

# Harold and history<sup>1</sup>

by Peter Alexander

(Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg)

Keynote address delivered at the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust's Tenth Anniversary Colloquium, "Engaging silences and unresolved issues in the political economy of South Africa", 21-23 September 2006, Cape Town, South Africa

---

I thought that something biographical might make this lecture more accessible. The obvious choice might then have been South Africa's most famous sociologist, its first professor of sociology, but that was none other than Hendrik Verwoerd, and I thought that, perhaps, it would be better to leave him to someone else. My choice of Harold Wolpe was not difficult. First, he is probably the country's second most significant sociologist. The historian Dan O'Meara asserts that his 'work and actions played a fundamental role in revolutionising the way that social scientists and activists ... understood ... the workings of South African society and the appropriate ways to change it.'<sup>2</sup> Secondly, I can empathise with him rather well, both because he was an activist and because he secured jobs in sociology without having any degrees in the subject.

It is not my intention to present Harold's biography, nor even a balanced assessment of his work. Time is short and I have elected to limit myself to three critical comments. My desire is to clamber on to his shoulders in the hope that I might see more of our social world, for, if Harold was not quite a giant, he was certainly 'a tall man'.<sup>3</sup> I begin with a brief sketch of his life, then make my three points and, finally, conclude by rooting my argument in contemporary soil. My thesis will be that a critical assessment of Harold's scholarship can lay a solid foundation for seminal advances in sociology.

## To start: a sketch

Harold was born in Johannesburg in 1926.<sup>4</sup> The son of Lithuanian immigrants, he attended Athlone Boys High in Bez Valley and, in 1944, went to Wits University. After a year of natural science he transferred to BA Social Science, i.e. social work. The latter included some sociology,<sup>5</sup> and also a course in statistics, which is where he met AnnMarie. Whilst an undergraduate, he joined the communist party, whose

---

<sup>1</sup> The keynote address for the Wolpe colloquium was a shorter version of my inaugural lecture as Professor of Sociology at the University of Johannesburg (16 August 2006) which was entitled "History, internationalism and intellectuals: the case of Harold Wolpe". This paper is the full lecture.

<sup>2</sup> Dan O'Meara, 'The Engaged Intellectual and the Struggle for a Democratic South Africa: The Life and Work of Harold Wolpe' (1997), available at [web.uct.ac.ac/misc/wolpe/tribute](http://web.uct.ac.ac/misc/wolpe/tribute).

<sup>3</sup> The idea of a 'tall man' comes from Partha Mukheri, former president of the Indian Sociological Association and a recent visitor to the university.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, biographical information is from AnnMarie Wolpe, interviewed in Cape Town on 11 August 2006, and Henry Bernstein, 'Obituary,' available at [www.wolpetrust.org.za/obituary](http://www.wolpetrust.org.za/obituary)

<sup>5</sup> During his LLB years, Harold was also a tutor in sociology. He worked for Prof. Wagner, the head of department, who later wrote him an uncomplimentary reference.

members included Ruth First and Joe Slovo, the latter becoming a close and lifelong friend. Harold was also 'befriended' by Nelson Mandela (his word), and was later the friend and lawyer of Walter Sisulu.<sup>6</sup> After graduation and a year as president of the students' representative council, Harold began work on an LLB, which he completed in 1952.

Being an attorney was something that paid the bills rather than a vocation, but Harold was good at his job and one of the few lawyers who took political cases. He was also involved in re-establishing the communist party (the SACP), and helped purchase Lillieslief Farm in Rivonia, which became the headquarters of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK).<sup>7</sup> After the arrest of members of MK's high command in 1963, Harold was also captured, but, together with Arthur Goldreich, escaped from detention, eventually managing to flee the country. Mandela said of this achievement, which made headlines around the world: 'It was an embarrassment to the government and a boost to our morale.'<sup>8</sup>

In exile in London, Harold was joined by AnnMarie, who he had married in 1955, and their three children. He spent a year working for the movement, another reading sociology books at the London School of Economics, and a third teaching extra-mural students. He then held sociology lectureships at Bradford University, North London Polytechnic, where he was based from 1970 to 1974, and, finally, Essex University.<sup>9</sup>

In 1991, following the unbanning of political organisations, he took a position at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), where he became a professor and director of the Education Policy Unit. Here he played an important role in developing the government's higher education policy.<sup>10</sup> He died from a heart attack in 1996, and O'Meara claimed that he 'worked himself to death.'

