

THE LIFE AND WORK OF ERIKA THERON: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ADULT EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA¹

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It is a great honour for me to give this year's Erika Theron Public Lecture. She was born on this day 92 years ago. I want to endorse the idea of the Memorial Committee to hold this lecture on or as near as possible to Dr Theron's birthday on 17 May.

It is perhaps unnecessary for me to give all the detail about her illustrious career. She attained her master's degree in Economics under Professor Johannes Grosskopf, who was at that time a member of the Carnegie Commission on the Poor White problem. While assisting him in his research work, she developed a keen interest in the social (or human) dimension of Economics. Prof Grosskopf advised her to continue her studies in Social Economy in Germany. After three years at the University of Berlin she attained her DPhil at the University of Stellenbosch with a dissertation on women employees in factories in Cape Town. Dr HF Verwoerd was the promoter of her dissertation.

In 1934 a Volkskongres was held in Kimberley to evaluate the Carnegie Report on the Poor White problem. At the congress a *Voortsettingskomitee* (Continuation Committee) was appointed to co-ordinate the decisions taken at the congress. Dr Theron was appointed as full time secretary of the committee. In this capacity she was not only confronted with the Poor White problem in all its complexities, but also became closely befriended with Mrs ME Rothmann (MER). This was a friendship that lasted until 1975 when MER died at the age of 100. Of all the formative influences on Erika Theron, her friendship with MER may have been the most important.

In 1937 Dr Theron was appointed as lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Stellenbosch. In 1943 she was promoted to senior lecturer and in 1955 to professor at the same university. In her academic position, and as editor of the Journal for social work, *Maatskaplike Werk/Social Work*, Erika Theron has done extremely important pioneering work to lay the foundation of Social Work – both as an academic discipline and a professional career. She also served on the National Housing Committee and on the Group Areas Board. She received honorary degrees from the Universities of Port Elizabeth and Stellenbosch and from the University of the Western Cape, of which she was Chancellor.

Shortly after her retirement in 1972, Erika Theron was appointed in February 1973 as Chairman of the *Commission of Inquiry into Matters relating to the Coloured Population Group* (The Theron

¹ Paper read at the Erika Theron Public Lecture at the University of the Western Cape, 17 May 1999.

Commission). I was fortunate to be appointed as one of the 18 members of the Commission. At the time I was mainly interested in the philosophical aspects of the History of Economic Thought and for that matter a typical Ivory Tower academic. It is a pleasure for me to testify at this occasion that Erika Theron has exerted a very formative influence on my life and career. During the three years of the Commission's term I was fortunate to be one of the inner circle of the Commission with Koos du Toit, Dr van der Ross and Marinus Wiechers. In this capacity I obtained invaluable experience. But it was Erika Theron as typical social worker who insisted that the Commission should attain its information through as many *in loco* visits as possible. These visits brought me down from the Ivory Tower to the hard – and in many aspects rather precarious – reality of socio-economic conditions in South Africa. For this I will forever remain thankful to her. During the work of the Commission I became interested in the phenomenon of a vicious circle of poverty in the ranks of the poorest 40 per cent of the Coloured community. She gave me much scope to read extensively about this phenomenon in other countries. This enabled me to write Chapter 22, “A socio-economic perspective” on the poverty problem. In spite of a concerted attempt by the right wing faction of the Commission not to include Chapter 22, I was wholeheartedly supported by Erika Theron that it should be included.

Professor Theron's task as chairman of the Commission was not an easy one. The other 17 members were all men with a great variety of backgrounds and – as it turned out – with an equally great variety of hidden agendas. It soon became apparent that the members of the Commission were divided in three groups, namely the six Coloured members, seven right wingers (or *Verkrampptes*) and five other members who were *Verlig* in orientation but not organised in a group. They were Mr Kingwill (the UP member of parliament), Mr de Villiers Loubser (who never caucused with anybody) and the three professors of Stellenbosch, Erika Theron, Ben Vosloo and myself. In the end the five *Verligtes* joined forces with the Coloureds to vote in favour of the majority Recommendations on all the controversial issues.

