Engaged and insurgent scholarship: a reflection

Lungisile Ntsebeza*

Senior Research Scholar and Emeritus Professor, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa

**Abstract**

This article is a rejoinder to the special issue that celebrates and honours my life as a scholar-activist. Rather than directly responding to the articles, the rejoinder traces my intellectual and political development from growing up in Cala, a small village town where I was born in the Eastern Cape, to how I ended up being the engaged and insurgent scholar that all the contributors proclaim me to be. The key point is that my entry into the academic world and where I am now can be traced to my involvement in organic, community-based reading and study groups in Cala and beyond, thus underscoring an almost seamless continuity in my intellectual and political work. Related to this is a reminder that rigorous intellectual activity does not happen only in the academy. None of the activists in our study groups was an academic. The flow of knowledge is not one-directional, where knowledge generated from the academic is transmitted to the wider world. Academics should accept that there is a lot they can learn from intellectual activities taking place outside the academy. Hence the importance of greater collaboration between university-based academics and intellectuals who are doing serious work outside the academy. Finally, this rejoinder is a clarion call to academics for engaged and insurgent scholarship: making a connection between their scholarly pursuits and the struggle for social and economic justice. The call is not about academics and intellectuals acting for and on behalf of the downtrodden, but rather for academics to conduct rigorous research using the abundant resources in academic institutions and feed its outcomes back in intelligible forms to the wider society as a way of developing the agency of the downtrodden to lead struggles for emancipating not only themselves, but society at large.

**Keywords**

Engaged and insurgent scholarship; community-based reading groups; study groups; Marxism

**Introduction**

First and foremost, let me unreservedly thank those who conceived the idea of the conference that led to this special issue, those who presented papers at the conference, and those who went the extra mile of reworking their papers for publication. I would particularly like to thank my two colleagues, Horman Chitonge and Shahid Vawda, for

*Corresponding author email: lungisile.ntsebeza@uct.ac.za

Accepted: 26 May 2024

©2024 ROAPE Publications Ltd. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License (CC-BY 4.0), a copy of which is available at: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.
organising the conference in June 2022 under the difficult conditions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. I cannot forget to thank Peter Lawrence, the ROAPE editor who worked on this volume. He, together with Chitonge, doggedly ensured that it sees the light of the day.

In writing this rejoinder to the articles, I initially considered responding to each of them. I decided against doing this, largely because the editorial has already provided an excellent overview of all the articles and how these relate to my work. I thus felt I should not muddy the waters. I also felt that, given that this volume is dedicated to a person who is still alive and active, there are gaps that I could fill in, specifically to throw more light on how I ended up being the engaged and insurgent scholar that all the contributors proclaim me to be.

Fred Hendricks is correct in his contribution that my ‘route into academia was … not as an apprentice, a research assistant to a white academic, as was the case with Archie Mafeje, for example’. For Fred, I came to the academic world through involvement in ‘organic, community-based reading and study groups’ that were established in late 1969 and the early 1970s. However, I would like to situate the establishment of these study groups and my involvement in them within the broader and historical context of growing up in Cala, the small village town where I was born in the Transkei part of the then Cape Province.

Growing up in Cala

There are two things I would like to highlight about growing up in Cala that had an influence on my intellectual and political development: my family and Cala as a centre of education.

Family background

I am the youngest of three siblings, with my brother Dumisa Buhle the eldest in the family, and then my sister, MaThuse Patiswa. Both our parents were teachers. Our father was dedicated to education. He liked reading books, newspapers and magazines, and had a bookshelf full of books, encyclopaedias and dictionaries. He also subscribed to the Reader’s Digest magazine and Daily Dispatch newspaper, which was delivered to the local café from East London daily (except on Sundays). There was also a transistor radio and our father enjoyed listening to the news, the two popular stations at the time being Radio South Africa and Springbok Radio. Our father also assisted students who were doing correspondence studies, mainly matriculation studies. He held afternoon classes at our home.

