

Wolpe's new book provides a convenient occasion for summarising and evaluating his early economic and more recent political analysis. **Michael Burawoy\*** argues that Wolpe overlooks the possibility of a post-apartheid racial order and suggests that there is no reason to believe that apartheid is the highest stage of racism. The racial content of bourgeois democracy will complicate the relationship of the class and national struggles

## Harold Wolpe: Doyen of South African Marxists

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South Africa is one of the few areas in the world where Marxism continues to flourish in the popular consciousness, in political organizations as well as in academic treatises. In large measure this is due to the historic role of the Communist Party of South Africa in kindling opposition to the South African state. During the last two decades, however, a new impetus for theorization of the distinctive features of South Africa capitalism has come from political exiles of the 1960s repression. Drawing on developments in European Marxism, as well as their own experiences of apartheid, they took a fresh look at the history of South Africa. Although many were and still are academics, their continuing links to the liberation movement motivated their writing and inspired animated debates both in England and South Africa.

As one of the most important contributors to these debates, Harold Wolpe has shed new light on the economic basis of apartheid and its political transformation. His writings are unmistakably directed to the possibilities — objective and subjective — of a South Africa free of racial domination and capitalist exploitation. The publication of *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* provides a convenient occasion for summarising and evaluating

its erosion. Nevertheless, as soil eroded, as overcrowding increased and as land was concentrated in the hands of fewer Africans so the reserves, or what came to be known as the Bantustans, were unable to provide even a minimal level of sub-

sistence for those left behind. Inevitably, many families moved to urban areas, even though conditions there were often no better than in the 'homelands'.

Thus, pressures on the system of migrant labour were already building up in the 1930s. Escalating industrial and political struggles during the Second World War brought into question the entire racial order. The crisis came to a political head in 1948 when the constellation of class forces was reorganized to build the new racial order of apartheid. Wolpe marks this transition as a shift in the mechanisms for maintaining cheap labour, a shift from reliance on economic subsidies of subsistence agriculture to political repression. To keep wages down blacks were subjected to draconian laws

cogent theoretical formulations, subsequent research by Kaplan, Davies, Morris, O'Meara and others, examined the balance of class forces which gave rise to and then transformed the system of reserves and migrant labour. Yet their

analyses were not simply a return to the work of Simons and Simons but aimed to account for specific state policies. Accordingly they paid less attention to struggles between classes and more attention to competition among different fractions of the dominant class, to the organization of what — following Nicos Poulantzas — they called 'power blocs' formed by agricultural, mining and manufacturing capital or by domestic and international capital. That the dominated classes did not figure prominently in these accounts reflected in part the effective repression of most organized resistance to apartheid after Rivonia and in part influential trends within a European Marxist theory trying to come to grips with the eclipse of the effervescent

accounts of movements from below.

Harold Wolpe's *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*, provides an important corrective to this turn towards voluntarism. His major thesis is that the state creates opportunities and sets limits on struggles both on its own terrain in the judiciary, parliament, the military, schools, etc. as well as outside the state in the community and the workplace.

Just as Wolpe's earlier work highlighted the discontinuity between segregation and apartheid on the basis of the needs of capital so now he seeks to distinguish periods within apartheid on the basis of changing patterns of struggle. Between 1948 and 1960, the judiciary became increasingly subordinated to the executive through parliamentary enactments. Although spaces for political action were increasingly restricted even during this period, mass struggles expanded, culminating in the demonstrations and strikes of 1960. In the post-Sharpeville period the ideology of the rule of law was abandoned, and the extra-parliamentary political terrain was systematically destroyed, organizations were banned and activists imprisoned. The liberation movements went underground and turned to armed struggle. The state responded with declarations of emergency, enhancing its police powers and closing down virtually all possibilities of reform.

*The third period which Wolpe calls the*

### **Race, Class and the Apartheid State**

by Harold Wolpe

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occasion for summarizing and evaluating both his early economic analysis and his more recent political analysis.

## 2

Of Harold Wolpe's early contributions, the most important was his paper on the transition from segregation to apartheid, a transition conventionally marked by the National Party's assumption of power in 1948. ('Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From segregation to apartheid', *Economy and Society* (1972) 1 (4): 425-56) Rather than seeing apartheid as the intensification of segregation, he delved into their economic bases, highlighting their different mechanisms for maintaining low wage African labour. Segregation, he argued, was a racial order which preserved cheap labour by maintaining subsistence agriculture in the reserves. By providing livelihood for a worker's family, the reserves subsidized wages so that capital no longer had to bear the full cost of the reproduction of its labour force.

