

**Obituary of John Laredo, issued by King's College, Cambridge
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JOHN EPAMINONDAS LAREDO (1955) was one of the first generation of Afrikaners to take issue with the apartheid regime, a position which led to interrogation, torture, a suicide attempt, imprisonment and estrangement from his children - but also eventually to the joy of seeing apartheid crumble and the knowledge that he had been a part of its destruction.

He was born in Pretoria, at the centre of white supremacist Afrikaner Nationalism, into a family which was in full support of apartheid - in later life John was once visited unexpectedly by an aunt at his home while a debate was going on, and when she was offered a seat by a black man, she publicly and vigorously scrubbed the chair with her handkerchief before sitting down.

John went to an Afrikaans-speaking school, but was urged by his mother to learn to speak English fluently too, a skill which was to prove invaluable when he was being interrogated. He went on to the University of Stellenbosch, the theoretical seed-bed of apartheid, majoring in History and 'Native Administration', but, against the drift of nearly all of his fellow students and lecturers, he came to the conclusion that white rule was responsible for black poverty, a view that his mother never found it possible to accept. When he came to King's to continue his studies, reading Social Anthropology for an MA, his commitment to a broad-based and democratic socialism developed further. He was to spend two decades actively involved in the anti-apartheid movement, and a further three working for the Labour Party in Leeds.

Returning after King's to South Africa in 1958 with his wife Ursula Marx, also a Stellenbosch graduate, John lectured at the School of African Studies in the University of Cape Town, and then moved into fieldwork to support his research into social anthropology, with the hope of eventually gaining a PhD. His daughter and two sons were born. During these years tensions in South Africa were mounting. The massacre in Sharpeville in 1960 of unarmed protestors against the pass laws was followed by a state of emergency and new laws which effectively allowed indefinite detention and torture for those who protested against the government. By 1964 not a single radical anti-apartheid political organisation was left functioning.

The Laredos had joined the non-racial Liberal Party in Durban when John began his fieldwork, taking part in anti-apartheid demonstrations, protest meetings and teach-ins, and organising car-lifts for black workers who were boycotting the buses. The party, influenced largely by Gandhian ideals, was split between those who rejected the use of violence, and those who wanted to strike back at the violence being inflicted by the government - those who were in favour of sabotage joined forces with a small group of Trotskyists and ANC Youth from Soweto to embark on a short-lived campaign directed mainly against electricity pylons.

John was never a violent man, but after Sharpeville he felt driven to take direct action, and was betrayed to the secret police. He was detained for 110 days, and then sentenced to five years' imprisonment for the possession of explosives. While being interrogated he tried to jump from a window ledge to his death rather than give the names of his comrades, but was pulled back by his captors; he was several times offered indemnity if he turned state witness, but he refused in spite of the possibility of the death penalty. In prison, his wit, courage and cheerfulness helped preserve the sanity and equilibrium of a group of men from very different backgrounds and political persuasions. He held courtyard seminars in Durkheim and Mauss, and very occasionally the prison authorities allowed the performance of Shakespeare. Meanwhile one of his sons ran around the school playground calling out 'My father's in jail, my father's in jail', while the other explained the absence by telling everyone that John was a polar explorer.

Banned and house-arrested on his release, John returned to England, to be Resident Visiting Fellow at King's. His children waited at Heathrow on Christmas Eve 1969, to meet the stranger who was supposed to be their father - the trauma surfaced not long afterwards in a flood of tears at a cinema while watching a film with the children, who were embarrassed at this man so different from other people's fathers.

John's marriage to Ursula broke down in 1972, but characteristically they achieved an amicable divorce, and John had custody of the children, whom he took around the UK and Europe on holidays in a camper van. He had considerable domestic skills, and successfully juggled family and professional responsibilities as well as a very full social life. John took up a post at the new Bradford University's sociology department, where he began to rebuild his shattered academic career and also worked tirelessly for the Labour Party and the Anti-Apartheid Movement; he organised local boycotts of South African products, and lent a practical hand to all the little things - jumble sales, coffee mornings - that are an inevitable part of campaigning organisations.

As a teacher he had a reputation for idiosyncrasy and charisma. His lectures were soundly based in theory, but illustrated with examples from his South African experiences, allowing the students to recognise the links between the abstract and the concrete, relating the theories of social anthropology to what actually happens in the world. He spent much of his time with mature students, to whom his home was always open, and many who would not otherwise have been able to complete their degrees found themselves living with John and the children, and maybe other friends, colleagues, students and refugees, until they could find their feet. He loved to cook on a large scale and to give massive parties, with excellent wine and conversation. He had beautiful copperplate handwriting, and was an inveterate letter-writer, not only to family and friends; he particularly enjoyed writing letters of resignation, and joined and then resigned from at least eight book clubs in order to indulge this hobby. He also loved musicals, and would sing, loudly, in the car at red lights with the windows down - he had a truly terrible singing voice.

In 1986, on an anti-apartheid picket outside the Tesco supermarket in Leeds, John met Ailsa Swarbrick, an Open University lecturer who had lived in Tanzania. They enjoyed great happiness together for fourteen years. John suffered a heart attack in 1990, the year of the release of Nelson Mandela, and he retired in 1993. He and Ailsa were able to revisit South Africa, and his invitation to lunch with President Nelson Mandela was cherished as if it had been a medal of the highest honour - and he was almost as delighted in 1997 to witness Labour's landslide victory in the General Election.

John Laredo died suddenly on 1 October 2000.