

The political economy of education: its place in democratic struggles

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South Africa today is in a state of crisis. The crisis lies deep and is far-reaching: it has its roots in the economy, but is equally manifested in all other spheres of life - the political, the social and, importantly, the ideological. In the current crisis, the state has been forced to recognise the profound and structural form of the problems facing it, and it has realised that a defective, low-keyed tinkering with various mechanisms will not be enough. The state has therefore responded actively, attempting to control and channel the changes through reform and, since reform of any kind opens up uncertainty, the state has simultaneously become more repressive. The issues are far from resolved: the choice that lies before South Africans is whether the present interest groups retain their power by means of piecemeal reform (and perhaps reaction), or whether the pace and force of change will bring about a deep and serious transformation; a restructuring which will alter all facets of our lives. In these times, there is no room for passive bystanders: the crisis affects everyone, and we can all play a part in the restructuring, especially in those areas in which we are best equipped. For those at universities, it is the arena of education.

In recent times, the state has responded to the crisis by appointing commissions of inquiry into labour relations (Wiehahn), urban blacks and labour migration (Riekert), education (de Lange), health (Reynders) and, of course, security (Rabie). It has put many of the recommendations into law already, easing restrictions in some cases, tightening others (such as the proposed 'Orderly Movement of Black Persons' which puts another nail into the coffin of migrant workers). Capital likewise has not been idle during this period: the vehicle of liberal capital, the Urban Foundation, is enthusiastically aiding the creation of a black middle-class, and preaching the ideology of free market enterprise. These same employees, perhaps not surprisingly, are simultaneously attempting to crush the trade union movement, through dismissals and retrenchments of their members. The government is beleaguered: there is a right wing backlash against its reforms on the one side, and an increasing pressure from democratic movements on the other.

It is against this background that we have to view the education system, and particularly universities, and assess how

to respond to the crisis of legitimacy and ideology that threatens the present structure. Education is a double-edged weapon: it can be used to fight for democracy and freedom; more commonly it is a weapon in the hands of capital and the state to oppress and control.

The Political Economy of Education

Education in general performs the role of reproducing the class system, and ensuring that the status-quo is not seriously challenged. Social control begins informally, in the family, with processes of socialization, whereby children are inculcated with the attitudes, values and beliefs of their parents. It becomes formal in the schooling system where, as Bowles and Gintis argue (1),

"schooling has been at once something done for the poor and to the poor."

They agree that, "the politics of education should be understood in terms of the need for social control in an unequal and rapidly changing economic order", and it is clear that the education system is a method of disciplining young people, with a view to producing a dominated and quiescent adult population.

One of the main features of an education system is to allocate individuals to places in society, especially to produce and reproduce a class-stratified and divided labour force for capitalist production. Education, at its very roots therefore, is fundamentally unequal, and seeks to reproduce inequality. But the inequality is not restricted to the educational sphere; this is just a class-rehearsal for real life: the education system aims to reproduce economic inequality and, in South Africa, political inequality as well. In so doing, it distorts and stunts personal development.

The combination of formal and informal education - schools and universities, as well as socialization in the family, and the media, gives rise to the production of forms of consciousness which lead people into accepting their allocated roles as workers, managers or bureaucrats in a trouble-free, unquestioning way. The structure of education in South Africa reinforces the main divisions of our society: racial/ethnic identities, sexual differentiation and oppression and, often overlaid and concealed by the previous two, class divisions.

But, education is not without its own contradictions. Again, in the words of Bowles and Gintis the education system, while it

"served the interests of profit and political stability, it has hardly been a finely tuned instrument of manipulation in the hands of socially dominant groups. Schools and colleges do indeed help justify inequality, but they have also become arenas in which a highly political egalitarian consciousness has developed among some parents, teachers and students" (2).

In short, there is room for manoeuvre in the educational sphere, in which progressive and democratic individuals and groups are able to struggle for their ideals. Education, and especially tertiary education, deals with the ideological terrain. The university, if it has a contribution to make, equips people with intellectual skills: how to work with one's head, and to be analytical. There is an important role for students and academics in this arena, to challenge the dominant myths, and to demystify the deeply-held assumptions and prejudices of our society. Importantly, too, it is not enough merely to dismantle the ideological barriers - there is a further duty to act upon the beliefs and insights gained in the privileged community of the university, for the university is a place for the elite, very few workers, or working-class people find themselves in the lecture halls.

