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Human Rights as a Vision of the Masses (Gorm Gunnarsen)	5
The Moral Position (Kirsten Holst Petersen)	10
Drum'ing up a Storm (John Hansen)	25
Women's Resistance (Karla Sørensen)	40
Academic Apartheid and Progressive Response (Hans Erik Stolten)	60
The Role of Nelson Mandela in the Struggle (Pernille Sidorencó)	71
The Teaching of and/or Learning from the Masses (Gorm Gunnarsen)	87
Culture in a State of Siege (John Hansen)	102
'Cry Freedom' and 'A Dry White Season' (Sussi Poulsen)	116
Transitional Literature, 1987-1991 (Stephen Cooper)	125
Radical Historiography as Academic Protest (Hans Erik Stolten)	131

Academic Apartheid and Progressive Response

by Hans Erik Stolten

Only some years after the National Party assumed power in 1948 did black demands for education become an integral and major ingredient of the struggle against racial domination. This education struggle changed considerably over time. Four, perhaps five, phases since the 1950s have been identified by the historian Harold Wolpe, each period being differentiated by the specific social forces which became the main actors, by the organisational forms and objectives of the struggle, as well as by the varying strategies and tactics adopted:

- (a) The opposition to the Bantu Education Act and its effects from 1953 to about 1957;
- (b) The time from 1957 to 1967, when university apartheid was executed, without much popular resistance;
- (c) The Soweto uprisings and their aftermath, protests from 1976 to about 1980;
- (d) "Liberation first, education later;" protests in the period of the early 1980s;
- (e) "People's education for people's power;" protests from 1985 to 1988 and later.¹

The first major struggle over education occurred in the early 1950s, in opposition to the proposed Bantu Education Act. The stated purpose of the Act was to implement Christian national education in the sphere of African education and this meant, in Verwoerd's notorious words:

There is no place for him (the Native) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour... For this reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim absorption in the European community, where he cannot be absorbed. Until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his own

¹ Wolpe, Harold: Educational Resistance. From Lonsdale (ed.): *South Africa in Question*, London, 1988.

community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he was not allowed to graze.²

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 referred mostly to lower levels of education and was met with extensive protests. This contribution however is about the delayed introduction of apartheid at South African universities and the reactions against it.

A comparative analysis of the early period of the National Party's initiation of systematic apartheid, contrasted with the racial discrimination of the earlier segregation period, would clearly show how far the informal structures of racial segregation had already been incorporated into the English-speaking universities before 1948, not by oppressive governmental proclamation, but in voluntary agreement with prevailing European thought and practice of the time. Although the universities of Witwatersrand and Cape Town admitted a few non-white students to their academic facilities, the residential and social facilities were segregated and unequal. The University of Natal extended its unequal and separate facilities to the academic sphere as well as the social. Rhodes University, in the same way as all the Afrikaans universities, admitted only whites. The University College of Fort Hare, formerly the South African Native College, which was established by missionary initiative in 1916 for the black upper and middle class, officially admitted all races, but in practice, of course, very, very few whites ever made use of this opportunity.

South African universities were essentially white institutions even before apartheid. Of 19,720 full-time university students 325 were registered as "Bantu" in 1948. While 1,868 staff members were white, 36 were black. Despite a general expansion in the number of students, the statistics in the mid-1960s looked comparatively the same. At this point full-time student numbers had increased to about 43,000 out of which, 3,500 were non-whites.³

² Christie, Pam / Collins, Colin: Bantu Education: Apartheid Ideology and labour Reproduction. From Kallaway, Peter (ed.): *Apartheid and Education. The Education of Black South Africans*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1984, p. 173. This book also has an extensive bibliography.

³ *South African Statistics*, 1974, pp. 5.2-5.8, Pretoria: Government Printer. Murray, B.K.: Black admissions to the University of the Witwatersrand 1922-1939, *South African Historical Journal*, Vol. 14, p. 35-54, 1982.

But these statistics do not tell anything about the political picture or the development of university structures. The 1950s were a period of comprehensive turbulence in the universities, as the government extended its determined policy of ethnic separation to higher education. As the issue of university apartheid was so pertinent to academics in the 1950s, many articles were published at that time.⁴ Some qualified scholarly surveys have been made afterwards.⁵

The position of the National Party on university apartheid changed over the years. In the early 1950s, there was no immediate unanimity about the way in which the NP government should be the "trustee" of the African people in terms of university education.

