

## **A MOMENT OF REFLECTION ON THE OCCASION OF THE ELEVENTH COMMEMORATION OF THE JUNE (1976) UPRISING .**

by

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It is perhaps unavoidable and totally understandable that for many of us South Africans in exile a feeling of violent anger and profound sadness engulfs us as we reflect on, and attempt a politically informed analytical appraisal of, the deepening crisis back home. The recent charade of white elections in which 81% of the white adult voting population gave Botha and his henchmen the mandate for more repression and savage oppression, more than justifies this dialectical feeling of anger and sadness. The anger informs our political consciousness that absolute revolution is the only practical process through which a complete social transformation of the state and national order can be effected in South Africa today: reciprocally, the sadness instructs our historical consciousness that a comprehensive destruction will have to take place there before liberation day arrives in our troubled homeland. This double process of revolution and destruction, which will perhaps be a process of purification against the detritus and poison of Apartheid, is necessitated by the unremitting intransigence of the racist bourgeois state, its pretorian guard and various misguided supporters, ranging from Gatsha Buthelezi to Helen Suzman. To be sure, the misguided supporters of Apartheid derive enormous privileges and economic benefits to persist stupidly in their misguidance. But equally on the other hand, our eleventh commemoration of the 1976 Uprising makes clear to all of us South Africans that the heydays of Apartheid are definitely over, the dawning of a new historical moment and ideological age is unquestionably here to stay until liberation day. This does not mean we minimize the military strength and the diabolical nature of the neo-fascist Apartheid State. That the Apartheid State is going to be defeated is certainly clear to everyone, even Botha himself is convinced of this. What Botha is presently and desperately trying to prevent is the transformation of this defeat into the forging of a new political order and social system in South Africa. Whereas we South African patriots are counting that defeat in matter of years, Botha and his traitorous clique seeks to forestall that defeat in the time-span of decades. Equally, whereas we seek to preserve as much as possible of the industrial and technological base of South Africa from total destruction in the coming upheaval and total transformation, Botha and company are beckoning the total destruction of the country when the hour of defeat engulfs them.

What accounts for the illuminating sanity of Nelson Mandela, Joe Slovo and Bishop Desmond Tutu on the one hand, and the desperate madness of Botha, Buthelezi and Hendrickson on the other? To attempt even to formulate a

schematic answer to this question necessitates a quick glance at our history.

The consequences of our national history is imbricated in or, more appropriately, with pregnant paradoxes: the fact that South Africa is located at the intersecting zones of the First World and the Third World spheres; the fact that 87% of the land is preserved for the 15% of the white population whilst 13% of the remaining uncultivable land is designated for the 85% of the black population; the political and economic formation of our country was over-determined by the forces of imperialism and its agents than by the political action and will of patriotic forces; today South Africa is an autonomous client state of imperialism (note the oxymoron); the State and law is articulated on racial lines; a minority white-settler population is holding at bay a majority indigenous population; South Africa, a highly industrialized capitalist country has not yet achieved a rationalization which Max Weber saw as the signature of achieved capitalism; the white working class is profoundly racist and has aligned itself with the Apartheid State in opposition to the combative and progressive working class; not only does South Africa possess the richest literary culture in the African languages in Africa, the cultural contestation between this literature and that written in the European languages is a central moment of our cultural experience; the fact that an element or feature of European culture has become a permanent component of our African cultural landscape, thereby irretrievably altering our cultural relations in significant ways; the fact that South Africa is simultaneously an advanced country and at the same time a backward country ---- these are some of the paradoxical components of our national history.

What are the shaping factors of our South African national history?

The theoretical structure of South African national history can only be apprehended in its complex and multifarious forms when it is seen as an active product having been shaped by the following interlocked processes and forces: British imperial history and English imperialism were the external central determinants of the pathways and form of our national history; the displacement of the indigenous and African peoples from possession of their land by the white-settler community which completely distorted the shape of South African history; the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in 1876 and gold in 1883 in Johannesburg, both of which facilitated the invention of the industrial revolution through mining; the temporary defeat of British imperialism by the great Zulu nation in the Battle of Isandhlwana in 1879 restructured the contours of our national history; the Mbambatha Rebellion in the early part of our century immensely consolidated the formation and forging of the ideology of resistance to oppression and Apartheid which has become a natural sediment of our political national culture; the domination of our national economy for extended periods by imperial capital has subjected it to external directions; the unification of the

national forces of opposition to Apartheid through the founding of the African National Congress in 1912 in response to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 has been a central determinant of our national political history; the penetration of the South African economy into the economies of the neighboring African states has complicated the waging of a national liberation struggle; the banning of the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress in 1960 has made necessary the forging of new liberation struggle strategies and new ideologies ---- all these are some of the forces and processes that have shaped the theoretical structure of South African national history.