Although our father never actively encouraged us, these resources were always there for us to use. We used the radio, not only to listen to the news, but to listen to music on LM Radio, broadcasting from the then Lourenço Marques in Portuguese-colonised Mozambique, as well as Springbok Radio. In their book, Terry Bell and my brother Dumisa wrote of our father: ‘A life devoted to study and the encouragement of learning was, in many ways, the whole aim of life for Whyte Bafana Ntsebeza’ (Bell and Ntsebeza 2001, 119).
Cala and education

Terry and my brother describe Cala as ‘a town which bears the reputation, for the most part proudly, as a centre of intellectual ferment and rebellion’ (ibid., 118). The roots of intellectual life in Cala can be traced to January 1894, when the Catholic church established a convent school there (Dischl 1982, 62). A year earlier, in 1893, a public library was established.1

The convent accommodated white pupils. In 1900, the Holy Cross Sisters started a school for the children of coloured people. The coloured section had been established because of a grant from the Cape government (Brain 1982, 85). Pupils came from all over the Transkei. According to Dischl (1982, 64), the curriculum comprised ‘the usual school subjects’. The convent also prepared pupils of higher forms for Cape University examinations and for the College of Preceptors in London. Additionally, the school offered commercial subjects and music. By the beginning of the twentieth century, before the Union of South Africa in 1910, Cala was already regarded as an education centre.

However, the focus was on white and coloured pupils and students. This should not be surprising given the fact that Cala, established in 1884, was settled by whites. This was the result of the recommendation of the Thembuland Commission of 1881–1883, which established the Xhalanga district, whose hinterland was occupied by Africans who were under the jurisdiction of chiefs and headmen (Ntsebeza 2006). The coloureds in Cala would have served as a labour force for the white settlement, hence the provision of school facilities for coloured pupils. Schools for the children of black Africans were established in the villages around the town (ibid.).2

In the 1940s, intense discussions around establishing a secondary school for the Xhalanga district resulted in two such schools being built. One was the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) Secondary School, which was in Cala and was established as a private school in 1945 (ibid., 124). Our father became the first principal of this school. The school was later upgraded to a teacher training school and renamed the Arthur Tsengiwe Training School. Cala kept its reputation for attracting pupils and students from as far afield as Cape Town. Arthur Tsengiwe Practising School, where I did my primary education up to Standard 6, was arguably the best school in the Transkei.

There was also, in the 1960s, a rich culture of reading and discussion in Cala. The texts comprised novels (such as those by James Hadley Chase) and magazines such as Chankie Charlie and True Magazines which we bought from a local Outspan Café. The owner of the café also showed films – bioscope, as we called it. A main feature of the reading and discussion groups that I was part of, and something that left an indelible mark on me, was the abundant spirit of sharing resources, which benefited those whose parents could not afford to buy them or to pay the cinema admission fee.

In 1967, when I was completing my primary school education, the students who were at high school and university formed the Cala Students’ Association for Cultural Activities (CASAFOCA). My brother, Dumisa, and Vuyani Vincent Gobodo were the leading figures. The association organised various activities, including plays and debates. However, the life of CASAFOCA was cut short when my brother was, as will be seen below, expelled from Fort Hare in 1968.

The above bears testimony to the claim made by Terry and Dumisa in their book that Cala was a centre of intellectual ferment. What needs clarification is their claim that Cala was also a centre of rebellion. Cala was certainly not a centre of rebellion when I grew...
up in the 1960s. For example, none of the books and magazines we read and discussed were political. The same with the films we watched. This was the period soon after the banning of political organisations in 1960, following the Sharpeville massacre and related events. While the hinterland of the Xhalanga district was the site of resistance against Tribal Authorities in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the town itself, which was still thickly populated by whites and coloureds, was relatively quiet. Furthermore, the political clampdown that followed the Sharpeville massacre was such that people feared talking about politics.

It is important to note an important development that contributed to shaping my political thinking, namely my brother’s experience at the then University College of Fort Hare and its influence on me. Dumisa became a first-year student at the University in 1967, and ‘was politically naïve and academically ambitious’ when he arrived (Bell and Ntsebeza 2001, 121). However, he found in Fort Hare ‘an environment of intellectual ferment where ideas of liberty were being discussed and news was eagerly sought and relayed about “anti-imperialist struggles” in Vietnam, Angola and in particular Guinea-Bissau’ (ibid.). Dumisa associated with the students who were involved in these discussions, where the writings of Cabral and Fanon were also read and discussed (ibid.). His involvement in student activities at Fort Hare led to his arrest in October 1968. He and six other students were charged with damage to property for painting slogans on walls. They were sentenced to a fine of 60 rand or 60 days in prison. They were also expelled from Fort Hare (ibid.).

