Peter Vale

Prof P Vale, Centre for Advanced Scholarship, University of Pretoria.

Email:
petercjvale@gmail.com

Gerhard Maré

Prof G Maré, professor emeritus, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Email:
pgmare@gmail.com

Taking theory seriously ...

Some years ago, one of us raised an abstract point with one of the denizens of South Africa's policy community. The aim was not to expose the issue at hand to the rich array of thinking theoretically that has flourished in recent times – theory from the South, identity, feminism, environmentalism and the like. No. The intervention mildly critiqued the assumptions that lay behind the idea of regional security in the sub-continent. The dismissive response revealed a low threshold for the world of ideas – let alone, the act of theorising – in policy discourse. 'The problem with you, Professor', the expert opined, 'is that the kind of question you always ask, doesn't get us very far'. It hasn't always been the case that the raising of ideas branded one as the philistine at an ambassador's lunch-table where this particular encounter took place.

Even a little understanding of local intellectual history suggests that there is a rich tradition of theorising on (and around) public discourse and public policy. This has still to be fully explored, of course – and that task may be appropriate at some stage for a forum like *Transformation*. For the present purposes, it is helpful to recall that in anti-apartheid circles fierce contestation over ideas was once the norm, not the exception. Put in the form of a homily – once upon a time ideas mattered in debates on policy and politics in South Africa.

In those times, reflection on the theoretical underpinnings of the 'Charterist' versus 'Workerist' divide in the fledgling unions in the 1970s and 1980s; or the forms of feminism in a racialised and racist society; or the class-race divide were the stuff of everyday conversation. The gist of these debates

sometimes distilled into tighter positions which became milestones in political, social and economic policy in the unfolding of the struggle over apartheid. Here, the 'National Democratic Revolution', 'Colonialism of a Special Type' and the over-riding issue of the 'National Question' illustrate the point. These were not only debates on the direction of policy but they came to represent dividing lines in the direction of everyday politics. Such theoretical agitation stretched across the political spectrum, to change or maintain what existed, and with historical origins or new contestation, such as unleashed by Steve Biko and Black Consciousness. Much of this contestation took place 'in meetings of political organisations, movements and trade unions, or in what were called social debating clubs and other informal sites, rather than in the context of formal knowledge production within the academy' (Webster and Pampallis 2017: 4).

In the universities, however, contestations over these issues and wider exchange of ideas, helped to revise, first, the study of History (and its off-shoot, Economic History) and later shook up Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology; and even – at times with mixed enthusiasm and effect, admittedly – Political Studies and Economics. If this suggests that thinking theoretically crossed the divide between the Humanities and the Social Sciences, it certainly did, as those who study literature know, where, for example, Ampie Coetzee once wrote a book on Afrikaans literature and Marxism (1988), while teaching at the University of the Western Cape, then headed by another literary intellectual, Jakes Gerwel (who turned UWC into 'the intellectual home of the Left').

Indeed, it was the fecundity of ideas – and the fierce exchanges which they sparked – which lay behind the founding of this journal, *Transformation*, in 1986. It is the critical – a word in the very title of this journal – engagement with understanding, with proposing explanations of social concerns, that we will welcome on this platform. Such concerns must begin with exploring and engaging with theories that underlie systems of domination, exploitation and oppression.

The link between ideas and policy was not only on the Left but it played a powerful role in the shaping of apartheid. As the historian Saul Dubow has written, institutionalised racial domination – ie apartheid – rested not only on Christianity but on also on racist theories that were 'scientific' (1995). In this, of course, both church and universities played a significant role in validating policy. The epitome of this was the theorisation of apartheid by Hendrik Verwoerd – university professor, newspaper editor, prime minister – and its bringing to practice by theologically trained MPs and cultural leaders. Less overtly in the service of domination and exclusion than the theorizing of the 'father of apartheid', but equally extensive, would be the apparent commonsense of racial and gendered arguments and

practices in society, and the ideas that maintain them more than six decades after his assassination.

Rightly, this is was called an 'ideology' – and the task of critique for which we plead in this editorial is to ensure that no orthodoxy can be taken at face value but must be analysed in terms of wide interests and forces at work in society, both near and far.

