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Silent black intellectuals

Jonathan D Jansen argues that black intellectuals have been co-opted into governments follies, failing to point the way forward to a truly non-racial society

THE vocation of the intellectual – and the black intellectual in particular – has fallen on hard times.

It would be dangerous to ignore the fact that the objective conditions that nurtured black intellectuals under and against apartheid, and which inform and shape the character of black intellectuals after apartheid, are quite different from those that influence and nurture white intellectuals.

Black intellectuals do not enjoy the same access to leading publishing houses and resources as do white intellectuals.

White intellectuals are dominant within universities; black intellectuals, with few exceptions, are not.

White intellectuals 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.

But the picture is not as grim as it was ten years ago.

Black intellectuals enjoy a growing measure of public ascendancy and political visibility in the media – take political science commentators.

Black intellectuals stand in a very different relationship to the state, in the sense that 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.

Even white radicals, as Jeremy Cronin found out, are easily susceptible to attack – using “the race card” – from within the ranks of the black nationalist and political elite, because of a deeper, primordial bond among black people which he cannot possibly be a part of – even if he has committed his entire life to the struggles of the black working class.

And it is this peculiar position of the black intellectual – dominant in political terms but marginal in intellectual terms – that I wish to address.

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Reviewing the year behind us invariably provokes familiar concerns in which the roles of intellectuals generally, and black intellectuals in particular, have been thrown into sharp relief by critics such as Siphos Seepe, Majakathata Mokoena, Rhoda Khadali, Moelctsi Mbeki, Denis Brutus and others.

Such concerns include the presidential position on HIV/AIDS, the response of government to the Zimbabwean crisis, the manufactured plot against the president, the so-called Xhosa Nostra in political appointments, and the racist music video of Mbongeni Ngema.

Intellectual silence

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, for example, 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; that such 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.

One wonders whether the silence of so-called African intellectuals on the Mbongeni Ngema/*Amandiya* episode was based on similar unspoken retribution for Indians who had it coming their way for a long time, anyway.

And 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 a radical squeamishness about dealing with an unpleasant reality beginning to surface in our non-racial democracy: that is, 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.

While I understand the strategy on the part of the rural poor, I am less impressed by the strategy on the part of the insatiable black elite.

It must be said 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 - that those same voices have retreated into the comforts offered by silence.

The 'race card'

Playing the race and ethnic card requires commentary by especially black intellectuals, since white intellectuals making this point will invariably be paralysed by the effective but pathetic charge of "racism".

It is very clear the non-racial utopia advanced by the Charterists is receding fast in the exposing light of grinding poverty among the black poor, and greedy ambition among the black elite. I wish to come to the point.

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.

A striking and recent example was the behaviour of a Dr Mthuthuzeli Nyoka, then challenger to Percy Sonn for chairperson of the United Cricket Board. Nyoka made no bones about the basis for this challenge: "I will not rest until the UCB is headed by an African." The fact that Sonn is a fellow black traveller in the same country, on the same continent is, of course, not of interest to Nyoka. If he can claim that Sonn is different (that is, "coloured"), then his ambition for power can be justified on the basis of himself being "African".

For all the poetry of the "I am an African" speech, there are hardline ethnic chauvinists inside and outside government for whom the project of the African Renaissance is nothing less than a means to assert the primacy of the apartheid African. By "the apartheid African" I mean those women and men who had the misfortune of being classified under apartheid as "African".

The problem is there is tremendous political and economic opportunity, albeit for a small elite, in claiming such an apartheid identity as special and unique to the exclusion of other ways of being "African". I can share stories of persons who lived outside of the country in what for such persons was retrospectively claimed to be "exile", who assumed (voluntarily) new names, cultures and identities in another country, but who returned, changing their names at the airport, because of the political and economic opportunities tied-up with being an apartheid African.

There is an aggressive meanness and blind ambition in the behaviour of such persons, and contempt

for black people who had the equal misfortune of being classified "coloured" or "Indian" or something else.

The silence of black intellectuals, whatever their motivation, on the growing rift within the black community spells danger for the building of a strong civil society.

The Wits example

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 most prominent example, in this regard, is the plight of Norma Reid Birley at Wits University. Whatever the merits of the case against the vice-chancellor, the surrounding discourses are frightening. Not a single black intellectual attacked the dangerous ploy of dismissing a university vice-chancellor because of her status as a foreigner; and this in the context of institutions which should, per definition, be open and accessible, even celebratory of our broader humanity and our universal quest for knowledge and excellence.

