

Marxism And The Critique Of Apartheid

BY KEITH THOMAS

◆ *THE AUTHOR* challenges the Marxist view that South Africa's economy is an example of the free market at work. It is, rather, a system of monopoly which enables those who control natural resources to exploit workers. And destroying capitalism would not remove racism—witness the way Russia treats her ethnic minorities!

◆ *EFFECTIVE* reform, argues Thomas, can only come through the adoption of the fundamental principle expounded by Henry George—that everyone has the right to share in the resources of nature—which defines a society in which men are free and equal. . . .



A PARTHEID is the official policy of separate development for each of the four racial groups of South Africa. It has been applied since 1948 by the ruling Nationalist party to ensure continued supremacy of the whites (they call it their identity) over the country's non-whites.

In discussing apartheid we shall not be concerned with so-called "petty-apartheid"; this is the enforcement of separation in the use of park benches, lavatories and lifts and ensures that blacks and whites cannot marry. Petty-apartheid degrades and humiliates the blacks and embarrasses some whites but any attack on it misses the point; it is not an institution in itself but merely an outward manifestation of "grand apartheid" which ensures the economic and, therefore, the political dominance of the South African whites. Let us turn to the history of South Africa to see how apartheid arose and the economic function it plays in South Africa today.

The whites arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 to establish a provisioning base for Dutch East India Company ships on their way to and from the Indies. However, the Dutch farmers who were to produce the provisions gradually spread from the immediate area of the settlement and were followed by other settlers in search of better land in areas of higher rainfall. They enslaved or slaughtered the few tribes they encountered (Hottentots and Bushmen) and imported more slaves from East Africa and the Indies to work their large (c.6000 acre) farms. They met more serious resistance from the Xhosa and Zulu peoples who, like the Dutch, were also moving in search of better farm land. After a string of bitter "Kaffir Wars" most of the good land had come under white control by 1834 (when slavery was abolished by the British, who had taken over the Cape in 1815).²

The effect on the African tribes of the loss of their land was catastrophic. Land and the cattle it supported were the basis of African society.³ Before the white conquest there was a reasonable balance between land and population; as the tribes exhausted the soil or grass they would move on to new soil and fresh pastures. But such shifting agriculture had to cease as settlers and speculating absentee landlords expropriated great tracts of up to 450 square miles apiece. The Africans retreated into small corners of land too poor to support them by their traditional subsistence techniques and soil exhaustion and erosion resulted. It is these refuges which the present South African government euphemistically refers to as the Africans' "traditional homelands".

When the Africans became territorially restricted they lost their self-sufficient status. They were forced to turn to traders for supplies of varied foods, clothing and tools. To pay for these goods, which they had not needed to purchase when truly free, they had to work for white farmers and mine owners. And

just to ensure enough men were seeking work so that their mutual competition would depress wages to a bare subsistence level, Cecil Rhodes introduced a labour tax and restricted an individual African's landholding to a size insufficient for the support of a family. A poll tax on adult males followed. In 1912 the mines established the Native Recruiting Corporation whose function it was to enlist labour for all mines; African workers thus faced a single monopolistic employer and wages fell as all semblance of competition for labour disappeared.

By this time the Africans were no longer peasants who visited towns in search of extra income; they were a migrant labour force, based in the homelands and who had to seek outside wage employment to survive. This arrangement so suited the employers and landowners that apartheid was introduced to ensure that it was formalized and perpetuated. The movement of African labour was therefore controlled with passes and workers were forbidden the opportunity to settle or own land anywhere other than in their designated 13% of the country.