In terms of his publications, it is possible to discern three periods: roughly 1970-78, 1978-88, and 1988-96. In the first, the major thrust of his work emphasised economic determinants of social change and the importance of class; in the second his focus was more on political determinants and the nature of the state; and in the third he shifted his attention to educational policy.<sup>11</sup> In the second, he made sympathetic use of Nicos Poulantzas, who he had criticised in the earlier period, and one sympathetic critic was moved to comment that Harold came 'close to detaching political struggle from any anchorage in the forces and relations of production.'<sup>12</sup> Whereas the polemical thrust of the first period was directed mainly against liberal and orthodox SACP writers, the second can be interpreted as, principally, a critique of left-wing

---

<sup>6</sup> Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1994); Elinor Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In our Lifetime* (David Philip, Claremont, 2002). Lindiwe, Walter's daughter, now a government minister, would subsequently work for her doctorate under Harold's supervision.

<sup>7</sup> Rusty Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting* (Penguin, Sandton, 1999). Harold had also been detained during the post-Sharpville state of emergency. He undertook intelligence work for MK.

<sup>8</sup> Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 307.

<sup>9</sup> At the last of these, he obtained a doctorate (for a collection of articles rather than a dissertation), had a spell as head of department, and was promoted to reader, the equivalent of associate professor, but was denied promotion to full professor, probably for political reasons.

<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding this activity, and his continued membership of the SACP and the African National Congress, he was, in some measure, marginalised. For instance, he was not invited to the 1994 inauguration ceremony and was not appointed to the National Commission for Higher Education.

<sup>11</sup> In what was possibly his first article, Harold's concerns were rather different from his subsequent work. See Harold Wolpe, 'Some Problems Concerning Revolutionary Consciousness'.

<sup>12</sup> Alex Callinicos, *South Africa Between Reform and Revolution* (Bookmarks, London, 1988), p. 217.

Marxists, who argued that the struggle against capitalism and apartheid were inextricably linked. Harold's third period, begun in exile, starts with critiques of apartheid education, moves through policy papers, and ends with criticism of the new government.

The key work of the first period is undoubtedly his seminal 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power', published in 1972. O'Meara may be correct when he writes that this was 'probably the most influential and widely-cited theoretical text ever written on South Africa.'<sup>13</sup> Its impact should be understood within the context of a 'photocopying culture', in which tatty British seminar papers were widely circulated among student activists.<sup>14</sup> '1968', which in South Africa lasted well into the 1970s, produced a generation of radicalised students thirsting for new ideas, and Harold's article fitted the times; especially so after the 1973 strikes in Durban, which, in a very practical way, underlined the importance of class struggle. The principal achievement of the second period was Harold's only book, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*. This makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the state, and should be required reading for post-graduate political sociology students. For me, the most interesting output from the third period are Harold's final papers, partly because they provide an inkling of where he was moving politically.

I turn, now, to my three comments.

### **First: History**

The primary problematic for radical sociologists - and this was true for Harold - consists of developing an understanding of how societies change. In addressing this challenge they must, necessarily, consider the relationship between sociology and history. E. H. Carr, an historian interested in generalisation, concluded: 'The more sociological *history* becomes and the more historical *sociology* becomes, the better for both.' In contrast to this blending approach, Harold was keen to keep history at arm's length.<sup>15</sup> His sociology was a largely theoretical undertaking that made use of history, but saw it as a distinct activity. In 1985 he published a short article, which Michael Burawoy calls his 'praxis statement', in which he contrasted structural analysis with studies of consciousness, associating the former with his own work, that is sociology, and the latter with history.<sup>16</sup> This approach is consistent with the cheap labour article and also, though less obviously, with his book.

