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34th Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé Memorial Lecture

Liberalism and the problem of power

Charles Simkins

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CHARLES SIMKINS

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THE
ALFRED AND WINIFRED HOERNLÉ
MEMORIAL LECTURE

commemorates the work of Professor R F Alfred Hoernlé, president of the South African Institute of Race Relations from 1934 to 1943, and his wife Winifred Hoernlé, president of the Institute from 1948 to 1950 and again from 1953 to 1954.

Reinhold Frederick Alfred Hoernlé was born in Bonn, Germany, in 1880. He was educated in Saxony and at Oxford and came to South Africa at the age of 28 to be professor of philosophy at the South African College. He taught in Britain and the United States of America from 1911 to 1923, returning to become professor of philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, where his South African wife was appointed senior lecturer in social anthropology. His association with the Institute began in 1932, and it was as its president that he died in 1943. His Phelps-Stokes lectures on *South African native policy and the liberal spirit* were delivered before the University of Cape Town in 1939.

Agnes Winifred Hoernlé entered the field of race relations after the death of her husband, joining the Institute's executive committee in 1946. She worked for penal reform and to promote child welfare and the welfare of Asians.

PREVIOUS HOERNLÉ LECTURES

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Alan Paton, *Federation or desolation* (1985)

To deliver a Hoernlé memorial lecture is to take one's place in a long and honourable line of thinkers; even the least remarkable individual is sustained in his efforts by the substance of our liberal tradition. Would that our predecessors were with us now, in the hour of our need! For the great South African crisis, which they foresaw, is upon us; and it will test every institution and every tradition, including ours, with the greatest rigour.

A living tradition must be able to reorient itself in new circumstances, to tackle the problems and issues of the time. Evidence of such development is to be found in the Hoernlé lectures. In the 1960s liberals had to come to terms with the loss of valuable freedoms and the realization that the political forces which had removed them would remain dominant for a long time. To that era we owe the critique of the illiberalism of Afrikaner nationalism and resistance to it, as well as a degree of entrenchment of liberal values in some of our public institutions. In the 1970s, as UDI in Rhodesia wore on and the decolonization of Angola and Mozambique took place, the need for a more comprehensive liberal political vision became apparent. Work over the last 15 years has done much to locate more precisely the opportunities and problems associated with the application of liberal values to South African political and economic organization. Accordingly we do not now have to start from the beginning; much of the material for the construction of a liberal political programme already exists.

But the events of the last 2 years have raised in an acute form a problem that has existed all along. It may be put thus: liberal proposals about the regulation of power might have considerable merit, but liberals occupy no significant place in the power constellation and therefore cannot see to the realization of these proposals. More fancifully, one might point to two musical parallels which seem to illustrate the position of liberals: one sacred and classical, the other romantic and profane. In the St Matthew Passion Bach interpolates into the dialogue between Pilate and the crowds – between establishment power and popular power – an exquisitely fragile soprano recitative and aria as a last defence of the good. Decidely more ambivalent, reflecting the romantic revaluation of the relation between good and evil, is Brangäne's warning in the second act of Tristan and Isolde. Given the history of Western culture, it is no accident that both voices are female; they illuminate the situation and are ignored; and events take their fatal course. As a recent visitor put it: there can be liberal ideals – liberals may warn, or defend what seem to be impossible values – but there can be

no liberal strategy. This assessment is often believed by liberals themselves. It requires a closer look.

Power is always a term which needs analysis; indeed, it is understood in different ways by different schools of thought. One way of demonstrating this is by critique: a discussion of two illiberal approaches to power found in South Africa at present may help clarify what is at stake.

The first approach is associated with the name of Nietzsche. It may seem very odd to talk about him; very few South Africans can have read his works, though more might shudder at the mention of his name because of his reputation as a proto-Nazi philosopher. But he is of interest because he made the 'will to power' a fundamental term in his social analysis. The will to power is itself explained physiologically; every organism desires to discharge its strength. Because vitality is unequally distributed, so is (and should be) power; Nietzsche was fundamentally anti-egalitarian. His notoriety derives from unflinching acceptance of the consequences of his doctrine; because there are many selves, each with its quantum of power, social life is necessarily an unending and unlimited power struggle. Happiness is the feeling of increasing power which, in some circumstance, can be exercised over oneself. More often it is exercised over others.

Nor is this all. Nietzsche 'unmasks' morality as a device of the weak, who use it to propose limits on the exercise of power by the strong. The strong need to understand this use of morality in order not to be bound by it, but may themselves manipulate the mental constructs of those they seek to dominate in any fashion they find advantageous, including the employment of deceit. Find a man given above all to the pleasures of domination who is not in fact governed by principles, however much he may profess them, and you have found a practical Nietzschean, whether or not he has read the works of the master. There are a large number of practical Nietzscheans in all segments of the South African population today: the problem is to explain why.

