

## OPEN, REPRESSIVE, OR BLACK EDUCATION?

Mark Townsend

University of Zululand

Umlazi

On Friday, 31st May 1986 the Umlazi Extramural Division of the University of Zululand was host to a conference of relevance to all of us connected to black universities in South Africa. Funded by Ford Foundation and organized by the Association of Sociologists of South Africa (A.S.S.A.), the aim of the conference was to discuss the state of the social sciences at black SA universities. At least one delegate from each of the black universities was invited to give a short description of the situation at his or her university. It came as a shock to realize that most of the black universities were closed due to boycotts at the time of the conference. While some of the papers were stimulating, enlivening and critical, others were tired, boring and confused. George Orwell may perhaps have squirmed in his grave at the poor language usage of some of the delegates but, given the style of today's academic discussion, this is hardly surprising.

Psychology in society, 1987, 7, 54-66

While this essay is mainly about the conference, it may be of interest to relate the issues raised here to the debate about South African universities that has arisen in the columns of the Times Higher Education Supplement, where a fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge University, Christopher Forsyth, and the rector of the University of Zululand, Prof A.C. Nkabinde, have been discussing similar issues.

But before going any deeper into the debate, it would perhaps be relevant to explain what sort of model of debate I have in mind. In a polarised situation very little communication takes place. The partisans on one side disagree with everything offered by the partisans on the other. The voices get louder and the terminology becomes more and more insulting. This is not the kind of debate I have in mind. Rather, I would advocate a more responsive, open debate. This presupposes that each participant, while presenting a particular point of view as cogently as possible, remains open to the possibility of changing his or her mind when faced with more convincing arguments to the contrary. One should be prepared to review all one's prejudices, theories and presently-held standpoints if need be. If this openness is not present, the debate (especially in SA today) will degenerate into futile argumentation. Hopefully this essay will contribute to the discussion in this spirit.

Since access to the 'facts' of the situation is uneven, it seems inappropriate to attempt to assess the objective, factual reality of the various arguments. Where one side is able to marshal a formidable artillery of facts in support of its arguments while the other side, due to its being so narrowly circumscribed by a hostile environment, is virtually defenceless, it is not fair to take 'the facts' as proof. In such a situation no doubt the debate will be reduced to a straight fight between the positivists and the structuralists once again (because they are the only ones with a body of facts at their disposal) and no headway will be made. But really, no array of facts is likely to affect the debate because the issues revolve primarily around



perceptions, which are virtually unverifiable. Consequently, Nkabinde's attempt to refute Forsyth's contention that the black universities are dominated by SA government nominees by means of a table setting out the 'objective data' of the situation is ineffective. No amount of data from the Department of Information, or the Frankfurt School, is going to make any difference --- no one is likely to be persuaded. In this debate the only ones likely to be able to contribute meaningfully are the phenomenologists i.e. those who accept that no one knows what he is talking about and that we are all stumbling about equally in the dark.

On the other hand, this is not to dismiss the influence of one's political faith or one's philosophy of education. This will unavoidably direct and inform our appraisal of the debate. We should perhaps then be constantly aware, and make others aware, of the standpoint from which we are viewing the situation. Although no one will be able to claim absolute impartiality at the end of it, at least this will assist us in giving each other a fair hearing in the hope that some communication might take place.

#### A TYPOLOGY OF SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Before going on to discussing the problems experienced by black universities, it may be relevant to examine the differences between the various SA universities for the purposes of clarity. For at the ASSA conference these differences were mentioned continually; and Forsyth and Nkabinde mention them as well. In so doing they have developed a typology of SA universities.

Basically, there are three types of university in South Africa :

- (a) the 'open' university --- the long-established English universities (Cape Town, Natal, Witwatersrand and Rhodes) built from private funds and catering mainly for the white, English-speaking, professional class, but adhering to the liberal traditions of open debate and admission on merit, rather than on race or religion;
- (b) the 'repressive' university --- the Afrikaans universities

(Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Potchefstroom, OFS, RAU, UniSA and Port Elizabeth) catering mainly for the production of the governing bureaucratic class, and adhering to the conservative traditions of white racial admission, Calvinism and rote-learning, as opposed to debate; and

- (c) the 'black' university --- mostly new state-built universities established for the different black ethnic groups (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Zululand, Fort Hare, Venda, Vista, Turfloop, Western Cape, Qwa Qwa, Durban-Westville) catering mainly for the production of teachers and other personnel of the various ethnic groups' governments, and thus inheriting the state's bias towards accentuating cultural differences and rote-learning.

