

Critique in retreat? Intellectuals and inequality in South Africa

David Hemson

What makes men usually discontented ... is that they do not find the present adapted to the realisation of aims which they hold to be right and just ... they contrast unfavourably things as they are, with their idea of things as they ought to be (Hegel 1956:34-35).

One of the aspects of globalisation has been a tremendous expansion of knowledge and a proportional expansion of 'knowledge workers' who form an increasingly large proportion of the employed. This stratum has acquired vital skills and good education, is well paid, and highly mobile. Intellectuals are in one sense knowledge workers (usually at the lower end of the earnings market) who have an independent sense of their destiny and intellectual activity distinct from their employment, yet they also exist in an environment in which knowledge workers are increasingly absorbed into relationships of power. The transition in South Africa has brought all kinds of openings to intellectuals in the field of government and policy-making as Members of Parliament, highly paid officials, commissioners, etc. Critical intellectuals—those who are committed to sustain their independence and the ability to make critical assessment—have to some extent been excluded from this process. In the field of research, however, there are numerous opportunities in social and public policy that tend to be prioritised by those with orthodox views and with good relations to power. Consultancies reinforce this trend as government, both local and national, seeks solutions for dilemmas not through formulation of policy by direct political means but rather indirectly through experts who research the views of constituents and can involve critical intellectuals. In the field of labour there has been a drain of engaged intellectuals into the field of government which has often been used as a stepping stone into business with an associated transformation in

ideas, ideology, and personal wealth. These opportunities and dilemmas pose a challenge to the intellectual prepared to engage with the labour movement possibly at the cost of involvement in large-scale research work.

Intellectuals, it will be argued here, as critical thinkers could potentially have a decisive influence in the way in which post-apartheid society could be reconstructed; although social pressures operate towards the creation of uncritical engagement. In a sense the ground is ripe for the rise of critical policy makers, as the objective conditions of South African society are moving towards the growing inequality which is the hallmark of globalisation. Many observers of the South African transition initially had a simple minded belief that a liberation movement in power would make fundamental reforms in the interests of the majority. This was what was promised by the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) which was adopted as the election manifesto of the African National Congress in the first election of 1994, and it was imagined that this would be carried through on schedule. Over time, however, the structural reforms in jobs, income, and access to a better life have run into difficulties. Policy positions have also become problematic in relation to AIDS and towards tyrannical regimes in Africa and, along with the deeper social malaise of post-apartheid policy in relation to jobs, housing, and basic services, indicate a desperate disparity between what was fought for and what has been achieved. A brief synopsis of post-apartheid South Africa has to account for the growing disparities in life prospects and wealth that give a razor edge to the political debates of nation-building or racial polarisation.

globalisation and new levels of inequality

South Africa in its retreating transitional moment is a laboratory for the analysis of social trends, not least of which is the role of intellectuals in either confirming the present compromises or in challenging the structures of inequality and impoverishment. The present reality is a test of strategies for 'structural' reform, and of attempts to bring about change through political participation under the conditions of neo-liberalism. South Africa is still pivotal internationally both in the mind of liberal and social democratic paradigms and, somewhat surprisingly, also has a place in conservative politics and thought as well. The history of segregation and apartheid has appalled thinking people internationally in terms of the categorisation of peoples into ethnic and racial groups, the allocation of privilege or oppression on a racial basis, and its extreme violence. The international anti-apartheid movements arose out of a deep rebellion against what was seen as a form of modern slavery and took on the same political and social significance as the anti-slavery movements of the past. This is the background against which government is being judged in terms of

delivery as recompense for the burden of the past, and the measure by which intellectuals are assessed in giving voice to the needs and demands of the poor and dispossessed.

Recent reports point to stunning differences in life opportunities under the impact of globalisation which is driving income for the better off upwards and for the poor downwards. Food consumption is declining (the rich eat out and the poor cannot afford to buy) while luxury vehicles such as 4x4s, BMWs, and Mercedes-Benz C-class vehicles are at record levels¹. The decline in consumption is a matter of some controversy; some blame the increased expenditure on cell-phones and lottery tickets, but the Bureau of Economic Research of Stellenbosch University argues that the causes are wider and more complex.

