

The intellectual project is a precondition for societal redemption

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Albert Einstein famously opined that "we can't *solve problems* by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." This observation is at the heart of the failure of many experiments. Arguably the South African democratic experiment seems to have suffered the same fate. Far from ushering in a dispensation of equality and prosperity as envisaged in the country's constitution and the aspirations of the majority, the system seems to be reproducing itself.

Echoing what many analysts have said on the state of the South African economy in 2019, columnist and television host Justice Malala writes. "... the new season did not herald hope and renewal. It was a spring of despondency. The country had plummeted into the foulest mood ... The crime statistics were horrendous. Economic indicators showed we are a country in crisis. The currency was plummeting new depths ... Business confidence indices sealed the cocktail of pessimism, saying the mood was the bleakest since the 1980s" (Sunday Times 20th October 2019).

As early as March this year, a newspaper sympathetic to President Cyril Ramaphosa noted its disappointment with the prevailing economic performance. It pointed out that "economic growth in 2018 came in at a paltry 0.7%. Not only is this far from the levels of about 5% that are needed to make inroads into the country's unemployment crisis, it is only just more than half the rate achieved during Zuma's last year in office, when the economy expanded 1.3%" (Business Day March 4th 2019).

The situation is not any different in the political and socio-cultural sphere. If anything, the country remains trapped in the reality of two nations best described by the former President Thabo Mbeki in 1998. Mbeki (29th October 1998) observed:

South Africa is a country of two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. This enables it to argue that, except for the persistence of gender discrimination against women, all members of this nation have the possibility to exercise their right to equal opportunity, the development opportunities to which the Constitution of '93 committed our country. The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general, and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, with that right being equal within this black nation only to the extent that it is equally incapable of realisation."

Mbeki continued:

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This reality of two nations, underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white minority domination, constitutes the material base which reinforces the notion that, indeed, we are not one nation, but two nations. And neither are we becoming one nation. Consequently, also, the objective of national reconciliation is not being realised.

Echoing Mbeki's statement but taking a more circuitous route, Steinberg (2014) observed:

The freedom South Africans acquired in 1994 was mercurial and slippery. Politically, the changes were dramatic. The electorate expanded overnight to include every adult. But the structure of society stayed much the same. And white people remained white people, doing what white people had always done: running the professions, the corporations, the universities. Expertise, wealth, technical knowledge, social confidence – all of these remained deeply associated with whiteness.

The reproduction and perpetuation of racial inequalities can be traced to the general poverty of thought and lack of imagination. The new dispensation was built on the edifice of apartheid's geopolitical imagination. Ingrained within the system was the reproduction of racial inequalities. The think tanks and powers that be under apartheid had managed to achieve what they so hoped to do even as they were caught on the back foot. What prevails is basically apartheid in action without apartheid in name. Until this internal logic is disrupted and uprooted, the system can only reproduce itself.

The situation has not been different at the South African universities. This is despite policy prescriptions that envisage a different dispensation from that which was informed by the architects of apartheid.

The Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of the Higher Education System (DoE 1997) envisaged that a transformed higher education system that will "promote equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities".

Failure to escape the apartheid designs and machinations can be traced to the failure of the intellectual project in both society and South African universities. With regard to universities, Mahmood (1999) was crystal clear:

"Both the white and black institutions were products of apartheid, though in different ways. The difference was not only in the institutional culture, that the former enjoyed institutional autonomy and the latter were bureaucratically driven. The difference was also in their intellectual horizons. It was the white intelligentsia that took the lead in creating apartheid-enforced identities in the knowledge they produced. Believing that this was an act of intellectual creativity unrelated to the culture of privilege in which they were steeped, they ended defending an ingrained prejudice with a studied conviction. The irony is that the white intelligentsia came to be a greater, became a more willing, prisoner of apartheid thought than its black counterpart."

To escape the trap of apartheid geopolitical imagination would require nothing short of a leap into a new cultural imaginary. It is about making a clear break and escape from the tyranny of thought control. Bernard Shaw famously proposed, "Some men see things as they are and ask why I dream things that never were and ask why not."

Put differently, as suggested by the Einstein quote above, no escape from apartheid ideological entrapment is possible without an intellectual leap. The role of intellectuals in history was perhaps best articulated by Edward Said when he averred:

"There has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals; conversely there has been no major counter revolutionary movement without intellectuals. Intellectuals have

been the fathers and mothers of movements, and of course sons and daughters, even nephews and nieces” (Representation of Intellectuals).

There are many ways in which the centrality of intellectuals has been stated by others. But what is of value is the centrality of ideas in shaping reality and the future. Writing on *The Intellectual Legacy of Pan-Africanism*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1997) notes, for instance that in both the struggle against slavery and colonialism “the role of the intellect, of the mind, of the idea, a caring idea, a committed idea, ideas that capture the essence of the historical moment, was an important, often decisive ingredient “ (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1997:142).

