

**38<sup>th</sup> Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé Memorial Lecture**

# **Ideas have consequences**

**Michael O'Dowd**

**Thirty-eighth  
Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé  
Memorial Lecture**

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## THE ALFRED AND WINIFRED HOERNLÉ MEMORIAL LECTURE

The Hoernlé Memorial Lecture honours Professor R F Alfred Hoernlé, and his wife, Agnes Winifred Hoernlé, both of whom, as presidents, shaped Institute thinking during the organisation's early existence.

Alfred Hoernlé was an internationally recognised philosopher. He was born in Bonn, educated in Saxony and at Oxford, and became a professor of philosophy at the South African College at the age of 28. After teaching in Britain and the United States between 1911 and 1923, he became professor of philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand. He joined the Institute in 1932, guiding it as president for almost a decade from 1934 to 1943. Alfred Hoernlé is known also for his Phelps-Stokes lectures presented to the University of Cape Town in 1939, and published as *South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit*.

Winifred Hoernlé was a senior lecturer in social anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand. She joined the Institute's executive committee in 1946, and held the position of president three times. In the 1940s, she was a member of the government commission of inquiry into penal and prison reform. Winifred Hoernlé also worked to improve the welfare of children and Asians.

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# Ideas Have Consequences

**T**he South African Institute of Race Relations is, and has always been, an institution devoted to the propagation of ideas, and very specifically, of ideas based on facts. Research has always been a vital part of its work. This is a very important and necessary kind of activity, and this evening I want to discuss just why it is so important. In brief, ideas have consequences and wrong and false ideas have bad consequences, even when they are held in good faith and with good intentions. It is precisely in the context of mistaken ideas that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

## Facts versus theories, and the social sciences

There are people who contend that ideas are unnecessary. What we need to know is obvious, a matter of 'common sense'. Quite a good place to start in arguing with such a person is to ask him whether the earth is round or flat. If he says, as he almost certainly will, that the earth is round, is it then 'obvious' that the earth is round? In fact it is obvious that the earth is flat and that the sun goes round the earth. Yet the earth is not flat and the sun does not go round the earth.

To deal with reality even from day to day, we cannot rely on our own first hand and first sight observations, on what is obvious. We are dependant on all sorts of observations, by all sorts of other people, from different angles and points of view, and on elaborate reasoning and calculations to find out what those observations mean. When we have worked out a satisfactory conclusion which appears to account for everything that we know, in formal science we call it a theory. Outside of formal science, in every aspect of life, we do the same thing, and the product is our ideas, our general understanding of the world, and of what causes have what effects. Even when these ideas do not amount to formal scientific theories, they have two very important things in common with such theories — they may be wrong, and even when they are largely right, they are almost always capable of improvement.

Keynes made a famous pronouncement which, unlike some of his more prominent ones, was both true and wise, about those who think they have no ideas, but are guided by common sense or inspiration. Such people are in fact following ideas which they do not understand and the origin of

which they do not know. Someone who thinks he is hearing voices from heaven is probably following the prescriptions of 'some long dead economist, be he right or wrong'. It might be Keynes himself who was wrong.

So we need ideas (or theories) and what is more we need to be fully conscious of them so that we can examine and criticise them, and have a fair chance of realising what is happening when they lead us astray. The purpose of ideas is to guide action, to enable us to understand reality so that we can deal with it, either to change it, if that is possible and appropriate, or to accommodate ourselves to it.

Ideas can be derived in various ways. Some things can be measured and reduced, often with the help of calculations, to theoretical generalisations. Other aspects of reality cannot be so reduced. Theoreticians tend to ignore these, but those engaged in practical pursuits cannot afford to do so. In these spheres one learns the patterns and regularities by practical experience.

It is very important that we recognise how large a role knowledge and skill rooted in experience, which formal theory does not provide, play in our life. One of the great errors of the dominant intellectual fashion of the 20th century was to exaggerate, greatly exaggerate, the value of formal theory over against experience, and even to suggest that no practice which was not based on a fully explicated theory was justifiable. Suffice it to say that if this was so to this day, we could neither bake bread nor brew beer, nor bake bricks, and our ancestors would not have made steel, although the steel that they actually made, without any valid theory whatever, was as good as what we make today, though far more expensive.

This point is particularly important in the sphere of the social sciences and in the formulation of public policy; for we have far less good theory at our disposal here than in the physical sciences, and in proportion have to rely more on experience (including that which is embodied in tradition), both our own and that of other people. A presumption in favour of tried and tested practices is not reactionary or obscurantist: it is only sensible, as long as we recognise that it is merely a presumption. Established practices can be changed when we have sufficiently good reason to believe that there is a better alternative, whether that reason be rooted in theory or the experience of other people.

These points are important in themselves, but, more than that, they bring us to what is one of the central issues in this discussion, and probably the most important in the whole consideration of theory and ideas: the question of which is primary, theory or observation? There is no doubt about the answer to the question. Observation, or what can roughly be called 'fact', is primary. All theories about material reality are derived from

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observation, whether experiments, as in chemistry, or the direct observation of phenomena, as in astronomy. Theories are attempts to understand facts, and if they do not accommodate all known facts, they have to be changed, as scientific theories are constantly being changed.

Although this is not open to doubt, people constantly talk and think as if it were not so. It is not difficult to see why. In the life of an ordinary individual (which is anybody except an expert operating within his or her area of expertise), if one makes an observation which contradicts established theory, it is extremely unlikely that one has made a scientific discovery, and far more likely that one has got the observation wrong. If I think I have seen a bird in my garden in Sedgefield, which *Roberts* tells me is found only in the Northern Province, it is very likely indeed that I have misidentified the bird.

So as individuals we, in general, subordinate our observations to the theories which we have learnt (and in the process certainly lose some real discoveries — perhaps the bird I saw was a vagrant, and a real ‘sighting’). But humanity as a whole must not do this. Theories that are contradicted by facts must be changed.

Yet there are people who take the opposite view. Some years ago at a meeting of historians, I expressed the opinion that it is only by experience that we know that the sun will rise tomorrow. I stick to this view, but one of those present contradicted me quite angrily. ‘No,’ he said, ‘our knowledge that the sun will come up tomorrow is not based on experience, it is based on theory.’

