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CONCEPTUALISING PEASANTS:
THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIALISTS,
1928-1960

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AFRICANA

Conceptualizing Peasants:
The Theory and Practice of South African Socialists, 1928-1960

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Introduction

With few notable exceptions, the political organizations forming South Africa's liberation movement have historically underestimated the theoretical and practical significance of political aspirations and social movements in the countryside [Jordaan 1959; Bundy 1987:257; Weiner and Levin 1991:109-110; Claassens 1991:156-157]. Throughout much of this century, the principal efforts to address the political dimensions of the agrarian question came from socialists who, influenced by Communist and Trotskyist thought and experience, were concerned with the peasantry's political potential, particularly its potential to align with a proletarian-led revolution. South African socialists struggled for decades with the problem of the relationship between rural proletarianization and peasant consciousness, a problem which bedeviled European socialists as well [Banaji 1990], and they anticipated more recent scholarly debates on rural development and consciousness.[1] Nonetheless, their own theoretical and practical attention to the agrarian question has been sporadic rather than sustained. From the 1920s through the 1950s South African socialists held polarized views of the peasantry and its political potential, a theoretical polarity which manifested itself in an oscillating practice between town and country.

This theoretical polarity reflected, in part, the international socialist milieu in which the South African movement emerged and from which it drew inspiration. Socialist thought in South Africa developed within a broader,

European-centered movement which, from the mid-nineteenth century, had privileged the urban proletariat as the leading force in social change, a view reinforced by the 1917 Russian Revolution, which most socialists used as a lens through which they evaluated other societies and other attempts at socialist mobilization.

Reflecting internal power struggles within the Soviet Union, which spilled into the international socialist movement, by the 1930s South African socialism had split into two tendencies. The dominant tendency, represented by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) retained its allegiance to the Communist International (Comintern). The minority supported the struggle of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition, a movement against Stalin's leadership of the Soviet Union which broke from the Comintern's Third International to form the Fourth International in 1938. Theoretically, the Comintern adhered to Stalin's [1940] aspiration to build socialism in one country and the corollary notion of moving towards socialism in stages. Trotsky [1982], by contrast, had formulated the theory of permanent revolution to explain the circumstances in which proletarian revolutions could take place in less developed countries without passing through a stage of bourgeois democracy.

Cutting across the Communist-Trotskyist cleavage, however, South African socialists were divided between a majority giving primacy to the urban working class movement and a minority which saw the agrarian question as the backbone of any social revolution [Drew 1991:199-224; 456-505; Delius

1993:293-294, 302-303; Basner 1993:106-108]. The theoretical dominance of the urban bias has been accentuated by two other specifically South African factors: first, the long-term practical difficulty of political organizing amongst rural farmworkers and labor-tenants, due to the dispersed and extremely repressive conditions on white farms; second, and more recently, the rapid development and national visibility of an organized, militant, urban black working class. The dramatic upsurge of the black trade union movement in the 1970s shifted discussion away from considerations of an agrarian revolution to prognostications of a black proletarian revolution.

Thus, for much of socialism's history in South Africa, the discourse and the concepts that its proponents used to analyze the agrarian question were formulated with respect to agrarian conditions and socialist experience in Europe. In the 1940s and '50s, however, as a number of activists began organizing in rural areas, socialists began developing concepts and analyses based on South Africa's own empirical conditions. Not coincidentally, this was also a period when, despite the intense sectarianism dividing the left, the observations of rural activists often coincided and their analyses began to converge. Relatively little has been written about these theoretical and practical endeavors and their significance for understanding the relationship between theoretical and conceptual constructs and political practice. The blanket of repression which covered South Africa following the notorious Sharpeville massacre of 1960 not only put an end

to open political activity in the next decade, it effectively concealed many of these historical experiences.

The experiences of South African socialists raise questions about the extent to which their methodological approaches illuminated or obscured social conditions in South Africa and about the degree to which models or concepts, which are essentially abstractions derived from particular empirical conditions and constructed by prioritizing certain empirical variables over others, can be applied in an illuminating manner to other conditions.[2] These experiences also indicate the centrality of practical work in validating or modifying such models or concepts in light of particular empirical conditions or experiences.

Migrant labor and the peasantry

Two alternative perspectives have shaped discussions of the peasantry and its political potential this century: one stressing the primacy of political economy, particularly rural proletarianization [Lenin 1974], the other, the primacy of the peasantry's moral economy [Wolf 1966 and 1987; Scott 1985; *cf.* Brass 1991:174-175].[3] Lenin [1974:176] saw the peasantry as a bedrock of capitalism, even as the weight of peasant tradition slowed down capitalism's transformative effects. The social disintegration produced by capitalism was critical in understanding the peasantry's political potential, he maintained. Through the migrant labor process, in particular, the traditional peasantry was being replaced by a new rural population in which the intermediate stratum or middle

peasantry was being squeezed between the extremes of the rural proletariat and capitalist farming class. This social disintegration set the basis for class struggle in the countryside.

While Lenin stressed the peasantry's vulnerability and disintegration into opposing classes, Eric Wolf has emphasized the resilience of peasant social structures to external change. It is capitalism's threat to peasant society which pushes peasants out of their traditional conservativism to participate in revolutionary movements [1987:368-9]. Migrant labor provides the clue to this paradox of cultural conservatism and revolutionary potential. The middle peasantry engaged in migrant labor has ties to both town and country, making it a transmitter of urban ideas. Thus, according to Wolf, it is the industrial workforce which retains rural ties rather than the industrial proletariat *per se*, which is most potentially revolutionary. Moreover, he maintains, those peasants with tactical leverage over resources like land or with freedom to maneuver have the greatest potential to sustain long-term revolt. This includes the middle peasantry, which uses family labor to cultivate its securely-held land, as well as peasants whose relative independence from landlord control allows them "tactical mobility" [1987:371-372].

The distinctive development and disintegration of the South African peasantry poses a challenge to these dual perspectives. South Africa's distinctive racial path of capitalist development, as Hendricks [1993:4-7; 1990:162;

[1986?]:2] has argued, was based on blocking the development of an African peasantry and impeding the development of a stable black urban working class by deflecting proletarianization to designated rural areas, called reserves and later bantustans. This reserve-based population was drawn into the labor force through the migrant labor system.

If nineteenth-century South Africa was dominated by struggles amongst European colonizers and Africans over land, by the end of the century, with British imperialism's development of gold mining, capital's need for labor became paramount. Control of land became secondary to the need to incorporate workers into the migrant labor system [Jordaan 1959:12-17; Wilson 1972:234-256].

Following the Union of South Africa in 1910, the 1913 Native Land Act attempted to standardize state policy towards the reserves. There, the "one man, one lot" principle, far from promoting a homogenous peasantry, accelerated class differentiation and proletarianization as land became fragmented into economically unviable holdings. Although a minority of cultivators in the late nineteenth century had turned to commercial production and developed into a prosperous peasantry, by the early twentieth century poverty was driving Africans from the reserves into migrant labor on farms and mines [MacMillan 1919, 1949:120-132; Roux 1949:171-172; Jordaan 1959:12-13, 22; Bundy 1988; Lewis 1984].

Black tenants and sharecroppers suffered deteriorating conditions on white farms, which were typically undercapitalized. As competitive pressure intensified,

farmers increased the exploitation of tenant labor. The 1904 Master and Servants Ordinance deprived black tenants of legal protection by defining them as servants instead of wage laborers. The 1913 Land Act prohibited land sales to blacks outside reserved areas and outlawed sharecropping and squatting, making labor service the only legal means by which tenants could pay rent, and precipitating mass evictions of blacks from farms to the reserves [Plaatje 1987:49-66; Jordaan 1959:18-19; Keegan 1986b:182-4, 192-3]. But labor-intensive farming methods typically remained more profitable than capital-intensive ones well into the twentieth century. Only after World War II, when state policy sought to modernize white farming and capitalist investment in agriculture shot up dramatically, did mechanization and wage and prison labor displace labor-intensive tenant production [Jordaan 1959:25-26; Keegan 1986b:30, 190-206; Mabin 1991:34]. In the 1980s, about 20% of Africans were labor tenants [Mabin 1991:40; Claasens 1991:150].

