

Intellectuals Under Fire

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The nation is awash in 'ten years of democracy' celebrations and, perhaps predictably in an election year, the ruling party has ensured that the enormous accomplishments of 'the rainbow people of God' cover all fronts and are attributed to this act of covering that conceals the disturbing ferment percolating wildly just below the thin surface membrane of our young democracy. I speak of the unprecedented attacks on intellectuals, the widespread self-censorship among the black elite, the quiet but effective ways of silencing dissent - and the uncritical reflections on what this might mean for the future of our young democracy.

I do not come at this debate from the position of the cynic - in its politely liberal or aggressive racist tones. Indeed, to dismiss the enormous strides taken since the early 1990s in building this young democracy as fictitious rainbowism is unfair and misleading. Much has been attained. On the other hand, to celebrate mindlessly the achievements of the state is to render this young democracy acutely vulnerable to the very stresses and strains that destroyed some of the most promising democratic movements on the continent. I enter this debate via personal stories of my own experiences in the past ten years as an independent critic loyal to the democratic project for which so many paid the ultimate sacrifice.

In March 2004 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC Radio) aired a live documentary of almost three hours on the now ubiquitous theme of 'ten years of democracy'. I was invited to lead the segment on "intellectuals" and to address the question as to whether there was space for criticism and independent thought ten years later. Contrary to the excessive *ululation* from a dozen other speakers in the earlier segments, I made the point that intellectuals are in fact under fire in this new democracy, and that those working in universities (not to be confused with academics) have, well, shut-up in the face of such relentless fire.

I suggested three reasons for this. First, there is the threat of ostracisation. White intellectuals are readily branded as racists at the slightest indication of a position that differs from the official party line, or that flies in the face of black privilege. Black people know that the charge of racism is the most effective emotional weapon to silence white people - particularly those whose lives have been committed to fighting the scourge of racism. Black intellectuals easily branded as disloyal, a charge that seldom describes the subject of disloyalty (disloyal to what?) but which nevertheless summonses the emotions of deep racial solidarities forged under the fire of apartheid. Second, there is the fear of retaliation through the withdrawal of rewards readily on offer through politics, the bureaucracy and the private sector to those who cooperate. Black enrichment has proceeded at an alarming rate, albeit for a few, and those public figures called intellectuals could easily turn from a lousy salary in university life to an abundance of wealth and recognition under the largesse of the state and its BEE

(Black Economic Empowerment) affiliates. Third, there is the uncertainty of reaction—that personal lack of confidence or certainty in how to respond to power within this new space created for democratic life. South Africa had one of the most articulate intellectual communities - encompassing artists, academics and journalists - under and against apartheid. For many, the liberation movements had taken on romantic and idealistic proportions, especially under the leadership of the Islander, Nelson Mandela. Much had been sacrificed in terms of black life, quite literally, and this was embodied in the African National Congress. Surely intellectuals cannot stand up to this new nationalism, premised as it is on the politics of race? Or can they?

One of the respondents to my opening statement was a senior ANC loyalist and constitutional court judge. His response to BBC listeners was personal: “Of course I know Jansen; he is a known gadfly”- and that was more or less the sum total of his dismissive response to 65 seconds of analysis. Off the air, this senior politician and lawman took a completely different tone. First he said that he agreed with my comments and gave several examples to support my claim that the ANC-led government rendered the country weak on a number of fronts and that intellectuals had succumbed in their duty to speak truth to power. This is not an unusual stance on the part of government loyalists: the split between the public and the private stance on the role and claims of intellectuals. In public I have often been damned by politicians and black functionaries of the state only to be told in private by the same persons that they completely agree with my position. Yet it is the public position that counts, for it is in the public domain that attitudes are formed, opinions crafted and perceptions solidified both of intellectuals and the issues that require challenge and engagement. It is moreover in the public domain that the conditions are being created for the kind of democracy that is likely to emerge in the future.

The racial profiling of the critic however is the most serious of the public responses to intellectuals. I appear often on late-night call-in shows on public radio and this is the forum in which to really measure public attitudes towards public criticism of the state and democracy ten years after legal apartheid was terminated. In a recent one-hour long programme I was vilified by the callers, with few exceptions, as being “that Boer from Tukkies” who dared to call for the closure of historically black universities for offering our youth a warmed-up version of Bantu Education. Exactly half-way through this programme, the host announced that I was black, an identity that I had deliberately not announced in order to see how far this racial vilification would go on public radio. In the second half of the programme the responses from callers turned warm and affirming: “we agree with that Prof”. The perception of who I was coloured the nature of the responses to what I said. But this is not always the case.

