

FROM CLASS ROOM TO CLASS STRUGGLE:
Radical Academics and the Rebirth of Trade Unionism in the
1970s

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IN any society, at any time, ideas matter. Even those who insist that they don't are often expressing ideas received, directly or indirectly, from the intellectuals they deride. The speeches we hear from politicians, the analysis of public commentators – all are shaped by ideas even if we have no idea whose they are because the influence has passed through so many hands that its traces are no longer visible. But in most cases, this influence is long-term and indirect. It takes time for academic ideas to filter through to society – many great thinkers achieve influence long after their death. And since ideas only take hold if they pass through many hands, the gap between the article or book and the actions or approaches they trigger, is great.

And so it was that the worker organisation which preceded, and more particularly that which followed, the Durban strikes was strongly influenced by ideas. Some of this was direct: an intellectual inspired his students to take an interest in the organisation of black workers. The thinker, Richard Turner, was based in Durban and was a physical presence at union offices in the city. But much of it was also indirect – scholars in British universities, most of them South Africans in exile or studying for post-graduate degrees, produced a radical analysis of apartheid which was not designed to stimulate worker action or union organisation but was widely read by young radicals, some of whom entered the union movement. In neither case did the intellectuals exert a direct influence on trade union strategy: Turner was murdered by the apartheid security apparatus five years after the strikes, most of the British-based academics remained distanced from the action and debate. But, in both cases, the influence was important. It prompted middle-class intellectuals who might never have sought to organise workers to do so and shaped some of the strategic responses they adopted in the union movement. And so this intellectual influence played a role in shaping the movement which was the primary legacy of 1973.

Because intellectuals often harbour an exaggerated sense of their own importance, it is necessary to offer some qualifications. The 1973 strikes were not organised by the intellectuals. The 'hour of the intellectual' in the history of the current worker movement was relatively brief and selective. Its role in framing strategy was overtaken – as it always should have been – from the early 1980s. Nevertheless, the intellectuals' influence played an important role in shaping the type of unionism which emerged from the Durban events. And so recalling its role should cast some light on the complex relationship between ideas and social movements – and offer a sense of why union organisation took the form which it did.

Beyond Boer-Bashing

The last years of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s saw the emergence of a new radical scholarship influenced by Marxist thought. This was not the beginning of South African Marxism: by then, the SA Communist Party (SACP) had been banned for two decades. But the message it sent to young, mostly white, intellectuals was new.

Before its appearance, apartheid was understood by liberals and Marxists alike as the consequence of racial ideology imposed on the society by Afrikaner nationalism. The new radicalism insisted that all of white society – in particular English-speaking business – derived benefit from racial domination and so had a stake in its survival. Liberals and Marxists alike had argued that apartheid was a constraint on the capitalist economy – the new radicalism insisted that capitalism needed racial domination. An account of the scholarship which developed mainly among South African émigrés in Britain noted that: ‘These young scholars invented a new language, one which did not speak of “Bantu, Boer and Briton”...but of “inhabitants of precapitalist societies forced into wage labour by the processes of primitive accumulation”...they saw violence and forced labour as having been essential to capital accumulation, rather than archaic leftovers from preindustrial times. Race became seen as an effect, not a cause’.¹

This implied that structural change would need to tackle not only the society’s racial hierarchy, but its social and economic pecking order. This was attractive to radical white students whose interest in moving beyond liberalism was fuelled by the rise of the Black Consciousness (BC) movement led by Steve Biko, which challenged them to see the collective action of the black majority, not the polite entreaties of white liberals, as the only viable threat to apartheid. BC also implicated all of white society in racial domination. And so it helped to provide a context in which white radicals could make sense of their belief that the suburban homes in which they were raised were as much a part of the problem as the Afrikaner Nationalism which was blamed for it.

It was predictable, given this background, that these radicals would be impressed by scholarship which stressed the complicity of English-speaking business in apartheid. The first article produced by the new generation of academics to make an impression was a 1970 paper by the Canadian scholar FA ‘Rick’ Johnstone challenging the liberal view that the 1922 strike which produced the white Pact government and laws reserving skilled jobs for whites (and during which white workers rallied round a banner exhorting them to unite and fight for a white South Africa) was targeted at colour-blind mine owners. He argued that the owners were as reliant on racial domination as the white workers because it enabled them to suppress black wages – white workers wanted a job colour bar, he argued, but the mine owners enforced a wage colour bar which relegated black workers to powerlessness and forced them to accept inferior pay.²

¹ Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius ‘Radical History and South African History’ in Joshua Brown *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices* Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1991 pp.5-26, pp.10/11

² F.A. Johnstone, “Class Conflict and Colour Bars in the South African Gold mining Industry, 1910-1926”, *Institute of Commonwealth Studies Collected Seminar Papers No. 10, The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, (1970), 112-26

Not long after, an even more influential article was published: Harold Wolpe's *Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power*³ described by Dan O'Meara, who was profoundly influenced by Wolpe, as 'probably the most influential and widely-cited theoretical text ever written on South Africa'.⁴ The British Marxist sociologist Henry Bernstein described it as 'the most path-breaking theoretical statement in South African Marxism in the apartheid period'.⁵ O'Meara notes that Wolpe 'was neither the first, nor the most prolific' of a new 'revisionist' or 'neo-Marxist' school.⁶ Stanley Trapido at Oxford and Shula Marks at the School of African and Oriental Studies, had already begun examining the class dimension of apartheid. Trapido had written during the 1960s of the alliance between gold and maize and its role in entrenching racial domination – he focussed on the 1913 Land Act, the first major piece of racist legislation after Union in 1910, and the immediate reason for the formation of the ANC (then the SA Native National Congress). Martin Legassick had published Marxist accounts of apartheid and Colin Bundy's work on the peasantry was also influential. But for O'Meara and others influenced by the new radicalism, Wolpe was the key figure because he offered a theory of the class origins of apartheid: he 'played a very specific role' in the evolution of the new school of analysis and in doing so, hugely influenced the thrust of this work... His 'powerful theme' was that 'he alerted radical scholars to 'the absolute necessity of theory'.⁷

BC's influence prompted a renewed interest among radicals on the white campuses in supporting organised black resistance. It led also to the formation of student Wage and Economic Commissions which helped ignite the wave of black trade unionism which began in the 1970s and become the key focus of black collective action by the 1980s.⁸ In Durban, Turner, whose radically democratic socialism drew on the Marxian tradition, inspired a generation of activists. His protégés were the early influences behind the re-emergence of unionism after the 1973 strikes. The desire to move beyond the understanding that the problem lay in Afrikaner bigotry may explain why the first project of Wits University activists interested in labour issues was an expose of extremely low wages paid by businesses owned by English-speakers in the 'border areas' created by apartheid. There could surely be no clearer illustration of the way in which the businesses owned by English speakers directly profited from apartheid.

Another World: The Direct Influence of Rick Turner

Turner's influence on young radicals who sought to build trade unions was overt and direct. That of Wolpe and his colleagues was almost invisible to the naked eye.

³ Harold Wolpe 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid', *Economy and Society*, Vol No. 1, 4, December 1972, pp.425-456.

⁴ Dan O'Meara *The Engaged Intellectual and the Struggle for a Democratic South Africa: The Life and Work of Harold Wolpe* Address to the Inaugural Conference of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust: The Political Economy of Social Change in South Africa University of the Western Cape 1-2 April, 1997

⁵ Henry Bernstein *Obituary: Harold Wolpe 1926-1996*

⁶ O'Meara 'The Engaged Intellectual'

⁷ O'Meara 'The Engaged Intellectual'

⁸ Steven Friedman *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions 1970-1984*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985.

