspapers that ZANU(PF) is building a Black agrarian capitalist class who are presumably Mugabe’s cronies.

on the board of directors of a private company (Aminzade 2003). This segmented socialism had important implications:

Despite a strong commitment to the value of equality, the socialist experiment failed to eliminate a racially stratified class system. The suppression of discussion of racial issues during three decades of socialist rule, and the embracing of a race-blind approach that emphasized consensus rather than diversity, meant that affirmative action policies of redistribution to reduce racial inequalities were not publicly discussed or implemented. The collapse of state socialism and implementation of neoliberal economic policies have helped to further exacerbate racial inequalities and animosities (Aminzade 2003: 48).

Not surprisingly, it is in the more socialistically oriented countries that the issue of race has been posed sharply during the era of neoliberalism and privatisation because about the only capitalists around have tended to ethnic or racial minorities that had somehow operated outside state controlled institutions. In such contexts privatisation is likely to generate racial tension. The “indigenous” bourgeoisies will often be, as in Tanzania, “former public officials who have used their cultural capital and social connections to develop businesses”. Such businessmen “have been in the forefront of efforts to implement policies of racial preference in the transition from state socialism to capitalism”.

Sometimes the programmes of indigenisation are criticised on productivity grounds. Nationalist policies may favour the less efficient over the efficient producers, for instance. Nationalism, like social policy, has both productivist and distributivist attributes, with the former referring to the use of nationalism to galvanise human resources for development, while the latter refers to policies that are redistributive when, in the name of bridging the gaps between national or ethnic or racial groups, the state transfers resources from one group to another—even at the expense of more productive and efficient resource allocation. Which of these aspects a country emphasises will depend on its history. In many cases, the emphasis on “politics of recognition” has undermined economic development but this may be deemed part of the price. One should remember Sekou Toure injunction that it was better to be poor on one’s feet than rich on one’s knees that has been echoed by many nationalists.

National Unity

While by its very nature, nation building and the national question it seeks to answer, together with the territorial mobilisation that goes along with them, touch upon the social question, many social measures associated with welfare states and that have been taken

elsewhere as responses to the social question were driven by the national question in the new African States. New states were faced with problems of uneven development and ethnic divisions that had been assiduously cultivated by the erstwhile colonial masters as part of the “divide and rule” strategy. The quest for unity was expressed through such slogans as “one Zambia, one nation” “harambee”, “ujamaa”, “reconciliation”, “rainbow nation”, “non-racialism”, etc. The holding together of the nation and the mobilisation of population behind the new nation-building project demanded that the state embark on some form of social policy to establish the fact that its policies were inclusive. Social policy was important in the nation-building project because it offered all citizens a set of worthwhile goods and opportunities that installed a sense of affinity and a hope for a better future, even in face of current inequalities (Adesina 2007). As Béland and Lecours (2006) observe, there is an affinity between the answers to the two questions. Nationalism and the welfare state revolve around the notion of solidarity because they often involve transfers of money between citizens. Nationalist movements are likely to seek the congruence between the “national community” (as conceptualised by their leaders) and the “social community” (the community where redistributive mechanisms should operate). Béland and Lecours (2006) further observe that that “the political discourse of social policy lends itself well to national identity-building because it is typically underpinned by collective values and principles”. This might partly explain the fact that a number of nationalist movements adhere to various forms of idiosyncratic socialism as recognition of the problems. The point I would like to stress here is that the quest for national unity is not only about feelings of one-ness or nation-ness or of simply perching on the same rainbow, but it also has serious redistributive implications.

For a while, the imperative of national unity and legitimacy kept the political leadership alert to emerging social problems that might subvert the nationalist project. Therefore, there were many elements of nation-building in much of policy that were redistributive among nationals themselves. In the African case, Tade Aina (Aina 2004) notes, central to the post-independence accumulation model was

the legitimisation strategy of the populist and in some case, socialist programmes of the nationalist parties that came to power after independence. A key element of the legitimisation strategy was a strong social policy initiative tied to a 'constructionist' approach to economic development, that is, the building of physical and social as well as human infrastructures. This was the period of 'constructing' elaborate social subsidies and major social programmes in education, housing, health, and urban planning (Aina 2004: 12).