Greater urgency has been added to our plea by the Covid-19 pandemic which, as Simon Marginson points out,

> is instructive for social theory. It is like a gigantic experiment. It is not a controlled experiment, but a universal condition that enables differentiation on the basis of time and space, both geographical and discursive. It is possible to compare society before and during the pandemic, and also to compare the political and social evolutions and manifestations of society-under-pandemic-conditions in different nations and regions (2020).[1]

For now, however, we will not pursue the issue around the Covid pandemic but given its immediacy and its standing in the field, *Transformation* carries already, in this number, contributions that reflect, from a wide range of perspectives, on the issues the pandemic has graphically revealed – opening debate that could be continued.

Instead, we will consider the task of theorising – and begin with the elementary question, What is it? Most readers of these pages will feel this question to be unnecessary – but an uncomfortable truth, as the exchange at the ambassador's table suggests, is that far too few remember, or know the answer.

So, here follows, a brief primer which is the fore-runner to a discussion of some recent trends in thinking theory and a plea for deeper engagement in theorising both in these pages and other places interested in understanding the social world, in such ways as effectively to make it vastly more equal than it is at present. Therborn extended the aspects of concern in what he named the 'killing fields of inequality' (2013).

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1   This encounter between the theorising the social and the pandemic has been explored in a web-page linked to the journal, *Thesis Eleven*, where the Marginson piece (with many others) is to be found at: https://thesiseleven.com/living-and-thinking-crisis/

A primer

To think (or to speak) about the social world is (in point of fact) to theorise about it: even to mouth statistics about society is to choose amongst many possibilities of what to include and to what ends to use it: this is theorising about the social world. This is because facts are theory located and judgements, even factually descriptive ones, 'are shaped by theories and values' (Turner 1996: 99), by the way we order our thinking.

Understanding this, explains the confusion at the ambassador's lunch. In the security expert's opinion, he – and it was, a 'he' – was dealing with the 'factual' situation which shaped thinking about regional security: that world of national borders, passports and other technologies of social control. But these 'facts' of the region's security were forged from pre-conceived (yes, theoretical) understandings of what constituted both 'region' and 'security', as well as 'national' borders. The questioner raised his critique – an attempt to understand what lay behind the assumptions upon which policy on the issue of the region and its security was constructed. Many similar examples can be drawn from our daily interactions, whether they relate to poverty and inequality; to climate change or driving behaviour; to women in the workplace; or, indeed, the use of the word 'race'.

Near the very core of what we choose to use in analysing the social world is the issue of analytical categories – which ones matter, why and how. And here, in the academy rather than everyday life, the bitter divide in South African historiography between the liberals and the radicals in the 1970s, and which was so influential in conversations on political change, involved the different categories of 'race' and 'class': immersed and embedded in theory.

The divide between the experts and the questioner around the issues that divided them suggests that there are two strains of theorising about the social – problem-solving and critical theory. This understanding followed the Frankfurt School which was interested in the link between thinking theoretically and the challenge of social change. Problem-solvers, it is held, are largely interested in the maintenance of the status quo – but this is not enough for critical thinkers who are interested in unmasking the values and prejudices which make for *established* knowledge and for *establishment* 'knowings' about the social world. The idea is that the 'facts of the matter' – as the saying goes – are never enough: 'facts' hide interests and structures which order social power. This notion was taken further in the unlikely (and wholly untheorised) field of International Relations in a phrase by a writer who had himself crossed the divide between the world of theory and the 'real world', Robert Cox. His phrase, 'theory is always for someone or for some purpose' (1981), exposes the power relations inherent in thinking about the world.

The lesson is clear: theorising the social does not stand outside of politics, and, thus, outside power. Instead, thinking theoretically is central to making a different world by encouraging questions and thinking differently about social relationships; or keeping the world the same, by avoiding questions. One way of excluding change resides in the claim that 'there is no alternative'. The sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, once said that this approach has a 'treacherous allure' for those who attempt to maintain what exists (2001: 51). Instead, Bauman argued for an approach that assumes, 'first, "things are not necessarily what they seem to be", and second, that "the world may be different from what it is"' (2001: 33). Marxism, for example, reflected and continues to reflect such an approach to thinking the social world.

To bring our introduction to the theory Platform to the local let us reflect on the transition in South Africa that marks also the diminution of attention to theory. Are there links between the form of the politics of change in the late-1980s and the next decade, between global ruptures and the tip of the African continent?

For the sake of illustration, consider two large issues...

End of history?

