

Book Reviews

Structural Adjustment and Universities in Africa

A Thousand Flowers – Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities

Editors: Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis and Ousseina Alidou
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A Thousand Flowers is a collection of articles that chronicles the social struggles against Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in African universities from the 1980s into the 1990s. Divided into two parts, the first deals with the policies and the logic that motivated them and the second with the consequences of these policies for the people who had to live with them.

Part 1, entitled 'Structural Adjustment and the Recolonisation of Education in Africa', seeks to highlight the role of the Bretton Wood institutions undermining higher education on the continent. The first article, by Caffentzis, 'World Bank and Education in Africa' sets the pace for the rest of the book. It provides the background to World Bank's (WB) drive to

cutting funding of tertiary institutions in Africa. Caffentzis shows that the WB claimed that cutting funding to the tertiary sector was driven by the desire to create a more egalitarian distribution of scarce educational resources by diverting more funds to primary education and to create more efficiency in the tertiary education sector that was bureaucratically blotted. In the WB's view African universities are '... "Sacred cows" consuming an undue amount of limited resources, they are an example of fiscal overgrazing ...'. But Caffentzis argues that this project actually has a more sinister motive than initially meets the eye:

More likely, the WB's attempt to cut higher education [funding] stems from its bleak view of Africa's economic future and its belief that African workers are destined for a long time to remain unskilled labourers.

So Caffentzis explains WB called for cuts in funding to tertiary institutions and increase in funding to primary education during the SAP period, on the grounds that investment in primary school education would realise a higher return than investment in tertiary education. The WB also argued that tertiary students came from the elite or 'white collar' urban families who were already at an advantaged position and so funding cuts would not seriously harm their economic standing.

Although there was much opposition to all aspects of the SAPs, they were a 'blessing in disguise' for African universities because they were an opportunity to 'rationalize' the delivery of educational services, decrease the burden on taxpayers, and allow governments to reroute funds to primary education.

Caffentzis says that the WB intended to achieve these goals by encouraging governments to remove subsidies to students for accommodation, food and stationery. *The removal of these subsidies*, as Caffentzis points out later, was a *prerequisite for the awarding of the SAP loans* by the Bretton Wood institutions. The WB also called for 'an expansion of cost sharing with beneficiaries' which meant an increase in tuition fees that would 'reflect the true value of the service provided'; the opening of a 'credit market option' to students so that they could 'complete their studies by borrowing against future earnings'; and the 'reduction in unit

cost' by retrenching 'excess' staff. Furthermore African governments would be encouraged to create 'centres of excellence' which would be regionally based to coincide with the WB's aim of decentralization of education.

Against the backdrop of what may seem like noble intentions on the part of the WB Caffentzis points out that social spending, in all the Sub-Saharan African countries undergoing SAP, fell by 26% between 1980 and 1985. The WB had argued that wages had to be reduced to 'attract foreign investment' and as a direct result of WB policies in this regard real wages had often fallen to below sustenance levels. Furthermore currency devaluations, also undertaken at the behest of the WB, dramatically inflated the cost of educational materials that were mostly imported. Caffentzis says that all these points taken in unison resulted in a situation where 'Enrolment rates were declining in many countries for the first time in history'. He points out that these policies resulted in increased suffering of African students and that:

... today it verges on the catastrophic. Overcrowded classrooms, students running on one meal per day, failing water and electricity supplies, collapsing buildings, libraries without journals and books, lack of educational supplies from paper to chalk and even pens are the visible test of what SAP stripped from the ideological smoke.

The WB assertion that African university students were drawn from elite families was simply untrue. Only 40% came from 'white collar families' and the rest were from smallholder farmers and traders who could hardly afford the tuition and board that was required. Furthermore the dwindling real incomes in structurally adjusted African countries meant that even middle class families found it very difficult to afford education. Caffentzis discounts the credit loan facilities recommended by the WB on the grounds that they require collateral or some form of modest income to be able to access them and this was very often just not available. He concludes that the WB's policies with regard to tertiary education in Africa amount to 'academic exterminism'.

Caffentzis further points out that reducing the number of universities and university students in Africa compounded Africa's relative disadvantage in this area. He explains that only 1% of the 500m African population has

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some form of higher education compared to Latin America with 12% and the rest of the developing world with a combined average of 7%. He quite rightly calls the African university student an endangered species.

He rounds off his analysis by saying that when students rise, often at the cost of lives, to protest against these measures and are subsequently crushed by authoritarian governments, the WB turns a blind eye. This contradicts its stated commitment to the fostering of human rights in Africa. He gives a number of examples of the violent crushing of students' protests including an incident in Nigeria where a dozen students were killed for demonstrating against SAPs, and similar incidents in Uganda and in Zambia where the campus was closed for political reasons. South Africans will of course recall how neither the state nor the agencies that are driving structural adjustment programmes and its current attack on higher education, took a stand against the police killing of Michael Makhabane¹ during a protest against the exclusion of poor students on the campus of the University of Durban-Westville in May 2000.

