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Introduction: Writing the Dialectic

“What’s Left of the Left?” is not a conventional assemblage of academic essays. Rather, it supplies a rare glimpse into one of the strongest Left movements in African politics, the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP). For the first time, a substantial body of interlinked thought and praxis is being made available in English. Readers are introduced here to dynamic exchanges among a small, highly influential number of leftists engaged in dialogue about the pertinence and adaptability of Marxist theory to a society living under colonial and postcolonial subjugation. As a political tendency, Marxism has persisted tenaciously to the present day, despite the new forms of repression faced by its proponents.

The SCP endured systematic oppression that forced its members to go underground. In his 1978 work *Islam, Nationalism, and Communism in a Traditional Society*, Gabriel Warburg delineates the ways in which conservative ideologies circumscribed the SCP, explicating the linkages between the very first Sudanese Communist cell and its Egyptian counterpart, which grounded itself as part of the broader *Mouvement démocratique de libération nationale*.¹ Throughout the years of institutionalized state contraventions

South Atlantic Quarterly 109:1, Winter 2010

DOI 10.1215/00382876-2009-021 © 2009 Duke University Press

of human rights that engulfed the people and marked the country, party members were imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Surviving members' freedom of movement was limited, and their ability to hold public gatherings was severely restricted. When party members were invited to respond to the questions, "How did you touch Marxism? How were you touched by it? What events? What comrades? When and where?" the difficulties were incalculable. Salah Mazari, one of the most powerful members of the SCP, drew on the experiential knowledge he shared with other comrades to describe the elaborate stratagems required by underground work: reading between the lines, unspoken words, bikes, typewriters, red handkerchiefs, pseudonyms, and body language.² Party activists and community organizers had to negotiate dangerous terrain in their attempts to frame and sharpen their approaches to social justice under extremely difficult circumstances. Neither unspeakable atrocities nor the constraints of clandestine activity dissipated adherents' yearnings for social justice. As labor organizer Ibrahim Zachariah reminisces, "I must confess that what attracted me the most was the secretive nature of the organization and the pseudonym I had acquired and which lived within me for thirty years."³

The underground nature of political struggle shaped the literature that circulated as internal party documents. These texts, such as Abdel Khaliq Mahgoub's 1967 *Marxism and the Quandaries of the Sudanese Revolution*, form the foundational resources for this issue's focus on the SCP's political and intellectual legacy. Exploring the historicity of this clandestine struggle has helped to unlock the mysteries of transformative Sudanese politics and the consequences of radical thinking for activists who, as Sudanese poet Mohamed al-Makki Ibrahim puts it, wrote their names on their land with letters of blood.⁴ Reactionary forces continue to overwhelm Sudanese society, holding it hostage to sectarian and religious loyalties in a situation akin to what anthropologist Abdellah Hammoudi calls "master and disciple."⁵ Those who cultivated elements of dialectical materialism in Sudanese soil in order to bring about what John Rawls would call "circumstances of fairness" paid a heavy price.⁶ In a setting such as Sudan, where culture and society are constantly taken for granted as if carved in stone, mapping transformative politics has seemed outside the realm of possibility.

"What's Left of the Left?" is exceptionally revealing in its presentation of the dilemmas that accompanied efforts to carve new spaces for intellectual inventiveness and political creativity. Abdel Khaliq Mahgoub (1927–71), the late secretary-general of the SCP, swam indefatigably against these power-

ful sociopolitical currents. His narrative about how and why he became a Marxist is included here. Mahgoub worked diligently to craft critiques of traditionalist politics as well as the political practices of his comrades on the Left. His hopes for conducting transformative political work at a critical moment in the Sudanese struggle for emancipation led him to undertake a remarkable, epistemologically conscious search for the solid ground on which a progressive society could be built. The first to conceive of the promise of the “New Sudan,” a phrase that has come into vogue more recently, Mahgoub forcefully imagined a society in which decolonization, equality among citizens, and the empowerment of working people would be accompanied by the acceptance of religious and ethnocultural differences. His insistence on this possibility is at profound variance with what exists today as the Sudan, which rightly or wrongly has become known as the site of the first genocide of the twenty-first century. Mahgoub’s vision of the New Sudan has provoked jealousies and deliberate effacements. Strikingly, he produced these ideas when he was just twenty-seven years old, and his execution by the regime seventeen years later was—and has been—unable to extinguish them.

The intellectual legacy of Marxism, the work necessary to adapt abstract theory to African conditions, and the sustained effort to turn words into action pervaded Mahgoub’s thought about a democratized society that broke the shackles of convention whenever they were used to contravene fundamental human rights. In this process, Mahgoub offered carefully considered perspectives on the marginalization that provoked bitter grievances among the largest segments of the Sudanese populace on account of region, race, class, and religion. Whenever opportunities presented themselves for reflection on what progressive politics in Sudanese society meant, these questions were subjects of intense critical inquiry. “What’s Left of the Left?” commemorates historic efforts to root progressive thought in a conservative society and to engage in reflexive dialogue about leftist praxis. Invoking Mahgoub at (almost) every turn, this special issue is prompted by the nature of exchanges, critiques, and deliberations on subjects ranging from labor, youth, women, and peasants and the channeling of their struggles within a Marxist epistemology that united these seemingly disparate renderings of the myriad predicaments and promises of the situation in Sudan.