By the 1930s and '40s, rural poverty had reached epidemic proportions, and Africans were flooding into towns despite continued legislative efforts to restrict their movements [Wilson 1972:161; Jordaan 1959:19]. The state enacted a series of measures, including the Natives Land and Trust Act in 1936, the Betterment Act and the Rehabilitation Scheme, which aimed to stabilize the economic deterioration of the reserves to ensure their viability as a base for migrant labor which was to be a permanent social class in South Africa. The effect of these measures was to increase economic

stratification and rural poverty. After World War II, the Rehabilitation Scheme attempted to resettle sections of the population into a variety of newly constructed villages where, in some cases, government programs of afforestation and soil conservation would be implemented to create reserve-based proletarian settlements for migrant laborers and their families [Roux 1949:189; Hirson, 1977:2-3, 11; Beinart and Bundy 1980:297-298; Basner 1993:100-105; Hendricks 1990:96-119]. However, these measures never fully halted the exodus of blacks from the countryside or prevented the development of a proletarian consciousness.

Communists and the agrarian question in the 1920s

South African socialism emerged in the early twentieth century from the traditions of skilled British workers and Eastern Europeans fleeing Tsarist repression [Johns 1976; Mantzaris 1987]. This white, urban-based social composition reinforced the classical socialist emphasis on the vanguard role of the urban proletariat but gave it a particular twist. Imbued with the racial ideology which rationalized colonial conquest and British imperial penetration, early South African socialists superimposed a racial paradigm on this model and assumed white workers to be the political vanguard [Ntsebeza 1988]. Africans, they believed, were better off in the rural areas where they were not a threat to white workers. But by the late 'teens, the continuing influx of black people to the cities and mines made this deproletarianization thesis untenable and, recognizing that blacks were a permanent part

of the industrial workforce, socialists began calling for working class unity across the color line. In 1921 the CPSA united a number of tiny groupings on the basis of their common acceptance of the Comintern's 21 points. The CPSA's 1924 draft program called for a working class revolution which would expropriate and redistribute large landholdings amongst the landless rural population [SACP 1981:80-84].

In the late 1920s, under Comintern pressure, the CPSA began to seriously reconsider the agrarian question. Between 1927 and 1929 the Comintern's agitation for the adoption of the Native Republic thesis in South Africa pushed the CPSA very painfully towards a reinterpretation of the relationship between the national democratic and socialist struggles and between the urban working class and rural majority [SACP 1981:90-106; Roux 1993:118-130]. The version of the thesis adopted at the Party's seventh annual conference in 1929 proposed:

> An Independent South African Native Republic as a stage towards the Workers' and Peasants' Republic, guaranteeing protection and complete equality to all national minorities [SACP 1981:104].

The theoretical roots of the Native Republic thesis lie in Marxist discussions on the national question in the early years of this century, and the exchanges between the Polish revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg, and V. I. Lenin, both of whom theorized from varied Eastern European experiences, established the framework for subsequent Marxist discussions.[4] In a crucial respect the Native Republic thesis differs from earlier Marxist discussions and preceding Comintern policy. All previous formulations had spoken of the *right* of oppressed

nations to self-determination. Instead, the Native Republic thesis proposed majority rule as a specific form of national self-determination which would be a stage towards socialism. The thesis proposed national-self determination through a struggle against British imperialism, but this was an imperialism defined not by its capitalist essence, but by its colonial aspect, which included both foreign and racial domination. From its emphasis on the seemingly colonial character of South African society, flowed the characterization of the peasantry and aspirant-peasantry as the moving force of the South African revolution in the absence of a black bourgeoisie and the view that "...the national question in South Africa, which is based upon the agrarian question lies at the foundation of the revolution in South Africa." By giving primacy to the satisfaction of black land hunger, argued the Comintern, South African Communists would induce rural blacks to align themselves under proletarian leadership, as in the Russian Revolution [SACP 1981:94].

South African Communist thinking polarized around the thesis. Some broke from the Party over what they saw as the slogan's alienation of white labor, still seen as a potentially revolutionary social force. Others, like Jimmy La Guma and Douglas and Mary Wolton, applauded the slogan's emphasis on the needs of the black majority. Still others, notably S. P. Bunting and T. W. Thibedi, thought the thesis overemphasized the peasantry to the neglect of the proletariat, black and white, although Bunting later modified

his view and campaigned under the slogan [Drew 1991:125-151].

The polarization over the relative political significance of workers and peasants can be seen in the contrasting arguments of Bunting and another Communist, Albert Nzula. In explaining his skepticism about the thesis at the Sixth Comintern Congress in Moscow, Bunting focussed on the highly differentiated class structure of the African population and the underlying tendency towards proletarianization, even claiming that there had not yet been any significant black rural movement in South Africa. But Bunting's assessment of rural movements was seriously off the mark in the late 1920s. The decade had begun with a wave of rural anti-tax protests, and by the late 1920s, the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) was organizing black sharecroppers and labor-tenants seeking to retain possession of their meager means of production. Its decline through the 1930s reflected its inability to stop the process of proletarianization. Nor were rural protests confined to anti-proletarianization struggles. In the Western Cape, the African National Congress' (ANC) organization of rural farmworkers became a groundswell, only halted in the early 1930s by the brutal of farmers and the state [Bunting 1928a, 1928b; Hofmeyr 1983, 1985; Nzula 1979:210-211].

In contrast to Bunting's initial dismissal of rural movements, Nzula argued that the British expropriation of peasant land gave peasant revolts their anti-imperialist thrust, manifested in their demand for "more land, less taxes" [1979:104]. In South Africa, he argued [1979:199-201],

imperialist exploitation occurred chiefly through the reserve system, which made agricultural subsistence impossible for the black majority. The concentration of landholdings and the landlessness of the majority were barriers to peasant-based economic development. Following the Comintern, Nzula [1979:163] called for a two-stage revolution to eradicate pre-capitalist relations and allow for free peasant development as the basis for the gradual transition of national democracy into socialism.

Just as Bunting's initial position did not accurately reflect the development of rural movements in the late 1920s, Nzula's analysis, too, abstracted away critical social forces, seen in his dismissal of the South African working class as even a potential social vanguard and in his presumption that the democratic revolution would be bourgeois-led. In the late 1920s, 44% of all workers employed in private manufacturing were Africans, who performed unskilled manual labor, while 38% were white, typically performing skilled or supervisory work. By contrast, there was no African bourgeoisie able to accumulate capital by exploiting the labor-power of others, and less than 1% of Africans could be described as formally-educated and trained professionals.

The *de facto* proletarianization of reserve dwellers who, despite being domiciled on the land, depended on wage labor, lent credibility to Bunting's skepticism about the possibility of a peasant-based revolution. In the mid-1930s, close to 83% of all Africans lived in rural areas, mostly in reserves or other scheduled areas where they had access to small plots of

land, or on white farms, and approximately 62% of African males and 87% of African females worked in agriculture and forestry. They could not be neatly categorized as self-sufficient peasants, however. Men based in the reserves were contract or migrant workers on farms or mines. Typically, in the 1930s, a third of the total male population was absent from the reserves. In some areas, like the Ciskei, this reached close to 100% of the adult male population. Outside the reserves, most rural blacks worked on white-owned farms as wage workers, squatters or tenant farmers [Van der Horst 1949:112-118; Natal University College 1949:312-313].

Although the Native Republic thesis pushed South African Communists to examine the agrarian question and laid the basis for organizational work which gave the Party a foothold in the countryside [Roux 1993:131-147; Simons 1983:411-413], the version articulated by the Comintern was inadequately grounded in South Africa's material conditions. While the implicit demand for return of the land struck a chord with recently colonized blacks, the thesis too readily characterized most Africans as a homogenous peasantry. As a result, socialists polarized around the thesis, their various positions reflecting their own perceptions of social class formation in the countryside. The CPSA's 1929 program gave greater depth and content to the thesis by including demands which represented a variety of rural interests. But these demands were incorporated into a particular framework which privileged black peasant-based development through its acceptance of a two-stage conception of change. The thesis priorized the

needs of black peasants and aspirant peasants over those of the virtually proletarianized reserve dwellers who depended on migrant wage labor and those of the large agricultural proletariat organized by the Western Cape ANC and Independent ANC, whose demands indicated a proletariat seeking control over working conditions rather than an aspirant peasantry [Hofmeyr 1985:321-328].

Trotskyists and the agrarian question

With the Party's ultra-left turn in 1930, the Native Republic thesis went into eclipse for several years as Communists repudiated popular work in national organizations in an effort to streamline and bolshevize the Party [Roux 1993:148-179; Roux 1964:269].

Notwithstanding this abrupt shift, the Native Republic thesis had a profound impact on the socialist movement, catalyzing the development of Trotskyism in South Africa. Numerous individuals either left or were expelled from the CPSA because of their objection to the top-down manner in which the Comintern imposed the thesis. Others still adamantly rejected what they saw as its subordination of the working class struggle to bourgeois democratic aims [Roux 1993:156-158; Roux 1964:256; Simons 1983:424; Drew 1991:186-187]. Methodologically, the thesis led to a polarization in the way in which socialists conceptualized the relationship between town and country which can be traced through several decades.

