



Living out our differences: Reflections on Mandela, Marx and my country: An interview with Jakes Gerwel

Thesis Eleven

115(1) 7–24

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DOI: 10.1177/0725513612470531

the.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article takes the form of an exchange between Cape Town academic John Higgins and Jakes Gerwel, respected South African citizen and formerly chief aide to the country's first democratically-elected president, Nelson Mandela. The conversation covers a wide canvas which ranges from Gerwel's rural childhood to his recollection of working for Mandela. But there is also an exploration of the role played by South African Marxism in the struggle to end apartheid; on the place of education (and its failure) in the post-apartheid years; on the role of universities both prior and after the ending of apartheid. The important role of the humanities in educating is considered and the rise of technically-inclined forms of education are analysed; in this context, the idea that the citizen has been replaced by the entrepreneur is also raised. The issues of race and class in the context of South Africa's past and present are also discussed.

Keywords

Afrikaans, education, humanities, Mandela, universities, Marxism, Jakes Gerwel, South Africa

Jakes Gerwel, who passed away on November 28, 2012, was one of South Africa's most respected citizens: public intellectual, academic, bureaucrat and businessman.

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Gerwel was born in 1946 and raised on a sheep farm in the rural Eastern Cape. He studied at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), which was then an institution for Coloured (mixed-race) people, majoring in the Afrikaans language and Literature. He took his doctorate in at the University of Brussels. *Literatuur en Apartheid. Konsepsies van 'gekleurdes' in die Afrikaanse roman tot 1948* (Literature and Apartheid. Conceptions of 'Coloureds' in the Afrikaans Novel until 1948) (1983), his first book, was based on his thesis. He published several other books, many papers and, until his sudden passing, contributed a monthly column for a mass-circulation Afrikaans newspaper.

After a decade at the chalk-face which ended as Professor of Afrikaans at UWC, Gerwel was appointed as the university's Vice-Chancellor (VC). He was responsible for a shift in that institution's direction by calling, in his Inaugural Address, for it to become "the intellectual home of the Left". On apartheid's ending, Gerwel was appointed Director-General (chief of staff) in the office of South Africa's first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela. He stood down at the end of the Mandela presidency in 1999.

Gerwel was active in the country's public life, especially in the field of education, and in business. He held several honorary professorships and had received honorary doctorates from universities at home and abroad. He was also the Chancellor of Rhodes University.

Gerwel and his wife, Phoebe, lived in the working class suburb in a house they bought when he was at the chalk-face, but John Higgins interviewed him in the offices of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation in central Cape Town in August, 2012. Gerwel was the chair of the Foundation's Board.

JH: This interview will appear in a special number of the journal *Thesis Eleven*, an issue focusing on South Africa. The journal's title refers to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it', and I am sure we shall come back to that sentiment somewhere along the way. But for now, let's begin with some basics. As everyone knows, South Africa has enjoyed, since 1994, an extraordinary and extraordinarily peaceful transition from apartheid state to democratic nation. In your view, what are the factors that made this unprecedented transition possible?

JG: I have been criticized in the past for being too deterministic about these things, but I am of the view that it was South African history that laid the ground, or established the foundation, for us to come to a remarkable resolution of apartheid and the colonial conflict.

The concept of South Africa as 'one nation' is an old one. It's not one that we only discovered during the negotiations, though it was one that was realized and concretized during the negotiations. But if one thinks back: at the end of what we used to call the 'colonial wars of dispossession', in the mid 19th-century, there were no independent African polities left after those wars. Then, as a material factor, there was the fundamental change of the South African economy with the discovery of minerals in the latter part of the 19th century. This had many direct effects: urbanization increased to an extent that I don't think happened elsewhere on the continent; the economy became an integrated one, although not equal in its allocation and distribution. So, from the late 19th century, the fact of the new economy effectively brought into being the concept of 'one nation'. And after that came the South African War, the Anglo-Boer War, which in a sense

consolidated this idea, though in a very violent way. The fact of union was the juridical consolidation of this idea, and from Union¹ (of South Africa) onwards, the main political struggle was about the ‘colouring in’ of our nationhood. You’ll remember that after 1910 the delegations went to Britain to argue that we were ‘one nation’, and how that should be politically expressed. And, similarly, you saw that same concern coming through during the long years of the struggle against apartheid. Even the concepts that came out of that struggle manifested the commitment to the idea of South Africa as one nation. We produced the idea of ‘non-racialism’ that appears to be a singularly South African concept. The idea is a particularly South African extrapolation coming from that core concept of South Africa as one nation.

Another term that was central in the push towards democracy – though often criticized by some – was Harold Wolpe’s (1988) idea of South Africa embodying a ‘colonialism of a special type’. This also gave expression to the fact that the struggle was always amongst ourselves; it was not about some South Africans having a real home somewhere in a metropole beyond. And this came through in many of the other key concepts that drove the struggle against apartheid. The ‘democratic struggle’ was never directed outwards, was never about the extinction of something: it was about the country’s people coming together. Just remember how a substantial element in Congress² politics – naively at some points – thought that we were moving from a racial society to a multi-racial society, and towards a non-racial society, and that apartheid was an aberration within that movement. There was a great deal of that kind of inclusive thinking, so that even in the fiercest moments of struggle, what was going on was not typified as a racial struggle. We had a theory of contradiction that, while the principal contradiction was the class one, the dominant one in the sense of the one which showed was the racial one. But the struggle was never conducted as a racial struggle. I always had the sense that our history was conditioning us to the point where we could resolve our conflicts in the way we eventually did.

