

THE DIALECTICS OF DIALECTICS: HOW SOCRATES SURVIVED (IN) STELLENBOSCH

Nash, Andrew (2009) **The dialectical tradition in South Africa**. New York & London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0415-97530-8 hbk. Pages xv + 247.

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I can quite easily imagine – fuelled by a certain longing, no doubt – an alternative intellectual universe, proudly South African nonetheless, in which this remarkable book by Andrew Nash would have been eagerly anticipated; in which its publication would have been met by broad discussion and debate, by refinement and refutation; and in which its legacy would have included the bestowal of renewed currency, a kind of intellectual afterlife, to almost-forgotten scholars, traditions, problematics, and books ...

But this is not the intellectual universe we inhabit. Far from it. Despite some dutiful academic attention, this book published four years ago already, has come and gone largely unnoticed in South Africa. This can be attributed in part to the fact that the book was published internationally and then only in an extremely expensive hardcopy edition, but it also points towards a general and deplorable neglect of intellectual history that has become almost endemic in intellectual life in this country. Consequently scholars my age and younger, who embarked on their academic careers in the post-apartheid years, often are left with a very truncated intellectual memory, one which bypasses considerable traditions of local thought, and more importantly, *critical* thought and praxis, in favour of relishing our (always fashionable) links to London, Paris and New York. This is simply how our curricula are parcelled out nowadays and how we are “post-ed” (if I can stretch the metaphor somewhat) in a higher education sector that overzealously pursues its own commodification and marketability under the dubious rubric of “internationalisation” – after 1994 we effortlessly became post-modern, postcolonial, post-apartheid, and in the process “post” many of our local histories of problematisation, mobilisation and struggle in the human and social sciences.

Many among my generation probably have a more fully developed sense of the intellectual and political milieu of Paris in 1968 and its impact on the globalisation of “Theory” than of how our own academic heritage could be traced back to, for example, the 1973 Durban strikes or the formation of OASSSA (and **PINS!**) in 1983. Whilst many of our more senior colleagues have lived through these events and contributed to important, often foundational moments of local theoretical critique and radical politics, academic life today, especially in the discipline of psychology, is structured in such a manner that these experiences remain just that: personal yarns, anecdotes for tearoom banter and retirement functions. They will soon cease to animate the kinds of questions

we ask, the ways we go about thinking about answering them, and how we engage with (or end up evading) politics and society in our own work.

Perhaps this is why calls for “indigenisation” in the South African academy frequently sound so hollow; why “indigenous knowledge systems” are so easily reduced to function as repositories of mere nostalgia, or worse, as harbingers for all sorts of ethnic essentialisms. The history of intellectual traditions in South Africa makes for a richer and more contradictory archive than simplistic, politically correct bifurcations of Western versus African “knowledge systems” would lead us to believe. This archive should serve as more than fodder for intellectual history as a disciplinary specialisation. It should ideally be realised, reactivated and constantly re-imagined in our different disciplinary spaces, curricula, and research agendas; it should drive processes of productive genealogical self-interrogation, of practices of historical “reflexivity” more potent than the narrow, often self-indulgent biographical use of this term in so much qualitative research.

Nash traces in this book the emergence and, yes, the indigenisation of what he refers to as “the dialectical tradition” in South Africa. It is a faint tracing at times, for two reasons. Firstly, and to Nash’s own admission, the object of his study “has not always been sufficiently self-aware to be described as a philosophical tradition, in the strict sense” (p 3). Secondly, Nash does not attempt to ameliorate this potential imprecision of focus methodologically by defining strict criteria of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, even though he grants privileged position to a number of historical events (eg, the liberalism debate in the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape during the latter decades of the nineteenth century), institutions (eg, the philosophy department at Stellenbosch University), and actors (eg, the philosopher Johan Degenaar) in the emergence and development of this tradition, he is willing to consider figures as far removed from these quite specific historical coordinates as Olive Schreiner and Mohandas Gandhi as representatives of the dialectical tradition in South Africa.

Risky, perhaps; but Nash pulls it off brilliantly. In fact, by casting his genealogical net this wide, but without sacrificing any philosophical depth, Nash gives a rich and resonant articulation to – and it is indeed difficult to think of a better word than “tradition” once one has read this book – what he describes as “a complex continuity in South African political and intellectual life” (p 1); a continuity which, although not the *only* mode of dialectical thinking in South Africa, represents for him “the only continuity sufficiently sustained, sufficiently reflective on its own distinctive premises, and sufficiently embedded in the conditions of our history, to be described as the dialectical tradition in South Africa” (p 3). Inheritors of different traditions of Marxism and Marxian critique in South Africa might disagree on this point, but then one should remember that Nash is also a very competent historian of Marxisms in this country (see Nash, 1999). Furthermore, Nash stages a highly productive encounter between “the dialectical tradition” and different traditions of South African Marxism in this book (including insightful discussions of Richard Turner, Jeremy Cronin and others), an intellectual *tour de force* which works its way – dialectically! – towards nothing less than a renewal of critical philosophy in South Africa and elsewhere, with an eye on developing “a shared political and moral vocabulary of global scope” (p xiii).

