



Lowe, C. (1998). Academic transformation struggles in Southern Africa and the U.S. *Workplace*, 2, 77-82.

Academic Transformation Struggles in Southern Africa and the U.S.

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Academic transformation struggles in South Africa and the U.S. are distinct national phenomena, within the histories of differing national societies and institutions. They are also the struggles of national sectors of an organized transnational global institution, higher education, within the world capitalist economy. These struggles are conducted by differing national segments of global occupational sub-classes of persons who work in higher education: maintenance and clerical workers, students, student-employees, teaching and research faculty, administrators. We need to see both the connections of a global system, and its differential effects, to work out grounds for international solidarity. This need applies to transnational academia itself as a realm of work, and the role of progressive intellectuals in broader national and international labor movements.

Comparisons between the U.S. and South Africa based on the centrality of cultural race idioms to social inequality have limits. The U.S. and South Africa reflect the importance of race for world capitalist expansion, sharing histories as settler societies of the European diaspora. Justifications of land dispossession, slavery, extreme labor coercion, labor market segmentation, along with constructions of individual interclass ethnic solidarity strategies, deflections by rulers of potential class threats, and gross and subtle social discriminations, have been underwritten by cultural claims about race and ethnicity. Race has thus shaped capitalist class and state formation, along with unequal and undemocratic relations in civil society, and attendant educational and intellectual practices. Yet the present structures of inequality in each country are quite different. This includes majority vs. minority demography and differing idioms of racial categories. There are also dramatic differences in per capita wealth and income and their distribution, patterns of urban, rural and transient residence, extent of unemployment and underemployment, proportion of people in deep poverty or lacking access to adequate provision of basic human needs for housing, water, food, sanitation, and clothing, access to health care, and access to education. At least sixty percent of the population lives in self-built housing in shack settlements of urban density, or peasant rural areas partly reliant on migrant labor; formal unemployment estimates range from twenty to forty percent. While race partially organizes these inequalities within both societies, different histories, bases and courses of capitalist development, and the location of colonial and nation-state political economies in the structure of global capitalism make the inequalities unlike one another. Southern Africa has been more marginal to the world economy than North America since the 17th century. It remains so.

Both the common systemic history and national differences have shaped intellectuals' roles and the institutional forms of higher education. This may be illustrated by a trite personal epiphany of mine, sitting one day in 1988 in the library of the University of Swaziland (Uniswa) reading Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's edition of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci, translated from Italian into English. Gramsci's own self-consciousness of his place in the Italian humanist tradition as he worked out a Marxian political sociology of intellectuals, distinctions among intellectuals with "organic" relations to different classes and the problem of intellectuals seeking to act politically against such "organic" relations, made me think about the historical and institutional nexus represented by the book, the library, the university, and myself, catching up on reading neglected in New Haven in a tiny

kingdom in southeastern Africa. The twenty year old university sat uneasily in Swaziland, yet was definitely Swazi. A far outpost in a global network of academic sites and roles, it in some ways defined that system. The university was a post-colonial institution, established for Swazi national ends by a hereditary king. Yet its form and the national necessity for its existence were products of colonialism, as was the bureaucratic state structure that paid the salaries of the academics and support staffs, and the fees of the students.

The form and need for U.S. universities and colleges might also be said to be colonial products. But in southern and South Africa, descendants of colonizers are a small minority compared to descendants of the colonized. Together with the later timing of colonial cultural transformations, and the more powerful indigenous cultural persistences compared to North America, demography gives Gramsci's question of the organic relationship of intellectuals to the society profoundly different answers.

In the U.S., academic intellectuals have their most organic relationships to the managerial and professional sections of a petty bourgeoisie enlarged by U.S. pre-eminence in the world economy. Themselves part of that class, they feed their students into it, and to a lesser extent into the high bourgeoisie, while supplying cultural and ideological solvents that soften perceptions of the distinction and limit petty bourgeois class resentments. Present efforts by some social interests to proletarianize an increasing proportion of "knowledge workers," including trainee, temporary and contingent academic faculty, form a large element of struggles over U.S. academic restructuring. The organic relation of academic intellectuals to the nation comes into question mainly in the case of immigrant scholars and teachers in technical subjects, and in anti-intellectual rhetoric casting academic social critics holding specific kinds of ideas as "outside of the mainstream" elitists.