I would like to propose a third position. Whilst 'blending' should be encouraged, it does not disaggregate the different time frames within which change occurs.<sup>17</sup> At one extreme, we have great epochal transitions, and, at the other, individual actions. There is, I think, a case for a division of labour between historical sociologists and historians working from one end of this continuum. However, there are also overlaps, and these are especially important for researchers interested in political change (including Harold, and also myself). Let me mention two matters here. First, there is

---

<sup>13</sup> O'Meara, 'The Engaged Intellectual'.

<sup>14</sup> Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius, 'Radical History and South African Society,' *Radical History Review* 46/7 (1990), pp. 13-45.

<sup>15</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 65. See also Charles Tilly, *As Sociology Meets History* (Academic Press, New York, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Harold Wolpe, 'The Liberation Struggle and Research;' Michael Burawoy, 'From Liberation to Reconstruction: Theory & Practice in the Life of Harold Wolpe,' *Review of African Political Economy* 102 (2004).

<sup>17</sup> 'Blending' might at least encourage sociologists and historians to gain respect for the strengths and complexities of each other's disciplines, something that is often lacking.

'contingency', meaning, in practice, that a structuralist argument is insufficient to explain a particular phenomenon. This might be interpreted as a chance occurrence requiring a specific, historical explanation, or it could provide a basis for some new generalisation. Secondly, there is 'balance of forces', an assessment of which is critical for the development of strategy and tactics. Such assessments can be highly complex, since they not only involve weighing different factors - some structural, some linked with agency - but also an appreciation of changes in the weights of those factors.<sup>18</sup> So, then, I am suggesting that, in grappling with certain key issues, the sociologist needs to bring structure and agency together, and must, in a certain sense, become an historian.

Back to Harold. My proposition is that, in developing a theoretical position that downplayed the significance of history – that is, the interaction between structure and agency (and, indeed, between economic structure and other variables in his first period, and between the state and others in the second) – Harold's analysis was weakened, resulting in conclusions that were inadequate.<sup>19</sup>

I want to substantiate this critique by drawing on some of my own research. The first example relates to another of his first period writings, his 1976 article on the 'white working class'.<sup>20</sup> In my view this provided a powerful response to those writers who separated workers into two classes along racial lines. Starting from an orthodox Marxist position he argued for a singular working class that included black and white workers. However, he excluded white miners, whose primary role as supervisors meant they should be regarded as members of the 'new middle class'. So far, so good. But there was a problem. This was reflected in Harold's unwillingness to 'spell out the South African class structure', arguing that concrete class analysis was still required. The difficulty was, it seems to me, that an explanation of racial division within the working class was necessary, as was shown by blacks and whites striking separately. A possible way of handling the dilemma would have been to introduce E. P. Thompson's notion of 'class experience', a concept that provided a link between class structure, on the one hand, and class culture and consciousness on the other. That is, an input from social history would have assisted in resolving a theoretical problem.

My second example comes from the 'cheap labour' article. His analysis here rested on two claims. First, he says that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, South African capitalism prospered because the cost of reproducing mining labour was subsidised by subsistence farming. Secondly, by the 1930s, capitalism had undermined this rural economy, so that it became necessary to buttress the system using the new forms of domination associated with post-1948 apartheid rule.<sup>21</sup>

Here, I have two observations, one relating to each of his two claims. Firstly, the development of a cheap labour *system*, which I want to distinguish from the mere employment of oscillating migrant labour, was more 'contingent' than he assumes. For the system to work, strict rules limiting permanent settlement on the mines were required, but when these were introduced, in 1908, it was at the behest of the police,

---

<sup>18</sup> In periods of crisis, issues of consciousness and agency become relatively more important.

<sup>19</sup> I should add that, whilst my assessment draws on some criticism coming from social history, in turning their backs on structural constraints and determinants most social historians have been unable to contribute to an account of the longer-term factors shaping South African history. I am tempted to say, with Carr, that history now needs to become more sociological.

<sup>20</sup> Harold Wolpe, 'The "White Working Class" in South Africa.'

