

A particularly timely contribution to South Africa's intellectual history

Steven Friedman (in collaboration with Judith Hudson), *Race, Class and Power: Harold Wolpe and the Radical Critique of Apartheid*

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This intellectual biography of one of South Africa's leading white, anti-apartheid academic radicals, arrives during a feverish phase of the country's post-apartheid life. A new generation of black student radicals are staking a claim to the "radical" mantle in protests currently rocking the country's university campuses. If the work by the subject of Steven Friedman's book, Harold Wolpe and other Marxist theorists were *de rigueur* for white student radicals in the 1970s, Franz Fanon and Steve Biko and talk of "decolonisation" roll off the lips of post-apartheid student activists. What then does Friedman's biography have to offer in the contemporary moment where the now somewhat older white academic left is derided as "irrelevant" and as presenting obstacles to radical change?

The extent of Wolpe's influence in the broad anti-apartheid political universe and the precise character of his relationship to the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP) are central themes in the book. These questions are part of a larger meditation upon the relationship of intellectuals (let us not forget that Friedman is one of our more prominent public intellectuals) to social movements running through the book. Friedman argues that Wolpe's influence is most clearly visible among a generation of white leftists for whom his 1972 piece "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid"

proved foundational to formulating the class based critique of apartheid and of the limits of liberal historiography. In this regard Wolpe made an invaluable contribution to the “revisionist” theorisation of the interactive relationship between capitalism and apartheid.

Friedman does an admirable job guiding readers through the Byzantine debates which Wolpe’s account of the relationship between capitalism and apartheid provoked amongst a range of social scientists. Liberals, Poulantzian fractionalists and social historians collectively demonstrated that Wolpe had overstated the isomorphism in the relationship between apartheid and capitalism. Similarly labyrinthine discussions surrounded Wolpe’s intervention regarding the SACP’s theory of “Colonialism of a Special Type” (CST) and his disagreements with “workerists” on the relationship of worker power to national liberation. At issue in many of these debates were questions about the direction of anti-apartheid strategy and the character of post-apartheid politics and society. Friedman shows that while Wolpe perceptively recognised strategic possibilities in late apartheid reforms, he nonetheless conspicuously failed to foresee the negotiated end to apartheid because of his investment in a “polarisation paradigm” central to the exile anti-apartheid imagination (chapter 9).

On the question of wider influence, Friedman confirms the negligible purchase Wolpe enjoyed amongst “grassroots” activists in the anti-apartheid movement, and his uneven influence at the higher reaches of the ANC and SACP. Friedman’s exploration of the complexity of Wolpe’s relationship to these two organisations is arguably the most intellectually arresting aspect of the book. This aspect speaks directly to Friedman’s interest in the relationship between intellectuals and social movements. Wolpe’s 1985 statement, “The Liberation Struggle and Research”, laid out a position placing intellectuals at the service of the anti-apartheid movement, while simultaneously accepting subordination to that movement. This was an awkward posture for any intellectual to adopt. Wolpe’s reluctance to challenge the SACP’s position publicly on CST led him to engage occasionally in unbecoming intellectual gymnastics, but this also owed something to Wolpe’s insistence on keeping both race and class in play analytically, a balancing act which recent critiques of white anti-apartheid leftists have suggested often led to the privileging of class at the expense of race.²

Wolpe’s reticence to publicly contradict anti-apartheid party lines, together with his apparently “unquestioning public loyalty to the former Soviet Union” calls to mind controversies about Eric Hobsbawm’s relationship to the British Communist Party, which he notoriously refused to leave, despite the departure of a large number of Leftists (including fellow historian E.P. Thompson) following the Soviet invasion of

2. N. Ally and S. “Ally, ‘Critical Intellectualism: The Role of Black Consciousness in Reconfiguring the Race-Class Problematic in South Africa’, in A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander and N.C. Gibson (eds), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (Palgrave, London, 2008).

Hungary in 1956 (p 36).³ Friedman dedicates significant space to the question of Wolpe's independence from the SACP and ANC, but surprisingly little to the more acute question of his continued loyalty to the Soviet Union. In exile in the United Kingdom, Wolpe could not possibly have been insulated from growing Leftist disillusionment with the Soviet Union and Communist Party abuses, but Friedman disappointingly does not explore this area nor the extent of Wolpe's possible knowledge of alleged abuses in ANC exile camps.⁴

The absence of discussion on these topics somewhat weakens Friedman's goal, clearest at the conclusion of the book, to use Wolpe to fashion a tool-kit for theorisation of the post-apartheid predicament, a tool-kit which must – in the author's words – “transcend” Marxism, and be untainted by the sclerotic Marxist-Leninism of the post-apartheid SACP. Friedman believes, for good reason, that Wolpe's gift to the South African social sciences was his insistence on the critique of “private power” (p 170). While the historical and contemporary importance of gender is emphasised in discussion of Belinda Bozzoli's critique of Wolpe, the overall invisibility of gender from Friedman's attempt at constructing a Wolperian roadmap for post-apartheid critique is a rather conspicuous absence (pp 194–199).⁵

The lengthy theoretical exegesis makes for heavy going in places; at three hundred plus pages, a spot of judicious editing would have been welcome. None of this detracts from the fact that this book is an excellent and particularly timely contribution to South Africa's intellectual history. Wolpe grappled impressively (and sometimes inelegantly) with the inextricable relationship of race and class in South Africa. This illuminating book is highly recommended to the readers of this journal, as well as for the student activists currently following in the footsteps of the leftist radicals of the 1970s.

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3. For a particularly critical view of Hobsbawm's relationship to the British Communist Party see T. Judt, “The Last Romantic”, *New York Review of Books*, 20 November 2003.
 4. S. Ellis, *The External Mission: The ANC in Exile* (Hurst, London, 2012).
 5. B. Bozzoli, “Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9, 2 (April 1983), pp 139–171.