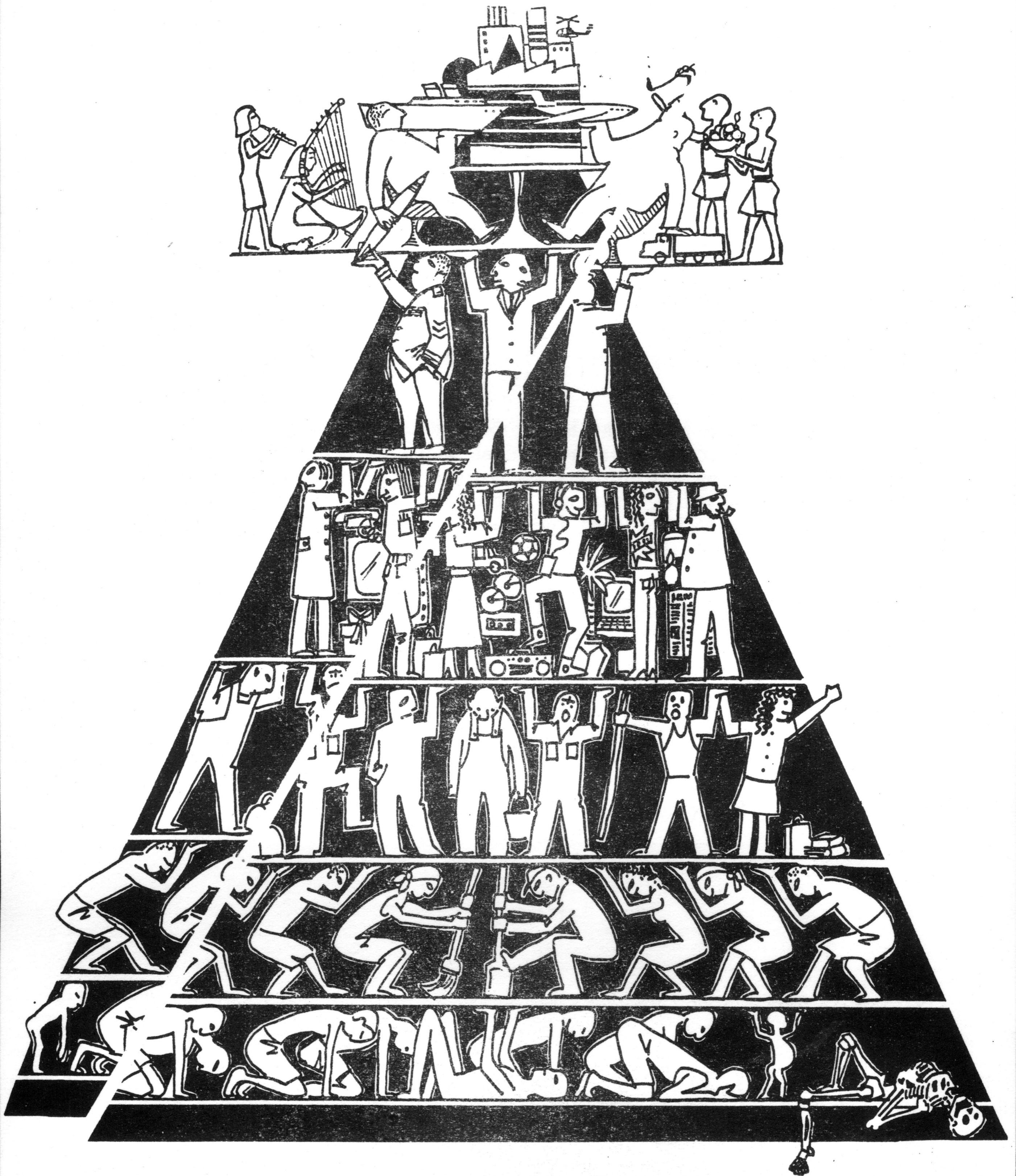


# RETHINKING CULTURE



Edited by Keyan Tomaselli



## PREFACE:

# ESTABLISHING AN INTELLECTUAL BRIDGEHEAD

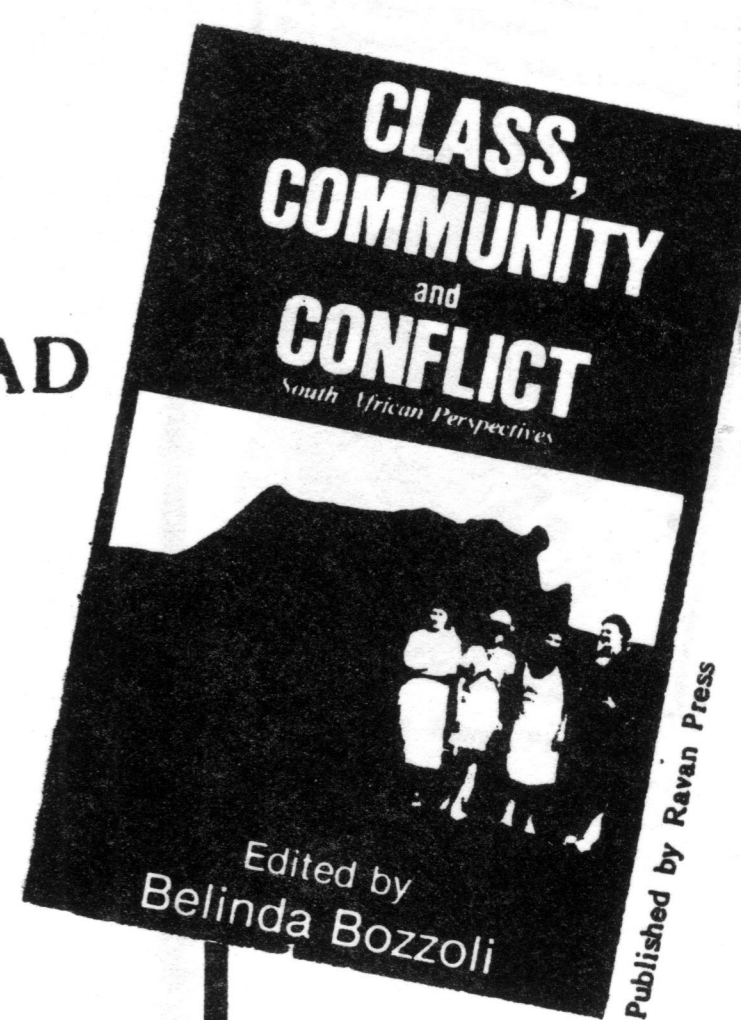
Ntongela Masilela

Culture, whatever the ideological or idealist characteristics of its expression, is ... an essential element of the history of a people. Culture is, perhaps, the resultant of this history just as the flower is the resultant of a plant. Like history, or because it is history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production(1).

