

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Edward Webster: South African intellectual, teacher, activist, a man of great energy and integrity, and the life and soul of any party

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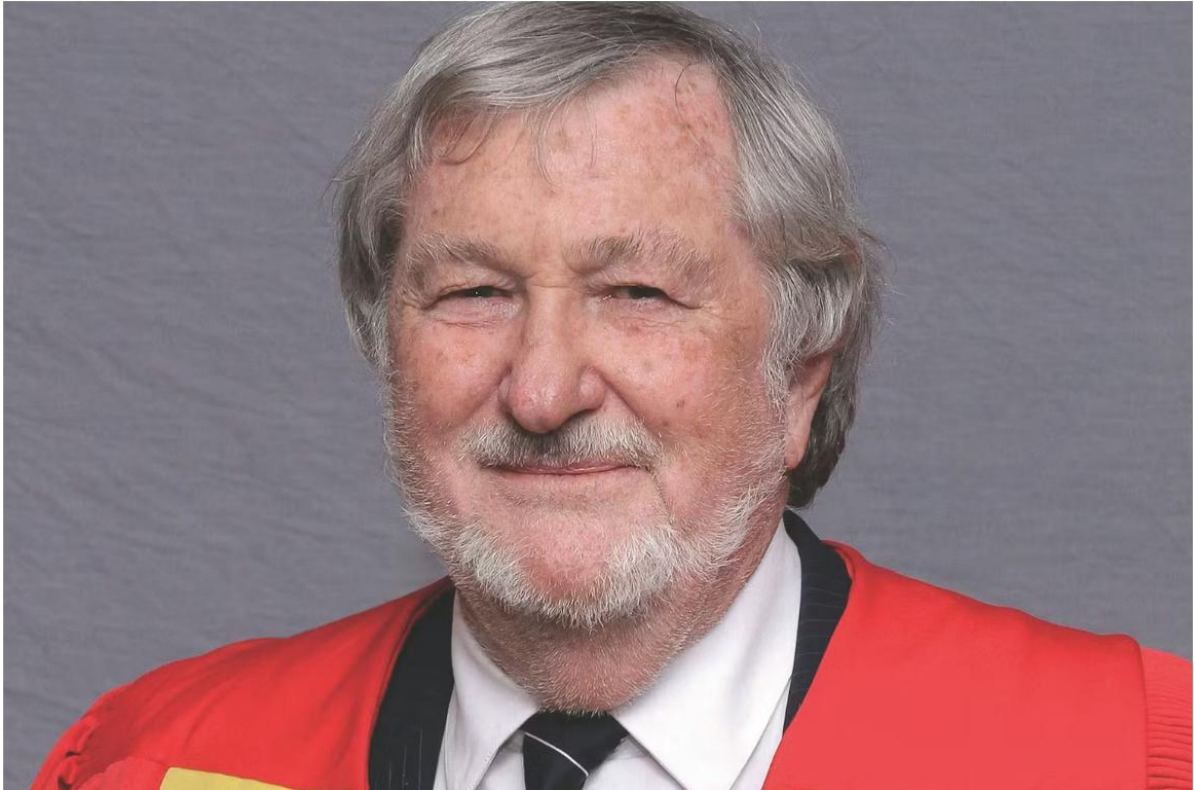
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Prof Eddie Webster. University of the Witwatersrand

Eddie Webster (82), sociologist and emeritus professor at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, who died on 5 March 2024, lived a huge life, applying himself to many different arenas with great energy and insight.

His achievements are quite extraordinary. He was an intellectual, a teacher, a leader, an activist for social change, a builder of institutions, a rugby player and jogger, a man of great energy and integrity, and the life and soul of any party.

As an intellectual and activist he was always independent and critical, and always engaged, whether working with trade unions or with South Africa's new democratic government. It was important to get your hands dirty working for change, he always said, but as important to retain your autonomy and intellectual integrity. This held for the university itself, an institution to which he was wholly committed but at the same time found deeply disappointing when it came to social justice. His life was shaped by these kinds of tensions.

Eddie was one of that pioneering generation of scholar-activists at the university, white academics who identified with and supported the black resistance movement, and who saw the world in new ways and pioneered the production of new knowledge: his close colleague, feminist and environmental sociologist Jacklyn Cock, anthropologist and democratic activist David Webster (assassinated in 1989), and distinguished historian Phil Bonner.

Eddie inspired generations of us with his vision and practice of critically engaged scholarship – not only in South Africa, but across the world.

Independent streak

In 1986, believing that the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) was out of touch with the majority of South Africans, he drove an investigation called the Perspectives on Wits with his colleagues. They explored the views of trade unionists and community activists about the university. The university had agreed to fund this investigation. But it was unhappy with the results. These revealed that the institution's own narrative about its liberal opposition to apartheid was not shared by black South Africans, who saw it as serving white and corporate interests.

