

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL



# Laudation

spoken by the University Orator

Professor DANIEL A HERWITZ, BA (Highest Honors) (Brandeis), MA PhD (Chicago)

in presenting

HILDA LILIAN BERNSTEIN

to the Chancellor at the Graduation Ceremony

held in Durban on

Wednesday, 22 April 1998

**CONFERMENT OF THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF LAWS  
HONORIS CAUSA UPON  
HILDA WATTS BERNSTEIN**

One must reach back into the smouldering and exploding space of World War II South African history to imagine what it was like for Hilda Watts Bernstein, the woman we have the pleasure of honouring tonight, to become both the first woman and the first communist elected to the Johannesburg City Council. The world is at war; her husband is fighting in the Italian Campaign. She has emigrated from England to South Africa in 1933 and in 1937, at the age of twenty-two, founded the South African Peace Council, which boasted as a member, Jan Smuts. Later, Smuts will set the police to fire on South African mineworkers during the famous strike of 1946, for which Bernstein and her husband, Rusty, will be charged with sedition. It is now 1943 and she is twenty-eight. One can, in 1943, count the number of women in public office world-wide on the fingers of one hand. Nowadays it is different and women have held presidencies of Norway, England, India, Turkey, the Philippines, Ireland, and, and - well, perhaps it is not *so* different for women even now, unless you count Hilary Clinton, Paula Jones and dare one say it, Evita Bezuidenhout as potential presidential candidates. Hilary and Evita are probably too clever for their respective countries, while Paula will end up a permanent guest on the Oprah Winfrey show. Such is the dissipation of the postmodern world. Meanwhile Hilda Watts Bernstein is working to alleviate problems of health, welfare and passes for African women. She is working to institute land access for dispossessed African workers. She is trying to improve those septic squatter communities which in twentieth century modernity stretch from Mexico City to Johannesburg to Beijing and serve as glaring advertisements for the truth of Marxism.

There will be arguments against that truth, but not until it has been tried. Meanwhile, let it be noted that the list of those who forged ahead and risked their lives for a better South Africa is in many ways a list of communists: Joe Slovo and Ruth First, Chief Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Helen Joseph. These people raised families while on the run in the movement, reacting like lightning to event and repercussion. For those who came of age in the 1930s, Marxism was *the* discourse. For that world contained no shades of grey and no shadows. It was apocalyptic and utopian, black and white. Its script was written in the viperous oil of fascism and the rainbow colors of the popular front. Hilda Watts Bernstein, continuing her work after the war while she is, along with the Communist Party, banned, focuses on the violence which the racist capitalism of Apartheid perpetrates on women. She forms, with Ray Alexander, the Federation of South African Women in 1957 to this effect. Dedicated to the rights of women, the organization proclaims a charter of women's rights and works to negotiate problems of gender between the divergent groups of South



Africa. In the federation's work we may find many of the themes which the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s will develop: issues of the rights of single women, of safety within marriages, of mothers and children, of freedom from violence and freedom of work and expression. Hilda Watts Bernstein, in thematising, that is to say, politicising, these rights, is therefore a citizen of South Africa before the fact of its willingness to accept her claim on it, a woman whose rigorous articulation of rights requires a feminist politics to assure their force. The South African constitution now contains admirable laws ensuring the citizenship of the women enfranchised under its scope. However, we may recall that in the Pietermaritzburg area alone, there have been over 800 reported rapes of children since the beginning of this year, and it does not take a genius to deduce that these rapes were committed by men. It is not women who rape; it is men. It is not women who drive motor vehicles in paroxysms of rage and contribute to road death; it is men. It is not women who enter houses and shoot their sleeping inhabitants; it is men. And it is not women who assassinate African heroes from the Black Consciousness Movement or shoot innocent children in places like Sharpeville; it is men. Then apparently to speak of "violence in South Africa" as if this were an amphibious category into which all South Africans equally fell is to do violence to the facts: it is mostly the men who commit acts of violence. South Africa suffers from male trouble, a condition also extending to those wizened men who continue to boss around women in the name of the struggle. The implication is that there is no way to articulate - much less enforce - the rights of citizenship without bringing in this most brute fact of gender: the fact of what men do to women, and to children, and to other men. There is no way for a university to train the young in the conditions of citizenship in the name of a more *civil* civil society, without training them in the hard acknowledgment of this fact and the necessity of its sustained exploration (in terms of female complicity, socio-economic pressure, and the like). We may look to the pioneering work of Hilda Watts Bernstein as exemplary for the South African nation now, since South Africa right now must take seriously the project of empowering women; and women's organizations are required for that. Citizenship is now granted to all South African women; the point is to assure its existence by making the world safe for democracy. Feminists in South Africa are currently busy interpreting the world; the point, as the good thinker said in his eleventh thesis, is to change it.

