



The Lessons of the PAIGC

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Amílcar Cabral, *REVOLUTION IN GUINEA* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 174 pp., \$4.95

Gerard Chaliand, *ARMED STRUGGLE IN AFRICA* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 142 pp., \$5.50

The story of "Portuguese" Guinea is a fascinating one. A national liberation movement in a tiny state, less than a million in population, has been fighting a war with a European country for a decade. It has established control in two-thirds of its country. Had the country been a colony of Britain or France, it would have been independent ten years ago and probably of little more significance than a dozen other small independent African states. Had it been Portugal's only colony in Africa, the Portuguese might have been willing to concede independence to this area of small economic interest.

But the accident of history was that Portuguese acquired this tiny slice of West Africa and that Portugal's interests in Angola and Mozambique made her unwilling to withdraw from Guinea. However unfortunate for the inhabitants of Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands, this accident, has had its fortuitous side. It has produced a remarkable movement, the PAIGC, led by a remarkable man, Amílcar Cabral, and the experience of this movement has added precious knowledge for the benefit of those struggling everywhere.

What can we learn about national liberation movements in general from the experience of the PAIGC? Let us place it in the context of evolving world intellectual history. In the 18th century, the European bourgeoisie took heart from the universalist doctrines of the Enlightenment and Kantian philosophy to argue against the constraints of the monarchical state. In the 19th century, the liberal bourgeoisie, however, raised high the banner of national independence (particularly in outer Europe — central, eastern, southern Europe) against the oppressive weight of remaining empires. As the bourgeoisie became nationalist, the working classes began to speak of inter-national proletarian solidarity. Nationalism was denounced.

The 1917 Revolution occurred to everyone's surprise, however, in Russia — outside "advanced" Europe. And its echoes were heard in Asia. It was Lenin who first drew the lesson of this unexpected event, and spoke in 1920 of "oppressed and oppressing nations." Stalin later spoke of "socialism in one country." The world socialist movement of various tendencies was from then

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on never quite sure how to handle the phenomenon of national liberation. But, especially after 1945, it moved towards seeing national liberation as part of the world-wide struggle against imperialism.

The phenomenon of neo-colonialism which has become so visible since 1960 has raised doubts once again about "national liberation." Here is where the PAIGC comes in. And Cabral is willing to face the question head on: "I would even go so far as to ask whether, given the advance of socialism in the world, the national liberation movement is not an imperialist initiative." (p. 71)

Amidst a spate of debunking literature on the left which gives primacy to a fear of co-optation and which inflates the ability of the ruling classes to manipulate everyone including their opponents, Cabral's voice is refreshingly clear. This fear about national liberation movements is a left-wing version of old-style European presumptuousness about Africa, a way of analyzing Africa only in terms of Europe (and America)'s problems; an arrogance more dangerous because it calls itself leftist, Cabral says:

"A rigorous historical approach is similarly needed when examining another problem related to this — how can the underdeveloped countries evolve toward revolution, toward socialism? There is a preconception held by many people, even on the left, that imperialism made us enter history at the moment when it began its adventure in our countries. This preconception must be denounced: for somebody on the left, and for Marxists in particular, history obviously means the class struggle. Our opinion is exactly the contrary. We consider that when imperialism arrived and colonialism arrived, it made us leave our history and enter another history." (p. 65)

This concept of two histories (not historiographies) of oppressed peoples — their own and their oppressors — is extremely helpful and clarifies, *mutatis mutandis*, the situation of oppressed minorities in industrialized countries (e.g. Blacks in the United States) as much as it does that of colonized peoples in Africa. Cabral draws from this concept the appropriate conclusion about the nature of a national liberation movement (and, hence, *mutatis mutandis* again, a Black liberation movement in the United States). Far from being an "imperialist initiative,"

