

## NOTES

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### STATE POWER AND REVOLUTION IN OUR TIMES

*Joel Netshitenzhe*

#### INTRODUCTION

I think it is a great idea to start off the PEC meeting with an exchange of views on theoretical issues. This I hope will help to infuse the organisational, governance and administrative matters you will be dealing with, with a sense of strategic direction.

The formulation of the topic you've asked me to present on reminds me of an experience at the Moscow Institute of Social Sciences (Party School). This applies particularly to the word AND between the two concepts, "the state" and "revolution in our times". I had prepared a thesis, "The crisis of the South African ruling class AND the national democratic revolution"; and had thoroughly dealt with the issue of the ruling class: its definition, its crisis and so on; but did not go into much detail on the national democratic revolution (NDR).

The panel was however not impressed, arguing that I should have given more or less equal treatment to the issue of the NDR. My explanation that the issue of the NDR was merely the context within which I wished to examine the matter of the South African ruling class did receive their sympathy.

In similar vein, in preparing my input for today, I assumed that you had made the same mistake as I did some 25 years ago; and that you want me to deal with state power in the context of revolution in our times.

I will start off briefly with that context as a reminder. Firstly, to underline that revolution is a process of resolving antagonisms in society. In this regard, the NDR sought and seeks to resolve fundamental contradictions about national oppression and social exclusion; class super-exploitation and the triple oppression of women (as a class, as black people and as women).

The NDR contributes to this through the pursuit of a national democratic society, elaborated in detail in Chapter III of the Strategy and Tactics document adopted at the 52<sup>nd</sup> National Conference of the ANC in December 2007. In this section, dealing with the “Vision of our collective effort”, the Strategy and Tactics document argues that the society we seek to create should, among others:

- have a democratic and legitimate state based on the values of our Constitution
- promote unity in diversity among South Africans, recognising the common interests that bind them as a nation
- ensure a growing economy which benefits all, including through the creation of decent jobs
- be informed by a value system of mutual respect and human solidarity
- be led by a state that is efficient in providing services and which gives leadership to the programme of national development.

This then is the context within which we should approach the issue of state power. The critical matter is that the state does not exist for its own sake, but as a critical instrument in ensuring the realisation of the strategic objectives of the liberation movement.

## **THEORY OF STATE AND REVOLUTION**

What are some of the key principles that we need to keep in mind in addressing the notion of state and revolution, an issue that has occupied the mind of revolutionaries over the centuries?

This is captured succinctly by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the 1872 Preface to the German edition of the Communist Manifesto, after the attempt at a proletarian revolution through the Paris Commune:

*“One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes’.”*

Vladimir Lenin in his typical blunt self emphasises this in his book, State and Revolution:

*“the working class must break up, smash the ‘readymade state machinery’, and not confine itself merely to laying hold of it”.*

Their approach is premised on the understanding that the state is a class instrument to pursue and defend class rule and class interests. However, in *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx and Engels do argue that the state, as superstructural phenomenon, can enjoy some autonomy from the economic base or from the main classes (the phenomenon of Bonapartism) – an observation that is of relevance to understanding some of the developmental states in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This approach to state power was further developed by Antonio Gramsci, especially in terms of emphasising that the state is not just a coercive force (“dictatorship” taken literally); but also a cohesive force. In this sense it should be able to exercise ideological hegemony in society.

From this point of view, one can argue that elements of ‘liberal democracy’ are in fact achievements of human civilisation. This applies to such freedoms as those of speech, thought, association, the media and so on. In my view, one of the deficiencies of ‘living socialism’ – partly imposed by the conduct of counter-revolution – was precisely this reluctance to allow the human spirit free reign. With the emphasis on the notion of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ the tendency developed to interpret this too literally. This is in fact against Marxism. For, in the same manner as they spoke of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ Marx and others also referred to bourgeois democracy as a ‘dictatorship of the bourgeoisie’. In emphasising the reality of class rule, they were not arguing against individual freedoms. In fact, they insisted that workers’ rule would entail both institutional and human freedoms that would be more profound than had hitherto existed.

Let’s conclude the general theoretical treatment by asserting a critical principle relevant to our challenges today. This is that in all revolutions before the socialist revolution, production relations (forms of economic ownership and control) of the new system emerged in the womb of the old socio-economic formation. State power comes into play in the midst of such changes in production relations and it was used to further consolidate the new economic relations. This was the case with relations of slavery within the communal system, feudal relations within slavery and capitalist relations within the feudal system.

