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Introduction

The Politics of Inequality: South Africa Then and Now [*]

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Guest Editor



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Each year for nearly a quarter century, the University of Florida Center for African studies has honored Gwendolen M. Carter's association with the Center in her latter years as a scholar through holding a conference or set of lectures named after her on a topic of critical importance to the study of Africa.[1] Gwen, as she was known to her friends and colleagues, delivered the first set of Carter Lectures on Africa in fall 1984.[2] It was a time of great turmoil and strife in South Africa, with then President Botha thereafter declaring a "state of emergency" on July 20, 1985. Given her broad and detailed knowledge of South Africa based on nearly four decades of research and writing about the country and broader region, Gwen chose to inaugurate the Carter Lectures with presentations on "United States Policies toward South Africa and Namibia" and "Can SADCC Succeed?"[3]

Although Gwen spent only a few years at the University of Florida, her interactions with both faculty and students left an indelible mark on its community of Africanist scholars.[4] Since she was born in 1906 (July 17; she died on February 20, 1991), the faculty of the Center thought that in the centenary year of her birth the Carter Lectures on Africa for 2006 should return to her central scholarly and personal concern with South Africa. She had first become acquainted with South Africa when, during a thirteen-month trip around the British Commonwealth in 1948-1949, she spent three months in South Africa. Gwen wrote that she was "utterly fascinated by South Africa," and was "particularly fascinated by its contrast with what I had seen of emerging African nationalism" elsewhere on the continent.[5] In 1952, she returned to South Africa for a year's research that led to the publication of what is arguably her most significant work: *The Politics of Inequality: South Africa Since 1948*, which appeared in 1958. As she noted in her introduction:

Few countries have been so subject to publicity and criticism since World War II as has South Africa. It is a rare year in which no writer uses that colorful country as a subject. And yet, for all this publicity, there is remarkably little understanding in other countries either of the complexity of the problems which South Africa confronts or of the character of the forces which are shaking it.[6]

She therefore set out to promote that understanding in a manner that "tried to separate facts and analysis from . . . judgments, and to let the former speak for themselves," deliberately aiming "at a broad coverage in the hope of providing. . . the material necessary for understanding the political

factors and forces operating” in the country.[7]

In contrast to much of the subsequent literature on South African politics, *The Politics of Inequality* had only a limited coverage of African politics.[8] In the book’s conclusion, Gwen acknowledged as much, stating that she had “virtually disregarded the non-Europeans . . . because, in practice, they have relatively little to say about the . . . policies which affect their lives. Yet in the end, they will be the most important factor of all in determining the future of South Africa.”[9] She also had had great difficulty in securing material for “non-European groups.” Recognizing the long-run importance of African and other black political organizations, she joined with Tom Karis, Gail Gerhard, and Sheridan Johns in producing the four volume documentary history *From Protest to Challenge* that covered the period 1882-1964 and the huge collection of microfilmed South African political materials that make up the Carter-Karis Collection in the Northwestern University Library. [10]

Since Gwen’s pioneering work appeared, there have been innumerable studies of South African politics and political history, many of which have drawn heavily on *From Protest to Challenge* and the Carter-Karis Collection. These studies have generally sought to illuminate “the complexity of problems” that have confronted South Africa and the forces shaking it. Yet, understanding has remained illusive. Perhaps nothing better illustrates this than the belief that most South African academic specialists held in the 1980s that the country was inevitably headed toward a bloody revolution. As it turned out, however, there was no violent revolution. Rather, apartheid ended as a result of a protracted and sometimes difficult and violent process of negotiation and compromise. Since the early 1990s, there has been a torrent of publications about the “new” South Africa, the “rainbow nation,” the country’s prominent leaders (most notably Nelson Mandela, the subject of several biographies), and similar “positive” themes. To be sure, as the immediate euphoria of the democratic election of 1994 has faded, more critical studies have emerged. Still, there is ample room for further scholarly analysis of contemporary South Africa and its recent past, “of the complexity of the problems” the country faces and “the character of the forces” shaping them.