At the end of the 1940s, access to university education for black students was extremely limited. Most were registered at Fort Hare or at the non-European section of the University of Natal. At the Witwatersrand and Cape Town "open" universities, there were less than 100 African students.⁶

Before 1948 the governing United Party had no clear policy regarding the universities, even though there was some dissatisfaction with the openness of the English universities, which was found to be too liberal.

The earliest practical implications of a new policy towards the universities came from the apartheid government in 1951, when grants to African medical students at the University of Witwatersrand were suspended.

⁴ For example Kerr, A.: *University Apartheid*, *South African Outlook*, Vol. 87, 1957. Matthews, Z.K.: *Ethnic Universities*, *Africa South*, Vol. 14, 1957.

⁵ Russell, Margo: *Intellectuals and Academic Apartheid, 1950-1965*. In van den Berghe (ed.): *The Liberal Dilemma in South Africa*, New York, 1979. Dreijmanis, John: *The development of tertiary education*. From Vuuren / Wichanh et al.: *South Africa: The Challenge of reform*. Pinetown, South Africa, 1988. Unterhalter / Wolpe et al.: *Apartheid Education and Popular Struggles*, London: Zed Books, 1991. Beale, Mary: *The Evolution of the Policy of University Apartheid*, *Collected Seminar Papers*, No. 44, Societies of Southern Africa., Vol. 18, London: Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1992. Hartshorne, K.: *Crisis and Challenge: Black Education, 1910 - 1990*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1992. Lazar, John: *Verwoerd versus the 'Visionaries.'* The South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (Sabra) and Apartheid, 1948-61. From Bonner, Philip / Delius, Peter / Posel, Deborah (eds.): *Apartheid's Genesis, 1935-1962*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press / Witwatersrand University Press, 1993. Hyslop, Jonathan: *A Destruction coming in. Bantu Education as Response to Social Crisis*. From Bonner, Philip / Delius, Peter / Posel, Deborah (eds.): *Apartheid's Genesis, 1935-1962*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press / Witwatersrand University Press, 1993.

⁶ Report of the Commission on Native Education, (U6, 53 - 1951), Eiselen Commission, Pretoria, 1952, pp. 68-71.

During this time there was little development in the ideas about what apartheid would mean at universities. In August 1953, when the Minister of Education, J.H. Viljoen, raised the issue of "the difficult and delicate matter...of non-Europeans at our universities," he spoke in terms which, like Malan, seemed to stem primarily from the desire to segregate students.⁷ It seems clear that for Viljoen university apartheid meant little else than total segregation.

In December 1953 a commission was appointed, chaired by J. E. Holloway, formerly Secretary of the Treasury, "to investigate and report on the practicability and financial implications of providing separate training facilities for non-Europeans at universities."⁸

On behalf of the Native Affairs Department, NAD, Eiselen recommended that "university institutions for the Bantu should be situated in the Native reserves." In this model Fort Hare "should become a Xhosa institution" and there would be "a Zulu institution in Natal to serve the Northern Nguni as well as a Sotho institution in the Transvaal to serve the whole Sotho community."⁹ On these grounds the recommendation of the Holloway Commission was that black students should be concentrated in the parallel classes at the University of Natal in Durban and at Fort Hare.¹⁰

The fact that the Holloway Commissions to some extent disregarded the worst hard-liner proposals of the NAD revealed the struggles that were taking place over the shaping of the new policies, caused by differences in priorities and strategies. The South African Bureau for Racial Affairs, SABRA, played a central role at this point securing that the pursuit to establish a version of university apartheid, which they found acceptable, did not rest on Holloway's muted and pragmatic report.¹¹

Behind the closed doors of the Cabinet, Verwoerd, as Minister of Native Affairs, acted forcefully to carry the issue forward:

⁷ Republic of South Africa, House of Assembly, Debates, *Hansard*, cols 2592 - 94.

⁸ Department of Education Files, UOD E53/94, File 1397, 1953. Also *Cape Times* 3/2-1955.