Well, the theory as to how the earth moves so that the sun appears to rise was changed about 400 years ago — undergoing one of the most complete revolutions that any theory has ever undergone — from the view that the earth is stationary and the sun moves round it, to the view that the earth orbits the sun and revolves on its own axis. Yet at the time when the most bitter controversy raged between the two theories, when there was in fact no accepted theory, nobody doubted for a moment that the sun would come up the next day, at precisely the expected time. They knew that from experience, and they knew that whatever theory prevailed would have to accommodate that known fact.

I do not think it was a coincidence that the conference where this exchange took place was about history, not about astronomy, and it was not a coincidence that the man who contradicted me was a Marxist. It is not in the physical sciences that the primacy of facts over theory is called into question, but in the social sciences — and because social scientists always pretend that they are scientists in the same sense as physical scientists are

(even when they are nothing of the sort), they, the social scientists, will call the principle into question in relation to the physical sciences as well.

It is the social sciences that concern us tonight, and from now on that is what I shall be talking about. The reason for these digressions into astronomy, which is the father and mother of the exact physical sciences, is that the social sciences constantly invoke for themselves the aura of prestige which the physical sciences have so richly earned by their record of practical achievement. It need hardly be said that the social sciences have not earned any such thing by their own achievement. Indeed, one might be inclined to ask, 'What achievement?'

When we look back over the 20th century, we find that in contrast to the achievements of the physical sciences, and in contrast too with the achievement of practical people, often acting contrary to the advice of the social scientists, the track record of the social sciences is abysmal.

Economics is indeed a most impressive intellectual structure, but how much has it contributed to human welfare? During the period of about 40 years in which the per capita income of Japan rose from being a quarter of that of Britain to being fifty percent higher, and the wages of workers rose more than in proportion, did the Japanese know more economics than the British? In a sense, of course they did, for they knew what to do. But if by 'knowing economics' we mean following the prescriptions of the latest, and in the opinion of the great majority of the learned, the best, economic theories, then it was quite the other way.

Britain followed what was known as Keynesian economics. These theories were only in part those of Keynes, but they certainly represented the consensus of the leading theoretical economists. The Japanese had no truck with these doctrines. They practised fiscal discipline (that is, little or no inflation), they kept taxes low and state expenditure down, and, above all, they did what Keynes is supposed to have said one must on no account do, they saved.

The results are there for all to see. The orthodox consensus of economists over a large part of the 20th century was wrong and did great harm. It is a sad fact that the unsuccessful development strategies followed in so much of the third world since the end of the Second World War were based on the advice of what appeared to be the very best experts in the world.

### **Marxism's contribution to the atrocities of the 20th century**

When we turn from economics to the other social sciences the story is worse. Over the same period, in sociology, political science, and other related disciplines (if, indeed, they are disciplines), the major orthodoxy — over-

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whelmingly in continental Europe, to a large extent in Britain, and to a somewhat lesser extent in the United States — has been Marxism, a dogmatic and therefore essentially unscientific tissue of absurdities which helped to bring about, and which consistently and remorselessly defended and glorified, the greatest crimes and atrocities which the world has seen in modern times. These were the crimes of Lenin, Stalin, and their slightly less abominable successors, Mao Zedong in China and Pol Pot in Cambodia.

In calling these the greatest crimes of modern times, I am not in any way extenuating the crimes of Hitler. The crimes of Lenin and Stalin were worse only in the sense that they continued for longer and therefore killed more people — far more — but morally they were absolutely on a par. All these regimes, of Hitler, Lenin, Mao, and Pol Pot, repudiated all morality and claimed the right to seize and maintain power by the use of unlimited violence. They all lied, constantly and remorselessly, and they each, as given their principles they were bound to, killed millions of people, not for anything that they had done but simply and only because of what they were, or rather, what the regime chose to say that they were.

I would not for a minute suggest that Hitler was better than Lenin but I cannot accept either of the arguments that make him worse. I cannot accept that when you choose to murder people because they are in your way, it is worse to say that you are doing it because of 'race' (as you choose to define race) than to say that it is because of 'class' (as you choose to define class). To make the seriousness of a crime depend on what the criminal chooses to call it, is simply to invite criminals to exercise greater ingenuity.

In the same way, I cannot accept that Lenin 'meant well' because he said that he was creating some kind of New Jerusalem. On this point we must not fail to learn the lesson that ends cannot justify means where ends cannot be foreseen with reasonable certainty. We now know that the ends at which Lenin and Mao said they were aiming will never be achieved — and if anything vaguely resembling them ever comes about, their crimes will not have contributed to it in any way.

If we are to allow criminals to extenuate their crimes by claiming that they did what they did 'for the greater good of humanity', then assuredly they will all say that. Talk, after all, is cheap. The fact is that it was part of the strategy of Lenin and his successors to make claims that would impress silly intellectuals. It was not part of Hitler's strategy. If it had been, he would have done it. The important point is that their claims as to their intentions made not one jot of difference to what they actually did.

It is perhaps necessary to explain why I talk of the crimes of 'Lenin, Stalin and their successors', not — as has become customary since Stalin

was denounced by his former close associate and chief murderer, Khrushchev — of the crimes of Stalin. In fact Stalin was no worse than Lenin. The principle of total amorality, the right to do anything which is expedient in your pursuit of power, was formulated by Lenin, and learned from him by both Stalin and Hitler. Every evil thing that Stalin did, Lenin did first: mass murder, not only imprisonment but execution without trial, slave camps in which the slaves were deliberately worked and starved to death, making Russian slavery actually worse than in the West Indies more than a century earlier.

The crime for which Stalin was denounced was that in the great purges of the late 1930s he executed a large number of communists, all of whom richly deserved it (though not for the reasons for which Stalin executed them). This Lenin did not do, but the only reason that Stalin murdered more people than Lenin (and more than Hitler) is that he had longer to do it in. The annual murder rate was actually higher under Lenin than under Stalin.