JH: What you’ve said usefully takes us up to 1994, and some way beyond that, but today, and particularly in the current wave of populism, one has to ask whether the idea and practice of non-racialism really holds such a central position in current national and political discourse as it should, and as it did in the Mandela years.

JG: I think today there is a lot more overt racial talk; there is a lot of racial noise. But I still think the non-racial concept is an informing one. It is not always lived out; and it is not always talked about by different groupings. But I still have the sense that on the world scale, South Africa is actually a pretty reconciled nation. We still live out our differences and our tensions and our divisions within a solid political and constitutional framework. The ANC was the main driver of the old non-racial concept, for both tactical purposes and moral and principled reasons.

I think today the ANC faces challenges: it has allowed material or materialistic factors to influence the concept of non-racialism. It was Stephen Gelb (1991), if I remember correctly – drawing from what was happening in the world and in the so-called ‘actual socialist states’ – who made the point that it was becoming clearer that South Africa could not become a worker’s state or a socialist state (at least not in our time) and that the most one could look forward to was a de-racialized South African capitalism. He asked, ‘If you have that, who will be the greatest rent-seeking or rent-gaining groupings

or classes?', and predicted that it would be the black middle class or the black bourgeoisie, and went on to probe a number of related questions: 'How do you then discipline that process?', 'How do you discipline the rent-gaining classes in order for there to be reciprocity, for the entire society to benefit?' Today it looks to me like we failed in just those ways – unable to discipline the rent-gaining classes towards reciprocity.

Gelb spoke about the need for a strong state to achieve that, but also asked, 'What does it mean to have a strong state without becoming an authoritarian state?' It seems to me that we have failed to answer that question too, and that rent-seeking and rent-gaining have become a driving force in society. We are not living out or pursuing those other principled ideals that we, as opponents of apartheid, had talked about.

JH: And much is happening under the cover of that re-racializing discourse: for even the *rentiers* you speak of need the support of the masses!

JG: I often contend that there is a kind of rationality in this trend, a perverse rationality perhaps. Africans, in the South African sense of the word, had been the most discriminated against, and the most exploited and the most suffering group in our society, by and large. Of course discriminations or exploitation can be calibrated in different ways. But, even if only subjectively and in the rationality that goes along with that, one can understand why there is that rent-seeking trend among black South Africans. But it is also clear that this trend is not good for society, and needs to be regulated and governed in a particular way which doesn't become *non* non-racial. That is the challenge: how do you put right a past that was so racially determined, without yourself becoming racial in addressing it?

That is the great challenge for our society, and it is a great pity that the race/class couplet is little addressed in public discourse, at least as far as I can discern. What has happened is that the issue has become almost a purely racial one, and even at times an ethnic one within black groupings themselves. This is the discursive challenge for public thinking set up long ago by the late Harold Wolpe (1988) and others, in their writings on race and class, and on the agenda again now that we face the imperative to change the society and the way that its racial/economic make-up looks.

JH: That is a significant challenge. I am wondering whether a part of the problem is perhaps the different critical resources and reference points available in the public mind to different generations. People of our generation were largely brought up to think in the terms offered by the complex interaction of race and class analysis; but, as you say, much of this kind of analysis has fallen out of use. So, what do you think make up the reference points for young thinkers today? How are they framing the issues of our time?

JG: This brings us to our pre-interview conversation about the humanities and education. I am no longer that in touch with universities. My closest contact with university life now is through Rhodes University, where I serve as its Chancellor. What happens in the universities now and how we are educating in the humanities are important societal questions. It is, after all, where those debates originated in our times. It was in the humanities that we spoke about these issues, and we were taught about them, and that young people learnt about them.

Interacting with students at the Mandela Rhodes Foundation³ these last ten years, I find encouraging the way that they think, and I am quite sure that there are many more young people like them. But I don't find that they have picked up on the class debate:

Marxism and its form of questioning have gone totally out of fashion it seems. I shouldn't generalize ... but the race/class issue was actually quite a fervent and informing debate during my time as a student and as a teacher; and we do know, of course, that material circumstances influence thinking. Perhaps today the demands for material progress are so strong and prevalent that people think of 'class progress' rather than 'class war'.

JH: Would you like to say something more on the question of the humanities, given the debates today?

JG: Ja, well, I remember that I half flippantly said after 1994 – when I was still a VC at UWC – that the bar for entry into the humanities should now be raised, so that the cream of the national intellect is directed into the humanities and social sciences. But that was in the old days, I suppose. Today you have to have a better mark to get into the natural sciences.

JH: Yet you yourself – with degrees in literary and social studies, and as former Vice-Chancellor of UWC – have had a deep involvement in humanist education for most of your life. Where do you see the place of the humanities in higher education policy today? All the latest policy documents focus on the contribution of science, technology and innovation to society, but tend to have little to say of the humanities as such, while acknowledging the social and human challenges that the country faces. What do you make of the current marginalization of the humanities?

JG: Look, one can understand the emphasis on science, technology and innovation because of the history of education in South Africa, and the sense after '94 that transformation of higher education was an imperative. In the old education system, too many black students went into areas like 'biblical studies' and others, and there was a neglect of advancement and the development of human capital in the natural sciences, mathematics, commerce and technology. So it's quite understandable why we sought to address that. The question is why the demise of the humanities, if there is indeed this demise, is a consequence of that changed focus?

In a strange way apartheid played a huge role in the vibrancy of the social and human sciences at the time. At the height of apartheid, sociology and historiography, for example, were vibrant and driving forces in the intellectual environment and public discourse. I often ask myself the question, in our epistemology or our conceptualization have we not lost a kind of *raison d'être* for the social and human sciences in the years that have followed? Did so much of the energy for the humanities and social sciences come from that oppositional energy that was set into motion by apartheid?