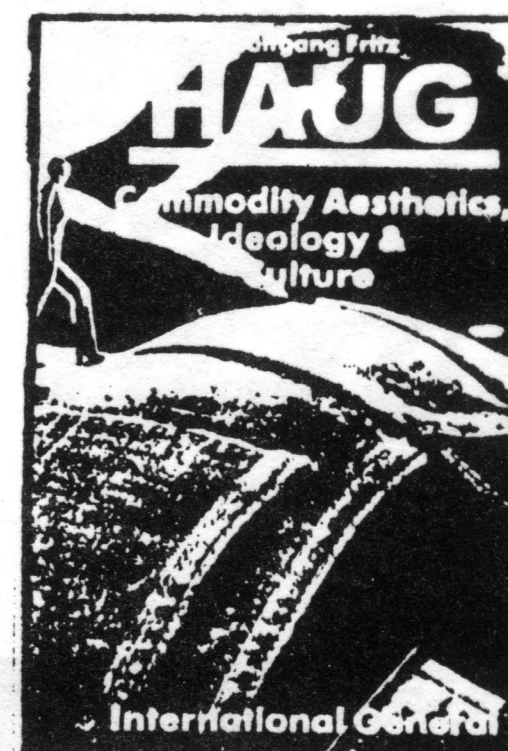
Looking at home from the distant and painful beachheads of exile, something remarkable, and naturally very pleasing, has been happening in South African intellectual culture in recent years. I refer to the series of brilliant cultural studies and theoretical formulations stretching from Belinda Bozzoli's *The Political Nature of a Ruling Class* and the various books compiled from the Wits History Workshop, the work by Charles van Onselen(2) to Keyan Tomaselli's inaugural lecture, *A Contested Terrain: Struggle Through Culture* (3). Whereas the History Workshop and van Onselen occupy an intellectual space defined by E.P. Thompson's culturalism, Tomaselli situates himself within the ambience of Louis Althusser's structuralism and, as with Bozzoli, develops the ideas of Antonio Gramsci. Within the poles demarcated by these two approaches, many other impressive monographs and books can be located (4).

Limiting ourselves just to three chapters in this volume, Ian Steadman's 'Popular Culture and Performance in South Africa', David Basckin's 'The Culture of Animals and Humans', and Johan Muller and Ruth Tomaselli's 'The Lineage of Contemporary Cultural Studies', are part of the the previously published cultural documents which have effected a significant mutation in our intellectual climate. What cannot be gainsaid is that these are very impressive studies. These works are formulated between the intellectual systems of culturalism and structuralism. Culturalism and structuralism are intellectual contestations defining particular moments of European national intellectual history: if the former is particularly British in its nature, then the latter is singularly French in its speculativeness. A question that will have to be answered on another occasion is why cultural studies in South Africa has been harnessed to European national intellectual climates rather than searching for their own vernacular voice! What accounts for this intellectual dependency? How can the process of decolonization be effected in our intellectual history? (5).

It would seem to some of us in exile that the error of emphasis of cultural studies in South Africa is to have thought of European intellectual history as its contested terrain rather than South African history. In fact, some dominant cultural strands of cultural studies in South Africa have have sought to define their historicalness within British cultural debates (from E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams through Perry Anderson to Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson, with an embarrassed backward



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glance at Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot). The fact of the matter is that our historicalness lies mainly in our native cultural history. The constellation of brilliant English Marxists can only seriously be of assistance to us in establishing cultural bridge-heads on the political terrain of our history. In other words, cultural studies in South Africa is in need of de-Europeanisation and a thoroughgoing nativisation and Africanisation in its intellectual references. The consequences of this transference of intellectual references would be profound. This would enable us South Africans collectively (both in exile and at home) to trace, establish and debate the historical lineages of our cultural history. Some sections of this volume represent a tentative step in this direction, particularly the section on "Popularising Culture".

In many of the impressive cultural analyses emanating from South Africa and reaching us in foreign political skies, there is an implicit assumption that the founding moment of cultural studies in South Africa is the same as that which founded British Cultural Studies: the latter having been founded by Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958), Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). What is even more astonishing, is the assumption that cultural studies in South Africa is merely the continuation of English cultural studies on a different historical plane.

Earlier I spoke of the need to nativise cultural studies in South Africa. This nativisation can eminently be achieved through historicisation. Retrospectively, this historicisation would reveal that the real founding moment of our literary cultural studies is two interrelated books: Laurens van der Post's *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958), and A.C. Jordan's *Toward an African Literature* (1973), a posthumous publication assembling literary essays written in the late 1950s. What unites these two books, is that whereas the former sought to locate our cultural origins in the Khoisan culture, thereby formulating the hierarchical components of our national culture, the latter theorized the possible forms of writing a new literary history by tracing the literary figurations of a particular segment of our national literature. That both these ventures were political acts is absolutely clear. A.C. Jordan sought to forestall the deleterious effect of the English language literary hegemony exercised by Sophiatown Renaissance writers on the African peoples by invoking the richness and solidness of Xhosa literature as an example. Laurens van der Post sought to disdain the then recently acquired political hegemony of Afrikaans state interests against English state interests by contrasting the universalism of the latter's liberalism to the particularism of the former's Apartheid. From this moment of its founding, cultural studies poses to us these historical questions: is a unified national culture possible in pre-revolutionary South Africa or can it be truly realised only in a future democratic South Africa? What could be the class basis of its various components?