But what exactly distinguishes the dialectical tradition as delineated in this book? According to Nash its core value resides in “a defence of active and ongoing discussion

– of freedom of speech, in the classical sense – as a precondition for a good society, as distinct from the liberal defence of freedom of speech as an individual right” (p 1). Furthermore, it is “a tradition that draws on Socratic dialectic rather than the dialectic of Hegel and Marx, and has been embodied mainly within Afrikaner dissent over the past 150 years or more” (p xii). In other words, the dialectical tradition developed in critical distance from both liberalism and Marxism. Whilst its intellectual origins are to be found in liberal Dutch theology and its transplantation to South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, it eventually migrated – spurred on by Dutch Reformed orthodoxy’s increasing intolerance towards liberal theology – to academic philosophy at Stellenbosch University in the 1930s, where first J P Kirsten and then, from the 1940s onwards, a young generation of Stellenbosch philosophers, including James Oglethorpe, Daantjie Oosthuizen and Johan Degenaar, became the custodians and major proponents of the Socratic dialectic – with an important Kierkegaardian inflection. The prominence and influence of Degenaar, especially, meant that Stellenbosch University remained the dialectical tradition’s centre of gravity well into the 1970s and 1980s – an island of dissent within a sea of Afrikaner Nationalist hegemony.

Degenaar remains to this day a revered figure, not only at Stellenbosch University, but in the Afrikaans community in general. Much maligned under apartheid he became in later years, like Beyers Naudé and other Afrikaner dissidents, icons of integrity in the often tainted Afrikaner intellectual establishment. Nash’s treatment of Degenaar’s philosophical development is excellent; in fact, anyone wishing to study Degenaar’s work will find Nash’s book indispensable. He credits Degenaar for his sustained philosophical challenge to both Afrikaner nationalism and liberal thought, in the process keeping alive an awareness of the individual as “agent in the processes of their own formation, kept alive the question of how the life of Socratic dialogue might most fully be realised in society, and negated any incorporation of that individual into the harmonious workings of God’s providence, national destiny or the capitalist market” (p 112). At the same time, he also criticises Degenaar for a model of communication that is insufficiently social; that largely ignores the historical situation and the relations of power between participants.

As mentioned above, the dialectical tradition came to be “formed by Afrikaner politics – and Afrikaner dissent – in ways which continue to be felt even after the end of apartheid” (p.67). Now, Afrikaner dissent might make for mildly interesting history, but could it contribute significantly to the future of critical philosophy and theory in South Africa? This is precisely what Nash argues for in this book, an argument that is complicated by the fact that Nash subjects the dialectical tradition to a thorough critique of its politics. For example, despite its anti-authoritarian stance, rooted in a powerful account of autonomous selfhood not reducible to capitalist individualism, and its critique of nationalism and apartheid, Degenaar’s thought rarely identified concrete political positions or programmes; there was a tendency “to keep its distance from politics” (p 17):

“The characteristic form of its political engagement has been critique and commentary, rather than ideological mobilisation; its vehicles journals and discussion groups, rather than political organisations and campaigns. It has been concerned with political reflection rather than political action, but also with arguing that political reflection is a necessary condition of autonomous political action.” (p 3)

This, clearly, has to be seen as a major shortcoming, and indeed it threatened to leave the dialectical tradition hopelessly irrelevant, politically, in the 1970s and 1980s, when radical thought and politics flourished at English-speaking universities and within the liberation movement itself. As Nash argues, a rather abstract account of politics renders the dialectical tradition finally “unable to locate the contradictions it discovers in any historical process” (p 16). Why should this not be the final word regarding the dialectical tradition’s potential as a *critical* philosophy? Time and again Nash identifies contradictions and failures in the dialectical tradition’s engagement with politics which demand an engagement with the “other” dialectical tradition, namely Marxism. Why then tarry with the representatives and problematics of the dialectical tradition? What does it have left to offer us? Nash argues that the dialectical tradition’s distance from concrete politics could *also* be seen as “perhaps one reason why the tradition has been able to endure through so many political and ideological developments, each with its very own different demands and idioms, while other forms of dialectic have proved less enduring in South Africa” (p 17). What Nash has in mind is the depressing demise of critical theory and praxis in the South African academy after 1994: “Once the radical intellectuals influenced by Western Marxism lost their dominance in the trade union movement, they had nothing to fall back on. [...] The radical intellectuals of that generation quickly reverted to an individualised conception of individual agency ...” (p 179).

In other words, they got gobbled up by the careerism of the neoliberal university and the individualist logic of the market. Under such conditions, according to Nash, it certainly makes sense to re-engage a philosophical tradition which has managed to maintain its critical distance from liberalism precisely on account of its peculiar conception of individual agency – even if this re-engagement demands a thorough rethinking of the dialectical tradition’s conception of the political, specifically in Marxist terms. It is at this point where Nash’s book ceases to be *about* the dialectical tradition and instead becomes a brilliant demonstration of dialectical thought in action.

One of the highlights of the book, for me, is the careful, critical discussion of the political writings of Breyten Breytenbach. Breytenbach, of course, is neither an academic philosopher nor from Stellenbosch – in fact, he is known for many derisory comments about both academic philosophy and Stellenbosch University! Yet, Nash credits him with “a fundamental revival and transmutation of dialectical themes” (p 2), a claim he substantiates with what is probably the most perceptive analysis of Breytenbach’s political writings I have yet encountered. Breytenbach’s writings can be difficult and are often contradictory, inflammatory, and anarchic, but they are also a fascinating and challenging corpus of texts. They reward close reading, as Nash demonstrates.

It is impossible to do justice to the full complexity of this book’s historical and philosophical achievements in a short review. Perhaps it is best not to try, and to leave Nash with the last word. In the paragraph below he not only gives a perfect description of dialectical thought, of its formal characteristics and its political urgency, but also diagnoses the conditions which causes books like these to disappear:

“Dialectical thought has flourished always in the margins and interstices of society. It seeks to follow the movement of contradictions while the major social institutions are designed to resolve or obscure them. This mode of thought seeks out the hidden cracks in prevailing ideas and conjunctures, anticipates the

unexpected, imagines a future vastly different from the present, and examines the potentialities of the present to seek a basis for its realisation. But the margins and interstices of South African political and intellectual life are under unprecedented pressure today, as ideas and activities are brought into line with the needs of the market.” (p 209)

REFERENCES.

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