

Transforming the Socio-Academic Space in the University

Introduction

Universities have always served as fertile grounds for nurturing competing ideas. They are also breeding grounds for groups set on collision course with one another as they endlessly climb the greasy pole for authority. But these dynamics are part of everyday life on campus and the South African socio-academic space is not exempt from this, not least in the post-apartheid era where attempts to erase painful memories of the past are a never-ending quest for various ideologies.

The recent wave of student protests across the country, united under the banner of changing the shape and character of former white universities, bears testament to a nation still haunted by the politics of race and the rhetoric of racial identity. We are compelled not only to reflect on the wider South African body politic, but we are equally charged to take stock about the presence of these nuances within the internal socio-academic space of the University.

This piece recounts personal experiences at two former white universities with starkly contrasting cultural heritages. The release of the *Luister* video by students and some academics of the University of Stellenbosch struck a chord and it serves as a prompt for these reflections. The video sparked nationwide condemnation for the alleged racism at the University with others further arguing that the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction at the University is the reason the University remains unflinchingly racist. I felt impelled to reminisce over the time I spent at Stellenbosch during my postgraduate student days after my undergraduate spell at the University of the Witwatersrand. Needless to say, the video reopened wounds that I thought had healed. It began to dawn on me that transformation of academic staff complement in the University serves no good purpose if the socio-academic space remains resolutely unchanged. To put it bluntly, transformation must happen wholesale.

The Socio-Academic Space of a Post-apartheid University

Universities do not only serve the academic mandate of producing an enlightened generation. Theirs is a mandate much larger than that as they nurture the talent of people who are innately social. The socio-academic space is then comprised of social beings intent on pursuing academic excellence yet inextricably enmeshed within the social space that will have the ultimate impact of shaping their world view. These socio-academic spaces serve as informal places where different worlds intersect to offer a richer learning experience outside the confines of lecture halls



ELIAS PHAAHLA

obtained, from the University of the Witwatersrand, a BA Hons (with Distinction) in International Political Economy and a PhD in Political Economy from the University of Stellenbosch. He is a 2009 Mandela Rhodes Scholar (South Africa and Stellenbosch) and, he is currently working at the Helen Suzman Foundation as a Researcher. He has recently been awarded a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein.

and tutorial rooms. It is also a world where different groups, ideologies, cultures and identities are pitted against each other in a bid to challenge conventions and unleash a new understanding of the world we claim to have knowledge of.

The former white universities are no doubt a consequence of their colonial origins. These institutions of higher learning remain bastions of privilege where class and the pursuit of academic excellence overlap. Herein lies a fertile ground for students to question the intransigent nature of this state of affairs, carrying the covert, yet impactful message, that academic excellence should not be pursued at the cost of the national project of reconciliation and the ideals of a non-racial society. In other words, the University in post-apartheid South Africa must dispose of its white identity if it is to avoid the folly of being out of touch with the rest of society.

That a University retains its traditionally Afrikaans identity, or Anglo-Saxon traditions, or even Semitic culture is preposterous and can only serve as blight to the very idea of education itself. Any University that retains a particular cultural or ethnic disposition and still considers itself a fountain of knowledge ceases to exist as one.

I do concede that a distinction of former white universities must be made here. Compared to former White Afrikaans universities, former white English universities played a significant role in transforming the landscape of higher education sector during the dark days of apartheid by opening their doors to students of colour. Many of these white English universities adopted a defiant stance against the laws that barred many blacks from accessing white universities simply on the basis of skin colour. But the bone of contention here is not access, nor the politics surrounding that issue. Instead, a case is made here about the challenges which confront students of various backgrounds as they navigate their way through university today.

Considerations relating to belonging and ownership of the social space within the university must be taken into account. Therefore, it is also covertly, yet loudly stated in these student campaigns, that the contemporary post-apartheid University can shed off its white, colonial identity and still be at the forefront of academic excellence. In essence transformation of the socio-academic space within the University and the pursuit of excellence are mutually reinforcing and the two can be carried out in tandem.

Indeed, beyond the trappings of ivory tower lecture halls there exists a platform which allows minds to question this colonial heritage as a vice that is divisive and toxic to the socio-academic fabric of the University and the wider South African social fabric. The proponents of Rhodes Must Fall, Open Stellenbosch and Transform Wits, to mention but three, highlight one grim reality about the socio-academic space at former white universities: that is, the University remains at odds with the wider social fabric of post-apartheid South Africa and theirs is an advocacy for change. That a University retains its traditionally Afrikaans identity, or Anglo-Saxon traditions, or even Semitic culture is preposterous and can only serve as blight to the very idea of education itself. Any University that retains a particular cultural or ethnic disposition and still considers itself a fountain of knowledge ceases to exist as one. A University in post-apartheid South Africa should, *inter alia*, accommodate an array of cultures, identities and religions, and any attempt to the contrary serves to defy the national project of reconciliation and coexistence itself. No cultural disposition or heritage should trample upon the other. Certainly, space must be made available for different cultural backgrounds to exist alongside each other.

