South African Universities in the Tumult of Change

By Ahmed Bawa and Daniel Herwitz

The world of knowledge production is lopsided, with its center of gravity resting somewhere in the mid-North Atlantic. Trends in the humanities and basic sciences that catch hold in the global north often imprint themselves in knowledge systems elsewhere. While robust knowledge systems in parts of the global south do exist, this substantial region of the planet has until recently suffered from lack of capacity. Development today within the South African higher educational sector remains uneven, with certain universities sharing modern facilities and top researchers while others limp from the past into the present. It has been said that uneven development is a fault that generally pertains to the global south, with its massive differences in wealth among citizens, access to resources (water, power, education), and its profoundly unequal regional economies. Half an hour outside a world-class South African city one may find flimsy shacks built on sand, cooking on paraffin stoves, unregulated informal economies wrought with insecurity. Such inequality in development also pertains to universities.

Where genuine originality has been generated in the south (e.g., in engineering, literary writing, physical anthropology), it has been too often consigned to the category of quaint or marginal in Europe and the United States.

African university—especially their role in building new nations from fragmented ones. This gave rise to discourses of transformation and new imaginations—the shaping of a new place for Africa in the world. The university was to be the place where postcolonial vision translated into the making of new knowledge, and a new generation would be educated to steer its course through the tumult of change.

Impediments to Knowledge Production

Shortly afterward, as a state of crisis set in nation by nation, African universities began to enter their own crises of chronic underfunding, which were consolidated by the structural adjustment programs forced on African nations by the World Bank. During this time, more instrumentalist notions of the university in Africa began to take hold—the advent of the “development university.” Recently the World Bank and UNESCO have established a series of substantial interventions with governments in Africa about the importance of large-scale investments in higher education, the larger social purpose being to integrate the insecure state economies of such states into the larger global economy. Similarly, one sees substantial investment in higher education by various development aid agencies such as the UK’s Department for International Development, Sweden’s SIDA-SAREC, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and others.

Many South African universities have compounded their dependency through legacies of Eurocentrism, whereby settler gains status and authority over native populations and over time retains “non-native” identity by aping the European, acting “more British than British.” The liberal South African university between the conclusion of the Boer War in 1901 and the introduction of Apartheid in 1948 (the moment of the South African colony) formulated itself on a diet of Dickens, Trollope, and Shakespeare. Eurocentrism is dependency since it waits for scholarship and style from the mid-North Atlantic and immediately tries it on to ensure the student becomes as “European” as possible. This formulation of university curriculum and scholarship consigned the South African university to the status of “outpost.” It is a template that the post-Apartheid moment directly assaulted, with the glorious result of skepticism: it is no lon-
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At the time of World War II, when the South African colony (formed at the end of the Boer War as a liberal/ segregationist state) was still in place, UCT was ranked in the top 50 universities around the world. This was in part because it was flooded with the same generation of intellectuals and scientists. Cecil John Rhodes founded UCT, a university with no resources, situated far from any urban center, and with no market for its graduates. It was a beacon of this colonial vision and remained so during the apartheid period, but with a difference.

The University of Natal (the third major English university) was founded in 1910 in the provincial capital of Durban, and in the 1930s it was renamed as Howard College, built by a grieving parent to honor his son’s death in the war. This college was placed at the highest point on the highest hill directly overlooking the Durban port. It was built to house the King George V statue, erected above the University of Cape Town at the highest point on Table Mountain. This was a symbol of English colonialism. It was the origin of the Apartheid state’s idea for the University of Durban: that it would be the headquarters of the English-speaking population and the Cape’s place of cultural and intellectual life. It was also the site of the University of Natal’s most famous student uprising in 1952, when the first mass mobilization against unj at law in the country’s history, gestated fierce struggles between the progressive forces (among students, faculty, and staff) and the institutional regimes that were put in place by the state. Some white liberal universities also opposed the state. The University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg had a place in the Library of Congress. The Apartheid state required that a physical gap be opened up between para-city and city proper—because it was in a natural concomitant of industrialization that groups mix in space, identity, and ideas. Forced removals tore apart the urban fabric through which these new identities and ideas could be woven. And so these cities were reduced to rubble.

