**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**LECTURE 17: BLACK POLITICS AFTER DISPOSSESSION**

**1..From defence of precolonial society to claiming rights within colonial society:** There is a major transition that takes place in almost all contexts of colonial conquest. If the indigenous societies are not destroyed, driven into inhospitable territory or exterminated, they are assimilated into the society created by their conquerors, probably always in a subordinate position. The initial response of precolonial societies to colonial aggression and penetration is almost always to defend the structures and territory of the precolonial society. At what point does this defence end? There is probably no single answer to this question. Some individuals become assimilated into colonial society—e.g., as religious converts—while their own societies are still being defended. Some forms of colonial conquest aim to preserve, or even reconstruct, indigenous forms of authority and organization. In South African history, the formation of the Native National Congress(later ANC) in 1912 best marks the transition to accepting the imposition of colonial structures of power and authority and seeking rights within them, at least for an educated elite.

**2. Indians and Africans in early 20th century South Africa:** Gandhi’s response to racial discrimination in the Transvaal Colony of 1906 depended, implicitly or explicitly, on an acceptance of British ideals of civilization. But the Indian situation differed from that of Africans, not only because Indians were a minority. Indian immigration into South Africa was the product of colonial conquest, but colonial conquest which had taken place on another continent. In this context, some Indians could take on a trading and intermediary role in South Africa, especially in the cities. There was no longer any possibility of defending precolonial Indian societies in their new country. In contrast, traditional structures of African society survived the dispossession of African precolonial societies.

**3. Christianity and civilization:** Perhaps the most readily available route to assimilation into colonial society is through conversion into a universal religion such as Christianity (universal in the sense that it does not restrict itself to an ethnic group). John Dube, who was to become the first president of the ANC in 1912, begins his “Talk Upon My Native Land” with an appeal to Christians to rescue Africa from its “darkness”. Africans are presented as victims not of colonial conquest, but of “heathen oppression” (*From Protest to Challenge*, p. 68). Christianity offers the prospect of ushering in a “new civilization” in which Africa is transformed “into a land of commerce and Christian institutions” (p. 69). There are similar themes in the writings of Pixley Seme, with a similar ambiguity about whether Africa is to become part of an existing civilization, form a new civilization, or make its own distinctive contribution to a single civilization of global spread (p. 71). The discourse of civilization is easily combined with a discourse of the stages of development through which all peoples must pass, as in Tengo Jabavu’s address of 1912 (p. 73).

**4. Subjects and citizens:** The transition from defence against colonial conquest to assimilation into colonial structures of power often leads to a politics of petitioning those structures for recognition, and basing claims for recognition on the readiness with which indigenous people (or the elite among them) have accepted their subordinate status. Thus the ANC’s petitions to the British king and parliament affirm repeatedly that the petitioners are “Your Majesty’s most loyal and humble subjects” (p. 125). In exchange for their loyal and cheerful submission, they expect to be given “the full benefits of British rule like all other British subjects” (p. 126). This expectation was often disappointed. Subjects were not citizens!

**5. Nelson Mandela’s school principal in 1937:** In his *Long Walk to Freedom* (p. 35), Mandela describes his principal at Healdtown College, Dr Arthur Wellington, who announced at the school assembly, to enthusiastic applause: “I am the descendant of the great Duke of Wellington, aristocrat, statesman and general, who crushed the Frenchman Napoleon at Waterloo and thereby saved civilization for Europe—and for you, the natives”. Mandela, aged nineteen, and his friends sought to model themselves on the “educated Englishman”. His autobiography, written many years later, indicates no regret. Instead he discusses his early years almost as necessary stages in his political formation.