

AMILCAR CABRAL AND THE THEORY OF THE NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLE

by

Nzongola-Ntalaja
Associate Professor of Political Economy
African Studies and Research Program
Howard University
Washington, D.C. 20059

Paper prepared for presentation at the First International Amilcar Cabral Symposium, to be held in Praia, The Republic of Cape Verde, between the 17th and 20th of January, 1983.

The struggle for national liberation in the colonial and dependent territories is one of the basic historical trends of the present century. The rise of the national liberation movement in a world divided into two antagonistic social systems posed a definite threat to the survival of imperialism and the capitalist system underlying it. Among the outstanding revolutionary thinkers and leaders who have attempted to understand and influence the liberation process itself, Amílcar Cabral has no equal as the theoretician par excellence of the national liberation struggle in its totality. He earned this distinguished position by the theoretical clarity explicit in his writings on the nature and objectives of the struggle, the originality of his class analysis of the social base and the political dynamics of the liberation movement, and above all the unbending unity of revolutionary theory and practice exemplified in his leadership of the national liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands.¹

This paper is an attempt to show the contribution of Amílcar Cabral to the scientific analysis of the struggle for national liberation. Rather than detailing all aspects of Cabral's analysis as set forth in his writings, the paper seeks to highlight the major lessons to be learned from his theoretical and political work on the one hand, and how his great revolutionary insights have enriched the theory of the national liberation struggle, on the other. A particular emphasis will be placed on his discussion of the concept of national liberation, the different phases of the struggle, and the organization and conduct of the struggle itself.

The Concept of National Liberation

The most original and comprehensive discussion of the concept of national liberation is to be found in a number of Cabral's classic texts, beginning with "The Weapon of Theory".² It is here that Cabral offers the best theoretical analysis of the nature and objectives of the national liberation struggle.

Any scientific study of the national liberation struggle must start, as Cabral begins his analysis, by looking at this phenomenon historically in relation to the social structure, one in which foreign domination is the principal contradiction. For a dominated people, genuine liberation implies the fact of regaining not only one's historical personality as a free people, but also one's own initiative as a maker of history. This initiative cannot be regained as long as the people's productive forces, or its ability to produce and reproduce social existence, are subjugated to foreign domination, thereby negating the people's historical process.

The specific type of foreign domination in the present historical epoch is imperialism, whose permanent characteristic is, according to Cabral, "the negation of the historical process of the dominated people by means of violent usurpation of the freedom of development of the national productive forces".³ Having placed it in its proper historical and sociological context, Cabral defines national liberation as

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 regaining of the historical personality of that people, its return to history through the destruction of the imperialist domination to which it was subjected.⁴

According to the theory of imperialism established by V.I. Lenin,⁵ imperialism is a historical necessity in the development of capitalism. Building his analysis on this theory, Cabral shows how imperialism operates around the world through a variety of methods and forms of exploitation to achieve its permanent goal of subordinating the productive forces of underdeveloped countries to the needs and interests of the developed capitalist countries. In exploiting the dominated countries and peoples in this way, imperialist capital has failed to fulfill its historical mission in "appreciably increasing the level of economic, social and cultural life of the peoples".⁶ Thus, given its own contradictions and the revolutionary awakening of the dominated peoples, imperialism is today confronted by other historical necessities, namely, "the national liberation of peoples, the destruction of capital and the advent of socialism".⁷

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between imperialism as a stage of capitalist development and the various phases of that stage, which are products of economic and political transformations. To each phase corresponds a form of imperialist domination that the international bourgeoisie deems appropriate for furthering its interests. As identified by Cabral, the two principal forms of imperialist domination in the contemporary world are colonialism or direct imperialist domination through foreign rulers, administrators and settlers, and neocolonialism or indirect domination through national rulers.⁸ If colonialism was the predominant form of imperialism during its first phase, neocolonialism is undoubtedly the dominant form in its current and last phase.

During the first phase, imperialism developed into what Lenin calls a "world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the people of the world by a handful of 'advanced' countries".⁹ The financial oligarchy in each of these countries preferred colonial possessions to any other type of dependent "economic territory". For unlike other dependent territories, colonial possessions represented a guarantee of economic hegemony for the oligarchy. However, as Lenin himself points out, not all of the dependent territories of the first phase of imperialism were colonies. They included "semi-colonial states" and "even states enjoying complete political independence".¹⁰ The latter case was exemplified by Portugal, which was itself a colonial power. It is described by Lenin as "a British protectorate",¹¹ and by Cabral as a neocolonial state.¹²

Countries like Portugal provided imperialism with a testing ground for the methods of exploitation used today in the politically independent nations of the Third World. Naked financial strangulation, economic sabotage and destabilization measures are still being exerted today whenever the international bourgeoisie or its hegemonic U.S. fraction fears a radical transformation, as in the cases of Allende's Chile, Portugal under the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) and Sandinist Nicaragua. Generally, however, the current or neocolonial phase of imperialism is characterized by the application of economic and diplomatic pressures under a more sophisticated and increasingly multilateral strategy of imperialist domination.