<sup>21</sup> Ari Sitas recently listed six substantial critiques of this position, arguing that the extent of the debate reflected the seminal importance of Harold's initial case. It would serve no purpose to repeat the various these here.

and against the initial opposition of the Chamber of Mines.<sup>22</sup> Here 'contingency' might have been useful as an argument, though the bans were not contingent in the sense of a chance happening, but rather a result of a desire to maintain order around the mines. That is, they were politically rather than economically motivated, not something that could have been incorporated within Harold's frame of analysis.

Secondly, an explanation for the move from segregation to apartheid must be very much more complicated than that he presented. My own account highlights two factors. The first was that Jan Smuts's labour policies produced unrest among black workers and opposition from white workers, and that, taken together, these undercut his support among white voters. This, again, is a contingent explanation, and again it is one resting upon a largely-political dynamic. The second was that, in contrast to Harold's assessment (though also that of other writers), capitalist development was highly uneven, and that, even in manufacturing, there was substantial dependence on migrant labour. This exacerbated divisions within the ruling class, making it difficult, if not impossible, for Smuts to resolve the crises that had developed. Again contingency was important, though this time it was rooted in economic considerations that Wolpe had not considered.

The implications of these points are considerable, for if the migrant labour system and the coming of apartheid were both, to a significant degree, contingent on political dynamics, then perhaps, too, it was possible to delink white domination and cheap labour; that is, apartheid could be ended without the overthrow of capitalism.

To be fair to Harold, in 1970s he could not possibly have incorporated historical research that was not undertaken until much later. Moreover, in good measure, my criticisms about politically-rooted contingency are ones that could have been incorporated within the analysis advanced in his book (which was published in 1988). Focusing on the state, this argued bluntly: 'the capitalist economy and the system of white domination stand in a contingent relationship.' This opened up the possibility, at some point in the future, of apartheid being dismantled whilst preserving capitalism intact (albeit in a weakened form). However, because the book shifted so sharply in the direction of political structures, problems remained. So, he would, I suspect, have had difficulty integrating the economic aspects of my analysis of apartheid's genesis. Interestingly, perhaps, the periodisation that the book presents is one that starts in 1948.

More significantly, the book retains Harold's continuing interest in theory at the expense of history, producing blindspots in relation to agency. Whilst not as pronounced as in his first-period writings, this flaw is implicated in the problematic nature of the book's conclusion:

there are two reasons why a negotiated settlement with the regime seems not possible [he presumably means 'not possible' in the near future]. The first relates to the narrow limits of the possible demands of the liberation movement as set out in the Freedom Charter. The second relates to ... the possibility [that] negotiation would be undermined by its continued control of the army and security forces.

---

<sup>22</sup> Peter Alexander, 'Oscillating Migrants, "Detribalised Families" and Militancy: Mozambicans on Witbank Collieries, 1918-1927,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27(3) (2001). On the collieries, there was a similar disjuncture between the ban on married workers and the views of the owners (though here the regulations were not introduced until 1925, by which date about a quarter of African workers in the Witbank areas, the main coal district, had settled on or close to the mines).

I will return to this prognosis, which was clearly wrong (though no commentators I know got it right). Here it will suffice to note that, as an account of balance of forces it is primitive, and that it hinges on a very restricted and idealistic notion of agency, the demands of the Freedom Charter. Only eight months after the book's completion in February 1987, and prior to its publication, Harold was a participant, with Thabo Mbeki, in the first of a series meetings that would pave the way to a negotiated settlement. Harold himself had become an agent of change. He would have had to revise his analysis, and maybe, in time, his separation between sociological theory and historical practice. But, by the end of 1987, he had more pressing and interesting concerns.

### Now my second comment: Internationalism

My case here is much easier to make. Intellectually, Harold was a nationalist. His entire body of work, so far as I am aware, focused on South Africa. Occasionally there are references to, for instance, Latin America, but these are used in support of a theoretical proposition rather than a component of new analysis. International influences are present at an abstract level, where theory is not examined critically in the light of its own historical context. From the early 1970s, Immanuel Wallerstein was making important theoretical break-thoughts in the study of social structures, doing so through an understanding of the *world-system*. Back in 1956, that most imaginative of sociologists, C. Wright Mills, was proclaiming: 'the history that now affects every man [sic] is *world* history.' And, of course, these assessments hark right back to Karl Marx's 1848 call for 'workers of the *world*' to unite. This kind of international framing is simply not present in Harold's work, and this is its most significant shortcoming.

