

# BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE INTERNATIONAL PLIGHT OF THE "OPEN" UNIVERSITIES.

South Africa's "open" universities face intense pressure from three increasingly hostile quarters: the state, and the international community of scholars and their students. All three seem unremitting in their determination to impress upon the open universities a particular understanding of the role the universities should be playing in the deepening national crisis.

The prescriptive nature of the demands made on the universities, from the students and the international community of scholars, arises from two parallel understandings of the current South African crisis. First, a view that the battle for the soul of South Africa is being fought in education. Secondly, a belief that other institutions – parliament, the courts, the bureaucracy – have either lost, or have almost lost, their legitimacy. With certain of the churches, the open universities still command wide respect.

There is a clear tension between these positions, and this dilemma for the universities: By adopting a more activist stance in the battle over education, the universities risk losing the legitimacy which has been so painstakingly built. Quite clearly, as custodians of the country's learning, the universities have an interest both in the battle over education and in its outcome. Equally, the respect which the universities enjoy in the wider community is the product of the hostility which they have shown to 40 years of Nationalist rule.

The question of international pressure on the universities appears secondary to the domestic dilemma. However, South Africa's universities are international institutions which until recently were largely immune from the foreign pressures which have sought to isolate the country in many other ways. To be sure, since the 1950s there have been efforts to isolate South Africa's tertiary education, but the open universities largely escaped this pressure. Their exclusion was advanced on the grounds that they strongly opposed apartheid, and paid a high price for this stand. The renewed international efforts to crush apartheid have gone further than before, and calls for boycotts against South Africa's universities are widespread on campuses all over the western world.

Thus, while the current crisis is of a new magnitude, the open universities have long been caught between the rock of Nationalist ideology and the hard place of their international standing.

The so-called open universities are "open" only in a limited sense; it is not altogether certain that they should enjoy such a title, which they have themselves chosen. By this self-anointment, they communicate to themselves and to the world at large that they embrace a set of academic principles which are the lifeblood of the western university experience. To a large degree, the open universities have been clones of non-African academic institutions – they

have not been African, nor have they been Afrikaner. They have, however, been enriched by drawing their membership from the great diversity of all South Africa's peoples; Africans and Afrikaners have made great contributions to the open universities.



South Africa's first universities were established at a time when some broad consensus existed on the traditions and values of western culture, which was at the centre of western university experience. However, the motives for the establishment of individual South African universities differed from case to case: Wits was established to serve the mining industry, whilst the University of Potchefstroom, with its overt cultural leanings, aimed to foster and promote a specific Afrikaner view of the world. However, at their establishment, the English universities and their Afrikaner sisters, were originally part of a single world culture – the one-world culture of the late-Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries.

The retreat of the Afrikaans universities behind the ideological curtain of Apartheid was completed by the passing of the Universities Extension Act of 1959. With this event, the Nationalist government elected instead to pursue a set of cultural loyalties which were regarded as unique; this was Christian National Education (CNE). CNE was a huge blow for the open universities. The establishment of the so-called Homeland universities – or "bush colleges" as they were once known – formally cut the open universities off from the majority of South Africa's citizens.

In spite of intense official pressure to conform to CNE, the open universities continued to claim membership to the western university experience. However, when the one-world culture began to falter with changing post-War attitudes to racialism and colonialism, South Africa's open

universities were caught between this changing experience and a government which viewed the world through an increasingly narrow lens. Today, the same forces which undercut the one-world culture, particularly the question of racial discrimination, have bought about a near universal condemnation of **apartheid**.

The international dilemma before South Africa's open universities is plain: how are they to ensure membership of a world community of scholars, given that successive Nationalist governments have prevented them from pursuing the huge cultural diversity which the wider university tradition has encouraged? If this were not enough, they recognize that the domestic order is in the process of disintegration, and that the ground is inadequately prepared for what is to follow. In addition, academics at the open universities are under sheer physical threat: witness the recent firebombings at the University of Natal; the violence at UCT during the O'Brien brouhaha; the continual incursions by the security forces on the campuses; and the permanent violation of university integrity by the security police.