The British-based radicals were based in the United Kingdom, Turner in South Africa. They were explicitly Marxist, he was influenced by Marxism and is described accurately, as an exponent of 'democratic socialism'.⁹ Turner was also involved in resistance to apartheid in ways which most of the scholars were not and for which he paid the ultimate price. He played a significant role in encouraging white students to help in the formation of trade unions for black workers and was banned in 1973 when the government tried to silence the white student movement. Despite an order forbidding him to mix with more than one person at a time, he clandestinely advised the union movement¹⁰. He was a defence witness in the 1976 'SASO trial' of leaders of the BC movement.¹¹

Turner taught political science at the University of Natal in Durban from 1970. There he joined Michael Nupen, an adherent of the Frankfurt School of radical philosophy which had – largely through the work of one its number, Herbert Marcuse - influenced the student movement which, in 1968, had made a deep impact on Europe and North America (threatening, for a while, to topple the French government). South Africa was yet to emerge from the enforced political slumber of the 1960s and there were few outlets for a radical thinker who wanted to place ideas at the service of the fight for change. Turner created an outlet. From 1971, he worked with students to organise a project in which they gathered information on the conditions of factory workers, which they published.¹² Out of this initiative grew student Wages and Economics Commissions which played a role in stimulating trade unionism. He also contributed a short book to the church-funded Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (Sprocas), which began as a Christian critique of apartheid but became a broader attempt to develop an alternative understanding of South Africa.

The work, *The Eye of the Needle*,¹³ was his most influential contribution to radical thought. It was not intended as an academic work - Turner himself described it as 'non-academic and free from philosophical name dropping'.¹⁴ The contrast with the consciously academic preoccupations of the new radical social science was stark. Tragically, Turner's life departed from that of the British-based sociologists and historians too. Just after mid-night on January 8, 1978, only two months before a banning order imposed on him by the state was due to expire, he was shot dead through a window in his Durban home in the presence of his two young daughters.¹⁵ No-one has been charged with his death – but, as his biographer Tony Morphet noted, 'The reasons for . . . [the] . . . death are clear to all'.¹⁶

⁹ Tony Fluxman and Peter Vale 'Re-reading Rick Turner in the New South Africa' *International Relations* Vol 18 No 2, pp. 173–189, p. 182

¹⁰ Fluxman and Vale 'Re-Reading Turner' p. 175

¹¹ Tony Morphet 'Richard Turner: A Biographical Introduction' in Richard Turner *The Eye of the Needle. Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* Johannesburg, Ravan Press 1980, p. viii

¹² Morphet 'Biographical Introduction' p. xxv

¹³ Richard Turner *The Eye of the Needle. Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* Johannesburg, Ravan Press 1980

¹⁴ Morphet 'Biographical Introduction', p. vii

¹⁵ Fluxman and Vale 'Re-Reading Turner' p.176

¹⁶ Morphet, 'Why we Need Richard Turner', p90 cited in Flux man and Vale 'Re-Reading Turner'

Despite the clear differences between Turner's life and work and that of Wolpe and his colleagues, there are similarities between their roles in changing the thinking of middle-class students and pointing them towards action. Turner had an immensely powerful influence on an important minority of his white, middle class, students: ' Within the university his exploratory teaching technique was to galvanize and inspire a generation of students who were ready to challenge prevailing assumptions. Many were to become prominent anti-apartheid activists; some were eventually to take up leading positions in South Africa's first post-apartheid government'.¹⁷ Turner's stress on participatory democracy and his reading of the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre which stressed that human beings could overcome alienation through action in society¹⁸ meant that he urged his students not only to learn but to act on what they had learned. Once workers struck in Durban in 1973 to provide the catalyst, his influence produced a generation of trade unionists who helped shape the nature of the movement which is still the largest organised force in national politics.

His writing offered an alternative to the prism through which most middle-class white students opposed to racism saw South Africa. White liberals, Turner observed in *The Eye of the Needle*, were 'white first, liberal second'.¹⁹ Liberals 'believe that "western civilisation" is adequate, and superior to other forms, but also that blacks can, through education, attain the level of western civilisation'.²⁰ But the critique went far deeper. Turner espoused a radical participatory democracy, at its heart the ideal (which he obviously did not expect to be realised soon) of worker control of industry. He argued that the profit motive at the heart of private ownership was not natural but was a product of socialisation – the beliefs inculcated into people by those who dominated society.²¹ This suggested that the problem in South Africa was not only that one race dominated another but that economic and social power prevented people from expressing themselves and making free choices. Morphet observes: '...the influence of the book was large – among opposition intellectuals it served to shift the focus of debate away from the question of race discrimination and towards the more fundamental choices between things and people, or to put it simply, the conditions of exploitation'.²²

Turner's suggestion that students investigate wages and working conditions focussed their attention on the concrete consequences of that exploitation– poverty and exclusion from the life chances available to those who wielded private power. Its most immediate consequence was to ensure that Turner's students who agreed were now arrayed not only against a state run by Afrikaans speakers who harboured obvious prejudices against black people but against English speakers like themselves who owned the factories where black workers were deprived of control over their lives. In that sense, Turner began what the

¹⁷ Fluxman and Vale 'Re-Reading Turner' p.175

¹⁸ Morphet 'Biographical Introduction', p. xxv

¹⁹ Turner 'Eye of the Needle', p.82

²⁰ Richard Turner 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals' *Reality*, July, 1972, p.20

²¹ Fluxman and Vale 'Re-Reading Turner' p.178

²² Morphet 'Biographical Introduction' p. xxiv

radical social scientists were to continue – seeing apartheid as a consequence of white economic power, not merely of Afrikaner prejudice.

He also implicitly opened a broader question – the appropriate goal of action against apartheid. If the problem was racial bigotry and the use of state power to enforce it, the solution was to end legislated discrimination. This liberal view was shared by African nationalism which sought to ensure that the state was controlled by the racial majority; this did not necessarily imply any change to the private arrangements which Turner criticised, the concentration of economic power in the hands of the owners of capital. If the problem was the use of private economic power to dominate, real change could not mean the same arrangements without racial laws – a different economy and society would be needed too. For some that meant the end of capitalism and its replacement by socialism – for others it might mean less radical change. But it did imply that a democratic South Africa would have to be one in which economic and social domination would be challenged too. Turner's work and life raised the prospect that the fight against apartheid was also one against the domination of capital over labour.

Perhaps most importantly for an understanding of how unionism developed first in Durban and then in other parts of the country was Turner's commitment to participatory worker democracy. This had clear implications for the way in which workers should organise: it implied that democratic organisation ought to be a core principle. The stress on worker control of unions which became so central during the union recognition battles of the 1970s and early 1980s²³ was influenced by Turner's belief in the necessity that workers seize control of their lives.

Turner's influence produced the key white middle class intellectuals who played a role in organising unions in the early 1970s – in particular David Davis, David Hemson and Halton Cheadle, all of whom were banned in an attempt to nip unionism in the bud. Others who were influenced by Turner and who played roles of various sorts included Paula Ensor, Karel Tip, Charles Nupen and Mike Morris (who encountered Turner at the University of Cape Town in the late 1960s and, by the 1970s, was one of the British-based Marxist scholars). Had he lived, he may well have played a direct role in advising unions, either officially, or informally through continued contact with the organisers and strategists who he had influenced. To insist that Turner played a role in encouraging young white radicals to help build a trade union movement is to state the obvious.

Revolution in Thought: The Indirect Influence of Harold Wolpe and the Academy

Unlike Turner, the British-based Marxists witnessed the unfolding of the trade union movement which grew out of the crucible of Durban in the early 1970s – some participated in debates on union strategy and a few clashed with the ANC on how it should respond to worker organisation. But their influence on unions and unionists is far more difficult to establish than Turner's.

²³ Friedman 'Building Tomorrow Today'

An immediate reason is that they were not physically present. Their influence, if they had any, was exerted not through face-to-face encounters but at a distance. Peter Alexander points out that their academic articles became influential on white English language campuses despite the fact that Marxism was banned because they benefitted from a 'photocopying culture' within South Africa, 'in which tatty British seminar papers were widely circulated among student activists.'²⁴ This phenomenon was not restricted to white students –Badat recalls poring over the works of British-based Marxists when he was a BC-oriented student.²⁵ But this offered no room for direct dialogue between the writers and their readers.