As a general criticism, other writers have not, to the best of my knowledge, focused attention on this matter. There have been two partial exceptions. The first is Robin Cohen, who noted that 'Wolpe misses the point that up to 1973 nearly 80 per cent of the African mine workers were from outside South Africa.'<sup>23</sup> His figure needs some qualification, since, before 1943, the majority came from within the country. However, this nuance strengthens the contention that the mines were addressing their labour problems by recruiting externally, so that, in terms of maintaining a supply of cheap labour, apartheid was not as critical as Harold assumed.<sup>24</sup> Then there was Mahmood Mamdani's argument that it was necessary to understand the *form* of political domination that operated in South Africa, and that this could be advanced through a comparison with colonialism elsewhere in Africa.<sup>25</sup>

With respect to the weakness in Harold's 1988 prognosis, already quoted, part of the problem lies with an absence of international dimensions. These might have included the growing inability of the South African economy to compete internationally, especially with other newly industrialised countries; the impact of solidarity, and, eventually, pressure on the regime from western allies; and, on the other side, pressure on the ANC from a weakened and détente-oriented USSR.

---

<sup>23</sup> Robin Cohen, *The New Helots: Migrants in the International Division of Labour* (Gower, Aldershot, 1987), p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> By 1972, after which date Malawi halted supplies of migrants, only a quarter of mine workers came from South Africa, and the significance of the rapid rise in local workers deserves further attention.

<sup>25</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy Of Late Colonialism* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1996). Moreover, a comparative study of liberation elsewhere in Africa, with, generally, black elites replacing white ones, would also have been instructive.

Attempting to distinguish between local and international dynamics requires a comparative approach to history and sociology. There have been many revealing studies using South Africa, or some aspect of South Africa, as a comparator,<sup>26</sup> but I would like to give four brief examples taken from my own work.

First, through a comparison of South African and US labour movements during the second world war, I realised that I had overlooked a key factor affecting worker militancy in the former.<sup>27</sup> This was the impact of generational difference, with new female and black workers far more likely to strike than the well-established white men, whose unions had accepted the priorities of Smuts's government. The role of generation in shaping history is an issue worthy of further attention.

Secondly, following from a comparison of black and white miners in Alabama and Transvaal, it was possible to advance an argument about the significance of the US Civil War and Anglo-South African War in shaping labour relations.<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, together with a collaborator, I investigated pass laws in South Africa and China.<sup>29</sup> The analysis highlighted the fact that the racialised form of the laws in this country was a key factor in unifying black opposition to apartheid across class lines. It also helped explain rapid economic growth in China.

Finally, recent work on coal miners in South Africa and India has shown that, by the 1930s, daily pay in India was about half that received by South Africa's workers.<sup>30</sup> The concept of 'cheap labour' which involves a comparison with white South African labour, is parochial, and, in my view, it should now be discarded.

When Wallerstein visited South Africa in 1996 he noted 'a certain parochialism and South African exceptionalism.'<sup>31</sup> I have no reason to think he was wrong, and this is what one might expect given the intensity of struggle in the country, and, perhaps, also the impact of academic boycotts. However, it is unfortunate that Harold, the country's leading sociologist, had not bucked the trend. Had he lived he may well have done so. Internationalising our analyses in such a way that we do not lose the comparative advantages gained from drawing on local experience is, perhaps, the biggest challenge facing South African sociology today.

### **So, to my final comment: Intellectuals**

In his praxis statement, Harold argued:

---

<sup>26</sup> For some discussion of the literature, see Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern, 'Introduction: Comparing Race and Labour in South Africa and the United States,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30(1) (2004).

<sup>27</sup> Peter Alexander, 'South African and US Labour in the era of World War II: Similar Trends and Underlying Differences,' in Rick Halpern and Jon Morris (eds), *American Exceptionalism: US Working-class Formation in an International Context* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Peter Alexander, 'Race, Class Loyalty and the Structure of Capitalism: Coal Miners in Alabama and the Transvaal 1918-22,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30(1) (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Peter Alexander and Anita Chan, 'Does China Have an Apartheid Pass System?' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30(4) (2004).

