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David Webster: an activist anthropologist twenty years on

Deborah James

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On 1 May 1989, anthropologist David Webster was assassinated outside his home in Troyeville, Johannesburg, South Africa by a marksman acting on behalf of the apartheid state. His assassination, carried out without apparent specific motive but certainly linked to his activities as a human rights advocate, was condemned in the strongest terms, and his loss widely mourned. Over ten thousand mourners processed through Johannesburg's streets at his funeral (Spiegel and Kadalie 1989). The obituaries published in a variety of academic journals (Hammond-Tooke 1989; Spiegel and Kadalie 1989; E Webster 1989; Klugman 1989) were however relatively low-key and subdued compared to the outpourings of grief, outrage and anger which his death occasioned in the wider world. It was beyond the university community, and in particular in the arena of anti-apartheid activism, that Webster appeared to have made his most significant mark.

Twenty years on it is worth reassessing the balance between the political and the anthropological work of this intriguing and somewhat contradictory figure. To do so now is apposite not only because of the anniversary of his untimely death, but also because a volume based on his PhD thesis is to be published this year, translated into Portuguese, in a volume edited by Joao de Pina Cabral (Webster 2009). But the fact that it has taken 32 years to bring the document to the attention of the wider world and especially to the Lusophone community, and that it is has taken two decades since his death to publish any book by him at all, points to a number of anomalies. Contradictions in South Africa's turbulent passage to democracy, in the relationship between South Africa and its neighbours in the region – especially the one situated just to the north-east, Mozambique - and in the changing character of anthropological scholarship in that country, have all conspired to stall the publication of this book. There have also been contradictory tendencies in the life and work of its author, and personal tensions experienced by a man torn between dedication to the profession of anthropologist and commitment to a struggle

against a brutal and unlawful regime. It is perhaps true to say that these tensions were never fully resolved. Had they been, and had David Webster survived, he might eventually have achieved the standing of a public intellectual in the fullest sense of the word. But the efforts he made are no less praiseworthy for all that.

If, by the time of David's assassination in 1989, he was better known for his political activism, and for his written interventions which were offered as testimony against the inequities produced by the apartheid system (1981b, 1982b, 1983a and b, 1984a, 1989) than for his academic writings, this was not because the latter were insubstantial. And they too encompass a startling range, from anthropological articles on Chopi and Tembe Thonga kinship terminology, marriage strategy and domestic life on the one hand (1973, 1977, 1981a, 1986a, 1991) to writings on proletarianisation, capital and class (1976, 1978, 1983a); nutrition and disease (1986c) and the unemployment crisis in Soweto (1982a, 1983b, 1984b) on the other. This surprising juxtaposition is explained in part by a sudden switch in anthropology's theoretical trajectory: a switch experienced with particular force by left-leaning and radical academics in South Africa. It is also explained by David's own personal trajectory which took him step-by-step into political activism. But it did not do so along a predetermined path.

The backdrop of David's childhood, adolescence, student days and research field 'spanned four different countries in southern Africa in different phases of decolonialisation' (Glenda Webster, personal communication). It is likely that all of these contributed in some way to making him an anthropologist with a commitment to political activism in South Africa. But they did not do so in any preordained manner. Some accounts, written in somewhat heroic vein to celebrate his role in fighting 'for our freedom' (Frederikse 1998) or to commemorate him as a 'campaigner for human rights' (Klugman 1989; see also E Webster 1989), interpret David's early life through the prism of his later activism. They represent his family as members of the white working class, who left Roodepoort in South Africa to settle in Luanshya, in what was then Northern Rhodesia. David, born in 1945, is depicted as having inherited racist attitudes from his background and from his schooling at Falcon College boarding school in then Southern

Rhodesia, but as then having overcome these in the course of his undergraduate university education – first in accountancy, later in anthropology – completed in 1967 at Rhodes University. He is then shown as further transcending these attitudes, eventually to become the militant campaigner celebrated in all his obituaries. But matters were considerably more nuanced than this suggests.

If David did indeed learn something of his activist humanism in the course of his studies as an anthropologist, it is probable that his initial experience of fieldwork among the Chopi of the Inharrime district of southern Mozambique, in 1969, played no small part in this process. His then wife Glenda Webster, who accompanied him, recalls being received as a clan member (she was a Mucumbi and David was a Nyakwaha), and being continually plied with produce: maize cobs grilled over small fires, peanuts or cashew nuts, chickens, venison and tea made with condensed milk (a highly valued commodity only used on very special occasions). She recalls one occasion when the Websters were passing the home of someone who was in his hut shaving. ‘When he heard the car he came rushing out with shaving cream all over his face to wave at us.’ The hospitality and generosity they experienced, says Glenda, justifies ‘Vasco da Gama’s description of this part of the east coast of Africa as *‘terra de boa gente’* - the land of the good people’ (Glenda Webster, personal communication).

