

Nelson Mandela's 1994 inauguration as South Africa's first democratically elected president soothed decades of racial tensions in that country. Officially racist rule crumbled under the spasms of the violence that shook Johannesburg and other cities in the 1980s, but the action that eventually destroyed apartheid became possible because of the struggle over knowledge and thought waged in the 1940s and 1950s. The white Nationalist Party that won the 1948 elections codified racial segregation by advancing an ideology of racial division and hierarchy. The African National Congress (ANC), originally founded as an interest group for the educated African elite, in the 1940s and 1950s forged a racially inclusive counter-narrative to combat apartheid's intellectual underpinnings. Together with the South African Communist Party (SACP), the mid-century ANC waged a war over knowledge and thought that inspired the next generation to rise up for a nonracial democracy. Though the state imprisoned the ANC leadership beginning in the 1960s, the ideological framework they developed in the preceding decades carried the movement through its difficult times on the long walk to freedom. South Africa still faces serious disparities, but its progress from the apartheid age shows the efficacy of an intellectually coherent movement in affecting significant change. Contemporary progressives should model the ANC's campaign over knowledge in the 1940s and 1950s as they try to turn thought into action.

The Dutch first settled in South Africa in 1657, but their small population and rural lifestyle precluded any complete racial dominance.¹ Occasional skirmishes over land or cattle peppered an otherwise peaceful racial coexistence until the discovery of precious metals in the 1860s. The British, who had come to South Africa during the Napoleonic Wars, began emigrating to the mineral-rich interior. The descendants of the Dutch settlers, now known as Afrikaners, resented the British incursions and fought the South African War at the turn of the century. The British won a costly victory for control over the natural resources, but reached an understanding with the agriculturally inclined Afrikaners to together exploit African labor on the farms and in the mines. As historian Bernard Mugabane notes, "Africans and their welfare were sacrificed to promote an abiding settlement for the whites."² The Treaty of Vereenging ended hostilities in 1902 and precipitated a series of laws that solidified economic and political dominance by whites.

The British and Afrikaners consummated their peace in the 1910 Union Act, which established the regions of Natal, Cape, Transvaal and the Orange Free State as a single British colony.³ The economic needs of the British mine owners underwrote the political agreement between the British and Afrikaners. The newly unified South African state passed several laws that forced Africans to work part of the year in the mines or on Afrikaner farms, and spend the rest on barren reserves. Harold Wolpe, a South African specialist, terms this arrangement the "dual economy," since Africans split their time

1 D.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 16

2 Bernard Mugabane, *Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 47

3 Ibid

between industrial and agrarian labor, resulting in the breakdown of African social life. The new government augmented its economic disenfranchisement of the African community with socially debilitating policies that divided the African population. For example, the 1927 Native Administration Act empowered compliant tribal chiefs in the reserves to hinder any unified African resistance. More importantly, social legislation constructed a regime of racial knowledge that dictated all aspects of behavior, including political opposition. Resistance to white rule floundered until the late 1940s, when the ANC and SACP challenged the mindset supporting white supremacy.

This flurry of legislation following the establishment of the united South African colony began the war over knowledge and thought that characterized the mid-century struggles. Economic imperatives for cheap mine and farm labor motivated the white British-Afrikaner alliance, but the racist tone of their efforts developed into an independent and pervasive ideology. Assumptions about innate racial differences percolated throughout South African society and corrupted early efforts to oppose the economic system. African nationalists, black trade unionists, and Marxist groups sprung up in the early 20th century to fight the economic and social order, but ideological incoherence and racial assumptions stymied their efforts to change South Africa.

