**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**LECTURE 6: SCHREINER ‘S POLITICAL ANALYSIS**

**1. Three levels of political thinking in Olive Schreiner’s work:**  Schreiner’s *Political Situation* (1895) is divided into two parts. Its second part is probably the most sustained attempt she ever made at political analysis in the strict sense—that is, at weighing up contending forces in a specific context, and assessing the options for mobilizing, or even creating, the camp with which she identified. This is our focus today. Such an exercise is essentially about opportunity and for that reason it does not come naturally to a principled opponent of all opportunism. The analysis is informed by the other levels of political thought found in her work. Her best known work, including the first part of *The Political Situation*, lies in moral critique and formulation of a moral vision for society. She also had a novelist’s ability to imagine details of a possible social order that brought it to life for her readers.

**2. The retrogressive party and the monopolists:** The core of Schreiner’s analysis is her account of the unhappy marriage of the “retrogressive party” and the “monopolists” (pp. 9-11), which provides political support for monopoly interests in exchange for monopoly support for racial inequality. The monopolists, according to Schreiner, do not constitute a party in the strict sense, but play a parasitic role in politics, through bribes and deception. The Afrikaner Bond, representing mainly agricultural interests, includes many who are suspicious of modern liberalism, but ordinarily held in check by other elements of a broad but “natural” alliance, made in “simplicity and sincerity” (p. 11). This balance is destroyed by the intervention of the monopolist, who is ready ‘to forsake his bride when she has nothing left to give him” (p. 11). The alliance of monopolist and retrogressive is at the heart of the “disease” inflicting the political life of the Cape (pp. 10, 11, 21; cf. section 4 below).

**3. Progressive liberalism:** Schreiner uses a range of terms to describe the alternative perspective, speaking of enlightened and civilized practice, upholding the examples of Europe (and New Zealand!), etc. In Part Two of the text she defines this alternative as “progressive liberalism” based on three interrelated principles: the welfare of humanity as a whole; defence of the weaker from the stronger; refusal to base the welfare of one part of society on the suffering of another (p. 25). She avoids her own question of how such a camp could stand up to the alliance of monopoly capital and Afrikaner Bond by saying it would be a minority for years to come (p. 28) and depend on principle rather than numbers (p. 29). Its strength would lie in its “superior intellectual enlightenment” (p. 29) and its task would be to educate public opinion.

**4. The “Intermediate or Colourless Party”:** The premise of Schreiner’s argument for is that the bulk of society is ready to be swayed by leadership or example. The “intermediate or colourless party” (p. 32) would not support the principles of progressive liberalism. But a small group of people could influence the “thinking element” among them (p.30). Party activity along these lines would break with the “parliamentary personalism” (Rotberg, *Founder*, p. 453) that prevented Rhodes’ opponents from joining together. Would it also violate Schreiner’s own principle of “gradual and natural development” (p. 7)?

**5. Wealth and poverty:** Schreiner upholds the ethical ideal of a society rich in its ethical life and social relations rather than in gold and diamonds (pp. 7-8). The disease “eating the core of our national life” is the fevered desire to grow rich without labour (p. 21). But does she make clear how to tell the fever from healthier forms of progress?