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The South African research body which includes the entire research activity in social and natural science (both within and outside of the state and corporate sector sponsorship) draws its membership mainly from the dominant social group. In South Africa the dominant group is both economically and racially determined. Consequently the white minority dominate the research body and the intellectual discourse as they do other socio-economic and political spheres of that society. This condition therefore guarantees the constant reproduction and perpetuation of the social relations of racial domination.

As an agent that generates knowledge and new ideas, research as an academic and intellectual tool of enquiry is an instrument of social control - producing new concepts, language, and theoretical abstractions which are not accessible to those outside its multifarious disciplines. In so far as the large proportion of those in these specialised disciplines are drawn from the dominant group, research has itself become a pivotal part of the dominant ideology. Its role is inevitably and inextricably bound with the processes of the systematic reproduction of the relations of domination.

The aim of this essay therefore is to explore various ways by which research bodies and the intellectual discourse in general in South Africa can be deracialised and be made more representative of the social make-up of that society.

Defining the Problem

Does the fact of racial complexion and composition of those who are associated with production of advanced knowledge matter? Should we not pre-occupy our minds with the quality of the knowledge itself rather than the racial or gender or religious or any other social background of those behind its production? These are questions that are so central to the nature of the problem that we need to address. In a society with a long history of struggle against racial discrimination like ours, in which racial domination is institutionally entrenched, the fact of racial domination of the research body and the intellectual discourse can’t not be a problem. There can be no doubt that the quality of knowledge produced should be our principal concern. This concern with quality need not be used as a pretext to ignore the chronic ills within the research body especially considering the fact that their redress does not always and inevitably affect quality.

The issue is not so much that the ideas emanating from this white dominated research body are inherently reactionary, wrong or poor in standard, or even unrepresentative. It is not even to suggest that they are representative of some white minority monolithic bloc. The association of the white minority with being the
predominant source of advanced knowledge, inadvertently confirms the 'inferiority' of blacks while simultaneously conferring 'superior status' to whites.

It is due to the success of the segregationist and subsequently the apartheid system that this relationship persists. It is not peculiar to the research body and intellectual discourse exclusively, but exists in other spheres of socio-economic life as well. The almost exclusive occupation of the upper echelons of society, especially its professional body, by a racial group on whom superior status is bestowed is always intended to make that social position permanent. There is nothing inevitable about its demise; it has to be systematically challenged as part of the wider engagement of the apartheid system and its legacy thereafter. It becomes imperative therefore, as part of its project, that the research body and all those in the entire intellectual discourse who are interested in the total transformation of South Africa, black and white, should seek to challenge this situation.

General Background

The argument that follows does not result from any systematic study of the subject, but from an observation of its various manifestations which also account for its structural articulation and deliberate perpetuation.

The first point of observation is the development of service organisations with a strong research perspective primarily based or supported (although not exclusively) by a university framework. Secondly the literature and the racial background of the authors - be it in the form of books, articles in journals including those deemed 'progressive', conference papers or guest opinion column articles in various newspapers etc. Thirdly the roles played, or that tend to be played, by various racial groups in conferences where expert knowledge is canvassed both inside and outside South Africa. Finally the funding of the research projects and the racial composition of their leadership.

Systematic reproduction of the relations of racial domination in research

The under representation of blacks in general and Africans in particular in the research body and thereby its domination by whites is as much a legacy of a long history of racial domination as it is the most telling indictment on the enlightened sections of that body whose failure to seriously challenge this, only contributed to its perpetuation. It is an indictment on the (predominantly white) enlightened sections of that community because with all their well intended efforts they have done little to impart enabling skills, but have been content with using their research positions and intellectual prowess to produce and generate ideas and knowledge for blacks. Although this has been a positive contribution, it is by all accounts inadequate.

Education in South Africa has always been a privilege preserved for the limited few, drawn mainly from the middle classes. A few African recruits of missionaries penetrated the system pursuing careers in fields such as ministry, teaching and to a limited extent journalism. Consequently the system of education has always been
and continues to be dominated by whites, producing from that society and in its interests agents who occupied dominant positions in socio-political and economic spheres that guaranteed the systematic reproduction of the social relations of racial domination.

