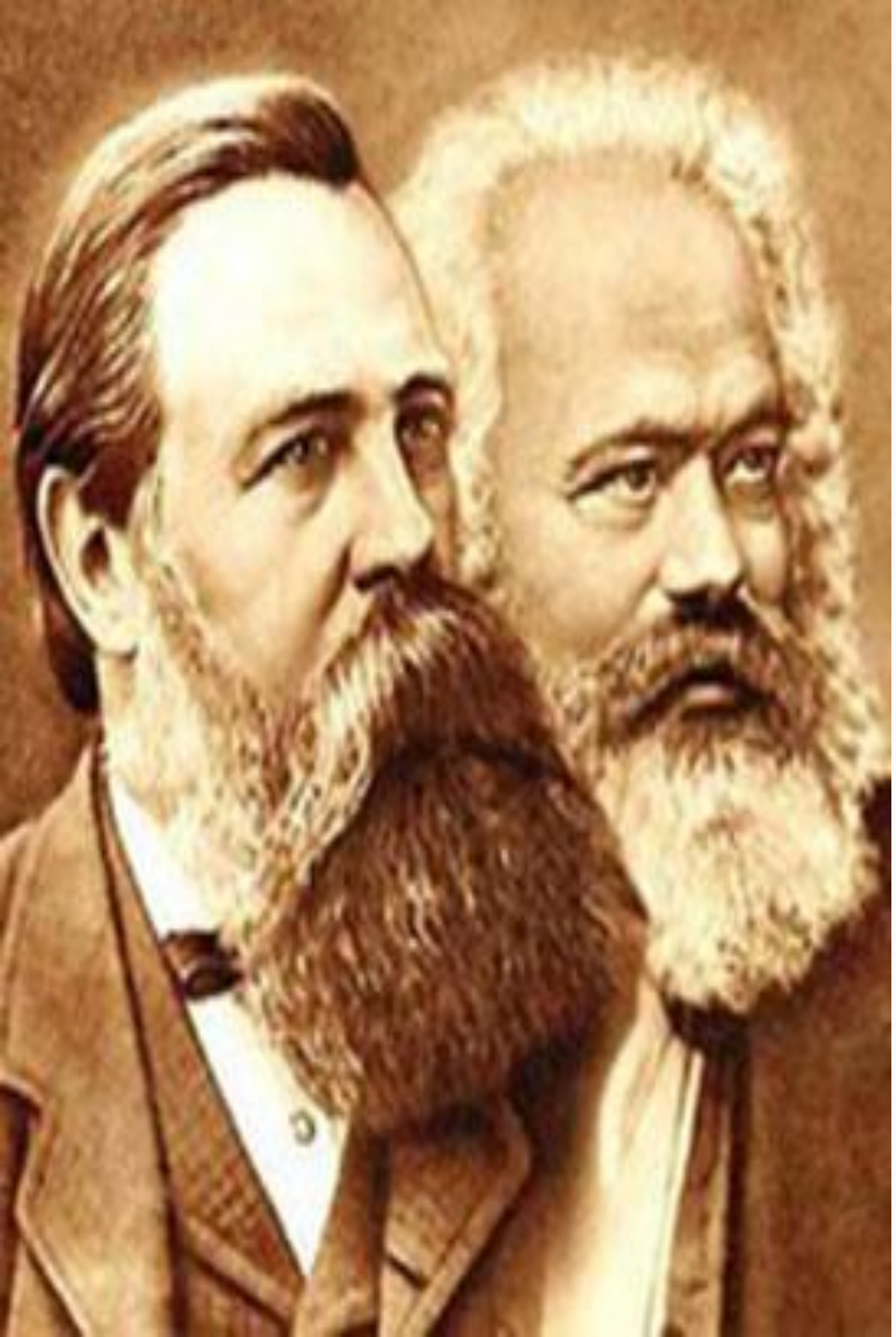
The Relevance of Lenin on the National Question in South Africa Today

Here we seek to present some of Lenin's perspectives on the national question and their application in contemporary South Africa. We will explore Marx and Engels' views on nationalism, Lenin's approach to self-determination and class struggle, and how these ideas relate to post-apartheid South Africa's ongoing challenges of economic inequality, racial tensions, and land redistribution. Also, this is an under-theorised topic in SA.

Mandla J. Radebe
SACP Gauteng
21 July 2024





Introduction: Marx and Engels on Nationalism

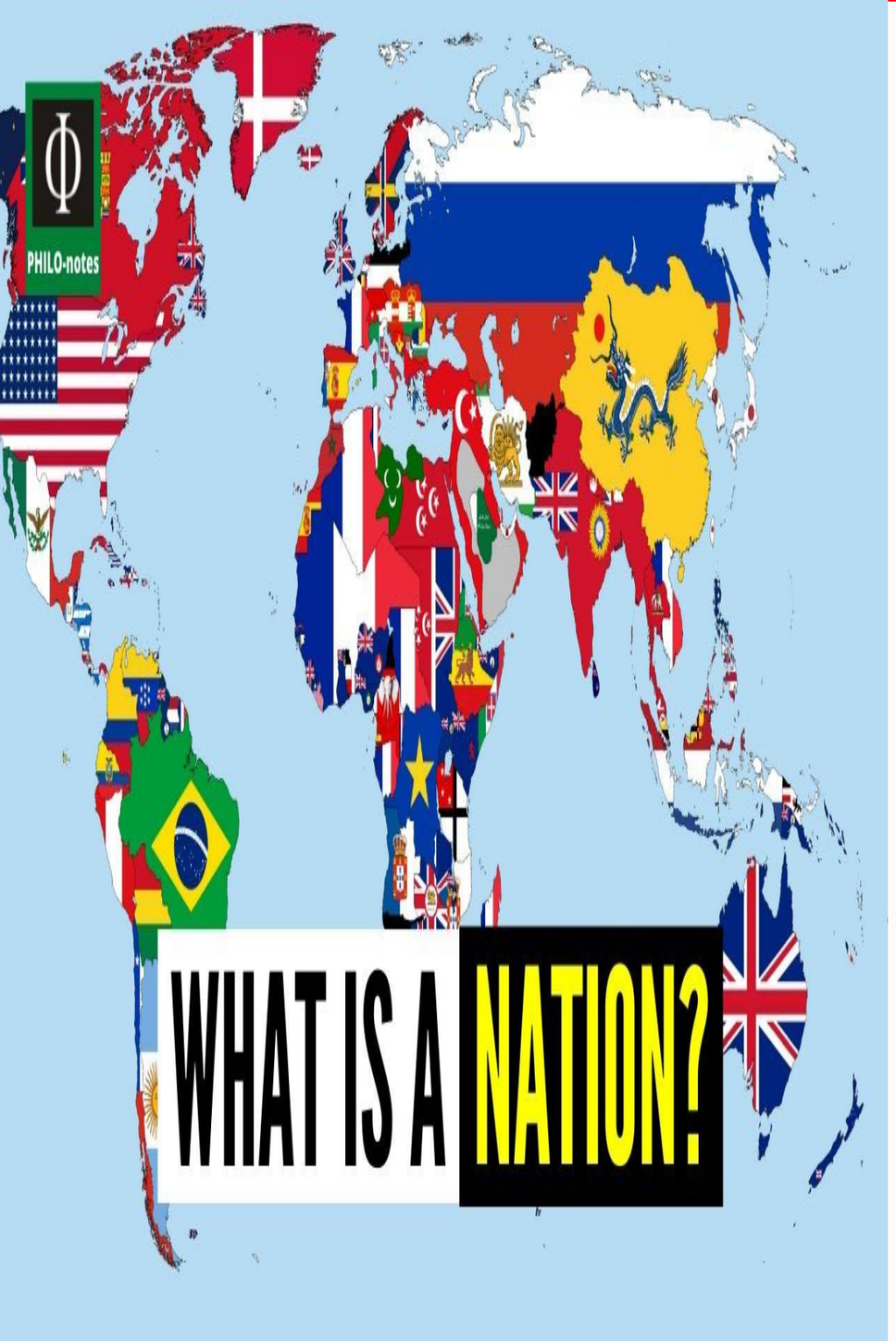
According Walker Connor (1984):

