The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Challenges for the Left.

Brian Raftopoulos, Associate Professor,
Institute of Development Studies,
University of Zimbabwe.

(Public Lecture delivered at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 23rd June 2005.)

Introduction.
In the journalistic world the Zimbabwean crisis since 2000 has been constructed through the dichotomy of either a radical nationalist redistributive project carried out as historical redress in the face of neoliberal orthodoxy, or a breakdown of the norms of liberal governance through the machinations of an authoritarian political figure. The first position has been the dominant message in the Zimbabwean state controlled media and some African voices in the diasporas, and has been articulated as a Pan Africanist project. The opposition media inside Zimbabwe, and the liberal and conservative press in South Africa and the West have largely presented the second position. It is on this rupture that the major ambiguities of the left have arisen around analyses and solidarities regarding the Zimbabwean crisis. In what might be referred to as a left nationalist tradition the emphasis has been placed on the legitimacy of the Zanu PF’s ‘anti-colonial’ agenda, downplaying the importance of the democratic deficit and human rights abuses of the process. As an example a leading political commentator in Zimbabwe, has criticised

......the leaders of the opposition parties (in Zimbabwe) who have placed primacy of on issues of ‘democracy’, ‘good governance’ and ‘human rights at the expense of addressing the National Question and all its ramifications."

For such a position the democratic political questions can only be understood as a sequential product of first resolving the structural issues of the ‘National Question’ in a mechanistic deployment of the much abused base-superstructure metaphor in Marxist thought. A more general position along these lines can be found in Issa Shivji’s critique of human rights discourse. Shivji observes that:

Human rights discourse has succeeded in marginalizing concrete analysis of our society. Human rights ideology is the ideology of the status of the status quo, not change. Documentation of the human rights abuses, although important, although important in its own

---
2 In the word of George Shire, a prominent Zanu PF supporter in the UK: “Another world is possible in which the ownership of land and economic resources in the region are deracialised – and are put to use for the benefit of the people. This economic strategy is what is at the heart of the policies being pursued by Zanu PF and its allies in the region. This is why Mugabe is seen as a ‘threat’, a ‘dictator’, a ‘tyrant’ and worse by those whose real interests are not compatible with the interests of the majority in Africa.” George Shire, ‘Sinner or Sinned,’ African Business, April 2003, p15
4 The Scrutator (Commonly believed to Ibo Mandaza) ‘The Victoria Falls mini summit on land.’ The Zimbabwean Mirror 28th April 2000.
right, by itself does not help us to understand the social and political relations in our society. It is not surprising that given the absence of political economy context and theoretical framework, much of our writings on human rights, rule of law, constitution etc. uncritically reiterate or assume neo-liberal precepts. Human rights is not a theoretical tool of understanding social and political relations. At best it can only be a means of exposing a form of oppression and, therefore, perhaps, an ideology of resistance.\(^5\)

One could certainly agree with Shivji about the limitations and dangers of the neo-liberal constructions of human rights discourse, without falling into his derivative notion of the marginality of a human rights questions and the primacy of a structuralist political economy positions. Once again within such a framework there is secondary position designated for issues of democratic process that has in my view been a serious weakness in the left nationalist position on Zimbabwe, and within a particular African tradition of political economy. More will be said on this below. Other scholars have tried to draw attention to the forms of politics constructed through the Zimbabwean crisis setting out a more multi-layered view of the issues at stake, including not only the structural legacies of the settler colonial period, but also the specificities of the authoritarian nationalist content the Mugabe regime as well as the effects of the complex and difficult legacies of the liberation movements on contemporary politics.\(^6\) Henning Melber has referred to the latter as the process through which the political elite in the region, by employing ‘selective narratives and memories relating to their liberation wars, has constructed or invented a new set of traditions to establish an exclusive post-colonial legitimacy under the sole authority of one particular agency of forces.’\(^7\)

Thus in the Zimbabwean context in particular there has arisen a very deep divide among what can loosely be called ‘the Left,’ which refers to individuals whose analysis emphasise various aspects of the issues noted above and who have taken a stand either alongside the current regime or with the opposition and a large part of the civic movement. Yeros has referred to this divide along the following schematic lines:

...one takes the side of civil society and concerns itself with ensuring free and fair party elections remaining cognisant of the bourgeois nature of the ‘civil’ electoral platform; the other takes the side of the ‘uncivil’, endorsing the radical land acquisition programme of the ruling party, while remaining cognisant of the latter’s democratic deficit.\(^8\)

The rest of this paper will attempt to tease out these issues in the Zimbabwean context, and the challenges they represent for the Left in Southern Africa. In order to do this the discussion will look at four major areas: The intellectual Legacies of Political Economy; problematising nation, race and anti-imperialism; and the problems of opposition politics.

