

AMILCAR CABRAL: A THEORY OF IMPERIALISM

Jock McCulloch

The speeches, essays and other writings of Amilcar Cabral represent an attempt to think of imperialism and the colonial relationship in a new way. In his published work Cabral sought to explain how a subsistence agricultural society was being transformed under the abnormal conditions attendant upon colonial domination. Superficially Cabral's writings don't present any new or particularly complex interpretation of colonialism. With the exception of a few rather brief essays most of his work is a description of a guerrilla war fought against the last of the great colonial powers. Yet the appearance in these essays of the terms 'mode of production' and 'productive forces' indicates that his understanding of imperialism is founded on a new set of presuppositions. Cabral used these terms before they became common among the ranks of the advanced left and at a time when the concept of the mode of production was essentially a possession of Soviet marxism. In the early 1960's Soviet visions of the Asiatic Mode of Production were achieving much the same effect as modernisation theory in the west. That most of Cabral's important essays were written at this time only emphasises how innovative his work is.

Cabral was born in mainland Guiné in 1925. He received his secondary education in the Cape Verde Islands and later trained as an agronomist in Lisbon. On returning to Guiné he was employed with the Provincial Department of Forestry and Agriculture. He was expelled from Guiné in 1955 but returned for a brief visit the following year and helped found the PAIGC. For the next four years Cabral worked as an agronomist in Angola making regular trips to Guiné and Portugal. Cabral was the leading intellectual and organisational force behind the PAIGC. It was his analysis of the social structure of Guiné that formed the basis for success of the party in its 14 year long struggle against the Portuguese. The early reversals suffered by the party in organising strikes among the dock workers of Bissau proved the importance of following the correct line. The answer as to how the PAIGC arrived at an appropriate theory can be found among Cabral's earliest writings published while he was working for the Department of Forestry and in particular in that cluster of articles arising from the survey of agriculture he conducted for the Department in 1955. It was

essential for Cabral to come to an understanding of the relationship between Portuguese colonialism and the dominant features of Guinean agriculture. His life's work began with an exploration of the way in which Portuguese economic interest had penetrated the lives of indigenous cultivators and had set the horizons for all economic activity in the country. Cabral's intellectual journey reached fruition ten years later with the publication of his important and highly innovative essays, "A Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea" and "The Weapon of Theory".¹

The Theoretical Context:

In the immediate post-war period there was a need within Marxist theory and practice for a new approach to the theory of imperialism. By the mid 1960's most Marxist thinking was looking more and more inadequate as Marxists clung to Lenin's Imperialism as the definitive text on capitalist expansion. When Cabral began his intellectual journey he was faced with these established verities which dominated thinking on African society. But Cabral was by chance placed in a unique position; his intellectual life began at the end of the 1940's within the context of the antique colonialism practised by the Portuguese in Guiné and the Cape Verde and stretches well into the neo-colonial era or as Cabral preferred to term it the age of rationalised imperialism. In terms of the development of Cabral's own theory it was an advantage that the war in Guiné was fought against the first of the great colonial powers which because of its economic and social backwardness was the last to decolonise.

Before the end of the 1960's modernisation theorists and Marxists could at least agree on one thing: the lack of human achievement on the African continent. This prejudice infected both Soviet and Western Marxist thought throughout the 1950's and 1960's and found expression in the most schematic presentations of categories of modes of production. African societies could readily be integrated into a marxist perspective as instances of the Asiatic Mode. Leaving aside the problems inherent in this concept, such as the absence of hydraulic works this tack merely reinforced the prejudice that African societies were stagnant and that Africa was a continent without a history.