Initially, Trotskyists simply inverted the Native

Republic thesis, substituting the utopian notion of a proletariat united across color lines for the thesis' assumption of a homogenous peasantry. Thus, the Cape Town-based Lenin Club, formed in 1932 of a number of former Communists, argued that the thesis

> ...is in complete contradiction to Marxism-Leninism, for it places at the head of the Revolution the backward Native peasantry, which is by far the dominating element in the Native population, instead of giving the sole leadership in the transition period to the Working Class, black and white alike. The Communist's cry for a "Native Republic" would doom the Revolution beforehand to failure, for never in past history have the peasants alone been able to carry a revolution to a successful issue [Lenin Club 4; *cf.* Southall 33-34].

Despite their common rejection of the thesis, Trotskyists rapidly polarized over the agrarian question, and in 1934 the Lenin Club split into two factions, the majority forming the Workers' Party of South Africa (WPSA), and the minority, the Communist League of South Africa (CLSA). In striking respects, their arguments replicated the Communist debates of the previous decade.

The WPSA took as its point of departure the distorted social relations on the land. This was, it argued, the material basis for the oppression of blacks, for the racial division of the working class and for South Africa's economic stagnation. The skewed racial distribution of landholdings meant landlessness for the majority of blacks, forcing them to labor on mines and white-owned farms. This huge pool of ultra-cheap black labor was then used to threaten white job security and push their wages down. Finally, the extremely low level of economic development of the majority restricted

the domestic market and stunted industrial development. The WPSA characterized the rural black population, even the agricultural proletariat, as a landless peasantry, and contended that black land hunger would be the mobilizing force and the pivot of a permanent revolution, which must be led by a working class united across color lines [WPSA 1934:6].

Although strikingly close to the Native Republic thesis, the WPSA believed that the thesis pandered to a black nationalism which would impede working class unity. Instead, it put forward "Land to the Natives" and "Every man has the right to as much land as he can work" as slogans to mobilize the black majority. In this way, it wrote,

> The unconditional active support of the peasantry will thus be assured to the proletarian revolution. *By popularising among the workers the needs of the peasantry, and vice versa, the Bolsheviks succeeded in their revolution.* So also can our revolution succeed. By uniting and defending in combined effort the common aims and interests of the workers and peasants, black and white, the revolutionary movement can bring about the overthrow of Capitalism and the establishment of a Soviet South Africa [WPSA 1934:6; emphasis in original].

By contrast, the CLSA argued that the immediate priority lay in trade union work as a means to bridge the color bar and thus to weaken British imperialism. To the extent that any rural grouping had anti-imperialist potential at that stage, argued the CLSA, it was the Afrikaner *bywoners*, not the backwards black peasantry. But in its hope for a progressive role for Afrikaner nationalism, the CLSA underestimated the potential for the Afrikaner struggle against British imperialism to be diverted to a purely reactionary path due to racialist attitudes [Drew 1991:194-199]. Despite the CLSA's

critique of the WPSA's stress on the agrarian struggle as the pivotal point of the revolution, it in effect came to a similar position when it concluded that the rural anti-imperialist struggle against British imperialism

> is the *first* stage of the struggle. Once, having got rid of the biggest bandit, we can turn our attention to the lesser bandit - the local capitalist class. We can then rally the workers of South Africa for the *final* struggle, the overthrow of capitalism and the setting up of workers' rule [CLSA 1935:9; my emphasis].

Aside from the particular reference to the *Afrikaner* peasantry and bourgeoisie, this passage is remarkably close to the Native Republic thesis in its conception of an initial *national*, rather than class-based alliance against imperialism!

The division in the Lenin Club provoked a series of exchanges between South African Trotskyists and the International Secretariat (IS) of the Left Opposition. Both the IS and Trotsky argued that the WPSA's conception of the agrarian question was not adequately related to the national struggle and that both of these were rooted in British Imperialism. The IS criticized what it saw as the WPSA's overly quantitative approach, which led it to overemphasize the agrarian struggle on the basis of the demographic predominance of the rural black population, and its mechanical application of the Russian model to South Africa. Thus, wrote Ruth Fischer (Dubois) on behalf of the IS, the call for "Land to the Natives," while correct in itself, was inadequate in that it was not linked to any other political slogan except an abstract "South African October," echoing Russia's October

1917 revolution. In effect, she maintained, their conception of the agrarian revolution lacked political content because it neglected the national question. The agrarian revolution, Fischer wrote,

> ...poses and resolves, at the same time, what one calls the national question of this country. This is why the two questions are inseparable. The thesis, instead of indicating the connection, neglects it, separating the two sides of the *same* question quasi-independently of one another. This is why this thesis remains weak, not providing any tactical indications and teaching only an inadequate and abstract propaganda.

The seemingly nationalist Native Republic thesis, Fischer contended, might not be antithetical to the socialist struggle, given the absence of a black bourgeoisie in the 1930s, and it had the potential to mobilize a mass movement against British imperialism. Indeed, she noted, the WPSA did not propose any effective counter-slogan to the Native Republic thesis [International Communist League 1935:15; translated from the French; Drew 1991:199-209].

Trotsky's own analysis of the South African struggle was framed in terms of his theory of permanent revolution, which sought to explain the possibility of a proletarian revolution in a less developed society, like early twentieth-century Russia, in the absence of revolution in the advanced industrialized countries [Trotsky 1982; Burawoy 1988:781-783]. Trotsky argued that in "backwards" countries, those with relatively recent and limited capitalist development built on feudal institutions, the weak bourgeoisie is unable to fulfill popular democratic aspirations. Because of its intermediate class position in the capitalist era, Trotsky maintained, the

peasantry cannot play an independent, let alone leading, political role and will align either with the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Hence, the task of completing the bourgeois democratic revolution falls to the proletariat. Yet its numerical weakness in backwards countries precludes it from taking power without the support of the peasant majority, and an urban-based proletarian revolution could not extend beyond the bourgeois democratic stage unless class struggle extended to the countryside as well, enabling the urban proletariat to gain support from the poorer strata of the peasantry. Similarly, peasant uprisings are a response to the immediate question of land ownership and, on their own, would not be able to destroy the state power which supports landowners. In this sense, Trotsky concluded, just as the success of the proletarian revolution depends on the peasantry, the fate of the agrarian revolution is determined in cities [1982:108].

In this theory, the combined and uneven nature of international capitalist development sets the parameters for domestic class struggles and national revolutions.[5] This conception of revolution contains a three-fold notion of permanence. First, it is temporally permanent in that social transformation does not proceed through stages but develops continuously, albeit unevenly and in a combined manner. Second, it is structurally permanent in that the interconnection of all struggles against social oppression based on their common reproduction through capitalist social relations means that the resolution of one struggle flows into and shapes the outcome of others. Finally, it is permanent in

that social revolution in one nation is immanently part of an international struggle against world capitalism. Thus, national struggle spills over into the international arena. Conversely, the failure of a national revolution to gain international support means that it remains isolated and limited.

In applying this theory to South Africa, Trotsky [1974] argued that although any social upheaval in South Africa would begin from an agrarian revolution, such an upheaval was predicated on the prior overthrow of British imperialism. This could occur, he maintained, through either military defeat or revolution in Britain and its possessions, both possibilities catalyzing the disintegration of the Empire. In Trotsky's estimation, a social revolution would in all likelihood begin first in Britain and would be facilitated by a movement against British imperialism in the colonies and dominions. In South Africa, he argued, any proletarian-led revolution which had the support of the peasantry would necessarily transform both class and national relations. In turn, a proletarian dictatorship would allow socialist reconstruction.

In such a context, he wrote, it was vital that a working class party support the right of national self-determination. While it must support the ANC against white supremacy and the progressive over the reactionary tendencies in the national movement, its solution to the national question must be based on the method of class struggle rather than the classless anti-imperialist front proposed by the Comintern. To mobilize

the masses, Trotsky suggested, revolutionaries needed to develop a series of tactical slogans which reflected the living conditions and struggles of workers and peasants and which would link the national and agrarian questions. However, the greatest practical difficulty in propagandizing amongst the rural masses lay in the fact that black workers lacked a tradition of organization, while whites were arrogant and protectionist [Trotsky 1974; Drew 1991:215-217].

Certainly, Trotsky's optimism about the prospects of the collapse of the British Empire was misplaced, although to a certain degree he anticipated its post-war dismantling.[6] But in linking the agrarian and national questions to British imperialist policies and in pointing to the practical difficulties posed by the racially-divided working class, Trotsky was essentially advising the South African Trotskyists to move away from abstractions and to engage with empirical conditions.