1. Nationalism is predicated upon the assumption that the most fundamental divisions of humankind are the many vertical cleavages that divide people into ethnonational groups.

2. Marxism, by contrast, rests upon the conviction that the most fundamental human divisions are horizontal class distinctions that cut across national groupings.

3. The nationalist would therefore contend that, in a test of loyalties, national consciousness would prove more powerful than all intranational divisions, including that of class.

4. Marxists, on the other hand, would maintain that class consciousness would prove the more powerful.

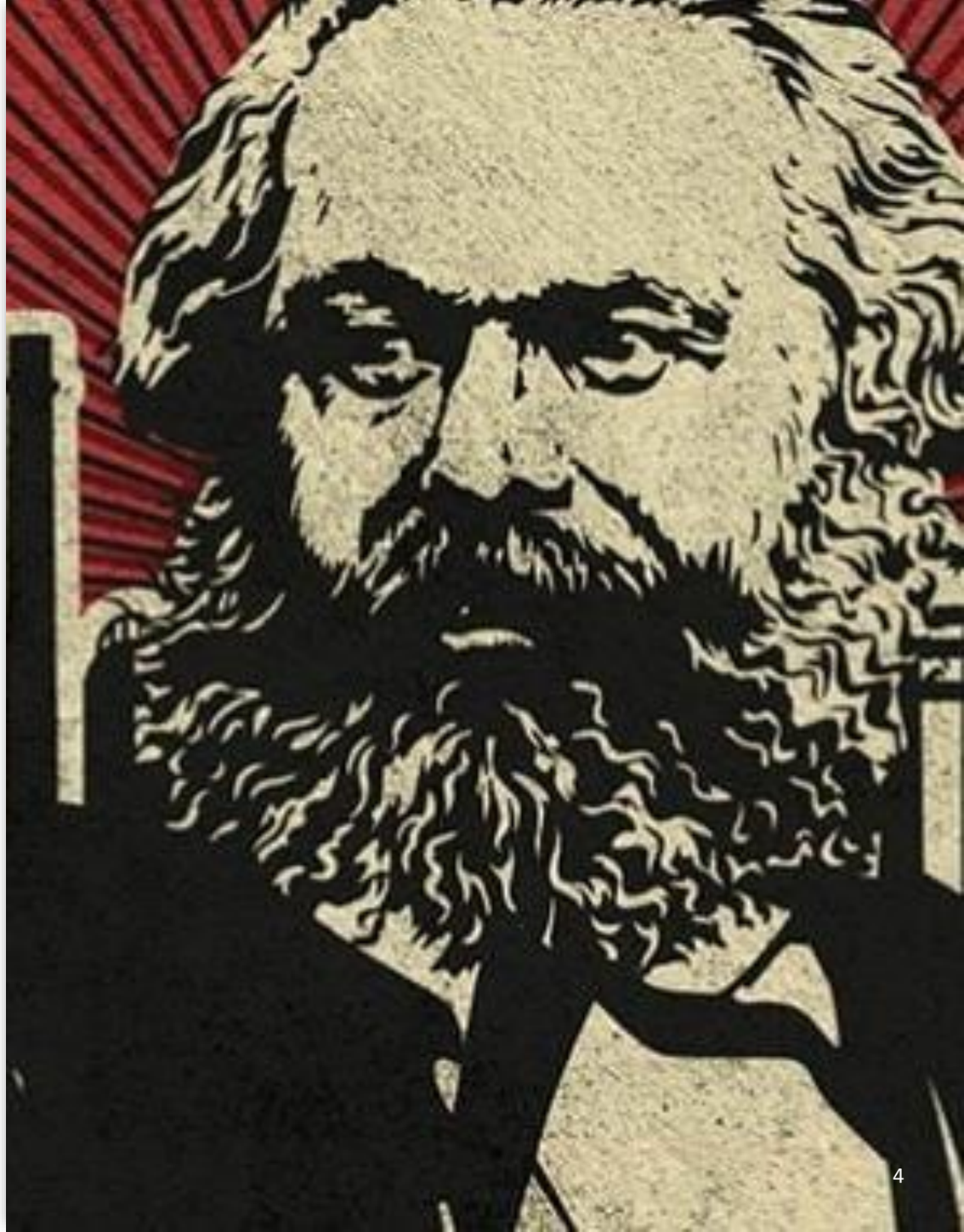


Marx and Engels on the Nation

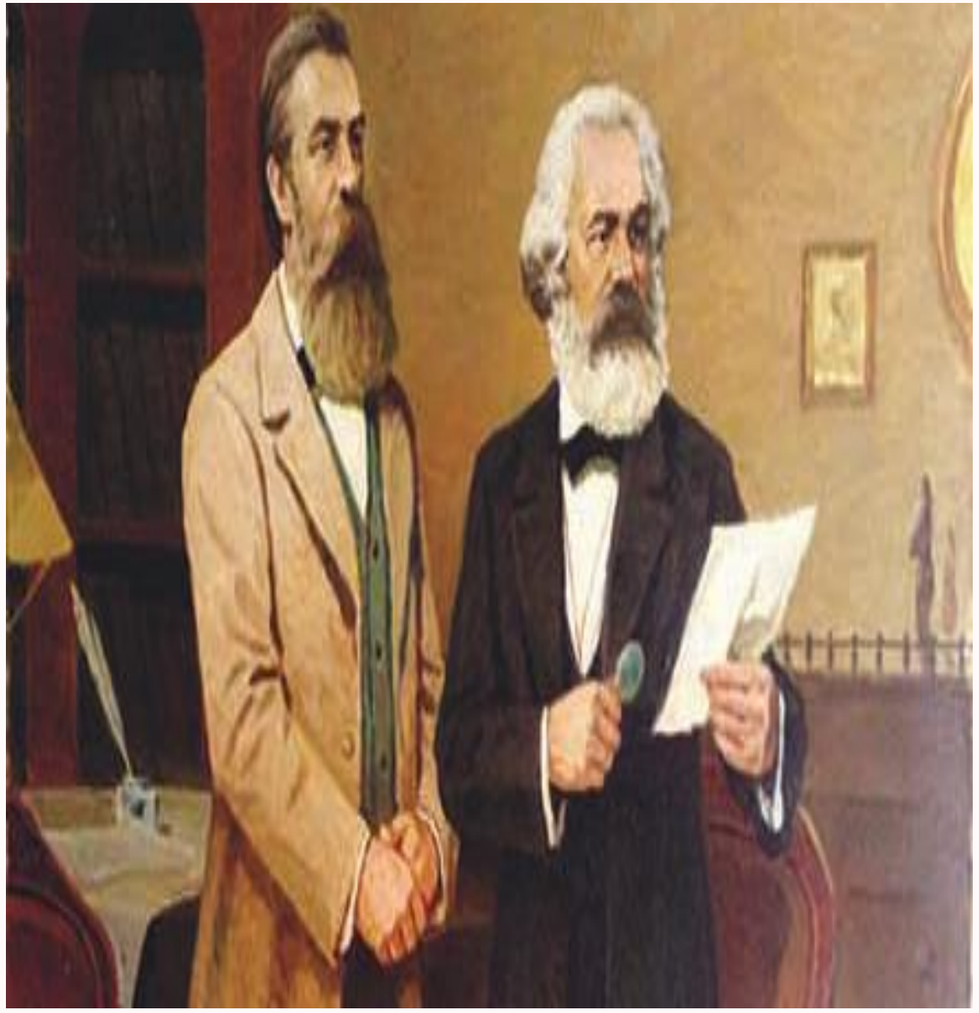
