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THE IMPACT OF INTELLECTUALS ON THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

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The role of intellectuals in the labour movement in South Africa has, with the exception of an article by Johann Maree, remain unstudied (Maree, 1989). In a much neglected study titled *New Men of Power* the late C Wright Mills identified four different types of intellectuals involved in the American labour movement. Firstly, there were professionally trained intellectuals such as lawyers and economists who were sometimes on the staff of the union. Secondly, there were the 'party' intellectuals who followed the 'line' of the party and sought to promote it among the rank and file leaders within the unions. Thirdly there were the free-lance research intellectuals who had no foothold in the institutions of the labour movement. Fourthly, there were union-made intellectuals. 'They are', Mills said 'union thinkers, with a big job on their hands ...(they) are in themselves a link between ideas and action' (Mills, 1971, 285).

While I think these are useful categories to begin an analysis of intellectuals in the South African labour movement, I would like to add a fifth - what Debbie Bonnin calls the grass-roots intellectual. The traditional Zulu praise poet, the *imbongi* for example, may be seen as a grass-roots intellectual, educating the workers about past struggles and at the same time offering interpretations of how the past can affect the present (Bonnin, 1987).

The third, fourth and fifth type - the party-intellectual, the union-made intellectual and the grass-roots intellectual - come closest to Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual. The first and second type - the professional and the free-lance researcher are the most visible, partly because they tend to be white, middle class and usually based in an established university. By examining the work of economists in the Economic Trends Group, David Lewis will be focusing on the first type; I intend to focus on the second - the free-lance researcher.

In doing so let me make four points clear: firstly, I do not think free-lance researchers are the most important. Arguably they are the least important and certainly the least influential type of intellectual in the labour movement. Secondly, I do not think Mills meant these categories to be seen as fixed - they are more like ideal types. Thirdly, for the free-lance researcher, worker education and research are closely linked - teaching is the means through which research findings are channelled into the labour movement. Fourthly, I agree with Sipho Pityana that it is problematic that these intellectuals are predominantly white and I am committed to trying to break down this division of labour through affirmative action. I have made a few comments on training of researchers in my own department in a book, recently published by Maskew Miller Longmans titled *Training for Transformation* (Motala, 1991). Maybe we can include a discussion on training after the presentation.

The central question I am concerned with in this paper is the impact of the free-lance research intellectual on the labour movement during the seventies and eighties. I suggest that there was no neat one-to-one linear relationship between the knowledge generated by the free-lance researcher and its application in the labour movement. Furthermore, the free-lance researcher was seldom commissioned to fill a knowledge gap which then provided information for a policy decision in the labour movement. Rather the concepts and theoretical interpretations that the researchers engendered permeated the labour movement in what the Harvard policy analyst Carol Weiss has called *knowledge creep* (Weiss, 1980).

The imagery of knowledge creep is that concepts 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.

What were these ideas and how did they circulate? Two theories of South African society were dominant in the sixties: liberal modernisation theory and pluralism. Both downplayed the significance of class.

However, in the early seventies these theories came under pressure from a new class paradigm emerging among a group of exiled and expatriate scholars. These 'revisionist' scholars sought to show, through the use of class analysis, that apartheid was conducive to capitalist development (Webster, 1991). This new class paradigm produced a number of powerful moral critiques of employer complicity in apartheid which operated at a rather general level. Their arguments were complemented by two further intellectual projects which came together at the University of Natal in the early seventies. These projects linked theory with the practical struggles taking place at that time in what has been called nostalgically, the 'Durban moment'.

The first of these struggles was Steve Biko's attempt to formulate the political discourse and practical programmes of black consciousness. The emphasis of BC on the need for blacks to mobilise as a group left white liberals with a deep uncertainty about their role in change in South Africa. Marxism, with its bold claims of class as a motor of history, offered a new generation of white academics an intellectually coherent political alternative to BC.

The second intellectual project can best be illustrated by the work of Richard Turner. The main themes of his ideas are set out in that remarkable book published in 1972, the *Eye of the Needle*, in which he stressed the capacity of people to change the world in which they live while at the same time providing them with a vision of a future South Africa based on participatory democracy. Most importantly, Turner placed heavy emphasis on the significance of black workers in the economy. He believed that it was through collective organisation, especially trade unions, that black people could exercise some control over their lives and influence the direction of change in South Africa.

What were the channels through which the ideas of these free-lance researchers percolated? Let me offer four examples of channels drawn from my own experience during the period under review.

Firstly, there was the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE), an off-campus

educational-cum-research body set up in 1973 in Durban largely by academics from the University of Natal. The key ideas were contained in six study-books, published in English and Zulu, that formed part of the IIE correspondence course. Produced largely by Richard Turner, these booklets introduced to union activists the key ideas of accountability and mandate among worker representatives - concepts that were to percolate into the movement and over time were to help shape the political culture of shop floor democracy that was to emerge in the eighties.