This strategy is a function of, among other factors, the growing internationalization of capital, the rise and consolidation of the socialist camp, and the political awakening of dominated peoples all over the globe since

World War II. These historical developments have necessitated new and more subtle methods of exploitation, with neocolonialism superseding colonialism as the principal form of imperialist domination by the year 1960, the "year of Africa". Seeking to prevent the enlargement of the socialist camp, the international bourgeoisie resolved to create new allies in the dependent countries. As Cabral points out, it sought "to create a bourgeoisie where one did not exist, in order specifically to strengthen the imperialist and capitalist camp".¹³

Thus, in both the colonial and neocolonial contexts, the principal target of the national liberation struggle is imperialism. As defined by Cabral, national liberation is a very rich concept, indeed, as it represents a reality that goes beyond political independence. This is to say that in its fullest sense, national liberation is a revolutionary process, and one that involves the complete overthrow of imperialist domination in its colonial as well as neocolonial forms.¹⁴ It implies both a national revolution, or a people's struggle against foreign rule, and a social revolution, one which seeks to destroy the capitalist structure on which the exploitation of workers and peasants is built in order to replace it with socialism.

The Two Phases of the National Liberation Struggle

After the definition of the concept of national liberation, the second major contribution by Amílcar Cabral to the theory of the national liberation struggle resides in his demonstration that this struggle consists of two phases, the national phase and the social phase, with the latter being more crucial to its ultimate denouement.¹⁵ Each phase is specific with regard to the historical tasks to be accomplished, and to the class alliances

and organizational structures necessary for carrying them out successfully. Whereas the national phase involves principally the struggle for national sovereignty or independence, the social phase is one in which the very question of genuine liberation is clearly posed. Has independence benefited the gross majority of the population economically and socially? Is the new nation truly free to determine its own destiny?

The first phase corresponds to the colonial context, in which the absence of national elements in the power structure facilitates "the creation of a wide front of unity and struggle, which is vital to the success of the national liberation movement".¹⁶ However, this success will remain partial if the independence movement fails, for lack of a revolutionary leadership or vanguard, to understand the difference between true or genuine liberation and formal independence in an unaltered economic framework.

This is what happened in most of the colonial territories, where the petty bourgeois leadership of the movement was reformist rather than revolutionary. As the one class of colonized society that had learned how to manipulate the apparatus of the colonial state, the petty bourgeoisie was in most cases the only class capable of leading the struggle for independence. Lacking a revolutionary consciousness, it sought primarily to replace the colonialists in the leadership positions within the state apparatus. To this end, it used the mass factor and exploited the threat of mass violence as a leverage for successful negotiations with the colonialists. Popular participation in the struggle was for the most part limited to public rallies, demonstrations, and electoral politics. In those countries where independence was achieved through a war of national liberation, on the other hand, the struggle could not have succeeded without a high level of popular mobilization and participation, since the masses were needed to provide the cover, the resources and the support which the liberation armies required to fight the colonialists.

A frequently overlooked aspect of Cabral's analysis is the point that the historical tasks of national liberation are very complex in all post-colonial countries, regardless of the manner in which independence was achieved. For they involve the ultimate question of radically transforming the very structure of the economy and the state. During the anticolonial phase of the struggle, this objective is often discussed in revolutionary circles, but it is overshadowed by the priority attached by all to ending foreign rule. Once this is done, the moral unity of the anticolonial national front bursts asunder and gives way to class struggles. The popular masses begin to demand their fair share of the fruits of independence. And their petty bourgeois leaders come face to face with a terrible alternative: either to betray the revolution by siding with imperialist capital or to remain faithful to the anti-imperialist goals of the struggle by "committing suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong".¹⁷

For Cabral, this alternative is the historical dilemma of the petty bourgeoisie in the context of the national liberation struggle. The way it is resolved will determine the success or failure of the struggle itself. This is why he maintains--and appropriately so--that the principal aspect of the national liberation process is the struggle against neocolonialism.¹⁸