A slowing in household income, rising unemployment, a drop in formal sector employment, heavier tax burdens, higher medical costs, and high real interest rates all make a more decisive contribution. The rich are getting richer and fewer as the poor get more numerous and poorer².

These are the startling results of a post-apartheid period which was premised on a better life for all. The growing burden of unemployment on the African population has not eased and indeed has worsened in the new dispensation. In general more than 20% of the potential labour force was unemployed in 1970 according to the expanded definition of unemployment, but increased to almost 40% in 1995. More recent statistics demonstrate that the situation has not improved. Employment is not growing to meet the demands of the black majority: in the same period employment of non-Africans in the formal sector increased by 45% while African employment declined by just under 4% and African unemployed increased by 160% (cf. Bhorat & Hodge 1999:Table 7).

Subsequent research indicates that there is an increasing tendency in every sector of the economy to employ more highly skilled workers and to retrench the unskilled. These tendencies towards greater employment of 'knowledge workers' with increasingly higher remuneration than manual workers operate to accentuate the privilege of the previously privileged and those relatively few who gain access to the upper levels of the formal sector. For the majority who do not, the marginal 'peripheral labour force' (the informal sector, subsistence agriculture, etc.) has expanded from 24% to 50% during the period 1960-1994 (cf. Van der Berg & Bhorat, 1999:Table 4). According to SA Statistics there has been a massive

¹ Cf. Belt-tightening cuts into food sales, 'Business Report', *Sunday Independent* 8 April 2001; and A state of luxury, *Sunday Times* 8 April 2001.

² BER report in *Sunday Times*, 8 April 2001.

expansion in the informal sector, growing 91,5% over the past four years. These are not indices of real growth but, as research has revealed, rather of survivalist strategies which see transfers from the working poor to the very poor as the median income in this sector is R200 (\$25) per month³.

These are powerful, if exceedingly sombre, trends in labour market and economy that point to the growing impoverishment of the poor. The gap between rich and poor has been, and still remains, among the widest in the world with the poorest 60% receiving 16% of total income and the richest 10% enjoying 48% (cf. Woolard & Klasen 1997). The indications are that after some advance with the African National Congress coming to power in 1994, and initially carrying out limited welfare measures, there was an improvement in the conditions of the poor. More recently, however, a report of the SA Reserve Bank presents the fact that the poorest 40% have had a decline in income of 21 % in recent years⁴. Although the statistics are difficult to source, it is logical to assume that the rising unemployment, particularly of less skilled workers, must have a particularly depressing effect on rural incomes as remittances decline.

It is frequently argued that the cause of much of South Africa's gross inequalities is in the labour market and it is within the labour market that redress must be sought (cf. Van Den Bergh & Bhorat 1999). The perception is that state regulation in the context of an economy stressed by the pressures of globalisation and the associated processes of liberalisation, casualisation, and privatisation can be less than effective. There has been an enormous growth in labour brokering with the implementation of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act as employers work to lower the cost of the new benefits by reducing workers from permanent to 'variable' (casual) labour. Those active in the reform of labour markets argue that eventually

³ Poverty and Inequality in South Africa. *Report Prepared for the Office of the Executive Deputy President and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Poverty and Inequality: Final Report*. 13 May 1998.

⁴ This figure has been used in providing a critique of the present order, but is difficult to source. A search of the SARB Quarterly Bulletins over the past two years does not produce any material about income distribution at all. The official statistics of South Africa do not provide coherent data on incomes, far less on the wealth of individuals. Although the October Household Survey carries income in terms of categories (e.g. above or below R800 a month) it does not provide the absolute amounts and this makes it difficult to work out trends in income over time. Statistics South Africa has, however, published 'Income and expenditure of households', CSS statistical release POIII which provides data on income distribution in 1995. There does not seem to be subsequent information available.

the provisions being made for the education and training of workers will feed into the system and that various labour shortages could be filled by trained workers. The problem is that funds for education and training are mounting unspent while retrenchments and casualisation are continuing apace. The education of adult workers (ABET) is at very low levels.