At the heart of the 'articulation' of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production was a system of migrant labour in which able bodied men travelled to town for work while their families were left behind to eke out some existence in the reserves. The various pass laws and influx control laws, which regulated the movement of labour, were designed to uphold this system of migrant labour against tendencies toward

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\*I would like to thank Heinz Klug and Gay Seidman for their comments and their criticism.

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blacks were subjected to draconian laws which destroyed political and trade union organizations, regulated geographical and social mobility and created puppet regimes in the reserves.

**W**olpe's essays were a profound critique of liberal modernization theory which saw racism as inimical to capitalism, and of pluralist theories of racism which ignored the economy as a basis of racism. But in focusing on the interests of capital it also questioned conventional Marxist theories which saw racism as the outcome of the struggle between classes, as laid out, for example, in Jack and Ray Simons' classic work, *Colour and Class in South Africa*. In their account the white working class and not just the mine owners played critical roles in deepening the racial order.

Wolpe's fresh look at the institutions which served the economic needs of capital, not surprisingly, raised many new questions. First, in focusing on the cheapness of labour to individual capitalists, Wolpe ignored the escalating costs of maintaining the conditions of cheapness, that is, the entire apartheid system — costs that were in part born by the capitalist class. Second, it was clearly an oversimplification to presume the hegemony of mining capital and to leave out of account the distinctive and competing needs of other fractions of the capitalist class, including agriculture and manufacture. Third, it never explained how it was that capital, and mining capital in particular, was so far sighted and so all powerful as to be able to enforce its interests.

In large part inspired by Wolpe's

with the eclipse of the effervescent 1960s.

Ever sceptical of European transplants, Wolpe criticized the fashionable 'power bloc' analyses for their failure to address the distinctive features of the state itself. These theories regarded policy, legislation, executive edicts as the reflection of relations within the dominant class, failing thereby to recognize the autonomous role of the state as it affects the organization of the economy and the regulation of struggles between and within classes. In confronting the apartheid state, particularly in an era of reforms, one cannot only look at what is happening within the dominant classes, one must also pay attention to the dynamics of the state and the political terrain itself.

## 3

Wolpe's criticisms blended well with the blossoming of the liberation movement — the Durban strikes of 1973, the expanding labour movement, the Black Consciousness Movement and the Soweto Uprising. No doubt reflecting the changing political terrain, during the last decade academics have increasingly focused on the struggles of blacks to fashion their own lives. Social historians, such as Charles van Onselen, began to produce a new history of South Africa from below, a history based on the lived experience of racism. Sociologists, such as Eddie Webster, turned to theories of social movements to make sense of the merger of labour and community struggles. Very quickly the focus on dominant classes was eclipsed by its obverse —

The third period which Wolpe calls the 'rise of insurrectionary struggles' begins in 1973 with strikes by workers and the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement in the community and schools. How are we to explain these new developments? Certainly, as Wolpe claims, the state is not weaker. If anything it has become substantially stronger through the militarization of its various apparatuses.

**S**o Wolpe turns away from the state toward an analysis of the changing balance of class forces. The restructuring of both industry and agriculture increased the demand for skilled blacks who moved into positions vacated by whites. These black workers were better educated, with deeper roots in the city, than the migrant labourers. While economic changes increased the 'class capacity' of the most unambiguous opponents of apartheid, they created divisions within the white community. As manufacturing capital expanded, its opposition to the strictures of apartheid became more effective and as the white working class and *petit bourgeoisie* declined so its support for apartheid became weaker. In other words a changing constellation of *interests* within the white community and an increased class *capacity* of black workers instigated mass mobilization by the popular classes, led by the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the ANC, compelling the regime to introduce reforms. Although the reforms have not been successful in dividing and coopting opposition to apartheid, Wolpe predicts that they can-



not be reversed and will therefore continue to provide openings for the liberation movement.

## 4

Wolpe sketches his portrait of the periods of apartheid in two short chapters at the end of his book, but they don't always sit well with the theoretical prolegomenon of the first three chapters. In chapter 2, he claims that the relationship between capitalism and the racial order is an ever-changing, contradictory and complex one. Certainly, capital's recent attempts to reform apartheid do *appear* to contradict the 'internal colonial model', according to which apartheid promotes the expansion of South African capitalism. Yet it is quite possible for a particular racial order to be unpopular with fractions of the capitalist class or even the entire capitalist class while at the same time it benefits the capitalist system. One must distinguish between the interests of individual capitalists to make profit and the political requirements of the entire capitalist system to reproduce itself. Apartheid may still be the best political order for containing, organizing and repressing class struggle even though individual capitalists are finding it harder to make the rates of profit to which they have become accustomed.