But, somebody may say, Marxism is dead, the Soviet Union has dissolved, the Chinese have given up communism, and so have the Cambodians. Why kick the corpse? The answer is, we need to kick the corpse hard and often in order to make sure that it does not come to life again. One of the things that has been done right in the 20th century has been the persistent campaign to make people aware of the full extent of the evils of Hitler and his followers. I believe that this really has made it impossible for the foreseeable future for anything that is recognisably a recrudescence of Hitler to take place. The same thing needs to be done for Lenin and Stalin.

Indeed, the great mistake which has been made in the campaign against Hitler is to lay undue emphasis on the particular rationalisation which he used for his massacres, that is his peculiar definitions of race, quite different, be it noted, from those which were used in South Africa and the southern states of America. Dr Verwoerd's race classification board would have assured Hitler that the Jews belonged to the same race as he did.

The very purpose of the emphasis, which seems to imply that Hitler would have been perfectly entitled to massacre five million Jews if only he had had the decency to call them Trotskyites, was to allow a distinction to be drawn between Hitler and Stalin, although even that distinction was spurious. Stalin *did* murder people on grounds of race when he set out to exterminate the Crimean Tartars, and the Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians.

To make the point once more: Hitler's, Lenin's, Stalin's, Mao's, and Pol Pot's crimes all consisted in the same thing, the claim, put into practice, that a government may murder a group of people merely because it thinks it expedient to do so. To distinguish between the wickedness of one rational-

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isation and another is to accept that there *can* be a justification for such behaviour. This we must not do.

So ideas have consequences, and the consequences of the major set of ideas of the 20th century, Marxism, was the cold blooded murder of at least 40 million people (possibly far more) and the death from politically caused famine of at least ten million in the Soviet Union and 25 million in China. The famine apart, the Chinese seem to have been less prone to mass killing than the Russians, but in China the full facts have still to come to light.

This is one of the great facts of the 20th century. The other great fact is that the people who set out to maintain their power absolutely without scruple, who used any form of deceit and any form of violence that they thought would serve their purpose — these people did not prevail. Their ideas were wrong. Whether they really wanted or intended to improve the human lot is very doubtful, but if they did so intend, they failed. One only has to compare conditions in East and West Germany at the time of reunification to see that. The thing that they most certainly did want and intend to do was to ensure their systems' continuance in power, and that too they failed to do. There are lessons here, and we must learn them.

After so many, so learned, and so highly qualified people have been so wrong, we might expect to be hear a babble of explanations, perhaps exculpations, certainly retractions and recantations. It was not only the out-and-out Marxists who were wrong. What of the 'middle of the road' people who were still telling us in 1987 that the per capita income of East Germany was higher than that of Britain, that the East German government enjoyed substantial popular support, and who insisted that there were two viable routes to development? How could they be so wrong? Ought they not to tell us how they came to be so wrong?

No such thing is happening. We have heard of 'The Silence of the Lambs'. Now we seem to be experiencing The Silence of the Wolves. The general view of intellectuals seems to be that we should now forget the past, talk as little as possible about the failure of Marxism, and concentrate on gloating over the very real difficulties being experienced, in Russia and elsewhere, in establishing working capitalism and democracy. It is rather as if someone who has cheered while somebody was beaten to within an inch of his life now finds consolation in the fact that the victim makes a slow and painful recovery, as if this fact reflected not the severity of the beating, but somehow calls in question the goal of recovery. Why was Lenin a hero for leading a bloody, bitterly contested, and minority-based revolution, and Yeltsin is not a hero who led a virtually unanimous and therefore bloodless revolution? Certainly all is not well ten years after Yeltsin's revolution, but

all was very far from well ten years after Lenin's. I very much doubt whether in the next five years we will see ten million Russians dying of starvation, which is what happened 15 years after Lenin's.

At one level the reaction of the ex-Marxists is fair enough (though the middle of the road people are more difficult to account for). According to Marxism what you said was not meant to be true, it was meant to be expedient. If a particular line of propaganda proved ineffective, it should be changed. Any stick will do to beat a dog. If the stick which you are using breaks in your hands, you find another one. We have to realise, however, that this attitude is supposed to be validated by a real theory, at another level, which has to be true or the whole process may be futile, unreal, or counter-productive. Why must you beat the dog? What if the dog does not exist? What if you yourself are in fact the dog and you are beating yourself?

The core of Marxism was its theory of history and this theory claimed to be scientific, to be based on the collection and interpretation of facts. Like any real scientific theory, it claimed to predict the future, and it did predict it. Like any scientific theory, if its predictions proved to be radically wrong — not wrong in detail but wrong in fundamentals — it was disproved, and that is what happened. According to the Marxist theory of history, the wholesale conversion by internal processes (that is, without violent outside intervention) of socialist societies to capitalism was as impossible as for water to flow uphill, but that has happened very nearly everywhere, and nobody seriously doubts that it will happen in the few remaining places as well.

Of course, we can say that what existed in the Soviet Union was not socialism, but then 'we' have to face up to the fact that 'we' 'struggled for socialism' for seventy years without knowing what it was. Why did we make that mistake? Do we know what socialism is now? And if so, what is it? Are we sure it is not one of the sentimental utopias on which Marx himself poured such scorn?

Marx insisted that it was absolutely futile to say that the French Revolution failed because 'they got it wrong' or 'were betrayed' or 'did not try hard enough'. It was necessary to know, precisely, in theory, what was wrong, and to put it right. He said he had it. What was required was to abolish private property. Well, the Soviet Union did abolish private property for seventy years, and so, for a short time, did China. It did not work. Marx was wrong. If somebody else, whom we will call X, knows the answer to what makes a revolution succeed, then he is propounding not Marxism but Xism, and after the Marxist débâcle he may have quite a job persuading us to believe him.

In fact, Marxism never was scientific. From the very beginning it was

based on a lie. Marx's contention in *Das Kapital* that capitalism led to the emiseration of the workers was a lie when he wrote it. He cited figures from British government statistics which showed cash wages falling in the 1840s. In fact, prices were also falling, so real wages may have been rising, slightly, but the important point is that by the time that he published the book, the very same source showed wages to have been rising throughout the 1850s, for a longer period than they had fallen. Marx suppressed this information.