In all societies, the relationship between university and state is a delicate one. In South Africa successive post-War governments have sought to curb both the influence of the universities and students. The PW Botha government appears to realize both the domestic and the international dilemma of the open universities, and is putting pressure on the open universities to conform. The persistent rumour that in late-1986, a government committee consisting of four government Ministers had carpeted the Vice-Chancellors of UCT, Wits and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) is strong on the campuses of the open universities. If true, it represents an astonishing infringement of university autonomy. How the open universities respond to the mounting government pressure will strongly influence their relationship with the international community of scholars.

In the face of this pressure South African universities will have to make a choice: either to conform to pressure, or strike out in new directions which will satisfy their international critics and, perhaps, the students. Not surprisingly, the choice will be a difficult one, and protagonists of each position will emerge across the spread of all South Africa's universities. In other words, it will be increasingly difficult to characterize those at open universities as falling into one side of a divide, and those at South Africa's other universities as falling on the other.

All too often there is a feeling of smugness within the open universities - the sentiment that English-speaking scholars command the high ground over our Afrikaner colleagues both intellectually and morally in their opposition to **apartheid**. This is a most unfortunate trait, and it should remember that in August 1986, Annica van Gylswyk, who was attached to a university not traditionally regarded as open, was denied the right to live in South Africa. Like her, many in all South Africa's universities have made personal and professional sacrifices as a result of their opposition to apartheid.

The first response to pressure on the universities will be called "Incorporation" and the alternative, "Toward the New Frontier". The former has the open universities, in particular, joining with the country's present rulers in perpetuating the **status quo**. The latter, has the same universities seeking ways to relate to the deep structural

changes which are taking place in South Africa, particularly, in the extra-parliamentary field.



In the short term, the open universities will seek to avoid making a choice. This is understandable in the face of economic pressure from the state, the rising expectations of the students and uncertainty of what exactly the academic boycott is all about. It may be possible to avoid choosing in the immediate domestic climate, simply because the state has enormous power to repress opposition. Of course, the avoidance of choice for whatever reason, will be seen abroad as having chosen the **status quo**. The international pressure on the universities is dismissive of the need of the open universities to tactically engage the state, from time to time. In the long term there can be no prevarication for the very survival of the universities **qua** universities hinges on making the correct choice.

Consider the first of these responses, "incorporation". The South African government has sought to ensure its survival both by entrenching power through constitutional means and through the establishment of what political scientists call the "corporate state". For the purpose at hand, it is sufficient to define such a state as one in which as many activities as possible are brought into the scope of the state's control. Activities which cannot through legislation be seized by the growing tentacles of the state, are simply repressed. In contemporary South Africa, there is no clearer example of this direction than the current State of Emergency, which - in the opinion of many, including the former Minister of Law and Order - is aimed at smashing all extra-parliamentary opposition.

This tactic has huge implications for the open universities: the state will draft the universities to its service, by means both fair and foul. Individual academics will be tempted to join the service of the state in its determination to survive and motives will vary widely, depending upon circumstances and disciplines. One can see that engineers will benefit from the research contracts which will become - and may already have become - available through ARMSCOR, the Atomic Energy Board or ISCOR. Social scientists will also be tempted into the State's service by the belief that they can help "save" South Africa by inventing yet another new constitutional model, one which will be seized by the governing party and lead, one fears, to yet another political

**cul-de-sac.** Indeed, many in this trade have already gone down this path, among which this government's former Ambassador to London, Denis Worrall, is the best example. In time, all the major academic disciplines, from Education to Ecology, from Physics to Physical Education, from Geography to Genetics could be pressed into the service of the State in one form or another.

