

ARTICULATIONS: A HAROLD
WOLPE MEMORIAL LECTURE
COLLECTION

EDITED BY
AMANDA ALEXANDER

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AMANDA ALEXANDER

Introduction

The University of KwaZulu-Natal's Howard College Theatre has 252 seats. Quite who should sit in them is the subject of conflict. The university management would like those seats filled with students who can afford to pay university fees and are willing to settle for a curriculum dictated by the whims of the professional market. But the management are opposed. In February 2006, they faced a staff strike, with solidarity from students, demanding not only a salary increase but also a halt to infringements on academic freedom and the corporatisation of the university. Rising numbers of black and poor students show up to register for classes at UKZN and wait in winding queues only to find that they are not allowed to register because of unpaid fees, that they are forced to change their field of study because of 'overcrowding', or that their financial aid is gone.¹ Howard College is the oldest, most elegant building on campus and an icon in the public imagination of Durban. The vast majority of Durban's population, however, will not find a seat there.

Except on the last Thursday of every month. Since 2002, the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) has hosted the Harold Wolpe Memorial Public Lecture Series on these evenings, bringing lecturers esteemed for their commitment to critical thinking and debate together with audiences eager to discuss the most pressing matters facing contemporary South Africa. For one and a half hours, the seats of the Howard College Theatre are filled with a dynamic audience of community organisers, academics, Congolese refugees, Zimbabwean exiles, AIDS activists, ANC officials, student socialists, musicians and artists, and a handful of local government councillors. The room is packed with people engaged in struggles across the city as members of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, Chatsworth's Bayview Flats Residents Association, *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (the 'shackdwellers movement'), the African Initiative for Peace, Democracy, and Development, the Wentworth Development Forum, the Socialist Students Movement, KwaMashu's Edenic People's Organisation, the Treatment Action Campaign, and several other neighbourhood associations and movements.

These evenings are magnificently out of step with the rest of the month, and out of step with the management's vision for a university.

The vibrancy of CCS's Harold Wolpe Memorial Lectures has, from the very start, come from the frisson between the lectures and interpretations that take place around them. As an explicitly *public* lecture series, much is demanded and expected of both the lecturers and their audiences; people are encouraged to find points of common relevance, to constructively challenge and hold each other to account. The lecturers and critical reviewers in this collection have more than risen to the task.

This collection spans a rich range of topics – from cost recovery to HIV/AIDS and sexual assault, from structural racism to Marx and Fanon on political empowerment, from land reform to *Moby-Dick* and the search for self. In this brief introduction, I hope not to force out key themes, but to offer a sense of the context in which these lectures take place. Those looking for an introduction to the works of Harold Wolpe will be satisfied by the formidable synthesis and analysis contained in Michael Burawoy's lecture, which opens this collection. I will similarly leave the overview of contemporary South Africa's political and economic context to the insightful lectures and reviews in the book's second section.

As the lectures now shift from voice to printed text, it is imperative that they remain but one part of a shared dialogue. Even though we now meet these lecturers on the page, we must not cease to talk back at them, make them a little jumpy, ask them to clarify themselves and, overall, make their contributions stronger through mutual engagement. It is by interpreting what they have to say through the lens of our own experiences that we allow their words to inform and fuel our struggles.

One aspect of this interpretative process has been the critical reviews written by attendees, most often Durban academics or activists familiar with the field or topic of the lecture. CCS commissions these reviews to be published on the CCS website alongside a lecture's text, if available. The reviews often help to ground the lectures in the Durban context and continue the interpretative process by serving as prickly messengers, carrying the lecture's ideas (poking and prodding them all the while) to a wider audience.

A range of activities surrounding the lectures serves as part of the dialogue. As people enter the Howard College Theatre, a slideshow of local marches and Zapiro cartoons or a film may await them. The lecturers are introduced to the crowd by representatives of civil society organisations; in 2005, some lecturers shared the stage with a band composed of members of the Edenic People's Organisation. Some talks have been preceded by workshop discussions for civil society practitioners and other interested parties, which seek to contextualize the themes of the talk by providing background information on the lecturer's work and the lecture topic. Other lectures are preceded by on- and off-campus screenings of relevant films; for example, Charlene Smith's lecture on the politics of sexual assault was introduced by screenings of *Flame* – about women fighters in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle and the gendered power structure that prevailed during the fight for national liberation – on the Howard College

campus (co-hosted by the UKZN branch of the Treatment Action Campaign) and at the F Section community hall in KwaMashu (co-hosted by the Edenic People's Organisation). Ike's Bookshop has co-hosted book launches following several lectures, as was the case for William Mervin Gumede's *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* in 2005.

