

Nationalism in South African politics

Nationalism and modern nation states have always gone hand in hand. **Dale T McKinley** looks at how this combination has resulted in a new black bourgeois state that has simply adopted this package from the previous white apartheid bourgeois state to the detriment of working-class people.

Beneath all the recent debates and noise around the state of the South African nation, the character and content of nationalisation, and issues of national identity and pride centred on the Soccer World Cup, lies a problem which is rarely acknowledged. It is the acceptance and embracing of the ideology of nationalism.

But why is this a problem when an acceptance of nationalism seems both 'natural' and 'realistic'? After all, isn't the core of the pre- and post-1994 liberation struggle a nationalist one? Don't we all live in a defined nation state and identify ourselves through a nationalist lens of one sort or another? And generally don't we recognise the legitimacy of the state that manages national affairs?

Simply put, the problem is that nationalism is not 'natural'. It is an ideology of capitalism which reproduces the conditions for capitalist accumulation and indeed, the legitimacy of the capitalist system. The main 'vehicle' for capitalism is the nation state.

Nationalism is grounded in the assumption that the most fundamental divisions of humankind are those that divide people into

ethno-national groups. In other words, it is not a natural but a social, political and ideological construction. Once the nation state has been constructed, nationalism becomes a political ideology which takes on the role of a supposedly 'natural' way of ordering society, framing identity, engaging in struggle and conducting 'business'.

As long-time theorists of nationalism, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm have argued, it is an ideology which requires an identity with, and loyalty to, the nation. This in turn gives rise to the centrality of the 'national interest' and political duty towards the 'sovereign' power (government) of the nation state.

In historical terms, the march to 'modernity' from feudalism was made possible by the unification of the modern nation and capital. Indeed, the entire concept of a nation is represented as the most fundamental component of capitalist modernisation.

Since any national state is a reflection of the society which gives it form and life politically, socially, culturally and economically, it cannot be separated from the capitalist mode of production and accumulation. Placed within the

context of the development of capitalism and the 'modern' nation state, nationalism became the ideological glue.

As Rosa Luxemburg so clearly stated over a century ago: 'Capitalism demands for its proper development not only markets, but also the whole apparatus of a modern capitalistic state. The bourgeoisie needs for its normal existence not only strictly economic conditions for production, but also, in equal measure, political conditions for its class rule... the specific form of national aspirations, the true class interest of the bourgeoisie, is state independence.'

Given that the bourgeoisie remains the main architect and sustainer of nationalism, nationalism is fundamentally an ideology of that bourgeoisie. In other words, nationalism remains a political/ideological device of the bourgeoisie for identifying their class interests as the interests of the entire society.

NATIONALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

All of this is clear in the case of South African nationalism. While there were times, throughout the 20th century struggle against the apartheid system and apartheid state,



The main liberation forces, ANC, SACP and Cosatu, adopted the theory of national democratic revolution where the struggle would have two stages to socialism.

when the movements of African nationalism adopted certain progressive elements and ideas, for example, common struggles of all oppressed peoples against colonialism/imperialism, it remained a nation state.

Given also that this black African nationalism was in constant 'competition' with white Afrikaner nationalism which was in control of the state, South African nationalism was further constructed by the realities of this struggle. In turn, this created an even deeper sense of national 'uniqueness' and a political thrust towards reclaiming a 'true' South African nationalism.

In order to provide a theoretical grounding as well as a more serious ideological/political and organisational direction to their nationalist struggle, the main liberation movement forces (the ANC, South African Communist Party (SACP) and Congress of South African Trade Unions) adopted the theory of the 'national democratic revolution' (NDR) in the early 1960s.

The NDR was grounded in the SACP's parallel formulation that apartheid South Africa represented a 'colonialism of a special type' which showed 'a combination of the worst

features of imperialism and colonialism within a single national frontier'. In this formulation, black South Africa was a colony of white South Africa and was seen as having 'no acute or antagonistic class divisions at present'.

What followed from this was that the immediate task was to fight for the national liberation of the 'colonised'. This task would be carried out through a 'national democratic revolution' with the multi-class liberation movement as the main vehicle represented by the ANC, while the working class represented by the SACP and later Cosatu, constituted the leading revolutionary force within it.

Not all classes however had an interest in fundamental transformation of a post-apartheid South Africa, but the NDR argument was that the leading role of the working class would ensure that the struggle could be extended towards socialism. Thus the liberation struggle would have two stages: the first for a national democratic state, the second for socialism.

