Unchaining the human of the humanities

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In his article, 'Still searching for "the human"', Premesh Lalu (2012, p. 1) decries the National Research Foundation's decision to fund 60 new chairs at universities in South Africa, to foster research in line with the government's identified social development goals and priorities, leaving the humanities out in the cold. The article highlights the primacy of the idea of the human condition over developmentalism defined by policy experts which 'threatens to obscure more than it reveals about the predicament of post-apartheid South Africa' (p. 2).

In response to this article, I will proceed first to dismantle the terms of the opposition which the problem statement poses; secondly, to invert the problem statement; and finally to restate the case and the cause for the critical humanities on different grounds.

It is potentially misleading, I would argue, to disentangle a developmentalist social policy agenda from, and oppose it to, reflection on 'the human condition' marked, as the article would have it, 'by a history of race, ethnicity, gender, and class' (p. 1). The two are closely tied up with each other – 'the history of race, ethnicity, gender, and class' provides the pretext in the motivations given for a developmentalist social policy. In that sense, rather than working in opposition to each other, they are complicit with one another. From another perspective, giving pride of place to the 'history of race, ethnicity, gender, and class' means leaving the assumptions and assertions of a developmentalist social policy out of critical account, as the article itself seems to do, in conceiving of developmentalism minus its connection to 'the history of race, ethnicity, gender and class' as a kind of 'benevolent outreach' (p. 2). Such a truncated understanding of 'developmentalism' would mean not only failing to address 'the predicament of post-apartheid South Africa' (p. 2), but also failing to challenge or address the framework of current higher education policy-making, as it finds expression in the 'Humanities Charter' (Department for Higher Education and Training, 2011) initiated by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, and directed by Ari Sitas and Sara Mosoetsa.

There are repeated references in the Humanities Charter (e.g. pp. 5, 13) to the legacy of the inequities of apartheid in the post-apartheid education system. Scientific pursuits post-apartheid are to be directed to 'economic development, social development, health, energy, rural development, education and training' (ibid., p. 5). Higher education is to be steered to meet the requirements of a 'developmental state'

(p. 24). 'Community' is reasserted as a touchstone of egalitarianism and warrant of participatory knowledge production – both in the 'Humanities Charter', and, since 2008, also in the convergence stipulated between 'research' and 'community engagement' in national research policy templates handed down to universities.

While Lalu seems content to leave the developmentalist agenda to one side, arguing that it has received undue attention and resource allocation already, and that it is important to shift the focus to 'the deeper structural and psychic dimensions of humanistic inquiry' instead, I would like to state the case for the humanities in a reverse direction, starting by questioning the demands imposed on the humanities in the name of the unresolved social issues cast in the terms of a 'developmental state'. The very characterisation of millennial South Africa in the terms of a 'developmental state' marks a programmatic turn which also found expression in the ANC's Polokwane conference in December 2007. The shortcomings of the macro-economic framework of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (Department of the National Treasury 1996), spearheaded by former President Thabo Mbeki, popularly associated with the idea of referring socio-economic issues to the 'trickle-down effect' of an accelerated growth path coupled with 'fiscal discipline' in social expenditure, were to be addressed through an alternative model of the 'developmental state' with greater scope for state intervention and industrial policy with respect to socio-economic policy objectives, put forward at Polokwane in 2007. The Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) launched by the government in 2006 was to eliminate the category of the 'second economy' through the developmental state reaffirmed at the Polokwane conference in 2007 (The Presidency Republic of South Africa 2006).

Socio-economic policy is playing itself out within these frameworks, between the snakes of a 'trickle-down effect' and the 'ladders' by which those 'trapped in the second economy' are supposed to 'lift themselves out of poverty' through becoming responsible citizens in production and consumption, through seeking waged employment, and being trained in skills related to materially productive labour – to use the terms of Thabo Mbeki's 2003 State of the Nation address, which craftily reaffirms the ANC doctrine of the national democratic revolution through the superimposition of the 'two economies' onto the template of the 'two nations'.

In a situation where stable jobs provide a decent life to less than one-third of the population (see Barchiesi 2011, p. 134), productive employment and skills training are still being normatively upheld as the model for sustainable livelihood and social and civic inclusion. The idea of the normativity of the labour market is, however, questionable in view of the fact that most people living in poverty vigorously pursue income-generating activities; and in view of the fact that it is the way in which they participate in the labour market that relegates them to a life in poverty (see du Toit 2005 cited Barchiesi 2011, p. 255). This conundrum would lead us to question 'job creation' wielded as a panacea, shot through, as it is, 'with contestations over what "jobs" mean, the desires that they should address, and the kind of life that they should enable' (Barchiesi 2011, p. 256).

Thus, the 'alignment' of higher education policy, and of the chartered humanities in particular, with the normative tenets congealed in the designation of the present South African polity as 'developmental state' would call for some 'thought from the outside'. 'Going boldly into the unknown', entertaining uncertainty as a harbinger of opportunity, for writer Njabulo Ndebele, would require us to 'run away from unidimensional characterisations of ourselves … nurturing imaginative thinking [and] the

ability to embrace uncertainty from a position of intelligence and imagination' (2008, p. 7). This would fall to the humanities as search for the 'human' of the title of Lalu's article.