I used to listen attentively to Dumisa’s narration of events at Fort Hare and remember reading a book on African nationalism he had, which was authored by Ndabaningi Sithole, a founder of the Zimbabwe African National Union. I am not sure how much I understood, but I was proud of reading a book on politics! This kind of exposure, at the tender age of 13 to 14, was in many ways my political awakening.

In a nutshell, growing up in Cala until I left in 1969 for boarding school at St John’s College in Umtata (now Mthatha) laid a solid foundation for what was to follow.

**Encounter with Marxism: 1969–1976**

My encounter with Marxism was decisive in defining and shaping who I am today. In December 1969, a childhood friend of mine, Meluxolo Godfrey Silinga, introduced me to an uncle of his, the late Advocate Alexander Sobantu Mlonzi, who was visiting his parents in Cala. Sobantu had spent time in prison and served a banning order in Johannesburg for his political activities. This was his first visit to Cala, his hometown, after almost five years. We had a few discussions, with Sobantu cleverly asking questions trying to assess our view of the world. I later learned from Meluxolo that Sobantu was highly impressed with my curiosity and grasp of politics, a clear testimony to the impact of my upbringing. For this reason, Sobantu wanted to have more discussions with the two of us. This turned out to be the beginning of my engagement with Marxism, and more.

Sobantu introduced Meluxolo and me to organised politics and crucially to the systematic study of texts, using study groups and close reading of texts as a method of instruction and learning. We never read a text to memorise its contents. In reading a text, we ended up studying a range of things, including language, history, science and mathematics. The
main purpose was to ensure that we thoroughly understood texts, without any bias or prejudice. This trained us to be open-minded and tolerant of other views, including, if not especially, those we did not like.

This method saved each of us from being biased against texts we did not like, by rejecting them without even reading them. It also rescued us from being dogmatic. Here I entirely agree with Samir Amin when he writes:

To be a ‘Marxist’ is to continue the work that Marx merely began, even though that beginning was of unequal power. It is not to stop at Marx, but to start from him … Marx is boundless, because the radical critique that he initiates is itself boundless, always incomplete, and must always be the object of its own critique (‘Marxism as formulated at a particular moment has to undergo a Marxist critique’). (S. Amin, The Law of Worldwide Value, quoted in Aijaz Ahman’s introduction to Amin (2019))

The study groups that Sobantu initiated, which we later developed and enriched, made us the type of Marxists that Amin describes above. This was as much the case then as it is now.

By June 1976, we had study groups in various parts of South Africa, the strongest and most active being in the Eastern Cape and Johannesburg. They focused on three sets of readings: first, the theory of Marxism; second, the history of the liberation struggle in South Africa; and third, guerrilla warfare; readings which Fred Hendricks cites in his article. Reading texts written from various perspectives was consistent with our open-mindedness and with reading as widely as possible.

When, around 1974 or 1975, we began to think about how to bring about change and were exploring possibilities of a ‘military showdown with the enemy’, as we would put it, we read widely about the revolutionary struggles in Asia, specifically China and Vietnam. We also read, as Fred noted, about the Cuban struggle and so came across Robert Taber’s The War of the Flea (Intakumba – the flea in isiXhosa – as we called it), a classic text on guerrilla warfare. What impressed us most about Taber’s book was his description of a guerrilla as an armed politician, as opposed to a rebel or bandit. This, for us, underscored the importance of being well-read, to have a clear understanding of what you are fighting against and the type of society you are striving for. We took Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, that ‘philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it’, seriously. We interpreted this to mean that this is not an either/or situation; to change the world is inseparable from an understanding of it. This is how we understood Taber’s guerrilla to be.