The anti-apartheid struggle was also in a large degree a battle of and over ideas, a battle of the priority of one set of ideas over another, and in this struggle the human and social sciences played a great and liberating role. Is it that we've not properly conceptualized what the human sciences do in, say, [a] 'developmental state', because that has become another cliché? The emphasis seems to have shifted from oppositional social science to what do we do in a non-oppositional context? As you've said, the issues we're facing are social ones – social cohesion, for example – and just how well are we doing with that? These are questions that are not going to be addressed by the non-human

sciences. So it's not about being sentimental about the human sciences or the social sciences. These are crucial to the development and progress of our society.

JH: Indeed. I think that what slipped out of the picture – and what emerges very clearly in the example that you use – is that the force of ideas in society is a living and vital force. Certainly, you cannot really, for instance, look back at the successful anti-apartheid struggle and say that its force for social change was in some way due to the precepts of science, technology and innovation! Science and technology can do certain things very well, but one would have thought there would be more recognition that education in these areas simply is not useful for other socially important and politically crucial features of our lives in South Africa. While ideas – the terms of public understanding and social belonging – are clearly of crucial importance to a society, it's as if educating people in the tools of critical reflection – the assessment, interpretation and criticism of these ruling ideas – is just not important any more. What are your views on this?

JG: Even from my own recollection of what I learned at primary and secondary and high school, ideas were central; or perhaps we might say 'values', though it is an old sociological term that is perhaps overused, and sometimes misused. If we just think about historiography in South Africa at the time, and its role in the societal battle of ideas, part of that struggle was about our conception of our history, and of the way to go forward from that history. And one of the exciting and major intellectual developments in South Africa was the emergence of the revisionists and neo-Marxists; it changed the way people thought and eventually acted. And I think that much of this debate is now being neglected.

The plan currently is that what we need in this country is, above all, more technology and science; but we may be a poorer society for that. Again, and without being moralistic, there are a lot of things that are of concern, particularly the erosion of values and good practices, and increasing corruption. How much of the debate around these issues and the action against them is being influenced by those kinds of debates? I don't think that they are, or at least not in the same manner as it was done in the struggle years.

JH: I sometimes feel a terrible irony is at work here: that after years of intense struggle to overthrow the apartheid state, and to engage in the creation of an active and principled democracy, the key term and figure for our sense of social being has turned out to be the *entrepreneur* rather than the *citizen*, and it is that idea which is now acting to regulate the aims and outcomes of our education system post-apartheid.

JG: I remember UWC in those years, and think that perhaps we too were erring in a certain way, after the changes, especially because our changes coincided with the final collapse of socialism.

After 1990, there was an almost tangible feel how approaches – even, I would say, ideologies – were changing. I remember I said to Ebrahim Rasool⁴ – who was then a special assistant in my office – that it was strange 'how you can feel how the term "efficiency" is overtaking the term "human solidarity"', and adding and conceding that 'I suppose we'll have to go that way because the demand is now for efficiency'. Who can argue against efficiency? But it did replace concepts of human solidarity.

This was at a moment when we, at UWC, were admitting students who were not able to pay to study there. On one occasion I ran into Derek Bok, the well-known President of Harvard University. He jokingly – but commendably – said, 'They tell me that you guys

at UWC are putting education above economics!’ I think that remark describes what actually is now happening in reverse. It is, in a sense, economics above education: individualistic entrepreneurship above human solidarity – a different conception of citizenship.

JH: Perhaps, as another dimension of contrast with the present, we could move now to discuss your time in Nelson Mandela’s presidential office. What can you tell us about that extraordinary period? How do you look back at it from the present?

JG: Let me situate it first on a personal level. I had been VC at UWC for going on ten years; I started off as a change-seeking – and a radical change-seeking – VC. After so many years, you suddenly listen to yourself, and hear yourself defending positions. . . . I then negotiated with the university that I would step down as VC in 1995. At that time, you were appointed to a vice-chancellorship until you fell down, so I had negotiated to go back to a research professorship – an academic’s dream. And then, in 1994, I was asked to take up the position in the government. Those five years were in many senses more interesting than any traditional research professorship.

I was Secretary of the Cabinet in that Government of National Unity with the ANC, NP⁵ and Inkatha⁶ together: three historical enemies, and enemies in the real and not just metaphorical sense! To be there with those parties, working together – it was a remarkable South African experience. We were all a bit over-optimistically proud of ourselves and what we had achieved, the three sitting together as one government, and really working well together as the Government of National Unity. That was indeed an exceptional experience.

But your question was more about working with Mandela himself.

Mandela is a leader that throws up epistemological questions. We all cherish him and lionise him as this leader – which he really was – but he himself had a sense of collective leadership. He always raised the issue of how does the individual relate to the collective, how is the individual’s experience and conduct influenced by the collective, and how does it feed back to the collective? What I remember most of all about Mandela as decision-maker is his ability to project himself from the present – the moment in which he had to make a decision – into the future, and almost being able to stand at that future point and look back on the effect of a decision. Any of his generation – that Robben Island generation at least – would probably have taken the same positions that he did; but he had in addition this uncanny ability to not just reflect but, as it were, ‘forward-flect’ on a decision.

JH: Observing from a distance, and just, say, from reading Mandela’s autobiography (1995), what is so striking is his quite extraordinary depth of self-reflexivity. As you say, the capacity not only to step outside yourself, and really take in other people’s viewpoints, but also to think through how the consequent decision might look in the future – what its implications are in the real sense – and then also take those into account is startling.

