

# THE ENGAGED INTELLECTUAL AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA: THE LIFE AND WORK OF HAROLD WOLPE

**Dan O'Meara**

Département de science politique, Université de Québec à Montréal

Address to the Inaugural Conference of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust

“The Political Economy of Social Change in South Africa”

University of the Western Cape, 1-2 April 1997

## **Introduction**

In 1980, some two months after the assassination of Walter Rodney, I received a letter in Tanzania from a close friend and former colleague, the Zaireois historian and militant Jacques Depelchin, who was then working in Maputo. Jacques wrote: "I still can't believe that Walter Rodney is dead". Sixteen years later, Jacques was in the United States. He was the first person I called with the news of the death of Harold Wolpe, Jacques being the very few people I knew in North America whom I felt I would share my sense of what this devastating loss would mean. Once again Jacques repeated, almost word for word, what he had written about Walter Rodney - "I can't believe what you are telling me, that Harold is dead! Its too soon for him to die!"

It seems to me that in his instinctive reaction, Jacques Depelchin put his finger on the significance of Harold's life and work. Neither Jacques nor Harold were, what we used to call in Dar es Salaam, Rodney-ites. But both had a deep recognition of the profound significance of the man's life and work. I'm not sure that Harold himself would have appreciated the comparison. But I am going to make it nonetheless, because in the end, it seems to me, that following the death of a prominent intellectual, theorist and activist, the meaning of that person's life becomes constructed out of the different ways in which the people who lived and worked with that person remember him or her.

And like Walter Rodney, Harold Wolpe's life and his work were monumental. Walter Rodney transformed and then helped to shape the way in which generations of intellectuals and activists interpreted Africa's past, its present and its future. Equally, Harold Wolpe's work and actions played a fundamental role in revolutionising the way in which social scientists and activists in the struggle against apartheid understood both the workings of South African society and the appropriate ways to change it. Though he never occupied a leading position in the liberation movement — indeed he declined formal political office throughout his life — through his remorseless intellect and prodigious capacity for analytical synthesis, Harold was without any doubt whatsoever one of the architects of "the new South Africa". His work quite literally reshaped the way in which vast numbers of people saw apartheid South Africa, and in doing so, made a huge contribution to doing away with it. I also have few doubts that were he still alive, he would also be among the leading analysts of the process of transformation in this country since April 1994. The new South Africa cries out for the kind of rigorous critical analysis to which Harold subjected the old, apartheid, South Africa.

If Harold's work influenced generations of South African activists, it has defined an entire epoch in Southern African social science. I will come back to this in a moment. But the power of Harold's work lay not only in what he had to say, but also how he said it. Harold was quiet simply one of the most generous, one of the warmest, and one of the best people I have ever known. His enjoyment of life was immense, and his ability to laugh at his own foibles was one of his most endearing characteristics. The generosity of his spirit made him a magnificent

teacher. This was evident both in a formal classroom setting, as well as in his remarkable capacity for constructive criticism.

As a critic, Harold exemplified the very reverse of the now well-known punch-line of one of the famous jokes loved by his best friend and longtime comrade, Joe Slovo: "Comrade! We in the GDR find that when you self-criticise some people, they don't like it". I have never been able to work out how Harold did it, whether it was in tone, in body language, in his evident humanism. But to have your work criticised by Harold Wolpe was a unique, and always positive experience. Somehow he managed the impossible. He could, and WOULD, take one's work to pieces with a pitiless logic. He would point out every last ambiguity, all the weakness, the inconsistencies, and logical contradictions, the flawed assumptions — all that had not been thought out, or in one of his favourite, almost signature expressions, all that was inadequately "theorised". And he would seem to know, better than you did yourself, what it was you were trying to say, and why you had been unable to say it coherently.

The cumulative effect of all of this should have been devastating, but it never was. Harold managed to leave the people whose work he criticised with the sense that despite all of this, they had somehow achieved something of real worth, and that they now had a much clearer idea of how to proceed, how to make the piece even more worthwhile.