It is no coincidence that Nietzsche embeds his discussion of the will to power in an analysis of nihilism – the process in which 'the highest values lose their value'. Like other nineteenth-century thinkers he believed that the attempt to replace the religious underpinnings of morality with philosophical foundations would fail. The failing grip of morality drives the weak to despair; it also gives the strong a chance to unshackle themselves and to create a new set of values to which others, in their desperation, would be driven to adhere. Nietzsche thought that normative confusion would become universal; if, as seems to be empirically justified, one takes the view that it can become marked at particular times and places, then one might conclude that practical Nietzscheanism appears to the extent of the confusion. It can be identified by two characteristics: firstly, demands for power accompanied by a weak or spurious justification and, secondly, polarization as ordinary people are obliged to choose between a limited number of contending power centres, to one of which they must abandon

themselves. In these circumstances the very function of speech itself becomes that of signalling to others whether one is friend or foe; language expresses solidarity or enmity, but becomes useless for debate.

Now, there is precisely such a marked confusion about norms in South Africa at present. This derives from several sources: white people find themselves stranded in a post-colonial era, which demands a major shift in their understanding of themselves; black people find their traditions eroded by industrialization and have to reorient themselves; and the government, once so determined to regulate many aspects of its subjects' lives, has retreated somewhat from this role. The apartheid crystallization is dissolving; various parties have proposals for a recrystallization, so an emphasis on the power to impose them can be expected.

The conservative manifestations of this are, of course, longstanding. Asked by a reporter on American television what he thought of the reimposition of the state of emergency in June, one young white man replied bluntly, 'It's about time. These blacks are getting out of hand.' The clip was no doubt chosen as a concise expression of a widespread sentiment; a thinkable future lasts only as long as a social order underpinned by white domination. It is a cast of thought which combines determination with pessimism; the gloom of Norse mythology hangs over it, with its peculiar valuation of contest and disaster.

Other manifestations, however, also exist and are just as important. A tragic example can be found in the events leading up to the destruction of the greater part of Crossroads earlier this year. There had been factions all along, but the entry of the 'comrades' in 1985 and the shifting set of alliances they formed radically destabilized the situation. What Josette Cole in a recent paper on the subject calls the 'political practices of the undisciplined sections of the comrades' produced a reaction within the community. And the alliances formed by the comrades seem, from reports, to have pushed the squatter leader, Johnson Ngxobongwana, into the arms of the security forces. Everyone was after power; everyone was prepared to use any means at hand to get it; the outcome was in the interests of the most powerful party – the government – which had wanted, for a number of years, to reduce the population of Crossroads. Nietzscheans would have no cause for complaint; the rest of us, dismayed by the results, would do well to reflect on one of Cole's observations: 'Few had realized that [Crossroads's] militant tradition could be mobilized by the right as easily as it had been by the left in the political struggles of the Cape Peninsula.' There are those who would lead us into the promised land without having realized that.

One cannot go too far here. 'Extirpate the will to power,' declared Nietzsche, 'and you destroy life itself.' That is quite true; human beings are constructed that way. One ought not (as Smuts said in 1937 to municipalities trying to impose prohibition on Africans) to try and make human nature better than the good Lord made it. The notion of competition for power is not repugnant to liberalism, though what it has been mostly concerned with is a framework which tames and represses, so that

power may serve worthy ends.

What is objectionable in Nietzsche is the limitless scope he allows power, and his hostility to its regulation by moral considerations. His case actually depends on his account of the spread of nihilism being true. In fact, the acceptance of moral codes has survived secularization better than he thought it would; religious underpinnings have not been so crucial after all. Liberalism has been grounded philosophically in two major traditions: in utilitarianism by Mill, who developed a still highly influential account of the limits of the authority of society over the individual, and in Hegelianism by Bosanquet, who stressed the social conditions essential to self-realization. These accounts are not easily rendered compatible, because their premises are different, even though they might support the same policies in many cases. But some moral account of the purposes and limits of power is essential to liberalism; if it is to be socially effective this account must build on moral understandings already present. Our search must be for the understandings present in South Africa on which a modern liberalism can be built.

There is already an important preliminary conclusion to be drawn: liberals betray their vocation if they enter the stakes for power at any price at the cost of propagating ideas according to which power claims can be assessed and challenged. A great deal of liberal thought in recent years has gone into the discussion of constitutional forms. That is as it should be. Constitutional forms tame power; they divide and allocate it and so control what Madison called 'its encroaching nature', which, unchecked, leads to tyranny. They also specify the limits of the authority of society over the individual. But the discussion of the scope of liberal ideas ought not to be limited to the narrowly political; a vision of what a liberal order offers its citizens and what it requires of them is necessary to underpin all the rest. Bosanquet encouraged us to see all social institutions as ethical ideas; the reason for transforming institutions is that they should express ethical ideas more completely. Social change ought to represent moral progress, and the framework within which power is exercised should serve this purpose.

Ah, moral progress! Were the Victorians not the last to believe in it? Some suppose that Victorians believed in inevitable moral progress. But they could not have done so, because inevitable moral progress is logically impossible. If morality has applications, choices have to be made; and where there is choice, there is no inevitability. Moral progress is always fragile; the horrors of the twentieth century have underscored that point. But there is a difference between believing in its fragility and believing in its absurdity, as Nietzsche did. Karl Marx, the originator of the second illiberal approach to power, handles the issue in yet another way.

