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Critique and the Decolonizing Nation

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We now have two high-level reports that put the future of the humanities and social sciences prominently at the forefront of higher education debate in South Africa – we have the Charter for Humanities, under the leadership of Ari Sitas and Sara Mosoetsa¹; and we have a study led by Jonathan Jansen and Peter Vale for the Academy of Science of South Africa² (Assaf), published at about the same time as the charter. Both reports note that there are daunting demographic anxieties to do with declining enrolments in humanities and the very worrying prospect of not producing enough graduate students -- particularly black South African PhD graduates.

But of course it is not we alone who face these challenges. The difficulties involved in being, and deciding to be, a humanities scholar and student are global ones. In the postcolonial world we are faced not only with the imperatives of narrowly defined “development” but also the global North’s market instrumentalism in the era of market fundamentalism and economic recession.

Speaking from my vantage point at the CHR, at UWC, one of the things we have been doing is studying the legacy that we inherited in a very deliberate way. We have, in various projects, tried to think about where we are thinking from. What marks UWC, as it were? There is a book my colleagues have produced on the university which tries to make a start on that³. And there is an exhibition currently on at the national gallery which also explores this inheritance—and asks whether the aesthetic production known as “struggle art” attends sufficiently to that body of work?⁴ That is our little story from down Modderdam Road. But I want to suggest that our particularity is not our own story. Each institution of apartheid is marked by its particularity, but also by what we share. Universities, whether here, or there, are marked by apartheid. To say this is to say the obvious. Or is it? Have we really confronted, amongst ourselves as scholars, what that inheritance might mean? As particular as the questions might be that we ask from down on the Cape Flats, to up on the Hill, a question we share in common as I see it is this: what does it mean to do critical scholarship today in a settler colonial society trying to move beyond the category settler and native, and trying to move towards us becoming the citizens that our political settlement has gifted us?

1 <http://www.hssi.org.za/>

2 <http://www.assaf.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/25-July-Final.pdf>

3 Lalu, P et al (2012) *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways, and Unmaking Apartheids Legacy*, Bellville: Center for Humanities Research

4 <http://www.iziko.org.za/news/entry/uncontained-opening-the-community-arts-project-archive>

In a talk he gave on satire and law, Judge Albie Sachs made recourse to a posture of critique that he described as discomfort⁵. I have been thinking a lot about what that means. To inhabit discomfort. How many of us would voluntarily put ourselves in a position of discomfort? If we are to think of our inheritance as containing a history of privilege rather than subjection, or a colonial genealogy of liberalism paternalism and Eurocentrism, then how do we deal with the discomfort of others naming us as such? I cannot answer that question, but I can only imagine that these are questions that produce discomfort. Colonialism, Eurocentrism, Settler Colonialism- each of these are lightning rods that signify discomfort for some of us. Is our somatic reflex to disavow and to defend? Do we go there voluntarily--to this place of discomfort-- or do we, as Sachs suggests, sometimes have to be nudged?

Coming from the legacy we do then – this crumbling legacy of a world, a country, and a city colonially and racially defined in time and space– my question is, should we as humanities scholars not be leading the critique of that inheritance? An inheritance of, on the one hand, the stubborn traces of Bantu Studies, and on the other, a Eurocentrism that has still to realize that it is not a universal but a particular? Let me add a point of clarity: No race or ethnicity has the monopoly on Eurocentrism in this country; Eurocentrism might be one of the few things that most South Africans actually share. Our Afro-phobia showed that quite well.

There are amongst us colleagues who seem to view any effort to address the legacy of Bantu Studies or Eurocentrism, as an immediate recourse to nativism. They see the need to hit the panic button of Academic Freedom to rescue us from ourselves when we talk about curriculum transformation in relation to Eurocentrism or apartheid. In its most provocative formulation, my good colleague John Higgins, an esteemed Professor of Literature at the University of Cape Town, describes one very important gesture of undoing our inheritance as a dangerous call for us to participate in Applied Nationalism⁶. No less than a founding father of postcolonial theory has been mobilized to settle the point conclusively—namely Edward Said and particularly the T B Davie Memorial lecture he gave here in 1991⁷. Incidentally, I was at that talk, and I also had the good fortune while being a graduate student at Columbia University to hear Prof. Said speak often about the question of Eurocentrism, and to talk about South Africa with him, and his impressions of his visit here.

It strikes me as more than a minor misreading of Said, to think he is a persuasive hammer with which to smash nationalism in the colonial world, even if we qualify it as Applied. I suppose you could do that if you leave out an account of the very real ambivalences, tensions and subtlety that marked Said's intervention in that talk, as well as his writings on nationalism more generally. But to leave that out surely goes against the grain of the mode of literary criticism that he so championed as a teacher: of putting a text in context? If you

5 Sachs, A '(2011) The Dogs Bark and Bite, Even in Cartoons, Keynote Address to the Time of the Writer Festival, UKZN. The full text of the talk can be found at <http://africartoons.com/story/3476>

6 <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-06-24-dilemma-of-the-humanities>

7 reprinted in Said E (2000) Identity, Authority and Freedom: the Potentate and the Traveller, in *Reflections on Exile*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

recall in that essay, Said's starting point is a discussion of the canon or 'culture' wars that marked the humanities in the US—he does not dismiss those canon wars, declaring himself a clear partisan on one side—the US academy could not stay that way it was, it had to open itself up to other cultures, as he put it, and other traditions of thought and writing. But he was issuing a warning—not about the canon being left untouched to teach the classics, as it were, but about the dangers of constituting those other now newly valorized cultures and traditions and what happens when they become new closed orthodoxies rather than subversive points of opening and connection. He makes the point in contrast, with an account of the lacklustre place that Arab universities have become. It is curious to me why those who see Said as only a harsh critic of nationalism seem to recoil from that other Said, and his role in the Palestinian national liberation movement. Out of my own interest, I have been in correspondence with his widow, Mariam Said and Rashid Khalidi, who occupies the Edward Said Chair at Columbia, and manages his literary estate, about retrieving a curriculum that Said devised at the request of the PLO, of a new humanities and social science course of study, for a future Palestinian state, a curriculum that as he described it, would try to undo Eurocentrism and colonial thought, and speak to what it would mean to being a Palestinian scholar. I remain curious to see how he conceived of such a curriculum.

