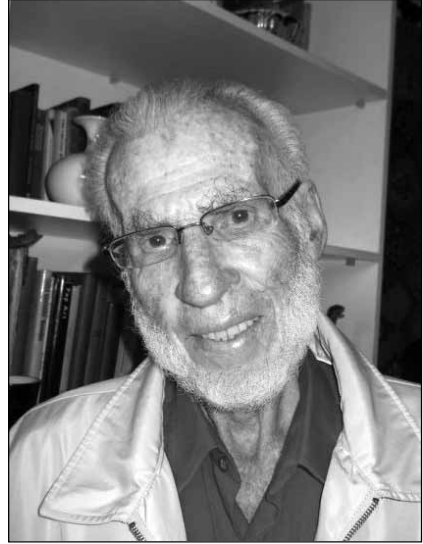


Laurence Schlemmer, 1936–2011

LAURIE Schlemmer was born into what he always said was “a fairly boring” Afrikaans family (though half of it was English-speaking) in Pretoria, but once, on a long trip into Zululand, I got him to explain his origins to me and they were extremely complex. He was, he said, about one twelfth Jewish and the name Schlemmer is German Jewish. Lawrie was proud of the fact that the great Oskar Schlemmer, sculptor, painter and designer, was a bit too progressive even for the Bauhaus movement he was associated with and that his paintings were specially selected by the Nazis for an exhibition of “Degenerate Art”.

Lawrie’s father was an accountant but as a boy Lawrie was always fascinated by the less respectable side of society and went to Pretoria University to study criminology, ending up with a degree in Social Work His real education came, however, when he became a social worker, moving amidst every variety of down-and-out, semi-criminal and highly distressed people. What he couldn’t but be struck by was that while apartheid was then at its height and South African society was constrained within a sort of Calvinist strait-jacket, such folk paid scant attention to laws of any kind and made their own complicated arrangements with reality. Like most social workers who have entered the profession through a sympathy for the downtrodden, he quickly realised that this was a world entirely without sentiment, principle or even belief. Down-and-outs had no problem at all in making quite contradictory arrangements with the other actors in their life. They could accommodate themselves to almost any set of circumstances



Laurence Schlemmer

and would negotiate a way through by making deals with criminals and cops, social workers and shebeens, Salvation Army workers and hookers. Lawrie remained permanently impressed with the ingenuity of it all long after he gave up social work for sociology, attending Wits where he became a lecturer in the subject.

Soon, however, he moved to the University of Natal in Durban, rapidly becoming professor and setting up the Centre for Social and Development Studies (CSDS), which became a hive of activity and spawned the influential journal *Indicator*. Lawrie was an indefatigable worker and turned himself into a remarkable all-round social scientist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the sociology, politics, economics and anthropology of South African society – and with a considerable knowledge of comparable societies elsewhere. More than most, he understood South Africa as a remarkable laboratory of the social

sciences in which almost every kind of human plight and contradiction was present. He was endlessly fascinated simply to understand how it all worked.

Lawrie was a natural libertarian who had no time for racism of any kind and favoured a bohemian lifestyle. Durban in the late 1960s and 1970s was a political and social hub all of its own. It had all the life and the foreign intermixing of a great port city. As now, its social fabric wove together a dominant Zulu majority with 600 000 Indians, leaving whites and Coloureds far behind. Economically, it was the fastest growing part of the country and a major labour movement was silently growing underfoot. At the same time Natal (or, rather, KwaZulu) was home to Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, by far the most significant of the homeland leaders. Buthelezi, who had grown up in Luthuli's shadow, made no secret of the fact that he had always been a strong ANC man and was determined to see the end of apartheid. Increasingly, Buthelezi loomed over not only the Durban and Natal but also the national scene as by far the most significant internal black leader.