In the towns skilled occupations were reserved for whites, ensuring high wages for white workers and limiting the range of jobs open to Africans—again depressing the latter's wages. Manufacturing industry was built up behind a tariff wall in line with a policy of state intervention which also established commodity control boards to set artificially high prices for agricultural produce, beyond the reach of many Africans. Since 1948 the Afrikaners have had political control and have used the state to promote Afrikaner industry, bolstering Afrikanerdom against both foreign capital and African labour. Whilst South Africa proclaims itself a bastion of freedom against communism and collectivism, it actually has much more state owned industry than Britain and possibly more than any other non-socialist state.⁴

IT IS OFTEN not appreciated the extent to which apartheid, and even racism, is an economic phenomenon and not a social or psychological one. Generally the latter view is taken by conservatives and the former by radicals. Hundreds of comparative studies have shown that whites are not born with racial prejudices nor are blacks born with attitudes of racial inferiority. These attitudes must, therefore, be inculcated by society. The way this is done is beyond the scope of this article⁵ but it is important to note that legalized racism, such as apartheid, is incompatible with capitalism and the free market.⁶ This is hotly denied by the Marxists⁷ of course but their idea of a free market is not informed by Georgist principles.⁸ For them the monopoly capitalism of South Africa is free competition and they blame capitalism in any and all forms for the tyranny there. But for the Georgist natural resources should be enjoyed equally by all; this proposition specifically excludes the creation of second class citizens and the perpetuation of social, political and economic

monopolies such as dominate South African society at present.

Perhaps the error of the Marxists is understandable. They can see capitalists benefiting from apartheid but what they do not realize is that South African capitalists represent only a perverted form of capitalism which cannot be taken as representative of capitalism in all its possible forms. Business in South Africa gains from apartheid in six main ways: (a) by prohibiting effective unions and inhibiting wage bargaining power, (b) by preventing access to the national press or political forums for black critics of employers or the state, (c) by keeping large numbers of Africans as a reservoir of unemployed for boom times (some 20% of the African workforce is currently unemployed), (d) by providing whites with a scapegoat for social problems, (e) by controlling the movement of labour for the benefit of mine owners and farmers through the pass system, and (f) by promoting the homelands where much social welfare, education and health needs are provided by fatherless family units rather than by the external state. These effects of apartheid are indisputable but we cannot, therefore, assume that apartheid will disappear with the overthrow of capitalism. The racism currently practiced against the ethnic minorities of the Soviet Union and in other self-proclaimed communist states puts the lie to that oversimplification.

TABLE 1 Population of South Africa 1974¹

Racial Group	Number	Percentage of total
Africans	17,745,000	71.2%
Coloureds	2,306,000	9.3%
Asians	709,000	2.8%
Whites	4,160,000	16.7%
TOTAL	24,920,000	100.0%

The whites of South Africa have fought their way into their present dilemma through three hundred years of murder, torture and exploitation of the African majority. There is now no easy way out and for those who have participated in—or benefited from—the many grave injustices there will, inevitably, be some loss to bear before equality of opportunity, equality before the law and freedom of the individual are achieved. Some white South Africans plead that the South African blacks are well off compared with the rest of Africa and yet there are a dozen independent African nations whose per capita income exceeds that of their South African fellows. And beside them the whites are the single most affluent group in the world, surpassing even Californians some eight years ago.

FOR ninety nine years Georgists have firmly opposed violence and state tyranny so it behoves us today to suggest some measures which may ease the necessary transition to a new society and provide a basis for peace and well-being beyond that period. It is as well to stress that though the temptation may be otherwise there should be no attempt to legislate for all contingencies, to replace

one form of social engineering with another, when apartheid is done away with. Rather, if Henry George's original simple proposal was introduced overnight and all existing discriminatory, monopolistic and fiscal legislation were abolished at the same time, the way would be paved for a peaceful transition. Indeed, this may prove to be the only solution and is certainly more likely to be successful than any of the three proposals usually put forward: the Afrikaners' determination to continue with apartheid unrelentingly (of which the farcical "independence" of Transkei and Bophuthatswana is an integral part); the Marxists' desire to overthrow the capitalist state, sweeping apartheid away with it, or the moderates' vague suggestions which focus on piecemeal political and social reforms but ignore the centrality of the economic sphere.

