**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 34: Mandela’s Critique of the Homelands Policy**

**1. The Atlantic Charter, self-government and the homelands policy:** Mandela’s article “Verwoerd’s tribalism” responds to the new (or supposedly new) element of apartheid introduced by the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959. He begins with a summary of the aims of the legislation, mainly as set out in the government’s White paper. A major part of his critique of the legislation is that it is an attempt to *deceive* South Africans and the world. Mandela’s focus is mainly on the vocabulary intended to appeal to the West; he pays little or no attention to the whole vocabulary of “national groups.” The legislation makes use of the central term of the Atlantic Charter of 1941: self-government. Mandela quotes Dr Eiselen’s “lip-service to the Atlantic Charter and appeals to ‘Western democracy’” (p. 65). Beneath the facade of self-government, Mandela argues, the oppressive features of apartheid continue.

**2. Self-government as democracy and sovereignty:** The Atlantic Charter calls for “sovereign rights and self-government to be restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.” Those sovereign rights are not defined and the form of self-government involved is not necessarily democratic. Mandela provides a more ambitious definition of self-government than is implied by the Atlantic Charter. Its two essential elements, according to Mandela, are democracy and sovereignty (p. 62). Sovereignty is defined as freedom for the government to “act and legislate as it sees fit on behalf of the people, not subject to any limitations upon its powers by any alien authority.” Against this definition, the homelands policy does not measure up as true self-government. But the National Party was more likely aiming at the more minimal form of self-government granted by decolonization, where the history of colonialism imposed limitations on the powers of newly independent governments, which would be continued by global economic inequality.

**3. “Nothing but a crude, empty fraud”:** Mandela’s extensive and apparently sympathetic summary prepares the ground for his rebuttal of the homeland policy. Whatever its ultimate aims may be, the NP government is keeping control over the homelands and making itself the judge of their readiness to take on the limited tasks of self-government (cf. the White paper’s treatment of Bantu education, p. 61). The legislation is “nothing but a crude, empty fraud, to bluff the people at home and abroad” (p. 63); “mere eyewash” (p. 64); “high-sounding double-talk to conceal a policy of ruthless oppression” (p. 65). Politically, it falls short of democracy. Economically, it creates homelands which are not viable. Historically, it seeks to resuscitate a tribal past which cannot survive “the complexities of modern industrial civilization” (p. 62).

**4. Shaking imperialism to its foundations?** From the outset Mandela contrasts self-government “as the term is used and understood all over the modern world” (p. 62) with the form of self-government offered by Verwoerd’s homeland policy. He speaks as if there is no real gap between the dominant conceptions of Western liberalism and the peoples of Africa and Asia, who have been subjected to Western slavery, colonial rule and racial domination. He emphasizes only the gap between the West and the apartheid government. But at one point, this emphasis shifts. Mandela argues that Verwoerd’s policies are aimed at “the millions of Africans in the great cities of this country” who have boldly spoken “the message that is shaking imperialism to its foundations throughout this great continent of Africa” (p. 67). For a moment, he implies that the process of decolonization is not the result of universal agreement about political norms, but a contested process. But it is apartheid, rather than imperialism, which is “soon due to make its exit from the stage of history” (p. 68).

**5. The end of Mandela’s encounter with Marxism?** Last week we discussed Mandela’s study of Marxism in the early 1950s, and his interest in Soviet support for national liberation struggles. If he seems now (1959) to take the promise of decolonization at face value, does this mean that he has abandoned the critique of capitalist exploitation and Western imperialism with which he had sympathized before?