Many of these concerns were to disappear with the wave of authoritarian rule that swept the country. The overthrow of the nationalist agenda by soldiers often beholden to foreign powers simply erased the entire nationalist agenda and the issues pertinent to that agenda without necessarily advancing the social agenda. Structural adjustment programmes were to further erode any remnants of "developmental welfareism" (Adesina 2007).

Paradoxically, one factor that devalued the status of the legitimisation policies in the post-colonial period was the apparent settlement of national question, or at least its mastery, in a large number of countries. Contrary to predictions of the dismemberment of multiethnic African states founded on "artificial boundaries", African states have proved remarkably resilient, and secessionism has been a minor concern, prompting some scholars to speak of a "secessionist deficit" in Africa (Englebort and Hummel 2005). This, at least in retrospect, should not be surprising. African nations are not new: the identification with the geographical space they cover dates much further back than their independence. Most of the borders go as far back as the infamous Berlin conference of 1884–1885 that partitioned Africa. Both the strength and self-contained character of the colonial administrative units, as suggested by Anderson (Anderson 1983) and the nationalists' acceptance of these units as the basis upon which to make their claims, "created meaning"; therefore, national identities predated independence. As Neville Alexander (Alexander 2001) observes, administrative units, if they endure over time, can acquire or create meaning. Concretely, this means that even oppressed, indeed enslaved, groups of people and individuals eventually identify with the political-territorial community that has evolved, no matter how arbitrary or artificial its origins. Even though conventional wisdom suggests that large sections of African populations that are far from the capital do not identify with the capital, the empirical evidence points in a different direction. As has been observed with respect to Kenya and Nigeria, even communities located on the geographic margins are very conscious of their belonging to a nation (Barkan 1976;William, Miles, and Rochefort 1991).

One should also note here the acumen and commitment of some of the first-generation leaders in holding their countries together. This has become clear in the light of state failures in some parts of Africa. It is perhaps significant that while the Western press wrote an obituary on the “economic disaster” that Nyerere had putatively wrought on Tanzania, Tanzanians celebrated the fact that he had created a nation out of disparate groups and maintained peace. Even the detractors of Mobutu point to his uniting the Congo as one of his important contributions through a kind of redistributive kleptocracy that distributed the loot among elites of different ethnic groups.

With the realisation that the threat of secession had been exaggerated or was receding, African leaders became more complacent about the social question. The instrumental value of social policy in the nation-building project was thus downgraded as the social question receded into the background.

Developmentalist Imperative

Writers on nationalism have stressed the affinity between nationalism and developmentalism. Thus in his seminal work on nationalism, Gellner (1983) stressed the importance of uneven development in eroding the legitimacy of the nation state. Bjorn Hettne (2005) argues that the success of the nation-building project depends on economic growth: “the development strategy is also a strategy for nation-building. The two cannot be separated”. Not surprisingly, embedded in the nationalist project was developmentalism. In much of the twentieth century, there has been a close affinity between nationalism and development or industrialisation. And few ideologies have goaded economic development, including the “spirit of capitalism” and Stalinist industrialisation, with such unrelenting persistence as nationalism. Development was a political project, and it was largely driven by ideologies of nation building and developmentalism. As formulated by Parghi Chatterjee:

Self-government consequently was legitimate because it represented the historically necessary form of national development. The economic critique of colonialism then was the foundation from which a positive content was supplied to the independent national state: the new state represented the only legitimate form of exercise of power because it was a necessary condition for the development of the nation (Chatterjee 1993: 203).

One potent criticism of some of the programs of “indigenisation” is that they do not really further the developmental cause. In a nationalist project, empowerment would be concerned with (a) whether it effectively transfers power to the “nationals” and (b) whether it

serves the national developmental objectives. In radical nationalist theories, the real issue was: who were the elites? The choice was between a “national bourgeoisie” and “comprador bourgeoisie”. Recall that Fanon criticism of a Black bourgeoisie was more about its effecteness, pettiness and senility than about its being bourgeois *per se*. He railed against them for having become senile without ever embarking on a renaissance. In many current efforts to promote “national capital” we are faced with situation where governments give out “rents” but have no instruments for ensuring that the beneficiaries reciprocate in the desired way. In a sense the adoption of neoliberal policies may account for the predatory nature of the rent distribution since the state had carrots (rents) but not sticks to ensure reciprocity of the new Black capitalists or any other capitalists for that matter. Empowerment would be judged on whether it effectively transfers power to the nationals and whether it serves its developmental objectives by producing true “captains of industry” rather than the “container capitalists” it seems to be currently spawning.

