Commentary


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The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

LP Hartley, The Go-Between (1953)

Having perforce been a witness to the unfolding of the liberal-radical debate over South Africa on Durban’s Howard College campus of the University of Natal (UND) during the early 1970s, I read Shireen Ally’s paper with particular interest since many of the scholars whom either she or her informants identify as being significant figures were Durban-based at that time. They included most notably Richard [‘Rick’] Turner, Edward Webster, Fatima Meer, Dunbar Moodie, Laurence Schlemmer and Hamish Dickie-Clark. Steve Biko was a medical student at the University of Natal’s ‘non-white’ medical school in Durban, situated separately and suitably remote from Howard College, and medical students of that period were obliged to take the first level course in Sociology in their preliminary year. Members of the UND Sociology Department, myself included, were required to travel to teach this on the Wentworth campus that incorporated the medical students’ residence and consisted of decommissioned old military barracks dating from World War Two. It was situated adjacent to the Bluff oil refinery – a far cry indeed from Howard College’s sylvan ‘groves of Academe’!

But, much as I appreciated reading Ally’s robust paper for the varied memories that it served to conjure up, I remain somewhat disappointed by its treatment of the topic for a number of reasons.
First, in the paper Ally seeks to prove a thesis rather than to test a hypothesis. As a result, only evidence that is supportive of the thesis is presented rather than tests devised and applied in an effort to evaluate a hypothesis. Attempting the latter would have been a challenge, but could have been effected using a multi-methods approach combining the application of techniques such as content analysis to archival material with various unobtrusive measures and non-reactive techniques and supplemented by ethnographic interviews and biographical materials. (Although Ally makes no specific mention of the research methods used in the paper, it is obvious that extensive research was undertaken employing similar methodological strategies).

Secondly, the central thesis is stated at different points in the paper in what appear to be both strong and weak forms, making it difficult to decide what exactly is being claimed. In its strongest form, Ally’s thesis would seem to be to the effect that the Marxian-inspired radical oppositional intellectualism that arose in South Africa in the 1970s (particularly as this manifested itself in the Wits Sociology Department) far from being the result – as has previously been suggested – of intellectual space created by a relaxation of State power at that time, was a direct response by self-serving left-wing white academics and students to the challenge of the nascent Black Consciousness Movement.

At no point however does Ally offer any evidence to either confirm or deny that State power was relaxed at that time. Furthermore, at various stages she introduces other potential causal influences that serve to reformulate the central thesis in diluted form. These include inter alia the decline of liberalism, the return of South African scholars who had ‘... been exposed to New Left politics in Britain’ (87) and the ‘... Marxist oppositional intellectualism ... that swept across the country, and indeed, all over Europe as well’ (93). I recall Dunbar Moodie once speaking of the difficulties associated with Max Weber’s various formulations of the Protestant Ethic thesis as inducing a sense that one is ‘boxing with a jellyfish’ – a feeling that I also began to have in seeking to follow Ally’s argument.

Thirdly, in considering the knowledge-intellectuals-power debate, the paper makes no mention of several influential contributions. These include most notably Karl Mannheim with his conception of a ‘free-floating intelligentsia’, Berger and Luckmann (whose ‘sociology of common-sense knowledge’ fascinated Rick Turner to such an extent that he incorporated elements into his work, The Eye of the Needle, cited by Ally) and Michel
Foucault (whose disquisitions on intellectual discourses, power/knowledge, ‘regimes of truth’, ‘technologies of power’, discipline, surveillance and control would seem entirely apposite to Ally’s concerns and a rich source of potential hypotheses, his claim that ‘knowledge is never innocent’ being a case in point).

Fourthly, on the Wits Sociology Department itself, Ally quotes extensively and to good effect from interviews with leading departmental figures. However, there is a dearth of detail on aspects such as the specific intellectual interests of staff and their respective career paths, syllabus contents and their revision, the research undertaken by staff and students (including dissertations and theses), the sources of research sponsorship, and trends in actual student numbers as well as various staff and student involvements in ‘activism’ – all matters of central importance to the paper’s argument. Such information – much of which could be readily summarised in tables, diagrams and graphs – would have afforded readers both greater insight into Wits Sociology over the relevant 14-year period, 1975-1989 (a lengthy one in any department’s history), and the opportunity to evaluate Ally’s claims concerning it.

Fifth and finally, much the same applies to the paper’s consideration of left-wing white student activists based at Wits and involved in NUSAS both locally and nationally – they remain shadowy figures rather than appearing in high relief. In the absence from the paper of details on matters such as their socio-economic profiles, one is left to wonder whether they were indeed ‘rebels’ (with or without a cause of their own, vide Eddie Webster’s article in the same issue of Transformation) or rather, as numerous studies of US radical students during the same era found, overwhelmingly the scions of affluent, highly-educated and politically-aware families with strong humanitarian values and therefore essentially thoroughly well-socialised conformists who constituted a campus aristocracy – an issue bearing directly upon the paper’s point concerning the importance of relative social power. The likes of David Ginsburg’s empirical study of left-wing white students at Wits, carried out circa 1970 under the supervision of Henry Lever if I recall correctly, could conceivably serve to cast further light on such matters. Contemporary US research also suggested that the role of ‘student radical’ became an accepted campus social type at that time, forming the basis for a distinctive student sub-culture that enjoyed both considerable on-campus vogue and extensive media attention. Could the same have been true of the situation obtaining on the campuses of the white
English-medium universities in South Africa during the 1970s? Anecdotal and biographical evidence would seem to suggest that it was.

For these several reasons, therefore, I am led to conclude that, whereas Ally might indeed have a valid case concerning the genesis of radical white oppositional intellectualism in South Africa in the 1970s, on the strength of her presentation of it in this paper final judgment in the matter must be reserved until further notice.

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