The Durban campus in those years was home to a group of young white radicals, many of whom were working to help build black trade unions: Rick Turner, Mike Kirkwood, Alec Erwin, Johnny Copelyn, Jesmond Blumenthal and others. Lawrie worked with this group and often lived in shared houses with its members. A contemporary observes that "the house Lawrie and Jesmond ran on Lighthouse Road, on the Bluff, was remarkable for the fact that all the apartheid laws were first abolished there. It had a floating population of white, black, Coloured and Indian people. Sexual liaisons

quite normally crossed colour lines, there was generally a party going on and the plentiful drink that flowed was usually bought at shebeens after midnight". In the midst of all this Lawrie was frantically working (and smoking) away at books, articles, surveys, reports and speeches, quite normally working through the night before jumping onto a plane to give a talk at the other end of South Africa before returning to base to repeat the feat. His colleagues regarded this blur of energy and creativity with awe and, when he finally left, gave him a cartoon picture of himself as the turbo-prof, leaping on and off planes with talks hurriedly put together in the departure lounge.

Lawrie had learnt from his social work days that you could do most things if you kept your own counsel. So at home and by night he was a bohemian and libertarian, by day a hard working academic, and found he was in ever increasing demand to address chambers of commerce and the like. He could deal with any milieu because he did not advertise his radical views or personal preferences and found that even at the height of apartheid South Africa you could not only have friends of all races but of all political persuasions. People were just people and if you treated them properly you could get past the ideology. So he would chat away happily to campus marxists, Inkatha activists, conservative Afrikaners and anyone else who came his way. His efforts to help unionise black workers led him into contact with Buthelezi, for Buthelezi supported the great Durban strike wave of 1973 and the workers happily elected him as their honorary President.

One of the reasons that Lawrie respected Rick Turner was that when this occurred some of the trade union organ-

isers such as Alec Erwin were upset and said Buthelezi was too conservative a figure to be acceptable, whereas Rick argued, as did Lawrie, that they had promised the workers democracy and so they must respect their democratic choice. Lawrie enjoyed discussing French marxism and existentialism with Rick but he appreciated the fact that Rick's sort of theorising was strongly grounded in respect for the classic liberal rights of free speech, free choice and free expression. As a sociologist Lawrie was simply far too eclectic to be a marxist and as a libertarian he was instinctively wary of any creed – apartheid, Communism, or any form of religion – which would try to exercise authority over how he should live or what he should think.

In a sense, Lawrie recognised Buthelezi as a kindred spirit for he was tightly bound to his position as homeland leader but somehow negotiated a strong relationship with the exiled ANC and the local black workers as well as with business and white liberals. Buthelezi asked Lawrie to become director of the Inkatha Institute and, daringly, at the time, Lawrie accepted. When I visited the Durban campus in 1978 this association placed Lawrie on the leftward limits of what was possible at the time and I found he knew far more about the world of black politics than any other white I met. Typically, Lawrie had hired black researchers at CSDS long before any other university department had crossed the colour line.

Lawrie was sharing a house with Rick Turner when an unknown gunman shot Rick through the ground floor window. Lawrie had to do whatever he could to try to save Rick, to ferry his children out of the way and to deal with the ensuing commotion. Buthelezi was among the

first on the scene – he had been on his way to the airport when he heard the news and hurriedly diverted his official car, for he had been devoted to Rick. For years afterwards Lawrie wondered if the murder had not been an accident committed by a security policeman who had meant only to spy but he later found evidence which suggested the murder had been deliberate and that the assassin was still at large.

In 1979-80 Buthelezi and the ANC quarrelled bitterly and thereafter the ANC viewed Inkatha as its deadly rival and enemy. At around that time Lawrie pitched up at CSDS one Saturday morning to find the Security Police waiting for him: they wanted access to the office of one of his black researchers. Why, Lawrie asked? They explained that the man had multiple car registrations in his name and this was a clear sign of an MK operative since infiltrating MK guerrillas needed a car with a legitimate registration number. They had no warrant but threatened to go and get one if Lawrie refused to open up the office. Typically, he bargained: he would open the office if they would let him be present while they searched it. Lawrie opened it and the police rapidly found damning evidence inside. So where is this guy, they demanded? “God knows where in Umlazi”, said Lawrie. “And he has no phone. You’ll have to wait till he comes in on Monday.” Once the police had gone he phoned the researcher from a call box and advised him to leave the country immediately.

