

Williams, John, J., (2012). Gerwel taught us that theory without application is useless. Cape Times, 03 December 2012: 8



## **Gerwel taught us that theory without application is useless Cape Times, EDITORIAL PAGE, Monday, 03 December 2012, p 8**

This tribute to Prof Gerwel has been triggered by a picture on p 2 of the *Cape Times*, 29 Nov 2012, of a group of students, he addressed in 1977 [not 1973] as I was reading for my Honours degree in Geography. As students we admired him deeply for his seemingly effortless ability to apply profound theoretical insights to the existential reality of apartheid and its nefarious effects on society as a whole. He usually addressed us during lunch-hour, in the Science Block. Every student leader of the different student organizations on campus was usually there, even the deeply-spiritual students, like myself [I headed the Anglican Student Society of Southern Africa [ANSOC/ASF] in the Western Cape, at UWC, US and UCT.

Prof Gerwel, was, indeed, passionately, committed to the struggle for justice through education . He NEVER advocated the misleading/dangerous slogan 'liberation before education' of later years. On the contrary, he helped us to form 'conscientization' reading groups, covering classical texts .such as those of Paulo Freire, etc. He encouraged us to link theory and practice and practice and theory. Thus, for example, when the regime in the 1970s destroyed the 'survival structures' ['houses'] of the "Union Bell Squatters " we readily interrupted our Geography lectures to move the homeless people onto the UWC campus .This meant that the lecturer, together with a visiting USA Prof of Geography had to wait for us, the 5 Honours students, reading the module "Political Geography". Upon inquiry by the USA professor, why we were late, my response was direct: "Prof we are putting into practice what you have been teaching us in class! I added "Theory without application is useless and knowledge without empirical inquiry does not make much sense, especially, in SA where 87% of the people are living on 13% of the land !" The USA professor congratulated the group of students stating that, very soon, all of us would hold doctorates and, hopefully, become professors! Alas, at the end of that class, the SA lecturer - whose name I withhold -- instructed me: "Williams, stay behind! You think you are clever, but rest assured I hold the red pen in my hand, and I'll determine the outcome of your final examination!" Shaken by this threat against my future, I immediately, contacted the ever-accessible Prof Gerwel. He advised me simply to do my best in all my courses. Accordingly, with his continued encouragement, and the then rector's support, Prof van der Ross, I completed my MA, in Geography, at UCT in 1981- as the UWC Geography Department was explicit in its opposition to my academic progress. It was, however, decided that UWC would confer the MA degree. Prof Gerwel then advised me to read for my PhD elsewhere, as the mind-sets at UWC were very stifling to students like me. Consequently, I applied for and won in 1986 a scholarship to read for a PhD at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, where I completed

both a Master's in Urban Planning (1988) and a PhD( 1989) with a thesis, titled "Urban Social Movements in Metropolitan Cape Town".

Whilst encouraging me to return to South Africa in 1989 to assume an academic career at UWC, Prof Gerwel advised me, in 1990, that he has" become struggle weary" as some people were against my appointment as academic at UWC. Indeed, how ironical, whilst being largely Prof Gerwel's product, yet some people at UWC were dead-set against my appointment, there! Fortunately, armed with an advanced degree in Urban Planning, from the USA, I was able to assume, in mid-1990, the position of Principal Planning Professional [Policy& Research] in the City of Cape Town. I eventually assumed a full-time academic career at UWC in July 2004.

Prof Gerwel truly exemplified "Lux et veritas" - may his boundless work continue to flourish in the lives of all humanity.

**John J Williams, PhD (Illinois, USA),** Professor: School of Government, University of the Western Cape.