

South Africa: still an apartheid state

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ESSAY: The roots of the Marikana massacre lie in the ANC's deep antipathy to those it relied upon to rise to power: the black working classes.

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Since the massacre of 34 striking miners in the Marikana region of South Africa last month, there has been a lot of handwringing about the underlying causes of the outrage. Many have located the massacre in the African National Congress's (ANC's) failure to deal with the enduring legacy of Apartheid, but in truth the roots of the tragedy lie elsewhere - in the reality of South African capitalism, and in the politics of the ANC and its alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP).

In trying to understand how something like the Marikana massacre could happen, it is important to grasp that the leaders of the ANC have always had a contradictory attitude towards their mass base, the black working class. That the ANC's leadership is now acting with hatred and violence towards the very constituency that it allegedly represents (and upon whose sacrifice it rode to power), has surprised many commentators. But in reality, Marikana has merely brought to the fore the class interests and tensions at the heart of post-Apartheid South Africa and its ANC-led governing alliance.

The roots of the Marikana massacre can be traced back to the formation of the alliance between the ANC and the SACP in the early 1950s. Following the Apartheid regime's brutal crushing of the ANC-led defiance campaign in the 1950s, the black masses had always been the key to the ebb and flow of the liberation struggle. But the tragedy of South Africa is that they were never able to develop an independent perspective. Instead, they became the adjunct of political interests that were largely hostile to the real interests of the black working class.

Before examining this in more detail, it is worth reflecting on the fact that it was the black masses' resilience that brought about the end of Apartheid. When outgoing Apartheid-era president FW De Klerk claimed that he 'won the liberation struggle' because the decision to end Apartheid had been made 'long before' Nelson Mandela had been released from prison, his absurd assertion went unchallenged. Indeed, he won the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet there would never have been any change in South Africa, let alone non-racial elections, had it not been for the determination of the black majority to liberate the country from Apartheid. De Klerk, and his Western backers, would never have contemplated change if they had not been forced to by the resistance of the black masses.

De Klerk's attempt to write the black resistance struggle out of South African history was never contested by the ANC. It is often forgotten that during the first post-Apartheid election campaign in 1994, the history of Apartheid and the role of the National Party was the subject of considerable

revisionism. Indeed, under a clause forbidding 'unfair criticism' of political opponents, the Independent Electoral Commission prohibited candidates from saying the National Party built and ran the Apartheid system - despite the fact that it did.

Effacing the role of the black masses in the liberation struggle in the post-Apartheid era was more than an abuse of historical record. The new ANC political elite also had every interest in marginalising its own 'Trojan Horse'. So the more that the white ruling class was able to insist that it, and not the masses, had brought about the end of Apartheid, the easier it was for the old elite to secure its status and relationship with the new aspirant black elite represented by the ANC as part of the new rainbow-nation South Africa. And it was this political marginalisation of the black working class, in which the new and old elites were complicit, that set the scene for the massacre in Marikana.

This is a bold assertion. But it is one that is based upon an understanding of the reality of how the market operates in a country like South Africa.

A lot of rubbish has been written about South Africa. For example, one of the most enduring myths is that Apartheid resulted from the backwoodsmen prejudices of South Africa's Afrikaner minority. Yes, members of that minority benefited from Apartheid and many of them were racists. But Apartheid - the forcible denial of democratic rights to South Africa's black majority - was never simply an irrational racist system. It was also essential to the accumulation of vast wealth in South Africa. Apartheid was the form that the market took in South Africa at the time, a form of capitalist organisation for extending the boundaries of exploitation and wealth creation. Violent repression and political oppression were as necessary to the market as foreign capital.

And the form capitalism took in South Africa had fundamental consequences for all sections of society.

The consequences of Apartheid

Apartheid temporarily solved a problem for the tiny white elite in South Africa: how to exploit the black masses economically, while denying them political influence. So under the doctrine of 'separate development', blacks were told they could not vote, live in white areas or travel anywhere without permission. Instead they were made 'citizens' of remote 'tribal homelands', and forced to operate as an impoverished army of migrant workers. Apartheid facilitated the exploitation of 23million blacks on a scale that was the envy of the capitalist world.

De Klerk's forefathers - the architects of Apartheid - created conditions in which a carefully controlled labour force could produce wealth on the scale needed by South African capitalists if they were to compete in the international market. They took advantage of a host of racist institutions inherited from the British administration of South Africa to realise their capitalist ambitions and simultaneously attract much-needed foreign investment. The steady supply of cheap black labour guaranteed by the Apartheid state, together with massive subsidies and import restrictions, led South Africa's real gross domestic product to grow by 67 per cent in the decade up to 1960. South Africa's annual growth rates were second only to Japan's in the Fifties and Sixties. Apartheid was no obstacle to these developments. On the contrary, it was the mechanism upon which South African capitalism relied.