In the neocolonial context, where the petty bourgeoisie is allied with imperialist capital, the liberation struggle becomes more clearly than ever a part of the international class struggle. From the standpoint of revolutionary forces, this new phase of the struggle requires greater dedication and mobilization than the previous phase involving national independence. Cabral shows that struggling against the betrayal of the revolution is difficult but not impossible:

On the one hand the material effects (mainly the nationalisation of cadres and the increased economic initiative of the native elements, particularly in the commercial field) and the psychological effects (pride in the belief of being ruled by one's own compatriots, exploitation of religious or tribal solidarity between some leaders and a fraction of the masses) together demobilise a considerable part of the nationalist forces. But on the other hand the necessarily repressive nature of the neo-colonial state against the national liberation forces, the sharpening of contradictions between classes, the objective permanence of signs and agents of foreign domination (settlers who retain privileges, armed forces, racial discrimination), the growing poverty of the peasantry and the more or less notorious influence of external factors all contribute towards keeping the flame of nationalism alive, towards progressively raising the consciousness of wide popular sectors and towards reuniting the majority of the population, on the very basis of awareness of neo-colonialist frustration, around the ideal of national liberation.¹⁹

The distinction that Cabral has established between the two phases of the struggle is of both theoretical and practical significance in the scientific analysis of the national liberation struggle. It allows us to clearly differentiate genuine national liberation from simple decolonization on the one hand, and national liberation movements from other types of nationalist movements, on the other. Since political independence alone is not the final result of the national liberation struggle, a nationalist movement may be struggling against foreign political domination or the purely political aspects of imperialism, but not for genuine national liberation.

A decolonization process that does not aim to destroy imperialist domination in all its forms corresponds to a simple transfer of political power from the colonial bourgeoisie to a national ruling class--in most cases, the national petty bourgeoisie. As such, it is basically the form taken by the transition from colonialism to neocolonialism. It is the imperialists who colonize and decolonize. And they do so either on their own terms, as the French did in most of their African colonies, or on terms basically favorable to their long-term economic and strategic interests. Such a

decolonization is, in the context of Marx's theory of revolution, a partial revolution, or a purely political revolution "which leaves the pillars of the building standing".²⁰

The national liberation struggle as a contemporary historical trend is a popular struggle with an anti-imperialist tendency. However, all the various political movements and parties attempting to lead and organize the struggle are not necessarily committed to its ultimate objective nor capable of realizing it. The question of political commitment has to do with the social basis or the class determination of the political movements or parties. That of the ability to realize genuine liberation is related to the political conjuncture, including the international environment, and its effects on the strategy, tactics and internal dynamics of liberation movements.

Liberation movements can be defined as revolutionary political organizations which mobilize oppressed peoples for purposes of overthrowing imperialist domination. As popular, revolutionary, and anti-imperialist nationalist organizations, they may emerge in opposition to all forms of the dependent capitalist state, including, as already shown above, those states enjoying the fullest political independence. Unlike the bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties corresponding to other types of nationalist movements, liberation movements are not established as class organizations of those social groups desiring primarily to obtain high positions in the state apparatus. They are organizations of workers, peasants and other exploited classes and strata (the lumpenproletariat, the lower strata of the petty bourgeoisie) under the leadership of revolutionary intellectuals, committed to radical social change.

Such an alliance of the popular classes with other progressive forces is required for the success of the national liberation struggle in the post-colonial context. Whether the state is neocolonial or under the control of a

national liberation movement, this success cannot be achieved without a well-structured political party guided by a revolutionary vanguard. Once again, it is Cabral who gives us the best theoretical justification for this type of party as being indispensable for the socialist objectives of the national liberation struggle during the postcolonial phase, the phase of the struggle against neocolonialism. According to Cabral, the party is to be organized by a firmly united revolutionary vanguard, "generally an active minority", and one that is "conscious of the true meaning and objective of the national liberation struggle which it must lead".²¹ As already shown above, the vanguard group consists of revolutionary petty bourgeois intellectuals who, in order to fulfill their historical role, must be able to commit class suicide.

The Organization and Conduct of the Struggle

A theory of national liberation will remain incomplete if it does not include a discussion of how the struggle itself is to be carried out. The contribution of Amílcar Cabral in this regard is outstanding by its originality and its comprehensive scope. Nearly all aspects of the organization and conduct of the struggle are covered in his writings, speeches and interviews. Questions of particular interest to the theory of the national liberation struggle include the following three points: 1) the concrete analysis of concrete conditions, 2) mass mobilization, and 3) the primacy of political factors in the revolutionary strategy of armed struggle.