The Reserve Bank argues that the exceedingly poor growth in employment and rising unemployment—'weak labour absorption capacity'—is due to radical restructuring under the pressure of globalisation involving job loss through international competition, capital-intensive production, new technologies, the decline in investment, the 'right-sizing' of the public service, and a shift from primary and secondary sectors towards services⁵. It also notes that new technologies, and particularly information-technology, increase the demand for a small number of highly skilled workers but at the same time lowers the demand for less-skilled workers. This trend, which appears to combine managerial employees and information technologists, leads towards the rapidly increasing incomes of 'knowledge workers' (the managers, consultants, engineers, IT specialists, etc.) who are the 'winners' in the present distorted growth of the economy. In addition there is a sharp increase in the privileges of the ultra-rich consultants and directors exemplified at its uppermost reaches in the exorbitant earnings of the former CEO of SAA, Coleman Andrews whose contracts earned him R232m after less than three years work for the Corporation⁶. These figures are justified by government officials as the inevitable and necessary rewards for global expertise, but they indicate the huge waste of local talent and continued dependence on external competence to the irritation of local business leaders and the anger of the poor.

Such extravagance contrasts with the slow death of workers through casualisation, quixotic policies towards AIDS, the desperation of young criminals, and the wrecking of lives through crime. Many of South Africa's social problems can be traced to the combination of a deprived yet ardent youth consumerism and the colossal inequity between rich and poor. Some argue that it is such a contrast in life opportunities which lead to a culture of seduction and high risk sex which has placed South Africa in the forefront of the AIDS pandemic. This is brought into sharp focus in the contrast between those with the 4x4 lifestyles and the people of impoverished townships who, it is stated, have a culture of non-payment. However, on this last point, research in the form of a survey conducted by the University of the Free State's Centre for Development Support, concludes that non-payment is more about the ability to pay rather than the willingness to do so:

⁵ SA Reserve Bank *Quarterly Bulletin*, March 2001, 219:19-20.

⁶ Cf. SAA battle out in the open, *Business Day*, 14 June 2001.

... people found themselves in a cycle of poverty and nonpayment. This was as a result of low incomes, which reduced the assets available for people to use as collateral, and the fact that many people had no savings and high debt levels. These people could not improve their situation because they lacked the skills and education that could lead to them finding jobs⁷.

It is this background which has led to the ferocious responses to cut-offs of water and electricity and which are subjecting urban local democracy to great stress. These aspects of structural adjustment, graphically analysed by Bond (2000), advance without the concession of a social safety net in the form of increased welfare. Although promises are made about the provision of minimum needs in water, the reality of the moment is higher charges for existing services.

Policy directions at the moment are seen by an increasing number of people, including politicians, to be misguided and unintegrated. The recently announced industrial strategy for the manufacturing sector, for instance, carries the following pronouncement:

Strategies that can potentially have a major impact on employment largely lie outside the realm of industrial policy ... enhancing employment through industrial policies is likely to be constrained by largely fixed technical coefficients or labour/capital ratios of technologies utilized ... the role of an industrial strategy is to create the necessary conditions for employment creation, but it is not the necessary and sufficient condition⁸.

In short, industrial growth has little to do with job creation and the satisfaction of human needs; it has become a fetishized thing-in-itself. And more than this, a strategic turn in policy towards colossal expenditure on arms has been undertaken which appears equivalent, and related to, the turn away from the Reconstruction and Development Program. New priorities are superseding electoral promises on welfare and reconstruction and there is as yet no reparation date for the violence of the apartheid state.

the terrain of discourse

Within the currents of political change which open or close opportunities for new

⁷ Xolani Xundu. 14 March 2001. 'Culture of low income' blamed for arrears, *Business Day*.

