

Introduction

Freedom of expression

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes –

- (a) freedom of the press and other media;
- (b) freedom to impart information or ideas;
- (c) freedom of artistic creativity; and
- (d) academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.

[*The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996*:

Chapter 2: Bill of Rights, 16(1)]

I would like to thank the contributors to this issue of *Alternation* for their patience. The production of this journal was tied up with the tendering procedures of the University of Durban-Westville (U.D.W.) whereby the printer who put in the lowest bid received the contract. Jannie Smit tirelessly dragged the journal through retyping and re-editing, mentoring the printer in the process.

The efforts of *Alternation* to provide a platform for debate and medium of empowerment have taken place within a shifting institutional history. I would like to take this opportunity to sketch my impressions of this context and stress the importance of the current conjuncture.

With a legacy of active opposition to the apartheid regime, U.D.W. has moved through insurrectionary politics to arrive at the chill dawn of economic pragmatism. Like many other South African universities U.D.W. has never produced an acceptable overall quantity of accredited research. The reality that university status depends on research production suggests that the future for some historically black institutions may include shedding university status altogether. In this environment the university community aims at building capacity and delivering on its Mission Statement:

1. To make university education accessible to all, especially to students who are financially and educationally disadvantaged, thereby opening up opportunities for their personal growth and empowerment.
2. To promote teaching and research in a context of social responsibility and academic excellence.
3. To encourage intercultural understanding and tolerance.

Here prospective learners are aware that access to an equitable higher education system on the basis of merit rather than privilege is a fundamental promise of the Freedom Charter. Broadening access to mature and intermittent learners pursuing vocational programmes other than degree qualifications is linked to the demand that the university democratise itself and clarify the specific outcomes of its learning programmes. This last component includes acknowledging that the skills for life-long learning and socially responsible praxis can be informed by unexpected areas of study. For example, the socio-political and moral critique drawn by Chris Hani from his B.A. in Latin and English – the struggle between the Patricians and the Plebeians, the industrial revolution in England and the limitations of Dickens' liberal analysis – illustrates the complexities involved in defining what is relevant. Despite these difficulties an historic opportunity presents itself for gearing the often anachronistic and elitist structures of the university to the needs of learners requiring the flexible skills necessary to fulfil the essential outcome of all genuine education and training: transformation of an unjust society.

In 1999 those South African universities that have incurred large student debts because of an admissions policy that sought to accommodate poorer students are facing the demands of fiscal rectitude. The challenge of institutional transformation has taken the expedient form of adapting imported models of curriculum development and giving real content to the language of increasing

choice for students who are 'customers', 'stake-holders', etc. Sententious monetarist rhetoric, with its shuttling analogies and doctrine of economic inevitability, often distracts from the integrity of these transformational processes and obscures the work of genuine reformers confronting the remnants of apartheid.

The cost-cutting neo-liberal education policies associated with the heady days of Reagan and Thatcher provide one limited but pertinent point of comparison from which to assess the originality of South African attempts to modernise higher education. While the U.S. tertiary education sector sharpened its market-driven ethos and a highly successful big business sector reasserted its primacy as the key social partner, in the U.K. polytechnics (technikons) modified themselves to become universities. The latter represented both the upgrading of the status of vocational studies and the recognition of the importance of academic research: interaction between the practical and the theoretical offers the best returns for a society investing in its future by integrating education and training. The excesses of the utilitarian wave effectively led to an acknowledgement of the value of a broad educational training that included all areas of culture, even those not immediately commodifiable.

One of the positive returns of educational neo-conservatism in the U.K. flowed from the demand that academics be productive in terms of publications; this often favoured younger academics and facilitated the removal of an inert senior strata. The negative aspect of Thatcher's revolutionary parochialism became clearer when the demand that academics (and everybody else) justify their usefulness targeted pedagogy. From the start incriminated in the conspiracy of teaching useless knowledge, the sullen obscurantist has to prove her innocence (usefulness). An attempt, of course, that simply confirms retroactively the validity of the initial charge since any proof must be adduced in accordance with the terms of the tribunal. This authoritarian ruse never fails to deliver the cutting of courses and facilitation of 'equitable' exits from the profession by demoralised personnel. Those with research capacity and/or business oriented skills find themselves most marketable, and students are left with the obstruction *in situ* of a sedentary staff awaiting the 'renegotiation' of their contracts. At the administrative level the carapace of 'rationalisation' shelters both transient monetarists and those gambling on the possibility of restraining the fiscal fundamentalism of their cohorts. In this case the soft underbelly serves as a useful cushion against attack.

The inappropriateness of such a scenario in the developmental context of South Africa is clear, not least because the neo-liberal agenda presumes an existing reserve of cultural capital and (useless)skills waiting to be trimmed. Historically black universities have struggled to clear a space for a none racist and none sexist humanistic education that is unlikely to quickly regenerate if cut. In this waking nightmare the grave-diggers of apartheid would resurrect a reinvigorated 'Bantu Education' and set an old ghost walking again. A clumsily administered re-orientation of the university camouflages the mutation of strategic planning into institutional Darwinism. Febrile bureaucrats who were seldom regarded as academic luminaries themselves set the agenda within an institutional structure that instinctively reverts to autocracy - the hackneyed alibi for this lack of democratisation being the administrative need to institute democratisation efficiently. Approaches regarding accountability meet with the secretion of exculpatory references to apartheid and ritualised exhibitions of piety. Ultimately, state-directed impulses toward social responsibility and institutional transparency are digested by a culture of opportunism.

My reading of the majority of the contributors to this issue of *Alternation* is that they attempt to look beyond the sterile prospect of pleading and pageantry that can characterise the contradictions of political liberation. Authors writing from Malawi, Northern Ireland, the U.S.A., and a range of universities in South Africa turn to the past and present to recover marginalised traditions that may still be useful in the struggle against multiple forms of domination. U.D.W.'s official commitment to foster research in all areas of the university should ensure that the contribution to this international dialogue by scholars of diverse backgrounds will not be lost.

Shane Moran
Guest Editor