Cabral was totally uncompromising in his refusal to accept any dogmatic principles or any imported models of revolutionary struggle.²² He remained faithful to the dialectical unity of theory and practice, which he presents with regard to his own analysis of the struggle he led as follows:

. . .we would recall that every practice produces a theory, and that if 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.²³

Working within the framework of historical materialism, and fully aware of the lessons to be learned from other revolutionary experiences around the world, Cabral elaborated a rich and distinctive revolutionary strategy based on a meticulous study of the social, economic, historical and geographical conditions of his own country.²⁴

A major task of any revolutionary undertaking is to analyze the social structure, in order to find out what the relevant class forces are as well as their disposition toward the revolution. Who are the people struggling for liberation, and who are the friends and enemies of the people? In the underdeveloped countries, where the majority of the population lives in the countryside, the peasant question is a particularly salient aspect of this problematic. Is the peasantry a revolutionary force? How can it be mobilized in the struggle?

The success of the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde owes a great deal to Cabral's brilliant analysis of these and related questions. It is through this analysis that Cabral has corrected many of the misconceptions concerning the role of various social classes in the national liberation struggle in general and in the African context in particular. He shows that the revolutionary potential of each class can be ascertained

only with reference to the concrete historical situation obtaining in a given country. His essay on Guinean society, "Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea", will remain a classic text in the annals of revolutionary sociology.²⁵

With regard to political education and mobilization, the major lesson Cabral reaches us is twofold. In the first place, political education and mobilization must precede armed struggle. For the people must come to understand why they should accept sacrifices, including death, to further the cause of liberation. In the second place, successful mobilization as the most important determinant of the success of the struggle must be a learning process for both the party cadre and the people, and one in which the latter discover the real benefits for which they must struggle. Instead of talking down to the masses, revolutionary organizers have to play the role of intellectual midwives à la Socrates to allow the former to discover the truth on their own, both mentally and through experience.²⁶ For Cabral, the only way to sustain that mobilization is to offer the people concrete evidence that their aspirations will be satisfied:

Remember always that the people do not fight for ideas, for things that only exist in the heads of individuals. The people fight and accept the necessary sacrifices in order to gain material benefits, to live better and in peace, to experience progress, and to guarantee the future of their children. National liberation, struggle against colonialism, building peace and progress—*independence*—all of that, they are empty words and without significance for the people if they are not translated into a real improvement in their living conditions. It serves no purpose to liberate a region if its people cannot have at their disposal the basic necessities of everyday life.²⁷

This is a lesson that is particularly pertinent to postcolonial states, especially those in which liberation movements hold state power. For it is precisely in these liberated countries that the people have a right to expect a better life after all the sacrifices they endured during the war of national liberation.

The last point to be considered refers to the organization and the conduct of revolutionary guerrilla warfare. Two decades after Frantz Fanon's pioneering work,²⁸ it is now an accepted fact that liberation movements resort to armed struggle as the only alternative available to them in the face of the intransigence of the oppressors, and in response to the latter's systematic use of violence against the people. They do not choose violence for its own sake, nor do they cherish its generally devastating effects on the country and the people. Like Fanon, Cabral stresses the affinity between imperialism and violence, and the necessity of confronting it with armed struggle, whenever peaceful means prove to be ineffective or useless.

Contrary to a widespread misconception, guerrilla warfare is not necessarily revolutionary. It is a form of warfare used by the militarily weak against a strong enemy, particularly an invading force. It is characterized by mobility, flexibility, and surprise attacks. More than any other form of war, however, it allows for greater mass participation. Thus, in most cases, it is also a people's war.

What distinguishes revolutionary guerrilla warfare from other forms of guerrilla war is its political strategy, which consists in winning the population to the revolutionary objectives of national liberation, in enhancing the people's creativity and their ability to be self-reliant, and in preparing the liberation movement for the exercise of power after victory.

The aim being sought is to win the political soul of the population by deepening its alienation from the colonial or neocolonial state. By exhausting the enemy and its will to continue governing a hostile population, the liberation movement may win the struggle even when it is facing military defeat, as the FLN did in Algeria.²⁹

In Cabral's case, the primacy of the political in the revolutionary strategy is evident in his determination to avoid the pitfalls of militarism and adventurism. There was no separate military structure within the PAIGC. Cabral explains this fact as follows:

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. Our fighters are defined as armed activists.³⁰

Armed militants, or the people in arms, such fighters required political as well as technical skills to mobilize the rest of the population and to win them to their side. Such a mobilization cannot occur in a spontaneous manner, as advocates of the foco theory might lead us to expect. It is Cabral's great merit to have demonstrated that it is a work that requires great patience and that must include the creation of a parallel government in the liberated areas to carry out the social and economic tasks necessary for satisfying the people's aspirations.