On 11 June 1976, five days before the outbreak of the Soweto revolts, the inevitable happened. Some of us, including Dumisa, Meluxolo and my sister, MaThuse, were arrested and detained. Further arrests, including that of Matthew Goniwe, followed. We had become aware that our branch at the University of Fort Hare had been infiltrated by the security police, popularly referred to at the time as the special branch. We, however, took a decision that we would not leave the country and operate from exile. By this time, a few of us, including me, had decided that we would devote our time to the struggle
for emancipation, to become ‘permanent revolutionaries’, a term we came across as we were reading about the struggles in China and Vietnam. Five of us – Dumisa, Meluxolo, Matthew, Michael Mgobozi and I – were subsequently charged under the Suppression of Communism Act, No. 44 of 1950.

To prove and support its case, the state roped in the services of Stoffel van der Merwe, at the time a senior lecturer at the then Rand Afrikaans University, now the University of Johannesburg. We found his understanding of Marxism very limited and one-sided, and took every opportunity during cross-examination to expose him. However, our defence advocate, Justice Poswa, told us that despite our spirited attack on van der Merwe’s testimony, he was brought in as an expert and, according to Poswa, a judge will put more weight on the evidence of another expert, and less on the cross-examination. This meant that we could not rely only on our cross-examination but needed to bring in our own expert witness.

Our first choice was Rick Turner, an academic and activist who at the time, the beginning of 1977, was banned in Durban. (He was murdered a year later, by the security police in January 1978.) Even though he had given evidence in a trial involving leaders of the Black Consciousness movement in 1976, it became difficult for us to get his services and we had to look elsewhere. We went back to Rick for advice. Without hesitation, he recommended Dr Andre du Toit, a senior lecturer in the Department of Political Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, a university that was known for producing leaders of the then ruling National Party. Given the background of the university, we were naturally unhappy with Rick’s recommendation and searched for more possible candidates. However, each time we presented Rick with the names that were recommended to us, he would be dismissive of them, in favour of Andre du Toit. In the final analysis, we asked Justice Poswa to meet with Andre du Toit and find out more about him. When Justice returned from Stellenbosch and visited us in prison, he greeted us with a beaming smile and all he could say was: ‘Du Toit is our man.’

Andre du Toit’s testimony had a lasting impression on all those who listened to him. Our parents were also in attendance, and I vividly remember my father’s remark in isiXhosa after Andre’s testimony: ‘Uyanikhupha u Du Toit’ (Du Toit is getting you out). That’s how impressive Andre was.

Andrew Nash has given a detailed account in his article of the extent to which Andre’s testimony was a significant turning point in my ‘path to academia’. Indeed, the way Andre presented his evidence, and how he withstood cross-examination and hostile interventions from Chief Justice George Munnik, turned out to be, to quote Andrew, ‘a life-changing experience’ for me. Be that as it may, what I would like to do below is to throw more light on what Andre’s testimony meant to me, leading to my decision to register for a degree in philosophy and politics when we were given an opportunity to study in prison.

First and foremost, what I found impressive about Andre’s testimony was the depth of knowledge he displayed both of Marxism and, to my surprise, the history of the liberation struggle in South Africa. He spoke fluently of the various streams within Marxism, especially when he was making a case that our brand of Marxism was not the one that was defined in the Suppression of Communism Act, the Act we were charged under. He argued that what the Act defined as communism was in fact Stalinism which, according to Andre, was one stream within Marxism. Focusing on the documents that
were found in our possession, Andre argued that while they could be classified as Marxist or communist in orientation, they were not the kind of communism that was defined in the Act.

Linked to the above was Andre’s powerful analytical ability, attention to detail and scrutiny of arguments. As an illustration, I recall how Andre got us through what we thought was our Achilles heel. One of the charges against us was that we conspired to train people. The state interpreted training to mean military training. To demonstrate that we were committed to a violent overthrow of the state, the prosecutor relied on a sentence in one of the documents that were found in our possession, the ‘Organisational Tasks’. Having criticised the ANC’s strategy, that it pursued for almost four decades from its establishment, the document concluded: ‘The days of peaceful pleadings are over.’ For the state, this was an open declaration of violence against it. Rick Turner, who had read the document, had confessed that this one sentence could be our downfall.

