

# TRANS FORM ATION

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTHERN AFRICA

106



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# TRANSFORMATION

## Critical perspectives on Southern Africa

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# **TRANS FORM ATION**

106 (2021)

Critical perspectives on Southern Africa

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# Editorial

## Introduction

Jeremy Grest and Phila Msimang

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In our last issue (#105) we recorded the death in August 2020 of Bill Freund, one of *Transformation's* founding editors. We noted his outstanding intellectual legacy, and in place of an obituary, many others already having been published elsewhere, we featured an extract from his posthumously published autobiography, along with a bibliography of his many publications in our journal over the years.

In the same issue we also published a Research Note on the political economy of South Africa's constitutional road to central bank independence (1993-1996) co-authored by Vishnu Padayachee and Jannie Rossouw. It pains us greatly to now record Vishnu Padayachee's death in May of this year. Vishnu was another intellectual colleague of enormous stature, also an editor of *Transformation* for many years, and good friend and intellectual sparring partner of Bill Freund. We publish here an Obituary written by Imraan Valodia – a moving account of Vishnu's important policy work and research as an economist, his personal and intellectual formation, and his influence over younger generations of scholars and activists.

In their article Peter Delius and Stefan Schirmer ask what can land reform achieve in the 2020s? They provide us with some quite detailed historical and comparative reflections on the potential of land redistribution to contribute to transformation and poverty alleviation in South Africa, and conclude, contrary to the current policy orthodoxy, that transferring large amounts of land to black families will not have the effect of substantially reducing poverty or inequality over the next ten years, without strategic state support. They warn that '[w]e must do everything possible to avoid reproducing elements of the inhuman and destructive effects of entrenching divisions between rural and urban areas'.

In the first of two Review Articles, entitled ‘History and hope in Cradock, Eastern Cape’, Alan Mabin argues that South African small towns receive relatively little research attention, and that many are currently in serious trouble. He reviews what is quite an extensive literature on Cradock and its inhabitants, its history and its present situation, and makes some comments on its potential future. His conclusion is that a deeper look at histories and their contemporary effects could be useful in tackling contemporary issues as well as pointing to new research directions.

Grahame Hayes reviews two recent publications dealing with the life and work of Robert Sobukwe – *Lie on Your Wounds: the prison correspondence of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe* (2019), and Benjamin Pogrund’s edited collection *Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe: new reflections* (2019). Hayes makes a case for the importance of Sobukwe’s prison letters in the ongoing scholarship of this neglected figure of the South African political struggle for freedom. He sets out to retrieve a view of Sobukwe as an intellectual, a deeply engaged political thinker, and a man committed to ethical leadership. He argues that Sobukwe’s life and ideas also operate as a vehicle for criticising South Africa’s post-apartheid leaders’ lack of integrity, corrupt practices, and the forgotten promise of alleviating the suffering of the majority of poor people who elected them.

Following on from its introduction in issue #104, the editors of Platform: In Theory, Gerhard Maré and Peter Vale, issue an invitation to readers to participate in the ‘keywords’ approach, pioneered by Raymond Williams, to discussing changes in discourse, ideology, and common sense. John Higgins, who has had a long engagement with Williams’ work, explores the notion of ‘keywords’ in an introductory essay, providing a context for the call for collaboration in a series dealing with this approach to understanding society.

Editors Vasu Reddy and Donna Andrews are also issuing a call, for a Focus Issue of *Transformation*, ‘Cancel Culture: shrinking or remaking narratives?’. The controversial term has emerged in recent debates, challenging ideas, identity markers and diverse interests. Submissions are invited from a broad range of interdisciplinary and methodological perspectives (including divergent positions) to offer conceptually and empirically rigorous approaches that bring fresh and nuanced insights to the idea, meaning and practice of ‘cancel culture’ in critical perspectives

on southern Africa. A non-exclusive list of topics is suggested, with deadlines for abstract and copy set out in the call.

Books reviewed in this issue include *Renewing Workers' Education: a radical vision* (2020); *A Short History of Modern Angola* (2019); *Decolonisation in Universities: the politics of knowledge* (2019); and *The Political Economy of Government Subsidised Housing in South Africa* (2020).

We hope you will enjoy this issue, and to consider responding to one or both of our calls for contributions to our Platform: In Theory series, and the Cancel Culture Focus Issue call.

# Obituary

## Vishnu Padayachee 1952-2021<sup>1</sup>

Imraan Valodia

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The prominent South African economist Vishnu Padayachee passed away in the early hours of May 29, 2021, following a series of health challenges over the previous two years. Vishnu was a past editor of the journal *Transformation*, having joined the editorial team, then made up of Bill Freund, Mike Morris, and Gerhard Maré shortly after its launch in 1986. Vishnu's name first appeared on the list of editors for issue 5, published in 1987. He left the editorial board in 1999, whereafter I was invited to join the board, to continue the important work Vishnu had undertaken to develop *Transformation* as an influential forum for debate about the nature of the economic transition in South Africa, and a voice for alternative economic policy analyses. Vishnu rejoined the editorial board in 2012, and remained an editor until 2016. During the interregnum in the 2012-2016 period and post-2016, Vishnu remained a regular contributor to the journal – as an author, publishing several important pieces on economic policy in South Africa, and as a referee. *Transformation* was a key part of a multifaceted and deep academic and personal friendship that I enjoyed with Vishnu over a period of some 38 years.

I first met Vishnu Padayachee when he walked into my Economics 101 class in 1983 at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) to lecture on introductory microeconomics. Vishnu immediately made a lasting impression on me, and has since then been my mentor, friend, academic colleague, and comrade until his untimely death. As he began his lecture, I was immediately mesmerised by this handsome, urbane, genial, exceptionally articulate lecturer, his mannerisms more akin to that of an English upper-class gentleman than what was then the norm at UDW, who made Economics 101 not only interesting, but also tinged with radical economic ideas. As a young student growing up in apartheid South

Africa and studying at a university where a number of the lecturers were members of the Broederbond, this was truly extraordinary stuff. I made regular visits to Vishnu's office when he moved to the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at UDW and he 'fed' my curiosity for better understanding South Africa. He introduced me to the work of, among others, Harold Wolpe, Martin Legassick, Rick Turner, the famous speech by Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) general secretary Joe Foster at the FOSATU congress, which outlined the Federation's views on the relationship between the struggle for workers' rights through trades unions, and the struggle for political freedom in South Africa. None of this literature was, of course, a part the Economics curriculum and most of it was, at the time, banned. In those days, people went to jail for distributing this kind of material. Suddenly, Economics was exciting and I began better to understand the world around me. These early years shaped my academic trajectory forever. Over the years, Vishnu had the impact of steering me toward a better understanding of the world, linking up with new exciting research ideas, striving for academic excellence, and enjoying books and leisurely lunches. Remarkably, he had this effect on many, many others.

Vishnu was born on the south coast of (then) the province of Natal in the town of Umkomaas on May 31, 1952. His father was a teacher and school principal. In those days, the life of an Indian school principal in Natal involved having to move from one little town to the next. Vishnu's parents lived this life. As a result of this Vishnu was brought up by his relatives in Umkomaas, a well-off and globally connected family with connections in, among other places, Germany. I think this upbringing was instrumental in Vishnu's love for the good things in life – good food, sporty cars, good wine and the best whisky – notwithstanding his lifelong work for a democratic and egalitarian society.

Vishnu studied at the University of Durban-Westville, at the time the only place where Indians were able to study, completing a BComm, BComm (Hons) and MComm in Economics, respectively in 1973, 1975 and 1979. He began working as a junior lecturer in the Economics Department at UDW in 1977, while completing his master's degree. He completed his PhD, under the supervision of Bill Freund, at the University of Natal in 1989. He went on to have a stellar academic career having published ten books, some 110 journal articles, supervised some 70 masters and doctoral students, and achieved recognition across the globe. He was recognised internationally with appointments in Oxford and Cambridge and Johns Hopkins, among

others. In 2018 Rhodes University recognised his outstanding work and awarded him an honorary doctorate for his ‘exceptionally distinguished contribution to the post-apartheid transformation of economic policy’.

His academic career was influenced by a number of colleagues in those early years while he was at UDW. One of his early research papers, co-authored with Shaheed Vawda and Paul Tichmann, was an economic history study of Indian workers and trade unions, 1930-1950, and in some ways this reflected the scholar that he would become – an economist, with a keen interest in the history of the downtrodden. In these early years, some key collaborations shaped him. He lived in a flat, in a small three-story block, in Overport, Durban. The flat above was occupied by Enver and Kulsum Motala. Enver, at the time, was director of the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED) office in Durban and steeped in worker education. Vishnu taught a number of courses on economics to workers and activists through the SACHED programme. Kulsum was a keen collector of all things old. In this network was Ike Mayet, an artisan who was also a book-binder and book collector. AKM Docrat, the Communist Party of SA stalwart, repeatedly banned from the 1960s until 1990, who made a living from buying and selling books, was also an important figure in this world. In later years while we were colleagues at Natal University in Durban, Vishnu often went off to see ‘old man Doc’. For all his life, Vishnu remained a close friend of Rajend Mesthrie, the distinguished South African linguistics professor, who also hailed from the little town of Umkomaas. All of these influences were to shape Vishnu in profound ways.

In 1985 and 1986, Vishnu was invited to lecture on the African Studies programme at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, where he taught a course on the political economy of South Africa under apartheid. For a young economist, until then having experienced academic life only at UDW, these two years at Johns Hopkins were intensely significant in this formative stage of his academic career. It opened his eyes to a much larger academic world and was probably a key marker for his lifelong pursuit of academic excellence, and for promoting the idea of collaboration with international academic institutions.

Moving from the Economics department at UDW to a full-time research position in the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at UDW, Vishnu began working more closely with the economist Trevor Bell, and shifted his gaze to South Africa’s international economic relations, especially with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which became the focus of

his doctoral research.

Around this time Bill Freund moved to the Economic History department at the University of Natal, and so started a life-long friendship between the two. Two more unlikely bedfellows you could not find. Vishnu, meticulous and organised to a fault, and Bill, somewhat unkempt and totally disorganised, were, on the face of it, a most unlikely collaboration and companionship. But, theirs was a deep and very special friendship and I don't think anyone had a bigger influence on Vishnu. Bill supervised his PhD, on 'South Africa's International Economic Relations, 1960-1989', and their collaboration, which included work on economic development in cities, lasted until Bill's untimely death in August 2020.

Having completed his doctorate, the early 1990s were exciting years. Under the leadership of Jairam Reddy, UDW became a hotbed of exciting intellectual activity as the democratic transition unfolded. Vishnu moved into Reddy's office, as special assistant to the rector, and took up the cudgels to build a new progressive university.

On the economic policy front, having been involved in the Economic Trends Group (which advised the Congress of South African Trade Unions on economic policy matters), Vishnu took up a leadership position in the Macroeconomic Research Group (MERG), the ANC's economic think-tank to develop proposals for the design of post-apartheid economic policy. In MERG, Vishnu worked closely with Vella Pillay and other members of the ANC's (then) Department of Economic Planning (DEP), a host of local and international economists who assisted the DEP at the time, including Ben Fine, John Sender and Chris Cramer of SOAS. In MERG, Vishnu became involved in some of the key economic questions during the transition, including the importance of the Reserve Bank's mandate and questions about its accountability. He was part of the team that drafted the final MERG report. Vella, who became a sort of fatherly figure to Vishnu, and the SOAS economists remained lifelong collaborators with Vishnu.

Sadly for Vishnu, the ANC had pretty much ditched the MERG report even before it was finalised. On the issue of the Reserve Bank, the government opted for an independent monetary policy authority and an inflation-targeting regime. This became a focus of much of his later work, as he searched for documents and logical arguments for why the ANC, a supposedly left party, opted for, in his view, a neo-liberal economic policy. Vishnu explored these themes with a number of collaborators around the world including Jonathan Michie (who collaborated with Vishnu extensively over many years and

will be co-author of a book to appear later this year), Asghar Adelzadeh, Adam Habib, Keith Hart and, most recently (2019) with Robert van Niekerk (*Shadow of Liberation: contestation and compromise in the economic and social policy of the African National Congress, 1943 to 1996*).

As MERG's recommendations were ditched, so was the exciting project of university transformation at UDW unravelling. Having worked more or less full time for MERG for much of 1993 and 1994, Vishnu returned to UDW, which by 1995 was a shadow of the vibrant early years of the Jairam Reddy administration. It was now something of an alien place for Vishnu. Bill Freund rescued him from this world and offered him some solace by arranging an office for him in Economic History at Natal University.

I had joined the School of Development Studies (SDS) at the University of Natal, then under the leadership of Mike Morris, in 1996. Vishnu joined us in 1997 as a research professor, interestingly after the Economics Department at the University of Natal chose not to appoint him to a post. Vishnu's academic life thrived in the exciting intellectual environment that developed in SDS. He took up the headship of the school over two spells during the period 2002-2011. For many of us in the SDS, and especially for Vishnu, these were intellectually exciting times. The School grew to have a talented group of academics, a highly successful academic programme, large amounts of research funding, research and teaching collaborations across the world, and a highly impressive research output. The academic programme attracted the smartest students from all parts of the globe – our intake in any one year would have included students from, among other countries, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Uganda, Japan, Canada, France, Sweden, Norway, the UK, and the USA. As the senior academic in this milieu, Vishnu led much of the initiative, built what was considered by many to be the among the world's most innovative and productive development studies programmes, created a truly collegial community (something almost impossible in the cut and thrust of academic life) and encouraged younger members of staff by being a generous leader.

He was fortunate to inherit an excellent administration team which he enhanced and which, in turn, pampered him. A key unwritten rule in the School, which Vishnu and his predecessors enforced, was a common teatime at 10:00, when all the staff gathered for tea, good food, and a convivial chat. For all his years there, Vishnu loved lauding over the teatime chat and the seat in the middle of the room was, unofficially, his. Notwithstanding his administrative responsibilities, this was a period when Vishnu was highly

productive having supervised a number of masters and doctoral students and published books on Durban's economy (with Bill Freund), cricket (with Ashwin Desai, Krish Reddy and Goolam Vahed), and numerous journal articles on economic policy in South Africa, macroeconomics, investment, inflation targeting, social policy, and central banking, among others – many of these in collaboration with colleagues in the School. While the School remained an exciting space, after the 2004 merger between the former Universities of Natal and Durban-Westville, the new University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) had entered a period of turmoil with some of Vishnu's closest colleagues, among them Robert Morrell, forced to leave the university.

In 2013, the UKZN management decided to dissolve the School into a larger structure that merged Development Studies with a set of Built Environment disciplines. The rationale was that the model apparently worked at the University of Manchester and so, argued the management, what was good for Manchester had to be good for Durban. Deeply angered and too distraught at the destruction of the institution that he did so much to build, Vishnu withdrew and found new inspiring spaces at Rhodes University where Robert van Niekerk and others there created an environment in which Vishnu thrived.

Wits University's Economics programme benefitted greatly when Vishnu decided to take up an appointment as distinguished professor and Derek Schrier and Cecily Cameron chair in economics at Wits in 2014. At Wits he played an instrumental role in developing the Applied Development Economics (ADE) postgraduate programme and contributed hugely to the conceptualisation and consolidation of the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies. Notwithstanding ill health, this last period of his life was also highly productive. He completed two books – *Shadow of Liberation* and a book, with Jonathan Michie, on *Ownership and Governance of Firms*, and authored 35 journal articles on topics including economic policy in South Africa, Reserve Bank independence, inflation, inequality, Keynesian economics, and business in South Africa.

Given the volume and scope of Vishnu's academic work, it is an impossible task to capture all aspects of it. Three threads really stand out for me. First, his work on economic policy in South Africa, beginning with his early work on South Africa's international economic relations and the more voluminous work on MERG, GEAR and post-apartheid economic policy is unparalleled and without doubt his most important contribution.

Second, was his passion for economic history, much of it in collaboration with Bill Freund, but important works include that with Robert Morrell, on *Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in Natal*, his work on Indian workers, with Shahid Vawda and Paul Tichmann, and more recent work on central banking. Thirdly, is the broad range of his work – from economics, central banking, and politics to cricket.

Vishnu was the most organised, meticulous and systematic person I have ever known. He and I shared a preference for an early start to the day. Vishnu was usually at work at 6:00 and by the time I arrived at 6:45 he had cleared his email from the previous day and begun writing for a paper that he would be working on. We shared a coffee before 7:00, caught up on the gossip, and then he wrote uninterrupted until about 9:00. when the others arrived. From then on, Vishnu's door was always open and there was a steady stream of staff members and students that came knocking. He gave generously of his time. Remarkably, even if you arrived unannounced, you left feeling that he had been waiting to talk to you. He loved having an elaborate and leisurely lunch and most days he combined lunch at a Durban restaurant with a work engagement or discussion. Late afternoon was most often spent at Ike's Bookshop. This was his routine pretty much for all of the time that we worked together in Durban.

Everything he did was meticulous. He updated his CV immediately that a new paper was accepted for publication. Every book in his office had a specific place on his bookshelf, and every aspect of his office was perfectly ordered. His work output was remarkably efficient. In all the years I had known him, I cannot recall him ever missing a deadline, or not being adequately prepared for a meeting.

Outside of his academic work, Vishnu's contribution to books is second to none. For much of the late 1980s, Vishnu spent many hours in Durban with Ike Mayet at Ike's Books in Chapel Street, Overport. From these humble beginnings, Vishnu, later with Joanne Rushby and Julian May, established Ike's Books and Collectables in Florida Road. It quickly became the intellectual hub of Durban – not only for the book launches but also for all sorts of other events and discussions. The typical stream of visitors into Ike's on any given day included visiting academics seeking Vishnu's counsel on research matters, colleagues popping in for a chat, and students seeking advice, a book hunter looking for an out-of-print book ... it was an unending stream and Vishnu was always at the heart of it. He was himself a great book collector with pride of place on his shelf being a complete

set of JM Coetzee's novels – all first editions and signed. He collected art too and introduced me to some of South Africa's best art and we shared a small collection of Mithala art, which David Szanton introduced him to.

Although he did have his fair share of academic fallouts (which academic has not?), Vishnu had an extraordinary ability to engage across ideological boundaries. Though firmly in the left post-Keynesian economic camp, he was able to supervise students more firmly to his right and engage with academic disciplines from accountancy to politics. He never imposed his ideological views but was always clear on where he stood on important matters of ideology.

He had his shortcomings too. For one, he supported Tottenham Hotspur, and somehow came to terms with their promise of potential success with little, if anything, to show for it. Though a highly successful collaborative worker, he did sometimes bail out of collaborations that he had committed to. Almost everyone that has worked closely with him will, I think, attest to having received an email from him, meticulously constructed and written in the early hours of the morning, with news that he has decided to withdraw from a project. It happened to me on more than one occasion, but we were able to move on. I put this down to his high academic standards and the need fully to be in control of his academic commitments.

Though we wrote a lot together, most of the time he and I spent together was spent talking over morning coffee, in our respective offices which for many years were adjacent, in the bookshop, or over lunch. Our conversations were mainly about academic matters – universities, the latest paper, anger at the ANC – but often drifted into sport. He loved cricket and, more than anyone else I know, understood the intricacies of how the *doosra* was bowled, or the technical adjustment that Hashim Amla had made to his batting. We spoke a lot about his personal life, a source of great joy – he unconditionally loved his daughter Sonali – but also great pain as his relationships entered challenging and complicated realms.

Due to his poor health, I saw less of Vishnu over the last two years. But we continued to have conversations over the telephone and on occasion when I was in Durban, I made a point to see him over lunch. Three issues dominated our most recent conversations. First, his concern with the state of our universities. It bothered him no end that our universities were being distracted from the core concern with academic and research excellence and that increasing pressure on universities – from students demanding free higher education to political interference – was undermining our ability

to retain South Africa's place in the international scientific community. He implored me, as a university manager, to focus on the core issue of academic excellence. Second, the state of our economy and politics in South Africa. That the party that he so strongly supported in the 1990s and worked tirelessly for in the heady days of the transition, and the movement that he was a part of for all of his life, had chosen a set of economic and political strategies that resulted in such outlandish corruption, poverty and unemployment, depressed him. He urged me to use the spaces at Wits to shift our economic policy toward addressing poverty and inequality in our society. Though he had a taste of being at the table of power with appointments on the Board of the South African Reserve Bank and various other formal and informal relationships to political power, Vishnu was unflinching in maintaining his independence and remained critical of the ANC's policy choices. Finally, he wanted to ensure that our late friend Bill Freund's autobiography, *An Historian's Passage to Africa*, just published by Wits University Press, be given the recognition that it deserved. A few days before he died Vishnu called, uneasy, incensed and concerned that unless we make sure it happened, the launch of Bill's book would not be given the prominence that it should. 'We owe Bill so much because he made it possible for us to be what we are', he said.

Vishnu's contribution to economics in South Africa is unmatched. So too his contribution to so much more. Go well, Mahavishnu Srinivasan Padayachee (his full name, which is what I often called him. Being the contrarian he was, he responded by shortening my name to 'Ims'). You have made an indelible and deep contribution to making this world a better place.

## Note

1. An earlier, much shorter, version of this obituary was published in *The Conversation*, June 2, 2021.

## Article

# What can land reform achieve in the 2020s? Historical and comparative reflections on the potential of land redistribution to contribute to transformation and poverty alleviation in South Africa

Peter Delius and Stefan Schirmer

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### **Abstract**

This article assesses the likelihood that land reform will reduce poverty and inequality by highlighting important historical processes and relevant comparative experiences. These lead us to a different perspective than the one driving calls for a radicalisation of land reform. Conquest and colonial rule reserved most of the land for whites, and processes of land alienation and discrimination were constantly exacerbated until South Africa became a democracy. At the same time, while a system of private property and individual title was secured for whites, land rights were systematically diminished within black societies. Through most of the twentieth century an entrenched system of migrant labour ensured a massive flow of people, initially mostly men, between rural ‘reserves’ and white-owned mines, offices, suburban households and the factories of the emerging manufacturing sector. Influx control prevented black families from moving to, or acquiring property rights in, urban areas. During the apartheid era, these processes destroyed the ability of most Africans to generate any income from agriculture, while also leading eventually to mass unemployment and a dependence on state grants for those who continued to live in rural areas. Meanwhile, rather than benefitting from state attempts to boost their productivity on the land, weaker white farmers mostly exited the rural areas and moved to urban centres, where their standards of living rose substantially. Combining these historical insights with the reality that the successful land reform programmes of Asia were based on providing poor farmers with access to land titles rather than additional amounts of land, leads us seriously to question the notion that transferring huge amounts of land to black families will substantially reduce poverty or inequality over the next ten years.

## **Introduction**

There is now a voluminous literature dealing with the debate about land reform in South Africa, ranging from often optimistic formulations in the 1990s to current demands for the radicalisation of land reform (See, for example, Binswanger and Deininger 1993, Lipton et al 1996, Ntsebeza and Hall 2007, Walker 2008, PLAAS 2016, Cousins 2017). A major focus of debate has been on the percentage of land that has been transferred, with recent research tempering some of the most negative conclusions. It appears the country is now much closer to reaching the initial 30 per cent target for state-facilitated land transfers than many had imagined (Beinart and Delius 2018). But research remains far from complete (Cousins 2018). Even less adequately researched is whether processes of redistribution and restitution have significantly enhanced most beneficiaries' livelihoods and created new pathways out of poverty for rural communities. But the evidence that does exist suggests that this is far from the case, overall (Lahiff and Guo 2012). Indeed, poorly conceptualised and implemented processes of land reform may have diminished rather than enhanced the opportunities available to many rural residents. This perspective has often been lost in polemical debates. But it should surely be at the forefront of policy makers concerns.

To obtain a fuller, more balanced, perspective on the complex challenges that must be overcome before we can get improved outcomes from land reform, it is important to understand the unique and complex ways in which the country industrialised in the context of various forms of racial discrimination.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when black South Africans suffered the most far-reaching processes of land dispossession, South Africa was an overwhelmingly agrarian economy and society (Beinart and Delius 2014). Land, livestock, gathering and hunting were the basis of subsistence and accumulation. Loss of land effectively deprived people of their livelihoods. Twentieth century South Africa witnessed processes of industrialisation and urbanisation which radically transformed the nature of the society, the possibilities for escape from poverty and for accumulation. By the twenty-first century access to land in former homelands was at best of marginal significance to economic subsistence and social advancement for the majority of households. The evidence that as much as 80 per cent of the land previously tilled in these areas now lies fallow is testament to that fact. And the growing preference over the last 15 years of restitution

beneficiaries for compensation in cash rather than in land re-enforces this point (Beinart and Delius 2018).

These observations are not intended to suggest that land reform should not remain central to South Africa's policies to deal with the burden of the past and to enhance opportunities for all South Africans in the future. But we do believe that policies need to take into account the realities of deep seated and dynamic historical processes that have profoundly transformed both the challenges of generating value from land and the ways in which people regard and utilise it.

We also engage with the question of what the appropriate comparative perspectives for land reform in South Africa are. The comparative analyses that have influenced policy debates have suffered from a failure to locate initiatives in specific historical contexts. The widespread assumption that South Africa is best understood within wider processes of colonization and decolonization in Africa generates important insights but also obscures key differences in processes of economic and social transformation. We argue that while needing to be mindful of our unique challenges, it is appropriate also to draw insights from countries which undertook land reform in an industrialising context.

Our approach is rooted in the assumption that a considerably enhanced rate of labour absorbing economic growth is fundamental to reducing poverty and creating new opportunities. In that context land reform should be undertaken so as to enhance, rather than diminish, the prospects for growth and the expansion of non-agricultural opportunities for the poor. But it is not our aim in this article to provide either an overview of land reform debates or to set out a comprehensive land reform framework. Our main hope is that the historical and comparative perspectives we develop in the article will stimulate further debate about how to locate and integrate land reform within deep seated and wide-ranging trajectories of socio-economic change and to identify relevant comparative insights.

### **Myth of an empty land**

The idea that white settlers occupied empty land is often trotted out as an explanation for them securing control of most of the land. While this is a travesty of the truth, there were zones that were more sparsely occupied than others for historical and environmental reasons. As a whole, South Africa is not particularly well suited to farming. This is largely due to the low and erratic rainfall over much of the interior of the country. As Beinart

(2003) has pointed out, the land area of South Africa is divided by the 500mm rainfall line, which runs from Port Elizabeth through the Free State and Northwest Province. Over half the country, most of it to the west of this line, receives so little rain that it has always been difficult to grow crops, unless irrigated like in the lower Orange River valley. Areas like the Karoo and the Northern Cape are semi desert shading into desert and can at best support very low human and livestock densities. At present about 13 per cent of South Africa's surface area can be used for crop production. High-potential arable land – mostly on the eastern seaboard – comprises 22 per cent of this relatively small pocket of land (Beinart 2003).

Not only is the rainfall low over most of the country, it is also erratic. Droughts, pests, destructive, often dangerous animals along with endemic and epidemic diseases made living from the land a highly risky business. In the pre-colonial and early colonial periods (before approx 1900), most families adopted diversified, risk-averse farming methods. They pursued a range of economic strategies including hunting, gathering, metalworking, and trading, with degrees of emphasis shaped by local possibilities. Members of poor families would also work for wealthier families and hunting and trading expeditions often resulted in long periods and distances of travel and extended absence from home. The creation of new labour and produce markets in the nineteenth century initially provided additional options within this array of strategies for survival and modest accumulation (Hamilton et al 2009, Delius 2016).

