

2-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Nesbitt, Prexy, "The Ideological Tendencies and Political Pre-Dispositions of the Black 'Left' in and Around the Anti-Apartheid and African Solidarity Movement in the 1970's and 80's: Some Thoughts & Notes" (2013). *Rozell 'Prexy' Nesbitt Writings and Speeches*. 78. <https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/nesbittwritings/78>

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**THE IDEOLOGICAL TENDENCIES AND POLITICAL PRE-DISPOSITIONS
OF THE BLACK 'LEFT' IN AND AROUND THE ANTI-APARTHEID AND AFRICAN
SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT IN THE 1970'S AND 80'S: SOME THOUGHTS & NOTES**

By
Prexy Nesbitt
(Chicago February, 2013)

-In the thoughts that follow I will be concentrating on reflecting about the following political organizations that I would define as constituting the main organized bodies within the Black American political 'Left' in the United States:

NAIMSAL – the National Anti-Imperialist Movement in Solidarity with African Liberation, linked to the CPUSA

AA- the African Agenda of the **AASC**, African American Solidarity Committee

AIS- the Africa Information Service (and the **ARG** resources and connections)

ALSC- the Africa Liberation Support Committee

SOBU –the Student Organization for Black Unity

YOBU-the Youth Organization for Black Unity

BPP- the Black Panther Party

CBTU- the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists

While these are mostly African American organizations(in terms of membership) and are largely US-based formations, they maintained relations with white solidarity groups and with the mostly white professional Africa solidarity groups(e.g., the ACOA, the ICCR, the AFSC, the WOA) and they had extensive international connections and associations . These international linkages were to Africa and the Caribbean but also to Latin America(especially Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico) and Europe. In the case of one organization, maybe two, there were extensive links to the socialist bloc of nations (specifically the USSR, the GDR and China) that included some financial and other material backing.

-There were certain political moments and certain African liberation movements that highlighted the tendencies and orientations more than the normal ups and downs of African solidarity work. Three of those moments were: 1) the 1974 Sixth Pan Africanist Congress and decisions taken as to who would be invited to it and who would be allowed to participate in it; 2) Cuba's entry into the Angolan liberation struggle after the invitation extended to Cuba by Agostinho Neto, the then President of the MPLA; and,3) the over-all performance and steady demise of the Pan-Africanist Congress(PAC) throughout the 1970's and 80's in direct proportion to the steady increase in support and relationship of US activists and supporters to the African National Congress(ANC).

-Who or what shaped the ideological thinking and political orientations of black , left activists and thinkers in the period of the 70's and 80's? It was not , I would argue, based on a solid and clear understanding of what was happening on the ground in the Front Lines of struggle whether Mozambique or Wankie or Alex/Kyelisha/Durban? In fact, it was a clear lack of intimate knowledge of the situation that led to so much confusion about Angola and whether to support the MPLA or UNITA. (It was this very confusion that both Cabral and Rodney addressed in their impactful tours of 1972 and 1975-76 respectively)

I don't think it was the profound intellectual debates and powerful analyses of the late 1960's and early 1970's gathered together in collections like the Braganca/Wallerstein collection, the African Liberation Reader or in the pages of the African Communist that molded the thinking of the young American activists of the 1970's. Rather, it was meeting and listening to individual and penetratingly charismatic individuals like Amilcar Cabral, Samora Machel, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Fidel Castro and Mohammed Babu. It was classes and lectures from Walter Rodney, CLR James, Maurice Bishop, Michael Manley, Eqbal Ahmed and others that moved hundreds, if not thousands of young American men and women, Black, Asian, Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander, and white, as well, into overt action and serious engagement, some for the rest of their lives.

A few African American activists were lucky and lived and worked in places like Dar Es Salaam, Lusaka, Algiers and Cairo, sitios that were in the middle of the struggle and provided intense education and political stimulation to all whom were around. Those who spent time in places like Dar Es Salaam got to benefit from meeting and getting acquainted with people like Eduardo Mondlane, Marcelino dos Santos, Jorge Rebelo and the founder/President of the MPLA, Agostinho Neto. Dar Es Salaam was a heady milieu of struggle & liberation that shaped the thinking of many an African American and others. Later, Dar Es Salaam would be succeeded in its hosting role by Maputo and people would benefit from encountering people like Ruth First, Joe Slovo, Albie Sachs and Pallo Jordan. Others were not so fortunate to have in Africa experiences but had, in addition to reading, films like *the Battle of Algiers* (1966), *A Luta Continua* (1971) and *O Povo Organizado* (1976) that stirred them to taking action.

So what were some of the political orientations and tendencies of these different organizations?

NAIMSAL was in many respects an off-shoot organization of the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA). It largely followed the political direction of the CPUSA, which, in turn, pursued a similar line towards Africa as that pursued by the Soviet Union. It appeared at times, however, that NAIMSAL'S positions could and did diverge. One instance of such a divergence occurred with regard to Cuba's role helping defend Angola against South African aggression and violence during the 1975-1988 period. Unlike the USSR, from the beginning NAIMSAL applauded and supported Cuba's military and armed solidarity to the MPLA and its FAPLA forces.