This unique Wolpe cocktail of penetrating intelligence stirred with a generosity of spirit, made a huge difference to the lives of many, many people. At the Memorial service held for Harold by the ANC at St. George's Cathedral on Jan 29 last year, I was struck by the fact that so many people referred to Harold as their mentor. He certainly played that role my life. In no small way I owe much of my own intellectual development to his towering influence, criticism, encouragement and advice. He is still the posthumous presence by which I measure the value of anything that I write. Every time I read something I have written, I ask myself the question of how would Harold react to this.

### **The impossibility of an appreciation**

So, I want to thank AnnMarie and Peta Wolpe for having invited me to speak today. It is a privilege and an honour which I feel very keenly. I trust that they will understand however that, presumably along with everybody else gathered here, I wish profoundly that I were not here today. We all wish that Harold had not, quite literally, worked himself to death, that he was still working on education policy to this day, and that he could turn his extraordinary brain to a critical analysis of post-apartheid society.

All of this means that to try to do justice to the life and work of Harold Wolpe, all in the space of a paper of readable length, is an impossible task. I say this for two reasons. Firstly, Harold's life and work were so rich, his accomplishments so many, his contribution both to the struggle and to our understanding of South African society of such an order, that he would make an admirable subject for a serious intellectual biography. This is not the place to even begin to such a task.

Secondly, however, the task is beyond my knowledge of Harold's life. Many people knew him far better than did I, in all the various stages of his career — be it his legal work connected with the struggle up till his arrest in 1963; his work as a sociologist in Britain, 1964-1991; and his work on education policy for a democratic South Africa, from 1977 until his death. I knew him only in the second of these roles, and during the early stages of the third.

However I knew Harold long and well enough to be certain that he himself would have resisted reducing his life purely to its public dimensions. Anyone who knew Harold soon became aware that his life with AnnMarie, Peta, Tessa and Nicolas was the central element of his own sense of self. And he was painfully aware of something that AnnMarie has herself written and spoken about — the price that she, Peta, Tessa and Nicolas had paid for some of Harold's political choices.

I do not want to enter onto the family's terrain here, but I do feel that any account of Harold's life and work would be entirely inadequate if it focussed only on the public. Pushed — as he himself was the first to acknowledge — by AnnMarie, Harold was one of the first men I knew to acknowledge the justice of the feminist critique of the old Marxist political orthodoxy, to

recognise that the personal is as profoundly political as the public, and that public relations of domination and exploitation are equally located in the family.

The Wolpe's family life is their own affair, not ours. But I do want to say that I had the very great pleasure and privilege to live in the Wolpe household in London for two months in 1979, and again on passing visits to London over the next few years. All five of them were the warmest and most welcoming of hosts, making their home in Muswell Hill the most agreeable temporary accommodation I have ever had. Staying with all the Wolpes, I learned that the warmth of Harold's public persona was matched by the great warmth of the entire family. It was clear to me that whatever their petty quarrels and conflicts, this was a family bonded by real love, caring and humour. To pay tribute to Harold's life and work, we need to pay tribute to all of its dimensions.

So, this was an immensely rich and treasured life. Confronted with the fullness of Harold's absent presence (or is it a present absence?), I cannot in all honesty do what AnnMarie and Peta have asked of me — give an overall appreciation of the full range of Harold's life and work. This must necessarily be a collective undertaking, a meaning constructed out of the different senses that many of us hold, of Harold's life and work.

Rather, I want to do two things here, at this conference. The first consists of a brief and schematic overview of my purely subjective understanding of the significance of Harold's work as a theorist of South African society in the period of apartheid. I am aware that I will be leaving big blanks and that others need to fill in, or even contest, my rendering of this part of his career. The second is an ancillary contribution, my real homage to Harold: an attempt to use my own understanding of the logic of the insights of Harold's overall theoretical project to pose the question of the theoretical and practical lessons to be drawn in the new South Africa from the experience of a central feature of the old South Africa — Afrikaner nationalism.

In the time that remains to me, I can accomplish only the first of these tasks. The second is available in a paper, hopefully circulated by the organisers.