JG: Yes. And then there was his *anthropology*. He had this genuine belief – and he often argued with me about the provability of it – that human beings are essentially ‘good-doing beings, beings who do good’. We had an incident in government where somebody very senior did something very silly and stupid, and had to step down from that position. But, at the same time, he had played a crucial role in

ensuring the stability of the transition period. In the end we had to part ways with him, and he stepped down.

Madiba⁷ said to him, 'If there is anything that I can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask me'. A day or two later he came back and asked for an appointment to another international position. Everyone we consulted said 'No, you can't appoint him', and Mandela was actually quite upset about this, and asked 'Why don't they trust the guy?' I replied to him, 'Actually, because he did something quite untrustworthy'. And he said to me, 'That was an exception', and he made the argument that if you are able to follow human beings from the moment they get up in the morning until they retire at night, you would find that most of them do the proper things most of the time, and that the erring is an aberration. And he really acted on that. He is not naïve, but he has a faith in the goodness of human beings, no matter how they disagreed politically or otherwise, and he always acted in line with that belief. Of course, this attitude also helped to lay the basis for the furthering of social cohesion and national unity in the country.

He is a remarkable human being. I just sit back and marvel about what makes a human being, and what are the factors, what are the conditions, that can make a human being like that. And the other thing, of course, is that he also believed that other people are like him, in that concept of acting.

But he is a good politician. If you asked me what the difference is between him and Desmond Tutu – the two icons of our transition – it is that Mandela is a politician through and through. He understands party politics and politics to the finger-tips. He is not a saint, and he often made that point. He is a hard politician. But he uses power, he uses his political agency for the good.

JH: Yes. All this makes him such an extraordinary figure. One often wonders – and I'm sure you wondered it as well – just what the psychic mechanisms are for becoming like that. What happened to all the pain and trauma that he suffered? How did that come through, was it – or how was it – transmuted, changed into something else?

JG: In all the years that I worked with him, in government and then after he left government – that's over 18 years that I worked more closely with him than most others. And we often spent quite a bit of time together, not just on official business. In all of those years, he never expressed a word of bitterness. If he had bitterness, he worked with it, he internalized it, and buried it away. He would sometimes say to me, 'Some things are better not to dwell on'. That is the way he dealt with it. One could say, for instance, that he had been incarcerated and victimized by the Afrikaners – Afrikaners having been the masters of the apartheid state – but he had great appreciation for Afrikaners, and for individual Afrikaners. I could mention examples.

JH: Partly why I ask this is because of the role in your own development of black consciousness thinking, and the great emphasis in that placed on the psychic dimensions of oppression and subjugation, and the consequent importance of facing and getting through that.

JG: There was a lot of emphasis placed on the importance of psychological liberation, as [Steve] Biko⁸ would often emphasize. A part of that was not to be the victim of your suffering, and not to be the victim of those who perpetrated it against you. Mandela often made that point, 'To be bitter would be to allow yourself to be kept imprisoned'. He rose

above that by the generosity of spirit . . . Mandela was so generous in his relationships with those who could be described as the adversary. If you talked about the enemy, which he didn't regard as an enemy, he would say, 'Be kind to your enemy, be kind to your adversary'.

People often talk about Mandela's values, and what they learned from him. And often, when we had these long debates at the Nelson Mandela Foundation, about what are the core values of Mandela, I would say that the thing that I remember him teaching me was: 'Jakes, never let your enemy choose the terrain of combat by reacting in anger. If you act in anger to anybody, even if it's your friend, you are allowing that person to choose the terrain'. So all this was a combination of genuine principled morals with a great tactical sense.

JH: One of the proudest achievements in this country, one that is recognized worldwide, is the South African Constitution, with its visible embodiment of and commitment to the constitutive principles of [an] open and democratic society. Yet there are visibly currents of opinion in the ruling circles of the government that maintain that the Constitution is a flawed document, the result of an unworthy political compromise, and in need of substantial revision. How do you view the short history of the South African Constitution and do you think it's under threat?

JG: Look, constitutions are things which can be amended. They're born in a particular circumstance and at a particular conjuncture, and they are answers to the issues of that moment. Constitutions are not cast in stone. But, in stable societies, a constitution is intended as a foundation, and to be long-lasting. And I think [post-apartheid] South Africa has actually lived up to its Constitution. There have been slight amendments to the Constitution (I read recently that there have been 18 amendments), but these were on peripheral matters. It seems to me that the current debate – noises that we've heard about the Constitution being counter-revolutionary and so on – revolves a lot around the so-called Property Clause.⁹

The issues raised by this clause were very comparable to those raised by the language issue. South Africa has, as you know, 11 official languages, and this came out of the fact that the negotiated settlement was, in the end – if you want to talk about it in those terms – principally a settlement between African aspirations and African Nationalism on the one hand, and Afrikaner nationalism and concerns on the other, and a compromise had to be found. With regard to the language issue, we previously had the two official languages, Afrikaans and English. I think if the ANC had come to power through a revolutionary seizure of power, we probably only would have had English as an official language. But with the negotiated settlement, you couldn't just have English. Afrikaner nationalist interest would have been very much against that. But then you couldn't just have Afrikaans and English either, given the demographics. So now we sit with the rather unusual position of having 11 languages of state and of government. And similarly the Property Clause was also important, if once again we set the dominant contradiction against the principled one. The Property Clause in the Constitution was important in the negotiations, and I think it's still important for South Africa's stability, but it is obviously a contentious clause.

