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Speaking Truth to Power: A Personal Journey through the Politics of Boycott and Engagement at Rhodes University during the 1980s

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Introduction

Re-reading my chapter in the recently published *Voices of the Transition*[1] where I offer a personal journey for and into democracy in South Africa, I noticed that I barely mention my Rhodes experience of 1980. This is curious, given that my years at Rhodes were, in many ways, life-changing. It was a time when my Marxism developed, when I engaged in national political activity, aboveground and underground, and when I was arrested, and later convicted of ANC activities. What follows, then, fleshes out my personal journey through Rhodes University during the 1980s.

Black consciousness, Marxism and non-racialism

Guy Berger, then a Journalism lecturer and now Head of Media Studies, first introduced me to Rhodes University in 1979. Guy used to attend meetings of a youth programme in my home town, East London, called Masazane (meaning 'let's get together'), of which I was assistant coordinator. It was affiliated to the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), but had sufficient independence to be a home for radical political discussion, including black consciousness and the re-emerging ANC/SACP perspective, as articulated by people like Guy and Mandla Gxanyana, an ANC operative working under the guise of Black Consciousness. These perspectives engaged with the liberal perspectives of the SAIRR.

While on the one hand I was attracted to the black identity bestowed upon all oppressed people (i.e. African, Indian and coloured) by Black Consciousness, I was also inclined not to see all whites as oppressors, and all blacks as saviours. I was drawn to the understanding that apartheid was a systemic problem, and individuals were socialised to think and act in various ways. In particular, I was impressed by the class and gender analysis offered by Guy and others (including Jacky Cock, a guest speaker at Masazane), which allowed me to see beyond race as the only or primary line of fracture in our society.

Of particular significance is that Guy alerted me to a strange subject called Sociology, and, given my rejection by UCT on race grounds, encouraged me to study at Rhodes. I could get a special permit to do so if I registered for Journalism, because it was not offered at my ethnic university, UDW.

Both Guy and Mandla gave me ANC and SACP literature to read, and when I went to Rhodes in 1980, I started reading Marxist texts as part of my courses, and joined a reading group to study the ANC and SACP. This was supported by my contact with an increasingly explicit expression of Congress allegiances by NUSASs, and later AZASO (which was already moving away from BC towards a non-racial Congress position, and increasingly co-operating with NUSAS). However, despite my inclinations towards the ANC and SACP, the New Left literature I was exposed to at Rhodes made me wary of their allegiance to the Soviet Union, and introduced me to emerging anti-Stalinist currents within the party, exemplified by activists like Ruth First and Rob Davies, based in Mozambique.

At Rhodes I also met Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) activists who preached a hard-line non-racial, pro-boycott class perspective, and these debates were highly charged amongst black students on campus. I was part of an initiative to set up the Phoenix Cultural Society, which was an attempt to politicise students on campus, alongside the initiatives of NUSAS. However, the NEUM and BC activists would have nothing to do with NUSAS, so, in the interests of unity amongst black students, I found myself treading a fine line between my BC and NEUM comrades, and my comrades in the non-racial ANC-aligned socialist camp on campus, with whom I felt most at home. In addition to these influences, I had been approached by the ANC underground to plan a boycott of the upcoming Lions tour of South Africa, and a boycott of the South African Indian Council (SAIC) elections (none of which materialised at that time).

By the time I was arrested in July 1980 for possessing banned material and furthering the aims of the ANC and SACP, I was well on my way to becoming a committed underground activist.

The politics of boycott

All universities were subject to the constraints of apartheid, and Rhodes was no exception. In 1980 black students had to apply for special permission to attend Rhodes, and were housed separately from white students. We were a tiny minority on the campus, and felt like colonial subjects in a white world. Rhodes consciously saw itself as an extension of the British university, particularly of the traditional Oxbridge type. The residences were strictly segregated according to gender, and female students had to be in by a certain time. They were not allowed male visitors. Tea was quaintly served for all staff and students at specific tea times in the garden. The buildings, halls and images made you feel that you might be in England, and indeed this was the intention:

the university was established primarily to cater for the needs of English-speaking white students in the colony.