As exhilarating as many of these activities are, CCS has not always gotten it right or done well by its audiences. These flaws have been glaring (not least because of the general truth that, when people attempt to do something daring or relevant, they open themselves up to more criticism than if they had just stuck with the well-worn and acceptably reprehensible norm). Many of these shortcomings flow from the fact that, though CCS rails against neoliberalism and the corporatisation of the university, it remains embedded in their midst, and contaminated by them. Situated firmly in the UKZN context, CCS shares its short-term staff contracts and racialised payscale, its measures of 'productivity' and 'success' solely by publication output (rather than by its contribution to dialogue through public events and support for local struggles), and its dependence on Northern funders. Grotesque power imbalances along many intersecting lines (most obviously race, gender, nationality, and class) prevail at CCS, and these imbalances are carried, with varying degrees of consciousness, into all that the Centre does, including the Wolpe lecture series. The lectures, conducted entirely English, have remained inaccessible for too many audience members. By not breaking vigorously enough with the overrepresentation of whites in the South African academy, CCS has been complicit in the devaluing of thought by black thinkers. Finally, the pedagogical methods of the workshops have not been as successful as they could be. They were often held in a short lecture format, leaving hardly any time for group discussion that would have allowed all to draw on the immense experience and expertise of civil society participants. Fortunately, criticism is not an end in itself. It is part of a process, and these criticisms have informed an overhaul of CCS's engagement with the Wolpe lecture series. Beginning this year, CCS plans to hold many of the lectures in Zulu or to provide Zulu translation. CCS has also begun a weekly workshop programme, in Zulu and English, where activists determine the topics to be covered and serve as their own teachers.

Though we have a long way to go, we hope that our efforts may eventually be more fully in the spirit of what Harold Wolpe referred to as 'people's education'. Around 1985, Wolpe began work on a project called 'Research on Education in South Africa' (RESA), which he would continue after founding the Education Policy Unit at the (historically-black) University of the Western Cape in 1991. In his lecture, Michael Burawoy describes what Wolpe defended as the ongoing struggle for 'people's education':

...“People’s education” [referred to] a schooling that would eliminate ignorance and illiteracy, cultivate an understanding of apartheid and all its oppressions and inequalities, that would counter competitive individualism with collective organisation, that would equip people with the capacity to realize their potential. People’s education did not have to wait for the end of apartheid but could begin now by connecting, but not subordinating itself, to the liberation movement.

People’s education was very different than the proposals of the government and corporations which were concerned only with upgrading skills. As the negotiated transition was looming Wolpe feared, however, that servicing the economy with skilled personnel would take precedence over education’s role in the transformation of society.

“Preoccupation with the question of the provision of education and skilling which fails to link this, on the one hand, with a programme of people’s education and, on the other hand, with the question of restructuring of the social and institutional order, threatens to allow education to be edged towards performing a predominantly reproductive rather than transformative role”. (17)

As Burawoy adds, Wolpe was convinced that ‘South African universities should not slavishly seek “international standards” or uncritically adopt the rhetoric of “quality” and “excellence”, but do so only within the context of specifically national problems of social transformation. The university has to be responsive to national conditions’. It is in this spirit that we have sought to make the Wolpe lecture series responsive to local conditions – of those living in the shack settlement of Banana City on the Westville Campus facing eviction by the university management (which recently delivered on its threats by disconnecting the settlement’s water); of the female students raped in their residents halls in the past year who waited hours for the university’s Risk Management Services to respond to their call (without a gender policy in place and with rapid turnover of casual staff, RMS is unable to ‘manage’ the reality of rape); of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* members who have their teeth kicked in by police when they march for housing, electricity, and dignity – in the midst of a university that seeks to be ‘The Premier University of African Scholarship’ but ensures that fewer Africans are able to enter its lecture halls each year. Through the Wolpe lectures and their many on-going interpretations, we undertake the increasingly transgressive act of responding to, and being responsible for, each other.

The lectures and reviews in this collection represent a small sample of the discussion and debate undertaken in the context of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Public Lecture Series

over the past four years. Many lectures were not available for inclusion because written versions do not exist. Some lecturers spoke from drafts of book chapters or long articles; in those cases, we have included those longer entries here. Other lectures retain a spoken quality. Many more lectures and reviews can be found on the CCS website, www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs, along with the schedule for upcoming lectures.

This collection, and the lecture series itself, would not have been possible without the creative and financial support of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust. The Trust, based in Cape Town, is committed to 'a radical politics based on critical scholarship that is as rigorous as it is engaged', and in that vein fosters public engagement and research on the national level. Tracy Bailey, national coordinator of the Wolpe Trust, deserves special thanks for her on-going work to establish the Trust, and the Wolpe Lecture Series in particular, as a critical generator of national and international dialogue. AnnMarie and Peta Wolpe are warmly thanked for their inspiring vision and commitment. We also wish to recognise the parallel efforts of the lecture series partners at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, the Wolpe Trust in Cape Town, and at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. We look forward to continued collaboration in the future.

Our local organisers and partners at UKZN have made immense contributions of time, energy, and imagination. We would like to thank the School of Development Studies and, in particular, Caroline Skinner. Thanks also to the Workers College, numerous departments on the campuses of UKZN, and media outlets for helping to publicise the lectures. Though all CCS staff are involved in one way or another with the Wolpe lectures, particular thanks must go to Richard Ballard, Richard Pithouse, and Helen Poonen for being the backbone of coordination efforts over the last several years. Special thanks also go to Patrick Bond, Ashwin Desai, John Devenish, Lungile Keswa, Princess Nhlangulela, and Amy Ramsamy for their logistical feats. Finally, we are deeply grateful to all the Wolpe lecturers, reviewers, and audiences who make this endeavour in dialogue, interpretation, and struggle what it is.

Amanda Alexander
Durban, February 2006

Notes

¹ According to the UKZN Student Representative Council, registration fees doubled this year from last year's R2 000 to R4 000. It was only through student strike action that fees were reduced back to R2 000. Still, calls for an end to financial exclusions of students and free tertiary education have not been heeded. See Mhlongo, A. and S. Peters (2006), 'Students plan strike', *Daily News*, 3 February.