Pixley Ka Izake Seme, an African educated in the United States and Britain, called on 60 prominent Africans to meet at Bloemfontein on Jan 8th, 1912 to “together devise ways and means of forming our national union for the purpose of creating national unity and defending our rights and privileges.”⁴ Few Africans had any rights or privileges to defend, making this nascent ANC an intrinsically elitist organization. The Congress accepted support from sympathetic whites, but welcomed no non-Africans to its membership. Its narrow focus led it to concentrate on small issues germane only to the African upper-class. For example, its first major campaign attempted to defend the limited African franchise in the Western Cape province, where blacks able to pass a “civilization test” could vote. The ANC's effort garnered little support outside those few Africans concerned with limited voting rights, and ultimately failed to protect what rights that some Africans could claim at the time. The ANC failed to attract a large following in the decades after its birth, and labor groups soon eclipsed it as Africans' political voice.

Draconian labor laws like the 1916 Labor Registration Act funneled Africans into low-wage, unskilled labor. Wretched conditions, especially in the mines, eventually provoked organic resistance, but black workers lacked the organization to effectively wield their latent economic power. In 1920, forty thousand Africans walked out of the mines on the Rand, prompting one newspaper to observe that “The strike is undoubtedly an instinctive mass revolt against their whole status ... The Native Congress had very little to (do) with the movement... The strike is in no man's control.”⁵ The leadership of the

4 R.V. Selopa Thema. “How Congress Began” *Drum*, 1953.

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/began.html>; Paul Rich, *State Power and Black Politics in South Africa*, p. 16

5 “The Great Native Strike” *The International* 27 Feb 1920. In Drew *South Africa's Radical Tradition: A Documentary*

Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)⁶, educated in Europe, struggled to fit the black workers' agitation within their orthodox Marxist framework. The party idly observed the African strike, then sided with white workers demanding preferential treatment in 1922, surrendering its chance to lead a interracial coalition against dangerous working conditions.⁷ When a Labor government co-opted the white working class in the 1924 election, the CPSA lost its white support while earning the enmity of African workers. It took nearly thirty years for new leadership to abandon Marxist dogma and develop the knowledge and thought, specific to South Africa, to forge a united front of blacks, Indians, and liberal whites against apartheid.

The Left's vacuum of intellectual leadership in the 1920s and 1930s rendered most Africans powerless to resist South Africa's worsening racism. Resistance to white rule reached its nadir in the 1930s, just as blacks began migrating to the mostly white cities. The Second World War accelerated South Africa's industrialization, and Johannesburg became the focal point for the tension between racist rigidity and a color-blind demand for labor. The population of Africans living in urban areas more than doubled from 1921 to 1945, and Johannesburg's 5,500 new factories drew over 150,000 new black residents.⁸ Restrictive land laws shunted the newcomers to the city's outskirts, prompting clashes over housing and transportation rights. Tents and shanties popped up on the strips of vacant land surrounding Johannesburg, its population reliant upon white owned bus companies to take them to work in the downtown factories. The bus companies exploited their very captive market by arbitrarily raising rates, prompting an organic boycott in 1942. For eleven months, tens of thousands of Africans walked 24 miles round-trip to the factories every day, eventually forcing the bus companies to reduce their fares.⁹

Just like the 1920 Rand mine strike, the bus boycott proceeded without much organizational support. Unlike that earlier incarnation of African resistance, though, the progressive leadership this time sought to turn popular discontent into a viable political force. Dr. Alfred Xuma took the reins of the ANC in 1940, and though a moderate himself, he cultivated a new generation of leaders committed to representing the African masses instead of the ever shrinking elite. Xuma consented to forming a Youth League and a Women's League within the ANC; the former spearheaded efforts to politicize an entire generation, while the latter represented and motivated the huge numbers of women entering urban life. Youth Leaguers like Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo pressured the Congress to hire an

History (Vol 1) (Cape Town: Buchu Pess, 1996), 45

6 The Nationalist government banned the CPSA in 1950; a distinct organization, the SACP, formed underground in the mid 1950s.