At the heart of Marxism is optimism about power. Capitalism divides society into classes, and the relationship between them is essentially one of exploitation; accordingly, capitalism requires a coercive state to underwrite this exploitation. Capitalism, however, will inevitably be replaced by socialism. Socialism abolishes class divisions and hence the

need for state coercion; indeed it ultimately abolishes the need for a state at all. But the path to this desired condition runs through a revolution to overturn the political power which sustains capitalism, and the dictatorship of the proletariat, which replaces capitalist economic and social institutions with socialist arrangements. Ultimate freedom would require acceptance of its opposite at many points *en route;* a process of piecemeal and experimental change is out of the question. This is what gives Marxism as a social doctrine its all-or-nothing character; one has to decide whether, taken as a whole, the account Marx gives of capitalist development and its contradictions is true. If one accepts it, one has no alternative but to enlist in the political struggle for socialism. All one's existing morality has to be subjected to the demands of the struggle; it does not matter that one may feel one is going morally backwards at any particular point in time. The truth of the theory guarantees that the process will eventually produce the right outcome. This requires a mighty leap of faith.

Leszek Kolakowski has said that the quarter-century before the First World War was the golden age of socialism. He is right for several reasons: firstly, it was still possible to believe in a relatively short and painless transition from capitalism to socialism: an endless, grinding set of socialist dictatorships had not made its appearance. Emancipation could be stressed rather than repression – and, on the whole, quite innocently despite some prescient warnings. Secondly, the account of the development of capitalist society proposed by Marx had not been proved false and seemed plausible to many. Thirdly, the era was one of rapid unionization and development of working-class cultural and political organization; socialism as working-class political theory therefore articulated with (though always in a complex fashion) real advances in the quality of working-class life.

The situation changed after 1917. Contrary to the predictions of Marxism the first socialist revolution took place in an economically backward country rather than an advanced one. Lenin greatly elaborated the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat and put it into practice, and it became clearer as time passed that this would be a long and costly phase. In the advanced capitalist economies the distribution of wealth ceased to become more unequal and income distribution generally improved, thus undermining one of the most important mechanisms for producing a revolutionary situation. Altogether, it became harder to make the Marxist leap of faith; *credo quia absurdum est* gained a new lease of life and by the 1930s Marxism had produced a mysticism as remarkable as that of medieval Catholicism. Take Brecht's play, *Die Massnahme,* for instance, in which a group of revolutionaries on a mission liquidate one of their number for acting in an immediately compassionate way rather than exploiting suffering for revolutionary ends. The victim consents, abandoning his own judgement for the conclusions of revolutionary doctrine as interpreted by the group. It is true that Brecht offered his play as a *Lehrstück* to be discussed and debated; but for a debate to be possible at all, one case to be taken seriously amounts to the view that Mother Church knows best; and she offers

to take away your guilt if only you consent to be bound by her ways. The witnessing of hardships for which there seemed to be no remedy save by overthrow of the system accounted for the considerable numbers of intellectuals in the West who converted to Marxism in the 1930s. For, although a major crisis in capitalism would have seemed to offer opportunities for advance in Marxist analysis, the key contribution to its understanding was made by the decidedly non-Marxist Keynes.

In the postwar period the emphasis shifted again to the analysis of the use and abuse of power by communist parties. George Orwell understood what was going wrong very well; empirical material accumulated about the Soviet Union, the most stunning event being Krushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956. Some people in the West continued a hard-line defence of the Soviet Union; some switched their hopes to China, Cuba, etc. only to be disillusioned by the gradual build-up of evidence of abuse of power there; some switched to social democracy; some simply gave up. The conclusion is hard to escape for anyone who takes the evidence of the past century seriously: the emancipatory promise of Marxism as a system is irretrievably shattered. It can neither explain the evolution of advanced capitalist economies nor can it deal with the problem of power in socialist societies – the problem that stands squarely in the way of the promised emancipation.

But there are fragments and echoes. No fair-minded person could say there is nothing of value in Marx; on the contrary there is interesting sustained argument as well as suggestive fragments in his work. These have entered academic work in one way and another; the 1960s saw the last great wave of interest. Since then many South African scholars, historians in particular, have used frameworks derived from Marxism to a greater or lesser extent.

There are problems in doing so. One is peculiarly South African. Frank Parkin commented some years ago that the attempt to apply class analysis to a society so clearly organized along racial lines is about as appropriate as applying functionalist integrationist theory to the modern Lebanon. It is a telling jibe; there were early heroic attempts to ground theoretically the identification of classes in South Africa, but they failed. And the consequence has been the treatment of groups of people who have a prima facie common economic and political interest as actors in a 'class' struggle, with the difficulties ignored as to whether they really constitute a class in the Marxist sense. Usually the actors are much the same as those who appear in non-Marxist analyses, and the new-found flexibility allows the incorporation of new ones as they arise. If much orthodox political analysis is a more or less liberal journalism, then there is a Marxist journalism to match it. This is not surprising; the market demands it, and the real battle, as always, is over market share.