The conference organizers utilized the concept of “the politics of inequality” as the central organizing theme for the 2006 Carter Conference, for it provides a pertinent analytical approach for furthering understanding of present-day South Africa.[11] What has been the legacy of the original politics of inequality and the place of law in society under its sway for the years since 1994? How appropriate is it to continue to examine politics and society in South Africa through the lens of “inequality”? If so, to what degree is it a product of the politics that Gwen wrote about it, and to what degree is it the result of newer forces such as the wider process of globalization? Posing questions such as these led to the development of the conference theme with the title, “Law, Politics, Culture, and Society in South Africa: The Politics of Inequality Then and Now. A separate session of the conference, entitled “Law, Language and Politics in South Africa: The Impact of the Constitution,” subsequently took place at the University of Cape Town.[12]

The seven papers presented in this special issue reflect the broad range of topics within the overall general theme of the conference and the diverse mix of scholars who participated in it. Two of the papers focus on the apartheid era. Sheridan Johns’ analysis of South African communism covers a crucial aspect of political history in the first decade and a half of the apartheid era. The Suppression of Communism Act (1950) forced the Communist Party of South Africa formally to dissolve itself. As Johns notes, however, its leadership went underground to resurrect the party as the South African Communist Party (SACP). The SACP was quite active until the arrest of its leadership at its Rivonia headquarters in 1963 led to its near collapse. John Mason’s paper also centers on the apartheid era, but it takes a different tack to political history with its focus on Abdullah Ibrahim’s jazz hit, “Mannenberg.” This piece became an anthem of the anti-apartheid

struggle in the 1980s. Mason devotes more of his paper, however, to its composer, Abdullah Ibrahim (aka Dollar Brand), how he came to write this song, and the meaning that it came to have for the South African coloured community. In the process he also examines African-American cultural and political influences on South Africa.

Bob Edgar's paper straddles the apartheid and democratic eras with its description of conducting research and collecting documents on political and religious movements over the course of three decades. Though the challenges and hurdles change between the two eras, but they do not disappear. His personal research agenda led him in unconventional directions, two of which he recounts in his paper. One was an involvement with the discovery in a Grahamstown museum of the long-lost Ark of the Covenant of an Israelite sect. The other consisted of the search for the burial site and the re-interment of the remains of a female prophet from the Eastern Cape in the 1920s named Nontetha. His ability to establish close and rewarding relationships with the communities involved in both instances serve to remind other researchers to be open to unanticipated opportunities that their research may offer them to move beyond the conventional.

The remaining papers all center on the post-apartheid democratic era, a period that many scholars consider as marking South Africa's true independence. Dax Driver deals with one of the most difficult legacies of the South Africa's long colonial history, that of massive land alienation. Though the large-scale loss of African lands preceded the apartheid era, it intensified during those years. Land issues have thus been at center stage since 1994, as, he notes, they have also been in international development debates. As a result, South African examples and policies have been influential internationally. South Africa's Constitutional Court has also had an international impact through its legal reasoning in several cases where it has used "reasonableness" as critical element in deciding the justiciability of cases arising from the high levels of economic inequality resulting from the apartheid and earlier colonial eras. Henry Richardson is concerned with how strongly the Court should push its judicial authority towards having actual decisional influence on national resource priorities and allocations, including where resources are scarce. It could therefore have a greater potential for meeting the needs of poor people, not least those of color, through offering judicially-enforced legal rights for access to resource transfers critical to their basic welfare.