7 Mugabane, p. 283

8 Phillip Bonner "The Politics of Black Squatter Movements on the Rand, 1944-52" *Radical History Review: South Africa* p. 92

9 Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (London: Longman Press, 1983) The story is recounted in chapter 1

organizer for community outreach, and the 1942 ANC convention authorized the position.¹⁰

The new ANC leaders branched out to both the larger black population, as well as to leftist white leaders. The ANC adopted a new constitution at its 1943 convention that welcomed anyone, regardless of race, that supported its goals.¹¹ Though some black nationalists initially distrusted white and Indian allies, they worked together to articulate a platform acceptable to all. The CPSA, then the only viable political home for progressive whites, also sought common ground with the ANC.¹² The Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU), a previously marginal player, elected J.B. Marks its leader in 1943.¹³ As a leader in both the Communist Party and the ANC, Marks strengthened the bridges between the two groups, thereby elevating CNETU's role and packing an economic punch to back the ANC political demands .

The Communist Party welcomed closer ties with the ANC, and itself sponsored broad-ranging night schools for African workers. The Communist Party also published a "Native Republic Thesis" that situated South Africa's racial tensions within a larger class narrative. Importantly, the Thesis called for nonracial democracy as a step toward a classless society, thereby aligning itself closely with the ANC's stated goals. The state banned the CPSA in 1950, pushing many of its members into the ANC. The party reformed underground as the SACP, but its leadership accepted the primacy of the ANC. Through mass education at night schools and careful reflection about South Africa's racial past, the SACP and ANC together formulated the knowledge and thought required to build a coherent movement against white rule.

Black urbanization revitalized South Africa's Left, but also engendered resentment among the white community. Concerned about jobs and cultural identity, the white electorate voted the Nationalist Party into power in 1948. The Nationalists had campaigned on a platform of white chauvinism, and their policy of "separate development" ossified South Africa's already stark racial divide. Just as the formation of a united South Africa in 1910 preceded a flurry of discriminatory legislation, the election of the Afrikaner Nationalist government triggered a cascade of racial laws. The Population Registration Act of 1950 compelled all residents to be defined as a specific race. The Mixed Marriages Act prohibited interracial marriage, while the Group Areas Act strengthened the government's hand in racial zoning and pass laws. Most importantly, the laws passed after the 1948 election shared a common foundation of knowledge and thought, rooted in the notion of distinct group identities. Whereas previous governments mostly avoided grand racial theories, the Nationalists turned ad-hoc segregation into a coherent regime of racial hierarchy. D.F. Malan, the first Nationalist Prime Minister, explained apartheid as "(the separation) between "barbarism and civilization, heathenism and

10 "Resolutions of the ANC National Conference, December 20-22, 1942" in Karis and Carter, p. 202

11 Ibid

12 Cape Province hosted a small Liberal Party, but it had virtually no voice in interracial dialogue in the 1940s. See: Richard Dale "Review: Liberalism's Failure in South Africa" *The Review of Politics* 35, no. 4 (1973): 573

13 Edward Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 333

Christianity."¹⁴ The state, according to Nationalist political thought, must maintain the purity of social groups (i.e., races) and arbitrate their relations. When put into action, Nationalist thought led to state protection of white, especially Afrikaner, interests, and brutal repression of non-white economic and political aspirations.

Surprisingly, the ANC's younger leadership welcomed the ascension of the Nationalist Party. The Malan government clarified the state's approach to non-whites, prompting Youth League president Oliver Tambo to remark that "Now we know who our enemies are and where we stand."¹⁵ Absent any illusions about the government's vision, the ANC adopted a more coherent and assertive campaign for equal rights regardless of group identity. The ANC's 1949 Annual Conference showcased the movement's new approach. Youth League leaders Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu drafted a Programme of Action to outline the ANC's response to the Nationalist government. The ANC's new manifesto invited closer cooperation with allied groups, leading to a Joint Planning Council to coordinate strategy with organizations like the South African Indian Congress. The Council soon undertook the largest and most intellectually coherent endeavor ever staged by government opponents. On November 8, 1951, the Council resolved to stage a nationwide campaign of civil disobedience of apartheid's six cornerstone laws (Population Registration Act, Group Areas Act, Separate Registration of Voters Act, Bantu Authorities Act, Natives Act, and Suppression of Communism Act).¹⁶ The ANC targeted those six laws because they encapsulated the knowledge behind apartheid. Each one propagated the Nationalist thoughts about strict group identity and segregation. In violating those laws, the ANC used action to undermine apartheid's ideological facade.

