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I’ve been asked to speak on ‘intellectuals, the working class and politics and that sort of thing’. I feel that I am on very thin ice here. I am not even certain that I know what an intellectual is. I know that not all people with a high degree of formal education are intellectuals and I know conversely that there are many people without substantial formal education that are intellectuals. I know that not all intelligent people are intellectuals and I know certainly that not all intellectuals are intelligent. When I look around this room I think that maybe the most accurate definition came from the late and unlamented Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia that defined all people who wore spectacles as intellectuals and then proceeded to shoot those who never got rid of their specs in time.

I am not proposing such a drastic solution. I am however going to suggest that the work of left intellectuals is being seriously undermined and undervalued and that, in part at least, it is the intellectuals themselves who are responsible for the low esteem in which their work is held. It is a result of the subordinated and rather obsequious attitude that they adopt to their own work. I would hope that UDUSA would be able to help change this.

I am naturally addressing my remarks to left intellectuals, people who wish to do serious research and other mental work in the service of challenging a repressive and exploitative status quo. This might not reflect the concerns of every UDUSA member. I am confident however that these are and should be the concerns of the organisation itself and clearly UDUSA would want to make these issues the concern of its members.

It is a strange personal reversal, talking to intellectuals about intellectuals. My union work consists mainly in talking to workers about workers. There’s a big difference whereas workers expect to be told - especially by left intellectuals - how politically important they are, and are, moreover, comfortable in this knowledge, left intellectuals generally expect to be told how peripheral they are, how they must subordinate themselves and all their activities to the workers and the masses generally. Indeed it sometimes seems that the greatest joy that a left intellectual can experience, the ultimate vindication, is to be told this by a real flesh and blood worker. This reflects a peculiar kind of humble, self-flagellation that is at odds with my experience of the ambitious and competitive spirit that characterises intellectuals in their own environment when surrounded by their own peers.

What I want to do this evening is to examine this cringing and subservient attitude. I think that it is important partly because it drastically affects intellectual production; it influences the questions that intellectuals are asking and it influences the answer that they give. And secondly it is important because it is increasingly at odds with reality. In fact intellectuals are increasingly influential and important and to pretend that they are not is somehow to deny the genuine
complexity that the relationship of intellectual work to political struggle and organisation entails and by so denying ironically to accord certain intellectuals far more effective power and independence than they should be accorded. Particularly given that these questions and this self-denigration does not tend to afflict conservative or liberal intellectuals. It has the effect of marginalising left intellectuals whilst the others blithely steam ahead drawing up their plans for a post-apartheid South Africa and meeting those who will implement the plans.

I should hasten to add that, within organisations like the unions, the democratic and class oriented nature of their project appropriately struggles to subordinate intellectuals. Similarly I think that in the relation between a grouping of intellectuals' and a mass organisation, it is wholly appropriate that the latter should struggle to establish their dominance in the wider political context. My argument is not with these fundamental issues. My concern here is with the question of intellectuals work. I think that it is about time that intellectuals begin to work out in relation to their product where lie the areas of autonomy and self-determination, and begin to specify and codify the precise character of politically responsible intellectual work.

There are three dominant ways in which intellectuals qua intellectuals relate to popular organisation and to the broader political struggle. The first two are not at the heart of our concern here but let me mention them and some of the major issues:

Firstly, as members or employees of mass organisation, I think that the relationship here is relatively uncomplicated and, in the unions with the development of an experienced and sophisticated leadership core, the potential dominance of non-working class intellectuals has, if anything become less of a problem over time. I should just say that, to the extent that intellectuals do dominate areas of union work, there is naturally an obligation on the part of those intellectuals to attempt to rectify this. Here it is not a lack of political education that is the problem but rather the professionalisation of key areas of union work that is the culprit. In this regard, lawyers, my particular bete noire, are the greatest scourge. For every sophisticated legal trick they devise to snare an unsuspecting boss, a thousand workers are confused and rendered powerless, and yet legal acumen and other professional skills are necessary, but it is imperative that the tide of creeping professionalisation, always a likely area for intellectual domination, be halted. One way for this to be done is for intellectuals - possibly using the resources of the universities - to involve themselves in providing 'barefoot doctor' type skills - para-legal, para-medical, para-accounting, etc.

Secondly, there is the hardy annual, service organisations. I don't intend getting into this hoary debate in any detail, suffice to say that I don't, for the most part, share the suspicion that emanates from much union leadership regarding service organisations. I think that there are problems of overlap, I think that service organisation often do attempt to be politically interventionist, I think that in many instances service organisations tend to take on tasks that the unions themselves should carry out, I think most seriously that service organisations, partly by offering better pay and working conditions, tend to divert intellectuals from direct involvement in the unions. But many of these tendencies emanate
from bad practices in the unions themselves and it is these that the unions should be tackling.