In another programme which I shared with Siphosiso Seepe, it was announced from the beginning that these were two black academics. The responses were vicious in their personal attacks on our integrity. We were called “peace time heroes”

whom, by implication, were silent during the apartheid years and now benefited from this new space made available by the sacrifices of the “war time heroes”. What was striking in the responses of most of the callers was the resolute determination not to deal with the substance of what was being argued (Zimbabwe, AIDS, Haiti, Education, the Plot, and the arms deal) but to call into question the credibility and loyalty of the critics. In other words, the entire programme revolved around who we were rather than what we said. This is exceptionally dangerous: the climate of name-calling could take two forms - outright dismissal as racists, opportunists or denialists on the one hand - or the more subtle dismissal as gadflies, mavericks or eccentrics, on the other hand. The consequences for democracy are not at all positive, for playing identity politics rather than engaging substance will, when the economic chips are down, make vulnerable *any* identity perceived to threaten the state or state interests that fail to deliver on its basic promises.

Nowhere has this acidic response from the state and its functionaries been more acute than in the debate around the matriculation results. The heart of this debate concerns the increasing number of measures that had been deployed to enable more and more students to pass this final school examination. At the end of 2003, the response from the state through its Director General (Mr Thami Mseleku) and the CEO of Umalusi (Dr Peliwe Lolwana), its quality assurance body, had taken on dangerously new levels of intimidation. The critics were, for the first time, called racists by the organs of state - without any repudiation from the senior politicians to whom they report. The argument of officialdom was that since mostly black students gained from the range of adjustments made to the so-called “raw scores” (Mseleku) and that since no criticism was made when white, Indian and Coloured student results were very high in previous years (Lolwana), the critics were nothing but *racist*. Up to this point, there was no reference to “black” students - since all students benefit from most of the upward adjustments. But now, rather than engage the substance of the criticism, a dangerous play on identity politics once again entered the public arena.

It is not the public debate that concerns me - for officialdom has the right to respond to public challenges to its actions. What concerns me greatly is the nature of the response. It is personal, it is vicious and it replays the dangerous game of identity politics in a nation still vulnerable to racial conflagration at the slightest provocation. This must be one of the few democracies in the world in which an ordinary citizen writes a letter to a newspaper complaining about not being paid as a teacher and then receiving, from a senior politician, a detailed response in the same newspaper attacking the race and privilege of the unknown writer. This bizarre behaviour took on a very distressing form in a ministerial briefing to journalists, as I wrote in a *Sunday Times* article at the end of 2003:

Anyone with doubts about the politicisation of the “matric” examinations should reflect soberly on two media events this past week. The SABC,

on its Morning Live show, passed through its blond hostess a series of heart-warming questions to the Minister of Education, one of which was: “Minister Asmal, this year the matric examinations went without a glitch; who would you like to compliment?” The Minister, ever-smiling, lapped up this servile pandering of the public broadcaster with relish. *Die Burger*, in the context of the official announcement of the results, posed its question through a young black journalist who asked for a response to criticism that the exam results might reflect electioneering gimmicks. She was torn to shreds: the now non-smiling Minister berated the young woman for daring to pose the question; he questioned her commitment to the new government; and he instructed her on the role played by *Die Burger* in supporting the previous government. She had *spoiled* the party; and she made the fateful error of assuming that in our democracy mildly critical questions by the media to government officials would receive serious technical commentary rather than vicious attacks on her personal integrity and political commitment.

This kind of behaviour by the state co-exists, curiously, with regular calls by the senior politicians for robust intellectual debate, by queries from government about the silence of the intellectuals, and by a damning critique of intellectual disengagement by none other than the President of the Republic. How does one make sense of this kind of official behaviour? On the one hand critics and intellectuals are attacked and dismissed in highly personal terms, on the other hand, their silence and disengagement are lamented by the wielders of power? I believe the sensitivity to the existence of an intellectual class is both a concern of those in power as well as a means of anticipating the criticism: that intellectuals have effectively been silenced within the ruling class (such as Jeremy Cronin) as well as outside of it (such as Sipho Seepe). It is a concern because the lack of vigorous intellectual engagement, especially under a President whose sense of paranoia has been the subject of several analyses, questions the very democratic impulses that brought this new state into being in the first place. It breeds concern about “the third term,” about ethnic privilege, about control of the SABC, about the reining in of black journalists, and about a presidential style that from time to time creates and inflames a divisive line—two nations—that threatens to undo this young democracy. Decrying the invisibility of intellectuals is nothing more than the pre-emptive strike of a self-conscious ruling class.

