

# On the development of nations in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

*J. Adams*

LIONEL FORMAN affirms that there is no nation in South Africa. But there were nations once; two, in fact, for the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State conformed to his definition of a nation in every respect. Did the Afrikaans lose their national identity when they were conquered? If one respects his rejection of the term "nationality"—a term used by Marxists for half a century—should one refer to the Afrikaans as a "post-nation"?

His error has been to interpret the concept "common territory" as meaning "a territory on one's own". In fact, there are nations where several cultural, linguistic groupings share a territory; for example, Switzerland and the Soviet Union. It is no good quoting Stalin on the Jews in Russia to prove the need for a majority in one area before a nationality comes into being. One can counterpose Lenin in "Critical Remarks on the National Question", who speaks of ". . . the most oppressed and persecuted nation, the Jewish". Better than a battle of quotations is to look at the facts. In pre-revolutionary Russia the Jews were oppressed. In present-day South Africa the Afrikaans operate the machinery of oppression. Afrikaans culture is fostered by the state, Afrikaans religion flourishes, Afrikaans is an official language.

It is quite true that English is also an official language, and that the element with an English background enjoy the same privileges. But then there are other nations with more than one language; India, for instance. Economic intercourse in a capitalist state requires a language used in common by its inhabitants. Although neither English nor Afrikaans is the language of the majority, this requirement is met by the legal enforcement of their use in South Africa. Quite clearly a nation exists in South Africa—not Afrikaans nor English—but South African, composed of people who use Afrikaans and English languages and cultures.

What of the other racial groupings in South Africa—African, Indian and Coloured? Forman envisages a separate nation, each flowering and prospering, for each separate grouping that differs in language, territory, economy or culture. The Apartheid advocated by the Nationalists proposes

a division into three, but there would be Zulu, Basuto, Xosa, Swazi, Tswana, Barotse, Baralong, Pondo African nations *ad infinitum*, plus Tamil and Gujarati nations divided into Hindu and Moslem states and so on, if his line of thought is pursued to its conclusion.

He has overlooked the assimilating force which capitalism provides. To quote Lenin who puts it pithily:

"The wide and rapid development of productive forces by capitalism demands large, politically compact and united territories in which alone—breaking down all the old medieval, caste, parochial, small national, religious and other barriers—the bourgeois class—and its inevitable antipode, the proletarian class—can unite . . . as long and in so far as different nations constitute an integral state Marxists will not under any circumstances advocate either the federal principle or decentralisation. The centralised big state marks a tremendous historical step forward from medieval disintegration towards the future socialist unity of the whole world and except through such a state (inseparably connected with capitalism) there is no road to socialism nor can be" (Lenin: "Critical Remarks on the National Question").

This does not overlook the possibility of separate national states arising in South Africa in view of a democratic respect for the rights of nations to self-determination. In view of the fact, however, that no democrat in that part of the world will have any say for some time, the probability is otherwise. There is so little doubt that the dominant mode of production in South Africa is capitalism—a modern, dynamic, expanding capitalism—that one need not pause to prove the point. It is this which makes the South African situation unique in Africa. This capitalism has unleashed tremendous economic forces which are assimilating all the different peoples of South Africa into a single nation. For example, an economic factor, more important than national composition, is the growth of towns, distinguished for their mixed populations, which cannot be divided up to fit separate territories for the sake of the national factor. The United States of America is an example of such a nation where this assimilation has been completed. There it does not matter what language, religion or culture, workers or bosses—be they Negroes, Anglo-Saxons, Russians, Jews or Italians—use in private life, all are equally American. Similarly, if the process has

<sup>1</sup> See *Marxism Today*, April 1959

not been completed already, Africans, Indians, Coloureds and Europeans are being fast assimilated into a South African nation which is already in existence. The process is being accelerated precisely because the full cultural and linguistic expression of some sections is being impeded in South Africa. Those disintegrating tribal communities which have not yet attained separate national consciousness will only do so as South Africans.

It is not surprising that there is little demand for secession and self-determination—indeed, the label “National Liberation Movement” is a complete misnomer—for in a single national state the demand is for equal democratic rights. This does not spring from the fact that there are no nations in South Africa, but that the arising South African nation is oppressed by a reactionary government. The ideology which animates the Nationalist Party is an example of the contradiction between political superstructure and economic basis in a changing capitalist state. It corresponds to an earlier phase of capitalist development in South Africa, a semi-colonial phase based largely on the formation of absolute surplus

value extracted from the exploitation of primary resources. Although this continues, the basis has changed to modern industrial capitalism based largely on the formation of relative surplus value. The bourgeois superstructure will one day conform better to this economic basis, provided the more fundamental clash between capitalism and socialism is not resolved meanwhile, despite the attempts of the Apartheid doctrinaires. Comrade Forman need not align himself with them by identifying himself with the specific national aspirations of each nationality. He should do no more than respect such feelings.

No wonder then that when Forman looks at the Afrikaans and sees only policemen, at the English and sees only supervisors, at Africans and sees only workers, he can complain that each section fails to qualify as a nation. He is looking at components of a single arising nation where class divisions for good historical reasons happen to correspond to some extent with racial differences. He does not see classes only colours, hence misinterpreting the evidence of the single national market he cannot pass over in silence.