1. A historically evolved phenomenon.
2. Came to being due to the changes in the mode of production.
3. A device of the bourgeoisie.
4. An attempt to dampen the class consciousness.
5. Could be progressive or reactionary.
6. In the Manifesto Marx and Engels made clear the nation would survive the revolution at least for a time.
7. The working men have no country.

Marx’s economic view on the nation

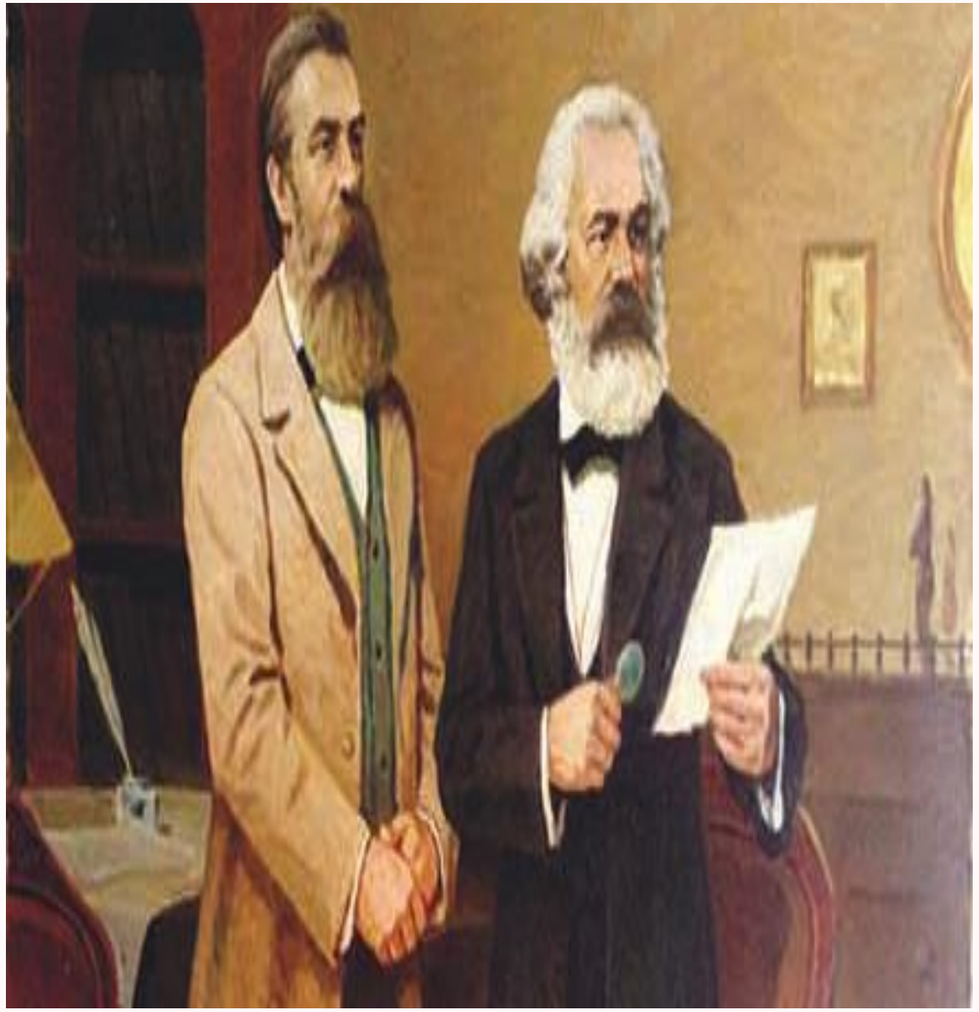
- Justification of overseas colonialism and imperialism.
- Offered the pre-industrial Africa and Asia opportunity to advance to a higher economic stage.
- Non-historic nations’ = “people without history,” “remains of nations,” “ruins of people,” “ethnic trash,” and worse) (Connor, 1984).