In this role, the university is the handmaiden of the state. The state's immense patronage – and its control of the purse strings – will make it very difficult for the universities or for individual academics to resist the state's overtures. The recent SAPSE<sup>1</sup> proposals which financially reward universities whose academics publish in specified income-generating publications, represent obvious efforts to control both thought and its dissemination. Disturbingly, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) the state-sponsored research funding agency, recently sent out a questionnaire seeking to canvass ideas on how the academic requirements of a degree might be most efficiently blended with a student's military training.<sup>2</sup> Here the state's efforts to control the universities is brazen! Where the resistance is strongest, the government will attempt to invoke patriotism, blowing a familiar bugle; those who refuse to succumb to these inducements will be branded communists or enemies of the state.

As suggested, many in the open universities will seek a compromise with the state on the issue of incorporation. They will believe that they can continue to operate within the system and, at the same time, retain their individual academic integrity. This is the balancing act which the open universities have been performing for the better part of three decades, and in which they have been fairly successful.

The open universities have operated in this fashion in the sincere belief that the respective disciplines are value-free, and the chief duty of the scholar is to pursue the truth. If issues of objectivity are not central, as is the case in some academic circumstances, the prevailing response is simply that the social, economic or political consequences of institutional and individual academic activities are really not the responsibility of the individual academic involved.

However, given the desire of the state to incorporate the universities, is it possible to believe that academic endeavours can be value free? One thinks not. Values – in South Africa's case, deeply ingrained racial values – penetrate every aspect of the country's life. The universities, and individual scholars, are no less free and unfettered from this than are South Africans outside the universities.

Consider two complementary and extremely value-laden ideas which have been systematically propagated by the South African government: the old chestnut "anti-communism" and the recently discovered "free-enterprise".<sup>3</sup> Increasingly, these underpin the country's education system, and the state seeks further to ensure that public debates are deeply imbued with both.

Indeed, scarcely a single aspect of our political discourse seems to be free of them. This presents immense problems for social scientists who find it impossible to work in their sub-disciplines without having first to deal with the ideological baggage accompanying both issues.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the work of a social scientist is often judged, not by its intrinsic value, but by its approach to both these issues.

A cursory consideration of these leads to the issue of the question of sanctions where the rub of "incorporation" will be most keenly felt by those in political science. We can anticipate a deluge of work on the sanctions issue, and those who have been incorporated within the structure of the state will no doubt launch a new "Rhodesian-syndrome" – a complex mythology concerning sanctions, their busting, their duplicity, their futility. Indeed, this has already started. This exercise is, however, foolish and self-serving because it is regarded as an offence – in terms of the emergency and under the ordinary law of the land – to advocate sanctions, or to write about any possible positive aspects which may flow from sanctions. The issue will, therefore, not be debated: it will only be a one-sided exhortation.



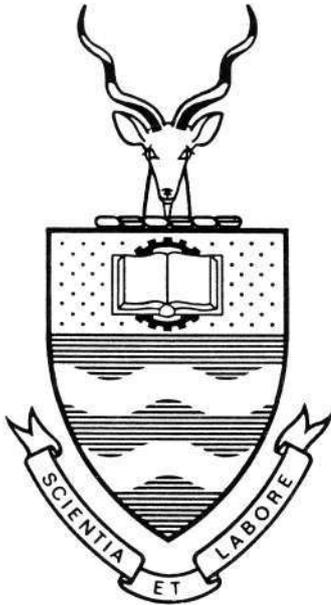
For their part, a fundamental question which the open universities are asking the international community is, "What would you **now** have us do to call the dogs off?" It is not altogether surprising that this question should be asked, given that the open universities consider themselves as part of the international community of scholars. Moreover, the open universities have consistently opposed the determined efforts of successive Nationalist governments to crush their independence. If members of the international community of scholars turn their backs on the open universities, who have worked so hard to defend their freedom, will they not themselves be limiting the academic freedom that has been so persistently defended?

The near universal condemnation of the institutionalised racial separation of people in South Africa, and the extraordinary efforts which the present rulers have made to preserve their power have given the country a special place in human affairs.<sup>5</sup> As a result, foreign academics are expecting more than merely symbolic opposition to apartheid from the open universities; they are looking for action. They are looking to the open universities for ideas about how to initiate a process of change in which common values will play a determining role. Increasingly, it appears that they will judge international acceptability on how the open universities meet this challenge. In short, they are asking the open universities to treat the causes of apartheid, and no longer its symptoms.

