

OBITUARIES

Robert Molteno, 11 January 1943–31 January 2022

I met Robert in 1960 when we were first-year students at the University of Cape Town (UCT). From the outset it was clear to all that Robert was – by a street – the most brilliant student in that first-year cohort, possessed of a focused and analytical intelligence in contrast to the rest of us floundering around trying to find our feet at university. Just how impressive that intelligence was was brought home to me when he lent me some of his lecture notes. A motor accident had prevented me from taking notes in a course in which the lectures were unique and there were no textbooks to cover the material. Robert's notes were remarkable: not only full and detailed but written in four different colours! Not for aesthetic reasons either – each colour signalled a different aspect of the lectures: headings, subheads, key points, supplementary observations, references and Latin terms for legal concepts, and so on. So, incredibly, here was this guy, with a fistful of pens, able not only to concentrate and record what was being said but also to give structure to the lecturer's rather rambling delivery as he went along.

In South Africa, the early 1960s was a time of considerable political ferment. The shadow of the Sharpeville massacre hung over the country and its aftermath brought political repression, the banning of opposition parties, the imprisonment of protesters and the expansion of the apparatus of a police state. Legislation had ended the right of universities to admit students regardless of race: in response, the English-language universities came out strongly with commitments to academic freedom and assertions of liberal, non-racial values. The national student union, NUSAS, became a prominent opponent of anti-apartheid values, and campus politics took on the issues of national politics. Robert was prominent among the student voices critical of apartheid. From the start, he was articulate in asserting a clear rejection of racism and a commitment to democracy, values that he held all his life. That clarity of thought – and the respect in which he was held – made him an important figure in campus politics and led to a leadership role in NUSAS, until serious illness brought that to a halt in 1964.

I left Cape Town in 1965 to return to Zambia and lost contact with Robert for the next three years. Our friendship had been warm but rather casual up to that point, based on overlapping course programmes and student activism, but not extending to social life. Then, in 1968, we met again when Robert and Marion arrived in Lusaka, the start of a closer, more frequent interaction. Robert was there to undertake research. There was a housing shortage and they spent much of their first year in a bedsit that belonged to my mother.

Robert was offered a lectureship at the new University of Zambia (UNZA) in 1968, and a year later I joined him in the same department. Zambia had become independent just a few years earlier. It was said that there had been only twelve Zambian graduates at the time – so initially the university had to be staffed almost entirely by expatriates. If anything, the political climate was even more intense than it had been at UCT. The new state faced the crippling effects of sanctions ostensibly imposed on the illegal settler government in neighbouring Rhodesia, but because all of Zambia was dependent on imports coming through Rhodesia, sanctions in fact damaged Zambia far more than Rhodesia. Anti-colonial wars were being waged against Portuguese colonialism in two of Zambia's other neighbours – Mozambique to the east and Angola to the west. Security concerns promoted increasing government intolerance of debate. On the campus, unsurprisingly, student activism was consumed by questions of development, revolution and socialism. Much the same could be said for much of the staff as well.

Robert threw himself wholeheartedly into this ferment. He identified passionately with the project of Zambian development and African liberation. His lectures were inspiring and students were clearly inspired by them. He was co-chair of an ambitious interdisciplinary teaching experiment called the Social Science Foundation course, aimed at introducing first-year students in three faculties to issues of development and giving them the study skills needed for university work. The course involved half the faculty, many working under protest, and took up half of each student's workload. Robert managed to hold it all together in that cheerful way that so many of us came to know. For years, one would meet Zambians who had been students on that course who would volunteer that it was the most important formative influence in their lives.

He saw his work as requiring a practical contribution to Zambia's development, not just talking about it, and he took his teaching beyond the formal classroom to various outreach efforts. In his first year there he participated in a university study of the 1968 elections (complete with television coverage of the count) – and afterwards found himself giving evidence in court about electoral malpractice in one constituency. (When the court ordered a rerun of the election, the disqualified victor hurried to assure Robert: 'I'm not a dirty politician, Mr Molteno, I'm really not.') The university ran a staff development programme to equip early graduates to become members of staff, and no one promoted this more forcefully than Robert. He wrote mountains of lectures for correspondence courses, which provided on-the-job training for those who had missed out on the chance of higher education. He co-authored a civics textbook for schools, working alongside an experienced head teacher in a rural school. He wrote several papers – some published, some not – analysing the Southern African conflict and the crises confronting Zambia. He contributed a chapter to an important volume on politics in Zambia edited by Bill Tordoff (a lifelong friend and mentor) on the situational nature of 'sectionalism' and ethno-regional factionalism; this became a wellspring for later work in the region on this issue.

His time in Lusaka came to an abrupt, tragic end in 1975 when he was arrested, detained without trial, and eventually deported. The circumstances reflected the political tensions of the time. Angola's struggle against the Portuguese had become a civil war in which the big powers were much involved. The Zambian government, in supporting one of the movements, found itself in league with South Africa and the

USA. The students took great exception to this, organizing a major demonstration, condemning many of the Zambian lecturers known to be government supporters, and provoking the government to close the university and place it under army occupation. More than thirty student leaders were detained, followed by half a dozen members of staff (the government view was that 'foreigners' must have corrupted the students). One of them was Robert; he had circulated an open letter defending the students and arguing that a developing country needed free and independent argument. Eventually, international protests helped free the detainees, the staff members being issued with notices of deportation. I don't want to labour this episode beyond noting that detention affected Robert very badly for some years. But I would like to mention something that perhaps illustrates just how much of a contribution he made during his time there. A week before his release, a friend who had also been detained was released and flew out. The airport concourse was thronged with well-wishers there to see him off. The vast majority of the crowd were expatriate university staff and the atmosphere was joyous and defiant. A week later, Robert flew out. Again the airport concourse was thronged with well-wishers seeing him off. But this time, a large section of the crowd, perhaps the majority, were Zambians – and many of them were in tears.

A few years later I too moved to England and we resumed our friendship. Since I lived in Leeds and he in London, much of it was pursued on the phone in regular long conversations. Our conversations amounted to a forty-year seminar on climate change, the hollowing out of democracy, the spread of fascism, the enduring power of racism, the resurgence of antisemitism, the corruption and hypocrisy of incompetent leaders, and on and on. Always, the serious issues were laced with much laughter. The interaction enriched my life – and I would hope his too.

To the end, Robert's intellectual curiosity never waned in the slightest. Nor did his intellectual humility – he was as much concerned with his own mistakes as with those of others. Nor did his love of people, of his friends, of the family of which he was so proud (we both agreed that our grandchildren were evidence of a higher stage of human evolution). It was my privilege to be his friend. He leaves an enormous hole in my life and the lives of many others.

Morris Sheftel