

One Student at Rhodes in the Early Apartheid Years: A Memoir

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I

I came to Rhodes in 1958, unsure whether to major in History and English or Sociology and Psychology. James Irving persuaded me to sign up for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. Sociology changed the way I saw the world – or perhaps it confirmed it – and I became convinced that a major in the field would not prevent my continuing an interest in history.

After the first year, James Irving insisted that we read the sociological classics. I remain eternally grateful to him for developing in me a taste for Durkheim and Weber – and for the freedom he granted all his students to explore on their own. I remember *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* blew me away, although my friends in philosophy always kept me sceptical about the status of Durkheim's conception of 'society'. Weber's methodological individualism and his clear-eyed conception of power sustained me. Ironically, we never read Marx. A careful reading of Marx came much later for me. I do remember one day in the Rhodes Library, however, while looking for something else, coming across a thin copy of the *Communist Manifesto* (long since banned, of course) on the shelf. I sat on the floor right then and there, and read it from cover to cover. I remember thinking, 'Is this all there is to it?', before slipping it back into its place for someone else to find. I suppose if that was my reaction, Professor Irving had done his job well.

It was not until the Honours year that Irving had us read George Herbert Mead's, *Mind, Self and Society*. Of all the classical writers, Mead influenced me the most. I still remember lying on the wall outside Beit House and arguing with Mary Fysh about whether or not Mead was a social determinist. I argued that he was positing only social conditioning. Mary was right to read him as a determinist, of course, as she often was about such things. But Mead's social determinism is so open to individual difference, relative freedom and historical emergence, that it became a lode-star enabling me to cling to what Eddie Webster jokingly calls my 'voluntarism'.

Mead's point is that our selves are indeed socially formed in interaction with others but that such formations are so complex and various as to enable the emergence of a degree of freedom (within social limitations, of course) that

makes social change and innovation possible. While ‘a person is inevitably a person by other people’, we are also able to take some responsibility for who we are within the constraints of the social situation in which we find ourselves. Although socially determined, we do thus make our own selves to some extent. If Mead is correct, however, we are also responsible for the selves of others whom we have known and with whom we have lived. We are not merely *morally* responsible for our friends’ *behaviour*, then. We are also *personally* responsible, as it were, for who they *are* and who they *become*. I expect friends from my Rhodes years to take some responsibility for who I am. Only they can say if there was reciprocity.

Another major impact on my thinking was the lectures of Philip Mayer. At the time, Mayer was working on (or had just completed) *Townsmen or Tribesmen*. In class he simply lectured about his findings. Many students were deeply frustrated because his lectures seemed to lack direction and failed to cover the reading. I was entranced. Most important for me was Mayer’s insistence that culture, indeed all symbols and ideas, never float free from (formal or informal) social networks. Ideas and beliefs have a history; the same ideas may be differently appropriated and interpreted by different groups; meanings are never fixed unless they are set within (Mayer said ‘encapsulated in’) dense networks of social interaction that sustain and reinforce them. Loosely-knit networks make possible greater cultural variation in which individuals are more open to rational argument (or other alternatives). Close-knit networks, however, render cultural traditions quite impervious to outside effects.

During our Honours year, Mary Fysh and I did field-work for Mayer in Duncan Village. I get a footnote mention in his introduction to Pauw’s *Second Generation*. More important, however, in my own work I have always insisted on trying to uncover informal social networks. Even in *The Rise of Afrikanerdom* where I had to rely on newspaper articles and pamphlet literature, I always tried to root my discussion of ideas in the social networks that carried them. That remains a strength of that work which in other aspects now seems to me rather dated. Social networks are even more important in *Going for Gold* where my understanding of ‘resistance to proletarianisation’ relies as heavily on Mayer as it does on Marx. If there is any aspect of my work which truly manifests the sociological imagination, it bears the stamp of Mayer’s influence.

II

I did do a course in Philosophy with Daantjie Oosthuizen during my second year at Rhodes. Daantjie had a delightfully open teaching style, presenting his students with problems and then inviting them to participate with him in solving them. I knew that he was brilliant. His inaugural lecture filled me with awe. I recall a couple of occasions when I went to him with an idea and he would say, ‘Well, but what about so-and-so?’, raising an issue that seemed totally

irrelevant. Several weeks later, wrestling with the idea, I'd come to realise that his was the central issue. It took me weeks to come to where he was within a few seconds! During my first year at Oxford, Daantjie was on sabbatical there. I remember a morning of intense conversation in his smoke-filled digs there. At one point he told me I was fortunate not to be a philosopher because I could take some things for granted and move on to moral examination of the social world. There was comfort in that because my philosophical friends were always challenging assumptions which is what they had learned from Daantjie.