The other was that they were far more self-consciously academic than Turner and therefore, at least initially, more concerned with winning scholarly debates than providing new directions for activism. A couple – Wolpe and Rob Davies – were members of the ANC and SACP. Legassick was an ANC member who was later expelled. Morris became a unionist for a time (although that might be attributed to Turner's influence) and Duncan Innes participated in debate on whether unions should register with the government after unions with black members were allowed to register in the early 1980s. But they were never direct influences on the union movement or on unionists: during the early 1970s, the students who read the photocopies emanating from Britain were poring over abstract discussions of the relationship between racism and capitalism, not tracts urging them to support democratic worker organisation.

There was an irony in the relationship between the Marxist scholars and the labour movement. Their conscious efforts to influence it – or to influence events in its favour - came to nought. But their unintended influence over union organisation was significant.

Taking Socialism Seriously? The 'Gang of Four' and Workerism in the ANC ²⁶

The key argument of Wolpe's 'Cheap Labour Power' article was that apartheid was not an irrational ideology imposed on the market: it was functional to the growth of the capitalist system. This, it transpired, could be interpreted in several ways.

First – and this was almost certainly Wolpe's intention – it could be a rationale for endorsement by socialists of the ANC's nationalist struggle against white rule. The article was a significant influence on a much-quoted analysis by Joe Slovo which argued that apartheid's defeat would either destroy or severely weaken capitalism.²⁷ The obvious implication was that socialists should join the ANC and SACP (Wolpe belonged to both). But it could also inspire 'workerists' who insisted that, since apartheid was simply an

²⁴ Peter Alexander 'Harold and History' Keynote address delivered at the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust's Tenth Anniversary Colloquium, *Engaging silences and unresolved issues in the political economy of South Africa*, 21-23 September 2006, Cape Town, makes a similar point, as do Bozzoli and Delius

²⁵ Saleem Badat *Harold Wolpe: Reminiscences and Reflections* Keynote Address at the launch of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust, Spier Auditorium, Stellenbosch, 31 March 1997

²⁶ This account is an adapted version of Steven Friedman 'Whose Liberation? A Partly-Forgotten Left Critique of ANC Strategy and Its Contemporary Implications' *Journal of Asian and African Studies* February 2012 No 47 pp. 18-32

²⁷ Joe Slovo 'South Africa – No Middle Road', in Basil Davidson, David Wilkinson and Joe Slovo (eds), *Southern Africa: The New Politics of Revolution* Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1976

expression of capitalist exploitation, the appropriate strategy was to fight against capitalism outside the nationalist movement. The Marxist analysis of Wolpe and his colleagues could also be interpreted in a third way, which was the option chosen by one of his fellow scholars, Legassick. While it recognised the importance of racial identity, and thus of the nationalist movement as a vehicle, it argued that, for Marxists, this struggle against capitalism, like all others, could only be led by the working class. It was thus the task of the nationalist movement to strengthening worker organisation as an essential means to apartheid's overthrow.

This intervention, which was to drive Legassick and his colleagues out of the ANC, appeared in 1979 and was titled *The Workers' Movement, SACTU, and the ANC-A Struggle for Marxist Policies*.²⁸ The authors were South African socialists who had been involved in varying degrees with the union movement in its early days – besides Legassick, they were Ensor, Hemson and Rob Petersen, who was then editing *Workers Unity*, the newspaper of the ANC's trade union ally, the SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).²⁹ The ANC and SACTU never responded directly to the document but the four – later to become known as the 'Gang of Four' - were all suspended from the ANC in response and, in 1985, expelled.

Legassick and his colleagues joined the ANC because they had concluded or had been convinced that it would lead the fight against apartheid and that, if they wanted to wield influence, they would have to work within it. Petersen and Ensor arrived in Britain hostile to any form of nationalism and eager to pursue a socialist programme. But they were advised against opposing the ANC by (South African-born) Marxist Ted Grant who told them that it was destined to lead the struggle against apartheid because '...(there) will be the sense among the black masses that we must not allow ourselves to be divided',³⁰ a prediction which was vindicated. They had therefore joined the ANC - but with the aim of steering it towards a strategy which assumed that black workers were oppressed by capitalism as well as racism. In 1981, they formed the Marxist Workers' Tendency,³¹ whose publication, *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*, offers further insight into their position.

The chief purpose of the document was to persuade the ANC and SACTU to become vehicles for a socialist revolution. It insisted that the needs of 'the people in their daily lives' could not be secured '...except through the overthrow of the apartheid regime and (because they come up against the barriers of the capitalist system) on the basis of the transition to socialism'.³² In an article in the first edition of *Inqaba* in January, 1981, Legassick, writing under the name Richard Monroe, declared that 'the oppressed' were

²⁸ Martin Legassick et al, *South Africa: The Workers' Movement, SACTU, and the ANC-A Struggle for Marxist Policies*, London, Cambridgeheath Press, 1980

²⁹ Rob Petersen, 'Petersen Memorandum addressed to the National Executive Committee of SACTU' 8 April 1979 lodged in Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town

³⁰ Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick and Nicole Ulrich 'White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement in South African Democracy Education Trust *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: 1970-1980* Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2006, pp. 297/298

³¹ Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu, 'The Revival of the Labour Movement 1970-1980' in South African Democracy Education Trust *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: 1970-1980* Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2006, p.195

³² Legassick et al, 'South Africa: The Workers' Movement', p.48

discovering 'that there is not a single concrete need that can be fully satisfied without sweeping away, not simply the apartheid regime, but the capitalist class that shelters behind it'.³³ Apartheid could not be defeated unless capitalism was also overthrown.

This revolution, the dissidents argued, could not be achieved by the ANC's army, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), whose guerrilla war was only 'an impotent method of exerting "pressure" on the ruling class'. 'The armed actions of small groups'³⁴ simply gave the apartheid state an excuse to increase repression and diverted attention from building a mass movement. What was required was 'methods and tactics... which will lead to the eventual armed insurrection of the mass of working people against the state'.³⁵ This did not need to be created from scratch, for the 1973 strikes and the 1976 Soweto uprising had revived 'the mass movement' inside the country.³⁶ This mobilisation had revolutionary potential because South African capitalism, Monroe/Legassick argued, could not survive by paying a living wage, abolishing the pass laws or conceding the right to strike.³⁷ The role of 'armed struggle' was 'the self-defence of the mass workers' movement'³⁸ or 'arming the workers in self-defence in preparation for a future insurrection'.³⁹

At first glance, this was an odd proposal to nurture worker organisation: recruiting unions to a revolutionary programme seemed more likely to ensure that organisation was smashed than anything the ANC proposed. But the armed insurrection was a longer-term project which could presumably only be attempted when organisation had become much stronger. Until then, worker organisation was the priority. Ensor justified this by arguing that the stress on guerrilla war was weakening popular mobilisation and organisation:

While we saw the need for people to be organised and strengthened within the townships, the ANC was in a sense pulling the best cadres out ... it wasn't that we were against the armed struggle. But we had taken up a position against the particular form that it took'.⁴⁰

Monroe/Legassick wrote that a strategy was needed to achieve enhanced popular action. The task was to follow the approach proposed in Petersen's memorandum: 'to strengthen and unify the movement by linking together all the struggles over day-to-day needs with the central tasks of the revolution'.⁴¹

The Workers Movement argued that the task was to:

³³ Richard Monroe (Martin Legassick), 'Trade Union Struggle in the South African Revolution' *Inqaba ya Basebenzi Journal of the Marxist Workers Tendency of the African National Congress* No 1 January 1981, p.34

³⁴ Martin Legassick, *Armed Struggle and Democracy: The Case of South Africa*, Uppsala, Discussion Paper 20, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002, p.36

³⁵ Marxist Workers Tendency (MWT), 1982, *South Africa's Impending Socialist Revolution: Perspective of the Marxist Workers Tendency of the African National Congress* London, March, p.155

³⁶ Legassick, 'Armed Struggle and Democracy', p.34

³⁷ Monroe/Legassick, p.35

³⁸ Legassick, 'Armed Struggle and Democracy', p.34

³⁹ Hemson, , Legassick and Ulrich 'White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement', p.298

⁴⁰ Interview cited in Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, p. 298

⁴¹ Monroe/Legassick, p.34

put forward demands which are regarded by the workers as ... right and reasonable, but which strike at the very heart of apartheid and the capitalist system. ... We have to bring out in practice ... through struggles organised around the demands – the total incapacity of the system... (or any reforms within it) to provide a decent life for the working people'.⁴²

Monroe/Legassick notes: '...the struggle to build factory organisation and independent trade unionism is a vital part of the struggle as a whole'.⁴³ Worker organisation would ensure that the fight against apartheid was also one against capitalism. While the dissidents assumed that one day this would lead to an armed uprising, they were interested not in an attempt to arm workers but in a strategy which would respect independent worker organisation. The carrot dangled before the ANC was that this would ensure the armed overthrow of the state. The MWT hoped to persuade the ANC to adopt the approach suggested to them by the new Marxist analysis, a strategy to overthrow capitalism. Central to this was a stress on worker organisation, not 'armed struggle'.