### **The engaged social scientist**

I hope that the amour propre of none of this present august assembly of intellectual luminaries will be offended when I say that Harold Wolpe was possessed of the sharpest intellect it has yet been my privilege to encounter. But, Harold hated both hagiography and individualism. He would have been the last to expect us to speak well of him and of his work, simply because he is dead. It would have been important to him that we were honest in our assessment of his intellectual work and achievements.

I will come back to this point in a moment, but here I also wanted to stress something that, as a good Marxist, Harold would also have been the first to acknowledge — he did not work in isolation. His theoretical achievements were not the innocent product of his immaculate intellect. It seems to me that three sets of contexts gave Harold's work the particular edge that he managed to achieve.

#### **a. Harold Wolpe and the national liberation movement**

The first, and probably most important, was Harold's own overt and direct political engagement, quite literally till the day he died. Harold never saw himself as a "mere academic". He loathed and distrusted the widespread use of the term "academic Marxism" in the 1970s. Though I never discussed this question with him, I am convinced that he would have been in sharp disagreement with the privileged indifference, the relativism and apolitical stance of much currently fashionable post-modernism and post-structuralism. Harold Wolpe believed profoundly, as I would assume do most of the people in this room, that mere theorising for the sake of theorising was a futile and self-indulgent exercise, a luxury available only to those with tenured posts and enough to eat. In the words of the famous thesis on Feuerbach, the point was — and remains — to change the world.

For Harold theory was always connected to, and ultimately about, practice. He was, after all, himself a longstanding member of both the ANC and the SACP. He saw his theoretical work as an integral part of his membership of both organisations. He was equally clear-eyed — in private if not always in public — about the shortcomings of both. And, since we owe it to Harold's memory to be honest about this, he realised the price he paid for his insistence on theoretical rigour, particularly in terms of how he and his ideas were viewed by much of the SACP hierarchy.

With the notable exception of Harold's great friend Joe Slovo, during the 1970s and much of the 1980s, the SACP simply ignored — when some of its leading members were not actively denigrating, I heard many of them doing so myself — Harold's profound contribution to the way in which political activists at home were conceiving of South African society. And if the Party has belatedly embraced the vast importance and relevance of Harold's work, at least some of its leading members still do not bother even to get the minor details right. Thus the official spokesman for the ANC at the January 29 ANC Memorial at St. Georges Cathedral, himself a prominent member of the SACP Central Committee — persistently referred to Harold as having taught at Sussex University in Britain, when in fact he was barely ever in Brighton, teaching instead at Essex University.

I include this little anecdote because it seems to me hugely revealing of the relationship between Harold and "the movement". As AnnMarie herself felt obliged to point out at that memorial service, Harold never toed the Party's line when he felt it was wrong. However, as a profoundly committed intellectual, Harold believed that change in South Africa could only be achieved through organised political action. He saw it as his duty to be part of that organised movement, and said so repeatedly to all of its critics on the left.

He also tried to use his own theoretical work in the service of that movement. The results were sometimes mixed. Written and widely circulated in the early 1970s, Harold's paper on the SACP's programmatic theory of "Internal Colonialism" (Wolpe 1975a) was an attempt to introduce some theoretical rigour into what was a purely descriptive analogy — as Joe Slovo was soon to acknowledge (Slovo 1976). In my mind, this paper remains the most coherent critique of the theory of internal colonialism ever written. It certainly helped push Slovo himself to attempt to present a theoretically more coherent version of the SACP's "two-stage" theory of revolution (Dubula 1985). However, in the concluding section of this paper, an attempt to use the theory of articulation of modes of production to demonstrate the pertinence of internal colonialism, Harold tied himself up in terrible knots.

Late one night in Tanzania in 1977, I raised with him the extraordinarily contradictory nature of this piece. I should add that we were sitting on a moonlit beach under a palm tree, that we were both somewhat euphoric having just won what seemed to us an important and difficult battle in the local ANC education committee, and to celebrate, had both had quite a lot to drink. So each was being more frank with the other over the nature of our political commitment than we might normally have been. In this spirit, Harold immediately acknowledged the logical gordian knot he had wound himself into with this article, telling me that it had taught him an important lesson.