In spite of all the ideological and political differences and the rather serious clashes of personalities, Erika Theron performed her chairmanship with great skill, dignity and diplomacy. During all three years – with the exception of the last two weeks when the Commission voted on the Recommendations – the atmosphere was very relaxed with a spirit of *camaraderie*. Erika Theron handled her “boys” with a firm hand, but also with sensitivity and lots of humour.

It is almost 25 years since the Theron Commission completed its work. The past 25 years were of the most memorable and meaningful in South Africa's controversial history. During these 25 years we experienced the freedom Struggle of the Liberation organisations and the Resistance of the white government against it. During the early 1990s the negotiated transition towards a majoritarian democratic system took place. In a few weeks the second democratic election will take place. With the wisdom of hindsight I cannot but acknowledge that the Final Report and the Recommendations were all but perfect. It contained several deficiencies for which there are no excuses. It must, however, be taken into account

that the Commission was appointed by an Apartheid government with the purpose (or the hope) that the Commission would give a measure of legitimisation to the government's so-called Coloured policy. It would be dishonest of me to claim that the Report and the Recommendations have made a clean break with the apartheid system. The majority of the Recommendations put forward a strong case for the abolishment of legislation concerned with racial separation, but – if I can use a term of Karl Marx – the final Report still carried the “birth marks” of its “apartheid mother”. The Report was not as influential as we had hoped it would be. An important reason for this was that it was tabled two days after the Soweto unrests started on 16 June 1976. The African problem became the really pressing one after Soweto. Due to the fate of history the Theron Report was already dated on the day of its release.

The true meaning of the Theron Commission was that the majority (under Erika Theron's firm leadership) was brave enough to defy the NP government and the Afrikaner Establishment in tabling a Report that was directly against the grain of the prevailing orthodoxy of the Afrikaner Establishment in the mid-1970s. The Vorster government expected a white majority and a Coloured minority report. The fact that Mr de Villiers Loubser and the three Stellenbosch professors joined forces with the six Coloured members, was from Mr Vorster's point of view an unintended and inexcusable outcome. The final Report evoked bitter resentment and caused the wrath of John Vorster and his government against the Stellenbosch professors but mainly against Erika Theron.

To understand the true nature of the break with the Establishment, I must take you back to the last two weeks of the Commission. Members of the *Verkrampste* group complicated matters enormously by being in constant contact with Mr Vorster and by telling him in which direction the majority of the Commission was heading. On 24 March 1976 – two days before the vote on the constitutional recommendation – the responsible Minister, Hennie Smit, told Ben Vosloo and me to pay a visit to John Vorster at Grootte Schuur. He told us in no uncertain terms that he did not want a majority recommendation on the constitutional issue. Ben Vosloo told him that the three groups – the Coloureds, the *Verkrampstes* and the *Verligtes* – would in all probability vote separately on the constitutional issue. At the end of our conversation I told him that it was the Commission's opinion that the Coloured Representative Council (CRC) could not work. He told us with great decisiveness that the CRC *had to* work and turned his back on me. He never talked to me again since that day. I told Dr Theron about the meeting and with great tact she convinced the Coloureds to vote for the proposal of Ben Vosloo that was somewhat milder than those which the Coloureds had in mind. Recommendation 178 recommended “satisfactory forms of direct Coloured representation and a direct say for the Coloureds at the various levels of government and in the various decision-making bodies”. Mr Vorster was furious. He was not in South Africa when the Report was tabled in Parliament on June 18, 1976.

In April 1977 a White Paper on the Report was published. The majority of the Recommendations was accepted, but all the sensitive ones that recommended racial integration were rejected. On 10 April 1977

Dr Theron and six other members issued a statement in which we denounced the White Paper and declared that it seemed to us as if the government did not understand the philosophic approach subjacent to the Report. On 19 April 1977 Mr Vorster made a scathing attack on Dr Theron in parliament. He asked *inter alia* the sarcastic question whether Dr Theron had asked herself whether the reason for not accepting certain recommendations was that the government understood only too well the philosophical approach subjacent to the Report. The implication was clear, i.e. that the majority of the Commission was in favour of integration between the whites and the Coloureds and that it was completely against government policy. Mr Vorster also told parliament that NP congresses, and not the Theron Commission, would have the final decision on government policy. With this response of Mr Vorster the die was cast.