However, there was a secondary consideration, which was to civilise the natives into the mores of English culture. Cecil John Rhodes was after all the 'civilising' agent of British imperialism. Apartheid, however, upset this mission, and the university, partially because of its liberal-colonial mission, and partly due to pressure from students, did seek to bypass apartheid restrictions in certain instances. For example, Rhodes was the first 'white' university to racially desegregate its residences during 1980.

Being housed together, however, had the effect of creating a strong sense of solidarity amongst black students, and accelerated the political conscientisation of new students. All black students, as well as those white students who identified with the struggle against apartheid, were called upon to boycott all non-academic and non-residence facilities at Rhodes. This included the SRC, all sports facilities such as playing fields and squash courts, and activities such as Rag. Because black students were not allowed to use off-campus facilities such as cinemas and pubs, white sympathisers were asked to boycott those. Great resentment was shown towards those who chose to defy this boycott, and they were invariably ostracised.

A positive aspect of the facilities boycott was that it obliged us to build links with the townships. We thus played soccer on township fields, and attended social gatherings in the townships. This formed part of a broader argument that the university, positioned as it was cheek by jowl with the townships, needed to orient its teaching and research to grapple with social problems in its vicinity. In addition, the facilities of Rhodes needed to be accessible to the broader public, including the impoverished black residents of Grahamstown.

The boycott tactic centered very much around the politics of the South African Council on Sport (SACOS), which argued that there could be 'no normal sport in an abnormal society'. This view was extended to life at the university, such that there could be no normal university experience in an abnormal society. Participation in apartheid institutions was seen as legitimising those institutions, and the boycott strategy was meant to de-legitimise them.

It was a slogan that was popularised during the BC era, and which re-emerged with great force during the upsurge that followed the repression of BC organisations during 1977-8. The pendulum had swung towards Cape Town, starting with the Fattis and Monis strike and consumer boycott in 1979, and followed by the red meat strike and boycott in 1980. These events coincided with a massive high school student boycott throughout Cape Town in 1980, and which began to spread to other parts of the country. Politically active students at Rhodes, including many NUSAS students, were keen to express their solidarity with the strikes and boycotts.

Matters reached a head as the June exams approached. Black students were incensed by the increased brutality of state repression against the high school students, and argued that the boycott should extend to university students, as an act of solidarity. The counter-argument was that this would achieve little, and only result in students missing a year of study. They would be dispersed into their communities, and be deprived of the opportunity to assemble and plan effective solidarity action from their university base. This issue was debated fiercely, and late into the night. Eventually the latter position won out, to the relief of many students.

A site of critical engagement

The argument against a 'simplistic' boycott strategy came from the ANC/SACP perspective, which was forged during a long period of struggle that saw the boycott as a tactical weapon, and not a principle cast in stone. It should be used to achieve certain objectives under particular conditions, on the understanding that tactics of engagement might be more appropriate under other conditions. This was also the approach of the re-emerging trade union movement, which employed strikes and stayaways, as well as negotiations, to achieve its objectives.

The mere fact that we were at Rhodes University, under a racial permit, contradicted the simplistic boycott strategy, notwithstanding the convoluted arguments of SACOS and the NEUM that exempted places of learning from the boycott. Some of us were keen to use the resources Rhodes offered to further the struggle against apartheid capitalism. While we knew participation in the SRC was going to split black students down the middle, covertly using SRC and other university resources, through the support of our white allies in the SRC, to prosecute the struggle could still be pursued. This approach was adopted at all campuses where NUSAS and other leftist student groups had a strong presence, paving the way for an alliance between NUSAS and AZASO in the years to follow. University resources played a major role in supporting the Fattis and Monis and red meat consumer boycotts, and the Release Mandela Campaign. Copies of the Freedom Charter and other anti-apartheid material were easily printed at the university, and widely distributed.

NUSAS nationally produced impressive publications unmasking the Total Strategy of P.W. Botha, including analyses of the Wiehahn and Riekert Commissions. It also celebrated the revolutions in Angola and Mozambique. Many of these publications were banned, but that did not prevent their circulation on campus, alongside other radical publications such as *Work In Progress, The SA Labour Bulletin, Africa Perspective*, and others. All of these were collaborations between students and radical lecturers.