The carrot was rejected. The ANC showed no interest in the proposed change of strategy. A later account gives a sense of its response – it criticised the 'Gang of Four' for '(dismissing) the ANC leadership as a rightwing faction whose aims ran contrary to the interests of the working class' and suggested that this explained why the ANC 'viewed them as arrogant enemies of the ANC-led liberation struggle'.⁴⁴ They were banished to the political margins and none played a role in the ANC after the incident. But ironically, the argument with which they underpinned their position was not very far from Slovo's.⁴⁵ The difference was that theirs implied a critique of ANC and SACP emphasis on guerrilla warfare rather than worker organisation and his did not: the issue for the ANC at the time was not the theoretical value of a position but whether it denoted loyalty or disloyalty.

While Legassick and his colleagues under-estimated South African capitalism's ability to reform itself – and later to adjust to majority rule – their position could have changed the nature of the fight against apartheid and the society which it produced. If armed insurrection or an apocalyptic leap to socialism were never possibilities, a different sort of ANC was – one which supported and sought to build the popular mobilisation and organisation which began with the 1973 strikes rather than one which sought to channel it into paths which ensured its subordination to the movement and its elite. If such an ANC had emerged, the outcome would not have been the replacement of a nationalist movement by a socialist one, nor would it have been the overthrow of capitalism which Legassick and his colleagues sought. But it could have been one in which both a more inclusive democracy and a more effective challenge to inherited inequalities may have been possible.

The 'Gang of Four's' use of the new Marxist analysis did not change ANC thinking on unions. Nor did it have any appreciable effect on worker organisation – despite the fact that Legassick was the only 'gang' member who had not organised workers in the period after the Durban strikes. There were voices within the emerging union movement who

⁴² MWT, 'South Africa's Impending Socialist Revolution', p.48

⁴³ Monroe/Legassick, p.36

⁴⁴ Sithole and Ndlovu, 'The Revival of the Labour Movement', p. 238

⁴⁵ Slovo 'No Middle Road' p. 148

had been influenced by Marxist class analysis and applied it to union strategy – but their position sharply contrasted with that of the ‘Gang’ because they wanted to keep the new worker movement as far away as possible from the ANC, not to bring them together. This position was known as ‘workerism’ and it was seen by the nationalist movement as a threat. As if to settle any doubts about how he expected his analysis to be understood, Wolpe waged unceasing battle against ‘workerism’ right through the 1980s.

Wolpe and The Perils of Workerism

Not long after fledgling unions began to emerge in the mid-1970s, doctrinal and strategic arguments between activists, strongly influenced by the photocopied academic articles, began to emerge. Some were of far more interest to the protagonists than us – they were based on conflicting readings of Marxist texts and tended to rage most fiercely at the early stages of the movement when workers, whose enthusiasm for abstract strategic debate was understandably tempered by a pressing need to address concrete problems, had not yet joined the unions in any numbers. But one was to become a central divide within the movement, to attract the allegiance of workers and to shape strategies and attitudes – that between the ‘workerists’ and ‘populists’.⁴⁶

‘Populists’ saw the union movement as a vehicle for an assault on apartheid in partnership with or on behalf of the nationalist movement led by the ANC. For ‘populists’, the conditions under which black workers laboured were a consequence of apartheid and they would remain in shackles for as long as apartheid survived. For some, this meant that unions had to tailor what they did to serve the struggle against apartheid – this mirrored the approach of SACTU, an ANC ally during the 1950s which made the fight against apartheid its priority.⁴⁷ For others, union organisation was important but could not be pursued in isolation from the nationalist anti-apartheid movement. What united these views was consensus that unions needed to join the anti-apartheid resistance.

The ‘workerists’ wanted to build independent worker organisations which would keep a distance from the ANC and organisations within the country, such as the UDF, which were sympathetic to it. The closest to a workerist charter was a much-quoted keynote address to the 1982 congress of the Federation of SA Trade Unions (Fosatu), by its general secretary, Joe Foster. He urged workers to develop their own political direction because anti-colonial (or anti-racist) nationalism could not ‘deal with the particular and fundamental problems of the workers’ – nationalists might ‘in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters’.⁴⁸ It would be a strategic error for the working class to focus its energies on the fight for ‘national liberation’ because this would allow the owners of capital to ‘hide behind the curtain of Apartheid ...’⁴⁹ A worker position based on class interest rather than race was necessary and possible.

⁴⁶ For a more elaborate discussion see Friedman ‘Building Tomorrow Today’

⁴⁷ Friedman ‘Building Tomorrow Today’

⁴⁸ Joe Foster ‘The Workers’ Struggle: Where Does Fosatu Stand?’ in Johann Maree (ed) *The Independent Trade Unions 1974-1984* Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987, p. 228

⁴⁹ Foster ‘The Workers’ Struggle’ p. 223

Charles Simkins has pointed out that there were two workerist positions.⁵⁰ ‘Right workerists’ were concerned far less with changing the world than with building a union movement which would improve workers’ lives. They worried that the ‘populists’ would compromise unions: they believed that unions could survive only through patient organisation built by winning small victories and that the populists sought to undermine this. They shared with ‘populists’ a rejection of apartheid, but did not see the union movement as an appropriate vehicle for political change. The ‘left workerists’ were influenced directly or indirectly by the new radical social analysis. If apartheid was another form of domination of one class over another, it could only be defeated if economic domination was also smashed.⁵¹ Trade unions were to ‘workerists’ a vehicle which would allow workers to build the power they needed to ensure that the ‘struggle’ was about ending capitalism. African nationalists, in this view, could be an obstacle to change because they wanted to replace white racial capitalism with a black or non-racial variant. Only staying away from the nationalist movement would preserve the socialist potential of the union movement.

‘Left workerists’ shared with their right counterparts a fear that the anti-apartheid movement would compromise worker organisation – a key criticism of SACTU was that its best unionists were recruited into Umkhonto we Sizwe,⁵² weakening the ability of the unions to strengthen and grow. (This was, of course, the core of the ‘Gang of Four’ position) This complaint was shared by both groups of ‘workerists’ but for different reasons. One wanted unions protected because workers needed them in their battle for survival, the other because they needed them to defeat capitalism.

‘Workerism’ distilled a second strain in the radicalism of the 1970s which made it attractive to white left-wing students – a rejection of African or black nationalism.’ For a growing number of white students and intellectuals in these years, Marxism, stripped of its Stalinist accretions and with its emphasis on class, offered a coherent alternative to liberalism on the one hand, black nationalism on the other’.⁵³ Many of these white intellectuals ‘had a strong sense that they were involved in a decisive rupture with the past’ .They believed (and hoped) that the liberation movements had been defeated because ... ‘the exclusivism of (BC) and the sorry record of independent Africa – not least in the treatment of workers – made for a sometimes strident hostility to nationalism and a stark privileging of class over race’. An analysis based on class alone offered white radicals a role in the struggle for freedom. This approach had an important influence on early worker education content in the union movement.⁵⁴ The academic literature produced in Britain helped to reinforce this view.