Land came under white control because of the superior coercive capacity of settlers and the power of the British Empire, which backed white claims to the land at the expense of black communities. The degree of land alienation that took place in South Africa was unrivalled in sub-Saharan Africa. Even in neighbouring African countries such as Zimbabwe, Namibia and Swaziland where colonial governments and settlers appropriated large areas of land, the total taken remained below 50 per cent. In South Africa, a mere 13 per cent of land was reserved for the black population. However, the often-repeated assertion that this was largely barren land is incorrect. A significant proportion of it lay in the higher rainfall areas in the eastern half of the country (Beinart and Delius 2014). The mostly fertile Transkei, for example, consisted of 45,000 square kilometres and was largely though not exclusively under black control (and modified systems of communal tenure) overseen by chiefs.

As important, though less commented on, is the insecurity of tenure that

Africans experienced even on the limited land reserved for them in urban and rural areas. Conquest and colonial rule entrenched a system of private property and individual title for whites, but it diminished the strong rights to land akin to ownership, which had existed within black societies. This was particularly true for those who continued to farm on land that was now placed under the control of white owners. It was similarly the case in the so called ‘reserves’, where an insecure system of communal tenure was enforced and the powers of officials and traditional leaders were expanded at the expense of the rights of their subjects (Beinart et al 2017).

In terms of access to land, however, the destructiveness of land alienation was initially softened in that millions of Africans continued to live and often farm on land designated as white-owned after 1913. It was to be many decades before the reality of settlement and the ideology of racial segregation were brought into closer alignment (Beinart and Delius 2014). Thus, while Africans suffered from dispossession and exclusion from the legal landholding system, they were still able to generate some income from land as sharecroppers, rent and, increasingly, labour tenants.

### **Migrant labour and the decline of African agriculture**

By the beginning of the twentieth century, conquest, land alienation and onerous taxation along with a range of other factors ensured that the majority of black communities were not able to meet their subsistence or monetary needs from the land. This situation underpinned a pervasive and rapidly expanding system of migrant labour. A massive flow of people, initially mostly men, moved between rural ‘reserves’ and white-owned mines, offices, suburban households and the factories of the emerging manufacturing sector in the Union of South Africa.

Fundamental to these patterns was a system of influx control (notably pass laws) which had its roots in the nineteenth century – and reached its apogee in the apartheid era. This system prevented black families from moving to, or acquiring property rights in, urban areas. At the same time, black farmers were actively discriminated against in terms of access to inputs, capital and markets.

Nevertheless, there were periods during which agricultural production in the reserves experienced growth. For example, South Africa’s manufacturing sector expanded by more than 300 per cent between 1938 and 1948, leading to a rise in the number of black people in manufacturing jobs from 207,000 to 440,000 (Feinstein 2005, Simkins 1982). At the same time, pass laws

were relaxed to a degree and some in government recognised that industry required a stable urban labour force rather than oscillating migrants. These developments had a positive impact on both the welfare and the farming activities of black South Africans living in rural reserves. Overall, the output of black farmers operating in the reserves increased, and the general incomes of those living in the reserves rose. Thus, under the right conditions and in a context of decreasing pressure on land and expanding urban markets, the value that some African farmers were able to generate from the land expanded during the initial phases of industrialisation (Simkins 1982:264). It is worth thinking about this pattern in relation to the potential impact a combination of increased levels of urban employment and more secure rights to rural land might have in the present.

In the 1940s, there were, then, indications that controls on urbanisation would be loosened and opportunities for African economic participation broadened. But the National Party victory in the 1948 election and the shifts towards more thorough going segregation shut down the opportunities that had emerged. Urban influx control was intensified and the drive to reduce black settlement in white rural areas had dire consequences for the reserves. The population of these areas increased rapidly. According to Simkins, average population density in the reserves rose from an already significant 60 persons per square mile in 1955 to 110 in 1969. As a result, 'production per head plummeted, production as a proportion of subsistence requirements in the late sixties being less than two-thirds of the 1955 level. And the private industry wage/agricultural product ratio rose from 5 in 1955 to 11 in 1965 ushering in the contemporary disequilibrium between urban and rural African incomes. Increasing dependency on remittances from the modern sector was the inevitable result' (Simkins 1982:263).

These trends continued into the 1970s and had somewhat contradictory effects. During this decade of economic turmoil there was rising unemployment, a substantial part of which was exported to the reserves. Forced removals, betterment schemes and settlement programmes led to ever-increasing population densities, but those residents who were able to remain employed in the modern economy as migrant workers experienced a rapid increase in real wages. At the same time, a significant number of reserve residents, especially those with some education, benefitted from the growth of local employment as a result of the expansion of reserve administrations (Murray 1992). Based on a statistical survey of household incomes, Simkins (1984:150) maintained in 1984 that the result was a

‘widespread and substantial real improvement in incomes ... since 1970 for the majority of reserve residents’.

But inequality in the reserves increased during this time as the poorest 5 per cent of households remained destitute and the 10 per cent of households just above the poorest experienced a real drop in their standard of living. The wealthiest 70 per cent of households almost doubled their per capita incomes, while the 15 per cent of households just below this group improved their standard of living at a much slower rate. The reasons for these trends were clear. The vast majority of reserve households had become heavily dependent on wage employment in the modern economy and therefore benefited greatly from the rising wages of the 1970s. However, a growing number of unemployed households often had no land to fall back on and therefore experienced greater destitution than when land had been more readily available (Simkins 1984, McGrath 1984, Delius 1996). Even for those who still had access to land the rising costs of cultivation made placing land under production increasingly untenable (Delius 1996).

By the 1980s, the apartheid government had forced almost all black farmers and tenants into so-called Bantustans (Francis 1999:50). In these regions, population pressure, insecurity of tenure, poor infrastructure and limited access to markets made agriculture a very unattractive option. During the 1970s, incomes from homeland agriculture were in steep decline in relation to non-agricultural sources of income. This trend continued in the 1980s and by 1985 agriculture had become of negligible importance. Production defined as non-market or subsistence in 1985 contributed a mere 10 per cent of total household earnings (Cobbett 1987:66-69, Bromberger and Antonie 1993). Still, significant variations across and within homeland regions persisted. Some homeland regions continued to contain much more favourable natural resources than others (Tapsen 1996:266). In the Transkei in 1985, agriculture made up 31 per cent of household earnings, whereas the average was as low as 4 per cent in QwaQwa and 1 per cent in KwaNdebele (Bromberger and Antonie 1993).

By the 1970s, the wages that migrant workers sent home were the lifeblood of rural households. In the Transkei in 1982, where agriculture remained relatively important, more than two thirds of the income of poor and middle-income households came from remittances. About one-sixth of their income came from old age pensions and the remaining income came from wages in local jobs. At least for these households, the income they derived from agricultural production was insignificant (Seekings and

Nattrass 2006:98).

However, remittances proved a precarious foundation for future growth. As unemployment rose in the 1980s, the relative importance of remittances began to decrease while social transfers such as old age pensions became increasingly important (Delius 1996). During the 1970s and 1980s, African pension rates rose, reaching R293 per month in 1992, which was only slightly lower than the state pension that whites could receive. In 1995, 24 per cent of African households (including 42 per cent of the poorest two deciles) received a social pension and by 1999, the total number of social pensioners had reached 1.8 million, which included 90 per cent of age-qualified black South Africans (Devereux 2007).

This pattern has intensified since the 1990s, and by 2016 grants accounted for 71 per cent of the income of poorest households, the vast majority of whom lived in rural areas. These households derived only 9 per cent of their income from wages (World Bank 2018). While the massively increased scale of these transfers under ANC rule has taken the edge off some of the most extreme poverty, the lack of employment opportunities has left millions of the people still residing in rural areas with little prospect of improving their situations.

Recent decades have also seen profound changes in the generational and gender dynamics of the reserve areas. From the 1980s, a major expansion of secondary education took place in the homelands, which ensured that most youth became more remote from agriculture in both practice and aspiration. The fact that many young people spent their days at school resulted in even less labour being available to work the land and herd livestock. Cattle and goats left largely to their own devices were more vulnerable to disease, theft and the drought that gripped parts of the country in the 1980s (Delius 1996).

Such developments ensured that whatever allure farming might have had faded fast. Tragically, the education that youth received in most of the new schools that were established was of very poor quality. In the 1980s, the ‘comrades’ mantra of no education before liberation and the dismantling of systems for monitoring and managing the quality and content of teaching contributed to the further erosion of educational standards (Delius 1996). Youth whose education and immersion in new urban centric youth culture led them to aspire to white collar and preferably professional employment found that they were very badly placed to compete for these jobs. Increasing numbers of educated youth swelled the ranks of the unemployed already

inflated by large numbers of unskilled workers who could not find or retain jobs in a context of stagnant demand for unskilled labour (Spaull 2013).

It is therefore the case that agriculture no longer provides any real prospect for a growing majority of rural people who have very little experience with or knowledge of farming practices appropriate to contemporary circumstances. It is also the case that many rural people aspire to standards of living that the labour intensive, family-based forms of farming – which might still be available for some if they got better access to land – cannot deliver (Johnston and Schirmer 1997). Research by David Harris in much more agriculturally intensive African countries shows that even there the majority of smallholder farms are not viable when benchmarked against the poverty line (Harris 2019). Christopher Cramer and his co-authors have also challenged in a wider African context the notion that small holders are relatively productive or that increases in their production levels are especially effective in alleviating poverty (Cramer, Sender and Oqubay 2020).

Finally, the greater willingness of women and youth to challenge generational and gender-based authority undermined the patriarchal forms of production that were a central element of small-scale farming in the 1930s and 1940s, creating challenges for family-based farming that are difficult to overcome (Paton 2018).

### **White farmers and apartheid**

Part of the future imagined by white supremacists from at least the 1920s was that large numbers of white farmers would remain on the land buttressing the segregationist system (Schirmer 2005). The fact that this proved an impossible dream appears to have bypassed recent proponents of far-reaching land redistribution.

White farmers were always a crucial political force and, in the context of the racially defined electoral systems established after 1910, were able to elicit many subsidies and price controls to allow them to remain on the land and to raise their incomes. In the immediate wake of the 1937 Marketing Act, economists estimated that during 1939/40 the sum of seven and a half million pounds at historical price levels was transferred to farmers from other sections of the community. This enormous amount, however, failed to produce discernible improvements in the productivity or competitiveness of the agricultural sector (Feinstein 2005:142).

Apartheid greatly expanded the state assistance to white farmers, but this

increased expenditure again failed to bring about the results policy makers intended. Having been essentially elected into power by a white farming constituency that was struggling to survive on the land, a crucial aim of the National Party after 1948 was to help poor whites on the land become more competitive and less poor. National Party politicians and many of the farmers themselves believed that smaller farmers had been neglected by previous governments, and were the victims of unfair competition from larger, more capitalised and market oriented agricultural producers (Schirmer 2005). Contemporary observers often referred to these large, successful producers as ‘cheque book farmers’, due to their ability to access finance and use their better resources to pay for the latest farming technologies.

The National Party extended controls over labour on white farms, thereby reducing the labour costs of all farmers. Marketing boards fixed prices well above market rates, ensuring that all white farmers received better incomes. The Land Bank provided farmers and cooperatives with loans on very favourable terms, making it easier for all farmers to take risks and to mechanise. If that was not enough, the state then also used the imperative of soil conservation and land rehabilitation as a way to transfer free or cheap fencing material, dams, irrigation canals and other productive inputs (Delius and Schirmer 2000a). While these amounted to additional transfers, often to marginal farmers, they produced little in the way of more sustainable farming practices. The Soil Conservation Board admitted that throughout the 1950s and 1960s the demand for works of immediate benefit to farmers was much higher than that for works geared more specifically towards conservation and reclamation. It also became evident that many farmers obtained soil conservation works merely because they were subsidised and, when the costs of maintaining the works began to affect them, they either neglected or completely removed fences and dams. State transfers failed to make the majority of white farmers more competitive (Delius and Schirmer 2000a).

What happened instead was that smaller farmers absorbed and consumed many of the new resources directed into the countryside by the state. They used them to supplement the agricultural practices that generated some income for them, but they did not use them to change those practices. Meanwhile, the farmers with capacity and with a deeper market-orientation benefitted more substantially from additional state support and protection, in that they used these resources to improve the ways in which they generated agricultural value.

The majority of white farmers who had somewhat of a survivalist orientation and tended to farm on smaller plots of land than the successful ones, continued to lag behind. This reality is clearly highlighted by the massive market dominance of a small number of very large farmers. In 1963, for example, after more than a decade of a concerted policy to support small, white farmers, the largest 16 per cent of farms produced 65 per cent of the gross value of agricultural sales, and the top 6 per cent produced 40 per cent of the sales (Natrass 1982:99).

Inequality between whites living on the land was therefore not overcome by the apartheid state, despite their best efforts and the marshalling of very significant resources. However, the poor white problem was all but eradicated during the second apartheid decade despite the failures of direct government intervention. Whites on the land improved their economic situation not by becoming better farmers but by moving from low-value land to more productive jobs in the booming urban areas. In addition, the transition to urban livelihoods was eased for some by the job reservations that gave them access to employment within the bureaucracy, state owned enterprises and into lower management positions from which black South Africans were excluded

### **The benefits of urbanisation and rising inequality**

The vision of white urban areas that animated the architects and implementers of segregation and apartheid also proved unworkable in the face of declining access to rural resources in the reserves and quickening pace of industrialisation. Between 1911 and 1948 the percentage of GDP generated by industry went from 5.9 per cent to 23.3 per cent, which must be seen as a significant and rapid transformation of the economy, even though more dramatic changes would emerge in the next two decades. Employment in manufacturing tripled between 1950 and 1980, from fewer than 500,000 to over 1.5 million workers. Both the industrial and the service sectors expanded in size while also using more capital per worker. This ensured not only that millions of new jobs were created, but also that these jobs were more productive and better paying than older forms of employment (Feinstein 2005:142).

In this context, Africans moved off the land in large numbers, in defiance of the pass laws then in place. There were already 350,000 Africans (or 10 per cent of the population) living in towns in 1904. By 1946 the number had risen to 1,690,000, or 22 per cent (Ramphela and Wilson 1989:25).

This was a large number in a country that sought to prevent black people settling in cities. After 1948 the apartheid state also failed to realise its more grandiose designs and its brutal attempts to prevent and even reverse black urbanisation proved unworkable in the long term. But through the massive expansion of its coercive capacity, the apartheid state was able to reduce substantially the urbanisation rate. Tragically, it did so at the very moment that cities offered the best route out of poverty in South Africa's history. The numbers tell the story: between 1910 and 1936, the urbanisation rate for Africans (excluding Indians and Coloureds) was 2.2 per cent. From 1936 until 1960 it accelerated to 4.4 per cent, but between 1960 and 1980 the rate plummeted to 0.2 per cent and then rose again to 2.1 per cent between 1980s and 2000s. That meant that only 33 per cent of Africans were urbanised in 1980. By then 88 per cent of the white population was urbanised. In 2000 the relative numbers were 47 per cent for Africans and 90 per cent for whites (Seekings and Natrass 2006:98).

Seekings and Natrass (2006:98) have summarised the effects of these profound changes. They point out that the period after 1950 was one of unprecedented prosperity for whites who became almost entirely urban and employed in white collar rather than blue collar jobs. Drawing on Manpower Surveys, they show that the proportion on Afrikaans-speaking white workers in agricultural occupations fell from 30 per cent in 1946, to 16 per cent in 1960 and 8 per cent in 1977. Per capita incomes of whites more than doubled between 1947 and 1975.

It remains a matter of dispute to what extent the apartheid state contributed to the economic boom of the post-war period. Some analysts believe that apartheid policies may actually have inhibited economic growth through the many restrictions imposed on both business and labour (Feinstein 2005). It is likely that some affirmative action policies, aimed specifically at white Afrikaans speakers, as well as job reservation policies, ensured that whites got access to jobs at relatively high wages. The expansion of the welfare state also played a role in easing the transition to urban areas for many whites (Seekings 2006).

Nevertheless, the most important way in which the state contributed to the rising prosperity of whites was through omission rather than through deliberate action. The Apartheid state placed no restrictions on white urbanisation while placing severe restrictions on African movement (Posel 1991). As a result, Africans were only able to receive limited benefits from the rapidly expanding economy during the 1960s and 1970s. These

developments placed rural Africans at a growing disadvantage in the modern economy, which from the 1980s was increasingly dominated by a skill and capital-intensive service sector. Rurally based and poorly educated people found it ever harder to find an entry point into a modernising economic system. Meanwhile, those African households who had been fortunate enough to put down roots in the urban areas and avoid forced relocation generally fared much better than those trapped in the rural areas (Feinstein 2005:145).

Seekings and Natrass (2006:100-1) have assessed the distribution of income in 1975 across ten income groups. The bottom two groups, earning less than R500 per year, were mostly made up of rural households without migrants sending remittances, female-headed households in the rural areas and farm workers in remote areas. The next two groups, earning more than R500, but less than R1,000 per annum, was largely made up of rural household with migrants sending remittances and farm workers in less remote areas. At this time, 40 per cent of households in the reserves earned less than R500 per annum. By contrast, the average household income in selected townships in the East Rand, the West Rand and Pretoria was R2,000 per year. In Johannesburg incomes were slightly higher. One third of all African households earned R2,500 per year, which placed them in the 8<sup>th</sup> decile or higher. Even under apartheid, urbanisation emerged as a potential route out of poverty for Africans, and Africans living in urban areas were substantially better off.

The story of apartheid therefore is that it managed to destroy the ability of most Africans to generate any income from agriculture, while also preventing them from fully benefitting from rapidly expanding urban opportunities. Meanwhile, attempts to use state resources to allow white farmers to increase the value they could derive from the land largely failed. State support in the form of subsidies, regulated prices and other transfers obviously benefitted white farmers as a whole, but they did not strengthen the position of smaller, more marginal farmers in relation to large, dominant producers. Instead, the weaker farmers mostly exited the rural areas and moved to urban centres, where their standards of living rose substantially.

## **Transition**

By the 1990s, when the transition to democracy took place, it had been many decades since most rural families made any kind of living from

farming. Herds had been decimated and ploughing, securing seed and fertiliser to grow crops on exhausted land all required cash which was in short supply (Delius 1996). New, more-educated generations placed a substantially smaller emphasis on farming than their predecessors. The changing balance of power between the genders and the generations also made it increasingly difficult for aspiring patriarchs to extract labour from their wives and children. As a result, the ‘family labour’ that had been the foundation of early reserve farming was increasingly a thing of the past. And, where it was drawn on, it intensified conflict and accelerated the disintegration of households. So, even as the population densities continued to rise in the 1980s, there were already large areas of arable land in the reserves lying fallow as a result of these constraints on production (James 2007, Delius 1996).

This pattern has become ever more pronounced in ensuing decades. As noted at the outset contemporary evidence suggests that over 80 per cent of former fields are no longer used, amounting to hundreds of thousands of hectares – perhaps close to a million (Beinart and Delius 2018). The main form of cultivation that still exists is of household gardens on or adjacent to residential stands. Some argue that there are better prospects for pastoralism than cultivation, but it is unlikely that this will achieve a scale that will impact on the overall downward trend in production (Walker 2008:16, Beinart and Delius 2018).

### **The impact of land reform**

In the post 1994 democratic context two major thrusts emerged to address past injustices and current rural inequalities. One thrust set out to liberalise and deregulate the agricultural sector by shutting down the marketing boards and cutting farmer subsidies. Another thrust was a comprehensive land reform programme consisting of three elements: land restitution which aimed to return land to ‘communities’ and individuals that had been dispossessed in the past, land redistribution which aimed to provide agricultural land for Africans who did not qualify for restitution, and land tenure reform which was intended to assist those in communal areas to gain more secure tenure to land.

Both in conception and especially in implementation these interventions focused on equalising access to land and resources, without considering the complex network of services, infrastructures, capabilities and rights that interact to affect the value that can be derived from different pieces of land.

During the last 25 years the failure of both restitution and redistribution to deliver the scale of land transfers envisaged, or to alleviate poverty, resulted in debates and some policy shifts, but none of these had a significant impact on boosting production amongst land reform beneficiaries (Schirmer 2009).

As noted above the patchy evidence that exists suggests that land reform has at best provided very limited returns to the beneficiaries. Most of those making use of transferred land are engaged in household-based farming, but levels of production and productivity on this land are extremely low in many cases (Hay 2015). Rights on this land are often weak and/or overlapping, planning is poor, and residents have very limited access to labour, capital or markets, and they very seldom receive any extension support (PLAAS 2016).

The instances where beneficiaries have ended up significantly better-off have mostly involved partnerships with established business partners, who bring in capital, skills and market access (CDE 2018). Even more worrying is the fact that while land reform has often been presented as the major plank in rural development policies it has done little to address the scale of the challenges of poverty and lack of opportunity – especially for the unskilled and the youth in rural regions (Delius and Schirmer 2001, Lahiff and Li 2012, Hay 2015, Beinart and Delius 2018). In the wake of the Covid epidemic the levels of unemployment in rural areas are approaching 50 per cent in general and 70 per cent amongst the youth. Recent research has revealed widespread food insecurity and stunting amongst children (Beinart and Delius 2020, van der Berg, Patel and Bridgman 2021, *Mail and Guardian* Feb 18, 2021).

The great majority of land reform farms remain at the periphery of the rural economy. In the commercial farming sector, continued processes of concentration mean that fewer and fewer enterprises dominate production in most sub-sectors. Global competition, combined with increased wages for farmworkers, means that these enterprises are mechanising as much as possible, and levels of farm employment continue to drop. A small number of black commercial farmers are attempting to gain access to formal markets, often with the support of commodity associations and commercial farmer unions but, despite being able to access cheap credit that the Land Bank supplies, there are probably fewer than 10,000, and few can claim to be thriving (CDE 2018, Aliber 2009).

Section 25(6) of the Constitution entitles persons or communities ‘whose

tenure of land is legally insecure as a result of past racially discriminatory laws or practices' to tenure which is legally secure. Section 25(9) commanded Parliament to enact legislation to provide for such tenure security. But tenure reform, which is crucial for any discussion on generating value and gaining benefits from land as an asset, has remained in the doldrums disturbed only by occasional flurries of retrogressive and unconstitutional policy making: the Communal Land Rights Act 2003 being one particularly pernicious example, which has recently been overtaken by the Khoisan and Traditional Leaders Act. Legislation has tended to diminish rather than strengthen household and individual land rights in the former homelands. Fortunately, the judiciary has acted as an important check on regressive law making. And recent court judgments have gone some way to clarify and strengthen land rights in 'communal' areas (Meyer 2020, Mabasa and Mabasa 2021).

In recent years, a growing awareness of the scale of failure in all branches of land reform and the rise of populist politics has revived debates about land reform. However, the focus of most critiques has largely been on the insufficient quantities of land that have been transferred (Hall and Kepe 2017). There has been less discussion of how those who currently live in rural areas would actually be able to derive any value from the land they might receive (du Toit 2019).

### **Points of comparison**

Proponents of radical redistribution of land on economic, rather than simply social justice grounds, often draw on comparative examples to demonstrate that equalising land access does ultimately lead to positive consequences for the country as a whole. In some African examples, Kenya is one, where a productive peasantry lacked land access and was ready to put additional acreage under cultivation, land reform, especially if it was accompanied by improved tenure rights, did have at least some positive consequences (Harbeson 1971). But South Africa is in a very different position. Here family farming has all but collapsed, demand for land is weak, and the agricultural sector is dominated by highly sophisticated commercial operations. Despite low growth and a weak manufacturing sector, the urban areas continue to offer viable alternatives as places where even poor people can raise their incomes (Turok 2020).

The experiences of Asian Tigers such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, have been drawn on in support of the importance of large-scale

expropriation and redistribution in laying the foundations for extremely successful development and poverty reduction. But the assumption that they can be used to justify large-scale land redistribution in South Africa ignores some major issues relating to the context in which the reforms emerged, as well as the way in which those programmes were designed.

With the partial exception of Japan, these were poor countries in which the majority of people lived on and made a living from the land. For example, in 1960 South Korea was an extremely poor country, earning an average of \$158 per person per annum in current prices. At the time, South Africa's per capita income was significantly more than double that. Today, South Africans are a massive 36 times better off than Koreans were in the 1960s (with a per capita income of \$5,731) (World Bank 2020).

The income improvements that were generated as a result of increased productivity on the land were achieved from a low base. And we must not forget that the majority of farmers produced rice, on highly productive, irrigated parcels of land. In this kind of labour-intensive agriculture, the potential to raise incomes through additional effort is very high. The potential to raise productivity on much of the land that rural South Africans could conceivably receive in an expanded land reform programme is significantly lower, and will depend much more on investing additional capital than it will on additional effort.

At the time of their redistributive land reforms, all three of the Asian countries where land reform has been so successful had largely rural-based economies. In 1955, the share of agricultural workers in the economically active population was 34 per cent in Japan, 54 per cent in Taiwan, and a massive 80 per cent in South Korea. What is even more important, however, is that land reform was much less about redistributing access to land, and much more about redistributing land rights (Honma and Hayami 2008). There was some landlessness and some sales of public land, but land scarcity was not something that land reform could generally overcome. There was very little spare, uncultivated land to redistribute.

What land reform in Asia could, and did, address, was the distribution of ownership rights. In early twentieth century Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, ownership rights over land were held mostly by a small landlord class that leased the land to a large peasant class. Landlords typically received about 50 per cent of the annual crop yield as rent. While landlords did provide inputs and were sometimes responsible for substantial investments in land, high rents were essentially a manifestation of ancient land rights that had

not been modified as these economies moved into the modern era (Iskan 2018).

Landlords, in other words, were rich because they exerted traditional rights over land, and tenants were poor because they were forced to hand over a significant fraction of their output to those who claimed to own the land. Land reform removed this source of inequality and provided the existing producers of the land with an ownership stake in the land, which acted as an incentive to work harder and produce more. In all three cases, land reforms were about ending traditional rights and handing over ownership to those who worked the land. After these reforms, tenancy almost disappeared in all three countries (Sung-Chan Hong 2013).

The success of the agricultural sector after the reforms came about mostly because of the improved incentives that the new ownership rights generated. Sharp increases in labour effort (measured in working days) emerged amongst farmers after the land reform in Taiwan. Similarly, in South Korea, once they became owners, farmers exerted more effort and became more productive. All of this productivity growth was achieved without much financial support. Iskan (2018) estimates that replacing tenancy with ownership in Korea increased productivity by about 40 per cent.

The final, and perhaps most important, issue that South Africans need to understand about Asian land reform is that the real benefits that these reforms generated for rural people were not rising rural incomes. In spite, and to a large extent because, of increases in agricultural productivity, the average income improvements that flowed from the reforms were severely muted by the inelastic nature of agricultural demand. This meant that an increase in output produced a dramatic fall in prices, which usually result in a fall in total agricultural revenue. All things remaining the same, this means farmers end up poorer than they were before. Luckily, all things did not remain the same. Instead, in all three countries discussed here, land reform was followed by, and interacted with, a process of rapid industrialisation. This development allowed a large number of land reform beneficiaries to sell their land and to move to urban areas to take up industrial employment.

A recent quantitative study found that in Japan, Taiwan and Korea the land reform programmes generated a considerable reallocation of labour out of agriculture, which generated a larger overall benefit than improved rural incomes (Iskan 2018). Without industrialisation and urbanisation these land reform programmes would have had a much smaller positive effect, and, of course, these countries would be much, much poorer than

they are today.

### **What is the way forward for land reform in South Africa?**

South Africa has to achieve higher levels of labour absorbing economic growth to emerge from its current economic crisis and tackle crippling levels of unemployment and shockingly pervasive poverty especially in rural areas. The country also needs to find more effective measures to ameliorate apartheid's legacy of inequalities and racially skewed access to resources and opportunities. We therefore face the difficult challenge of reconciling the need for growth and transforming the economy with the need to compensate black South Africans for the suffering and discrimination caused by apartheid. Land reform can and should make a contribution to achieving these goals, but if done badly, it could also constitute a major impediment to positive outcomes.

