A new book analyses threats our universities face and proposes ways of resisting them

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA: ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE HUMANITIES by John Higgins (Wits University Press)

Although the humanities might feel an economic pinch, has the greater good prevailed: the serving of the common good?

Higgins, however, argues persuasively against giving up on questions of either academic freedom or the value of the humanities. Referring to the statement in a 2004 report by the Development Bank of Southern Africa that the humanities are of greater importance to society than what Higgins groups together as the "Nail" pursuits of practice of narrative, analysis, interpretation and literacy. It is Niall that Higgins regards as the distinctive contribution of the (non-human) humanities to social sciences and humanities an education and, by application, to a more generous liberal education.

This is a society of citizens in which (instrumental) benefits (learning skills, economic growth) would be enhanced by the intrinsic benefits of cultural growth, stronger social networks, community identity and - through imaginative exercise - greater participation in democratic processes.

One cannot refuse the importance of developing the economy. How, then, do the humanities in the humanities articulate the utility value of the disciplines when the balance sheet might suggest the closure, e.g., of language departments or classics departments?

In responding to this dilemma Higgins draws on Raymond Williams’ notion of higher-order literacy, or what Higgins throughout his argument calls critical literacy, it literate, to quote Williams, that “calls the bluff of authority, since it is a condition of all its practical work that it questions sources, closely examined offers authentication, makes contempory and comparatively, identifies conventions to determine meaning.”

Higgins finds support for a “nurseren citizens” in, among other sources, Manuel Castells’ 1991 report to the World Bank seminar on higher education and development. As Castells argued, “the economy (as well as the national economy) functions within social institutions, within a culture of communication and representation.”

We assume that, both locally and internationally, we are not second-class citizens to be governed by the laws of others. We assume, too, that South Africa’s grand visions - usually so politically inspired - will continue to offend everyday reality. The result is what Higgins calls "traumatic universities head for extinction", Mail & Guardian, November 1, 2010. The second is by Minister of Science and Technology Naledi Pandor, in her opening address to the conference On Being Controversial: The Humanities Reach Out, organised by the Academy of Science of South Africa this year.

Currie wrote: "The fact is that the record of universities, over the past 30 years, in defending themselves against pressure from the state, has not been a proud one. "Few academics appreciated, from the beginning, the scale of the attack that was being launched on their independence or the ideological passion that drove it. Resistance was weak and ill-organised; routed, the professors beat a retreat to their diquesta, from where they have done little besides launching the immediate national battle against the managerial newspaper they are probably having to accept."

Whereas the National Party, between 1941 and the late 1960s, had a conception of the state to which "such tenets of British liberal faith as academic freedom were simply alien," Pandor, in her keynote speech, says the influence of the ANC to academic freedom is that, raised on a philosophical basis, and may simply come out of a defensive reluctance to sanction sites of power over which it has no control. But is this not too simplistic? To turn to Pandor, we hear some disdains for the phrase "speaking truth to power," she is somewhat imputing with critique, critique, critique. "What is the language that the humanities have to offer to policymakers to contribute to the government's vision of a prosperous, non-racial nation?"

Pandor’s invocation of vision is instructive. Instrumentalisation, bureaucratisation or utilitarianism in South Africa have long operated in tandem with grand, often delusional visions: Rhodes’s Cape to Cairo; Milton’s Anglicisation, apartheid or (to use Verwoerd speak) separate development, now the overlapping harkering after a socialist utopia and capitalist productivity or, in short-hand, a national democratic revolution.

In the educational sphere, cost efficiency seeks to coexist with the ideal of massification: developed world imitation (as in outcomes-based education) founds on the reality of developing world underpreparedness.

If the law of the professors has been replaced by the law of the manager, then the law of both the professors and the managers is regarded in government circles as subservient to the law of ANC party-political power.

Higgins’s book consists of five essays, covering the period from the late 1980s to the present. These are followed by three interviews - with Terri Edgarson, Edward Waid, who lent the phrase “speaking truth to power” to the current Nationalist administration, and a former anti-apartheid activist and former rector of the University of the Western Cape, the late, late “peace.”