With regard to the socialist revolution, of course you have to have developed productive forces in the form of systems and technology of production. But the first and most critical act in that revolution is the attainment of state power and the utilisation of such power consciously to create socialist production relations. This places huge demands on the cadres meant to drive such transformation; for they have to resist the pull of the negative tendencies deriving from the system they seek to bury.

The same principle applies to the national democratic revolution. Production relations of the NDR have to be consciously built by the victorious forces that constitute the national liberation movement. First you have to attain state power.

### **LESSONS FOR THE NDR**

How have we applied this theory of state and revolution to the South African situation; how have we operationalised it post-1994; and of what relevance is the theory itself to the current situation?

An approach to this question is articulated in the Tripartite Alliance document of 1998, *The State, Property Relations and Social Transformation* which proceeds from a number of premises:

Firstly, in defining the state and state power, it refers to political institutions and the state machinery. But it also argues that political power extends to issues of economic power, workplace organisation, the schools and religious bodies and organisations of civil society generally.

Secondly, our state like all others is a concentrated expression of class interests. It would reflect class contestation in society as it seeks to fashion itself in the image of the coalition of classes and strata that are the motive forces (drivers) of the NDR.

Thirdly, because revolutions are at core about property relations, how the state regulates these and sets out rules of economic and social engagement is fundamental to the project of social transformation.

Let us now examine the challenges identified in the document, *The State, Property Relations and Social Transformation*; and whether we've made progress in dealing with them.

The 1998 document says that we had attained a legitimate government based on a democratic constitution. We will all agree that the situation is even better now. Though there may be challenges in the detail, the trajectory with regard to popular confidence in the democratic government is a positive one.

The 1998 document argues that the South African state machinery still had to be transformed to reflect the outlook of the social classes and strata that pursue transformation. This is in terms of demographic composition, the doctrines that guide them, issues of allegiance to the constitution and so on: not whether these individuals are members of the ANC or in line with ANC party interests or not! And this matter applies to the judiciary, parastatals, regulatory bodies, the public broadcaster, the central bank, the army, the police, intelligence agencies and the bureaucracy generally.

I suppose we will all agree that massive progress has been made in this regard; but that there are still massive challenges to deal with. One can refer here to the content of judicial education and the challenge with regard to some of the personalities. One can also refer to technical and professional functions: yes, we do have individuals with an anti-apartheid background as generals and in other ranks in the SANDF and Commissioners in SAPS and so on. But, in terms of demographics for instance, how are we doing in relation to air traffic controllers, pilots, forensic experts and so on!

The 1998 document argues that the national democratic state that we seek to create should utilise economic leverage to lead the process of socio-economic development and that, in this regard, we were found wanting.

Today, we can justifiably argue that we have over time improved our ability to utilise the government budget for purposes of redistribution. We have made progress in terms of setting up regulatory agencies and defining the frameworks within which they should operate, a good example in this regard being the recent self-assertion of the Competition Commission. There has also been some progress in terms of developing an industrial policy framework and sector strategies.

However, there are fundamental weaknesses such as regulators that are much weaker than their mandates require, and are unable to assert their authority in relation particularly to powerful state and private monopolies. The performance of some state-owned enterprises and development finance institutions in relation to the development path the state has chosen is woeful. We have not used the capacities of the state, including the massive infrastructure programme, to leverage industrial development in specific and effective ways; and we cannot claim that our incentives over the years have delivered the outcomes envisaged.

Some of the problems, particularly in a number of the state agencies may have been due to the objective balance of forces. But we also have to acknowledge that in some instances, such as the legion of recent fiascos at the SABC, Transnet and SAA, there were critical subjective weaknesses – some of which are a result of activities of cadres thought to be cognisant and supportive of transformation.

The 1998 document argues that our performance had been woeful in terms of exercising hegemony of ideas, a major anomaly when compared with the electoral performance of the ANC. Outside of electoral mobilisation, our ability to engender a value system that accords with the injunctions of our constitution among citizens and cadres alike still leaves much to be desired. Indeed, in many respects, taking into account, for instance, the levels of public discourse and the challenges of corruption, one can argue that we may in fact be experiencing a regression in this regard.

In addition to this scorecard, there are two observations arising from the Ten and Fifteen Year Reviews and the Macrosocial Report that require further reflection.

The first one is about capacity and limitations of the state. The Ten Year Review in particular makes the apt observation that greater progress had been made in areas of social endeavour where the state acts directly and is virtually in full control. This applies to subsidised housing, water electricity and so on. On the other hand, where the state relies on leadership by others, such as the bulk of job-creation, progress had not been optimal.

