

Shula Marks

The Societies of Southern Africa seminar at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies

The seminar tradition at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies was started by Sir Keith Hancock the first Director of the ICS. This had two notable characteristics – the pre-circulation of written papers and an emphasis on discussion. In many ways the seminar was – and to a large extent remains - the life-blood of the ICS, and its health can be best measured by the intellectual liveliness of its seminar programmes. It was also – to change the metaphor – part of the glue that kept the ramshackle University of London together. In a very real sense the Institute seminars were the equivalent for the social sciences of the laboratory for the natural and hard sciences – a place where ideas were tested and probed, expanded and at times jettisoned. The Institute – and the London institutes in general – brought together individuals with common interests from across the University. Scholars – post-graduate students and staff - from all over London and often from all over the UK – were drawn to the Institute – to exchange research with one another and the many visitors to the Institute from all over the Commonwealth.

Every member of the small staff of the ICS has left his or her own imprint on the seminars and they provide a chart of its widening intellectual agendas. The obvious staples of the ICS over the years have been the seminars on the history of the Empire-Commonwealth, and the politics and institutions of the Commonwealth, but in addition, there have also usually been a series of multi-disciplinary seminars devoted to countries or region of the Commonwealth.

It was with this model in mind that I set out in 1969 to establish a new seminar at the Institute on ‘The societies of southern Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’; from the papers that are [reproduced here](#) you will get some taste of its proceedings, though not of the lively discussions which characterised them.

It was launched without much fanfare – it grew, as I remarked in the first of the twenty volumes of *Collected Seminar Papers* 'out of the need for some kind of focus and meeting ground for students of modern Southern Africa, working at different university centres and in different disciplines. The title was sufficiently broad to take account of most current research in the southern African field, and part of the aim was simply to discover what work was being done not only in the UK but also in South African and North American universities.' The intellectual mix was eclectic and heady: as Colin Bundy has remarked, the seminar was:

... a rich seedbed for a critical, self-consciously revisionist flowering of southern African scholarship, and especially South African, history. Its activities were fertilised by a number of currents: by British social historians, by French Marxist anthropologists, and by comparative history. One does not have to dig very deep in the first couple of volumes of collected papers to discern the influence of E P Thompson, Barrington Moore, Meillasoux, Genovese, Gunder Frank, and so on.

To this list I would add the importance of the proximity of the recently established department of African History at SOAS, not least because it did not allow us – mostly radical white South Africans - to forget that South Africa was still in Africa, that any history of South Africa had to be the history of all its peoples, and that we had to address the most profound silence in the historiography of southern Africa, the silence of its African majority. Thus – again in the introduction to volume I of the CSP – I deplored the fact that in its first year more than half the papers in the seminar dealt with the white political economy, while even those papers dealing with African societies dealt with African societies already under considerable white pressure and responding to colonial rule. This sounds pretty tame now, but in the 1960s there was no South African university teaching African history – though this was to change through the 1970s in part as historians who trained at SOAS and elsewhere in the UK and the USA began to filter back into university positions in South Africa.

Our first seminar was not wholly auspicious. I had invited the eminent South African sociologist of race and ethnicity who had recently moved to Warwick University, John Rex, as our introductory speaker. Unfortunately his train was delayed, and

faced with an extremely crowded room, I thought I would play for time by asking everyone to introduce themselves and say why they had come to the seminar. All went well until we came to Professor Lucy Mair, who spat at me 'I am Lucy Mair – and I am not coming to any more of *these*'. Although I think she meant she had only come because she wanted to hear John Rex, it seemed a singularly unpropitious beginning to what turned out to be a seminar series which lasted over twenty years and has been compared to Malinowski's famous anthropology seminar at the LSE – where of course Lucy Mair herself had cut her rather fierce teeth!