These, then, are the three main types. As we are here primarily concerned with the black universities, I would like to suggest that the last type could fruitfully be divided into a further two sub-types :

- (i) the 'urban black' university --- those universities for blacks which are situated near to the major urban areas (Durban-Westville, Western Cape and Vista);
- (ii) the 'homeland' university --- those sited within the homelands.

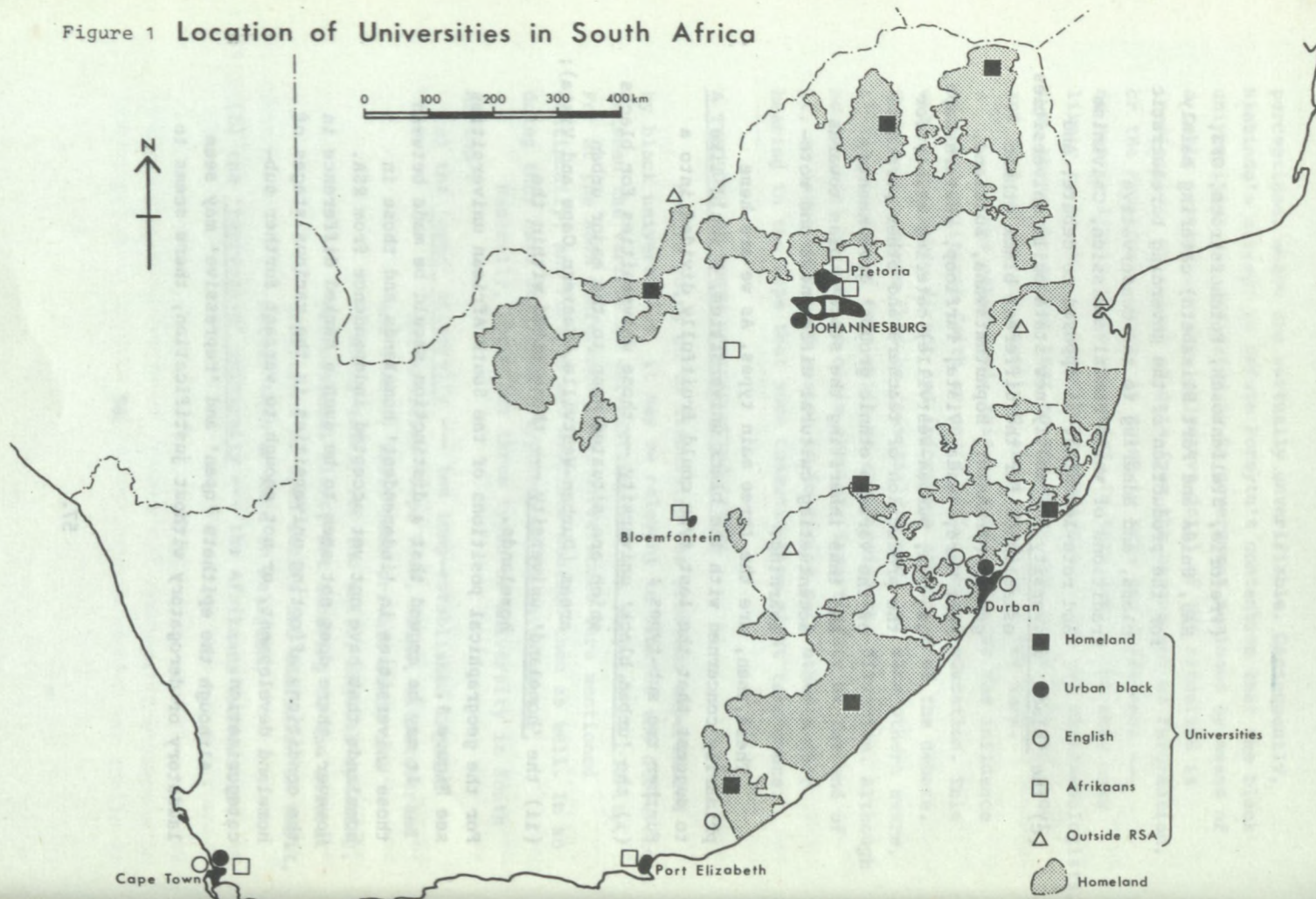
For the geographical positions of the South African universities see Figure 1.