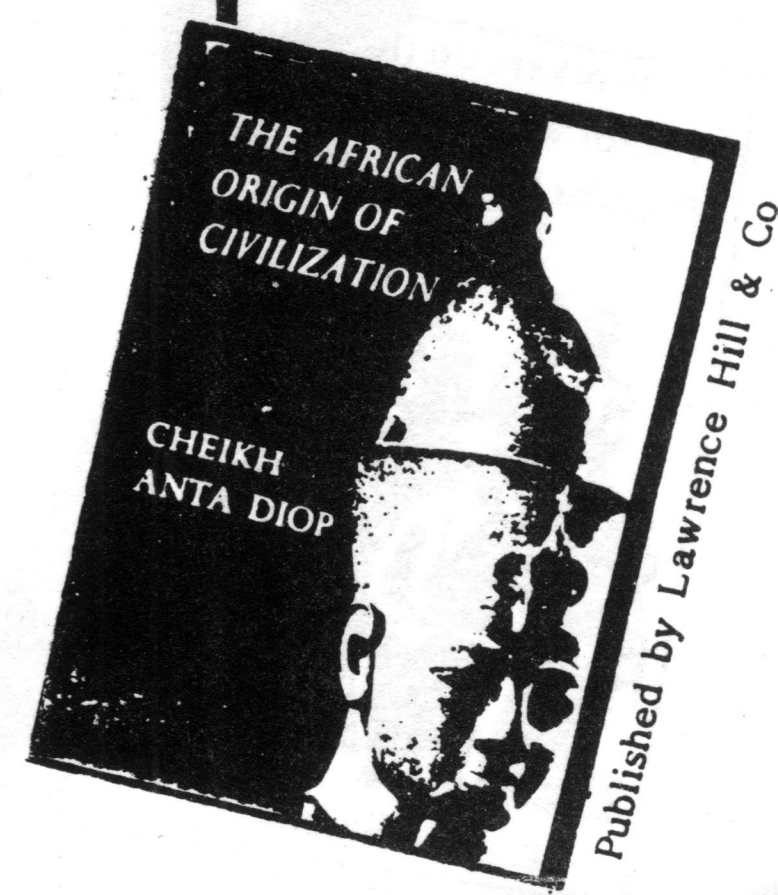




Carrying this process of nativisation deeper and further back in search of our idiomatic expression in cultural studies, and not substituting a European (European in the sense of geographical location and not as a form of racial categorisation) idiomatic expression for it, we would note that behind A.C. Jordan and Laurens van der Post stands a colossal figure, namely Olive Schreiner. Could we not with justification see this great woman, whatever her profoundly dispicable racial attitudes, as perhaps the originating moment of the formation of the peculiarities of our cultural studies. Are not her two books, **Thoughts on South Africa** and **Women and Labour** part of our cultural formation? Given the presence of Olive Schreiner, shouldn't we locate Sol Plaatje between her and her two 'followers'? Should we consider only written texts as part of cultural studies, or are also oral forms of expression a central part of it? How is the qualitative nature of cultural studies affected by this extension of this cultural depth and horizon? Is this not enough to indicate an 'epistemological break' between our conception of cultural studies and the British conception which seems to have dominated our historical imagination! But this by no means means that we should not and cannot learn from the important British experience.

