

Personal Reflections on Harold Wolpe as A Critical Thinker

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I want to thank the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust for inviting me to share my reflections on Harold Wolpe as a critical thinker. I consider this to be a great honour.

Milan Kundera has said in that now oft-quoted line that “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”.

I would like to think that our gathering here today, to interrogate and debate leading political, social and economic concerns of our country is also an act of struggle against power, in favour of social justice – and in this way perhaps one of the most fitting tributes to Harold and our collective memory of him.

Like so many others of my and preceding generations Harold Wolpe was a profound intellectual and personal influence.

What accounts for his enduring influence? I think a great deal of the answer lies in what feminists have rightly alerted us to, that the personal is also political. From the many personal records of individuals who knew him, including Nelson Mandela, Harold clearly comes into view already from a young age as a student activist at Wits in the mid 1940's as a deeply thoughtful individual committed to social justice based on exceptional personal and political integrity. This is so tellingly evidenced for example in the personal choices Harold made as an activist lawyer in the early 1960's which I shall return to. The personal choices he made in those dangerous political times had real consequences for him and his comrades as well as consequences of hardship for Annmarie, Peta, Tessa and Nick, the family he so deeply loved. Harold was also an academic who painstakingly and dispassionately undertook rigorous intellectual work as a leading Marxist theorist of social change and who critically aligned this intellectual work with a national liberation movement, with all the possibilities, challenges, tensions and messiness such a relationship entailed.

It is in this confluence of the personal and the political in the struggle to create a more egalitarian social order, and the real, difficult choices embedded in them, that I feel we find the power and enduring influence of Harold as a

critical thinker. The two are inseparable and I will try and capture this through the partial lens of my own experience and drawing on two pieces he wrote, one on the liberation struggle and research in 1985 and the other a critique on the RDP in 1996, a year before his untimely death.

As recounted by Saleem Badat in his paper at the first Harold Wolpe Memorial Conference in 1997 my first encounter with Harold's work was also through the text. It is perhaps a particular sign of the extent of his influence that his seminal 1972 paper on Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power, was found by me in the early 1980's in a clandestine box of banned literature of our youth movement on the Cape Flats, amongst other banned texts such as Guerrilla Warfare by Ernesto Guevara and Lenin's What is to Be Done ?

Then a high-school student I kept reading and re-reading the dense text, frustrated at not having the conceptual tools to understand this radical re-evaluation of the relationship between race and class in the South African social formation or its significance. What it identified to me though was not only a writer who was forever sandwiched in my mind somewhere between the towering revolutionary figures of Lenin and Che Guevara, and who actually seemed quite comfortably placed there, but a writer whose primary concern was the revolutionary transformation and creation of an egalitarian social order in South Africa.

I was thus somewhat in awe then, on meeting Harold for the first time in 1990 at the University of the Western Cape shortly after the unbanning of the ANC. It was for a placement at RESA, the education policy training centre that Harold founded in London with Elaine Unterhalter for training black education researchers.

Harold at this first encounter exuded an immense personal warmth but with a firm, concentrated gaze in his blue eyes that conveyed his very serious intent. As a committed UDF activist I was to learn quickly that Harold did not suffer lightly the dogmatic re-statement of the political line and the comfortable truths masquerading as political analysis found in the textbooks of political movements.

At his response to my research proposal he commenced with what was to be a characteristic clearing of the throat and he said

“ I picked up a contradiction between what you say in your argument on page 3 and what you say on page 8 and 10. But that is the lesser concern. My main

concern is your research question. You say you want to undertake research on the positive lessons a democratic South Africa can learn for overcoming illiteracy from the Nicaraguan Literacy Campaign of 1980.

But why do you assume that those intended outcomes of mass literacy will necessarily be the result of a South African literacy campaign modelled on the Nicaraguan experience? Surely they are not a given and must be subjected to an analysis of the conditions that make certain educational outcomes possible but preclude others within a given conjuncture?