"...national liberation is the phenomenon in which a given socio-economic whole rejects the negation of its historical process. In other words, the national liberation of a people is the repairing of the historical personality of that people, its return to history through the destruction of the imperialist domination to which it was subjected." (p. 102)

Of course, liberation, not national independence, is the goal. Hence "the liberation struggle is a revolution and . . . does not finish at the moment that the national flag is raised and the national anthem played. . ." (p. 107) Hence we must distinguish between the strategy at two different historical moments: the colonial situation "in which the nation-class fights the repressive forces of the bourgeoisie of the colonising country" and the neo-colonial situation "in which the working classes and their allies struggle simultaneously against the imperialist bourgeoisie and the native ruling class. . ." (p. 106)



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Nation-class

Let us pause a moment at the concept nation-class. This recalls another hyphenated concept, party-state, invented by the Algerian FLN and taken up recently in a CONCP publication to apply precisely to the PAIGC. (*Guinea et Cap-Vert* Alger: Information CONCP, 1970, 24-25). The hyphenation underlines the argument, the rejection of nineteenth-century theoretical oversimplifications (even those of Marx). While for the nineteenth-century theorists — and many of our contemporaries are still nineteenth-century theorists — classes existed *within* nations, parties existed *within* states, the national liberation movements are forcing into our theoretical consciousness (via *praxis*) the fact that classes and parties exist within a world-system, as do nations and states, and that under certain conditions the parameters of nation and class, state and party so overlap that it is not intellectually useful (*a fortiori* not politically useful) to distinguish them.

But this intellectual classification also brings in its wake an intellectual confusion. In the older analyses, it was quite clear who were the revolutionary forces and who the reactionary. But if we now become even more historically relativist than the older theorists (not merely distinguishing between a feudal and a capitalist era, but between multiple specific aspects of a capitalist era), how shall we determine *objectively* the forces of progress? Cabral does not speak to this question directly but if we look closely at what he says about revolutionary forces, there is an implicit answer.

Cabral describes the beginnings of the PAIGC as a search for the social basis for a movement:

"We had some knowledge of other experiences and we knew that a struggle of the kind we hoped to lead — and win — had to be led by the working class; we looked for the working class in Guinea, but did not find it. Other examples showed us that things were begun by some revolutionary intellectuals. What were we then to do? We were just a bunch of petty bourgeois who were driven by the reality of life in Guinea . . . (We) obviously did not have a proletariat. We quite clearly lacked revolutionary intellectuals, so we had to start searching, given that we — rightly — did not believe in the revolutionary capacity of the peasantry." (pp. 65-66)

What? Not the peasantry? What about Fanon, Mao? "The peasant who fought in Algeria or China is not the peasant of our country." (p. 158) Why so?

"It so happens that in our country the Portuguese colonialists did not appropriate the land; they allowed us to cultivate the land. They did not create agricultural companies of the European type as they did, for instance, in Angola . . . This created a special difficulty in our struggle — that of showing the peasant he was being exploited in his own country." (pp. 158-59)

If one cannot count on the three standard classes put forward by one or another theorist of the last 150 years — the proletariat, the revolutionary intellectuals, or the peasantry — to lead the revolution, can one count on that other alternative advocated by socialists from Bakunin to Debray and the Weathermen — the body of committed men, the militants, the fighters, the underground, the military *foco*? Cabral minces no words:

"The political and military leadership of the struggle is one: the political leadership. In our struggle we have avoided the creation of anything military. We are political people, and our Party, a political organisation, leads the struggle in the civilian political, administrative, technical, and therefore also military spheres." (p. 146)

If Cabral is too polite to spell out whose doctrines he is attacking,* Chaliand is less shy: "The experience of the PAIGC contradicts the Cuban *foco* theory (p. xiv)