**The Intellectual Legacies of Political Economy.**


In a study of the history of the African Association of Political Science (AAPS) from 1973-2003, the Nigerian scholar Adele Jinadu noted that the period 1975-1985 ‘witnessed the popularity, if not the dominance of a Marxist political economy approach in African political science.' Mahmood Mamdani has also written that for the first generation of postcolonial intellectuals the major assumption of their political consciousness was that the impact on colonial rule on African societies was ‘mainly economic’, and that following this the tools of political economy were the ‘most appropriate to come to analytical grips with the colonial legacy.’ This position repeats an earlier insight by Stuart Hall who, attempting to understand the dominance of economism in both numerous Marxist and non-Marxist accounts of post-conquest societies, wrote that ‘perhaps the weight of imperialist economic relations has been so powerfully visible, these formations have virtually been held to be explainable by an application of “imperialism” as essentially a purely economic process.’

A primary locus of this influence was what became known as the Dar es Salaam debate. Reading through the various contributions of this debate it is clear that in addition to the important insights provided on imperialist constraints on African development, many of the interventions were marked by a strong economism and instrumentalism in attempting to deal with questions of class and state, as well as a clear ahistorical approach and a penchant for arid Marxist exegesis. In addition much of the discussion focussed on the role of the state, with very little discussion of popular democratic processes. For many progressive intellectuals in, or supporting the liberation movement, who became part of the early Zimbabwean state and led intellectual debates in the 1980’s, the influence of political economy, and of the intellectual after glow of the Dar Debate, was immense.

It is significant also that the major work of political economic analysis on Rhodesia during the early 1970’s was carried out by two scholars who had also had contact with the Dar Debate. I am referring of course to Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul’s very influential Essays in the Political Economy of Africa, published in 1973 that spawned a series of radical analyses of the Rhodesian economy. Arrighi’s work influenced a radical revision of the analysis of the settler political economy and the process of proletarianisation in the settler economy, in particular debunking the assumptions of dualism and modernisation theory. It also provided a critique of the dominant nationalist historiography of the time. The work still stands as a milestone in Zimbabwean studies and paved the way for future political economy studies of Zimbabwe. It was therefore not surprising when the first collection of essays assessing the first five years of independence was predictably called ‘Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition.’ This study, edited by prominent Zimbabwean academic Ibbo Mandaza bore the major hallmarks of the political economy tradition, concentrating on the international and regional determinants of Zimbabwe's independence, as well focusing attention on the new state. Much of the analysis of class was heavily economistic and the collection provided little attention to democratic and human rights issues. Significantly there was no analysis of the state repression then taking place in Matabeleland. The collection did however make an interesting start in problematising the assumption of a protracted struggle leading to a more

---

radical content of the liberation struggle, by analysing the ambiguities of the petty bourgeoisie. When this influence in the Zimbabwean left was added to the dominance of a vulgar economistic Marxism emanating particularly from the Law Department of the University of Zimbabwe in the 1980’s, there was little growth in alternative non-economistic left thinking in the country during this period.\textsuperscript{14}

This first generation of left oriented intellectuals in Zimbabwe were also marked by their emphasis on the role of the state as the central fact of development and transformation. Even early liberal critiques of the state did not question this assumption, however much they criticised particular applications and abuses of state power.\textsuperscript{15} Jonathan Moyo, leading liberal political critic of the 1990’s turned authoritarian statist and Zanu PF spin doctor between 2000-2004, and reverting to state critic after falling from grace in 2004, had no illusions about the power of the state. In one of his many demonising comments on critical intellectual and civil society in his role as ruling party ideologue, Moyo proclaimed with characteristic vitriol:

\begin{quote}
The first people who started selling out are the intellectuals. They are no longer engaging in critical debates that help our people. They made the simplistic definition of State as Government and the rest as civil society. Everyone left the state and created civil society. Those who have abandoned the state need to rethink. They need to come back home and home is the state.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

This adherence to the centrality of the state complemented the liberation movement’s conception of the state as primarily owned and controlled by the ruling party the sole, legitimate heirs of the liberation movement. Any reference to the liberal concerns with human rights and democratic space that once informed the demands of the nationalist movement, were increasingly erased from the selective history of nationalism espoused by Zanu PF, and increasing emphasis was placed on the commandism that had dominated liberation politics.