The silence of intellectuals on the terms of exclusion and vilification, in the case of Norma Reid, betrays a deeper pathology with respect to the identity and politics of the black intellectual.

Curious, is it not, that the inquiry into Norma Reid had hardly begun when the black deputy vice-chancellor (research) was suddenly "tipped" as the favourite to succeed her? I dare to ask the question: was Norma Reid set-up to fail as the unlikeable foreigner who took on the (black) president, with the aid of black senior managers, the quid pro quo being her replacement with an authentic African?

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'Dumbing down'

The problem of the black intellectual is, to a large extent, self-inflicted. I am deeply concerned, for example, about the practices in which we engage as institutions to actively deny the emergence of a next generation of black intellectuals.

One of the most dangerous practices is "the dumbing down of the professoriate".

As a result of equity pressures on the one hand, and the desire of technicians to be universities on the other, institutions have promoted a large body of young black academics into professorships without any record of scholarship. The effects of this dam-

ning act is to destroy the career of these young black scholars who now, as a result of the position attained, have no further incentive to develop.

But 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 the kind described.

If the next generation of academics do not produce the public intellectuals critical for our social and moral well-being, I have no doubt that this failure would be traceable to the pressures of employment equity, opportunistic institutions and a misguided sense of liberal guilt.

Intellectual autonomy

It was simply unthinkable, ten years ago, that government would impose on institutions a regime of accountability that would systematically erode the autonomy of universities.

The minister of education, for example, appoints the chairpersons of interim councils in institutions proposed for mergers. The minister of education has the power to appoint an administrator to ungovernable institutions. The minister of education decides which institutions will merge.

The minister of education, through his bureaucratic offices, decides which programmes will receive state funding and which will not; which institutions will offer what kinds of delivery modes in higher education; and which institutions are quality assured, and which not.

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

I am not arguing that some of these dramatic in-

terventions were undesirable, given the multiple crises engulfing several institutions in the 1990s.

My point is simply that taken together, important ground has been lost in the defence of autonomy and that the regime of accountability that governs institutions has created a new climate of operations for academics and intellectuals.

It is in such an environment in which we hope to see the emergence of black, public intellectuals. There is little ground for optimism.

White universities

I tested these new institutional and societal waters recently, in part to measure the nature and the origins of the public response to a position paper in the City Press (a paper with a largely black readership), where I made the argument for "the closing down of the historically black universities".

I learnt a lesson about making nuanced arguments in the public press: The retribution was swift. It started with a one-hour programme the next evening on Radio Metro, in which I was accused by several callers of being a "Boer". One caller was blunt: "I have a real problem with that Boer on your programme."

Half an hour later, on hearing that this Boer was a brother (whatever that means), the tide shifted as callers "agreed with that brother". The print media was no less forgiving: letters to the editor were laced with arguments about my racial identity, and therefore the invalidity of my arguments.

Feature articles were written by black union leaders and (mainly) black university academics attacking my person and, as an after-thought, the arguments being made. One black person charged that "this is the lobotomised view of a non-white who had forgotten about the strategic interests of black readers", she argued (having spent 10 years at Wits) - remarkably - that white universities were not for black people.

What struck me about this attempt "to start an argument", as I put it, was the blunt, racist sentiment that underpinned the positions of the unionists, the academics and the black public in general. I was struck by the force of what amounted to a barricading of racial interests within what were, effectively, homeland universities that were never intended to be thriving intellectual centres or world-class research laboratories.

I remain struck by the incapacity of the black intelligentsia to even countenance an argument for genuine African institutions of higher education - a new basis for intellectual life and scholarly pursuits. Black public figures remain trapped in a vicious language of racial defeatism on the one hand, and racial self-interest on the other hand.

And this self-absorbed and self-interested behaviour is one of the main factors explaining the failure of the emergence of a new class of black public intellectuals.

The bureaucratic intellectual

The most common route followed to oblivion has been the co-option of black intellectuals within government.

I am amazed at how quickly black intellectuals, once they enter the halls of power, not only change how they dress and speak, but how they understand external realities. A new vocabulary is quickly acquired. Words like "drivers", "moratoria" and "rationalisation" replace terms like "stakeholders", "transparency" and "retrenchments".

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 dishonesty and self-denial. As one government official put it to me recently, obviously thinking he was paying me a compliment: "I told them to select you onto this committee; that way you cannot question the work of the committee or its results!" If only he knew.

● Jonathan D Jansen is dean of the faculty of education, University of Pretoria. In The Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture Series at the Centre for Civil Society at the University of Natal, he took a hard look at the plight, stature the role of the black intellectual. This is an abridged version of his lecture.