In Memory of Tom Lodge

My academic work in the political and social history of South Africa has been, almost literally, bookended by the scholarship of Tom Lodge. When I began my PhD work on the political movements of students and teachers, in the mid-1980s, his book *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* was a formative influence – perhaps even more than I realized at the time.[1] And a few months ago, just after I retired, I read, with admiration, his remarkable new history of South African Communism, *Red Road to Freedom*.[2] In between, during the 1990s, I was Tom's colleague on the committee of the Johannesburg History Workshop. I benefited from his personal kindness, and adored his dry wit. So although I had not seen him for many years, it was an appalling shock to learn, in November, of his death at the far too early age of 72.

In this tribute I want to focus on *Red Road*. I view it as Lodge's culminating achievement, and as the work that will be his most lasting legacy. But in many ways it reflects all the admirable features that were already present in *Black Politics*, and have characterized his many writings along the way: a mastery of archival and field research; sensitivity to local contexts; clarity of exposition and an avoidance of jargon; an unusual ability to situate South Africa in wider international contexts; empathy for his subjects, combined with scepticism about their ideological commitments; and those light touches of acerbic humor.

Why is *Red Road* such an important work? To me, it is a model for writing the history of the twentieth century left: not only the best book, by far, on its subject, but one with much to teach students of other geographical regions. It reminded me a great deal of the work which I have previously regarded as the finest history of a national Communist Party, Stuart Macintyre's two volumes on the Communist Party of Australia, to which it has close similarities of methodology, tone and style.[3] In general, histories of national communist parties in the twentieth century tend to fall into two categories. On the one hand, the works of those who are sympathetically inclined to their subject stress the - often very real - role of the communists in promoting movements for social equality. But they often do so at the price of ignoring the complicity of the parties in Soviet repression and aggression.[4] On the other hand, critics, whether from the right or far left, often focus exclusively on the subordination of the national Communists to Soviet foreign policy interests, on Soviet imposition of disastrous policy directives on national parties and on Soviet crushing of real or imagined dissidents in fraternal parties.[5] The difficulty is that Communist

[1] Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa*.
[2] Lodge, *Red Road to Freedom*.
[3] Macintyre, *The Reds*; Macintyre, *The Party.*
[4] Johanningsmeier, "Communists and Black Freedom Movements" is a good example of an approach which insists on that the Communist parties were basically autonomous from Soviet and Comintern control.
[5] See, for an example of the right wing historiography, the extensive works of Harvey Klehr, such as Klehr, Haynes and Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism*. There is a vast leftist literature critical of the subordination of national Communist parties to the Soviet Union: for example Broué and Témime, *Revolution and Civil War*; Claudin, *The Communist Movement*; Mandel, *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism*. For South Africa, the writings of Eddie Roux both represent both a disaffected Communist's critique of the Soviet role in the early days of the South African party and are, at the same time, important works of South African literature: Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope* and Roux, *Rebel Pity*.

parties were commonly both of these things: crucial in the history of egalitarian social movements in their own countries, but simultaneously willfully blind to the crimes of Stalin and his successors and subject to their manipulations.

Lodge avoids these twin traps. *Red Road* shows the deepest admiration for the courage and dedication to social equality of the Communist Party militants who are the subjects of the book, many of whom Lodge got to know well through oral history interviews and other collaborations. This enables him to give vivid and empathetic accounts of their experiences. But Lodge was always outside the self-referential framework of the Communists. His pioneering early work, on the African nationalists of the Pan Africanist Congress and Poqo, went against the grain of the communist tendency to write their opponents on the left out of history.[6] Lodge gives deeply sympathetic accounts of the communists' role in the white and black workers' struggles of the 1920s, community and labour organizing in the townships and factories in the 1940s, the passive resistance campaigns of the early 1950s and the heroic underground struggles that began in 1960. Yet he is at the same time ruthlessly critical of the often self-deluding logic and sometimes paranoid organizational practices that characterized the party. He is unsparing in his accounts of the major catastrophes of party history, such the sectarian self-destruction of the 1930s and the brutal purges by the ANC security apparatuses in exile. Although Lodge is at pains not to overstate the subordination of the communists to the USSR, even in the 1920s and 1930s, and to show their high level of independent policy development in the post-Comintern era, it is apparent from the book that the party consistently swallowed whole the Soviet line on major world political issues, right up until the arrival of Gorbachev (albeit sometimes with initial hesitations and sidelining of dissidents). Lodge also makes it clear that the belief of many party leaders in the exile period, that they could overthrow the apartheid state by guerilla warfare or insurrection was always the pursuit of a chimera. The result is a work of magisterial balance in its judgments.

