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The Past Speaks to the Present The Newness of an Old Education Debate



By Prof. Steven Friedman

IF our university campuses – like our country – had held the conversations we needed to have two decades ago, they might not be the zones of conflict they often are today. Fortunately, it is not too late to hold them now.

The campus protests of the past year are a symptom, and a microcosm, of this country's development path since 1994 and its effects. The society which democracy inherited was one in which a racial minority had built an economy and institutions which suited its needs but excluded most people. Instead of matching political negotiations with an attempt to bargain new arrangements, the political and interest groups which shaped the new society left them intact, concentrating on fitting black people into them, rather than redesigning them.

Universities and Society

Major universities were designed for a small, white, elite. As apartheid eroded and then collapsed, they began to admit black students. But, in the view of many of these students, that is all that changed: they remained as they had always been, institutions designed for the minority. Black students were expected to adapt and universities were not willing to change to accommodate them.

This triggered two waves of protest ostensibly focused on different issues but in reality motivated by the same pattern.

Fees Must Fall rebelled against the financial pressures higher education imposed on black students. Even with publicly funded loans and bursaries, many students make do with two or less meals a day so that they can afford fees and books.

Rhodes Must Fall expressed the alienation of students who experience formerly white universities as places where the racial make-up of faculty, course content and many practices seem designed for others – they rebelled because they do not feel at home at institutions which seem to want them to become someone else to fit in. At best, universities failed to understand how alien they seem to students who are often the first in their family to receive higher education (a black intellectual describes how she ‘escaped’ from UCT to UWC because she found the ‘whiter’ university so forbidding that she knew she would be unable to cope with it emotionally). At worst, they assumed that formerly white universities represented what education should be and that black students must adapt if they want an education.

Reviving a Debate

To determine what is needed to change this situation, we need to go back to the years immediately before 1994, when all of society’s institutions were up for debate. This shows that nothing is happening now which was not anticipated then. It also invites us to accept a challenge which would have helped to tackle the problem then and can still do so now.

During that period, an important (but almost unnoticed) debate raged between Harold Wolpe, a radical intellectual who was part of the ANC education policy team (and whose thoughts feature in a book published recently by this author)¹ and his colleagues at the Education Policy Unit at UWC and a range of interests whose chief academic voice was Charles van Onselen, an historian then based at Wits. This ‘development versus equity debate’ canvassed precisely the issues which were raised in the protests.

The debate has two strains. The first centred on the role of historically white universities. Van Onselen argued that black universities were largely artificial, established by apartheid to keep blacks out of white universities. In contrast, the latter were real universities because they were created to fill educational needs (among whites) rather than to serve an ideology. Thus, the post-apartheid higher education system should accept ‘white’ universities as the model, leave them to do what they always did when apartheid did not interfere with them, and channel new entrants who cannot not cope into lesser colleges.

¹ Steven Friedman *Race, Class and Power: Harold Wolpe and the Radical Critique of Apartheid* Scottsville, UKZN Press, 2015

Wolpe and his colleagues replied that all the universities were creatures of apartheid – the white institutions were designed for a dominant group and the black ones for the dominated. So both needed to change. Prophetically, they warned that white universities were prepared to invest in bridging courses and other programmes designed to change black students to fit their needs, but would not change themselves to fit black students' needs.

This debate was largely ignored – policy makers were far more interested in how to slot black students into 'white' universities. Its relevance today should be obvious.

The second strain hinged on higher education's purpose. In the 'development' view, universities exist to enable society to address economic and social development needs – their priority is to produce an elite capable of this task. The 'equity' view insisted on redressing the elitism of the past by opening the academy to those it had excluded.

Wolpe and his colleagues insisted, against both views, that a post-apartheid education system should address equity and development, the needs of the economy and of students.

They knew that there were tensions and trade-offs between the two – concrete policies would favour one over the other and no recipe could dictate how much development and how much equity was needed to address particular problems. The only way to find a mix which could win the support required to take higher education forward was to negotiate – the future of higher education should, they argued, be shaped in a bargaining process in which everyone with a stake, from business to 'radical' students, should be included.

This too was ignored for much the same reason as the argument for changing how universities functioned.

Conclusion: A Necessary Conversation

These missed opportunities explains today's conflict. But the need to negotiate a way out of the competing values which different sections of society place on higher education is as acute now as it was then. No-one is powerful enough to impose their vision of the university on everyone else – at least without meeting so much resistance that they would fail to achieve their goals. Thus, then and now, only negotiated compromise could move higher education forward.

In higher education as in everything else important, the problem with 1994 was not what was done but what was not done. Recalling the debates of that time reminds us of the need to seek the negotiated change which was ignored then.

Steven Friedman is Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Rhodes University and the University of Johannesburg.

He is a political scientist who specialises in the study of democracy. He researched and wrote on the transition to democracy and on the relationship between democracy, inequality and economic growth. He has stressed the role of citizen voices in strengthening democracy and promoting equality. He is the author of *Building Tomorrow Today*, a study of the trade union movement and its implications for democracy, and the editor of *The Long Journey* and *The Small Miracle* (with Doreen Atkinson), which presented research on the South African transition. His current work focuses on the theory and practice of democracy and his study of South African radical thought *Race, Class and Power: Harold Wolpe and the Radical Critique of Apartheid* was published in 2015. He writes a weekly column in *Business Day*.

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