During the 1990’s and the period after 2000, in the context of the growth of civic movement and the emergence of stronger opposition politics, there were significant development in the intellectual deconstruction of nationalism and the politics of the liberation movement, about which more will be said in the next section. Significantly however, in the context of a polarised national politics, divergent trends developed in the application of a political economy analysis to explain the politics of land occupations in 2000 and beyond. On the one hand intellectuals like Sam Moyo, Ibbo Mandaza, and Paris Yeros have taken a position in critical support of Mugabe’s land policy. Moyo explains his position as follows:

\begin{quote}
Much of the negative fallout from the occupations movement, including its short term gain, has to be weighed more seriously against the longer term gains to the broader democratisation process, of creating space for awareness and participation in the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} It is ironic that many of the leading law students and student leaders from this period became key human rights activists, concentrating their advocacy on human rights abuses of the state with little influence from theoretical imperatives of political economy. The irony may be explained that because of the dominant economism of this university based Marxism, there was little attempt to deal with the specificities of politics and human rights, both considered derivative and secondary to the economic base.


\textsuperscript{16} ‘Non-State actors doomed: Moyo.’ \textit{The Herald} 14/10/03.
basic social struggles hitherto dominated by formal state structures and urban civil society.\(^{17}\)

Similarly Mandaza judges that the rural struggles not only constitutes a ‘land reform process of no small proportion; but it will largely have resolved and democratised the land in Zimbabwe.\(^{18}\) In his turn Yeros largely approves the land reform process because ‘one cannot miss the fact that 1 million rural poor are being resettled.’ Responding to the violence that has accompanied the occupations Yeros reverts to a form of structuralist justifications. He writes:

\[
\text{The argument that violence is being instrumentalised is correct. Yet again while terror cannot be condoned and must be resisted, one must recognise that violence, whether it comes in the form of ‘infant mortality’ or ‘so called war vets’ or the riot police, is endemic in the neo-colonial situation and cannot be extirpated in any permanent way unless neo-colonialism itself is.}^{19}\]

For those who have criticised the authoritarian nationalism of the Zimbabwe regime, tried to unpack the specificities of the Mugabe regime’s current anti-democratic politics and human rights abuses, as well as laying bare the new processes of elite accumulation that are currently underway in Zimbabwe\(^{20}\), Moyo and Yeros have only a shrill response: Such intellectual and the ‘oppositional’ politics have been coopted,

\[
\ldots\text{to the point where imperialism has become mystified, national self-determination demoted, the state obscured, and the agrarian question abandoned. Such intellectual reversals have had real effects, perhaps most clearly in relation to Zimbabwe, whose radical nationalism and land reform have proved unpalatable to the ‘civic’ and ‘post’ nationalisms of domestic and international forces.}^{21}\]

Elsewhere Phimister and I have responded to such positions noting in particular challenging such optimistic characterisations of the land ‘reform’ process, as well as serious lack of analysis on the part of Moyo and Yeros of the nature of the Zimbabwean state and the specificities of the authoritarian regime currently being consolidated in Zimbabwe. Moreover the narrow economism of their particular deployment of political economy analysis connects with the long-standing problem in this are that has already been noted.\(^{22}\)

Other commentators drawing on the insights of political economy have taken a more critical view of the processes and politics currently underway in Zimbabwe. The voluminous work of Patrick Bond, and his collaboration with John Manyanya has traced the flows of finance

\(^{19}\) Paris Yeros, op cit, 2002, p12.
capital in both colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe, clearly setting out the circuits of this process and their determinations on politics in both periods. More specifically their work has tracked the destructive effects of neo-liberalism on the Zimbabwean economy and the emergence of the authoritarian politics in what they have called ‘exhausted nationalism’. 