Bringing the Social Question Back In

This brings me back to the last point of my lecture, which deals with potential or incipient factors pushing a new agenda in which the social question is prominent. Some of the factors are instrumental and still related to answering the national question, while others are about the intrinsic values of matters addressed by the social question itself and a reflection of the rise of new social forces clamouring for equity, citizenship and justice.

Growing Social Differentiation

If colonialism repressed social differentiation among the colonised people, independence removed the lid, as it were. The economic development strategies embarked upon after independence led to greater economic inequality. Already by the end of the 1970s the nationalist project was in deep trouble. Many of the social pacts and coalitions that had provided African societies with some welfarist or populist inclinations collapsed. Rising social inequality, growing unemployment and unrelenting rural poverty attracted considerable attention from the international community, with the ILO calling for a “basic needs strategy”, and Robert MacNamara, the then president of the World Bank, placed poverty at the centre of the Bank’s policy and insisted on “redistributive growth”. Under adjustment, both the national and social questions were unceremoniously kicked off centre stage since the answer to both was said to be reliance on the market. The ideology of globalization suggested that the nation was

no longer the space within which the issues of poverty, development and equality would be resolved, if only because its principal actor—the state—no longer occupied centre stage. The social question also disappeared from the agenda, and concerns with poverty and growing inequality that received the international community’s attention were replaced by structural adjustment with its socially blind macroeconomics. Concern with such social issues was partly blamed for the crisis of the welfare state in the North and for the fiscal and debt crisis in the South. On the ideological level, a new strand of criticism of nationalism and its developmentalist claims has come from what has been referred to as “neoliberal populism”,⁹ which sees state intervention as simply rent-seeking, and condemns corruption and privileged access to markets which removes any ideological brakes that might have slowed down social inequality. Both the greater social differentiation and the increased opportunities for illicit self-enrichment further eroded the legitimacy of the state.

The Social Crisis

A major factor that is lending urgency to the social question on the agenda is the grinding poverty that still inflicts Africa and the revival of efforts at development after years of deflationary adjustment policies. During the first decades of independence African countries performed reasonably in both economic and social terms. Indeed one could justifiably classify some of the African states as developmental (Mkandawire 2001; Sender 1999). All this ceased by the end of the 1980s. Removal of opportunities for rent-seeking and other distortions would allow the market to allocate resources so as to make welfare dependent not on the resolution of a social question but on an individual’s own efforts. Any collective social action would be left to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or civil society in general. There have been acrimonious debates both on the cause of the crisis and the proposed solutions. The Washington consensus won this debate in policy circles but structural adjustment policies (SAPs) have been a failure both on their own terms and in terms of the needs of the African

⁹ Kurt Weyland characterises this position as follows:

“since in practice interest groups have considerable political influence, both populism and neoliberalism have an anti-status-quo orientation. They share an adversarial relationship to organized civil society, condemn established politicians and government bureaucrats as serving ‘special interests’, and accuse these ‘rent seekers’ of undermining the collective good for the sake of particularistic benefits.

This joint denunciation of group egotism provides a powerful ideological justification for neoliberal reforms that initially have fairly obvious losers, but unclear, uncertain winners. Neoliberal experts use populist attacks on ‘special interests’ to combat state interventionism, while populist leaders employ the modern, rational recipes of economic liberalism to undermine intermediary associations, entrenched bureaucrats, and rival politicians who seek to restrict their personal latitude” (Weyland 1999).

continent. If in earlier policies legitimization was a central occupation of state policies, in the neoliberal era facilitation became the central objective, with SAPs producing what O'Donnell refers to as "low intensity citizenship" (O'Donnell 1993).

If the new capitalist system—to which many have become resigned or have benefited from—is to survive, it requires legitimization. Reconciling the nation and the market has always one of the central preoccupations of policy. The ravages of depression and the social upheavals they had produced lent credence to Polanyi's proposition that markets had to be socially embedded if they were to perform that allocative role without causing social disintegration. Even for societies that were quite developed, the view was that social policy would not only embed the market but would also make its very existence compatible with the national project. Karl Polanyi could state, more than 50 years ago; "To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment...would result in the demolition of society" (Polanyi 1946: p.73). During the last two decades we have witnessed a disembedding of the market that threatens the social order. The social dislocation this has engendered many problems. For one, growing crime is forcing many members of the elite to escape to "gated" communities and is a general source of unease. In other cases its has created urban malaise that has contributed to fuelling civil wars in many parts of Africa (Mkandawire 2002).