⁸ Linda Ensor 30 May 2001. MPs express fears about job creation. *Business Day*.

directions in society and carry the potential for 'a better life for all', intellectuals can have an important influence on the direction and strength of social change. But intellectuals are themselves not independent actors and are affected by the tides of ideology and the construction of discourses of power. Jürgen Habermas explains the process of interests being reflected in language and action:

From everyday experience we know that ideas serve often enough to furnish our actions with justifying motives in place of the real ones. What is called rationalization at this level is called ideology at the level of collective action. In both cases the manifest content of statements is falsified by consciousness' unreflected tie to interests, despite its illusion of autonomy (Habermas 1972:311).

Critical social science is based on active assumptions about knowledge and human interests with researchers being seen as either conscious or unconscious agents of the operation of wider social forces that act to reinforce or reproduce the existing social order (cf. Habermas 1971:72f). Intellectuals involved in critical evaluation regard themselves as undertaking research to transform social relations by a process of analysis of the underlying forces that keep oppressive relations in place, and the development of empowerment strategies. The critical evaluation researcher is thus action-orientated, working to change the world and transform the social order (Fay 1987). The methods and impetus for evaluation should be free from bureaucratic interests and be sensitive to the interests of the beneficiaries and workers of the programme evaluated. Schumpeter (1940:44) argues that criticism of the existing capitalist order 'proceeds from a critical attitude of an individual'—that is, from allegiance to extra-rational values. It is argued here that such criticism is tied up with the very impasse in society which leads to such gross inequalities, a staggering economy, the exclusion of the majority from reasonable living standards in the midst of plenty, and the reassertion of the discourse of race. This is a critical review based on facts and reason and allowing contrary argument on the same basis.

Habermas presents a simple formulation of the problem of truth, interests and social action; imagining that the 'unreflected tie to interests' could be excluded through discipline and self-reflection that aims at excluding such interests. Habermas gives less attention to the independence of the intellectual from power and appears to rely on the exercise of professional expertise in resolving these tensions. The matter is not, however, so simply resolved as the ideological formations of globalisation have a tripartite power: firstly in the powers of persuasion of agencies having communications skills; secondly in having the desired commodities; and, finally, through the appearance of a lack of any alternative. The crucial question is *how* the rationalisations of interest can be made plain and private interests brought into the

debate of the public sphere. According to C. Wright Mills the necessary elements of such self-clarification include independence, analysis, and ultimately involvement in political action against the stream:

The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely living things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity to continually unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications [i.e. modern systems of representation] swamp us. These worlds of mass-art and mass-thought are increasingly geared to the demands of politics. That is why it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centered. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of lived experience (Mills 1963:299).

Edward Said (who employs this quotation) argues that there is no readily available disinterested centre, that politics is all pervasive and that the intellectual is an individual with the capacity for articulating a message to and for a public. In this context an intellectual is someone prepared to raise 'embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug' (Said 1994:9). These are elevated projections of the intellectual, assuming a high level of critical engagement, resolve and stamina that is exceptional in individuals and even rarer in a whole strata.

Often the self-clarification of intellectuals appears pretentious, of ascribing a greater influence and power than they carry, a conscious knowledge of destiny and position, and too much indulgence and self-absorption. But ideally intellectuals are involved in creating, enlarging, describing and recreating the mental world in which we take stock of ourselves and our society. The critical researcher should develop a critical awareness of those involved in programmes, about practices, social issues and power relationships implicit in the social contexts in which they work:

Empowerment evaluation ... focuses on the educative potential of evaluation, with knowledge providing avenues for power and emancipation of the individual and of groups. The evaluator plays a collaborative and facilitative role that includes advocacy for the work undertaken by the program (Potter 1990:221).

