



Neil Aggett

Meaning of his life today

In September this year **Peter Vale** gave the Neil Aggett Memorial Lecture at Kingswood College, Aggett's former school. In it he asks what this trade unionist's death in detention and fight for social justice means for us in the globalised world of today.

I did not know Neil Aggett but I did attend his funeral in Johannesburg on 11 February 1982. I remember that day as if it were yesterday. I parked at Wits University, where I was working, and walked across the Queen Elizabeth Bridge under the summer sun; turning left into de Villiers Street, I passed the Johannesburg Park Station.

I walked four blocks to St Mary's Anglican Cathedral which stands on the corner of Wanderers Street.

Three things stand out from the occasion.

First, the potent mix of love and fire from the great Desmond Tutu, then secretary-general of the South African Council of Churches, who electrified the more than 2 000 people packed between white-plastered columns.

Second, the quiet dignity of Neil Aggett's partner, Dr Liz Floyd who has gone on to do such sterling work in the fight against HIV/AIDS in this country.

The third was the tribute by Jan Theron, then the secretary of the Food and Allied Workers Union. Across the finely-balanced acoustics of the great cathedral, Theron's rich South African accent delivered a searing attack on a political system that could brutally murder those, like his friend Neil Aggett, who stood for social justice.

A product of Kingswood College, Aggett was a medical doctor and a union organiser for the African Food & Canning Workers Union. This was, and remains, an unusual combination for any man in South Africa, let alone a white man in the late '70s. Aggett chose the more difficult, stony path turning away from the easy world of apartheid privilege. He asked questions about social justice and, when he got answers, turned these into action.

The important question for us is: what does it mean to stand for social justice today in the same way that Aggett stood for it in the late 1970s? What does it mean to stand for justice under neo-liberal globalisation and what questions do we need to pose and answer with action?

MEANING OF GLOBALISATION

We use the word globalisation as a way to understand and explain history and the world and as a means to classify what we see. As a shorthand, the word helps us to jump across ideas.

But, although we use words to say things, words can also use us. The philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein said that "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language".

Because the term 'globalisation'

means many things, what has it come to mean in our times? This will help to show how the idea of globalisation is used, and importantly, misused.

In one sense, globalisation means the increased connection between all corners of the earth. It means the Internet, world-wide-web, e-mail, BBC, CNN. It means the world-wide exchange of ideas in many areas.

Instant communication of ideas, news and entertainment means that we are no longer separated by distances. Or, put differently, great distances are less important.

These technologies have created what people call the 24/7 world - a way of living that does away with time and space.

In another sense, globalisation means the way in which we have organised the world through a particular arrangement or understanding of economics.

In this sense globalisation is a system of social arrangements that have put economic relations at the centre of the way the world works. As a result, economics determines the way people interact with each other. Some would say this is nothing new, that the impoverishment of the poor is what Marx and Engels theorised on the back of Smith and Ricardo. But what is new about the fate of the poor is that their

impoverishment is regulated by their criminalisation. By jailing the poor, capitalist society exercises control over this class by 'legal' means.

This is globalisation which does not favour the social justice for which Aggett sacrificed his life.

Let me illustrate by asking four questions.

DOES GLOBALISATION BENEFIT EVERYBODY?

Between 1950 and 1970 economies were the opposite of globalised, they were nationalistic. The world economy grew faster, was more stable and showed a more even distribution of the benefits of growth especially through the creation of jobs.

This is where the recent financial crisis has taught us much: economies have grown but jobs have not been created and the gap between rich and poor has widened.

Today, the money coming into rich families is growing but the difference in the quality of life between rich and poor is increasing. Poor people, even in the United States, find it difficult to access medical drugs and technology which will improve their lives.

Consider this: malaria is a disease which affects 200 million people worldwide. But the company which produces a drug to treat malaria has stopped manufacturing it because its profits have dropped. So, for victims of this treatable disease, globalisation has no benefit.

WHO IS IN CHARGE OF GLOBALISATION?

The integration of financial and other markets at the heart of globalisation was aided by political intervention. This has taken two forms.

Firstly there has been worldwide propaganda that freeing and integrating markets will create a better life for all. Secondly, international institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation have set the rules for international

economic relations. These rules have sought to incorporate countries' economies into codes of 'good' practice which depend on their acceptance of free market policies.

But these 'good' practices are usually based on unfair grounds. Consider this: every cow in the European Union receives a subsidy of R10 000 per year. Poor cattle farmers in Africa are told to compete against those in Europe, and yet they do not receive any subsidies. This is not a mysterious logic of the market but the direct result of hard-nosed intervention and control by the economically powerful.

DOES GLOBALISATION FAVOUR DEMOCRACY?

Elected representatives frequently rewrite the rules that run an economy, on taxes and trade, on wage policies and public spending, for the benefit of wealthy asset owners and global corporations. Far too many decisions are made by small groups of experts who claim inside knowledge.

This permits, in turn, corporations and special interest groups access to decision makers through lobbying, called 'buying influence' by some. At the same time, it may place restrictions on trade unions from demonstrating to protect their rights. The result is that the rich enjoy benefits while the poor struggle for rights.

This is 'thin' democracy in which citizens are permitted a limited participation in decision making. It should be called 'unrepresentative' democracy.

WILL GLOBALISATION MAKE US SECURE?

Amnesty International reports that there are 2.3 million prisoners in the world's richest country, the United States. There are more people in jail in America than citizens of Botswana and Swaziland combined! Of these, most are black men between the ages of 30 and 34.

These figures reflect the situation of Americans who were subjected to welfare cuts between 1981 and 1989 when Ronald Reagan was president and social justice was secondary to laying the ground for globalisation.

Exactly 20 years ago, when the Cold War ended, many believed that the worldwide build up of weaponry would end. Instead military expenditure has increased. For example, the cost of America's war on Iraq and Afghanistan according to Nobel Economics Laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, will be R36-trillion (that's 36 with 12 zeros!).

How ironic that the Iraq war was about trying to restore sovereignty to Iraq's people when others were saying "globalisation means that sovereignty doesn't matter anymore".

The criminalisation of the poor and the making of war are globalisation's instruments of social control over a worldwide population under-represented by democratic governance.

CONCLUSION

The cause of social justice exemplified by the life of Aggett is best served by asking questions about the way the world is presented to us. Often we are led to believe that a word or an idea means something different from what it is in practice. Globalisation hides a reality that is not as attractive as we think. The good intentions of words and ideas can be twisted by the powerful to mean something different.

In asking questions about the way the world is presented to us, we get a clearer idea of what is happening and, like Aggett, we can work to change the way things are. LB

This is a shortened version of the Neil Aggett Memorial Lecture by Professor Peter Vale, Nelson Mandela Professor of Politics at Rhodes University.

Neil Aggett died in John Vorster Square on 5 February 1982 after 70 days in detention.