This strategic choice of a racially-framed political nationalism however, incorrectly assumed that once the apartheid system had been removed

the working class would be willing and able to transcend nationalism and politically defeat the capitalist class, whether inside or outside the national liberation movement. The problem was, and still is, that once the political negotiations had been concluded and the dominant African nationalist force, the ANC won the 1994 elections, it took political control of an existing national state that had been built to secure the dominant interests of a white national bourgeoisie.

In other words, there was a changing of the nationalist 'guard'. The only difference was that now the state was in the hands of a political party whose overall strategic aim (as part of the first phase of the NDR) was to build, and secure the interests of a black nationalist, as opposed to a white nationalist, bourgeoisie.

The NDR's claim of the leading role of the working class did not materialise and indeed could not have done so because of the political ideology of nationalism. In this sense then, the democratic victory of 1994 represented, above all else, the triumph of a majority black nationalism over a minority white nationalism.



South Africa is in the grip of the politics of nationalism as the frenzy around the World Cup shows.

The ANC's acceptance of South Africa's capitalist political economy, within the context of a dominant, late 20th century global capitalist neo-liberalism was thus not surprising. The two went hand-in-hand. What was thus demanded by the ANC was the creation of a dominant discourse of 'nation-building' as a means to politically legitimise the role and character of the 'new' state and the 'place' of those under its command.

The majority black population who had historically been denied any meaningful national or international 'belonging', were told that they could achieve both because they were now the 'real' owners of a nation state dedicated to securing their national identity, as well as their international status and position.

Over the last several years the ANC has consciously and politically constructed a 'new' kind of nationalist ideology that has deepened a 'new' nationalist identity but within the same historical framework of capitalist development. This has ensured that working-class forces remain ideologically divided and confused and unable to take the 'leading role' in the continuous struggle for full liberation.

If nationalism is accepted as the main political vehicle for social and

economic liberation then where does a non-nationalist socialism fit in? When does the second phase of the NDR begin?

Politically, the continued dominance of nationalism, even in an altered form, in post-apartheid South Africa has fed the illusion that the struggle for political and socio-economic liberation by the black majority is defined by the loyal participation of a citizen bounded by the 'new' nation state and a 'new' nationalism.

To a large extent, the South African example of the political 'naturalising' of nationalism, alongside its capitalist twin, has worked. Despite regular and even increasing shows of dissatisfaction with the performance of the state and the capitalist inspired unjust distribution of socio-economic benefits, there is no sign that the majority has abandoned the 'national popular project'.

Equally, despite lots of political rhetoric and threats of divorce involving the Alliance 'battles' between the 'nationalists' and the 'communists', there is little indication that working-class forces are willing to abandon the politics of nationalism. Nor that the working class is willing to unite and wage an independent political and ideological struggle for an alternative politics. A politics which is defined by its rejection of the twins of capitalism and nationalism.

If anything, South Africa continues to exhibit all the hallmarks of being firmly in the grip of a politics of nationalism. This is clearly confirmed by, amongst other things, the continued xenophobia, the rising tide of social conservatism, the nationalist character of foreign policy and the frenzy of nationalist jingoism around the Soccer World Cup.

NATIONALISM RISING GLOBALLY

The capitalist system, at a global political and institutional level,

remains a constellation of various nationalisms. While such nationalisms might be 'practiced' in different ways, alongside the changing nature of the capitalist system of production, accumulation and distribution, they are grounded in a common ideology, which always 'returns' to the source. Even the presence of 'socialists/communists' in the management and leadership of the nation state or nationalist movements has proven time and again to make little difference, although it might make a difference as to how the national cake is cut.

As can be so plainly seen as a result of the latest and ongoing capitalist crisis, the role of the nation and nationalism has not disappeared. Indeed, that role has taken on greater importance.

Firstly, it has reproduced the power of the 'nation' and the politics of nationalism which demands varying degrees of popular support. And secondly in resurrecting the specific role of the national state in 'rescuing' or managing the key components of the capitalist system itself and so temporarily 'addressing' the crisis.

Not surprisingly, it is the billions of poor and working-class people that have borne, and continue to bear, the burden of nationalism's role in sustaining and reproducing the capitalist system. It is when this majority of humanity, of whatever national 'identity' or place, no longer accepts and embraces the ideology of nationalism and the politics that flows from it, that there will emerge a real possibility of breaking the back of a capitalist system whose trump card always has been, and always will be nationalism. LB

Dale T McKinley is a writer, researcher, lecturer and political and social activist.