When the non-scientific nature of Marxism has been pointed out, the retort has always been that what is being invoked against it are the invalid principles of 'bourgeois' science, whereas Marxism is validated by Marxist or proletarian science. The trouble with this is that it is 'bourgeois' science that is validated by its track record. Galileo, Newton, Lavoisier, Boyle, Ampère, Faraday, the Curies, Einstein, Heisenberg, and Rutherford were bourgeois scientists, and Sputnik, and the AK-47, that great triumph of socialist technology, were designed according to bourgeois principles. It is the prestige of real science, based on its track record of achievement, that Marxism intends to invoke when it calls itself scientific. It is only when it is in a corner that it says that 'scientific' means something else.

'Bourgeois' science is validated by its track record. Marxist science is validated by Marxist theory, and Marxist theory is validated by Marxist science. It is circular, but not quite because one great attempt *was* made to make Marxist science real. Marxist science *does* have a track record which the Marxists are particularly anxious to forget, the work of that great Russian unperson, Lysenko.

Lysenko was a soviet biologist whose theories were for a time made compulsory in the Soviet Union and China. I sat in the Great Hall at Wits and heard one student after another, physicists, social workers, lawyers, anybody but biologists, explaining exactly why Lysenko was right. After the applications of his theories had caused extremely costly agricultural disasters in both the Soviet Union and China, Lysenko was disgraced, his name disappeared from the Soviet encyclopaedia, and everybody pretended that he had never existed. That is the track record of Marxist science. Of course there was also real science in the Soviet Union, some of it apparently quite good though strangely little came of it, but it was conducted according to ordinary orthodox 'bourgeois' scientific principles.

Lysenko is chiefly known for having claimed that acquired characteristics can be inherited — not to some slight extent over very long periods, as may indeed be the case, but in short order and for practical purposes. But his Marxist heroism did not end there. Being a good Marxist he decided

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that plants of the same species do not compete with each other (being, you see, of the same class, they could no more be in competition with each other than Stalin and Trotsky could). Therefore, seeds could be planted as close together as was physically possible. In China the peasants were ordered to act on this theory, and some of them did so causing massive crop failure and contributing to Mao's famine, in which not fewer than 25 million people died.

The story of Lysenko brings us to the most important point of all. Ideas have consequences, but ideas are not all-powerful. We are familiar, from George Orwell, with the idea that 'the truth is what the Party says is the truth'. It will be recalled that O'Brien, the interrogator, told Winston Smith that if the Party says that two and two is five, then two and two is five. This one, too, was tried out in practice. At the time of Stalin's famine in the Ukraine, a depot might perhaps receive 200 tons of wheat from one place and 200 from another, but, since it was necessary to say that the production targets had been exceeded, they reported that they had received 500. 'Fine,' said Moscow, 'Send 200 to Moscow and 200 to Leningrad and the peasants can eat the remaining hundred.' Unfortunately, in a world where two and two make five, five minus two and two makes naught, so the peasants starved to death.

This is not a joke. One of the causes of the famine was that officials were ordered to extort from the peasants food which existed only in falsified returns of production.

The Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* believed that 'he who controls the present controls the past. He who controls the past controls the future.' The idea was that if you are in power (control the present) you can falsify any records and make anything appear to be true, and thereby you control the future. They were wrong. To make things *appear* to be true is not the same as to make them actually true. Nobody controls the present, so nobody controls the future (as was so richly proved to The Party in Russia in 1989). Stalin could order everybody in the Soviet Union to believe Lysenko and act accordingly. Perhaps he could enforce this order in every case (though that is unlikely), but he could not coerce one grain of wheat in all Russia to act otherwise than it was going to act.

This point is of the uttermost importance, and making it is not merely a matter of kicking the corpse of communism. The belief that ideas have power over reality, that we can make something true by believing it, or by making everybody believe it, or by not allowing anybody to question it, is very widespread and by no means confined to Marxists. It was very prevalent long before Marx was born, and it is a dangerous fallacy which is

likely to infect anybody who deals in ideas, and especially those who feel strongly, for it is a product of wishful thinking.

### **Truth prevails**

Great is the Truth, and it shall prevail. This is sometimes thought to mean that the truth will necessarily prevail in intellectual debate, but that is a very dubious proposition. Truth prevails by being true, and by not going away, whatever anybody says about it. If it matters in human affairs, it will prevail in some obvious way which, if it has been ignored, may be very rough and ugly. If it does not matter it will simply quietly continue to be, until one day perhaps it does matter: 'it moves all the same' as Galileo is supposed to have muttered when he had, under coercion, retracted his theory that the earth both moves round the sun and revolves on its axis. This is a good instance to bear in mind, for if ever there has been an absolutely unanimous human error, it was the belief that the earth was stationary and the sun moved round it. For many, many centuries every living human being believed this, whether as a matter of elaborate theory, or as a matter of common sense and simple observations. Did this then mean that at one time the earth actually was stationary? If so, when did it start moving and how did that rather large-scale phenomenon come about?

Of course, outside situations of virtual insanity, such as Stalin's Russia, people have seldom tried to subordinate the physical sciences to ideology, though they did in Galileo's time. The place where this normally happened, and I am afraid still happens, is in the social sciences. Much of what passes as social science is in fact propaganda, advocacy, or journalism, at worst, lies, at best, genuine belief or observation, but not tested by any proper scientific method, put forward in order to influence people's behaviour in a way which the advocate for good or bad, idealistic or selfish reasons, believes to be desirable.

The first question which we have to ask here is whether social science is possible. Are there indeed laws, or at least patterns and regularities, in human behaviour which can be investigated in a scientific manner, which will enable us to predict the future, and, most important, will enable us to know what the effects are likely to be of any measures which are taken with the object of changing society? That, above all, is what, in a practical sense, science is for: it tells us how we can do what we want to do, and how we can prevent what we want to prevent.

