

Bill Freund (1944–2020)

Professor Bill Freund's death in August 2020 prompted a remarkable outpouring of grief within the (now widely distributed) Durban-based left intellectual networks of which he was such a central part. This had something to do with the circumstances of Bill's passing, during the global Coronavirus 'lockdown', but it is also a testament to how well-loved and influential Bill has been, even if he personally felt that he did not enjoy the recognition that he perhaps deserved. Freund was no ordinary scholar of Africa. Clicking through his Google Scholar citations is to be immediately humbled by the sheer volume of his scholarly production. But he was not one for slicing his salmon too thinly or opportunistic milking of state publication subsidies: every essay, book review and monograph oozes the erudition, insights and reach of an intellectual giant with a prodigious reading habit.

It's hard to shake the feeling that Freund represents a distinctive (and disappearing) sort of post-World War Two intellectual: a child – like his hero, Eric Hobsbawm – of Viennese Jewish émigrés to America, whose precocity was nurtured in the hothouse of the University of Chicago. His family was of more modest means than that cultured background suggested, and after Chicago his doctoral experience at Yale – under the supervision first of Maynard Swanson and then Leonard Thompson – was an unhappy one. Unlike many of his cultural and generational cohort, who more readily landed tenure-track jobs at elite American institutions, Freund endured an unglamorous spell as a journeyman – including a formative period in Nigeria – before finally landing a permanent post at the University of Natal, Durban. Here he found a city worthy of his imaginative and intellectual powers. A series of his monographs – *The African Worker* (1988) *Insiders and Outsiders: the Indian working class of Durban, 1910–1990* (1995), *The African City: a history* (2007) – all bear the unmistakable imprint of Durban and the intellectual debates and political struggles that it witnessed at the close of the twentieth century. But Bill was also uniquely able to evoke and analyse other societies and cities on the African continent, in ways that put other South African-based scholars to shame.

Unmistakably a standard-bearer for Marxian political economy in the productivist tradition, Bill longed for the kind of disciplined, developmental transformation of South African economy and society that the ANC has been singularly unable to effect. These Promethean instincts found clearest expression in his most recent monograph, *Twentieth-century South Africa: a developmental history*, but he was no Stalinist and could also be a perceptive observer of culture, as any reader of his writings on African urbanism over the *longue durée* will know. Unsurprisingly, his long-standing disdain for identity politics intensified in light of the painful descent of the University of KwaZulu-Natal into the quagmire of authoritarian managerialism and racial nationalism. The populism and nativism within the Fallist student movement also gave him pause, and he rightly bemoaned the degrading effects of massification on the quality of degrees in South African universities. Yet he was no gatekeeper and he had no illusions about the uneven quality and exclusionary nature of pre-democracy

institutions. Working closely with him on the board of *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, the important leftist journal that he helped found in Durban in the late 1980s, I certainly became accustomed to his gift for the biting put-down, but I was as often struck by his lack of dogmatism and his openness towards new scholarship.

He would not repeat the mistakes of his own doctoral supervisors, proving to be an attentive and generous mentor to many junior scholars, including the author of this obituary. Many young scholars live in fear of senior scholars muscling in on their research topics, and, given that I had recently completed my doctorate on the history of the SASOL project and Sasolburg, I was alarmed when Bill told me he had found the perfect vehicle for his interests in the developmental state: the state-driven industrialization of South Africa's Vaal Triangle. I had nothing to fear, for Bill had been a generous supporter of my research since I had been a postgraduate student in Durban, and he cited my work on SASOL fulsomely in *Twentieth-century South Africa*. Our interests and interpretations are quite different, and my own book – which Bill never failed to pester me about finishing – will quibble with aspects of his argument. He would certainly have approved of scholarly disagreement; I'm sorry that he didn't live to see it.

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