The relationship between Erika Theron and PW Botha remained cordial even after the Theron Report was published. As leader of the so-called Cape liberal wing of the NP, he was not as negatively orientated towards the Report as John Vorster. But in 1979, when Erika Theron made a plea to review the Group Areas Act, she was strongly reprimanded by Botha. When it was announced in early 1981 that the inhabitants of Maitland Garden Village were to be resettled, Erika Theron wrote two articles in *The Argus* (1 and 3 April) in which she described the Group Areas Act as a "cruel act". She put it as follows:

"Along with others I believed in all sincerity (and naivety!) that the policy [concerning group areas] would offer the various population groups wider scope for more effective self-determination and that, particularly by division of residential areas, possible friction might be avoided ... But selfish concern for their own profit by whites led to their taking advantage of the Act – and this in turn ruined sound human relations. The vulnerability and lack of bargaining power of the coloured people were frequently exploited, particularly after they lost the municipal vote. *Of all the apartheid legislation the Group Areas Act has caused the most bitterness and division among population groups – not only in a geographic sense.* Being forced to move to certain other areas was not only cruelly costly to many people, but many were uprooted from communities where they had lived for generations ... One government commission of inquiry after the other has shown that discriminatory laws like the Group Areas Act are major causes of riots and disturbances. To an even greater extent they will continue to be a threat to our safety and security, and contribute to the deterioration of race relationships"

PW Botha reacted with outrage. A general election took place at the end of April 1981 and at a NP campaigning meeting in Cape Town on the 9th April, he told the audience that he "is sick and tired of Erika Theron's nonsense". He also referred to the cheques paid to her in her capacity as a member of several government boards and commissions with the clear implication that she was silent in those days and should remain silent now. To blame her that she was not prepared to be "bribed" with government favours was indeed the cruellest cut of them all.

There were those in Afrikaner circles that tried to belittle Erika Theron's defiance of the Afrikaner Establishment as the action of a Johnny-come-lately. This may have been true, but Erika Theron was not an ordinary Johnny-come-lately. She was an academic heavy weight. Her status as a social worker and a cultural leader stood above dispute. From the perspective of today – a quarter of a century later – her defiance of the Afrikaner Establishment was a momentous event of significant historical meaning. To put

the significance of her defiance of the Afrikaner Establishment in the necessary historic perspective, I have to make a little detour to explain the true character of the Afrikaner Establishment in the period from 1940 to 1980.

A few weeks ago I met an ex-student who told me that he and other young Afrikaners have formed a discussion group to address the following question: How is it possible that such good people like the Afrikaners could create and maintain such an evil system as Apartheid?

I think it is praiseworthy for young people to wrestle with questions like that. But I do not think the question reflects the problem correctly. The Afrikaners are not necessarily good people. They were – and still are – quite ordinary people. It is also wrong to claim that they have “created” the evil system of apartheid from scratch. In certain English speaking circles the myth is carefully and assiduously propagated that the NP started with apartheid in 1948 and that a humane policy against blacks was in place before 1948. Over the past two years I have been doing research on South Africa’s political and economic history since the 19th century. There is no doubt that an exploitative system of racial capitalism in the agricultural sector was already institutionalised by the British settlers in the eastern Cape in the middle decades of the 19th century. During the mining revolution a more exploitative system of racial capitalism was extended on behalf of the English business establishment to all sectors of the economy.