⁹ Report of the Commission on the Implications of Providing Separate Training Facilities for Non-Europeans at Universities (Holloway Report), Pretoria, 1954.

¹⁰ Holloway Commission: Report of the Committee of Enquiry into University Finances and Salaries, Annexure 45, 2. session of Parliament, Pretoria: Government Printer, 1953.

¹¹ Department of Education Files, op. cit. Also Lazar, J.: *Conformity and Conflict: Afrikaner Nationalist Politics in South Africa*, DPhil, Oxford, 1987.

The integrated education of white and Bantu creates astonishingly big problems because it defines the nature of the moulding that Bantu leaders receive. Thus... the price of separation also buys a guarantee against corrupting influences on Bantu leaders with all the attendant implications.¹²

Verwoerd's own recommendations provided the first definitive elaboration of the model of university apartheid that, with minor adjustments, was later encoded in the 1959 Act. In brief, he recommended the establishment of two new university colleges, one for Sothos in the Transvaal or Orange Free State, and one for Zulus in Natal - both "on modest terms with facilities for an ordinary BA course and an ordinary BSc course." They would be "founded in or near native areas" and "Fort Hare should be declared a Bantu institution for the Xhosa and church trusteeship should be exchanged for State trusteeship." Separate institutions for coloured students in the Western Cape and Indian students in Durban were also recommended.

The reaction from white liberals and academics to the apartheid government's proclamation of its sinister intentions was slow and weak. The new Liberal Party, which was created in South Africa in 1952 as a progressive reaction to apartheid, had in its programme only a mild advocacy of qualified non-racialist voting rights.¹³

The liberal think-tank, South African Institute of Race Relations, which had existed since the 1920s, gave a rather vague criticism of the plans of segregated, black universities, which allegedly would deny "opportunity for normal contacts with Europeans" and would be unable to give "a sound humanistic education," particularly to Africans who "had no equivalent in their traditions to Western forms of scholarship."¹⁴

Outside the universities the ANC and the Coloured and Indian Congresses, organised broad, militant, mass movements and fought intense prolonged struggles against the institutionalisation of racialism in other areas. The influence

¹² Kabinetmemorandum: Mening van die Minister, quoted from Beale, Mary: *Op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹³ *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1953-1954*, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1954, p. 6.

¹⁴ *A Survey of Race Relations*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

of these battles on higher education was however much weaker in the 1950s than in later stages of the fight for freedom.¹⁵

Until mid-1956 there was almost no response from the universities to the possible effects of the government's plans for them. On the issue of racial segregation, the faculty and student opinion was pretty half-hearted. On the issue of university autonomy on the other hand, there was a much readier consensus for protest. This last principle was understood and valued in the Western academic tradition, and at the same time it raised the latent anti-Afrikaner feelings in the English academic circles.

The National Union of South African Students, NUSAS, launched a campaign to "oppose interference with the principle of academic non-segregation" from their congress in July 1956. The terms of opposition were even more carefully phrased when a student meeting with more than 1300 participants at the University of the Witwatersrand in September 1956 voted against "the compulsory introduction of apartheid," and the University of Cape Town, where more than 1100 students simply voted for "full university autonomy." The white students of the University of Natal could only give a non-committal support for the so-called Open Universities when assured that it was only autonomy, not racial integration, which was being supported.¹⁶

In December 1956 the advisory assembly of Witwatersrand and Cape Town universities held protest meetings, and in January 1957 the same two Universities held a joint conference in Cape Town on open universities. Their Students organised demonstrations with slogans like "Keep These Gates Open."¹⁷

The Separate University Education Bill was made public in March 1957, proposing a stop for the admission of non-white students to the old universities without special permission from the Minister, and authorising the relevant ministers to establish new ethnic university colleges for non-whites. According to the bill, the ministers were to have power to nominate staff and senate, establish departments and institutes, outline the authority and duties of the staff. The ministers could punish misconduct which was defined in seventeen subclauses

¹⁵ Kuper, Leo: *Passive Resistance in South Africa*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1956. Also: Yale University Press, New Haven, 1965.

¹⁶ *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1955-1956*, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1956, p. 205.