Because Apartheid relied upon racial oppression, the colour of one's skin determined one's existence. Legally enshrined 'separate development' reduced the lives of blacks to a totalitarian nightmare. The ruthless imposition of the pass laws created a permanent state of terror, dictating

where blacks could move and work in the white-owned economy. And while black life was strictly controlled and policed, concessions to white workers helped to integrate these workers into the racist system of domination. 'Petty Apartheid' – the system of whites-only restaurants, beaches, hotels, public transport and the ban on racial intermarriage – cemented an alliance which gave working-class whites an interest in cooperating with white employers to maintain racial discrimination.

The consequences for the tiny black middle class that began to emerge properly after the Second World War were equally harsh. Racial oppression ensured that all blacks faced the same discrimination and exclusion from the spoils of capitalism. There was no chance of accommodating the emerging black middle classes' moderate, pro-market demands for equal participation in South African society.

What is infrequently acknowledged is that the ANC's nationalist politics, and its leaders like Nelson Mandela, were initially rabidly pro-market. There was a narrow and conservative nationalism, which in many ways aped postwar Afrikaner nationalism. The unfortunate historic accident of South Africa is that the success of Afrikaner nationalism meant African nationalism could not be accommodated into the system and instead was ruthlessly repressed.

The real problem facing the emerging African nationalists was that on their own, they stood little chance of generating any significant political pressure to affect change. In short, they needed the black majority on their side to press for political change. But to do this they could not use their own narrow political and pro-market aspirations, which would have flatly failed to enthuse or mobilise a movement overwhelmingly made up of urbanised wage labourers. And this is where the South African Communist Party came in: it furnished the ANC with the radical credentials it needed to mobilise the black masses.

The ANC developed a long and close relationship with the Communist Party, which the moderate ANC leadership used to consolidate its relationship with the militant black masses. The ANC's Communist Party-inspired 'Freedom Charter', which embraced state control of the economy and made promises to 'return the wealth of the people to the people as a whole', gave it the language and tools to legitimise its campaign in the eyes of working blacks.

Yet, caught between its own insignificance as a social force and the uncompromising Apartheid regime, the ANC's pragmatic embrace of Stalinism led the ANC to become unacceptable to South African capitalism. Conflict and struggle were the order of the day. It would take the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the discrediting of 'African socialism' to alter the South African political climate sufficiently to allow the Apartheid regime to contemplate bringing the ANC into government, where its pro-market roots could be teased away from its state-socialist rhetoric.

The two-stage theory of revolution

It is impossible to understand how the national-liberation struggle evolved and culminated in the negotiated compromise of 1994 without understanding the politics of the ANC-led alliance against Apartheid. The role of the SACP cannot be overstated. Its theoretical and programmatic influence shaped the strategy and tactics of the liberation struggle with disastrous consequences. Remember, this is the Communist Party that was famed for its slogan in the 1920s which called upon the workers of the world 'to unite to keep South Africa white' – an expression of support for a colour bar prohibiting black workers from skilled jobs. The party's justification for this at the time was that the white workers were the 'vanguard' of the struggle. This was just the start of the grisly twists and turns that characterised the development of South African Stalinism.

Central to the SACP's theory, which was later codified by its leading Marxist activist and academic Harold Wolpe, was that the central contradiction in South Africa was not the wage-labour/capital relationship but, in its own obscurantist language, the 'articulation between two modes of production'. This suggested that South Africa was a pre-capitalist social formation that needed a national democratic revolution, which would, in turn, allow the full development of capitalist social relations. Only then could the classic class struggle - between labour and capital - be undertaken and society transformed into a socialist state. This was the foundation of the 'two-stage theory of revolution', where the first stage was the democratic struggle to be followed by the second, the socialist transformation of society.

But Apartheid wasn't a pre-capitalist phenomenon. It was the form that capitalism took in South Africa for historic and political reasons. By confusing the form of South African capitalism with its essence (the wage labour/capital relationship), the SACP provided the theoretical justification for the separation of the struggle for democratic rights from the anti-capitalist struggle. This introduced a tension between short and long-term goals in the ANC programme. In the past, the struggle against Apartheid for black-majority rule was the 'immediate goal', while the socialist transformation of South African society was the 'long-term' one. The separation of these stages in theory, when it was impossible to separate them in reality, meant that the 'long-term' goal of socialism was always put off indefinitely. This separation, which reflected the separate class interests of the social forces making up the national-liberation movement, contained the seeds of all the compromises and betrayals that followed in 1994.

The critical role of the two-stage theory of revolution was that it gave the ANC the radical credentials to appeal to the black masses. It also, incidentally, enabled the ANC to use recondite Stalinist jargon about objective reality and the mysterious 'balance of forces', to 'educate' the masses as to why the political goal of a limited democratic transition was necessary.

The compromise that the ANC negotiated in the early 1990s revealed what the two-stage theory of revolution meant in practice: a compromise that would not even realise the first stage of the two-stage revolution, the development of democracy. The constitution agreed upon by the National Party and the ANC ensured that the outcome of the first democratic election would not result in black-majority rule. Instead, it guaranteed a coalition government with De Klerk as vice-president and other ex-Apartheid leaders in top cabinet jobs. Similarly undemocratic arrangements were built into the new South Africa at every level of government. The overall effect was to defraud the masses of their democratic rights, and to shield the old Apartheid state from popular pressure. The two-stage theory of revolution postponed not only the socialist transformation of South Africa, but black-majority rule, too.