“After all”, Harold went on, “Bantu Education was intended to make blacks subservient hewers of wood and carriers of water – instead it resulted in the Soweto uprising of 1976 and a spur to mass resistance to apartheid. Surely then the strategies of political movements which have progressive intentions need to be subjected to critique if they are to have the efficacy claimed of them”. I was left reeling. Harold’s questioning made me radically question the voluntarist assumptions that informed my thinking on the role of mass movements in political change: that strategies with progressive intentions could have quite opposite effects to those intended under given structural conditions. For some this was straightforward enough but for those of us steeped in the often turgid, self-propelling revolutionary discourses of the political movement it came as a revelatory shock.

What Harold was indicating was captured in a paper he published in the Review of African Political Economy in 1985 on the Liberation Struggle and Research (p.75). Harold argued, and I quote, that “theory and analysis and hence the research priorities they give rise to in the liberation movement are always problematic. That is to say neither the theory nor the analysis of the liberation movement can ever be regarded as settled but are continuously open to theoretical and empirical testing”. He went on further to argue that for committed researchers political priorities become the priorities of social research, not as “conclusions” but rather as “starting points”.

This I think marked Harold as a critical thinker. His deep commitment to achieving social justice through a political movement meant that as a committed intellectual he felt the most meaningful contribution to such a movement was constantly to interrogate its political positions and strategies and not take these as given - so as to determine whether they indeed were achieving the egalitarian goals ascribed of them. For some this again may be taken as a given - but for Harold, who never thought of himself as an individual

academic but as a conscious, critical member of a political movement, it was of inestimable importance - and lead him on occasion to lonely political places when the penetrating acuity of his analysis, such as his critique of the internal colonialism thesis in the late 1970's, put him at odds with the dogma infesting sections of the political movement in that period.

This is the second element of what stood out about Harold as a critical thinker: his willingness to hold the critics, including himself, to account. There was nothing politically self-satisfied in his approach. Some have commented on the vehemence with which Harold often defended his positions in public and the often cutting manner in which he dismissed counter arguments.

Having been on the receiving end of Harold's criticism of my work, I know how the pulse could quicken in trepidation under his intellectual scrutiny and one could be felt wanting. But one always came away feeling you had learnt something significant from the encounter, even if it was mainly discovering the huge holes in your arguments. Perhaps not surprisingly some saw this as arrogance.

I think however that Harold's intellectual vehemence stemmed from the fact that he deeply felt the strategic implications of his writing and its consequences for implementing a revolutionary strategy to overthrow the apartheid regime. He realised only too well that in revolutions people die, are imprisoned and are tortured. He felt these implications because Harold was no armchair revolutionary - he earned his stripes in the trenches of the South African political struggle - ultimately placing his own life at risk through his direct organisational support for the Rivonia armed struggle organised on these very premises here in Lilliesleaf and secondly by escaping captivity and likely very lengthy prison sentence with Arthur Goldreich, Abdulhay Jassat and Mosie Moolla under the very noses of the apartheid security police in 1963, a story rivetingly re-told in Annmaries book. The anger of the apartheid regime, whose invincibility had been badly damaged by their daring escape, meant the security police would have been willing to shoot Harold and Arthur Goldreich if required in order to re-capture them.

That was what for me accounted for the power of his tersely constructed writing: politically committed intellectuals had to labour over their formulations with critical introspection: intellectual labour is very hard work and its strategic consequences can be fatal and thus should not be taken lightly.

In the period of the 1990's Harold led the Education Policy Unit at UWC and was pre-occupied with the determination through research of policies in higher education that could serve both the purposes of development and equity for a new democratic social order. This was a period of sustained intellectual engagement, with many young black researchers including myself as well as the administrative staff at the EPU. Harold made seminal contributions here to the work of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) tasked with transforming the system of higher education.

Although respected as the leading theoretician of the movement and amongst its most able thinkers Harold was curiously often over-looked when senior positions of academic leadership arose – such as the role of a Commissioner in the NCHE. He never demonstrated any disgruntlement, working tirelessly and unreservedly for social transformation through his work on higher education policy, indeed even further spurred on. It is perhaps this side of Harold that was most hidden from the public eye: the selfless, personally gruelling manner in which he toiled inside the EPU in making his contribution, working away long after the office had closed for the day. The manner in which he under conditions of great immediacy for policy alternatives in the 1990's by the progressive movement consulted and engendered participation and ensured that everyone benefitted from such collective participation.