Despite its colonial trappings, Rhodes under Derek Henderson did, in large measure, try to live up to its liberal standards. It protested vigorously when we were arrested, sought to protect academic freedom zealously, and allowed a

diverse range of intellectual currents to run through its academic programmes. These included Marxism, particularly in Sociology, History and Political Studies. I was even allowed to introduce a Marxist perspective in my relatively conservative Economic History class.

On one occasion, when the Sociology head of department, Professor Higgins, failed my first year essay, calling it 'Marxist claptrap', he had the grace to concede later that he was in a bad mood when he marked it, and subsequently increased the mark to 65 percent (It was not a great essay, I was told by my Sociology lecturer Jacky Cock, who intervened on my behalf!). This revealed the degree of respect and power enjoyed by radical academics within particular spaces on campus, despite the fact that the student body on the whole (many of whom were ex-Rhodesians), as well as the administration (staffed by many ex-Rhodesians) was known to be more conservative than other English campuses.

Although all social science departments during those years were run by liberals of various hues, the space for radical, mainly Marxist, thought was opened for me in Journalism (Guy Berger), Sociology (Jacky Cock and Richard de Villiers) and Political Studies (Terence Beard), as well as History (Jeff Peires). Both the Liberal and Marxist perspectives, however, were anti-apartheid, which made me feel comfortable within those spaces of intellectual engagement I chose to attach myself to. In addition, despite my intellectual aversion to liberal capitalism, I was attracted to a libertarian interpretation of Marxism (i.e. a socialist vision of equality that contained substantial liberal freedoms).

The Rhodes Library contained many Marxist texts, from Marx's own works to the then-popular neo-Marxist world systems, dependency and under-development perspectives. Journals such as *Socialist Register*, *New Left Review*, *Monthly Review*, *Review of African Political Economy* and others were readily available, which surprised me. Many contained influential Marxist interpretations of the South African social formation, including those by well-known exiles such as Harold Wolpe and Martin Legassick. Of course, many texts were banned, but available under restriction – including Marx's more political writings, and more explicitly revolutionary work by writers like Joe Slovo, John Saul and others.

As students we delighted in attending lectures by liberal academics, and adding Marxist texts to the reading list, so that we could challenge them in class. The Rhodes Library was a favourite hangout, and we could not get enough of this fabulous literature we had never seen before.

Quite why the apartheid regime allowed the English universities such liberties remains a mystery to me. Was it because it served to maintain a façade of normality to the outside world, as a racially exclusive bourgeois democracy? Security police surveillance of universities was very evident, and they acted to detain activists who had become radicalised on campus. Yet they did not

venture to ban the study of Marxism, or Marxist interpretations of South African history, or prevent access to a range of Marxist texts and journals. However, they did ban all ANC and SACP literature, and other pro-Soviet literature. Did they feel that academic Marxism posed no threat?

If they did, then it was short sighted from their own point of view. As activists we were nourished by the access to radical thought of all kinds, and simply merged these with our understanding of the ANC and SACP. It deepened a non-Stalinist appreciation of Marxist politics that encompassed the re-emerging trade union movement, and undermined the narrow nationalist perspectives coming from black consciousness. Students and ex-students went on to play pivotal roles in the formation of community organisations, trade unions, the UDF and other radical organisations throughout the country. These organisations owe much of their independent radical outlook (embracing feminism, the environment, and participatory forms of democracy) to universities like Rhodes, which facilitated access to new intellectual practices occurring globally.

Carrying on the critical tradition

Rhodes University now operates in a very different environment. There is no anti-apartheid struggle, and students are in the main pre-occupied with getting a qualification that will secure them a good job. While this was always the intention of most students under apartheid, there was also a critical minority that used the university space primarily for subversive (anti-apartheid and/or anti-capitalist) purposes. Today universities are called upon to support socio-economic development within a neoliberal environment, where corporate needs and values are threatening their role as spaces of critical thought and engagement. New voices of subversion are emerging, but are still tiny and fragmented.