The battle raged through much of the 1970s until the formation of Cosatu in December, 1985. Students who joined the unions and became ‘left workerists’ pinned their hopes on

⁵⁰ Charles Simkins (with contributions from Monty Narsoo and Andre du Toit) *The Prisoners of Tradition and the Politics of Nation-Building* Johannesburg, SA Institute of Race Relations, 1988

⁵¹ Monroe/Legassick

⁵² Friedman ‘Building Tomorrow Today’

⁵³ Bozzoli and Delius ‘Radical History’ p.13

⁵⁴ Bozzoli and Delius ‘Radical History’ p.13

Fosatu, which favoured shop floor organisation and independence from the nationalist movement – when the UDF was formed in 1983, it did not join. They insisted that the ‘populist’ unions which competed for worker support were long on anti-apartheid rhetoric but short on ability to organise workers to exercise power. They pointed out that these unions had far less worker support than Fosatu, suggesting that workers knew that independent organisation would serve them better than populism. But their hope that the worker movement would become an independent vehicle were dashed. When Cosatu was formed, the ‘workerist’ unions still dominated the workplace but, outside it, the UDF’s formation accelerated grassroots resistance to apartheid; an independent worker movement separated from this resistance seemed increasingly isolated. Cosatu, which immediately became the largest union federation in the country, linked up to the UDF through the rest of the decade. While Fosatu’s stress on workplace organisation was a strong influence on the way in which Cosatu operated, its formation signalled that organised black workers saw the fight against apartheid as at least as important as building strong worker organisation.

Wolpe waded into battle against the ‘workerists’. It would have been irrational for him to remain a loyal member of the ANC and SACP if he believed that his work meant that apartheid would not be destroyed until capitalism was. He never suggested that Marxists ought to escape the shackles of the nationalist movement and fight for a socialist revolution. Saleem Badat insists that he always assumed that both race and class mattered.⁵⁵ He was always, therefore, a plausible opponent of ‘workerism’. Perhaps because the new Marxist scholarship of which he was part had played a key role in providing a rationale for ‘workerism’, he felt a need to seek to demolish it.

He found the means to challenge it within a Marxist framework in the work of Louis Althusser, whose writing sought to address a similar question to that which South African Marxists had to confront – why, if, as Marxism insisted, history was driven by class struggle, so much of what happens in politics seems to have little to do with class interests? In South Africa, the question was pressing because race was so central a factor. A key element of Althusser’s theory was the notion of the relative autonomy of politics. When Marxist theory said that material factors shaped politics, he argued, it meant that it did so only ‘in the last instance’.⁵⁶ In any economic system, material factors set the outer limits of what is possible. But within that much can happen and politics can be shaped by non-economic factors. This offered a plausible way of remaining committed to Marxist analysis but insisting that race in South Africa – as well as other political developments – could not be explained away as products of the economy and the class system. Wolpe adopted an analysis whose prime goal was to remind the ‘workerists’ that race and politics mattered. His shift of focus enabled him to see trends which many scholars and commentators within South Africa failed to grasp. This work, arguably Wolpe’s most accurate and perceptive, had far less influence than his earlier work which is now widely seen as flawed.

⁵⁵ Badat ‘Reminiscences and Reflections’

⁵⁶ Louis Althusser ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)’ in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York, Monthly Review Press 1971

The new Marxists' position had drawn attention to the key role of economic domination in apartheid, but this needed to be placed in perspective. The conclusion which some drew from it – that apartheid was simply a fig leaf for capitalism – was shown to be wanting by the mid-1970s, when much of business began to see reform of racial laws as a key to maintaining the economic order. It was Wolpe who took on the task of demonstrating the dangers of ignoring the continued importance of race in the lived reality of South Africans. It could be argued that his correction went too far – that he was so determined to stress the importance of race and politics that he threw the baby out with the bath water, ignoring the continued importance of private power exercised through the economy in obstructing people's capacity to choose. He may have realised this after the ANC became the government. One of his last articles, written in 1995, *The Uneven Transition from Apartheid in South Africa*,⁵⁷ came as close as a loyal ANC and SACP member could to suggesting that policy after apartheid paid insufficient attention to private power. The article could be seen as Wolpe's insistence that, if the 'workerists' had ignored the importance of race and thus of politics and the state, the ANC's stress on gaining control of the state to address racial inequalities had, by ignoring private power, made a continuation of the inequalities of the past a strong possibility.

But, whatever the merits of Wolpe's argument, it had no influence on the union movement. There is an irony in this: Cosatu's blend of nationalist politics and continued commitment to worker control of unions (at least in theory!) was consistent with Wolpe's position that what was needed was a nationalism in which the class concerns of workers enjoyed a strong voice.⁵⁸ But *Race, Class and the Apartheid State (RCAS)*, the book in which he made this argument, appeared three years after Cosatu's formation and, while some of its arguments appeared in articles written in the early 1980s, these were not widely read among academics, let alone unionists: Wolpe's later work did not have nearly the same impact as his 'cheap labour' article and he played no role in shaping union responses to the resistance of the 1980s and the subsequent formation of Cosatu.

Several key 'workerists' had been influenced by Turner. That may show the limits of academic influence since Turner did not believe, as some classical Marxists did, that race was simply a fiction which capitalists used to entrench their power. He was acutely aware that racial domination mattered: this was confirmed by his support for (BC) – although he argued that it took a too rigid view which did not allow for complex racial identities.⁵⁹ Part of Turner's rejection of apartheid was his marriage to Fozzia Fisher, a black woman, which broke at least three racial purity laws. (The police never acted against them, presumably because intruding in a middle class married couple's private life would have triggered embarrassing revulsion). While the marriage was an expression of personal commitment, not a political statement, his insistence that even under apartheid racial identities could be complicated was surely born of his personal experience. Fisher was

⁵⁷ Harold Wolpe 'The Uneven Transition from Apartheid in South Africa' *Transformation* 27, 1995 pp.88-101

⁵⁸ Wolpe articulated this position in Harold Wolpe, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State (RCAS)* London, James Currey, 1988

⁵⁹ Turner 'Eye of the Needle', p.75; Turner 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals'

also largely supportive of BC⁶⁰: she influenced Turner and confirmed the seriousness with which he regarded race. Workerists might have been influenced by Turner, but both his work and life suggest that he might have not welcomed this interpretation of what he sought to teach.

A Tactical Conversation: Wolpe Debates Union Strategy

Only once did Wolpe explicitly enter a debate on union strategy – and it is perhaps an indication of his lack of interest in influencing decisions that he took no firm position on the issue in question and raised it only to make a point about something else.

Wolpe was not meant to be participating in debates within the country. He was in exile after escaping from prison (where he was detained because of his peripheral role in assisting the ANC's military high command to operate out of Lilliesleaf Farm in the Johannesburg suburb of Rivonia). Marxism was banned as were the ANC and SACP. But Wolpe could participate in academic debates within the country. He read the articles which intellectuals who participated wrote in journals and could respond by writing in British journals. This enabled him to engage with intellectuals on a key strategic debate facing the unions in the early 1980s over whether to register with the government.⁶¹

The debate had begun in the early 1980s in response to the apartheid government's labour law reforms which allowed unions with black African members to register. This gave them the right to bargain and, in some circumstances, to strike legally. But registered unions were also obliged to accept controls. Some unions which had grown after the 1973 strikes chose to register on the grounds that bargaining rights offered a platform to demand worker rights, others opposed registration saying that it would restrict them.⁶² Since it was a largely technical debate, it was far more a concern for middle-class intellectuals in the unions than workers, whose sense that the debate was not that important was vindicated since whether or not unions registered had little effect on their ability to represent workers or fight for political change. Because the debate was one between intellectuals, it filled the pages of journals and Wolpe was able to read and respond to it. He was relying only on academic writing, and so his analysis missed some of the flavour of the debate as it developed within the unions. But his interest was not whether unions should register, but to make some points on the law, the state and reform. He used the pro- and anti-registration positions as props to argue that boycotting or participating in apartheid reforms was not a matter of principle but of strategy which must stem from analysis of concrete conditions.