I think that we have to accept, and nearly everyone does accept nowadays, that we must not look in human affairs for 'laws of nature' of the kind

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which physical scientists believed in, and sometimes correctly found, in the 18th and 19th centuries. We will not find in human affairs the equivalent of Newton's law of gravity or Boyle's law, laws which allow of no exceptions, so that one contrary instance disproves the law, laws which detect a single cause of an effect, and which promise a constant mathematical relationship between cause and effect. People did look for such laws in society, and solemnly proclaimed laws of development (as Marx did), laws of evolution, laws governing the changes which take place in language; but I do not think that anyone does so any more.

Does this mean that there is nothing that we can usefully say about human society? Let us consider what we are saying if we take that view. In a year's time, or indeed tomorrow, is it as likely that Sweden will be a dictatorship and Iraq a democracy as vice versa? If not, if we say, 'Things do not change so quickly,' we are making a generalisation which can be subjected to scientific investigation. If we do investigate it we will find that generally things do not change so quickly, but sometimes they do. We will start to find certain factors which are usually present when they do change profoundly. We will indeed find not laws but recognizable regularities.

We must not fall into the 'all or nothing' error that 'science means Boyle's Law', and that if we cannot find laws like that we cannot have science. That does not fit present-day ideas even about physical science. In the world of the Uncertainty Principle and Chaos Theory we accept that there are many areas where we cannot detect laws of the old kind, but that does not mean that there can be no science.

It is widely believed today that the weather is inherently and irremediably unpredictable, but that does not mean that all the money that we spend on meteorology is wasted. Weather forecasts are fallible as we all know very well, but they do help. The fact that they are fallible does not mean that forecasters can say anything that comes into their heads, nor does it mean that weather forecasts need not be 'value-free', but, on the contrary, that weather forecasters must recognise that droughts are highly undesirable and therefore on no account should be predicted.

For about the last thirty years a debate has raged about whether social science should, or indeed can, be value-free. In fact, the debate has been rather one sided, consisting mostly in social scientists claiming the right and the obligation to distort or suppress data and, indeed, to tell lies for the sake of promoting a cause which they believe in. The contrary view has been expressed, and very well expressed, but not very often.

Yet what appears to be the majority view is absurd, as we see immediately if we apply it to meteorology or medicine. A meteorologist is not

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value-free. He knows perfectly well that droughts and floods are highly undesirable, but if for that reason he refuses to predict them when the evidence requires it, he will do positive harm. It is precisely disasters of which we need prior warning.

In the same way, medical researchers are not value-free. They know better than most of us that disease is undesirable, but if for that reason they pretend that a disease that in fact exists does not exist (say AIDS), they again will do positive harm.

To the extent that social sciences are real (that is, that they are, as they claim to be, science, not a fraudulent cloak for propaganda), there is no valid distinction between them and meteorology or medical science. The fact is that in order to function as human beings we need two distinct things. We need values to tell us what we want to achieve, and we need objective knowledge to tell us how it can be achieved. It does not matter whether our values are appallingly narrow and selfish or marvelously idealistic: without correct objective knowledge we will not achieve them.

Both the extremely selfish and the extremely idealistic are all too liable to delude themselves that they are omnipotent, that they can have whatever they want just because they want it. When they do so delude themselves, both will come to disaster; disaster, that is, in terms of their own values. Perhaps Lysenko genuinely and even desperately wanted to improve the dismally inadequate food supply of the Soviet Union. Perhaps he was merely seeking power and glory for himself. Whichever was his goal, he failed abysmally, and he failed because his science was objectively wrong.

Marx said, 'Other philosophers have tried to understand the world. What matters is to change it.' In fact, if we are going to change the world effectively, that is, in the way in which we want to change it, we had better understand it first. Marx set out to change the world without first understanding it, and he did change it, very much for the worse.

The logic is irrefutable, but there are several complications. The first is purely psychological. There is a very strong tendency to believe that common belief makes reality, that what we refuse to see or to talk about does not exist. All societies create myths about themselves and, in the very process, confuse myth with reality. This is superstition, and it is the purpose of social science to dispel superstition, not to serve it.

The essential point which must never be forgotten is that, as we have already noted, all social phenomena involve the interaction of human beings with intractable non-human factors — crops, weather, fire, germs, gravity. We may believe that by creating arbitrary beliefs we will be able to control all human behaviour, but even if this is true, at some point, if our objective knowledge is wrong, this behaviour will not work.

Nor must we forget that there are intractable *human* as well as non-human factors. At one time some people used to talk as if they believed that human beings could be conditioned to do and believe absolutely anything. This was obviously untrue. Nobody seriously believed that human beings could be conditioned to live without food or sleep or oxygen, or at impossibly high or low temperatures. There always were limits. Today, following on the spectacular failure of the societies based on coercion and brain-washing, we are inclined to believe that the limits are much closer-in than used to be claimed. After all, 70 years of Soviet education was unable to convince the inhabitants of St Petersburg that their city should be called Lenin-grad. Forty years of communist education in East Germany produced the crowds that turned out to overthrow the communist government.

I think that there is, after all, an intransigent human nature not only that we *ought* to respect in terms of values, but that we *have* to respect in terms of objective reality. In the light of the fate of the Soviet Union it is no longer possible to believe that 'conditioning', that is, coercion and brain-washing, can do anything whatever with human beings. They have been tried, to the very limits of human ingenuity and determination and brutality, and they did not prevail.

So if we are to achieve anything at all, if we are to have any hope at all of implementing our values (whatever they may be), we need accurate, objective information. We need to know what exists and we need to know what works. To lie to ourselves, that is, to indulge in wishful thinking, can only do us harm. To lie to others is another matter. That means that we are trying to make them do something which they would not do if they knew the truth, which means that we are trying to harm them in some way.

### **The human factor**

There are two further complications in the social sciences which make it difficult to accept what is so obvious in relation to meteorology or medical science. The first, and the realistic one, is that although in all social phenomena there are present objective factors which are independent of the human will, the human will and human behaviour are also present, and human behaviour is influenced by what people believe to be the truth. This creates the possibility, for both good and ill, of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Meteorologists do not have to worry that if they forecast a drought this may bring the drought about, but economists do worry that if they forecast recession this may bring recession about. Did not Marx forecast revolution and claim that it was inevitable precisely as a strategy to bring revolution about?