Indeed, it was through my friends who were his students that Oosthuizen had his most profound influence on me. I came to Rhodes out of a turbulent adolescence in which my personal turmoil, mostly about sexual desire, was sustained and to some extent provoked by a deepening religious faith and a caring family. At high school, I had been involved in the Student Christian Association and several interdenominational evangelical groups. The outcome was a quite conventional and highly individual personal spirituality that remains important for me but was transformed while I was at Rhodes. In Jan Smuts (which was then the first-year residence) I gravitated quite naturally to a group of first years with church connections and became involved in the SCA at Rhodes as well. Ian Macdonald, a theological student (we called them 'toks'), was my best friend. In the second year, I moved to Piet Retief house because of its proximity to (and a shared dining room with) Livingstone, the 'tok' residence. Thus began for me an important personal, political and intellectual pilgrimage that vastly expanded my religious and political horizons.

The students at Piet Retief were a motley bunch. In addition to several groups of party-going, heavy-drinking sporting types, there was some overflow of 'toks' from Livingstone house that first year. I remember Cliff Allwood and Danie van Zyl (whatever happened to Danie, by the way? He had been a magistrate up near Aliwal North, I think). I recall being told that the 'van' in Ravan Press came from Danie) but most important to me was Basil Moore. The Methodist 'toks' came to Rhodes having already experienced several years of ministry out in the wider world (Basil had been in Alberton, as I recall, and in Stilfontein working with gold miners), so they were older than we were, and had seen more of life. Basil was (and, I presume, still is) highly intelligent and deeply passionate about everything he did, whether it be intellectual, political, religious or personal. (I remember that he and Cliff Allwood and I formed a little prayer group that met some mornings for a while – it was an electrifying experience.) Bas went on to found the University Christian Movement from which black theology in South Africa arose.

At Rhodes, Bas Moore and Ian Mac and James Moulder all majored in Philosophy under Daantjie Oosthuizen. In his inimitable way, Daantjie engaged them in debate, not only about moral issues but also about fundamentals of epistemology and about whether ontological questions were worth asking. This was the high-point of analytical philosophy in the Anglo-

American tradition and I remember being challenged by Ian about the fundamentals of sociology even as he himself challenged his theological professors. He had me reading Ryle and Austin and Ayr. The very idea of society was a 'category mistake' as were most of the age-old problems of theology and metaphysics, he insisted. Philip Mayer's concept of networks held me firm, however, even as I came to doubt any notion of a larger social and cultural 'superorganic'. Someone, it would not have been Ian, got me reading Nietzsche in my Honours year. James Irving was delighted. Those were heady years, indeed!

I remember after writing my honours exams, James Irving cornered me. 'I have been arguing for the past five hours with someone who wasn't even there', he said with a smile. He'd been reading an examination paper in which I'd argued an avowedly Christian position, deliberately challenging his agnosticism. He had enjoyed it! His is a model that I continue to cherish and try myself to apply as a teacher. (The Rhodes scholarship selection committee was a lot less happy with my taking a critical political position, by the way.)

I suppose one of the reasons I was able to adapt my faith to politics more easily than some of the 'toks' themselves, is that I was Anglican. Peter Hinchliff had just come to Rhodes and with his help a group of students and I rejuvenated the Anglican Club. That in no way diminished my personal commitment to the SCA network and the 'tok' Livingstone Fellowship, but it added an additional dimension of spirituality to my understanding of politics. I was fascinated by an ideal of the church as a corporate body rooted in sacramental practices conforming closely to my reading of Durkheim's conception of ritual. This was a faith perhaps somewhat more impervious to intellectual argument than that of some of my more protestant friends, struggling in Daantjie's Oosthuizen school of intellectual integrity. Hinchliff and his friends and students started a movement called 'Faith in Action' which brought an incarnational perspective on Christian practice that went beyond moral criticism and aspired to promote lived alternatives. I remember going to the township to worship, being shocked by the deference and embarrassed by my own condescension, but also uplifted by a transcendent sense of community.

I am fond of provoking my American students by saying that I was a Christian before I became a Marxist (and for similar reasons). But intense outrage about racial exploitation and oppression was an integral part of the Christianity I came to at Rhodes during those years. Although we might not have used the word, 'structural evil' as a notion was certainly entrenched in our thinking. I vividly recall getting a lift down to PE with a group of 'toks' to see the French mime, Marcel Marceau. Since his was a matinee performance, we decided to throw in an evening performance of a play, *The Blood Knot*, by the then unknown playwright, Athol Fugard. Marceau was good but Fugard was stunning. It was a very quiet ride back to Grahamstown that night. For the first time, I think, I comprehended emotionally as well as intellectually the reality of

race for persons of colour in South Africa. The revelation appalled me. For me, at any rate, it was impossible to maintain spiritual commitment to faith without passionate (and I hope compassionate) indignation at the injustices built into the society in which we lived. Don't get me wrong here. This was not heroism. We were a privileged group of white men and women (mostly men). We had no experience of the suffering and humiliation felt by people of colour in South Africa. We did make contact with Fort Hare and we tried to witness to a social faith that was deeper than mere individual piety, but we were not activists in any sense that endangered our physical comforts. Perhaps as a social network we helped establish a critical tradition – or perhaps we merely continued one. Others can say.