In 'The Recolonisation of African Education', Silvia Federici moves away from the more 'well-known facts' of the political and economic recolonisation of the African continent and limits herself specifically to the intellectual ramifications of this process. She states unequivocally that

... conditions are being created whereby African academics cannot produce any intellectual work, much less be present in the world market of ideas, except at the service and under the control of the international agencies.

She says that the systematic demonetisation of the continent has resulted in a situation where many African academics are no longer paid a living wage. For example, the average salary paid to lecturers at the University of Dares Salaam provides for about three days of subsistence. In many cases salaries have been reduced to paper values through the devaluation of currencies and SAP policies instituted by the government. Lecturers are now supplementing their incomes through bartering and consulting, with teaching time being

¹ Pithouse, Richard 2001. Student's Murder an Outrageous Assault on Democracy, *Daily News* 20 May.

shortened. As a result this has forced many lecturers to migrate to US/UK in search of a better livelihood for themselves. Others have to do lucrative consulting work for the WB or agencies like USAid. Federici believes that the loss in autonomy of African institutions began with the

... systematic defunding of African academic institutions. This is instrumental to their takeover by international agencies, who can thus organise and reshape Africa's academic life for their own purposes.

Federici says that defunding is a direct result of the cutting of subsidies by African governments as a result of obligations imposed by the Bretton Woods institution. The subsidy cuts have led to the escalation of costs of education i.e. a rise in residence fees, books, transport and food on campus and the rapid deterioration of university infrastructure because of reduced capital investment.

She argues that the worst effect has been the forced dependence on foreign agencies and individual donors for research grants and general funding. The implications of this factor alone led to research being done on commission. In many cases foreign donor agencies (e.g. The Rockefeller Foundation) have actually taken over the infrastructural facilities and thus have a direct say in how the institution is run. This has resulted in the extensive curtailment of independent and oppositional thinking.

Federici sums up her article by appealing to all Africans to help each other through material support so as to break dependency on foreign donor agencies. She reminds us of our need to educate ourselves.

'Booker T. Washington in Africa between Education and (Re) Colonisation' is Ousseina Alidou's first article. He focuses on Francophone Africa. He begins by reminding us of Booker T.'s ideas of practical education in the face of the oppressive Jim Crow laws of the Deep South. The idea of practical education was centred around self-reliance, moral upliftment and, more importantly, the emphasis on vocational training as opposed to mere book learning. Alidou believes that in the time of structural adjustment these ideas have assumed greater importance.

He says that in especially Southern Africa's settler regimes and British colonies these ideas had a special appeal both for racist and capitalist

reasons. He gives an example of how the British in Zanzibar published a ten part series of Booker's life story in a journal intended for a school teacher and adds that:

What was significant is that the series appeared at a time when the colonial government had just launched the Rural Middle School, whose curriculum was disproportionately vocational in substance.

This project was premised on the racist idea that Africans lack the intellectual capacity to grasp anything that requires critical, analytical thinking. Alidou points out that the WB's new ideas are in agreement with the colonial project. He also argues that the WB's 'African Capacity Building Initiative' is a policy that seeks to dominate our academic institutions and to gear them for its designs.

In the last part of this article and the one that follows (*Francophonie, World Bank and the Collapse of the Francophone Africa Education System.*) the emphasis is on French patronage in education in its former colonies. The use of the French language as a medium of instruction, cultural imperialism and economic dependency influenced the educational system of these countries. The Agence Culturelle De Cooperation Technique (ACCT), controls the reform and design of school curricula of Africans. This can be through the employment of under-qualified French expatriates who would not have got the same employment in their home countries as trainers of African educators and the dumping of books that were not considered appropriate for French students on the francophone Africa market.

Part 2 of *A Thousand Flowers* entitled 'African Students' and Teachers' Struggles against Structural Adjustment and For Academic Freedom' goes a step further than just analysing the causes of strife in African scholarship. It documents real student struggles. In the first article the editors give us a brief chronology of actual protests of students in the various universities in Africa from 1985 to 1998. From Algeria to Zimbabwe, the story is the same, students boycotting for more subsistence grants, better facilities, against increased fees and meal hikes. Students were harassed, arrested, expelled and some even killed by authorities. The editors point out that the WB's

assertion is that tertiary education on the continent is for the privileged few. They further claim that these protests are more than just political demonstrations for greater democratic rights, as the WB have us believe, but also socio-economic, and directly directed towards the SAPs that have been introduced in their countries.

In Zaire (DRC) 52 students were shot dead, in Uganda 2 have been killed, in Guinea 3 have been killed and thousands more have been arrested in other countries. The article shows the lengths to which students go so that they can get a decent education in the face of hostile economic policies that seek to make them skilled workers for foreign companies' instead of enquiring intellectuals.

Ousseina Alidou's next article in this second part zeros in on the Niger Republic. Here students protest against government's plan to privatise public high schools and the national university. Students claim that the government wants to turn the university into a *de facto* teacher training college as state subsidies are removed from those studying courses the authorities deem as unnecessary. Money is rerouted to private schools offering vocational training (courses in Accounting, computer programming, marketing, administration) on the grounds that 'technical and administrative skills are more competitive on the global stage'. Local companies taking their cue from government, employ these students whereas bachelors and masters graduates are seen as being 'over qualified'. Here, again, withdrawals of university student stipends and lecturers' salaries incite protests. Again, the government retaliated by deploying a heavy military and police presence on campuses to stifle dissent. Academic freedom has suffered as a direct result of the WB's policies.