After Sharpeville, Bernstein was arrested under the State of Emergency Act and detained without charge. In 1964, after the Rivonia Trial - in which her husband was a defendant - she escaped from home and walked on foot with her children across the border into Botswana. Eventually returning to England, she authored 6 books, including The World That Was Ours, about the Rivonia Trial, Steve Biko, and Death Is Part Of The Process, which won a literary award and was turned into a BBC film. Through the pen, through the producing of documentary films, she continued her political work. May we live up to the image of citizenship contained in it.

ACADEMIC PROCESSION AND ROBING ROOM

GRADUATION CEREMONIES: APRIL 1998

FOR: -

MRS BERNSTEIN

FOR WEDNESDAY

AND SATURDAY

Please note that details of the Academic Procession for the Graduation Ceremonies in the City Hall during the week 20 to 25 April 1998 inclusive, will not be sent out to participants, but will be put up in the Robing Room an hour before the commencement of each ceremony.

Ceremonies are **due to start at 18:00** on Mon/Tue/Wed/Thu/Fri and **at 16:00** on Sat.

The Robing Room in the City Hall is as indicated on the sketch on the back of this notice.

MAIN HALL.

MAIN ENTRANCE.

ROBING.





# UNIVERSITY OF NATAL

Durban

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18 May 1998

Dr H Bernstein  
57 Lock Crescent  
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UNITED KINGDOM

Dear Dr Bernstein

I have much pleasure in enclosing photographs of your special moments at the Graduation Ceremony on 22 April 1998.

It was, indeed, a great privilege to meet with you.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely

**SMITA MAHARAJ**  
Deputy Director : Communication & Publicity

## HISTORY, LANGUAGE AND GENDER

It is difficult for me to express the extent of both my surprise and pleasure in accepting this honorary doctorate. I always regretted that I never had the opportunity to go to University, and in a way this seems like entering it through a back door. For this late chance, I am truly grateful to the University of Natal.

It also makes me feel as though I have been restored to the history of South Africa from which many of us have been distanced by long years in exile; for it seems to me that today too little is known about the great political struggles of the 40s, 50s and 60s, the years in which the Congress of the People adopted the Freedom Charter that was the basic statement of policy and objectives for the African National Congress.

Still less is remembered - or even known - about the entry of women into organised political struggle during those years.

This is a reflection of the way history has been interpreted. Women have occupied a subordinate status in society and have been generally excluded from the institutions of political power. It is the statesmen - and note that defining suffix 'men', I will return to it - and the military leaders that fill those positions. In historiography, as in every other discipline, the experts bring their own bias formed by the social mores of their class and their society into their interpretations. The vast majority of historians have been male, and being male they have imbued history with their male patriarchal attitudes. They have deprived half of humanity of its history.

Take for example the march of 20,000 women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1956. It was a protest against the extension of pass laws to women; it was organised by the first multi-racial woman's organisation - the Federation of South African Women. And during all the years of campaigning it was the most successful and spectacular anti-pass demonstration that had ever been mounted by any organisation.

In addition it was a significant indication of the extent to which black women of the 1950s were challenging both legal and traditional restraints on their independence. Yet Eddie Roux, in his history, *Time Longer than Rope*, barely mentions this significant growth of women in the liberation struggle; and in his chronology he does not include the huge demonstration that was a political highlight, not just for the women but for the whole Congress movement.

Professor Guy from this University writes: 'To fail to understand, or to ignore the history of half the human race does not merely mean that historical studies are truncated; it also means that they are distorted. It is not just that a history of women is needed, but that without it there is no adequate history . . . a new totality must be created.'

How is that to be done? A first step would be to change the status of women by laws that outlaw discrimination and guarantee women equal rights in all spheres.

That start has been made in our own country. We now have what is probably the most advanced Constitution in the world with regard to women's rights. Equality for women is enshrined in the preamble and entrenched in its



clauses. The significance of the role of women is recognised by making August 9 - the anniversary of the Pretoria march - Women's Day, and a public holiday.

It has also ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women and has committed itself to implementing the provisions. It has set up a parliamentary committee to oversee the improvement of the quality of life and status of women, and the UN Convention.

Yet despite all this, South Africa remains an extremely male chauvinist country in which prejudice and backward attitudes towards women remain at all levels. How can we understand and eliminate this contradiction?

You do not end discrimination simply by passing laws, nor do you restore women into history simply by anniversary commemorations; it requires a more fundamental approach and necessitates the reshaping of our social attitudes.

Discrimination is a symptom of the way society works, so to change the way society works we must remove the cause. Without the full participation of women at every level of the struggle we can never build a just and democratic society. To make the principles of our Constitution a reality we need to correct the imbalance in power relationships. Hierarchies and power relations are self-perpetuating. Legislation in itself cannot redress historical imbalances. We have to bring about a change in social attitudes - to change the way people think about themselves and their gender relationships.