A second example was the *South African Labour Bulletin*. This journal began as a project of the IIE, to record the struggles of workers and also to provide workers with a source of ideas. One of the first activities undertaken was the commissioning of articles on the history of the labour movement by academics sympathetic to the labour movement.

These articles had a didactic quality evidenced in their emphasis on demonstrating the relevance of class in the South African past and in the search to establish the historical presence of organised labour traditions. The articles were written with an eye to the present: Jon Lewis, for example, investigated the origins, and argued for the advantages of, industrial unionism; Philip Bonner's article on the ICU of the 1920's castigated that organisation for failing to organise the small nucleus of workers in the towns, and warned about the dangers to organisation of a vague populism (Webster, 1978).

The third example was the Fosatu Labour Studies course which began at the University of the Witwatersrand, and ran from 1980 to 1985. The aim of this course was to encourage advanced worker leaders to analyse South Africa in historical perspective and come to understand the enormous transformation of our society under capitalism. The analysis was based on a combination of theory and practice. That is to say it rested on a Marxist analysis of the situation, rooted in the study of the concrete reality of society, which cannot be grasped purely in the abstract, but only through human praxis.

The final example is the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP), set up in 1985, as a research programme linked through an advisory committee to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). SWOP emphasised participatory research defined as a co-operative enquiry by both the researcher and the people who are the focus of the study. This included joint identification of the problem to be studied; sharing of ideas on the best way of conducting the study; and reporting back on the results. This involved making the research accessible. An example is the publication of *A Thousand Ways to Die*, a study on underground mine safety, into a popular pamphlet in Xhosa, Sotho and English for the members of the National Union of Mineworkers (SWOP, 1986).

This research method is not without dangers. It can lead to attempts to suppress uncomfortable research findings, as SWOP experienced when it investigated how the system of migrant labour created a market for prostitution and a potential AIDS epidemic (K Jochelson, M Mothibeli and J Leger, 1991). Careful negotiation was required with our research partners before coming to an agreement to publish this vital research on the devastating social consequences of the migrant labour system.

However, the significance of this research is that it percolated into official consciousness and, with the support of sympathetic individuals in the union, overturned accustomed patterns of thought. It helped clarify and reorder the union agenda leading it to become the first COSATU union to take up AIDS in a systematic way.

I have suggested in this paper that the knowledge of free-lance intellectuals has permeated the labour movement, a process best captured through the concept of knowledge creep. Does this mean, then, that the free-lance intellectual wielded a lot of power in the labour movement?

I believe not. There's an old saying, remarks Carol Weiss, that knowledge is power. Not in policy making, she says. In policy making, power is power. Knowledge is an adjunct; it is not the star of the show, it is only a supporting actor - sometimes only a bit player. The reasons are obvious, she says. People take their policy positions primarily on the basis of their ideological commitments and their interests (usually their self interest). Facts alone can't make such headway (Weiss,1988).

This does not mean research is powerless. If ideologies and interests are pulling in opposite directions, research has a chance of being heard. The AIDS research is a case in point. Here the ideology of patriarchy and promiscuous sexual practices was in conflict with workers' interests and the research findings made an impact. The important point is that the labour movement has many different interests and their members' ideologies are not fixed. The free-lance researcher can help define these interests and clarify the direction of the union.

Conclusion

Through a process of knowledge creep the ideas of free-lance research intellectuals permeated certain sections of the labour movement. However, by the mid-eighties their influence had begun to decline as *union-made intellectuals* began to increase in power and research became more professionalised, opening up the possibility of research consultancies on both sides of the class divide. Besides, knowledge creep takes time, and when change is urgent, it is hard to wait. For those who want research to influence policy, more efficient routes need to be found.

Have we seen then the end of the free-lance intellectual? I hope not, as the resources enjoyed by this type of intellectual enables them to do research on long term concerns rather than trying to answer immediate and short term questions. They also enjoy a degree of intellectual autonomy that gives them the potential to intervene in a critically engaged way. (Although I agree with David Lewis' remark in his key-note address to UDUSA in 1989 that left intellectuals have tended to adopt a rather obsequious and subordinate attitude towards their work (Lewis, 1989).

Much of the future of the free-lance intellectual depends on what happens in our universities. For the young academic today to write for the labour movement is to risk being thought insufficiently academic. It also places at risk tenure. In a contracting academic market, the old wisdom of 'publish or perish' is uppermost in the minds of most academics.

In his conclusions to *The University Reader*, Immanuel Wallerstein offered some thoughts about radicals in the university. 'There is much hard work to be done on

the left', he stated. 'This intellectual work will never be done well if it is isolated from praxis, from involvement in a political movement and political action. But neither will it be done well if it is isolated from the pressures of competing intellectual ideas in the mainstream of intellectual debate, which in America is still located in the university' (Wallerstein, quoted in Jacoby, 1987).

What Wallerstein says here about the university in America is also true of South Africa. If we are to harness the universities to serve the mass movement, then the transformation of the university remains the central question in any discussion of research and the transformation of South African society.

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