Nine Point Summary of Marx and Engels Classical Position on Nationalism



1. The nation and its ideology (nationalism) are part of the superstructure, by products of the capitalist era.
2. Nationalism (and perhaps all national distinctions) is therefore an ephemeral phenomenon which will not survive capitalism.
3. Nationalism can be a progressive or reactionary force, the watershed for any society being a point of developed capitalism.
4. Whether progressive or reactionary, nationalism is everywhere a bourgeois ideology pressed into service by that class in order to divert the proletariat from realising its own class consciousness and interests.
5. This stratagem cannot work, for loyalties are determined by economic realities rather than by ethnonational sentiments.



Summary of Marx and Engels Classical Position on Nationalism continued…

6. Communists may support any movement, nationalist or otherwise, when the movement represents the most progressive alternative.

7. But Communists themselves must remain above nationalism, this immunity being their single defining characteristic.

8. An ostensible alignment with national aspirations through the public endorsement of the abstract principle of self-determination is good strategy, but, at the nonabstract level, the decision whether or not to support a specific national movement must be made on an individual basis.

9. The ultimate test in determining support or nonsupport is not the relative progressiveness of the specific movement but its relationship to the broader demands of the international movement as a whole.

Inconsistencies and Ambiguities

1. Underestimation of emotional pull and tenacity of national identity.

2. Economic self-interest to lead the secessionists to seek some form of political reunion.

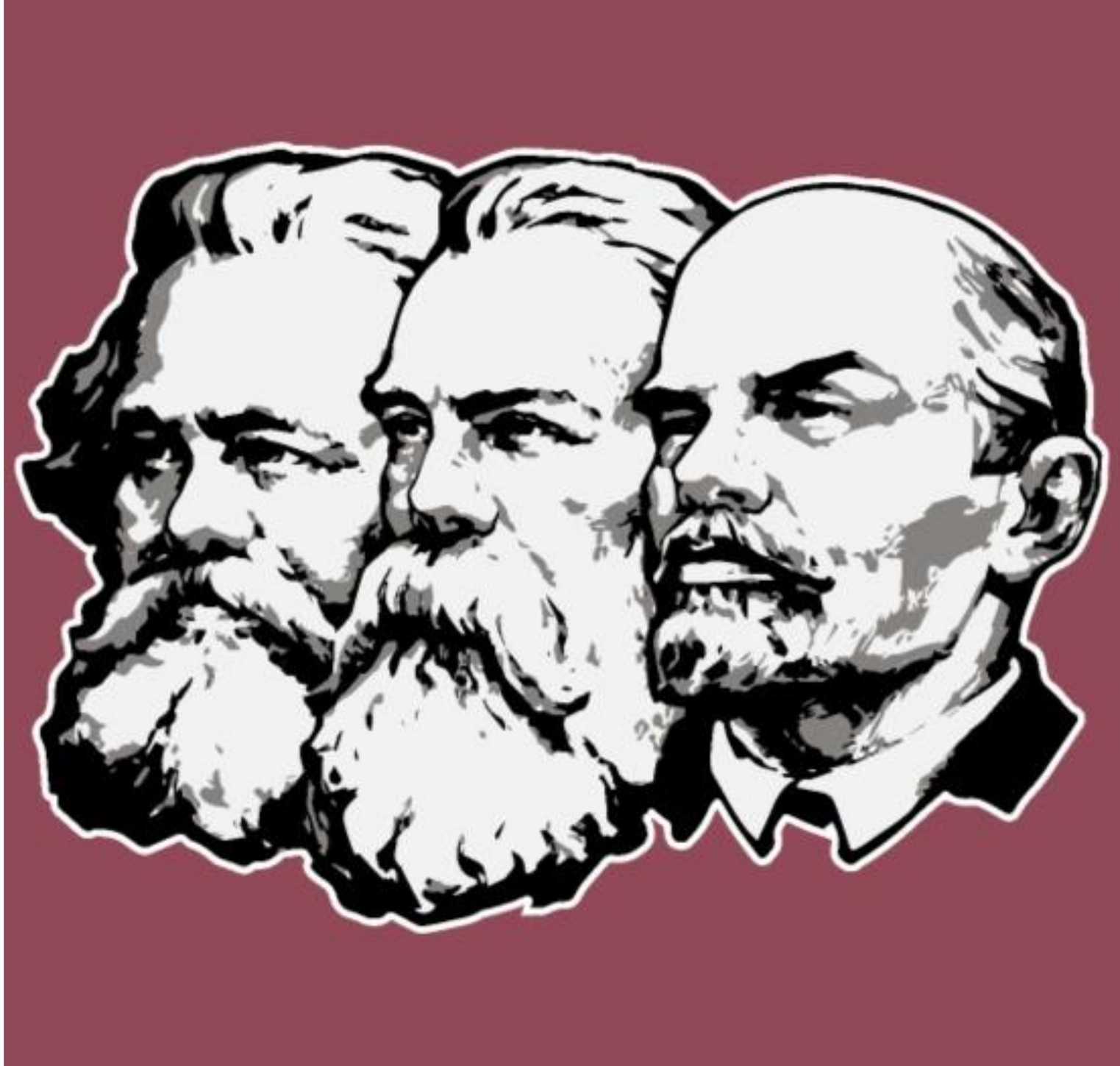
3. Inconsistencies and ambiguities illustrate the basic incompatibility between classical Marxist assumptions and national realities.





Lenin’s on the National National Question

- Lenin built on the work of Marx and Engels regarding the national question
- He wrote and spoke extensively on the national question and his earliest writing on the topic emerged in 1901 on “The protest of the Finnish people”.
- This was followed by a number of writings where his ideas developed over time.
- “The National Question in Our Programme” (1903).*



Self-determination

- **Marx and Engels**: Acknowledged the importance of national struggles, particularly in the context of oppressed nations and their right to self-determination.
- **Lenin**: Lenin expanded on this by strongly advocating for the right of nations to self-determination, including the right to secede.*
- In “The National Question in Our Programme” (1903), he argues for the right to self-determination for all nations.
- Self-determination is one of central themes for Lenin as he developed his thesis on the national question.



