

## Book Review

Edward Webster and Karin Pampallis (eds.) (2017) *The Unresolved National Question: Left Thought Under Apartheid*.

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Apartheid South Africa represented a dramatic and devastating social experiment. Through an impressive legislative and bureaucratic apparatus, the apartheid state implemented a draconian system of racial exclusion and domination that touched all aspects and spheres of life – from work and access to public services to residential organisation and romantic relationships. Relegating black residents to deplorable and unequal conditions, apartheid was arguably the apex of twentieth-century oppression and injustice. This injustice spawned massive resistance.

In *The Unresolved National Question: Left Thought Under Apartheid*, editors Edward Webster and Karin Pampallis aim to resurface the varied strands of left thought that developed alongside popular resistance to apartheid and previous forms of colonial rule. They hope that attention to hidden voices of the past may help to resolve some of the country's current problems. Challenges such as extreme inequality, widespread unemployment and poverty, attacks against foreign-born residents, and government corruption underscore the “unresolved” status of the National Question. In their Introduction to the volume, Edward Webster and John Mawbey define this question as how “to build one united, democratic nation” (p. 1).

The idea of a National Democratic Revolution (NDR) has long been central to considerations of the National Question, in South Africa and beyond. In his concluding chapter, Daryl Glaser describes how the NDR concept emerged during the twentieth century to align two different political projects: a Marxist class project and a nationalist anti-colonial project. In South Africa, the idea of NDR stemmed from theories of internal colonialism or Colonialism of a Special Type (CST). Highlighting that racial domination and capitalist exploitation were indistinguishable, proponents of the CST thesis called for a two-stage revolution, with a national democratic revolution for racial equality preceding a class revolution for socialism.

As Glaser notes, the idea of NDR stood in stark tension with the constitutionalist and liberal-democratic ideas that gained prominence during the transition from apartheid to democracy. Under apartheid, however, left intellectuals had little choice but to engage with the CST thesis, which the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) adopted as their guiding programme. Yet there were also plenty of critics. The first part of the book addresses foundational traditions, which emerged before state repression squashed popular resistance in the 1960s. The second, and larger, part of the book engages with the political ruptures and extensions that emerged within the explosive resurgence of resistance in

the 1970s and 1980s.

In the first part, three of the five chapters pertain to left traditions with close associations to the ANC and SACP. Jeremy Cronin and Alex Mashilo reconstruct CST as an articulation of external (semi-peripheral production of exported commodities) and internal (racialised cheap and surplus labour) forms of domination. In assessing the current moment, they reject the idea of a two-stage transition, and call instead for building socialism within the NDR through state-led re-industrialisation and promotion of livelihood over profit. The other two chapters address the broader Congress tradition, which centred on the Freedom Charter adopted by the ANC and its racially diverse allies at the Congress of the People in 1955. Luli Callinicos traces the ANC's gradual embrace of white activists and communists as the Congress Alliance formed. Robert van Niekerk argues that the Freedom Charter and other public statements developed a clear social-democratic agenda, which prioritised universal and free access to public goods such as housing, health care and education.

The other two foundational traditions include Trotskyist and Africanist perspectives. Illuminating the Trotskyist position, Basil Brown, Mallet Giyose, Hamilton Petersen, Charles Thomas and Allan Zinn examine the Non-European Unity Movement, which formed in 1943 and experienced a resurgence in the 1980s as the New Unity Movement. The Unity Movement shared with proponents of CST an opposition to capitalist domination, but emphasised the need for unity among the oppressed working class, rather than collaboration between racially defined groups as in the Congress Alliance. Siphamandla Zondi shows how Africanist perspectives permeated the ANC but also extended well beyond it. He argues that they prioritised pan-African opposition to imperialism and coloniality, whether traditional colonialism or neocolonial imperialism. The key implication was that "South Africa could not solve its National Question in isolation from the rest of Africa" (p. 102).

The second half of the book builds on these alternative traditions. Four of the chapters address left traditions that, like the Marxist-Leninist (CST) and Trotskyist (Unity Movement) traditions, centred on critiques of capitalism. Enver Motala and Salim Vally trace the intellectual contributions of Neville Alexander, a giant of nationalism studies in South Africa. Criticising the Unity Movement for failing to address questions of class leadership, Alexander called on the working class to unite all oppressed groups within a single nation based on democratic socialism. Martin Legassick traces the history of the Marxist Workers Tendency of the ANC. Building on the Trotskyist idea of permanent revolution, this group pushed for socialism and working-class leadership within the national liberation movement. This led to their expulsion from the ANC. In separate chapters, first Alec Erwin and then Sian Byrne, Nicole Ulrich and Lucien van der Walt address the "workerist" tradition in South Africa, which formed around the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). Whereas Erwin emphasises the centrality of shop-floor organisation within workerism, Byrne et al. focus on the potential for working-class movements to constitute a new nation based on the ideal of worker control.