In most of the rural areas where black South Africans are concentrated there are less risky ways to eke out a living than cultivating land. In these areas the capabilities, institutions, services and other forms of support required to generate value from land are largely absent. A failure to take these factors into account can lead to an overblown confidence in the potential of land reform which will then distract attention and resources from strategies more likely to stimulate job creation, economic growth and to alleviate poverty.

Partly as a result of unfounded assumptions about the economic potential of land reform and partly as a result of political pressure to change racial ownership patterns in a quantifiable way, the primary concern driving land reform has been about the amount of land transferred. But it is surely clear now to all willing to see that land reform cannot be conducted in its own silo disconnected from historical and comparative evidence about improvements in poverty levels and the imperatives for economic growth.

Attempts to revive small scale farming in South Africa have, both in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, produced very limited results, and the prospects of reversing this trend in the current context seem limited. Urbanisation, in the meantime, has defeated the most draconian attempts at controls and will continue apace. It is currently moving rapidly towards 70 per cent of the population. Urbanisation in the context of economic growth and job creation, although by no means simple to achieve, provides better, and definitely larger scale, prospects for overcoming poverty.

Moving forward land reform needs to become much more concerned

with assisting rural people to escape poverty. To achieve that in a context of limited state capacity and a rapidly worsening fiscal crisis, it is important that land transfers become coupled with an expansion of secure and ultimately transferable property rights across the society as a whole. When that happens, landowners can experience land as a flexible asset, and may be able to generate income from it in a variety of ways, including converting it into loans or into cash by selling it, depending on their shifting circumstances.

The most compelling evidence from our brief review of South East Asian examples is that under some circumstances strengthening land rights can facilitate economic growth. At the same time, it is important to recognise that providing marginalised people with secure and transferable property rights is an extremely costly and complex issue, which in South Africa cannot be undertaken on a mass basis without provoking bitter conflicts and rapidly exhausting available budgets. It will also require the strengthening of existing institutions such as the deeds office and developing additional institutional capacity, as well as the exploitation of new methodologies, all of which are costly. Nevertheless, even gradually dismantling the dualist residues of the Apartheid property system could loosen some of the shackles on economic growth – especially in the former reserves (Delius 2021, Beinart and Delius 2021).

Recognition has to be given to tenure arrangements that exist outside of formal systems but nevertheless work at a local level (Cousins et al 2006, Hornby et al 2017). It is equally important to avoid well-meaning paternalism silencing the diverse views of rural people, which includes a strong demand for more secure forms of title. Given the challenges and the existing fiscal and state-capacity crises, we would argue for gradualist more flexible bottom-up systems designed to overcome the legal dualism and insecure rights that existed under apartheid, as well as encouraging rather than seeking to modify rapidly changing patterns of settlement and urbanisation.

It is equally important to recognise, if land reform is to contribute to the fight against poverty, that land can only generate value when it is embedded in a broader growth-inducing context. That means, of course, that any land redistribution programme will generate positive results only if there are broader reforms to shift the South African economy from its currently depressed state to one that consists of much more investment, job creation and movement towards a more inclusive economic system. It is therefore

counter-productive to allow unresolved restitution processes, uncertainty about land expropriation, and an overblown confidence about the positive consequences associated with transferring land to undermine a focus on encouraging both private and public investments. These investments are crucial for kick starting the economy in general, but also for improving the infrastructure, health services and education available in rural areas.

It is also critical to embed land reform initiatives within a workable rural development policy. Given current fiscal and capacity constraints, rural development policy should not be about starting additional programmes and significantly extending bureaucratic tasks. Rather the state must fundamentally change its approach while drawing on the capacities and resources that currently exist. The idea would be to construct a programme of interventions that are targeted at areas and people where they can have an impact. The main issue is to coordinate local programmes in such a way that they complement each other (Delius and Schirmer 2001).

Lastly, the majority of the long-term solutions to rural poverty lie in the urban areas. That means that rural people should have much better access to quality education and training opportunities that will allow them to compete for jobs across the economic system. It also means that it must become easier for rural people to move to cities. To achieve that, we need better policies and city level interventions to allow those who want to migrate to find affordable land and housing in areas that are conveniently located in relation to centres of economic activity.

Higher growth, faster urbanisation and a much more capacitated state are vital ideals, but they will take a very long time to achieve. In the meantime, most households in rural areas (and many in urban areas) will continue to depend on a multiplicity of strategies to get by. This is especially the case now, as rural poverty and general unemployment levels have been escalated significantly by the impact of Covid-19. Where these strategies involve any kind of cultivation or animal husbandry, we need targeted forms of support that avoid overwhelming state capacities and budgets and will not impede wider processes of growth.

It is vital for South Africa's future to move land reform debates away from unrealistic expectations and to accept that we are on a road in which rural development is inextricably interlinked with broader processes of urban-based economic change. We must do everything possible to avoid reproducing elements of the inhuman and destructive effects of entrenching divisions between rural and urban areas. Finding new ways to keep people

on land that will not provide either themselves or their children with a better, more viable future is not the way forward. We need rather to ensure that land reform is located in a wider rural development strategy which in turn takes account of the centrality of processes of urbanisation and is designed to contribute to accelerated labour absorbing economic growth. Historically the loss of land led to loss of livelihoods. In our view in the contemporary context vastly increasing people's access to employment and livelihoods should be the dominant and integrative objective.

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# Review Article

## History and hope in Cradock, Eastern Cape<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

South African small towns receive relatively little research attention. Many find themselves in great difficulty presently. The article examines Cradock and its people using some of the relatively unusual volume of literature on this small town. The article briefly considers contemporary developments and concludes with some thoughts about the future. Its interest is in transformations that have (and have not) taken place in the town, so imbued in the consciousness of many political and other moments in wider society – the Eastern Cape particularly, and South Africa more generally. It argues that deeper consideration of histories as well as their traces in present social dynamics can contribute to addressing the difficulties that the town faces, and provides some thoughts on how that may occur, as well as suggesting forms of further research.

### **South Africa: small town histories and transformation**

Scholars lament the paucity of studies of the hundreds of small South African urban places (eg Freund 2005:303-4, Setiloane 2015:vi). ‘The fortunes of smaller centres ... tend to [be] ignored given the immediately apparent and politically pressing needs which assert themselves in the largest urban areas’ (Nel and Hill 1998:131). Apart from an obvious bias towards the largest cities in the historical, sociological, geographical and other literatures, a new urgency attaches to small towns with populations up to – say – 100,000, in which live at least a fifth of the national population (not to mention the quarter of the total to be found in the ‘dense rural’ or ‘closer’ settlements) (National Planning Commission 2011:236).<sup>2</sup> Popular media suggest that ‘small towns are collapsing’ (Sihlobo 2021) and national government’s auditor-general reported in 2021 that nearly 60 municipalities that include many small towns ‘disclosed significant doubt in their financial

statements as to whether they will be able to continue operations in the near future' (Auditor-General 2021:19). Among those is Inxuba Yethemba, a local municipality that includes the towns of Middelburg and Cradock in the Eastern Cape province. Further research on small towns seems to represent a significant need in these circumstances. How have the histories of these towns shaped the situation in which they find themselves today? What do their histories offer as means towards more successful actions that may improve their conditions? Such questions raise large issues: and no single answer will emerge. This article explores the history and present situation of one small town, Cradock, as a contribution to thinking about such questions.

Cradock appears to be relatively unusual in that there is a significant volume of historical literature on this particular small town – a place with a population of about 40,000 today (1 per cent of the population of Ethekwini/Durban or Cape Town). Earlier texts from such illustrious authors as Olive Schreiner (who occupies a central place in South African literature in English) and Neville Alexander (a highly significant anti-apartheid intellectual figure) among many other works, touch on Cradock, a place so imbued in the consciousness of many political and other moments in wider society – the Eastern Cape particularly, and South Africa more generally. Two scholarly works written in the 1990s but only published in 2012 and 2017 provide a basis for thinking about the town's history, as well as three biographies of individuals inextricably linked to that history and published between 2011 and 2018. The article reviews the Cradock context, examines the five volumes mentioned in some detail, and proceeds to notes on contemporary developments and transformations that have (and have not) taken place in this town. It suggests that, at least in Cradock, the relation between history and contemporary action is worthy of more debate, with the implication that the same may apply to many other towns. The article asks and tentatively suggests how these features of the town might be mobilised.

### **Cradock: the place**

War and other forms of coercion established nineteenth century colonial ascendancy in the Eastern Cape; as Ngcukaitobi (2018:22) put it, 'With the land lost, and Africans unable to resist the military incursions of the British, a new frontier was open – the frontier of ideas. Education, law and religion were the epicentre of this new frontier'. Over time in Cradock, these spheres

became arenas of oppositional organising. Later in the twentieth century serious challenges to white supremacy developed after two centuries of violence and oppression, which remains in the historical memory of people in Cradock as it does elsewhere in South Africa (eg Wale 2020).

Cradock originated as a colonial outpost in 1812, on the left bank of the Great Fish River – the Inxuba. Its economy grew with wool booms of the 1850s and 1870s: fencing and other investments capitalised the sheep farms, and dams and weirs proliferated, also supporting agriculture along the valley (Mabin 1984, Beinart 2008: esp 173-4) and the town became a strategically located commercial centre. By that time, a ‘location’ existed at the south end of the town, to which were relegated most people other than white – especially isiXhosa speakers. Between the location and the colonial town centre lay a less determinate section in which lived many of the coloured and Asian-descended population, along with some of the less well-off white people (none of these categories being legally distinguished as they were after 1950). ‘Segregation and apartheid came to Cradock’ (in Jeffrey Butler’s 2017 title) in numerous and contested phases, culminating in the destruction of the old location, removals of ‘disqualified’ people from the town, and by degrees new housing schemes that grew into Lingelihle township (‘a good effort’). In the 1970s when coloured people were removed from the town, they went to Michausdal township across the national road from Lingelihle, with a mix of housing types typical of many such areas.

The memorials and museums that populate the landscape capture some of the reasons why ‘Cradock has an influence on the South African literary tradition and political history far out of proportion to the town’s size and location’ (Inxuba Yethemba Municipality 2009:1). From celebrating a settler, colonial imprint to an apparently radically different post-apartheid way of memorialising, the panoply presents the ‘memorial complex’ of which Minkley (2008) wrote. The deepest mark of Cradock on the national political imagination arose from a dreadful tragedy: the murders by security police of the Cradock Four on the night of June 27-28, 1985, and the massive funeral that followed in Lingelihle on July 20 that year, with resonance far beyond as well as in Cradock (cf Pillay 2011). In addition to their graves in the Lingelihle cemetery, three memorials (and internationally, several films and other works) commemorate the Cradock Four.<sup>3</sup> The largest monument, the Cradock Four Garden of Remembrance, stands on top of the hill above Lingelihle from which military and police watched

the funeral of the Cradock Four in 1985. The long-delayed completion of the Garden and its currently dilapidated state form the source of much controversy (cf Skiti 2015).<sup>4</sup>

Rather more visited is the Olive Schreiner House Museum, beautifully renovated in 1986-7 (Radford 1987). The Schreiner Museum occupies the house in which she lived as an early teenager for only two years, in 1868-1870. Beyond *The Story of an African Farm* and other well-known works Schreiner also made ‘prophetic and eloquent criticism of many South African policies and institutions’ (Butler 2017:ix). Memorials to other aspects of Cradock history such as the forced removals of the 1960s do not exist; the old location site is derelict. Once serving the location, Holy Rosary Convent School on Sprigg Street in the old mixed area serves as a reminder, though most will not notice it, unless armed with Wilmot’s township tour guide that ends here. ‘Notable alumni include renowned academic and struggle icon, dr Neville Alexander, author EKM Dido, and poet Clinton du Plessis’ (Wilmot 2016:21).<sup>5</sup>

### **Recent literature on Cradock: two histories**

The major sources available on Cradock include two substantial and readable scholarly histories written in the 1990s but published more recently, that addressed the town and its politics, with different emphases. Those are *We Can: black politics in Cradock 1945-1985* (Tetelman 2012, his thesis of 1997); and *Cradock: how segregation and apartheid came to a South African town* (Butler 2017/2019, based on a longer manuscript drafted up to 2001). Published at much the same time, Menzi Duka’s two biographies of James Calata (2011) and of Matthew Goniwe (2018) draw on many sources, including Butler and Tetelman. To these works may be added *My Father Died for This* (Calata and Calata 2018), largely a biography of canon James Calata and his grandson Fort Calata, one of the Cradock Four. In this and the following sections, I examine these texts as supports for understanding the circumstances of the town today, and as the basis for further research which may help to address ways of achieving better lives for the people of the town.

Jeff Butler’s account begins in the 1920s, the years of his childhood in the town where he was born in 1922, four years younger than his better-known brother Guy, a prominent author and literary scholar. He only slightly knew the old location in the 1930s: he described the town of that time as ‘a single contiguous settlement bisected by Regent Street into a

dominant town where whites and a sprinkling of coloureds, Asians and Africans owned homes and land; and the ‘location’, ‘owned by the town, a place of unpaved streets, mud huts, and brick and tin shacks housing the bulk of the African and coloured residents’ – ‘a dusty warren of small houses and huts, covered in early evening by a fog of smoke and emitting a gentle hubbub we could hear from some distance in parts of the white town’. His family lived on the same street as, among others, two shops owned by Indian-descended people – ‘Mr Casavan, who sold vegetables and sweets, the other Mr Ranchod, who mended shoes’ (Butler 1977:9).

After an absence of 30 years, when Jeff Butler returned in 1977, people such as messrs Casavan and Ranchod had been forced out, and ‘the location was silent – an empty ruin of mud-plastered brick walls without doors or windows or roofs’ (Butler 2017:xii, x). The ‘devastating physical alteration’ was the result not of bombardment but of comprehensive segregation from the 1950s to the 1970s. Over more than two decades, Butler crafted possibly the most substantially researched history of a smaller South African town over the first three quarters of the twentieth century. Along the way he published articles and chapters on some of the themes important in that history around the country (Butler 1985, 1987, 1989). Butler suffered a stroke in 2001 and died in 2008 and the book appeared only in 2017 (2019 in South Africa).

Seven chapters of *Cradock: ... a South African Town* address the ‘age of segregation’, in other words the period before formal apartheid. The first provides a general background, followed by a description of the population. The next five focus on how politics unfolded, including boycotts around ‘liquor and beer’; sanitation; charity and welfare; public health; and public housing. Segregation ebbed at times, but mostly flowed. In the last full chapter ‘Apartheid comes to Cradock’, and the book ends in the early 1970s with the last group areas proclamation affecting the town. Perhaps the book reaches its peak in describing the painful destruction of the churches in the old location (2017/2019:158, 166-7), for which no compensation was paid.<sup>6</sup> Throughout, the account juxtaposes relationships between diverse groupings in Cradock, and explores the struggles that took place between municipal and central scales of government, especially in the apartheid period, creating ‘a text rich in insight and with conclusions on the changing dynamics of state power that extend far beyond this small locale’ (Aiken 2019:68-69).<sup>7</sup>

Today in Cradock divisions between townships and town society – while not absolute – continue, making an issue of how such barriers may be overcome. Past interaction between location elite and liberal town people especially through the ‘Joint Council of Europeans and Natives’, one of about 40 such voluntary bodies in cities and towns around the country, perhaps demonstrated the ‘paternalistically-conditioned humanitarianism and the “separate worlds” that the protagonists occup[ied]’ (Haines 1991:7 [citing Marks 1987], cf Hirson 1978). Butler brings home the difficulties of interpersonal relationships between whites and the school-and-college educated African elite. The foundation of division is not memorialised in, for example, the form of a plaque at the Old Location site at which succeeding years of school children might gain some sense of coercive change. The results of division are portrayed in artist Sue Williamson’s work. ‘The form of *A Tale of Two Cradocks* functions as a screen – somewhat like apartheid, you can only see one side of the “tale” properly at any one time, depending on where you are standing’ (Williamson 1994).

In his detailed analysis of interaction between housing and segregation, Butler took the housing story into the era of apartheid, with the removals from and destruction of the old Cradock location, and the creation of Lingelihle (in stages from the 1940s to the 1970s) and Michausdal. He realised a ‘remarkable analysis of government institutions in the pursuit of social engineering endeavours’, as Leta (2019) put it: relations between national and local government were often fraught.

Without an account of society and politics in the segregation period, making sense of what apartheid meant physically and socially in the town would be difficult. Butler provides an account of how the town came to be fundamentally the way it is now – particularly due to the enormous geographical restructuring brought about by apartheid, which has persisted with relatively little alteration to the present, save the new housing projects built post-1994. Reading Butler’s work suggests that grappling with the present requires engagement with the *longue durée* of the frankly awful history of Cradock and indeed all South African towns: in which very diverse characters and political traditions played roles that current commentators perhaps neglect, in seeking to overcome some of the legacies of the past.

Butler argued that apartheid post-1948 differed significantly from segregation (2017:185-94). Work on DF Malan – the first apartheid prime minister – cited him arguing that ‘apartheid was nothing new; it was merely a word which attempted to eliminate the negative connotations that had

become associated with “segregation” (in a speech at Stellenbosch in 1953 – Korf 2010:449). For those in Cradock who lived through the rupture from segregation to apartheid, no doubt existed as to the dramatic changes the latter wrought. In Michael Tetelman’s words, ‘The national election of 1948 signalled a turning point in the history of South Africa’ (2012:55).

Butler’s history is infused with debates, actions, and difficulties of the municipality, meaning, of course, predominantly the politics and administration of white local politicians and officials. Black politics, including what would probably be called coloured politics, enter the story largely in relation to those white politics, and their own agencies, twists and turns receive less attention. By contrast, Tetelman’s (2012) account is one of the independence of black politics from white politics even though much of the history is one of protest at, response and resistance to, white politics and government.

In *We Can! Black politics in Cradock ...* Tetelman (2012) provides a history that is hard to match for other towns, though there is the more recent work of Tshepo Moloi (2015) on black politics in Kroonstad. Like Moloi’s, Tetelman’s book began as a 1997 doctoral thesis, in his case at Northwestern University near Chicago. The underlying strength of *We Can!* – the title borrowed from James Calata’s choir van slogan ‘Sinakho!’ – lies in more than 100 interviews, mostly conducted in Lingelihle with individuals whose participation in events there and in connection with Cradock and people from Cradock stretched back to the 1930s or before.<sup>8</sup> Working ‘more like an anthropologist than historian, he moved into [a] shack in Lingelihle, played fullback on the township’s rugby team ... and drank a lot of beers in shebeens’ (Campbell 2020). Tetelman also conducted research in numerous public and private archives. He also spent a ‘wonderful part of a summer’ with Jeff Butler in Middletown, Connecticut (Tetelman 2020) and built on his long-term research.

Tetelman’s first chapter provides an excellent account of the old location in relation to the town in the pre-World War II period, arguing that the notion of accommodationist black politics failed, opening the way to far more oppositional activity after the war. James Calata played a central role in building social organisation from his Anglican church post – schooling, choirs and other groupings created strong formations. The book goes on to concentrate on black politics over the subsequent ‘forty lost years’ of apartheid (O’Meara 1996), addressing first the period 1948 to the beginning of forced removals from the old location (1958); then up to the point at

which the national wave of rebellion starting in Soweto reached Cradock in 1977. Tetelman proceeds beyond the time span of Butler's volume – into the 1980s. 'Reform' apartheid, community councils, and the beginnings of new and strong forms of civic and youth organisation and action in Lingelihle (Cradora and Cradoya respectively) form the substance.

The last major chapter bears the title 'the eye of the cyclone' but it is hard to find the quiet such an 'eye' might suggest, for school boycott, violence, and death squads permeate the chapter: 'all possibilities for organised peaceful protest had disappeared' in the later 1980s (2012:193). The funeral of James Calata in 1983, and its important contribution to revival of mass-based opposition, marked a key moment in development of new organisational tactics that echoed activities of the earlier generation (cf also Tetelman 1999). The chapter takes up the inspiring but also frightening 1983-1985 period – true for the country as a whole but particularly in Cradock, culminating in the brutal murder of the Cradock Four in June 1985 and the funeral attended by something like 50,000 people the following month.

Led by Matthew Goniwe and Fort Calata amongst others, the Cradock Residents' Association (Cradora) and Youth Association (Cradoya) built participation in collectives such as street committees that became the platforms for boycotts of education and of commerce in town, and the 'ungovernability' that by 1985 had paralysed 'black local authority' in Lingelihle. Like the elder Calata, Goniwe and the younger Calata started from cultural and developmental activities. They insisted on sobriety, respect and dedication that formed the backbone of successful challenges to authority: with 'slow, patient organising, and disciplined, tightly controlled groups' (Tetelman 2012:151). These Cradock organisations and methods of organising provided an example followed in many other parts of the country as anti-apartheid contest became more and more effective in the middle and later 1980s (see also Zuern 2011:73-4, Houston 1999:212-3).

Tetelman's account ends with the late apartheid attempt (end of the 1980s) to bring some improvement to Lingelihle (some millions of rand invested in a day clinic, stadium maintenance, road improvements and storm water drains); at the same time as community organisation began to revive from the massive detentions and trials of the 1986 state of emergency and after. A postscript is optimistically titled 'from darkness into dawn' – although it points to the 'massive obstacles that still confront Cradock and indeed all of South Africa' (2012:197).

Neither Butler nor Tetelman addressed in any detail deepening lines as well as connections between those apartheid defined as black and as coloured in Cradock. One cause must have lain in the national policy of ‘coloured labour preference area’ (Cole 2012, cited in Eigelaar-Meets 2018). The author of the original ‘Eiselen line’ separating western from eastern Cape indicated that ‘Briefly and concisely put, our Native policy ... aims at the ultimate elimination (sic) of Natives from west of the line’ (Eiselen 1955, in Goldin, 1984:111). Certainly, the preference policy in practice created animosity between those favoured and those dismissed: the extent of its effects in Cradock after 1967 when the line moved further east to include the Cradock magisterial district in the ‘preference’ area remain unexplored. On top of that, the ‘pass laws’ allowed continuing harassment of black residents some of whom at least found themselves removed for lack of ‘qualifying’ to live in the town under constantly modifying ‘urban areas’ laws. There seems no record of the numbers of removals of African people from Cradock to ‘dumping grounds’ to the east, the major one of which was probably Sada, situated 150 kilometres away, where thousands of evictees from farms and similar towns were concentrated from the 1960s onwards – which along with Dimbaza ‘owe its very existence to these removals’ (Surplus People Project 1983:106-7, 112) and in which desperate conditions became general (de Wet et al 1996, ECSECC 2000:34, Evans 2019).

By the time the two academic histories of Cradock were published in 2012 and 2017, ‘The broadening of democracy in South African society in the 1990s allowed for new and different questions to be asked about history, for diverse materials to be made available, for a multiplicity of interpretations to be offered, and for varied notions of history to emerge’ (Witz et al 2017:2). What would Butler or Tetelman have done differently in the light of debates, conflicts, and much further publication by others on the issues that the histories of Cradock engage? Butler’s manuscript found its way into publication 16 years after he perforce stopped work on it. Tetelman’s thesis was published 15 years after he completed it. During that time, other volumes set mostly in Cradock – biographies of its personalities - have appeared. They offer ‘multiple knowledge routes and journeys that can disrupt the conventions. This is ... a space where the conventions of source and history are questioned and where the meaning of the historian’s practice is shifted’ (Witz et al 2017:19).

### **Biographies: James Calata, Matthew Goniwe and Fort Calata**

The literature on Cradock became primarily concerned with the set of events connected to the story of the Cradock Four, the political organising that lay behind them, and some of the personalities of those involved. James Calata has received renewed attention in relation to that narrative. Biographies by Menzi Duka (2011, 2018) address the lives of two of the best-known names associated with Cradock – the elder Calata, and Matthew Goniwe, both of whom lived much of their lives in Lingelihle, and some years in the old location before that. The political organising that challenged apartheid in Cradock, Lingelihle especially, in the 1980s drew very much on Calata's legacy: his grandson Fort who along with Matthew Goniwe led the civic organisations then and was murdered with him, had the same notions, principles and skills of music, discipline and community that canon Calata had conveyed. In *My Father Died for This* (Calata and Calata 2018), Fort Calata receives attention from his son (who was only 3 when the Cradock Four funeral took place), and daughter-in-law. Duka, born in Cradock in 1948 (Duka 2011:319, 2017), describes the personal, cultural and political worlds of Calata and Goniwe. Both of his biographies are primarily set in Cradock but take in wider parts of South Africa. Duka's varied career centred on teaching and writing (including short stories and poetry in isiXhosa and a bilingual dictionary) and included teaching at what is now Matthew Goniwe High School in Lingelihle. He recorded that his five favourite books were by SEK Mqhayi, PT Mtuze, JJR Jolobe, ZS Qangule, and N Saule. 'They motivate thought and are inspiring' (Duka 2017). That list reminds that publications in English do not exhaust the published literature of the Eastern Cape, although it appears that the historical accounts of Cradock and its people are predominantly in this language. Oral accounts particularly in isiXhosa or Afrikaans might take narratives and their analysis further, a subject for further exploration.

James Calata did not make the history of the town alone, but he certainly had a major impact, as portrayed by all the authors reviewed here. Duka's work on Calata (2011) was produced as a typescript bound in hard covers, suggesting that publication can be a challenge for some authors in South Africa. The biography provides a fascinating way of approaching extremely complicated politics, including the struggles of Calata's family to establish themselves first in the old location and then with forced removal, in Lingelihle (where the Calata house is now a national heritage site, not always well maintained). The passages describing life in these parts of

the Cradock environment add elements to those in Butler and Tetelman, especially on the circumstances of the old location. A sense of an aspirant elite surrounds families such as Calata's, in Duka's account.

Duka's title describes Calata as 'one of the greatest sons of Africa' and 'a pioneer of South African nation building', and given that he acted as the longest serving secretary general of the ANC for 12 years while living in Cradock – and held more offices in the organisation before and after that – he clearly merits attention nationally, not much of which is presently afforded. Duka insists that the ANC Youth and Women's Leagues were basically Calata's creations, and that he initiated the process leading to the Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter of 1955 at meetings in Cradock a little earlier. As a participant in the Congress, he was arrested and tried in the saga of the Treason Trial of the late 1950s and continued to experience harassment and banning long after. He had the company of numerous fellow members of the ANC in Cradock during all those years and Cradock certainly featured on the national map of the organisation. At the Cape ANC congress in 1953, held in Cradock, ZK Matthews, who had been provincial ANC president but then spent some time in the USA, proposed a national convention which became the Congress of the People – leading to the Freedom Charter and the treason trial in which Calata was one of the ultimately acquitted accused.

Paradoxical features of Calata's background and life affected his roles in Cradock as well as nationally, and those appear as vital features in understanding society in Lingelihle. One of Calata's ambitions was to unify diverse tendencies among isiXhosa speaking people and he clearly sought to do so in Cradock. Far away as it was from the great places of major traditional leaders, he nonetheless was Sandile's adviser for some years, raising the complications of the ANC's relations with 'chiefs' and 'royals', something that none of the works reviewed here sufficiently pursues in relation to the black population of Cradock as it grew rapidly in the middle and later twentieth century.

Calata disliked attempts of the ICU and of the Communist Party to establish a presence in Cradock. In both cases that concern had religious roots – but those roots, as is characteristic of Christianity in black society in South Africa, were also complex. Ntsikana, early nineteenth century councillor to Ngqika as well as a Christian prophet, according to Calata, as quoted by Duka 'gave Africans a model for integrating English culture and African culture' (Duka 2011:211, cf Peires 1979, Kumalo 2014). 'Calata used both

the St. Ntsikana Memorial Order and the IDAMF [Inter-denominational African Ministers Federation] strategically to bring Africans, through Christianity, to the nationalism of the ANC' (Duka 2011:112). Pursuing that theme Calata rewrote English hymns to make them more palatable to amaXhosa singers. Duka's account – like Tetelman's – shows the importance of Calata's training of choirs and composition of music to oppositional organisation in Cradock and well beyond. The significance of the churches as central to social – and political – life in the town, recognised by others too, comes through most strongly in Duka's work.