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While these concerns are often genuine, I believe that they are generally misconceived. Recessions are not caused by 'sentiment' but by objective factors: 'inflationary expectations' cannot cause inflation if the money supply does not permit it, nor can their absence prevent inflation if the money supply is such as to cause it. (Of course, these contentions are a theory capable of scientific investigation that will either support or disprove it.) Markets which are due to fall for objective reasons may possibly be 'talked up' for a very short time but the only consequence will be that they will fall harder a little later. Indeed, I believe that trying to talk things into a direction contrary to where objective factors are drawing them always causes harm, delaying necessary adjustments, and making them more, and unnecessarily, disruptive.

This is not to say that nothing can ever be done about anything: only that empty talk is never effective. If an epidemic threatens, to say that it does not threaten can only do harm, but if we know what needs to be done to prevent it, and what measures need to be taken by people at large, then to persuade people to take these measures can be highly effective. In the same way, we cannot prevent a market that is too high from falling, but we may, by real measures, be able to prevent it from going too high in the first place. We cannot prevent inflation by talk, but we can prevent it by controlling the money supply.

Panic, we should note, is not something that strikes out of the blue. It is an unfortunate and unconstructive reaction to a real misfortune. When the Titanic hits the ice the passengers may or may not panic, but they will not panic if it does not hit the ice. So far from fear of creating panic being a good reason for withholding information, it is a very good reason for not doing so. If the passengers of the Titanic had known that they were embarked on a dangerous voyage, they would have been less likely to panic when disaster struck than when they had been assured that there was no danger. The practice of airlines of telling the passengers on every flight what to do in case of very improbable mishaps, is quite right. They are not withholding from the public the fact of risks for fear that they will panic. They are laying out the risks, perhaps by implication exaggerating them. They are right to do so.

So far we have been talking about bona fide concerns, but when we come to the remaining complication, this is no longer so. The remaining complication is that knowledge is power and those who have knowledge have a selfish motive for keeping it to themselves. This has given rise to the idea which is as old as Plato and as new as 'scientific socialism' (ie Marxism) that there can be a ruling elite which is in possession of secret knowledge

which enables them to know what needs to be done for the general good. This doctrine, they claim, cannot be comprehended by ordinary people, so they have to be deceived (or coerced) into acting correctly. Plato was perfectly explicit about this, and so (sometimes) were the Marxists. In both cases it was, of course, a justification for rule by a non-accountable and irremovable minority.

What none of these people has ever satisfactorily explained is why only some people are capable of understanding the secret doctrine, and, still more, why the 'some people' are them and not others. I believe that all such ideas are a cover for power-seeking and that the only proper view is the traditional one of liberal science, that scientific findings should be published and should be available to everyone, and that neither secret doctrines nor secret facts should have any part in the formulation of public policy.

It follows that no social scientist is ever justified in shying away from a line of research, or in suppressing or distorting findings, because the results may be 'undesirable'. If the results are true, it can never be undesirable that we should know them. Bubonic plague germs are very undesirable indeed, but, since they exist, it is far better that we know that they exist than that we don't know. If a social scientist fears that certain results will be used by others to promote measures which he thinks are wrong (and still thinks so, even in the light of the results), what he is called upon to do is not to suppress the results, but to prepare the arguments as to why the results do not lead to the conclusions of which he disapproves.

So we do need value-free social science, but this statement is subject to some reservations. We cannot research everything and our values will certainly influence our priorities in deciding what to research. There is no such thing as 'European science' and 'African science', but an African scientist may have very different priorities from a European scientist. This is very important in South Africa where the weight and prestige of the science of the large and rich countries can easily lead us, as they have led us in the past, to adopt priorities inappropriate to our own situation.

We must also note that while a chlorine atom is the same in the United States and South Africa, human society is not exactly the same. But we must not make too much of this. A generalisation which is valid in the United States (or equally in India) may not be precisely applicable to us, but it can never be irrelevant to us. The very reason why it is not fully applicable may be very significant and worthy of investigation.

One of the arguments used by people who opposed value-free science was that it was not possible. 'People,' they said, 'simply cannot free themselves of their backgrounds and predilections.' This is true, but it is not a

good argument. It is like saying that we must not make vacuum flasks because it is impossible to make a perfect vacuum. We want pure water. We cannot have pure water: to purify water perfectly is impossible, and to purify it as completely as possible is prohibitively expensive. This fact will not prevent us from making our drinking water as pure as we can, and we will not allow those who deliberately put sewage into our drinking water to hide behind the fact that pure water is unattainable. In the same way we will not allow those who deliberately falsify results to hide behind the fact that perfect objectivity is unattainable.

At the same time, we will not pretend that biases and prejudices do not exist. In looking at the work of social scientists it is perfectly appropriate to note where they come from, what prejudices they are likely to derive from their backgrounds, and what from their interests, and to be alert for these prejudices in their work. That does not mean, however, that we can ever discard findings because the persons making them appear to be speaking to their interests, or from their likely prejudices.

We must first of all rid ourselves entirely of the idea that was so dear to intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that the world can be divided into a 'them' who are motivated by selfish interests, usually referred to as 'vested interests', and an 'us' who are motivated only by the purest concern for the public good. There are people who are motivated only by concern for the public good, but they are found in any walk of life, and they are rare. Intellectuals are a definite vested interest, who mostly vigorously pursue their class interest (ie that theoretical experts should be empowered — hence their love of control). Trade unions are a vested interest. The civil service is a vested interest. Politicians, irrespective of party, are a vested interest. People from any of these backgrounds, just as much as businessmen, are almost certain to be influenced by their 'class interest' and may well be pursuing it with vigour.

Having said this, we have to note that the fact that someone who is putting forward a point of view that serves his class interest, or equally his personal interest, does not automatically discredit what he is saying. People may, and often do, put forward the purest truth in order to further their interests. Only some people are prepared to lie in order to further their interests, but everybody is prepared to tell the truth in order to do so.