However, no sooner does Lalu invoke the idea of 'the human condition' than he disavows it by referring it to its determinations. His article is shy of exploring the human in its universality. It seems that the argument cannot countenance the ideas of the free, conscious activity that, for Marx, constitutes the human species-character (see Marx 2007). For the mention of the 'human condition' is immediately qualified by the asserted need to 'alleviate the burden of the human condition'. Lalu (2012, p. 1) opposes the NRF's production of 'a concept of the human condition merely as an inheritance of underdevelopment' with his own vision for the role of the humanities in South Africa based on a concept of the human condition 'specifically marked by a history of race, ethnicity, gender and class' (ibid.). Arguing for the role of the humanities as inquiry into 'the historicity of the human condition', the author asserts the need to be reminded of 'the years of sheer courage and bitter struggle through which the experiment in racial formation of the human condition was overturned' (p. 2).

The determining specification and limitation of the field of inquiry termed 'the human condition' speaks of the reluctance of South African social historians to consider the very possibility of a philosophical idea of freedom. The immediate referral of 'the human' to the conditionalities of race, ethnicity, gender and class and these, in turn, to 'the years of bitter struggle' aimed at overturning them, speaks to the reduction of the idea of 'freedom' to that of 'liberation'. With that reduction, the author is returning to the tenet of South African exceptionalism, even as he, along with Mahmood Mamdani and others, commits himself to questioning South African exceptionalism (see Makerere Institute of Social Research and Centre for Humanities Research, 2011).

It would be instructive to ponder what the distinction between 'liberation' and 'freedom' entails. Writing in *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt disinters some 'forgotten truisms' concerning the relationship between 'liberation' and 'freedom':

> It may be a truism to say that liberation and freedom are not the same; that liberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it; that the notion of liberty implied in liberation can only be negative, and hence, that even the intention of liberating is not identical with the desire for freedom. Yet if these truisms are frequently forgotten, it is because liberation has always loomed large and the foundation of freedom has always been uncertain. (Arendt 1963, p. 22)

A reopening of the distinction between 'liberation' and 'freedom', and the embrace of the uncertainty of 'freedom' would return the humanities to their critical role. Instead of reverting to the reflex of reaching for the determinative 'race, class and gender' as a putative 'emancipatory' scholarly pursuit (even if these categories are being affixed with the predicate of being 'socially constructed'), the inquiry into the 'human' of the 'human condition' would have to reflect on its own conditions of possibility, which would locate it within the order of knowledge of modernity. The human, being subject and object of its own knowledge, is bounded by its biological being on the one hand, and its reach towards the unconscious, unthought, unknown, on the other. Its epistemic location in a third place – between nature and culture, between the knowable and the unknown, between nomological science and

signification, between determination and indeterminacy – renders both its subject and object unstable. The inquiry germane to it would be attuned to contingency even as it is delimited, and to possibility even as it is bounded by need and demand. Conditions through which and sites at which it would be able to generate knowledge would be, to name but a few, critical literacy as a second order learning – learning to learn; discursive transformations; language as secondary modelling system providing humans with resources for extending primary forms ad infinitum (see Sebeok and Danesi 2000, p. 108); reflective judgement as a form of thinking in which the particular is given and the universal has to be found (Kant 1952 [1790], p. 1818).

If we return to the role of the humanities mapped out in the article by Lalu with these considerations, we may be led to counter the idea of the determinative function of gender and race with the argument that, being cultural reinscriptions of the perceptions of the givens of biological existence, they cannot be critiqued simply by calling them prejudices or errors, however socially consequential these may be. From the vantage point of critical humanities, as outlined above, we would find them giving expression to an 'insistent desire to know': 'It is not only a way of legitimating privileges or disqualifying competitors or continuing old traditions or reacting to situations of violence, it is a way of asking questions about who you are in a certain social world' (Balibar 1994, p. 200).

Of course, such 'desire to know' is politically inflected and historically specific – yet it gains its political traction on the basis of a psychological/anthropological trajectory which the critical humanities would be called on to explain, from the vantage point of the third term of 'the human', which opens a gap: a biologically defined notion of race reifies 'race' as an unquestioned biological given, while a social definition of race as construction tends to reduce 'race' to a mystification lacking a motivational force of its own (see Goldberg 1999, p. 366). Understanding the role of the 'human', and situating the critical humanities in an intermediate location, could lead the humanities to rethink their role in relation to the human sciences, i.e. the life sciences concerned with the human, rather than construing them in an oppositional or antagonistic or competing relation to each other.

The argument here is not to justify the NRF's move to establish 60 research chairs, as stipulated by government, in academic disciplines excluding the humanities. My aim is, rather, to question conceptualisations – governmental and academic − that nail the humanities to the cross of specific understandings of 'the predicament of post-apartheid South Africa' based on a history of colonialism and apartheid.

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