In foregrounding transformative discourses on social justice, self-reflexivity was an essential element in the task of constituting a leftist public culture. This public culture marked Mahgoub’s imaginings of new ways

of reading political life, drawing inspiration from international experiences while simultaneously recognizing homegrown versions of what works and what does not. In today's complex, often chaotic political situation, intellectuals and activists read Mahgoub's analysis with the benefit of hindsight to explore pathways through which democratization and emancipatory praxis can be set in motion. The debates included in this issue mirror Mahgoub's concern for state and society, as he continues to wield enormous intellectual power. His sustained philosophical dissection of society and politics and his centeredness amid shifting global and local crosscurrents enabled him to formulate a praxis that could address key national quandaries. Today, if we applied his approach to understanding representations of the prolonged conflicts between the centralized state and Southern Sudan and the multisided conflict that continues in Darfur, we would attend to the yawning gaps among local, regional, and international formulations of the issues and parties involved. While always examining the power of transnational forces in specific situations, Mahgoub refused easy analogies and simplistic models of Sudanese topography, such as "Arab" versus "African." This issue honors his investment in the dialectics of debating, critiquing, and writing to produce leftist Sudanese knowledge. Despite the daunting nature of the political struggle, we have come to understand the Sudanese Left's enduring contributions to difficult yet essential dialogues on the cultural politics of the nation-state. This intellectual current concretized and localized a Marxist theoretical tradition that had been regarded as alien and imported. "What's Left of the Left?" offers a privileged inside story about visions and practices as to what socialism would mean to Sudanese society.

Moving from clandestine work to talking about Marxism in public is a logical product of the leftist harvest. The Fifth Congress of the Sudanese Communist Party, which convened on January 24, 2009, broke through the barriers of contemporary political culture and demonstrated the continuing significance of the Left in the national scene. It exemplified the unbroke spirit of leftists who remain determined to confront authority and challenge elitist hierarchies. At this gathering, participants not only reflected on persistent quests for self-redefinition and independent thinking about the predicaments of the Sudanese state and society but also solidified measures for moving forward on fundamental questions of citizenship and the distribution of resources on equitable terms irrespective of class, regional, ethnic, and cultural differences. Lively discussions centered on human rights; the role of a broad-based, nationalist, and democratic movement;

and conceptual paradigms for political, economic, and social transformation. Although this convention had been long delayed (the party's constitution mandates that a meeting be held every two years, but four decades had passed since the previous gathering),⁷ the SCP wrestled with key intellectual and political matters, demonstrating its unequivocal commitment to addressing the myriad intertwined problems that afflict the Sudanese populace. The various intersecting debates in "What's Left of the Left?" both register the movement's ability to go beyond memory and rise to the occasion that is the history of the SCP and the demands of the current conjuncture. When the question of whether the SCP should change its name was posed, it provoked no major controversy, despite recent shifts away from the use of terms that refer to Communist theory and practice. Taj el-Sir Osman contends: "The failure of the socialist experience is not the failure of Marxism. We must draw lessons from positive experiences and learn from flaws in building socialist models [that are] more effective in attaining justice, democracy, and humanism."⁸ The retention of the party's name signified the recognition and reaffirmation of the historicity and specificity of the organization's Marxist-Leninist intellectual points of departure and genealogy. The SCP encapsulates and honors this long history. Building on a powerful vision that was born out of intensive deliberations about directions for renewal,⁹ the forum included participants from the entire spectrum of the Sudanese political rainbow, both traditional and modern, and considered broad questions regarding the state apparatus, religion, secularism, women's rights, and methods of work. SCP secretary-general Mohamed Ibrahim Nugud articulated the value of Marxist theory and practice in a few eloquent words: "A drop of Marxism is enough to remedy an ailing economy and society."¹⁰

The proceedings of the Fifth Congress and the events that led up to it confirm that the SCP has managed to create a space for speaking of and about Marxism in public, subverting political taboos and the demonization of Marxism as akin to witchcraft, atheism, and Satan. Convention participants discussed the transformation of Sudan into a multicultural state, a conversation that is particularly significant in a setting where Islamic sharia has been the primary jurisprudential source regulating law and society since 1983 and in whose name holy wars have been waged and the Sudanese people's blood has been shed. What needs to be dispelled is not dissent but the degradation of Sudanese citizens, who remain the cheapest commodity in their own nation-state. This attitude on the part of a handful of despots must be cleared out by root and branch, Marxists argued.