The gist of this lesson was that Harold had come to realise that we could not expect that a rigorously theoretised understanding of South African society would come to be elaborated either from inside the political leadership of "the movement", or through its day to day practices. Both the ANC and the SACP were too preoccupied with the immediate political needs of the struggle to

take the exigencies of theory seriously. Here Harold was particularly clear-eyed about the capacity of much of the leadership of both organisations to deal with theory and its proponents.

But he was adamantly opposed to the view of some South African Marxist intellectuals that it was necessary to break with both the ANC and the SACP — to form a supposedly theoretically pure organisation. His reasons were two-fold. Firstly, whatever their shortcomings, both the ANC and the SACP were, in his view, profoundly rooted in mass struggle and mass political culture in South Africa. Breaking with them would mean breaking with the political culture of the masses, rejecting the existing mass culture for some idealist version of what intellectuals wished it would be — to parody Bertholt Brecht, electing a new, and ideologically pristine, people. Harold believed that such a project rested on a theoretically unacceptable, and profoundly un-Marxist, "essentialism" — the notion the working class was possessed of an instinctive revolutionary essence. In such a view, all that one was required to do was dangle before the working class a "pure" revolutionary Marxist programme, and they would spontaneously rise en masse. Harold saw this as both deluded and arrogant — that intellectuals could somehow themselves arrive at the "correct" formulations, divorced from the actual consciousness of the masses. He also saw it as profoundly divisive and sectarian. To this day, I remain persuaded by his argument.

This meant that for Harold, the elaboration of a coherent Marxist theoretical understanding of South Africa was possible only through involvement in the existing national liberation movement. In his view, intellectuals had to walk a tightrope. On the one hand, simply to earn the right to be heard — and Harold had indeed earned this right — intellectuals were required to contribute as ordinary members to the daily and often tedious work of a political organisation, On the other hand, they were to continue with their intellectual work, using the advantages and ideas of a broader intellectual environment and debate and then do what they could to have these ideas discussed, and if necessary, adapted and adopted by "the movement". This involved something peculiarly difficult for most intellectuals, knowing when to keep quiet, and perhaps even more difficult, accepting that those who did not see the world your way were not necessarily deluded, or wrong. This was how internal democracy worked. But it was not the glamorous work of writing ringing declarations and programmatic statements, it was rather the essential work of theoretical struggle.

To the extent that I know about Harold's work as a militant, he accomplished this kind of theoretical intervention in the movement at two levels. The first was his deep involvement with the ANC's various education policy fora, leading up to his formation of the Education Policy Unit. He believed profoundly that the struggle to define the nature of appropriate education policy was in effect the struggle over the kind of society the ANC would want to construct in South Africa. It was in this role that Harold quite literally worked himself to death.

His second was a tireless effort to raise and discuss theoretical issues in the various ANC structures in which he found himself (I cannot speak for any efforts he may have made along these lines within the SACP). Harold also recognised that his great friendship with Joe Slovo was a huge asset to him in this work. Despite a great deal of bantering denigration of "you academic Marxists", Slovo was the first member — and for a long time, the only member — of the SACP leadership to read, and to engage seriously with, the new Marxist analysis of South Africa being produced in South African and English universities — a theoretical renaissance of which Harold was, in my mind, the leading figure.

During the seven years in which I saw Harold work in various ANC committees and councils, I was struck by three qualities of his. The first was his humility. This might surprise some who knew Harold only in an academic context, a context in which he was certain of the significance of his own viewpoint, and said so — often forcefully, though never personally. Within the ANC, however, I saw Harold behaving very differently. Unlike many other intellectuals in the movement, he did not behave as if he had all the answers, as if those who were not as theoretically well-formed or as clear as he were somehow in error and should immediately cede to the superiority of his ideas. He took all comrades seriously, whatever his private opinion of them, and engaged with them.

Linked to this was, secondly, his great patience. Harold knew that the historical process of change would not necessarily follow a theoretically pure formula, that it would be a long and laborious struggle, that he would lose more battles than he won within the movement, and that the nature of democracy obliged him to abide by majority decisions with which he disagreed. While this might sound banal today, a text-book recitation of the requirements of internal democracy, it was an essential part of building a more democratic practice within the national liberation movement.

