

Obituary

HAROLD WOLPE (1926-1996)

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Harold Wolpe died in Cape Town on 19 January 1996, five days after his seventieth birthday and just over a year after the death of his intimate friend and lifelong comrade Joe Slovo, one of the most important figures of South African communism. Harold was an outstanding political intellectual and human being who contributed much to the cause of national democracy in South Africa in diverse ways: as a political thinker and activist, lawyer, social theorist during nearly 30 years of exile, researcher and strategist in the area of education and its reform before and after his return home in 1990.

Harold graduated with a BA in Social Studies in 1949 and an LLB in 1952 from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, where he was President of the Student Representative Council and a leading activist in the National Union of South African Students. In his splendid autobiography, Nelson Mandela recalls the intellectual and political ferment of Wits at that time, including the influence on him of the intense discussions with Harold and other young communists who were to share 'the ups and downs of the liberation struggle' (*Long Walk to Freedom*, Randburg: Macdonald Purnell, 1994: 84).

The historical moment was one marked by the accelerated social change of the war-time and post-war years, and mass resistance to white minority rule. The landmark (white) election of 1948 brought into office the Afrikaner National Party and its programme of apartheid. The Suppression of Communism Act (1950) outlawed the Communist Party (CPSA), whose Central Executive Committee decided by a majority vote to disband the party. Harold Wolpe was an important member of the illegal South African Communist Party (SACP) established in 1953, and of the Congress of Democrats, an affiliate of the Congress Alliance led by the new militant ANC of Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo. In the turbulent political years of the 1950s Harold's legal work constantly involved him in the defence of political detainees, alongside his clandestine activity.

The ANC was banned in the state of emergency declared by the apartheid regime following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960; Harold was among many political activists arrested and detained for part of that year. In 1963 the ANC suffered a devastating setback when its underground headquarters on a farm at Rivonia were raided by the police. Harold was again arrested in the wake of the Rivonia raid but subsequently escaped from prison with several other comrades, and went to Britain where he was joined by his partner AnnMarie Wolpe and their three young children. These events are grippingly narrated in Anne Marie's book, *The Long Way Home* (London: Virago, 1995).

Settling in Britain was difficult for the Wolpe family, as for many other exiles. Harold now switched career from the practice of law to the academy as a sociologist and social theorist. He was a Nuffield Foundation Sociological Scholar at the London School of Economics in 1964-65, and after periods at the University of Bradford and North London Polytechnic (now the University of North London) joined the Sociology Department of the University of Essex where he worked until his eventual return to

South Africa in 1990. In the posthumously published *Unfinished Autobiography* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996) Joe Slovo notes that in the period of exile Harold 'made a stimulating contribution to the development of the theory of our revolution; a contribution which helped inspire some of my own forays into theoretical writing' (p32). In their tribute to Harold Wolpe, the editors of the South African journal *Transformation* observed that 'although his roots were in the communist movement he assimilated the new wave of Western Marxism and decisively broke with the SACP analysis which still privileged race in the analysis of South African capitalism. His significance... [was] in the importance of introducing a new set of conceptual prisms through which to view the concrete problems of the society'.

The announcement of the seminal contribution Harold was to make came in his article on 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid' in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1972. This reformulated the problematic of class and class struggle, and its connections with the different historical moments of codification and practice of white supremacy, in the framework of shifting conditions of capital accumulation and the articulation of modes of production. This was simply the most path breaking theoretical statement in South African Marxism in the apartheid period. In the year of its publication, mass struggle in South Africa was revived by the (re)emergence of black worker militancy and the subsequent formation of independent black trade unionism that was to prove the most decisive social force in the eventual demise of apartheid. Harold's (re)insertion of class analysis at the core of national democratic revolution could not have been more timely.

His later work on education registered the impact and aftermath of the student-led Soweto uprising of 1976, another definitive moment of the struggle against apartheid. His understanding of both class and popular struggle was also carried forward in subsequent work on the state, to help define the contemporary conjuncture and its contradictions rigorously, to grasp the strategic and tactical openings they presented to the mass democratic movement. There was a series of important contributions including a critique of the 'internal colonialism' thesis of the SACP; an early recognition and ongoing analysis of class formation within the black population, and especially of the black petty bourgeoisie, and its implication for political strategy; a revisiting and synthesis of years of intense intellectual labour in his book, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* (London: James Currey, 1988).

Harold's work on education occupied much of the last ten years of his life. A key member of the ANC's London Education Committee and its National Education Council, he was involved in intense debates about, and visits to, the ANC's Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Morogoro, Tanzania, where many of the student militants who fled South Africa after Soweto resumed their schooling. At the University of Essex he established a project on Research in Education in South Africa, and edited two books of papers on educational reform after apartheid. Ronald Segal (in *The Guardian*, 22 January 1996) suggested that this project was 'the single serious and sustained exercise in the development of policy for a post-apartheid South Africa undertaken during the many years of the ANC's legal existence only in exile'. On his return to South Africa Harold became the Director of the Education Policy Unit (EPU) at the University of the Western Cape and chair of the forum which coordinates the work of five such EPUs at the national level. For reasons that are unclear, but which no doubt relate to the political tensions, frustrations and rivalries of the transition period from 1990 to 1994 and to Harold's characteristically independent, critical and rigorous stance, he was not appointed to the National Commission on Higher Education. None the less he was a leading intellectual

beacon in its deliberations, and suffered his fatal heart attack hours after completing the marathon task of writing the synthesis of the Commission's work.

While always preoccupied with the conditions and progress of the struggle in South Africa, Harold was part of, and made his own contribution to, the wider international terrain of Marxist scholarship and debate. He was a founding editor of *Economy and Society*, and edited a collection of some of its notable articles to which he also contributed an extensive and original introductory essay – *The Articulation of Modes of Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980). He was at the centre of those intellectual currents that initiated a remarkable generation of new journals in Britain in the 1970s, including *Economy and Society*, *Capital and Class*, *Critique of Anthropology*, *Radical Philosophy* and *The Journal of Peasant Studies* which he admired and enjoyed. His wide intellectual interests and committed scholarship were also communicated through, and stimulated by, his visits to the University of Dares Salaam, Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, the University of California at Berkeley and elsewhere, where many were able to benefit from contact with his distinctive combination of challenging analytical rigour, generosity of spirit, and warmth and interest, not least towards younger intellectual workers.

In recent years Harold regretted that the unremitting pressures of his work on educational policy and reform restricted the wide compass of his earlier reading, reflection and writing. An indication of his concerns, and of how much he still had to offer, is given by an article published shortly before his death in *Transformation* No.27 (1995). Titled 'The Uneven Transition from Apartheid in South Africa', it assesses the *White Paper on Reconstruction and Development* of the new democratic government as 'a programme for welfare capitalism', shows the dangers of instrumentalist conceptions of the state to the political tasks of implementing fundamental reform in South Africa, and reminds its readers that 'from the standpoint of the ANC and its allies, what is at stake is the completion of the national democratic revolution'.

Sadly, that process will lack further input from the sharp analytical instrument of his thought. Those fortunate enough to have known his friendship, and the many more who have access to him through his writings, will long continue to benefit from Harold Wolpe's contribution and example.