For her part Hooks (1996), the African American scholar, comes closer to not only integrating both Said and Ngugi wa Thiong’o but also demythologising and disrobing the intellect [[or intellectual work] from the elitist portrayal they have come to represent. Hooks (1996) claims that “intellectual work differs from academic work precisely because one does not need to undertake a formal course of study or strive for degrees to live the life of the mind. Formal education can and often does enrich an organic intellectual process but it is not essential to the making of an intellectual mind. At the heart of intellectual work is critical engagement with ideas. Intellectual work can itself be a gesture of political activism if it challenges us to know in ways that counter and oppose existing epistemologies (ways of knowing) that keep us colonised, subjugated, etc.”

In a sense, Hooks forces us to ask: what are the necessary conditions for the term 'intellectual' to be ascribed to a particular individual? From what has been said about intellectual work, the following conditions must be factored in describing one as an intellectual: (i) the ability to think critically about ideas, (ii) the ability to be self-reflectively critical (i.e. not to cling to out of date and unworkable ideas/positions just because one has held them, but to have the ability to be persuaded by the latest evidence and information), (iii) the ability to challenge existing ideologies, theories and practices, (iv) to be actively engaging in a struggle to bring about material change.

Conditions (i) to (iii) could be seen as constituting the necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of the term 'intellectual'. Condition (iv) is an attribute that we may wish an intellectual to have, but is not essential for the ascription of the term. As the notion 'intellectual' suggests, the important features involve a critical engagement with ideas. If a person meets the conditions (i) to (iv), the correct ascription here will be that of 'activist intellectual' or the socially engaged intellectual.

There is a sense that universities have abdicated their role in contributing to the nurturing and unleashing of the creative energies of both students and academics. This has occasioned a rather scathing comment by Ngugi wa Thiong’o: that “post-independence has been [to have led to] the devaluation of African unity and Pan-Africanism, the devaluation of intellect and intellectual achievement, and worst of all, the devaluation of African lives” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1997: 144).

Ngugi wa Thiong’o is not alone in his observation of the seeming abdication of intellect in the affairs of African society. Jansen (2005) cautions that the abdication of intellectual activity is tantamount to the death of a university. He opines that a “university ceases to exist when the intellectual project no longer defines its identity, infuses its curriculum, energises its scholars, and inspires its students. It ceases to exist when state control and interference closes down the space within which academic discourse and imagination can flourish without constraint.”

Former President Thabo Mbeki had earlier expressed the same sentiments when he challenged university academics. On the occasion of the Investiture of the late Professor Hugh Africa as Vice-Chancellor of Vista University, Mbeki (1998) noted:

There seems to be a paralysis of thought or withdrawal from an open engagement of the burning issues of the day among this important section of our population, which is difficult to explain ... Clearly, the black intelligentsia, including those who work in this University, needs to ask itself whether it is discharging its responsibilities to

itself, to the country and to the students for which it should set an example by its own activity and conscious social engagement.

Dismantling the apartheid ideology would require the dismantling of its internal logic. Mere tinkering with the system here and there, as has been done over the years, has demonstrably failed to change reality. As a result, South Africa remains in a permanent state of Gramscian limbo in which the “crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”.

To escape this reality, universities and society in general should place the intellectual project at the centre of their daily business. They should be transformed into incubators of ideas and cutting edge knowledge. This is not possible without creating a vibrant intellectual culture that enables a free flow of ideas. Put sharply, the operative idea is that a university is obliged to ensure the free exchange of ideas. Few descriptions do better than Yale University’s (2003) take on intellectual freedom when it states that intellectual freedom is

the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionables, and challenge the unchallengeable. To curtail free expression strikes twice at the intellectual freedom, for whoever deprives another of the right to state unpopular views necessarily also deprives others the right to listen to those views.

Back to the future. As matters stand, South Africa seems to be held captive in a prison house of thought. South Africa’s future begins and ends with Einstein’s argument that “we can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” At the centre of the resolution of the historical challenge is the restoration of the intellectual project. This is critical if the country aims to step out of the malaise of a frozen moment in which history looms large and replays itself, each time with worsening prospects, before its very eyes. The country cannot afford to remain trapped in the cultural imagination of the past. It cannot be a mere spectator that is reduced to watching as opportunities for real freedom flit by. The heightened restlessness that has been expressed by the youth and political organisations on our campuses is a call for a new political consciousness. This is a call for the ushering in of a consciousness that reaffirms the previously oppressed to dream anew and in the language that speaks to their existential realities. It is a call for the reclamation for cultural affirmation in which participants set the terms and the terrain for engagement.

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