¹⁷ Legassick, M / Shingler, J.: South Africa. In Emmerson, D. (ed.): *Students and Politics in Developing Nations*, London: Pall Mall, 1968, pp. 13-34.

including "insubordination," "adverse public comment on the administration of a government department," and the propagation of "any idea...prejudicial to the administration of any university college or government department."¹⁸

As it happened, the bill was postponed officially because of legal technicalities and it was not until August 1958 that the revised Extension of University Education Bill came up again in parliament. Government spokesmen argued that the black graduate "should seek and find his highest fulfilment in the environment of his own social group."¹⁹ The bill was debated for three days in the House of Assembly. Both the Native Representatives and liberal members of the United Party spoke extensively in opposition to the bill, while Viljoen called attention to the effect of university education in socialising future African leadership:

I am convinced that one of the basic causes of the numerous defiance campaigns is attributable particularly to the fact that the leaders of those non-whites are often trained in an area and in an atmosphere which is totally foreign to the section of the population they have to serve...is it to be wondered then that such a person becomes an agitator and takes part in disturbances such as we have seen in this country in the past?...instead of becoming a leader and a social asset, he becomes a traitor and a social evil...The non-whites are still too immature to accept the responsibilities concomitant with an independent university. Apart from that, unfortunate experiences, some of them very recently, have clearly shown how susceptible the non-white students are to undesirable ideological influences which can so easily lead to riots and violence.²⁰

Afrikaner academics and legislators remained highly united in their apparent conviction of the moral rectitude of racial separation. In its so-called enlightened form, Afrikanerdom promised full independence and self-realisation for each ethnic group. In its more sinister formula it reveals a rigid, cultural imperialism as can be read out of the quotations in this paper.

¹⁸ A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1956-1957, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1957, p. 199.

¹⁹ A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1957-1958, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1958, p. 200.

²⁰ Republic of South Africa, House of Assembly, Debates, Hansard, 27/5-1957, cols 6765.

The real background for the increased political discipline was of course somewhat different. That was constituted by factors such as the politicians' need for the support from the white workers, the employers' need for an obedient and effectively allocated African workforce and the need of the whole white population for preservation of the privilege-system, in a situation where African mass protests were growing.

The bill passed through the second parliament vote with 72 votes in favour and 42 against. But instead of proceeding to the third reading, it was consigned to a committee, which was later converted into a commission, which ultimately delayed the implementation of the policy of university apartheid until 1960.

One factor which could have influenced the delay was the opposition which eventually had been mounted by liberal circles to the bill at this late stage. The open universities, as well as the South African Institute of Race Relations and NUSAS, had rather strongly opposed the bill. With the general election awaiting in April 1958 an intensified opposition could have been a serious consideration for the NP.

By late 1958 the chairman of the commission, Deputy Minister of Native Affairs, M.D.C. de Wet Nel, recommended the creation of separate bodies on the basis of a conception of the "present state of immaturity of the non-European groups" which rendered them unable "to finance, staff and control a university college on their own." In Nel's opinion this meant that white staffing was essential.²¹

It seems clear that this policy was part of a broader approach to apartheid and that the forces moulding the overall shape of apartheid affected this aspect. Later studies have demonstrated that as the 1950s drew to a close, apartheid entered a new phase in response to the failure of its earlier policies to stabilise the turbulent urban environment.²² Fundamental shifts in policy were created by this continuing and escalating crisis which threatened white supremacy. In this context the Native Affairs Department consolidated and extended its influence,

²¹ Report of the Commission on the Separate Universities Education Bill (de Wet Nel Commission), Pretoria, 1958.

²² Bozzoli, Belinda: History, Experience and Culture. From Bozzoli (ed.): Town and Countryside in the Transvaal, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983.
Posel, Deborah: The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961. Conflict and compromise, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

reconceptualising the roles for all kinds of national authorities linking them to a wider scheme to create the conditions for political stability.