Over the next decade both Trotskyist groupings used Trotsky's response as a basis for reevaluating the relationship of the agrarian and national struggles to the class struggle.[7] The WPSA changed its original slogan "Land to the Native" to the Bolshevik slogan of "Land and Liberty," to indicate the interrelationship of the agrarian and political struggles [*cf.* Trotsky 1974:253]. The WPSA played an underground role in the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), and its influence is seen in the 1940s, with the formation of the Ten Point Programme of minimum democratic demands, in which the franchise (Point One) is seen as the key to the

agrarian question (Point Seven). Likewise, the Fourth International Organisation of South Africa (FIOSA), successor to the CLSA, now admitted the significance of the agrarian question for social mobilization. M. N. Averbach (A. Mon) of the FIOSA argued that practical implementation of the right to own land entailed the expropriation of large landholdings and thus was part and parcel of the socialist struggle:

> ...the struggle for "democracy" embraces the struggle...not merely for the right to the land, but for the actual division of the land....since the land cannot be won except through a struggle against imperialism and the South African capitalists, and since the land can be divided only after it has been expropriated from the big landowners, farmers and land-companies, the struggle for land, as part of the struggle for the realisation of the tasks of bourgeois democracy in South Africa can be won only through the socialist revolution...[Mon 1945:7].

Thus, influenced by Trotsky's letter, both the WPSA and the FIOSA were attempting to apply the notion of a permanent revolution to South Africa: that democratic demands represented a transitional program and that the road to democracy would pass through socialism.

Migrant labor and "tribal proletarians"

Despite the emergence of a Trotskyist tendency in the early 1930s, that was a still a decade of relative fluidity on the South African left in terms of political allegiances and organizational affiliation.[8] But by the 1940s, collaborative work between Communists and Trotskyists was becoming increasingly difficult. Several conjunctural factors, including Trotsky's assassination in 1940 and the divergent attitudes which Trotskyists and Communists took towards the

war efforts from 1941 and towards participation in the Native Representative Council (NRC), contributed to an increasingly rigid sectarian divide which permeates the South African left to this day, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is striking, therefore, that those Communists and Trotskyists who did engage in rural mobilization in the 1940s and '50s focussed specifically on migrant labor and the rural reserves. In this attention to migrant labor, South African socialists began to grapple in earnest with South Africa's empirical realities and came closest to breaking from their polarized conceptions of a homogenous peasantry versus a rural proletariat.

This concern with migrant labor in the reserves reflected both the experience of practical organizing difficulties and a growing recognition of empirical developments in South Africa. On the one hand, the extreme difficulties of organizing black farmworkers or labor tenants on white farms, seen in the brutal smashing of the Western Cape ANC and ICU in the late 1920s and early '30s, meant that to the extent that socialists were able to organize in rural areas, it was in the reserves rather than on white-owned farms [Hofmeyr 1985:281-311; Interview with Alexander 1987].[9] On the other, the difficulties which socialists confronted in their repeated attempts to reach migrant labor on the mines pushed them to consider reaching them in the reserves [Moodie 1986:16-17].

Socialist efforts to organize on the mines began in 1930, when Bunting and Thibedi formed the African Mineworkers Union (AMWU) [Simons 1983:587]. Later, the tiny Johannesburg WPSA

made several attempts to reach black mineworkers, seeing organized black mineworkers "...as the battering ram that will smash down British Imperialism in South Africa" [International Communist League 1936:27-28].[10] But it was Max Gordon of the WPSA, the leading trade unionist on the Rand between the 1935-40, who successfully fanned the discontent over the deteriorating war-time conditions so that the defunct AMWU could be revived [Hirson 1986:235-6; Stein 1978; Basner 1993:223, n. 5]. Following Gordon's internment in 1940 for opposition to the government's war efforts, the CPSA once again turned its attention to the mines, and in August 1941 relaunched the AMWU. Kept in check by the CPSA's anti-strike policy during the war, in 1946 workers engaged in a series of spontaneous strikes which culminated in a strike initiated by the AMWU. Although brutally squashed by the state, the strike demonstrated the explosive character and potential economic strength of an organized migrant labor force on the mines [Simons 1983:512, 569-579, 587; Basner 1993:140-141; Moodie 1986:34-35].

Much as Wolf [1987:371-372] would argue later, socialists saw migrant labor as a vector of transmission facilitating the diffusion of political ideas from town to country. According to I. B. Tabata, a member of the WPSA and a rural organizer for the NEUM-affiliated All African Convention (AAC), the WPSA realized early on that as long as the reserves remained unorganized, migrant labor could easily be used by capitalists to break the strikes of black workers in towns:

> Already black workers were fighting for their rights as workers; but it occurred to us that they were

> isolated because they were the minority at that time....Whenever the workers from the reserves asserted themselves they could be sacked and then they'd just ship in [more] blacks from the reserves and that factor alone made it absolutely imperative to organize the peasantry as well [Interview with Tabata and Gool 1987].

While there is scant evidence that the CPSA tried to theorize the concepts of the peasantry or migrant labor [Delius 1993:303], Trotskyists debated the nature of the reserve population amongst themselves. The WPSA assumed that rural Africans were overwhelmingly peasants or aspirant peasants. But the FIOSA's Averbach argued that aside from a minute layer of farmers scattered about some reserves, landless Africans were peasants in aspiration only, and those on white farms were agricultural proletarians. Averbach coined the term "tribal proletariat" to characterize South Africa's migrant labor force and rural proletariat, indicating what he took to be their janus-faced character: proletarian in day-to-day outlook; peasant in aspirations.

Clearly influenced by Trotsky's [1974] letter, Averbach pointed out that South Africa lacked the advanced working class strataumwhich the Bolsheviks had relied on to educate the masses and link town and country, as only the racist and protectionist white workers had a tradition of self-conscious political activity. Thus, he argued, migrant labor could fulfill the vanguard role which Lenin and Trotsky saw as vital to the formation of an town-country alliance. However, the alliance fostered by migrant labor was not the classical alliance of proletariat and peasantry but one of urban and rural workers commonly oppressed by their lack of democratic

rights. Accordingly, Averbach concluded, the basis of this alliance must be the struggle against the color bar and all forms of racialism [Mon 1945:6-11].

In his acute awareness of the ongoing proletarianization of the countryside, Averbach grasped an aspect of change which the WPSA underestimated. The concept "tribal proletariat" assumes, as Jordaan has pointed out [Interview 1987], that migrant labor would necessarily retain rural ambitions and tribal perspectives and that the major social cleavage to be overcome was between town and country rather than between classes or strata. It does not encapsulate the twin processes of differentiation and disintegration of the peasantry which Lenin thought to be critical in understanding social transformation in the countryside. However, the concept anticipates Wolf's thesis that it is the culturally conservative middle peasants who engage in migrant labor to maintain their position on the land who paradoxically play a progressive social role by transmitting ideas from town to countryside. It also presages more recent findings about the operations of the AMWU in the 1940s. Namely, that faced with the strength of "home-boy" networks on the mines, the AMWU was often unable to promote a working class consciousness that cut across tribal affiliations, and that it was the *tshipa* or absconders who had broken their links with their rural homes who formed the main base of the AMWU. Yet, even though the *tshipa* were the principal organizers during the series of black mineworkers' strikes in 1946, the success of the strikes depended on making the link between food shortages on the

mines and drought in the rural areas [Moodie 1986:2-3, 26-27].

Organizing the reserves

It was through their organizational work in the reserves from the late 1930s through the '50s, that socialists were able to develop and to modify their ideas about the role of migrant labor in the countryside. Despite their differences in social background and organizational allegiance, rural activists displayed striking similarities both in their attention to the reserves and their analyses of rural mobilization and protest. Essentially, they found that it was in the reserves rather than in towns that social protests transformed into sustained mass-based uprisings potentially capable of challenging state power. This rural discontent reflected the long-term economic deterioration produced by state policies which locked Africans in the reserves while stifling the development of an African peasantry. The observations of rural activists pose a challenge to the Leninist and Trotskyist argument that it is urban proletarian struggles which pull and provide leadership for rural uprisings, and it raises the question of whether socialist revolution was the viable possibility in the early 1960s that socialists believed it to be.

By the late 1930s the CPSA was moving away from the Native Republic thesis, and in 1950, when the CPSA disbanded following the Suppression of Communism Act, it maintained that the Africanist call for the right of self-determination meant the right of political secession, which was tantamount to

apartheid [Delius 1993:302; SACP 1981:209]. Hence, the Party's continued focus on urban politics to the neglect of rural struggles. From the late 1930s through the '50s it was the exceptional Communist like Alpheus Maliba in Zoutpansberg, Flag Boshielo in Sebatakgomo and Govan Mbeki in the Transkei who worked in rural areas. Those Communists who engaged in rural work tended to be migrant workers who later gained trade union experience through employment in urban industry, and as Delius points out, they were clearly much more sensitive to the possibilities of rural organization than the largely urban-based Party leaders [Delius 1993: 306-308, 310; Hirson 1977: 4, 6-7; Basner 1993:105-108; cf. SACP 1981:138].

