

## Harold Wolpe - An Obituary

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Harold Wolpe, who died of a heart attack on Thursday 18 January 1996, was one of South Africa's most influential intellectuals and a leading political activist over more than four decades.

He joined the Communist Party in the 1940s and in the 1950s became a member of the Congress of Democrats. As a lawyer he worked on a number of political cases while continuing his work as an activist. In 1963 he was arrested for being part of a group of ANC leaders, most of whom were arrested at Rivonia. His subsequent escape from prison, described by his wife AnneMarie in her book *The Long Way Home*, resulted in him leaving the country and eventually settling in England.

There he studied further and pursued an academic career as a sociologist. Here he made his mark on South African studies, especially with his seminal 1972 article, 'Capitalism and cheap labour power: from segregation to apartheid' (*Economy and Society*, 1(4)) which partially explained South Africa's shift from its pre-1949 segregation policy to the establishment of apartheid by the need for the state to increase and systematise repression in order to accentuate capital accumulation. This would occur through elaborate controls on migrant labour as the ability of the reserves to supplement workers wages with subsistence farming decreased. This article, together with some other contemporaneous writings (notably by Martin Legassick, Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido) helped to shape the intellectual thought of a whole generation of South African sociologists and revisionist historians.

He later worked on the theory of the South African state, attempting to revise and update the theory of Colonialism of a Special Type and to deepen its class analysis. He wrote a number of articles on this topic as well as the book, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*, published jointly by UNESCO, the OAU and James Curry in 1988.

His work was banned in South Africa during the pre-1990 period but clandestine copies of his writing circulated amongst academics and activists among whom his name became well known even though he had been out of the country for over two decades.

In the wake of the Soweto uprising in the late-1970s the ANC established educational structures in exile. One of their main tasks was to ensure that school policy and curriculum were developed for the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO) in Tanzania. Wolpe became a key member of the ANC's London Education Committee and of the ANC National Education Council. In this capacity, he participated in debates, often heated, on what the role of the school should be. He argued that the school should be used to meet the needs of the liberation movement for specific skills rather than to act as an 'ordinary' secondary school preparing students for higher education as was proposed by the school's teachers, including myself.

In the late-1980s, seeing the need to start developing education policy for a post-apartheid South Africa, he established the Research on Education in South Africa (RESA) project, attached to the University of Essex where he was a Reader in Sociology. In 1991 RESA merged with a similar project at the University of the Western Cape to form the Education Policy Unit (EPU) and Wolpe returned to South Africa to become its Director. He also became chairperson of the EPU Directors' Forum which coordinated and facilitated the work of the five EPUs in South Africa.

In the past five years he has built up an effective and successful research unit and participated in most of the the major policy development initiatives of the democratic movement - for example, The National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI), the ANC's Policy Framework for Education and Training, and the pre-election Implementation Plan for Education and Training. As the director of the country's only policy research unit specialising in higher education, he felt disappointed - even slighted - at not being appointed to the National Commission for Higher Education. Nevertheless he agreed to be the Convenor of the largest of the Task Groups: on *Programme, Qualification and Institutional Framework*. He put the finishing touches on the report only hours before he suffered his heart attack.

He was a warm person with a gentle sense of humour and always stimulating to talk to. He loved to debate and seemed genuinely surprised when people took his sometimes sharp attacks on their arguments and ideas personally. He would often engage in a fierce intellectual disagreement with someone, and, after it was over, speak to them on various topics with no rancour whatsoever. He will be sorely missed by his colleagues, especially those in the education policy community, as well as by his many friends.