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can access online. This sadly continues to exclude many African universities. The basic limit of infrastructure is that it does not exclude South Africa. The capacity of South African universities is being built by numerous players, recently by a coalition of foundations that has joined European partners. And the Eurocentric/Afrocentric formations of knowledge are being slowly overcome by the South African university, unique in its colonial, then apartheid history. That history has left South African universities with basic faults, but it has also blessed them with unique gifts. These make South African universities admirable partners for American universities today. In what follows, we want to explain why. We shall do so, by turning to history.

An Architecture of Universities 

The University of Cape Town (UCT) was formed in the early twentieth century as a place for training civil servants for English colonial management. This was the genealogy of universities in the colonies. In South Africa an industrial-based Enterprise was formed in consort with a local industrial class—built by a colonial settler community and influx of new immigrants. The University of Cape Town was formed in the early twentieth century by Scottish missionaries in the name of Matthew Arnold and Queen Victoria. University Hall was built by the gold and diamond magnates who wanted new engineering for their mines. In 1875 the city of Johannesburg had 3000 people, but by 1900 it had risen 3.5 times toward the sky and descended 8000 feet into the earth, where the gold was extracted in mines surrounding the city—with migrant labor drawn from all corners of rural South Africa and from as far afield as Nyasaland (now Malawi). With the rise of the city came immigration. Jews from Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Italy, and the Scottish who founded this liberal university.

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Apartheid was the origin of an activist/community-driven model of knowledge production found today in many South African universities. with an epistemic formation that was essentially activist. The presence of activist scholars at many universities in South Africa helped to shape their engagement with the liberation movement, the trade union movement, and local communities, and this became a central feature of the academic profiles of the white liberal universities and the historically black universities. At the University of Natal, in the 1980s and 1990s, as a way of providing protection to community-based organizations from Apartheid's security apparatus, the infrastructure for more than 80 of these non-governmental, community-based organizations was created. These organizations played an extremely important counter-hegemonic role in the construction of the academic profile of this university. Just prior to the fall of Apartheid, the University of Western Cape was an avowedly Marxist university. These activist concepts, sometimes of an oversimplified Marxist variety, as in the case of the University of Western Cape, are clearly out of date. This is part of why scholarship at South African universities simultaneously faces the challenge of renegotiating epistemologies of activism and the relevance of the autonomy of the disciplines. The first is an imperative of history—it is what saved the South African university from ignominy. The second— to preserve the autonomy of scholarship without reverting back to a Eurocentric formation—is among the most severe challenges faced by the South African university. To negotiate the needs of autonomy, capacity building, and many duties of a university to its vast, racialized, inequitable society: this is the basic project of South African universities today.

Transformation and Reform
During the early transition to democracy in the 1990s, the template of the activist university in South Africa transmogrified first into a new array of community engagement projects, and then into a more sophisticated struggle for the development of a place for intellectual work in this nascent democracy. This took place even at formerly pre-Apartheid, Afrikaans-speaking universities like Pretoria. Transformation was undertaken in all aspects of university life, from curriculum to institutional structures to senate policies at universities, enrollment of under-represented students on mass, and diversification of faculty and staff. The system was remade through a large platform of new policies that served to make higher education more accountable, more representative of the post-Apartheid political and social landscape, more effective and efficient, more relevant to the needs of reconstruction and development, and more connected to the global competitiveness of the economy. (The imperatives that underpin these policy reforms are not always driven by the best interests of higher education or society. Narrow political agendas sometimes intrude, such as the need for it to appear that universities are as ruled by ety. Narrow political agendas sometimes intrude, such as the need for it to appear that universities are as ruled by
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