

the york conference on post-apartheid south africa

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It's not that post-apartheid South Africa is around the corner, but unless academics get going and come up with some pretty sorted-out alternatives, we're simply going to have the same system with more black faces in a wider variety of jobs', commented one academic at the York Conference held at the end of October 1986.

As I see it, there are three good reasons for shifting some of our energies from the current crisis to an examination of a longer-term perspective. Firstly, we tend to become caught up in the day-to-day opposition to apartheid. In the almost overwhelmingly repressive climate, we need to shake ourselves occasionally and ask where we are heading. What do we want in the long-term, and how does that fashion our current strategies and direction? We need goals towards which we can strive. Simply fighting apartheid is neither sufficient to define the methods of opposition used, nor is it preparing us for the future society.

Secondly, South Africans black and white — have no experience of democracy. Even whites who are given the chance to vote every few years, are ignored or silenced if their views are slightly left or right of the ruling faction of the National Party. Without sound democratic structures, participation in policy-making in post-apartheid South Africa is likely to be extremely limited, so that the range of options is not able to be seriously considered by the majority of South Africans.

Thirdly, people's demands are based on their experience. If that experience is limited to existing options, without exposure to

alternatives, demands will reflect only current thinking. It is necessary to integrate future policy issues, including those based on the demands of the Freedom Charter, into debates within the trade unions and popular organisations.

It is thus important to bring home the debates on post-apartheid South Africa currently occurring outside the country. For it is the majority of people inside South Africa who must mould future policy. It is out of an integrated process of practical struggle here and now, and exposure to theoretical debates, that policy should be formulated. Mere sloganising will bring neither liberation nor food, housing and clothing in the future. In the process of giving content to demands, alternative solutions can begin to be considered.

The York Conference on 'The Southern African Economy after Apartheid' was one of the first of a number of meetings to discuss different aspects of a future South Africa. It attracted a wide range of academics, fieldworkers and others. The papers presented varied considerably in standard, accuracy and perspective. For a first attempt to debate these issues, I found the conference both very exciting and depressing. It was exciting to meet in person and debate with so many people whose names are familiar from the literature only. It was depressing, however, to see what little work has been done, and in those areas which have been broached, to realise how tentative those first steps are. Some sessions, such as 'The economist's role in the apartheid debate' and 'International comparisons: South Africa vs Latin America', were dominated by

economic, often technical, debates relatively unrelated to problems seen from the ground.

Other sessions, such as 'An economic overview: will South Africa be socialist?' and 'Trade unions and industrial relations', generated heated debate, particularly between academics of various ideological persuasions and observers from the ANC.

In other sessions I attended on population pressure, urbanisation, redistribution, 'Employment: women and the informal sector' and 'Agriculture: the land question and the political economy of the agricultural sector', I found some of the papers most stimulating and useful. Doug Hindson, who was one of the few to offer any thoughts on future research priorities, rather than concentrating on current trends, pointed to some strategies for handling urbanisation. There were also controversial papers such as that presented by Matthew Cobbett on 'The land question in South Africa: a preliminary assessment', in which he claimed there was no real demand for land; that, in a liberated South Africa, most people presently living in rural areas would move to town and, by implication, that rural development is not a pressing priority. (This is highly unlikely. In my experience thousands of people who have been removed, for example, are desperate to return to their land and to re-establish themselves as farmers.)

Space does not permit a review of the papers but — resuming the argument that these debates should not be inaccessible to local people, that they should be integrated into organisations, and indeed, that the researchers should more consciously be listening to the ground opinion in order to inform their theories — the final session of presentations, entitled 'What kind of economic system?' brought a number of perspectives together. In particular, John Saul's presentation, 'Race, class and the future of socialism in South Africa', using concepts of 'popular democratic' and 'proletarian' movements, explains why a 'positive dialectic' between them should be cause for optimism in building a society free of oppression and exploitation. □