Bonds major interventions in this have also linked the popular struggles in Zimbabwe to broader global struggles against neo-liberalism, and shed some light on the ‘sub-imperial’ role of South Africa in the context of the ‘New Imperialism’.

Another major intervention in this area has come through the work of David Moore. In a series of articles Moore has raised a series of long-term issues by locating the Zimbabwean crisis in what he terms in ‘unresolved processes of primitive accumulation, nation-state formation, and democratisation.’ The *longue durée* questions raised by Moore have helped to clarify the longer term structural constraints facing developing countries like Zimbabwe, and to provide greater depth to the problems facing the democratic struggles in the country. Moore has also provided an important commentary on the debates within the Zimbabwean left pointing to the strengths and weaknesses of contending arguments, but also stressing the centrality of democratic struggles and the avoidance of ‘authoritarian closure’, for the resolution of the Zimbabwean crisis.

While the work of political economists like Bond and Moore have produced impressive insights into the Zimbabwean crisis, there are tensions in their work in moving between broad structural analyses to more concrete levels of political analysis. As Hall has pointed out, drawing strongly of the work of Gramsci, Marx’s central concepts such is ‘primitive accumulation, were pitched at high levels of abstraction and were ‘epochal in their range and reference.’ Setting out the Gramscian challenge Hall argues that:

---

23 For an early use of this term see the newspaper article ‘Electoral violence has a long history’ The Zimbabwe Independent, 23 rd J une 2000.


......until one has shown how ‘objective economic crisis’ actually develop, via the changing relations in the balance of forces, into crisis in the state and society, and germinate in the form of ethical-political struggles and formed political ideologies, influencing the conception of the world of the masses, one has not conducted a proper kind of analysis, rooted in the decisive and irreversible ‘passage’ from structure to superstructure. 

For intellectuals working from within a historical materialist framework this is enormous challenge, but one that has to be faced if the analysis of the specificities of a concrete political situation is not to appear like a voluntarist addition to structuralist assumptions, with little organic basis in such analyses. Moreover this weakness will have serious political effects, particularly in the failure to understand the force of particular discourses, and the hegemonic reach of, potential or actual, of post-colonial elites in the region. This applies for example to constructions of Nationalism and Race in the region, to which the discussion now turns.

Problematising Nation, Race and Anti-Imperialism.

Historically one of the major theoretical and political failures of the left has been around questions of nationalism and race. In South Africa for example, commenting on the record of the revisionist radical South African scholarship Neville Alexander concluded:

....although there were different emphases among the individual scholars, most of them tended to adopt a dogmatic position in terms of which racial ideology was seen as a kind of ‘false consciousness’ originally, and a relationship of functional necessity was established between the development of capitalism and racism in South Africa. This was related to the prevailing militant revolutionaryism in the broad liberation movement at the time. It was to prove to be the analytical Achilles heel of the revisionist ‘new history’ since, ultimately, history itself was to indicate long before events themselves demonstrated the fact that the capitalist system is able to survive and even thrive in South Africa without recourse to racial ideology.

While it is clear that capitalist production relations do not require a racial political structure, it is also clear that racism and issues relating to that imprecise construct ‘the National Question’, remain alive and active in the post-colonial histories of former settler states. At state level these issues have come to be centred around the challenge of ‘indigenisation’ or ‘black economic empowerment,’ and it is at the level of emergent elites that this issue has received the most policy and ideological attention. In Zimbabwe the ravages of neo-liberalism combined with the loss of ruling party legitimacy and the emergence of a formidable opposition, brought these issues of black empowerment and historical economic redress to centre stage. The land, a continuously unresolved problem in the post-colonial period, became the sole central signifier of national redress, constructed through a series of discursive exclusions, among which race became a central mobiliser and marker of outsider status. An important part of this discourse was the selective telling of nationalist and liberation history, citing the ruling party as the only legitimate agency of liberation and


therefore the sole arbiter of the national interest, patriotism and authenticity. Terence Ranger has referred to this as ‘Patriotic History’ and though there is certainly an overlap with what used to be called nationalist historiography, the narrowness and exclusivity of this latest product are qualitatively different from what was certainly a greater openness of the nationalist historiographical trajectory.