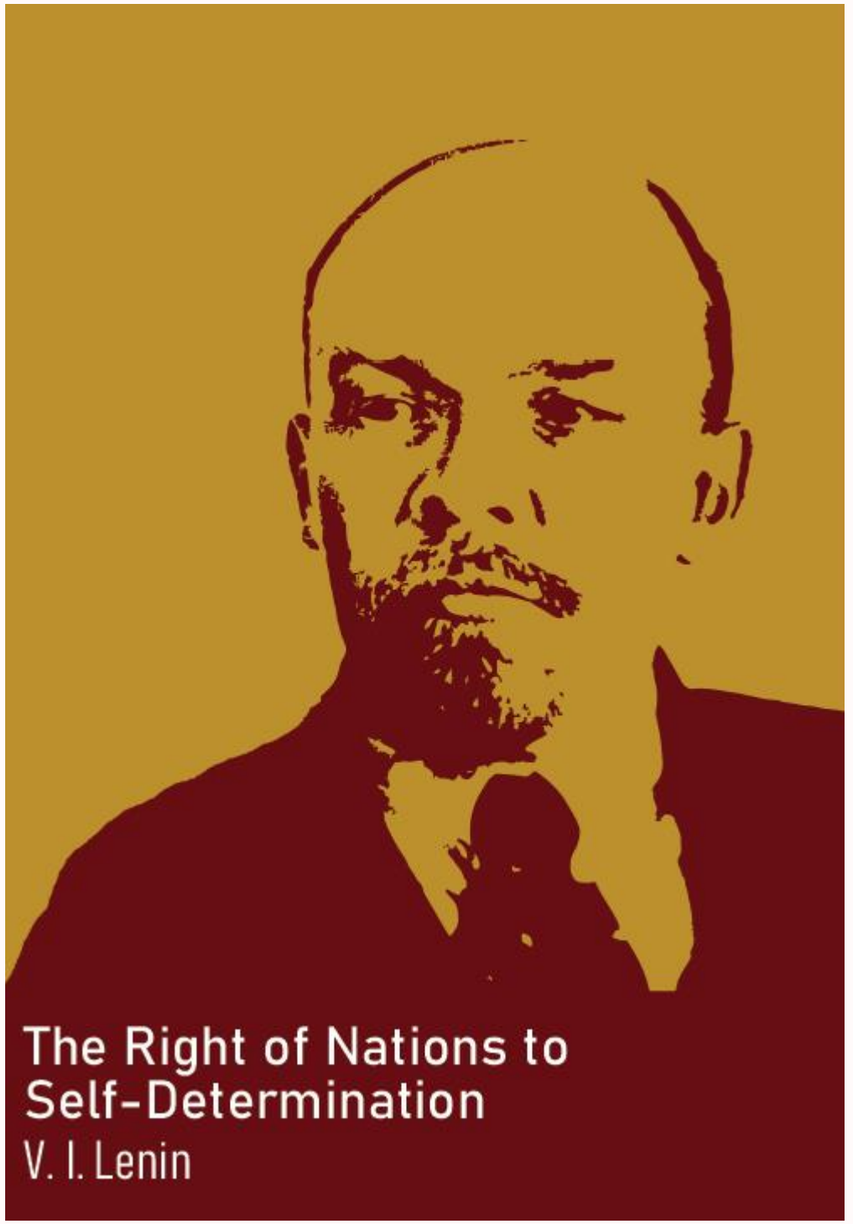
Self-determination continued…

- “The Working Class and the National Question” (1913) – the national question to be solved by class-conscious workers.*
- For Lenin “Class-conscious workers [should] stand for *full unity* among the workers of all nations”
- In the “Theses on the National Question” (1913) – *political* self-determination and the right to secede.**
- Reinforcing the position of the Social-Democratic Party’s recognition of the right of all nationalities to self-determination.***



The Right of Self-determination

- In “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination” (1913, p.83), defends position on freedom of self-determination, i.e., freedom to secede.*
- However, there was some differences with the Russian Party on this question with the likes of Rosa Luxemburg, Bukharin, Pyatakov, and others opposed to this point.
- Essentially, the view was that under capitalism, self-determination was utopian, while under socialism it was reactionary.
- Rosa Luxemburg argued against self-determination in a class society as essentially self-determination for the ruling class.**
- Nevertheless, many South African communists advanced a strong case for the right of the oppressed to self-determine – a right that they regarded as being at the heart of addressing the colonial question (Mzala, 1988). ***





Lenin’s Thesis on the Existence of Nations

1. **Capitalist Epoch and National Consciousness**: The existence of nations, nation-states, and national consciousness is a characteristic feature of the capitalist epoch

2. **Feudal Society and Particularism**: Feudal society was dominated by particularism, where peoples identified themselves as members of villages, towns, localities, regions, and principalities.

3. **Progressive Historical Task of the Bourgeoisie**: The gathering of productive forces into one nation-state was a progressive historical task of the bourgeoisie.

4. **Lenin’s View on Modern Nations**: Lenin linked the development of ‘modern’ nations to the capitalist mode of production.

5. **Marxist Perspective on Nation States**: From a Marxist viewpoint, a nation-state arises from a developed, stable community of language, territory, economy, and culture.

6. **Creation of New Nations**: In some instances, nations can be created where none existed before.



Capitalism and the National Question

1

Exacerbation of National Problems:
Capitalism, instead of resolving the national question, has in its decline exacerbated problems worldwide.

