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The contribution of public intellectuals in defining public interest in South Africa

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Introduction

I wish to thank the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust and the Sociology of Work Project at WITS University for convening and inviting me to this important seminar. We also welcome what seems to be renewed hunger for debate in our country, including amongst progressive intellectuals and cadres of progressive organisations.

During the first decade of our freedom there has generally been a complaint about a decline in debates, particularly left debates. This has been attributed to a number of reasons, real and perceived. These include euphoria over the transition, the uncertainties accompanying all major political transitions, the emphasis on reconciliation to stabilise our democracy, a perceived ANC leadership “intolerance” of debate on major issues, a somewhat “dislocated” mass movement, and lack of appropriate public platforms for debate other than the mainstream bourgeois media. Despite major advances made during the first decade of our freedom, it is perhaps the persisting problems facing our country that are becoming a wake-up call, particularly to the left, that now we need to sober up and have more frank, critical and open debate about our transition.

What is heartening about these developments is that progressive foundations, notably the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Chris Hani Institute and the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust, lead these new progressive platforms for debate. We are confident these institutions will continue to liberate us from the suffocation we have suffered from the mainstream media, and its neo-liberal paradigm. We need to sustain these as platforms of progressive and left wing thinking, which are sorely needed in our country.

Clarifying our conceptions and definitions

Clarifying what we mean by “intellectuals,” “public” and “public interest,” is a very important dimension of this debate. The necessity to clarify these concepts is informed by the fact that, I

would argue, South African society seeks to address three deeply interrelated contradictions. These are the national (whose main content is race), class and gender contradictions, which cannot be addressed in isolation from each other. The current struggles, including ideological struggles and intellectual debates in our country, reflect the contradictory articulation and disarticulation of these three contradictions, both in terms of the paradigms we use, and our approach to the content of the issues.

It is within the above context that we need to clarify some of the concepts central in this debate. Let me start by briefly outlining what I understand intellectuals to be. I find Gramsci's description of intellectuals even more relevant in our times, and in the light of recent debates. Gramsci distinguished between "organic" and "traditional" intellectuals. Organic intellectuals are those linked to particular classes and their movements or institutions, whose role is to articulate, interpret and elaborate on the theory, strategies and objectives of such movements and institutions.

From my standpoint the organic intellectuals of the working class are the shapers of ideas in mass, trade union and political organisations, shaping their policies, strategies and tactics. They are usually "hidden" within these organisations, yet they have a huge impact in defining public interest, from the standpoint of the class they serve.

For instance the South African liberation struggle has thrown up thousands of organic intellectuals, many of whom cannot even write, and who are hardly quoted in what we sometimes regard as platforms for public intellectuals (e.g. media, journals etc). These are neither accredited with the status of being intellectuals, let alone public intellectuals. Yet they play their role of public intellectuals, within the public that is the mass of people of our country on the ground and in their respective organisations.

Let me take the case of cde Dora Tamana. She illustrates the confluence of race, class and gender. She helped pioneer in practice but also in theory, by word of mouth, through localised workshops and the training of grass-roots cadres, modern coops on the terrain of township and squatter camps. She linked practically earlier traditions of our people to a struggle to socialism – but she is completely un-acknowledged as an intellectual.

One would ordinarily expect that their views would be freely available in broader society, but in class societies it is usually not the case, as it is those who control the primary means of production and reproduction of ideas whose ideas tend to be dominant in society. South Africa is no different.

This necessarily leads to the questions of who is the public? The series in ANC Today ("The Sociology of public discourse") is correctly surfacing this issue. Unfortunately the series is

couched more as a “conspiratorial analysis”, when in fact what is required is the raising of the centrality of class and race in the sociology of public discourse in our country. One platform where the issue of class, race and gender surfaces in very interesting ways is SAFM’s “After Eight debate”. Listening to this programme the extent of the difference in views between black and white callers on political issues facing our country is striking. At the same time, one also observes the coincidence of class interest of the elite, across the colour line (albeit in their distinct racial and gender dimensions), particularly on matters concerning capital accumulation in our country.

