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## RESEARCH, POLICY-MAKING AND THE ADVENT OF DEMOCRACY: A REPLY TO MAX PRICE

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With the advent of democracy in South Africa a large number of progressive intellectuals have moved from policy research into policy making.<sup>1</sup> The relationship of intellectuals towards power is an ambiguous one. Alec Erwin, now Minister of Trade and Industry but at the time NUMSA education officer, captured this dilemma in his talk to the 1992 Symposium on The Role of Research in Transforming South Africa:

researchers and intellectuals in general oscillate between two powerful imperatives - one when research is able to lead events or one when it follows events in the sense of responding to research requests ... In a situation of transition such as that we now face, this tension will intensify (Erwin, 1992:4).

In a recent article in *Transformation*, Max Price, a past Director of the Centre for Health Policy (CHP) at the University of the Witwatersrand, addressed this tension between knowledge and power by reflecting on the changing role of progressive policy groups in South Africa. (Price, 1995). He provides a valuable framework for periodising these changes and points to the ironic fact that, instead of extending the freedom of the intellectual, the advent of democracy may be diminishing it by turning research units such as the CHP into research technocracies.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to examine Prices's argument by exploring the changing role of the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand. I argue that the advent of democracy does not only contain constraints and threats: it has also opened up opportunities for widening our research activities and our research partnerships. Indeed, it involves a new form of knowledge construction, one based on problem-solving, rather than one based only on the procedures of academic disciplines.

Following Price's framework it is possible to identify three distinct periods<sup>3</sup>. The first period -the oppositional period-runs from 1983 to 1987. During this period our research agenda was shaped by the labour movement and we saw our role predominantly as that of strengthening the collective bargaining capacity of these organisations.

The main thrust of our research concentrated on health and safety.(Sitas, 1984: Leger,1985). This included a project on the social consequences of disability for the victims of underground accidents (Arkles, 1993). The results of this research on underground safety was presented at a joint NUM/Chamber of Mines seminar at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1985. By sharing the platform with Cyril Ramaphosa at a time when the NUM was struggling for recognition SWOP was attempting to legitimise the union. The Chamber of Mines was outraged by what they saw as an attack on the industry and challenged the sampling method (an expert choice sample) used in the study. A heated exchange took place in the media around the study and the safety conditions of black underground gold miners.

As part of the research process SWOP committed itself to making the research results accessible to NUM's members. This was a difficult task as most members were barely literate and spoke a range of local and regional languages. The research report was turned into a popular pamphlet in Xhosa, Sotho and English (*A Thousand Ways to Die: The Struggle for Safety in the Mines*, 1986).

Although we saw our role as providing research to strengthen labour's collective power, it was never as simple as that. We were operating in a university and we were committed to the publication of scholarly articles. The underground safety study was published in an international journal and eventually a key concept in the research - the notion of 'pit-sense' - become the core of Leger's doctoral thesis (Leger, 1986: Leger 1992).

The second period begins in 1988 when we decide to apply for formal recognition from the University Research Committee (URC) as a university research programme. SWOP's central interest during this period was research on management's new corporate strategy. The notion of participative management had generated increasing interest in the late eighties among South African managers. The need to improve productivity, the growing rate of unionisation of black workers, and the realisation that the capitalist system was at risk in the long term because of its association with apartheid, had prompted management to introduce participatory schemes.

The results of our research suggested that employers preferred Japanese-style task oriented forms of participation such as Green Areas and Quality Circles. (Maller, 1992). The one exception that emerged from the study was the

Volkswagen assembly plant in Uitenhage which held the potential, the study concluded, of a 'new kind of workplace democracy'. (Maller, 1994:249). The study suggested that Volkswagen workers, through their union, had used the management-initiated structures of participation to extend their influence over the company. They retained intact the institutional locus of power of the trade union, while participating in management-initiated joint committees as union representatives, not as individuals.

The case-study is important, Maller concluded, because it indicates the beginnings of a shift away from simple adversarialism as collective bargaining is supplemented by participation. It points to a creative fusion of oppositional relations when a conflict of interest occurs, with participative relations when their is a coincidence of interests (Maller, 1994:253).