It may be argued that a distinction should be made between those universities in 'independent' homelands and those in homelands that have not yet accepted independence from RSA. However, there does not seem to be such a marked difference in the conditions affecting universities in the various stages of homeland development, or not enough to warrant further sub-categorization.

Although the epithets 'open' and 'repressive' may seem laudatory or derogatory without justification, there seems to



Figure 1 Location of Universities in South Africa



be no way of avoiding the use of such terms. Merely the perception and description of these institutions as 'open' or 'repressive' by a sufficient number of people is enough to show the currency of such perceptions, and enough to warrant our acceptance of these terms here. Again, whether one accepts or rejects these terms will largely depend on one's political ideology or one's educational philosophy.

#### PROBLEMS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AT BLACK SA UNIVERSITIES

Since the passing of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, the position in black schools has deteriorated alarmingly. The educational protests that eventually resulted in the Soweto riots of 1976 and have continued to disrupt black schooling in the decade since then, have a factual origin few would deny. It does not seem necessary to discuss whether Bantu Education really is a tool of oppression --- it is definitely perceived as such. The detention of scholars under the age of 16 for public violence, the popular slogan amongst the youth "No education before liberation" : these things are hard to ignore. The poor quality of black education was brought up early on in the conference and was referred to repeatedly throughout. Inevitably, this affects how well trained the teachers in black schools are, how well equipped the black students entering university are, and how able the lecturers at black universities are to teach realistic, relevant social science. The view that SA's black education is a snake feeding on itself, or a machine grinding itself down to nothing, was expressed by many. And merely "improving our pedagogical techniques" will not alter this. Being structurally induced, this problem can only be alleviated through structural change. And some delegates called for a greater commitment to bring about such a change.

However, there is another factor that, while seemingly absent from black schools, looms overwhelmingly large over black universities, and perhaps this is where we should link up with the Times Higher Education Supplement debate. The opinion of delegates at the conference that the black universities at which



they work are dominated by conservative Afrikaans bureaucrats was expressed so often that it would be difficult, as Nkabinde has tried to do, to refute. Seemingly, this problem manifests itself in mainly two ways.

Firstly, student grievances ignored by the administration of the university result in protest marches and boycotts, to which the administration responds by calling in the police (and the fact that so many black universities were closed at the time of the conference due to scenarios of this kind would tend to support this view).

Secondly, in the academic departments, faculties, senates and councils highly placed conservative Afrikaans academics are so dominant that the younger black academics' efforts and aspirations are continually stymied. For example, annoyance was expressed at the fact that external examiners are usually chosen from the 'repressive' Afrikaans universities. (On the other hand, the 'open' English university academics were blamed for not wanting to dirty their hands by touching goods so soiled by apartheid and for refusing to help in this regard.) The young black lecturers said that they feared to say what they really thought, or even to try to change their syllabi to incorporate their real, honestly-held scientific opinions and subject matter, for this would invariably lead to conflict with their conservative department heads and prejudice their chances of promotion.

It would seem that from 1959, when the Extension of University Education Act (which brought about the establishment of the 'bush colleges', as they are sometimes known) was passed and when the founders of the black universities were recruited, till today the conservative authority structure has been retained. As the UWC delegate argued (and Forsyth supports this contention), UWC may be an exception to this rule. However, it seems to apply to all the other black universities.

The concentration on political factors so far may obscure from recognition an element essential to any educational debate : one's educational philosophy. Nor is it so simple that we can say that a conservative will automatically opt for merely improved techniques of data-gathering while a radical will opt

for an education that liberates. Instead of looking at the division between the two main factions in terms of politics, it may be more valid to try to explain the division in terms of more basic differences in philosophy. It may be an oversimplification but there seem to be two main approaches to education here.