Wolpe's chief criticism of the pro-registration position (one of whose proponents was Innes⁶³), is that it argues that unions are always strengthened by using reforms which

⁶⁰ Robert Fatton Jr *Black Consciousness in South Africa: the Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy* Albany, State University of New York Press, 1986, p.89

⁶¹ Harold Wolpe 'Political Strategies and the Law in South Africa: Analytical Considerations' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol 12 No 1, Special Issue on Law and Politics in Southern Africa, October 1985, pp. 12-24

⁶² For this debate see Friedman 'Building Tomorrow Today'

⁶³ Bob Fine, Francine de Clerq and Duncan Innes 'Trade Unions and the State in South Africa: The Question of Legality' *Capital and Class*, Vol 15, 1981

allow them to operate legally. Thus Bob Fine, a British academic who was influential in the academic writing of the pro-registration intellectuals (although not in the concrete debates in the union movement), wrote: 'In *general*, the extension of legality creates a more favourable environment for unions to build up their organisations, to undertake strikes and other forms of direct action, to win real benefits...(and) to draw in ever larger numbers of black workers...'.⁶⁴ Wolpe declares that the 'exhortation' to participate in the industrial relations institutions 'is based on a general proposition about the value of bourgeois rights, and the necessity, at all times, to use these rights, whatever the conditions in which they arise...'.⁶⁵

Wolpe's objection is that this is stated as a general principle – use of legal avenues is always a source of power regardless of the conditions. So convinced is Fine of this, writes Wolpe, that he argues (as he did in a book on the fight against apartheid arguing that the ANC was repeatedly 'out of tempo with the class struggle'⁶⁶) that the ANC's 'turn to illegality' in the 1960s was a mistake. In reply, Wolpe asks, 'what were the conditions ... in which there was a turn to illegality in the 1960s and how do they differ from (those) of the present period? Did the conditions in the 1960s demand a strategy of illegality and do the conditions of the 1980s call for participation in legally established institutions?'⁶⁷ The question is rhetorical, designed to make the point that boycott or participation are not principles, but depend on context.

The anti-registration position, Wolpe argues, is based on the assumption that the legal structure will shape the union movement. He cites an article by the General Workers Union which declares that registration is 'a *total package* which structures the relationship between workers and the state, and between workers and the bosses'. It will, the union predicts, force unions into institutions which 'mirror the dominance of the bosses in society' and must lead to a loss of independence for the union and the dominance of union officials over workers.⁶⁸ For Wolpe, this means that 'no space exists within the institutional structure for struggle'; this confuses legalism and legality. Legalism relies on the law to win rights and so legal experts dominate – legality creates opportunities which do not require the sacrifice of grassroots work or direct action.⁶⁹ For the pro-registration position, legality is always an opportunity, for their opponents always a constraint. And so neither analyses the concrete conditions to examine whether registration offers opportunities or imposes constraints. Wolpe insists that his view that 'boycott and/or participation must be decided through political calculation under determinant conditions (including the provisions of the law)' was been the 'practical position of the liberation movement and the democratic trade union movement'.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Bob Fine 'Trade Unions and the State Once More: A Reply to Our Critics' *SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 8 No 1, 1982 cited in Wolpe 'Political Strategies and the Law', p.18

⁶⁵ Wolpe 'Political Strategies and the Law', p.18 See also Fine 'Trade Unions and the State' p. 50

⁶⁶ Robert Fine with Dennis Davis *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa*, Johannesburg, Ravan, 1990, p.251

⁶⁷ Wolpe 'Political Strategies and the Law', p.19

⁶⁸ General Workers Union 'Reply to Fine, de Clercq and Innes' *SA Labour Bulletin*, Vol 7 No 3, 1981 cited in Wolpe 'Political Strategies and the Law', p.20 Emphasis in original

⁶⁹ Fine 'Trade Unions and the State' p. 52

⁷⁰ Wolpe 'Political Strategies and the Law', p.21

Wolpe identifies three periods in the history of white domination which were characterised by 'different political structures'. First, 1948 to 1960 saw 'persistent extra-parliamentary mass struggles'. This was possible partly because the extra-parliamentary terrain 'continued to be protected by law', even though the state was eroding the authority of the judiciary and becoming more repressive. The second period, 1960 to the mid-1970s, was one of intense repression which saw 'the virtual abolition of ... extra-parliamentary politics and organisation'. The third, beginning with the 1973 strikes and the 'student and community struggles' which followed, achieved the '*de facto* restoration of the terrain of mass struggle' and 'have left in their wake institutions and structures, introduced by the state, which can only function through the participation of the masses or their representatives'. This has placed the question of whether to boycott back on the agenda.⁷¹ He goes no further than repeating that the issue of boycott or participation, 'falls to be determined not by any universalistic conception of the nature of law or struggle, but by an analysis of the specificity of the law in the concrete conditions of the social formation...'.⁷²

RCAS goes much further. It argues that apartheid's retreat opened space for those who sought its overthrow. From the 1973 strikes, through the rise of BC and the 1976 Soweto uprising, a period of 'the rise of insurrectionary struggles' began which did not weaken the state's military force but prompted it to introduce reforms – recognising trade unions and offering enhanced opportunities for black representation. These, he argues, present opportunities. Indeed, he included one of the most maligned apartheid manoeuvres of the time, the creation of the tricameral Parliament⁷³, with union recognition and the expansion of black access to schools and universities, as 'reformist measures' which 'created a political space within which the opposition organisations were able to deepen their links in the communities and consolidate themselves'.⁷⁴ Tricameral election campaigns and union organisation 'provided legitimate arenas, in which the intervention of the coercive apparatuses of the state were relatively limited'.⁷⁵ Even campaigns for the boycott of elections were, in Wolpe's view, partly protected by the reforms.

Wolpe's argument was an important break with much thinking in the anti-apartheid movement in general and the ANC in particular. For many in the ANC, the idea that boycott of apartheid institutions was not a principle was anything but obvious, despite Wolpe's attempt to portray it as mainstream thinking. But his implied point that the spaces opened by reform apartheid held potential for resistance was an important strategic perspective of unions, some civic associations who negotiated with the authorities and, arguably, the ANC itself when it saw negotiation as an opportunity to end apartheid. He had no wish to minimise the massive role of state coercion in ensuring that

⁷¹ Wolpe 'Political Strategies and the Law', p.22

⁷² Wolpe 'Political Strategies and the Law', p.24

⁷³ In 1984, the NP introduced constitutional reforms, chief among them a coloured and Indian chamber of Parliament. Black Africans were excluded and the white house could outvote the other two. The formation of this tricameral Parliament prompted sustained resistance from resistance organisations. Jeremy Seekings *The Udf: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991* Cape Town David Phillip 2000

⁷⁴ RCAS p. 100

⁷⁵ RCAS p. 100

whites dominated blacks or to suggest that these institutions ‘amount to “real” reforms of the political system’. But the reforms gave ‘the popular masses’ access to structures ‘as forms of... organization... – they are ‘sites of mass struggles’.⁷⁶ The reforms, then, open up opportunities for collective action by the dominated.

But what is the relationship between the collective action which the system allows and political change? Wolpe addresses this by examining the relationship between unionism and the fight against apartheid. He notes a ‘widely held’ and ‘undoubtedly correct’ view that, in South Africa, ‘because of the pervasiveness of race and its penetration into productive relations... struggle in the factory is at the same time both a trade union and a political struggle against racial domination’.⁷⁷ But this has ‘led to two very different views of trade union strategy’, adopted by the two sides of the registration debate.