The second difficulty is more general. Shorn of emancipatory promise both by the course of history and by the conventions of scholarship which rule out anything by way of too overt a *parti pris,* academic

Marxism continues to use as analytical instruments concepts such as exploitation, class struggle, state power and popular resistance without adequate grounds for locating their redemptive potential. As a result, work sometimes takes on a populist cast with a general presumption in favour of workers and the people. This is a far cry from Marx's own view, according to which the workers, even more 'the people', frequently got it wrong; it was the task of Marxist theory to put them right. In this development, too, the grounds for distinguishing science from ideology also became attenuated; a relativization may take place where the realm of discourse becomes filled with ideologies, all of which are rationalizations of interest and power positions. Here Marxism degenerates into Nietzscheanism; history becomes an endless power struggle. What disappears in either case is an assessment of the achievements of the past as a basis for identifying the potential of the present. Marx's view of capitalism was complex: on the one hand it was characterized by an exploitation which left the great mass of workers at subsistence level and pushed some of them below it; on the other, it was a system which expanded productive forces at an unprecedented rate. This and other mechanisms were the means by which the ground was prepared for an emancipated future. How little of this complexity is captured by South African analysis! Given the vague and shifting conception of class and given the problems of creating a satisfactory account of emancipation, the lack of a basis for assessing the potential in South African history is often evident. At the extreme there appears a most un-Marxist pessimism. Better that white people had never landed at the Cape! Better that South African industrialization had never happened!

It is therefore not surprising that the refraction of academic Marxism in the popular consciousness has often achieved little more than intransigence in whatever struggles people happen to be waging and a devaluation of open debate. Incessant confrontation, without a sufficient sense of real possibilities, is the inevitable result. The last thing to disappear as the Cheshire cat faded was the grin; the last thing to disappear from declining Marxism is, alas, its harshness.

The important liberal conclusion here is not a generalized suspicion of grand theory but an insistence that all social theories, grand or small, need to be tested. Just as the successful practice of science requires the establishment and institutionalization of certain norms – free entry of qualified people to the community, unrestricted access to information, accurate reporting of data, occasions for criticism of work – so societies as a whole need institutions in which proposals can be tested. Liberals have often pointed out how damaging censorship is to the achievement of an open society. It suppresses both information and opinion – at present more completely than at any time in the past half-century. If all we can hear is the official story we can be certain that powerful interests are being advanced in the dark in a way that could not otherwise happen, we know that language is being debased and a cynicism about its use is being generated and we know that even the powerful will start to lose their bearings.

All this is very much to the point; tough battles have been fought and are being fought at present over censorship. But there is a tougher issue still awaiting attention. South Africa is a society where several ideologies coexist without real interaction. Afrikaner nationalist ideology has never been accepted in circles beyond its electoral support; it certainly cannot be described as the single dominant ideology in the society. Some of these ideologies have evolved in an essentially traditional fashion; others have been quite consciously created. Some have many supporters, others have few. The Cape flats, for instance, is not the only site of flimsy shelters erected against the elements; a considerable number of mental shacks have been erected in which people huddle for warmth against the social storm. And, although no ideology can seal itself hermetically with complete success, all ideologies pose significant questions and offer answers; not only that, they maintain themselves by ostracizing those who raise awkward issues. All this generates relatively little demand for information and produces not one but a whole series of conservatisms standing in the way of the diffusion of a more widely based sense of an evolving social system. Just to see the existence of problems or opportunities may require not only an intrepid intellect but moral courage as well. Liberals have to challenge received doctrines of all kinds and not just those from one quarter. It can be a very lonely task.

Here it must be said that parts of the establishment are responding better than its critics to the challenges brought about by changing circumstances. This is evidenced, for example, by the enormous improvement in social science research funding both through the Human Sciences Research Council and private sector institutions. The point has been reached where the constraint on progress is not so much the availability of money as the desperately small number of South African social scientists capable of doing decent research.

A couple of years ago this process was often described as the incorporation of a new group into a technocratic, managerial class which was becoming increasingly influential. This does not seem so plausible now. What the government has displayed in dealing with the present crisis is not a smooth managerialism but its old, clumsy methods. Given government objectives, a technically well-organized police force would have killed far fewer people than the police actually have done in the last 2 years. Or, again, take the problem of unemployment. Ten years ago a series of academic papers appeared, most warning of a substantial and growing problem. There was a technical response in the form of a new statistical series, but the information collected is gravely defective, limiting the scope of further analysis and therefore the proposal of informed policies. The advance of technical rationality has been limited and subject to halts or even reverses.

The language of technical rationality can also be abused. People who told one 20 years ago that a certain position was subversive are now likely to say that it is unscientific. Despite this, despite the uneven and

faltering progress in the scope of questions subject to empirical investigation, some successes have been achieved. Repeated demonstrations of the absurdity of the old anti-urbanization policies, for example, played a role in the abolition of the pass laws. Such demonstrations were not sufficient to produce the changes, but they were necessary. What is needed is more, not less, technical rationality applied to a number of other areas of South African life where transformation is urgently required.

But the spread of technical rationality must be accompanied by something else: the construction of social institutions which embody ethical ideas more completely. To illustrate what is involved, one may start with an example. A committee is a group of people who agree to bind themselves to a set of rules. These may be formal rules of procedure, such as regulation by a chairman or notification of items of business to be discussed. There may also be more general obligations such as the duty to listen to what others are saying, to keep one's own contribution concise and to work on a presumption of the good faith and competence of the committee members. Every rule limits the range of appropriate behaviour; the reason for accepting these limitations is the achievement of a greater good – the goals for which the committee was instituted. People who work on committees generally agree on this in the abstract; when it comes to the performance no one is perfect and some people are worse than others. We have all encountered people who are inattentive, ill-prepared, rambling and who want to break rules of procedure when conflicts arise, despite the fact that the rules are there precisely to regulate conflict. When there is insufficient submission to the rules, no useful work can be done: the embodiment of the ethical idea has not taken place. The generalization from this example was well put by T H Green: 'It would seem indeed that there is a real community of meaning between "freedom" as expressing the condition of a citizen of a civilized state, and "freedom" as expressing the condition of a man who is inwardly "master of himself".'

