

Academics and the Policy-making Process under Apartheid and in Contemporary South Africa

Trevor Bell
*129 Juniper Road
Berea, Durban*

In a career that began as a student in 1952 and ended as a professor of Economics in 1994, my various spells at Rhodes spanned a period of 43 years under Apartheid. I have lived and worked in Grahamstown for varying periods of time during each of those decades – as a student in the 1950s when I acquired the emotional equipment for life as an academic; as a young lecturer in the 1960s (full, enriching and collegial years in a small Department where the emphasis was on teaching and we taught our butts off); as Reader in the 1970s (an obscure elevated title that is equivalent to today's Associate Professor); as Professor from 1984, and Head of Department from 1988 to 1994, a period when administrators grew in influence compared to academics, SAPSE took over, and the lives of academics were made miserable by bureaucratic chores and demands for increased efficiency in the face of financial stringency.

Such are my credentials for the present task – to try to encapsulate what I believe Rhodes' critical tradition in the social sciences to be, as I experienced it personally, how it related to the wider society during the Apartheid years, and how it should continue to do so.

Academics are believed to live in ivory towers – which the dictionary defines as 'state of seclusion from the ordinary world and protected from the harsh realities of life' It is true that social scientists in some sense inhabit a world of abstraction, fascinated by the prevailing theories of the time. I confess that I am passionate about the ideas, the beautiful symmetry, of economic theory, and perhaps this smacks of the ivory tower. It is also true that in the Apartheid years most people in the university, including myself, who dabbled in theory were not part of the harsh reality, in that in their ordinary lives they were not the direct victims of that reality. They were not victims of the system. They did not suffer directly from its ill effects. For some, ideas and theories may have been a way of avoiding having to confront the harsh realities.

But this is not the whole story. Social scientists at Rhodes were not copping out.

In the first place it was very hard in Grahamstown to escape the harsh reality. Rhodes, located as it is in the heart of the Eastern Cape, was surrounded by the effects of South Africa's racial policies – rural poverty, restrictions on the geographical mobility of people and belated attempts to create job opportu-

nities in remote areas without infrastructure – the so-called border industries project. One saw the harsh reality on a daily basis – in the High Street, the townships, if one tried to escape to the bright lights of East London, or on the way to the Hogsback, if one preferred a rural retreat.

Academics responded to the political milieu and their social environs in different ways – perhaps depending on their temperaments and aptitudes. Some became political activists, of whom some are bearing their witness in this colloquium. I was not one of those.

This does not mean that I was completely out of touch with what was going on, or out of touch with people who were politically active: by no means. This, I think, would have been very difficult at Rhodes. Perhaps I lacked the courage, but certainly the temperament and aptitude to pursue the activist path. Mine was what may be called the ‘academic response’ to the harsh realities that surrounded us, and I want to argue that it is essentially the academic response that has shaped the critical tradition at Rhodes.

The critical tradition is born of what William Makgoba in his address at his installation as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Natal last year termed ‘a complex and dynamic interplay of societal, political, historical and economic processes – pressures which had an impact both on knowledge for understanding and knowledge for use’ (p.4). Academics at Rhodes were contributing in a particular way to the alleviation of the harsh realities of life by trying to understand them, to make others understand them, and, in some cases, to influence the policy-making process. This is the way in which they contributed to the wider society.

Not surprisingly, given the harsh realities of the Eastern Cape, economists at Rhodes were concerned with poverty in South Africa, especially rural poverty. The tradition goes back a long way, to W.M. MacMillan who first took up a lectureship in a newly created dual Department of History and Economics in 1911. He was the first to teach formal courses in economics and also the first to undertake studies of the so-called poverty datum line in South Africa. This was the beginning of a great tradition of social science research at Rhodes, carried on, *inter alia*, by Monica Wilson in Pondoland.

None did more to carry on Macmillan’s pioneering research in the area of poverty than Desmond Hobart Houghton, who was in charge of Economics from 1932 to 1966, and to whom I owe a great deal. He had a compelling lecturing style. As an undergraduate I, like many other students over the years, listened enraptured, often finding it difficult to take notes and forced to go off and read and work things out for myself. Weekly Honours tutorials were held at his home at the top of High Street and concluded with refreshments and conversation with him and Betty, his wife. These were the early days of development economics, which became his special interest. He had a house at the Hogsback to which he retreated at the weekends to garden and work, cheek by jowl with the harsh reality of rural poverty in Keiskammahoek. His academic response

was a study of rural poverty in Keiskammahoek. The tradition has lived on at Rhodes in the late 1980s and 1990s in the work of Chris de Wet in Anthropology and Murray Leibbrandt in Economics, to name only two.