In “What’s Left of the Left?” contributors take up the task of making public culture capable of generating democratic possibilities under socialist, nationalist, and democratic frames of governance. Leftists have reaffirmed their commitment to a creative process of reflection and renewal, basing their approaches to building a broad popular movement on the solid ground of intellectual and political work through a methodical process of localization and vernacularization.¹¹ Central to the SCP’s approach, as articulated by Mahgoub, is the idea that language, religion, and culture must be respected fully, as Marxists develop a style of leadership in which intellectuals play a prominent role. Concern for culturally appropriate discourses shaped the formulation and effective delivery of the Left’s political message to ordinary people. The historical specificity and cultural particularity of Sudanese society figured prominently in cogent writings on the promises and predicaments of localizing what conservative forces condemned as imported, antireligious ideologies. The case for Marxism was made with ample clarity, demonstrating that contrary to many misconceptions, it is a philosophy of refashioning politics, a path to justice rather than a vehicle for social engineering.¹² Leftists see this radical approach to politics as the breath of fresh air that a suffocated people has been expecting.

“What’s Left of the Left?” goes beyond the fond memories of Mahgoub that thousands of Sudanese people have harbored since his execution.¹³ What remains are the ideas that he so powerfully rendered in his intellectual contributions to Marxism and African socialism. He theorized Marxism as a malleable set of ideas and an instrument of revolutionary change enacted at the level of the quotidian. In translating Marxist theory into Sudanese political praxis, Mahgoub deftly interwove culture and politics and championed philosophical analysis as a tool for developing effective popular strategies for reclaiming human dignity. This stance grew out of his hope for a radical political overhaul in a society for which he held the highest of expectations. Mahgoub’s testimony “By Virtue of Marxism, Your Honor” (in this issue) articulates his vision, which is grounded in an incisive theoretical analysis of Sudanese realities. In spite of the overwhelming conservative forces that sought to stifle progressive thinking, he and other Sudanese Marxists engaged questions of internal consistency, religion, and tradition as ways of generating a sense of permanence and sustainability for the new perspectives on emancipation for a society weighed down by commodification and objectification.

What is left of the Left is its resiliency and ability to circumvent the most

difficult obstacles, its desire to make history, its keen interest in challenging comfort and complacency, and its unremitting commitment to enacting justice for the aggrieved and downtrodden.

Notes

I am exceptionally grateful to Grant Farred for his unswerving support and scrupulous commentary on the introduction in regards to sharpening my arguments about the critical and dialogical tradition in SCP literature. I would also like to acknowledge Salah Hassan for his tremendous help throughout. My friend Grey Osterud was keenly interested in my arguments on SCP theoretical and methodological concerns, which I attempted to position within the larger contexts of political and Marxist anthropology, and for this support I remain appreciative.

- 1 Gabriel Warburg, *Islam, Nationalism, and Communism in a Traditional Society: The Case of Sudan* (London: Frank Cass, 1978), 95.
- 2 Interview with Salah Mazari, *Al-Shioui* 152 (1988): 70–79. *Al-Shioui* is an SCP circular.
- 3 Interview with Ibrahim Zachariah, *Al-Shioui* 152 (1988): 25–41.
- 4 Abdel Khaliq Mahgoub, *Marxism and the Quandaries of the Sudanese Revolution* [in Arabic] (1967; Khartoum: Azza, 2008); and Mohamed al-Makki Ibrahim, “Ummaatti” (“My Nation”), used in Mohamed Wardi’s 1965 song “Green October.”
- 5 Abdellah Hammoudi, *Master and Disciple: The Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- 6 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).
- 7 SCP secretary-general Mohamed Ibrahim Nugud acknowledged the party’s shortcomings in not convening the conference earlier, but he stressed the urgency of the current domestic and international situation. Mohamed Ibrahim Nugud, opening remarks (Fifth Convention of the Sudanese Communist Party, Khartoum, January 23–25, 2009); reported in *Al-Sudani*, January 25, 2009.
- 8 Taj el-Sir Osman, “The Intellectual and Theoretical Departures for Naming the Sudanese Communist Party,” *Al-Midan*, January 8, 2009, www.midan.net/nm/private/news/tajelsir-osman_8_08.htm (accessed January 8, 2009; site now discontinued).
- 9 See Mohamed Ibrahim Nugud, *Principles and Directions for Renewal* (Khartoum: Azza, 2004).
- 10 Nugud, opening remarks.
- 11 For comparative perspectives on the localization and vernacularization of international principles of social justice and human rights in specific cultural contexts, see Sally E. Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Sally E. Merry and Mark Goodale, eds., *The Practice of Human Rights: Tracking Law between the Local and the Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 12 See the comprehensive political report, presented to the SCP on March 25, 2008, and printed in *Al-Midan* supplement, 2067.
- 13 Only one Sudanese journalist was allowed into Mahgoub’s military trial. See Idris Hassan, “I Witnessed Them Prosecuting Abdel Khaliq Mahgoub,” *Al-Ayyam*, April 1, 1987, cited in Omdurman blog, <http://abdelkhaliq.net/images/mahgoub1213rb.jpg> (accessed August 2, 2008; site now discontinued).