The Challenge of Ethnonationalism

I argued above that the apparent achievement of "national unity" and the recession of the threat of secession led to complacency about both the national and social question. The nationalism of liberation movements tended to take it for granted that emergent nation-states would be multiethnic or non-ethnic or non-racial. "Kill the tribe and build the nation" were the famous words of Samora Machel. Ethnicity was seen as inimical to nation building because it weakened the state by the conflicts it engendered, and the multiplicity of its claims simply denied the new countries a national image. The nationalist movement saw recognition of this pluralism as succumbing to the divide and rule tactics of the colonialists and the neocolonialist forces that were bent on denying Africa independence, or, wherever they accepted independence, on emptying it of any meaning by nursing the fissiparous potential that social pluralism always harboured. And so nationalism saw itself as fighting imperialism and the retrograde forces of tribalism. In the process something else happened: in combating tribalism, nationalism denied ethnic identity and considered any political, or worse, economic claims

based on these identities as diabolic as imperialism, if not worse. The nationalists could be excused for their conflation of tribalism and identity for, in many ways, the forces ranged against them tended to abuse identity. The shock of Katanga—in which Africa’s worst enemies, imperialism and racism, championed tribalism against the central government—was to profoundly affect African nationalism’s perception of ethnicity and regional claims. One should also add here that it was always important for authoritarian regimes to emphasise the centrifugal forces that threatened national cohesion and to underestimate the centripetal values that tended to hold the country together.

The radicalisation of the nationalists, through armed struggles, was to banish ethnicity even further from any serious political consideration. In those states where Marxism became the leading ideology, class analysis simply rode roughshod over any other social cleavages. Ethnic identities were something “invented” by the colonialist or the petty bourgeoisie locked in combat among themselves. It was part of a “false consciousness” that was bound to disappear through ideological struggle, or as development of capitalism made class consciousness more salient. This may eventually be the case, but false consciousness, while subjective in its origins, assumes an objective historical presence that can only be dismissed at one’s peril.

The nationalists were cheered on by the modernisers who considered ethnic identities and social pluralism as barriers to development. Karl Deutch (Deutsch 1978), who contributed considerably to the modernisation school, argued that modernisation would lead to the disappearance of ethnic differences as the smaller groups were progressively absorbed by the dominant group.¹⁰ If nationalist leaders could somehow bedazzle those mired in their tribal world view with a more cosmopolitan (“nationalist”) world view, modernisation would begin. The leaders could, in a Weberian way, use their charisma to symbolise the new nations. The new myth was that such charisma, if nurtured, would gradually replace the retrograde and anti-developmental myths of tribe.

One consequence of this posture was little attempt at addressing the institutional requirements of governing such multiethnic societies. Subaru is close to the truth when he

¹⁰ As Calhoun succinctly observes: “Modernization theory thus predicted that when outlying regions were incorporated into a social system they would gradually be ‘homogenized’ into cultural similarity with the rest of the system, nationalism centered on the encompassing state would grow and contrary ethnic mobilization would be transitory” (Calhoun 1993: 218).

argues, “The student of comparative ethnicity is immediately confronted with the irony that while Africa contains some of the most deeply divided countries on earth, the continent appears the least creative, innovative, responsive in development institutional solutions to ethnicity” (Suberu 2000: 130).¹¹ Paradoxically, while formally and constitutionally denying the salience of social pluralism and the ubiquity of ethnic identity, the nationalist movement engaged in the politics of “regional balance”, especially while in power. It is this practice that produced “nationalist by day and tribalist by night” politics. And so we had the almost schizophrenic politics which prided itself on ensuring that all ethnic groups were somehow officially recognised, while the existence of such groups, their interests, composition and even size were denied. The regional balance arrangements practised by the one-party regimes seemed more cognisant of the social complexities of African nation-states than the outcomes generated by the constitutional arrangements that we have so mimetically adopted as our own. Although ethnic diversity did not produce the apocalyptic scenarios that had been foretold many times, it did produce a low-intensity cohesion, which, while sufficient for the survival of the nation-state, only produced conditions of permanent anxiety among the political elite. I believe an important lesson from Africa is that recognition of ethnicity does not make one a tribalist. Similarly, recognition of the racial question does not make one a racist.

