

REPORTS

Dilemmas of the Left Academy: A Report on the 1998 Socialist Scholars Conference

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Background

The questions which stood out for me, after spending three days at the Socialist Scholars Conference held in New York in March 1998, were not those which were explicitly addressed in conference papers; but rather those raised by the character of the event itself: Is there a community of socialist scholarship? How is it structured, both within a national context such as the USA, and globally? How does it, or should it, relate to the struggles of oppressed people? Does a conference of this sort enable a South African to relate more coherently to an international context of thought and activism?

One way of responding to these questions is by beginning with the background in South Africa, and at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), which was most conspicuous in forming my expectations and reservations about a conference of this sort: my involvement, in the eight years from 1988 to 1995, in the Marxist Theory Seminar (MTS) at UWC, which sought to bring together a similar set of academic and political concerns, in a very different kind of context.

Within the context of UWC, MTS sustained a weekly series of lunch-time seminars which, in the early 90s, was ordinarily attended by 100-150 people and occasionally by as many as 400-500. It also ran several smaller reading groups, study groups and the like. In the larger national context, it made one major intervention: a conference on 'Marxism in South Africa – Past, Present and Future', held at UWC in September 1991, with about 40 papers presented and 350 people attending (reported in Bundy 1991). What that conference demonstrated was the absence of any common conception of Marxism which made possible a fusion of activist and analytic concerns. Once it was over, the MTS committee had no sense that a Marxist culture could be built through conferences of that sort. There were probably three divergent ways in which such a conference was conceived of by its participants:

- (i) For the MTS, organizing the conference, we saw it as an opportunity to assess the resources of Marxism in South Africa in such a way that these could be developed in a more conscious and collective way. This idea as-

sumed a common understanding of Marxism as a resource always in need of development, which could be historically interpreted and understood, rather than Marxism as a completed set of beliefs or dogmas.

- (ii) For many of the most vocal participants at the conference, it was an opportunity to put forward the line of their own organisation or tendency, and attack those of their rivals. The sectarianism of small groupings, mostly Trotskyist, was not going to be incorporated into any larger purpose. The conference made clear that this approach relied on a conception of Marxism as a completed and true account of reality which could be tested by its strategic political perspectives.
- (iii) It is perhaps only seven years later, after seeing the American equivalent of our UWC conference, that I see that there was a third approach to the conference – as an opportunity to get together with the right people, i.e., those with a certain kind or level of prestige. (For this perspective, see the column of 'Red Eye' (1991:p.7) in the *South African Labour Bulletin*.) No one will openly defend an approach to Marxism as a way of keeping company with the right people – but this is undoubtedly a part of what happens on such occasions.

Against this background, I was interested to see how the first two approaches to Marxism (or socialist thought more generally) played off against each other in the context of an advanced capitalist country, with incomparably larger intellectual resources. I did not anticipate the extent to which the third approach would be decisive for the interaction of the first two.

Conference aims and format

The Socialist Scholars Conference has been an annual event in New York for about 20 years. In recent years, it has regularly been attended by 2000 people or more. It seeks to combine academic scholarship and discussion of the issues concerning activists in a way which is perhaps unique today – at any rate, unique on that scale and with that degree of continuity.

The central organisers of the conference are based at the City University of New York, but its organisational format is relatively decentralised. A large number of 'sponsors' – including political organisations, journals, academic departments and research institutes, networks and the like – take responsibility for specific panels. They select a topic, and invite speakers. The central organisation then allocates times and venues for each of the panels. The benefit of this is that each session has a relatively coherent focus, rather than having to accommodate individual topics which may turn out to have little in common. It also ensures a certain kind of pluralism, and an inclusive conception of socialist scholarship. This may also be seen as a problem, insofar as the conference as a whole does not get far in addressing any central theme, and different socialist groups are likely to talk to themselves rather than each other.

The conference began on the Friday evening, 20 March, and continued until Sunday evening, 22 March. The first and last sessions were plenaries. In the other six sessions, there were a total of 116 parallel panels – that is, about 20 at any given time – meeting at different venues. This meant that, if you attended every session, you still attended not much more than 5% of the conference. In addition, there was a very busy trade in books, magazines, journals, tapes, etc, which seemed to attract as many patrons at most times as did any of the actual panels.

Conference theme

The theme of the conference was 'A world to win: From the *Manifesto* to new organizing for social change'. The conference marked the 150th anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto*, and the 30th anniversary of the Paris revolt of May 1968. It also took place at a time of increased labour action in the United States (most notably the huge United Parcel Services strike of 1997), and growing strains in the system of global capitalism, after the crisis of the South East Asian economies.