One of the most disturbing features of the Zimbabwean crisis has been the manner in which the Mugabe regime has articulated a repressive national politics to a broad anti-imperialist, pan-africanist appeal, with essentialist notions of race as the central markers of the conflict. This process has been a reminder of the power of the idea of ‘race’, precisely, as Gilroy reminds us, because ‘it supplies a foundational understanding of natural hierarchy on which a host of other supplementary social and political conflicts have come to rely.’ With great intensity in Zimbabwe, but with increasing frequency in South Africa, the mobilisation of race as a legitimating force has been used to justify the battle against historical inequities, while attempting to conceal the structures that increase such inequality. The real broad appeal that such a discourse can invoke can disable a left that fails to come to terms with the lived realities of race in post-colonial settings.

For as in Zimbabwe, where the legitimacy of nationalism has faced substantive challenge, the resonance of aspects of Mugabe’s ‘race’ message has been felt even within opposition forces. I have witnessed the difficult attempts to deal with white and other minority involvement in the MDC and the civic movement in the face both of Mugabe’s characterisation of the MDC as a foreign white creation, and as a result of certain complaints about the predominance of whites in certain leading positions in both movements. Given the weak history of non-racial opposition in Zimbabwe this is not surprising, but I have been struck by the ease with which opposition activists slip into such narrow nationalist positions, under the strain of trying to develop different modes of operation. As critical intellectuals and social movements we have yet to develop sufficient popular practices and disseminating structures which allow us, in Erasmus words, to ‘find ways of recognising race and its continued effects on people’s everyday lives……while at the same time working against practices that perpetuate race thinking.’ An important part of this process involves a clearer understanding of the role of ‘race,’ as well as ethnicity, in the mobilisation practices and leadership structures of our liberation movements.

Interestingly the emergence of this narrow official nationalism emerged against the background of an increasingly critical historiography from the 1990’s. Studies carried out were concerned with an overall revisionist assessment of nationalism and the liberation struggle. Critical assessments included: a closer examination of the coercive mobilisation strategies and patriarchal structures of the liberation movements; an analysis of the historical tensions between nationalist politics and the trade unionism and the ways in which these have been manifest in the post-colonial period; the divisions of urban societies along

---

class, gender, age and ethnic lines, the heterogeneity of urban politics in the context of the emergence of mass nationalism, and the emergence of a complex black urban civil society;\textsuperscript{35} studies of the emergence of ethnicity, nationalism, violence and politics in Matabeleland, setting out the specific contours of land and politics in this region.\textsuperscript{36}

Critical work also looked at the nature of the land and political crisis that emerged from the late 1990's, laying bare the class-based, patriarchal and authoritarian nationalist content of the politics, but seeking also to provide an historical context for the emergence of this politics.\textsuperscript{37} Additionally important work on ‘race’ contributed to the deconstruction of the binary positions that became an essential part of Mugabe's revived nationalist rhetoric, and pointing to more complex inter-relationships between racialised identities.\textsuperscript{38}

Some of these studies moved away from a political economy framework and sought to understand issues of identity, culture and politics by drawing on the insights of post-colonial theory and post-structuralism, in particular on the work of Foucault. In the case of Rutherford and Worby, in particular the Foucault has been productively employed to understand the power relations of land politics in communal areas and commercial farms, increasing our understanding of how intellectual, economic and political processes are articulated in the formation and maintenance of power and identities in both the colonial and post-colonial


periods.\textsuperscript{39} Other work on the land question showed the differences and connections between rural and urban struggles, undercutting the divide between rural/ethnic subjects and urban citizens, demonstrating the mutual interconnections and influences of both struggles, and making Neocosmos point, in his critique of Mamdani, that ‘civil society was (and is) not simply an urban phenomenon in Africa.’\textsuperscript{40} The general historical thrust of this work points to Frederick Cooper’s assessment that the

‘...triumph of nationalism appears less as a linear progression than as a conjuncture, and the success of African political parties less a question of a singular mobilisation in the name of the nation than of coalition building, the forging of clientage networks, and machine politics.’\textsuperscript{41}

As noted above, notwithstanding this rich historiography rethinking nationalism in Zimbabwe, the ruling party has been able, through its media monopoly and the widespread use of force, to project a much more narrow and selective vision of the past. This has been an important lesson for progressive forces in Zimbabwe, namely the need to popularise alternative visions of the past and to ensure that important academic historical work is placed into the public domain in more accessible forms. As the Zimbabwean experience has shown an important part of legitimacy struggles can be fought around the past, and the battles to confront official appropriations of the liberation struggle is a key area of contestation.