Alpheus Maliba was one such migrant worker-activist who had been involved with Thibedi's short-lived Communist League of Africa in 1932, then joined the CPSA in 1936 and from 1939 through 1950 served on the Party's Johannesburg District Committee. In 1939 he founded the Zoutpansberg Cultural Association, later renamed the Zoutpansberg *Balemi* (Ploughmen's) Association (ZBA) in the Northern Transvaal. It was there that the state first began implementing its Betterment Act, ostensibly aimed at stopping erosion in the reserves, and despite the ZBA's success at resisting this state intervention, by the 1940s it was declining due to state repression [Basner 1993:106-108, 219, n. 1; Delius 1993:303-305]. Maliba wrote several political pamphlets based on his experiences organizing against state intervention. His 1939 pamphlet, *The Conditions of the Venda People* [SACP 1981:138-147; Delius 1993:303-304], described an area where subsistence

production was supplemented by barter of occasional surplus, and where by the late 1930s, poverty had driven most men into migrant labor, mainly on the mines, as the white farms already had large numbers of labor-tenants. The solution to rural poverty, Maliba argued, was not to kill the cattle, as the state proposed. Rather, it was to increase the land available to rural people by redistributing large estates and Crown lands; to replace the corrupted form of tribal tenure with individual tenure as an incentive to improve the land; to establish agricultural schools and to abolish the "useless" NRC.[11]

Other Communists engaged in rural organizing, like Flag Boshielo, drew on Maliba's experience. The Party that regrouped in 1953 as the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) was more squarely committed to an alliance with the ANC, rather than explicit working class politics [Everatt 1991]. Thus, when Boshielo and other Communist migrant worker-activists formed *Sebatakgomo* in 1954, they affiliated it to the ANC. *Sebatakgomo* was conceived as an organization linking farm workers and reserve dwellers. Boshielo and other activists responded to the increasing repression in the reserves by organizing in urban-based hostels and amongst migrant workers, and *Sebatakgomo*'s membership grew in the late 1950s as the struggle against Bantu Authorities escalated into the Sekhukhuneland Revolt in 1958, although its focus became more localized as its leading activists were banned [Delius 1993:308-309, 311-313].

While Communists worked closely with the ANC, Trotskyists

either worked in or gave their critical sympathy to the NEUM. Within NEUM ranks, practical work on the land question was largely the work of the AAC and its affiliate, the Cape African Teachers Association (CATA). In contrast to the migrant labor base of rural activists aligned with the Congress movement, those in the AAC tended to be teachers, a reflection of the NEUM's use of "teachers as a vanguard" who could penetrate South Africa's towns and dorps with progressive ideas [Kies 1943; Drew 1991:424-430, 470-474]. The different social backgrounds of rural activists in both political tendencies reflected and reinforced differences in the social base and outlook of the two wings of the liberation movement. Through the SACP, the ANC was able to draw in a wider working class base, but its practice lacked a long-term strategy. The NEUM's teacher base explains the organization's continuous efforts to engage with theory and its criticism of the Congress movement's lack of strategy but it became, over time, a brake on practical work, although this was far more accentuated in the Western Cape than in the Transkei, where pressure for militant action was keen [Alexander 1986]. Both migrant workers and teachers were important points of access into the reserves in the 1940s and '50s, and their activities in combatting the state should have been complementary rather than antagonistic.

The AAC's practical work concentrated on the Transkei and began in earnest with the struggle against Rehabilitation. In a pamphlet called *The Rehabilitation Scheme: "A New Fraud,"* Tabata [1945], who was born near the farming community of

Queenstown and organized for the AAC in the Transkei, argued that the reserve policy was premised on the restriction of land as the basis of ensuring a cheap migrant workforce. Land hunger, he concluded, was the root of the problem in the reserves. As Maliba had, he argued that the means to rehabilitate the reserves was not to castrate or destroy cattle, as this would only intensify hunger and malnutrition, but to increase the land [*cf.* Hendricks 1990:101-102]. This conception of a land hungry peasantry was voiced in the AAC organ, *Ikhwezi Lomso*:

> The demand for an equitable distribution of land among the peasant population is and will continue to be for a long time the most powerful driving force of our struggle for it touches the heart-strings of the majority of the oppressed, the African peasant [quoted in Jordaan 1959:35].

The first implementation of the Rehabilitation Scheme was in Libode, West Pondoland in 1947, an area, Ganyile [n.d.] notes, which had been known for the docility of its inhabitants. Yet the degree of local resistance to Rehabilitation indicated that preparations against its implementation had begun well in advance. Government-sponsored meetings to explain the policy were boycotted, collaborating chiefs threatened, government officials attacked, and livestock hidden. The testimony of chiefs and headmen revealed "...great fears because we people who accepted the rehabilitation scheme move about among the people risking our lives" [quoted in Hendricks 1990:112]. People "...voluntarily formed Location Committees against their headmen and Bungas [advisory general councils] to assert their right to decide how they should own their land." AAC

influence grew, with the affiliation of the clandestine, mountain-based Kongo movement and the Transkei Organised Bodies [NEUM 1948:302; AAC 1948:5-6, 14-16; Beinart and Bundy 1980:301-302].

Through the CATA network, teachers linked up small rural dorps and larger towns. W. M. Tsotsi, later AAC General Secretary, addressed the Transkei Organised Bodies on the Rehabilitation Scheme and N. Honono addressed local Vigilance Committees on the Bantu Authorities Act. CATA activists successfully promoted boycotts of activities sponsored by Bantu Authorities, laying the basis for a local branch of the Society of Young Africa, another NEUM-affiliate [Hyslop 1986:92-93; Hyslop "CATA and CATU," 11-12; Tsotsi 1953:13]. However, CATA's influence declined in the late 1950s as it was hit by intense state repression and weakened by internal dissension in the NEUM. In 1955 the entire CATA executive were dismissed from their teaching jobs in retaliation to their struggle against Bantu Education; its members were harassed into the '60s, and its organ, *The Teachers' Vision*, which had appeared regularly since the early '40s, was forced out of production [NUM 1989:16; Hyslop, "CATA and CATU," 16 and 22ff.].

It is in the analyses of Tabata and Communist Govan Mbeki that the South African left came closest to developing an indigenous theory of rural mobilization that reflected local empirical conditions. Given the intense sectarianism between Trotskyist and Communists, which was mirrored in the relationship of the NEUM and the Congress movement, the

similarity in Tabata's and Mbeki's analyses of rural protests is striking. Essentially, both conceived the relationship of urban and rural protests as one of intense, short-lived urban protests which periodically intersected with slower, longer-lived rural protests, with migrant labor as the critical link. Tabata recalls:

> We noticed that there was some kind of a seesaw [relationship]. The workers in the towns would fight and fight and fight and the graph would go up, up, up. And the peasantry was simply down there but now when we had begun to organise the peasantry they also would be fighting against the Rehabilitation Scheme and then they would go up. Now the peasants were very slow in going up while the workers just went like that (snap) and they reached a zenith and after that they would come down. The peasants were simply going slowly up and they crossed at a point. But now the workers don't go right down to the bottom, they hold at some point by the peasantry that's going up [Interview 1987].

The Transkeian-born Mbeki was politically active there from the early 1940s, first as secretary of the Transkei Voters' Association, then as general secretary of the Transkei Organized Bodies from 1943-48. His argument that the rural areas had a greater capacity to sustain uprisings over a longer period of time than urban areas overlapped in many respects with Tabata's, and was echoed by the tiny, ephemeral Socialist League of Africa [1961:11] a few years later. In Mbeki's words,

> ...a struggle based on the reserves had a much greater capacity to absorb the shocks of government repression and was therefore capable of being sustained for a much longer time than a struggle based on the urban locations. The urban-based campaign, which starts on a high note after very intensive and costly propaganda work, consumes itself by the intense energy it generates to carry the masses to the climax - usually a general strike....The struggles of the peasants start from smaller beginnings, build up to a crescendo over a

> much longer time, are capable of pinning down large government forces, and are maintained at comparatively much lower cost [1964:130-131].