Ousseina Alidou interviews Babacar Diop, President of the Senegalese Union of Teachers and Researchers. Diop castigates the SAPs, and states that they have lead to political favouritism, embezzlement and corruption in Senegalese universities. Diop talks about 1988, which he calls a 'terrible year' because in that year a student uprisings took place, triggered by a fraudulent presidential election that led to the subsequent closure of the universities. The following year teachers went on a 70 day strike in solidarity with students and for increased salaries. He says that the WB irked by these protests released a document that called for a weakening of students' and teacher's unions. This of course is a flagrant violation of what the WB

preaches i.e. 'good governance, democracy and transparency'. The government also called in the police to suppress the unions and then cut funding to universities. It also instituted the hiring of part-time lecturers to cut costs, by avoiding the benefits that are normally due to permanent staff. Once again, the same old story of vocational schools beginning to receive more funding than universities surfaces. Diop believes all these to be measures designed to destabilise the research capacity and thus development of African scholarship on the part of the WB.

A particularly fascinating article is from Franco Barchiesi called 'South Africa, Between Repression and Home-grown Structural Adjustment'. He mentions University of Durban-Westville, the year is 1997 and the air is thick with repression of students protesting against fee increments and financial exclusion. The university which had been struggling to shrug off its apartheid past and working towards democratisation of its faculties, had to deal with privatisation of services and outsourcing (in other words retrenchment of support staff) in what he calls the 'new democratic dispensation'. This has led to an increase in workers joining the university union Combined Staff Association (COMSA), to fight for greater worker rights. We are then transported to the University of the Western Cape where a leftwing lecturer is arrested for being an illegal alien, but Barchiesi says that the lecturer was better known for being a critic of a student organisation aligned to the ruling party. The article highlights the rightwing shift to neoliberalism in higher education. The writer finds it strange that contrary to other countries throughout the continent, South Africa was not forced into structural adjustment programmes but followed a 'home-grown structural adjustment'. This was because of

... the rise of a new, technocratic, market-orientated and previously exiled leadership inside the ANC-led government, mainly around the likely future president Thabo Mbeki.

He ends by reminding us that in South African the state is the main proponent of neo-liberal policies.

The next article is about military rule, the scourge of post-independent Nigeria, and its role in suppressing academic freedom. Attahiru Jega's article chronicles the student struggles during martial law. Where

corruption results in less funds flowing to universities through inflated contracts and dubious projects where the money is squandered by administrators with the blessing of the military. Where resources for infrastructure and facilities go missing, academic freedom and autonomy is attacked because the generals fear rival power centres. Vice-chancellors are rendered powerless and bend to government directives to allow soldiers on campuses to prevent student demonstrations. Jega claims that this is in part because Vice-chancellors also want to protect their positions. We read of lecturers and students summarily dismissed or expelled because of protesting for academic freedom and against reduced grants. This is aggravated by the SAP forced on the country by the WB.

An article on the Malawian Writers Union is about writers in a dictatorship and their struggle for freedom of expression in the face of state repression and economic deprivation resulting from the SAP. Formed by university students, it has grown and spread across the country to include high school teachers and students too. It has organised plays, festivals, other cultural events to protest the Bretton Woods policies and the state's human rights violations.

In their conclusion the editors focus on the continuing growth of the African students protests against SAPs. They explore ways in which these protests can be mutually and externally supported and suggest that connections with progressive organizations, like Jubilee 2000, may prove useful. They conclude that the primary goal of the book is to alert progressive people in the North American academy to the crises in African universities caused by the WB and to mobilise them to refuse to work with and for the WB and donor agencies with similar agendas, and to support struggles by staff, students and workers at African universities.

A Thousand Flowers makes for sober reading at this juncture in South African history. Our self-imposed structural adjustment program, GEAR, has been in place since 1996 with the result that unemployment has declined, poverty has increased dramatically and the state has been implementing 'cost-recovery'² polices in sectors like water, housing,

² Mcdonald, David & John Pape 2002. *Cost Recovery and the Crisis of Service Delivery in South Africa*. HSRC.

electricity, education and so on with catastrophic consequences for the poor³. Furthermore we are now in the middle of a state-lead project to rationalize the tertiary education sector that is clearly no different from similar projects elsewhere on Africa. Many people have bought into the clearly dishonest claims that the current mergers are about 'addressing the legacy of apartheid'. This book makes it clear that they are really just one more step in the ANC's home-grown structural adjustment program and that they will have disastrous results for higher education in South Africa and that the negative consequences will be disproportionately visited on the poor. *A Thousand Flowers* challenges its readers to respond to SAPs with the same courage and determination that has fuelled student, staff and worker struggles elsewhere in Africa.



³ Desai, Ashwin 2002. *We are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. New York.: Monthly Review Press.