The theme was probably meant to bring together these motifs, without quite setting an agenda for discussion of them. The extent to which the conference dealt with that theme probably depended on which 5% of the conference you attended. My impression is that it did not (and perhaps could not) do much more than make very loose connections between the legacy of the *Manifesto* and the sense on the left that the task of organisation has taken on renewed importance.

Conference panels

The opening plenary panel had six speakers, and a good deal of overlap in what they said (history has not ended, as capitalist ideology would wish us to believe; problems of poverty and inequality grow worse; it is necessary to organise and resist). Elaine Bernard spoke of trade union struggles at Harvard and other universities, Dave Cotterill of the Liverpool dockworkers' strike. Francis Fox Piven paid tribute to Joe Murphy, former chancellor of the City University of New York and one of the stalwarts of the conference. (As it happened, he'd attended a class of mine at UWC in the late 1980s.)

On Saturday, I attended three panels. The first was entitled 'One Hundred and Fifty Years after the *Communist Manifesto*', and was sponsored by *Monthly Review*. It was chaired by Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff, who have edited the journal for almost 50 years, and it was an experience in itself to see them still at work. The panel included three outstanding papers by Ellen Wood, Aijaz Ahmad and Daniel Singer. Wood used the *Manifesto* as the basis for an analysis of the world economy since 1945, and the 'closet Keynesianism'; of the New Left response to it. Ahmad discussed the differential temporalities of capitalist progress, the resulting crisis of the nation-state and revival of ethnic

loyalties. Singer dissected the idea that 'there is no alternative' to capitalism today. The panel was held in the main auditorium, and was followed by a somewhat chaotic discussion.

The second panel I attended was on 'Capitalism and the Media', sponsored again by *Monthly Review*. It was a smaller meeting, and I hoped it might offer opportunity for more focused discussion. But the papers (by John Bellamy Foster, Edward Herman and Joan Greenbaum) were pretty indifferent. Some of the empirical detail concerning questions such as Bill Gates' strategy for the Internet was mildly interesting. But none of this seemed to have much political focus. The discussion was also chaired in a way which I found bizarre: with the chairperson selecting contributions from those on the floor whom he (or the panel) knew, and chair and panel effectively by-passing any contribution which was not conspicuously that of an 'insider'.

The third panel I attended, 'Dialectics: The new frontier', was sponsored by the Radical Philosophy Association and the journal *Science & Society*. Papers were presented by Joel Kovel, Bill Livant and Bertell Ollman. Kovel gave a lively and attractive account of dialectics, which forms a small part of a much larger project. But the panel did not really succeed in setting out the parameters of any debate on what was 'new' about dialectics, or in what ways it constituted a 'frontier'. This was especially evident in the discussion, which turned on the extent to which the legacy of Engels' dialectic of nature (very much the product of a Victorian idea of science, as I argued) could be dispensed with in order to make of dialectic a viable instrument of social and political analysis.

The panel to which I contributed was held on Sunday morning. It was entitled 'The sorry state of South African socialism', and was sponsored by the journal *Critique*. My paper was entitled 'Nelson Mandela, the Tribal Model of Democracy and the New South Africa' (forthcoming in a much-shortened version in *Monthly Review*). The other paper was presented by Hillel Ticktin of Glasgow University, and dealt with the 'Political Economy of the South African Transition'. There were about 40 people present. Because the presenters of the scheduled third paper did not arrive, there was time for quite extensive discussion. Contributions were lively, but very disparate, ranging from someone who had thought that all problems in South Africa had been solved by the elections of 1994 to a New Yorker who announced that the South African working class was preparing for struggle under the leadership of the Workers International Vanguard League!

The two subsequent panels were – each in their own way – a disappointment. The first of them dealt with the '50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights', and was sponsored by the Democratic Socialists of America's CUNY branch. I was drawn to it by the sub-title, 'From Cold War roots to Progressive Paradigm', which suggested a historical treatment of the ways in which human rights discourses and ideologies have evolved over the past 50 years – a topic of considerable importance in the South African context. But the

panel offered nothing of the kind. The papers (Richard Klein, Ward Morehouse, Peter Weiss) were largely written from a legal perspective, and were addressed to a human rights advocacy profession, with its own codes and concerns. As far as I could see, they depended on a conception of social change as the product of legal arguments by liberal-minded experts, which was so firmly-embedded that the presenters no longer realised they held it.

