

## 2. NGOTSHE

Ngotshe is one of the most remote and conservative farming districts of Northern Natal. In the 1880s it became part of the New Republic which was set up by the Boers in that area and which was later incorporated into Paul Kruger's South African Republic.

Hardly a promising setting for the development of liberal attitudes one would think, yet on August 8th something quite remarkable happened there. Ten thousand people came together at the small town of Louwsburg to seal a pact protecting the land rights of black farm-workers living on white-owned land. Such a thing has never happened before anywhere in South Africa, where blacks living on white-owned land can be

given three months notice to get off it, even though their families may have been there for generations.

Now, in Ngotshe, things will be different. Mr Tjaart van Rensburg Chairman of the local Farmers Association told the gathering "The pact recognises the rights of blacks in the district . . . We are bound together as neighbours and partners; one cannot be successful without the other." And the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini told the crowd "We have come here as Africans – black Africans and white Africans – on the face of Mother Africa, to pioneer a new thing in human relationships."

If such words can be spoken in Ngotshe, all is far from lost. □

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by David Welsh

## THE HOUW HOEK CONFERENCE ON LIBERAL VALUES

It is quite striking how various groups of South African liberals have independently recognised the urgent need for liberal values to be restated or recharged for the South Africa of the 1980s and beyond. There has been a sense that liberal values were going by default, under the sustained onslaught of both right and left.

Historically, the most forceful attack has come from the right, with liberals being forced to fight battles in defence of shrinking rights. So tough have these battles been that few liberal theorists have had the time or capacity to stand back from the immediate struggle and think out afresh what liberal values mean in a society such as South Africa. From the writings of Alfred Hoernlé in the 1940s there is a long break in systematic liberal philosophising, broken by the publication of the Spro-cas Political Report (written largely by André du Toit) in 1971, but thereafter seemingly lying dormant until the mid-1980s.

Now we have a flourish of activity, both cerebral and practical. Beginning with the delivery of Charles Simkins's seminal restatement of liberalism (the publication of which is anticipated), carrying on with a conference convened by the S.A. Institute of Race Relations and, most recently, the Houw Hoek conference which was organised by Jeffrey Butler, Richard Elphick and myself. In addition there has been the Grahamstown conference in mid-1985, which examined the history of the Liberal Party (whose history, by the way, is beginning to be mangled by the left), and subsequent attempts to establish a Liberal Association.

The Houw Hoek conference was born out of the recognition, shared by many liberals, that liberal values had for too long been taken for granted, both by protagonists and antagonists. Few people, including academics, could articulate a forceful and coherent statement of what liberalism was all about. Moreover, the sustained attack from the left and from the Black Consciousness movement had tended to sap the self-confidence of liberals and to put them on the defensive.

In the English-language, predominantly white universities, the left occupied the high moral ground, if not the support of the university communities at large. The intellectual discourse on South Africa's past and present was dominated by neo-Marxist and Marxist thinking, even if this thinking has become increasingly fragmented.

Our conference sought to achieve three basic aims: first, to review the history of liberals, liberalism and liberal activity in South Africa – partly with a view to rescuing this history from interpretations currently being placed upon it by revisionists, but more importantly because it is a significant history that deserves empathetic analysis. Secondly, we tried to take stock of the critique of liberalism emanating from the left. This was, in general, not undertaken in any combative, 'Marxist-bashing' spirit. As the published papers will show, their tone was sober, analytical and refreshingly free from any sense of wounded **amour propre**. Generally speaking, I would say that most of the liberal scholars took the sensible and balanced view that the

revisionist critique had been valuable, that it had pointed up some weaknesses in traditional liberal analyses, thereby acting as a useful spur to future analysis. Few liberals would deny that the revisionist revolution in historiography has produced insights of immense value, which more eclectic scholars can use, without necessarily embracing the entire historiographical paradigm employed by the revisionists. For example: few liberal scholars would accept the proposition that class is the primary analytical category in South Africa, but nowadays few would dismiss its analytical usefulness quite as cavalierly as before.

A third aim was to breathe new life into, and to restate, liberal values. Here we wrestled with many of the traditional issues like equality, freedom, the Rule of Law, civil rights and so on. For far too long liberals have been inclined to assume that collectively these values were inherently and self-evidently 'a good thing'. One hopes that the published papers by Johan Degenaar, John Dugard, Tony Mathews, Gerald Shaw and Charles Simkins will provide a more substantial basis for continuing to believe that they are 'a good thing'. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the discussions in this area was the question of 'group rights': do they exist, and should they be entrenched in a Bill of Rights and/or a constitution? Most (but not all) came away convinced that the idea of group rights was a chimera, other than in the case of language and religion, whose protection could in any case be subsumed in a conventional Bill of Rights. This, however, is a debate that has just begun and will undoubtedly continue.

A repeated theme was that liberalism, if it were to be relevant, had to be democratic, even radical. If it could be construed merely as a covert defence of capitalism or an elaborate facade for the perpetuation of inequality then it had no role to play. At the same time, however, most of the economics papers argued that the retention of a market system, modified by what might be termed 'social democratic' interventions, was necessary both in terms of allocative efficiency and incentives, as well as an underpinning of an open society.

On the basis of this conference and other discussions in which I have participated it seems to me highly likely that liberalism has to go the route of social democracy if it is to survive as a significant set of values. It is far too facile to assume that historically liberalism has merely been capitalism's **alter ego** – which conventional Marxist analysis suggests. Liberal values derive

from many sources, not just the aspirations of 'possessive individualists', helpful though they may have been at a certain state of capitalism's development.

Liberalism, it seems to me, is not necessarily or intrinsically related to particular types of economic system. The values it upholds can theoretically be applied to several kinds of economic arrangement: **which** kind is a matter for empirical examination. Thus far the evidence is clear: the set of rights that is at the core of liberalism is consistently upheld **only** in societies that are predominantly market-oriented and protect the rights of private property. (Such societies, incidentally, include the Scandinavian social democracies which are often incorrectly described as 'socialist').

The economic dimension of liberalism remains an open-ended issue. At the very least the Houw Hoek conference showed that there is still scope for debate. The papers by Séan Archer, Norman Bromberger and Ken Hughes, and Jill Nattrass represent a promising and creative start to the process of thinking about the South African economy after apartheid.

Somewhat to the chagrin of the organisers the further the conference proceeded the more gaps we realised we had left. In the light of hindsight we wished we had had a paper on Alfred Hoernlé – currently stigmatized by some on the left as a progenitor of apartheid; we needed a paper on liberal values in education, and so on and so on until the list gets embarrassingly long!

The gaps will be apparent to the critical reader when the book appears next year. But in self-defence we have to say that our conference was, like the other liberal stirrings, a preliminary to a more sustained effort to provide an intellectual basis for liberal values. At a future conference (1988?) we hope to plug some of those gaps.

We also have to be frank and open about the most serious gap of all in our conference, the lack of a strong African presence. I will not weary the reader with a long account of our efforts to fill this gap: the brutal and unpalatable truth is that in the circumstances of South Africa in 1986 liberalism (at least as it is understood) is not an attractive philosophy to the great majority of able, creative and articulate African scholars. I happen to believe that many misconceive what it is all about. I believe that the great majority of blacks actually want a society that is genuinely free, and would resent a post-apartheid government that stifled freedom because it and it alone 'knew' what the people wanted. □

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