However, it must be remembered that the roots of repression and inequality lie not in the educational system, but in the structure of the capitalist economy, and the social forms it gives rise to. In countries like Britain and America, there have been numerous attempts at educational reform, all of which have failed, because they failed to confront this basic truth; they have failed to challenge the real foundations of exploitation and oppression, which lie in the structure of property relations and power in the economy of a country.

This is a useful perspective therefore: most educational problems do not have their origins in the educational structure, but arise from the operations of a society based on a capitalist economy; the contradictions of capitalism are reflected in the educational sphere. A further concomitant is that attempts at reform of the educational system alone are never adequate. At best, it must be seen as a short-term goal, to be placed in proper perspective in the context of long-term demands as well, demands which will challenge the structure of power in South Africa.

For instance, the call for compulsory and free education for all people in South Africa opened up certain possibilities, but is not necessarily a progressive demand. Compulsory education is a positive menace if all it means is that Bantu education and gutter education is thrust down the throats of all the dominated population, but with more efficiency than before. Nor is it necessarily a progressive demand for equal education either. Education for whites in this country is far from ideal; it too is attempting to allocate people to positions in a racist, capitalist state. We need a entirely new education; but it can only be effective if it is linked to fundamental changes in the political, economic, social and cultural life of our society.

From this, two lessons can be drawn. Firstly, democrats and progressives who wish to involve themselves in the sphere of education, have a responsibility to challenge the quality of that education, and should try to do so from a position of strength - by being well armed with knowledge and with successful organisation. Secondly, from this position of strength, they should forge alliances with democratic groups who are working for progressive change in South Africa, who question and challenge both the political and economic order: organisations such as the independent trade union movement and

democratic community organisations.

The Bourgeois University

On a previous occasion (3), I have spoken about how South African universities have always reflected the dominant prejudices and contradictions of our society. How, for example, our universities have systematically discriminated on grounds of sex and race, despite high-sounding principles which deny it. More seriously, universities discriminate on grounds of class. It is extremely rare for working class people to enter the sphere of tertiary education rather, our places of higher learning are institutions for the training of the next generation of managers, bureaucrats, supervisors and exploiters - and the majority of them are drawn from the same middle classes which presently control and dominate.

Universities perpetuate the class division which separates mental from manual labour, and portrays intellectual work as being somehow more "valuable", giving such people the "right" and the ability to exploit working people. This separation creates a distortion in our development, for as intellectuals, people in universities tend to talk to businessmen, administrators and other academics. With a few notable exceptions, university courses seldom expose students to the problems of the working class - factories, ghettos, squatter camps, unemployment, poverty, etc. We are left with a fragmented, elitist view - we are not encouraged to see society as a whole, and to analyse and understand the concomitant link between wealth and poverty.

Even the structure of the university tends to fragment vision and knowledge. The institution is highly structured, hierarchical, divided by disciplinary boundaries. New and ground-breaking interdisciplinary courses have to fight for their very survival against departments which feel threatened by encroachment, and which hold up academic "discipline" as their bankrupt call for purity. The pinnacle of achievement in the academic world - the PhD. - exemplifies the point: it is research in which the individual selects a topic, narrows it down, and becomes a specialist in it.

Most of the funding for universities comes from two sources: the state, and capital. Both make substantial contributions to the finances and, to varying degrees, both make demands and have expectations of the university and its graduates. To take a small example, my own department - Social Anthropology - began life at Wits in 1922 under the name of Bantu Studies, and it was set up by means of a generous grant from the Council of Education and, intriguingly, Wenela - the Witwatersrand Native Labour Recruiting Organisation. Within a year, the department was offering a diploma course in Bantu Administration, directly aimed at district officers, magistrates, compound managers, etc; in other words, it was a course for those who administered and controlled the lives of black South Africans.

Struggles on the Campus

I remarked earlier that education (and universities) reflect the contradictions of the wider society. Much of the pre-

ceeding account is about domination and control. But oppression gives rise to resistance and struggle, which takes place within the university, as elsewhere. The university is not monolithic, it is subject to conflicting demands from many sides, and these are contradictions which can be prised open and exploited. It is difficult to offer general observations about campus struggles. Each campus is located in a different centre, and local conditions influence issues on campus. Also, each campus has had a different historical experience, that sets a tone for campus politics. Issues that appear to be high priority at, say, Rhodes, may not arise in Cape Town. For instance, the "cricket tour" affair in Durban didn't touch other campuses, and the "Koornhof affair" at Wits was a local event.