Both of Duka's works are somewhat didactic: they perhaps provide useful texts for teachers of social studies in current South African school curricula – which call for teachers to provide learners with model biographies of 'heroes'. The first ends with 'South Africa is in dire need of leaders with attributes such as those displayed by the late Canon James Arthur Calata, as presented in this book' (2011:244), and the second opens with a representation of Matthew Goniwe as 'the quintessential authentic transformational leader which South Africa, and Africa in general, direly needs' (2018:vii). A striking difference between the two biographies is the promotion of religious views in the first, reminiscent of the fusion of elements of Christianity and Xhosa world views characteristic of Ntsikana in the early nineteenth century, and the promotion of something more akin to post-apartheid ideologies of the ANC and SACP in the second. There is a difference in tone between the two biographies in relation to these organisations, and to the agency of their central characters.

Duka's biography of Goniwe passes through sections titled 'Onward to joining the Socialist Front, 1961-1975' (2018:24) and, after Goniwe's imprisonment along with others during the 1970s, 'The new approach, 1981-84' (2018:81). The book ends on something of a triumphalist note, 'The truth victorious: 1992 to current times', an optimistic view perhaps. Duka wrote as a community historian, with an insider's knowledge which gives a certain vitality and sense of intimacy when describing people and events that took place in Lingelihle. Notably, Duka taught Goniwe as a senior school pupil, who was also later a student teacher working with him. The pages of the Goniwe biography (eg 2018:26-27) that detail teachers and learners as well as classroom practices at schools in Lingelihle represent elements of such a community history. Duka presents Goniwe as a model 'public intellectual' (2018:37) who loved reading and was a stickler for discipline in terms of hard work and application. He traces Goniwe's

intellectual influences through Paulo Freire and the texts that he read whilst working in other parts of the country in Marxist study groups and early political (sometimes ‘underground’) cells. That provides also a sense of the ways in which this political-intellectual background shaped organising in Lingelihle in the early 1980s. The account thus contributes to explaining how Cradock became the ‘epicentre of rebellion’ in that period (2018:143), and that is why Duka’s work adds importantly to understanding the history of the town and its place in the country.

A further measure of editing on the part of publishers would have been valuable for both the Duka books. It is sad that reproduction of the photographs of the protagonists, their families and environments in Cradock are poor. The Calata book has no list of contents; the Goniwe volume, no index. Perhaps stretching beyond the evidence, in *Matthew Goniwe* Duka also suggests that his subject joined the both the ANC and the Communist Party (SACP) at a very young age: Tetelman’s interview evidence is that he was in contact with ANC and SACP officials from 1982 (2012:151). The two political organisations in their manifestation after the formal end of apartheid are portrayed as the heroes of the struggle, with Goniwe to some extent reduced to serving – rather than contributing to shaping – their policies as they developed at the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s.

Both pessimism and optimism appear in another biographical account, largely focused on Fort Calata, grandson of canon James. His son Lukhanyo wrote *My Father Died for This* with his wife, Abigail; it is framed by Lukhanyo Calata’s own travails, not during the formal apartheid period, but rather at the hands of agents of a post-apartheid government institution. Its first chapter describes the 2016 firing and subsequent court reinstatement of the ‘SABC 8’, journalists removed formally for ‘disrespecting’ the South African Broadcasting Corporation after they spoke out about censorship and other ‘shenanigans’, to which subject the book returns in its closing pages (Calata and Calata 2018:17-41, 251-4).

Early parts of the book again deal with the life of canon James Calata, followed with biographical material on both Fort and his spouse Nomonde Calata. (The first five chapters convey alternately the words of Abigail and of Lukhanyo). The book turns finally to the story of the Cradock Four, the identification of the murderers at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s, and the subsequent failure of the state to prosecute the killers, who did not receive amnesty.

*My Father Died for This* engages with both physical and political aspects of life in Cradock, Lingelihle particularly, with some pages on Michausdal. Its passages on Fort's wife Nomonde's life and harassment by police add considerably to the story. New housing into which Nomonde and Fort Calata and their children moved in 1983 were 'mere shells of houses ... [they] had only windows and doors and no other fittings. The walls were not plastered and there were no ceilings. Residents were expected to turn these empty shells into homes ... discrepancies in rent and the appalling living conditions black people had to endure ... angered the iLingelihle community ... which made sure that whenever a meeting was called, many residents attended'. Cradoya, the youth organisation which Fort Calata chaired, helped to secure safety and comfort of pensioners and other grant recipients when they collected funds, helping to reduce petty crime and 'protect pensioners from unscrupulous loan sharks and "shebeen queens"' (Calata and Calata 2018:136).

Lukhanyo Calata 'perceives a traceable lineage between the lives of his great-grandfather, his father, and his own, and that there pulses between them a commitment to liberation that transcends the specific political contexts in which they operated' (Hawa 2020). The book expresses Lukhanyo Calata's disillusionment with ANC leaders who rather than using their power to serve and bring justice to the people, 'instead ... have looked at it as a power to enrich themselves'. In his view, 'the once-glorious liberation movement of (Canon Calata) and my father has not honoured the pain of our people in its politics, in the seeking of justice, and in securing the future of our children' (Calata and Calata 2018:250). That is an indictment which in turn reflects in Cradock itself.

These histories and biographies from Cradock demonstrate much of the hideousness of segregation and apartheid. Dehumanised by the hegemonic white leadership locally as well as nationally, the majority of the population could not but hope for a better life once the 'regime' came to an end. That is not to deny moments of enjoyment such as those evoked in other apartheid townships far away, by authors such as Dlamini (2009) and van Wyk (2014). Stanley Manong (2015:22) wrote of his early high school years in Lingelihle at the end of the 1960s: 'I started to enjoy staying at Cradock as I became familiar with its people and surroundings'. Yet coming to terms with 'all the blockages that settler rule put in place' (Raftopoulos 2012:160) proved difficult on all sides of manipulable and stark cleavages among divided people, a vital subject in all aspects and

parts of the country today. All these works go beyond the criticism made by Sapire (2013:169) that ‘Many analyses of the politics of the 1980s did not locate the dramatic political developments within deeper historical traditions or demonstrate awareness of concurrent historical research into comparable phenomena in earlier periods’. Reading of these histories and biographies provokes a sense that grappling with the past in the small town of Cradock provides much stimulus to thinking about potential for positive change in present times.

### **Hope in a small South African town?**

In April 1994 I travelled through the Eastern Cape, including Cradock, experiencing widespread and intense excitement at the forthcoming elections, crystallised around optimism that at last a government would address the needs of people in Cradock and other towns more generally. Over a year later the first partly democratic municipal elections took place, resulting in beginnings of ANC dominance in local government. One area for further historical research lies in the process by which the transitional council (1995-2000) for Cradock came to be formed – perhaps with similarities to the town of Sterkstroom, 150 kilometres to the northeast, one of the few smaller towns for which such a history of the period between 1990 and 1994 can be found (Gibbs 2013:348-57).

The municipal elections in 2000 consolidated ANC political dominance, under the new dispensation which combined Cradock, the smaller town of Middelburg over 100 kilometres away, and surrounding rural areas.<sup>9</sup> The way in which the single national demarcation board drew boundaries to include a much larger area than previous local governments – and the difficult merging of several town administrations – once again provides a subject for further research. The larger cities have to a degree received that attention (eg Cameron 2005), but generally not the smaller places, which were almost all combined into ‘municipalities ... vast in size and population’ (de Visser 2009:15), a controversial subject around which conflict continues. The new municipality chose the name Inxuba Yethemba; between 2011 and 2016 Nyameka Goniwe, widow of Matthew, served as mayor, and later speaker of the council until she passed away in 2020 (Smith 2020).<sup>10</sup> The municipality became one of several ‘local’ councils within the area of the Chris Hani District Municipality, with its seat in Queenstown (or Lukhanji or Komani) – 150 kilometres distant. From the start these institutions have struggled to fulfil the promise of better lives for people in Cradock, so eagerly awaited in 1994.

One of the challenges confronting the town, in common with small towns other parts of the country (Murray 1995) arose from increased migration into Cradock from farms in surrounding areas. A much-examined feature of that shift lies in conversion of sheep farms to game and hunting areas (Mkhize 2012, 2014, Brandt 2013, 2016, Zungu 2017) which has ‘reconfigured’ relationships (Brandt and Spierenburg 2014), and increased a poor and struggling population evident in Lingelihle. Presently the population is growing more slowly, perhaps because there are no longer many people still to be evicted from farms. But the challenges of the town may have deepened all the same.

Notoriously tendentious, social media are replete with stories of sewage flowing in the streets and into the township cemetery; road maintenance is decidedly limited with potholes on almost every block in town and townships, and newer hard surfaced roads losing their tarmac. Between October 2020 and January 2021, the town was rocked by sometimes violent ‘service delivery’ protests. In late 2020 the police unit called the Hawks conducted a raid on municipal offices in JA Calata Street seizing documents and investigating charges of misappropriation of over 20 million rand. The notion of ‘local economic development’ seems to remain largely rhetorical (cf Ellis 2021, Francke 2020, Maliti 2019, Maphanga 2020, PARI 2016, Sigenu 2007, ECSECC 2000:21-35). In such circumstances, what hope is there for ‘better lives for all’ in Cradock? Much discussion of ‘urban transformation’ takes place, and national, provincial, and more local scales of policy and practice may be examined in relation to the situation in Cradock.

National currents of policy directed towards urban transformation have been informed mostly by the conditions of the largest South African cities, to a degree for the simple reason that 40 per cent of the population resides in them and that they concentrate much of the national economy. The question arises as to whether documents such as the ‘Integrated Urban Development Framework’ (IUDF) and the subsequent implementation plan (COGTA 2016) – or many preceding attempts to shape national urban policy – have much relevance in smaller towns. In some ways the same issues certainly apply, and the ambition is that ‘By 2030 South Africa should observe meaningful and measurable progress in ... creating more functionally integrated, balanced and vibrant urban settlements’. The difficulty is to ‘translate the lofty ideals and ideas of the IUDF into workable local actions and practices’ (de Beer 2016:12), particularly for small towns. In those,

such as Cradock, the scale is so different from the large cities that such notions as ‘steering urban growth towards a sustainable growth model of compact, connected and coordinated cities and towns’ seem far removed from the mundane issues of maintenance, new infrastructure, and very high levels of unemployment.

At national scale, other initiatives have attempted to approach small towns more specifically. The South African Local Government Association introduced a ‘small towns regeneration programme’ in 2013 and held a conference on small towns in 2015 – but little seems to have come of that since – though the national department responsible for local government policy is at the time of writing attempting to pursue a ‘roll out’ to a small number of towns (Chetty 2021), based on a notion of ‘establishing a Local Community Forum and Action Group’ which seems unlikely to move forward if initiated in a ‘top down’ manner. Eastern Cape provincial government prepared a small-town development policy (Province of the Eastern Cape Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs 2021) which reads as a sophisticated document but falls short of providing clear guidance and support to local municipalities. Other national initiatives include a ‘national local economic development framework’ which does place emphasis on local initiative rather than national programmes (Rogerson 2019) and the idea of an ‘R61 [major road east-west across much of the country, through Cradock] Regional Corridor Development Initiative’ – but yet again, results of these policies seem ethereal. A ‘national obsession with solutions’ rather than ‘accurate problem definition’ (Round Table 2021) – not to mention understanding local histories and relationships – seems to bedevil these policy approaches.

Multiplication of policies and plans without discernible change in places such as Cradock has led the national ministry and department responsible for municipal government to move their emphasis towards the notion of a ‘District Development Model’ through which local, provincial and national departments and agencies might plan together – across sectors and scales – to produce an implementable plan and concrete results within each of the more than 40 district municipal areas in the country (as well as the metro areas, not the focus here) (Lodi 2021).<sup>11</sup> Two pilot district municipalities have enjoyed attention under this rubric: one in the Eastern Cape, but not the Chris Hani district municipality into which Cradock falls.

Between the local municipality Inxuba Yethemba, with its divided responsibilities for two small towns, and the provincial and national

governments, stands the district municipality. The District Development Model (DDM) idea implies that it is at that scale that transformation will be promoted, projects identified in the 'One Plan', a schema to be prepared jointly by all government departments national and provincial as well as municipalities for the district scale - and implemented. Thus far, the only impact of DDM on Chris Hani district lies in a 'profile and analysis' report (COGTA 2020), one of those completed for all district municipalities in the country. The report assembles a certain amount of information generally at a district scale, is heavily based on a 2018 consultancy report that produced a 'spatial development framework' for the district and concludes with half a dozen recommendations for 'catalytic projects' (2020:34). Only one of those potentially refers to Inxuba Yethemba municipality in the sense that 'rural sustainable villages' are called for in all local municipalities in the district, which may be relevant in former bantustan areas within the district but lacks purpose around Cradock. There is nothing about transformation in Cradock, which the report rather briefly and optimistically describes as having 'a well-developed CBD and fair infrastructure'. With reference to the townships, it adds vaguely that 'A lot still needs to be done in the former previously disadvantaged communities' (2020:9).

Legislation two decades ago provided for district councils to be the primary providers of many services, and the extent to which local municipalities still carry out electricity reticulation and other such tasks to a degree depends on exemption from those provisions. The Chris Hani district council decided that it would take over water services in its area, but in practice has struggled to do so effectively, with negative consequences for Cradock (including the townships) and other towns. It appears that the district does not have the capacity to carry out such functions which adds to the difficulties of life in Cradock.

My sense is that the urban transformation policy environment is exceedingly top heavy: so many documents, so many ideas, so many requirements, so much with which to grapple for local officials and citizens. The consistent notion that 'capacity' must be built in municipalities and trust must be re-established can hardly be faulted, but they have little (or even no) engagement with the historical dynamics and present conditions of each one of the places that I have called 'small towns' like Cradock in this article. 'One must always remember that when intervening in a community there is a possibility of disturbing its dynamic - and not always positively' (White 2004:186).

In his consideration of Eastern Cape histories, Wotshela noted that ‘The ANC government pinned its hopes on the municipal system ... to drive service delivery and the upliftment of the quality of life at grassroots level. The process, however, proved tricky, and was mixed up with local politics and patronage manufacturing’ (2018:342). Many smaller towns provoke the sense that ‘some localities are poverty traps and, due to demands for basic and a range of social services, become traps for municipalities and through them, the Treasury, as well’ (Wessels 2012:26). Cradock’s size and location suggest that is not a town to be abandoned: it does offer potential, but policy and practice have generally not successfully addressed its problems. Neither the local nor the district municipality appears to achieve much success in new projects, something long characteristic of much of the continent: ‘Few development efforts seem to benefit the majority significantly, and most do quite the opposite, often building on pre-existing exploitative relationships to further depress the status of the majority’ (Southall 1988:13).

In the academic literature the answers provided to these problems include appeals for more research on small towns, involving many kinds of enquiry: ‘A clear need exists to extend existing scholarship beyond the current economic and development focus and to pay greater attention to a diverse range of themes which ... have been under-researched to date ... these include concerns over issues of governance, institutional capacity, land and resource access, environmental considerations, food supply and skills development’ (Hoogendoorn and Visser 2016:103-4). Absent from such proposals is engagement with the intricacies of social conditions and relationships in South African towns – including their histories. Although significantly more research on small towns has appeared over the past decade (a milestone being an edited volume – Donaldson and Marais 2012), little of it engages with long term trajectories and evolution of contemporary social dynamics, though on occasion some historical material appears. The thrust is general and structural (for example a study of Calvinia – Rule and Fryer 2012). Bill Freund (cited in Oldfield et al, forthcoming 2021) argued that historians could ‘apply their wisdom effectively and systematically to contemporary problems’, something he felt they ‘do rarely’. By that he did not mean historians should become consultants: he wanted more work on ‘what we don’t know’, indeed ‘stuff you don’t get paid for in consultancies’. Understanding the difficulties of local government requires both careful study of the historical context and of the how officials – elected and appointed – understand their roles (Ledger 2020). The extent to which

the ‘anatomy’ and development of the ANC, dominant party in Cradock, undermined the capability of the municipality, will only be understood on the basis of much more research and reflection, as Ndletyana (2020) demonstrates in the case of Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth).

Under some national programmes, changes have certainly taken place in Cradock. The most visible is new housing constructed with government subsidy, several thousand new units having appeared in diverse projects in Lingelihle, and a large new area adjacent to Michausdal known as Hillside, where street names in both isiXhosa and in Afrikaans do reflect some degree of integration between previously segregated populations. Non-government action has also produced visible results: from 1982 an organisation named Masizame (‘let’s try’) linked migrant workers from Cradock in Cape Town to projects at Lingelihle (CS Studio Architects 2000). Again, with public sector as well as private funding support, Vusubuntu Cultural Village, in which author Duka is involved, sought to provide conference facilities as well as a tourist attraction together with lodge accommodation. More research on these questions can start from the detailed housing history which Butler provided, exploring the ups and downs of what has transpired in the town since 1994, setting that in the long history of subsidised shelter in the country (cf Mabin 2020).

Difficulty persists in maintaining projects: physical maintenance – but also maintaining momentum, energy, and commitment. On the hill between Lingelihle and Michausdal the neglect of the Cradock Four Garden of Remembrance results in theft of parts of the structures and the failure to maintain a presence on the part of a staff who would welcome visitors and offer interpretation: not only would that mean some of the promised jobs for local people, but also stimulus to other initiatives. Unfortunately, this monument’s dilapidated state appears symbolic of other projects that have struggled to continue – including, for example, the Masizame creche which daily is intended to welcome 150 small children from both Michausdal and Lingelihle but which urgently needs greater support to overcome a difficult situation: ‘In recent years, the school has been severely neglected and often falls victim to vandals, most recently in December 2020’ (Fort Calata Foundation nd).

Duka’s 2018 publishers hoped that his biographies would ‘spur on and inspire further community-based histories’ that would ‘reclaim emancipatory ideals’ (van Niekerk 2018:v). Such ideals, as well as the practices of organising in earlier decades, seem to be lacking. Perhaps that optimistic

note can be recovered. Cradock's history suggests that successful positive action requires the commitment established by James Calata, Matthew Goniwe, Fort Calata and others. Without that, it seems unlikely that the elements of urban transformation, district development, small town regeneration and other nationally defined programmes will engage in any substantial way with the circumstances of this small town. Insistence on continuing expensive consultant driven programmes with fancy launches – suggested for example in a recent Round Table on Small Towns (Round Table 2021) – leads only to more disappointment and distress.

Could the traditions of the past be mobilised in ways that become significant to the future of Cradock? That suggests something beyond the kind of memorialisation which has predominated thus far. It is the organisational efforts of the past that might be recaptured, even more than maintaining the memory of the difficulties and tragedies of that past. There is a relative neglect of James Calata's organising roles, which are not captured simply by a street name change and small monument outside municipal offices. Finding ways to apply the organising style of Goniwe and Calata requires a deeper understanding of historical and contemporary social dynamics. Thus this article suggest that the histories of Cradock offer hope for positive improvement in the town. No certainty is possible: but just as some actors did over past decades, and perhaps with reorientation of municipal approaches and locally available support from national programmes, a different trajectory may be accomplished.

Part of that trajectory requires better performance from municipal government. Provincial intervention has failed to deliver improvement so far (Ellis 2021). Yet, another world of municipal government is apparently possible in the region: 300 km away from Cradock, Senqu municipality (which is larger, more populated and more complex with a small-town base at Lady Grey and a large former reserve area at Herschel/Sterkspruit) has for seven years received a clean audit. Its mayor, Nomvuyo Mposelwa who is serving a full term, 'gives all credit to her team. "My job as a politician is not to pressure administration but to let them do what they are qualified to do ...": clean books mean clean streets, and stable leadership leads to better governance. Municipal manager Mxolisi Yawa has served for 20 years, and chief financial officer Kenneth Fourie has 16 years under his belt' (Patrick 2021). The prospect of accomplishing such service in Inxuba Yethemba beckons, and revival of organising traditions offers a route to accomplishing change.

## Conclusion

Cradock cannot be claimed as typical of small South African towns. But it offers the possibility of thinking in new ways about change now in relation to its fraught histories. Failures of transformation policies might have evoked despair; but that is dispelled by many residents of Cradock, frequently cited in reports of interviews. In one example, an older woman resident told Elder (2010:77-78): ‘I’ll say I got my dignity back, you know?’ – ‘I think we’re very lucky to live in Cradock’. In the absence of programmes at larger scales that connect with real conditions and offer real prospects of change in the town, and the difficulties of local government, the people of Cradock, including its townships, form the locus of potential for new directions. Particularly in the conditions of South Africa as the Covid-19 pandemic hopefully recedes, and the necessity to change the conditions that gave rise to violence in parts of the country in July 2021, that could provide the difference between “a *planned* society” reliant on “fixed blue-prints imposed from above” and a “continuously *planning* society” operating through “the release of intelligence through the widest form of cooperative give-and-take” (Dewey 2008:321, cited in Lake 2021:6).

‘Hope for a better world remains alive’, as Alexander wrote (2013:viii). ‘The real question behind these reflections is how we can tap back into the power which actually exists in many different social spaces and instantiations but which we have made ourselves believe is vested only in and, indeed, belongs to “the government”’ (Alexander 2013:192, cited in Soudien 2014:3). That some citizens of Cradock and its townships well understand that they themselves hold the keys to a better future was captured 35 years ago at the funeral of the Cradock Four in 1985. An image shows a young man in the crowd, Lingelihle houses in the middle distance, holding a hand-painted placard reading ‘The enemy cannot defeat us: the future is in our hands’. The future indeed remains in the hands of the people of that township and the whole of Cradock.



Source: Riaan de Villiers image from funeral of Cradock Four July 1985.  
Used with permission.

## Notes

1. Each of the following has contributed to my researching and writing this paper, the result being my responsibility alone: Amos Nteta; Brian Wilmot; Carin Smuts; Cynthia Kros; Doreen Atkinson; Jeff Peires; Jim Campbell; Leon van Wyk; Lisa Antrobus-Ker; Mike Tetelman; Nancy Odendaal; Sue Williamson. Thank you, and thanks also to referees and the editors who provided incisive criticism and suggestions. The research fund of the School of Architecture and Planning at Wits University supported a short research visit to Cradock in November 2020; the author reports no conflict of interest.
2. Small towns are variously defined in diverse analyses and policy documents. In some cases Cradock is listed sometimes as a 'service centre' and on occasion as a 'regional centre,' for example by the CSIR (van Huysteen et al 2016); in other cases it is categorised as some other type of small town. It is of roughly similar size to something like 50 other towns in the country.
3. Fort Calata, Matthew Goniwe, Sicelo Mhlauli (from Oudtshoorn but travelling with Cradock friends) and Sparrow Mkhonto were, for some, the second Cradock Four given the deaths of four others from Cradock in the 1960s in an Umkhonto

- we Sizwe campaign (Manong and Macmillan 2016). Several films (da Canha et al 1999, Forbes 1993, Arusha Media (forthcoming) as well as other books (such as Nicholson 2004) engage with the story of the Cradock Four.
4. Press release February 16, 2021, also covered in *Daily Dispatch* and *Eastern Province Herald* papers on February 18, 2021.
  5. For examples of works, see Dido (1996), du Plessis (2014) and Alexander (2013) – who wrote that his title ‘makes a direct reference to a marvellous book – *Thoughts on South Africa* – by a remarkable South African, Olive Schreiner, which I read in prison on Robben Island and which had an enormous and lasting impact on me’.
  6. Subsequently, and not addressed by Butler, leading clergy such as James Calata and lay members including Alfred Sithethi Skweyiya succeeded in reestablishing their institutions with new buildings in Lingelihle and Michausdal. The Methodist Church in Lingelihle, built in 1965, was named the AS Skweyiya Church in 2007.
  7. Another review oddly stated ‘the finding of constructive solutions was impeded by an electoral system that did not reward parties and leaders seeking moderate solutions and broad-based economic growth’ (Giliomee 2019:142) – surely massively more serious was the fact that the large majority were excluded from voting altogether.
  8. Discussion is in progress on depositing copies of the recordings and transcripts of the interviews in a suitable archival repository.
  9. Middelburg representatives, including ANC members, unsuccessfully tried to challenge the combination of their town with Cradock in 2000, cf Municipal Demarcation Board (2004:45). Hostility between leaders in the two centres continues, according to an informant in 2020, with Middelburg-based councillors on occasion refusing to participate in meetings in Cradock where the offices are, frustrating aspects of work, due to ‘different political cultures’ and, perhaps, to the long distance between the towns.
  10. The position of the widows of the Cradock Four remains a very sensitive example of ‘political widowhood’ (Ramphela 1996) and is deserving of much further separate treatment.
  11. The responsible department has indicated that DDM does not replace IUDF (<https://iudf.co.za/news/what-is-the-district-development-model-and-has-it-replaced-the-iudf/>) but to my knowledge little is heard of IUDF at this point especially in smaller towns.

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# Review Article

## On remembering Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe

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### **Abstract**

This review article discusses two recent publications dealing with the life and work of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe (1924-1978), namely *Lie on Your Wounds: the prison correspondence of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe* (2019), and Pogrund's edited collection *Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe: new reflections* (2019). The article makes a case for the importance of Sobukwe's prison letters in the ongoing scholarship of this neglected figure of the South African political struggle for freedom. The main aim is to retrieve a view of Sobukwe as an intellectual, a deeply engaged political thinker, and a man committed to ethical leadership. Inevitably, Sobukwe's life and ideas also operate as a vehicle for criticising South Africa's post-apartheid leaders' lack of integrity, corrupt practices, and the forgotten promise of alleviating the suffering of the majority of poor people who elected them.

The name, if not always the ideas, of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe continues to haunt the South African political scene, regardless of the neglect he has been subjected to. And every few years there is a small flurry of activity around Sobukwe, which then dies down again (see for instance, Ndletyana 2013, Gqola 2014, Lebelo 2015, Pogrund 2015a, Maserumule 2016, Mkhwanazi 2016, *PINS* 2016 – special issue on Sobukwe, Marx 2017, Kondlo 2019). It seems that the irregular appearance of Sobukwe in the media and in scholarly writings functions as a reminder of the ANC's airbrushing him out of the history of the struggle, and more recently as a counter to the ANC's political and moral bankruptcy. Sobukwe is often put forward as a man of integrity, with strong moral principles, and a dedication to the plight of the oppressed.

Sobukwe lived at a very different time in the history of the struggle against apartheid, and he was politically active for a surprisingly short period of time (three years) before he was jailed, and then sent to Robben Island for a further six years (1963-1969), and finally released in 1969 to spend the last ten years of his life restricted under a banning order to Kimberley. Yet his stature as a political figure is carved into the massacre of March 21, 1960 at Sharpeville, where he led hundreds of supporters to the police station to be arrested for not carrying their identity documents – the much-hated *dompas*. The police fired into the peaceful protestors and left 69 people dead. Thus, the Sharpeville massacre regularly appears in our political commentaries, but less so Sobukwe, and his ghost lives on to haunt our political imaginary.