Betrayal and 'Marikanas' waiting to happen

The compromise of the new constitution was always a possibility in South Africa. The socially insignificant black petit-bourgeois political elite was always predisposed to accepting a compromise as long as it could gain access to political power and the right to participate in the market economy. Prior to De Klerk's willingness to reform Apartheid, the ANC leaders had little choice but to uphold their Stalinist rhetoric about 'socialist transformation' to maintain their appeal to their working-class base. They knew, as did the Apartheid regime itself, that the real power to force change was the black masses.

But the collapse of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of 'African socialism' more broadly in the 1980s and 1990s changed all that. Around the world, liberation movements were put on the

defensive. The ANC soon toned down its programme, accepting the market economy and dumping the armed struggle. The changed political context persuaded South African capitalists that they could do business with Mandela without putting their wealth and social power at risk. As a consequence, the National Party conceded reforms.

Indeed, the remarkable thing about the lead-up to the first post-Apartheid elections in 1994 was how the ANC under Nelson Mandela increasingly demonstrated to the old rulers of Apartheid that they had little to fear from an ANC-led government. The ANC unilaterally gave up its armed struggle, renounced its state-socialist policies and embraced the market economy. It also pledged not to interfere with the repressive machinery of the Apartheid state, a fact that has become all too apparent in recent weeks. Most importantly, it accepted a constitutional arrangement that institutionalised power-sharing and minority rights at every level of government, effectively abandoning its commitment to real black-majority rule. Post-Apartheid South Africa gained a black government, but the white-minority capitalist class, and its international backers, continued to exercise social power. The ANC effectively abandoned its base to get a piece of the action.

President De Klerk's entire strategy of negotiation was geared towards moderating the ANC, separating it from its mass base while protecting the white privileged minority. His National Party was reconciled to seeing black faces in government. De Klerk's strategy was always about drawing the liberation movement - or at least sections of the ANC leadership - into a relationship with the state. It followed the classic decolonisation strategy perfected by British imperialism, first in Ireland and then used to great effect in Africa and Asia. By rewarding moderation while brutally cracking down on those unwilling to compromise, De Klerk succeeded in moderating the ANC to the point where it dropped all talk of fundamental economic and social change, and even abandoned black-majority rule, the democratic principle at the heart of the liberation struggle.

The retreat of the ANC was perhaps the greatest in the history of national-liberation movements. In 1969, the ANC conference in exile at Morogoro, Tanzania, adopted the document 'Forward to freedom: strategy and tactics of the African National Congress'. The 'Morogoro Declaration' signalled the ANC's intention to be a liberation movement committed to mobilising the black masses and overthrowing the Apartheid regime. In appealing to the black working class, the document spelled out that liberation meant more than electing a black government: '[T]o allow the existing economic forces to retain their interests intact is to feed the root of racial supremacy and does not even represent the shadow of liberation.' It was a measure of De Klerk's success and the ANC's complicity that even such a 'shadow' as power-sharing and the institutionalisation of minority rights could be celebrated as a victory and the achievement of black liberation.

Compromise is always a reality in political struggles. But the ANC presented its betrayal of the black masses as a victory. All the sacrifices the black masses made over the years - sacrifices that allowed the ANC leaders to get where they are today - were effectively signed away in the post-Apartheid constitution. Yes, blacks got the vote, but these were now votes for a system which continued to keep them at the bottom of the pile in the factories, mines, farms and townships of Apartheid capitalism. It has taken 18 years for that reality to be murderously demonstrated at Marikana. Not only has the ANC government invoked the use of Apartheid laws, and labelled those fighting for trade-union rights and a living wage as 'agitators' (much as the Apartheid regime used to), but it has also deployed and used the armed power of the state to gun down striking workers in a way that Apartheid-era leaders would have applauded to the rooftops.

Marikana has demonstrated just how hostile the ANC government is towards its own working class. It clearly illustrates that the problem in South Africa was never simply the denial of democratic rights, but the capitalist system itself. Apartheid is dead, but the economic system which it nurtured remains in place. It is not Apartheid laws that keep black South Africans in their place, but economic

realities. Having the vote has not allowed millions of impoverished blacks to escape from the grim townships and move into the leafy white suburbs. Having the vote has not diminished the power of the state that is prepared to gun down its own citizens in order to protect the rights of the minority capitalist class, which now contains some black faces.

Post-Apartheid South Africa has begun to destroy many myths. What has come as a shock to many, however, is just how closely the new African elite share the hostility of the old regime towards those who made change possible in the first place - the black working class. But despite the fact that the ANC effectively marginalised its mass base and deconstituted them politically, Marikana has also demonstrated that South Africa's black working class has begun to make its presence felt in the new South Africa.

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* <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/12910#.UqWeUc3kTYJ>

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