Inquiring into the political interests of the capitalist class raises a further question: how are those interests actually represented? Traditionally, Marxists have answered 'the state'. But how is it that the capitalist state is able to 'manage the common affairs of the entire bourgeoisie?' Certainly, the view that the state is an instrument of the capitalist class has few defenders, if only because

apartheid. Not for nothing did Lenin order the state to be smashed! Wolpe's analysis confines the effects of the state to orchestrating and repressing struggles. He does not examine incumbents of state apparatuses as an autonomous force with interests in preserving apartheid, except, curiously enough, in his analysis of what he calls the black bureaucratic bourgeoisie in the Bantustans. What about the much bigger white bureaucratic bourgeoisie in Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg and indeed in every platteland dorp?

However, it is not enough to look more carefully at the balance of *forces*, one must also look at the *changing* constellation of *interests* in a racial order. The opposition of different fractions of capital to apartheid may reflect an interest in a *new racial order* rather than the elimination of racism. Wolpe does not theorize the possibility of a post-apartheid racial order. If the economic basis of apartheid was the need for cheap labour power, what might be the corresponding need in a post-apartheid racial order? One might argue that with the rise of capital-intensive manufacturing, producing high-quality goods control over the labour process becomes more critical than keeping wages low. Capital therefore may be more interested in the mobilization of racism at the work point through the flexible deployment of colour bar and in the institutionalization of differential rights through unions, while being less interested in regulating the movement of labour through pass laws and influx control.

Wolpe overlooks the possibility of a post-apartheid racial order because he tends to reduce apartheid to a system of intensified repression — a view continu-

UDF. Wolpe is optimistic that the new black classes, which have a stake in the existing order, will either fail to gain popular support or throw in their lot with the liberation movement but he does not examine at what cost. What concessions, what dilution of the class content of the ANC programme will be necessary to secure the loyalty of the black bourgeoisie and *petit* bourgeoisie? Even with majority rule, racism could still be reproduced in civil society much as it is in the United States. It is not sufficient to look at the class composition of nationalism, one should also examine the racial content of bourgeois democracy.

Why should South Africa be different? How might majority rule either foster better conditions for black workers or lay the basis for a transition toward such betterment? Certainly dismantling legally defined and enforced racism would by itself improve the lot of blacks. But what of the possibilities of the redistribution of wealth, of restoring black control over the future of South Africa? If South African blacks, as a whole, are to fare better than in other post-colonial countries, then this will be due to the distinctive strength of the working class in the liberation movement. That strength lies in the solidarity of the working class, forged in a long history of struggles, forged by the development of the capitalist economy and finally forged through a common racial identity.

In pursuing this line of argument, Wolpe examines the process of class formation. At its most abstract the working class is defined by wage labour but this definition says nothing about the formation of a class actor. Here it is important to look first, at the economic

simply cannot ignore the debates about the possibilities and impossibilities of socialism now taking place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. While the ANC is tackling these questions, they are matters which also warrant the serious attention of scholars.

## 6

Yet Wolpe would not be happy with discussions of movement goals which excluded the examination of the strategic possibilities in the existing context. Thus, he is particularly critical of those who focus on social movements at the expense of the structures which channel and limit their direction. His periodization of forms of state is designed precisely to study the limits and possibilities of struggles. Once more he refuses to accept a simplistic dichotomy, this time between reform and revolution. Even if the political reforms proposed by the apartheid regime are cosmetic — that is, do not fundamentally alter the material life of the mass of the black population — that is no reason to dismiss them since they create political spaces within which the mass democratic movement can expand. Whether it is the recognition of trade unions, or the token extension of political representation, they add fuel to the burgeoning liberation movement. Far from being inimical to revolution, reform becomes its vehicle.

This is Wolpe's optimistic scenario and it can be challenged from two sides. On the one hand, reform could give way to heavy repression. Wolpe argues that the constellation of international pressures from major Western powers and the over-extension of the state in Southern Africa precludes the possibility

state is an instrument of the capitalist class has few defenders, if only because it assumes a unified capitalist class, which in South Africa, for example, is patently false. Rather theorists have turned to the character of the state itself and argued that the state's economic dependence on the fortunes of business leads state managers to act in the interests of capitalism. But this presumes that they can rise above the fray and both recognize and then implement what preserves capitalism as a whole. Others argue that class struggle itself forces the state to take action against capitalists and so stabilizes the capitalist order. That is, class struggle rather than being the grave digger becomes capitalism's saviour.