Critical action research involves the aim of taking the understandings and actions of those involved in social action as the basis for developing critical theory. Through the public sphere significance is given the particular issues of our time—for example, the weighing up of social and monetary costs and benefits—in short, key questions of policy and social relevance. To this intellectual activity is ascribed a certain awkwardness, a questioning of contemporary values, a critical sensibility, a certain opposition to established truths, and an amount of controversy. Such are the conditions of critical engagement. But intellectuals are often professionals moving through a variety of planes (policy, academic, professional, political, communication, etc.) providing reward and status relating to individual capacity but also to alignment closer to power.

In the interests of self-preservation and modest advancement the intellectual often prefers the questions of the day to be resolved through amicable discussion and civilised discourse rather than adopt positions against those in power. At a recent United Nations conference on poverty in Southern Africa held in Cape Town a keynote UN speaker argued that the fact that poverty in Southern Africa was being discussed by policy-makers *in itself* indicated that a solution would be reached⁹. Here is evidence of real optimism in the convening of officials and experts, although the road to radical change or even modest reform, however, is rarely reached through quiet discussion alone.

shifts and mediations

Much has been written about the ambiguous class position of intellectuals; their middle class status, the rise of the 'new' middle class distinct from the traditional middle class particularly in advanced capitalist countries, and whether they could form part of a redefined working class. Basically the traditional middle class intellectuals are found among journalists, doctors and lawyers who live off independent sources of income and are somewhat directly independent of big business in providing public comment on matters of the day, and the rising new middle class was to be found within the state and corporate world as 'employees' of the new order. These debates have been located within analysis of employment data and the nature of advanced capitalist society, but intellectuals are defined subjectively in terms of critical analysis and reflection.

The sociology of intellectuals, their social context, and ideology is explored by Petras (1997) in an insightful analysis of political, intellectual and funding processes. He argues broadly that there has been a metamorphosis of intellectuals in Latin America (and, can we argue, in other continents of the Third World?) from the

⁹ Interview with UN official, *SAFM*, 27 March 2001.

Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' of the 1960s to 'institutionalised intellectuals' of the 1980s. The elements of this transformation include: external dependence, competitive tendering for external funds, intellectuals migrating towards centre-left politics, the rise of new research institutes, and a change in the political language and concepts, the entire discourse of left intellectuals have some correspondence with the South African experience and is worth exploring even if there may be significant differences. His views are read as a confirmation of the generally rightward trend among intellectuals from the left to the centre and of their shift from radical expression towards research and policy concerns.

Petras argues that there have been two basic trends among Latin American intellectuals. Firstly there has been the growth of research institutes which have taken up waves of interests: human rights, new social movements, democratisation processes, with each concern increasingly taking direction away from the popular movements and drawing attention away from the politics of imperialism. Secondly, these flourishing, but externally dependent institutes, were pivotal in drawing the organic intellectuals involved in trade unions, student movements, or revolutionary parties into the privileged life of a professional researcher dependent on foreign funding with politically anodyne professional interests. The goal of the funders was to establish ideological hegemony over the Latin American intellectuals, since they were to serve as a major recruiting ground for the centre-left political class. In the transition towards democracy in Latin America these intellectuals avoided class analysis and much of the funding was blatantly ideological, 'freezing the process of transformation to a transaction between conservative civilians and the military'. These institutionalised intellectuals then became the 'prisoners of their own narrow professional desires' and were caught up in a 'vacuous and vicarious internal political life'. From an interest in social transformation they now regarded the essence of politics as bureaucracy and struggle as a matter to be 'contracted, managed and governed'. All of this amounted to the diffusing of emerging class struggles summed up as the 'metaphysics of post-politics'.