And here one can state the central thesis of this lecture: the problem of power is the problem of a deficit in the ethical content of social institutions. South Africans will never rid themselves of the fact or the fear of the oppressive use of power until they bind themselves to just institutions. It is in the search for just institutions that liberalism finds its application.

In the most remarkable liberal text of our time John Rawls summarizes the requirements of justice in two principles:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.
2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, the claims of later generations being taken into account, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

The first principle is prior to the second and fair opportunity is prior to the difference principle (arranging matters to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged).

These principles are derived from considerations of fairness: a fair form of social organization is one that would be chosen by the people composing it if they were ignorant of the actual social positions they would occupy when the organization is realized. An argument about fairness always involves abstraction of this kind and always asks what would be agreed once it is assumed. In this sense Rawls belongs to a tradition of contract theorists; none the less, the general facts about human society are known throughout, so there is scope for analysing the social possibilities of heightening individual potential.

A society which complies with these principles is said to be well ordered. In it authority derives from consent; power would underwrite authority. There is no other basis for power in a well-ordered society; it is noteworthy that the term does not appear once either in the table of contents or in the index of *A theory of justice*. There are plenty of illegitimate sources of power in actually existing societies. Progress towards a liberal society does not consist of strengthening some illegitimate bases of power at the expense of others; it consists of strengthening just institutions in which legitimate power is bound to serve larger purposes.

Now, it has been said more than once in contemporary South Africa that there is nothing to negotiate about at the political level; all that is necessary are arrangements to transfer power to the majority. From a liberal point of view such an approach ignores the complex problem of construction of institutions, and therefore of understandings and commitments, which do not presently exist. In his 1968 Hoernlé lecture Meyer Fortes distinguished between liberal optimists, who think that economic progress is sufficient to bring about political integration in a plural society, and liberal pessimists, who believe that in addition moral and political action is necessary. He declared himself a liberal pessimist; and, while the forging of new relationships in the economic sphere may offer models and impetus to political action, recent events compel one to agree that he has the better case. There are common goals, standards and values in South African society, but the process of their further definition and acceptance has to be considerably advanced if a liberal order is to be supported.

Calls for negotiation come nearer the mark; while negotiation may produce nothing more than a truce between powers (even this may be a considerable achievement), it usually functions as a forum within which demands for justification of position are made, a forum, in other words, where a degree of moral progress is possible. Negotiations are often seen exclusively as a single national event in which everything is at stake. Indeed, there is a substantial body of opinion which at present rules out negotiations at any other level and demands, as preconditions, the unbanning of political parties and the release of political prisoners. For the time being it is quite clear that the government will not initiate discussions on this basis. How this situation will evolve is beyond prediction. What is clear, however, is that there is also a great deal of work to be done at the regional and local level. It is really a tactical question to decide whether

sufficient potential exists to make progress in particular circumstances. One initiative of promise is the Natal/KwaZulu indaba – what it does and what becomes of its proposals will shed considerable light on the prospects for the reconstruction of at least some of South Africa's regions in accordance with liberal principles.

But negotiations cannot happen *in vacuo;* they need coherent political movements and they need an intellectual context to justify the exercise and to provide a framework for the definition and debate of issues. Liberals can do little directly about the creation of political movements, though their work might enable others to see advantages in mobilization of a particular kind. They can do much to provide the intellectual context; here, the question becomes one of the arguments to be developed and deployed.

Liberals ought to start with an assessment of the South African social order against the two principles of justice. The suggestion here is this: when the changes of the last 15 years are considered, it must be concluded that while significant progress has been made in terms of the second principle, none has been made in terms of the first. For Rawls the first principle (that of maximum liberty) precedes the second; in our case the order has been reversed and this accounts for much of our present trouble.

The case that there has been progress in terms of the second principle has to be established. Many (including some liberals) regard it as wrong even to assert this view, because it seems to give aid and comfort to the enemy. Certainly the thesis must be tested as rigorously as possible so that error may be detected, but if it is true (as I believe it is) one dare not leave it out of account. It is attested by several studies that South African income distribution was extremely unequal in 1970, but that the 1970s saw a clear improvement, with a shift in the racial distribution of income far outweighing an opposite movement in the demographic composition of the population. More controversial is the question of which strata in black (specifically African) society were affected by this change. Few would question that most urban dwellers benefited; one study concludes that the improvement reached the majority of households in the homelands. Rising unemployment, however, introduced a counter trend; at the bottom of the distribution the conditions worsened.