The importance of Olive Schreiner in our cultural history goes even deeper, for with her we encounter the first serious attempt to come to terms with socialism and feminism. Intellectually speaking, one fundamental historical project that could be investigated is the cultural metamorphosis of feminism from Olive Schreiner to Ingrid Fiske and Menan du Plessis. Politically speaking, another challenging project would be to trace the cultural vicissitudes of the concept of socialism in the exile experience of the African National Congress. So then, the nativisation of cultural studies in South Africa would reveal enormous cultural resources on our own historical landscape.

Equally, the Africanisation (in so far as the re-orientation of intellectual and historical perspectives) of cultural studies would make clear to those in doubt that South Africa is part of Africa, culturally, intellectually, historically, and not only geographically. South Africa has deeper cultural affinities with Africa than it could ever hope to have with Europe. This historical fact is not apparent to many of our white compatriots. Hence, and I repeat hence, the sacred documents (its orientating theoretical instruments) of cultural studies in South Africa ought to be, and in fact should be, the great cultural texts of the African Revolution. There are several of these, but the following will suffice: Nadine Gordimer's "The Position of the White Writer in South Africa", Ngugi wa Thiongo's "Literature and Society", Amilcar Cabral's "National Liberation and Culture" and "Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation Struggle", Frantz Fanon's "On National Culture", and Aime Cesaire's "On Colonial Discourse". The great historical works of Cheikh Anta Diop and Joseph Ki-Zerbo could be added to the list. The qualitative nature of these writings, especially on cultural matters, are as brilliant as those emanating from European quarters. The terms of debate on cultural matters should be







within an African intellectual context; that ought to be the terrain of our discussion. By saying this, it does not follow therefore that the European intellectual context would not be a central point of reference in our cultural discussions. To the European intellectual reference point we could also add the Latin American intellectual reference point, within the latter the Cuban experience would be central.

This exile plea for the Africanisation of cultural studies in South Africa is governed by a monumental event that has recently taken place within African intellectual culture: namely the emergence of what could be designated as African Marxism. Though its precise moment of emergence is difficult temporally to locate, its founding moment are two essays by Amilcar Cabral: "The Weapon of Theory" and "Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea". These two texts constitute and exemplify the African genius at its best. Not only the writings of Amilcar Cabral, but also the writings of Frantz Fanon are a constitutive part of African Marxism. On another occasion it will be necessary to delineate the structural lineaments of this materialist philosophy.

One thing is clear from the beachheads of exile, that the powerful cultural debates currently developing at home ought to be conducted within the current of African Marxism and not solely of structuralism and culturalism. While **Rethinking Culture** does not go this far, it does very importantly contest dominant paradigms in South African universities, while simultaneously providing a direction to help free academic cultural work from a colonial, if not entirely successfully, European derived intellectual heritage.

To be sure, some of my comments are very contentious, probably because they are formulated from afar and also because they despairingly wish for a democratic order to arrive as soon as possible in South Africa in order that we can all collectively determine our cultural destiny. They are offered to create debate, to initiate a discussion relating to an exile view of things and to help determine a way to the future.

#### Notes and references

1. Cabral, A. 1980: "'National Liberation and Culture". in **Unity in Struggle: Speeches and Writings**. Heinemann, London.
2. Bozzoli, B. 1981: **The Political Nature of a Ruling Class: Capital and Ideology in South Africa 1890-1933**. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London; Bozzoli, B. (ed.): **Town and Countryside in the Transvaal**. Ravan, Johannesburg; Van Onselen, C. 1982: **Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914**. 1 New Babylon. Ravan, Johannesburg.
3. Tomaselli, K.G. 1987: **A Contested Terrain: Struggle Through Culture**. University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg.
4. See, eg., Ndebele, N.S 1987: "The English Language and





Social Change in South Africa", *Triquarterly*, Spring/Summer; Ndebele, N.S. 1984: "Some Thoughts on South African Fiction", *Staffrider*, Vol 6 No. 1.

5. Such a project is being undertaken by the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit in conjunction with Johan Muller. *Critical Arts*, now published through the Unit, has set this task of Africanisation for itself. *Psychology in Society* is another journal pursuing this orientation.

