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The silence of the intellec tuals

The voices of black 'public thinkers' have been noticeably silent over crucial issues

JONATHAN JANSEN, Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria, says co-option by government spells critical oblivion

Last year the unthinkable happened. The Minister of Education in our young democracy instructed major newspapers to sign an undertaking as to the way in which they would report the 2002 matriculation results. The newspapers were required to print the results without editorial comment and to carry an apology for breaking an "embargo" on such editorialisation in the 2001 examinations.

Had such a thing occurred under the draconian "emergency" legislation of the apartheid regime, it would have provoked public outrage and widespread debate. That it could happen under a post-apartheid democracy is one thing; that it could pass without sustained protest and outrage from the public in general, and public intellectuals in particular, is the subject of this article.

The vocation of the intellectual in South Africa has fallen on hard times.

Persons are under attack, reputations are muddied and lives are even threatened. Courageous voices have been severely attacked by politicians, academics and the

general public for daring to pose uncomfortable questions about health, education, warfare and the presidency itself. In this fragile democracy, it is more important than ever to be vigilant to the conditions under which public intellectuals speak and are compelled to speak.

It is now 35 years since Harold Cruse first published his landmark book, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. While I do not position myself with the black nationalist sentiment of Cruse, and his diatribe against the integrationists, it is difficult not to recognise the significance of his reflection on a particular class of intellectuals – the black intellectual.

This is not to minimise the role of the white intellectual; there must of necessity remain a place for solidarity and collective action by white and black intellectuals, together. But it would be dangerous to ignore the fact that the objective conditions that nurtured black intellectuals under and against apartheid, and that informed and shaped the character of black intellectuals after apartheid, are quite different from those that influence and nurture white intellectuals.

For example, black intellectuals do not enjoy the same access to leading publishing houses and resources as do white intellectuals. White-intellectuals are dominant

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within universities and are still the dominant voices in research, in public performances, on international platforms and in artistic forums. White intellectuals continue to dominate and sustain the powerful knowledge networks that sustain white authority in all kinds of productions.

Having said this, the picture is not as grim as it was 10 years ago. Black political science commentators enjoy a growing measure of public ascendancy and political visibility in the media. In certain fields such as medicine and education, black intellectuals have gained recognition by sheer force of personality, publication and production, albeit in a world still dominated by white intellectuals.

The main point, however, is that black intellectuals stand in a very different relationship to the state. There is a patriotism that is expected, even demanded, from those who are supposed to understand the struggles and support the projects of the emerging state.

Reviewing the past year inevitably provokes familiar concerns, in which the role of intellectuals generally, and black intellectuals in particular, has been thrown into sharp relief. Concerns include the presidential position on HIV/Aids, government's response to the Zimbabwean crisis, the manufactured "plot" against the president, the so-called "Xhosa Nostra" in political appointments and the racist music song of Mbongeni Ngema.

The first thing that strikes one is the silence of black intellectuals on most of these concerns. From one crisis to the

next, the voices of leading intellectuals, with or without expertise in the relevant fields, were simply absent.

One can only wonder whether the silence of the medical establishment had to do with concerns about access to vital resources, the loss of prized jobs and access to social and disciplinary privilege; such potential losses might explain the silence or the belated and muted response from a few.

Indeed, there was evidence of swift retribution visited on those doctors who dared to provide life-prolonging treatments to patients with HIV/Aids.

One wonders also whether the silence of black intellectuals (as opposed to the chorus of white sympathisers) on the Zimbabwean crisis might reflect a latent attitude that "the Rhodes had it coming anyway", given the viciousness of colonialism about two decades ago.

One also wonders whether the silence of so-called "African intellectuals" on the Ngema episode was based on their unspoken retribution for Indians who, like the Rhodes, "had it coming their way for a long time, anyway".

Finally, one wonders whether the failure of black intellectuals to lead the debate on ethnic and tribal identities in the wake of the "Xhosa Nostra" is the result of squeamishness about dealing with an unpleasant reality beginning to surface in our non-racial democracy: that as resources and the promises of resources dry up, poor people (and the insatiable black elite) will once again mobilise ethnic identity to make demands on such resources.

It must be said, parenthetically, that while some of the most courageous voices in the anti-apartheid struggle were those of intellectuals - in the face of vicious retaliation by the apartheid state - those same voices have retreated into the comforts offered by silence.

It is very clear that the non-racial utopia is receding fast in the exposing light of grinding poverty among the black poor and greedy ambition among the black elite. When the chips are down, the comfortable accommodation of an inclusive "black" (that is, the fragile bond of coloured, Indian and African solidarity) rips apart. The unspoken assignment that "we are all black" quickly disintegrates when resources, position and mobility are at stake.