The replay of identity politics is not limited to the strategy of defacement of the intellectuals; it simultaneously recruits intellectuals precisely on the same basis. I was shocked to receive in this election year an invitation, from a senior politician, to dine with the President at Gallagher’s Estate. “The President would like to meet prominent members of the White, Indian and Coloured communities.” “Fine”, I said, “but what the hell has this got to do with me?” The caller was stumped but offered (too late) a more neutral logic: “we regard you as a prominent person”. I declined but not before making a speech about the dangers of courting people on the basis of apartheid-constructed identities. It is

nevertheless striking to observe how intellectuals and activists, once drawn into the sphere of state power and influence, lose their sense of criticality and fall, sadly, into silence or sycophantism. Either way, the recruitment of intellectuals, with attendant privileges for those who are prepared to play the game, is not outside of the official strategy of silencing independent voices.

What concerns me is the fact that the few critical voices that remain on the South African landscape are left exposed under this withering away of the intellectuals. The same few voices then become charged with predictability. As my BBC respondent and ANC loyalist was keen to point out: “when I listen to you, I know what you are going to say”. It was clear to me what he was really saying: “I don’t like what you are saying, and that irritates me...why can’t you be like other more reasonable blacks”. I wanted to argue that I do not write in order to protect, to secure privilege or to hide behind the mask of academic pretense; that this subtle attempt to dictate the terms of engagement - such as denoted by the abused term “constructive criticism” - is precisely what undermines the building of a robust and contemplative democracy.

There was another strategy at play here in dealing with critical voices. That was to find the racial or intellectual counterpoint to the critic, and play that person or persons against one another. In my criticism of the ambitious outcomes based education of the Mandela government, an elaborate conference was set-up with a prominent University of Natal academic specifically hired by the teacher union, at that point in close solidarity with the state, to systematically attack both my person and my argument in equal measure. The academic counterpoint was supposed to neutralise the anti-OBE criticism, in one of the most personal attacks yet recorded in a pseudo-academic paper. When the OBE-based curriculum was eventually reviewed because of its “scriptural authority” among activists and its educational collapse within classrooms, there was not even a hint of acknowledgment that these personal attacks and vilification were misplaced. Reputations were trashed, academic credibility questioned and research commitments challenged. I remember being told by political and trade union heavyweights at the time that my career was over and, that if I knew what was good for me, I would “do the right thing”; and I recall vividly a team of senior activists visiting my office in late 1999 to intimidate me to take a different stand on outcomes based education.

What I did not expect, however, was that the second Minister of Education would in public call me “a charlatan” - much to the amusement of the media but, without challenge from the many researchers and officials whom I continue to train in education policy or with whom I lead joint research projects on policy implementation. Once again, the intellectual counterpoint (who happens to be a good friend) was chosen to chair the governmental review of the curriculum and, even though my writings were liberally cited, I of course was excluded from participation in a subject (curriculum reform) that was central to much of my writing in the past decade.

A recent strategy in dealing with intellectuals is to call into question the basis for criticism and critical engagement. Whenever I raised questions about the validity of the national examinations, of their declining quality or utility as a predictor of university success, I was asked: where is the research? On the face of it, this is a reasonable question - serious claims must be backed by research knowledge. But what if the research exists (as is the case with all these questions) and officialdom simply refuses to acknowledge it? What if the research findings are unpalatable? What does this mean for taking a position on a pressing social issue based on experience, compassion or ethics? Is "research" the only truth claim for moral positions?

Increasingly, research claims and researchers are being subjected to the political truth test. It happened recently with the release of the book *State of the Nation* (2004) by the Human Sciences Research Council; the President, on reading the book, called for an immediate meeting in which this parastatal, eager to retain its share of the A-budget (state subsidy), went out of its way to reassure the politicians of its official commitments. It happens, regularly, when the international studies of educational achievement are released; these studies are first scrutinised by government and then released to reduce negative impact. It happens with AIDS research data: to this day officially commissioned studies are kept "embargoed" under all sorts of pretenses - like the methodological reliability of the findings - rather than face up to the damning results in the public sphere.

In one sense, the survival of the democratic project depends less on who is "right" or "wrong" in these debates and controversies and more on what kind of conditions are set for these engagements, in the public domain. If the public conditions for public engagements are hostile to independent thought, secretive about research findings, manipulative of racial identities, and dismissive of intellectuals - then there is little reason to believe that when social conflict and economic hardship eventually bite in this restrictive macro-economic climate, that ideas will trump authority and that the democratic impulse will displace the irresistible tendency towards dictatorship.

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construction of identity” will actually be addressed via the pedagogic facility offered in the question, “Is Happy White?”. His motto: “the fact that we live in the third does not mean that we should settle for a third world education”.