So surely it matters for what we want to recover the life and times of Sobukwe, and as tragic and disrespectful as it might seem, maybe his time has passed! Maybe the name Sobukwe is now metonymic for us, rather than politically substantive. However, in the language of structural linguistics it could be said that the name of Sobukwe is a signifier that refers to many (repressed) signifieds. What does the name of Sobukwe signify and at the same time keep hidden? Is it the moral integrity of his leadership? Is it the unresolved question of land dispossession (*Izwe lethu*)? Is it the complex questions of non-racialism and ethnic nationalism? Does it have to do with how South Africa should position itself in relation to the rest of Africa? Is it that his name is *not* associated with the (corrupt) ANC? Interestingly, recent graffiti on university campuses during the #Fallist movements' protests have championed Sobukwe, Biko, and Fanon mainly, and not ANC 'struggle heroes' (cf Mkhwanazi 2016). We are left with the question of what work do we want Sobukwe to do for us when we call out his name. How should we talk about Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe? And how should we allow Sobukwe to talk to us? In the political imaginary of South Africa, it seems that Sobukwe has not been allowed to die, and yet he has also not been allowed to live. In a counter to this, Barney Mthombathi (in Pogrund 2019:84) presents a much more optimistic view (or hope) when he notes that

four decades after his death, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, the former leader of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC), *is at last emerging from the shadows, his ideas now sought and closely scrutinised* as South Africa continues its search for lasting solution. (emphases added)

An important question can still be posed, and that is, what would it

mean to rehabilitate Sobukwe's ideas in the current conjuncture, or would a 'return to Sobukwe' be a misplaced form of political nostalgia?

My intention in this article is not to answer all the above questions as each would require quite a few volumes in themselves, but rather to point to Sobukwe's prison letters as an important resource in attempting to make sense of some of these burning political questions. Political scholars would benefit from thinking with Sobukwe on these questions not so much because he offers 'solutions' to these substantive issues – the land question, pan-Africanism, non-racialism, and so on – but because of the way he approaches these complex aspects of our social and political lives. In sampling some of the debates and discussions between Sobukwe and Benjamin Pogrund, I hope to show the potential that these prison letters might have in getting us to think anew, and by going back in time, maybe to think in a less encumbered way. I am not concerned to promote a *particular* political reading of Sobukwe, but wish rather more discursively, to re-affirm the crucial role that he played as part of the political history of our country. However, my bias is with a view of Sobukwe that emerges through the letters as a political *thinker*, an intellectual and a man of letters.

The two texts under review here invite us, in very different ways, to consider where Sobukwe might be useful for us in thinking about the current political situation in South Africa. One of the consistent champions of Sobukwe is his friend Benjamin Pogrund who wrote the biography of Sobukwe in 1990, titled *Robert Sobukwe: how can man die better*, and updated in a new edition in 2015 (see Hayes 2016, for a review of this new edition; as well as Tom Lodge's review in 1991 of the original edition). This remains the definitive account of Sobukwe's life and struggles, especially his six-year incarceration on Robben Island. It is also in part a memoir of Pogrund's friendship with Sobukwe. Pogrund (2019) has once again rallied to the cause of his friend by publishing a set of essays by various authors on Sobukwe, sub-titled, 'New reflections'. Pogrund (2019:ix) tells us in the preface that his letter of invitation to the contributors stated that the book would 'be a collection of viewpoints from significant and interesting people about Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe: his life and work, and/or his current, and possible future, relevance'. Furthermore, he says that this 'book does not seek to present a cross-section of South African views. Instead, a mixture of logic and quirkiness went into deciding whom to invite ...'.

Quirkiness indeed, and some of the contributions hardly mention Sobukwe at all, or what relevance he might have at this time, or for the future! (see

chapters by von Eck, Mohale, Nzimande, and Dlamini-Zuma for instance). It seems that broadly the contributions in this *New reflections* collection are concerned to affirm Sobukwe's moral integrity, his humility as a leader, and as a deep thinker on matters political. They are also concerned to keep alive the historical contribution of Sobukwe, and to ensure that he is not written out of the political history of this country as has mostly been the case, unfortunately. The ruling ANC seems reluctant to include any other political formations, besides themselves, as the 'true' liberators of the black majority from apartheid rule. For instance, imagine changing 'Human Rights Day' (21 March) to 'Sharpeville Day', or even more outrageously to 'Sobukwe Day'! Commemorating Sharpeville or Sobukwe Day would require a very different set of speeches than what can be said on Human Rights Day. In short, many of the contributions use Sobukwe's life and ideas as a vehicle for criticising South Africa's post-apartheid leaders as lacking integrity and being hell-bent on securing their own comfortable lives at the expense of alleviating the suffering of the poor majority who elected them.

The other text, *Lie on Your Wounds*, is the prison correspondence during Sobukwe's six years (1963-1969) on Robben Island. Most of the letters are between Robert Sobukwe (Bob) and his friend Benjamin (Benjie) Pogrund, but they also include letters to his wife, Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe, mrs Marquard (Nell Marquard, who was married to the liberal historian, Leo Marquard), and a few other correspondents. The letters cover a wide range of topics, from the practicalities of everyday life in prison, to the difficulties of securing the books necessary for Sobukwe's studies, to arrangements regarding his children's schooling, to his criticism of organised Christianity, to astute commentaries on world politics. The letters are a delight to read, thanks to the elegance of their expression, which Derek Hook comments on in his introduction by describing the letters as both an historical document and an *epistolary novel*. However, as novelistic as the letters are, they do not necessarily encourage a quick read as we are witness to Sobukwe's daily struggles to make a 'normal life' for himself while he was held in isolation. He was kept separate from other prisoners throughout his stay on Robben Island, and seemingly 'treated well' by being allowed to live in a small house to which occasionally his wife and children were allowed to visit and stay for short periods. He was also not required to wear prison uniform, and so cynically he was treated as though he was not really a prisoner, and yet cruelly denied any social interactions except with the warders in charge of him.

While I knew the story of Sobukwe's incarceration before I read the letters, reading the many (the text is 565 pages long) letters between him, and mostly Pogrud, plunges one into the daily struggles of a man trying to make a life in the most arduous of circumstances. Sobukwe was denied contact with the other prisoners, and thus was cruelly left to get on with himself, which he did through very extensive reading of both novels, and his study materials for his degree (BSc Economics) through London University; creating a garden in the rather barren soil of Robben Island; and listening to records that Pogrud sent him. And, of course, writing hundreds of letters!

Sobukwe was arrested after the Sharpeville massacre, and was charged, convicted, and sentenced to three years in prison for incitement. He served his sentence first in Witbank Prison (1960-1961), and then in Pretoria Gaol (1961-1963). Given that the South African state was terrified of releasing him, it passed the General Law Amendment Act, allowing his imprisonment to be renewed annually at the discretion of the minister of Justice. This became known as the 'Sobukwe clause' as nobody else was ever held under this provision. In May 1963 Sobukwe was transferred to Robben Island and would spend the next six years there. Each May Sobukwe's detention on Robben Island was extended for another year, until finally in May 1969 he was released, and banished under severe restrictions to Kimberley. Clearly the state's intention was to keep Sobukwe out of the public eye and away from any political influence that he might, and surely would, have exerted. And yet it is hard not to imagine that the specific conditions of his detention on Robben Island were not also intended to distance him from his political comrades, and hopefully over time undermine his appeal so that as a political figure he would be neutralised. Unfortunately for the apartheid state, it had seriously underestimated Sobukwe's political commitment and integrity of character!

The six-year mistreatment of Sobukwe on Robben Island sadly did take a toll, and nearly broke him. In a letter (dated April 16, 1969) to his wife, Sobukwe wrote: 'Yesterday I wrote to Ernie Wentzel [the lawyer] on a rather serious matter, affecting my health. I have also written to the Minister of Justice on the same' (Hook 2019:514). As Hook points out in his note to this letter, Sobukwe had resisted making any appeals to the minister of Justice, and so after six years of imprisonment to break his resolve on this matter, was cause for alarm. Sobukwe wrote to the minister, PC Pelsler on May 22, 1969, after arriving in Kimberley, and complained

of the ‘persistent harassment and systematic torture to which he [had been] subjected’ (Hook 2019:535). Sobukwe also claimed that the Security Police were responsible for his harassment and torture, and that they had used gadgets to negatively affect his emotional and physical well-being. As Hook points out (note 32, 2019:535; and note 36, page 537) Sobukwe’s symptoms would have been consistent with long periods of incarceration, and solitary confinement. It is remarkable that he did not manifest these effects earlier. Today Sobukwe would probably have been legitimately diagnosed as suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)! The state clearly did not want to risk the local and international fallout from the publicity that would be generated by Sobukwe’s deteriorating health at the hands of the prison authorities, especially the accusation of torture, and thus hurriedly released him.

The prison letters are presented in chronological order, starting with a few that Sobukwe wrote while in Witbank Prison and Pretoria Gaol (1960-1963), the majority covering his six-year stay on Robben Island (1963-1969), and finally a few he wrote from his home in Galeshewe, Kimberley, just after his release. We are in Derek Hook’s debt for the impressive editing work of presenting these remarkable letters, and the accompanying annotations. Thankfully, the annotated notes appear on the same page as the letter being read and are mostly of a historical and contextually clarificatory nature. The letters are the closest thing we are going to get to an ‘autobiography’ of Robert Sobukwe, and it could be said that because he was not writing an autobiography, the letters are less self-conscious and defensive than autobiographies inevitably are. So, through the letters we can get close to Sobukwe’s *daily* struggles on the island, from the ‘mundane’ concerns about the delivery of his fruit from Stuttafords in Cape Town, having enough warm clothes for the severe Robben Island winters, getting newspapers, arranging the books needed for his University of London degree course, to his thoughts on local and world politics. Mundane as some of these everyday practicalities might seem, for someone having to negotiate the inconsistent bureaucratic workings of the prison system, they became persistent and significant obstacles to overcome both for Sobukwe, and Pogrund who took responsibility for seeing that most of his friend’s needs were met. The letters allow us to peer into the private life of Sobukwe, from his ‘conservative’ taste in clothes and the range of affectionate names he had for his wife, to his prodigious reading habits in world literature and political history. Through the letters a complex view of Sobukwe emerges

of a very learned man, a man of principle, a critical thinker who cannot easily be co-opted by the narrow interests of political opportunists. For instance, Daitz (in Pogrund 2019) suggests that one of the reasons the letters would hold the interest of contemporary readers is because they encourage reading the past in more complex ways, and being aware of the ambiguities of holding certain, maybe even contrasting, political views, which need not keep people apart especially across the racial divide of then, and now. The contrasting political views between Pogrund, a liberal, and Sobukwe, a pan-Africanist, certainly emerge in the letters, while their friendship and respect for each other flourishes.

The epistolary form is dying and will soon be a relic of a bygone age when people, rather quaintly, wrote letters to each other. The practice of letter writing was often characterised by a self-conscious concern with style, grammatical expression, and a certain thoughtfulness in construction. This is hardly what we can say about emails, and other forms of electronic communication, that are in contrast mostly brief, grammatically delinquent, and champions of stream of consciousness incoherence! Sobukwe's letters reference his literary interests and wide reading habits, his Christian spirituality, and his grasp of the complexities of local and world political affairs. As is clear in reading the letters, many of Sobukwe's letters were blocked, and delayed by the prison censors, and he only realised this in subsequent letters to Pogrund and other correspondents when puzzled by why certain replies to his questions and queries had not been given. The prison authorities also occasionally blocked the incoming letters without indicating this to him. In commenting on the 'missing letters' between himself and Benjie they were not able to determine what content had particularly offended the authorities, as both Sobukwe and Pogrund were aware that all the letters were being read by the prison before being let through, and hence were somewhat careful about what they wrote to each other. For instance, writing to Benjie on October 20, 1964, Sobukwe notes, 'I subsequently received a letter from my wife, dated 24<sup>th</sup> September, followed by a telegram. But the letter of the 10<sup>th</sup> September to which she refers, I have not received' (Hook 2019:108). He continues,

Now Benjie, it is my contention – and I have given the matter my most serious thought – that neither the Minister of Justice nor the Prison Authorities have the right, under any published law or regulations, deliberately to delay my mail as to render nugatory my right (granted under their own regulation!) to write and receive two letters a week. The reason for their actions is not my concern. The Administrative arrangements they make to

achieve their purpose are not my concern either. But I *do* want to be convinced by a court of law that the rights I have referred to can be reconciled with such restriction. And it is not unavoidable, this delay, Benjie. I have been a convict, as you know. And never had reason to complain about mail delays. (Hook 2019:108)

This matter was never resolved, and it is hard to say whether this was a strategy on the part of the authorities to make his life difficult, or whether it was merely the incompetence and capriciousness of some of the warders.

Daitz (in Pogrund 2019) wonders whether if the censors had not been ‘watching’, might the letters between the two men not have been more overtly political. Probably, but nonetheless the content of many of the letters is surprisingly political, and not of a content that would have pleased the censors. There are letters about communism, about race, about class, and many over the years, about Christianity and Sobukwe’s highly critical views on religion. For instance, in the early 1960s Benjamin Pogrund was working on the influence of communist ideas on black politics in South Africa, and the two friends exchanged many letters on this subject. As Hook (2019:58) comments in his note about this research of Pogrund:

The influence of communists and white liberals in watering down the Africanist agendas of the African National Congress had been one of the crucial reasons that Sobukwe had broken with the ANC. Sobukwe was, as such, not only an expert but a historical participant within the broader topic of Pogrund’s research.

And yet the authorities granted Pogrund permission to interview Sobukwe for this research! They allowed Pogrund six day-long visits over a period of three months to interview Sobukwe. Pogrund (2015b: cf 199) suggests that there were two main reasons for this seemingly unusual request being granted. The one was to prove that Sobukwe was being treated well, which he was at the time under the strained circumstances of his solitary detention, and thus to dispel reports both locally and internationally that he was being beaten and starved. Even the PAC leaders in exile were spreading these stories. The second reason was that Pogrund ‘believed that the government was extremely anxious to know what Sobukwe was thinking and that I was being used as a convenient way of looking into his mind’ (Pogrund 2015b:199). Sobukwe’s political mind was still unchanged after nearly four years of prison, and as Pogrund (2015b:199) writes about their discussions:

The days of discussions could not on the whole have pleased whoever had the task of listening [they were convinced that the interview room was being bugged] for it was only too obvious that he had not the slightest regret about his actions, that he remained dedicated to African Nationalism and pan-Africanism and to gaining freedom for blacks.

It seems that what the government saw as Sobukwe's anti-communism partly explains their concession regarding him being interviewed by Benjamin Pogrund, as well as allowing him to read 'communist literature'. Granted, the literature that Sobukwe was reading in prison was mostly critical of communism and this would have suited the censors. For example, in a letter to Pogrund of May 30, 1964, Sobukwe writes, 'I have finished reading *An African Student in China* [by Emmanuel John Levi, 1963] and am now busy with *Africa and the communist world* [edited collection by Zbigniew Brzezinski, 1963]. I am finding the latter most interesting.' (Hook 2019:79). Sobukwe's experience of communists in the Congress movement, and his concern that they were wanting to dilute the Africanist agenda, were the basis for his anti-communism. One could surmise that it was a form of command communism and the Stalinist tendencies within the SACP that irked Sobukwe! His cynicism, and wit, about communists are evident in a remark that he made to Benjie in his letter of February 18, 1965, when he writes:

I have been thinking about the project [Pogrund's work on communist influence on black politics in South Africa] on which you are working. And at the risk of annoying your 'bosses' I feel you should note in your conclusion that in spite of their unlimited propensity for mischief, it will be a sad day for the world if Communists were to disappear altogether. There are no people with such an imaginative disregard for the truth and a poetic genius for abuse as these guys. They have enriched the English language! (Hook 2019:136)

However, communism aside, and given the strands of African communitarianism in Sobukwe's thought it is not surprising that he had a mildly sanguine view of socialism. This is evident in a letter he wrote to Nell Marquard on November 30, 1964 about the crisis in South Vietnam and the problems of the American approach to that conflict. Sobukwe notes: 'There is not a single country in Africa, Asia or Latin America that would voluntarily go Communist. Of that I am certain. They'll all declare themselves *socialists*, yes, but it will be their brand of socialism' (Hook 2019:119).

It is not at all clear, to me at least, what kind of society Sobukwe envisaged once racial oppression was overcome. He unambiguously understands that black people in South Africa, through apartheid laws and regulations, overwhelmingly occupy the ranks of the working class, and yet his main political concern was to fight against racial oppression, and not class or economic exploitation, not that the two dimensions of race and class can easily be separated, especially in the operations of South Africa's racial capitalism. Nevertheless, in his letters and other writings, and his speeches, the notion of exploitation is very seldom directly addressed. Sobukwe was unashamedly an Africanist, a pan-Africanist too, and not a Marxist, and thus concentrated his political efforts on liberating Africans from racial oppression, both in South Africa and the rest of Africa, and hence his somewhat idealistic notion or hope of a United States of Africa. Mthomboti (in Pogrud 2019:96) describes Sobukwe's call for a United States of Africa as 'pie in the sky. Fanciful. It may have been an ideal, but it is still not feasible'. This lack of feasibility is evident in Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance idea and the creation of NEPAD that had very limited success, and while the African Union is doing important work on the continent, it too is beset with many institutional and structural issues that make intra-continental cooperation difficult. This is not to suggest that the African Union should not exist, but that its aims and goals might need to be re-thought in terms of what is realistically possible given the extreme heterogeneity of the societies and countries that make up the continent. Do we really believe that because we are all on the same massive land mass that the problems of Tunisia and Zimbabwe, for example, are in any way similar? Sobukwe saw the anti-colonial struggles in Africa as binding the diverse countries together, and hence his preoccupation with the land question as a precondition for Africans to be truly free. His call for 'Africa for Africans' should be read in this light, rather than as inherently anti-white, or racist. Sobukwe was hardly racist in his personal outlook or in his politics but was more concerned to carve out an independent space for Africans to assert and claim their freedom. The ethno-nationalism of the PAC, and to a lesser extent that of Sobukwe, has often come in for harsh criticism, without understanding the strategic logic behind the 'Africa for the Africans' call. Lodge (1983:85) elaborates on this point when he notes:

Sobukwe's presidential address outlined the basic principle of the new movement. The PAC stood for government by the Africans for the Africans – 'everybody who owes his loyalty to Africa being regarded as an African'. Whites, however, were for the present unable to owe their loyalty

to Africa, even if they were intellectual converts to the cause of African freedom, 'because they benefit materially from the present set-up' and so 'cannot completely identify themselves with that cause'.

Lodge (1983:202) further comments that 'The PAC leadership was convinced that Africanism made articulate a deeply rooted ethno-nationalist popular consciousness. A political appeal founded on such sentiment would immediately attract massive support'. However, what is clear is that the leadership misjudged how little organisational work they had done to achieve this.

While there was some awareness of the issues of class or material conditions in determining the lives of Africans, this was not an organising principle for the PAC or Sobukwe, and their political strategy was strongly directed towards a 'racial' (African), ethno-nationalist, or group solidarity for liberation. Even though Sobukwe was not unsophisticated in his view of what constituted class in social life, he argued for the centrality of an Africanist political strategy for South Africa's (and Africa's) liberation struggle. For example, Pogrand in a letter had suggested to Sobukwe that he should write a novel, and in the letter of 29 June 1966, Sobukwe replied as follows:

Oh yes, you remarked in an earlier letter that no African has produced a great social novel in this country. I agree with you. But I want to suggest to you, as a verifiable fact of history, that an oppressed people or class has never produced great literature or art. When we read that such and such an artist was a peasant or worker, what in fact is meant is that he was of peasant or worker *origin*. He himself was no longer that. It is the middle class that idealizes the worker or peasant or that writes indignantly on his behalf. As Bernard Shaw says, 'The worker is concerned with the drudgery of making a living' and has no time to appreciate the nobility of character assigned to him. Marx spoke of the 'stupidity' of the peasant. He, of course, belonged to the middle class. (Hook 2019:292-3)

Sobukwe puts his class antipathy more blatantly in a later letter to Benjie of September 14, 1966, when he writes:

With regard to my remarks about the social novel, I believe I expressed myself badly. The point is, Benjie, when we talk of European experiences, we talk in terms of class. Except for the great national struggles of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the dichotomy in Europe has been a class one. But in Africa, particularly, though I believe this goes for Asia, too, to a large extent, class interests are either non-existent or irrelevant or muted. The oppression and the struggles are *group* struggles. In Europe, when a member of the middle

class wrote about the lower classes he was writing about a *different* people. In this country the dichotomy is a colour one. Class distinctions within the group are muted and perhaps even discouraged and emphasis is placed on the solidarity and unity of the *group*. (Hook 2019:303)

Whether one agrees or not with Sobukwe or the PAC on the strategy of excluding whites in the struggle for African political freedom, one should at least engage their reasoning from a historically informed perspective, and also with an awareness of the complexities involved in creating a non-racial society, then and now. As Gerhard Maré (2014:21) reminds us, we are still a long way from achieving a non-racial society given ‘the regrettable continuity into a democratic (“post”-apartheid) South Africa of race thinking and race practices as well as racism’. The arguments and practices that Maré lays out for us about how we might go about creating a non-racial society one feels would have had a resonance with a twenty-first century Robert Sobukwe were he still with us! The complexity of Sobukwe’s views about race, Africanism, organising politically, and even the exclusion of whites from the political organisations of Africans, regardless of whether we agree with them or not, are significantly more interesting and engaging than the arrogant intellectual nonsense that is spewed out by those political actors wanting to spuriously claim a political lineage with Sobukwe.

Many of the authors (in Pogrund 2019) make mention of Sobukwe’s leadership qualities, his moral integrity, his humility, his devotion to helping the downtrodden, and his faith which would be difficult to tally with a view of him as an anti-white racist. It is unfortunate as Bobby Godsell (in Pogrund 2109) argues that the PAC, various Black Consciousness organisations, Steve Biko and Sobukwe have been seen as anti-white. Godsell (in Pogrund 2019:169) remarks that

Not the slightest indication can be found that either Sobukwe or Biko envisaged or wanted a future South Africa shorn of its white citizenry. They were deeply committed to a common humanity shared by South Africans of all races. Unfortunately, the negative response by some whites to Africanism and Black Consciousness confused their determination to give blacks space and a voice with the end goal of the society the black organisations wanted to create.

Godsell further points out that there is a difference between Black people wanting to assert their own agency, and especially in a context where whites have dominated the political spaces and being anti-white. He says: ‘The key learning from Sobukwe and Biko is perhaps agency and positive

identity first, and cooperation second' (in Pogrund 2019:171).

One of the more interesting arguments about Sobukwe's leadership qualities comes from Kwandiwe Kondlo (in Pogrund 2019) where he proposes the notion of 'political spirituality' to characterise the distinctive features of Sobukwe's leadership. Kondlo (Pogrund 2019:128) writes,

One could argue the 'political spirituality' occurs in actual fact when the political becomes the sphere of the 'spiritual', that is, when the ethical character of politics as duty to fellow human beings is restored.

He further notes that Sobukwe's life was a reflective life of principle and sacrifice. It also appears that, as an individual, Sobukwe would have preferred to pursue a quiet life of the mind; he was more of an intellectual [hence, Sobukwe's nickname, 'Prof']. But his feeling for the downtrodden, and his awareness of the cares and sorrows of ordinary folk, pushed him in a direction he would not have taken had the situation not been as dire as it was during his time. (Pogrund 2019:129)

Author upon author in Pogrund's (2019) edited collection refer to Robert Sobukwe's *moral* integrity (Barney Pityana and Kwandiwe Kondlo), 'uprightness of character' (Anele Nzimande), humility and respect for all people (Joel Mbhele and Ishmael Mkhabela). Given the deformations of character and moral integrity of many in South African political life, it is not surprising that Sobukwe is used to remind us of a time when ethical principles and a commitment to serve were the determining features of what drew many into the political struggle. We will never know, seeing as Sobukwe died in 1978 at the age of 53 of cancer, what kind of leader he would have been in the new post-apartheid South Africa. Sobukwe would have been 70 in 1994, and surely would have been offered a position in the new government. Whether he would have been prepared to serve in the government of national unity is of course a completely different matter. The appeal of Sobukwe is that he was not corrupted by power, and maybe that is our hope and optimism, that not all leaders betray the fight for a just, decent, and fair society for their own personal enrichment and greed.

It could be argued, or at least reasonably conjectured, that some of Sobukwe's moral integrity as an individual, and as a leader, came from his immersion in the teachings of Christianity. This is not the same as saying he was a committed Christian throughout his life, and in fact seemed to become quite critical of Christianity if his letters are anything to go by. The Gqubules (Thandeka Gqubule-Mbeki and Duma Gqubule, in Pogrund 2019) – whose father, reverend dr Simon Gqubule, was at school in Healdtown

with Sobukwe – offer some personal reminiscences of Sobukwe that are part of their family lore. They suggest that Sobukwe’s self-identification was ‘his idea of himself as an intellectual’ (Pogrud 2019:81), and that his commitment to ‘reason and reasoned action’ mark him out as ‘the ultimate Enlightenment man’. And as an Enlightenment man it is not surprising that he was so familiar with the Christian Bible. He regularly quotes from the scriptures in his letters, and here are just two of many instances, in his letters to his wife. On June 17, 1965 he wrote:

You’ve been wonderful, Little Girl. And your courage is matchless. To be a Christian is not to go to Church in your ‘Sunday best’ with a ‘Sunday’ face – long and lugubrious. It is to suffer with God in a godless world. When Christ asked Peter, James, and John: ‘Could you not watch with me one hour?’ He was expressing the loneliness and helplessness of God. And by this test, you are an outstanding Christian. (Hook 2019:161; Christ’s words are from Matthew 26:40)

And then in the letter of July 6, 1965, Mangi [as he often signed himself in his letters to his wife] wrote: ‘This is a very short note to say “Happy Birthday” to both you and Mili [Miliswa, his eldest daughter]. God bless you both “with length of days and show you His salvation”’ (Hook 2019:169).

Paul Verryn (in Pogrud 2019:107) comments on Sobukwe’s faith and how he ‘struggled to sustain his relationship with God in the face of years of meaningless incarceration and humiliation’. Verryn (in Pogrud 2019:107) also tells us that the

Methodist Church proudly claims Sobukwe as one of its preachers. His journey in faith was not a separate dimension of his politics. In fact, some might be so bold as to claim that part of his insight derived from his faith journey. If one visits the Methodist church in Galeshewe in Kimberley, those who remember Sobukwe will show you where he sat for worship every Sunday.

It is not possible to say exactly what aspects of Sobukwe’s life, faith or other, put him on the path that he chose to walk. Both Kondlo (political spirituality) and Thandeka Gqubule-Mbeki and Duma Gqubule (Enlightenment man), as discussed above, make a more complex argument about Sobukwe’s spirituality and ethical principles, that does not unproblematically align with a commitment to Christian faith. Sobukwe’s prison correspondence shows him questioning his belief in God, and being critical of Christianity, and especially the conduct of the Christian churches.

It is worth quoting Sobukwe at some length to show his struggles with his faith in God, Christianity, and the churches.

In a letter to Benjie of February 5, 1967:

You'll be shocked to learn and so will many of my friends that these authors [he is mainly referring to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological writings] and others of their school have freed me to face the fact that I am not a Christian and do not desire to be one. (Hook 2019:336)

In response to this letter, Pogrund writes to Bob on March 16, 1967: 'As you predicted, I was indeed shocked to learn about your change of feelings about being a Christian'. And later in the same letter, Benjie asks, 'And when you say you are no longer a Christian, does this extend to a rejection too of G-d [sic]?' (Hook 2019:350, 351).

