Rethinking the South African Crisis:

Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony

Reviewed by **Jeremy Cronin** (Deputy general secretary, SACP)

Gillian Hart - *University of KwaZulu-Natal Press: Scottsville, 2013. 268 pp*

Like her earlier work, *Disabling Globalisation* (2002), Gillian Hart's *Rethinking the South African Crisis* is grounded in her close and interesting ethnographic work in the townships of Ladysmith and Newcastle. However, as the title suggests, Hart has wider theoretical ambitions. Drawing on Gramsci, Lefebvre, Fanon and others, she opens up a challenging discussion on nationalism, populism and hegemony in contemporary South Africa.

A substantial part of the book is devoted to tracking developments in the Achilles heel of our post-apartheid system, what Hart refers to as the "unruly terrains of local government". She quite correctly sees in this local terrain the condensation of a wider set of systemic problems. These broader problems, she argues, are the consequence of post-1994 South Africa being stalled in a "passive revolution". This idea of a "passive revolution" has been invoked by others before – including, by the way, the South African Communist Party. The concept derives from Gramsci who defined it as a crisis situation, "sometimes lasting for decades", in which, in his words, "incurable structural contradictions" have emerged. According to Gramsci, the dominant political forces (Hart wants us to read "the ANC government" in our case) seek to "conserve and defend the existing structure", while "making every effort to cure" these contradictions at the same time. The revolution is "passive"; it flounders because there is a failure to advance a decisive programme capable of transforming the existing, problematic structure itself.

In Hart's view, South Africa's ongoing structural crisis is rooted in "de-nationalisation" – the process driven by corporate capital to break through into globalisation after a decade of relative isolation in the final years of apartheid and relatively unprofitable surplus accumulation bottled up within the country. It is a strategic agenda, she argues, driven by the oligopolistic mineral-energy complex whose dominance dates back to South Africa's late 19th-century capitalist path. Since 1994, she further argues, corporate capital has also won over key sectors of the new political elite, partly through BEE collaboration. "De-nationalisation" has been associated with massive capital flight, major off-shore listings, increasing financialisation, de-industrialisation and an investment strike. The result has been the production of severe racial and spatial inequalities in our country. Hart provides a useful overview of these critical processes. This is all absolutely spot on.

But if de-nationalisation is the driving force behind the reproduction of inequality, two questions arise. One, how do we characterise the allegedly "every effort to cure" endeavours undertaken by the ANC ruling group, efforts that, according to Hart, render the revolution passive, precisely because they are insufficiently anti-systemic? And, two, on what programmatic basis do we shift the revolution from passive to active?

It is here that Hart's arguments become wobbly. "Re-nationalisation" is the book's answer to the question of how to characterise the futile efforts to cure the contradictions brought on by de-nationalisation. With "re-nationalisation", according to Hart, the ANC alliance has been drawing on various nationalist and populist discourses to sustain majority support and a degree of hegemony.

Countering the often too-easy dismissal of nationalist discourse by both liberal individualists and some on the left, as well as various strands of academic post-modernism, Hart argues that "official articulations of 'the nation' and 'liberation' are not just cynical manipulations from above, or manifestations of 'exhausted nationalism'. They carry powerful moral weight and connect with specific histories, memories and experiences of racial oppression, racialised dispossession and struggles against apartheid."

She affirms, at least sometimes, the thoroughly dialectical appreciation that both Gramsci and Fanon, in their different ways, brought to the national question. "Essentially Fanon saw anti- and post-colonial nationalisms as simultaneously important and profoundly dangerous," Hart writes. She follows this up with an instructive quote from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "If (post-independence) nationalism is not explained, enriched and deepened, if it does not very quickly turn into a social and political consciousness, into humanism, then it leads to a dead end."

So far, so good – but then Hart goes on to categorise what she regards as the three strands in the post-1994 evocation of the "nation" and "nationalism" in SA. The first is the notion of a "rainbow nation" (nicely captured as a "liberal, ecclesiastical discourse of forgiveness"). The second strand of "re-nationalisation", Hart claims rather unconvincingly, "is found in the ANC government's immigration policies and practices… Fortress South Africa." The third strand, we are told, is "embodied in the keywords of the ANC Alliance: the 'national question' and the 'National Democratic Revolution (NDR)'."