In class societies, what normally presents itself as the “public” are the interests of those classes that control wealth and the means of communications. The issues that affect ordinary workers and the poor tend to be absent in the public arena. Even when these issues surface in the public arena, they are presented from the standpoint and the interests of the powerful. In essence, therefore, in such societies we have competing “publics.” We therefore cannot unproblematically talk about a single public, maybe we are talking about different “publics” shaped by the articulation and disarticulation, as Harold Wolpe would have argued, between the racial, class and gender contradictions in South Africa’s transition to democracy.

Flowing from the above, I would further argue that what has come to be defined as public interest depends on which “public” – is it the media, is it mass meetings, is it the bourgeoisie, is it the workers and the poor? In so far as we can talk about a single “public interest”, it is intensely contested along class, racial and gender lines. There is therefore no single public interest in a class, racialised and gendered society. Therefore “public interest” is not a single, objective, neutral phenomenon, it is heavily contested, shaped by, and in turn impacting upon, the class, racial and gender contestations in society. Again, the ANC series is strongly alluding to this important matter.

Given these realities the very notion of a “public intellectual” is not a given at all times, it is contested and being shaped by broader struggles in society. The conclusion that I can make from these reflections in relation to the topic under discussion is that, yes, intellectuals do play an important role in shaping public interest. But they do this not in an ideologically neutral manner. In addition, they make such a contribution in a manner that reinforces (or undermines) the consolidation of certain class, national and gender interests as the public interest. This is, however, not meant to suggest that there is nothing called “public interest” or broad consensus around certain public interests (e.g. a democratic South Africa, and the principle of free speech). However even such “consensus” is contested, and has different meanings for various class and social forces.

Public intellectuals, mass struggles and the public interest in the 1980s

I have chosen to reflect on one particular period in the 1980s about the role of particularly left and Marxist intellectuals, in order to draw some lessons and conclusions for the immediate future about the challenges and possible contribution of intellectuals in shaping public interest.

In apartheid South Africa, in the late 1970s, there emerged a variety of intellectual discourses, engaged with the critical question of the strategy and tactics of fighting and defeating the apartheid regime. One such discourse was a left academic discourse that was clearly aligned with the resurgent mass and worker struggles against apartheid. Marxism and socialist ideology largely inspired it. From about the early 1980s, this left (academic) intellectual discourse was principally organised under a national professional association known as the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa (ASSA), now known as the South Africa Sociological Associations. ASSA as an internal left, legal academic, sociological platform, ended up attracting left academics outside of the sociology discipline. This trend found space for itself in white liberal (English) universities but not in black and white Afrikaner universities. This was because of the spaces provided by these liberal campuses which had managed to use the notion of “academic freedom” to roll back some of the most vicious censorship measures of the apartheid regime. For instance, in virtually all the four white liberal university libraries, there was a section of “banned literature” (practically all of classical Marxism, the literature of the South African Communist Party and the liberation movement). It however provided a vibrant interdisciplinary left intellectual platform during the time.

The irony and weaknesses of ASSA was that, despite being such a progressive left platform for progressive academics, it did not manage to produce a critical mass of black left scholars. This was partly because black students were barred from attending white universities, except under very strict and exceptional circumstances (literally requiring ministerial approval and permission). The black universities were also under tight political, academic and ideological policing by reactionary white Afrikaner academics whose approach to teaching any Marxism was to demonize it.

The above created a curious anomaly whereby full access to Marxism or any left discourse by black students and activists was largely through the liberation movement in exile, in prison and the underground. This partly contributed to mutual suspicions between these two South African “Marxisms,” though this tension was fundamentally attributable to differences about the very trajectory and the manner in which the motive forces for democratic change needed to be mobilised. The one was linked to legal internal mass organisations, particularly the trade union movement, (not without complications and not in homogeneous ways) and the other to both legal internal mass organisations, albeit doing so illegally, using underground mechanisms, and the exiled liberation movement. In the context of apartheid, there was inadequate space for open

dialogue between these two Marxisms. Interestingly, Harold Wolpe's works were one of the few bridges and points of dialogue between these two Marxisms. The history of South African Marxism with its different trends and ideological camps, particularly in the 1980s, of course, still remains to be written.