The Revolutionary Petty Bourgeoisie

Does Cabral then have a candidate for the leadership of the national liberation movement? He does, and it is a most extraordinary one, for it is totally unexpected in terms of the history of modern socialist thought. It is a segment of the petty bourgeoisie which he calls the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie. And how can these be identified? Of course by their commitment to the struggle against colonialism. But what about those still uneducated and uncertain? Among what groups will potential recruits be most likely to be found? Again a surprising answer: among the *declassé*. But not just any *declassé*:

"The really *declassé* people, the permanent layabouts, the prostitutes and so on have been a great help to the Portuguese people in giving them information; this group has been outrightly against our struggle, perhaps unconsciously so, but nonetheless against our struggle. On the other hand, the particular group I mentioned earlier, for which we have not yet found any precise classification (the group of mainly young people recently arrived from the rural areas with contacts in both the urban and rural areas) gradually comes to make a comparison between the standard of living of their own families and that of the Portuguese; they begin to understand the sacrifices being borne by the Africans. They have proved extremely dynamic in the struggle. Many of these people joined the struggle right from the beginning and it is among this group that we found many of the cadres whom we have since trained." (p. 62)

Cabral's honesty in tracing the real social roots of his movement is matched these days by that of one other revolutionary theorist: Huey Newton, who asserts that the social basis of his movement, the Black Panther Party, lies in the revolutionary segment of the *lumpenproletariat*. When we examine closely what Newton means by the *lumpenproletariat* in the American context and Cabral by the *declassés* in the Guinean context, and we make allowances for the differences of the social situations, are they not pointing to the same group: the

*Cabral is making this particular statement in an interview with *Tricontinental* magazine.



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group that "has nothing to lose but its chains" but is sufficiently oriented to the world-system in its activities and its values to be educable as cadres for a revolutionary movement?

And what shall they be educated to do? Here Cabral is daring once again.

"We must be very clear exactly what we are asking the party bourgeoisie to do. Are we asking it to commit suicide? Because if there is a revolution, then the petty bourgeoisie will have to abandon power to the workers and the peasants and cease to exist *qua* petty bourgeoisie." (p. 70)

Commit class suicide? That is an idea difficult to assimilate. Those that are called upon to do it must be convinced that it is truly essential. And even so, how can you induce men to do it?

It is essential because even though "the neo-colonial situation . . . offers the petty bourgeoisie the chance of playing a role of major or even decisive importance in the struggle for the elimination of foreign domination," and even if in the process this petty bourgeoisie attains a high "degree of revolutionary consciousness," nonetheless:

"...the petty bourgeoisie, as a service class (that is to say a class not directly involved in the process of production) does not possess the economic base to guarantee the taking over of power [I]n the conditions of colonial and neo-colonial society this capacity is retained by two entities: imperialist capital and the native working classes." (pp. 109-10)

Hence the petty bourgeoisie must in the long run throw in its lot with one base or the other; it must either "betray the revolution or . . . commit suicide as a class." (p. 110)

And the way you induce men, cadres, to make the right choice is via political education:

"We realised that we needed to have people with a mentality which could transcend the context of the national liberation struggle, and so we prepared a number of cadres from the group I have just mentioned [people in the towns, which we have been unable to classify precisely, who were still closely connected to the rural areas], some of the people employed in commerce and other wage-earners, and even some peasants, so that they could acquire what you might call a working-class mentality. You may think this is absurd — in any case it is very difficult" (p. 67)

Theory in Revolution

This brings us to one of Cabral's principal themes — the centrality of theory:

"The positive balance-sheet of the year 1960 cannot make us forget the reality of a crisis in the African revolution which far from being a mere



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growing-pain, is a crisis of knowledge. In several cases, the practice of the liberation struggle and its future perspectives not only lack a theoretical basis, but are also to a greater or lesser degree remote from the concrete reality around them." (p. 17)

"... [I]f it is true that a revolution can fail even though it be based on perfectly conceived theories, nobody has yet made a successful revolution without a revolutionary theory." (p. 93)