This Defiance Campaign, set to begin June 26th, 1952, invited all apartheid opponents to participate. Thousands of black South Africans, as well allied Indians and whites, purposefully broke the targeted laws. Blacks entered white areas and anti-government speakers gave public addresses, forcing police to arrest nonviolent activists. Peaceful protesters filled up jails across the country, signaling popular commitment to the ANC's new assertive agenda. Unlike the intermittent protests and unorganized strikes on the early 20th century, the Defiance campaign funneled popular anger into a well defined mission to expose apartheid's hollow intellectual core. More importantly, the ANC's ideological development fortified the Defiance Campaign with an inclusive narrative that challenged apartheid's exclusive mindset.

Apartheid survived the Defiance Campaign. Few volunteers could afford to miss work, and the ANC feared that a fizzling campaign would devolve into violence (as it did in some areas). Nonetheless, the Campaign established the ANC as mass movement. Its membership swelled by tens of

14 D.F. Malan, "Apartheid: Divine Calling" In *The Anti-Apartheid Reader*, ed. David Mermelstein (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 95

15 Nelson Mandela. *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Black Bay Books, 1994), 112

16 Report of the Joint Planning Council of the ANC and South African Indian Congress. November 8, 1951. In Karis and Carter, Volume 2, p. 462

thousands, convincing its leaders to solicit popular suggestions for a new manifesto written its constituents. The public enthusiastically responded; Mandela recalls that contributions "came on serviettes, on paper torn from exercise books, on scraps of foolscap, and the backs of our own leaflets. It was humbling to see how the suggestions of ordinary people were often far ahead of the leaders".¹⁷ The ANC compiled the responses into the Freedom Charter, which it presented to an enthusiastic rally outside Johannesburg on June 25th, 1955. The Freedom Charter called for a nonracial social democracy, challenging both the thought and action of the Nationalist government. Its vision of "a democratic state...without distinction of color, race, sex or belief" undermined Malan's theory of group hierarchies, and its call for "equal rights to enter all trades, crafts, and professions" threatened the Nationalists' discriminatory labor regulations.¹⁸ The ANC laid out an alternative governing philosophy in the 1955 Freedom Charter, based on national, instead of racial, identity, and its actions in subsequent decades always rested upon those thoughts.

The Freedom Charter's inspiring language served its compilers well. The government feared a popular movement grounded in clear thinking. The state banned the Congress in 1960, forcing its leaders into exile or hiding. Mandela and five other leaders were convicted of treason in 1964 and sentenced to life imprisonment; for nearly 30 years they drew strength from the knowledge that their actions exposed apartheid's cruel mindset. Indeed, the ANC survived brutal government crackdowns because of the bonds it built with all South Africans willing to embrace their alternative knowledge and thought. Though its strategy varied through the years, and a series of complex factors undermined apartheid, the ANC ultimately forced and won free elections in 1994 because it always informed its actions with the philosophy developed in the 1940s and 1950s.

Contemporary movements can learn from the ANC's bottom-up model. The Congress failed as an interest group for the elite, but thrived as grassroots organization directed by its constituents. Its success depended, though, on its ability to cogently articulate the popular agenda. Political groups today are too often plagued by uncoordinated factions or unresponsive leadership. The present anti-war movement, for example, consists of countless eccentric groups pursuing different strategies; the leaders of organized labor, on the other hand, seem more intent on maintaining access to power than representing most workers.¹⁹ No one can expect utopia from human led endeavors, and contemporary struggles can only hope for progress toward their goals, but South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy shows that action, when directed by clear knowledge and thought, can produce real changes.

17 Mandela, 72

18 The Freedom Charter. In Mermelstein, 208

19 The Teamsters and other unions recently split with the AFL-CIO in part because of concerns about worker-leader relations. See James Hoffa's comments in "Two Top Unions Split from AFL-CIO" *Washington Post*, July 26, 2005; Page A01