Some might argue that struggles over affirmative action and curricular multiculturalism in the U.S. should be seen as national questions. African post-colonial comparisons suggest instead that these are struggles among differing forms of potential organic relations, that bear on the openness of individual class mobility within the racialized class system. Consider: in Swaziland in the late 1980s, the university had teaching and research staff from the ex-colonial power (Britain), Europe and the European diaspora (Canada, Netherlands, Belgium, U.S., Portugal, possibly Australian or New Zealand) and African expatriates (South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda, Nigeria, Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia) and Africans of Indian and European ancestry. Swazi academics amounted to about half the faculty. The medium of instruction was English. The students almost wholly had SiSwati as their home language. White Swazilanders (about two percent of the population) sent their children to university in South Africa or the U.K.

My room in a student hostel (dormitory) at Uniswa looked across a stream at peasant homesteads with thatched roof wattle and daub houses whose residents spoke SiSwati. The university has been built in view of a mountain range where the Swazi royalty were buried, under the eye of a royal palace. For the local people, the "organic intellectuals" include school teachers, ministers and priests in Protestant, Catholic and African independent churches, comparable to Gramsci's view of rural Italian intellectuals. There are also healing and spiritual practitioners whose practice and intellectuality were rooted in Swazi oral culture. The Vice-Chancellor of Uniswa, the biologist Lydia Makhubu, an expert on schistosomiasis, is known in southern Africa for fostering coordination and exchange of knowledge between "scientific" and "traditional" medical practitioners. Swazi and expatriate legal scholars at Uniswa regularly express concern about the oral practice of dispute resolution and (class-inflected) justice under local chiefs, since "traditional" law remains unwritten. The interface of written and oral has stimulated some of the finest scholarship in literature, anthropology and history by Swazi and other Uniswa scholars.

In 1990, the year after I left, the university was attacked physically by police and army forces because of student pro-democracy protests. Hundreds of students were beaten, many inside the library. Dozens were hospitalized. It was rumored that four died. Conservative royalists in the government continue to regard

the university as a foreign-inspired source of trouble. Such royalists include the police and army which descend from the colonial security forces, wear European-style uniforms, and receive British training. Student discontent was fueled by declining prospects of graduates. In the 1970s a high school degree could land you a white collar job, and virtually all university graduates were employed. By the late 1980s many Uniswa graduates went unemployed. Western experts argued that Swaziland needed more emphasis on technical and business training at primary and secondary levels, and fewer non-science university graduates. Today, though the World Bank has become somewhat less hostile to university level education, aid intellectuals remain technicist in orientation.

In Swaziland, there is one university, a separate agricultural campus, and a few technical schools. Half the faculty are Swazi and the large majority African. In South Africa, there are dozens of institutions of higher education, including technical training colleges. At many schools most faculty are white. There is ethnic segmentation among Anglophone and Afrikaans medium "historically white" universities. The universities for black people, which with one older exception were created since the 1960s, have had more complex faculties. To start with, many instructors were Afrikaners. English-speaking academics tended to look down on them as third-rate holders of sinecures. With a few exceptions (increasing in the 1980s) Anglos refused to teach in the "bush colleges" because they were "apartheid institutions." This choice was not unproblematic, as they were also the institutions where most of the black students studied. Afrikaner, African, Indian, "Coloured" and Anglo faculty at such institutions had to contend with grossly limited resources, educational opportunities and access to research support.

This history shapes academic transformation struggles in South Africa. In the former bantustan institutions, the uneasy post-colonial relationship of the institutions to the African populations they were supposed to serve under apartheid, and are still supposed to serve under national liberation, looks rather like the relationship in Swaziland. They become agents of sociological polarization within linguistic populations, cultural bridges both connecting and alien. As in Swaziland, ex-bantustan universities struggle with resource issues and with disproportionately white and expatriate faculties serving overwhelmingly African student bodies. Unlike Swaziland, they also struggle over whether and how to reconstruct formerly overt ethno-nationalist identities into a place in a functional division of labor for a multi-ethnic nation, in competition with other institutions. They have the weakest resource base but powerful ties to the ANC government.