In many ways the seminar was launched at exactly the right moment – more by serendipity than by good management. By 1969, the pall of quiescence that seemed to hang over South Africa after Sharpeville was beginning to show cracks; with the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement and splits in the façade of Afrikaner unity, there was room for more open discussion of Southern Africa. But what made the Societies of Southern Africa Seminar special was the presence, mostly, but not only, in London, of a substantial number of academics in a variety of fields; most were inevitably South African but the focus was always importantly *southern* and not simply South African, with papers on all the countries of the region. Many of its participants over the years had left South Africa – or been forced to leave – for political reasons during the era of apartheid, and were still passionately engaged in trying to understand the nature of southern African society. Many of the issues addressed could not be stated openly let alone answered in South African universities at the time. As a result, as fresh waves of South African students, émigrés and exiles came to the UK, the seminar remained in touch with what was happening in South Africa, and was in a state of constant renewal. This gave its proceedings a particular edge even when the subject matter was remote - in time if not in place - from their immediate concerns.

Thus, among its regular participants and contributors were: Martin Legassick, whose early seminal work was presented as a series of seminar papers at the ICS, and returned to South Africa to become the Professor of History at the University of the Western Cape; Harold Wolpe – a genial companion with a fine sense of humour but

a ferocious critic of shoddy argument, who returned to South Africa where, from a base in the University of the Western Cape, he headed a unit to study and advise government on educational policy; Colin Bundy who first aired his ideas on the South African peasantry in 27 Russell Square – and went on to become Deputy Principal of UWC, VC of the University of the Witwatersrand and Director of SOAS and Deputy VC of the University of London and Master of Green College , Oxford; Frene Ginwala, who became the first – and most formidable – Speaker in South Africa’s first democratic parliament. More of Stanley Trapido’s remarkable work was probably made public in the *Collected Seminar Papers* than in any more permanent form, while perhaps the most regular paper-giver was Baruch Hirson, who developed a passion for history after he came to London after spending nine years in Pretoria gaol for his role in the activities of the African Resistance movement..

If these represented something of an ‘old guard’ by the late 1970s they were been joined by a number of younger South African scholars as well as a growing number of graduate students writing theses on the history, politics, law, sociology and literature of southern Africa. In a sense what was unique about the ICS seminar was its capacity to keep together this cadre of younger trainee historians, and the ‘veterans of the struggle’.

As a result, according to Colin Bundy,

The seminar very rapidly established itself as the most challenging, most vigorous and most exciting source of ideas and debates on South African history. Especially in its first few years, the ICS seminar saw the first airing of themes, theories and findings that subsequently became some of the major works on South African history. Within South African scholarship, for a quarter of a century, there was no major debate nor new research field that was not heard in this building.

In retrospect it is astonishing how many young and not so young South Africans who were later to make their mark passed through the doors of the ICS – no fewer than four of South Africa's future high court and constitutional court judges were among its student audience in those years. In South Africa itself the volumes of the

Collected Seminar Papers reproduced here were widely - if secretly – read by succeeding cohorts of young students in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s.

It seems to me that many of the preconditions for the success of the southern African seminar and indeed for most if not all of the seminar series at the ICS had become more difficult by the later 1980s. There were several general reasons: the proliferation of seminars on southern Africa at other universities – Oxford, Bristol, Edinburgh, and a little later Sussex – was one factor. In London the fragmentation of the University itself and the loss of its central federal functions has undoubtedly been another. The Thatcherite reforms of university funding in the 1980s set colleges against one another and against the centre of which the Institutes were the symbols of an older corporate identity and a common loyalty : if the colleges did not want to stick together there was clearly no need for the glue. Yet everywhere, the increasing pressure on staff to earn brownie points within their own colleges, larger classes and more bureaucracy have all made running a weekly seminars more difficult, while considerations of cost have meant the abandonment of pre-circulated papers . The escalation in rail fares has also made the regular attendance of non-Londoners at seminars more difficult

For the Southern African seminar, the dramatic changes in South Africa with the transition to majority rule were of even greater moment. Not only did most of our most outstanding participants return to South Africa. Their place was not taken by new scholars who are for the most part far more interested now in more career-oriented degree courses whether in subjects such as human rights and the environment or in business studies, education and the law. History which for all kinds of reasons had been the queen of the disciplines during the apartheid years was suddenly and dramatically toppled from its throne. It is difficult in South Africa to find many young people who don't think South African History began in 1976 with the Soweto uprising, if not in 1994.

Today, however, as we greet the digital recording of the ICS seminar papers perhaps we can be forgiven for rejoicing in the way in which this project will nonetheless safeguard our past.

Shula Marks

March 2012