This was published originally in 1990 and no doubt much of the emphasis on the external funding, the dominant research institute model, and Latin American politics has changed as a number of the centre-left politicians, as in South Africa, have come to power. The South African experience is often held as illuminating many of the same processes, but it also brings forward other elements. These include a greater absorption of left intellectuals into key positions in the state and the greater attraction of academia. Intellectuals can adopt a certain class position, a place in civil society between power and powerlessness, and can be seen by the poor (even if not by themselves) as an intermediary, a translator (which is often directly the case with the African intellectual), an essential link between the abject subject and the

powerful centre. The African intellectual has a particular challenge as was evident in an animated discussion among worker leaders last year:

We are illiterate, we haven't been through school we don't know how to speak to these people who control our lives [the employers and officials], you are educated and know how to speak to them and sort out our problems. How many of the educated people are prepared to come and struggle with us? None. They are all going away from us to enjoy a better life, but god has sent you to us to help us have a better life for ourselves and our families.

The praise is both desperate and extravagant, working to bind the intellectual to the masses and to the problems of the poor that are often exacting, demanding and difficult to resolve. These are the contradictory pressures on the intellectual who is available to the poor in the semi-colonial world; a demand for leadership, a request for an explanation of the configuration of power, for the mechanisms of access to official society, for communication with the powers that be, for amelioration of their conditions, the accessing of the relevant official, and finally making things change. On other occasions this may involve demands for radical social action in support of community demands. This poses a challenge to the aspiring intellectual caught between an often unsympathetic, indifferent, or hostile order, and an uncomprehending, suffering and determined mass. As the workers recognise, there are few prepared to stay the course.

participants or apologists

In South Africa a vigorous critique of the transition of left white intellectuals previously closely associated with the labour movement into positions of power or influence has been mounted by Desai and Bomhke (1997). The critique is particularly sharp as these intellectuals were identified as having reinforced the theoretical link between apartheid and capitalism, strengthened the independent labour movement, and helped develop a working class leadership in the struggle for socialism. But at the crucial moment at which a negotiated settlement was being reached, the authors argue, these intellectuals 'turned their attentions towards making the system work' (Desai & Bomhke 1997:14). Their subsequent work is then subjected to criticism (in short) for either seeking stabilisation and increased productivity as priorities for growth, for putting forward the position that class contradictions should be contained rather than eliminated, and for supporting social compacts—positions which were not differentiated from the national leadership of

the African National Congress. Fundamentally the argument centred around the de-linking of intellectuals from the labour movement and their surrender to ideological pressures and to the attraction of power.

The ventilating of these issues caused great controversy precipitating the rupture of relations between the authors and this stratum which is indicative of the growing polarisation among intellectuals as the present neo-liberal policy framework is increasingly challenged. The critique was sharp and sustained, it seems, because of the influence attributed to these intellectuals and the demobilisation of the trade union and township resistance at the time of the negotiations and beyond. Yet the trend towards incorporation in the new order traversed the entire spectrum of political resistance—in one illuminating example a militant trained to work within the Mineworkers Union and build a left leadership now aims to be the richest woman in South Africa. Co-optation, incorporation, compromise apologies and collaboration go well beyond small blocs of white intellectuals. Black intellectuals who have written articles critical of the existing order are silent, and a culture built of veterans wanting to cash in their struggle credits thrives. In the universities the promotion of critical intellectuals into senior positions in administration has unfortunately almost invariably led to intellectual atrophy and often to bitter institutional politics. A milieu has been created in which an entire intellectual and political leadership has become caught up in the entanglements of power and a well-endowed lifestyle (Adam *et al* 1997).

Why should there be such a change in the social relations between intellectuals and the mass movement, in research orientation and in practice? It is worth exploring the current period to illuminate the dilemmas and possibilities present and the role of intellectuals. Analysts generally regard intellectuals as being critical of the capitalist order and search for psychological explanations in schooling and upbringing:

It is surprising that intellectuals oppose capitalism so. Other groups of comparable socio-economic status do not show the same degree of opposition in the same proportions. Statistically, then, intellectuals are an anomaly. Not all intellectuals are on the 'left'. Like other groups, their opinions are spread along a curve. But in their case, the curve is shifted and skewed to the political left (Nozick Jan/Feb 1998).