Ethnic claims or sub-nationalism has often been driven by either cultural distinctions or socioeconomic disparities. In the immediate post-colonial era, it was the former that seemed to pose the greatest challenge to the new states, especially in light of the colonial exploitation and exacerbation of ethnic conflicts through deliberate policies of divide and rule, which often intensified at the dawn of independence as the outgoing colonial masters sought to weaken the emerging nation-state. There was a general recognition of horizontal inequalities as the legacy of colonial development patterns with the characteristic unevenness of development and their reliance on enclave production. One consequence of the current crisis has been the exacerbation of distributive conflicts as erosion of faith in the social justice has weakened civic nationalism and given room to the resurgence of the politics of identity that threatens the entire nation-building process. The removal of distributive concerns from the political agenda has given room to the resurgence of the politics of identity that threatens the entire nation-

¹¹ One explanation could be that there has not been much intellectual effort deployed to understand ethnicity in Africa. Within Africa, the criticism of the primordialists by scholars such as Mafeje and Nholi was misconstrued as to suggest that the study of ethnicity and the recognition of its political salience was playing into the hands of the erstwhile colonial masters.

building process. It is partly the failure of the “social project” of nationalism that drove people towards ethnicity, with its cultural intimacy that gave some semblance of a common purpose across class lines.

Democratization has the seemingly paradoxical effect of increasing ethnic tensions. It has, in addition, first by insisting on the notion of citizenship as the basis for voting, raised questions about the definition of citizenship. A common response of the dominant groups has been to assert exclusionary national identities as the civic nationalist vision is replaced by a majoritarian ethnocultural nationalism. We saw it earlier in the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria and Ugandans of Asian origin from Idi Amin’s Uganda, and more recently in Chiluba’s denial of nationality on the basis of the parents’ birth, and the similar action against Quattara by Bedie in Cote d’Ivoire. This behaviour would be incomprehensible to the founding fathers of these nations. I have argued elsewhere that “the discrete charm” of African nationalism has actually been its deafening silence and profound non-specificity on cultural matters. It has been sublimely vague with respect to the identity of the political community it embraced while being quite certain about the boundaries of its territory (Mkandawire 1999). Eric Hobsbawm (1996) reminds us how a great deal of suffering has been caused by the shifts from the conception of a nation as an entity whose inhabitants were heterogeneous and whose citizenship had nothing to do with their ethnic origins, religious beliefs, spoken language or other personal characteristics towards a conception of a citizenry based on a “community” whose members were united by a supposed common origin (“ethnicity”) and history, by common language and culture. Where nationalism has sought more definite and fixed identities it has only fanned “ethnic cleansing”, irredentist expansionism or a genocidal exclusion of the other. Furthermore democracy has raised ethnic demands as newly empowered groups stake their claims on national resources (Apollos 2001). Where institutions are weak and the politically dominant group are unaccommodating of these claims, democracy can lead to bloodbaths and even the break-up of the nation.

Democratisation and the New Social Demand

Development was essentially a statist and elitist project—not in the sense that it deliberately sought inequality and protection of elite interests but rather in the sense that it presupposed the pre-eminence of the elites in both its elaboration and implementation. In such a schema democracy played a secondary role. Development presupposed a strong state running a coherent nation. The strong belief at the time was that there was trade-off between

development and democracy. In the more Right-wing circles, there was a greater willingness to accept the military because it brought “law and order” à la Samuel Huntington. Both in the name of development and national unity, nationalist parties in power resorted to one-party rule. Some of the nationalist parties were overthrown and replaced by military rule. Niceties about legitimacy were put to rest in undemocratic turns of governance in Africa, which radically reduced the space for popular expression of social demands. The revival of the social question has been advanced by the greater democratization of the polity. Early experiments in democracy had failed partly because political parties had evolved along tribal lines. But it was equally true that the institutional arrangements bequeathed by our erstwhile colonial masters did not facilitate things. Indeed, they made things devastatingly worse. The great source of incoherence arose from the failure to reconcile what was obviously a socially pluralistic arrangement with political and economic arrangements that were monolithic and highly centralised. In many ways authoritarianism, whose justification had been that it would contain the fissiparous forces of democracy, only exacerbated the social question (Laakso and Olukoshi 1996; Osaghae 1999).