2

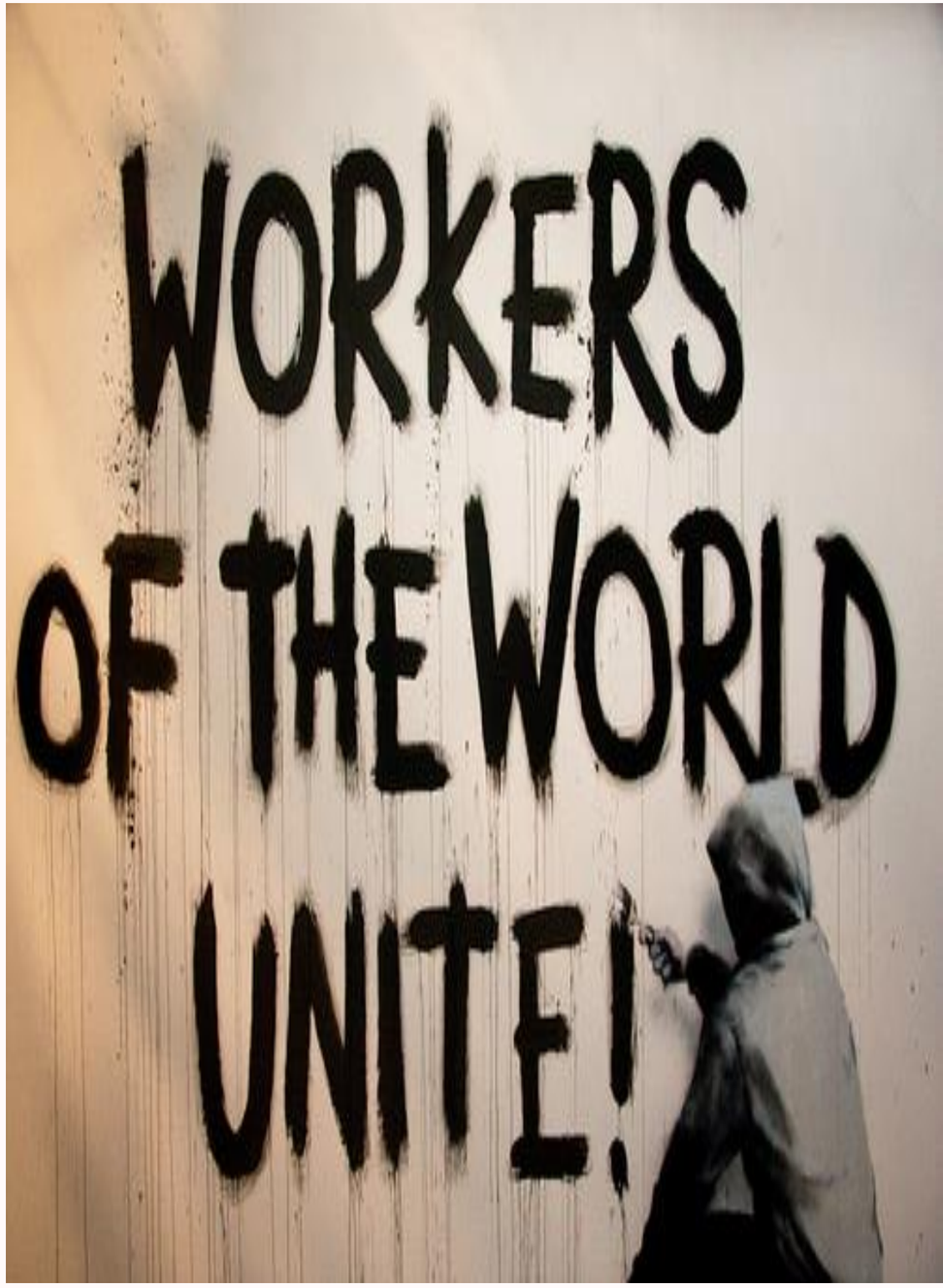
Productive Forces and National Markets:
The productive forces created by capitalism have now outstripped national markets.

Working Class Unity and Leadership

1. Lenin regarded the right of self-determination as subordinate to the interests of the working class.

2. He argued: “The bourgeoisie always places its national demands in the forefront, and does so in categorical fashion. With the proletariat, however, these demands are subordinated to the interests of the class struggle.”

3. He continued: “While recognising equality and equal rights to a national state, it values above all and places foremost the alliance of the proletarians of all nations, and assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers' class struggle” (The Right of Nations to Self-Determination, p.21)



The National and Colonial Question



- The leadership role of the working class.
- A closer union of the proletarians and working masses generally of all nations and countries.
- The resolution of the national question rests at the heart of the socialist struggle.
- The colonial and national question could not be resolved under the prevailing capitalist condition.

The South Africa Context

- The South African national liberation struggle and the need to alter the prevailing capitalist conditions (from the Party's perspective).
- Hence, the slogan – socialism is the future, build it now – remains relevant!
- The 1928 Resolution on 'The South African Question' adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist International following the Sixth Comintern and the national question.



Mzala Nxumalo on the National Question

1. Extends the ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin in addressing the national question within the South African context.
2. Asserts that Marxism supports the liberation struggle of colonised against imperialist oppression.
3. The role of capitalism in nation-formation.
4. Economic factors the creation of nation-states and impact on South Africa.
5. Ethnic separation, capitalism and possibilities of a nation-state in South Africa.
6. Comprehending the national question in South Africa in the context of historical events, such as 1652, the Union of South Africa in 1910, the ANC in 1912 etc.
7. Capitalist's uniting factor for African ethnic groups in South Africa.
8. The role of white communists in the liberation struggle.
9. The resolution of the national question and the class content of the national liberation struggle in South African.