Not long after Lawrie got a message smuggled in from the researcher, now an MK exile in Lusaka. You tipped me off, he said; now I’ll return the favour. His comrades, he said, were very angry with Buthelezi and wanted to kill him. They were also talking of coming to

kill Lawrie because of his association with Buthelezi. "Trouble is", Lawrie told me, "you can't run your life on the basis of death threats. You get too many of them." So he did nothing. But the Buthelezi-ANC rift was now affecting Lawrie's life across the board. On the campus student radicals denounced him because of his link with Inkatha and even within CSDS Lawrie began to have trouble with the young Turks that he had himself recruited. There was a fundamental difference of philosophy between them. Lawrie took the catholic view that every party and social formation was interesting and worthy of study and he was happy to have a plurality of approaches and styles within CSDS. The marxists wanted one style, one approach and a "progressive" selection of projects which would ultimately be subject to the needs of the progressive movement (ie. the UDF/ANC). In the short term this boiled down to an immediate demand that the CSDS (ie. Lawrie) must have nothing to do with Inkatha. Lawrie regarded this line as so obviously illiberal and unsuited to proper social science research that he had difficulty taking it seriously. The problem was that these were illiberal, indeed quasi-revolutionary times and this new form of ANC-centred political correctness grew apace, as did justifications for political violence in pursuit of the "correct" progressive ends.

One day Lawrie heard that his university office had caught fire. He rushed there – too late. His vast and irreplaceable collection of books, papers and ephemera had all been destroyed. Then he heard that his home was also on fire. This was even more alarming since it was a first floor flat and if his wife Monica were inside, she would have no escape. Luckily, she wasn't. But his

home was completely destroyed. It was an obvious case of simultaneous arson. The next day it was observed that a leading campus radical, who had frequently denounced Lawrie, was missing. It was universally assumed that he was the culprit and that he'd fled into exile. But it was now clear that Lawrie would be a continuing target and his position was untenable. So after 20 golden years in Durban – the centrepiece of his life – Lawrie gave up the Inkatha Institute and the CSDS that he had created and moved to Johannesburg to become chairman of the Centre for Policy Studies. Under him it was a lively place, though he continued to have problems with young Turks enthused with the new political correctness. Lawrie loved nothing better than messing about with old cars so his collection of cars moved with him. The gardens of all the houses he lived in were always full of characterful older cars – six or seven of them – though his pride and joy was the 1934 Chrysler fire engine he had picked up. He spent many hours, Chesterfield in hand, scrutinising every car magazine in the country for the old Citroens and Renaults that he loved.

Lawrie retained many links with Natal and for a while he and Monica had a cottage up the North Coast. Once I asked him if he was never tempted to return to Durban; so beautiful, warm all year round, so interesting. "Trouble is", he said, "Durban is just a bit too small." I said, hey, it's got three million people. "No", he said, "for someone like me it's just that bit too small. What it means is that sooner or later you start bumping into some of your ex-wives." Gee, I said, how many ex-wives have you got, Lawrie? "Oh God, I don't know", he said. "I don't remember." In fact most of the time that I knew him he was

pretty solidly partnered with Monica, his faithful support in all things and quite a force in her own right.

With the great change of 1990 in the offing the Broederbonders who controlled the HSRC decided they'd better make Lawrie their vice president. Given his pre-eminence as a social researcher, he might have expected such recognition decades before but he had, of course, been miles too liberal for them to touch. Ever the chameleon, he took immediately to his new environment, wearing suits and speaking Afrikaans all day long. But in no time the ANC exiles returned and immediately wanted to take over the cultural commanding heights: the SABC, the universities – and the HSRC. These pressures clearly had to be accommodated, which meant some people had to get the chop to make room for them. Lawrie told me it was quite absurd: neither the Broeders nor the ANC people were any good at research. But, of course, the inevitable happened and the Broeders reached agreement with their ANC counterparts that Lawrie – the most distinguished researcher in the organisation – should be the first one to get the chop.