<sup>30</sup> Peter Alexander, 'Women and Coal Mining in India and South Africa, c1900-1940.' (Worlds of Labour Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Eddie Webster, email to author 30 March 2004.

the priorities defined at the political level became also the priorities of social research. But, and this is the fundamental point which cannot be overemphasised, not as conclusions but as starting points for investigation.<sup>32</sup>

It is this 'fundamental point' that makes Harold so admirable. He was relevant, rigorous and courageous, and his bravery was not just about challenging the apartheid state, it was also, and more impressively, a willingness, where necessary, to stand up to his own comrades.<sup>33</sup> He was the kind of gutsy, engaged intellectual that many of us would like to be, but few accomplish.<sup>34</sup>

But what does one make of his first principle, the need for agendas to be politically determined? It will be recalled that earlier I noted that Harold contrasted structure and consciousness, associating the former with theoretical research and the latter with history. He also presented the study of consciousness in another way, one that underlined his rather dismissive approach to history.<sup>35</sup> 'To a considerable degree,' he argued, 'the national liberation movements through their organisations and through the activities of other organisations are well aware of what we might call the level of consciousness.' That is, researchers should limit themselves in two ways: avoid theory that is not politically driven, and do not touch 'consciousness' (which is usually more concrete and hence controversial).

The problem with this approach is most apparent if we return, once more, to the conclusion in Harold's book: a negotiated settlement 'seems not possible'. This conclusion rested in large part on his sense of the liberation movement's 'bottom line', which he detailed as 'the dismantling of the giant corporations', 'radical redistribution' of land, and 'massive redistribution of resources in education, welfare, housing, health and so forth.' Clearly he got it wrong and, doubtless, a range of factors was at work, but a key one relates to his 'praxis'. If one regards 'the organisations' as the solution, rather than a potential problem, why analyse them, especially if, *a priori*, you have ruled out any need to study consciousness? The book contained a compelling methodological argument against 'analytical closures' that existed in the writings of others, but Harold himself had an analytical closure, a very damaging one, he was unwilling to analyse his own party.

I need to clarify my position here, for I am not arguing against sociologists developing agendas on the basis of movement priorities. On the contrary, if one wants to practice research in the interests of the poor and exploited this must be done. But there are certain conditions. First, we should not mistake organisations for classes and mass movements, even though they may be related. In Harold's case, 'the organisations' were separated from the masses by illegality and exile, the SACP was relatively small (not a mass party), and the ANC was a multi-class organisation containing diverse interests. Secondly, intellectuals should be left to formulate their own

---

<sup>32</sup> Harold was writing about the position in Mozambique, but he was sympathetic to the position. Also Saleem Badat (2001) notes: 'Wolpe was insistent that intellectual enquiry had to "produce knowledge for politics, without cutting itself off from the objective and scientific investigation of the world."' See 'Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture Presented by Professor S. Badat at the Biennial Conference of the South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education, held at the Peninsula Technikon, July 1999.'

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, *African Communist*, the main SACP journal refused to publish his major articles.

<sup>34</sup> In broad terms, his position involved making a distinction between objectivity and neutrality, and of challenging the postivist defence of neutrality. Under apartheid, neutrality meant not opposing the old regime; a political, and, arguably, an immoral decision.

<sup>35</sup> This is possibly a criticism of Charles van Onselen in particular, because he is specifically mentioned in the book.

research questions, though this might be done in consultation with movement leaders and activists.<sup>36</sup> This may produce some useless research, but it is the only guarantee of developing theories in which the 'sociological imagination' can be applied to a changing world that exists beyond the priorities of the movement. Thirdly, researchers should be prepared to study agency and consciousness, not only for their inherent value, but also because this can point a way to new theory. Marx, for instance, came to an understanding of class through direct experience of workers' organisations.