In the former Afrikaans-medium white institutions, academics were organic intellectuals par excellence of Afrikaner nationalism, organizers and trainers of the teachers, ministers and managers and professionals who formed the nationalist leadership cadres. Now the Afrikaans universities face struggles over how Afrikaner ethno-nationalism fits in a multi-ethnic nation, and demands for ethnic cultural reproduction that may reproduce racial segregationism. The universities designated under apartheid for Coloureds and Indians fit least easily into apartheid conceptions of organic nationhood, attached to identities both displaced and excluded from formal power. Now the general problem is how to attach people to formal power through a national identity conceived as built, not organic. Yet the leading role of the apartheid Coloured and Indian institutions in opening to Africans sits uneasily with fears of a new minority status, while many Coloured, Indian and African students now try to go to historically white institutions.

The historically Anglophone white universities had their own complex alienations. Founded to support a global British empire, identification with an international academic culture has been particularly important at these institutions, as has backing from South African big business. "Liberalism" relative to Afrikaner nationalism was often a point of pride, yet only rarely was pushed much beyond rejection of total formal segregation. The great political intellectual ferments from the late 1960s onward, in the Black Consciousness Movement, the consequent developments in the ANC tradition of non-racialism, and the spread of class theory radicalism among white and black intellectuals, took their cue from the limits of such liberalism. Today they argue to defend their funding as maintaining "standards" to which the previously excluded can then be admitted.

This essay cannot adequately address the role of universities, students, and academics in the internal struggles for liberation in the 1970s and 1980s, but they mattered. Many students, teachers and researchers used the space of the university to organize and to reach outward, supporting great community and labor movements. Many were personally transformed, many made small and great sacrifices. Too many were hurt or killed. The greatest weights were carried by black students and academics, but people from all categories and at all institutions played roles.

Today there actually are three simultaneous university transformation struggles. First, what will be the distribution of resources and roles among universities in a single national system of higher education? The best U.S. analogies can be seen within state university systems, particularly in states with a history of formal segregation. Secondly, how shall apartheid practices in student bodies, faculty, curricula and governance be transformed within specific institutions? The third struggle is "rationalization": how shall resources, priorities, and working conditions (for non-academic as well as academic staff) be reorganized under economic imperatives of constriction?

Space does not permit going into the complex intertwining of these struggles. A key tension arises between some of the cultural content dimensions of transformation, and some of the resource dimensions. It can be argued that much of the content and "standards" of South African higher education are alienated from South African society, Eurocentrically irrelevant. A technicist version of this argument says that arts, humanities, perhaps most social sciences are luxuries that South African universities cannot afford. The latter point of view can dovetail with an instrumentalist, social-mobility seeking outlook shared by many students from all "racial" backgrounds. It also dovetails with the biases of many external aid-giving governments as well as transnational financial institutions concerned with "development," which also prefer students to have self-seeking market orientations. Yet the same forms of reasoning support efforts to limit South Africa's functional location in the overall structure of the global economy, articulated in economic ideology through the doctrine of "relative competitive advantage": South Africa's relative advantage will be in supplying semi-skilled labor with relatively high technical education at lower wages than in the West. Anything (like a higher social wage or excessive provision of non-technical education) that raises wages and corporate labor costs should be avoided. Thus critics of colonially-rooted definitions of "standards," on grounds of cultural and cost exclusiveness, need to weigh up on the other side the linking of technicist educational arguments with wage suppression arguments by corporate interests and neoliberal economists.

South African universities face severe problems of morale. The hopes for liberation were particularly high among the intellectuals. Instead, change is narrow. The new government has maintained a precarious stability, undermined by civil strife in KwaZulu-Natal province and severe violent crime. But it has been unable to effect any meaningful redistribution of resources to poorer black South Africans or any wide scale structural improvement in the basic conditions of their communities, contributing to social violence. This situation is largely the result of intense pressures from South African business, backed by the G-7 governments and the transnational financial institutions, that make "business confidence" virtually the only acceptable criterion for judging proposed policies, with a severe systematic bias against the legitimacy of state action for social ends. The effect of this post-Cold War constriction is corrupting. It encourages everyone to get or defend theirs, individually. Universities are no exception.

The relationships between the South African and U.S. cases are thus oblique and contradictory. At the global level, many sources of transforming forces are the same. The power of national and transnational capitalist corporations grows: structures whose relations of power and ceded authority are created by nation-states and enforced by their legal machinery, supported by treaty-based organizations created by nation-states, within a renewed imperialism of free trade. Their power, "private" because privileged from social accountability by public state action and power, redivides social labor. It conforms other institutions, including universities, to the corporations' preferred standard of quality (propensity to

promote accumulation of wealth in money) and their internally undemocratic power relations.