A few years earlier, at a time of great repression of unions, he and Phil Bonner had attempted to set up a worker education programme on campus. But the university refused to let it happen. The university's main funders, such as Anglo American, would have been greatly displeased by such a programme – a nice illustration of the point made in the Perspectives document.

A decade later the indomitable Eddie was able to establish a branch of the Global Labour University at Wits, and bring trade unionists into the heart of the institution. He was not someone to give up easily.

Insatiable curiosity

Eddie worked closely with South Africa's emerging trade union movement in the mid-1970s. At the time black workers were a tightly controlled source of cheap labour for South Africa's booming industrial economy, and the unions were not recognised legally and suffered severe repression by employers and the state together. Eddie believed that a strong trade union movement democratically controlled by workers would be a powerful force for change.

He contributed to educational programmes for trade unionists, advocating for the recognition of the unions whenever he could. He co-founded the South African Labour Bulletin, which served as a forum for the interaction between academics and trade unionists, and the Industrial Education Institute with his comrade Rick Turner and others. Turner was assassinated by the apartheid government in 1978.

Eddie went on to support the unions, and conduct research with and for them, his entire life. Generations of union shop stewards and organisers knew him through his support, teaching and research, and he was widely loved and revered as “comrade Prof”.

As an intellectual Eddie was insatiably curious about the world and how it worked and about new possibilities emerging for progressive change. While the sociology

classics were a foundation for his thinking, he kept up to date with new literature and ideas.

He founded Industrial Sociology at Wits and established the Sociology of Work Unit (now the Society, Work and Politics Institute SWOP) as a research unit in the early 1980s as a way of stimulating labour research and deepening his work with unions. The unit organised and financed research, held seminars and workshops, provided a home for students, and increasingly collaborated with colleagues at other universities and overseas.

Eddie loved working with others, whether students or colleagues or trade unionists. He knew that ideas arose from wide reading, discussions and interactions, and frequently said “there is no such thing as an original idea”. For its students, staff, colleagues and associates SWOP stood out as a place of vibrant intellectual exchange and curiosity about each other’s work: it was an intellectual home and a place of comradeship and critique that felt unique in the university.

Academic and teaching legacy

Eddie was also a great teacher, bringing all of his passion for ideas and his vivid sense of history and change and struggle into the classroom, exciting students about the life of the intellect and the life of struggle. At SWOP he established the first internship programme for black postgraduate students to support and encourage them in what they often experienced as a hostile environment.

Eddie regularly undertook large-scale research projects and recruited numbers of students to participate in field research. This was another learning opportunity, where students immersed themselves in the collective quest for knowledge and began to see themselves as researchers.

In the midst of a multitude of projects, Eddie remained committed to his academic work, publishing a great volume and range of articles and books, and achieving honours and recognition globally.

His first book, Cast in a Racial Mould, based on his PhD, provided the intellectual foundation for the new discipline of industrial sociology in South Africa, developing an analysis of changing workplace technology and its impact on trade unionism – specifically the workings of race and class. This provided a material basis for understanding the emergence of the new black mass unionism.

His co-authored book Grounding Globalisation provided a new account of globalisation and trade unions through a comparison of South Africa, Korea and Australia. Global scholars were inspired by it and it won a major prize from the American Sociological Association.

His most recent book, Recasting Workers' Power, written with Lynford Dor, returns full cycle to the themes of his first book, exploring the impact of technological change on the nature of work in the gig economy, and drawing lessons from forms of worker organisation and collective action that have been emerging across Africa.

Each of these books extends the boundaries of our knowledge by exploring the cutting edge of social change – in a sense helping us see the future and, indeed, helping to make it.

A great love for life

It is impossible to think about Eddie without thinking about Luli Callinicos, historian and biographer, and the great love of his life. Indeed, she was the rock on which he built his achievements. I remember with great fondness the Greek Easter feasts shared at their home, and the many other gatherings with family, friends and colleagues.

Michael Burawoy, the great American sociologist and lifelong friend of Eddie, once told me that he had never laughed as much as he did when he was with Eddie and his colleagues from SWOP. Eddie enjoyed people and was deeply generous; he was a great raconteur, he loved being alive. Three weeks ago he was celebrated for his 200th Park Run in one of Johannesburg's large parks. Whatever he did he did fully, heart and soul. He was not bigger than life, he was big with life.

In later years he introduced himself as “a living ancestor”. Now he is simply our ancestor, one who has given us a huge legacy, a living legacy. It is time for us to reflect on his inspiration, burn imphepho, slaughter a cow and pour out the wine.

Reference:

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