How then do we make sense of Said's views on nationalism? I want to suggest, and I do not have time to elaborate—that the clue lies in Fanon—it lies in the distinction Fanon makes between *nationalism* and *national consciousness*. It lies in the Fanon who said “*It is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of world history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture*”. “*National consciousness, which is not nationalism*” he emphasizes, “*is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.*”⁸

It is in Fanon's reading of national consciousness as a two-fold process that rearranges the derangement that colonialism performs on the native, that Said finds his argument, to be simultaneously *for* a process of national liberation yet simultaneously aware and alert to its pitfalls. But this is important: the pitfalls for Fanon, and later for Said, do not allow us to escape the problem that national consciousness is the answer to—and that problem is the colonial problem or what we might call the Native Question. To make sense of Said being critical of nationalism, but *for* national liberation and *for* decolonization, it is important to take note of what is at stake for him. Decolonization was not for him about identity politics, about valorizing Arab studies or African studies in and of themselves. Rather it was about justice. So too for Fanon. The pitfalls of identity politics, as both saw it, do not then remove the very real question of justice that remains with regard to the colonial question. The devalorization of native thought, its debasement and dismissal, is in the first instance then, a wrong that must be righted.

⁸ Fanon, F (1959) Reciprocal Basis of National Culture and the Fight For Freedom, Speech to Congress of Black Writers, in *Wretched of the Earth*,

The pitfall arises when the righting of the wrong produces its own injustice on others—when one Identity trumps others, when justice simply means turning the picture upside down, so that those at the bottom now stand above those at the top. It was this danger that Said was alerting us to. So hitting the panic button of Academic freedom, I am afraid to say, will not save us in the Humanities and Social Sciences from the discomfort of having to confront the problem of justice in this society, where justice refers to undoing the devalorization of intellectuals, of thought, of knowledge and aesthetics outside of the Western tradition as constituted in the modern disciplines around which the university is structured—and here I am referring to those devalorized traditions of thought and intellectuals not only in Africa, but in most of the world- in the Middle East, South Asia, South East Asia and Latin America as well.

A cursory glance at the limited expertise in our humanities and social sciences bears testimony to this devalorization. While we rightly try to undo the Euro-American hegemony by making Africa a focus, lets not end there. I have learnt through my participation in CODESRIA over the last decade, from those who have been through these debates a long while before us, and have much to teach us, that we need to have in our midst scholars who also study areas and issues outside Africa and the Euro-American sphere, so that we can learn to ask the questions that matter to us, as we learn from the questions that matter to them. So we need scholars who can tell us about concept of *Shi* in the propensity of things in Chinese philosophical thought in the Middle Kingdom, or illuminate the aesthetics of great modernist figures like the painter M F Hussain or the poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz in India ,or help us navigate Iranian cinema before and after the Revolution, or provoke us to re-theorize the distinction between the secular and sacred, through understanding Candomble as practiced by the *povo do santo* (people of the saint) in Brazil. We also need scholars who can tell us about the organisation of political authority in the Funj dynasty in Sudan or the Sekoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria, or the Rajput relations with the East India Company in India, not simply because of a historical and anthropological curiosity about pasts forgotten or cultures obscured, but because, as scholars have been pointing out recently, those accounts are actually central to understanding the emergence of modern thought and concepts that govern our present ways of thinking. Its not about saying they have there philosophers, so lets show them that we have our philosophers too. It is about disrupting the autobiography of how the West tells its story about itself, and it is about producing a less imperial, more democratic and inevitably, more violent version of how we arrived at our modernity.

So, for example, it is increasingly realized that liberalism doesn't simply evolve in Europe and then travel outwards with a generosity of spirit, bequeathing equality equally to all. Its development in Europe is constituted by ,in and through Empire. Partha Chatterjee, for example, argues persuasively in a new book that the modern nation- state form could not

exist and cannot exist without a concept of Empire⁹. The upshot is that it makes West Bengal rather than Westphalia central to the history of the modern state.

What I am saying is that we as scholars might rather than want to lead the critique of the humanities and social sciences we have inherited by pointing to its limitations, and being frank and open about recognizing our limitations. We might then be better placed to be part of reconstituting it in ways that navigate justice and decolonization productively, so that we attend to justice without allowing the solution to be entrapped by the pitfalls Fanon warned against.

In this country, to defend the humanities and social sciences without also offering a critique of our legacy, will constitute us as the last outpost. It will confirm a view that some of us humanities scholars defend the 'classics' as an alibi for building a bulwark against a demand for justice. To lead the critique of what we have inherited might however be a better grounds from which we can produce the argument for a *defensible humanities*. Without self-critique, renewal will not happen, and without renewal the humanities and social sciences in post-apartheid South Africa will continue to be less and less compelling for our students, and held in more and more suspicion by our political elites. If the fate of the humanities and social sciences in this country is the *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, then it is not simply a story that would have been authored by the market, but also a story that would have been authored in no small measure, by us.

⁹ Chatterjee, P (2012) *The Black Hole of Empire: The History of a Global Practice of Power*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

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