At this point, a promising beginning becomes conceptually muddled, as Hart the academic loses touch with Gramsci the revolutionary. For Gramsci, the national question in Italy was a critical terrain of struggle. A prevailing conservative class-hegemony resulted in a particular articulation of the national question. It underpinned the stalled (passive) democratic revolution in Italy that degenerated into fascism. However, for Gramsci, a different (basically working class) re-articulation of the national question was the essential condition for transforming the revolution from passive to active, for moving from dangerous stagnation to systemic transformation, paving the way for a deepening of democracy and an advance to a socialist hegemony.

Similarly, within the ANC Alliance, the concept of an NDR is not so much a separate strand of nationalist discourse along with the "rainbow nation" and immigration policy, but the site of a struggle that is fundamentally characterised by class. The superficial notion of a "rainbow nation", suggesting a "miracle" transition, was not invented from within the ANC alliance, as far as I know. But it was certainly seized upon by leading factions within the ANC-led government, and they used it as a re-nationalising alibi to cover up for their disastrous neo-liberal collusion with de-nationalising monopoly capital.

A related and perhaps more central re-nationalising concept, which came problematically to the fore during the Mbeki years but is still around, is the idea of South Africa as a "winning nation". We anointed ourselves as "special", with the "rainbow miracle" being part of the evidence for this claim of exceptionalism. The "winning nation" conceit has been closely linked to the collusion between leading elements within the ANC government and corporate capital. It is used to justify a range of mega-projects like those associated with the 2010 World Cup, as well as to argue for South Africa's "special" (read: "sub-imperial") role in Africa, and for our positioning as the supposed valid interlocutor between the developed north and the "developing" south.

The incipient national chauvinism in the idea of a "winning nation" is, I suspect, what Hart might have in mind when she rather unconvincingly evokes South Africa's immigration laws and policy as one of three supposedly major strands of the ANC's "re-nationalisation" discourse. Elsewhere in the book, Hart deals with the dreadful waves of xenophobic violence that have swept through many townships, particularly in 2008. But this xenophobia is a pathology with a very different class basis than the "rainbow nation" or NDR "re-nationalising" discourses.

Xenophobia in South Africa is surely a manifestation of the impossible pressures felt by communities living in burgeoning, under-resourced townships and informal settlements. Its social base lies with petty entrepreneurial, marginalised and de-classed elements for whom the millions of equally impoverished foreign nationals appear to be rivals for scarce opportunities. Scapegoat xenophobic violence doesn't belong under the category of ANC-led "re-nationalisation" discourses (as Hart suggests), but rather as part of a different set of pathologies in which communities under stress turn inwards and upon each other, as can be seen in taxi wars, ethnically tinged worker-on-worker violence on the platinum belt, or the destruction of township assets like libraries and community halls.

Hart analyses quite acutely many of the systemic features of our continuing crisis. She acknowledges the objective reasons for the continued resonance of a national liberation discourse among the majority of South Africa's oppressed and exploited. The failure to outline a programmatic perspective out of South Africa's passive revolution is therefore disappointing. In the end, Hart fails to connect with Gramsci's project for a "national-democratic" proletarian hegemony, or with Fanon's advice that post-independence societies should explain, enrich and deepen – but not abandon – a national emancipatory trajectory.

At the heart of this failure is her tendency to turn the idea of a national democratic revolution in South Africa simply into a monolithic, uncontested and even authoritarian orthodoxy that is supposedly used to bludgeon internal debate into line. Of course, no political concept is immune to this kind of bureaucratic vulgarisation and the idea of an NDR in South Africa is no exception. However, Hart has clearly failed to follow the internal debates within the ANC alliance on the national question, preferring to rely on generally unsympathetic academic accounts. If she had followed

these debates she would not, for instance, have simply declared that the NDR is part of a "two-stage" theory, in which a socialist "stage" is postponed while we await the completion of the nationalist stage. This is precisely the point on which most major strategic debates within the ANC alliance have revolved over the past three decades at least.

A progressive articulation of a national democratic strategy is what is required to mobilise the social forces capable of rolling back the de-nationalising agenda of monopoly capital. In contemporary South Africa, as Gramsci appreciated in the 1920s for Italy, it is the programmatic basis on which to turn a passive revolution into an active process of systemic transformation.