In many ways, Ken Salo's discussion of the role of law, policy making, and court decisions related to South African fisheries serves as a case study of how in post-apartheid South Africa the economic and social inequalities of the apartheid era are transformed and perpetuated. He argues that the present rhetoric of liberal rights transforms but does not transcend prior cultures of fisheries regulation arising out of colonial violence and bureaucratic racism that heavily disadvantaged primarily Coloured subsistence fishers in favor of primarily white commercial fishers. The subsistence or informal fishers, however, have their own legal claims to traditional forms of access and control over coastal fishing grounds, claims that are neither ahistorical nor abstract.

Economic and social inequalities are also transformed and perpetuated in the health arena. Nowhere is this more evident than with South Africa's raging HIV/AIDS crisis. Sean Jacobs and Krista Johnson examine the role of the country's mainstream media in shaping the discourse about HIV/AIDS. The media has for the most part failed to capture the urgency of the crisis and instead has taken an approach that focuses on its political dimensions in terms of conflict over policy. For the most part, this is due to the inherited structures of the media, structures that continue to reflect the social and economic legacies of the apartheid era. The authors utilize the concept of framing to explain why the media's coverage of HIV/AIDS has been primarily in terms of political battles and health issues rather than the more significant issue of the epidemic's devastating impact on the political economy.

In conclusion, it is clear that these and the other papers presented at the conference demonstrate the continued relevance in many different spheres of the concept of “the politics of inequality” for understanding the structures of contemporary South Africa. It remains an effective lens of analysis for examining “the complexity of the problems which South Africa confronts” and “the forces which are shaking it.” The conference papers and discussion would have been of great interest to Gwen, for they contribute to her quest for an answer to the question that she repeatedly posed in her scholarly writing, beginning in 1958: “Where is South Africa going?”^[13]

Notes:

[*] These papers and others were first presented at the The 2006 Gwendolen M. Carter Conference on African Studies held at the University of Florida from March 5-7. For the full conference program and abstracts of all papers presented see <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/Carter2006.html>

[1] Carter came to UF on a part time appointment as professor after retiring from Indiana University, where she had taught 1974-1984. Prior to IU, she had taught at Smith College, 1947-1964, and Northwestern University, 1964-1974. She was on the UF faculty 1984-1987.

[2] As her long-time colleague Tom Karis noted, “Everyone who knew Gwendolen Carter called her Gwen.” Karis, 2006.

[3] These two lectures along with some additional writings and lectures appeared in print as Carter, 1985.

[4] A lasting physical reminder of her contribution is the Gwendolen Carter Collection at the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries. This collection houses a voluminous set of correspondence, bibliographic notes, interview transcripts and other assorted ephemera all collected from several decades of research conducted by Gwen Carter throughout Southern Africa.

[5] Quoted in Karis.

[6] Carter, 1958: 9.

[7] Carter, 1958: 11.

[8] The coverage was largely confined to the chapter, out of sixteen, on “Non-European Political Organizations” near the end of the book. This was despite the fact that during her period of study in south Africa during 1952-53, the passive resistance campaign was in full swing.

[9] Carter, 1958: 417.

[10] The four volumes appeared from Hoover Institution Press. Vol. 1, subtitled “Protest and Hope” covered the period 1882-1934; Volume 2, “Hope and Challenge,” 1935-1952; Volume 3, “Challenge and Violence,” 1953-1964; and Vol. 4, “Political Profiles,” 1882-1964. For the catalogue, see Wynne.

[11] The organizers were R. Hunt Davis, Jr., editor of this special number of the *African Studies*

Quarterly, and Winston Nagan, Professor of Law and Samuel T. Dell Research Scholar, University of Florida. Nagan, a South African by birth, is founding director of the Institute for Human Rights and Peace Development at UF and has extensive experience in the field of human rights.

[12] The second session of the conference took place June 29-July, 2006 and was organized by Professor Daniel Visser, Faculty of Law, University of Cape Town. The sessions covered papers by sitting justices of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts of the first ten years of the new constitutional era, democracy under the constitution, gender and the constitution, the constitution and memory, and the constitution and “traditional” law.

[13] A variance of this question is the title of Carter, 1980.

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