The virtually continuous upheaval in South Africa's reserves, to which Tabata and Mbeki referred, reflected the widespread reaction to the economic deterioration of and mounting state intervention in the reserves. In 1955 the United Transkeian Territories General Council, whose nickname, *Utata Woj' Inj' Emsini* (Father has had dog's meat blackened with smoke], indicated its lack of popular credibility, passed the Bantu Authorities Act, precursor to the state's future policy of independence for so-called tribal homelands, and its acceptance by authorities in other reserves soon followed. The Act outlined a four-tier authority structure resting on Tribal Authorities of chiefs and headmen, whose legitimacy declined as they became direct symbols of the corrupt and oppressive state. Popular participation in local elections was curtailed and unauthorized public meetings of more than ten, prohibited, making open political organizing difficult and risky [Mbeki 1964:34, 40-42; Beinart and Bundy 1980:305-306; Delius 1993:303-305].

This repression did not succeed in smothering popular protests, and an evolutionary pattern of protests can be discerned, as both Tabata and Mbeki indicated. Initially, people resisted the various measures designed to strip them of land and cattle and turn them into perpetual migrant labor. Later, these protests merged into broader, political struggles against Tribal Authorities who, in addition to enforcing rehabilitation, controlled labor influx and efflux.

The prolonged state of reserve-based protests indicates that in the 1950s the reserve-based population did indeed have more capacity to sustain uprisings than urban areas, even though state intervention was more brutal in the reserves than in the townships [Lodge 1983:261]. In part, as Mbeki argued, the reason was tactical and accords with Wolf's thesis that peasants with tactical leverage over resources or freedom to maneuver have the greatest potential for sustained mobilization. In contrast to blacks laboring on white farms, who had little or no mobility or independence, reserve dwellers had access both to means of subsistence and to income from wage labor. Their relative independence from direct supervision, moreover, enabled them to convert their traditional institutions for political ends. The 1960 Pondoland uprising in the Transkei, suppressed finally by armed state intervention and the imposition of a State of Emergency, demonstrates how a protest against Rehabilitation became a politicized and broad-based rejection of Bantu Authorities. Resistance coalesced in a highly structured organization which led a nine-month revolt, functioned as an alternative authority, and intimidated with threat of force those chiefs who did not support the struggle [Turok n.d.; Lodge 1983:279-283; SACP 1981:271-274, 432-434].

This high degree of solidarity, which helps to explain the rural capacity to sustain protests, is remarkable given the stratification and differentiation of reserve dwellers. In Pondoland, Lodge [1983:279-283] attributes this solidarity to a number of specific factors: the extreme powers of the

Paramount Chief whose financial corruption pit him and his functionaries against the rest of the population; the presence of an unusually large proportion of unemployed migrant workers; and a tradition of external political involvement. Throughout the reserves, women were particularly hard hit by the Bantu Authorities Acts, and the high degree of female participation in these protests flowed from their common loss of communal land and the restrictions on their mobility into towns.

The class consciousness of reserve-dwellers and migrant labor was, indeed, far from uniform. Tabata argued that while the structural position of migrant labor enabled it to link urban and rural struggles, it also fostered a dual consciousness, a notion similar to Averbach's janus-faced tribal proletariat:

> The migrant labor played a part in this and therefore we began now to turn our attention to the migrant labor and organise them. And we organised them as peasants. Now they found when they came to town there were trade unions and they joined the strikes of the black workers. But they had to go back again to [the reserves] and fight Rehabilitation there...which was entirely for the peasantry. So from the point of view of organisation they go from one kind of organisation to another [Interview with Tabata and Gool 1987].

But what Tabata, like Averbach, saw as the dual consciousness of a seemingly homogenous category was actually a reflection of a highly differentiated reserve population with diverse aspirations. In 1946, about 30 per cent of the reserve population was landless, a similar proportion had no cattle, and about 60 per cent had a handful or less. Not surprisingly, on the mines, it was the most proletarianized

migrants who tended to be the most militant and who formed the AMWU's main base of support. Similarly, during the Pondoland uprising, it was the unemployed migrant sugar workers who played a central coordinating and organizing role through their migrant labor associations and whose protests against unemployment and pass laws indicated the need to control the sale of their labor power. Other reserve dwellers, by contrast, fought to retain their meager holdings of land and cattle, while a thin stratum continued to accumulate larger holdings [Beinart and Bundy 1980:308-309; Hendricks 1990:100-101].

These findings indicate that the stratified reserve population, a peasantry that had been disintegrating for decades, sought control over subsistence and livelihood in a variety of ways. Their perceptions about how to achieve this evolved historically as state policies turned them more and more into rigidly controlled migrant wage labor. Those reserve dwellers with land and cattle had a vested interest in their retention, and Beinart and Bundy [1980:303, 311] hypothesize, drawing upon Mettler [1957], that in contrast to proletarianized and landless migrants, it was the "middle migrants" or "peasant migrants" who had the most to lose from Rehabilitation who formed the social base of these protests.[12] But the common denominator was not a rejection of wage labor status *per se* but a desire to prevent their perpetual status as a particular type of wage labor: rightless and effectively homeless migrant labor. For many, retention of some minor means of production would make them less vulnerable to the

state's efforts to freeze them into total dependency on its industrial plans. The protests against influx and efflux controls were struggles for freedom of movement and the free sale of labor-power; the protests against Bantu Authorities, a struggle for democracy and self-determination which drew in all strata and classes.

Yet Tabata and Mbeki did not focus on the actual or potential differences amongst the reserve population but stressed it virtually unanimous solidarity. Thus, Mbeki wrote:

> It was in these reserve areas, too, that the struggle assumed the truly mass character which it lacked elsewhere. Every peasant had to show himself in favour of or hostile to Bantu Authorities [1964:128].

Although the varied responses to Rehabilitation undoubtedly reflected different class aspirations and interests, virtually the entire population had a common interest in fighting Bantu Authorities. Tabata's and Mbeki's immediate concern was drawing the rural population into the national democratic struggle, and their practical work aimed at this common denominator.

A final explanation for the capacity of the reserves in the 1950s to sustain uprisings lay in the combined nature of rural oppression. It is notable that Tabata and Mbeki stressed the strength and endurance of reserve protests, while most scholarly analyses emphasize their localized and limited nature. But it was in the reserves that economic and political oppression merged. There, the state owned the land, given in trust to Africans, and state administrators

accumulated wealth through corruption and enforced policies restricting African autonomy. Virtually all protests in the reserves during these years indicated the social class antagonisms emanating from the relationship between collaboration and capital accumulation. In the Pondoland revolt of 1960-61, for instance, people attacked chiefs both because they collaborated with the regime in enforcing these unpopular measures and because their collaboration was a means to accumulate wealth [Chaskalson 1987:51-52; Beinart and Bundy 1980:309-310]. Precisely because of the convergence of economic exploitation and political oppression, the South African countryside at that period was the base of the national democratic struggle.

In towns, by contrast, economic and political issues could be divided. Within the ANC, internal tensions between its nationalist leadership, still hoping to influence and accommodate whites, and its trade union membership continually resurfaced in controversies over tactics which diluted the success of several campaigns, which were generally single-issue campaigns. ANC leaders, influenced by Gandhi's passive resistance, called for mass demonstrations and petitions; trade unionists pushed for minimum wage campaigns and stay-at-homes. NEUM leadership resisted the growing pressure from its youth and left-wing factions for a more activist urban profile, and even though the NEUM scorned single-issue struggles in theory, its own campaigns divorced economic and political issues, eschewing the former as piecemeal and reformist [Lodge 1983:193-197; Drew 1991:482-488].

In the 1950s, the predominant form of urban black working class struggle was not the strike at the point of production but the stay-at-home, during which workers remained in the townships rather than going to work. The black trade union movement, which had been slowly developing since the 'teens, experienced a brutal setback in 1946 with the smashing of the black mineworkers' strike, closing a period of trade union organizing and worker militancy dating from the 1930s. The 1950s trade union movement began rebuilding in the harsh apartheid era in which blacks were uprooted and relocated into Group Areas, and strikes were illegal. The overcrowded and overwhelmingly working class townships provided fertile conditions for organizing and building solidarity. Yet the development of the stay-at-home tactic was a response to social conditions which strengthened racial and national forms of consciousness, and although this was a working class tactic, the solidarity it fostered was based on community rather than explicitly on class. As the Socialist League of Africa [1961:7-8] argued, the stay-at-home had particular limitations both for the development of working class consciousness and for long-term resistance, as state repression was relatively easy to enforce in the densely concentrated townships, which had been designed to be easily sealed off with a minimum number of forces.