And again, in a letter of April 12, 1967, to Pogrund, Sobukwe writes:

Now for the main thesis. Let me assure you that my break with Christianity is fundamentally doctrinal. Even if everybody around me were to live a truly Christian life, I still would reject Christianity. After some sober reflection, Benjie, I don't think you should be bewildered. After all, we are Christians because we were subjugated by Europeans, whose cultural religion Christianity is. If we had been subjugated by Turks we would be fanatical Mohammedans as are eighty million Africans on the continent. Similarly, if Indians had subjugated us we would be fanatical Hindus. There is nothing *inevitable*, therefore, in our being Christian. (Hook 2019:358)

One notices a disquiet from Pogrund about his friend's views on religion, and thus in a letter of April 6, 1968 he writes to Sobukwe:

I have niggling worries in my mind about our discussion last year about religion. I have asked you one question which you have not yet answered: what about the many, many Africans – and other non-Europeans (in the non-South African use of the term) who have a profound and sincere acceptance of Christianity? What of the RC Archbishop of Maseru who is an African, the Sinhalese Anglican Bishop, etc? Where do they fit into the view Christianity as a religion of Europe only? They cannot simply be dismissed as 'stooges' or anything like that. These are intelligent, believing, and devout men. Also, I do not have all your letters with me any longer, but there is confusion in my mind as to whether you reject Christianity as such or the entire concept of G-d [sic]. Will you elaborate? And why should you show a preference for Judaism, as you say you do. (Hook 2019:435)

And here is Bob's considered reply to Benjie, written on April 24, 1968:

Briefly: on the question of religion. *My faith in God remains unshaken*, Benjie. At the moment I don't care to know what he is like and where he

resides. It is enough to know that He is and that His will will triumph. It is not Judaism that I show a preference for, Benjie. It is the uncluttered God of the Old Testament – of Moses and Joshua and Isaiah and all the prophets – that appeals so strongly to me. It is Moses I think, who says: ‘Blessed are you O Israel. What people are like you whom God has chosen for His own?’ With such a faith, Benjie, one could go through Dachau and Belsen with a song on one’s lips. The chief contribution of Christianity has been to assure the whole world that promises made to Israel apply to all who confess Christ as their Lord. (Hook 2019:439; emphases added)

And finally, a letter Sobukwe wrote to Pogrund, about a month after his release from Robben Island on May 19, 1969 from Galeshewe in Kimberley:

It is *Christianity* per se, as I have told you before now, that I cannot accept. And I don’t think I’ll ever accept it, even if I attend service regularly.

And commenting on his arrival in Galeshewe he writes:

Quite a few people have already tried to make me feel welcome, and I am grateful. I am quite certain things will work out well. God has been good to me, Benjie, to leave his promises unfulfilled. I have no anxiety on that score. (Hook 2019:534)

The point of detailing some of Sobukwe’s thoughts on religion is not to cast doubt on his faith, or outrageously to suggest a creeping atheism, but rather to submit that his letters are inconclusive on where Sobukwe finally settled in his belief system, and I suppose, without further evidence, the least we can say is that he remained ambivalent. What is clear from these letters between the two friends is a deep and literate engagement with the issues of faith in God, Christianity, and the Christian churches, especially from Sobukwe. It is another indication that no matter what Sobukwe was thinking about, faith in God, the land question, non-racialism, colonialism in Africa, the novels of CP Snow, his approach was always studied, well-informed, and carefully reasoned. For this reason, at least, we should be suspicious of accounts of Sobukwe’s life and thought that are one-dimensional and assert unwavering opinions about politics and other matters of social life on his behalf.

The prison correspondence of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe gives us a privileged view into the mind and daily struggles of this truly remarkable man as he tried to make a life for himself in the most difficult conditions of solitary confinement. Why a privileged view? Sobukwe’s prison correspondence, most of which was between himself and Benjamin Pogrund, was never written in the anticipation that it would be published. This gives the letters

a more personal and chattier character and consequently, as readers, we feel that we are being taken into Sobukwe's confidence. The removal of Sobukwe from the society he was trying to change paradoxically gave him the freedom to think about politics, race, morality, faith, and so on in a way somewhat 'unencumbered' by not being in the daily cut and thrust of political struggle and organisational dynamics. The letters do not present Sobukwe as a man without his own personal struggles, or unwavering in his views (see the discussion about his faith and Christianity above), or unaware of his own vulnerabilities and inconsistencies. Even in the face of the cruelty of his continued detention on Robben Island he was able to maintain his humanity, his dignity, and his sense of humour.

Robert Sobukwe comes across as a very personable, funny, erudite, and literary man. Briefly, here are some examples of this side of Sobukwe's character. In his letters to his wife – Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe (1927-2018) – he playfully and affectionately refers to her as: 'darling, kid, child, sweet, little woman, little girl, baby, Zodwa, dear Mrs. Sobukwe'! After a visit from his wife, Sobukwe writes:

And how are you getting on my lady? I had hoped that in your letter you would say you enjoyed the visit because my company is thrilling and what not. Instead, you say I am a tonic for your nerves. What an unromantic thing to say about your husband, woman! Am I nothing more than a sedative? (Hook 2019 313; letter of October 14, 1966)

He signs off this letter: 'Well, darling, so much for now. Keep that head high! Your loving husband, Mangi'. And finally, in a letter to Benjie (March 30, 1966), Sobukwe says: 'Mrs. Marquard has sent me a lovely, warm jersey – RED. I am writing to thank her and to point out the sinister associations of the colour' (Hook 2019:257).

Thanks to Derek Hook's outstanding effort<sup>1</sup> in making these letters available to a wide audience, we now have a valuable resource to explore a range of dimensions of Robert Sobukwe's life. For instance, Daitz (in Pogrud 2019) in her article uses the letters to present a more complex view of Sobukwe, his political views, and struggles. And Derek Hook, in the same collection (in Pogrud 2019), concentrates on the letters between Sobukwe and Nell Marquard to show what he calls a neglected side of Sobukwe, and that is, as 'a man *of* letters' (in Pogrud 2019:144), 'a literary intellectual', a 'folklorist and translator, always ready with an African proverb, biblical verse or witty turn of phrase' (in Pogrud 2019:143). In this chapter, Hook shows Sobukwe's rather complex way of bringing up

sensitive political issues, not only to avoid the prison censors, but also to show respect for Nell. The subtlety and reserve that he (Sobukwe) shows is evident in their letters where liberalism is discussed, and on the surface, it seems odd that Sobukwe is not more scathing of liberalism as he tries to grasp the complexity of holding different political positions. As Hook notes this is not to cast Sobukwe as a liberal, but certainly as someone whose political views were multifaceted, and continually changing. Furthermore, Hook reminds us that it is not insignificant that Tom Lodge (1991) called his review of Pogrund's biography of Sobukwe, 'A liberal of a different colour'.

Hook (in Pogrund 2019:158) draws attention to the fact that an 'obvious drawback of remembering Sobukwe only in certain ways – and of *the limited number of biographical explorations of his life* – is that we lose a sense of how Sobukwe has the capacity to surprise us' (emphases added). These letters certainly surprise us and make it difficult to position Sobukwe as one type of person, one type of political being. Now that these prison letters are available to us, it is hoped that future biographers of Sobukwe will use them to tell his life story in a manner that goes against the way he has been presented to us thus far, both by his detractors, and those supposedly claiming his legacy.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and pointing out some of my embarrassing grammatical misdemeanours! Thanks too to the Managing Editor, Jeremy Grest, for his patience.

## **Note**

1. The only minor blemish in the edited collection of letters is where on page 163, note 49, Hook directs us to Appendix 1 for the speech Sobukwe gave at the Freshers' Social (Fort Hare) in April 1947. However, the speech in Appendix 1 is the 'Address on behalf of the Graduating Class at Fort Hare College delivered at the "Completers' Social" by Mr Sobukwe, October 21, 1949'.

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# Platform: In Theory

## Keywords: an invitation

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In the previous issue of *Transformation* we indicated that we would revisit the ‘keywords’ approach to discussing changes in discourse, ideology, and common sense. This approach has long been employed towards developing social theory. For this issue, therefore, we asked John Higgins to introduce the unfolding notion of ‘keywords’ to a contemporary readership, a full 13 years after the previous contribution of the technique to South African society (Shepherd and Robins 2008). Higgins was specifically asked because he has had a long interest in Raymond Williams, and has written about the issue and debates raised by that theorist since his ground-breaking work, *Keywords*, appeared in 1976. The essay which follows provides a clear guide to the history of the term and the approach it signifies (itself a changing keyword as is clear from his essay). But, as a close reading of the essay suggests, it explains why, when and how Raymond Williams’ exploration of keywords is of direct relevance to **Platform: In Theory**, appearing in a society in great flux, South Africa:

[A]s with theory, there is something in *Keywords* which is deliberately unsettling, something which actively challenges the consensus, and the apparently secure ground of common sense on which we stand in the world. *Keywords* threatens precisely the structure of meaning that Williams saw at work in Gramsci’s famous notion of hegemony as something ‘which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which... even constitutes the substance and limits of common sense for most people under its sway’. (Higgins, in this issue)

Williams employed ‘theory’ as a keyword in his own book (1976:266-8). One of us still has the 1976 Fontana paperback (loose pages, and all) which was used in teaching sociological theory in the 1980s – later to be updated by the welcome production of Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp’s

*South African Keywords* (1988). And Williams, as will become clear in reading the Higgins essay, is central to what will always be an on-going project, reflecting on keywords in a post-1994 South Africa, and during a pandemic of tragic proportions.

The essay demands and rewards a close and careful read, as much theoretical exploration does. In relation to our motivation, which now follows, we wish to alert the reader specifically to some aspects that struck us as crucial. Higgins notes that (emphases added):

Keywords are best understood as both the stake and the site of conflicts over meaning in, and the consequent *possibilities for the understanding of a social order*.

He also draws attention to dimensions of employing the keywords approach, namely that

... the first step in a keywords-style analysis is to *provide a historical survey of the uses of the term*, in order to better understand both how we have come to that contemporary usage, and what exactly is taken up or marginalised in and through this usage. The aim of keywords analysis is to resist – by becoming aware of them – the active forgettings and marginalisations often at work in the pinning down of meaning;

and later that

the critical study of language and its use can show us not just what a dominant world view is, but how that worldview can come to feel like ‘normal reality’.

Further points to note, especially for the South African context, is the attention given to comparing not only terms across time, but as used in different contexts, and as terms appear in different languages; and the relevance to the educational context:

Williams’ recommendation, ..., for *comparative research*, and [the] emphasis that ‘key developments...*can only be understood when other languages are brought consistently into comparison*’.

Higgins motivates for ‘rereading’ and ‘reactivating’ *Keywords* and what it illustrates:

There are two broad sets of reasons ... in the present moment. The first set lie in the theoretical insights that *Keywords* embodies, and the lessons these have for contemporary social, cultural and political activists, particularly in the academy. The second resides in the occasion any such active rereading gives for a better understanding of the ways in which theory is always generated from and within the pressures of specific social and historical circumstances.

## A call

Through exploring ‘keywords/key-words’ in sense-making in society our hope is to extend discussion. This is, of course, one of the prime purposes of any platform for ideas and debate. In commissioning this essay, we hope that our readers, especially new voices concerned with understanding, rather than simply describing the everyday, to become collaborators in a **Platform** project on keywords.

In essence the following questions underpin this project: what are the current terms employed by those who have the power to describe the social world? What is the intention, and the effect on individuals as citizens? Do the meanings that these keywords carry enable us to identify, understand and act on essential problems and the catastrophic conditions within which the large majority of people find themselves?

So, this is an invitation for readers to select a *keyword* and write on it for publication in these pages. In not more than 5,000 words (preferably far fewer) explain its importance – in the past and the present.

Contributions and queries to: [submissions@transformationjournal.org.za](mailto:submissions@transformationjournal.org.za) with **Keywords** in the subject line.

Over the next year, we will engage your contributions for inclusion on **Platform: In Theory**, and begin work towards a possible future edited collection in book form.

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# Article

## Theory as Keyword/Keyword as Theory

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### **In Memory of Anthony Morphet 1940 - 2021<sup>1</sup>**

Theory is, like many other (but not all) words, a keyword: that is to say, it is a word in common but significantly differential usage, meaning different things to different people and carrying different associations and connotations for different social, political and academic groups, both across time but also at any given moment in time. Keywords are best understood as both the stake and the site of conflicts over meaning in, and the consequent possibilities for the understanding of, a social order. As previously indicated in this journal,<sup>2</sup> the idea of theory – and especially in the social sciences and humanities – is under particular pressure for a whole variety of reasons, to the point that it is often difficult to get a clear sense of what is being referred to by theory at the very moment it is being rejected or supported, and often with considerable vehemence.

The aim of this essay is to suggest that while theory is undoubtedly a keyword, we can get a better grip on the practical work of Theory (yes, with a capital T, as I shall explain further below) by understanding more about the peculiar nature of keywords themselves, and hence it is the idea of a keyword which is primarily under scrutiny here. More specifically, it is the idea or concept of a keyword as first construed in the work of the socialist critic, Raymond Williams (1921 - 1988) which will form the main object of our attention. Let us begin, in other words, with a keywords-style analysis of the term keyword in order to bring out how and why the complex specificity of Williams's term and practice may still provide a powerful resource for the work of Theory in the current moment. In so doing we shall see how – somewhat paradoxically – Williams's rich and complex idea of a keyword is itself obscured or entirely neglected in standard definitions of the term.

The dominant sense of keyword today is that construed from the world of big data where it is used in relation to the practice of information search and identification protocols on the web; but much is lost (and notably the idea of keywords for the actual practice of critical thinking) if this apparently dominant sense is left unexamined. As always, the first step in a keywords-style analysis is to provide a historical survey of the uses of the term, in order to better understand both how we have come to that contemporary usage, and what exactly is taken up or marginalised in and through this usage. The aim of keywords analysis is to resist – by becoming aware of them – the active forgettings and marginalisations often at work in the pinning down of meaning.

First, then, a survey of some of the dictionary or dictionary-style definitions, reviewed here in part to show the ways in which keywords analysis differs in significant ways from the usual idea of dictionary definitions.

### **Defining keywords**

Keyword is a compound noun, found in the three main forms: hyphenated (key-word), open (key word), and closed (keyword). Its first recorded uses (according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)) occur in the hyphenated form and date from the eighteenth century. Here, the use of the hyphen to make a particular connection between two nouns (key + word) represents the original act of imaginative appropriation through which a particular word is understood to act as the key or cipher in a closed or coded system of communication.<sup>3</sup> As the use of the compound term increases in frequency, the hyphen is eventually dropped, while, at the same time, the original meaning of the term begins to shift as more and more people begin to use it, and to twist it to their needs. We can observe – in the recorded history of its use – the gradual emergence of a second, and more figurative sense coming through in the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth.

As this second sense of the term becomes dominant, a key word (or, as it increasingly becomes, keyword) is no longer understood as an actual cipher, but is understood more generally as a word or idea that serves much more broadly (as the OED puts it) as ‘the solution or explanation for something, or as a word, expression, or concept which is of particular importance or significance’. One example that the OED gives of this is taken from the 1926 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, citing ‘As

to [work]shop detail, the keyword to mass production is simplicity'. Here 'keyword' is understood as the key to mass production, but no longer in the literal sense of a key, but now more figuratively as meaning that which is essential to mass production, the essence of mass production (simplicity), that which makes mass production work.

In contemporary usage, this sense continues with the general understanding of a key word or keyword, often used to refer to a word or expression of particular importance in an extended argument, and hence as something to underline, and pay particular attention to, in the work of paraphrase or comprehension. Thus, as a standard part of teaching the skills of paraphrase and analysis, schoolchildren and students are often guided to identify (and perhaps literally underline) the key words of an argument and either to make sure to include these or translate them into other terms for the purposes of comprehension and summary.

In its turn, this usage gradually shades into what is the current predominant sense of the term. Here, a keyword is understood as 'a word' (usually one of several) 'chosen to indicate or represent the content of a larger document, text, record, etc, in an index, catalogue, or database', and, with the exponential growth of the world wide web and its data-accessing as 'any word entered as a search term in a database or search engine'. By 1997, the OED cites the journal *Business Age* for this now dominant sense: 'Most web users seeking specific information... will rely on typing a few key words and letting a search engine do the rest'.

For academics world-wide, this particular sense of the word is familiar through the increasingly standard request by journals to list the keywords of the argument of any article alongside its abstract. Indeed, any internet search for the meaning of keyword now confidently returns this new and selective sense as the primary one, alongside ads and recommendations for all manner of advisory texts on how to better game your web presence through the deliberate manipulation of keywords and keyword clusters (how many university research offices now run courses offering advice on this in an era of increasing monitoring?).<sup>4</sup>

And so it is that, in exemplary fashion and very likely by 'ranking meanings by their current frequency of occurrence' (Cameron 1998:40), the Wikipedia entry on keyword lists the four main senses of the term it sees as active and primary in contemporary usage. These all refer to information retrieval on the world-wide web. First, a keyword is 'a word or phrase typically used by bloggers or online content creator to rank a web page on a particular

topic'; second, it is used as an index term for use in a catalogue or search engine; third, it is used in the new compound term, keyword advertising, for improving your online sales (or, in the academy, citations); and fourth – also related to this quest for priority and dominance in terms of mentions, in another important compound, 'keyword clustering'.

These entries are very likely foregrounded in terms of their sheer frequency of occurrence on the web in synchronic terms (the current moment), with less interest in the alternative diachronic or historical meanings of the term. Nonetheless, despite the excluding force of this presentist and quantitative focus, the entry does acknowledge (though little more than that) what it describes and separates out as a range of 'other' senses of the term. Listed are the idea of keyword in linguistics as a 'word which occurs in a text more often than we would expect to occur by chance alone'; and apparently as a term in rhetoric, as 'a word that academics use to reveal the internal structure of an author's reasoning'. The third and final item in the list of 'other' meanings is simply '*Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, 1973 non-fiction book by Raymond Williams'.

In this particular entry, it's fascinating to see just how the active work of marginalisation and closure takes place in practice. In order to foreground the contemporary web-based use of keyword, the entry has to 'background' (if I may invent a term) competing senses of the term. It does this in three ways: first by literally relegating these uses to the secondary category of 'Other'; second, by offering only the haziest information about them; and third, doing all of this in such a way as to inhibit the understanding of the ways in which the final 'non-fiction book by Raymond Williams' is in fact central to both the preceding 'other' uses, and so would best figure as the first in this list, enjoying a fuller analysis and exposition.

In point of fact, the various ideas of keywords put forwards here are all related, directly or indirectly, with the work mentioned last, and mentioned in what amounts somehow to a mentioning which conceals or a way of describing which avoids the specificity of description, for by describing *Keywords* as a 'non-fiction book' it avoids and displaces any more precise description as, for instance, 'an engaged work of scholarship in historical semantics'.

For the reality is that the academic study of the idea of keywords in linguistics has been taken up with considerable success in the past decades in what is known as corpus-based lexicography. Here, advances in information processing have made possible the storage and manipulation of huge amounts

of linguistic data as the basis for dictionary-making and with keywords playing a central organising role, but with keywords here acknowledged as a term consciously adopted and adapted from Raymond Williams. Scott, one of the innovators of the new keywords search engine acknowledges Williams's *Keywords* directly (Scott 1997:233), as do Jonathan Culpeper and Jane Demmen put it, in their chapter on 'Keywords' in the authoritative *Cambridge Handbook of English Corpus Linguistics*. There they write that in corpus linguistics, 'a keyword has a quantitative basis: it is a term for a word that is statistically characteristic of a text or set of texts' (Culpeper and Demmen 2015:90). But in placing this emphasis on the 'quantitative', they consciously assert their distance from Williams's idea of keywords as (as they put it) words 'deemed key on the basis of "readings" of their role in representing and shaping culturally important discourses' (their effective summary of his *Keywords* book), but 'subject to the vagaries of subjective judgements' – their effective summary, acknowledgement and dismissal of Williams's text and project (2015:90).

I will return to the terms of this professional dismissal of Williams's project later in the essay. For now, it is enough to have shown some of the pushing aside of Williams's 'non-fiction book' in the Wikipedia entry. Such a pushing aside is also evident in the OED entry if one considers the simple fact of the continued usage of and reference to Williams's particular sense of keywords in a significant accumulating body of related work in addition to that of corpus linguistics. In this work, far from being qualified or rejected (as it is in corpus lexicography), Williams's idea and particular sense of keywords is endorsed and extended in ways which suggest that the specificity of the usage should be recognised and recorded by the OED as a distinctive sense, as distinctive as the 'keyword-in-context' which is recorded. In this active ignoring of the proliferation of keywords, it is not alone: the OED itself does not mention or seek to understand Williams's particular take on the term, and this despite the important fact that its use has been extended and taken on by many more commentators in ways that suggest it should be registered. Surely enough, in other words, to become a part of standard use, if only in academia.

The evidence for this is obvious enough, to the unprejudiced eye. Let us briefly mention some of the re-activations of Williams's keywords project. The British journal of the Raymond Williams Society is itself named after Williams's book: *Key Words: a journal of cultural materialism* and it began to devote some specific attention to the Keywords project from 1998, and

to feature new articles on keywords such as Gender (and so on). Similarly, the Department of English at the University of Pittsburgh set up its own online keywords site, and invited contributors to add entries in the spirit of Williams's project (see [keywords.pitt.edu](http://keywords.pitt.edu)).

Other works which acknowledge the influence of Williams's work, even if modifying the terms of its deployment now include (amongst others, to give a sense of the presence of this now 'other' sense of keywords): *South African Keywords: the uses and abuses of political concepts* (Boonzaier and Sharp 1988); Bennett et al (2005) *New Keywords: a revised vocabulary of culture and society*; a second volume from South Africa, *New South African Keywords* (Shepherd and Robins 2008); Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, AK Thompson (eds), *Keywords for Radicals. the contested vocabulary of late-capitalist struggle* (2016); *Keywords for Today: a twenty-first century vocabulary* (MacCabe and Arac 2018) (the culmination of the University of Pittsburgh project); and, in 2018, John Leary's *Keywords: the new language of capitalism*, described by the author in the spirit of Williams's original project as 'the critical study of language and its use can show us not just what a dominant world view is, but how that worldview can come to feel like "normal reality"'.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, two book series also appeared, surely cementing Williams's idea of keywords as something like a standard part of the academic lexicon, at the very least.<sup>5</sup> The New York University Press series currently comprises: *Keywords for African American Studies*; *Keywords for Disability Studies*; *Keywords for Children's Literature*; *Keywords for Environmental Studies*; *Keywords for Media Studies*; and, most recently, *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* (<https://keywords.nyupress.org>). Each of these reference Williams's *Keywords* as the model for their varied investigations. And, while the second series does not reference Williams directly, it is important that its set goal – the analysis of 'fundamental notions across different cultural points of view, taking a hard look at a common object with a view from afar' (Tazi 2004:vii) – seems entirely compatible with Williams's project. The second, the Keywords Series, is devoted to the comparative analysis of keywords in and across 'different systems of thought' (Tazi 2004) and current volumes focus on contrasting ideas of Identity; Truth; Gender; and Experience.<sup>6</sup>

All in all, even the mere mention of the various works cited above certainly adds to the sense that there is something missing from the OED's entry on keywords, as well as from the much sketchier discussion of the

Wikipedia entry. In other words, one purpose for opening this essay with this brief sketch of keywords is useful in exemplifying a central feature of Williams's *Keywords*: its emphasis on the contest of meanings, a contest in which, as he puts it, through the confident (exclusionary) definition of a word, people try 'to appropriate a meaning which fitted the argument and to exclude those meanings which were inconvenient to it' (1976:15).

## Resistances

So it is that the current OED entries on keywords (and the Wikipedia entry) are either unaware or actively ignore the by now well-established sense that Williams gave to it.

In this brief survey of the different senses and meanings of keywords, it is striking that the most neglected sense is that put forward by Raymond Williams in his 1976 book *Keywords*, a book reprinted many times and re-issued in 1983, and the acknowledged source or referent point for a whole new disciplinary or inter-disciplinary area of academic and activist research and writing.

I want to suggest that the very reasons for its rejection help us to better understand its value, and that in this, it's very rejection is like that often given to Theory. For, as with theory, there is something in *Keywords* which is deliberately unsettling, something which actively challenges the consensus, and the apparently secure ground of common sense on which we stand in the world.<sup>7</sup> *Keywords* threatens precisely the structure of meaning that Williams saw at work in Gramsci's famous notion of hegemony as something 'which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which ... even constitutes the substance and limits of common sense for most people under its sway' (Williams [1972-3] 2001:167-8). Here, let us seek to get a sense of the depth of this challenge by examining the social and political context in which the work of *Keywords* emerged, as well as some of the resistances to it, as it is these which may be at work in or behind the omission or marginalising of Williams's idea of keywords from the senses preserved in the OED and the world of online definition.

Theory is abstract work, to be sure, but it is intellectual labour that arises in real historical circumstances. As such, complex issues in theory may at times be more easily grasped through an understanding of those historical situations. Such is the essence of Williams's *Keywords*; and such is the case for the better understanding of the complexities and aporia of Williams's own project, and its continued relevance to our own projects.

## The roots of the Keywords Project

The great anti-fascist writer of the 1930s, Walter Benjamin, observed how for the progressive critic, the past constituted an archive of texts and events which were available for rereading and reactivating under the pressures of the particular moment. In one of his final writings, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', he wrote 'Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history'. '[S]eize hold of a memory as it flashes up at moment of danger', he advised (Benjamin 1973:256). Williams's *Keywords* is one of the texts that should not be lost, and is well worth the retrieval and reappraisal which Benjamin advocates.

There are two broad sets of reasons for such rereading and reactivation in the present moment. The first set lie in the theoretical insights that *Keywords* embodies, and the lessons these have for contemporary social, cultural and political activists, particularly in the academy. The second resides in the occasion any such active rereading gives for a better understanding of the ways in which theory is always generated from and within the pressures of specific social and historical circumstances.

In my view, the act of retrieval which interested Benjamin relied on a specific force of comparison between past and present, one which gave his central writings on Baudelaire their particular force and appeal. Without going into the detail of just why it was Baudelaire and nineteenth-century France should be the focal point for a Jewish anti-fascist intellectual writing under the shadows of Hitler's rule, the comparative intention is clear enough. Benjamin believed the study of the past can throw unexpected light on the present through the act of juxtaposition. Thinking historically, through the act of selective comparison and historical montage, can defamiliarise the present in useful ways.<sup>8</sup>

Here, to ground the underlying act of selective comparison, I choose the term 'transformation' as a bridging word for the reader. Transformation is, of course, a keyword in the representation and understanding of contemporary South Africa.<sup>9</sup> It is also a term that can be applied with some accuracy (it does not form part of the active vocabulary of the period itself) for grasping the specific social and political context of the writing of *Keywords*. The keywords project emerges from, and seeks to contribute to, the project of transformation in post war Britain.

Though *Keywords* was published in 1976, its roots go back to the Second World War and the visible project of social transformation taken up in Britain at that time. In the Introduction to the book, Williams recalls how

the ideas behind the keywords project began to take shape after his return to Cambridge University in the autumn of 1945.

Williams had started his degree in English literature in 1939. He completed the first two years of the three-year course before volunteering for the army in 1941, serving in the 21<sup>st</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment of the Guards Armoured Division, taking part in the D-Day landings in Normandy. He was released from service to complete his undergraduate degree in the autumn of 1945.

Not surprisingly, he found it ‘strange to travel from an artillery regiment on the Kiel Canal to a Cambridge college’ (1976:9). It was in discussions with another student returning to complete his own degree after his army service that the seed for the keywords project was first planted. Williams recalls how, on meeting up, the two students ‘talked eagerly but not about the past’.

We were much too preoccupied with this new and strange world around us. Then we both said, in effect simultaneously: ‘the fact is, they just don’t speak the same language’. (1976:9)

The phrase ‘they just don’t speak the same language’ is a common one, notes Williams, usually used to express differences of outlook between parents and children in an exaggerated and exasperated way. But what Williams found it expressed in this simultaneous use was something different, something referring to the appearance of broader social differences and political dispositions which lay beyond the familial. This something different, something ‘more general’ was articulated in 1976 as the starting point for the keywords project. It was the (usually unnoticed) fact that in such a case ‘Each group is speaking its native language, but its uses are significantly different, and especially when strong feelings or important ideas are in question’ and the crucial insight that ‘No single group is “wrong” by any linguistic criterion, though a temporarily dominant group may try to enforce its own uses as “correct”’ (1976:9).