We would argue that it is no accident that the ending of apartheid coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The idea that the apartheid state was integral to western interests was one of the central pillars of maintaining white power. The coming to power in the (then) Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev, especially his forceful propagation of the ideas of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reconstruction) helped to change the geometry of the global relationships. Although not altogether clear early on in Gorbachev's tenure, the fate of the apartheid state hung on these ideas. No longer able to sustain its global reach, the Soviet Union withdrew its commitment to support liberation movements across the globe – this included their long-standing commitment to the liberation of South Africa, which hinged on their relations with the ANC. Following this move western pressure on the apartheid regime increased – this was especially so after the Reykjavik Summit between Gorbachev and the American president, Ronald Reagan in October, 1986.

Two lessons for thinking about theory are to be distilled from these developments. First, *glasnost* and *perestroika* were really just new ways of thinking about social relations in the Soviet Union. But, and this illustrates the importance of thinking theoretically, they hastened to end communism by challenging accepted ways of doing things. More than anything else, this reinforces the notion that ideas have the power to implode even the most rigid of ideologies. To put this pointedly, ideas can change the course of a nation's –

and the world's – history: a fact often ignored by problem-solving thinkers. So, yes, indeed, the way in which social forces are constructed and understood – i.e. they way they are theorised – do change the social world, through agents acting and informed by the force of new ways of thinking, or the introduction of new social categories.

But it is the second lesson which is the one that matters most for the present exercise: understanding and interpreting the collapse of Communism by the champions of its ideological Cold War rival, Capitalism. There are, of course, several strains of capitalism but the ascendant one in the late-1980s, when the Cold War ended, was the neo-liberal variety which championed a small state and became increasingy linked to a thin version of democracy.

This conjuncture prompted the American-Japanese thinker, Francis Fukuyama, following the idealism of Hegel, to declare the 'end of history' (1989). The combination of liberal democracy and capitalism, his argument ran, proved superior to any alternative social system and satisfies the basic drives of human nature. In a nutshell, capitalism would underpin the human need for recognition, political freedom and promote equality. This was to be the commanding narrative into which post-apartheid freedom was 'won'. Indeed, it seems possible to suggest that embracing liberal democracy and capitalism set the conditionalities under which apartheid itself was ended. The birth of the 'new South Africa' was intrinsically linked to the idea of globalisation – a powerful idea with its sense of the interconnectedness of all and the simultaneous time-space compression which is associated with the end of history idea.

However, the ending of the Cold War, and the idea of the end of history, exposed the difficulty of how everyday politics responds to social change at the point where geopolitics intersected with global economic practice. Understandings of the emerging social conditions were underpinned by the proclamation by America's forty-second president, George HW Bush, that 'America has won the Cold War'. The ideologically-driven roots of this triumphalism obliterated any claims that left-leaning critique had anything to offer a world bent on resolving social problems. The message was the West had won the ideological struggle on which social relations turned.

The outcome has been plain to see: in the 30-odd years since the ending of the Cold War critique – especially from the Left – has been unable to lay any authoritative claim to viable alternative understandings of how humans should organise – and live – in the world. Because opposition to apartheid was manifestly left-wing – even socialist, or communist, inclined – conservative forces, and their voices, have commanded the political and policy agenda, at times with that apparently common sense refrain: 'there is no alternative', to free-market

capitalism; the refrain adoringly associated with the thinking (and persona) of Margaret Thatcher, British prime minister between 1979 and 1990.

New work has confirmed that Thatcher was an important figure in bringing apartheid to an end (de Villiers and Stemmet 2020) and the broadly market-centred economic policies adopted by post-apartheid South Africa can be laid at the same door. Plainly put, the failure of Communism and the 'triumph' of neoliberalism ended apartheid; the 'new South Africa' has had to live with the aftermath of this understanding. Our argument is that this essentially one-dimensional explanation of society, change, and the future has charted the course of world (and South Africa's) history for almost three decades.

Society?

The second illustrative case we raise, to suggest the importance of theorising, is to ask 'what is a society'? From the oil crisis of the early-1970s belief in the infallibility of market-based economic thinking was the lodestar of western political thinking, loosely based on the work of the Scots-born economist, Adam Smith, the so-called 'father of modern economics'. In the re-appropriation of Smith's ideas, especially by the powerful Chicago School of Economics, his purported championing of individualism (and self-reliance) was baked into political discourse right across the world. As the writer, John Rapley, has put it, '(n)eo-liberalism [...] [became] [...] the state religion across most of the planet' (2017: 297).The impact of this ideological position on society – and on thinking about the social world – was profound.