The academic response is not purely intellectual. It entails a set of values, concerns and beliefs, what I have been referring to as emotional equipment. In the 1950s, Keynesianism was still dominant and one's emotional ethos was profoundly affected by works such as the 1944 report of William Beveridge on Full Employment in a Free Society, one of the foundations of the British welfare state, read under the tutelage of Robbie Threlfell (who died tragically in 1956 at an early age). Equally influential was Desmond Hobart Houghton's deep commitment and passionate concern about rural poverty that conveyed itself to his students. We did not only take away with us the then recent exciting theory contained in Arthur Lewis' great study 'Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour': we acquired emotional equipment along with the formal theoretical analysis. This emotional equipment was crucial. Without it, one cannot decide what problems to focus on, let alone have the motivation to tackle them. It is an essential ingredient of the critical tradition.

Rural poverty is inextricably linked to the issue of migrant labour – another harsh reality that elicited an academic response from Rhodes. Rhodes has a notable reputation in Anthropology – I think of Philip Mayer and my very dear friend, David Hammond-Tooke, who died earlier this year. The social aspects of migrant labour prompted Philip Mayer's *Townsmen or Tribesmen* – a great book in my view. It not only made a contribution to the wider society, it was about the wider society, and inspired a branch of the Rhodes critical tradition all its own. It certainly inspired my own work on migrant labour in 1971 and 1972, which aimed to put the contribution of economists and anthropologists on migrant labour within the same theoretical framework. While writing the paper I would keenly await morning tea in the Senior Common Room to pounce on Philip to discuss some point in his book relevant to my efforts. That is my ideal of what a university is all about.

Migrant labour, for me, however, was a side interest. Events directed me to make my academic response in a relatively uncharted area involving its own kind of harsh reality – the State's industrial decentralisation policy, which had been introduced in 1960, the year of Sharpville and Langa, – which essentially involved attempts to develop centres near the 'reserves' through industrialisation. The real purpose of the policy, however, was obviously not philanthropic but to bring about racial separation on a regional basis.

Rather than merely question the morality of the politics of territorial separation, under the influence of T.W. Hutchison I took the view that there was little point in evaluating border industries policy except in terms of the government's own criteria. I basically set out to assess whether territorial separation of the races on the scale on which government apparently desired it was economically feasible. My prior intuitive belief was that it was not, but my aim was to

show it as objectively as I could. My implicit and naïve assumption was that, provided I did this, I would have an influence on policy, and that I would contribute to the abandonment of the aim of territorial separation and hence to a more realistic approach to the racial problem in South Africa. This was not political activism. It was not very heroic, and it did not meet with the approval of some, but it did involve a persistent and strenuous effort to undermine one of the major aspects of Apartheid policy.

I underestimated how irrational such policies are, of course, and I soon realised that there are very decided limits to the influence of rational analysis on policy. Logically watertight argument can be influential, I think, only once experience is beginning to show the difficulties in the way of implementing a policy. Indeed only in 1973, thirteen years after the work was begun, when I delivered a paper on the subject at the Economic Society of South Africa, did I feel that I had made any impression on people. Then only did I feel that I had fairly thoroughly disposed of the idea that industrial development could provide any answer to South Africa's political problems and had made it clear that the answers could not lie in the territorial separation of the races.

This same urge to direct my emotional equipment at influencing policy has underpinned my work in other areas too, such as the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), obstacles to the growth of manufacturing, the motor industry, international trade and industrial policy.

In the absence of Apartheid, what is the future of the academic response? To what end does one direct one's emotional equipment? Where is there an outlet for all the energy spent by so many people in the period before 1994 in fighting Apartheid in one way or another?

In my view, that energy should be directed at an *academic* response. One thing that struck me in the 1980s, compared to the 1960s and 1970s, was the growing prevalence of commissioned work done on a consultancy basis: that is, research that brings in extra income to academics. Today this is a plague. The consultancy business, I read in the press, now absorbs a quarter of government expenditure on procurement. It has been said that consultancy represents a second tier of bureaucracy. In as far as academics are part of this, they are in danger of simply becoming bureaucrats. I have myself in recent years done work for the Department of Trade and Industry and for NUMSA, and even had the unfortunate experience of attempting to influence policy administration from within as the Chairman of the Board on Tariffs and Trade.

