

Book review: Challenge to imperialism - the frontline states in the liberation of Zimbabwe

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Challenge to Imperialism - The Frontline States in the Liberation of Zimbabwe, by Carol B. Thompson. Boulder: Westview Press, 1985. Pp.xiii, 322.

In this thoroughly-documented book, Thompson provides a useful study of the theory of relative state autonomy in the post World War II conditions of heightened internationalization of capital. Given international capitalist domination of the independent states and the region of southern Africa, she asks how the weak peripheral Frontline States could support Zimbabwen liberation. She explains this contradictory reality by arguing that

"four of the five states were able to assert relative autonomy from the dominant classes -- although in different ways and certainly to different degrees. Even though the state in Botswana could not claim relative autonomy, the importance of its ideological support will be demonstrated."<p. 8>

Chapter 6 presents the core of Thompson's thesis. There, she observes that, as frequently presented, dependency theory oversimplifies the role of the state in the periphery almost to the point of suggesting that efforts to capture state power must prove fruitless. In contrast, she maintains, theories of relative state autonomy show that

"control of the state is worth fighting for, although it does not guarantee control of the forces of production. The limitations on state autonomy are consequential, as the pervasiveness and severity of neocolonialism attest. But control of the state can be

decisive in the class struggle."<p. 178>

Under certain conditions, Thompson argues, the state may act against certain interests of the dominant class (including international capital). She notes that theorists debate over the conditions necessary to permit peripheral states to exercise relative autonomy. In the Frontline States' case, she suggests they included: 1) the existence of mixed modes of production in which some peasant production at a relatively independent subsistence level provided a base for resistance against capital; 2) the lack of a strong African (as opposed to settler) bourgeoisie, leaving the state as the emerging African political rulers' primary means for appropriating surplus; 3) the state, seeking to accumulate and reinvest capital, conflicts with and seeks to circumscribe foreign capital as well as (alien) elements of local capital; 4) in the Frontline States, as distinguished from other peripheral states (for reasons which Thompson does not elucidate), each government set priorities in terms of its citizens' needs and sought to circumscribe the hegemony of foreign capital within its borders.

In chapters 2-5, Thompson sets the stage for her main theoretical argument by outlining the conflict in Zimbabwe between the white minority government and the African nationalists over control over land, minerals and manufacturing; the heavy cost the Frontline States paid for their support of the

nationalists, as well as the tensions between them and the nationalists; and the way foreign capital, with its regional base in South Africa, dominated the region. She maintains that the general decline of the hegemony of the advanced capitalist powers -- symbolised by the defeat of the United States in Vietnam and of South Africa --strengthened the Frontline States' ability to negotiate for Zimbabwe's independence.

In the second half of Chapter 6 and in Chapter 7, Thompson depicts details of the state structure in each of the five Frontline States to test her hypothesis. While holding that Angola and Mozambique sought a socialist transformation, she maintains that Zambia, Tanzania and Botswana remained populist. In each case, she seeks to show the extent to which the measures implemented to support the Zimbabwean nationalists reflected the relative autonomy of the respective state.

In chapter 8, Thompson suggests the independent southern African states' efforts to build the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC) constitute the use of state power to reduce dependence on South Africa and realize regional economic development potential. She asks (p. 287) whether the participating states, which include some with capitalist relations of production and others with mixed economies trying to move towards socialism, can achieve sufficiently uniform policies to achieve the desired coordinated development. She explains she

raises this question to suggest the extent of the struggle still to come. In her conclusion, she infers that, given the existence of relative state autonomy in the participating countries, the organization of SADCC for regional economic cooperation shows that the "challenge to imperialism continues in Southern Africa" (p. 302).

Thompson's book makes an important theoretical contribution to understanding the role of relative state autonomy in peripheral regions. However, at least two issues require clarification.

First, Thompson tends to treat the state as a unitary actor. She separates instrumental autonomy (defined as "freedom from direct demands <for or against specific policy formulations> by dominant interests or class fractions") from structural autonomy (in which "the state may oppose interests of the dominant class...") (p. 171). Yet her analysis suggests that the inevitable and numerous contradictions that comprise "instrumental autonomy" may at some stage, under conditions that exist in many peripheral states, lead to qualitatively different positions which assume the characteristics of "structural" autonomy. If that distinction can only be determined ex post, however, in what way are those seeking structural change any better off than when armed with what she characterizes as dependency theory's oversimplifications? Should not progressive forces constantly examine and take advantage of all the

contradictory features of the state to press for structural change in peripheral states?

To illustrate the significance of this point, Thompson herself raises the question about whether, given the contradictory social relations within and between the participating nation states, SADCC can achieve its declared goals. She quite rightly emphasizes the necessity of agreed state policies, rather than reliance on market forces, to attain them. But, unless significant contradictory features persist within the state structures of even the most conservative member countries, wouldn't it be unrealistic to expect that SADCC could discover the minimum threshold agreements needed to attain self-reliant regional economic development?

On another issue, Thompson suggests that the Frontline States may be distinguished from other peripheral states (eg. Brazil or Zaire) because of their concern for the welfare of their citizens as illustrated by their redirection of surpluses to improving the quality of life of their inhabitants through improved social welfare and efforts to reduce the hegemony of foreign capital (p. 166-7). Yet by the 1980s, four of the Frontline

1. Botswana's relatively small population received important revenues from the new diamond mines opened by DeBeers, an affiliate of the South African mining finance group, Anglo-American.

States¹ found themselves embroiled in a financial crisis, with three of them forced by to IMF austerity 'conditions' to reduce social welfare spending. South African destabilization tactics explain much of Angola's and Mozambique's difficulties. But could not one argue that Zambia (and some would include Tanzania) spent heavily on social services to legitimize the status quo, instead of introducing fundamental structural change? That they ended up with financial crises precisely because they did not exert sufficient control over the 'commanding heights' and implement a long term strategy to redirect a major share of their investable surplus to the planned political economic reconstruction?

All in all, however, Thompson's "Challenge to Imperialism" offers a useful case study for exploring the theoretical issues posed by the concept of relative state autonomy.

-- by Ann Seidman, Boston, 1987