The one philosophy looks at knowledge as an entity, or something that can be acquired by swotting or rote-learning. According to this way of thinking, the lecturer carries the burden --- the lecturer imparts knowledge to the student who in turn goes home to swot the information and reproduce the lecturer's version as closely as possible in tests and examinations. Questions in class are purely for purposes of clarification, not for truly questioning the validity of what the lecturer is saying. The rationale behind this approach is that upon going out into the professional world the student will be equipped to walk into the job and continue practising the methods and techniques learnt in class.

The other philosophy of education asks the question : But what if you encounter something in the outside world for which you have not been trained ? and suggests a different method. This philosophy denies the existence of a body of knowledge that one can apply to solve all problems, and concentrates on independent work, discovering problems and devising solutions for oneself. By encouraging seminars and critical debate the burden is shifted from the lecturer to the student. The idea is that upon entering the professional world the student may not know how to do the job at all but whatever the task he or she will soon master it because of the problem-solving skills acquired in the self-education process.

Disagreement over the philosophy of education could be seen as the core of many of the delegates' objections to the way that social science is taught at today's black universities. The campus is seen as dead, uncritical, half asleep, a place where nothing of interest happens, where there are no stimulating debates, and where everyone is involved in cramming for exams. By and large it would be true to say that the rote-learning



philosophy was said to be propounded by the older, conservative academics in control while the the critical-debate philosophy was pleaded for by the younger academics. An alternative explanation could be in terms of what each teacher hopes to achieve : whether one hopes that one's students will be able to enter a profession without problems, or whether one hopes that one's students will emerge from class as balanced human beings with a greater moral purpose. The dictum of Socrates (and echoed by Thoreau, Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King) that "an unexamined life is not worth living" is hardly something the academies can afford to ignore; but neither is it realistic to overlook the fact that we need to eat to live. Unanimity is unlikely to be reached over this.

There is also a tendency amongst administrators of educational institutions throughout the world to measure these institutions in terms of how many students pass, fail, achieve greatness, etc --- as if the university was some kind of sausage-machine, as if we were all merely entrepreneurs in the "business of education". It is not surprising that the more idealistic academics rebel against this view of their work.

Some delegates from homeland universities mentioned problems related to their geographical location. By design it seems, these universities have been situated as far from the urban areas as possible, which results in a sense of isolation felt by both students and lecturers. As is clear from Figure 1, the homeland universities are all at least 150 kilometres from the nearest city. Incidentally, this isolation coupled with the fact of the closures of most of the homeland universities would seem to refute the opening sentence of Forsyth's THES article :

"Only the most uncritical and isolated of South Africa's universities have escaped disruption since the state of emergency was declared on July 22 last year."

In fact the opposite may be true, i.e. that only the 'open' and 'repressive' universities have escaped disruption, for neither the English nor the Afrikaans universities have been closed down.

Another internal issue that cropped up regularly at the conference was the way in which money is spent at black universities. As Forsyth puts it,

"... considerable capital sums have been spent on the development of these universities by the South African government so they often have grand modern buildings and other facilities..."

At the conference the grandness of the buildings was attested to but described as irrelevant to the real problems facing black universities. The high student-to-lecturer ratio is simply not redressed by such expenditure. When a lecturer is expected to teach first-, second- and third-year courses continuously throughout the year and is the only member of the department, the size and magnificence of the buildings and lecture halls pales into insignificance. Whereas funding is withheld from what most of the delegates regarded as worthy projects, e.g. inviting world-renowned authorities to speak, organizing debates or conferences, and generally keeping abreast of the social sciences elsewhere, it is granted to improving the exterior facade of the university in order to impress visitors. One delegate called the black universities "Asinamali Institutions" in this regard.

Thus it would appear that the internal dynamics of the black universities keep them in a permanent state of disequilibrium.

However, in a time when the country is experiencing something of a crisis or upheaval, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the major problems referred to at the conference related to environmental influences from outside the campus. And in this respect there are major differences between the homeland and urban black universities. Whilst the influence of the townships on black universities in urban areas is powerful and all-pervasive, the same influence on the homeland universities is indirect. When there is widespread violence in Soweto, Vista University cannot simply ignore it and continue with classes. The same applies to UWC when Elsie's River is in



riot. Even though UDW is more insulated from the townships, nevertheless it always seems to be disrupted during the surrounding township upheavals.