The shift in research focus involved a change in research methodology. Participatory research became less common and more conventional research strategies began to be used. SWOP also became less oppositional in its stance towards management as a shift occurred in managerial strategy. In fact SWOP embarked on a number of joint union-management research projects during this period (Seidman, 1993; Bethlehem, Buhlungu, Crankshaw and White, 1994; Joffe and Buhlungu, 1994; Macun, 1994). Indeed some trade unionists became critical of what they saw as a 'reformist agenda' in the research work done by SWOP at this time.<sup>4</sup>

The prospect of a new democratic order, especially after 1990, when political movements were unbanned, led to a shift in union leaders' thinking and practice away from abstentionism toward the assumption of a central role and responsibility for unions in shaping a new economic policy. The idea that trade unions can shape national economic policy necessitates a different form of unionism - what has been called strategic unionism (Joffe, Maller and Webster, 1995). The potential exists in South Africa', we argued, 'for labour to adopt strategic unionism, but it will have to overcome the strong tradition of abstentionism. If any industrial, labour-led restructuring is to occur, it will also require the active cooperation of capital and an alliance with a strong developmental and democratic state' (Joffe, Maller and Webster, 1995:90).<sup>5</sup>

The third period begins in 1992 when SWOP began research on the Role of Trade Unions in Transforming the Nature of Popular Resistance in South Africa. In 1994 we began a comparative research project with CODESRIA on Labour, State and Democracy in Africa as well as a joint project on Organised Labour and the Advent of Parliamentary Democracy in South Africa. In 1995 the Director visited Brazil to begin a study of the impact of globalisation on industrial relations in that country (Friedman and De Villiers, 1996). In the same year Dr

Adler undertook a visit to Zimbabwe and in the following year to Zambia to explore the impact of structural adjustment policies on the labour movement (Adler, Barchiesi and Gostner, 1996).

During 1995 we received our first two commissions from the new Department of Labour; to convene a workshop on Work and Living Conditions on the Gold Mines and to co-convene the Enterprise Flexibility Survey with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva (Steinberg and Seidman, 1995; Standing, Sender and Weeks, 1996). During this period SWOP developed closer links with the National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI) and a member of SWOP was commissioned to undertake a number of key studies such as co-determination and public sector restructuring.

During this period a broad research vision emerged within SWOP around the theme of 'work and industrial relations in a changing South Africa'. This focus came together at a time when global economic change was transforming the nature of work and industrial relations and revitalising the sociology of work as a field of specialisation in sociology. The transition to democracy in South Africa during this period has also opened our work to the debates around the consolidation of new democracies. These two intellectual and political currents - globalisation and democratisation - have given our studies of the 'world of work' an audience beyond the field of industrial relations.

### **Constraints and opportunities**

Price stresses the irony of this period; instead of moving to the centre of the policy process and 'being involved in policy making at every stage', the case-study he focussed on (the Centre of Health Policy, CHP) was faced with many constraints

which resulted directly from that very transformation in our role and relations with government that we thought would liberate us (Price:27).

Price lists five of these constraints: a shift of funding from overseas donors direct to government who now controlled the research agenda, that they were now expected to function as consultants rather than researchers, a decline in the importance of participatory research, a demand by government of confidentiality until they have seen fit to release research, and the growth of competition from private consultants

who can tailor the job to the time and resources available and have few aspirations to standards set by academic peer review (Price:27-30).

At the centre of Price's argument is a concern with the autonomy of the intellectual: ironically, he says, the transition to democracy has undermined the CHP's ability to combine the role of intellectual and activist. The lack of legitimacy of the apartheid government gave the CHP the opportunity to speak through their research for the majority. With the advent of democracy the CHP could become a purely technical research unit, providing a range of options with pros and cons and ... tossing this analysis into the market place of ideas and leaving it to the politicians to make the decisions, since they are the only ones with a political mandate (Price:30).

Some of the observations made by Price of CHP apply to SWOP as well. In the first place overseas funding all but disappeared in the early nineties. SWOP had, from its inception, been generously funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Germany. In 1991 we were informed that we could no longer expect funding from the FES. In future their funding would be directed towards the ANC and the future democratic government. The collapse of 'socialism' in East Germany also opened up more immediate demands on the Germans' doorstep.

A second change has come with the new government who are more concerned with reliable labour market information than they are with qualitative data. This has meant that SWOP had to upgrade its skills in large scale survey work. This has had very positive results for SWOP allowing us to embark on larger-scale survey work and contribute to the improvement in labour market information in South Africa.