Schooled in structural-functionalist anthropology, David Webster found this descent-oriented approach inadequate to explain the variable and flexible character of Chopi society. He began instead to deploy frameworks of analysis derived from the scholars of the Manchester school, with their emphasis on transaction and strategy. But shortly after graduating with the PhD in 1975, and having started his first permanent lecturing job at the University of the Witwatersrand, he was soon exposed to a far more radical alternative. Ironically, his first actual acquaintance with Manchester, when he and Glenda traveled to the UK and he taught in the Department of Anthropology there for two consecutive periods between 1976 and 1978, instead of increasing his interest in transactionalist analysis, began to distance him from the theories and techniques of anthropology. Instead he was influenced by sociologists deploying Marxist theories, such

as Peter Worsley, and by the work of social historians such as E P Thompson. Whether this moment represented, for him, a permanent transgressing of the boundaries of mainstream anthropology, or a short-term preoccupation with new modes of analysis which could be successfully reunited with fieldwork and participant observation, is a matter for debate.

Profoundly influenced by an academic climate in which the experiences of the working class and the impact of capitalism and industrialization were predominant, he returned to South Africa and to his lecturing job at the University of the Witwatersrand. His teaching, using key works in the Marxist canon including some which were banned in South Africa at the time, informed - and reflected - increasingly radical South African trends, and his publications on the Chopi began to reflect similar concerns, expressing his growing interest in their proletarianisation and incorporation into the ranks of the migrant labour force working in South Africa's gold mines (1976, 1978).

David's interests gradually switched away from the 'satellites' of migrant labour and towards its South African 'metropolis', in particular the Witwatersrand, at whose university he continued to teach. He began to produce a range of short, arguably more journalistic pieces primarily intended to demonstrate the inadequacies of the South African apartheid system (1982b, 1983a and b), its health care (1983a) and nutrition (1981b). But he remained interested in Mozambique, where many ANC and SACP members, some in exile from South Africa, were living at the time. Both his connections in Mozambique and the radical nature of the transformation he underwent while living in the UK have fuelled speculation that David might at some point have been recruited to the ANC's armed wing *Umkhonto we Sizwe* or the ANC-allied South African Communist Party (SACP), or both. It was at around the time of his return to South Africa that SACP member Ruth First, wife of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* commander Joe Slovo, wrote to him, expressing interest in his piece on colonialism, underdevelopment and migrant labour in Mozambique (1976), and requesting some help with sources for her own book on a similar topic, later published as *Black Gold* (1983). In her letter, she refers to an enquiry he had made to her about the possibility of working at or liaising with Eduardo Mondlane

University, in Maputo: one which he did not eventually pursue.¹ A matter which similarly points to his possible membership of *Umkhonto* was his later involvement in helping party member H el ene Pastoors and her partner Klaas de Jonge, who fell foul of the South African authorities. Pastoors, who had come to South Africa from Mozambique where she was living as a member of *Umkhonto*, was briefly employed as a fellow lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand (Frederikse 1998). When she was later detained David Webster offered help and support.

Whatever his formal party or institutional connections, which are a matter of speculation, the character of his involvement as an activist within the country, and the extent to which his activities became irksome to the South African authorities, are a matter of public record. It has never been fully established which of these activities led to the terrible event of his assassination. But all of these activities appear to have caused extreme displeasure: whether to criminal smuggling networks, the police, the border authorities, nature conservation officials, or more shadowy figures higher up the authority chain. His death has been blamed on his co-founding of and active involvement in an organization called the Detainees' Parents' Support Committee (DPSC), which provided advice and nurture to relatives of those detained without trial during the increasingly repressive years of the 1980s, and sent gifts to the detainees themselves. Police, apparently aggrieved at the organisation's success in helping to boost the morale of those they were most keen to discourage, continually disrupted the regular 'tea parties' held by David and his colleagues in the Committee, including Maggie Friedman, his then partner.² His murder has also been explained by reference to his having uncovered illegal smuggling routes for arms or ivory between Natal and Mozambique while doing fieldwork in the late 1980s (Frederikse 1998). Probably less significant in contributing to his death, but still showing his tenacity and engagement, was David's opposition during the same period to the nature conservation officials of northern Natal, whom he suspected of hatching a plot to create a giant nature reserve and - in the process - of resettling numerous villagers from their

¹ Letter to David Webster from Ruth First, 8 May 1977, box A6, A2792, Historical Papers Library, University of the Witwatersrand.

