**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 31: Mandela’s Encounter with Marxism**

In the early years of the ANC Youth League, Nelson Mandela was much influenced by Anton Lembede’s Africanism, and opposed Marxism as a foreign ideology. After Lembede’s death in 1947, Mandela remained for a while in the Africanist (and anti-communist) camp, while several of his comrades, including Walter Sisulu, drew closer to Marxism and non-racialism. Here are two extracts from Mandela’s later writings (1964 and 1994), describing his encounter with Marxism in the early 1950s.

As far as the Communist Party is concerned, and if I understand its policy correctly, it stands for the establishment of a state based on the principles of Marxism. Although it is prepared to work for the Freedom Charter, as a short-term solution to the problems created by white supremacy, it regards the Freedom Charter as the beginning, and not the end of, its programme. . . .

I joined the ANC in 1944, and in my younger days I held the view that the policy of admitting Communists to the ANC, and the close co-operation which existed at times between the ANC and the Communist party would lead to the watering down of the concept of African nationalism. At that stage I was a member of the ANC Youth League and was one of a group which moved for the expulsion of Communists from the ANC. This proposal was heavily defeated. . . .

Today I am attracted to the idea of a classless society, an attraction which springs in part from Marxist reading and, in part, from my admiration of the structure and organization of early African societies in this country. The land, then the main means of production, belonged to the tribe. There were no rich or poor, and there was no exploitation,

It is true, as I have already stated, that I have been influenced by Marxist thought. But this is also true of many of the leaders of the new independent states. Such widely different pesons as Gandhi, Nehru, Nkrumah and Nasser all acknowledge this fact. We all accept the need for some form of socialism to enable our people to catch up with the advanced countries of this world and to overcome the legacy of extreme poverty. But this does not mean that we are Marxists.

---“I Am Prepared to Die,” Statement from the Dock, Rivonia Trial, 20 April 1964, pp. 126—28; the whole text is included in course reader 3.

Because of my friendships with Moses Kotane, Ismail Meer and Ruth First, and my observations of their own sacrifices, I was finding it more and more difficult to justify my prejudice against the [Communist] party. . . . If I could not challenge their dedication, I could still challenge the philosophical and practical underpinnings of Marxism. . . .

I acquired the complete works of Marx and Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung and others, and probed the philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism. I had little time to study these works properly. While I was stimulated by the *Communist Manifesto*, I was exhausted by *Das Kapital*. But I found myself strongly drawn to the idea of a classless society which, to my mind, was similar to traditional African culture where life was shared and communal. I subscribed to Marx’s basic dictum, which has the simplicity and generosity of the Golden Rule: ‘From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs.’

Dialectical materialism seemed to offer both a searchlight illuminating the dark night of racial oppression and a tool that could be used to end it. It helped me to see the situation other than through the prism of black and white relations, for if our struggle was to succeed, we had to transcend black and white. I was attracted to the scientific underpinnings of dialectical materialism, for I am always inclined to trust what I can verify. Its materialistic analysis of economics rang true to me. The idea that the value of goods was based on the amount of labour that went into them seemed particularly appropriate for South Africa. The ruling class paid African labour a subsistence wage and then added value to the cost of the goods, which they retained for themselves.

Marxism’s call to revolutionary action was music to the ears of a freedom fighter. The idea that history progresses through struggle and that change occurs in revolutionary jumps was similarly appealing. In my reading of Marxist works, I found a great deal of information that bore on the types of problems that face a practical politician. Marxists paid attention to national liberation movements, and the Soviet Union in particular supported the national struggles of many colonial peoples. . . .

A friend once asked me how I could reconcile my creed of African nationalism with a belief in dialectical materialism. For me, there was no contradiction. I was first and foremost an African nationalist fighting for emancipation from minority rule and the right to control of our own destiny. But, at the same time, South Africa and the African continent were part of the larger world. Our problems, while distinctive and special, were not unique, and a philosophy that placed these those problems in an international and historical context of the greater world and the course of history was valuable. . . .

I did not need to become a communist to work with them. I found that African nationalists and African communists generally had far more to unite them than to divide them. The cynical have always suggested that the communists were using us. But who is to say that we were not using them?

Extract from *Long Walk to Freedom*, pp. 112—13.