JH: I was also thinking, in this regard, of the mounting attacks on the separation of powers, and the critique of the idea of judicial independence . . .

JG: I thought that was just plain politics from people who had found themselves on the wrong end of the law. In my view our judiciary, particularly the Constitutional Court and our Supreme Courts, have been quite exemplary in the way that they exercise their powers. Those who cry foul are normally those who deem themselves to have suffered under the law. It's purely self-interest. Our Constitution, as you say, is one of the proudest achievements of our society.

JH: Maybe you could say that the Constitution is like the spirit of Mandela, embodied and given form as a material institution: it seeks both to embody and to promote democratic values.

JG: And another thing we should remember about Mandela and his legacy is that one of the first Constitutional Court judgements was against him. I remember in his office that day he said 'We should respect this judgement, and make it clear that we respect it'.

JH: I'd like to turn now to some questions concerning another legacy, the legacy of Marx and Marxism. There is, of course, a certain circulation of Marxist terminology in public discourse in South Africa – phrases such as National Democratic Revolution, for instance. Given the fact of your own early training in and commitment to a particular moment of Marxist theory during your studies in Afrikaans literature and culture back in the '70s and '80s, how do you see that legacy today in South Africa? Is it still an active resource?

JG: One question looking back now is how 'Marxist' was much of the 'Marxism' in popular public discourse even then? At UWC, students would read a text like Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, and we used to ask them – who were often such ardent Marxists – how much of that version of Marxism was Marx's own?

But now: what happens when 'socialist-inclined' people live in a post-Marxist period? How do we deal with that? The collapse of the Soviet Union was a great blow to the socialist ideal, and with it, to the broader concept of human solidarity, and the related concern to organize societies in ways that were less unequal and less destructive of human life. You will recall that part of the argument – part of the concerns and anxieties of that moment, when it was clear that things were going fundamentally wrong or not working out – led to the rediscovery, for example, of Gramsci and others. Part of the reason for the problems facing socialism could very well have been the closure of spaces for liberty because liberty was regarded as almost a 'bourgeois liberal concept'. Certainly, concerns about the absence of freedoms in the Soviet Union were too easily described by many of us as a bourgeois concern. The question is what are the post-socialist lessons that we take from Marx? For me, Marx's thinking still provides the best analytical tools for understanding societies in conflict, societies of inequality, and societies seeking change. And are we talking of that kind of Marxism today?

JH: Indeed. And it seems crucial to me to historicize the key terms: does National Democratic Revolution (NDR), for instance, mean today what it did for Lenin or Gramsci in the 1920s?

JG: The other day I read that the South African Deputy President [Kgalema Motlanthe], referring to the debate within the ANC about a so-called 'second transition', described that discussion paper as full of smatterings of Marxist jargon. Which put me wondering, given his background – he comes from the trade union movement – shouldn't

Marxism have a positive connotation in his frame of reference? Was Motlanthe really saying with that remark: 'Let's totally get away from Marxism and all of its concepts'?

But on the National Democratic Revolution (NDR), if I were an ANC theoretician, I would try to get away from that term and reconceptualize the problem to which it once sought to offer a solution. I'm not sure I know any longer what they exactly mean by the NDR. As you say, in Russia at the time, it had a specific and tangible meaning that could be concretized and realized. I am not sure that I quite understand what the NDR, in today's South Africa, can signify in a realizable way, in a practical, pursuable way. Maybe it's just useful as an ideological hammer with which we can strike anything that goes out of kilter. And I am not sure that everybody in the ANC understands equally or understands the same thing under the NDR conceptual rubric.

JH: I have been doing quite a lot of work on Marx recently, seeking to find a frame for introducing his work to the generation of students born after the fall of the Berlin Wall.¹⁰ For these students, Marx's writing is no longer guaranteed, as it were, by the automatic authority of Marxism as a global political force. The frame I've chosen is a simple one: Marx as the great public thinker or public intellectual of his time, alive and alert to his situation, and constantly seeking to find the tools to understand the world he lived in, with the emphasis on the seeking and the difficulties of that intellectual and political endeavour. Representing him in this way, as a public intellectual, responding to the ever-changing urgencies of the moment, brings him – I hope – closer to our time and place, where one of the most striking – and hopeful – features of contemporary South African political life post-apartheid is the range of movements in civil society that continue to fight for social justice, in various forms, from the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC)¹¹ to the Right to Know group,¹² and Equal Education¹³ . . . How do you see the role of such groupings in post-apartheid society? Why should they seem to be so necessary after the 1994 transition?

JG: Probably one of the big agents of change that kept the idea of change alive in South Africa was the strong civil society. Just as we spoke of with regard to the humanities and the social sciences, immediately after 1994 there was a lull or lack of activity in civil society; but that is ending and organs of civil society are strongly coming to the fore again. There may be a parallel here with what might have gone wrong in the Soviet Union, where there was the absence of that counter-balancing civil society. After the ANC came to power, I said to myself – in a kind of Stalinist way – with regard to concepts such as 'civil society', that there was almost an 'anti-revolutionary' guard against the ANC. Many of the old anti-apartheid civil society organizations responded in the same way by saying to themselves: 'This is our government; this is our democratic government; this is our progressive government'. It is the way that the ANC-in-government has since then disappointed people that has given rise again to civil society movements. Of course one should understand, as Jeremy Cronin¹⁴ (2012) pointed out in an article a few months ago, that civil society ranges from class-conservative agencies like chambers of commerce to real progressive agents on the other end, and that one should be able to make those distinctions. But a strong civil society is the counter-balance to governments that can become authoritarian and unaccountable, and I see that arising more and more. Trade unions, of course, are also important parts of civil society.

