**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 19: Marxism and Black Workers in South Africa**

**1..Marx on Europe and historical progress:** Marx’s work began as a continuation and critique of Western political thought, and shared its conception of historical progress being led by Europe. This is visible in a text such as Marx’s “Future Results of British Rule in India” (1857), which provides a scathing indictment of Western imperialism, but sees no clear way forward for its victims. “The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the now ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether.” The underlying principle is that the most advanced country shows the way to the less advanced. Elsewhere, Marx indicates how the colonial slavery and exploitation is the condition for wage-slavery in the English cotton mills. Later, he discussed the possibility of Russia “bypassing” the capitalist stage and building socialism on the basis of the village commune. But the Eurocentric conception of history was the dominant part of this ambiguous legacy.

**2. Marxism and the white working class in South Africa:** Socialist ideas took root in South Africa before the real development of a black working class. Olive Schreiner used some elements of Marxism, but used them largely to form an ethical general critique of exploitation, with little emphasis on class mobilization. Socialist organization began in the decade after 1902, with a range of local associations (e.g., the Pretoria Socialist Society, the Marxian Club in Durban) and some with broader reach (the Social Democratic Federation, established in Cape Town in 1903; the *Yiddisher Arbeiter Bund* which became Jewish Workers Clubs in various cities). The International Socialist League (ISL) brought together many of these groups in 1915. The ISL organized mainly among the white working class, and adopted a more educational role in relation to black workers. The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was formed in 1921, on the basis of the twenty-one conditions of the Communist International (or Comintern). The orientation towards white workers changed after the mineworkers strike of 1922 (the Rand Revolt), which was put down by the army and resulted in four unionists being hanged, but the change in orientation was not simply racial.

**3. “Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin, while in the black it is branded”:** The ISL and the SACP in its early years (before the intervention of the Comintern) developed a distinctive account of the politics of a racially-divided working class, arguing that the class could only be emancipated as a whole (*South African Communists Speak*, pp. 30-31; cf. 37). The argument was made at a relatively abstract level, providing a long-term perspective, and could have been compatible with more than one strategy. It explained the common fate of workers on the basis of capitalist competition, without anticipating capitalist options of creating a “privileged” white working class to consolidate capitalist super-exploitation of black labour through job reservation after 1924. But the argument also implied a different conception of liberation, measured not by wages, employment, service delivery, etc, but by values of human solidarity. This focus may have drawn on Schreiner’s thought and was continued by dissident Marxists such as Dora Taylor in the 1940s and Richard Turner in the 1970s.

**4. The Comintern and the “Native Republic” thesis of 1928:** After the failure of the German revolution in 1923 and Stalin’s rise to power in 1924, debates within the South African left were driven by shifts in policy from Comintern headquarters in Moscow. It was agreed that the struggle for socialism in South Africa was also a struggle for the overthrow of racial domination, which served capitalist interests. The question was, in effect, whether socialists should campaign for black political rights as a step towards socialism, or campaign for socialism as the form of society in which racial inequality could be ended. The “Native Republic” thesis of 1928 chose the first option, leading to large-scale expulsions of dissenting CPSA members. The Comintern presided over various shifts in policy with a heavy hand; for example, various party members were summoned to Moscow to discuss an internal dispute in 1937, resulting in three CPSA leaders—Lazar Bach and the Richter brothers—being executed there in 1937. They were re-instated into the SACP after the collapse of the Soviet Union.