Thirdly, Harold never shied from defending his own position and, equally, of insisting on the right of all comrades to have their own ideas heard, whether he agreed with them or not. To understand the significance of this apparently simple and obvious attitude, it is important to remember the political context of clandestinity and exile. There were powerful forces in the movement which worked hard to stifle debate, which held that the programmes, and indeed any document from the leadership, were close to sacred texts, open only to one interpretation. It took courage and intellectual integrity to stand up to these forces. Harold had clearly earned the right to do so through his underground work in the 1950 and 1960s. Again, his friendship with Joe Slovo and others in the leadership certainly did not hurt him in his internal struggles within the movement. But nothing obliged him to defend the right of younger and sometimes very critical comrades to state their views and have them debated without being dismissed or disciplined.

Once again, this might not seem extraordinary today. But in the context of the 1970s and the 1980s, Harold fought for more than just the right for dissent within the movement. Though many of his intellectual adversaries might not realise this, he fought equally tenacious against a strong tendency in the movement to condemn and denounce those intellectuals who did not regard the SACP as the font of all true Marxism. While he sometimes disagreed vociferously with various of the university-based South African Marxists, he insisted within the movement that the work of some of the harshest critics of both the Party and the ANC needed to be taken seriously and discussed by the movement. It is in the sense that I regard Harold Wolpe as one of the key figures in the struggle for a more open political practice, and more democratised political discourse within the ANC.

#### **b. Harold Wolpe and the wider theoretical debate**

This points to the second context which made Harold such a powerful intellectual force. He arrived in Britain in 1963, and retooled himself as a sociologist with a largely theoretical bent. First in Bradford and in London, then at Essex University, he found himself in a unique environment. Virtually alone among the five "founding figures" who initiated the neo-Marxist revival in South African social science at the end of the 1960s — the others being the Canadian Frederick Johnstone, and three South Africans, Martin Legassick, Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido — Harold was exposed to,

involved in, and worked actively to bring to the attention of South African activists, the debates around the theoretical revival of the European left.

Most of the South African intellectuals who were in Britain during the late 1960s and much of the 1970s will speak nostalgically of the intense ferment of ideas of the time, of the extraordinary climate of debate and discussion. Harold was the best placed of all to benefit theoretically. In an era marked by the theoretical predominance of various forms of French Marxism, although he neither could read nor speak French, he studied assiduously the work of Althusser et al.

Particularly following the formation of *Economy and Society*, of which he was a founding member of the Editorial Board, Harold was engaged with a much wider set of theoretical debates than were the other South African Marxists. He helped turn *Economy and Society* into one of, if not arguably the leading left-wing theoretical journal published in the English language. This added an enormously rich theoretical complexity to his own theoretical work. It gave him assets none of the other South African neo-Marxist yet had. In this guise Harold played a central role in dragging the left-wing South African intelligentsia out of its intellectual laager, forcing it to engage with theoretical debates raised within international Marxism.

Harold's seminal 1972 *Economy and Society* article on Capitalism and cheap labour-power (Wolpe 1972) introduced into South African Marxism a concept borrowed from French Marxist anthropologists — that of the notion of the articulation of modes of production. Harold would later edit a book on this theme, to which he contributed a definitive critical overview of the concept. (Wolpe, 1980a). It bears stating that Harold's *Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power* article is probably the most influential and widely-cited theoretical text ever written on South Africa. Every sociology and politics student working on South Africa since, has been required to read this article, as have more than a few historians. Every critic of the South African neo-Marxists has been obliged to begin their critique with this article. As the SACP noted in its statement on Harold's death, the article basically launched an entire new analytical paradigm on South Africa. But it did more than that. It alerted the newly emerging "school" of "revisionist" studies of South Africa to the absolute necessity of theory.

Not everyone received this warning enthusiastically. The article also now stands as the first signpost of what would later turn into a profound division among left wing South African social scientists, the — I am still convinced — entirely false polarities of the "structuralists" vs. the "social historians". I will come back to this, as I think Harold unwittingly contributed to this polarisation, and would, as I said earlier, want us to speak honestly of him.