Low academic salaries are a major contributory factor to the consultancy plague, of course, but consultancy comes at an individual cost to the academic and a cost to the academic enterprise in general. I see promising young people linked with research consortia and doing massive amounts of consulting, which prevents them from doing the difficult reading at an early stage that is essential for a long-term academic career. I do not believe that fundamental academic work can be done on this basis. It is one thing to get a research grant to cover

expenses for a research topic chosen by oneself for its intrinsic scientific value and practical importance. It is another to undertake some badly conceived consultancy project in accordance with terms of reference written by an official in local, provincial or central government for some half-baked steering committee. You don't have the freedom to design the research properly, to decide how you are going to do it, or even to decide where or what to publish. My own personal experience in recent years in doing work for government departments and trade unions has taught me that it is very difficult to do one's best work on a commissioned project. Nothing good is ever done in a hurry. The independence one has as an academic in a university is essential.

Independence is particularly important if one's emotional equipment drives one to try to change prevailing government policy. This cannot be done on a consultancy basis. Government departments are not conducive to fundamental thinking about policies. Many do not have the capacity to formulate policies, especially given the very ambitious programme the government has set itself. If they did, they would not need to outsource. They are not really even in a position to tell consultants what they want done. Even if departments appoint so-called advisers to conduct so-called policy reviews, government officials, and, at times, even the relevant minister give input into the process, managing the adviser's provisional findings and conclusions. Advisers do not produce an independent report that is then considered by top officials and the minister. The minister has often made up his mind in advance and the role of the adviser is simply to give some sort of legitimacy to this position. It is only the academic that has the freedom to analyse and present findings that are cogent, rational and independent, and to try to influence policy in the national interest. Genteel poverty is the price one has to pay if one's emotional equipment drives one in this direction. This may be asking too much, but the critical tradition will be the poorer without the academic response.

So much for the *academic* response. What of the response itself? In post-apartheid South Africa, to what is one responding? Does the current political and social milieu produce an emotional ethos sufficiently powerful to provoke the academic response, especially in the policy arena?

On the face of it, no. We see precious little of a real debate on many important issues related to government policy today. On some issues there has been virtually no public discussion. In some ways it is more difficult to criticise government policies now than it was in the 1960s, when the whole world was against Apartheid and one was simply elaborating the case against it.

This lack of a public debate and the lack of proper analysis of the effects of policy prior to implementation at the government level simply make the responsibility of the academic all the greater. The role of the social scientist is no different from what it was under Apartheid – to analyse, to understand and to make others understand the wider society in which we live. It is also not enough to leave it to government to formulate and implement policies on social and

economic issues. The academic has a role to play in this regard, no matter what government is in power.

For instance, those of us who are returning to Grahamstown for this colloquium cannot fail to notice that the harsh realities of daily life for many still stare us in the face. Ten years into democracy social and economic conditions in the Eastern Cape remain largely unchanged. There remains much analytical and critical work to be done on rural poverty and development in the tradition of scholars at Rhodes both past and present. My sense is that this issue is being neglected in South Africa as a whole. President Mbeki has mentioned rural development as one part of government strategy but nothing appears to have been done. The whole question of the proper balance between rural and urban development in South Africa needs to be addressed – the problem of rural areas and the number of people in them will not go away without such research. A former student of mine at Rhodes, Gill Hart, now at Berkeley, has written a major work on industrial development in Ladysmith and Newcastle. The old issue of the development of former homelands is still alive and well. What the country needs is more such academic response in the Rhodes social science critical tradition – a tradition that has contributed in its unique way to the wider society.

Much, if not all, of the research that established that critical tradition in the social sciences was inspired by a desire to deal with practical problems in South Africa. William Makgoba, in his installation address to which I referred earlier, spent time defining an African university. An African university has responsibilities and these responsibilities, he said, ‘are moral, intellectual and inspirational and they are served by adapting our scholarship to the social structure and cultural environment of Africa’... ‘An African university must not only pursue knowledge for its own sake’, he added, ‘but also for the... amelioration of conditions of life and work of the ordinary man and woman’ (p.7). Social scientists at Rhodes have indeed been African scholars.

Makgoba then issued a challenge: ‘Can we say that as a community of scholars we are effectively helping to address the primary issues of our time?... How is our scholarship contributing effectively to the fight against hunger, the weakened rand [He might well now say “the strengthened rand” – T.B.], disease, crime, poverty and racial division – all of which threaten to overwhelm the fruits of our hard-won democracy?’ (p.8). Here lies the challenge for present and future generations of Rhodes academics – to prove themselves African scholars by contributing to the wider society through their academic response, thereby earning their own place in the Rhodes critical tradition.