Unquestionably the student revolt and uprising of June 1976 has immeasurably affected the shape of our national political history. In fact, when South Africa is liberated it may be seen then that 1976 was the beginning of the real demise of the Apartheid State and perhaps also of the capitalist system. But it should be remembered that 1976 should always be historically interlinked to the date of 1973 when there began in Durban the great cycle of workers' strikes after a lull of a few decades. It was the political linkage of 1973 and 1976 that has in many ways shaped the form of present-day liberation struggles. In fact, one could even go further by stating that it was the breakthrough opened by the dates of 1976 and 1973 that made possible the massive political and military re-intervention of the African National Congress after a lull of a decade and a half. The spectacular bombing of the Sasol oil works in the late 1970s was the announcement of a new political era in our political history. Since then much has happened up to the present to indicate that our political struggle for a democratic and unitary South Africa governed by majority rule under one-man one vote principle, is a continuous and inter-connected process: the legalisation of the trade unions and the emergence of the Youth Movements in the 1980s; the founding of the United Democratic Front, of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, and of the South African Youth Congress, have been great political gains of our contemporary political struggles. To be sure, the declaration of a State of Emergency on June 12 1986 for a year and its renewal a week ago for another year is an incontestable proof that Apartheid is on the retreat and on the defensive, though defiant in many ways. One thing is certainly clear, that it would be a tragic folly to underestimate the defiant will of the Apartheid State to fight to the bitter end. It is the stubbornness of the Apartheid State and the ruling classes in South Africa which is definitely accelerating the revolutionary process which is at the moment picking up tempo and velocity. The rhythmic velocity of this revolutionary process cannot be predicted or anticipated for it is determined by the contesting political and social forces questing for a new political order and state power in South Africa today.

Before bringing this schematic and somewhat incoherent presentation to a conclusion, I would like to say a few words about the role of culture in the

liberation struggle. Since this presentation is being made here at the Kunst Keller Kreuzberg galerie in the midst of the sculptures created by Pitika Ntuli and the paintings of Lefifi Tladi, two excellent South African artists, and in recognition of the fact that here with me on the podium are two young South African poets, Herbert Mbukeni Mnguni and Vusi D. Mchuni, who are also editors of the cultural journal, Awa-Finnaba , it is all the more appropriate to conclude this political presentation on cultural matters. While it is absolutely clear that the fundamental aim of the liberation struggle in South Africa is to re-introduce forcefully and massively into South African history our people as its absolute determiners, who are presently oppressed by the forces of reaction, it may not be clear to some people that culture can facilitate this process eminently well, thereby giving our people historical strength and moral fortitude. But in fact this is the historical truth. Here I cannot do better than to quote the following statement from Amilcar Cabral's great essay on culture, "National Liberation and Culture": "The more one realizes that the chief goal of the liberation movement goes beyond the achievement of political independence to the superior level of complete liberation of the productive forces and the construction of economic, social and cultural progress of the people, the more evident is the necessity of undertaking a selective analysis of the values of the culture within the framework of the struggle for liberation. The need for such an analysis of cultural values becomes more acute when, in order to face colonial violence, the liberation movement must mobilize and organize the people, under the direction of a strong and disciplined political organization, in order to resort to violence in the cause of freedom ---- the armed struggle for national liberation ." [1](#) By this statement Amilcar Cabral makes it clear that armed liberation struggle is not only a product of culture, it is equally a determinant of culture. Indeed, in South Africa today, the national liberation struggle should not only be a historical process, or a political process, or for that matter an economic process, but fundamentally, it should also be a serious cultural process. Our violent anger at, and profound sadness about, the Apartheid State, impells us to participate unreservedly in the unfolding historically determined cultural process and also in the unravelling political revolution.

Let me close this presentation by quoting a part of a very great poem by the great Peruvian poet, Cesar Vallejo (1892-1938), unquestionably the greatest poet of the twentieth-century, if not of the last two hundred years. This excerpt is taken from the poem of 1938, "Hymn to the Volunteers for the Republic", in his book of poetry, **Spain, Take This Cup From Me** . It was written in defense of the democratic forces during the Spanish Civil War: [2](#)

Proletarian who dies of universe, in what frantic harmony  
 your grandeur will end, your extreme poverty, your impelling  
 whirlpool

your methodical violence, your theoretical and practical chaos,  
your Dantesque  
wish, so very Spanish, to love even treacherously, your enemy!  
Liberator wrapped in shackles,  
without whose labor extension would continue up to this day  
without handles,  
the nails would wander headless,  
the day, ancient, slow, reddish,  
our beloved skulls, unburied!  
Peasant fallen with your green foliage for man,  
with the social inflection of your little finger,  
with your ox that does not move, with your physics,  
also with your word tied to a stick  
and your rented sky  
and with the clay inserted in your fatigue  
and with that under your fingernail, walking!  
Agricultural  
builders, civilian and military,  
of the active, swarming eternity: it was written  
that you will create the light, half-closing  
your eyes in death;  
that, at the cruel fall of your mouths,  
abundance will come on seven trays, everything  
in the world will be of sudden gold  
and the gold,  
fabulous beggars for your own secretion of blood,  
and the gold itself will then be made of gold.

-West Berlin, June 16th, 1987.

1 Amilcar Cabral, **Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral**, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1973, p.52.

2 Cesar Vallejo, **The Complete Posthumous Poetry**, tans. Clayton Eshelman and Jose Rubia Barcia, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978, p.225.