After 1988, Harold continued to focus his research on a political priority, education. Now, however, there was a difference from his praxis position. For the first time he became involved in empirical research, giving him contact with the people he had championed from afar, and forcing him to grapple with thorny problems and political obstacles. In his two final articles, both published in 1995, one senses some frustration. In the first, on institutional transformation, he concludes by arguing: '[the] critical and radical thrust of the university [specifically UWC] should be implemented through a strong intellectual development which does not only serve an instrumental role – [an] Institute of Social Theory ... is one example.' He clearly wanted to move beyond his policy work to play a more critical role as an intellectual. In the second, an analysis of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), he is more trenchant. He argues that the programme, rather than articulating a vision for 'incremental changes' that produce a 'revolution in the social order', takes, as its starting point, 'a consensual model of society ... that permits starkly different and contradictory goals to be accommodated'. He says that the RDP White Paper 'represents a very significant compromise to the neo-liberal, "trickle down" economic policy preferences of the old regime', and concludes with a quote from two other analysts, who suggest that, for the poorest 60-70 per cent, the RDP 'will deliver little or nothing for many years to come.'<sup>37</sup>

Of course we cannot know how Harold would have developed his thinking. But would he have supported the GEAR policy that was introduced only two months after his death? I doubt this very much. Would he have identified himself with the SACP and COSATU against the government? I think so. I feel, too, that he might have sympathised with the following assessment advanced by his old friend, the Rivonia trialist and principal author of the Freedom Charter, Rusty Bernstein: 'It [the ANC] has impoverished the soil in which ideas leaning towards socialist solutions once flourished, and allowed the weed of "free market" ideology to take hold.'<sup>38</sup> What we can say with confidence is that whatever our criticisms of Harold, we are very much the weaker for the loss of his towering intellect. Oh, that we now had him and his Institute of Social Theory to help us understand our contemporary world!

---

<sup>36</sup> I am speaking here about 'movement intellectuals,' who, by definition, are always concerned with 'what is to be done?' See Colin Barker and Laurence Cox, "'What Have the Romans Ever Done for us?'" Academic and Activist Forms of Movement Theorizing' (2002), accessed from *Tools for Change*, [www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange](http://www.iol.ie/~mazzoldi/toolsforchange).

<sup>37</sup> Harold Wolpe, 'The Debate on University Transformation'; Harold Wolpe, 'The Uneven Transition from Apartheid in South Africa.'

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in John S. Saul, *The Next Liberation Struggle* (Between the Lines, Toronto, 2005), p. 234.

## **Lastly, then, something about that world, and how it might affect our conclusion**

Our ideas are shaped by the time and place of our existence. For Harold, the key factors were, I think:

1. His location in exile, with his disconnection of sociology and history reflecting his separation from South Africa.
2. His over-riding commitment to a struggle that was, necessarily, national, and thus to theory and methodology that were geographically bounded. And,
3. His identification of liberation organisations as the main agent of change, producing a praxis that was insufficiently critical.

Ours is a different world. First, we are not working under the constraints of exile and tyranny, and detachment from lived experience no longer makes any sense practically or theoretically. Secondly, with the ending of apartheid, South Africa has become far more integrated into the world economy and global culture. Comparative research has become more important and relatively easier to practise. And, thirdly, the main liberation organisation has become a governing party, and radical researchers must look elsewhere to locate agents of progressive change.

I would like to expand on the second of these points. Globalisation has, I have argue elsewhere, entered a new phase.<sup>39</sup> Firstly, growing inequality is apparent almost everywhere. In South Africa, with increased unemployment, more than 50% of the labour force now survives on less than R500 per month. Meanwhile, the head of Shoprite Checkers, Whitey Basson, receives about R5 million a month. Secondly, the US economy is experiencing a long-term decline, and is becoming increasingly dependent on loans from other countries. Its political hegemony is being undermined and we can expect growing instability.<sup>40</sup> Thirdly, the combination of inequality and wars has produced counter-hegemonic politicisation on a mass scale (notably in Latin America). This has increasingly gained an international dimension (key events being Seattle and the unprecedented international protests against the invasion of Iraq in 2003).

