
OBITUARY

Professor John Rex (1925 – 2011) Politics and Religion Journal (PRJ) member of Editorial Board

John Rex was born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1925. As a young man he volunteered to serve in the British Royal Navy throughout the Second World War and it was during this period, while serving alongside black Africans, that he became profoundly conscious of the injustices of apartheid. After the conflict he returned to South Africa and commenced training as a Presbyterian minister – a vocation that he abandoned in favour of studying Sociology and Philosophy in which he graduated from Rhodes University. After completing his degree he worked in a mission school in what was then Southern Rhodesia. He was forced to leave in 1949 after being designated by the government as an 'undesirable' due to his radical left-wing political views and moved to Britain to undertake a PhD at Leeds University on the subject of the philosophy of social studies research.

Rex held academic positions at the universities of Leeds (1949-62) after completing his thesis, Birmingham (1962-64), and Durham (1964-70). He founded the University of Warwick's Sociology Department in 1970 where he stayed in post until 1979. Since then Warwick has proved to be one of the most prestigious Sociology departments in Britain, enjoying an international reputation and producing some of the country's finest sociologists. He later joined Aston University (1979-84) and Toronto University (1974-75), before returning to Warwick in 1984 until 1990 where he was research professor on ethnic relations. He later went on to work in the universities of Cape Town (1991) and New York (1996). He accepted an emeritus position with the University of Warwick on his retirement in 1996.

Rex's principal academic interests focused on conflict analysis. His first book, *Key Problems in Sociological Theory* (1961) was innovating in developing the work of Max Weber along with the methodology of social science. Rex's emphasis on social conflict contrasted with the dominance of consensus theorising (Functionalism) of the time which he saw as over-emphasising core values as necessary for social integration. He argued that group conflicts were not inevitably harmful to social order. Indeed, he controversially argued that under certain conditions pluralist modern industrial society social group conflict may be inevitable and even beneficent in drawing attention to underlying social problems. In challeng-

ing Marx's analysis Rex did not regard social conflicts as invariably polarising around social classes. In short, he argued, that structured social inequality may arise from a variety of sources, of which 'race' was a major social division. While Rex endorsed the complexities of social conflict as outlined by Weber, his work also came close to the theorising advanced by the German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf in the late 1950s-60s. The similarity in their writings led to their names often being cited for a period as the two key conflict theorists. Although Rex embraced a unique theoretical perspective, he did not however attempt to formulate his own school of sociological thought and remained open-minded and tolerant of divergent standpoints which he saw as intellectually desirable and was evidenced in the contribution of many sociological approaches in his edited volume *Approaches to Sociology* (1974).

It is nonetheless Rex's work on 'race' and race relations that he is perhaps best remembered. One of his early and most memorable works was published in 1967 when, along with Robert Moore, he produced the pioneering study, *Race, Community, and Conflict: A Study of Sparkbrook*. The book examined the possible contribution of the housing shortages in Birmingham (Britain's second largest city, where many Asian communities had settled) in the rise of racial conflict. It was the first in which empirical research on the subject was informed by a distinctive theoretical approach. All his subsequent studies in the sphere of 'race' and ethnicity emphasised the importance of the imperative of clear theoretical concepts in the analysis of empirical data.

The research for *Race, Community, and Conflict* pointed out the complexities and potential dangers in the area studied, and Rex argued that unless suitable policies were enacted it was quite possible that serious 'race' conflict would occur. Indeed, he warned that Britain had a decade to destroy its ethnic minority ghettos and ensure that all, irrespective of racial and ethnic background, would have the same and appropriate opportunities in housing, employment and education. Controversially Rex suggested that the problems which Britain faced was less to do with the ignorance of the general population related to ethnic communities or even how the problem should be tackled by improving living conditions and opportunity. These were, he claimed, only secondary causes of racialism. The main problem was the lack of political will by those in influential political positions who had tried to win votes by advocating and enacting under-developed anti-racist policies that were in many respects counter-productive. Prophetically, as a result of political inertia, racial problems intensified and climaxed in 1981 with the devastating race riots which occurred in major cities across the country.

While many of Rex's best known publications were related to matters of race relations, they were not exclusively so. His list of published volumes indicate an energetic mind that was willing to engage with numerous areas within Sociology, although political analysis was a constant theme. These include the single authored books *Race Relations in Sociological Theory* (1970); *Race, Colonialism and*

the City (1973); *Approaches to Sociology: Colonial Immigrants in Great Britain - A Class Analysis* (1979); *Social Conflict: A Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis* (1981); *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations* (1983); *Race and Ethnicity* (1986); *The Ghetto and the Underclass* (1987); *Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Mobilisation in Britain* (1991); *Ethnicité et citoyenneté - La sociologie des sociétés multiculturelles* (2005); and *Transformation: Five Decisive Years at the Turn of the Century* (2009).

Although he was insistent on the necessity for objectivity in academic research he maintained that theory and its practice was always an on-going and dynamic and dialectical process, he was nonetheless an uncompromising left-wing activist in his personal life and was fervent supporter of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, an ardent advocate of racial equality, regularly contributed to the *New Left Review*, and once stood unsuccessfully as a Labour Party parliamentary candidate.

John Rex passed away in December 2011. His life has been described by Herminio Martins at Oxford University (1993) as a one where both 'passion' and 'knowledge' intertwined. He was truly an academic giant and a highly influential figure in British Sociology. For this he was recognised by various accolades and by holding significance offices. In 2010 he received a lifetime achievement award from the British Sociological Association. He was a member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) international experts committee on racism and race prejudice from 1967 (to which he contributed the edited collection *Apartheid and Social Research*, UNESCO (1981)), and served as president of the International Sociological Association's research committee on racial and ethnic minorities between 1974 and 1982. Scholars from a variety of theoretical perspectives contributed to the Festschrift edited in his honour, *Knowledge and Passion* (1993).

I would like to finish this obituary on a personal note. The first and only time I met John Rex was at an international conference in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, in 2005. Along with Rex, I was the plenum speaker on the subject of the interface between religion and politics in the contemporary world. John spoke of the continuing relevance of the 'Founding Fathers' of Sociology, namely, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, in highlighting the repercussions of social equality and injustice. In doing so he returned to some of the key themes developed in *Discovering Sociology* (1973). By this time Rex was of an older generation of sociologists and one that had laid the foundations of the discipline for my own generation and for which we are considerably indebted and to whose achievements we can only aspire. It was both a humbling and challenging experience to be in the company of such a renowned and considerably learned academic. It was refreshing to hear him infuse the discipline with a certainty and purpose at a time when Sociology seems in many respects to have lost its way. I remember being struck by his modesty, integrity, and penetrating intellectual thought. At the time John was a frail and elderly man who was only mobile with the aid of a walking stick. Nonethe-

less, he had arrived alone in Bulgaria having just presented an academic paper in Spain. The journeying was not easy for him but he was earnest in his endeavours. This epitomised the way that he had dedicated himself to advancing the discipline of Sociology throughout his life time, not to mention his long struggle for social justice and equality.

References

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