

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM

Mike Morris

On behalf of the editors of *Transformation* I would like to welcome all participants gathered here. Local academics, researchers, political activists, trade unionists, principals and vice principals and anyone else who does not fit into the previous designations. I would also like to especially welcome the guests from the rest of Africa that we have been able to bring to this symposium. We are very grateful to the Canadian IDRC for making the symposium financially possible, and in particular Marc van Ameringen and Pierre Sane (who is unfortunately unable to be here with us).

We have, as foreign guests, amongst us Abdoule Bathily, from Dakar, the President of the African Political Science Association; Togba nah Tipoteh the Director of the research institute USUUKU in Monrovia; Akilagpa Sawyerr, the vice-chancellor of the University of Ghana; Mahmood Mamdani from the Institute for Basic Research in Kampala; Ernest Wamba dia Wamba from Dar es Salaam University; Rene Loewenson from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions; and, from the IDRC, Marc van Ameringen from Ottawa and Firoz Manji from Nairobi. We are sorry that the other guests who were invited and prepared to come had to pull out at the last minute, but I am sure we will have many more opportunities for meeting with them.

It is of great significance, and I think the first time, that we have such a spread of eminent academics from the rest of the African continent concentrated in one symposium in South Africa. We are greatly honoured by the fact that you all took so much trouble to come. On behalf of the editors of the journal *Transformation*, the Universities of Natal and Durban-Westville and I am sure everyone else present here tonight, we are really extremely pleased to see you all and hope that this is merely the start of many more fruitful interchanges between South African intellectuals and those from the rest of our continent. We hope that you will find our discussions fruitful and that we are all able to mutually learn much from this interchange of ideas and experience.

I think it is appropriate in opening this symposium that I lay before you some of its genesis - both organisationally and conceptually. I was sitting in Ottawa about a year ago, shivering in the snow and longing for the sticky, stultifying heat of Durban, speaking with Marc van Ameringen from the IDRC when he raised a very important issue. This was that those of us who are committed to socially relevant research need to stop and reflect on what we are doing when we engage in research to effect social transformation. One thing led to another, and we soon began reflecting on the potential lessons to be drawn from the long period of struggle against apartheid. This made sense to both of us. After all the business of the IDRC is to fund research which has practical consequences, yet it has never really funded the process of reflecting on what it is doing. It struck a chord in me since, like many other researchers in the country, I have been continuously plagued by an inability to find a balance between

studying this country in abstraction and actively striving to change it. And so the idea of the symposium was born. And what better vehicle to host it than the journal *Transformation* which was founded as an attempt to intervene in the process of transforming South Africa through creating an intellectually rigorous, but politically informed and non-sectarian, debating forum for ideas, concepts and organisational lessons?

In setting up this symposium we very carefully chose the name. We did not want to have a large open academic conference, nor a large congress of social and political activists. We sought rather to try and bring together researchers from a variety of different institutions and organisations into a smaller forum where the issues that bind and divide them could be more easily debated and reflected on. That is why we have tried to keep the inputs to a manageable number and limited each speaker to 15 minutes. As regards the number of participants our original intention was a forum of around 60 people maximum. That soon proved to be a theoretically desirable but practically unattainable boundary. It grieves us to have had to say no to many who wished to attend, but if we had created an open conference we would not be able to achieve the goal we set out to achieve. Luckily the size of the room, the amount of money available and the optimal number that the caterers could deal with, created the necessary discipline to keep the number to a maximum of 100 and so still maintain its integrity as a symposium.

The word symposium has two classical meanings - 'philosophical, friendly discussion on one subject from various points of view', OR, alternatively, 'an ancient Greek drinking party'. Presumably the more one drinks the more friendly one becomes; whether this leads to philosophy or not remains to be seen.

Without pre-empting the discussion that lies before us, we thought it would be useful in opening this gathering to try and lay before you all a few ideas that sum up our intellectual reasons for hosting this symposium. We originally intended to circulate a few pages beforehand as a basis for the symposium. However due to a number of critical problems, which unfortunately can be summed up in my inability to both organise the symposium and write the introductory piece, we decided instead to rather start the proceedings with a short statement of the problem.

In reflecting on the role of research in social transformation in South Africa we were struck by three disjunctures that are likely to inform our deliberations and reconceptualisation of the issues at stake:

- the disjuncture created by the resistance period which fostered research and social action but which heavily privileged activism and thereby redirected many intellectuals away from research;
- the disjuncture between resistance and establishment researchers and institutions which so easily and clearly demarcated the lines of acceptability for many, but which is no longer viable in the current context of democratization and transformation of apartheid South Africa;
- the disjuncture between South Africa and the rest of the continent which the political process of isolating apartheid forced on all of us and which now requires us all to rapidly distill and disseminate the necessary lessons from our different experiences.

In our opinion the central problem that we are faced with can be reflected in a single question? How, in a society which is riven with the requirement to resist authoritarianism and gross inequality and transform it to one characterised by greater equality and democracy, does one do research that is rigorous and maintains scientific integrity but which also allows one to be ethically and socially relevant? How does one use these two imperatives in a creative manner rather than being paralysed by their potential polarisation? If one bends the stick too far in either direction this leads not only to the danger of being either epistemologically or morally illegitimate, but also very practically renders one useless to society and to the scientific community. In short bad research is useless to everyone, except perhaps the most cynical political maneuverer.

The problem is that the constituencies one is dealing with, university researchers on the one hand and organisational activists on the other, in the past at least, have tended not to understand the need to maintain both sides of the polarity in ones hand at the same time. Both constituencies have very legitimate perspectives - the problem tends to lie in the subordination of the needs of the other constituency.

Activists tend to want to subordinate research to their immediate and short term organisational needs, tend to resist conclusions and debates which run contrary to their immediate political agendas, and tend to adopt essentially a moral vision alienated by the objective necessities of rational enquiry.

Researchers, particularly university based ones, on the other hand tend to subordinate moral and social needs to analytical symmetry (the elegant simplicity of econometric model building), refuse to acknowledge the validity of a logic of social action equivalent to the logic of analytic enquiry, tend to feel individually threatened by social demands to concentrate their research agendas in this direction rather than that, and finally tend to be driven by a highly individualised moral vision of the self importance of their own intellectual work.

No matter how much each side of the polarity is irritated by the demands of the other, it helps not one iota to adopt a dismissive approach to the other's driving concerns. One cannot do good socially useful research if one is a political hack, and one cannot transform society usefully if one is not informed by sound analyses and policies.

How one achieves this balance? Well that is what we hope will emerge either from our discussions or from our drinking over the next few days!