Post-Apartheid South Africa

Democratic Transition

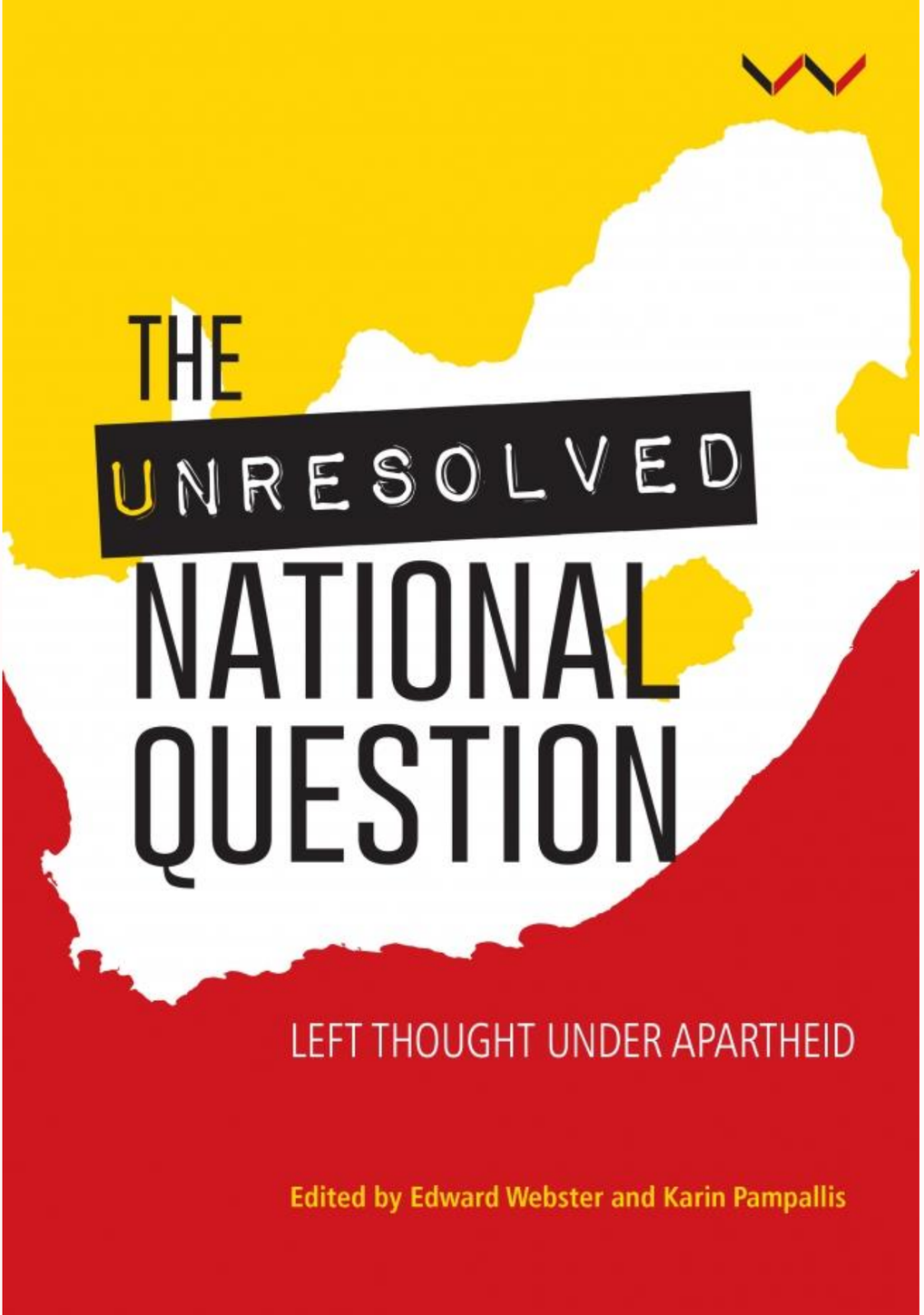
The transition to democracy in 1994 1994 marked a significant shift in in South Africa’s political landscape. landscape.

Current Dynamics

Post-apartheid South Africa continues to grapple with complex complex national and racial dynamics.

Ongoing Challenges

Economic inequality, racial tensions, tensions, and land redistribution redistribution remain pressing issues issues in contemporary South Africa. Africa.



The National Question in South South Africa

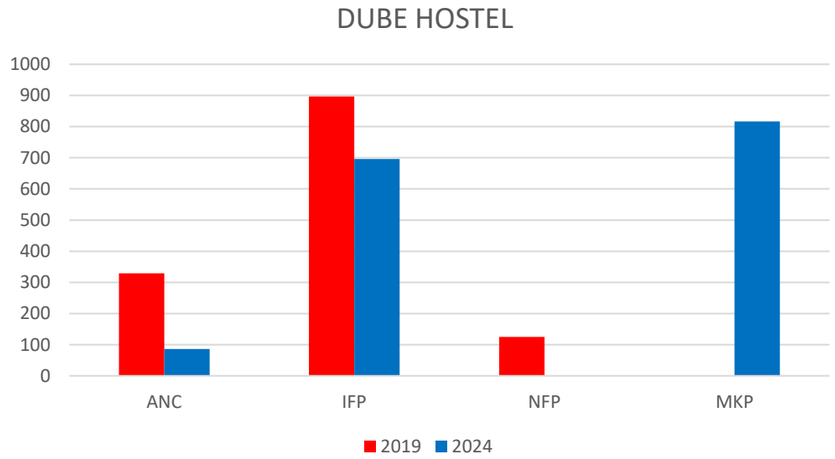
1. **Challenges Faced by National Liberation Movements**: National liberation movements in South Africa have encountered numerous challenges, including ideological fragmentation and electoral decline.
2. **Rise of Far-Right Ideology and Ethno-Nationalism**: The emergence of far-right ideology and ethno-nationalism poses significant barriers to the country's developmental aspirations
3. **Unresolved National Question**: According to Webster and Pampallis (2019), South Africa continues to grapple with an ‘unresolved national question’.
4. **Global Trends in Nationalism and Authoritarian Capitalism**: South Africa's challenges are not isolated considering a broader global tendency towards nationalism and authoritarian capitalism
5. **Role of Socialism**: Only socialism can fundamentally address the structural inequality and counter the dominance of neoliberal views and narrow nationalism.

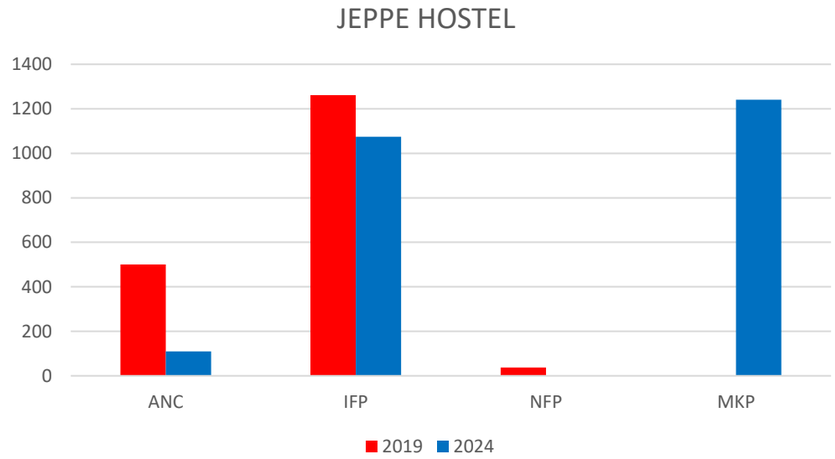
Narrow Nationalism and False Consciousness Today