² *Mail and Guardian*, 12-18th May 1989

homes in the area.³ Whatever the source of official or less official displeasure, the true reasons for David's assassination by Ferdi Barnard, member of the clandestine and shadowy Civil Co-operation Bureau with tenuous links to official police structures, were never fully revealed. Requests by the members of the David Webster Trust that his death 'should not be viewed as a free-standing case of an individual murder but rather as part of a co-ordinated campaign',⁴ an eventual inquest in 1992, and sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which were held in 1996 after the advent of democracy in 1994, never revealed a chain of command. Barnard was eventually charged with murder and sentenced in 1997, but without implicating any holders of higher office in the apartheid government of the time.

But although David's political activism appears to have overshadowed his academic activities after the late 1970s, and although his death brought both to an untimely close, there was a revival of his interest in academic fieldwork. Activism did not eclipse anthropology altogether. Tracing his work through the two major research projects conducted in this later period, one can discern a gradual progression. Starting from an initial theoretical awkwardness, the work demonstrates a growing intellectual maturity: it contains the promise that his activist concerns might eventually have dovetailed with research interests to produce a new synthesis.

It was not, however, an easy road. The first project, a jointly-run study on the informal sector and unemployment in Soweto, made an attempt to reconceptualise 'informal sector' activities as 'petty commodity production' (1982a, 1983b, 1984b, 1986b) which was rejected by some as having sacrificed ethnographic detail and empirical richness to an arid and abstract debate. The work combined some of the influences he had picked up in Manchester with a tendency to pick over neo-Marxist categories that had become prevalent in South Africa by that time. In retrospect, these episodes of criticism, and the defensive responses they prompted, can be seen as having manifested the kind of

³ Ellis (1994); see also letter from David Webster, 8th July (probably 1980), to Dan, Pippa, Pam and Ross; box A6, A2792, Historical Papers, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand.

⁴ David Webster Trust, Memorandum, box A6, A2792, Historical Papers, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand.

factional in-fighting that has often caused left-wing scholars and activists to find more fault with each other than they do with those to whom they are opposed.

The second of these projects, returning David to his earlier vocation as hands-on ethnographic fieldworker in a rural setting, was more fruitful. From 1976, and with redoubled vigour after 1986, he spent time amongst the Tembe Thonga of northern Zululand: a group whose territory and culture officially borders southern Mozambique but in fact crosses that border. Here he continued his interest in migrant labour, combining this with a focus on ethnicity, gender and household. In his articles from this period, particularly the one published posthumously in a tribute to *Townsmen or Tribesmen* author Philip Mayer, his former lecturer and mentor at Rhodes University, he successfully brings together subtle ethnographic analysis with theoretical perspectives from contemporary social science (1991). He sensitively deploys the concept of 'subculture', borrowed from Dick Hebdidge of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, to explain why Tembe Thonga women speak and dress as 'Thonga' while their husbands and brothers self-identify as 'Zulu'. By focusing on women's self-definition within the household, he offers an insightful challenge to what was becoming a hegemonic view among revisionist scholars: that ethnicity represents 'a form of popular male resistance to the forces that were reshaping African lives throughout southern Africa' (Vail 1989:15). Here, matters of anthropological interest such as marriage, gender and the domestic domain re-appear in his work, explained but not wholly determined by the broader context of proletarian experience and labour migration (as Marxist scholars would have thought appropriate), but allowing some agency to individual actors (as the Manchester school might have proposed).

Might David have proceeded further along these lines to contribute further to the revival of anthropology in South Africa and/or Mozambique? Or might he have taken up a key position in ANC structures and/or in the new government of South Africa, as did some other activist/academics? If so, might he have become disillusioned by - or even been sidelined as a result of - the post-1999/post-Mandela regime's gradual erosion of the ANC's non-racial tradition? Perhaps, in turn, he would have come back to anthropology

once again, upholding traditions of criticism and debate, airing the grievances of common people, and becoming a public intellectual in the true sense of the word. These are questions about which his former friends, colleagues and students (I count myself as a member of all three) often speculate. But all of these people, and many more besides, will be heartened and delighted that this account of his original Chopi fieldwork is finally to be published, and that an aspect of his work long overlooked will now become better known. It seems particularly apposite that the work's publication in Portuguese will contribute to the current strengthening and transnational interconnectedness of anthropology in the Lusophone world.

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