It is true that the name apartheid was only used from 1948 onwards, but at that time discrimination and exploitation were already firmly institutionalised. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission unfortunately reaffirmed – to a large extent – the myth that racial exploitation started only in 1948. Although the TRC acknowledged that its time frame was too short – i.e. only from 1960 until 1994 – it nonetheless ignores the first half of the 20th century and makes only vague generalisations about discrimination in this period. Consequently it blatantly underemphasised the social guilt of the white English speakers and of British colonialism and imperialism for what went wrong in South Africa during the 20th century. But after having said this, we as Afrikaners cannot but acknowledge that we have intensified the evilness of the evil system “inherited” from the English Establishment. In due time we also protected white privileges with a notorious security system. We can rephrase the question as follows: *How is it possible that ordinary people like the Afrikaners “perfected” the racist system they inherited from the English speakers, to become such an evil system?*

This question is indeed a very relevant one. It is a question that should be addressed over and over again in Afrikaner circles over the next 20 to 30 years. For the purpose of this Public Lecture it is necessary for me to address it. I do not claim that I am speaking the final word on it.

Perhaps it is also not fair to say that the Afrikaners were ordinary people. In comparison with the white English speakers, they were relatively poor in the 1930s. During the 1930s and 1940s the Afrikaners

in Afrikaner circles was completely paralysed. Consequently no criticism whatsoever was allowed from *ware Afrikaners* or from loyal Afrikaner institutions against the manner in which the NP used its political power and against the purposes for which it was used. Such criticism was branded undesirable, because it only strengthened the case of the enemies of the Afrikaners.

raised all kinds of allegations about being the victims of British imperialism and foreign capitalism. There was some measure of truth in these allegations, but the wrongdoings done to them by the British and the local English speakers were unfortunately blown out of all proportion to mobilise Afrikaner ethnic support for the NP.

The cultural and political movement of the *Afrikanervolk* got terribly derailed during the second half of the century. If I had to put a date on the beginning of this derailment or *volksontsporing*, I would identify the chasm (“skeuring”) between General Hertzog and Dr Malan in 1934 on the Fusion (“Samesmelting”) issue as that date. During the 14 years from 1934 to 1948 – when a large percentage of Afrikaners was in the proverbial political wilderness – Afrikaner nationalism was *redefined* into a much more *aggressive* and *exclusive* version of nationalism, called “Afrikaner Christian Nationalism”. At the core of this new Afrikaner nationalism stood the idea of “volksgebondenheid” (i.e. the idea that the close historic ties of “bloed, grondgebied en volk” were of the utmost importance for every Afrikaner). The ideological transformation of Afrikaner nationalism into “Afrikaner Christian Nationalism” after 1934 was mainly the work of the Afrikaner Broederbond and intellectuals in mainly the northern provinces.

These intellectuals and cultural leaders exulted the suffering of Afrikaners – especially women and children – during the Anglo Boer War into a “folklore” to instigate anti-British and anti-imperialistic feelings, also against the local English speakers. They also used – and even misused – the Carnegie Report on the poor white problem to blame the traumatic dislocation of “poor white” Afrikaners to circumstances created by the mining and industrial revolutions, and they targeted foreign (or Jewish) capitalism as the scapegoats to be blamed for Afrikaner poverty and deracination. It is a pity that the Carnegie Report was misused so blatantly. It was a rather scientific report and it blamed the poverty to a large degree on the Afrikaners themselves:

“A part of the poor white class is characterised by ... such qualities as improvidence and irresponsibility, untruthfulness and lack of a sense of duty, a feeling of inferiority and lack of self-respect, ignorance, and credulity, a lack of industry and ambition, and unsettledness of mode of life ... Poverty itself exerted a demoralising influence on them” (Carnegie Report, par. 52-60).

experienced the all-embracing nature of the *volksbeweging* and how difficult it was to break the ranks. When I did it, the different organs of the Establishment unleashed forces to denigrate me. Friends suddenly became enemies and remained enemies until this day. Looking back, I am truely sorry for my

part in the maintenance of the evil system. I regret that I was not earlier brave enough to break away. I am nonetheless very grateful for Erika Theron because her defiance made it much easier for me.