There is, of course, no isomorphic relationship between democratisation and how intensively the social question is addressed. In recent years, new democracies have initially, at least, tended to pursue quite orthodox economic policies in which social policies are marginal. Indeed one could argue that in era of globalisation, the newer the democracy, the more orthodox its economic policies (Mkandawire 2004). South Africa was not exceptional in this sense. With the passage of time, democracies have tended to put pressure against orthodox policies as they push for redistributive policies. We have already seen signs of this in Latin America where the new democracies are shifting towards populist or more social democratic options.

The New Threats to Sovereignty

Not only are the fissiparous pressures of politicised ethnicity putting enormous pressures on national unity, there are, in addition, new international forces that are challenging the sovereignty of African states. Nationalism has always been mediated by the international order which defines its territorial limits, poses challenges and evokes responses, legitimises its sovereignty, and so on. Neocolonialism notwithstanding, the post–World War international system was premised on the acceptance, albeit nominal, of the existence of sovereign states. The “embedded liberalism” that prevailed allowed considerable room for states to pursue their

developmental and welfare policies. There is considerable literature suggesting that that globalization has placed significant constraints on the autonomy of nation-states in the making of social policy. The processes of globalization have, in many cases, undermined the old “social contracts” and the established rules of access to political and economic resources.

Today the nation-building project is challenged by humanitarian interventions that carve out certain areas as “safety zones” or that challenge the authority of the nation-state. There is a slew of writing, mostly not from Africa, that argues for the redrawing of African boundaries to create more manageable entities (Herbst 2000; Spears 2004). Drawing on Charles Tilly’s argument that countries make war and war makes countries, it is argued that the primary cause of the weakness of the state in Africa lies in the absence of inter-state conflict, since “fundamental changes in economic structures and societal beliefs are difficult, if not impossible, to bring about when countries are not being disrupted or under severe external threat” (Herbst 1990: 118). The low levels of secessionist movements in Africa are described as a pathology producing “secession deficits”, partly because of an international system that recognises the sovereignty of otherwise weak and incompetent states. It is then suggested that by simply making territorial partition politically feasible, African leaders would modify the parameters of African elites’ political calculus (Englebert and Hummel 2005). Implicit in some of this writing is that a little war of secession or threat of occupation would help to sort out the mess (Herbst 2004; Luttwak 1999). After all, war played an important role in the strengthening of European states and nationalism. This then leads (Herbst to the argument that we ought to really do away with the “dogmatic devotion to the current boundaries” (Herbst 2000).

This Eurocentric, linear and bloody view of nation-building is proposed without the least consideration of what it would entail to the lives of millions of Africans.¹² But even more significantly it sanctions the new “humanitarian imperialism” which, in the name of “failed states”, has driven the self-described “most powerful nation on earth” to take upon itself the task of a little “nation-building” here and there with incredibly destructive consequences.¹³

¹² Tilly himself was not as sanguine about the process as some of his followers seem to be. He considered war making state formation as our “largest examples of organised crime” which “cost tremendously in death, suffering, loss of rights” (Tilly 1985: 170)

¹³ As Morton has noted, this policy-making approach which represents a pathological view of conditions in postcolonial states as characterised by deviancy, aberration and breakdown from the norms of Western statehood (has) a significant signalling function contained within the metaphors: of darkness, emptiness, blankness, decay, black holes and shadows. There is, then, a dominant view of postcolonial states that is imbued with the imperial representations of the past based on a discursive economy that renews a focus on the postcolonial world as a site of danger, anarchy and disorder. (Morton 2005 : 372-373)

This should remind us that nationalism has always been the other side of imperialism, which today goes under a whole new range of labels such as “armoured cosmopolitanism”, “ethical imperialism” and “unilateral globalism”.¹⁴

Conclusion

I have throughout assumed that a distinction can be made between the national and the social question. I know that, like all social matters, there is no Chinese wall between the two questions. Social agendas are never constituted by completely displacing old items of the agenda but by layering because of inertia, “path dependence” and the ambiguities of social questions. While conceptually one can imagine a neat sequencing of the question—first the national and then the social question—societies do not often follow this neat logic. There is generally a layering of problems. And so there will be many overlaps, and in some situations they may collapse into a single question of survival. Furthermore, in the new states of Africa, a number of problems relating to the national question have yet to be resolved. However, these caveats notwithstanding, I still argue that failure to distinguish between the different normative underpinnings of the social question and the national question can lead to absurd political positions.