This situation, in which a ‘temporarily dominant group’ seeks, illegitimately, to assert its control over social meaning, stands as the theoretical and political core of *Keywords*. The situation which frames and makes possible Williams’s insight is that of the social and political context of the post war period, this ‘new and strange world’.

## Strange new world

What was it about Britain as it entered the post war world that made it seem to strange and new? We can get a preliminary grasp of its contours by looking at one of George Orwell's most neglected writings, the pamphlet published in 1941 as *The Lion and the Unicorn: socialism and the English genius* (Orwell [1941] 1982). It was composed during the Blitz ('As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.' ([1941] 1982:31)) He was one of the first to put his finger on the transformative forces set in motion in Britain by the Second World War, forces which seemed to him to promise a new, different and better world. For Orwell, the dark days of 1941 seemed to herald nothing less than a specifically English form of socialist revolution.

War, argued Orwell, is 'the greatest of all agents of change'; it 'speeds up all processes, wipes out minor distinctions, brings realities to the surface' (Orwell [1941] 1982:111). 'Right through our national life' he argued, 'we have got to fight against privilege, against the notion that a half-witted public-schoolboy is better for command than an intelligent mechanic ... we have to break the grip of the moneyed class as a whole' ([1941] 1982:87). The war starkly revealed that the whole structure of British society had to be transformed, and one of the key elements in this was the education system. In 1940, the past was 'fighting the future and we have two years, a year, possibly only a few months, to see to it that the future wins' ([1941] 1982:111).

Despite his deep reservations concerning the forms he had seen Communism take in Spain and in Stalin's Russia, he insisted that 'a conscious open revolt by ordinary people against inefficiency, class privilege and the rule of the old' was absolutely necessary to defeat Hitler (Orwell [1941] 1982:87).<sup>10</sup> The proper name for such an open revolt against inequality and the 'moneyed class as a whole' was in fact Socialism: 'since a classless, ownerless society is generally spoken of as "Socialism", we can give that name to the society towards which we are now moving'.

Orwell was not as alone in these feelings as might be imagined. As Angus Calder put it, in his detailed account of the period, *The People's War*, 'In the shocked Britain which faced defeat between 1940 and 1942 there were very obviously the seeds of a new democracy'. 'The nation's rulers', he emphasised,

whether they liked it or not, depended on the willing co-operation of the ruled, including even scorned and underprivileged sections

of society, manual workers and women. This co-operation must be paid for by concessions in the direction of a higher standard of living for the poor, greater social equality and improved welfare services. (Calder 2008:17)

The concerns about the country's morale, and the consequent need to offer the vision of a more progressive and democratic society to come, both for those in the armed forces and for people on the home front came through in two significant initiatives. First, in the formation, in August of 1941, of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs and, second, in 1942, in the publication of the Beveridge Report.<sup>11</sup>

In *Education in the War-Time Army* (a research paper prepared for the Ministry of Defence), advisers urged the formation of an educational body within the army. Its central aim would be to show 'how the British Empire stands for the essential factors of a new and better life' (cited in Summerfield 1981:137). This body was to be the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (the ABCA). Its activities would all be devoted to improving morale through a regular programme of civic education. As one of the leading figures in the initiative explained, 'It cannot be disputed that if we can employ men's minds and stimulate their interests by promoting knowledge, discussion and thought about the affairs of the world in which they live, we go far to maintain their morale and thus to make them better soldiers' (cited Summerfield 1981:141).

The education envisaged for the ABCA was above all education for the formation of a new democratic citizen for the promised transformed society.

Not surprisingly, the initiative was not without its critics, and several events and publications of the ABCA were censored or prohibited by the Ministry of Defence. All in all, the ABCA came to be seen – and especially by the conservative establishment – as supporting a radical project of social transformation, akin to that figured in Orwell's definition of socialism. Indeed, the electoral defeat of the Conservative Party in the 1945 elections was held to be due in large part to the influence of the ABCA on the armed forces vote through its evident endorsement of the Beveridge Report.

The Beveridge Report was that rare thing for government reports, an instant best-seller for a public looking forward to a transformed postwar society (Whiteside 2014:1).<sup>12</sup> 'A revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching', declared Beveridge (1942:6). The report – *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, to give it its proper

name – called for social protection for all ‘from the cradle to the grave’. It identified ‘Want’ along with ‘Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness’ as the ‘five giants’ to overcome on the ‘road to reconstruction’ (Beveridge 1942:6) With the victory of the Labour Party in 1945 – in large part due to its promise to fulfil the recommendations of the Report – various legislations put in place the constituent elements of the new ‘Welfare State’.

At the core of these proposals was the attempt to bring dignity to the working-class population, removing, in particular, the humiliating social stigma of ‘means-tested’ benefits for the unemployed.

Alongside and in addition to these social security measures – and of particular interest to Williams as (on completing his degree) he entered Adult Education as a staff tutor – was how the giant adversary ‘Ignorance’ was to be defeated. The 1944 Education Act extended secondary education to cover all children up the age of fifteen and, through the mechanism of the ‘11+’ examination, to give all children the possibility of attending a grammar school and consequently make possible entry to higher education. At the same time, higher education was itself moving to make a transition from the pre-war ‘elite’ access to broader access, including women and working-class students.

Such an opening-up of the educational system was controversial. Understanding some of this controversy helps us to fill out the abstractions of what Williams calls the ‘different immediate values or different kinds of valuation’ with their ‘different formations and distributions of energy and interest’ that were to be found in that other social grouping, who so confidently insisted that their meanings for words were the only meanings.

For Williams, one of the central antagonists, one who exemplified this ‘different formation’ and its particular ‘distribution of energy and interest’, was the influential figure of poet, dramatist and critic, TS Eliot. Eliot’s poetry, drama and criticism had been a significant influence on Williams as a student, but with the publication of his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* in 1948 a line had been drawn.<sup>13</sup>

In the Introduction to *Keywords*, Williams describes this as ‘a book I grasped but could not accept’ (1976:11). Eliot’s *Notes* was assembled from a variety of essays and lectures he had composed between 1943 and 1948. Their guiding-thread was the firm opposition to the egalitarian impulses of the Beveridge Report and the new Education Act: an opposition which certainly expressed a very different set of values to the democratising ones of Beveridge. Eliot went on to argue:

the idea of a uniform system such that no one capable of receiving higher education could fail to get it, leads imperceptibly to the education of too many people, and consequently to the lowering of standards to whatever this swollen number of candidates is able to reach. (Eliot [1948]1983:100-1).

The panic of Eliot's argument, with its fear concerning 'the education of too many people and consequently to the lowering of standards', *despite* the admission that the reform is simply intended to assure a system in which 'no one capable of receiving higher education should fail to get it', exemplifies the very different set of 'immediate values' animating his position: elite rather than democratic values.

For Eliot's hostility to the democratisation of education and the general social transformation of which it was a part was far from being his alone. Indeed, it was the very prospect of social transformation towards a more equitable and democratic society that brought into relief and made more visible the constant system of micro-aggressions which gathered around the ideas of culture and education.

Both in *Keywords* (1976:10) and in the essay 'Culture is ordinary', Williams locates the teashop, a popular meeting place for students outside the closed walls of the Cambridge colleges, as the particular site of such micro-aggressions. 'I was not oppressed by the university,' he writes, 'but the teashop, acting as if were one of the older and more respectable departments, was a different matter'. For here there was culture, but culture 'not in any sense I knew, but in a special sense: the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people' (Williams [1958] 1972-3:12).

It was the experience of such everyday aggression that led Williams to the study and analysis of his first keyword, the keyword of keywords, 'culture'. In reaction to this discourse of distinction (to borrow the apposite term championed by Bourdieu),<sup>14</sup> Williams responded through the foundation of his keywords project. In one of the essays which form the earliest formulation of the project, 'The Idea of culture', he repeats his sense of the aura of distinction surrounding the idea of the 'man of culture', writing of how such a person 'is recognizable not by any specific attributes, but by certain qualities best perceived by others of the same kind' ([1953] 1993:58). Of course, writes Williams with a deliberately distancing contempt, there are 'cross-currents and deposits of emotional

association which further complicate the use of the idea and the word [culture] ... Abstraction, snobbery and fear are facts, and it is not surprising that they have left their mark on this difficult idea and word. We note the marks, not to set them aside, but to assemble them as active senses of *culture*, along with the more formal definitions' ([1953] 1993:58-59). In the act of assembly – in the persistent cataloguing of keywords that he undertook after the war – Williams used the irritation of micro aggression as the fuel to power his highly original inquiry.

### **Vocabulary in action**

As he seeks to explain the nature of the intervention that *Keywords* represents, Williams picks the term vocabulary to differentiate his analyses from the related work done on various other forms of disciplinary inquiry into the meaning of words. First and foremost of these other forms is the monumental work of scholarship, produced over generations of patient labour, and now generally known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Williams recalls how, in teaching the classes in adult education that went into the writing of 'The Idea of culture', he was approached by a student, WG Heyman, who pointed out the similarity of his project to that of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Alerted to this, in a public library in Seaford, Williams looked up the word 'culture' in the *Dictionary*. It was a moment in which Williams experienced 'a shock of recognition' ([1953] 1993:11). Heyman later gave Williams three cardboard boxes, containing a copy of the *Dictionary* as it had originally been published in serial form, as what was termed 'fascicles' ('Deject to Depravation', 'Heel to Hod', as Williams recalls). He pays tribute to 'the majestic object' (citing the critic William Empson's description of it) ([1953] 1993:16).

At the same time, though, he is quick to express his distance from the *Dictionary*, noting in particular the question of the 'ideology of its editors' and suggesting that 'the air of massive impersonality which the *Oxford Dictionary* communicates is not so impersonal, so purely scholarly, or so free of active social and political values as might be supposed' ([1953] 1993:16). He also notes the significant distance between the real source of the changing meanings of words – often made orally, in and through the active speech and dissent of people through the agency of speech – and only subsequently recorded by notation in the written record.

For Williams, vocabulary is above all language in use rather than the static image of language so often associated with dictionary definition.

In placing the emphasis on mobile and conflictual use in the meanings of words, Williams came up with a key theoretical challenge, one that still resonates in contemporary linguistics. For here, as Rajend Mesthrie has observed, 'a conflict model of society is not a point of departure that the majority of sociolinguists are comfortable with' (Mesthrie 2003:317).

It may well be that of all the practitioners of theory, Roland Barthes, with his grounding in literary studies, came closest to articulating (without, of course, being aware of this, or seeking to do so: Williams's work was entirely unknown to him) the core of the keywords project. For Barthes, as for Williams, 'In our culture ... there is an inveterate war of languages; our languages exclude each other; in a society divided by social class, money, academic origin, language itself divides' ([1989]1992:101); 'there is a division of languages, for which no simple science of communication can account; society intervenes ... constructing language like a battleground' ([1989] 1992:106). Because of the fact of these social divisions, 'lack of communication is not strictly speaking of an informational order but of an interlocutory order' ([1989] 1992:112). Interlocutory here signalling that dimension of active use which *Keywords* insists on.

And again, with a striking convergence of insight, Barthes presses on the same sore point in linguistics that Williams probes and identifies in *Keywords*, the fact that 'linguists know that a national idiom contains a certain number of species; but the specification which has been studied is geographic (dialects, patois) not social' ([1989]1992:112). In this perspective, the orthodox idea of a standard national language – available to all through the rigour of static dictionary definitions – is shattered and there is a 'division of languages for which no simple science of communication can account' ([1989]1992:106). Precisely the starting point (as we saw above) of Williams's investigation into the phenomenon in which 'each group is speaking its native language, but its uses are significantly different' (Williams 1976:9).

At a more general level (and what characterises Theory with a capital T from the wide range of theorising proper to all disciplines), Theory challenged the orthodox assumptions regarding language of the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>15</sup> According to this tradition, language was generally taken as the tool or instrument of an autonomous self and held to work best at its most scientific, when acting as a mirror to, or reflection of, an independently existing reality. But, as Emile Benveniste (a French socio-linguist operating outside this tradition) argued, to speak of language as

an instrument sets up an opposition between nature and humanity which ignores the fundamentally constitutive role that language plays in founding human consciousness and identity. While human beings make and use tools which exist independently of them, language is rather ‘in the nature of man, who did not fabricate it ... It is in and through language that man is constituted as *subject*’ (Benveniste 1966:259; my translation). Following from this insight, the thinkers most associated with Theory – Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva, and Althusser – all insisted, in their own ways to be sure, on the real sociability and intrication of language and thinking that Williams examines in *Keywords* and in the keywords project as a whole.

## Conclusion

The war did indeed prove to be an agent for change and social transformation; but it soon became evident that transformation was never going to be the relatively simple and immediate process Orwell (and others) had envisaged as, effectively, a revolution. Instead, as Williams came to realise, the promised post-war transformation was always likely to be in part a compromise, a moment in the longer struggle for a fuller more participatory democratisation that he came to call the ‘long revolution’ (Williams [1961]1975). In this longer struggle, he insisted, it was absolutely necessary to see education as a driving force in social transformation. ‘We must certainly see the aspiration to extend the active process of learning, with the skills of literacy and other advanced communication, to all people rather than to limited groups, as comparable in importance to the growth of democracy and the rise of scientific industry’ ([1961]1975:11).

In this active process of learning, the central theoretical insight embodied in *Keywords* and the keywords project is absolutely crucial. Language – despite the bland omniscience of static dictionary definitions – is in reality always an active and selective vocabulary, one in which we can see at work what theorists now term the dynamics of representation, the ways in which when ‘we have actual relationships, we start from the descriptions we have learned’ ([1961] 1975:89). Thus, even when we use such common terms as ‘the individual’ or ‘society’, we are in fact ‘using descriptions which embody particular interpretations of the experience to which they refer’ ([1961] 1975:65).

‘Descriptions which embody particular interpretations of the experience to which they refer’: this, above all, was the central theoretical point

embodied in the idea of keywords and the practice of keywords analysis. It was a point of theory that came into focus as the social transformation promised by the post war period met with resistances both conscious and unconscious. The theoretical innovation emerged from the ways in which the process of social transformation taken up in the post war period brought into visibility forms of class difference and social conflict in the very use of language itself.

In thinking on education in the post war period, the emphasis had been placed on a certain idea of education for active citizenship. This citizenship was understood – as we have seen – in terms of the ‘pursuit of a common aim’ (Wintringham 1940:5), the aim to transform society into a society of equals. But the current moment – in South Africa as elsewhere – is one in which the critical query first put by Karl Marx in response to the emergent discourse of human rights and democracy is more pertinent than ever.<sup>16</sup> What does my abstract right to equal citizenship mean in a society riven with material inequality? What does the right to citizenship mean in a society where the material foundations for its practice are lacking or unevenly distributed because of material inequalities, including – as now in current legislation in the USA – the material possibility of practical access to voting? As Etienne Balibar warns, simply ‘abandoning the terms “democracy” and “citizenship” would not be a renewal of the political, so much as it would be of resigning in the face of the difficult task that confronts the political’ (Balibar 2016:122). In the ongoing work of social transformation – our own ‘long revolution’ – an ongoing commitment to not feeling comfortable with our vocabulary is as pertinent today as it was for Williams. Williams’s lesson – the lesson of *Keywords* – remains a powerful one for attending to social transformation today.

## Notes

1. Tony Morphet, a professor in Adult Education at the University of Cape Town, shared ‘the desire to make education a part of the process of social change itself’, as Raymond Williams wrote. For an appreciation of Morphet’s life and work, see Higgins 2021a.
2. See **Platform: in Theory**, *Transformation* 104 (available at [www.transformationjournal.org.za](http://www.transformationjournal.org.za)).
3. Thus, in a standard cipher, if the word cipher is used as the cipher, a message is coded and transcribed in the following way.

Alphabet: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Cipher: CIPHERABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Message: Dinner tonight

Coded: HCHHELNIHCABN

4. See, for instance, *Learn to Make Money with Keywords* (Spencer 2021).
5. Perhaps the surest sign of this was the session held at the American Studies Association Conference in 2014: 'Kill that Keyword!', devoted to showing 'how and why certain academic terminologies are overused and undertheorised, or overtheorised and underused, producing the effect of jargon'.
6. This series is very much in line with Williams's recommendation, in *Keywords*, for comparative research, and his emphasis that 'key developments...can only be understood when other languages are brought consistently into comparison' (1976:18). For an exemplary instance of the benefits of such comparative inquiry, see Cassin (ed) (2014) *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. Though referring to Europe, the core and direction of its arguments could well be directed at the (South) African experience when it talks of the 'two kinds of solution' available to the problem of languages: 'We could choose a dominant language in which exchanges will take place, from now on, a globalized Anglo-American. Or we could gamble on the retention of many languages, making clear on every occasion the meaning and interest of the differences – the only real way of facilitating communication between languages and cultures' (Cassin 2014:xvii). Rather than tied 'to a retrospective and reified Europe [Africa?], defined by an accumulation and juxtaposition of legacies that would only reinforce particularities', the latter option 'explores divisions, tensions, transfers, appropriations, contradictions, in order to construct better versions of itself' (Cassin 2014:xvii).
7. I further examine the unsettling qualities of *Keywords* in particular relation to Derrida's idea of deconstruction in Higgins (2003). I also address here the conceptual challenges to Williams's method usefully summarised in Inglis (1995: 246-7).
8. For further discussion of Benjamin's place in the understanding of the political possibilities of montage, see Higgins 2021b (in press).
9. For a useful sketch, see Reddy (2008).
10. And for which he is much better known, especially due to the iconic place given to his late works *Animal Farm* and *1984* in the culture wars of the Cold War. But see also the earlier text *Homage to Catalonia* and the retrospective essay, 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War'.
11. According to Calder, a Gallop Poll held two weeks after its publication 'discovered that nineteen out of twenty people had heard of the report, while nine out of ten believed its proposals should be accepted' (Calder 2008:528).
12. I discuss the complexity of Williams's relation to Eliot, and his final break with that influence in Higgins 1999: 22-36; 52-53.

13. For Bourdieu, see especially Bourdieu 2005. Compare also how he describes the ‘naturally’ distinguished in the education system as those who ‘merely need to be what they are in order to be what they have to be, that is, natural distinguished from those who are obliged to struggle for distinction’ (Bourdieu 1990:11). For related discussions (though lacking any reference to this conceptual vocabulary) of such dynamics in South Africa, see, for instance, Tabensky and Matthews (eds) 2015.
14. In this sense, Theory is the resurgence of the emphasis on the theory of language as constitutive rather than instrumental whose tradition is brilliantly outlined in Taylor 1985.
15. For this, see Marx’s review of Bruno Bauer’s *On the Jewish Question* (Marx 1975). For more recent cautionary evaluations, see also Dunn 2014, Balibar 2016 and, in the African context, Chipkin 2007 and Nyamnjoh 2017.

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# Review

Linda Cooper and Sheri Hamilton (eds) (2020)  
*Renewing Workers' Education: a radical vision*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

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Since 1994 the landscape of both unionism and attendant forms of worker education in South Africa have changed dramatically. These are linked on the one hand to the changing world of work and on the other to the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (COSATU) alliance with the state and the formalisation and institutionalisation of worker education through accredited skills training. Despite the human capital rhetoric that envelops it, the system of which this is a part has not only been singularly unsuccessful in building institutions that are capable of nurturing new skills, it has also de-politicised and weakened earlier forms of worker education. *Renewing Workers' Education: a radical vision* aims to reinvigorate a flagging labour movement and its declining educational initiatives by providing new insights into the recent shifts in both. It brings together a range of authors with deep experience in labour and education who provide penetrating and rich interpretations of the current conjuncture and what is to be done. In so doing it participates in a broader trend to rethink the productive possibilities of Marxism today within the labour movement.

Following an introduction describing the malaise confronting worker education in the contemporary union movement, there are four sections respectively focusing on the history of worker education, institutionalised worker education, new trends in the 'local and global periphery', and conceptual tools for re-thinking worker education.

In the first section, the historical chapters by Dinga Sikwebu, who has been active for 40 years in union work and education, Kessie Moodley (one-time director of the Workers' College in Durban) and Namibian worker educationist Herbert Jauch as well as UCT's Jonathan Grossman give a

sense of the vision of worker education that informed historical expressions of it. All three draw attention to the importance of informal learning and education that occurred as part of worker organisation, mobilisation and strike as distinct from more formal processes. None glosses over or romanticises this history. Sikwebu for example discusses some of the limitations of experiential learning when ‘political education (becomes) “ideological cattle-dipping”’, while Moodley and Jauch emphasise the fact that both formal and any other form of worker education, even in the 1970s and 1980s, was always secondary to the main task of representing workers in wage negotiations and focused predominantly on shop stewards, officials and office-bearers. They describe the links between the Durban-based workers’ college and similar Namibian initiatives and show how in both contexts ‘workers’ education was increasingly seen by workers themselves ... as a tool for personal career advancement, either in the union or at the workplace’ (24). Inasmuch as they also deal with the theme of university-involvement in worker education, a major agent in worker education since 1994, Grossman’s chapter illustrates his own engagement as a university-based sociologist in solidarity educational work with dismissed workers.

One of the highlights of the book is a chapter by Mphutlane Wa Bofelo opening the second section on whether institutionalising workers’ education is democratising or domesticating. Like a later chapter by Mandy Moussouris and Lucien van der Walt he does not see accredited skills training and radical workers’ education as mutually-exclusive. Wa Bofelo provides a strong argument that in fact ‘individual ambitions of upward social mobility’ as represented in the attraction to the skills development discourse are not mutually exclusive from ‘collective aspirations and the agenda of social transformation’ (54). Indeed, he shows that working with the system is not new in South Africa and that struggles for registration and recognition within the framework of existing legislation characterised the glory-days of the 1980s and sat side-by-side with fierce independence for control over and content of worker education. Similarly, unions both developed their own independent spaces and worked with academics – these were not mutually-exclusive strategies. The challenge then as now is how, within the spaces that exist, to expand the scope of workers’ education so that it embraces ‘a diversity of organisational and institutional forms’ (65).

Vanessa Pillay’s close analysis of a Women’s Leadership and Development programme run by DITSELA as a university-accredited programme for NEHAWU trade union women, reveals not only the contradictions between

male unionists' rhetorical support for women's leadership and their actual practice, it also raises broader questions about the role of short-term education programmes in being able to effect immediate social change. Her chapter suggests that the effects of such programmes may be more indirect and long-term, rather than immediate. The difficulties faced in trying to establish any such programmes and initiatives not only in South Africa but also in other parts of the continent are evident in the chapters both on Namibia and Nigeria, the latter by Baba Aye and Valentine Udeh. Here there is likewise a rich and troubled history with important tentative links between initiatives there and in South Africa.

The third section on Educating Workers on the Local and Global Periphery is really the crux of the book as it provides sketches of new forms of work in both South Africa and Canada and the necessity for and nature of new approaches to education of such workers. If the new skills infrastructure in South Africa is oriented towards a declining and fragmenting, but also relatively elite organised base of public sector unions and their leaderships, then new forms of worker education are needed for the increasing numbers of informal, temporary, disorganised, migrant workers created by new forms of capitalist production.

Chris Bonner's chapter documents organisational-educational work, amongst other things, with waste-pickers and other informal workers in South Africa and others parts of the world. Aziz Choudry, Mostafa Henaway and Eric Shragge's chapter reveals the strategies by which capital in the form of logistics networks and retailers keep immigrant workers disorganised and working under horrendous and unprotected conditions. The Immigrant Workers' Centre, where they work, provides information, advice and various popular education workshops through which 'labour rights, health and safety in the workplace and approaches to organising and building campaigns' are addressed (138). Mondli Hlatshwayo's companion piece on precarious workers in South Africa and the work of the Casual Workers' Advice Office similarly highlights the distance between formal union education and skills programmes and the educational needs of and strategies to assist precarious workers who are often also migrants. Together the chapters reveal the new 'frontline' for workers' education where education is integral to strengthening the collective power of workers who, in Hlatshwayo's words, 'are the future of labour' (157). Astrid von Kotze's moving account of the use of plays and story-telling in a Delft community shows how contemporary forms of popular education drawing on the history

and memory of their role in earlier decades can provide ‘useful education’ and a sense of empowerment for people living in desperately insecure and impoverished socio-economic conditions.

The final three chapters in the fourth section, by Sheri Hamilton, Mandy Moussouris and Lucien van der Walt and Linda Cooper pick up what they consider to be the main conceptual elements for a regeneration of workers’ education: Hamilton calls for a re-evaluation of the central tenets of Marxian political economy in the light of the debilitating impacts of identity politics; Moussouris and van der Walt argue for strong independent worker organisation in the anarchist tradition that simultaneously appreciates the need to respond to workers’ demand and need for skills training and development; while Linda Cooper in a magnificent summing up of the main analytical points of analysis returns us to the notion of counter-hegemonic struggle. Particularly interesting is Moussouris and van der Walt’s specific argument that the loss of worker control, shifts in pedagogy and narrowing of content in the post-1994 period had much to do with the hierarchical control increasingly exercised by the SACP within COSATU over worker education.

This book is a fine achievement blending historical, contemporary and comparative analysis by a diverse set of authors whose work is rooted in their fields of work and activism. The case studies add to our knowledge of the field, especially the complexities of the relationship between formal and informal worker education and within the latter. It will no doubt stimulate further work in the field. If there is one area I would like to see more work on, it would be the analysis of the international connections historically and in the present. Worker education is historically a transnational and internationalist field. This emerges in the book in its comparative cases, but with some exceptions there is less discussion of the international inspirations, connections and borrowings by South Africa’s worker educationists than one might expect. While there is a great deal of this type of research in the field of skills development, this seems to be an area in the field of worker education with potential for further work.

# Review

## David Birmingham (2019) *A Short History of Modern Angola*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball

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David Birmingham's history of Angola provides an engaging overview of the country since 1820 into the contemporary moment. Much of what Birmingham narrates is not necessarily new to those familiar with the country, but he brings it to life by illustrating his account with detailed materials describing everyday life in colonial and post-colonial Angola. Walking readers through narratives of slavery and labour, the tensions of race and class, colonialism, state building, oil extraction, and the civil war, the book will appeal to non-specialists trying to acquaint themselves with the turbulent history of southern Africa's oil giant, as well as seasoned Angola researchers looking for a book which succinctly presents many of the key trends in the country's history.

In the first four chapters, Birmingham introduces the reader to classical themes of the historiography of nineteenth century Angola: slavery, race, early encounters, and colonial conquest. While the initial chapter is a general historical overview of the period under discussion illustrated with key examples, thereafter he zooms in on particular regions in each of the subsequent chapters, using rich details of everyday life to illustrate the major themes that shaped the period. Chapter 2 describes life in early nineteenth century Luanda. Detailed accounts of trading practices, the everyday life of a wealthy Luanda household, and the leisure activities of the city's elite provide insight into the lasting effects of the slave trade and slave labour on the city. This provides a segue into a more general discussion of the complex intersections of race and class in the city, focused on the emergence of the creole elite and mestizo<sup>1</sup> populations which Birmingham returns to throughout the book as he tracks the long durée trends in Angola's political history. Chapters 3 and 4 move the reader into Angola's interior and trace the gradual spread of Portuguese colonialism. Key to the narrative is the

process of land dispossession and the growing network of settlers who struck deals with indigenous rulers while also pressing for increased intervention from the Portuguese. The strength of these chapters lies in Birmingham's ability to highlight the complexity of nineteenth century Angola. While the overall story is one of colonial encroachment and abuse, he shatters any easy stereotypes of what it meant to be European or African during this period. Descriptions of the Ambaquistas – Africans in the Ambaca region who thought of themselves as Portuguese, had adopted architectural designs to distinguish themselves from other Africans, and were not governed by customary rulers – stand alongside accounts of Dona Ana Joaquina, a Luanda-based slave trader whose interests stretched across the Atlantic into the Caribbean and Brazil, and the rulers of African states. Echoing work done in other parts of the continent (eg, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), which have emphasised the diversity of relationships that existed during the early years of colonialism both between colonisers and colonised, as well as within these groups, Birmingham portrays nineteenth century Angola as a place fraught with ambiguity. European traders struck deals with African rulers and betrayed each other even while lobbying the colonial state to expand to protect their interests. Africans fought European encroachment but also intermarried with settlers as a means of alliance making.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace the shift from the diversities of early colonial and imperial relations to the entrenchment of Portuguese colonial rule and the rise of white supremacy as a major factor in politics and social organisation. Taking 1890 as the starting point of this process, Birmingham shows how changes in Portuguese politics as well as pressure from other colonial powers led to a renewed effort from Portugal to establish institutional control over Angolan territory, an exercise which led to a sudden influx of white settlers. The story told in these chapters reveals the factors that led to the emergence of anti-colonial sentiment and Angolan nationalism. Birmingham describes the rise of the twentieth century Portuguese colonial state, the abusive labour practices in the agricultural sector that underpinned the colonial economy, the loss of Luanda's creole elites' status as the leaders of the colony, and the emergence of not only nationalist sentiment among multiple groups but the accompanying factionalism that underpinned conflicts within political movements and between them for the next thirty years.