But locally, the struggles work themselves out in different forms. In both societies some academics and students identify pursuit of knowledge with commitments to social equality, justice and freedom, taking up one self-conscious historical role of intellectuals, often in support of related social and political movements. Such commitments by university-based intellectuals are rendered equivocal by the complex of social roles played by universities within capitalism. Universities require yet restrain critical knowledge, producing personal intellectual development and mental liberation for many individuals, as well as material upward mobility. Universities also produce skills, capabilities, certifications and orientations fitting students for corporate professional and managerial employment, thus reproducing class inequality and cultural legitimation of social status hierarchies. Those hierarchies differ nationally.

In the U.S., we have a context of mass higher education that reduces the distinction-making function of university education; present rollbacks may be designed in part to renarrow access and constrict mobility. In South Africa, university education moves graduates into a much smaller minority with dramatically better life-chances than most people. The national liberation imperative to open access to black people of working class and peasant backgrounds clashes sharply with the demands of global and local corporate interests. The result is intense competition among black people for the relatively narrow new access, direct and indirect efforts to preserve historical advantages by white people, and an extremely difficult situation for progressive academics. They become willy-nilly frontline arbiters of access. The constricting forces from above render their position insecure; the history of segregation alienates largely white faculties from increasingly black student bodies; faculty of all races face complex choices framed between international standards of work and life, and the widespread poverty around them. Moreover, the same constricting forces have obstructed the ANC's larger project of social reconstruction in a manner that is dispiriting and demoralizing. As the globally-imposed constrictions reduce ANC politics to a scramble for patronage advantage and social mobility by political means, and as the proponents of "business confidence" and maintaining corporate profit margins successfully obstruct any serious social reconstruction, the motivations of collective hope and willingness to take on sacrifice and risk, in the company of others who make similar choices--so notable in the 1980s--become harder to sustain.

In the U.S., academic workers seek on the one hand to defend practices that can be seen as the source of the virtues of a humane education, and of room to think beyond the columns of figures leading to the bottom line. Yet the same practices can be seen as vestiges of class and cultural privilege: tenure, professional status and pay, "pure" research. Thus on the other hand, they begin to rework their conceptions of themselves as workers. Seeing the terms of employment being forced on them, which reveal that professionals too have only their labor to sell, they begin to ask, should we not fight back in kind? Yet the contradictions of these two impulses remain to be faced. As with debates over technicist education in South Africa, misplaced critique of privilege risks accepting restricted definitions of workers' capacities for humaneness, yet simple defense of historical privileges may sustain historically-rooted patterns of inequality.

These struggles and debates only very tentatively begin to engage with the larger structures of inequality in the U.S., or with the mostly anemic, dispirited and disorganized social movements to redress them. Even less do they take a global view. Many of the attempts at such extra-academic "intervention" exaggerate the role of universities and the importance of academic discursive politics. The latter phenomenon can be seen in parts of the South African intellectual left as well, perhaps reflecting the foreclosure of more material possibilities. Still, the South African "rationalization" struggles that constrict what is taught, as well as working conditions for all university workers, cannot be separated out from struggles over the course of reconstruction in the whole society.

Ultimately, what the comparisons of academic transformation struggles show is that the university institutions are too narrow a frame in which to address the underlying problems or seek solidarities. We

must fight out our specific fights in our specific places. But at the same time we need to seek out alliances with which to challenge and build alternatives to global and national neoliberalisms. We can work together to articulate the moral and cultural poverty of society when economic ends are the only goals for which efficiency counts. We can try to envision what disalienated education would look like, in different contexts, and what wider types of social order it would imply. We can seek mutual support, whether it is Americans fighting U.S. promotion of knee-jerk imposition of "structural adjustment" on Africa, or South Africans sharing experiences in building academic-labor-community alliances. We can offer one another critical perspectives on blind spots in our assumptions. And we can try to think together about the inequalities in the global order, and what moves we must try to help organize, together with people not in the universities, from our specific present locations, to move that global order in more equitable, liveable and sustainable directions. That task is immense, but our isolated local struggles will be smashed without it.

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