There were supporting changes. A rapid expansion of coloured and Indian secondary schooling in the earlier part of the decade was followed by an even faster expansion of African secondary schooling a few years later. A changing overall occupational structure produced a higher proportion of better jobs; given the slow growth of the white working population, this meant a rapid improvement in the occupational distribution of black people employed in the modern sector. The proportion of Africans in middle-class occupations (professional, clerical and supervisory) nearly tripled between 1971 and 1983. Occupational mobility varied from region to region; in Soweto in 1981 Schneier found a pattern of movement resembling that in the United States, accompanied by an intense interest in

vocational training. Progress was made in the removal of discrimination as companies sought to unify racially separate pay scales and there is clear evidence of the narrowing of skilled/unskilled wage ratios.

For a time in the mid-1970s an approach to development known as 'redistribution with growth' commanded attention. The idea was that the incomes of the rich should be stabilized and that the growth increment should all accrue to the poor. Taking white people as rich and everyone else as poor, the South Africa of the 1970s fulfilled this prescription almost exactly. South Africa! Who would have predicted it?

The evidence for the more dismal 1980s is much less complete. A poor growth record in the late 1970s and a worse one in the early 1980s means that real per capita incomes in 1986 will not exceed those of 12 years earlier. Most of the progress of the 1970s had been achieved by the middle of the decade; beyond that there has been no growth to redistribute. Even so, there is evidence of the persistence of desirable trends. If one sets the modern-sector wage index in 1982 to 100 for each race, the indices in the third quarter of 1985 were: whites 95,9; Asians 100,5; coloured people 103,3; Africans 108,3 (Central Statistical Services). But the offsetting effects of higher unemployment have been stronger in this period.

Where do these changes come from and what do they mean? In the first instance, they are a consequence of economic growth and structural change. They cannot be expected to continue for long unless economic growth outstrips population growth by an appreciable margin. They are also a result of modernizing policy choices whose timing depended on political circumstances. In the 1950s Kuznets argued that economic growth brought rising inequality in the first instance; a peak would be reached somewhere in the middle of the development process, followed by a fall. Later work has established that the position of the peak varies greatly across countries and that, in the short run, movement in the direction of inequality is rather unpredictable. None the less, the effect of two structural changes in inducing the decline is important: the rise of relatively well-paid modern sector employment as a proportion of total employment and an improvement in the skill composition of employment by higher levels of education.

The second factor has certainly been at work in the last 15 years. For much of this period, however, modern sector employment as a proportion of the economically active population has been static or declining. What has taken its place is a rise in the unskilled wage rate paid by the private sector as a matter of policy even in the face of rising unemployment. The SALDRU median minimum wage rate for unskilled labour (which can be taken as a good guide to the wages actually paid) rose by 20 per cent in real terms between the beginning of 1974 and the beginning of 1984. But there are limits to what can be achieved by these means in circumstances of economic adversity, and the rate at the beginning of 1986 had dropped 8 per cent below that of 2 years earlier.

What of the role of the state? The government, it is true, has not

obstructed private sector efforts at remuneration improvements; it has even removed some racial discrimination in public sector wages and salaries. It has expanded black education, although it has quite failed to reform it in accordance with contemporary requirements. Against these modest and equivocal contributions have to be set activities which can only be reckoned as a dead loss. In all except possibly a handful of cases resettlement of millions of people wasted not only state money but the efforts of those who had to rebuild their lives, usually in worse circumstances. Influx control, likewise, has diverted state expenditure from more productive resources and has failed to provide investment opportunities for African people in urban areas. Liberals have often argued that apartheid is a wasteful system; they in turn have been criticized by those who argue that capitalism needs apartheid, that apartheid is 'functional' to capitalist accumulation. But how can it be when apartheid requires expensive projects to guard against the consequences of restriction of strategic imports? How can it be when apartheid policies lead to the loss of export markets or at least to disadvantaged access to them? How can it be when apartheid policies lead to circumstances in which foreign and domestic investor confidence is destroyed?

A desirable pattern of redistribution has emerged over the past 15 years as a result of a changing economic structure and wage policies in the public and private sectors adopted under pressure from abroad and from domestic trade unions. But distribution remains highly unequal and progress is now faltering because of stagnating real income per capita and failure to deal with unemployment. There are policies which would restore the growth rate and improve distribution, but they all require amendment or removal of central portions of state policy.

Rawls made his difference principle (that arrangements should be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged) subject air equality of opportunity. 'Equality of opportunity' is an abstract term whose concrete meaning needs to be investigated and debated in particular circumstances, but it must mean at least a common set of entitlement rules to publicly provided services. Continuing differentiation on racial grounds in these rules is one aspect of government policy that needs urgent attention. But while the absence of formal differentiation is obviously necessary to meet the requirement of equality of opportunity, it is not in itself sufficient to satisfy the difference principle. There is room for a great deal of investigation and debate about the policies required for the most rapid possible rise in the incomes of the poorest. The problem of power in relation to the difference principle is twofold: power should be mobilized to modify, transform or abolish aspects of social structure which stand in the way of poverty reduction; it should also be used to defend and strengthen institutions which promote progress in this sphere. Such a use of power requires a thorough understanding of the social system; it also implies the ability to focus attention quite specifically on the real issues.

But what of the first principle? What is the maximum liberty,

subject to the equal liberty of all, attainable in South Africa at present? Afrikaner nationalism asserts that a system of racial classification imposed by the state is essential to liberty and specifically to the maintenance of group rights. But the only valid group right is the right to a public space for the maintenance and development of language and culture; this right is not in question and is more fully realized on the basis of voluntary adherence. This is why the appeal to group rights as a justification for apartheid fails; the rights appealed to are not rights at all.