It is here that white "progressive democrats," in Portugal and throughout the larger European world, can play their appropriate role. First, of course, they must overcome "their own imperialist mentality, composed of prejudice and ill-founded disdain for the value and real capacity of the African peoples." (p. 18) But Cabral is not making one more "make-the-white-liberals-even-the-white-radicals-feel-guilty" speech. The revolution cannot be built by Africans alone:



"... [T]he European left has an intellectual responsibility to study the concrete conditions in our country and help us in this way, as we have very little documentation, very few intellectuals, very little chance to do this kind of work ourselves, and yet it is of key importance; this is a major contribution you can make." (p. 74)

The European "progressive democrats" are thus called upon to work on all fronts: to "study the concrete conditions" in Guinea and elsewhere for that is a "major contribution," to work on their own mentalities, and to organize politically at home "to support the really revolutionary national liberation movements by all possible means." (p. 74) Nor is it hopeless to educate the European working class movements to their responsibilities, for:

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"As we see it neocolonialism (which we may call rationalised imperialism) is not a defeat for the international working class but for the colonised peoples." (p. 73)

Cabral is in the direct line of the international socialist tradition of revolutionary optimism: it is possible to educate men within the framework of a theoretically self-conscious movement to pursue their self-interest in the kind of middle-range terms required for revolutionary change, provided one makes realistic assessments of the constraints of social reality at given times and places and provided one never stops reevaluating theory in the light of the new realities constantly being created not only by the structural evolution of the system but by the infusion of new elements by liberation movements themselves.

Cabral's writings are stacatto and uneven, work obviously squeezed in amidst the press of more urgent tasks. It is a measure of his esteem for theory that he has written at all. Chaliand's book is a necessary complement to that of Cabral for two reasons. Cabral gives us a picture of himself as he addresses himself to cadres, educated men, and intellectuals. But Chaliand shows us

Cabral as he talks to the ordinary militant, Cabral as the political leader rather than as the theoretician. We need such a portrait to evaluate Cabral's theory, for it gives us the true measure of the man. He comes off well.

But there is a second reason to read Chaliand. Chaliand illustrates the correctness of Cabral's call to "progressive democrats" to study Guinea (and similar situations). For Chaliand is free to reflect in ways that are not open to Cabral, though ultimately most useful to the PAIGC and to other movements. There are two statements Chaliand makes in the theoretical section of his book which are worth pondering:

"After making a tour of capital cities in 1963, Chou En-Lai declared: 'The revolutionary situation in Africa is excellent.' Nothing could be further from the truth. After a few short years, the facade of socialism has collapsed and African realities have begun to appear in their true light." (p. 109)

The second comes in the wake of describing the splits within the Camerounian UPC in the 1960's:

"Thus, the political climate had become one in which the principal enemy was no longer Ahidjo's neo-colonial regime but rather the factions within the UPC itself. Had the Sino-Soviet conflict deepened the rifts between the various groups or had it merely supplied them with motives for fighting each other under the cover of ideological arguments?

"The first point to be made is that the real struggle was not being waged. . . . This inability to solve one's own problems, this incapacity to act according to one's national reality when circumstances are favorable, is the key to the history of all truncated, bloodless party apparatuses that destroy themselves by inventing mad fables to explain away their failures. The problem goes far beyond the specific instance of the UPC: this was the case in Accra, it is now the case in Algeria, and in the future it will be the case elsewhere." (p. 104)

As it is indeed already — in France, in the United States. So we see that the lessons of the PAIGC are not abstract exercises in the study of an exotic small state tucked away in a corner of West Africa. They bear on the problems of Algeria, the United States, and I would add of the USSR. For they bear on the central problematic of the modern world: the conditions under which and the ways in which the majority of the world's population will regain effective and maximal control over their destiny. As Cabral says of the "absurd" idea that one might inculcate a "working-class mentality" in the minds of those who were not bred to it from infancy, "in any case it is very difficult."



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