The lessons of campus politics in recent years have been that, while a progressive leadership is vital, so too is the need to draw in a broad base of committed students, willing to work quietly but hard on the important subcommittees and groups, such as projects comms and ERC's. It is here that the real lessons of commitment, democracy and discipline are learnt, and they are an education which is seldom forgotten. The importance of these campus organisations cannot be overstressed, for they are self-educative. There are numerous skills to be learnt: how to work co-operatively, when to call a meeting, when to beat a tactical retreat, etc.

It is no coincidence that a considerable white left now exists off-campus, with real achievements to its credit. This broad category of people are mostly drawn from the mid-seventies group of graduates, people who learnt their politics and practices in the wages comms, etc., in other words, low-keyed student politics and organisation. These are important resources and allies to the present generation of students who, in turn, will swell the ranks of the off-campus left. How different this is from the high-profile protest politics of the sixties, which generated a brief, enthusiastic, but superficial commitment, mostly founded in liberal attitudes.

The left on the campuses have often been portrayed as being out of touch and out of step with wider political opinion. Recent events have shown this view to be untrue. Student participation in the anti-Republic day events, and their assistance to workers and community struggles, shows them to be alert and in harmony with the aspirations of the majority of South Africa's people. There is a danger that progressive students may begin to believe the protestations of their detractors. The isolation of the university may give rise to a fear of change, but democrats need have no such fears, and should embrace change, and play a part in moving it in a progressive direction.

Let us turn our attention to more specifically campus-related aspects of education. One of the most serious infringements of students' rights is in the control over the curriculum. It is especially the case in the sciences, engineering and medicine, that the curriculum is so tightly structured that the student has no free time. This has two effects: first, the student is completely controlled by the curriculum, and finds difficulty in exploring other areas of knowledge; second, there is either no time available to engage in campus

politics and other activities, or the student has no energy at the end of an exhausting day of lectures and pracs. This is a particularly serious problem when one considers that what is learnt in the classroom is often only a fraction of the useful knowledge one gains at a university. As a teacher, I value most those students who have interests beyond the narrow confines of the classroom: they usually have a maturity that comes from experience and practice in the self-learnt areas of student politics, wages comms, or cultural groups.

Arising out of this, students have both the right and the obligation to demand that the university offers socially useful knowledge in its courses. You should question the structure and content of courses, such as:

- Does your education equip you to analyse South African realities and events?
- Does it equip you to act upon your understanding?
- Is your education elitist and class based? If so, how can you redress the balance? How can you make your courses relevant to the mass of South Africa's people?
- The quality of the education : do you get your money's worth?
- Do you have any say in course structure and curriculum?
- Can you influence course direction?
- Are your lecturers well trained, well informed and accessible? You have the right to criticise both your lecturers and the courses.
- The social sciences often tackle subjects of social relevance; what about the so-called "hard" sciences?
- Can you challenge the facade of "scientific objectivity" behind which science, engineering and medicine tends to hide, when in fact they frequently serve the interests of the state, the military, or capital?

These are but a few of the questions which need to be asked and answered of the quality of university education. It must not be forgotten that South Africa is a complex industrial society. There are specialist skills that need to be obtained; they are required by democrats in order to confront the sophisticated working of an advanced capitalist state. As can be seen in Zimbabwe or Mozambique, these skills are also essential in a country undergoing reconstruction.

Education : Weapon and Tool

I have argued thus far that education usually serves the interests of dominant groups in society, and also that education reflects the major contradictions of society, which opens up possibilities for the arena to be used as a meaningful site of struggle. Given the privileged background from which most university students come, it is a duty and responsibility to attempt to redress the balance, and to put your education and skills at the disposal of the dominated and exploited population who have no access to the university. Juluis Nyerere put it succinctly:

"The purpose of learning is the advancement of man. Knowledge which remains isolated from the people, or which is used by a few to exploit others is therefore a betrayal. It is a particularly vicious kind of theft by false pretences. Students eat the bread and butter of peasants because they have promised a service in the future. If they are unable to or unwilling to provide that service when the time comes, then the students have stolen from the peasants as surely as if they had carried off their sacks of wheat in the night" (4).

It is not enough, therefore, for universities to call for academic freedom and, as Wits and Cape Town do, to import a prominent speaker from overseas to make an annual incantation, like a mortuary ritual, over the corpse of academic freedom. The university must equally recognise its social responsibility, to the majority of South Africans, and we must put our knowledge at their service. Terence Ranger is one who recognises these academic responsibilities when he argues,

"Any sort of notion of academic freedom in independent Africa had to be established and earned on the spot, by carrying out the combined duty and privilege of public proclamation of useful and sometimes dangerous truths. In this way one might set up a tradition of radical rather than bourgeois academic freedom" (5).