Linked to the change in research demand is the emergence of competition from private consultants. Consultants can be more client-centred and they are designed to respond to client demands. They are not hampered by teaching commitments and the conventions of academic research.

Above all, the centre of our research activity - the labour movement - was facing new challenges. The first of these arises from the creation of a democratic state and COSATU's alliance with the dominant party within it, the African National Congress. This required a shift from antagonism towards the state to purposeful protagonism. The second challenge is its changing relationship with management arising from globalisation.

But the advent of democracy does not involve only constraints; for SWOP it is also involves opportunities to widen the number of research partners and projects and engage more directly in the policy process. This has strengthened the activities of SWOP.

We have shifted our funding from overseas donors to local donors. Workplace change is no longer a marginal research interest; it has become the staple diet of

'the conference circuit'. This has led to consultancy work and a willingness by the private sector to fund our research work.

We have been able to enter into new research partnerships. We have recently completed a nation-wide survey on Enterprise Flexibility with the International Labour Organisation in Geneva.

Importantly, the advent of democracy allows us to become public intellectuals. In this sense, the advent of democracy has been a liberating experience: democracy has opened up a public domain where we have access for the first time to TV and the radio on public issues. Indeed public institutions such as the SABC TV and radio actively encourage us to give our views on areas where before we were treated as 'radicals' and our views caricatured and demonised.

We no longer feel obliged to take sides with our allies in the democratic movement regardless of the issue. We can raise provocative issues; issues that have been in the 'closet' until now. An example is the debate on social democracy that was first aired in the *South African Labour Bulletin* in 1993 and has continued intermittently in that journal and the *Mail and Guardian*. (Webster, 1995) The freedom to explore alternatives to the 'free market' and orthodox Marxism is an opportunity that has never existed in South African debate which has tended to polarise around orthodoxies on the left and the right.<sup>6</sup> The invitation to John Roemer, an advocate of market socialism, to run a workshop on the future of socialism is an example of this willingness to challenge local orthodoxies (Roemer, 1996).

The most gratifying aspect is that our research has begun to have an impact on policy - intellectuals do not only have to be critical of policy they can also be constructively involved in influencing policy. The Harvard policy analyst Carol Weiss calls this knowledge creep (Weiss, 1988).

The imagery of knowledge creep is that research findings percolate into the movement and come to shape the way people think about social issues. In terms of this model (which Weiss calls the enlightenment model) concepts, theories and research findings circulate through different channels. The clearest example of this process is the research undertaken by Leger in the eighties which argued for the need for mine workers to refuse to work if they have 'reasonable justification' to believe a serious danger is present. This idea has now become part of the new Health and Safety Act.

SWOP's research programme grew out of the relationship university-based intellectuals developed with the workers' movement in the seventies and eighties. It was an attempt to link our theory/knowledge to the struggles of this movement. As such it mirrors the growth and development of the labour

movement. Initially SWOP saw its role as providing intellectual support for a movement still in sharp conflict with management and the state. Research, it was suggested was a form of resistance.

With the beginnings of a 'negotiated transition' to democracy the labour movement shifts towards more co-operative relations with employers and engagement in tripartite fora. This coincides with a shift in SWOP's research agenda towards a focus on the restructuring of work and the economy and formal recognition from the university. 'Vanishing ideologies' provides the context within which a more pragmatic left social democratic agenda emerges openly in the research activities of SWOP. This marks the start of the third period in the development of SWOP.

Through SWOP's partnership with outside stakeholders it has developed new ways of producing knowledge. In the eighties when SWOP was struggling for recognition by the University, traditional notions of how knowledge is produced were dominant in the Faculty of Arts<sup>7</sup>. We contested this traditional notion of a rigid separation of theoretical (basic) knowledge from applied knowledge. Knowledge, we argued, is not only generated in the traditional basic and discipline-driven manner, what has been called Mode 1; it is also produced at the interface between the university and society - what has been called Mode 2 (Gibbons, et al 1994). Validation is not only scientific through peer review but also utilitarian and practical.<sup>8</sup>

More significantly, our engagement with outside stakeholders has helped us reconceptualise the sociology of work as a focus within sociology. Throughout the history of SWOP, we have played a central role in the development of industrial sociology within the universities and within our professional association. More recently, through the two key intellectual currents in our work - globalisation and democratisation - SWOP's work is now opening up new directions within the discipline.