I think at an occasion like this we owe it to Erika Theron to consider the present state of the Afrikaner society and their relationship towards the other population groups, and especially the black and the poor. The *volksbeweging* has come to an end. In its place we have a new movement to maintain the Afrikaans language on behalf of the white and brown Afrikaners. This movement has merit, but those involved must be extremely careful not to make themselves guilty of excesses that can cause a new derailment.

The Afrikaners are presently – as a minority group in democratic South Africa – rather demoralised and more divided than ever before. Many Afrikaners (and also many English speakers and Coloureds) find it extremely difficult to adapt to the new situation. In 1948 the Afrikaners did not know how to use their political power properly. Since 1994 many of them did not know how to make peace with the loss of their political power. The really important question today is whether the Afrikaner society has become a healthy society – or healthy enough to acknowledge its own mistakes. The question is whether the majority of Afrikaners has cleansed themselves from the uncritical self-righteousness and complacency of yesteryear. The question is whether the majority of Afrikaners has become honest enough to acknowledge that they have institutionalised and maintained societal structures that enriched themselves (and the other white South Africans) at the detriment of the blacks. The question is whether the majority of Afrikaners has developed the necessary guilty conscience about the evil system created and maintained by them. The question is whether the majority of the Afrikaners is today displaying a preparedness to make sacrifices to compensate – at least in the symbolic sense of the word – their evil deeds and their wrong-doings against people other than white?

I am afraid that for a large percentage of the Afrikaners – perhaps as high as 70 per cent – the answers on all these questions are a resounding “No”! If this is true then the majority of Afrikaners are still very “derailed”. There are of course promising signs of many institutions and organisations who are positively orientated towards the new situation. Many Afrikaners are prepared to acknowledge the terrible mistakes made by the NP and the Afrikaner Establishment during the Apartheid period. They show the necessary remorse and are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices. We must be very thankful for the attitude of these Afrikaners. The Dutch Reformed Church is busy with intense soul-searching. It is commendable. But what has happened, is still too little too late.

The best proof of the “unhealthiness” of many Afrikaners is the way many react towards their past. The great majority is still not prepared to acknowledge that they have done anything wrong in their personal or collective capacities. Others do not want to talk about the past. They want us to forget the past and to look forward and build a new South Africa. Any attempt to forget the past will be a terrible mistake. But then there are those – also among certain newspapers – who react with indignation whenever someone

dares to blame our present problems on apartheid. I have news for people who react in this manner. Apartheid was a system of *structural* and *systemic* exploitation that has been in place – to a greater or lesser degree – for the best part of 150 years. In the next 20 or 30 years we will still struggle to get rid of the ugly socio-economic remnants of apartheid. It is of the utmost importance that all the whites in South Africa should be convinced about the large “apartheid debt” for which we are responsible and on which we dare not turn our backs. How to convince all the whites – and especially the Afrikaners – about this, is a very difficult challenge. Those of us who understand the need for a comprehensive programme of adult education must work untiring to convince our white compatriots about its necessity.

All these Afrikaners who are not prepared to acknowledge that apartheid – as institutionalised and maintained by the NP government – was an evil system, should be reminded about the following: Africans were not allowed to own land and to accumulate capital. Due to low spending on African education they could not accumulate human capital to the same extent as whites. They were deprived of the opportunity to do skilled work and to develop entrepreneurial and professional capabilities. Many of them received ultra exploitative wages. Many were forced to work under very unhealthy and dangerous conditions. While the Afrikaners experienced a too quick *embourgeoisement* during the third quarter of the century, the lower 50 per cent of the Africans were at the same time reduced to a proletariat too poor to satisfy their basic human needs. During the Struggle and the Resistance against it, the lower 50 per cent were further impoverished. But it was not only African individuals whose lives were destroyed by the evil system. African societies were also disrupted by means of forced urbanisation to shanty towns, by the forced resettlement of millions and especially by means of the harsh actions of the security forces. The deprivation, repression and injustices inherent to the evil racist system not only impoverished the African population, but also brutalised large numbers of them. How on earth is it possible that the majority of the whites are still not prepared to acknowledge that apartheid was an evil system and that all of us will be saddled with its ugly remnants for decades to come.