Can the critical tradition of certain spaces within the university (particularly within the social sciences) be maintained? So far there is little to suggest that government intends narrowing that space – at least not overtly. However, the threat comes from other sources. Given relatively low salaries, academics are tempted to supplement their income by performing consultancy work for government, the private sector or international agencies. Once they do that, they diminish or constrain their ability to engage critically with those with power – whether they be in government, dominant political parties, big business or international institutions such as the World Bank. Does this explain why academics today, in a much more liberal environment of free expression, seem less prominent as independent, critical public intellectuals than during the apartheid years?

But what does 'being critical' mean in today's global and national environment? A critical perspective, I believe, does not have to mean criticising government as a matter of principle, or uncritically supporting

opposition parties and movements. The critical tradition, in the post-liberal or radical sense, has always meant articulating the interests of those without power – particularly the poor and marginalised – in the pursuit of social harmony based on social justice. In other words, it means speaking Truth to Power – *wherever* that power resides. Certainly, most power resides within governments and the corporate sector, but abuses of power may also occur amongst the leadership of organisations of the oppressed and marginalised, or within the university itself.

Rhodes University has shown that, despite its colonial trappings, it can play a role in developing a Critical Tradition. Hopefully, as it faces new challenges, it can find ways to play an even greater role. To conclude, I wish to quote from Albie Sach's Foreword to *Voices of the Transition*. He notes 'the twin anxieties that at times undermine critical intellectual discourse these days: fear of being considered anti-government and unpatriotic, and fear of being regarded as pro-government and sycophantic', and goes on to identify intellectuals 'who inhabit the huge and fascinating terrain in-between, and who are not afraid whom they might please and whom they might offend'.

This, I believe, captures the challenge of the Critical Tradition in the post-apartheid era.

Notes

1. Pieterse, E. and Meintjies, F., (eds.), 2004. *Voices of the Transition: The Politics, Poetics and Practices of Social Change in South Africa*, Johannesburg: Heinemann.

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Sociology – A Lot of Critical Thinking and a Few Great Women

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> [S]ociology's discursive formation has often demonstrated a relative lack of hierarchy, a somewhat unpoliced character, [and] an inability to resist intellectual invasions… (J. Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies*, 2000)

My Introduction to Sociology course at Rhodes University in the early months of 1978 will always be treasured. The lecturer was the Head of the Department, the late Professor Edward Higgins. To this day I, and I am sure many other former students, would insist that Professor Higgins repeated the same lecture in every class during the course, only altering the order of presentation and changing the emphases as he saw fit or felt. In fact, there seemed to be no logical order at all, as he darted from topic to topic with seeming wild abandon. But, as if under some uncontrollable compulsion, he constantly returned to two phrases that were to become forever etched on my mind and heart. These phrases were 'the sociological imagination', which I later realised he drew from the famous radical American sociologist C. Wright Mills; and 'debunking the conventional wisdom', that is, critically evaluating and undermining the dominant modes of thinking within a given human society. Professor Higgins was certainly no political radical – far from it – yet unintentionally he lit a fire in me that to this day remains alight.

As I continued at Rhodes doing majors in sociology and anthropology and then an Honours degree in sociology in 1981, it became increasingly clear to me that there was something inherently unique and special about sociology; this 'something' that I couldn't readily isolate and capture. But I certainly did not experience this 'something' elsewhere, for instance during my three years of anthropology. In fact, it was only last year after reading a recent work (quoted above) by the well-known sociologist John Urry that I started to come to grips with that 'something'. Urry argues that, relative to sociology, other social science disciplines are subject to 'more extensive forms of discursive normalisation, monitoring and policing'. The comparatively unmonitored character of sociology, and its broad and porous boundaries, makes learning this discipline and working as a sociologist an ongoing (almost unbridled) adventure of critical and passionate reasoning, at least potentially so. This formulation by Urry made my mind wander back to Professor Higgins and my initial taste of sociology, as the sociological imagination and the debunking motif give so much life and vigour to intellectual and discursive pursuits within sociology. Without doubt, sociology as a unique discipline played a big part in my devel-

opment as a critical thinker. Yet, as I argue below, this is not because of Rhodes University but despite Rhodes.