Andre had other ideas: he vehemently disagreed with the state that saying that the days of peaceful pleadings are over automatically meant that violent confrontation was the answer. Much as I was highly impressed by the way Andre mercilessly dissected the state’s case on the claim that we were communists, I thought that he was pushing his luck in thinking that he could demonstrate that we were not committing ourselves to armed struggle. In his response, Andre started by restating the argument of the ‘Organisational Tasks’ as I outlined above. Against this background, he argued that a violent confrontation could be one alternative, but certainly not the only one. There were other forms, such as civil disobedience, boycotts and stay-aways which were a departure from peaceful pleadings but were not illegal and were accepted forms of resistance.

Lastly, Andre’s testimony gave me hope that I could continue legally with studies of Marxism and the history of liberation in South Africa and beyond, without having to leave the country. In his testimony for the state, Stoffel van der Merwe, when asked about the books found in our possession, clearly indicated that they were subversive literature and anyone caught in possession of such texts would be plotting a violent overthrow of the state to introduce a communist dictatorship. Andre disagreed, pointing out that texts such as the Communist Manifesto were standard for undergraduate studies.

I found it difficult, at the time Andre gave evidence, to accept that Marxism was taught at South African universities. But it is clear from Andrew Nash’s contribution in this issue that a lot was happening at the University of Stellenbosch, specifically in the Department of Political Philosophy, where, drawing from Andrew’s input, philosophy was ‘integrated into the critique of existing reality, beginning with the reality of apartheid in South Africa’, and where by the early 1980s, the department had courses that focused ‘on Marxism as mode of analysis and revolutionary project’.6

A lot has been said about the introduction of Marxist ideas in teaching in South African universities, going back to the early 1970s. Mike Morris captures what he refers to as the ‘resurgence [of] Marxist analysis of South Africa’, dating this development to the early 1970s and associating it with the works of Harold Wolpe and Martin Legassick, who adopted a ‘class based’ analysis to counter the then dominant liberal thought in history and the social sciences (Morris 1988, 60).

What needs to be pointed out though is that Wolpe and Legassick were developing this kind of analysis from exile and their visibility in South African universities must be doubted. Andrew, in this special issue, is more accurate in his view that Marxist ideas had
a small presence in South African academic life in the early 1970s. Rick Turner must have been part of this small group of academics. The growth of this small circle of progressive scholars would often be disrupted by the vicious apartheid state through detentions and, as was the case with Rick, murder.

For those of us in the historically disadvantaged universities such as Fort Hare, it was unthinkable that Marxism would be taught. Furthermore, given the fact that blacks were not allowed to study in white universities, it was not easy for blacks to know what was taught there. This partly explains why, in our study groups, we could not pick up the ‘small presence’ of Marxist ideas in some South African universities. That these ideas were taught in lectures at the University of Stellenbosch was a huge revelation that left an indelible mark on me and influenced my decision to pursue philosophy and politics when we were allowed to study in prison.


After a lengthy trial, we – Dumisa, Meluxolo, Matthew and I – were found guilty on 1 September 1977 and sentenced to four years’ imprisonment. We spent all these years in prison. Fred, in his contribution to this special issue, picked up on an interview I gave in 2019 which sums up my thoughts about prison life: ‘The one good thing – if one can talk about good things in prison – was that they allowed us to study.’ It was a no-brainer for me to decide what I would study when I applied to the University of South Africa, popularly known as UNISA. I chose two majors, philosophy and political science, a decision that was clearly influenced by the way Andre handled himself when he gave evidence in our trial. There was no department of political philosophy at UNISA, it was offered as a module in Philosophy III.

The decision to register for a BA in Philosophy and Political Science ran counter to the expectations of parents, especially our father. He clearly had great ambitions for his children: Dumisa as a lawyer, MaThuse as a medical doctor and I, the last born, an accountant. Whereas my siblings completed their junior certificate (Grade 10) while still staying at home, he made an exception with me as he must have seen an opportunity opening in the field of accounting for black Africans. As Andrew Nash recounts, I left home to pursue studies in accountancy, achieving distinctions throughout, including in the first half of the year I was at Fort Hare before I was expelled. But here I was, taking a decision to abandon accounting in favour of philosophy and politics.