Society cannot rely for its progress on selfless and impartial people. They are too rare. Scientific research is likely to be undertaken — in both the physical and the social sciences — by people who expect to find facts which will serve their interests. Provided the research is genuine, it is in no way invalidated by this fact. If it was, what could we make of medical re-

search which discovers cures for common and serious diseases, which are in the interest of everybody?

The way to evaluate the claimed findings of science is not to look at the interests of those who made them. It is to criticise the findings themselves, to repeat, if necessary, the experiments or observations, to analyse their logic, and to check their calculations. If the tobacco industry produces research which calls in question some part of the case against tobacco, we cannot discard or ignore it because it comes from a tainted source. All sources are tainted. We can, and must, however, subject it to very careful and even suspicious scrutiny, as, indeed, we should with any finding before we make it the basis of costly and intrusive policies.

### **The need for critical debate**

This brings us to my last point. Progress, enlightenment, in the social sciences depends on debate. Even in the physical sciences, as they are today, with so much already known, it is rare for a new finding to be made, the validity and significance of which is so obvious that it sparks off no debate. In the social sciences this will never happen. New observations or interpretations are only the first step. Then there must be debate. The findings must be scrutinised and criticised. Conservative and even negative critics can play an important devil's advocate role. There must first be value-free debate. Are the findings valid? What is the truth as we now see it, having regard to both the new findings and whatever else we know? Then there must be value-based debate. Since this is so, what must we do or refrain from doing?

Ideally the two debates must not be confused. If I do not like a particular finding, I am entitled to work very hard to refute it, subjecting the research to the most stringent criticism and mounting my own research to check it. But if the finding stands up, I must admit it. To lie about it, or to try to suppress it by censorship, or by subjecting the discoverers to moral obloquy, is obscurantism in the true sense — the deliberate concealing of the truth; and remember 'it moves all the same'. If it is true, it will not go away; in some way, it will get you.

Because we depend on debate for progress in science and, indeed, in general, advocacy is a perfectly legitimate and important activity. Our court procedure is based on the belief that we are more likely to attain the truth by having both sides of a case argued strenuously, by people who have an interest in putting the best possible case forward on each side, than by everybody's trying to be an impartial judge. If this is true in courts it is likely to be true elsewhere as well.

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We are perfectly entitled to be advocates. We can concentrate our research in fields where we believe the findings will be favorable to our interests, or, in the case of a body like the Institute of Race Relations, our values. We can propagate facts, findings, and arguments that serve our purposes, in the confident knowledge that where there is another side to the case, others will see to it that it is put forward.

But, like advocates in a court, we must not lie. We must debate the issue, not personalities — the fact (even if it is a fact) that the defence counsel beats his wife does not mean that the accused is guilty — and we must not try to silence our opponents, either by invoking state power, or by threatening violence or moral intimidation. It need hardly be said that the purpose of slandering one's opponents is to try to intimidate people into not criticising one's position.

Never must we forget that those who think that they have a good case welcome debate. They want their opponents to lay their case out so that they can answer it. The hallmarks of those who actually have no case (and know it) are that they lie (nobody lies if the truth will serve their turn), they seek to intimidate people into not criticising them or putting forward other points of view, either by threatening violence or by moral obloquy, or both, and finally they arrogate to themselves some kind of supernatural rightness that is claimed to render all criticism irrelevant — an exclusive and superior logic which only they and their followers possess. This is what Hitler did. This is what the Marxists did, always and everywhere. I wonder if anybody is doing it today?

## Vote of thanks by the Chief Executive of the Institute, John Kane-Berman

**M**ichael O'Dowd's reference to economists who get things wrong reminds me of a joke doing the rounds in the US about the failure of the American economy to live up to their expectations. These were negative expectations in the sense that if the rate of unemployment dropped below 6%, so the economists held, labour shortages would generate inflationary pressures that would choke off the economic boom. Six per cent was known as NAIRU — the acronym for the 'Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment'. Well, unemployment has dropped below 6% — below 4% in fact — and the expected inflation has not occurred. So the latest view among economists is that the NAIRU concept is probably useless. In fact, NAIRU is now said to stand for 'Nothing About Inflation is Related to Unemployment'.

The fact of the boom has destroyed the theory. Or maybe the theory is correct, except that the safe unemployment rate is not 6% but 3%. Either way, it is a good illustration of one of the key points made to us this evening, namely that theories which are contradicted by facts must be changed. This might at first seem so obvious as to be hardly worth mentioning — except for the second key point made by Mr O'Dowd, which is that the primacy of acts over theory is often called into question in the social sciences, Marxism having been the worst culprit (though by no means the only one). Marx, in fact, got it wrong from the start. We are reminded that he 'set out to change the world without understanding it, and he did change it, very much for the worse'. As Martin Malia said in his book on the Russian Revolution, entitled *The Soviet Tragedy*, 'It takes a great ideal to produce a great crime.'

Mr O'Dowd says Stalin was no worse than Lenin, and he is surely right about this. It is a critically important point, for it destroys the only remaining argument to which communist believers still cling. Not only did Lenin do first all the evil things Stalin did, he did them very soon after the Bolsheviks mounted their coup in 1917. He had established the Cheka, forerunner of the KGB, within two months of seizing power, and taken care to place it above the law. He had set up concentration camps within a year,

by which time he had also launched the Red Terror, striking workers being among the main targets. By October 1918, between 10 000 and 15 000 'counter-revolutionaries and enemies of the people' had been summarily executed. In other words, the essentials of communist dictatorship were all in place before Stalin assumed power in 1924.

Though this is still denied today, it was obvious to some people at the time. Among them was Ramsay MacDonald, who in 1924 became Britain's first Labour prime minister. By the summer of 1919, his biographer writes, he had come to the conclusion that Bolshevik behaviour was not a question of accidental excess, but the inevitable consequence of the Leninist creed.

Why then, to use Mr O'Dowd's phrase, have the wolves been silent? Why has the corpse of communism not been kicked in the way that that of Hitler has been? These two questions cry out for answers. They are the unfinished moral and intellectual business of the second half of the 20th century. Perhaps part of the explanation is to be found in the denunciation of Stalin by Khrushchev to which Mr O'Dowd referred. This occurred in Khrushchev's speech in February 1956 to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party, known as the 'secret speech'. This was a brilliantly successful feat of disinformation, for in attacking Stalin with such ferocity Khrushchev contrived to exonerate the communist system. What happened under Stalin was just a question of pilot error, so to speak.