On the other hand the homeland universities are so far from the urban townships that they are not immediately affected. Here a very different political climate prevails, one dominated by the homeland government within whose territory the university falls. Apart from the general curbs on freedom of speech and the right to democratic participation that apply to the South African society at large, there are additional and seemingly much more frightening curbs in the homelands. Direct homelands government intervention on campus occurs too frequently to be dismissed as a figment of the academic's imagination : detention, deportation, personal violence --- it all serves to increase the fear one has of speaking one's mind. Those who get involved in community projects are most open to this kind of harrassment.

This inevitably has the effect of making academics too frightened to participate closely in community affairs and encourages a retreat to the ivory tower of positivism. Small wonder that the only academics who seem to survive are those who espouse the positivist approach. Furthermore, as ethnic creations, the homeland universities serve to enhance cultural differences to the detriment of the universal values the university is supposed to espouse, it was argued. In this way they bolster the position of the "little chiefs", as one delegate called them, and ignore the plight of 'the people' or the working class. To counter this there was the plea for all of us to become "committed social scientists", despite such undeniable obstacles.

The influence of the homeland government on the black university was so strong, some argued, that it corrupted the proper academic learning process by engendering fear in students and lecturers : students refuse to discuss topical issues concerning the homeland; lecturers are unhappy about quoting local examples unless they coincide with homeland ideology; prominent people from off-campus refuse to come and discuss

controversial local problems. Thus, although certain academics may be committed to teaching relevant social science and to changing the society, there are such high risks involved that only those prepared for banishment are ready to take them. Given this setting, it seems unlikely that the "strategies to promote freedom of speech on their campuses" (that Nkabinde says the homeland universities have devised) will have any effect since they only involve student participation in certain internal university affairs.

From the foregoing it might seem that no criticism was directed at the 'open' English universities. This was not the case. In fact, in contrast to Forsyth's praise for the 'noble' stand made by the open universities in the struggle against apartheid, many delegates supported Nkabinde's contention that the English universities do not have an unblemished copybook in this regard. The fact that most of the external examiners are chosen from Afrikaans universities is due to the elitist, condescending attitude of the English university academics towards the black universities. Even the English academics' description of the black universities as 'disadvantaged' was objected to on the grounds that this presupposed that black universities should strive to emulate the English universities. While perhaps not guilty of producing bureaucrats for the state, the English universities have produced professionals for industry who were generally inimical to the interests of the working class and by and large favoured capital and the upper classes, some felt. For social scientists more interested in the working class there were definite advances in working at black universities. In this way the patronising attitude of the English universities was seen as counter-productive towards improving the situation at black universities.

## CONCLUSION

Although I have tried to be as impartial as possible, it is unavoidable that this is nothing more than a partial account. Others who attended the conference may have come away with a completely different impression and may heartily disagree with



this version. The braai and informal discussions afterwards may inadvertently have affected my consciousness and served to accentuate certain impressions. Nor would it be just to say that every delegate subscribed to all the views above. The fact that the delegates were drawn mainly from the younger members of staff at the black universities may have distorted the picture somewhat, so that these are really only the problems the 'young Turks' experience with the 'old guard'. Similarly, it would be untrue to say that there was absolute agreement amongst those who attended. There were disagreements; and anyway many people will not express their opinions when they realize that they are patently in the minority.

However, there is one aspect that I think that most of us who attended the conference will agree about : the fellow-feeling or feeling of solidarity with people at other black campuses. And since we come from such isolated, scattered, small campuses this is a very positive thing.

As I have said, this essay may be a load of poppycock. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to deny the predicament in which the black universities find themselves when we are daily reminded of its reality. Perhaps a fitting example illustrating this can be gleaned from the ILANGA newspaper editorial (28-30 August, 1986 issue) deploring the reaction of SA's Minister of Education, Dr Gerrit Viljoen, to the offer made by some Western countries to fund 500 black students to study overseas. Minister Viljoen's reaction was that SA did not need their money.

#### REFERENCES

- Nzimande, E.B. Report on the proceedings of Conference/Workshop  
May 1986 held under the auspices of the ASSA-Ford Project  
on the state of the social sciences in black  
universities
- Times Higher Education Supplement, 21 February 1986
- Times Higher Education Supplement, 27 June 1986
- ILANGA, 28-30 August 1986.