The introduction of segregated education as part of the apartheid grand scheme tightened whatever loopholes there may have been in the exclusion of Africans from research. The idea was not only to provide education sufficient to make blacks hewers of wood and ministers to the white people's needs, but to systematically underdevelop the potential African intelligentsia. The massification of African education coincided with its impoverishment as no adequate resources were made available to meet the increased demand for this service.

African institutions of tertiary education were, and continue to be, isolated from the mainstream of the country's socio-economic and political life and ghettoised to those of the bantustans. Research work on the whole was therefore carried out by white universities and institutions attached to them. White universities enjoyed a comparative advantage over their black counterparts - smaller lecturer: student ratio, more government spending on white tertiary education, favourable relations with industry and access to the international intellectual and academic community even though an academic boycott was in place. In the circumstances a fantastic infrastructure for the constant reproduction of the white intellectual class associated with the reproduction of new and advanced bodies of knowledge was established.

Education has increasingly developed a mechanically functional value in black communities. It is a source of certification to open opportunities to enter the professional structure and enjoy the benefits that go with it. These are often associated with better life style for average people in the townships. Often overlooked is the place and role of both education and in particular research in the ideological and political struggle for liberation. In this instance, I am referring to education and the liberation struggle not so much in an oppositionist form (for instance opposition to bantu education) that it has taken so far, but rather as an instrument of self assertion, self actualisation and discovery of self in the processes of conceptualisation and development of ideas and therefore society itself.

Within the African intellectual body, the research potential was undermined by the tendency to adopt an apologist relationship with the bantustan regimes on account of fear of persecution or in some cases an attempt to buy favour from those in authority to increase promotional prospects. The real fact of the unfavourable conditions outlined above, combined with the repression in the bantustans, became a useful pretext to explain away both this phenomenon and the general lack of motivation to intervene in the research process. The teaching perspective itself is a continuum of the secondary school method which does not encourage the development of independent and innovative mind, but an uncritical consumption of what the system offers.

The other factor has been the fact that the politics of the student movement focussed on equally important issues, which by all accounts were, and perhaps continue to be, pertinent to the prevailing issues e.g democratisation of education, improvement
of provision and wider political settlement. It may well be argued that the concentra-
tion on the rejection of the apartheid education system and its autocratic authority 
and structure, obscured the most fundamental point and essence of these struggles - 
the demand for fully democratic and egalitarian education of the quality that would 
help secure the full realisation and development of every member of that society. 
The racist education system has been calculated to negate these ideals; our opposi-
tion to it has been intended to undermine the apartheid barriers in order to make 
room for the true articulation of these ideals.

The early theme of encouraging educational achievement as part of the liberation 
struggle has to be rediscovered and given prominence in our campaigns for the 
transformation of that system. The student movement has got to embrace the black 
empowerment project by playing its role of encouraging a positive approach to 
education (even during the phase in which it is undergoing transformation) disci-
pline, assertiveness and unremitting determination to achieve.

The contribution of the liberation movement as a whole in challenging this situation 
has been abysmal. There has been a general appreciation of the importance of 
securing educational opportunities for blacks with the view to general skills develop-
ment to prepare for the post-apartheid administration. Outside of that there has been 
no systematic cultivation of the organic intellectual body in the Gramscian sense. It 
substituted this with an extraordinarily heavy reliance on whites (progressive though 
they may be) whose advantageous location in the upper echelons of the body of 
knowledge is a consequence of both the discriminatory system of education and 
unequal access to opportunities. This reliance assumed an unquestioning character 
and became the norm.

The coincidence of the predominant white occupation of the specialist positions 
and concentration of blacks in various areas of activism gave the movement a 
character of a mirror image of the prevailing social relations it is meant to challenge. 
It negated the essence of the liberation philosophy of developing self-reliance by the 
most oppressed group. These internal dynamics were sustained by the external 
and international intervention.