The intention of my remarks was not to dampen revolutionary spirits, nor sow despondency or simply assert the normality of the situation in South Africa, given the historical experience elsewhere. Even less is the intention to suggest some kind of Panglosian resignation, to say that what befell our countries was the best of all possible outcomes. Rather it was to argue that since the theme of betrayal has been recurring for close to half a century and since the denouement seems quite standard, the deep sense of “betrayal” may actually signal the naivety of the expectations, the extreme voluntarism about social changes, and the teleological cast of mind of those who felt betrayed. It is, rather, to argue that, given the task that the nationalists had set for themselves, it was unrealistic under the circumstances to have expected a revolutionary outcome. It was also to insist on the importance of paying serious attention to agenda of social movements and actors. One common tradition on the Left is to peremptorily declare that a question has been solved even as social actors hold an entirely different view, or to insist that the continued preoccupation with the problem is simply

¹⁴ This new imperial order is given moral credence by a new “revisionist” literature that celebrates yesteryears’ imperial order.

evidence of a bout of false consciousness or betrayal. Often to accommodate nationalist aspirations, the Left has worked on a perfunctory recognition of something like a “national democratic” phase that would be mercifully brief. It is this posture that has led to disillusionment among some people because they somehow privileged their own questions over the many questions nationalists sought to resolve. They therefore could not understand the prioritization of the nationalists in power and the apparently quiet acceptance, if not complicity, of the working class and peasants in the post-colonial project. We ought to take such “phases” seriously and to examine critically in light of the core of the nationalist agenda what is possible, given the dead weight of history and the conscious agenda of social actors. The resolution of the national question is a prerequisite to an adequate addressing of the social question. We have to recall that where societies have failed to resolve in some meaningful way both the national and social questions, they have drifted towards various forms of “national socialisms”. My reading of the situation in Africa is that for many countries it is imperative to move on to addressing the emerging social question, partly because in some countries considerable achievements have been made in addressing this question while, for others where the national question remain unresolved, many of the problems complicating matters require active socioeconomic policies to address them. In both cases the new agenda will require new actors, new coalitions and new thinking. In much of Africa the national question has been removed from the agenda through attrition and the degeneration of the nationalist movements, and it is clear it can no longer be solved by the same coalitions that brought us independence or liberation. The shift entails a movement from a state-centred nationalism to a more citizenship-centred order.

I have suggested that there are new factors pushing for the ascendancy of new agendas—the crisis of the development model, the growing social differentiation along both vertical and horizontal lines, the rise of ethnonationalism and the new wave of democratisation. Egalitarian redistributive struggles to deal with the social question will require different social coalitions and different agendas. They will involve decoupling struggles for recognition (Black Empowerment) from struggles for redistribution and equality. There have been calls all across the continent for a “second independence”. These calls are a reminder of both the initial promise and the failures of “first independence”. In this still very Westphalian world, it is difficult to imagine the solution of the social question before key elements of the national question are dealt with. With respect to Africa, one can still ask the nationalist

questions: what happened to the development agenda and the fight against the “unholy trinity of ignorance, poverty and disease”? What is happening with social inclusion and the end of inherited colonial or racial divisions? What is happening to the democratic exercise of the rights that liberation has brought? These are weighty questions and firmly within the nationalist agenda. It is by revisiting the issues of nation-building, pan-Africanism, development and democracy that we will be able to address the main issues that devastate the lives of so many African people—poverty, wars, repression and inequality that constitute the social question.

Finally, I want to stress the point that scholarship ought to be more than an incantation of acts of betrayal committed by any chosen group. What is needed is a more open-ended research and understanding of both the conflicted agendas of key social actors and the structural limitations they have to contend with. One of the lessons from the African experience is that all too often our voluntaristic will for change blocked the dispassionate analysis of our societies. I believe the greatest tribute we can pay Harold Wolpe is through dispassionate analysis in search of a world of passionate possibilities.

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