The alternative response, "Toward the New Frontier", rejects absolutely the state's overtures for incorporation. It holds that the present social system is totally unacceptable, and that genuine prosperity and security for all the citizens

of the country lie in the clear, unequivocal acceptance that there is a non-racial alternative for what is now known as South Africa.

There is a fairly rich body of local literature on what role the South African university – particularly, the open university – might play in the present situation.<sup>6</sup> There is no need to rehearse the many arguments which have been put in those exchanges. Rather, the open universities should build on these early suggestions and seek new and innovative ways in which they might ensure their continued acceptability to the international community, to their students and to internal popular organisations. Consider, for example, three non-threatening areas.



First, the open universities might take a firm, vigorous lead in raising the level of educational attainment of all South Africa's people. The universities possess extensive pools of intellectual material, which the great mass of South Africans do not possess; indeed, they have been denied access to for many generations. Recently, Professor Ismail Mohamed, at the DCS Oosthuizen Academic Freedom Lecture at Rhodes, reminded his audience that "While the vast mass of our youth are struggling to acquire rudimentary knowledge of reading and writing, there are those who could reach out to an understanding of the universe, theories of an expanding universe and black holes millions of light years away. While the vast mass of our black youth lack the most elementary knowledge of health and hygiene and are the victims of the diseases of malnutrition and poverty, there are those who can reach out to an understanding of the very basis of life, of DNA molecules and genetic materials and the behaviour of chemical messages and electric pulses in nerve endings, determining communications between nerve cells."<sup>7</sup>

Of course the universities are not responsible for this situation. Nevertheless, on a **per capita** basis, they have been the main beneficiaries of the state's educational largesse and therefore must bear a large part of the responsibility for meeting the growing crisis in elementary and secondary education. It is clear that the international community will judge the universities by how successfully they relate to the immediate community; by the contribution they make to the education of all the country's citizens.

Significant contributions have been made in the field of education by many South African institutions, outside of the universities. For example, the SACHED Trust is viewed favourably both by South Africans and by many abroad, and it demonstrates that important alternative routes to educational upliftment are viable. While the jury is still out on the Khanya College experiment, the verdict promises to be a positive one. If so, it will be an important model for the open universities to emulate.

Secondly, the universities should be a catalyst for change within our society. In practice, this may mean providing extra-parliamentary opponents of apartheid with the necessary tools in their struggle to overcome the present structure; research and administrative skills are just two such tools. However, no discussion of this kind of assistance could be complete without considering the question of violence. Is it any less correct, for example, to help the ANC build a limpet mine, than it is to help ARMSCOR assemble a bomb? These are the kinds of questions which individuals cannot openly answer, but they are questions which need to be asked within the universities.

Many younger academics are already directly involved in the wider struggle against **apartheid**. Should the open universities encourage and reward these young scholars? Under the SAPSE regime this will be impossible, but are other ways to be found?

Finally, the open universities should become the chief arena for serious discussion of what South Africa after **apartheid** ought to look like. This debate has, of course, already begun, but it has been muted on the campuses, partially because of the intense ideological tension which debates of this kind engender. In light of this, it is encouraging that UWC has taken a lead in looking at these issues. However, each university is set in a unique environment and can thus only itself determine a proper relationship both to the present and to the future order where it is located.

The open universities should train South Africans in the skills they will need to run their country after **apartheid**. Obviously, this will be an immense and time-consuming task. **Post-apartheid** South Africa will be a highly complex society as the search to overcome **apartheid** has so painfully shown. As countless Third World models so graphically demonstrate, there will be no easy options in the new society.

If these suggestions are impossible to implement, the open universities should perhaps begin by admitting that the formula they have thus far relied upon has failed, and that the route to true academic freedom lies in consultation with the country's majority. Such an admission should not be a fawning apology, but a statement that a new beginning is possible both in the universities and in the country itself.