Conclusion

The exemplary life and work of Amílcar Cabral as a revolutionary leader and theoretician is both a major contribution to the theory of the national liberation struggle and a source of inspiration to freedom fighters all over of the world. Those of us who share his commitment to the total liberation

of Africa must constantly heed his advice on the necessity of struggling against our own weaknesses.³¹ For it is only by correctly analyzing the concrete realities of each of our countries that we may be able to determine the appropriate strategy for the attainment of genuine national liberation. Cabral has shown that the struggle is a difficult but not an impossible task.

NOTES

1. The primary sources used here are the speeches and writings of Amílcar Cabral, which are published in a number of collections: (1) Unité et lutte (Paris: François Maspero, 1975), vol. I: L'arme de la théorie, vol. II: La pratique révolutionnaire, also published in a shorter English edition as Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings of Amílcar Cabral (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); (2) Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts by Amílcar Cabral (London: Stage 1, 1969; New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); (3) Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973). Secondary references include Gérard Chaliand, Armed Struggle in Africa (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), reviewed by me in Radical America, 4:6 (August 1970), pp. 73-75; Basil Davidson, The Liberation of Guiné: Aspects of an African Revolution (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969); Ronald Chilcote, "The Political Thought of Amílcar Cabral", Journal of Modern African Studies, 6:3 (1968), 373-388; Bernard Magubane, "Amílcar Cabral: Evolution of Revolutionary Thought", Ufahamu, 2:2 (Fall 1971), 71-88; Sulayman Sheih Nyang, "The Political Thought of Amílcar Cabral: A Synthesis", Odu: A Journal of West African Studies, 13 (January 1976), 3-20.
2. The text quoted here is the one published in the Monthly Review edition of Revolution in Guinea, pp. 90-111.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

5. V.I. Lenin, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (1917). All quotations below are from the 1939 edition by International Publishers, New York.
6. Revolution in Guinea, p. 99.
7. Ibid., p. 99.
8. Ibid., p. 100.
9. Imperialism, pp. 10-11.
10. Ibid., p. 81.
11. Ibid., pp. 85-86.
12. Revolution in Guinea, p. 103; Return to the Source, pp. 82-83. There are several other references to Portugal as an underdeveloped country in Cabral's speeches and writings.
13. Revolution in Guinea, p. 71.
14. Ibid., pp. 102-103.
15. Ibid., pp. 102-110.
16. Ibid., p. 104.
17. Ibid., p. 110.
18. Ibid., p. 103.
19. Ibid., pp. 105-106.
20. Karl Marx, Contribution to A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction, reprinted in Robert C. Tucker (ed.) The Marx-Engels Reader (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 20.
21. Revolution in Guinea, p. 105.

22. A good example of his rejection of any ideological labels for himself will be found in Amílcar Cabral, "The Relevance of Marxism-Leninism", in Aquino de Bragança and Immanuel Wallerstein (eds.) The African Liberation Reader: Documents of the National Liberation Movements, vol. 2 (London: Zed Press, 1982), pp. 107-108.
23. Revolution in Guinea, p. 93. This point is correctly emphasized as the mainspring of Marxism by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the CPSU in its biography of Marx, Karl Marx (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), p.13:
- Without revolutionary practice, without the translation of Marxist ideas into life, theory becomes a set of outworn dogmas and a cover for reformism and opportunism. Without science, without a strictly scientific view of social development, revolutionary action degenerates into adventurism and leads to anarchism.
- This is a point that should be brought to the attention of the governing parties of socialist countries around the world, beginning with those of Eastern Europe.
24. Revolution in Guinea, pp. 136-138.
25. Surprisingly, this important text is not included in the English or Monthly Review edition of Unity and Struggle. It is available in Revolution in Guinea, pp. 56-75.
26. For Cabral's account of the proper approach to the mobilization of peasants, see Revolution in Guinea, pp. 158-160.

27. Unité et lutte II, p. 212. My own translation.
28. Frantz Fanon, Les damnés de la terre, (Paris: François Maspero, 1961); English translation: The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963).
29. Eqbal Ahmad, "Revolutionary Warfare: How to Tell When the Rebels Have Won", The Nation, 30 August 1965, p. 97.
30. Revolution in Guinea, p. 146.
31. Ibid., p. 91.