A similar lesson applies to the use of anti-imperialism as an opposing ideology. The Mugabe regime has been very effective in broadening its appeal through its use of an anti-imperialist ideological offensive, while carrying out a very specific, repressive class project domestically. The language of anti-imperialism has mobilised the collective language of the nation, in ‘nationalist forms of globalisation politics’ that attempt to conceal elite accumulation, and use popular mobilisation for authoritarian politics.\textsuperscript{42} There are several reasons for the official support for Mugabe’s rhetoric, not the least of which is the latest predatory phase of American imperialism with the predictable support of British satrapy\textsuperscript{43}, along side what Rao calls an ‘insidious return of normative defences of empire,’\textsuperscript{44} which very easily evinces a


\textsuperscript{41} Frederick Cooper, ‘Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History.’ \textit{American Historical Review}, 99, 5, 1994, p1539; see also Cooper’s ‘Africa’s Pasts and Africa’s Historians.’ \textit{African Sociological Review}, 3,2, 1999, pp1-29. Together these two pieces represent a brilliant review and revision of African historical trends and throw up important questions about the contemporary period.

\textsuperscript{42} For the use of such language in southeast Asia see Gerard Greenfield, ‘Bandung REDUX: Imperialism and Anti-Globalisation Nationalisms in southeast Asia.’ Leo Panitch and Colin Leys Eds) 2005 op cit.


defensive anti-imperialism which is by no means anti-capitalist. The dangers of the authoritarian appropriation of a potentially progressive discourse have been well summarised by Blade Nzimande:

…..what Zimbabwe does illustrate (once more) is that the demagogic appropriation of a progressive nationalist discourse by a bureaucratic capitalist stratum, invariably drives a wedge between radical third world nationalism and democracy. It ends up leaving former elites as the active champions of democracy. We need to challenge the monopoly of the nationalist discourse enjoyed by this stratum, just as we need (certainly here in SA) to challenge the dominance of the discourse on human rights by conservative ethnic minority forces, who use the discourse to defend ill-begotten wealth from the past. A working class and popular appropriation of both national and democratic is critical.

For the authoritarian nationalists in Zimbabwe this appropriation takes place against what former Zimbabwean Minister of Foreign Affairs Stan Mudenge believes to be ‘the mutation of European and North American “socialists” and even some “communists” from ‘progressives’ in the 1960's and 1970's to neo-liberal reactionaries today.’ A similar position was taken by ruling party intellectual Tafataona Mahoso who has written that the revival of African Nationalism has taken place as a result of the ‘bitter sense of betrayal which the African majority feel at the hands of a new breed of neo-liberal African “reformers” and their Western allies, the socialists and progressives of yester-year.’

It is clear that historically there have been serious tensions between various factions of the Western Left and progressives in the Third World, relating amongst other issues to the uneven experiences of capitalism, imperialism, racism and liberal human and political rights. The result has often been that, as Nash has written, the ‘appeal to fraternity never led to an account of the political strategies that would bring the two zones together.’ In the context of the demise of the socialist promise post 1989, the decisive loss of an internationalist socialist solidarity has provided more breeding space for resurrected nationalisms, particularly of the repressive variety. Mugabe’s nationalism is one such incarnation. Notwithstanding the impressive achievements of the anti-globalisation movement, the broadness of the diverse agendas of this movement can also accommodate the authoritarian anti-imperialism of the Zimbabwe regime.