On the critical issues, when others may have buckled under the pressure to individual representation, Harold was in my experience selfless and a democrat. Perhaps this is not an essential feature required of a critical thinker. I would argue that it was this feature of Harold, the ability and commitment to nurture a new generation of critical thinkers, that was an additional source of his intellectual influence. This ability exemplified in Harold's practice is sorely needed, both in helping to understand our society in the democratic era which is still riven pervasively with class and social inequality. It is also desperately needed in the political movements.

The concrete analysis of the state, class alliances and strategies for social justice within a given political context, that so pre-occupied Harold in the pre-democratic era has been replaced, with rare exception, by largely descriptive accounts of figure head politics, accounts which alternatively compete for ever more lurid accounts of the scale of personal and political corruption – but which fail to systematically account for the underlying structural conditions of South African capitalism, of which the personal and corrupt behavior is an element.

In his 1995 paper, a critique of the Re-construction and Development Programme, Harold invested his intellectual energy in trying to account critically and systematically on whether the RDP indeed suggested a “fundamental transformation” of South African society.

The critical questions he posed then have perhaps even a more profound relevance today. He firstly highlighted the fact that the impressive empirical accounts of welfare, housing and educational delivery of the first democratic government could not be assessed in relation to the claimed goal of the RDP of a “fundamental transformation”, as taken on their own they represented an important but largely disparate set of sectoral objectives, but which were not clearly indicated as part of an overall agenda of social change.

The achievement of these empirical objectives of delivery was thus “perfectly consistent with something far less than systematic “fundamental transformation”, putting at issue for Harold the use of the term in the RDP. Of course it is precisely the failure of these sectoral objectives in education and welfare to be sustained in the current era, the service delivery failures, that points to the absence of a coherent strategy of systematic “fundamental transformation” which Harold drew attention to 17 years ago. What then is the over-arching political strategy for achieving fundamental transformation ?

The second question he alerts us to in his paper in the RDP is the politics of implementation, or rather an absence of its discussion. He argued that the RDP while operating on a deeply contested terrain eradicated sources of contradiction and conflict by either presuming or asserting harmony, and on the basis of this premise conceptualised the state as the unproblematic instrument of the RDP.

The state however was not a “co-ordinating agency” but represented contesting class and political interests – and the constitutional distribution of powers to provinces constituted a condition which disrupts the possibility of the state functioning as a simple instrument of policy implementation. These all served to impede the attainment of fundamental transformation goals. For Harold the democratic state in its contradictory form needed to be understood and analysed in its specificity. Surely then the state should be the subject of a number of major research projects if we are to elucidate the strategy of fundamental transformation that Harold was questioning ? This challenge is now being taken up in a number of quarters and a re-visiting of Harold’s work on the subject would be deeply rewarding I feel to these projects.

The painstaking intellectual inquiry reflected in Harold's writings such as his critique of the RDP came on the back of an exhausting work schedule that would have floored those with a lesser commitment and enthusiasm for social transformation than Harold had. It was this deep conviction of the need for a social transformation of our society which extended beyond a re-ordering of social relations to accommodate a new elite in an otherwise still unequal social system that drove Harold. And he was able to achieve this also because of the loving and devoted support he enjoyed from his family lead by Annmarie – from the pride Harold took in speaking about the family it was clear that his family were ultimately Harold's greatest inspiration and joy - a mirror image in fact of the depth of his political commitment. Without Annmarie there would be a Harold - but not perhaps the Harold as we have come to know him, Harold the "mensch", in that evocative Yiddish term. The Harold that so profoundly influenced generations of activist intellectuals. That was the extent of Annmarie's influence on Harold, the reserve of unswerving strength he drew on in tough times, and reflected in their loving bond of personal and intellectual comradeship – indeed proving that behind every successful left-wing man is a feminist woman - and why I argue that the personal, in the form of self-less commitment and integrity, and the political in the form of taking and defending positions which resist dogmatic sterility are deeply intertwined in the example of Harold - and defined him in my view as a critical thinker who lived his revolutionary commitments. We can all learn and be re-inspired by Harold example...that the point is still to change the world: for a more humane and just social order.