The full implications of this kind of thinking were caught in a Thatcher interview which was given in October, 1987, to a magazine. Here it is: 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families'. This understanding has infected approaches to social problems, underscored by the the idea that – as Rapley puts it – 'economics lies at at the base of our existence' (2017: 190). More than other considerations – including race, gender and social justice – economics and its concomitant reliance on the transaction as the most favoured form of relationship – has marked the course of the transformation in the new South Africa.

To be clear, our position is this: for close on three decades, the market-centred approach to problem-solving in South Africa has favoured the status quo, leaving untransformed the notorious economic divides (most, but certainly not exclusively, still along race divides), and levels of violence on the most vulnerable – women, children, the unemployed, the poor. This approach to dealing with the country's mounting turmoil has been, as is aways the case with pandemics,

been exacerbated by Covid-19 as the contents of this issue of *Transformation* makes clear.

But, and this lies at the centre of the work of this journal, the past decade has witnessed – not only in this country, but across the world – a rising tide of voices who have not only attacked the dominant form of understanding and explaining the social, but have ignited a myriad of new ways to think theoretically about the social world. This breakaway was speeded by the global economic crises of 2007-2008 which, it needs to be pointed out, was resolved in the mode of problem-solving allowing the profligate to be bailed out by the public purse and imposing austerity on the tax-payer. As one wag famously put it: 'socialism for the bankers, neo-liberalism for the rest'.

Green shoots and grey matter

If the moment has opened an interesting space for different/alternative theoretical impulses, the palpable failure of neo-liberalism to make a better world has encouraged this development.

As we have made plain, the impulse to think differently about social relationships can have ancient roots and, simultaneously be very modern. It is also clear that these questioning approaches to theorising seek to rearrange the world in ways envisaged different from the conventional state-based politics which have held the world in thrall since the mid-nineteenth century – so, to reiterate this latter point, they are political and social ways but not in the everyday sense. Here, undoubtedly, the central issue of importance is the looming global climate catastrophe of which scientists have been warning for decades. This promises to overturn the very organisation of all social relationships, and exacerbate – as Covid-19 is doing – existing inequalities, and the strength of identity politics at whatever scale we look at it.

If the beggar-thy-neighbour policies around the Covid-19 vaccine are anything to go by, the nations of the world have much to learn about interdependence. And this is not only about sharing resources, it is about saving them, too. But, the planet – if it is to survive and sustain human life – has not got much time on its hands, to deliberately use an old cliché. Whatever happens politically and economically, in the coming decade climate and atmospheric change will be the ever-present backdrop to every human experience.

We also need to be aware that the effects of the solutions presently on offer to solve everyday problems need also to be subjected to scrutiny. For example, the rise and deepening power of computing, in recent years, has lead to inflated claims for the power and reorganisational capacity of technology. This has been

especially so in the exaggerated claims made under the banner of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Thinking about the role of technology on (and in) society is as old as the invention of the wheel. Its recent manifestations are almost theological in nature and form, claiming, in some cases, that the impact of machines will narrow the gap between the rich and the poor, and solve climate change. But for each of its utopian claim, there are dystopian ones. In this rush towards what has been called 'Technological Determinism' there is, as there was in the claims around neo-liberal economics, very little place for critique or, indeed, even pointing out that changing technology accounts for changes in culture, politics and economics.

The other technology, where the dangers are becoming clearer by the day, is found in the selective claims for social media – now core to profit and conservative and vicious politics of difference and control.

Why?

These paragraphs have tried to show why theorising the social world matters. It has drawn attention to South Africa's own experience of theorising; it has explained what theorising does and why it matters; it has suggested the limitations of theorising after the Cold War and linked this to the power and formidable hold of neoliberalism at the end of the Cold War. Our purpose has been to answer the timeless question of why it is that we should write and publish with a deep-layered awareness of why theory matter. Unlike the expert at the ambassador's lunch with which we started, we must know that empirical observations are not separate from theoretically informed approaches and selections, and thus in what we are trying to say about them.

And, most importantly, we invite you to use this new platform which *Transformation* has established to talk about, and to illustrate, the need to think theoretically. We are including a talk, given in 2019, on theory and on theorists, through a tribute to Peter Hudson. We think it addresses and illustrates well, the intention of Platform: in theory.

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