The anti-registrationists have concluded that, ‘for the conditions of black workers to be transformed, the black unions must struggle against the entire structure of racial domination...’ And so they directly entered the political sphere by engaging in ‘community struggles’ and working with the UDF. Why was there any need for them to do this if ‘struggles in the sphere of industry are themselves political?’ The answer must be their belief in the power of the law – if it was so powerful in controlling workplace conflict, ‘politics must challenge the whole legal edifice’. There is thus a very sharp divide between reform and transformation. The problem is that ‘the question of how reformist politics may be organised to produce radical consequences tends to be neglected’ and the result is an inadequate analysis of the way in which ‘union struggles should be linked to broader political struggles’. The pro-registrationists argued that the intrusion of race into industrial relations makes the trade union struggle a political struggle, ‘even when its demands are restricted to work conditions...’. To go beyond this by linking with political movements would endanger unions and weaken the worker movement. Those who hold this position tend to assume that the ‘workers’ political movement will emerge out of, and be based on, the trade union movement’. But this was not automatic and they offered no account of how it might happen.⁷⁸

Wolpe takes some poetic license here. The anti-registration position he describes is that of only the ‘populist’ unions which refused registration. Some anti-registration unions, such as the General Workers Union, who he quotes, did not participate in ‘community struggles’ as part of the UDF. But he did identify a crucial point. It was assumed that trade unionism would generate a movement for radical political change but the link was rarely demonstrated. Unions were based on careful organisation around winnable issues in the workplace – these were meant to build worker muscle and self-confidence and so create the conditions for a political movement. But how did that movement emerge? Populists did not have to address the question. For them, radical change was the end of apartheid and the nationalist movement would achieve that. Their opponents were so focussed on building workplace organisation that the link between this and political

⁷⁶ Harold Wolpe ‘Towards an Analysis of the South African State’ *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* Vol 8 No. 4, 1980, pp.399-421

⁷⁷ Wolpe ‘Political Strategies and the Law’, p.23

⁷⁸ Wolpe ‘Political Strategies and the Law’, p.24

mobilisation was never addressed. In the year in which Wolpe wrote this, a synthesis between the two positions was ostensibly found in the formation of Cosatu . But this still left unanswered the wider issue raised by his analysis – how incremental reform became radical social change. This author has attempted a theory of this relationship⁷⁹ but the problem was rarely if ever addressed in the political movement: it was not acknowledged as a problem since reform was considered an obstacle rather than a key to radical change despite the contrary evidence of the growth of the union movement.

Wolpe's discussion of the registration debate opens interesting strategic perspectives. But it did not influence union choices. This was not what it intended do – by refusing to advocate a position he was faithful to a position he staked out in another 1985 article, *The Liberation Struggle and Research*.⁸⁰ It drew a distinction between social structure and consciousness, the realm in which strategy is worked out. For Wolpe, strategy is 'a political, not an academic research function'.⁸¹ The academic's job was to analyse the social structure to enable 'the calculation of political possibilities'.⁸² Academics can offer movement leaders help in spelling out the context in which strategic decisions are being made – they cannot advise on particular options because that is a political function. O'Meara sees this as a recognition of the limits of intellectual influence. Wolpe knew that simply 'to earn the right to be heard' intellectuals had to submit to the constraints which organisations impose.⁸³ But he hoped that he could nevertheless have his ideas discussed and adopted by the movement. But Badat believes this was a principled position: 'he was also extremely concerned at the danger of intellectuals and experts dominating movements He was particularly sceptical that intellectuals had privileged access to truth and were therefore qualified to be arbiters of people's needs, and of political and social priorities and policies.'⁸⁴ Wolpe's distance from political engagement was a self-limiting exercise, recognising that the role of the intellectual is not to lead but to open minds to alternatives. Whichever view is accurate, Wolpe never sought influence over union strategies and never directly influenced them.

Starting What They Cannot Finish

Given all this, it seems odd to credit Wolpe and radical sociology with helping to shape the union movement. But they had a role despite their inability – and in Wolpe's case stated unwillingness – to influence union or ANC strategy.

⁷⁹ Steven Friedman *Understanding Reform*, Johannesburg SA Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), 1986; *The Limits of Co-Option*, Johannesburg SAIRR, 1986; *Reform Revisited*, Johannesburg, SAIRR, 1987

⁸⁰ Harold Wolpe 'The Liberation Struggle and Research' *Review of African Political Economy* 32 (April, 1985) pp.72-78

⁸¹ Wolpe 'The Liberation Struggle and Research' p. 76

⁸² Wolpe 'The Liberation Struggle and Research' p.77

⁸³ I have paraphrased O'Meara here. The point which he explicitly attributes to Wolpe is one which Wolpe disavowed in his interview with Kodesh. O'Meara says Wolpe knew that intellectuals were required 'to contribute as ordinary members to the daily and often tedious work of a political organisation'. Wolpe complained to Kodesh that the movement would not give him a role commensurate with his intellectual talents. He added that, after his return to South Africa, he found that the humdrum work expected of an ANC branch member was 'not me'.

⁸⁴ Badat 'Reminiscences and Reflections'

Wolpe had a lot to do, indirectly, with persuading people to think about the society in a way which made them decide to become unionists. An important boost to unionism was an intellectual climate among young university-educated activists shaped by the work of Wolpe and the revisionists. Ideas often do not enjoy an impact because they convince people by force of argument— often they give shape to a moral concern which listeners and readers already harbour. It was this ability to speak to the concerns of young radicals who believed that English speaking business shared complicity for apartheid which gave their writings its impact, and ensured that they played a role in the rebirth of the union movement. Wolpe's role was to offer union intellectuals a theoretical grounding for their radicalism, not to suggest strategic directions.

Wolpe and his colleagues clearly influenced anti-apartheid intellectuals. Within a decade, Marxist analysis had moved from the margins of South African social science to a dominance which non-Marxists experienced as 'hegemonic'⁸⁵ – it was not only the major stream of analysis, it had established itself as the norm. And some of those who experienced this choose to become unionists. Wolpe's writing pointed some young intellectuals in a direction which impelled them to contribute to change in particular ways. The view that apartheid and capitalism were good friends suggested, among other possibilities, the need for two courses of action which were to become perhaps the most effective pressures on apartheid. Neither were excluded by liberalism but both tended to flow from Marxist analysis. One was support for economic sanctions on apartheid, the other the idea that organising workers was a key to change. The work of Turner and then Wolpe and his colleagues, by inviting readers to see the market as part of the problem, prompted young radicals to support attempts to organise black workers into unions.

The Marxism of the school of which Wolpe was part was self-consciously academic. It was produced in the social science faculties of a few British universities. Its immediate effect was to influence others in universities, including the students who passed around copies of papers. But it did also produce activists, particularly unionists. That they were influenced by the new Marxism is demonstrated by the 'workerist''- 'populist' debate in which both sides were using ideas gleaned from the new social science even if they were unaware that this was what they were doing. That the work of Wolpe and his colleagues had a significant impact on the intellectuals who served the union movement which began emerging after the 1973 Durban strikes was hardly surprising, as most union strategists were intellectuals. But what effect did this have on worker organisation?

Conclusion: The Impact of the Intellectuals

As noted above, the influence of middle-class, mainly white, intellectuals on worker organisation was felt very strongly in the 1970s and first couple of years of the 1980s, after which it faded – the registration debate of the early 1980s may have been the high point of intellectual influence since it largely shaped whether unions registered or not.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ken Jubber 'Sociology and its sociological context: The case of the rise of Marxist sociology in South Africa', *Social Dynamics* Volume 9 No. 2 December 1983, pp. 50-63.

⁸⁶ Friedman 'Building Tomorrow Today'

But formative periods in any movement are decisive and so the intellectuals whose world view was shaped or confirmed by Wolpe, Turner and others may have had an impact on the worker movement which is felt to this day. Workers would still have organised without the intellectuals – decisions on when and whether to strike or to join the nationalist movement were not shaped by intellectuals. But in two areas it seems likely that the intellectual influence discussed here did matter – the form which organisation took and its ideological content. Both are enduring features of this union movement.