The left academic intellectual tradition of the 1980s provided a crucial platform for internal academic Marxist debates about the anti-apartheid struggles, the strategies and tactics of the mass and national liberation movements. This gave birth, for instance, to a range of literature, publications and institutions that provided very crucial platforms for dialogue between mass and workers' struggles and progressive left scholarship and analyses.¹

On the other hand, there was in the 1980s an intellectual left tradition linked directly to the liberation movement. It was largely suppressed by the apartheid regime through repression and bannings. It normally found its expression within trade union, mass organisations and underground structures of the liberation movement. It was expressed in the main in banned literature e.g. the African Communist and Sechaba. Some of it found its expression in semi-legal publications e.g. Isizwe of the UDF, Work in Progress and a variety of other legal publications, but it was constrained because this intellectual discourse could not publicly claim its loyalty to the liberation movement, except through underground structures.

The sharpest engagement between the two left intellectual analyses found itself in the debates in the lead up to, and immediately after, the formation of COSATU. The primary debate was about the relationship between the organised working class, on one hand, and the mass and liberation movements on the other hand. It was a dialogue and debate forged through struggle, and informed by the intensified mass and working class struggles against apartheid in the 1980s.

However, with the transition to democracy in South Africa, there began the decline of both the left academic intellectual tradition, and a dilution of the robust expression. There was a dispersal of many of these intellectuals, particularly after 1994. Some of these became full-time politicians; others joining government as civil servants; others became consultants in the private and public sectors and some of these became more absorbed with policy research work. Those left in academia tended to retreat even deeper into the ivory tower. However some of the NGOs and initiatives of the 1980s period have survived into a democratic South Africa albeit in newer forms and with obviously different challenges.

Some lessons from the South African experience

¹ Some of these included the South African Labour Bulletin, Work in progress, Transformation, Speak Magazine and a short-lived Durban based Zulu political journal "Injula." This intersection between these left academic intellectuals and mass and trade union struggles also gave birth to a number of progressive NGOs in the country.

What are some of the lessons we can learn from the 1980's public intellectual debates about the role of intellectuals today?:

- Failure to deal with the dynamics of a negotiated transition in a context when, earlier, an insurrectionary defeat of apartheid had seemed more of a possibility. This could be one major reason for the decline of particularly the kind of left academic intellectual discourse in South Africa, that it was caught flatfooted by the negotiated transition. Could it also be that the left academic intellectual discourse felt defeated by the intellectual discourse of the Congress tradition?
- The decline and relative demobilisation of the mass democratic movement since 1994 may also be another contributory factor. Perhaps a lesson out of this is that a vibrant left intellectual debate thrives best under conditions of intense mass activity. We can illustrate this through our own SACP experience in recent years. At the beginnings of the 1990s, the SACP more honestly than any other formation, faced up squarely to the paradoxical but interlinked reality of a major global rolling back and defeat of progressive left forces, with an opening up and a partial/uneven advance here in SA itself. The SACP collective intellectual project has been to admit and engage with the failures of the 20th century progressive projects (whether in the former SU or as in present-day Zimbabwe, or in the evolution of social democracy into Blair's third way). We have not sought to run away from these failures. We have been critical and self-critical. We have advanced the strategic slogan: "Socialism is the Future, Build it Now." We believe that it is possible (and necessary) to build momentum towards, capacity for and elements of socialism, now, in the present. This strategic perspective has now also increasingly begun to ground an active politics of mobilisation, struggle and the winning of transformative gains. We have realised that, in the face of a neo-liberal global onslaught, we were correct to engage critically with, for instance, GEAR. But, we tended to do so, simply as intellectuals, arguing a critique. This was important, but it tended to leave working people, those in squatter camps, or impoverished rural villages entirely on the margins. Through our various campaigns, guided by our transformative socialist perspective, thus for instance beginning to link up and debate, as well as listen to, social movements and a progressive intellectuals and academic think tanks. Public intellectual work strives best under conditions where it is connected to, and engaging with, concrete struggles!
- A related question is whether this disarticulation between progressive organisation and progressive scholarship is not a reflection of another disturbing reality. Could it not be that left, progressive scholarship and ideas thrive under conditions of repression and in an oppositionist struggle to fight an authoritarian regime but decline under conditions of democracy? Many of us in the mid 1990s were reflecting on the decline of the mass democratic movement as a result of its inability to make the transition from "opposition to apartheid" to transformatory struggles with a progressive government in power. Is this also not the case with progressive, left scholarship? Could it also be that an intellectual