Finally, I went to a panel with the title, 'Stop Capitalist Barbarism/Prepare the Alternative: Reports and comments on the Cape Town conference', which was sponsored by Against the Current and the International Network for the Socialist Alternative. I did not initially intend to attend that session, and did not expect much from it. But the conference on which the panel was reporting had been held in Cape Town, under the auspices of WOSA, and it was clear to me from the morning session that there was a certain level of interest in South Africa among conference-goers. For that reason, I thought I should probably be there. It turned out, however, that the Cape Town conference had been dominated by ideological feuds between two US left groupings who were now set to continue them on home ground. The strategy of the chair of the panel (Richard Greeman of the International Victor Serge Foundation) was to play for time. After he had spoken for about an hour (out of a total of one hour and fifty minutes), fielded many objections to the meeting's procedures, and looked set to continue, with three panellists still waiting to speak, I decided to leave. I sat in on the concluding part of a discussion of the legacy of Che Guevara, at which papers had been given by Michael Lowy and Paco Igaico Taibo.

Character of the conference

The conference was in many ways a memorable experience. Some papers were excellent, and there were moments of interesting discussion. It gave me a better sense of how the globalised academic system works, and in particular the ways in which intellectuals from the Marxist Left can relate to it. At the same time, the conference did little to inspire in me confidence in contemporary globalised academic life, the Western Left, or my capacity to relate coherently to their activities.

I shall try to summarise the experience with three comments on the conference itself, and a fourth relating it to the background with which I opened this report: First, the division between academics and activists at the conference seemed to me to be almost insuperable. Indeed, it seems to create a kind of paralysis on both sides. In some ways, the gap seems unbridgeable not so much because the two sides are so far from each other, but because they are so close. Many, perhaps most, of the activists from political organisations were students; others were ex-student activists, or were organising mainly on campuses. Perhaps because they are working in small organisations, their leftism tended to be dogmatic and sectarian. (The apparent exception which I came across was the 'News and letters' group, in which Raya Dunayevskaya played a prominent

role.) Academics, on the other hand, tend to see their research as a kind of activism in its own right, and to substitute concern with methodological framework, research agenda, etc, for concern with their own relation to political practice outside of the university. The result is that neither side communicates coherently with the other: student activists fling slogans on occasion, older academics respond ironically, or not at all.

Second, within the left academic community, the attitudes, conventions and hierarchies of mainstream academic life are reproduced to an extent that I found surprising. In the past, I have been aware of a contrast between a patriarchal mode of academic life – in which the older and better-connected males take priority, regardless of intellectual ability, research output and the like – and a mode of academic life based on the market. The conference reminded me that this contrast does not imply less emphasis on hierarchy within the market-based system. US academic life is almost certainly the most commodified in the world, and this makes itself felt in almost every transaction among left academics at a conference of this sort. To some extent, the sloganeering of the student activists reinforces this pattern rather than challenging it. The claim to engagement with real struggles which they imply is as much a way of negotiating an exceptional place within the hierarchies of discussion as it is a way of challenging it. This is probably true in South Africa as well, but less pronounced in our context.

Third, it must at the same time be said that the US Left has something of the remarkable openness to cultural outsiders which characterises the mainstream culture of the US. This acceptance of cultural difference provides the basis for a strong sentiment of socialist internationalism. Papers at the conference constantly returned to the need to challenge global inequality (cf. papers by Magdoff (1998:p.13) and Singer (1998:pp.41-2), now published in *Monthly Review*). But the commodification of left academic life seems to stand in the way of translating this sentiment into any very enduring reality. In effect, the global division of intellectual labour within Marxism mimics that of global capitalism today: the Third World provides the raw materials (the empirical studies of its own context) and the element of exoticism (guerilla struggles, etc), while the advanced capitalist countries control the process, set the parameters for debate, market the goods. Since the conference, I have written a paper on 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa' which tries to trace very briefly the interaction of the Western left with Marxist thought in the struggle against apartheid. Although this was not the main focus of my argument, it led me to think that South African Marxists have also been complicitous in preventing a global exchange of ideas and arguments on the Left on a basis of equality.

Finally, what could I learn from the experience about our own efforts at UWC to build a political and intellectual culture of Marxism? I began by setting out three different approaches to the task which emerged at the MTS confer-

ence in September 1991. After attending this conference in New York seven years later, I am forced to see the tasks of building such a local culture in a far more global and internationalist light. It is perhaps disheartening to discover that, in spite of the massive participation of the Western Left in the anti-apartheid struggle, the internationalism which could provide a basis for a viable Marxist culture in South Africa has yet to be built. In short, we will not overcome doctrinal Marxism in South Africa without challenging commodified Marxism here and abroad. Better to learn the lesson belatedly – after the moment of Marxism's intellectual and political purchase in South Africa – than not to learn it at all!

References

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