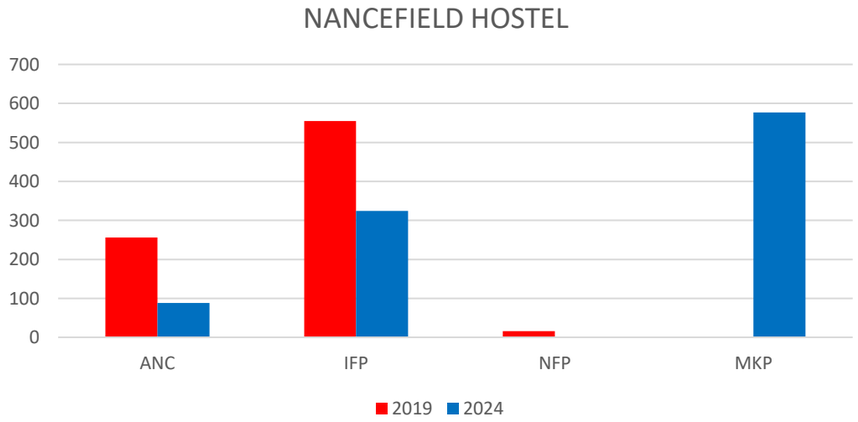
- ActionSA's Herman Mashaba xenophobic actions and hankering for the bantustan past.
- Gayton McKenzie anti-migrant stance and explicit ethnonationalism strategies.
- South African anti-migrant group Operation Dudula has become notorious for raiding businesses belonging to foreign nationals and forcing shops to close.
- Rise of narrow nationalism in the 2021 local government elections.
- The rise of MKP and PA on ethnonationalism platforms in 2024 elections.



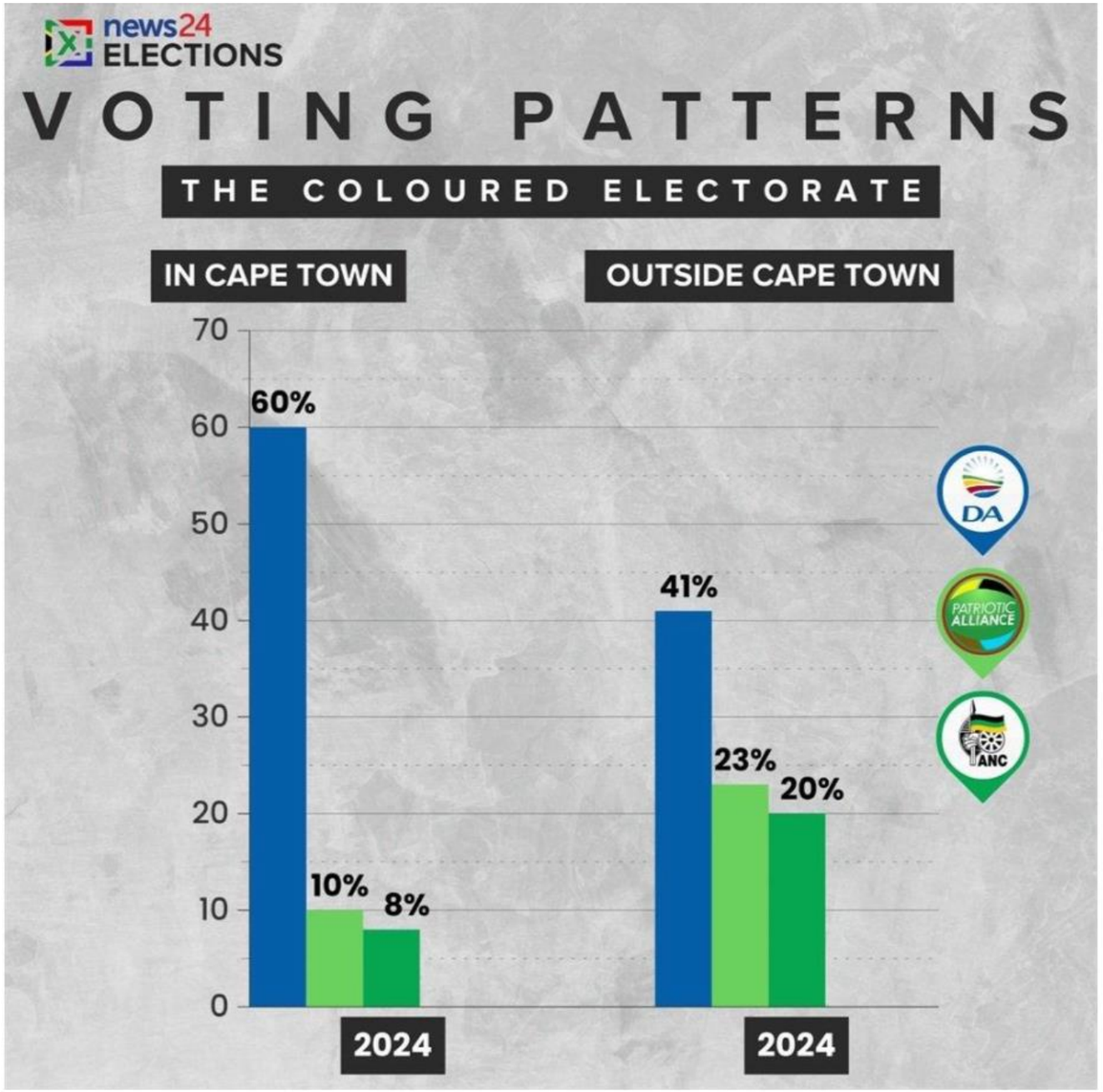
A Case for Ethno-nationalism?







A Case for Ethno-nationalism?





Lenin’s Relevance in Modern South Africa

Self-Determination

Lenin’s principle of self-determination is useful in the South African context, considering its considering its implications for various ethnic, racial and religious groups.

Class Struggle

The importance of addressing class struggle alongside racial and ethnic issues is important, important, reflecting Lenin’s focus on economic factors.

International Solidarity

The role of international solidarity and cooperation in South Africa’s ongoing is crucial crucial through the lens of Lenin’s theories.

Class Struggle and National Identity

Economic Disparities	Class Struggle	National Identity
Racial Lines	Interplay	Strategies
Income Inequality	Class Consciousness	Cultural Factors





Thank you!

Amandla!