In his tribute to me in this special issue, Andrew suggests that I abandoned accountancy due to the influence of the testimony of Andre, which would have been in 1978, when I registered for my degree. This is not quite the case. I abandoned accounting, a subject I loved, and still do, in 1974 when, as already indicated, I took the decision to become a permanent revolutionary. The impact of Andre’s testimony on my decision to pursue studies in philosophy and politics was that he gave me hope that one could study Marxism and the struggle for liberation in South Africa, within the South African university system.

However, as Andrew remarked, UNISA did not live up to the expectations created by Andre’s expert testimony at our trial. Andre, as has been seen, demonstrated how philosophy could be put to the service of society by means of a critique of existing societies,
including apartheid. But there were no lectures provided on Marxism and the liberation movements in South Africa, topics on which Andre eloquently testified.

Despite the above, I thoroughly enjoyed studying philosophy and have never regretted my decision to abandon accounting. I found the approach of the UNISA Department of Philosophy very attractive and instructive. Philosophy was seen as an activity, as opposed to a body of knowledge. In other words, there was a great deal of stress on ‘philosophising’, rather than summarising the views of philosophers. I also enjoyed analytical philosophy, with its focus on conceptual analysis and clarification. This approach helped me develop and sharpen the critical thinking skills that were forged in our study groups. What I found frustrating, though, was the fact that these skills were never used to examine the existing real-life conditions of South African society.

We also used the opportunity to establish links with academics in other universities; for example, Dumisa with John Dugard, who, like Andre, gave expert evidence for the defence on a legal matter. Matthew, who majored in English and philosophy, corresponded with Guy Butler, a South African poet who was a professor of English at Rhodes University. I took the opportunity to re-establish links with Andre, who in turn introduced me to Andrew. Andre also introduced me to some of his former students, including Willem Landman, who at the time was the head of the Department of Philosophy at the then University of Transkei (Unitra), now Walter Sisulu University (WSU). These connections were vital in making life in prison bearable.

Finally, we found ways of acquiring progressive literature outside the prescribed material of UNISA. We managed to make the prison warders accept that the books we ordered from the UNISA library and those we bought were for study purposes. Although the prison warders read our letters and checked the books to ensure that there was nothing ‘subversive’, the capacity to sift the wheat from the chaff was often limited. An example that comes to mind are the volumes authored by the British Marxist Maurice Cornforth on *Dialectical Materialism* and *The Open Philosophy and the Open Society*. I ordered these volumes at the same time as I ordered a prescribed book by William Ebenstein entitled *Today’s ISMS: Socialism, Capitalism, Fascism, Communism, and Libertarianism*. The irony is that prison officials confiscated the latter book, written from a very conservative angle, and passed through to me books that were written by a Marxist! They were clearly attracted by ‘communism’ in Ebenstein’s title and thought it was subversive literature, given that we were found guilty under the Suppression of Communism Act. As for Cornforth’s volumes, the prison warders concerned had apparently no clue what ‘dialectical materialism’ meant.

The road to an active academic life: 1981–1986

We were released from prison on 31 August 1981, exactly four years after our sentencing. Dumisa, Meluxolo and I were banished to Cala, where we all came from. Matthew was ‘deported’ to Cradock, his hometown, and was declared *persona non grata* in the Transkei.

Andrew has given a detailed account of the pitfalls along my way to eventually registering for an Honours degree at the University of Cape Town in 1987. What I would like to add is that there was a distinct possibility that I would teach philosophy at the University
of Transkei (Unitra) upon my release. Willem Landman, the head of the Department of Philosophy at Unitra, was keen that I join them in their department. At the time of our release, one of his staff members, Vincent Maphai, was going to leave for a similar position at the University of the Witwatersrand. Willem’s plan was that I would join his department and take up Vincent’s position in 1982. However, the banishment order restricting me to Cala made it almost impossible for this to happen. The other complication was that Willem fell ill and eventually left Unitra.