But to return briefly to this second context of Harold's theoretical work, his unusual exposure to non-Anglophone theoretical writings. He used his readings here to influence the debates in various other ways. Thus his critique of the facile use of the term of "the white working class" (Wolpe, 1976a), like his dissection of the instrumentalism present in the neo-Marxist writing on the state (Wolpe 1980b and 1987) not only obliged a number of people to rethink radically much of their own work, they forced an entire generation of intellectuals to situate their own writing on South Africa within a wider theoretical context.

Harold, then, obliged us all to read more widely, to think more rigorously. But, located both in time and space, there were clear limits and drawbacks to these influences. I do not wish here to get into an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the largely European-influenced debates of the 1970s,

but rather to point to a weakness which struck Harold forcefully during his 1977 sabbatical in the Law Faculty of the University of Dar es Salaam.

If the burgeoning South African neo-Marxism of the 1970s benefited from being forced to confront wider theoretical debates, its influences still remained largely European. Most of the work of the 1970s, by black and white writers alike, remained relatively blind to the tenor of the theoretical debates taking place in various centres in Africa. In a very sharp series of confrontations with the dominant "Nabudere-ite" tendency at the University of Dar es Salaam, Harold himself came to acknowledge that the South African Marxists were overly Euro-centric in their theoretical influences.

I do not want to be misunderstood here, particularly since two of the most eloquent and courageous critics of the anti-democratic practices and theoretical incoherence of the Nabudere-ite tendency in the "Dar es Salaam debate" are present at this conference — Mahmood Mamdani and Henry Bernstein. Harold was certainly far from the first to confront the absurdities of Nabudere-ism. But the experience brought him to recognise the necessity for South African Marxists to locate their theoretical writings in an African context. While, at least to my knowledge, Harold himself did not write on this issue, it was, I believe, an important factor in propelling the shift in the nature of his theoretical enquiry towards the issue of education for a democratic South Africa.

#### c. **Harold Wolpe and the renewal of South African social science**

This then points to the third context in which Harold's work evolved — the emerging neo-Marxism of the late 1960s, its blossoming in the 1970s, and the various debates within which it was engaged.

This intellectual history is now reasonably well-known, and I will not go into detail here. Suffice it to say that the early phase was marked by an attempt to criticise, and to break with, liberal concepts of race and the link between racial policy and capitalism. Focussed around the celebrated seminars on the Societies of Southern African in the 19th and 20th Centuries presided over by Shula Marks at the School of Oriental and African Studies, much of this early work was largely empirical, and some of it based on counter-factualisation. The thrust of its critique of liberal historiography was that the latter ignored class, took race for granted, and was ideologically blind to the ongoing collusion between capitalist interests and the propagation and adoption of racially exclusive policies.

At the time, Harold was the only one of the leading figures in this emerging neo-Marxism to have formally joined the liberation movement. Moreover, this work was exclusively bound to British universities — at least during the early phases. However, to all who came in contact with this attempt to recast South African social science, it was immediately obvious that the thrust of this work was profoundly political. What was being attempted was nothing less than a fundamental rewriting of South African history and a complete recasting of the way in which racism and racial policy were conceived of throughout South African history. The central preoccupation was to demonstrate the centrality of capitalism and capitalist interests to the evolution of racial policy.

The core thrust of this project was a radical rejection of the liberal notion, equally present in some Marxist writings (eg. Simons & Simons 1969), that racial policy in South Africa was somehow a pre-capitalist survival, a political imposition on the inherently colour-blind logic of the free market economy. This rejection of such notions had profound political implications. If capitalism was complicit in the construction of segregation and apartheid, then the

struggle against apartheid necessarily involved a struggle against capitalism. This meant in turn that the dismantling of apartheid involved more than simply dismantling political and social apartheid, it implied the need to dismantle the capitalism economic system which underlay and sustained apartheid.

Once again, Harold was neither the first, nor the most prolific, of this "new school" — variously labelled "revisionist" or "neo-Marxist". However he played a very specific role in its evolution, and in doing so, hugely influenced the thrust of this work (to the extent of provoking the later reaction against "theoreticism" by the "social historians"). Even during the early phase of the evolution of this new school (1969-1971), Harold's contributions were notable for their conceptual focus, and their rejection of counter-factualisation (Wolpe 1970, and 1971). That social facts were defined by theory was an early and still powerful theme. The conceptual definition of a social category was not an innocent act, but had profound epistemological implications.