Thus there remains the difficult task of developing an anti-imperialist critique and practice that is both anti-capitalist and democratic, and that builds more democratic political spaces while challenging the ravages of the New Imperialism. This is not a new challenge for the

---

47 These remarks are quoted in Terence Rangers, ‘The Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe.’ Lecture given at the University of Uppsala, 24th May 2004. Mahoso’s thinking draws heavily from Issa Shivji’s paper ‘The Rise, the Fall and the Insurrection of Nationalism in Africa. Centre for Civil Society Report No. 12. Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, 2004. In particular Shivji observes: “In sum, neo-liberal discourse and political rhetoric has served to debunk African nationalism on the one hand and to rehabilitate imperialism on the other. The majority of African intellectuals have pretty well accommodated mainstream thought. This includes former militant nationalists and radical socialist intellectuals.” P9.
left, as the twentieth century history of socialism theory and practice showed. However in the face of a seemingly unremitting global capitalist onslaught the challenge has become that much more urgent. For some on the left this has led to a form of stoic retreat from anti-capitalist practice while maintaining a critical intellectual stance. This is a structure of feeling that is easy enough to comprehend and even sympathise with, especially when the alternatives on the left are at times a repeat of ahistorical, rigid orthodoxies that have little to commend themselves to critical minds. In the face of such ‘alternatives’ heresy is a positive virtue. The real challenge remains the building of alternative political processes, and here again the Zimbabwean case has provided some sombre lessons.

Problems of Opposition Politics.

The emergence of a major political opposition in the post-1980 period, emerging from a combination of civic and labour struggles, heralded a new phase in Zimbabwean politics. For the emergence of the MDC represented the first major broad based alliance of social forces in Zimbabwe mobilised against the party of the liberation movement, and drawing its strength in particular from the urban areas. The movement drew its ideological strength from an emphasis on political, civic and human rights, pointing to the democratic deficit of the incumbent ruling party and building on the cumulative popular frustration with Zanu PF after nearly two decades of one-party dominance. The stress on human and civic rights issues and on the importance of using available judicial spaces to contest authoritarian politics has often been interpreted as characterising the opposition’s attachment to liberalism, and the rights of elites. Neocosmos in a very useful broad critique of such liberalism has written:

The politics of human rights is, at best, a state-focused politics and is predominantly reduced to a technicised politics, which is limited to a demand for inclusion in to an existing state domain. Thus a struggle for rights, if successful, can end up producing the outcome of a fundamentally de-politicised politics.  

I have a more sanguine view of such rights politics, and see it as an important modality for both challenging the repressive politics of authoritarian states, as well as providing more spaces for developing democratic politics. Additionally working through such perspectives often draw on historically based perspectives of human and civic rights struggles, which provide an important component in developing popular ownership around such struggles. Drawing on these legacies is also necessary because as Jonathan Hyslop has pointed out, while the liberal tradition has avoided questions of material inequality, ‘socialism has never had an adequate theory of political rights necessary to a democratic politics’. This is an important reminder when the deleterious effects of neo-liberal economics have often led to a blanket denigration of the opportunities of liberal rights, which have often been a central part of the anti-colonial struggles.

That being said it is also clear that the political and civic opposition in Zimbabwe have not placed sufficient attention on the relations between civic/human rights questions and economic rights, thus contributing to a dangerous rupture in the rights/redistribution discourse and politics in Zimbabwe. Moreover into this caesura the Mugabe regime has imposed a selective articulation of the issue of colonial redress, which has either forgotten, or completely marginalized the broader political rights questions that were just as central to the struggles against colonial rule. The opposition generally have not responded strongly to this

---

position, and yet one could argue that this is a general challenge for any progressive opposition today. The limitations of turning to neo-liberal economic programmes in response to authoritarian nationalist regimes have become globally apparent.

From its inception the political opposition in Zimbabwe had the urban areas as its major focus, although until the land occupations of 2000 and beyond, had to make inroads into the rural areas. However once the state’s land occupation programme effectively cordoned the opposition out of the rural areas, the disjuncture between ruling party domination in the rural areas, and opposition urban dominance was consolidated. This process has created major strategic and political problems for the opposition, and emphasised a long-standing historical weakness of the Zimbabwean trade union movement in dealing with rural issues. The result has been a break in the political connections between the lived experiences of rural and urban livelihoods, and the deepening of the despotic politics of Zanu PF in the rural traditional and local governance structures. In the urban areas the state has undermined elected local government structures, through the imposition of rigid central government administrative and financial controls, and a recent state assault on the urban ‘surplus’ in the informal sector through its notorious “Operation Restore Order.” The opposition, as a result of a combination of state repression, mass exhaustion, inadequate planning and preparation, and a weak conceptualisation of the relations between land and livelihood struggles in the rural and urban areas, has not yet been able to strengthen opposition politics through new rural-urban political linkages. In the near future the result of such state policies has been the increasing ruralisation of Zimbabwe, and the weakening of the structural urban basis of civic politics. Clearly the challenge of developing a broad citizenship rights politics across rural and urban areas remains immense.

