

Graduation 2008

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Professor Derrick Swartz

Honourable Chancellor, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is such a privilege to be honoured by one's alma mater, a wonderful gesture made all the more delightful in that it has been totally unexpected. My coming into contact with this fine University, some twenty years ago, in 1989, as a post-graduate student in sociology, was in fact – like so many other good experiences in life – as a result of a chance encounter. Driven from my own country into exile that year, I was privileged to enrol at Essex after a meeting with the late Professor Harold Wolpe, who was teaching sociology at Essex at the time. Harold insisted, in his own inimitable way, that there was no point in looking at any other options to 'seriously' study sociology (he rattled off a few names of institutions which I would not dare mention), as Essex, in his words, was 'by far the leading university' in this field!

At Essex, many South African émigrés found an intellectual space which celebrated many of those qualities which my generation had only dreamt of - enlightened, critically-engaging, cosmopolitan, multi cultural and internationalist in both its epistemological and organisational culture. Here, we had the opportunity to think afresh about many long-held notions about truth, power, freedom, democracy; about the difficulties of liberation movements in making the transition to parliamentary democracy; about the limits of state power and problems of economic development; and, about the inadequacies of dominant development paradigms in the face of great ecological strains.

This intellectual experience, I think, facilitated the development of a much more open-ended, discursive, self-critical and tentative worldview than that produced in the furnace of anti-apartheid political struggles. 'Certainty' made way for 'provisionality'; instrumentalism for ethical politics; the 'means' became as important as the 'end'; and a realisation that a new democracy in SA could best be achieved if we succeed in building an 'open society' based on social justice for all.

Twenty years on, South Africa is of course quite a different place from what it was back then. The political transition in 1994 had been quite remarkable. Under Mandela's leadership a new Constitution and Bill of Rights comparable to the best in the world was put into place. This constitution has presided over a relatively stable, competitive political system, not unlike what we have in Britain.

More recently, however, this system has come under pressure from political elites in mainstream political parties jostling for political hegemony. This has been manifest, for example, in attempts to use the state apparatus (e.g. intelligence agencies, police service, courts) to spy on and discredit political opponents; and a creeping culture of political intolerance within the ruling party and of public criticism in general. Yet, South Africa has a robust civil society and militant trade union tradition. A major revolt from within the ruling party ousted Thabo Mbeki in late 2007, ushering in a new leadership. Yet it is not altogether clear how this new leadership will deal with the challenges of an 'open society' where criticism, dissent and difference are an accepted norm of democratic culture.

If they promote and defend an open society, our public institutions and leaders may have a better chance of managing the contradictions of democratic transition. The fact is that these institutions are operating on the fault-lines of a highly unequal society – by some measures, the most unequal in the world. In recent years, major pressures have been building up from the social fallout of mass economic marginalisation: chronic unemployment, growing social dislocation of the poor, rampant crime and a recent spate of xenophobic attacks on fellow Africans. Thirteen years into democracy, millions of poor, mainly (but not only) black people are way outside of the mainstream economy

and its benefits. Unfortunately, the end of apartheid did not yield any economic windfall for the poor. Instead, Government adopted largely neo-liberal policies in response to the challenges of globalisation - with devastating consequences. It failed to stimulate sufficient levels of economic growth and what limited redistribution policies it did promote largely benefited a small black elite, itself incorporated into an economic order whose basic features largely remained the same.

It seems to me that the social pressures will continue to build up underneath our institutions of democracy until we succeed in placing social justice at the heart of a democratic SA. Failure to address this time-bomb may tempt people to lose faith in the virtues of democratic life, and worst still, encouraging authoritarian elites to resort to Mugabe-like tactics, with serious consequences for an open democracy. If we are to enjoy an open society, we must bring about economic and social transformation for the poor. But such transformation can best be achieved in an 'open society'.

Universities in post-apartheid SA have a crucial role to play in promoting and defending the twin imperatives of an 'open society' and 'social justice'. This lies at the heart of our 'public' good purposes. This role, arguably, cannot be performed if these institutions are driven solely by market norms. Universities need to explicitly place public good functions at the core of their missions, and foster a culture of critical scholarship and a spirit of social activism amongst its students – like at Essex University, as I experienced it, some years ago.

Thank you.