Alongside these changes there has been a decline in the post-modernist theorisation that, within sociology, probably provided the dominant paradigm in the later decades of the last century. It was recently demonstrated that sometime in the late 1990s the concept simply dropped out of use,<sup>41</sup> and, as Alex Callinicos argues: 'the debate has moved on, less because of some decisive theoretical refutation ... than because the worldwide rebellion against globalization has changed the intellectual agenda.'<sup>42</sup>

Within this debate, we in South Africa have the opportunity to make a significant contribution. This is an ambitious claim but in my view it is time to be ambitious. Mostly, we will fall short of our objectives or get things wrong, but, unless we in the South strive to be heard, the social sciences will continue to be dominated by people with ideas shaped by proximity to the world's rich. Waning US hegemony will impact

---

<sup>39</sup> Peter Alexander, 'Globalisation and new Social Identities: a Jig-saw Puzzle from Johannesburg,' in Peter Alexander, Marcelle C. Dawson and Meera Ichharam (eds), *Globalisation and new Identities: A View From the Middle* (Jacana, Johannesburg, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Curve of American Power,' *New Left Review* 40 (2006).

<sup>41</sup> Steve Matthewman and Douglas Hoey, 'What Happened to Postmodernism?' *Sociology* 40(3) (2006).

<sup>42</sup> Alex Callinicos, *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (Polity, Cambridge, 2003).

on the confidence of its intellectuals, and we, like our counterparts in India and Brazil, can influence the way people think, not only here, but internationally too.

The main requirements for this are, I believe, threefold. First, we should relate theory to lived experience here in South Africa. Secondly, we should extend our theorisation by means of international comparison. And, thirdly, like Harold, we must be meticulous, courageous and committed to social change.

Baie dankie, ngiyabonga, kealeboha, thank you.

### **Harold Wolpe: a select bibliography**

- Wolpe, H. 1970. 'Some Problems Concerning Revolutionary Consciousness.' *Socialist Register*.
- Wolpe, H. 1970. 'Industrialisation and Race in South Africa'. In S. Zubaida (ed). *Race and Racism*. London: Tavistock Press.
- Wolpe, H. 1972. 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power: From Segregation to Apartheid'. *Economy and Society* 4(1): 431. Reprinted in Beinart, W. & S. Dubow. *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Wolpe, H. 1975. 'The Theory of Internal Colonialism – The South African Case'. In I. Oxaal, T. Barnett & D. Booth (eds). *Beyond the Sociology of Development*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wolpe, H. 1976. 'The "White Working Class" in South Africa'. *Economy and Society* 5.
- Asad, T. & H. Wolpe. 1976. 'Concepts of Modes of Production'. *Economy and Society* 5.
- Legassick, M. & H. Wolpe. 1977. 'The Bantustans and Capital Accumulation in South Africa'. *Review of African Political Economy* 7.
- Wolpe, H. 1978. 'A Comment on 'The Poverty of Neo-Marxism''. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 4(2).
- Wolpe, H. (ed). 1980. *The Articulation of Modes of Production: Essays from Economy and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Wolpe, H. 1985. 'The Liberation Struggle and Research'. *Review of the African Political Economy* 32.
- Wolpe, H. 1985. 'The Liberation Struggle and Research'. *Review of African Political Economy* 32.
- Wolpe, H. 1985. 'Political Strategies and the Law in South Africa: Analytical Considerations'. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12(1).

- Wolpe, H. 1986. 'Class Concepts, Class Struggle and Race'. In J. Rex & D. Mason (eds). *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wolpe, H. 1986. 'National and Class Struggle in South Africa'. In *Africa's Crisis*. London: Institute for African Alternatives.
- Wolpe, H. 1988. *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*. London: James Currey
- Wolpe, H. 1988. 'Race and Class in the National Struggle in South Africa'. In M. van Diepen. (ed). *The National Question in South Africa*. London: Zed.
- Wolpe, H. 1995. 'The Debate on University Transformation in South Africa: The Case of the University of the Western Cape'. *Comparative Education* 31(2): 275-292.
- Wolpe, H. 1995. 'The Uneven Transition from Apartheid in South Africa'. *Transformation* 27.
- Wolpe, H. 1996. 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid'. In Beinart W. & S. Dubow. *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa*. London: Routledge.

I am grateful to Lauren Basson for her assistance in preparing this bibliography.