Turner's ideas encouraged a stress on democratic organisation in the workplace. This seemed more a tactic than a principle. Employers resisted union campaigns for recognition and the only way that unions could establish themselves was to run lengthy battles to win bargaining rights. This required high degrees of worker commitment and unity and the only way this could be achieved was by ensuring that shop stewards were in touch with their constituency and were responding to them. But this was not the only option. Other unions relied on cajoling employer associations or on mobilisation without organisation. The assumption that it was important for unions to win a voice in the workplace so that they could speak for an organised constituency was a choice –one which was strongly influenced by Turner's thought. It would be plausible to take this further and argue that the first decade of the union movement, stretching into the early 1980s, was one of the most direct cases in which the ideas of an academic were translated into concrete strategy by a social movement.

Unions did not remain vehicles for grassroots participatory democracy – as they grew, links between the shop floor and the leadership became more tenuous: later, the pressures of the transition forced unions to devote more time to elite bargaining than to serving a constituency⁸⁷ and, latterly, Cosatu has seemed to lose touch with its base as it seeks to influence ANC politics.⁸⁸ But the principles which were forged during the early period did not disappear – they have influenced worker organisation since the 1973 strikes.⁸⁹ Even where they have not been observed fully, they have remained the standard by which the movement is forced to judge itself. This has ensured that the union movement remained far more committed to democratic principle and practice than many other organised forces in the society. It also arguably wielded an influence outside the workplace – the style of civic organisation in the Eastern Cape town of Port Alfred, pioneered by Gugile Nkwinti (currently minister of rural development) and others, was modelled on the unions' stress on democratic organisation and the use of negotiation to empower the organisation and its members.⁹⁰ It could, therefore, have provided the impetus for a form of organisation and participation which still ensures that South Africa is more democratic than might be expected, even if it remains a minority phenomenon within the society. Turner's claim in *Eye of the Needle* that Utopian thinking could have

⁸⁷ Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster (eds) *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa 1985-1997* St Martin's Press, New York, 2000

⁸⁸ Steven Friedman 'Cosatu's quest to regain its lost soul' *The New Age* September 13 2012

⁸⁹ Sakhela Buhlungu, 'The building of the democratic tradition in South Africa's trade unions after 1973' *Democratization*, Vol 11 No 3, 2004, pp. 133–158.

⁹⁰ Raymond Suttner 'The UDF Period and its Meaning for Contemporary South Africa' *Journal of Southern African Studies* Volume 30, no 3, September 2004 pp. 691-701

practical effects has been vindicated by the subsequent development of the union movement and of some social movements.

The second influence could be attributed to the British- based academics: the stress in the early stages of the movement on a particular ideological focus. The intellectuals who entered the union movement did so because they wanted to change the world, a desire which was greatly enhanced by the academic Marxism they read. And so they sought, through worker education programmes, as well as through informal contact, to explain this theory to workers in an attempt to ensure that the movement became a vehicle not only for worker organisation but for a new consciousness. There was nothing new about this – socialists had been using union education and other vehicles, such as night schools, to win workers over to socialist ideas since the 1920s and 1930s⁹¹ - Harold Wolpe had been a teacher in one of these schools.⁹² What may have been new was what was taught. The new Marxist analysis which Wolpe and his colleagues pioneered was, as noted earlier, far more concerned with economic domination than that which had preceded it – Harold Wolpe’s difficult relationship with the SA Communist Party was a consequence of the reality that his and his colleagues’ Marxism challenged SACP thinking. The ideas which the new Marxism underpinned, and which were taught in the union movement, were far more critical of economic domination and far more concerned to make the case for an alternative than that of an earlier generation.

This may partly explain why Cosatu and its members have been more inclined to embrace ideas critical of prevailing economic relationships than most other sections of society. To some of its left critics, Cosatu has betrayed its radical roots, despite frequent rhetoric to the contrary. It has perhaps been more interested in talking about an economic alternative than in working for one – like its ally the ANC, it has also fallen prey to the temptations of an all-too close connection between money and politics.⁹³ One sign that left-wing ideas have had far less impact than the early unionists might have hoped is the tendency of Cosatu unionists to make use of opportunities for personal advancement which propel them into management.⁹⁴ And, if one purpose was to persuade unionised workers to avoid an alliance with the ANC and nationalist politics, it was a failure – perhaps most poignantly illustrated by the fact that Joe Foster, the voice of ‘workerism’, became an ANC Senator and chair of the State Lottery Board.⁹⁵ It would be easy to conclude from this that the left ideas current in the early days of the union movement were consigned to irrelevance as soon as the end of apartheid allowed black workers social mobility.

⁹¹ Raymond Suttner, ‘The formation and functioning of intellectuals within the ANC-led liberation movement’, in Thandika Mkandawire (ed), *African Intellectuals* Zed Press in association with Codesria Dakar, London and Pretoria, 2005, pp 117-154.

⁹² Transcript of an Interview of Harold Wolpe by Hilda Bernstein, Lodged at the Mayibuye Centre, Cape Town

⁹³ Friedman ‘Cosatu’s quest’

⁹⁴ Sakhela Buhlungu, *Comrades, entrepreneurs and career unionists: organisational modernisation and new cleavages among COSATU union officials*. Occasional paper, No 17, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2002 <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.196.3667>; Alexander Beresford ‘Organised labour and the politics of class formation in post-apartheid South Africa’, *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol 39 No 134, 2012, pp 569-589

⁹⁵ Vivienne Rowland ‘Lotery-hoof gesels oor alles - behalwe geld in die bank’ *Beeld* April 7 2000

But that would be superficial. First, while it was always a fantasy to expect that black workers would dismiss the racism they experienced as a fig leaf for capitalism, worker concern with racial issues did not exclude a continued commitment to pursue class issues. As an important study of worker action in the 1980s has shown,⁹⁶ race and class was not an either-or for organised workers: the fight against apartheid never entirely supplanted that for a redistribution of power and resources. Second, attitude surveys show that union members are more impatient for social and economic change and more militant in their attitudes than other social groups.⁹⁷ This suggests that the unions did build a social movement, one in which members share similar values and assumptions, and that the stress on economic domination in the early years of the movement influenced this. While worker experience in exercising power by winning gains is an important reason for this assertiveness, so too is the fact that the movement from its beginnings was saturated with a critique of economic domination. The union movement which began to emerge in the wake of the Durban strikes was not the vehicle for the anti-nationalist socialism which most of its middle-class activists had imbibed in the seminar room. But the influence of radical ideas did have an impact on unionism which is still evident in Cosatu positions today and, perhaps more importantly, in the perspectives of its members.

As we suggested at the outset, intellectuals' influence on social movements is always indirect and incomplete. This is entirely appropriate for, as Wolpe implied in his article on research, movements flourish most when they are controlled by those who participate in them rather than those who impart ideas to them. But that is not to say that ideas and those who communicate them are irrelevant: they often have an important impact, creating possibilities while foreclosing others. The influence of intellectuals on the union movement which 1973 helped to launch illustrates this. While their ideas were always filtered through the realities which workers and their organisations faced, and the logic of the library and the classroom was often ill-equipped to shape the choices of workers and unions, the evidence presented here shows that the worker movement which developed after 1973 would have been significantly different had the radical academic work of the early 1970s and beyond not influenced a generation of middle-class radicals.

The new radicalism of the early 1970s offered the new unionism which then emerged some guidelines which have helped to shape it. While these have been refracted through social realities and movement choices, they have an impact today. And that is surely the most that intellectuals who seek to change the world can reasonably expect.

⁹⁶ Karl von Holdt *Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa*, Scottsville, University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2003

⁹⁷ Sakhela Buhlungu 'Gaining Influence but Losing Power? COSATU Members and the Democratic Transformation of South Africa' *Social Movement Studies* Vol 7, Issue 1, 2008 pp.31-42; Craig Charney *Voices of a New Democracy: African Expectations in the New South Africa*, Johannesburg, Centre for Policy Studies, 1995;