

EDITORIAL OBITUARY FOR HAROLD WOLPE

Harold Wolpe was a revolutionary thinker in the best sense of the term. Although his early work occurred in the context of, and alongside, other important Marxist writers on South Africa such as Martin Legassick and Rick Johnstone, it was his pathbreaking article in *Economy and Society* (1972) that gripped the imagination of left intellectual analyses of South Africa. That article entrenched a new discourse of class and modes of production in writing about South Africa. In that sense Harold was very much the father of the New Left critique that emerged as the dominant analysis of the 1970s. Although his roots were in the communist movement he assimilated the new wave of Western Marxism and decisively broke with the SACP analysis which still privileged race in the analysis of South African capitalism.

His significance as a writer on South Africa lay less in the empirical richness of his analysis than in the importance of introducing a new set of conceptual prisms through which to view the concrete problems of the society. Most of the left intellectuals who succeeded him and built their reputations partly in critique and empirical reworking of the relationship between race, class and the articulation of modes of production, stood on his shoulders whilst doing so. In this most important sense, Harold was a revolutionary thinker of our time.

Wolpe was at his best when presenting generalised critique. It is a great pity that the last few years of his life were so tied up with attempting to assist in the formulation of education policy that he had little time to do what he was best at - radical critique and conceptual questioning of the theoretical foundations of the way we were viewing South Africa. His last published piece, in the previous issue of *Transformation*, saw him return to this role as he began questioning the way in which the RDP was conceptualised in the current transition. This is what he was best at, and it is a great pity that he was unable to devote his last years to reflecting on the transition he had struggled so hard for.

Harold was not just an important thinker, he was also a very human being - he was a mensch who had a wonderful sense of humour. There was a time to be serious and a time to laugh; a time for critique and a time to tell jokes. And if he was good at abstract critique, he was even better at relating a down to earth funny story. The last time some of us spoke to him and commented how good he looked

for his age, he wryly retorted: 'like the picture of Dorian Gray, good on the outside, but rotting on the inside'.

We all owe you, Harold. At least for some time, whenever we struggle with coming to terms with what this transformation of South Africa is about, or when we have to laugh at ourselves, we will remember you.

*Mike Morris, Bill Freund, Gerhard Mare,
Vishnu Padayachee, and John Daniel*

A Note from the Editors:

This issue of Transformation was completed in December 1995 and supposed to appear in the first week of January. Unfortunately a technical problem resulted in a delay that was beyond our control. Please note that it is still dated 1995.