There is also an appeal – and a more interesting one – not to abstractly conceived rights but to concretely defined custom. The present order has deep historical roots; Afrikaner nationalism crystallized the system of racial estates and has powerfully affected their relationships, but the system itself had been evolving for centuries. It affects every aspect of life; will not its excision represent too radical a piece of surgery? Or, to change the metaphor, will not a future South Africa labour under the difficulties Burke attributed to French revolutionaries: '... you chose to act as if you have never been moulded into civil society, and had to begin everything anew. You began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you. You set up your trade without capital.'

A conservative argument? Certainly, but not one a liberal can ignore. Against it must be urged that the sense of moral bankruptcy is what erodes the value of the immediate past as capital. This is what makes our situation so morally dramatic and requires of us a heroic effort spared most men at most times. Burke observed that if the practices of the immediate past appeared without much lustre, other elements in a nation's history might be referred to. This is the meaning of the South African liberal tradition: it must function as the cultural capital of the future by providing the norms to succeed the imperatives of a system of racial estates. South African liberalism has not existed and does not exist as an abstract alternative only. It has been embodied in our history, despite its limitations and defects. It is a tradition older than African and Afrikaner nationalism, and much older than Marxism.

A liberal should see failure in terms of Rawls's first principle essentially as a moral failure – a failure of recognition, a failure to universalize. We have it on good authority that the rich and powerful are more likely to fail in this way. It is not a matter of doing or having, but of seeing. For people who know how to grant and receive respect the formation of decent personal relationships has been astonishingly easy no matter what the imputed racial identities of the parties might have been. But the ability to respect has been greatly compromised by the grip of a status system centrally concerned with race and money; countless humiliations have produced the roar of fury and frustration we now hear: we shall rule and you shall feel our power!

But respect cannot be compelled: the master–slave dialectic remains the master–slave dialectic even if master and slave change places. The acknowledgement of others as moral agents can only be given freely;

in fact, it is where freedom begins. The political consequence of this recognition is, of course, a democracy with universal adult franchise. The refusal to grant it is what defines that old habit: the retreat into the laager. To give up that nineteenth-century practice is to give up apartheid. Some say that apartheid is dead already, but it isn't. It will die on the day when official race classification and all that it makes possible is given up.

There is another nineteenth-century inheritance that must be given up. Last year Alan Paton spoke of the undoing of conquest. It must be undone from both sides. In 1856 the Xhosa of the Ciskei, defeated in war and subjected to the pressures of social change, sacrificed cattle and grain in the belief that their former state would be restored. It was resistance, but resistance of a millenial sort with a reliance on magic, and its outcome was precisely an exacerbation of the conditions that they sought to avoid. But despite the failure of her prophecies, the spirit of Nongqause lives on; it would be surprising if it did not. It changes in detail, but has a constant form. Sacrifice now, and on the day of liberation your heart's desire will be restored to you – never mind how, the magic will take care of that; your part is merely to believe. It is strong on struggle, weak on programme. If the spirit of the laager represents the failure of recognition, the spirit of Nongqause represents the failure of analysis. Both are incompatible with liberalism.

'Well now,' a critic might say at this point, 'your game has become clear. Given what you exclude, you must be a supporter of capitalism. This proves what we have known all along, that liberalism is capitalism's justifying ideology.' Is this a reasonable conclusion?

Capitalism and socialism considered as ideal types are differentiated by ownership in respect of a large sub-class of assets known to Marxism as 'means of production'. In one case they are privately owned; in the other they are publicly owned. Often people speak as though these two ideal types were the only two choices really available, but that is a view which has appeared increasingly to have little merit. Actually existing systems of property rights are complex and varied and are constantly being amended. Most legislation affects them.

This way of looking at property yields conclusions which challenge uncritical intuitions. For instance, laws regulating safety in the workplace amend property rights since they limit what can be done with productive assets. The removal of health hazards extends freedom from disease: this is a gain which has to be weighed against the possible contraction in industrial employment that such laws might induce. The precise location of the optimal point will depend on incomes per capita and employment levels, among other things. It can therefore be expected to change over time and with it details of the overall system of property rights.

Taxation is a second example. It clearly affects the use or benefit of assets and labour. Right libertarians have asserted that taxation is theft, at least if it is above the very low level required to finance the 'night-watchman state'. But they start out with a particular set of property rights in

these industries (who are not the worst-off people in the economy) legislation covering remuneration and conditions of work can be passed. One of the dangers about nationalization is that it would absorb energy and resources which could be more effectively employed elsewhere.

The second problem is that the state represents 'the people as a whole'; one has therefore to ask how well the state can perform this function. Certainly the last 38 years would have been worse if Afrikaner nationalism had nationalized the banks and monopoly industry; limits that have been imposed on its programme would simply not have existed. But Afrikaner nationalism cannot pretend to represent the people as a whole because of the racial restriction on the franchise. If this were removed, would the objection not be removed?