The argument locates its points of focus in references to several education Acts, regulations and policies, both locally and globally. Higgins refers to PW de Klerk’s apartheid-era regulations of 1987 concerning state funding to universities - regulations aimed at curtailing staff and student campus activism. (De Klerk was minister of education at the time.)

Here Higgins draws a disturbing parallel with the recently promulgated Higher Education and Training Laws Amendment Act (2002), which gives the current minister of higher education and training, Dr Blade Nzimande, the power to intervene and to issue directives on a range of matters and the power to appoint an administrator if an institution does not comply. We quote Ahmed Bhasa saying of the Act.

Higgins then extends his argument outwardly by referring to Margaret Thatcher’s Education Act of 1988, which, in terms of funding, distorts the legitimating idea of higher education from a focus on serving the public to one on servicing the economy.

As such, a business model became entrenched (Thatcher was hostile to academic critique) and the concept of academic freedom, as Higgins argues, separated the freedom to pursue the debates of the discipline from the freedom to criticise the functioning of the institution, the latter leading possibly to a charge - as in business-oriented culture - of bringing the institution into disrepute. But if this, in South Africa, seems foreign to the pre-Thatcher English liberal way, it is not unusual for Afrikans institutions to toe the government line. Neither is it unusual, today, in British, North American or European universities to have an ascendant managerial class. As a colleague at a German university remarked, criticise your manager dean on Monday and by Friday you might be shown the door back.

So, do questions of academic freedom in South Africa amount to little more than our catching up with the rest of the world? After all, the post-apartheid government might contend that the major “human” battle has been won: racially unrestricted access to institutions of learning.

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secure academic freedom

Mall & Guardian October 10 to 16 2014 39

"You must engage with the other side... those who oppress form a core part of the act of oppression. As a core part of the problem they cannot be excluded..."

Kagiso Mugia, Blow forgot leader.co.za

angle fever", in which a desire in a globalised world to be international can distract planners from pressing local realities.

Template fever manifested itself in the response of three members of the South African National Planning Commission, which has tabbed its vision, mission and action plans for South Africa 2030. Admitting that the quality of schooling that is available to most people is poor, Professors Malangana Makgoba, Janvier Molwantwa and Thoro Renzberg concluded in a 2011 newspaper article that it is in making knowledge that the nation makes success. In “a knowledge economy” our priority, however, when the schooling system is failing too many pupils and our university “national” profile does not compare in productivity or achievement, with these three concern” grows, so does the proportion of academic staff with doctorates from 34% to 73% towards SA 2030.

This all sounds laudable. But their observations proceeded from an initial error, only to compound a mismatch of context and ambition: South Africa — a country with serious unemployment and literacy problems — cannot meaningfully and productively be classified as an upper-middle-income country. Given that we are not an upper-middle income country, the second error was to assume that the road to success lies partially in a knowledge economy.

In another mismatch of reality and ambition, the three commissioners placed Brazil, with a population of 200 million, in a direct research output comparison with South Africa’s 53 million. What they did not make clear is that Brazil’s research measurement is broad-based (outputs of variety are recorded); South Africa’s is constrained by a “colonial crisis” count, according to which preference is granted to state subsidy to universities — to articles in a very few Northern-based commercial citation indices. For all our grand talk of language policy, our research model — dare I say it? — remains a neo-colonial model.

A science and technology drive - education policy-makers led us to believe in the mid-1990s — would solve all our ills. This might have cre- dence in industrialised, upper-middle-income South Korea. But as we still burble old Soviet-speak (comrades, cadres), we should remain alert to the consequences of a science and technology drive in the noncompe- titive former Eastern Europe, with insin- ight of taxi drivers with engineering doctorates.

We need to get real. The low proportion of academics with doctorates is partly because our universities lack the fields that, in Europe or the US, are not always part of universities but are housed in spe- cialist institutions: for example, the music conservatories. To compendium an inter-disciplinary schooling system, the closure of teacher-training colleges and the endorses of teacher training within the narrow university R&D agenda is resulting in a generation of teachers without the necessary content knowledge or skills — say, in English, to educate the next generation.