The open universities face immense challenges as they move towards the new society. Their international colleagues appear to be asking them to meet the challenge, rather than buckle under the pressure from the minority government. From afar some foreign academics appear to be relishing in the quandary they have placed for the open universities. But the issue of **apartheid** will remain on the international agenda until the last vestiges of racism are removed from the statute books, until the majority rule the country.

If South Africa's open universities want to remain internationally acceptable they will need to move towards the new frontier, which the country itself faces. It will not be painless. WH Auden captured the anguish of such choices when he wrote:

**NOTE:** This article is based on notes used in an address to the Conference '86, **The Open Universities in Transition**, organised by the University Teacher's Association of South Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, September 4th and 5th, 1986. David Weiner assisted in the drafting of the original notes. Ian Macdonald, Gavin Stewart, Chris Heymans, Louise Vale, Caroline White and Roux van der Merwe gave valuable comments on the redrafting of the notes. I have also benefited from listening to Nico Cloete talk on this subject on two occasions.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>SAPSE stands for "South African Post-Secondary Education" and is the generic term given to the government's evolving university policy; obviously it encompasses the sensitive issues of university financing.

<sup>2</sup>Human Sciences Research Council, HSRC Education Research Programme. "Investigation into Better utilization of the Academic Year at South African Universities". (Project ONZA 14R001/3), Pretoria, 1986.

<sup>3</sup>I came to thinking about these issues after reading Michael D Yates, "South Africa, Anti-Communism and Value-Free Science" in **The Chronicle of Higher Education** May 14, 1986, p.84. While the piece deals with the issues raised in the title, it gives a good account of how this country is viewed by many scholars in the United States. Subsequent issues of **The Chronicle** carry responses, both favourable and antagonistic, to Yates.

"The sense of danger must not disappear,  
the way is certainly both short and steep,  
however gradual it looks from here,  
Look if you like, but you will have to leap" □

<sup>4</sup>Recently an organization called SYNCOM with links to the conservative Washington-based Heritage Foundation issued a "Privatisation Position Paper" which dealt with the topic "Towards a Community Based System of Education". A foreword to the paper written by a certain Andre Spier makes this somewhat extraordinary claim: "The purpose of publishing these PPPs is to provide interested parties with a neutral, objective and factual reference resource on key aspects and key areas of privatisation".

<sup>5</sup>It is unnecessary to traverse the issues of why this has occurred again. Perhaps, however, reference can be made to two recent articles from Jack Spence which clarify some of the points made in the March/May Special International Issue of **Reality**. The two Spence articles are to be found in **Optima**, Vol 34, No 1, pp. 2-22, entitled "**The Most Popular Corpse in History**", and the 5th Bradlow Fellow Address, entitled "**Why is South Africa popular Abroad**" to be published shortly by the South African Institute of International Affairs.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, James Moulder (Ed) University and Community, **Philosophical Papers, Monographic Series**, No 2, June, 1980, and the articles by Ronald Dworkin, Jonathan Suzman, Geoff Budlender and Mark Orkin in **Philosophical Papers**, Vol. VII, No 1, (May 1979). The collection edited by John Marcum entitled **Education, Race and Social Change in South Africa**, University of California Press, 1982 is a helpful compilation of writings on the role of the universities (and other aspects of education). A good recent piece - with a comprehensive survey of the literature - to be found in Jon File's **The Politics of Excellence: University Education in the South African Context**, Unpublished Seminar Paper, Africa Seminar, Centre for African Studies, UCT, 19th March, 1986, 34 pp.

<sup>7</sup>Ismail Mohamed, Academic Freedom and the Crisis in Education. DCS Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture, Grahamstown, 28 August, 1986, pp. 5-6.

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### **Last winter**

*Last winter in Namibia  
the casual music droned  
through empty farmsteads -  
Africa returning  
to the tuneless stars.*

*Abandoned windpumps,  
whirring metal flowers,  
grated in the wind  
pumping hot nothing  
into empty reservoirs.*

Don Maclellan.