JH: And how do you see the role of the Afrikaans language today? What has happened to the ‘language of the oppressor’ in the new democracy?

JG: There is a lot of anxiety among Afrikaans speakers – and particularly white Afrikaans speakers – about the prospects for the language. It is flourishing in many ways, though of course it is under pressure as a public language. Under apartheid, it was the language of the state and the courts, but that is happening less and less. And then there is this whole debate and struggle about Afrikaans as an academic language. But the language is doing quite well and indeed flourishing in many ways, as you can see in the publication of Afrikaans books, Afrikaans magazines, and Afrikaans newspapers. Afrikaans music is growing. Of course, the particular favour it was shown as a protected state-sponsored language has fallen away, and that has led to the anxiety about it, but it has itself strong backing from civil society organizations such as AfriForum¹⁵ and Solidarity,¹⁶ an Afrikaans Academy for Science and Art¹⁷ and a number of cultural formations.

In the triumphalist days of Afrikaner nationalism, Afrikaans was often spoken about in terms of ‘*die wonder van Afrikaans*’ (‘the wonder/miracle of Afrikaans’), and it should be remembered that the development of the language really was an achievement, moving from being just a ‘spoken’ language – often referred to as ‘a language of the kitchen’ – to becoming a language of academia, and of science, arts and culture. It has a remarkable apparatus of expression in all fields. But, again, as with most things, there was a material base to all this. It wasn’t simply a miracle. When Afrikaners came to power, they put resources and infrastructure into place to support the language: universities, publishing houses, distribution networks, and of course the economic advancement of the dominant section of its speakers.

There is no immediate danger to the language. It is a widely spoken language, indeed, one of the most widely spoken languages in the country. The long-term future of the language, all languages for that matter, depends on the maintenance of those infrastructural and material bases, while of course there is also the attraction of English as the dominant international language at the moment to be reckoned with. There are signs that younger Afrikaans speakers may in fact emigrate towards English; and its student numbers as a university subject are going down. The traditional English universities used to have some of the strongest Afrikaans departments such as those at Wits,¹⁸ UCT,¹⁹ Rhodes, and Natal.²⁰ But these are dwindling. Rhodes, for instance, now has a very small department, and I understand that UCT’s department is also much smaller than it used to be.

JH: Indeed. This shrinking of disciplines and departments in the humanities appears to be widespread, as the vocational impulse, and the emphasis on science and technology, becomes predominant in higher education policy globally. More generally, though, could I ask you what you think about the decisive shift in government policy – a shift that perhaps somehow works in parallel to the move away from the humanities – the shift from RDP²¹ to GEAR²² as the guiding government policy framework?

JG: Many people behind that policy shift thought of themselves as progressives – if not as actually part of the Marxist project, but as progressives nonetheless. You know that first we had the RDP as the macro-economic policy.

The argument in the economic cluster in government at that time was that, given the circumstances we faced, there was no way that you could have achieved what we hoped to achieve without taking the Washington Consensus seriously. We simply had to stabilize the South African economy. We had inherited a virtually bankrupt country: with massive debt, deficit before borrowing, and inflation. At the time, the argument was 'Let's stabilize that, let's not fall into a debt trap'. GEAR saw itself as a working refinement of the RDP as a necessary stage before we could go onto infrastructure and social spending. And it did achieve many of those things: the deficit came down dramatically, inflation was targeted and kept under control. And it did deliver on social spending; our social safety networks are actually greater than in most countries in the world. That was the whole argument behind it. The world had changed in ways so that you couldn't go any other way. From a revolutionary perspective, our political change in many ways actually came at the worst possible moment, given the state of the world economy and the shift in global international relations. The Marxist project globally had a setback but the defenders of GEAR would say 'We have achieved what we wanted to achieve by stabilizing the macro-economic framework'.

A term that was used a great deal by the government was that our 'macro-economic fundamentals' were sound. COSATU²³ was the first one – as far as I can remember – who raised this question: 'Can you say that your economic fundamentals are sound if unemployment is as high as it is?' The labour market clearly failed in addressing that. The world political economic situation almost forced that onto an ANC government. But it was clearly retrogressive in terms of addressing it. If you ask, what is a socialist or a Marxist project?, it is about addressing inequality. And that we clearly haven't done. The question is, if we had kept on going with RDP, given the state of the economy, would we have achieved a different outcome, would we have achieved greater equality? Following the adoption of GEAR, South Africa experienced the most positive economic growth than it had had for a decade or more. Those are its triumphs. But that growth didn't go with job creation, so growth was accompanied – according to all measurements – by increasing inequality.

JH: To frame it a little differently: unemployment is clearly one of the key areas of social inequality. Looking back to 1994, and then looking at where we are now, to what extent was unemployment a central focus of attention in the euphoria of that post-1994 moment? How was it framed or conceptualized then, and was this done so powerfully enough?

JG: The term 'unemployment' perhaps didn't feature that much but 'job creation', the positive side of that, was central. One of the ANC's election promises in 1994 was 'jobs for all'. So job creation clearly, the flip-side of unemployment, was a very strong priority. We had job summits in that first period of democracy; how are we going to create jobs? But I think what we and I've learnt is that job creation is not a simple thing. A central aspect to it is capacity building. You need people in order to build the economy which creates jobs, and that brings us back to education. One of our major failures has been in the area of mass education. There are good schools in the country, but the majority of youngsters in South Africa are not getting quality education. And maybe not just quality education, we are not even sure if they are getting the right education for what the

country needs. So inequality and unemployment to me are closely linked to our failures in other areas.