I also do not go along with the notion that the unions should be absorbing all the activities of the service organisations. I have little difficulty, however high-flown this may sound at the present time, in viewing the service organisations as embryonic state apparatuses performing tasks that the unions and popular organisation should not and cannot perform. For that, the service organisations should be nurtured rather than scorned.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we need to look at how intellectuals based at the universities, clearly the most important sites of intellectual activity, relate to political organisation and political struggle. I am talking here not about teaching work which is an increasingly important political relationship, but rather about research work, about the production of new knowledge. This area is controversial and important. I'll confine myself to a few basic points:

It seems to me that the output of left intellectual work on the campuses is not great. I stand to be shot down here, but I am going to stick to my particular guns. As an intellectual based, for the most part, outside of the universities, and more than averagely interested in what is being produced at the universities, I'm not aware of much work that is being produced in a systematic and co-ordinated way that seeps much beyond these four walls. I think, in fact, that increasingly the research initiative lies off campus. Already, it is increasingly clear that a precondition for raising research funds for a left project is the endorsement of one or other off-campus progressive organisation. There is considerable support for formalising this in the shape of a single structure that would co-ordinate the relationship between political needs and organisation, on the one hand, and research work, on the other hand. In large part this is to be welcomed, but in part it is being done because university-based intellectuals have failed to establish the political legitimacy of their particular project and the mass organisations, to their credit, increasingly mindful of the need for this type of work, have taken the initiative from the intellectuals themselves. I would suggest that if the producers of intellectual work do not begin to assert their interests and insights, then the nature and direction of research work will, for reasons I outline later, be severely distorted.

Furthermore, I think that, to the extent that intellectuals are beginning to occupy centre stage, it is disturbingly not the left who occupy these positions of prominence and influence.

Let me be more explicit about this. I think that the current political trajectory is going to, in and of itself, bring intellectuals and intellectual work to centre stage. If the seventies and the eighties were characterised by mass action, then the nineties are going to be about negotiation. I am not suggesting for one minute that negotiation and mass action are mutually exclusive activities or that they can exist independently of each other, but it is true to say that the process of negotiation far more clearly involves the direct participation of intellectuals than does the process of mass action. I think that the lack of influence of left intellectual work on the negotiators, or expressed differently, the lack of a self-confident and assertive left intellectual voice is particularly disturbing at this crucial point in our history.
Just look around you, whether it emanates from the Wits Graduate School of Business, or the UCT Political Science Department, most anti-apartheid intellectual debate is dominated by a pragmatic centre, producing work of a generally unexciting analytic quality. Compare this with the work that dominated intellectual debate in the early 70s and you'll agree, I'm certain, that not only has the debate moved significantly rightward, but its intellectual quality has deteriorated markedly.

And, in a strong sense, it is not only the intellectual centre that is at issue here but the right wing as well, who naturally never ask themselves the questions that cripple and immobilise left intellectuals. I realise that many of the learned National Party professors, the jurists and economists and what have you, who are being introduced to the ANC are being so feted and lionised not because of their intellectual work but because of their perceived closeness to the rulers, that the talks represent the first stages of a sort of proxy negotiation. I understand and sympathise with that project, but nevertheless, for the most part, they are not negotiators, they do not represent government. They are what they are, right-wing intellectuals, with no concern for or contact with popular organisation whose mediocre ideas are already getting on the negotiation agenda, whilst the left wait around to be told whether or not they may speak.

What then is an appropriate code of work for politically committed intellectuals? Two small prior observations: Firstly, it is a big question and one that people involved in this issue will have asked more frequently and with more depth than I have. I make no pretense at providing a comprehensive answer. I merely throw out some ideas. Secondly, when talking about an appropriate political climate for progressive research work, it is difficult to avoid all the old liberal cliches that surround the notion of academic freedom. But the fact of the matter is that for the most part these cliches are appropriate. It is after all important that intellectuals should be free to ask questions and arrive at answers that conflict with the political establishment, be it of the left or the right. That certainly informs my approach to intellectual work. Journalism, art, music, all activities that I have little hesitation in claiming are, in part, subject to the dictates of an internally defined integrity. The trick is for the intellectuals (or musicians or journalists) to construct collectively a set of progressive criteria; not to hand to another organisation the sole right to determine the criteria.

