

HAROLD WOLPE MEMORIAL LECTURE

presented by Professor Jakes Gerwel

2002

I must in the first place thank the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust for inviting me to deliver this inaugural memorial lecture in Harold's name.

Harold and AnneMarie Wolpe, like Kader and Louise Asmal here, have publicly held me responsible for them returning to the country when they did after the unbanning of the political organisations. If only a quarter of that claim is true I would feel very proud of at least one achievement during my time as university vice-chancellor. Their return greatly enriched the quality of intellectual life at the University of the Western Cape and their voices were prominent in the national discourse post-1990.

Harold Wolpe, whose work we honour and remember through the institution of this annual lecture, was one of those citizens and intellectuals who, to borrow an evocative phrase from Habermas, never neglected to make public use of his reason at every point: whether as teacher and mentor, as scholar in the fields of politics and society, as member of the liberation movement, as public intellectual, as interlocutor in private conversation.

My own interaction, engagement and, dare I say friendship, with him are remembered for its consistent, persuasive and inspiring affirmation of the value of reason and rational conversation in public life.

Harold Wolpe would not that we use these memorial lectures to dwell on his work, certainly not to dwell in them.

To dwell, in the meaning of "continue, remain, have one's abode", is most surely not what Harold would wish anyone to do with regards to his work and thought.

He wrote and taught as stimuli and challenges to progress, to move on, to advance – hardly to remain.

The Oxford Dictionary definitions of "dwell on" are "spend time upon, linger over in action or thought, treat at length" - none of which I intend doing tonight about Harold's writings and work. Yet one hopes that others in appropriate places and forums continue to study and debate at some length the important contributions he has made to our understanding of society and its processes.

Post-modernist discourse analysis is probably one of the last descriptions Harold Wolpe would have claimed or wished for his work. Yet – and this by way of arriving at the main theme of this lecture – his writing always had a very central concern with the nature and quality of discourse and modes of understanding. If there is a word and concept that has stuck with me out of conversations and engagements with Wolpe it is that of "theorising". Absence of or unsound theorising impaired understanding, in Wolpe's view of the nature and functioning of critical conversation about societies and social reality.

In one of his well-known works, the book on race and class and the Apartheid State, he typically devotes a substantial chapter on identifying and discussing theoretical obstacles to analysing the South African political system. The quality of the public conversation is itself a substantive social issue. Its effects are not only of a meta-nature: it impacts on and can alter the social reality it speaks or purports to speak of. And it is to that question of the quality of speaking about South African society and social processes that I mainly wish to address myself tonight in this inaugural lecture commemorating one who spent a lifetime critically and analytically conversing on those issues.

Gramsci in one of his grumpy moments in combat with Bukharin, I think, talks about confusing newspapers with books and petty daily polemic with scientific work. It is not so much the former, newspapers and petty daily polemic, that we have in mind when asking how we are currently describing, analysing and critically talking about our society, its processes and its state of being. Those are by their nature mainly descriptions of and sometimes reflections on disconnected and casual individual occurrences. It is, as it were, the scientific and analytical "state of the nation reports" that one is asking about.

Wolpe, for example, concludes that 1988 publication I referred to earlier with a chapter analysing the then present conjuncture and the prospects for change. He interrogates in another chapter a number of theoretical approaches dealing with the relationship between race and class, and proceeds to consider the question of the class content of national struggles and the interiorisation of race in class demands. He holds up colonialism of a special type as one theoretical approach that at least refuses both race and class reductionism. A reader came away from that book with a conceptual map for reading South Africa, the conjuncture and the possible paths ahead of it.

Where are the comparable maps about current day South Africa?

As I wrote elsewhere, there is in all political struggles the aspect of intellectual contestation about definition, worldview, historiography and understanding of the future; but we South Africans tended to suspect that our struggle was to an exceptional degree one over the supremacy of one set of ideas over another.

A distinctive feature of the anti-apartheid liberation struggle had been the political-intellectual dimension informing and underlying it. There had been a long and consistent tradition of debate and theorising about the defining nature of the society within which and over which the struggle was being conducted; the nature, goals and strategies of that struggle were subjects of intense and at times acrimonious theoretical arguments.

That theorising bent was not the preserve of formal intellectuals but occurred throughout various sectors and social formations involved in the struggle.

Are we in some ways in a post-theorising shock after the demise of formal apartheid and the assumption of government by the liberation movement?

And one asks this particularly of the Left in South Africa today, and that in turn elicits a prior set of questions: Is there a Left movement or ideological formation? What social forces constitute such a Left? What are the themes and concerns occupying it?

And then: how does it read the current conjuncture, if that term itself still has any currency? How does it describe the South African social formation, the South African state and the nature of the political system?