While the Africans were repressed for many decades by the *power structures* that were in place in apartheid South Africa, the whites (both English and Afrikaans speakers) were in a very privileged position to accumulate land, capital and human capital. They were in a position to build corporations and universities and attain invaluable experience in entrepreneurship and in several professional fields. They were in the position to build stable societies – although not necessarily healthy societies.

I am not making a plea that the ANC government should not be criticised. On the contrary, I regard the criticism by the civil society as the life blood of a healthy society and indispensable for a democratic system. But before the Afrikaners, as a collectivity, can restore themselves as a population group with the necessary respect and trustworthiness in the eyes of those we have been wronged and humiliated for decades, they should at least be humble and prepared to acknowledge their misdeeds. The Afrikaners have the responsibility to be honest about their past and about their share in the creation and maintenance

of the evil system. They have the responsibility to be honest about how they misused their power to promote their sectional interest at the detriment of the black population. Only if they are prepared to do these things, will they become a valued part of the larger South African civil society. It will only then be proper for them, as a collectivity, to usurp the right to be really critical against the new government.

I am not saying that the Afrikaners – in their individual capacities – should not be critical against the new government. On the contrary – the new government makes many mistakes and all the elements of civil society should highlight every mistake. But the Afrikaners should realise that for the time being many of them are criticising the new government from a position of weakness. They are in a rather unenviable position, but it is a position of their own making. They, and they alone, can rectify it. It is indeed not in the long run interest of South Africa that an important section of the population remains morally unfit to partake freely and with credibility in the public debate. But it will be unfair to allow those individuals who were so *uncritical* against their own self-righteousness, to appoint themselves with an attitude of pedantry to deliver unrestrained and destructive criticism against the new government struggling to administer the ugly remnants of the evil system of apartheid. Unfortunately this is exactly the privilege and right that many hard-line and embittered Afrikaners (and some English speakers) are claiming for themselves. These Afrikaners (and English speakers with the same conviction) can perhaps attain a measure of credibility in their relentless criticism of the new government, if they are prepared to make a clear distinction between what part of the problems facing South Africa currently, is a remnant of the evil system of apartheid, and what part is a result of the mistakes and the mal-administration of the new government. But, given their recalcitrant attitude and their argumentativeness it is unlikely that they will even try to make this distinction.

There are alarming signs that the new government can become increasingly more intolerant – also in its attitude towards minority groups. Until the time when the Afrikaners have succeeded in getting their house in order, it will unfortunately not be possible for the Afrikaners, as a collectivity, to act as a *credible* countervailing force against undemocratic tendencies in the new government. This is really a sorry state of affairs.

I want to end by returning to Erika Theron. She taught me the difference between “sympathy” and “empathy”. She taught me that we should address the poverty of the poor with empathy and not with sympathy, that we should try to place ourselves as completely as possible in their situation. I know that it is not easy. To a large extent it is not possible. But we should try. There are strong indications that the poorest 60 per cent of the population has become poorer over the last 10 years. In all capitalist systems there is a tendency for the poor to become poorer and for the rich to become richer. In the system of *racial capitalism* that has been in place in South Africa for 150 years, the strong *systemic* tendency for the poorest 60 per cent to get poorer and for the richest 20 per cent to get richer, *is undoubtedly still very much operational in the South African economy*. The new government spent more than 60 per cent of its

non-interest spending on social spending. Although this spending goes a long way to compensate for the structural tendency towards increased poverty and unemployment, it is not large enough to compensate for it to the necessary degree. All of us involved in social work and all of us with the necessary empathy for those living in abject poverty, should campaign relentlessly for a comprehensive *poverty relief programme* additional to the social spending programmes. We need to spend an average of at least R10 billion annually in the next 10 to 15 years on a comprehensive poverty relief programme. If we fail to do so, social unrest may become unmanageable. If we fail to do so we will also fail to restore social justice. The responsibility is ours. There can be no doubt that the whites have been the *beneficiaries* of the evil system and that the poorest 50 per cent of the black population are the real victims of the evil system.