And so it came about that Lawrie – a former dean of the social sciences at Natal, a professor at Wits, strategy director of the Urban Foundation, founder member of the Academy of Science of South Africa, vice president of the Institute of Race Relations, president of the SA Political Studies Association, research associate of the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (Germany), president of the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa, and the author or co-author of 300 publications and 15 books – was out of a job. I could see he was very hurt. For over 40 years he'd been the go-to man for anyone doing social research

in South Africa, and also as a pollster, speaker and political commentator. What are you going to do now, I asked? He laughed. "Return to basics. And I do mean basics. I'm a hunter-gatherer." And so he was. He was a director of the survey firm, Markdata, was endlessly sought out as a consultant or project manager by a raft of NGOs, and a variety of research projects, big and small, came his way. He had a pension income but he could no more imagine a life without research projects meeting their deadline by working through the night than he could imagine a life without cigarettes, dogs or old cars.

Around this time Lawrie and I worked together on a big book on the 1994 elections. One day we got a call from the ANC at Shell House. They explained that people who qualified as heroes of the struggle were going to be able to claim some sort of annuity. They were, as a result, flooded out by people claiming to be heroes of the struggle (Hots) and, er, well the truth was that they hadn't kept very good records or, indeed, any records at all, so they had no idea who was a hero and who was a chancer. Okay, we said. Well, could we help them? They had there in their office a white guy claiming to be a Hots. He had certainly been in MK since he'd misbehaved and ended up in an MK prison camp in Tanzania. But now he'd rocked up claiming to be a Hots on the basis that he had burned down Lawrie's office and home in Durban. Could we verify that? I passed the phone to Lawrie. "A white guy? What does he look like? Hmmm. What does he say his name is?" A name was pronounced. "Yes, that's the bastard", said Lawrie. "Oh hell, give him the money." He turned to me and said "I often wished that guy a lot of harm but I never wished

him anything as bad as an Umkhonto prison camp.”

Lawrie and I worked together on many projects. He was enormous fun and had an endlessly inventive mind. He was also quite a perfectionist and often insisted we go an extra mile or two just to get things exactly right. But he was also an extraordinary raconteur and had a huge fund of anecdotes. Most of all, his detailed knowledge was amazing. If you were doing polling in Botswana or Zimbabwe he had detailed knowledge of Shona or Barotse customs and beliefs. If you wondered aloud about the impact of affirmative action on small business he would start telling you in detail about the problems of small metal-bashing firms on the East Rand. If you were doing a farm survey he would betray a detailed knowledge of the particular problems of sugar, timber and wheat farmers. And so on it went. He was a cornucopia of social and historical knowledge and of shrewd opinions. I never saw him stumped. He was incomparably, irreplaceably good. Typically enough in the new South Africa, he was never awarded an honorary degree.

But he was also outrageous. During the 1994 elections he and I had to give a series of press conferences on the results of our opinion surveys. Lawrie would arrive one minute late, the raw data in his hand. He would plonk that down in front of me and get up to make (vacuous) introductory remarks to a room full of journalists and TV cam-

eras while I flipped through the data. He would then introduce me and say that I would talk about the major findings. I would then, deadpan, expatiate solemnly on what I'd learned in the last three minutes, while Lawrie hurriedly flipped the data himself and then broke in with fresh data and analysis. And so we would carry it off for an hour or more without ever revealing that we had had no idea about any of it till Lawrie walked in. It was a Laurel and Hardy act after which we'd go out for a beer and a lot of laughter. At that point I think we had a sort of complete respect for one another, that we'd been good enough as a quick study to do it and also enough of a performer to carry it off. The thing I could never get used to was that Lawrie knew he could do that and get away with it, but he just assumed I could too, without asking. It was unnerving.

Lawrie carried on working flat out till he died. He told Monica that if he had anything bad, he didn't want to know. So he was never told he had cancer. The day before he died he looked up at me, owlishly. “How's tricks? What are you up to? Tell me the news.” I told him and it was just like it has always been: interesting, politically incorrect, nail-on-the-head insight – and fun.

Lawrie Schlemmer died in Cape Town on 26 October, 2011. He leaves his wife, Monica, a son, Julian, and a daughter, Lucia.

R. W. JOHNSON