**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**CLASS DEBATE: BLACK PEOPLE AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR**

**Background:** The South African War of 1899 to 1902 was described by both sides as a “white man’s war” although large numbers of black people served on both sides. Educated blacks generally sided with the British, believing that “once the republics had been overthrown, the political, educational and commercial opportunities afforded to black people in the Cape would be extended to those resident in the Transvaal and Orange Free State” (Warwick, ed., *The South African War*, p. 189). J. Tengo Jabavu, editor of *Imvo Zabantsundu*, was the only prominent African to defend the Boer republics, describing the British demands as “the very quintessence of unfairness.” Gandhi argued in *Satyagraha in South Africa* that “justice is on the side of the Boers” (p. 98), but urged Indians to support the British war effort as “our rulers *profess* to safeguard our rights because we are British subjects” (p. 97, emphasis added; cf. course website).

**Two options:** There is no record of any attempt by black South Africans to debate a common response to the war, and it’s hard to imagine how such a debate could have been staged, given the problems of language, differing legal status, differing degrees of incorporation into existing political and economic structures, lack of political organization, etc. But we can imagine a debate between two options facing black people in South Africa in 1899. The first option was to side with the British. Another would have been to condemn all imperialist violence, including that of the British against the Boer republics, as blacks were the main victims of imperialism and would continue to be. Some arguments for each point of view are sketched briefly below.

**My enemy’s enemy is my friend:** *Support the British*: Both Boers and British oppress black people, but the British are more willing to give educated blacks political and social rights and a place within their society, whereas the Boers uphold racial inequality as an absolute rule. We should side with the British to bring an end to Boer racism.

*Condemn all imperialism*: Once the British have defeated African societies, they give privileges to a small black elite, who can help to secure British control of the mass of people. They use the pretence of non-racialism to divide and rule over us. The Boers are harsher than the British, but once the British have conquered the Boers they will make alliances with the Boers and against us, if it suits them. If we condemn British rule being imposed on us by force, we should condemn it everywhere.

**The rights of a British subject**: *Side with the British*: Even if the British are hypocritical, blacks can exploit that hypocrisy to their own advantage. The British at least acknowledge that we are part of their Empire, and we can use their legal terms to argue for improved status within it.

*Condemn all imperialism*: If we make rely on the laws made by the British in order to gain our freedom, we will be taking part in a game we are bound to lose. They will only concede when we have enough power to force them to. In taking part of the pretence, the black elite will become like them and deceive and later oppress their own people.

**What is practically possible?** *Side with the British*: The arguments against the British are idealistic and unintelligible to most of our people. People want an end to the oppression they know, and are not concerned with a general term like imperialism. Black South Africans are divided and only British rule can provide a framework for common action among them.

*Condemn all imperialism*: It may be true that the black majority are divided and have no common political programme or beliefs. But the argument for siding with the British will continue that division and lack of political education. The best approach is to start building unity and providing political education now, even if we can only make a modest beginning.