During the three months in which Harold shared the house in which I was living in Tanzania, we discussed this intellectual history at length. He explained to me that his main concern had been to insist on the need for the adequate theorisation of apartheid, to break with such descriptive — and indeed empirically suspect — categories as "forced labour". He felt the need to do this since it seemed to him that much of the "radical" history was still trapped on the terrain of empiricism.

As noted above, Harold achieved this aim with a vengeance with the publication of *Capital and cheap-labour power in South Africa: From segregation to apartheid* (Wolpe, 1972). This article marked a real watershed in the evolution of South African neo-Marxist writing. It did three things to the emerging neo-Marxist debate. Firstly, it very sharply shifted the terms of the neo-Marxists' quarrel with liberalism from the terrain of the empirical to that of the explicitly theoretical and epistemological. Despite various feeble attempts, as Harold's devastating reply to one set of liberal critics made clear (Wolpe 1978), at a theoretical level South African liberalism was simply unable to respond — and to this date, I would argue, has yet to develop a theoretically coherent account of its own position.

Secondly, as hinted at above, it changed the terms of the discussions within the neo-Marxist ranks. Himself deeply persuaded by Althusser's radical anti-empiricism, Harold's work propelled epistemological issues to the centre stage. Most of the participants in the burgeoning South African neo-Marxist school now began their real theoretical education. The accusation of "empiricism" became the worst charge one could lay against anyone's work.

This was also, it should be remembered, the high point in the Althusserian moment in Anglophone Marxism world wide, a moment well summed up in the title of another widely-read journal, *Theoretical Practice*. Its results, were, I believe mixed. On the one hand, it injected an essential rigour into much of the often sloppy and largely descriptive re-conceptualisation of South African society. Thus, Harold's article on *The White Working Class in South Africa: Some theoretical problems* (Wolpe, 1976a), drew our attention not only to the problem of unproblematically mixing racial and class categories, but also to the potential political problems consequent on such sloppy conceptualisation. At this level, his insistence on the need for epistemological and theoretical coherence was, I believe, an essential corrective, and a lesson which could be learned again by contemporary South African social science.

However, even though Harold did not like the term, I would argue that some of this work did tend to "theoreticism" — the notion that theory was the only significant element in social analysis, and that so long as one got the theory

right, empirical research simply became a matter of adding the right facts. What disappeared was what a well known theoretician once called "the living soul of Marxism — the concrete analysis of concrete conditions". At its most extreme — exemplified, I would argue in a spirit of self-criticism, in an article of which I was a joint author (Davies et al 1976) — this led to a fairly reductionist form of verificationism. We set out to find the "hegemonic fraction" of the bourgeoisie — we knew it existed because Poulantzian theory said so — and in the process, reduced the class struggle to struggles within the South African bourgeoisie.

But I digress. Harold's 1972 piece on Capitalism and cheap labour-power clarified, thirdly his own specific and crucial role within neo-Marxism. Others were more prolific than he — both in quantity of output, and in the scope of the issues they researched. But nobody matched Harold's capacity for theoretical synthesis. He was, in my mind, quite simply the guardian of our theoretical conscience. While others were exploring new issues, new empirical terrain, Harold Wolpe would applaud, and encourage such work, but he would also remind us of whatever was inadequately theorised. Nobody else could play this role with anything remotely approaching Harold Wolpe's skill, because, simply put, nobody matched his own erudition.

Many will certainly not agree with me on this point, but it is in this sense that Harold Wolpe remains for me the most important South African social scientist since 1945. Others, as I have said, have made a greater contribution to our historical and contemporary knowledge of the workings of South African society. And, indeed, it must be admitted, that Harold's strange reluctance to undertake detailed empirical research — at least before he started working on education — was a major weakness in his own work, and no doubt contributed to the vociferous reaction against "theoreticism" by the social historians. But despite all of this, I would argue that other South African social scientist has produced a corpus of work which forced all of us to think as did the writings of Harold Wolpe.