JH: Why do you think education in the country is in such a bad state, despite the attempts to deal with it?

JG: I largely think this is a question of management. We had a lot of things to undo about apartheid education. But I also think we went ‘fancy’ in too many ways. Take, for instance, Outcomes-Based Education (OBE). OBE is a good thing . . . if you have the proper infrastructure, if you have the material to do it. If I look at what my grandchildren do as part of Outcomes Based Education, and the facilities that they have to do it, then I wonder what a poor kid in the township can do. There was an unplanned way of tackling challenges; and we just don’t have the human capacity to manage it.

Too many school principals are not able to manage schools, and teachers are not attending to the basic things that they should be attending to. There is a massive failure of management. And, yes, we did a couple of silly things (I was Cabinet Secretary at the time), like the closing of teacher training colleges and other colleges, and the ending of the apprenticeship system, which has totally fallen by the wayside. There was also the changed focus of some universities, especially those which formerly taught technical subjects. We got a lot of systemic things wrong.

JH: Is it fixable?

JG: It has to be fixable. I often wonder about the management of state institutions and state departments. We have a number of schools of government, and a number of schools of public administration. I wonder whether there isn’t a way that there can be a combined effort by them to ‘speed train’ people towards greater administrative and management efficiency and competence? One mustn’t romanticize the past, but after the Cuban revolution, one of the things they did was to send thousands of people into the countryside to do basic literacy training. And look where Cuba stands today in the provision of doctors and teachers!

JH: Yes, it’s not as if there aren’t significant examples of countries with fewer or similar resources to ours getting their health and education systems right: Cuba immediately comes to mind, as you say, and – if we look at the new Happiness Index – Costa Rica.²⁴ South Africa figures very poorly on that index, which suggests that two of the main constituents for people’s happiness are good healthcare and good education.

JG: One of the other things that Mandela frequently repeated (in the beginning, we were sometimes embarrassed by him saying the same thing over and over again, but that is part of his integrity): he always said what most people in the world want is good education for their kids, good healthcare when they need it, decent shelter, and being able to work. And that is happiness.

JH: In terms of higher education, it was striking that the *Framework for Transformation* document of 1997 explicitly stated the importance of fostering ‘critical citizenship’ in students, for the greater public good. But it is striking that policy implementation over the years has (as I said a moment ago) tended to encourage entrepreneurship rather than citizenship. In your view, what exactly is the social role of university education? Is the vocational emphasis the only necessary one?

JG: I studied in Belgium in the early 1970s, and my supervisor at the time bemoaned the fact that universities were more and more becoming places which the bureaucrats had taken over from the humanists, as he put it. At that time, this wasn't the case in South Africa, and we were booming as places of debate. But now it has come to that here. Is this not a question of university leadership too? At some of the universities which I am acquainted with I have seen how the leadership of the institutions assertively promote the humanities in the face of current trends.

Yes, the emphasis should be on critical citizenship. Look, there are these systemic issues of funding, but I think university leadership in our circumstances should also be making a stronger case for the universities as cultural or humanistic agencies in a society that is dearly in need of that input. So, I'm saying there is the global trend towards bureaucratization, but I think this can also be combated or steered differently by strong leadership.

JH: Or to frame the question of the university in terms of Marx's Thesis Eleven, do you see the role of the intellectual as understanding the world or changing it? Or, more precisely, what do you see as the relation between the two?

JG: I suppose this is also a question of orientation. Coming from where I come from, if I speak of my own experiences, I share the Marxist maxim. What I felt had to be done was not only understanding the world, but also changing it. We grew up in a world that clearly and patently needed changing so I suppose it wasn't difficult to adopt that view. I remember the critic George Steiner – not everyone's cup of tea, I know – wrote in one of his essays that, in the 20th century, it is difficult for an honest man to be a literary critic because there are so many other urgent things to be done in life, and so many demands on one.²⁵ But then he spoke about Georg Lukács, who had ways of dealing with that problem, and argued that adopting humanist practice did not mean abdicating on having to change the world. At UWC, when I was VC, when we got into this concept of an 'intellectual home of the Left', often I had to say to activist academics: 'Just handing out pamphlets in the township isn't necessarily your change-seeking responsibility. An intellectual can change the world or contribute to the changing of the world through intellectual activity'. So I always unpack that Marxist phrase. Clearly understanding the world is an important form of changing the world, and Marx himself is an exemplar of that: what is needed is clear understanding, profound understanding.

JH: In conclusion, I wonder if we could, as it were, look at a few snapshots of you from some different moments of your life. Let's begin, say, when you were 13 years old. How then did you see yourself and your future?

JG: Look, my father was a farm worker in a rural Eastern Cape community and the sense that 'things were not right' was always there. That went for most black people in this country. I come from a family of ten and we were a debating crowd; where we lived, we had no neighbours. The conversations I always remember were the ones that started with 'one day when we take over . . .'. There was a sense that one day there would be a revolutionary change and things wouldn't be the same.

I admire current crops of kids who have their worlds so worked out and organized, but I can't remember at that age that I thought about where I would be. My parents were very insistent on education, so I knew I would have some education. But I also had the strong sense that this country not only must change, but will change.

JH: And a decade later?