In my third year, the Sharpeville massacre happened. Rhodes students marched in protest carrying placards from the Drostdy Arch to the Cathedral, two at a time. More we thought would have constituted a march and marches were banned. As it was, there was a good chance we would be arrested for 'loitering', so we walked pretty briskly, I can assure you. Later I was told that if any of us had been picked up by the police the next pair to have walked would have been Daantjie Oosthuizen and Peter Hinchliff, both professors. Daantjie had his own spies who were spying on the police and the special branch. Policeman 'infiltrated' public meetings, often wearing suits and ties. They stuck out like sore thumbs. I remember a burning barricade one night outside Olive Schreiner, perhaps when the republic was declared? In 1961, Ian Macdonald was elected chair of the SRC with Basil Moore as his secretary. They made a superb team – Basil's passionate political inventiveness well tempered by Ian's steady rationality and careful consistency. We passed some surprising motions. I remember one meeting where the student body voted to support the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights but I'm not sure how seriously one should take such actions, except as an instance of Ian's political skills. The next year, with Ian gone, Basil became SRC chair. His passionate approach to social justice was roundly rejected by the student body. Years later I remember attending an Old Rhodian get-together (in Johannesburg, I believe, but perhaps it was Durban) at which Rhodes graduates sang a ribald political song mocking Basil Moore. I left in disgust. I have not been to an Old Rhodian meeting since. Ours were not the only social networks bearing political traditions at Rhodes.

III

The more general point I am trying to make stems from what I learned from Philip Mayer in a classroom in Drostdy Hall overlooking the Botanical Gardens so many years ago. Traditions, including the critical tradition at Rhodes during the apartheid years, are carried by social networks. At Rhodes, as I remember it, the networks were not student networks alone. The fact that many of the 'toks' were older than the rest of us and the involvement of our

professors made important bridges for us. Faith commitments were crucial for the core of my original group of friends (and they were many more than the few individuals I have mentioned) but they expanded beyond that. Nor were church commitments essential for keeping the tradition alive, although they remained important for me personally.

Ian Macdonald, with typical intellectual consistency and integrity, eventually dropped theology and faith altogether – as did James Moulder, I believe – but neither stopped gnawing away at questions of social justice. Basil Moore continued his ministry, his pastoral and moral sense honed by Daantjie Oosthuizen's gently searching questions, his passionate intellect increasingly haunted by an intense drive for social transformation in South Africa. He founded the UCM as the national SCA showed its conservative colours and edited the first collection of writings on black theology to appear in South Africa. He and his family were made to suffer for those commitments. I went on to Oxford to read Divinity. Students like Eddie Webster continued the critical tradition at Rhodes. He can speak to the networks that sustained him and the political and intellectual transformations that occurred as a result of the politics of his day. Years later, having completed a doctorate in Religion and Society, I applied for the chair in Sociology at Rhodes. I was turned down, apparently, because it was said I was an anti-apartheid activist in the United States. I was, of course, but that stemmed directly from what I had learned at Rhodes. I just wanted to give back.

In conclusion, let me return to George Herbert Mead. Our selves, formed and nurtured in social interactions, are not necessarily fixed by them. As we move into adulthood, we enter social networks which form and nurture us, but as we move on into other social milieu our selves change with us. The present provides a consentient set through which we perceive the past (so that what I present here is a memoir, not a history) and which provides the basis on which we envision the future. The present is never a blank slate, either, and it too is trammled with structural limitations and peopled with significant others. Nonetheless, in very important ways we are who we are and where we are because of where we have come from. For that we may be more or less grateful.

Traditions can encapsulate us, binding us to closeness with one another, marching in lock step. Critical traditions, however, are by definition more open. We carry them with us as sheet anchors, providing ballast but not direction, keeping us into the wind but not precisely defining our course. My story is my own. Others will have their stories to tell. Speaking for myself, however, the critical tradition I learned at Rhodes, modified over the years, continues with me, for better or for worse. We wore certain racial and gender blinkers, but precisely because ours was a *critical* tradition, it enabled us to grow. That, at least, is how I see things.