AASC and the CBTU also had close relations with the CPUSA but included a membership and supporters who came from non-party orientations. Made up primarily of African Americans and a small smattering of Latinos (largely Puerto Rican) the AASC newspaper, the African Agenda, was written deliberately to appeal to a broad-based readership, especially black Americans who needed basic literacy about Africa & Africa-related issues. The AASC and the CBTU were serious in their intent and practice of reaching out to "the broad church." I think it might be posited that the numbers of people within these organizations who had had extensive experience working with various Southern African liberation movements, especially the Khartoum Alliance, OAU-recognized movements, in the Front Line States, deeply shaped the standing desire to educate as many people as possible about the real conditions and situation in the Southern African struggles. An outstanding example of how this practice played out was the very candid and revealing dialogue that members of the AASC had with Ruth First in 1974 during her first visit to Chicago (and the USA). Ruth's political straight-forwardness and candour, displayed during that visit, played no small part in motivating her husband Joe Slovo to draft his famously controversial 1990 Umsebenzi discussion pamphlet, "*Has Socialism Failed?*"

ALSC (SOBU & YOBU) Cuban solidarity to Angola (called "Cuban intervention in Angola" by some) became an issue for some in American Black Left. Thus, Cuban solidarity with Angola, as an issue, vividly illustrated certain of the ideological perspectives of organizations like the ALSC. From its inception ALSC had a Maoist ideological view. It was pro-Maoist and pro-Chinese. I assume that this meant, at a minimum, an ongoing dialogue with government and party officials from China who helped shape ALSC positions vis-à-vis Africa and Southern African political dynamics. It was this ideological orientation much more than a real understanding of Angolan history and politics that led to the ALSC/SOBU/YOBU blind and unquestioning support of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi and his organization, UNITA. Moreover, it was this ideological orientation that was more crucial in determining that unswerving support rather than the skin color loyalty (and accompanying automatic rejection of mulattoes) motive that moved so many in the USA black nationalist groupings (organizations like US in Los Angeles, the Brooklyn CORE, and NBUF out of Chicago) to uncritically fall into the USA's pro-Savimbi, pro-UNITA ranks.

The BPP- In general, the BPP and its leadership espoused a clear program of political support and material aid to the Southern African liberation movements. The leadership of the BPP, specifically the Cleavers, Bobby Seale, Huey Newton and Elaine Brown, had a very clear idea of who was who amongst the national liberation movements. They met, discussed and socialized with liberation movement representatives from Dar to Cairo and from Algiers to Havana. What did not generally happen was the transference of the leadership's knowledge and insights to the ordinary BPP membership. Given the immense range of relations which many

of the BPP membership had, there could have been a heightened consciousness of liberation struggles and the anti-apartheid struggle amongst the masses of ordinary African American folk had the BPP membership been better informed about the particulars and the concretes of the Southern African lib struggles. I remember having a protracted exchange outside the Chicago Amphitheatre with some BPP members who told me that handing out pamphlets against Polaroid Camera Company's providing the passport cameras for apartheid was a 'bourgey' activity because most USA black folk didn't take pictures and besides "our one revolutionary task was to off the fuckin' pigs!"

I learned from this episode and other interactions that the BPP leadership did not devote a lot of energy to the task of the ideological and political formation of ordinary BPP membership.

AIS was a short-lived, Harlem-based organization whose most important political contribution was production of the enduring political tome, Return to the Source: Speeches of Amilcar Cabral. I think of it as being a more independent organization and neither a party organization or a 'new communist' party organization or a party building formation. Its membership was made up of African American and Caribbean people, mostly students, who came from a diversity of political perspectives. Many of them were young and politically inexperienced. They were singularly united, though, in their desire to mount a response to liberation struggles in Southern Africa based on knowing the needs of those in the front lines of that struggle and not based on projected needs articulated by people far from the battle front. They incorporated and internalized Amilcar Cabral's admonition to them that the highest form of solidarity that they could exercise was to make change in the United States.

A similar grouping that lasted but a short time but made an important contribution was the April 17-19, 1979 International Freedom Mobilization SUMMIT CONFERENCE OF BLACK RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON APARTHEID. Organized by the Rev Willis Logan of the NCCUSA and others, it was the only time ever that a group of some 200-odd of the nation's most prominent African American religious leaders, people like Rev William Jones, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and Rev Wyatt Tee Walker, leading aid to the late Dr. Martin Luther King, would declare **their "unequivocal support for the national liberation struggle (including the armed struggle) waged by the South African people under the leadership of the African National Congress."**

For two days, at least, that Black Left in the USA was a "broad church" indeed.

Thus, another point for discussion is identifying and dissecting a history in which there were certain political moments and episodes when the Black American political Left was an ever growin,' ever-shifting political phenomenon.