No, because of what has already been said about the importance of taming power by dividing and allocating it. A successor government will inherit a weak democratic tradition; to centralize to the extent of conferring direct responsibility for the greater part of the economy would be to create conditions in which sustainment of maximum liberty subject to the equal liberty of all would be impossible. Better for freedom that trade unions should develop as a countervailing power to owners and managers; if international experience is anything to go by, better for the trade unions as well.

It is sometimes argued that universal adult franchise without nationalization would represent no real change. This seems an implausible argument. Half the electorate would come from households whose incomes do not exceed the levels calculated to be necessary for survival at a very modest level; the issues of poverty and inequality cannot be hidden from them. And one cannot be a nonracialist and then argue for nationalization on the grounds of the racial identity of the economically powerful; one has to make an argument about the functioning of a system that permits rich people to emerge. Of course, in any capitalist society (or society with capitalist elements) questions can be raised about the inequality of opportunity to amass fortunes. These cannot easily be dismissed; one liberal recommendation, which goes back to J S Mill at least, is stiff inheritance taxes to prevent the intergenerational transfer of privilege without function. Certainly that is a reform of property rights which merits implementation.

It is time to recapitulate the argument.

1. There are four approaches to power inimical to liberalism:

   (a) 'Its either us or chaos'. This is an approach usually identified with the government. It has the disadvantage of being a self-fulfilling prophecy; the longer the system of racial estates lasts, the more likely is the prediction to become true when (and it is only a case of when) the system can no longer sustain itself. This argument is beginning to be used in reverse by aspirant successor groups. The acceptance of any claim to be 'the sole authentic representative' of the disfranchised runs counter to the liberal ideal of periodical formal testing at elections and informal testing by the 'daily plebiscite' constituted by the relation between government and people.

(b) 'The purpose of power is to impose values'. This approach sees political life as a perpetual struggle uncontrolled by values embodied in a constitution and set of political practices and is contemptuous of moral claims and the interests of the weak.
(c) 'Power must be mobilized to support a necessary dictatorship'. This is the approach of Marxism (classical or in its Leninist development) or of a populism with Marxist antecedents. It depends for its justification on a grand theory, for the falsity of which there is ample evidence. In practical settings it tries to insulate itself from testing.
(d) 'We shall be delivered fom the clutches of power if only we believe hard enough'. This is the millenarian approach; at the heart of it is a belief in magic that always substitutes for explicit moral choice and analysis. All these approaches are present in South Africa. They need to be understood for what they are.

2. For liberals power must serve larger purposes. These may be diverse. Rawls's second principle, for instance, refers to the maximization of the position of the least well off. This maximization is with respect to primary goods, that is things that every rational man is presumed to want since they are general means to specific self-chosen ends: rights and liberties, power and opportunities, income and wealth, self-respect. To this end power must be tamed. Firstly, there must be a government of laws, not of men, and there must be a framework to ensure as far as possible that the laws are justly made. Secondly, the political system must contain sufficient checks and balances to make the political process an open one. No part of it should possess sufficient power to implement a programme without having to produce a public justification of it. The more power can be checked by countervailing power, the better. This is the most important argument for division of functions between a central assembly and regional assemblies. It is also the most important argument against further large-scale nationalization in an economy where the railways, the telephone system and most of airways, the iron and steel industry, the electricity network, the armaments industry and the oil-from-coal industry are publicly owned.
3. An important component of the system of rights is property rights. In the broader sense of the term and considering the apartheid period as a whole, black property rights have been under assault. Popular power would be constructively used if it were used to reverse this process by pressing for programmes aimed at reducing poverty.

The problem, of course, is that we have to start from where we are. It seems plausible to argue that liberal norms are quite deeply embedded in many parts of South African society. There are groups, some quite powerful, who subscribe to liberal principles of economic and even of political organization and others who are at least accessible to liberal argument. These groups need to be sought out and mobilized. But it is not the forces of liberalism that are setting the current political, diplomatic and military agenda. If these remain dominant, we are lost: the most likely

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The Hoernlé Memorial Lectures

The IRR is republishing the text of the Hoernlé Memorial Lectures, a series of talks which started in 1945. The original introductory note to the lecture series reads as follows:

> *A lecture, entitled the Hoernlé Memorial Lecture (in memory of the late Professor R. F. Alfred Hoernle), President of the Institute from 1934—1943), will be delivered once a year under the auspices of the South African Institute of Race Relations. An invitation to deliver the lecture will be extended each year to some person having special knowledge and experience of racial problems in Africa or elsewhere.*
>
> *It is hoped that the Hoernlé Memorial Lecture will provide a platform for constructive and helpful contributions to thought and action. While the lecturers will be entirely free to express their own views, which may not be those of the Institute as expressed in its formal decisions, it is hoped that lecturers will be guided by the Institute's declaration of policy that "scientific study and research must be allied with the fullest recognition of the human reactions to changing racial situations; that respectful regard must be paid to the traditions and usages of the various national, racial and tribal groups which comprise the population; and that due account must be taken of opposing views earnestly held."*

About the IRR

Since 1929, the Institute of Race Relations has advocated for a free, fair, and prospering South Africa. At the heart of this vision lie the fundamental principles of liberty of the individual and equality before the law guaranteeing the freedom of all citizens. The IRR stands for the right of all people to make decisions about their lives without undue political or bureaucratic interference.

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