These virtues of Lodges' work, I would suggest, reflect, in two very important senses, his intellectual formation in the political culture of the British left of the 1970s. Firstly, as a young man, he was part of that moment of political turmoil and identified with its anti-imperial militancy. I remember a lively account from him of participating, as a student, in a march on British Army recruiting station in York at the time of the Bloody Sunday shootings in Northern Ireland in 1972. But, very importantly for his future work, Lodge shared the New Left's hostility to Stalinism and to its Brezhnevite successors, and indeed its suspicion of all forms of authoritarianism. He had a deeply democratic sensibility. Secondly, I would see his academic practice as drawing on the strong left social history movement of England in those years. Although Lodge was in a Political Studies department at Wits and a Peace Studies Department in Limerick, his work was to my mind, really in the genre of social history. He certainly knew his Political Science literature exceptionally well, but it left only limited traces on his writing. He largely conducted his analyses through richly detailed historical narrative, punctuated by lucid statements of the salient issues. In this sense, Lodge's work was very much in the tradition of the British social historians.[7] He

[6] Lodge, "Poqo and Rural Resistance"; Lodge, "The Paarl Insurrection"; Lodge, "Insurrectionism in South Africa". The PAC and Poqo are also extensively dealt with in Lodge, *Black Politics*.

[7] See Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* for a useful survey of this intellectual context.

shared their devotion to oral history interviews, deep archival immersion, broadly accessible style of writing, and desire to engage with publics outside the academy. This combination of empathy with militant politics, scepticism toward the authoritarians of the left and committed, humanistic scholarship equipped Lodge exceptionally well to become the pre-eminent scholar of South African radical politics.

Lodge's work always had an extremely nuanced sense of place, time, and culture, and this emerges to full advantage in *Red Road*. He does not homogenize a national story about Communism, but drills down to identify the core areas of the party's support – notably, over the long term, the Rand, Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, and specific, fluctuating rural pockets. In each case he clearly identifies the local factors sustaining the party, and provides extraordinary levels of detail of where the branches were, membership numbers and periodical circulations. A remarkable feat of research is his recovery of the history of the underground network of the party in the 1970s, in which he traces the various attempts to rebuild the organization, acknowledging its remarkable and brave achievements without allowing wild claims about the level of support.

Red Road is a national history, but it is also, profoundly, a global history. It is no secret that scholarship on South Africa, certainly before the end of international isolation in the early 1990s, and to much lesser extent, down to the present, has suffered from a certain insularity and parochialism. This was never an issue with Lodge: a transnational vision was ingrained in him. The son of British Council employee father, he had spent parts of his childhood in Nigeria and Borneo, before returning to England for his secondary school and University years. His mother was Czech and that gave him a particular interest in Eastern Europe. Lodge acquired an astonishingly wide knowledge of global political history. *Red Road*, throughout, incisively situates South African developments in regional, African and intercontinental contexts. This is particularly interesting in illuminating the Party's alliance, from the 1950s to the present, with the ANC. Lodge, for example, has a brilliant section on the Eastern Europe sojourns of a number of South African Communists in the late 1940s and 1950s, and how these experiences contributed to Eastern European notions of "people's democracy" or "national democracy" being recycled into the ANC's key document, the Freedom Charter. Another striking international dimension of the book, for which Lodge was particularly well equipped, is the exploration of the complex interweaving – little acknowledged today – of the South African Communists with the British left, especially the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) (1920-1991). Many of the founders of the South African party were British immigrants, often influenced by the "syndicalist" radical trade union movements of the early twentieth century, and who retained strong links back at home. The Comintern placed the South African Communists, to a significant extent, under the supervision and guidance of the CPGB, bizarrely replicating the structure of the British Empire. The British Communist leader of the 1930s to 1950s, Harry Pollitt, was something of an oracle to the South Africans. As Lodge shows, this "special relationship" was renewed when the South African Communists and the ANC went into exile in the 1960s and received close support from the CPGB. For roughly the first fifteen years of exile, London became the organizational centre of gravity of the party, and there was a strong intertwining of the two organizations. And even once the SACP and ANC transferred their operational centres to Zambia, Angola and Mozambique in the mid 1970s, the party drew heavily on the CPGB for aid. Lodge traces in fascinating detail how CPGB

militants worked in the ANC's underground operations. And the United Kingdom also became the centre of arguably the most significant of the world's anti-apartheid solidarity movements, largely engineered by the South African – British communist alliance. This history of what one might call "British Dominion Communism" would be an interesting direction for future research.