In the writings of such people as Sekou Touré, Lumumba, Mondlane and Nkrumah on the struggle against colonialism there are a number of common elements which when taken together constitute an African theory of imperialism. Rather ironically these shared elements are most clearly codified in the writings of two West Indians, Aimée Césaire and Frantz Fanon. Both Fanon and Césaire viewed imperialism and European civilisation as essentially barbaric. Imperialism, they believed, had a distorting effect upon colonial societies and a peculiarly corrupting influence upon the metropolises where it ran hand in hand with the rise of reactionary elements and in particular with fascism. Conceding that imperialism was an outgrowth of capitalism Fanon and Césaire rejected completely the idea of a necessary connection between higher levels of technology and the quality of a civilisation. Fanon in particular has a tendency to see the relationship as inverse and to identify higher technology with cultural degeneration. Both Fanon and to a lesser extent Césaire, emphasised two elements which put them at odds with marxist belief; they rejected the primacy of class conflict within the metropolises as the determinant of contemporary history and they rejected the idea of a natural and effective solidarity between the metropolitan working class and the nationalist movements. Fanon in particular was convinced that the European working class was reactionary. These two points established an irrevocable separation between such theory and Marxism.

From the vantage point of 1980 the response of African Socialism to the challenge of the independence decade seems little more than an inverse reflection of the myths of Africa's social and cultural backwardness, etherealised. The existence of rich traditions in sculpture, the visual arts, music and the dance were presumed to reinstate the African back into the human family if only at the cost of perpetuating the prejudice this posture was intended to destroy. Pablo Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" is not really a convincing argument as to the strength of African civilisation. Certainly the traditional marxist theory of imperialism was quite inadequate in analysing colonialism from within. The intertwining of certain aspects of Lenin's essay with an unsubtle inversion of several of its central propositions weighed down the development of an adequate interpretation of the colonial experience. This was felt especially in

regard to colonial racism and the impact of the European presence upon African culture. This inadequacy opened the doors for the all pervasive influence of negritude and the concept of the colonial personality which for twenty years did so much to encourage a preoccupation with what were essentially personal questions of meaning and identity. The legacy of negritude is best seen not in Senghor's Senegal but in the writings of Fanon. The euphoria of the independence decade also reduced the impetus for radical theory further discouraging the development of a theoretical understanding of imperialism.

Marxist and pro-marxist theories of imperialism tended to be conflated with theories of underdevelopment which are particularly weak and unsubtle in terms of the account given of the meshing of relations between states and relations between classes. The theory of class conflict and the theory of underdevelopment have virtually become two separate activities; this is so because of problems of scale, and because of the prevalence of borrowed categories of class which are usually rather shallow.

The revolution in Guiné is fascinating because on a small scale it demonstrates in a most dramatic fashion the possibility of rapid social transformation in unfavourable conditions. The present Guinean state was invented under the shadow of an army of occupation far larger in scale than the American commitment in Vietnam. In terms of economic and social forces Guiné was unusual because only there had Portugal been so successful in engraving the image of her own backward development. Unlike Angola, Guiné was of no economic importance and boasted no large European population. The only reason Portugal invested so much effort in retaining the colony was out of fear that a loss in Guiné would mean the loss of Angola and Mozambique.

It is certain that the PAIGC would not have been successful if the party had been armed with an inaccurate analysis of the social structure or had pursued a stance based upon the wrong theoretical understanding of the principles necessary in waging a war against the Portuguese. The situation in Guiné forced Cabral to make a new beginning starting with an analysis of Guinean agriculture, leading into a detailed portrait of the social structure and ending with a macro-historical placement of the

Guinean revolution within contemporary history. A theory such as that suggested in The Wretched of the Earth, relying upon peasant leadership and spontaneous eruptions in the cities could not possibly have succeeded. In drawing a parallel between Fanon and Cabral The Wretched of the Earth appears as the final work in a lineage which has its roots in a past much more distant than Aimeé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism. If The Wretched of the Earth is the baroque of "African Socialism" then Cabral's scattered speeches, essays and incidental writings represent a new beginning in African Socialist theory.