None of what I have said denies that the National Development Plan identifies several tough realities — so tough to some that the plan has hardly got off the ground, challenged as it is by capitalist/socialist divisions within the government itself.

Let me conclude with a few further reality checks.

Both Courtaulds (in letter to Higgins) and Said (in the interview with Higgins) consider critical liter- ac”， although he offers a practicable path forward, Courtaulds rails on the paralysis. Said, for his part, offers several other ways forward.

Even if we grant that critical liter- acy is as important as Higgins claims — says Courtaulds — it would be hard to sustain the claim that only the “full exposure to the democratic education, can produce critical literacy, since it is always open to the objectification: if critical literacy is just a skill or set of skills, why not just teach the skill itself — simpler and cheaper?"

Accordingly, as in countless American universities, students, whether in the arts or the medi- cal faculty, might be introduced to two basic, single-semester courses, entitled “Reading and Writing,” in which students will be trained to dissect arguments and write good essays. One other: to be able to “Return Great Ideas,” in which they will be briefed on main currents of thought from ancient times to the present.

Said is more ‘teacherly’ — it’s a way of caring while raising crucial pedagogical politics. Let us grant critical literacy a centrality in education; but then we are obliged to teach it in a systematic way and not to imagine, as so many liberal or social science discipli- nes, that students — by a kind of osmosis — will absorb our erudition and eloquence.

One may query whether a concentr- ed and sensitive reading program is feasible, given the num- bers in mass education, especially humanities disciplines experience staffing cuts. Nonetheless, some form of teaching higher-order reading and writing is essential if a humanistic education is to help to educate future citizens who are intelligent in dis- cernment and compulsive in their commitment to the ideals and applica- tion of fairness and justice.

To conclude the provisional disci- plines of the value of critical literacy the reference to Courtaulds’s hermeneutical emphasis might have to climb out of their doughts, limit their satirical barbs and engage the professional societies (law, accounting, engi- neering, medicine) on the need to accord a substantial component of humanities education in the sev- eral professional degrees and diplomas.

None of these reality checks, how- ever, will ensure academic freedom in higher education (to return to the primary point of Higgins’s article). Despite the law of manag- ers outriding the laws of professions and university councils, in spite of modes to thinking things in the utilitarian-speak of regula- tions, Acts and policies, the “culture” of university governance is usually set by the leadership ethos of the vice-chancellor.

As in every culture, “manage- ment” — now selected from above, not elected from below by faculty or school — takes its character and behavioural traits from the ethos of its chief executive/vice-chancellor. The reflex action of the insecure manager is invariably command- and-control; goals are usually not “Smart” (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) performance-management sys- tems are geared to extract pun- ishing and, an encouraging development.

So, a final reality check: introduce consulting for university managers, most of whom have only scanty, if any, knowledge of leadership and management philosophies, principles or practices. Last managers be insulated by this suggestion, I should clarify what I mean by consulting. To be coaxed is not to be mentored or coached. Coaching, rather, to facilitate the coach’s own thinking to achieve, constructive but real- istic, goals. It enhances potential; but it is about “whole person” results.

Consulting should help the manager to avoid institutional demoralisa- tion with its attendant in-fighting and infi’delities.

As in the old South Africa, so in the new; the talent of leadership is uneven, whether in government, business, the media or, indeed, Insti- tutions of higher learning.”

Without enlightened leadership in universities, the worst of managerial- ism — fear of independent, inno- vative thought; a refusal to listen; a default mode of authoritarianism — will define and infect the charac- ter and practices of the institution. Academic freedoms are unlikely to fea- ture on the agenda.

To lament this as a world condi- tion is not sufficient. South Africa — we need not discuss all of Pandor’s conference address as that of an ANC party-faithful. Her concluding question remains pro- vocative: "What is the language that that is required to have to offer value-making?"

Higgins’s book luridly considers the scope of the challenge.

Michael Chapman is emeritus professor and fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This is an edited, abbreviated version of his review article to be published in the forthcoming edition of the journal Critical Arts 28(6), edited by Koyan Tomsmuell. The journal’s webpage is www.criticalarts.org.za/jca/rev28/27?570/1352.html

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