## Conclusion

It is in the nature of people only to speak well of the dead. Harold Wolpe was a man with his share of human vulnerabilities and weaknesses. But I do not think that I am slipping into mere praise when I state that his Harold's was a private and public life lived to the fullest. Harold lived in interesting but difficult times, and he strove with all of his towering intellect, all of his passionate commitment to his country, to his family and to his cause, to make those times, in every sense, better ones.

I want to conclude by saying just a few words about Harold's legacy. It is fashionable, in some intellectual circles today, to decry as deluded Harold Wolpe's kind of belief in, and profound commitment to, the possibility of change and of progress. The post-modern critic sits in his or her armchair, casting an amused and disabused view on human foibles and on the futility of the work of those who would change the world. Harold Wolpe's life and work stands as a sharp rebuke to such critics. Harold struggled at more than just the level of discourse, he lived, thought and fought a life of more than mere "text". Quite simply, he put his money where his mouth was, he lived a his commitment to a set of values which I would hope that most people gathered here are not ashamed to believe were, and remain, worth fighting for.

Harold's legacy is extremely rich and valuable — one felt at so many levels by so many people in so many walks of life. More than a year after his death, he is sorely missed not just by his family, not just by others who knew and loved him. I would suggest to you that Harold's death has robbed South African social science of one of its most incisive minds. And to use his own language, Comrade Harold, the present conjuncture has not been adequately theorised. Would that your absent presence could help us do so! May the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust carry out that legacy!

## References and a select bibliography

- Bozzoli, Belinda, & Delius, Peter. 1990. "Radical History and South Africa Society", *Radical History Review*, no. 46/7
- Davies, R., Kaplan, D., Morris, M. & O'Meara, D. 1976. "Class Struggle and a Periodisation of the South African State", *Review of African Political Economy*, 7
- Dubula, Sol (pseud. for Joe Slovo). 1985. "The Stages of our Struggle", *The African Communist*
- Legassick, Martin and Wolpe, Harold. 1976. "The Bantustans and Capital Accumulation in South Africa", *Review of African Political Economy*, no, 7
- Nabudere, Dan W. 1978. *The Political Economy of Imperialism*. London: Zed Books
- n.d. *Essays on the theory and practics of Imperialism*. London; Onyx Press
- Shivji, Issa G. 1975. *Class Struggles in Tanzania*. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House
- Slovo, Joe. 1976. "South Africa — No Middle Road". In Davidson, D., Slovo, J. & Wilkinson, A. *Southern Africa: The new politics of revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Simons, H.J., & Simons, R.E. 1969. *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Wolpe, Harold. 1970. "Industrialism and Race in South Africa", in S. Zubaida (ed.), *Race and Racialism*. London: Tavistock
1971. "Class, race and the occupational structure", in S. Marks (eds.), *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Vol. 2. London: Institutue of Commonwealth Studies, London University
1972. "Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: From segregation to apartheid", *Economy & Society*, Vol. 1, no. 4
1973. "Pluralism, Forced Labour and Internal Colonialism in South Africa". Paper to the Conference on the South African Economy and the Furture of Apartheid. Centre of Southern African Studies, University of York, 30 March to 1 April

- 1975a. "The Theory of Internal Colonialism: The South African Case", in I. Oxhaal et al., *Beyond the Sociology of Development*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975
- 1975b. "Draft Notes on: (a) Articulation of Modes of Production and the Value of Labour-Power; (b) Periodisation and the State", seminar paper, University of Sussex
- 1976a. "The White Working Class in South Africa: Some theoretical problems", *Economy & Society*, Vol. 5, no. 2
- 1976b. "The Changing Class Structure of South Africa: The African Petit-Bourgeoisie", mimeo
1978. "A Comment on the Poverty of Neo-Marxism", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 4., no. 2
- 1980a. "Introduction", H. Wolpe (ed.), *The Articulation of Modes of Production*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- 1980b. "Towards an Analysis of the South African State", *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, vol. 8, no. 4
1987. *Class, Race and the Apartheid State*. Paris: UNESCO.