Under George's proposals whites who had skills as trainers, workers or supervisors would find their abilities still in strong demand and would have little fear of violent reprisals as any action taken against them could have no benefit for the nation or other citizens. Likewise, the Africans too would be freed from their poor homelands, freed from the yoke of apartheid and free to work for wages or (and here comes the rub which embarrassed Marxists refuse to face) to cultivate the soil or otherwise become self-employed on equal terms with other entrepreneurs as and when the free market permits. All that is exploitative in the enforced migrant labour system would cease.

There is no reason internal to South Africa which prevents a Georgist course being taken. Furthermore, the notion that land is a common stock has a firm place in African tradition and a land tax/free market solution should appeal to some Africans conscious of their cultural inheritance. However, such a solution would be firmly opposed by the economic power of (a) the foreign and nationally owned mining companies for whom, even under apartheid, the wages bill is their largest expense; (b) the heavily protected manufacturing industry which gives a return on capital of 15-20 per cent per annum;⁹ (c) the subsidized farming sector and (d) the powerful rentiers, black as well as white (black land owners are creating miniature exploitative economies within the homelands).

NOTES

1. Davidson, B. et al., *Southern Africa*, Pelican Books, 1976, p 105.
2. Callinicos, A. & Rogers, J., *Southern Africa After Soweto*, Pluto Press, 1977, pp 18-40.
3. See the two outstanding articles in *Land and Liberty's* predecessor, *Land Values*, June 1906 and December 1911 for revealing accounts of the forced expropriation of the Africans' lands by the white state.
4. Johnson, R. W., *How Long Will South Africa Survive?*, Macmillan, 1977, pp 42-43.
5. Hunt, E. K. & Sherman, H. J., *Economics*, Harper & Row, 2nd ed., 1975. See especially Chapter 21.
6. George, H., *Progress and Poverty*, Book X, Chapters 1 and 2.
7. Wolpe, H., 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa', *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 4, November 1972.
8. See e.g., Henry George, *The Condition of Labour*, book three of *The Land Question*, New York, 1965, p 90.
9. Johnson, *ibid*, p 30.

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Nationalists fight foreign takeover

ARAB OIL money has shown increasing interest in Welsh land. Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Nationalist Party, wants legislation to restrict the sale of land to foreigners. A consortium of Arabs is anxious to spend £1m. on land in Wales. Local farmers blame the outside investors for raising land prices. Last year prices almost doubled, according to Gwilym Thomas of the Farmers Union of Wales—from an average of £652 to over £1,000 an acre. *The Observer*, 23.7.78.

◆ *WOULD-BE farmers in Wales are not the only ones to suffer from speculation in rural land. Argentina's city dwellers are buying farms rather than ploughing profits back into their businesses—often paying prices that working farmers cannot match. (The Times, 23.6.78).*

SOCIALIST THREAT

CROSS-BORDER speculation in land has become increasingly attractive for another reason, however. The threat of socialism is driving funds out of Europe—especially from the UK, Netherlands and West Germany—and into investment in North American land, according to overseas representatives of Jones, Lang, Wootton, the estate agents. Fear of socialist legislation has more than offset the decline in the value of the dollar against the mark, and made US land an attractive long-term proposition. *Estates Gazette*, 20.5.78.

LAND GRAB BID

LAND grabbers are not all wealthy speculators.

The Marxist Government of West Bengal faced the grim prospect of having to deal with 60,000 Bengali Hindu refugees who poured into the state in search of land. The refugees had been relegated to an arid piece of land, called Dandakaranya, when the old Bengal province was partitioned on religious lines in 1947. Bengal has had its share of anarchic land-grabs by landless peasants in search of a subsistence living. Some of the refugees, who belong to the lowest Namsudra caste, headed for Calcutta: hundreds of them squatted in Maidan, the city's central park. The fistful of daily rice doled out by the government was insufficient to prevent many of them dying from malnutrition. (*The Observer*, 11.6.78.)

NEWS DIGEST