Andrew played a decisive role in making it possible for me to pursue the university studies that, as we now know, led to me being an academic. Although the initial link with Stellenbosch was Andre du Toit, it was in discussions with Andrew that we explored the possibility of studying political philosophy at Stellenbosch University. As he points out in his contribution, whenever there was an opportunity I would visit Stellenbosch University, where he, among others, introduced me to his postgraduate students, who were a very interesting group and were excited that I would join them. By the early 1980s, when I first visited Stellenbosch, the politically active students in the political philosophy department took a keen interest in Marxism. It became clear that my Honours programme would be shaped such that it suited my interest in pursuing the study of Marxism and its relevance to the South African situation. In this volume, Andrew gives an indication of what the Honours course could have looked like: Gramsci on the southern question, with its parallels with the relationship of city and the countryside in South Africa.

Sadly, the dream of pursuing my studies in the Department of Political Philosophy at Stellenbosch University could not be realised. As Andrew notes, developments were taking place at Stellenbosch University that led to the closing of the department at the end of 1986. With this door closed, and having already committed myself to academic studies, I ended up registering for an Honours degree at UCT in 1987.

Life in academia

Finding a department and lecturers at UCT that provided the kind of orientation and support the Department of Political Philosophy at Stellenbosch University promised proved to be a huge challenge. I initially approached the head of the Department of Philosophy at UCT with a request that I do a project on the political situation in South Africa at the time, using the skills that analytical philosophy had armed me with. I was particularly interested in assessing the 1984–1986 situation in South Africa, which was widely referred to as a period of ungovernability and insurrection. It had become clear by 1987, when I registered at UCT, that this moment was over and that the ‘revolution’ had been defeated. My intention was to try and understand the nature of the struggles in this period, who led them and what the outcome was. Linked to this was my interest in the Freedom Charter, which was becoming an influential document in the struggles that were unfolding. To my disappointment, the head of the department told me that the Department of Philosophy was not able to accommodate my interests. I would have to fit in with what they were doing. I ended up, after consulting a few academics I knew about departments that would accommodate my interests, registering in the Centre for African Studies, with the Department of Economic History as my home department.
The Department of Economic History was by far the best department for me. But I still could not find somebody who would listen to my interests and build a programme around them, in the same way as Andrew at Stellenbosch was prepared to do. One possible explanation could be that Marxist ideas, which were dominant in especially the social sciences in the 1970s and early 1980s, were on the decline by the late 1980s. This was a period that would lead to the end of the Cold War and what some saw as the triumph of global capitalism. Some academics who, in the 1970s and early 1980s, would have identified themselves as Marxists abandoned the socialist project and jumped on the bandwagon of the neoliberal agenda.

It was clear, at the end of my Honours programme, that there was no supervisor at UCT I could work with for my Master’s studies. I had hoped to study under the supervision of Jonathan Grossman in the Department of Sociology at UCT. He had taught me a course on the history of the working class in South Africa that I found very interesting. I did my Honours dissertation on the early socialist tradition in South Africa, an area Jonathan covered in his PhD thesis. He was keen to supervise my Master’s study. Sadly, this was not to be. The head of the Department of Sociology at the time did not think that I would manage to complete a Master’s degree in his department and, as a result, rejected my proposal. Ironically, the same head of department phoned me 15 years later, a few hours after my interview for the post, offering me a position as an associate professor. I ended up postponing my studies and continued my quest for a supervisor that could listen to me and plan a rigorous academic programme around my interests, that centred on the work we did in our study groups. But I stayed in the academic world.

It took me almost 10 years to find an appropriate and extremely competent supervisor, Fred Hendricks, who, like Andrew, was keen to listen to me and provide the necessary academic support needed to produce excellent scholarly work that at the same time addressed real-life issues. I first heard about Fred from Andrew. Around 1988, Andrew started a seminar series on Marxism at the University of the Western Cape, where he was a senior lecturer, after the Department of Political Philosophy at Stellenbosch University closed. I was part of the discussions that led to the seminar series but left at the end of 1988 for the then University of Natal at Durban. I later heard from Andrew that Fred, whom Andrew spoke highly about, had joined him in the Marxist seminar series.