JG: At 23 I was married already. I was involved in political organization and that sense of a ‘changed world’ became more real. This whole concept of ‘change in our lifetime’ – well, we didn’t bet on it, but it was a kind of a driving initiative. As a 13-year-old, I was a young Eastern Cape school boy who had good teachers. Our teachers were not political as such, but they were political in their education. People like Dennis Brutus²⁶ and others were my teachers. They taught us in the sense of political responsibility. At 23, I was more actively politically involved; and at 33 I was teaching Sociology of Literature.

JH: And how was it that the love of literature first grabbed hold of you? Were there books at home?

JG: This was a strange thing. At home, on that isolated farm, there were always books. We had a room in the house that was always full of strange books: encyclopaedias and so on. I am number six in a large family, and my elder siblings were all teachers. And then I had good teachers in both Afrikaans and English. At university I majored in Sociology, Afrikaans and Dutch. But – recalling Steiner again – it’s difficult to be writing essays on *belles lettres* when the world is burning. So I combined Sociology and Literature and studied at the Centre for the Sociology of Literature in Brussels that the Marxist critic Lucien Goldmann had set up.

JH: Thank you.

Notes

1. The Union of South Africa was formed in 1910 by joining the previously separate British colonies of the Cape and Natal to the two former Boer Republics, the Orange Free State and Transvaal.
2. The generic term for the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC has been in power in South Africa since 1994.
3. The Mandela Rhodes Foundation is dedicated to providing post-graduate scholarships to promising African students with leadership potential. See: <http://www.mandelarhodes.org>.
4. Ebrahim Rasool (born 1962) was a United Democratic Front (UDF) activist and later Premier of the Western Cape. Rasool is currently South African Ambassador to Washington.
5. The National Party (NP) was founded in 1914 to present the interest of Afrikaners. The NP came to power in 1948 and enacted the apartheid legislation for which they (and the country) became notorious. From 1990 until 1993, the NP led the negotiations which culminated in South Africa’s first democratic election in April, 1994. The NP ceased to exist in 2005 when it was subsumed within the ANC.
6. Inkatha, or the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), is a Zulu cultural organization established in 1922 and revived in 1975 by Mangosuto Buthelezi to serve his political ends. Initially, Inkatha threatened to boycott the country’s first democratic election but, on Mandela’s invitation, entered the Government of National Unity.
7. Nelson Mandela’s clan-name, often used as a nickname.
8. Steven (Bantu) Biko (1942–1977) was a student activist and founder of the Black Consciousness movement in the early 1970s. He was murdered by the apartheid security police.
9. Property Clause: The property issue is central to the redistribution of wealth in the country where, under colonialism and apartheid, the white minority acquired the majority of land and natural resources. The property clause aims at achieving an equitable balance between the protection of existing property interests and promoting wider and more equitable access to land

- and natural resources. Section 25 of the South African Constitution 1996 therefore has three features: all aspects of property are bound into a legal regulatory framework; any expropriation of land for a public purpose or in the public interest will be based on the principle of just compensation; and the Constitution mandates redistributive and other land reform measures.
10. See Higgins (2009).
 11. The Treatment Action Campaign or TAC was formed in 1998. This NGO successfully spear-headed the campaign for public sector antiretroviral treatment in South Africa. See: www.tac.org.za.
 12. The Right to Know campaign was launched in 2010 in response to the Protection of State Information Bill. See: <http://www.r2k.org.za/>.
 13. Equal Education was formed in 2008 in Khayelitsha on the Cape flats. Through research and community-led campaigns, the NGO advocates for greater equality between schools through what it calls 'evidence-based activism'. See: http://www.equaleducation.org.za/what_is_EE.
 14. Jeremy Cronin (born 1949) was a political prisoner under apartheid and then exiled in the United Kingdom. Cronin returned to South Africa after the ending of apartheid and has been a stalwart of the South African Communist Party. He is currently Deputy Minister of Public Works.
 15. AfriForum is a civil-rights organization and is part of the larger Solidarity Movement (see below). AfriForum's main task is to protect the civil rights of its members and their communities, mostly in the white Afrikaans-speaking community. This is done by taking up rights and protecting rights. This is not only done through the courts but also by setting up structures in communities.
 16. Solidarity, known more commonly by its Afrikaans title, Solidariteit, came into being in 1902 with the establishment of the Transvaal Miners' Association. Since then, the trade union has undergone four name changes. In 1913 the name of the Transvaal Miners' Association was changed to the Mynwerkersunie (MWU). In 2001 the MWU changed to MWU-Solidariteit, and since 2002 the union is known only as Solidariteit. The union has more than 20 offices country-wide and members are serviced by more than 200 staff members and 1275 trade union representatives in thousands of companies. Its main concern is with South Africa's Afrikaners.
 17. This is formally called 'Die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns'. See: www.akademie.co.za.
 18. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
 19. University of Cape Town.
 20. The University of KwaZulu Natal.
 21. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is the short-lived neo-Keynesian economic programme implemented by the ANC after coming to power in 1994; it was replaced by GEAR in 1996.
 22. The Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) is a neo-liberal macro-economic policy introduced by the ANC government in 1996.
 23. Congress of South African Trade Unions.
 24. The Happy Planet Index was introduced as a measure of human well-being and environmental sustainability in 2006, as a counterpart to the usual measures of Gross Domestic Product and Human Development Index. Costa Rica topped the bill in both 2009 and 2012.
 25. In 'Georg Lukacs and his Devil's Pact', Steiner remarks: 'In the twentieth century it is not easy for an honest man to be a literary critic. There are so many more urgent things to do' (1984: 54).
 26. Dennis Brutus (1924–2009) was an activist educator and poet. Brutus was best known for his contribution to the development of the international boycott of sport against apartheid teams.

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