These questions and potential answers cry out for a careful examination of the South African State which would go far beyond Wolpe's own analysis. Indeed, when considering the present period Wolpe all but abandons the state and instead reverts back to a study of the balance of forces in civil society. He thereby leaves unanswered why apartheid does not crumble, since its only remaining defenders are remnants of the fast disappearing white working class and white *petit* bourgeoisie and diminishing sectors of capital.

Thus, ironically, Wolpe generates this puzzle because of the limited attention he pays to the *state*. It is quite possible that forces in civil society may be abandoning their interest in apartheid while the state, or at least important parts of the state, are not. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the distinctive apparatuses of the state, grown up over the last forty years, have staying power of their own, tied to the reproduction of

intensified repression — a view continuous with his early writings. But now in focusing on these political dimensions he loses touch with its economic roots. He does not examine the inter-relations and functions of different forms of racism — regulation of geographical mobility and residence rights, job reservation and colour bars, denial of civil and political rights, etc. Rather than investigating the *interests of different classes or class fractions in apartheid's component parts*, he examines interests in the system as a whole. As capitalism undergoes transition so we can expect the racial order to do the same, involving a re-articulation of its elements. There's no reason to believe that apartheid is the highest or last stage of racism.

## 5

Raising the possibility of a post-apartheid racial order complicates the discussion of the relationship of class and national struggles. Conventionally, we face two possibilities: either the struggles coincide and overthrowing racism is the same as destroying capitalism or the struggle for racial freedom precedes the struggle for socialism. Wolpe refuses such a simplistic dichotomy and instead examines the class character of the nationalist movement. That is to say he examines the balance of class forces within the black population, focusing on the significance of the urban professionals and *petit* bourgeoisie and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie of the Bantustans. These class divisions give rise to serious tensions within the nationalist movement, dramatized by the ferocious battles between Inkatha and the

important to look first, at the economic divisions of the working class, between, example, the urban insiders with relatively stable residence in the cities and migrant labourers and second, at the political dimensions of production. The particular institutions at the workplace shape interests and capacities of workers as well as linkages to communities. These concrete determinations, in which race plays a prominent part, will shape the trajectory and effects of working-class struggles. In short, just as Wolpe is sensitive to the class composition of racial groups, so he also points to the racial determinations of class.

Compared to other African countries prior to their independence, South Africa is economically much more developed and its working class correspondingly stronger. Paradoxically, therefore, it is the longevity of apartheid and the capitalist development it has engendered that makes commentators such as Wolpe optimistic about the possibility of a socialist South Africa. But this socialist future remains unexamined. Although the ANC does not purport to be engaged in the struggle for socialism, it still proposes to nationalize giant corporations so that a non-racial democratic régime can control the country's resources and radically redistribute land and social services (health, education, housing, etc.). But how will such a society be organized? In the light of increasing scepticism about the possibility of a centrally controlled economy being either efficient or just, this goal of revolution has to be subject to more than cursory inspection. What forms of redistribution work and what forms don't? Can South Africa do better than a bourgeois democratic order? One

Southern Africa precludes the possibility of a Chilean solution. Yet it is conceivable that with the formal extension of democratic rights to blacks, surrounding regimes would develop a peaceful accord with South Africa, international pressures would subside while at home heavy repression could still be sustained. On the other hand, reform could give rise to a black government which would effectively contain any revolutionary impetus while big capital retained control over the economy. In short, majority rule does not automatically spell the end of racism or repression.

The route from reform to revolution is easily cut short, particularly if the goals of the movements are not kept in sight. It is all too convenient to *assume* that revolution follows reform, and in so doing slide over the question of revolution — its meaning and its mission. Wolpe leaves us wondering what a future socialism might look like — the organization of its economy and its policy. What, for example, is to be done with the enormous militarized state apparatus created to serve apartheid? In the hands of a black bureaucratic bourgeoisie, which established its hegemony on the basis of its race, it could be as devastating and repressive as apartheid — capable of neutralizing even the most solidary working class. If majority rule does not guarantee the interests of the majority of blacks what sort of democratic order might? Clarity about the possible future of South Africa can only assist in a more incisive analysis of its present. □

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