The Agronomic Writings

Cabral's earliest published works are studies of Guinean agriculture written while he was an employee of the Department of Forestry. In November 1953, Cabral was placed in charge of a team set to undertake a census of all agricultural production in Guiné.² This census, which was the first of its kind in Portuguese Africa, was initiated with the covert aim of promoting the establishment of a groundnut economy. Ostensibly the Portuguese had only agreed to undertake this work as the result of an agreement contracted in the international community.

The survey which was begun with six months of intensive field work took more than three years to complete. The census presents a detailed account of all agricultural activity including profiles of the levels of production, the areas under cultivation, the relative balances of fallow and burning off, the proportions of various crops, and the contribution of the major tribes to production. The census showed that each tribe had one or two crops which dominated its output while only four tribes, the Fula, Balante, Mandinga and Manjanco contributed nearly 90% of the area under cultivation. Land was cultivated in small plots by family units and there are no plantations or land shortage. The classification of the peoples of Guiné according to the types of crops grown indicated that agricultural specialisation cut across ethnic lines linking smaller tribes with the main bodies. Despite the difference shown by crop choice Cabral is emphatic that all groups shared an identical socio-political situation; an extremely low standard of living characteristic of Portuguese colonialism.

Among the main tribal groupings there was an important division between groundnut/millet cultivation and rice growing. Rice is the principal crop of the Balante while among the Fula, the Mandinga and Manchanca groundnuts are dominant. Groundnuts are essentially an export crop which is usually grown in consociation with millet as a rice substitute. Despite this specialisation Cabral found that all the peoples of Guine were capable of cultivating all of the suitable crops and that agricultural vocation often only reflected traditional land useage. With the proper technical and economic guidance any of the tribes could achieve the diversification of crops essential to a prosperous economy. In general the cereal crops provide only a poor substitute for rice as its nutrinal value was low. Research indicated that for the indigenus farmer rice was by far the best crop.

Cabral expresses concern over the increasing acreage devoted to groundnuts. This crop which occupied over 30% of the cultivated land was setting a pattern of cultivation for export. The promotion of a single commercial crop, the value of which was entirely dependent upon fluctuating prices on the world market would bring obvious economic disadvantages as well as those technical problems attendant upon any form of monoculture. The choice between groundnuts and rice cultivation is expressive of the basic contradiction between the aims of Portuguese colonialism and the interests of the Guinean cultivator. After 1945 this contradiction was widening with the imposition of increased taxation as an incentive for groundnut cropping. In warning about the poor prospects of a groundnut economy Cabral's conclusions foreshadow those presented many years later in Samir Amin's 1971 study of the groundnut industry in Senegal.³

Cabral had attempted to prepare the ground for the conclusion of the census by the publication, in 1954, of two articles based upon the preliminary results of the survey. These articles, "On the Contribution of the People of Guine to the Agriculture of Guinea"⁴ and "Brief Notes on the Objectives and Methods of the Survey"⁵ suggest some severe criticisms of current agricultural policy. In "Brief Notes on the Objectives" Cabral asserts that the aim of the census must be to improve the lot of the indigenus farmer and not merely to spread the practice of intensive

cultivation. The census should seek to uncover the reason why some regions in Guiné were rich while others were poor. Cabral ends his article with a damning comment on what he feared were the "false intentions" of the administration in commissioning the census which ignore the need to improve the situation of the peasant farmer.

Cabral supplemented the census with a number of individual studies of soil erosion and the association of burning off and fallowing as an indicator of the destructiveness of groundnut cultivation. These studies offer a compelling critique of the costs associated with groundnuts in terms of damage done to the soil.