Reasons for this phenomenon are sought in schooling and upbringing. Yet the leftward and critical aspect of intellectuals is debatable since the present acceptance of the market priorities of globalisation appears to have been extraordinarily thorough-going. If there has been a wholesale shift from a tendency towards criticism of capitalism to its uncritical acceptance, this requires some explanation.

The first point to be made is that in South Africa critical intellectuals have been relatively isolated by the political shift towards a negotiated settlement and its various compromises. The thundering endorsement of the African National Congress in the first election provided a certain endorsement of the 'peace process' and subsequent compromises with the old order. The official labour movement to which they were often attached was associated with all the negotiations and gradually became, after some resistance, more accepting of their subordinate position; proud of the union leaders in power and expectant that over time many of their basic demands would be acceded to. Both the labour movement and intellectuals were changing and the existing official labour movement caught up in the compromises of the time, in investment funds, and in permanent negotiations in NEDLAC. Individual factors also have a social significance. Union leaders expect just the same upward mobility in the political realm as other aspirant politicians and the social mobility of individuals becomes the basis on which the labour movement stalls.

The basis on which social change can be secured is also now challenged. In the past intellectuals have defended the nation-state as the basis on which reforms and development strategies are enacted. But writers such as Castels (2000) now argue that the nation-state is no longer a defence against the trends associated with globalisation (financial instability, social inequality, changes in the labour regime against the interests of workers, de-industrialisation, etc.) which marginalise development strategies and social reform. Indeed in his view the state is the instrument through which the rule of globalised capital is enforced. As the conventional approaches to social reform have declined, intellectuals have accommodated themselves to current circumstances and established power.

the privilege of criticism

The intellectuals identified as crucial to the transition by and large did not have a leadership role within the movement and saw themselves as advisers and supporters of trade unions which were increasingly taking their own direction. Some were certainly instrumental in fostering the idea that there could be strategic reforms through necessary compromises which would set society in South Africa on the path of sustained growth and development. This expressed more theoretically the state of mind of most labour movement leaders. But if intellectuals lost influence in the labour movement this did not exclude them from participating in the debate of the extraordinary variety of policy issues which were freshly addressed even as the macro-economic framework was becoming fixed. Intellectuals of all kinds were and are under pressure to contribute towards resolving major social problems or in proposing alternative policies, to turn from a position of resolute criticism to finding solutions. The questions are often posed: 'What are you doing for your country? Its

all very well to criticise but how are you making a contribution?' Specifically the following letter appeared in the *Mail and Guardian*:

... criticising the government and the head of state under the facade of intellectual independence is gradually losing its fashionableness. When we raise our dissatisfactions on matters of national importance (something which is natural and accepted in any democratic society such as ours), should we not also suggest decisive and practical solutions that will take this country forward?¹⁰

Intellectuals who have fought to bring about the new dispensation are vulnerable to such appeals, although they may find their solutions not always taken seriously. They desire to participate in reconstruction and development; to make their contribution, to be associated with the socio-political shift to majority rule, to assist in developing the new democratic order, to employ their intellect and skills in positively reshaping policy, to constructively support the transformation project. More venally they are also not unattracted by the prospect of being close to power, assuming lucrative official positions, and gathering at the remuneration pool of consultancies.

After having being alienated from the state for a whole period they also have an intellectual curiosity about how society changes, how the state actually works, and the relationship between the intellectual and power. Surely they have the necessary skills and strength to contribute without losing their critical edge? While there is often evidence of intelligent debate it remains within relatively official circles, increasingly caught within the narrower ranges of possibilities within the existing order. The edge of critical intellect is soon dulled by the need for yet another report aimed at eminently practical concerns and targeted at the wide gulf between 'where we are' and 'where we could be'. And, finally, the intellectual as researcher, as in the Latin American case, is excited by the possibility of funding which may become available for comprehensive research programs. Research funding is closely linked to established national priorities and requires contacts and skills to access the necessary funds, to ease open the guarded doors of information and data, and provide a broad spectrum of analysis and original critique, with the attractive (although not guaranteed) possibility of remedial action. Pragmatism has become espoused as a method of research and a philosophical approach to difficult social problems (cf. Hyslop 1998).