When I was initially invited to deliver a paper at the Critical Tradition Colloquium, I had mixed feelings. I had not returned to South Africa since my deportation in June 1987, after lecturing in the Sociology Department at Rhodes for three and half years. I had lost contact with all Rhodes colleagues and friends nearly fifteen years ago, and I had no profound desire to see them once again nor to set foot in the new South Africa. But, more importantly, I did not feel that I had anything meaningful to contribute to the Colloquium; or, perhaps more correctly, I was perplexed by the very notion of a 'critical tradition'. The term 'tradition' seemed too strong a term for what was probably an uneven and discontinuous and incoherent stream of critical thinking over a period of decades at Rhodes. The term is an historical representation that over-privileges qualities of consistency, direction and ordering in intellectual history. I certainly do not believe that critical reasoning at Rhodes was ever lived as a 'tradition'. I prefer the metaphor of a 'line' of critical thinking, and in particular a jagged and haphazard line written in pencil and not ink. I was also not particularly sure what 'critical' meant, as the term has rather ambiguous theoretical and political connotations. Whatever its connotation, though, the list of speakers planning to attend the Colloquium indicated, at least to me, that the term was being used in a nebulous and 'catch-all' manner. Lastly, I felt that by linking the Colloquium to the centenary celebrations, any history of critical thinking at Rhodes, including my personal history, would be 'captured' and made part of some glorified official Rhodes history. I was not particularly comfortable with this.

I do not believe that there was anything particularly inherent in Rhodes University as a tertiary educational institution under apartheid that generated spontaneously some kind of critical thinking. The space for critical thinking was not built into the structure of Rhodes as a social entity, somehow arising automatically irrespective of prevailing social and political conditions. Of course, it is not uncommon to assume or even assert that social and cultural forms are (unproblematic) natural and universal forms of existence. But the substantive reality of these forms is always socially and historically specific. Thus, like all 'space' in society, space for critical reasoning (including debunking and imagining) cannot be explained in terms of some theory of structural determination let alone determinism. It will also be shown below that a 'conditions are ripe' theory is unable to provide a full account of the space for critical pursuits. This space is socially constructed, constituted, contested, negotiated and managed. In other words, it entails a fair share of human agency and practice, as a comparison of two 'periods' at Rhodes University will show.

My first period at Rhodes (as a student) was during the immediate post-Soweto era. The Black Consciousness Movement and the trade union movement were active but the forms and levels of political mobilisation and

organisation were exceedingly limited. The most public display of protest against apartheid in Grahamstown – at least of the ones that I witnessed – was the solitary women of the Black Sash with their placards standing silently outside the church at the bottom of High Street. On campus it was just as dreary. White Rhodesians as a large minority of the student body seemed to dominate campus life, and there were only a few black students. Each year Rhodes students voted on whether to affiliate to the National Union of South African Students, and each year they voted 'No'. There were few opportunities for progressive-minded students to work off-campus in any meaningful political fashion. The most we could hope for was to belong to the student society called Delta, which published and distributed on a very irregular basis the *Grahamstown Voice or Voice of Rini* intended for a black readership. As Delta we were also engaged, and very naively I must say, in self-help development projects in the nearby Thornhill resettlement area in the Ciskei. The conditions at Rhodes at that time were not particularly ripe or conducive for critical thinking.

After completing my Honours at Rhodes in 1981 I did a MA in Sociology under Frederick Johnstone in Canada in 1982 and 1983 before returning in February 1984 to lecture in sociology. I immediately noticed the far-reaching and dramatic changes that had taken place in on-campus and off-campus politics in South Africa during the time I was away. Community mobilisation and organisation around the banner of the United Democratic Front had arisen, and progressive student activists – mainly black students now – increasingly aligned themselves with the extra-parliamentary movement. The national stay-away and the consumer boycott became the weapons of mass choice, and these activities became prevalent even in Grahamstown. There was a heightened state of political activism on campus with mass meetings and demonstrations that often drew the wrath of an ambivalent university administration under Vice-Chancellor Henderson. Despite state repression, notably in the form of detentions, the political mood on campus was upbeat and euphoric during this, my second stay, at Rhodes. During the mid-1980s it was difficult not to be some kind of critical thinker.