Does this mean that the South African case contradicts the Leninist and Trotskyist thesis that urban proletarian struggles show greater strength, continuity and intensity than rural uprisings, which they held to be essentially

conservative. That argument suggests that when social classes have reached particular levels of development, all other things being equal, urban areas will be the moving force for social transformation. Given the relatively young age of South Africa's black working class, and the differential conditions in town and country, it is not surprising, in the 1950s, that reserve-based uprisings showed more capacity for sustained rebellion. Such capacity has its own implications: the more prolonged an insurrection or uprising, the greater the opportunity for the radicalization of political consciousness. The struggles in the reserves appear to have been undergoing such a development, as the anti-proletarianization struggles of the 1940s and '50s matured by the 1960s into the mass-based struggles for democracy to which Tabata and Mbeki referred. The relative fragility of urban working class protests, at that period, compared to reserve-based struggles, suggests a structural barrier against socialist transformation.

The NEUM and the agrarian question

Within the NEUM, the decision of Tabata and other AAC activists to organize in the reserves on a classically democratic program provoked a controversy which catalyzed its split in December 1958. To a large degree, but with significant exceptions, the NEUM split between its two main organizations, the AAC, strongest in Johannesburg and the Eastern Cape, and the predominantly Western-Cape based and urban Anti-Coloured Affairs Department movement (Anti-CAD),

formed in 1943 to fight the government's attempt to establish separate political institutions for Coloureds. This split echoed the South African Trotskyist debates of the 1930s and '40s, which revolved around a polarized conception of the peasantry. Both sides concurred in the essential unity of the land and national questions; hence, their common support of the Workers' Party slogan "Land and Liberty" to link the two struggles. The dispute boiled down to conflicting interpretations of Point 7 of the NEUM's Ten Point Programme and the implications for rural mobilization along democratic and socialist lines. Point 7 read: "Revision of the land question in accordance with the above," the "above," referring to the program's preceding democratic demands. The explanatory remarks attached to Point 7 read:

> The relations of serfdom at present existing on the land must go, together with the *land acts*, together with the restrictions upon acquiring land. A new division of the land in conformity with the existing rural population, living on the land and working the land, is the first task of a democratic State and Parliament.

Strikingly, neither interpretation adequately considered the differentiated nature and political role of migrant labor. The majority in the AAC saw rural Africans as peasants or aspirant peasants and interpreted the abolition of restrictions on acquiring land as the right to buy and sell land [SOYA [1954?]; Tsotsi 1954]. Tabata did not believe that people in the reserves could be mobilized on a slogan of nationalization: from their perspective the state's trusteeship of the land was tantamount to nationalization. For Tabata, who represented a left-pole within the AAC,

organizing around the right to buy and sell was not necessarily antithetical to socialism. As Averbach had earlier, Tabata saw the achievement of such a right as the pivot of a permanent revolution in that the legal right to buy land without the means to do so could never satisfy popular land hunger and that realization would drive people beyond capitalism. Any new division of land enacted by a democratic Parliament would reflect the balance of class forces at that time and could not be stipulated beforehand (Interviews with Tabata and Gool 1987 and Alexander 1987).

Paradoxically, the other position, articulated by Hosea Jaffe and the majority of the Anti-CAD, also assumed a high degree of African peasant consciousness. Because the Ten Point Programme was a minimum program, Jaffe argued, Point 7 implied a democratic redivision of the land rather than a maximum socialist demand of collectivization. Redivision meant the expropriation of large landowners, with abolition of white control of land and of exploitative practices like speculation and landlordism, and the allotment of land to smallholders on an equal, per family basis. Although in Jaffe's interpretation Point 7 did entail the right to buy and sell land, a right which would satisfy an aspirant black bourgeoisie, this would not be able to satisfy the land hunger of most blacks. In this respect, Jaffe subordinated the right to buy and sell to the need for an equitable redivision of the land. Undoubtedly also influenced by Averbach's "tribal proletariat" concept, Jaffe assumed that migrant workers or "peasant-workers" would return to the land, opt for individual

titles to non-marketable land and apply the technical and cooperative practices learned in their urban worksites to agricultural production [Jaffe 1953:24-26].

From outside the NEUM, K. A. Jordaan, a former member of the then defunct FIOSA, argued that the agrarian question was not the sub-soil of a South African revolution as it had been in other revolutions because the majority of the people did not look to land for their subsistence. South Africa's democratic struggle differed markedly from classical peasant-based democratic revolutions because most South Africans had been uprooted, and those still on the land were a proletarianized reserve labor force. Unlike classical democratic revolutions in which the bourgeoisie had been able to satisfy popular democratic demands, albeit in a delayed, top-down manner, South Africa's white bourgeoisie, Jordaan maintained, could not satisfy the democratic demands of the black majority; indeed, democracy might even undermine capitalism in South Africa, whose development has been premised on the lack of democratic rights.

Point 7, Jordaan argued, was internally dichotomous and ambiguous, containing elements which, from the point of view of capitalist development were both progressive and backwards. It did not address social relations on the land after the initial reallocation of land; thus it sidestepped the class nature of the future state [Jordaan 1959:32-33]. Underlying the AAC's demand for the right to buy and sell land, Jordaan continued, was the aim of creating a yeomanry, modelled on Stolypin's scheme in pre-revolutionary Russia. But industrial

South Africa lacked the large peasantry upon which to develop a yeomanry: the bourgeoisie relied on the superexploitation of proletarianized reserve-dwellers and would never allow sufficient numbers to withdraw from the labor market to develop as independent farmers. To call for the development of a small strata of black capitalist farmers or peasants in South Africa's conditions, as the AAC did, was not historically progressive from the point of view of the working class, even if it accorded with the laws of capitalist development. But the Anti-CAD's call to break up and redistribute large, productive capitalist landholdings using a quantitative yardstick was economically unviable and utopian, assuming that Africans had a prior land claim and would abandon industry. Jordaan suggested that nationalization would allow the continuation of large, mechanized farms conducive to agricultural productivity, enabling a gradual transition to collectivization [1959:34-38].[13]

To what extent did the NEUM debates on the land question engage with the prevailing social realities in the countryside? As Jordaan pointed out, both sides subordinated large-scale production to smallholder possession, effectively ignoring not just the issue of economies of scale on already mechanized farms but the possible interests of the agricultural proletariat. If the Anti-CAD's conception of an equitable distribution of land amongst the entire rural population was impractical from that point of view, it was also utopian in its belief that such farming would necessarily take place on a household basis, given the extent to which

rural households had been broken up, even then, and agricultural cultivation had become predominantly female.

On the other hand, if the AAC's aim was to link up rural and urban struggles through migrant labor, then why, in addition to addressing the efforts to forestall proletarianization, did the AAC not also concern itself with the landless reserve dwellers who were often the most militant on the mines or more broadly with labor tenants, who might not envision their access to land in terms of the right to buy and sell. As Claassens' research [1991] shows, many labor tenants still stake their land claims on their families' long-term occupancy, disdaining the concept of legal ownership. Even in the reserves, that right did not always strike a chord. Ralph Bunche, an African-American social scientist in South Africa in the late 1930s recounts that one of his Durban informants, Reverent M'Timkulu, described

> ...Zulus as not interested in the franchise because it is foreign to their experience; their thinking is entirely in terms of *land* and *more land*--they think that if they can get more land their problems will be solved. But they aren't interested in buying any land--they think it must be *given* to them--because they say the land belonged to their fathers and they wish it to be given back to them [Bunche Collection; emphasis in original].

Amongst Trotskyists, then, solutions to the land question ranged from various schemes for smallholder possession to large-scale nationalization as a prelude to collectivization. Can the position that Africans, tired of trusteeship, would resist nationalization, be reconciled with the position that nationalization was compatible with widespread rural proletarianization and productive economies of scale? The

former position emphasizes subjective aspirations in the reserves; the latter, objective conditions both in parts of the reserves and on white farms. What both positions missed is that the highly differentiated and rapidly changing rural population made any rigid solutions to the land question very difficult to maintain in the late 1950s. In that respect, these opposing views might have been temporarily reconciled through a practical recognition that a specific socialist solution to the land question would depend on the variety and balance of class forces in town and countryside at the time of a social revolution. Yet, if these opposing positions on the land question could have been temporarily united under the banner of "Land and Liberty" in a manner which left open the path to socialism, how do we explain the intensity and animosity of the NEUM's disputes on the land question?

The intensity of the theoretical disputes masked the political crisis facing all socialists which related to the theory-practice problem. Fuelling the disputes were two practical problems. Firstly, the question of whether to organize in the reserves on the basis of a classically democratic or an explicitly socialist program, a problem which became more acute after the passage of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, which pushed the entire socialist movement underground. Secondly, the question of whether to actively support armed struggle in the Pondoland uprising against state repression. Despite their fierce theoretical disputes, neither socialist tendency nor the NEUM nor the ANC supplied arms requested by Pondoland militants during their

uprising.[14] In the NEUM, the internal pressure which this created within its core, the Workers' Party, led to the organizational split. Only with the banning of black political opposition following the Sharpeville massacre and the ensuing nationwide uprising, did socialists begin to seriously address the issue of armed struggle and attempt to conceptualize it in relation to rural insurgency.