¹⁰ Nkosana Sibuyi, employed by GCIS (Government Communication and Information Systems), *Mail and Guardian*, 22-28 June 2001.

The general tendency towards engagement in policy matters makes it clear that some intellectuals, at one level, regard the main problem of capacity as lying within the state rather than within communities and unions. This has, however, blunted their critical engagement with the existing order and their ability to examine and possibly propose alternatives to this order. Many have made a personal transition from exile and marginality to central decision-making—regular flights to and from Pretoria—to assist policy-makers in framing new methods and in implementation. There is a growing pilgrimage of many intellectuals from labour movement to political involvement to public position to public official to consultancy or business (cf. Webster & Adler 1998). The movement is ultimately from labour and community interests to those of business, and transitions in the opposite direction have yet to be discovered.

The relationship between knowledge and power is central to the debate about the role of intellectuals. The attraction of academics to consultancy work, in particular in the evaluation of projects and other forms of commissioned work, has the potential for bringing to the lecture theatre the policy questions of the moment but also of distorting priorities to suit personal interests. Consultancy research has to be narrowly focused and the findings pitched within the range of the feasible. From an academic perspective it also seems that the engagement in consultancy work tends to lower the number of peer reviewed publications in research institutes as journal editors and peer reviewers demand higher standards than the agencies who commission research. Consultancies involve what Petras (1997) identifies as a continual struggle between professional opportunism and political commitment both in the nature of work and in time. The existing practices of consultancy are strongly criticised by black students who feel excluded from remunerated research, raising questions about capacity-building and advocacy in research.

conclusion

In my introduction the stark statistics of inequality and poverty were presented as an opening to the issues engaging intellectuals in South African society. As society internationally is increasingly polarised around the poles of wealth and poverty, knowledge workers are gathering around the upper pole and the intellectuals among them are drawn into global inequalities. Critical intellectuals have to be aware of the questions of perverse growth in economy and society, the growing gulf between rich and poor, black and white, rural and urban, educated and uneducated. The working class itself is also becoming differentiated between the organised employed, the rapidly growing casualised layer, and the unemployed. It is these inequalities and growing unemployment which are refracted in complex ways in the polarising discourses of race. Knowledge workers generally are the servants of power, caught

up in social processes they accelerate but don't control. Intellectuals should be aware that behind the apparently remorseless tides a wide field for critique and social action remains. Intellectuals are engaged in understanding the social field we occupy, of conveying significances from the global to the local, in adhering or resisting the social and political power, confirming or widening the spheres of action.

Poverty, for instance, is a wider social condition than low income. Chambers (1995) argues that there are various dimensions to poverty, the most obvious being the question of low income, but also including a wide range of other features of social and political indicators of poverty such as social inferiority, isolation, physical weakness, vulnerability, seasonality, powerlessness and humiliation. As well as the material factors are included those relating to social conditions which form part of the discourses of the moment: patriarchy, violence, oppression and stigma. In societies where there has been a contestation with ancient oppressions, as in Kerala state in India, there has been remarkable social progress even on a relatively stagnant economic base. The social and political still form a basis for engagement and change. Certainly the destiny of individuals and society is tied up with their life prospects, and whether there is sufficient material basis for hope. The mother of Kondile Sizwe, slaughtered by agents of the apartheid regime, has made the following statement:

It is easy for Mandela and Tutu to forgive ... they lead vindicated lives. In my life nothing; not a single thing, has changed since my son was burnt by barbarians ... nothing. Therefore I cannot forgive (Krog 1998:109).

Two points arise here: firstly the class differentiation between those who are in the category where forgiveness is possible, and, secondly, the illustration of the point that society is based on a myriad compromises between wealth and poverty—a compromise felt to be impossible by this victim. The latter point leaves society hanging in the balance, between the hundred daily compromises and impending confrontation.

Social Policy Programme
University of Durban-Westville

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