However there is a real danger that this potential contribution to the discipline will not be realised and that we will be pressurised to become the research technicians for the new power elite. There are a number of trends pushing us in that direction. There is the well known anti-intellectualism within South African society. There is also a perception that the new government is intolerant of dissent and that our constitutional settlement encourages a one-party system. There is the pressure to do relevant research in the national interest. Above all, there are high financial rewards that consultants are able to obtain.

Such an imbalance between Mode 1 and Mode 2 would be bad for research and bad for good policy. Good policy needs to be thoroughly grounded in Mode One. It would be dangerous to 'inferiorise' policy research as Herbert Gans does



when he describes it as 'quick and dirty' (Cock, 1994:19). There are no intrinsic reasons why policy research should be lacking in intellectual rigour. Research needs constantly to challenge first principles, and ask fundamental questions about the purpose of work. Is it to make the enterprise more internationally competitive as the rhetoric of globalisation demands, or is it possible to reconcile equity and efficiency in a changing workplace?

## Conclusion

I have suggested in this reply to Max Price that the advent of democracy is not simply one of constraint; it has opened up opportunities for new partnerships and new ways of producing knowledge. In the years ahead we intend to develop more structured relationships with these outside stakeholders, entering into joint research projects with them. By being responsive to the changing nature of the workplace we have widened the range of research problems we are concerned with and the number of research partners we interact with. In the process we have developed a hybrid knowledge structure, a mixture of discipline based knowledge (Mode 1) and problem-based knowledge (Mode 2).

The challenge facing SWOP, then, in this new phase in its development is how to accommodate Mode 2 activities without neglecting its Mode 1 teaching and research responsibilities. This, I believe, requires a radical rethinking of the relationship between research activities in the university and the communities that fund and support it. As Andre Kraak has argued 'Mode 2 has generated both threats and opportunities for universities. Whilst they have lost their sole monopoly over knowledge they have gained enduring partnerships with other key societal stakeholders' (Kraak, 1997). It has also, of course, redistributed knowledge and enhances the potential for knowledge to become a source of innovation.

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## NOTES

1. Most of the participants who spoke at the Transformation symposium in February 1992 on the Role of Research in Transforming South Africa (*Transformation*, 18/19) have moved from predominantly policy research roles into predominantly policy making roles.

2. Price does not use the term research technocracy; it was suggested to me by Debbie Posel. I have used because it captures the idea of the intellectual making an in-put but not on the key issues.
3. Although I have followed Price's periodisation I would identify the changes that he attributes to formal democratisation as beginning in the early nineties. For example, our overseas funders indicated to us in 1990 that they would be withdrawing from support for SWOP.
4. I first became aware of this criticism in September 1991 when some of the participants in our Democracy and the Workplace course suggested that we held a 'hidden agenda' that favoured social democracy. The general response among my colleagues at that time was that the suggestion was most probably true and that we should become more open with our views as to what path we felt the labour movement should follow.
5. This alternative to the 'corporatist' model of Social Democratic government in Sweden has been labelled 'labour movement theory'. It rests on a reinterpretation of social democratic rule since the thirties in Sweden and on the assumption that it is possible for the labour movement to use the state to advance the cause of labour. Labour movement theory is associated with Esping-Anderson, Korpi, Stephens and Higgins. (James Fulcher 'Labour movement theory versus corporatism: Social democracy in Sweden', *Sociology*, 21, 2, May 1987.
6. Of course it is true that there has been a decline in the number of progressive NGOs, the closure of alternative journals such as *Work in Progress* and alternative publishers such as Ravan Press. But these institutions, Tony Morphet has argued, were children 'of a very special time' (T.Morphet, 'Ravan: Child of a special time', *Mail and Guardian*, 1 to 7 November 1996). They were dependent for their survival on foreign funding and were not deeply rooted in the intellectual culture of that time.
7. It is necessary to note here that the opposition to SWOP's recognition as a programme in 1987 came from some scholars in the Faculty whose work was broadly within the framework of historical materialism.
8. An example is the tacit knowledge produced by Leger. This concept emerged through intensive discussions with underground mine workers. It challenges conventional notions of knowledge construction suggesting that 'workers experiences' are downplayed in our understanding of what counts as 'science'.