How can universities continue to exist as special enclaves while they ignore the wider social milieu surrounding them as if they are blind to the pressing realities confronting our society? Firstly, continuing to do so is dangerous and will only serve to threaten the existence of these institutions in the long run. Secondly, the research enterprise in these very universities will not thrive if their research output and curricula lose relevance to the African context. It is then laughable that a University continues to retain its European heritage in terms of pedagogy, throughput and research focus, and still claims to be at the forefront of producing African solutions to African problems. The trick is not to replace these forms of teaching with alternative ones, but rather to strike a balance between the two.

The poignant reality about all of this is that universities that are resistant to change show symptoms of an identity crisis, which further perpetuates even the more the notion of 'us and them' without the harsh, explicit racial overtones we loathe. Herein a call is made by the advocates of change in the socio-academic space of the academy; that universities should cease to act as colonial outposts, must break with tradition and must begin to embrace the freedom that comes with our democracy of embracing one another as equals. Others are quick to call this an attempt to change the levers of power and tilting the balance of forces. I call it change long overdue.

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Distinctions of Socio-Academic Spaces in the Academy

As a point of departure, perhaps it is worth asking the following questions: who owns the socio-academic space within the University; what shape have these socio-academic spaces taken; and can the socio-academic space in the University serve as an agent of change? A look into the distinctions of universities in post-apartheid South Africa is warranted.

Two set of public universities exist in post-apartheid South Africa. These are, the former white universities and, the previously disadvantaged black universities that were created (mostly) in the 1960s under the auspices of the Bantustan policy. The former are paragons of public-funded excellence and they continue to attract top academics and students from across the country transcending class and racial differences. Although the doors of learning in these universities have been made 'open' for all, the demographics are largely white, indicative of high social class status of the students who attend these institutions. The perception out there is that one did not quite receive an education if they were not educated at these universities. The latter set of universities struggle to shed the perception of mediocrity and, rightly or wrongly, stand accused of failing to emulate the research rigour of their white counterparts.

Against this backdrop, the socio-academic space in former white universities can be surmised in this way: it is predominately white owned, culturally predisposed to dance to the tune of the white social formation and, suffers severely from lack of advocates who can champion (with earnest) a balanced and plural socio-academic space in which all students, irrespective of colour or social class status can find belonging and not be made to feel like sojourners. University bureaucrats at these former white universities have not been entirely willing to rectify this social misdemeanour besetting the academic space of their respective universities.

Instead they have a knack for playing lip service accompanied by meagre actions with the hope that the flame dies slowly.

The rise of the Open Stellenbosch campaign should not come as a surprise. Students pursuing undergraduate studies in that institution are having Afrikaans shoved down their throats¹. Granted, Stellenbosch is steeped in Afrikaans tradition and it will take a while to reverse that; nevertheless the dominance of Afrikaans should not be used to exclude and marginalise others and end up compromising prospects of academic success. Afrikaans surely has a right to exist, like any other language in South Africa. However, the University has a duty to treat all students equally including those who wittingly or unwittingly choose to enter the University in spite of its notorious reputation. Many opinionated voices out there tend to erroneously ask the following question: why go to Stellenbosch if you know you are going to have problems with Afrikaans? The courage to ask such questions 21 years into our democracy not only defies the blissfulness of ignorance, but it attests to one being stuck on the wrong side of history. There is a need for an education about what the youth of June 1976 fought for here. How we forgot so soon!

The cultures these institutions embrace, by virtue of their Euro-colonial orientation, tend to be difficult for many poor students to identify with. A young person coming from a rural, underprivileged school in the Eastern Cape might find the Oxbridge-styled socio-academic spaces nestled in these universities highly unnerving.

In the next section I explore the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes in shaping the socio-academic space of the academy in post-apartheid South Africa against the backdrop of the social class make up that grapples this nascent democracy. I give due consideration to the legacy this man bequeathed the higher education sector in the wake of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which sparked nationwide student protests calling for transformation in the academy.