The so-called crisis of ideology appears to have called into serious question, evidently in South Africa as well, the continued validity of the distinction between Left and Right as descriptions of political approaches and positions. Paradoxically for a supposedly post-modernist world, there appears to have emerged the acceptance of a globally recognisable objective reality of economic and financial imperatives that draws all to a converging centre, seeking to eliminate Left and Right as descriptions with any classificatory value or evaluative application.

A nagging and nostalgic Leftism as remembered reflex is of course not very useful for theoretical understanding or for the formulation of political perspectives and objectives. For that the world has in fact changed too much and former Left movements across the world have transformed themselves in various ways into mutations that sometimes barely resemble the approaches and idea configurations of an earlier period where Left had a more self-evidently distinctive content.

But does the relative absence of a clear, self-conscious and coherently questioning and analytical Left not leave a society without options for understanding and describing itself? And as we know from the anti-apartheid liberation struggle, the pressure of 'options of understanding' provided a powerful dynamic for struggle and the progressive advancement of struggle.

Gamsci was dealing critically with the concept of the so-called "ethical state" in a specific historical context and those arguments cannot be transhistorically generalised or applied.

But let me quote out of historical context and for a moment challenge the Left, or residual Left, to ponder whether the following is not at least in part applicable to our state, and whether in the present conjuncture there is any alternative to the state being that.

"Every state is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes", and further: "The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. The entire function of the State has been transformed; the State has become an educator."

I am not proposing that as a valid description of the South African state or of the social forces operative within and through it. I just found the Gramscian formulation provocative and a challenge to find appropriate descriptions and analyses of the State and society. If, for example, colonialism of a special type was once considered an apt typification of South African society, what suffices today in mainline as well as alternative analyses?

As all of Wolpe's important critical and analytical work always in some way related back to and sought to inform the role, strategies and approaches of the liberation movement, a discussion of the nature, form and quality of the broader societal conversation in contemporary South Africa cannot neglect a consideration of the role of the liberation movement as government and dominant political party.

How does it perform as a major participant in and shaper of that conversation about understanding ourselves, our conjuncture and the possible roads ahead?

The voyeuristic enjoyment of catching glimpses of internal dissent in the governing party and alliance contributed to the attention being diverted from more serious and scholarly analyses of the current political nature of the African National Congress and of the way in which various social forces and tendencies configure within the organisation. The African National Congress is such an overwhelmingly dominant political force, and will remain so for a considerable time, that an analysis of the nature of the State has to understand the nature of that organisation. And for the purposes of the subject of this lecture, understand the manner in which the organisation influences and shapes the nature and quality of the public conversation.

The African National Congress governs in a liberal democracy with essentially formalistic, procedural and institutional mechanisms of popular participation. There is the further ideal, seldom fully obtained in modern democracies, of the state having a discursive, legitimating obligation in the public sphere. It is, put simply, supposed to talk with its citizens continuously outside of formal elections, to empower them to use fully their communicative freedom as citizens in conversation with the state and government. Understanding the communicative health of our society and polity will be an important aspect of understanding ourselves, how well we are doing on the scale of what we consider to be a healthy society.

I wish to conclude with reference to a concept that we on the old Left would probably have found somewhat outside of our core vocabulary in the public conversation.

In these descriptions, analyses and attempts at understanding ourselves: how much of a decent society would we regard ourselves to be?

A general Left distrust of philosophical idealism and of bourgeois sentimentality and pietism, has made one wary of employing descriptively such possibly vacuous concepts as “decent”. Yet we are so inundated with reports of acts and conduct of social pathology on such a scale that one is forced to ask such simple basic questions about ourselves.

One thinks of the occurrence of crimes of seemingly senseless violence, rape and the abuse of women, or the almost unspeakable sexual abuse of children and babies. At what point does the dialectical principle with its passage from quantity to quality assert itself so that we have to describe ourselves as a qualitatively an un-decent and un-caring society?

As a movement and people from a certain orientation we are more schooled in addressing structural issues and causes. We understand how poverty and unemployment represent underlying causes for many of the social symptoms reported on. We know how much the legal and social legacies of our past still inform current patterns of behaviour.

And those in positions of policy-making and implementation put effort in to addressing structural factors to make the economy grow; to stimulate the small and informal sector for job creation; to institutionalise affirmative action so there can be equitable participation; to strengthen democratic institutions for the protection of the rights of all; and so forth.

How and through whose efforts is the restoration and the nurturing of basic decency in the manner we live together being made a national developmental priority? We

did know a more superstructural concept that we once employed, that of human solidarity. The quest for such basic decency relates to that old Left concept of human solidarity.

And are we not – and this too relates to the forms of expression of human solidarity – not remarkably silent on analysing the relationship between class and race in the current development of our society and our state? Wolpe wrote at that time about recognising that both race and class are mutually implicated in the formation of demands which may stress racial as against class issues and vice versa. It would be intriguing to have contemporary developments analysed and describes in those terms.

It is in defining issues like these that we need to talk publicly again with the benefit of critical, analytical scholarly work as those that Harold Wolpe has bequeathed us with.