I later listened to Fred giving a keynote address in 1993, at the tenth anniversary of the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE), the NGO that Mercia Andrews and Fani Ncapayi write about in this volume. His topic, which was based on his PhD thesis, was on chiefs. It was a superb presentation that threw light on the resistance to Tribal Authorities in the 1950s and early 1960s. I related to this presentation as Xhalanga, my home district and research site, was one of the sites of resistance in 1960. However, at the time, I had just completed my Master’s degree on youth in ‘urban’ areas, my case study being the East London African locations. Two years later, I initiated research for my PhD degree, which was a follow-up to my Master’s thesis. This research explored what ‘country bumpkins’ who became involved in youth gangs in urban areas did when they returned to their homes in the countryside. ‘Country bumpkins’ emerged as one of the youth groups that I identified in my Masters thesis and it was fascinating to trace how they changed once they were in the towns, some becoming active members of youth gangs.
While conducting this research, which was at the time when there were preparations for the first local government elections in South Africa, I was struck by the divisions that I witnessed between supporters of chiefs and headmen, and those supporting civil society structures made up of democratically elected leaders, as discussed in Luvuyo Wotshela’s contribution to this issue.

Toying with this tension between unelected and elected structures made me ask questions about the nature of democracy in rural areas that were under the jurisdiction of chiefs and headmen, questions which became even more interesting when the final draft of the constitution was adopted in 1996. The latter, premised as it was on the notion of elected representation, recognised the institution of traditional leaders without any clarity as to their role in a democracy. This contradiction, as many contributions show, became the subject of my PhD and one of the main themes of my research for almost 30 years. In considering a supervisor for my research, Fred, who was based at Rhodes University by then, was the only contender. Fred has dealt with what our collaboration has meant over the years, the title of his contribution summing up the relationship between the two of us.

Conclusion

I want to go back to Fred’s point raised at the beginning of this rejoinder that my entry into academia can be traced to my involvement in the ‘organic, community-based reading and study groups’. This is a powerful statement that underscores an almost seamless continuity in my intellectual work, from growing up in Cala to where I am now. Fred’s statement is also a reminder that rigorous intellectual activity does not happen only in the academy. None of the activists in our study groups was an academic, but we dealt with serious issues that made it easier for me to make the transition from studies in accounting to philosophical inquiry. Finally, and linked to the above two points, the flow of knowledge is not one-directional, where knowledge generated from the academic is transmitted to the wider world. There is a sense in which it could be said that academics should accept that there is a lot they can learn from intellectual activities taking place outside the academy. For example, my teaching style, based on a close analysis of texts, attention to details, and so on, is drawn directly from the way we dealt with texts in our study groups. Furthermore, some of the texts that I prescribe for my courses are written by intellectuals that are not based at universities, indicating the value of greater collaboration between university-based academics and intellectuals who are doing serious work outside the academy.

The above is a clarion call to academics for engaged and insurgent scholarship making a connection between their scholarly pursuits and the struggle for social and economic justice. It is not a call for intellectuals, both in and out of academic institutions, to assume leadership of the struggle for social and economic change, by acting for and on behalf of those who are less advantaged and poorer. The call is about the need to conduct rigorous research, using the abundant resources in academic institutions and feed its outcomes back in intelligible forms to the wider society as a way of developing the agency of the downtrodden to lead struggles for emancipating not only themselves, but society at large.
Notes

1. The Cape of Good Hope colonial administration’s *Reports of Public Libraries* and *Blue Books (1858–1909)* provide annual statistics such as the average monthly circulation, number of subscribers and average number of daily visitors for the Cape’s various libraries.

2. Following my extensive research on the hinterland of the Xhalanga district (Ntsebeza 2006), I am now starting research on the history of the village town of Cala.


4. See Andrew Nash’s contribution in this issue for the importance we attached to reading widely.

5. Stoffel van der Merwe later became a minister of education in P. W. Botha’s government.

6. For more details, see the four-part essay on Degenaar at www.dialectic.co.za.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

*Lungisile Ntsebeza* is a Senior Research Scholar and an Emeritus Professor of African Studies and Sociology in the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town. His research interests include democracy in areas that are administered by unelected chiefs; social movements in the countryside; and, most recently, the youth.

[https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6574-9440](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6574-9440)

References