In 1954 Cabral also published two articles which offer a very different perspective of agricultural practice. These articles suggest a more theoretical approach to cultivation as a labor activity and explore the particular conditions faced by the farmer in tropical Africa. In "Land Utilization"⁶ Cabral explores the general problems facing all forms of agriculture in tropical Africa. There as in any environment the practice of agriculture is set by both a physical and a social horizon. But in West Africa the physical factors are insignificant when compared with those social and economic influences introduced by colonialism. Colonialism brought with it a more individualised mode of land useage, and a more intensive agricultural practice which very often led to a degeneration of the soil. In Guiné the Portuguese were intent in persuading the indigenus cultivator to adjust his choice of crops to the needs of an export economy. One immediate effect was the abandonment of traditional knowledge about the appropriate land useage. The itinerant system now acquired new features; more land was to be taken from forest areas, the duration of the period of cultivation increased, and the period of fallow shortened. The experience of Senegal and Cape Verde showed that cultivation would be intensified to the point at which the body of the soil was destroyed. The introduction of new plants and new techniques would accentuate the contradiction between colonial agricultural practice and the principle governing traditional cultivation; that the use of the land should benefit the whole of the community.

The same range of problems are further explored in "The Mechanization of Agriculture in Guiné."⁷ In this article Cabral examines the delicate ecological balance between the specific instruments used in the production of crops and the subsequent relations among producers. The introduction of machinery to groundnut cultivation in Guiné would alter the entire social environment. Although the use of tractors would solve a number of immediate difficulties and increase output it also brings a number of new problems.

The introduction of tractors would influence the choice of crops and do much to accelerate the cultivation of groundnuts in preference to rice and secondary foodstuffs. Under existing conditions it would create a new socio-economic context by ensuring that the bulk of cultivation was for export. Machinery would generate rural unemployment by replacing capital intensive for labor intensive methods. The high cost of machinery would in the long term affect the concentration of land into the lands of a few. More immediately the technicians using and servicing the machines would form a new rural industrial strata. Cabral is certain that the only way the destructive effects of mechanisation could be controlled would be by means of a state monopoly. Even so, all forms of agricultural activity in Guiné are conditioned by the fact that all economic activity is integrated into the national economy of Portugal. Therefore mechanisation wouldn't necessarily mean that the indigenous farmer would benefit. He may mechanise his plot because of world prices, the relative cost of machinery, and colonial agricultural policy, yet gain no advantage. Obviously a state monopoly couldn't always work in favour of the producer.

The agronomic writings show that as early as 1952 Cabral was deeply concerned about the effects of the groundnut industry in Guiné. The example of Senegal indicated that intensive cultivation of groundnuts would create a fragile and erratic export economy subject to the whim of world prices for a single, unimportant product. In Senegal increased groundnut production had been accompanied by the need for food imports into what had originally been a self-sustaining agricultural economy. Cabral's case studies of fallowing practices and soil erosion in the district of Fulacunda⁸ describe the degenerative pattern of land useage common with groundnuts.

Mechanisation could lead to the establishment of large estates and therefore in the long term to land alienation and the creation of a landless sub-proletariat. When taken together all this promised a bleak future for the Guinean farmer.

Cabral's agronomic writings describe the beginnings of a shift in Guiné from labor intensive system of cultivation for subsistence to a system of cultivation for export; this is a shift from one mode of production to another. In the early 1950's these two modes existed side by side and were expressed in the division between groundnuts/millet and rice growing. Perhaps solely because of this research on cash cropping the concept of underdevelopment, such as is found in The Wretched of the Earth doesn't appear in Cabral's political writings. In his later works Cabral always treats what is now known as underdevelopment as yet another instance of the capitalist mode of production which established its own particular cluster of relations among producers within a particular level of technical dominance over nature. There is nothing extraordinary or pathological about the spectre of groundnut cultivation in Guiné; it is simply the line of development which is most suited to Portuguese interests and least favourable to the needs of Guinean farmers. For in Guinea as elsewhere, the determining factor would be the question of the socio-economic conditions under which technological change was introduced. It is not technology itself which is revolutionary but the conditions of its ownership.

The New Theory of Imperialism

In all his political writings Cabral supports the traditional Marxist view of imperialism as the monopolistic stage of capitalism. But in the case of Portuguese Africa this relationship was mediated by the dominance of British capital which after 1885 enabled Portugal to retain her status as a colonial power. Portugal was not itself an imperial power but rather the instrument for imperialist interests. This separation made it necessary for Cabral to distinguish between formal political and actual economic control.