It is crucial that black intellectuals begin to take on the sacred cows of non-racial pretence and "speak truth to power". But this also means dealing with the silence of black intellectuals with respect to whiteness. The problem of the black intellectual is, to a large extent, self-inflicted. We need to be deeply concerned about the practices

in which we engage as institutions to actively deny the emergence of a next generation of black intellectuals. Institutions have promoted a large body of young black academics into professorships without any record of scholarship.

This destroys the careers of these young black scholars who now, as a result of the position attained, have no further incentive to develop.

These senior positions now require not the gradual building-up of a record of scholarship, but the burden of administration and management for which these young minds are completely under-prepared. Not only do such practices effectively terminate the career of a potential class of intellectuals, they yield to higher education a layer of academics with no capacity to reproduce the critical persons and skills required for a developing country.

The same mediocrity that produced a lost generation of dubious Afrikaner academics as a result of affirmative action in the previous century is now being visited on black academics through institutional malpractices of this kind. It is not just the termination of black academic and intellectual careers that is at stake; it is also the self-imposed culture of silence on black

(and white) intellectuals on our campuses today. Is it possible that the pervasive influence of a new managerialism has left in its wake institutional cultures which are starved of the oxygen of public criticism and intellectual engagement?

I suspect that intellectual restructuring requires fresh scrutiny with respect to its impact on academic and intellectual life in universities. It was simply unthinkable, 10 years ago, that government would impose on institutions a regime of accountability that would systematically erode the autonomy of universities.

The Minister of Education appoints the chairpersons of interim councils in institutions proposed for mergers. The minister also has the power to appoint an administrator to ungovernable institutions; decide which institutions will merge; and decide which programmes will receive state funding and which will not.

The minister has also hinted at getting involved in curriculum decisions and debates in higher education - an intrusion which, if it happens, would bring government into confrontation with the last frontier of liberal autonomy - the right to decide what to teach.

Given the multiple crises engulfing several institutions in the 1990s, some of these dramatic interventions were desirable. However, important ground has been lost in the defence of autonomy.

The regime of accountability that governs institutions has created a new climate of operation for academics and intellectuals. It is in such an environment that we hope to see the emergence of black, public intellectuals. There is little ground for

optimism. How do we create conditions under which black public intellectuals might once again be identified, developed, nurtured and sustained?

We could begin by actively creating forums in which public intellectuals - journalists, artists, academics, community activists, among others - find common ground in which to exercise the right to criticism and action as a matter of course.

The Wolpe Series led by the Centre for Civil Society is one of these kinds of projects.

We are also not talking about the rehashing of outmoded vocabularies that do more to align the intellectual with a particular ideological perspective than to cast new light on resilient problems of poverty, policy or pain. It should be possible to fulfil the role of the public intellectual while at the same time working with and through communities and government projects.

The most common route to oblivion has been the co-option of black intellectuals within government. It is amazing how black intellectuals, once they enter the

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halls of power, not only change how they dress and speak, but how they understand external realities. Some still pretend to be intellectuals. But the black intellectual has been co-opted into the machinery of government, where compliance and conformity are more highly valued, even to the point of honesty and denial.

Another way of nurturing black (and white) public intellectuals is by rethinking the curriculums of public institutions. It is true that the new regime of qualifications, unit standards and competencies has led to a very narrow, vocationally oriented curriculum in which programme compliance (and therefore funding approval) has overshadowed traditional preoccupation with what is worth learning and teaching in the first place.

This ground must be regained so that the intellectual content of the public curriculum in higher education is restored. Many young and promising black scholars and intellectuals are lost to universities within the first three years of employment. Young academics face working conditions that are palpably unattractive for long-term career development. New PhDs are loaded with large first-year classes and no teaching assistants to wade through the assessment of hundreds of students. Teaching loads, administrative commitments and the demand for research invariably take their toll on the young academic.

The answer might lie in a national institute for advanced studies that specifically targets young academics with PhDs. The institute would take young academics for three months every year, for three years in a row, into an institutional environment designed to encourage academic writing, intellectual engagement and the development of scholarship. It would expose these young scholars to peers working in different disciplinary traditions.

It would also expose the young academic to leading authorities in their fields of study. It would bring global intellectuals into seminars and discussions on trans-disciplinary concerns, thereby breaking the low-level disciplinary obsessions of most departmental cultures and encouraging thinking and reflection beyond such confines.

It means nurturing the art of posing public questions, whether the original discipline is genetics history or electronics. The art of posing public questions is the most important skill in the arsenal of the public intellectual, and it is unlikely to develop exclusively within the confines of university life as it is currently constituted.

● This is an edited version of an article which originally appeared in *Indicator South Africa*.