Yet as a student in sociology at Rhodes during the earlier period I received a heavy and regular dose of Marxist theory. For instance, our third year course on Sociology of Development dealt not so much with Parsonian modernisation and growth theories but rather with the underdevelopment, unequal exchange and world-system analyses of radical theorists. As well, courses on South African society centred around the materialist and class analyses of Legassick, Wolpe and Johnstone rather than the liberal 'convention wisdom' about race and racial domination. Meanwhile, in the Anthropology Department, there was a disdain and outright antagonism for Marxism amongst the staff, notably the department head. They were less concerned with the contradictions of South African capitalism than with what they saw as the irreconcilable contradictions

of Marxist theory. The point is that there were certain lecturers at Rhodes during my earlier period, in the Sociology Department but also less so in political studies, journalism and history, that sought to be at the forefront of critical analysis under apartheid conditions. They tried to break new theoretical ground, to be at the cutting edge of analytical thinking in the form of Marxism.

Notions of 'structural determination' and 'ripe conditions' do not provide a sufficient basis for understanding the emergence of these critical thinkers. I would suggest, perhaps somewhat un-sociologically, that a theory of greatness is more appropriate, particularly a theory of great women. In particular I think of Jaclyn Cock and Marianne Roux, with their contrasting personalities: the former sombre and the latter nothing short of eccentric. These women stood tall in the face of adversity, intimidation, and literal attacks on their homes, including the dynamite attack on Jacklyn's small abode. I do not know the intellectual history of these women, nor do I know their histories and experiences at Rhodes and who influenced and encouraged them. What I do know is that they sought quite consciously and with great conviction to open up and shape a space for critical reflection at Rhodes, or at least to maintain and broaden the space bequeathed to them by other earlier critical thinkers.

The quotation by Urry at the beginning of this paper suggests that sociology is necessarily a liberating discipline, as if somehow all sociologists are critical thinkers. In fact, Urry goes on to discuss how sociology 'has always skirted close to the edge of the [intellectual] academy (some would say over the edge) because of its proximity to various social movements'. This may be true, but it is not the full story, as the history of conservative, mainstream American sociology during much of the last century demonstrates (if anything, C. Wright Mills was one of the exceptions that proved the rule). Certainly, social movements enliven progressive thinkers and spur them on, as the extra-parliamentary movement did during the waning days of apartheid. But I am sure that a study of the personal biographies of such sociologists as Cock and Roux would show us that even in the face of adversity and isolation, critical thinking is possible. During the perplexing trauma of post-Soweto South Africa, these and other lecturers ensured that the line of critical thinking at Rhodes, always tenuous and frayed, was never completely broken. Thus, when I eagerly returned to Rhodes in 1984 to lecture in the Sociology Department, I was handed not just the keys to my office. I was given something much less tangible but much more precious: what the Colloquium refers to as a critical 'tradition'. I hope that, during my brief tenure as a sociology lecturer, I made a contribution (no matter how small) to ensure the continuation of that 'tradition'.

Nearly twenty years later apartheid South Africa is long gone, and so am I. I no longer live in South Africa nor am I an academic. But I now wonder about my former colleagues at Rhodes and the new generation of social science academics. With the end of apartheid and the intensity of the struggle against it,

have the sociological imagination and the critical passion also gone? Today is the age of global neoliberalism with its sub-regional hegemonic power in the form of contemporary South Africa. Because of this, it is more crucial than ever that academics at Rhodes adopt an unwavering critical approach to society and history, and not be co-opted into the hegemonic discourses of ruling classes and parties. It is important for them to increasingly recognise the significance of the progressive social movements in the country, and to sharpen their analytical insights by staying in close proximity to these movements.

I do not know if critical thinkers, whether in sociology or other social science disciplines, still ply their trade at Rhodes in post-apartheid South Africa. Yet, if the critical 'tradition' is alive and well, and I hope that it is, this serves to bear witness and testimony to the efforts of the great women (and a few good men) of the apartheid era.