As the electoral obstacles, repressive institutional measures, state violence and tactical acuity deployed by the state have eroded the political effectiveness of the opposition, the major strategic question facing the opposition is: how to confront an authoritarian state, with strong regional support and liberation legitimacy, through peaceful means, in the context of a resurgent imperialism wielding the sword of human rights as its battle call. The answers remain difficult and challenging. In the interim the opposition movement has also had problems developing an alternative political culture, on some occasions displaying a proclivity for perpetuating the ethnic contests and enforcer politics that have become the trade mark of Zanu PF.

54 Gillian Hart has suggested ‘the need to delink the land question from agriculture and from individual restitution claims, and to re-articulate it in terms of racialised dispossession as an ongoing process............this moves extends the definition of the social wage beyond employment-based entitlements or even conventional social policy to insist on basic social security grounded in citizenship rights.’ Gillian Hart ‘Denaturalising Dispossession: Critical Ethnography in the Age of Resurgent Imperialism.’ Centre for Civil Society Reports op cit 2005, p17.
In finalising this section it should be noted that one of the more positive features of opposition politics since 2000, has been the development of regional solidarities over the Zimbabwe crisis. Even as the alliance between the ZCTU and the MDC has come under increasing strain internally, the bonds between labour movements in Zimbabwe and South Africa have grown. COSATU’s two attempts to enter Zimbabwe in 2004 and 2005, in solidarity with the ZCTU was both an important display of solidarity in the face of violations of labour rights, and a challenge to the claims by an authoritarian state to use the issue of sovereignty as a legitimation for abusing such rights. Not for the first time in the history of the world’s labour movements alternative constructions of sovereignty were being proposed across national boundaries. In the context of a regional political body, SADC, that has given continued public support for a repressive regime, this was a very important political statement to make. The action points to different forms of popular Pan Africanist solidarity between post-colonial states.

Conclusion.

It is easy to be dismissive about left alternatives in our region, given the weakness of the forces of the left both in Africa and globally. It is also true that those who still claim some affinity to selective aspects of the legacies of Marxism have had to confront the huge political defeats of that history and the theoretical challenges that it has presented. This is particularly true in the face of a growing reactionary nationalism that threatens to enclose our political structures within the narrow agendas of our ruling elites. For some on the African left this resurgent nationalism represents a necessary defensive stance in the face of the New Imperialism, an abrasive face towards the global bully. Unfortunately much of the anger of this embattled nationalism is channelled against the citizens of our states, and the nationalism that presents itself as the nation’s shield is often the suffocating embrace of murderous regimes. We need to find new collective discourses that build on a broad participation, and a deep commitment to critical discussion and debate. African intellectuals have intermittently engaged in an examination of the theoretical presumptions of their politics, as part of the challenge of confronting the obstacles of post-colonial development. For Zimbabwean intellectuals this is clearly a good time to engage in such a debate. It is hoped that this contribution will develop such a debate.

---

56 One recent example of such a debate was the Mbembe/Zeleza exchange. See Achille Mbembe’s interesting and provocative, ‘African Modes of Self-Writing’, in CODESRIA Bulletin, No. 1, 2000, pp-19; and the response from Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, ‘The Author refers to the “Mbambe/Zeleza Debate.” CODESRIA Bulletin, Nos 1 and 2, 2004, pp26-27. A good intervention in the debate came from Steven Robbins, “The Third World is a Ghetto”?: Looking for a Third Space Between “Postmodern” Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Nationalism.’ CODESRIA Bulletin, Nos 1 and 2, 2004, pp 18-26. Apart from the elements of personal acrimony, there was much that was of use in the debate that opened up interesting questions around the development of African intellectual traditions, and the problems of nationalism as a discursive and political project.