In *Red Road*, Lodge consistently avoids another of the characteristic traps of communist historiography. This is what I would call the "right line fallacy." Because the left has tended to believe, with Lenin, that "Marxism is all powerful because it is true," much of their historiography acts on the proposition and becomes bogged down in minute examinations of the exact wording of party policies. But oddly enough this obsession with unpicking "the line" is frequently found among non-Marxist scholars of Communism as well. Advocates try to show that the "correct position" captured the exact historical conjuncture and its requirements, while critics seek to demonstrate that wrong formulations led to disaster.[8] In other words, both replicate the logic of the movements that they study rather than examining them analytically, from the outside. They tend to ignore, or play down, the contingent social conditions, cultural predilections and organizational factors that are at work in shaping the formation and implementation of policy. The result is often that writing on Communist history adopts a quasi-theological tone and becomes unreadable and unconvincing. This is not of course to say that "lines" are not important; but it is to say that they need to be discussed in a much more contextual and multi-faceted way than is often done. By contrast, in *Red Road*, Lodge's approach is to provide extraordinarily detailed and sensitive genealogies of the development of key policies and their execution, constantly moving between the ideas themselves and the contexts that framed them. He very lucidly explains the issues at stake, without being sucked into the thought-world of his subjects. A prime case in point is the adoption by the party in the late 1920s of the "Native Republic" thesis. This issue has been an obsession of scholars in the field, with the thesis variously being interpreted as moving the party away from a focus on white unions toward a primary focus on black workers, or as a disastrous sabotage of an already-evolving engagement with black labour, going down a fatal path of narrow sectarianism. Lodge's account is far more convincing than those of his predecessors because of the rich complexity of its examination of the roles in the evolution of the thesis of the Comintern and especially its "Anglo-American Secretariat," of different Bolshevik and international Communist leaders, of Comintern emissaries to South Africa and rival South African party leaders. Lodge takes a similarly sophisticated approach in his expositions of later party policy imbroglios, such as those around the "Colonialism of a Special Type" and "Protracted People's War" doctrines of the armed struggle era. He is alive to the relation of text and context, in a way that the discussion of these topics often lacks.

[8] Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969) and Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years* are both post-hoc rationalizations of past party policies. It must however be said that the Simons' book is is well written and contains a great deal of interesting historical research, while 'Lerumo' (the pseudonym of party ideologue Michael Harmel) is vague, abstract and almost unreadable. Legassick, *Towards Socialist Democracy* is the most sophisticated of the far left critiques of the various 'lines' of the South African Communists, including the Native Republic. It is a work of extraordinary erudition and commitment, but is perhaps the *locus classicus* of the "right line fallacy" for South Africa.

Tom Lodge was a great scholar and intellect: to hear him speak on his subject often gave one those "why didn't I think of that before?" moments. But above all, he was a deeply decent and inspiring human being. He was a person of creative contradictions; the most English of people in his manner, but a profound internationalist; a very private person, but energetically socially engaged and a generous and supportive academic administrator; understated, but a whirlwind of creative energy; serious, but extremely funny and averse to pomposity. Perhaps not a "natural" activist, he was, all the more creditably, courageous in the face of intimidation. Tom Lodge enriched the lives of all those of us who were lucky enough to know him. His books can offer a younger generation of scholar not only fine models of how history might be written, but a connection to a unique scholarly voice of compassion and humanism, whose spirit they might do well to look to for inspiration.

Jonathan Hyslop
Professor Emeritus, Colgate University
Extraordinary Professor, University of Pretoria
jhyslop@colgate.edu

Broué , Pierre and Témime, Elie. *Revolution and Civil War in Spain*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972.

Claudin, Fernando. *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform*. Harmondsworth: Peregrine/Penguin, 1975.

Johanningsmeier, Edward. "Communists and Black Freedom Movements in South Africa and the US: 1919-1950." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, no. 1 (2004): 155-180.

Kaye, Harvey J. *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis*. Cambridge: Polity, 1984.

Klehr, Harvey, Haynes, John Earl and Firsov, Fridrikh Igorevich. *The Secret World of American Communism.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Legassick, Martin. *Towards Socialist Democracy*. Pietermartizburg: University of Natal Press, 2007.

Lerumo, A. *Fifty Fighting Years: The South African Communist Party 1921-1971*. London: Inkululeko Publications, 1973.

Lodge, Tom. "Poqo and Rural Resistance in the Transkei, 1960-1965." Seminar paper, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 1979. https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/4074/ downloaded 16 December 2023.

Lodge, Tom. "The Paarl Insurrection: A South African Uprising." *African Studies Review*, 25 no. 4, (1982): 95-116.

Lodge, Tom. *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*. London: Longman, 1983.

Lodge, Tom Geoffrey. "Insurrectionism in South Africa: The Pan-Africanist Congress and the Poqo Movement, 1959-1960." PhD thesis, University of York, 1984. https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/14182/ downloaded 16 December 2023.

Lodge, Tom. *Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party 1921-2021.* Woodbridge: James Currey, 2022.

Macintyre, Stuart. *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality*. St. Leonard's: Allen and Unwin, 1998.

Macintyre, Stuart. *The Party: The Communist Party of Australia from Heyday to Reckoning.* St. Leonard's: Allen and Unwin, 2022.

Mandel, Ernest. *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism: The Bitter Fruits of Socialism in One Country.* London: Verso, 1978.

Roux, Eddie. *Time Longer Than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967.

Roux, Eddie. *Rebel Pity: The Life of Eddie Roux*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.

Simons, H.J. and R.E. *Class and Colour in South Africa*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.