Cecil J Rhodes Revisited

The socio-academic space in most former white universities owes much of its existence to Cecil John Rhodes (CJR) himself and his legacy thereon. UCT

came about as a result of CJR's generous land donation and Rhodes University in Grahamstown received a cash windfall from the Rhodes Trust and saved the University from closing doors indefinitely, while Victoria College (modern day Stellenbosch) produced eminent men like Jan Smuts who went on to become defenders of the British imperial project. In these universities, not excluding Natal, and to some extent Wits, we may find the legacy of CJR to be present.

Perhaps the impact of this man's legacy must be sought in the light of the institutional cultures of these universities. The cultures these institutions embrace, by virtue of their Euro-colonial orientation, tend to be difficult for many poor students to identify with. A young person coming from a rural, underprivileged school in the Eastern Cape might find the Oxbridge-styled socio-academic spaces nestled in these universities highly unnerving. They find themselves standing in stark contrast to their counterparts with Model-C or private school education who gained familiarity with such spaces long before entering University.

The end result is a disheartening one. Instead of facilitating social intercourse that transcends class and race, these University spaces cause a balkanisation of

social class and racial groupings which helps little to spur a common identity within the University's socio-academic space. Such is the travesty of University education in post-apartheid South Africa and it appals many of us who take notice of these trends. Regarding this point, some ask, now that the infamous statue of Rhodes on the UCT campus has been plucked out and stored – what now? Will his palpable absence spur the pace of transformation of the socio-academic space within the University? Are we not barking up the wrong tree here? I find the cynicism there disturbingly spine-chilling as it misses the point entirely.

Controversial figures such as CJR must and should be recorded in the annals of history, lest we forget. However, divisive figures such as Rhodes do not deserve simply to be celebrated and certainly do not deserve to adorn the socio-academic space of our universities. Paying homage to such a figure, even under the pretext of remembering his 'generosity', is inappropriate. For a university to allow the statue of CJR to exist on campus in such a prominent position can be interpreted as an act glorifying the evils he may have committed. The socio-academic space in such universities simply cannot get more oppressive than that.

Luister – Listen, and Please Take Heed

It is often said that riots is the language of the unheard. The Luister video, however, is symbolic to the voice which landed not only on deaf ears, but whose reverberations have been perceived as *swartgevaar*. And indeed *swartgevaar* tactics have been employed by the University to hold on to Afrikaans culture as well as preserving its identity. This is where the University and those who control the town of Stellenbosch show that all along they have not been listening to what the marginalised students have been saying. The issue was never the Afrikaans language, nor Afrikaans culture and identity. What irks many, and what has also proven to be abhorrent, is when the Afrikaans language is being used to drive a wedge among groups that ought to be living harmoniously.

However, turning a blind eye to barbaric means of the 'black burden' in an institution of higher learning is called acting in complicity. That makes such a University as equally guilty as the perpetrators who commit the offence and it should stand on the pedestal of infamy for this.

Granted, the Afrikaans community is not comprised of whites only; how then can the dominance of the Afrikaans language in that secluded part of the world be indicative of the prevalence of racism there? It is exactly that – racist, if black students (or students of any colour, really) express discomfort at being taught in a language they are unable to understand and that language is used as a symbol of group identity. When racially charged insults are hurled mainly at black students who are at times advised to vote with their feet if they find the dominance of the language offensive, the atmosphere easily qualifies as racist.

Moreover, South Africa belongs to everyone who lives in it, black or white, and Afrikaans, like any language has a right for preservation. However, turning a blind eye to barbaric means of the 'black burden' in an institution of higher learning is called acting in complicity. That makes such a University as equally guilty as the perpetrators who commit the offence and it should stand on the pedestal of infamy for this.

Conclusion

Spaces are created for the sole purpose of interaction among various groups. In the University, such informal spaces, aimed at facilitating social interaction are in existence and they were referred to in this piece as the socio-academic space. However, the socio-academic space in the academy, particularly at former white universities, needs to be reconciled with the society as to sincerely partake in the project of change that we want to see taking place in South Africa. The division that exists among the inhabitants of the socio-academic space in these universities becomes a crude reminder of the road we still need to travel in order to get to the Promised Land. A University that still does the bidding of the old guard (culturally) at the exclusion of marginal groups must be educated about the need to move with the programme and understand that all persons have an equal right to exist, even in the socio-academic spaces they may have created themselves. Advocates of change in these intransigent socio-academic spaces, led mainly by the student movement, expose the toxic and pervasive nature of social class and racial divisions that these universities helped to create.

FOOTNOTE

1 Postgraduate studies are conducted in English at Stellenbosch.