The second one is about the fault-lines in society and the body politic and their impact on the legitimacy of the system. This applies to:

- the issue of the levels of poverty and the political manipulation in localities which then results in protests and the violence that accompanies them

(attached to this are challenges of corruption, and the fact that rising to the position of councillor can be the difference between unemployment and a middle class existence)

- the anger against and irreverence towards the state shown in the violence that accompanies workers' strikes, demonstrations of the taxi industry and so on
- the quality of some personalities in the judiciary and the prosecution system which can compromise the legitimacy of the judicial system
- discourse on issues such as how to deal with our levels of violent crime.

Overall, all this raises the question whether elements of the country's Constitution are aspirations that are too high-flown – too advanced – in relation to the level of development of society! Could it be that South Africa needs to lower its Constitutional standards? I am quite certain that there would be howls of protest even to the fact that such questions can at all be posed. The point we are making is that if we are true to the ideals of the Constitution, we should promote and defend them in good times and bad, lest the whole edifice loses its legitimacy.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL STATE AND ORGANISATIONAL RENEWAL**

Let me conclude with a brief treatment of the articulation between notions of a developmental state and organisational renewal.

The 2007 Strategy and Tactics document asserts that the national democratic state should have the best attributes of a developmental state and social democracy. In terms of a developmental state, it argues for attributes such as strategic capacity (about orientation and legitimacy); political capacity (its democratic nature and ability to mobilise society); organisational capacity (appropriately structured and organised to meet its objectives); and technical capacity (the expertise to make things happen).

With regard to social democracy, the Strategy and Tactics document identifies its best elements as 'a system that places high on the agenda the needs of the poor; social issues such as health care, quality education and a social safety net; intense role of the state in economic life; pursuit of full employment; quest for equality; strong partnership with the trade union movement; and promotion of international solidarity'.

From the above, it is quite clear that we are still a long way off from both objectives. What is impressive though is the intensity of work to attain these, for instance through the establishment of the strategic planning and monitoring and evaluation functions and work on comprehensive social security.

However, of concern is the discourse on national strategic planning that can have the effect of undermining the original objective. I am referring not so much to personalities because these can always step aside if they're obstacles to that objective. The worrying tendencies in this regard are:

- seeking to put line function Ministries or sectors on the same pedestal as The Presidency; instead of recognising that all state institutions will need to have strategic planning capacity, and that the product of their work would feed into the generic national strategic plan
- to ignore the many references in the Green Paper to consultative and iterative processes and the fact that Cabinet would be the final arbiter both on process and content in respect of the strategic plan
- scoffing at a methodology in strategic planning that includes the weighing trade-offs: as if it would be possible to take a decision about a path of development without making choices on difficult issues today!

Overall, it would seem that under cover of what is called a Left approach, we may end up with a system and a culture in government – in terms of co-ordination and integration – that take us back to the pre-1999 'federation of Ministerial/Departmental fiefdoms'.

What about the matter of state power and cadreship? In the document on organisational renewal developed by the Gauteng Province, there are four aspects of the renewal of governance identified: reaffirming the Freedom Charter; institutional renewal; democratic renewal; policy renewal; and renewal of values of governance.

I wish to underline the latter – renewal of values of governance – which incorporates: integrity, honesty, service, ethics and accountability. This is proceeding from the premise mentioned earlier that the creation of social relations of the NDR starts with the attainment of state power and that the cadreship has consciously to construct the national democratic society.



In this regard, we will need to nip in the bud the very dangerous tendencies pertaining to the relationship between the state and the party, as well as the challenge of corruption. One can illustrate this through many examples in terms of recent experiences in State-owned Enterprises and so-called 'deployment' in some of the provinces and local structures. What the strange practices of 'deployment' ignore is the fact that we have asserted that the ANC is the *strategic* centre of power and it is not meant to micro-manage government – the word 'strategic' was used deliberately. It is not, for instance, meant to give instructions on which specific individual should be appointed into a state institution: it can identify persons, yes; but these will have to be processed through the correct state channels as defined in legislation and regulations. Indications from municipalities are that many of the woes they experience today are a consequence of this terrible practice.

Let me conclude, on the issue of corruption, by referring to what one friend recently appointed into a senior position in government calls the *en nou* (and now) syndrome. He complains that especially unscrupulous business-people are harassing him. 'Why do you think we mobilised for your appointment during the elections', they ask. 'It is now time to deliver'. This is what they mean when they extend their hand and ask, *en nou!*

But I suppose we will all agree that if state power is to promote the objectives of the NDR, the response of a cadre of the movement to the question, *en nou* would have to be: '*n better lewe vir almal*' (a better life for all)!

**END**