The increasing power of NAD showed that Verwoerd's and Eiselen's version of university apartheid became dominant and this policy changed little after it was first expounded in 1954, but it took time to impose this version on the National Party as a whole, just as a certain prudence had to be observed in relation to the rather dominating stratum of liberal academic experts and to the international opinion. In the meantime other pressures arose, of which the most important was the mass resistance of the Congress Movement, which led to adjustments linking the policy more and more closely to the repressive Bantu Authorities rather than to other models of "development." By 1959, when the Extension of University Education Act and the Fort Hare Transfer Act were passed, university apartheid had become an integral component of a strategy to defuse political tensions through the Homeland policy.²³

Several Fort Hare faculty members including seven white heads of departments had to resign. The staff at the new black institutions were overwhelmingly Afrikaners. The student/teacher ratio in the new institutions was rather good, because of the shortage of qualified African students. The whole African population, at least fifteen million persons in 1966, had only 2034 candidates attempting the matriculation examination for the universities, and only 23,9 percent of these passed (only 1,5 percent 1st class).²⁴

The Extension of University Education Act prevented the admission of non-whites at the old white universities. Nevertheless the Minister could give his permission and this permission was actually given to such an extent that the number of blacks, at white universities, remained rather constant or maybe even slightly increasing. Because of economic and manpower considerations, the government had to admit some blacks to white universities to study those subjects not available at the ethnic colleges. This was actually just another example of apartheid's impossible system of simultaneous co-optation and exclusion. The blacks were shut off from the democracy, but remained an inevitable part of the economy.

²³ *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1958-1959*, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1959, p. 235.

²⁴ *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1968*, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1969, p. 222.

The reaction to the new universities of the black intellectuals was marked by practical considerations, since the restrictions were to affect them, not only in principle, but in practice. Their early protests took the form of bold statements, in which they still saw themselves as a selected, African elite:

Let it be noted once and for all that our stand as students of Fort Hare and as future leaders of our country, upholding the principles of education as universally accepted, remains unchanged and uncompromising...our outright condemnation of University apartheid legislation remains steadfast.²⁵

But at this point there was no great enthusiasm for boycott or militant protest by black students. Black students had not yet been recruited from the representative majority, but mostly from the chosen few, and they had just been watching the agitated protest at the government seizure of black schools in 1954 fade into resignation. The time was not yet ripe for the enthusiastic mobilisation which black student organisations have later displayed.

The repressive power of the apartheid government and the Nationalist Party's clarified, single-minded persistence were more obvious in 1959 than in 1954 and so were the limitations of peaceful protests and persuasive arguments. For the conscious students and academics, it was more meaningful to channel their protests through broad, popular political movements, as it also happened on a wide scale during 1960-61, which were years of surging black optimism, when for a brief moment far-reaching change seemed imminent. By the time the government had re-established its brutal grasp on the situation, the question of university autonomy seemed to be one of the least of South Africa's problems.

Reactions to the hardened suppression varied. Several hundred black intellectuals were regarded as threatening and arrested. Many of the best academics left the country and many second-best academics stepped into their places, with damaging consequences for the quality of research. The international flow of visiting academics almost stopped.

In the dark years which followed the 1959 Act, the English universities continuously, but in a rather relaxed and not very convincing manner, worked for the lifting of race restrictions on their own institutions. The government's dogged

²⁵ *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1958-1959*, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1959, p. 277.

determination to limit and control the number of black students in white universities maybe even provided a stable, reassuring context for liberal declarations about the desirability of university desegregation, which had not really been an issue before the 1959 Act despite of the existing discrimination.

But what begins as a moderate defence of university autonomy can, in the face of intransigent government policy, become a more radical demand and political participation from whatever motivation may itself be a transforming experience. By 1974 students carrying placards were demanding the release of political prisoners.²⁶

In the liberal ideal of an intellectual, the commitment is to the ideas as such and the deed is born out of pure intellect. The South African case of the 1950s shows that in reality the action originated mostly from social position. The black elite was drawn into political struggle through ethnic and social relations. It was the experience of being black and socially discriminated, rather than idealistic ideas of academic freedom, which determined the political affiliation of progressive black intellectuals. The broad, enthusiastic movement of popular black resistance inspired the educated. Only to a limited extent did the educated mobilise support, by articulating dissent themselves. On the other hand, the support from black university students to the freedom movement was constantly growing, and 15 years later the university students responded immediately to the Soweto Uprising.

²⁶ A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1974, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1975, p. 375.