The overwhelmingly white research bodies have been of no concern to the donor 
agencies. The standing of African researchers in the eyes of these bodies is un-
favourable, in that they are often with little experience and few publications; and 
more often located in universities and institutions which lack a coherent and 
established research infrastructure. This in essence is a catch-22 situation in that 
research experience is conditional on there being a research framework within which 
to conduct it; this in turn is conditional on availability of the necessary financial and 
other resources to make this possible. Some among these have challenged this white 
domination of the research body and have often been presented with a list of black 
trainees who are said to benefit from such projects. More often than not these remain 
perpetual trainees who never seem to break through the barriers.

What is to Be Done?

The above situation warrants an organised and deliberate response. It is inconceiv-
able that this can be achieved without an organisational framework to give guidance and coherence to the issues at stake. Although researchers tend to be organised into various other professional structures within their own disciplines, this cannot be reason enough against the establishment of an association of research workers. Such an organisation would draw its membership on a non-racial basis and from various disciplines.

The fact that blacks have been excluded from it cannot be sufficient reason for them to organise in a way that enhances that exclusion. For blacks to organise separately, away from the established research infrastructure with all the resources associated with it, would be to ghettoise themselves to their own disadvantage. The strength of non-racial organisation would be to isolate and neutralise those forces that have in the past operated to exclude blacks from the research body while simultaneously enlisting the broad support of those who are sensitive to the issue.

An organised formation would among its primary objectives encourage affirmative action within the research body. Whenever affirmative action has been called for in the past, some respondents often decry it as inevitably leading to declining standards. It is imperative that we address the matter. Quite often affirmative action is confused with tokenism. Affirmative action is not about window dressing, but a fundamental correction of the imbalance. An affirmative action programme would seek to address a situation of ill-representation of any social group by reviewing recruitment policy i.e. draw qualified candidates from a particular social stratum. Where no qualified candidates exist, they would recruit potentially able candidates and establish training programmes to assist with their development to the required standard. Affirmative action therefore, unlike tokenism, disregards neither the qualification of the candidate nor the quality of his/her work output.

A database on research organisations could form the basis for a code of conduct which governs the race relations within the research body. Such a code of conduct could be used by the proposed association of research workers to enlist the support of research institutions that support its ideals and to pressure those that do not to operate within this defined framework to conform. Regardless of the unfavourable conditions for research in black universities especially those which are predominantly African, there has to be a deliberate effort to encourage more research to be conducted from there. The encouraging developments of the proliferation of research institutes at the University of the Western Cape provides an interesting example. The political developments that resulted in the dramatic change of leadership at the University of Fort Hare opens possibilities for the re-establishment of a progressive culture of research given the necessary support.

Black empowerment within the research body and intellectual discourse falls short of development of a group of organic intellectuals in the sense of Gramsci - albeit not always contradictory to that objective. The location and lifetime experience of the black intellectuals in the oppressive conditions of apartheid society should play an important role in shaping their political outlook. It is axiomatic therefore that they should at all times be on the side of the oppressed constituting its organic intellectual core. We know from our experience that this assumption does not always hold. The
fact that this is so is as much due to the failure of the liberation movement to nurture this stratum, as it is a reflection of the ideological limitations and vulnerability of such a group when outside an organised formation that constantly influences its development.

Concluding Remarks

The challenge to racial domination in South Africa has got to be thoroughgoing. All aspects of that society have to undergo a fantastic revolutionary transformation. In the recent past the experiences of other situations have been cited to urge caution on the pace and speed of such changes and transformation. Often cited is the experience of africanisation of the dominant sectors of society in post-colonial Africa and the mistakes around that process. The manipulation of the weaknesses of such progressive projects is often intended to justify white minority domination of the spheres of social life. Our historic task is to take cognisance of these shortcomings and build on the often underplayed positive aspects of these struggles.

The essence of the above discussion is to locate research and the intellectual discourse in the wider project for black empowerment. As in other areas, its success in research will be determined by the extent to which those within it are sufficiently organised to systematically challenge the status quo. Not even a post-apartheid society would inevitably alter the situation in this area unless those involved in the intellectual discourse are organised to utilise the possibilities that such a society would produce to effect changes in their own sector. The condition for such a development is the systematic engagement with the issue in all its manifestations.