This enduring rationalisation is presumably what allows some of our own leading trade unionists and politicians to sport the hammer and sickle or the general secretary of the South African Communist Party to adorn his office with a portrait of Lenin.

Mr O'Dowd's references to Orwell raise, by implication, another point: the role of imagination in discerning where ideas might lead. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a work of fiction, but it came closer than many supposedly factual newspaper reports to the truth about totalitarian systems. Churchill similarly grasped the essence of Nazism very early on.

Contrary to what the party says in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Mr O'Dowd observes, nobody controls the present, so nobody controls the future — 'as was so richly proved to the party in Russia in 1989'. Attempts are nevertheless still made to subordinate social science to ideology. In fact, the track record of the social sciences in the 20th century has been so 'abysmal', in Mr O'Dowd's view, that we must ask 'whether social science is possible'.

The answer is that it is both possible and necessary. We need not only values to tell us what we want to achieve as human beings but also objective and accurate knowledge to tell us how it can be achieved. Ideas — knowledge — must be published and available to everyone. Progress and

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enlightenment in the social sciences depends on debate, of two kinds: value-free debate as to whether or not particular findings are valid; and value-based debate, or advocacy, as to what we should or should not do in the light of the findings. There are roles for conservative and even negative critics and devil's advocates. But in putting forward argument we must not lie, attack personalities, or slander or otherwise intimidate our opponents.

I need hardly add that these are important junctions. And they have as much direct relevance in South Africa now as at any time in the past.

The Institute was delighted when Michael O'Dowd accepted our invitation to deliver the millennium Hoernlé Lecture. He has been a long-standing supporter of the Institute, not least when he headed the Chairman's Fund, and more recently in distinguished articles in some of our publications. In thanking him for tonight's lecture, and presenting him with this gift, I want also to pay tribute to him on behalf of the Institute and on behalf of tonight's audience, for the substantial way in which he has enriched, and continues to enrich, the intellectual life of this country.

## CURRENT PUBLICATIONS OF THE INSTITUTE

The Institute publishes the *South Africa Survey* annually, *Fast Facts* monthly, and *Spotlights* periodically. In addition to these the following, and various other, publications are available.

**Political Correctness in South Africa** (Rainer Erkens and John Kane-Berman) (2000)

**The Truth about the Truth Commission** (Anthea Jeffery) (1999)

**Mbeki: His Time Has Come — An Introduction to South Africa's New President** (Terence Corrigan) (1999)

**Unshackling the Crime Fighters: Increasing Private Sector Involvement in South Africa's Criminal Justice System** (Martin Schönteich) (1999)

**Race Relations in Post-Apartheid South Africa** (Themba Sono) (1999)

**Beyond the Boycotts: Financing Local Government in the Post-apartheid Era** (Terence Corrigan) (1998)

**Unemployment in South Africa: The Facts, the Prospects, and an Exploration of Solutions** (Lawrence Schlemmer and Charisse Levitz) (1998)

**Bill of Rights Report 1996/97** (Anthea Jeffery) (1997)

**The Story of a Good Law, its Bad Application, and the Ugly Results** (Martin Schönteich) (1997)

**The Natal Story: Sixteen Years of Conflict** (Anthea Jeffery) (1997)

**Business and Affirmative Action** (Anthea Jeffery) (1996)

**Liberal and Populist Democracy in South Africa: Challenges, New Threats to Liberalism** (Hermann Giliomee) (1996)

**The Democratic Chorus and Individual Choice** (Lionel Abrahams) (1996)

**The Liberal Slideaway** (Jill Wentzel) (1995)

**The Politics of Black Business** (Elizabeth Sidiropoulos) (1994)

**Virtuous Trends in South African Society** (Julia Frielinghaus) (1994)

**Political Violence in South Africa** (John Kane-Berman) (1993)

**Do Judges Speak Out?** (Richard Goldstone) (1993)

**Education and Growth** (Michael O'Dowd) (1992)

**Riot Policing in Perspective** (Anthea Jeffery) (1991)

**Forum on Mass Mobilisation** (Anthea Jeffery) (1991)

**Holding the High Ground** (Helen Suzman, DBE) (1991)

**South Africa's Silent Revolution** (John Kane-Berman) (1990)

**Guaranteeing Fundamental Freedoms in a New South Africa** (M M Corbett) (1990)

These are available from The Bookshop, South African Institute of Race Relations, P O Box 31044, Braamfontein, 2017 South Africa.

In this lecture, Michael O'Dowd explores the necessity for the elevation of facts and practical experience over theory. He takes issue, in particular, with the social sciences and their pretensions to strict scientific validity. Mr O'Dowd targets Marxism as perhaps the worst example of a social theory which has been assumed to be 'scientific'. He describes the atrocities brought about by, and defended in the name of, Marxism: the 'cold blooded murder of at least 40 million people (possibly far more) and the death from politically caused famine of at least ten million in the Soviet Union and 25 million in China'.

Mr O'Dowd is not idealistic about achieving absolute objectivity, but insists that we remain conscious of the implicitly value-laden nature of all theory. Ultimately Mr O'Dowd calls for the constant critical evaluation of theory in the light of new factual experience in order to achieve integrity in intellectual endeavour.

Mr O'Dowd was educated at St John's College, and obtained his BA, MLLB from the University of the Witwatersrand. He has held a series of prestigious positions in several fields. He was an executive director of the Anglo American Corporation of South Africa and chairman of the Anglo American and De Beers Chairman's Fund. Mr O'Dowd has played a prominent role in the educational and literary spheres. He held the position of president of the English Academy of Southern Africa from 1969-73, and is the honorary life president of the Association of Private Schools. Mr O'Dowd was awarded an honorary doctorate of social science by the University of Natal, and holds honorary doctorates in law from the University of the Witwatersrand and from Rhodes University. He is presently the chairman of the Free Market Foundation.

# 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.