We all tend to accept the world as given; therefore instead of challenging traditional assumptions and reshaping our society we expect women to conform to how things are. George Bernard Shaw put it this way:

'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.'

The unreasonable woman today as in the 1950s still faces barriers not only of racism, but also of gender. Not only that; women have been left with a great burden of backwardness, for the subservient position of women, the discrimination against women, was not only integral to the apartheid system, but endemic in the whole society, and even within the liberation movement itself.

In the past when we raised the question of the rights and status of women we were accused of dividing and weakening the fight against apartheid. Yes, we were told, we know you want more rights for women, but national liberation is the priority - don't confuse the issue. Of course we women were needed to take the minutes at meetings, and to arrange the catering for conferences, but it was the men who ran the show.

They still want women to take the minutes. It is time that men acquired skills in shorthand and cooking. There is never a 'right time' to work to raise the status of women. The time to assert a right is the time when that right is denied.

A powerful step in that direction would be by altering the language we use.

As a writer I am keenly aware that language is not merely a way of conveying ideas; like history, language, is not neutral. It is in itself a shaper of



ideas. Our accepted language informs our judgements and our attitudes.

Men often react fiercely when we challenge their use of language. They ridicule us when we want to change words such as statesman, chairman; or to use Ms in the place of Miss and Mrs. They are scornful of what they call 'political correctness.' But it is not a mere linguistic quibble. We are challenging a man-made language that expresses the male concepts and power relations on which our society is based. We are also threatening men's accepted positions.

Shaw speaks of the unreasonable man, using 'man' in its generic form. 'Man', we are told, has two meanings. It can mean the male of the species, but it also can mean the species itself.

But does it? Take the sentence: Man, being a mammal, is a warm-blooded vertebrate - an acceptable sentence in which 'man' is used to represent the species. Then why does this sound odd: Man, being a mammal, lactates and breast-feeds his young?

The truth is that 'man' and 'he' is taken to include women; but 'woman' and 'she' would never be used to include man.

In her book on the Descent of Woman Elaine Morgan attacks the androcentric writers on evolution. 'The longer I went on reading his own books about himself the more I longed to find a volume that would begin: When the first ancestor of the human race descended from the trees, she had not yet developed the mighty brain that was to distinguish her so sharply from other species.'

When you think about it the use of 'man' to define the species does not include but excludes 'woman.' Language reflects society. And man-made language reflects both the status of women in our society and also its male-dominated character.

Our language subtly denigrates women. Look at the usage of language in the titles we give to men and to women. Titles set our status in society. In their common usage male titles retain their value; while the female equivalents are almost always demeaning, often with a degrading sexual connotation. Starting from the top of the social scale:

A King is a king. A Queen may be a monarch, but it is also a demeaning term for a homosexual

A Lord is a man of rank. A lady is simply a well-mannered woman.

A Governor has power and authority. A governess none.

A Courtier has honour at court. A courtesan is a high-class prostitute.

Sir is a title of respect. Madam is often used to mean the keeper of a brothel.

A Master is an expert in charge. But a Mistress is a kept woman. Think of the honour given to 'an old Master', and the contempt for 'an old Mistress.'

A Bachelor is an unmarried man about town. A Spinster an aging woman who has been left on the shelf.



'He's a professional' is respectful of a man's achievements. 'She's a professional' means she is a prostitute.

Calling a man an old woman is insulting. But to call a woman an old man is simply a case of mistaken identity.

'Mr' tells you nothing about a man. 'Mrs' and 'Miss' is the guide for a man - married and unavailable, or single and available.?

So language is not only shaped by social attitudes; it also shapes and reinforces them. When we modify and correct our language we will at the same time alter male perceptions and gender relations.

Personally I have never liked the idea of titles. Titles designate rank. Rank divides society not only by class but also by gender. However, I am both happy and proud to accept the totally non-sexist title of Doctor of Laws.

I feel it is a recognition of the development of the women's movement during those vital years of struggle; because if I have made any contribution to the changes much of it was through the women's movement. And if any tribute is being paid it should be to all those wonderful women who challenged the double bondage of racial and sexual discrimination and marched in their tens of thousands to the seat of government in Pretoria singing a new freedom song: When you strike a woman you have struck a rock.

I believe that the University of Natal will continue to uncover that history. And the legacy of hope, courage and defiance they have left will help you to make a reality of that dream of a democratic non-racial, non-sexist South Africa.

HILDA BERNSTEIN  
University of Natal  
22 April 1998



**Collection Number: A3299**

**Collection Name: Hilda and Rusty BERNSTEIN Papers, 1931-2006**

***PUBLISHER:***

*Publisher:* **Historical Papers Research Archive**

*Collection Funder:* **Bernstein family**

*Location:* **Johannesburg**

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