Conclusion

These experiences of South African socialists indicate the interrelationship of political theory and practice. Despite the symbolic significance of land for most blacks and the massive land-hunger of the rural majority, only a minority of socialists in either tendency gave their theoretical or practical attention to rural mobilization. In the late 1920s and '30s, when socialists began to consider the agrarian question more seriously, they worked with abstract and polarized notions of a peasantry and a rural proletariat which were derived from earlier European experiences and debates [Lenin 1974; Banaji 1990]. Drawing on the European experience, Lenin grasped the political economy of a migrant labor process that was relatively unfettered by state intervention, and Wolf highlighted the political and cultural dimensions of this process. However, South Africa's migrant labor process had its own distinctive characteristics. The deliberate state policy to stabilize migrant labor as a permanent social class went counter to capitalism's historical tendency which links urbanization to proletarianization. It

also went counter to popular aspirations, both those of the most proletarianized reserves dwellers who spent most of their working lives in industrial areas, struggling over working conditions at their places of employment, and those with peasant aspirations who needed adequate access to land.

From the late 1930s, through the 1950s, empirical developments coupled with their own practical efforts in the reserves compelled socialists to revise the abstract concepts with which they had initially analyzed the rural population. To a striking extent the common observations of socialists organizing in the reserves from the late 1930s through the '50s overrode their sectarian political divisions. But the divergent socialist tendencies which permeated the South African left in the 1920s and '30s produced two different traditions of theory and practice. Generally, Communists were consistently stronger in practical work while Trotskyists excelled at theory. This dichotomy impeded the work of socialists in the rural areas and the development of socialism as a movement.

1. Scholarship on South Africa's agrarian question has been bifurcated between a structural political economy approach concerned with the impact of apartheid on class structure and rural development (Wolpe 1972; Levin and Neocosmos 1989; Weiner and Levin 1991; Mabin 1991; Marcus 1989) and a social history approach (Beinart and Bundy 1980; Keegan 1986a, 1986b; Hendricks 1990:9-11 compares these approaches). Alternative developmental models envision a society based on articulating modes of production in which continued proletarianization in the rural areas is expected to give a working class thrust to the national struggle (Wolpe 1972; Levin and Neocosmos 1989) or a neo-classical populism premised on small-scale rural capitalism. Structural approaches have presumed that rural political consciousness follows economic class, and discussions of the political dimensions of the agrarian question are encoded in debates about class homogenization or differentiation in the countryside.

2. As Dobb (1963:2-3) notes, definitions of concepts influence the principles according to which we select variables for study, form hypotheses and develop analyses and interpretations of history and politics. To analyze historical and, hence, changing phenomena with a fixed and abstract definition might obscure their development; thus the need to continually reevaluate and modify abstract definitions by reference to history. By questioning the construction of Marxist models and concepts, Marxism as a methodology which attempts to illuminate and explain patterns of social development can be strengthened (Burawoy 1989).

3. The peasantry is a class of agrarian subsistence producers which possess its means of production and includes labor-tenants and sharecroppers who rent or obtain access to land owned by other people in exchange for labor, crops or cash. Unlike feudal lords or the bourgeoisie and proletariat, it is not specific to a particular mode of production. Its possession of the means of production is a defining feature across pre-capitalist and capitalist periods; the discontinuity comes from the transformation of the relations of surplus extraction which, under capitalism, increase the threat of proletarianization. During feudalism, surplus production was transferred directly to the lord under threat of coercion. In capitalism the process is more complex. Typically surplus is extracted through the market but landlords may extract surplus crops or labor services or the state may extract surplus through taxation and agricultural pricing schemes (*cf.* Hilton 1978 and Dobb 1963:1-32 on class).

Most Africanists identify peasants as rural cultivators who control their means of production, who are generally organized in subsistence-producing households, who produce a surplus for other classes, extracted by rent or taxes, and who possess a distinct peasant culture which nonetheless is related to the broader social culture. According to Klein peasants engage in both subsistence and market production, which distinguishes them from pure subsistence cultivators, on the one hand, and capitalist farmers, on the other (Klein

1980:9-13; see also Isaacman 1990:1-2). However, the differentiation and fragmentation of the household under capitalism, seen in extreme form in South Africa due to the migrant labor system, suggests that peasant production cannot adequately be understood in terms of household production.

4. Luxemburg argued that antagonistic class interests within nations prevented any collective national will and bourgeois leadership of a national movement could divert the proletariat from its own class struggle (Davis 1976:13-15, 27-29; Luxemburg 1976:150-151). Lenin, by contrast, believed that insofar as the bourgeoisies of oppressed nations which had not yet completed their democratic revolutions fought for the right of national self-determination, they had a progressive potential. With the October 1917 Russian Revolution, Lenin's solution, expressed in the slogan, "the right of nations to self-determination," i.e., the right of oppressed nations to choose and agitate for political self-determination through independent statehood, became paradigmatic (Lenin 1971:41-45, 101).

5. Unevenness characterizes social development generally, but this becomes accentuated under capitalism because of the system's potential for rapid growth in response to specific investment opportunities. Combined development refers to the compressing of different stages of capitalist development. For example, industrial development in economically backwards or newly developing countries often outpaces that in earlier industrialized countries, like Britain, because it is financed by massive investment with access to the latest techniques. See Trotsky 1977:27*ff.*).

6. Whether Trotsky's misplaced optimism and his problematic assumption that a South African revolution would hinge on developments in Britain is due to his particular application of the permanent revolution theory to South Africa or to a flaw in the theory warrants further consideration.

7. Between 1932-34 the CPSA had briefly resurrected the Native Republic thesis, with conflicting interpretations. The dominant position saw the Native Republic as a workers' and peasants' government but Lazar Bach and L. L. Leepile called "For Independence and Soviet rule and for the voluntary unification of the free Native Republics - Basuto, Bechuana, Swazi, Zulu, Xosa etc. into a Federation of Independent Native Republics." *Umsebenzi*, May 5, 1934:1; Simons 1983:473). This minority thesis was a response to attempts to incorporate the British Protectorates into the Union of South Africa, nonetheless, most socialists rejected it on the grounds that it would reinforce national fragmentation. In this context, the WPSA initially thought that Trotsky's argument reflected a mechanical application of the Soviet model of national self-determination, which in South Africa, they believed, would reinforce sectional divisions. Interview with R. O. Dudley, Cape Town, April 1988.

8. Thus, in the All African Convention, formed in 1935 to fight the state's attempts to curtail African voting rights, both left-wing Communists and Trotskyists concurred on the need to boycott the proposed Native Representative Council. Communist Johnny Gomas felt intellectually closest to the Trotskyists, even though he disdained what he saw as their lack of grass-roots activity. Fanny Klenerman, who joined the Johannesburg WPSA after being expelled from the CPSA, nonetheless helped distribute the CPSA's organ, *Umsebenzi*. Alpheus Maliba, who originally worked with expelled Communist T. W. Thibedi in the short-lived Communist League of Africa, joined the CPSA in 1936, but still asked Trotskyists to publish one of his pamphlets.

9. The neglect of the rural proletariat evoked considerable criticism by South African leftists. See Ernstzen (1952:11-12) and Jordaan (1959); interview with Jordaan 1987.

10. The WPSA sold *The Spark* on the mines, and its ephemeral Johannesburg organ, *Umlilo Mollo*, contained a number of letters from mineworkers and metal workers. Fanny Klenerman noted in her memoirs that miners came to some of the WPSA's public meetings ("The South African Workers Party").

11. Reflecting the CPSA's changed policy towards the NRC in the 1940s, Maliba later campaigned unsuccessfully for a seat in the NRC (Basner 1993:122).

12. Hendricks (1990:152) seems to doubt the existence of this stratum, arguing that the minimal efforts to promote a stable middle peasantry had been untenable, given the economic conditions of the reserves.

13. More recently, Jordaan (Interview 1977) questioned whether the failure of collectivized agriculture in the USSR, Tanzania and Mozambique negated the viability of collectivization for South Africa. Unlike those cases, he argued, South Africa's relative industrialization would preclude the need for state-driven primitive socialist accumulation based on exploiting the peasantry. Moreover, state policy had prevented a private property tradition amongst blacks, in contrast to Europe's long tradition of private possession or ownership, suggesting that resistance to collectivization would not be as great in South Africa as in other countries.

14. For the NEUM's response to the request for arms see Drew (1991:474-505); for the ANC, verbal communication from Howard Barrell, St. Antony's College, Oxford, 4 April 1992.

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