I think that the following begin to lay out some of the most rudimentary characteristics of progressive left work:

1) I do not accept that politically disengaged intellectuals are capable of progressive intellectual output. I think that it is imperative that progressive intellectuals be active in organisation. Obviously, membership of UDUSA seems to be a non-negotiable condition for somebody based at the university to claim the title of 'comrade intellectual'. But more than that, it seems to me that a progressive intellectual who plays sport must self-consciously do so through a progressive sports body or forfeit his or her claim to engage in progressive intellectual work or that a progressive intellectual belongs to the various progressive street committees and resident associations that are to be found in all the major cities. More than that I think that it is imperative that a certain portion of output of each intellectual be directly structured through one or other of the
service organisations or mass organisations. And maybe above all I think that it is imperative that committed intellectuals fight to make the facilities of their departments and universities as well as part of their paid university time available to full time activists and workers.

2) I am quite comfortable with the notion that research and intellectual resources and activity should be centralised and brought into a direct relationship with mass organisation. But I am equally comfortable with the idea that the day to day activities of such a centre should be largely in the hands of the researchers themselves. All the big questions of academic freedom aside, too intimate a relationship between research work and political organisation tends to distort research work towards immediate and short term questions at the expense of deeper long term concerns. To take two very different examples: I have one progressive intellectual comrade who has spent much of the past three years doing research on telecommunications. I know another intellectual who has expended similar energy on German and Hungarian politics in the early decades of the century. I am in no doubt that this research is every bit as valuable as research on housing or on provident funds, but I am equally sceptical of the possibility of persuading progressive organisation of this. It sometimes seems that where attitudes to research are concerned, if political organisations made all the decisions we would have little pure science, no economic theory, no philosophy, and very little history. It is clearly the duty of intellectuals to attempt to persuade popular organisation of the necessity for this type of work, just as it is the duty of popular organisation to force the philosophers to render their philosophy more accessible. But on balance, stretched organisations will always insist on directly functional work. I understand why this is so but I don’t believe that this is always in the interest of a progressive political direction and I don’t think that intellectuals should always be obliged to bow to these needs.

3) Progressive intellectuals should not only be concerned with the content of their work but also with the style, with the manner in which it is produced. University work seems to me to be par excellence individualised and isolated work: the tin God holding forth to hundreds of students; the researcher working on his or her own in order to produce work which shall evermore be associate with his or her name. It is the kind of activity that inspires big egos and a proprietary sort of individualism. I have had a recent experience of working with a group of political economists - the economic trends group - which has had a very different atmosphere to the normal university seminar. It has been a very collaborative project where everybody has drawn pretty freely on the insights of other members of the group. Unquestionably the fact that the output is commissioned by COSATU and will also be made publicly available has dictated this distinctive atmosphere. Clearly though, collaborative work must characterise a left intellectual project.

4) Whilst I clearly adhere to the notion of intellectual autonomy, I think that this was to be exercised in a politically responsible way. I think that political responsibility is a much abused concept. It is frequently used to suppress debate and to intimidate opponents. I have to recall that the notion of political responsibility held in 1980 by the editors of the SALB as well as prominent intellectuals in the unions would have prevented the registration debate from being aired. Its
ramifications and positions would have been confined to an elite few. Later
generations of activists would never have benefited from its lessons. Tactical
and strategic questions would have been far more difficult to introduce today
had the registration debate not publicly raised them then. I think that the same
false notions of political responsibility have prevented the so-called
‘workerist/populist’ debate from being opened up to rigorous examination. So
the debate continues to grind on - partly because its about real and important
issues - but partly because, in the name of ‘political responsibility’, it has never
been openly aired and properly put to bed.

Clearly though responsibility is a real issue: For example research that exposes
an organisation or an individual to the security police is naturally irresponsible.
But there are subtler issues and let’s examine some of these.

What of a left intellectual who has specialised in research on the unions and
who, because of this expertise, is invited to speak to a bosses’ seminar, precisely
because they are interested in what a leftist thinks on the issues at hand. Does
he or she go? Yes, under certain circumstances; no, under others. The fact is that
intellectuals are able to move between the bosses and the workers, the rulers and
the ruled. This is, at all times, a sensitive, and only sometimes, a necessary task.
It is imperative that intellectuals help establish the ground rules for this type of
conduct and that they monitor the conduct of their peers and discipline irrespon-
sible conduct. If they do not do this, then others will do it for them, at the
inevitable expense of intellectual autonomy and freedom.

Which brings me to my final point. All that I have stated here, and much more
besides, can only be achieved by the self-conscious organisation of intellectuals.
If intellectuals wish autonomy, if they want the right to set their own research
agendas, if they wish to work with mass organisations, if they want to delve into
debates and raise uncomfortable questions, if they want the right to dissociate
themselves from, and discipline, irresponsible colleagues, then they must be
organised. For these and many other reasons we require a strong and democratic
organisation of university democratic teachers and researchers. I hope that
UDUSA is able to fulfill that vital role.