Following closely in the footsteps of Fanon, Cabral believed that

after 1945 imperialism entered a final phase as the new programmes of aid and preferential investment accompanied the rise of nationalism in the colonial world. With Fanon he views these national liberation struggles as the most dominant political movements of our time replacing in importance the class struggles within the capitalist states and the conflict between the capitalist and socialist blocs. Class conflict as the opposition between European labor and European capital has been superseded.

In his most important essay "The Weapon of Theory" Cabral set out to establish two basic propositions: that Africa has a history other than colonial history and that the national liberation movements are not in themselves revolutionary.

Cabral argues that human history can be divided into three distinct phases: the first corresponds to a low level of productive forces in which man's mastery over nature is rudimentary. Private property does not exist and neither do classes. The social structure is horizontal. In the second phase there is a rise in the level of the productive forces and the emergence of private property and classes. Change is achieved primarily through class struggle. The social structure is vertical. In the final phase the level of the productive forces is highly advanced, private property is eliminated, classes vanish and once again the social structure is horizontal. There is history and historical change before the rise of classes and after their disappearance. Therefore the motive force of history is not, as Marxists suppose, class struggle, but the mode of production in which the productive force is the dominant term. It is here that the secret of change and social transformation lies. Only within a limited and quite specific historical phase is class struggle the determining element within the mode of production. Societies in which there are no classes and no state are dynamic entities capable of self-transformation.

National liberation movements should not be viewed as extraordinary nor should the dismantling of the colonial empires be seen as anything but normal. The retreat of the British and the French was a rationalisation of imperialism and not the ending of foreign domination. This initiative

by the metropolises was aimed at preventing the enlargement of the socialist camp by liberating local reactionary forces which could be promoted into a pseudo-bourgeoisie. The failure of the independence decade was inevitable.

Cabral's belief in the dominance of the productive forces as the wheel of history was designed, specifically, to refute the Marxist assumption that societies in which there is no state and no classes are retarded and lack a history of their own. But in doing this Cabral supposes that such diverse societies as the slave-owning states of ancient Egypt, the civilisations of classical antiquity, European feudalism and North American capitalism belong within a single historical phase. Unfortunately Cabral's schema also implies that if societies can best be identified according to the level of their productive forces, that is according to the level of their technical mastery over nature, then the peoples of Guiné, including the stateless Balante rank rather low in the human family.

Cabral's primary concern however, is with the possibility of indigenous development. He claims that in Guiné the tribal system was already in decline before the arrival of the Portuguese. Among the Fula, the second most numerous tribe in Guiné, a feudal state system was emerging entirely in response to indigenous factors and that the peoples of Guiné were pursuing their own line of development before that development was halted. Cabral argues that colonialism is a system in which the history of one people is accelerated at the expense of the history of another. But that doesn't mean that the history of the subordinate group is cancelled. Cabral's major complaint against the Portuguese is that like the other colonial powers Portugal failed to sufficiently develop the local productive forces and thereby fulfil the historical mission achieved by the bourgeoisie in the countries of accumulation. In the light of his three historical phases this is a very different position to that of Paul Baran, Fanon and the whole underdevelopment school. In particular, Cabral is critical of the failure of imperialism to stimulate changes in class structure and to produce anything like a healthy working class or national bourgeoisie. He finds no structural reason for this failure.

The Portuguese didn't set up a permanent condition of terminal under-

development in Guiné but rather truncated the internal reflex to change. Cabral views every increment to the productive forces as positive. The idea of social or economic regression at higher levels of technology is to him quite ridiculous. This also indicates why Cabral would tend to ignore the possibility of the warping effects of underdevelopment on the class system, a perspective that Fanon had done so much to popularise.