Another five chapters address ideas about ethnicity, race and gender. Dunbar Moodie shows how Afrikaner nationalism, which prioritised ethnic survival over liberal rights, helped to justify apartheid. Yet debates among Afrikaners increasingly posed the question, does ethnic survival require control over the state? Separate chapters by Gerhard Maré and Ari Sitas address the Zulu ethnic group. Maré shows how Zulu ethnicity enabled access to resources under both apartheid and democracy, while Sitas demonstrates the malleability and multiplicity of "Zulu-nesses" and their relationship to shifting forms of signification.

Xolela Mangcu examines the politics of the Black Consciousness tradition, which he argues emphasised the importance of culture and identity, in contrast to the rationalism of liberal and

Marxist approaches. Building on Steve Biko's notion of "joint culture", he calls for a national identity and "civil religion" that is cross-racial and anti-patriarchal. In the only chapter that directly addresses gender, Shireen Hassim argues that the "woman question" was the most unresolved because nationalist and class struggles side-lined it. Nationalism, she suggests, is a gendered project that silences feminism by promoting unity. Hassim shows how gendered inequalities and forms of violence continue to underpin the nation.

These very brief summaries do not do justice to the complexities of the accounts, or to the intricate differences between the different traditions. It is in the differences, one might argue, that South Africa's National Question lies. Which groups and identities belong at the forefront of ongoing struggles for transformation? Which structures of domination demand the greatest attention? Should activists and left thinkers prioritise capitalism, culture, work, the state, class, race, ethnicity, gender or none of the above? These are fascinating and important questions. Each chapter offers different answers. Webster and Mawbey hope that the volume stimulates debate and further research. I share their wish.

One might criticise the book for leaving out certain traditions, such as the liberal tradition, which certainly addressed the National Question. Yet the key limits stem from the wide coverage, which made in-depth treatments impossible. Authors could only pay limited attention to the historical development of each left tradition. Further, while some chapters do address the democratic period, as a whole they lack a thorough account of how left traditions relate to the present. How do the varied political traditions shape collective organisation today, from well-organised trade unions and political parties to more fluid and localised protests and xenophobic attacks? The volume as a whole offers more questions than answers. In this respect, it represents a great point of departure for students, who may use it as a launching point for further reading – significant bodies of literature underpin every chapter – or for developing their own projects.

What is the National Question, and is it unresolved, or is this even an appropriate question? One might argue that, from the perspective of the original CST formulation, the democratic transition resolved the National Question by establishing a nation free of formal racial discrimination. Yet the National Question was always about more than democracy. For Glaser, it referred to both the specific question of how to organise "South African nationhood" after apartheid, as well as the broader question of how to liberate black people from domination. With respect to the latter, the CST thesis highlighted the need to go beyond democracy through a second, socialist transition.

Against the idea of a two-stage transition, multiple chapters within the volume suggest that national unity depends on class transformation. This is the conclusion that Webster comes to in a separate article introducing the book (*The Conversation*, 2 October 2017). He argues that resolving the National Question requires resolving the "social question", including redistribution of wealth and improving access to education, health and welfare. Whether social democracy can deliver these results, or whether they demand a more fundamental anti-capitalist shift, is an open question.

For some of the chapter authors, though, the national frame is insufficient. Zondi appears to challenge the premise of the volume when he asserts that the National Question "is in essence also supranational and global" (p. 97). Hassim suggests that, at least in the past, formulations of the National Question erased women and gender inequalities. Finally, pointing to the inevitability of ethnic diversity, Maré argues that the National Question "was never the right question to begin with" because a "South African nation, or a black nation, or even a nation of the oppressed" is both "impossible and undesirable" (pp. 163, 165). These criticisms point to a need for different questions.

In short, *The Unresolved National Question* provides much to ponder and explore. Using South Africa – one of the world’s most vibrant hubs of left debate and popular resistance – as a laboratory, it raises crucial questions for activists and scholars across the globe.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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