transition from oppositionism to new forms of engagement is something that intellectuals and scholars take a long time to adjust to?²

- The emergence of what are now known as “independent analysts which brought along with it the tendency to push everyone into some kind of “neutrality”, and forced the left intellectuals more into a neutral mode than the bourgeois intellectuals. However the platform of the media constitutes an important space to contest.
- The ambiguous stance on how to relate to and engage with a legitimate and democratic government,
- The first ten years of democracy were spent with the left on the defensive as a result of neo-liberal triumphalism from the early 1990s

Going beyond the “Debate on Debate” mode

We are currently going through a major debate about the need for debate in our country and the terms of such debate. This has largely been sparked by the Mbeki-Tutu debate. This reflection is of course to be welcomed. However, my view is that we need to move beyond debating about debate and move to tackle the content issues of the many debates we need in our country. This is an important lesson from the 1980s for instance. Of course the debate on debate is a necessary ongoing issue, but it should be located within debating the challenges facing South Africa. Otherwise it starts to deteriorate into a perpetual, but abstract debate, liable to conspiratorial analyses. This is not to deny that there are conspiracies, but there is a difference between analysing the conspiracy (e.g. class society as a conspiracy against the working class) as opposed to conspiratorial analysis, which tends to subject all else to a conspiracy and tools of analysis somewhat fudged.

The media has been particularly guilty itself of conspiratorial analysis. Whilst the media cries foul of conspiratorial analyses that might be emanating from political organisations, it in itself is replete with this approach. For example, media would complain that the succession debate cannot be a matter for the ANC alone, it must be opened up. But if some debates emerge within the Alliance and spill into the public arena (e.g. Zimbabwe, BEE) instead of positioning itself as a platform for further debate on these issues, it focuses narrowly on all manner of speculations about an imminent break of the Alliance. In this way the real content of issues is lost sight of.

As a Marxist intellectual and promoter of rigorous debate, Wolpe would have enjoined us to focus on the substantive challenges facing our country. Amongst other things he would have sought to debate the evolving expression of the three principal contradictions we seek to address. In addition, he would have called for an analysis based on identifying the continuities and discontinuities pre- and post- 1994. The other fundamental question, a subject of intense

² Raymond Suttner’s recent contribution in the Mail and Guardian about white activists and intellectuals touches on some of these issues and many others.

contestation in shaping public interest, is that of seeking to address the legacy of apartheid in a context of deepening capitalist relations.

What should be the primary debate today, within which we locate the “debate about debate”? Perhaps Harold’s work has some insights on identifying the fundamental problem facing South Africa. In the SACP we have partly characterised this as the contradictory reality of a political transition and shift of political power to the majority whilst economic power still remains with the same class forces as under apartheid. Another dimension to this problem is aptly captured by Jacklyn Cock as “the double transition”, that is, political democratisation and economic liberalisation. This essentially translates to the reality that the current accumulation path in our economy is incapable of addressing poverty.

Harold spoke about the articulation of two modes of production which sustained capitalism under apartheid. Could it be that the one mode of production (mainstream capitalist economy) has completely destroyed the other mode of production (a rural subsistence economy). In short the crux of the matter is whether a market economy can ever address the nature and scale that a country like South Africa faces? Let us debate the real issues.