Cabral's typology of the three historical phases is the only model of its kind in the literature of African Socialism. Despite its obvious schematic character it is important in regard to Cabral's understanding of imperialism and his judgment as to the historical importance of the national liberation movements. It is important because it reveals a number of tensions present in his theory as well as being entirely contradictory of his analysis of the class structure in Guine. Cabral's use of the concept of the mode of production was part of his attempt to escape the pull of the atrophied Marxism of the early 1960's. By employing this concept Cabral was able to allow for the existence within Guiné of more than a single set of economic and social relations. The Balante which practise communal agriculture for subsistence can be identified with one mode of production while the Fula, the major producers of groundnuts belong to another. This concept also allows Cabral to identify a history of Guiné which is something other than an appendage to the history of Portugal.

Cabral's emphasis upon the forces of production was equally a response to the ethereal strain common to African Socialism. It led him to the belief that in both the colonial and neo-colonial contexts it is the state, which he tends to define solely in terms of the repressive apparatus of the state, that is the location of the major contradictions. The neo-colonial state is repressive because of the nature of the class that inherits state power; the petty bourgeoisie is a service class which cannot rule on its own account. Therefore the neo-colonial phase must be ephemeral.

His productive forces thesis also lead Cabral away from the pull of underdevelopment theory which contains such a strong strain of pessimism.

In underdevelopment theory higher levels of technology are associated exclusively with increasing economic and political repression. This abandonment of the belief in the liberative effects of technology, which is so important in Marx, has led to a widening gap between Marxism and what is sometimes termed neo-Marxism. In Marx as in Hegel there are no abortions in history. But in underdevelopment theory in general and in Fanon's work in particular, where it is enshrined in the form of the national bourgeoisie, the idea of pathological development is seen as normal.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cabral, Amilcar. "Breve análisis de la estructura social de la Guinea 'Portuguesa'," Pensamiento Crítico, 2-3 (March-April 1967), 24-48; "The Weapon of Theory," in Revolution in Guinea (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), pp.90-111.
2. Cabral, Amilcar. "Recenseamento Agrícola da Guiné: estimative em 1953," Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa XI (July 1956), pp.7-243.
3. Amin, Samir. Neo-Colonialism in West Africa (London: Penguin, 1973).
4. Cabral, Amilcar. "Acerca da contribuição dos 'povos' guineenes para a produção agrícola da Guiné," Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa IX (October 1954), pp.771-777.
5. Cabral, Amilcar & Maria Helena Cabral, "Breves notas acerca da razão de ser, objectivos e processo do execução do recenseamento agrícola da Guiné," Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa IX (January 1954), pp.195-201.
6. Cabral, Amilcar. "Acerca da Utilização da Terra na Africa Negra," Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa IX (April 1954), pp.401-416.
7. Cabral, Amilcar, "A Propósito de Mechanização da Agricultura na Guiné," Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa IX (April 1954), pp.389-400.
8. Cabral, Amilcar. "Para o conhecimento do problema da erosão do solo na Guiné. I- Sobre o conceito de erosão," Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa IX (January 1954), pp.163-194; "A propos du cycle cultural Arachide-Mils en Guinée Portugaise," Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa, XIII (April 1958), pp.149-156. This is the text of a speech first presented at the Conference Arachide-Mils at Banbey, Senegal in September 1954; "Queimadas e pousios na circunscrição de Fulacunda em 1954," Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa IX (July 1954), pp.627-643.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The most readily available sources of Cabral's writings are:

Revolution in Guinea: selected Texts (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).

Return to the Source: Selected Speeches (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings (London: Heinemann, 1980).

The most extensive bibliography of Cabral's writings and speeches is found in R. Chilcote's "Amilcar Cabral" a Bio-Bibliography of his Life and Thought, 1925-1973", in Africana Journal, Vol. V, no. 4, Winter 1974-1975, pp.289-307. Chicote's bibliography contains reference to most of Cabral's agronomic writings as well as numerous short pieces written for the PAIGC.

