Development and the Humanities

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'History, when it is well taught', said Minister of Education Kader Asmal, addressing an audience on Robben Island last October, 'can encourage critical thinking, exploration of our diverse identities, reconciliation and serve as a reminder of what mistakes not to repeat'. He appointed a panel to investigate the situation of History as a discipline both at schools and at tertiary institutions and into the ways of improving that situation[1].

Two months later the panel presented its findings. Apart from describing the crisis that the discipline is going through and outlining the ways of dealing with it, the panel stressed the multiple points of value History offers to contemporary society—points that would, of course, in varying degrees, apply to other disciplines in the Humanities. According to the authors of the report, History 'encourages civic responsibility and critical thinking, which are key values in a democratic society'; 'fosters the individual mental powers of discriminating judgement'; 'is important in the construction of identity'; 'enables us to listen to formerly subjugated voices and to redress the invisibility of the formerly marginalised'; 'encourages us to examine in concrete terms, through rich examples of narratives of real-life situations, the challenging nature of "truth"; 'is a vital ingredient in promoting democratic values'; 'is a significant instrument for desegregating society'; and is about the 'crucial role of memory in society'[2].

Of particular importance for us here is the fact that the panel stressed the practical, applied significance of History. Not only does the discipline constitute 'a

[1] Address by Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, MP at the opening of the Inaugural Meeting of the Consultative on Racism in the Education and Training Sector of South Africa. Robben Island, 18 October 2000, p. 4.: http://education.pwv.gov.za/Media Statements/Speeches/October/racism.htm.

[2] Report of the History/Archaeology Panel to the Minister of Education, pp. 9-10: http://education.pwv.gov.za/Policies Reports/ Reports/ 2000/ HistoryArchaeology/ Report.htm.

sound vocational preparation for a wide range of jobs and careers' the report stated, but it also 'provides a critically important perspective on the pathways to economic development and economic growth'[3]. Unfortunately, this view of the role of History and of the role of the Humanities in general, is not widely shared—both by learners, and administrators of education. Student enrolment is dropping dramatically in departments in the Humanities and these fields are the first to be sacrificed in times of financial constraint.

Much of this is the result of a perception that the Humanities are intrinsically conservative. This was created during the apartheid era and persists among both students and those responsible for the promotion of a holistic approach in education.

There is no lack of anecdotal evidence to confirm this view. At a meeting to discuss a 'business plan' for UDW's History Department—whose student enrolment fell from about 700 to 70 within three years—a senior manager assured the staff that she understood the importance of their discipline. 'We all know', she said, 'that the Trek is very important'. Other senior managers present nodded in agreement. The Head of the wretched department attempted to object but was stopped. 'Don't worry, we really understand that History is important—I remember we were taught all about the Trek and how important it was', the manager repeated. The year was 1999 and the manager was Black. Counterpoising the Humanities and other disciplines, a colleague in Industrial Psychology said at a meeting: 'We have so many students because we teach them what industries and businesses require, not just how to be nice —as History or Anthropology do'. Worse still, debates on the transformation of tertiary education have often seen History being singled out as an example of a 'Eurocentric' discipline.

Should one blame the managers who do not have a background in the Humanities and who hold simplistic views of its disciplines? Or should one blame the Humanities themselves for a lack of energy in engaging in public debates on what they can offer the nation? When was it last that we attempted to promote what our disciplines offer society in general and also the individual? Have we been able to show the contribution that each of our disciplines makes or can make toward what this country needs most: development?

This was the idea behind this volume: to show what our research can and does contribute to different aspects of development. More often than not the notion of development is popularly associated with the introduction of new technologies, industries and means of communication, construction of new factories, hotels and

[3] Report of the History/Archaeology Panel to the Minister of Education, pp. 9-10: http://education.pwv.gov.za/Policies Reports/Reports_2000/History_Archaeology_Report.htm.

roads, the uplifting and enhancement of social services, transformation of delivery structures, etc. This volume, however, centres on different aspects of development: identities, perspectives and perceptions.

No other aspect of transformation has been raised more often than the need 'to change perceptions'. Understandably so: no development is possible without conducive attitudes and perceptions. But what are the perceptions that need to be changed? Is anything really wrong with them as they are? What were they in the past and what evolution have they undergone? The majority of the articles in this volume deal with different aspects of perceptions in past and present South Africa: religious perceptions of South Africa's Indian Muslims (G. Vahed); ethnically and socially grounded perceptions of Durban's taxi and bus drivers (A. Singh); a Zulu community's perceptions of the notion of development (P. Sithole); academic and popular perceptions of the Zulu (S. Leech); 'traditional' perceptions of land rights by Zulu women (U. Bob); historical perceptions of the patterns of transformation of a South African tertiary institution (D. Burchell); and the perceptions of women prisoners in Westville prison (N. Pillay).

None of these studies was commissioned by any industry or business, any ethnic or religious group, or by a branch of local or national government. Yet, it is difficult to imagine that any concrete project aimed at transformation and development of the above communities could be successfully carried out without taking into consideration the results of these studies. This is also true about other aspects of research, the results of which are offered in this volume.

'Tradition and innovation' is a topic that is crucial for understanding and implementing development both at the level of theory and practice. It is also represented in this volume by several studies. U. Bob discusses the changing patterns of land tenure in KwaZulu-Natal; P. Sithole looks into the intricate web of 'traditional' and new structures and institutions pertaining to development in a local Zulu community; K. Hiralal analyses equally intricate networks of ties, mutual support and interpenetration of 'old' and 'new' institutions and practices in the development of trade among the Indians in Natal; S. Leech presents the role of innovation in the creation of Zulu 'tradition'. M. Goedhals explores the conflict of 'new' and 'old' values and economic systems at early stages of the introduction of Christianity into Pedi society.

Gender issues—a challenge considered to be one of the corner stones of development—are central to five articles (U. Bob; M. Goehals; K. Nadasen; N. Pillay; P. Sithole) but they are touched on by several other authors as well. U. Bob's article is devoted to aspects of land reform in KwaZulu-Natal. G. Vahed studies the crucial yet ambivalent role of religion in the South African Muslim community. Political economy of growth, constitutes the essence of K. Hiralal's article on Indian traders. D. Burchell's story of Fort Hare presents dramatic twists and turns in the

historical transformation of this institution. K. Nadessen's and P. Pillay's articles deal with different aspects of international law and its correlation with aspects of Africa's political and cultural legacy. M. Goedhals presents the process of construction of a female Christian martyr.

The idea of this volume emerged when we, representatives of different disciplines who come from different academic backgrounds, traditions, approaches and styles, merged together to form a School of Social Sciences and Development Studies at UDW. Week after week we sat together to create a new programme which, as the management of the day decreed, had to be interdisciplinary. Not only was this process difficult, it was also unwanted, in fact, imposed on us—and each department asked itself and its counterparts whether it had not sacrificed too much of its sacrosanct disciplinary territory in favour of the unproven merits of complete and limitless interdisciplinarity.

At the same time, however, we discovered how much we could tell one another, how much common ground we covered in our teaching and research and how much richer we were by getting closely exposed to other disciplines' perspectives. Not that we had been unaware of these perspectives before, but our common fortune made us think of our commonalities and differences in a much more focused way.

The debate on the future of our disciplines, of the School and of the University as a whole goes on, unfolding around the issues of an interdisciplinary vs. disciplinary approach and on the relative value of our disciplines for students and for the country against the background of a national reform of tertiary education. This volume is our contribution to this debate.