The final three chapters are about Angola's civil war and its aftermath. Understandably these chapters are shaped by the work produced over the last three decades, and although he continues when possible to provide the

detailed descriptions that give life to broader themes in earlier chapters, such as discussing the bartering system that emerged in the face of economic collapse in the 1980s, these sections of the book mark a shift to a more standard political history of the country. Major themes in these three chapters are the building of the MPLA-state in the 1970s and 1980s, the gradual transformation of the MPLA from a liberation movement to ruling party (along with the factionalism, repression and corruption that ultimately accompanied this), the rise of the oil economy, the explosion of the parallel market, and the effects and path of the country's brutal civil war especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Unusually for accounts of Angola, Birmingham ends on a positive note, focusing on renewed efforts at small-scale agriculture and informal trade by women as evidence of hope in a post-conflict context.

Three themes particularly stand out in Birmingham's account: 1) the ongoing relevance of legacies of slavery and forced labour to Angola's past and present; 2) the emergence of racialised class relations that have heavily shaped the direction of Angolan politics; and 3) the importance of understanding Angolan history as ultimately a transnational phenomenon shaped heavily by external actors. While many of these topics have been addressed by other authors, Birmingham's temporal scope allows him to trace how developments in these three areas accreted over time to produce the social, political, and economic tensions that continue to characterise contemporary Angola. Of these three themes the focus on race is particularly interesting because it has historically been the most overlooked in studies of contemporary Angola. This is partially due to the overwhelming urgency in the post-colonial moment of understanding and addressing the civil war, but also because the MPLA's socialist and nationalist ideologies explicitly rejected appeals to racial identification as a source of political mobilisation. In fact, it was Savimbi who most often mobilised a racial politics to justify his continued war against the MPLA (87). Nevertheless, recent works by Lara Pawson (2014) and Jon Schubert (2017) highlight the ongoing salience of histories of racial discrimination in shaping everyday Angolan politics. The text provides an important introduction for understanding the history of racialised class relations in the country, an area still in significant need of study for much of the African continent (see Pierre 2013).

Finally, Birmingham makes a notable effort to highlight the contribution of women in Angolan history. Gender is a comparatively under-researched area in studies of Angola. Recent works by scholars such as Margarida Paredes

(2015) and Selina Makana (2017) have done much to begin addressing this; nevertheless, the historical interest in the formal institutions of politics and war-making has lent a particular masculinist focus to understandings of social relations and political power in the country. It is refreshing to see a major historian of Angola place so much emphasis on women's roles in shaping contemporary Angola and hopefully researchers will take this as a provocation for further investigation in this area.

Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to studies of Angola, especially for those seeking an introduction to the primary themes of research produced about the country. The bibliography provides a useful starting point for those wishing to find a record of canonical works as well as more recent research. It is moving that the author recognises the role of the late Jill Dias in conceptualising this project and one can only hope that the new generation of Angola scholars will be able to fill the shoes of such a major scholar of the region.

## Note

In this review I have chosen to make use of the terms that the author himself uses for designating specific racial and class groupings in Angola.

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# Review

Jonathan Jansen (ed) (2019) *Decolonisation in Universities: the politics of knowledge*.  
Johannesburg: Wits UP.

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Jonathan Jansen's edited volume, *Decolonisation in Universities: the politics of knowledge*, traces the debates, the debacles and the discussions that delimit the so-called 'decolonial turn'. Featuring some of South Africa's leading figures in curriculum studies, it eschews the vexed matter of definition by making the same point several times over – that the jury is still out, that the conversation is ongoing, that decolonisation is less about being than becoming. The contributors refuse consistently to short-circuit the deliberative process by resorting to the sloganeering commonly associated with the decolonisation movement. Instead, theirs is a serious bid at understanding and realising this call for an alternative higher education vision.

Jansen makes clear in his overview chapter that the book is not about social, economic, or political decolonisation, despite their position as the concept's original contextual moorings. The intention, rather, is to focus on decolonisation as a knowledge project. The book's opening section provides accordingly the various arguments for decolonisation, extending outwards through the colonial character of the African university (Mahmood Mamdani) before returning via the eclipse of curriculum matters in South Africa's transition to democracy (Lesley le Grange).

Jansen's own chapter begins the second section on the politics and problems of decolonisation, where he proceeds to explain why the concept functions too generically – even misleadingly – if one is to make sense of the complex character of South Africa's centuries-old education system. In fact, for Jansen, 'the decolonisation moment is destined to pass because it underestimates the power of a settled curriculum within established

institutions that, in terms of their core knowledge commitments, remain impervious to the politics of protest' (73). What he calls the *institutional curriculum* is left untouched because decolonisation efforts – despite getting mainstreamed – end up “*tak[ing] institutional form*” (74, original emphasis).

Lis Lange picks up where Jansen leaves off: she foregrounds the question of recognition by distinguishing the formal academic curriculum from the implicit institutional one – the hidden ‘null’ curriculum into which students are tacitly socialised – that leaves black students in particular feeling misrecognised and ontologically ‘out of place’ (87). Ursula Hoadley and Jaamia Galant expand on the recognition problem in their discussion of Chandra K Raju, the Indian thinker whose 2017 visit to the University of Cape Town polarised the academic community. They contend that Raju – far from raising epistemological concerns – is protesting at the level of ontology, ‘asking why he is not recognised’ in the discipline of mathematics (110).

But it is in the book’s third section that the stubborn practicalities surrounding calls for decolonisation start to unfurl themselves. Jess Auerbach, Mlungisi Dlamini and Anonymous describe how their attempts at introducing decolonial thinking into a brand-new Mauritian university foundered on their ‘failure to recognise that “from scratch” meant deeply grounded in the structures of neoliberal market responses to global challenges’ (131). Similarly, Crain Soudien reviews a range of transformation-focused higher education interventions – some ontological, others epistemological – at universities around South Africa. He focuses on the development education (DE) initiative at the University of South Africa and, particularly, Catherine Odora Hoppers’s idea of *enlargement* as antidote to the tribal (European) character of modern universities. Yet the lofty talk of UNISA ‘plac[ing] itself at the disposal of the service of humanity – not at the service of the market’ (146) – did not prevent the DE initiative from ending in 2017. For his part, Soudien appears to attribute this to ‘the homeostasis of neoliberalism’ (148).

The seemingly inexorable logic of the market anticipates Yusuf Sayed, Tarryn de Kock and Shireen Motala’s critical examination of teacher education and their contention that decolonisation must deal with epistemic, economic, and political concerns simultaneously. In keeping with the concept of enlargement, these authors argue for the development of a ‘recentred curriculum’ (162), which, being neither reformist nor nativist,

‘seeks to straddle both continuity and change’ (163), confronting also the inequalities that beset the basic education system.

In the fourth and final section the reader is given a glimpse of alternative readings of our colonial inheritances. Brenda Schmahmann cautions against the removal of colonial and apartheid era sculptures and monuments from university campuses, observing that ‘removal is often the modus operandi of choice for those leaning more toward the right than the left of the political spectrum’ (186). Artwork does not have fixed meanings yet the ‘plasticity’ of historical memory (194) – and a truly critical appraisal – cannot be actualised through psychological scotomization. She recommends therefore the use of dialogical or *counter monuments* since ‘a new monument placed in proximity to an old one, and which is designed to have a dialogical relationship to it, can thus serve to challenge its messages and meanings’ (188).

André Keet continues with this theme of plasticity: unusually, he posits the university as inherently transformable, reading the decolonial turn as ‘a call to excavate and recover the innate plasticity of the university’ (203). The problem, however, is that academics ‘lack a critical ontology’ of themselves (207), which encourages the unhelpful ‘metaphorisation of decolonisation’ (206). Instead of interrogating and resisting their loss of agency due to their own intellectual habitus, academics repeatedly lay claim to ‘an unburdened agency that can at best lead to self-indulgent reflexive studies that serve as moral hideouts’ (207). For Keet, the decolonisation of knowledge ‘will not emerge as a battle of additions, assimilations or displacements, but as prefigured within knowledge itself’ (212).

Neither Schmahmann nor Keet acknowledge the Janus-faced nature of plasticity with its discursive grounding in the neoliberal motifs of adjustment and malleability. Piet Naudé, however, recognises the issue in a chapter on *Ubuntu* that reveals the ever-present spectre of the so-called ‘Western’ canon. Like Schmahmann and Keet, he foregoes the gospel of epistemic-ontological radicalism, believing that the system can be changed from the inside. Yet despite his praise for the putative openness to falsification of the post-positivist, ‘Western’ scientific tradition, Naudé writes that ‘the prospect of success [in decolonising moral philosophy] does not look good’ (234).

Achille Mbembe expands further on the theme of enlargement and a recentred curriculum with his idea of a *pluriversity*, which, far from amounting to a renunciation of universal knowledge, involves embracing

a 'horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions' (241). Accordingly, he laments the tendency within decolonial circles to interpret multiplicity as difference and, therefore, separation. Where some see only incongruity, Mbembe identifies possibilities for connection – as in his observation that the present-day extension of human subjectivity through technological means resonates strongly with – again – the 'plasticity' (250) of precolonial African cultures given their preoccupation with the borders of the living world.

It would be tempting to read this book as a commentary on the relationship between the universal and the particular. It is not. It is a commentary on the unequal relationship between *two* particulars – the one 'Western', the other (South) African. Granted, Jansen problematises the centre-periphery thesis, citing as proof the international leadership of South African researchers including the late Bongani Mayosi (poverty and cardiovascular disease), Salim and Quarraisha Abdool Karim (HIV/AIDS infection among rural women) and Ian Phimister (central and southern African histories). And yet it would not be accurate to suggest that there are no power asymmetries in the global academy today. Far from it: the contributors articulate a clear and present need for a recentring of the academic project that will make provision for other ways of interpreting the world.

What is unclear, however, is *how* that recentring can happen at all. This is where Naudé's observation assumes critical importance – that local knowledge only becomes Knowledge (with a capital K) when it has been validated by the centre. It is good and well to insist on the decentring of 'Western' academic hegemony, but without an explicit economic and political agenda, the decolonisation movement will come to be remembered, surely, as little more than a moment – not simply because it failed to dislodge the institutional curriculum but also because academics once again mistook the gown for the town. While I am mindful of the opening editorial caveat that decolonisation is being considered strictly as a knowledge project, one is left wondering how a project so defined can ever lead to broader social, economic, and political emancipation.

At this point, Mamdani's opening chapter begins to loom large. Recounting the historical antagonism between excellence and relevance, between the universal scholar and the public intellectual, between Ali Mazrui and Walter Rodney, Mamdani's conclusion is that the one cannot do without the other: 'Our challenge is to acknowledge that the public intellectual and the scholar are not two different personas but two sides of a single

quest for knowledge' (26). What is necessary, then, is not the continued balkanisation of the knowledge-making enterprise but a radical, dialogical universalism unafraid of connecting with local struggles lying beyond the rarefied circles of the academy.

Once again, however, that is easier said than done: scholars are not renowned for speaking truth to power. The road to tenure does not ordinarily reward those who step out of line and, as Keet observes, academic agency is frequently constrained by the university habitus. The activism of South Africa's decolonisation movement is restricted typically to the relative staidness of the academic environs; comment is seldom offered on what is happening beyond university campuses and in the country at large. That is a clear indication of how disconnected the movement is from the everyday struggles of ordinary people, notwithstanding its role in the insourcing of university workers.

In order to meet Mamdani's challenge, we need to identify those shared struggles that connect university and public spaces. Taking down statues – I would argue – is not one of them, whereas the pursuit of linguistic diversity certainly is. Following Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Mamdani reminds us that 'the starting point of decolonisation is language' (25). At the level of the university, a multilingual project is not only about teaching students in several languages but also about 'provid[ing] the resources to nurture and develop non-Western intellectual traditions as living traditions with the capacity to sustain public and scholarly discourse' (25). And at the level of the community, mother-tongue instruction for young school-goers brings with it a host of cognitive, psychological, academic, economic, and cultural benefits that cannot be over-estimated. Significantly, the struggle for a society that is multilingual in more than a nominal, constitutional sense addresses both the epistemological and ontological thrusts of the decolonisation movement. Indeed, much of the decolonial focus in South Africa is ontologically self-referential, generating both the narcissism of identity politics and the impoverishment of attempts at epistemic justice.

The language question is, according to my reading of this book, its commonest refrain. It is given varying degrees of prominence by all of Mamdani, Jansen, Lange, Auerbach, Dlamini and Anonymous, Sayed, de Kock and Motala, Schmahmann, Mbembe and, in his Afterword, Grant Parker. In short, language is mentioned by almost all the contributors to this volume. It comes as no surprise, then, that the late activist, Neville Alexander, also features prominently in the pages of this book. A formidable scholar

and public intellectual, Alexander dedicated decades of his professional life towards advancing the prospects of a multilingual – and, lest one forget, non-racial – South Africa. But he was fighting – or so it seems – a losing battle. As Parker notes, multilingualism has become increasingly difficult to implement in our schools and universities. This was a project for the 1990s when nation-building was still a priority for the Mandela administration. The neoliberal commodification of higher education – as well as the fact that 11 languages enjoy official status in this country – has accelerated the unassailability of English as a local and global lingua franca.

In spirit, *Decolonisation in Universities* is refreshingly collegial, opening up the higher education conversation beyond the closures that have now become typical of much decolonisation talk. And yet the book raises more questions than it answers: for grassroots activists and public intellectuals, it is likely to frustrate because its terms of reference, on the whole, do not advance much beyond the confines of the university grounds. Then again, they are not the book's intended audience. For academics and postgraduate students, this text will undoubtedly stimulate thinking about the future of the South African university.

# Review

Sithembiso Lindelihle Myeni and Andrew Okem (eds) (2020) *The Political Economy of Government Subsidised Housing in South Africa*. London: Routledge.

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For over 100 years, South African governments have subsidised vast numbers of houses (cf Mabin 2020). Between the Housing Act of 1920 and the installation of the apartheid regime a variety of efforts initiated by municipalities produced such segregated areas as the famous Orlando in Soweto, with its contemporaries Coronationville (coloured) and Jan Hofmeyr (white) in Johannesburg – and many others around the country. From 1950 until the mid-1970s a comprehensive and vigorous programme developed during which local governments again played an important role, but the dominance of central government drove much of what occurred, producing landscapes and places of living from Katlehong to KwaMashu and from Mamelodi to Manenberg. After the intricacies of late apartheid (bantustans, tricameralism, sales of public housing to occupants ...), housing subsidies dried up until the democratic era. The new model introduced after 1994, preceded by the subsidised programme of the Independent Development Trust set up by government in 1990, resulted in the much-cited millions of ‘RDP’ houses – but apparently not in a ‘solution’ to the housing question, for there are still millions of poorly housed people in the country. *The Political Economy of Government Subsidised Housing* seeks to analyse what has transpired, to offer a critique, and to make some suggestions for different policies in this massive and complex field.

Although millions of people live in or are otherwise directly affected by the massive housing programme, and hundreds of thousands built, planned or had other involvements, the scholarly and professional literature on the subject features a fairly small number of prominent authors: names such as

Bond, Charlton, Dugard, Huchzermeyer, and Turok recur (eg, Bond and Tait 1997, Charlton 2018, Huchzermeyer 2001, Turok 2016). Criticism often focuses on failure to fulfil the promise of the ‘right to housing’ inscribed in Section 26 of the constitution (Dugard et al 2016). Clearly there is more space for research, discussion and debate, and the book under review is immediately interesting and refreshing in providing access to other voices. It represents a considerable achievement in bringing the work of a range of researchers to publication. The editors and most of the authors are or were until recently academic staff or graduate students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Whilst the coverage of the book is national, chapters that address particular cases tend to come from the same province.

The book is a vehicle for the claim that ‘As was the case during apartheid South Africa in large part, the South African democratic government has failed to introduce programmes and initiatives that focus on improving the everyday lives and livelihoods of black households’ (60). The book contains an introduction and a dozen further chapters that address diverse subjects related to housing questions. A few of the essays have a more tenuous connection to the theme than the title suggests: for example, one on sustainable development goals and the new urban agenda (chapter 1) scarcely touches on the South African housing situation; chapter 12 on climate change is pitched at a very general level.

The contents include the editors’ ‘setting the scene’ by way of a general description of the housing situation and policy; and an historical survey by the editors and two others, Oliver Mtapuri and Siphon Nkambule: that chapter draws extensively on the last-mentioned’s doctoral thesis. His work on livelihoods also appears in chapter 4, a further historical contribution. In between, chapter 3 by the editors ranges broadly over the central development plans proposed by government since 1994, as well as many of the aspects of support for housing development. It is a useful catalogue of both. It does not really engage with the National Development Plan, which is named in its title, perhaps because the NDP has been left largely on the shelf since the fanfare of its adoption, and because its engagement with housing subsidy processes is rather limited.

Chapter 5 bears one of the most enticing titles in the book: ‘A demand-driven subsidised housing policy for South Africa’, by Judith Ojo-Aromokudu, Michael Samuel and Rubby Dhunpath. The authors contrast the decades of supply-side support which has resulted in the production of millions of houses with the potential of what they term a demand-driven

programme. Exactly what such a demand-driven approach would mean is not terribly clear. The authors argue from a case study in northern KwaZulu-Natal province that ‘the housing subsidy criteria allowed the demand for housing to increase exponentially, and [that] the policy objective of redressing poverty is subverted by the subsidy programme’ (60). Not all researchers come to the same conclusions: thus, whilst the authors cite Charlton’s research in relation to their case study, they do not explore her substantial analysis which notes very strongly that there have indeed been real beneficiaries of the process, whatever its problems (inter alia in Charlton 2018).

Case studies can provide powerful arguments of course. Ndwakhulu Tshishonga in chapter 6 provides a compelling account of ‘stakeholders’ participation in the implementation of ‘Cornubia Housing Project in eThekweni Municipality’, although the opportunity presumably existed to add voices from the 20 beneficiary interviews mentioned. Similarly, Vincent Myeni and Phumelele Khumalo draw on the latter’s masters research to review the situation of women in relation to a project in iNanda, again providing a valuable narrative, overlaid with less necessary general material in the earlier pages.

Gender inequality emerges as a theme across some of these chapters. Another case study, of a more rural setting in Jozini, is provided by editor Myeni and Tafadzwa Chibvongodze in chapter 8. Although gender is in the title of the chapter, that theme actually occupies only a page and half: the chapter nonetheless raises significant issues in relation to citizenship and the nature of government, particularly where traditional leadership is involved.

The underlying issue of land receives attention from Lovemore Chipungu and Knowledge Zungu in chapter 9, who examine the challenges of the subject in Durban/eThekweni. The study is valuable and would certainly contribute to understanding the hows and whys of local government actions and difficulties in housing provision. Yet perhaps some of the lengthy space devoted to a broad historical account, which mostly covers the same ground as that addressed in chapters 2 and 4, and on many pages in other contributions, could better have been used to expand on the details of the Durban case, or to make comparisons with other centres in the country.

In chapter 10, ‘Housing for individual sovereignty through innovations in policy and practice’, editor Myeni and colleague Oliver Mtapuri once again provide a summary of housing policies since democracy (not really since

‘independence’, a concept that is appropriate in most other African countries but can be applied only imprecisely in South Africa). Unfortunately, the promise of the chapter’s title is not realised, for the chapter does not explore the notion of ‘individual sovereignty’ in relation to possession of a place to live. At least as seriously, it draws on the Marx and more particularly Engels critique of housing problems as an epiphenomenon of capitalism, without noting how much diversity there is across cities and countries where high levels of regular paying work and good levels of ordinary people’s incomes allow for at least reasonable standards of accommodation. In other words, there are possibilities within capitalist market societies for better housing, but they depend on politics, and favourable politics for decent housing in turn depend on successful organisation of large numbers of people. Innovations in policy and practice do not emerge without such politics.

Gender returns in chapter 11, by Claudine Hingston, who provides a survey of ‘women’s access to housing in South Africa’. The central recommendation of the chapter, the implications of which are not discussed in detail, is that ‘the South African government should give preference to women over men in all housing processes’ (171). The book ends with a chapter by editor Okem, Mdoda Davidson Zondo, Siyabonga Ntombela and Sarah Bracking, on climate change and housing to which reference has been made above. There is no general conclusion to draw the threads together.

As my description of the chapters indicates, the volume certainly has strengths. Some of those are best seen in the reports of cases; and taken as a whole the book introduces concepts and questions as well as arguments which are not commonly seen in the literature.

Unfortunately, this promising book is marred by many features. As a draft manuscript any publisher might have welcomed the text, and reviewers could have offered important suggestions for correction, precision, style, and argument – not to mention the copy editing which might have improved a final version for printing. The series editors and reviewers (if any) surely missed the opportunity to help the editors and authors make this book into something with less repetition, and much more substantial and satisfactory.

At minimum I would prefer not to have to read such contradictory sentences as ‘in apartheid South Africa, there were a number of national state institutions involved in the delivery of low-cost housing, notably the local municipalities’ (56). On occasion rather strange propositions simply interfere with potentially significant arguments, such as ‘Women’s

movements intensified in the post-apartheid era leading to mass rural to urban migration by women' (108). Innumerable small errors unavoidably irritate – from spelling such as 'expoloration' in a reference, or the way in which Mozolo becomes Mzolo within four lines. More seriously some of the historical accounts contain assumptions that amount to factual errors; and many of the arguments advanced need tightening, stronger evidence, and further development, including comparison with and perhaps refutation of other contributions.

The *politics* of subsidised shelter in South Africa involves many factors, a powerful one of which has to do with the gift of houses to the people and the concomitant relationship to electoral democracy. The *economics* of subsidised shelter has to do with devoting a significant share of an essentially welfare-oriented national budget to housing, as well as the profit oriented activities of contractors and much besides not addressed in this volume. Since 1994 the social life of the housing gift (a phrase used by Leslie Bank) has involved great complexity. To add to the labyrinth, in the context of financial difficulty in 2020 the minister of Human Settlements rather suddenly announced the end of the house-as-gift and its replacement by distribution of serviced sites ... on which occupants would be expected (and perhaps given some assistance) to construct their own dwellings. These shifts in the politics and economics of subsidised housing will continue to demand strong research and careful analysis. *The Political Economy of Government Subsidised Housing* provides food for thought and stimulus for much more work in the field.

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# CALL FOR A SPECIAL EDITION of *Transformation*

## Cancel Culture: shrinking or remaking narratives? (2022)

Vasu Reddy and Donna Andrews

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The ‘Cancel Culture’ turn in recent debates has bearing on transformation. This demands self-reflection, exploration of the social, as well as explanation of social concerns. Moreover, the practice requires rethinking to deepen a transformative agenda, least of all because of how it has been usurped by right wing forces.

The term challenges ideas, identity markers and diverse interests. ‘Cancelling’ has become ubiquitous in popular culture and is directed towards expressing disapproval and withdrawing support by exerting social pressure. It is emblematic of a movement that has deep imprints in influencing and shaping public consciousness. There are many global and local examples of this phenomenon: #RhodesMustFall (meanings of statutes, symbols, insignias); #BlackLives Matter (fuelled by the George Floyd Murder) and Black Twitter; #MeTooMovement (fuelled by the Hollywood industry and treatment of women); xenophobia vs afrophobia; the recent Adam Habib affair at SOAS (use of the N-word); the recent removal of Tanzanian MP, Condester Sichwale, who was accused of wearing trousers that were believed to be too tight, amongst several others.

Additionally, ‘cancel culture’ is a concept that has strong linguistic (social and political) implications. It functions simultaneously both as a noun and verb – and importantly as concepts emanating in a divisive world riddled with inequities. ‘To cancel’ is to make null and void, yet simultaneously it assigns meanings to the ‘cancelled’ and to those ‘who cancel’. There are differing stances expressed that show either support or opposition to ‘cancel culture’, contingent on the location and ideological

positions held. On the pro-side, to be ‘cancelled’ has much to do with being culturally blocked which is often induced by a public backlash in response to that which is perceived to be a ‘transgression’ or an offensive resulting in a boycott, protest, silencing and often erasure of the person/idea who is to be ‘cancelled’. Proponents view this as part of the necessary interventions in a democratic project. A central dimension to ‘cancel culture’ is strongly influenced by a public accounting in the broader ideals of social justice and speaking truth to power. On the opposing side, there are views that hold ‘cancel culture’ to represent anything other than speaking truth to power because it is perceived to be rather a form of mob rule that violates freedom of speech, the muting of citizens and the curtailing of ideas that are essentialist and homogenising. Opponents (notably Trump) often labelled ‘cancel culture’ to be totalising and representing a form of ‘totalitarianism’.

In descriptive terms ‘cancelling’ has much to do with identity markers (race, class, gender, sexuality, language, etc) with additional agentic attributes being that it is a ‘call-out culture’ to name, shame and expose what is perceived to be harmful ideas. It is also shaped by the idea of offering a corrective to assign meaning to a sense of powerlessness experienced by proponents. At another level, there is a view that to ‘cancel’ is an ethical intervention. Calling out the person to be cancelled has a utility that compels the cancelled for a greater cultural purpose to change the behaviour they embody and represent.

‘Cancel culture’ is perhaps therefore ideologically fraught, ambiguous, affective, discursive, and multi-layered. It is a performative gesture that is intellectual, ontological, and fundamentally political. There are no easy responses to this social phenomenon that has much to do with *how* people and the ideas (they represent) are publicly engaged. It is probably the case that ‘cancel culture’ is a contemporary current, but indications are that it may be not entirely a new phenomenon in the historic evolution of society. Its currency and traction seem to have gained momentum particularly with social media and the digital revolution, but is there a much broader pre-history and purpose here?

In thinking about ‘cancel culture’, there is also much to explore in *how* symbols/representation via leaders/artefacts etc., remain central to cancel culture but in no way fully engage the systemic and structural power deeply embedded within societies. How does ‘cancel culture’ aim to change *what* is at the root of racial and gendered inequalities? How is,

for example, social media/twitter used for “social justice” and yet truncates and converges multiple issues? It tends to do so whilst minimising deep discussion, often resulting in targeting of an individual leaving the centres of power untouched and often invisible.

This special edition invites submissions from a broad range of interdisciplinary and methodological perspectives (including divergent positions) to offer conceptually and empirically rigorous perspectives that bring fresh and nuanced insights to the idea, meaning and practice of ‘cancel culture’ in critical perspectives on Southern Africa.

Topics/Issues/Questions proposed (although by no means a definitive and exhaustive list) could cover:

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- Ethics of ‘Cancel culture’
- Cancel culture and the public sphere
- What is the cost of ‘Cancel culture’?
- Cancel culture: works of art, monuments, statues, advertisements, music;
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Email to: *submissions@transformationjournal.org.za*; put **Cancel** in subject line.

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