

REVIEW

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The Poverty of Ideas: South African Democracy and the Retreat of Intellectuals

The Poverty of Ideas is a gigantic failure. It claims to be about intellectuals' retreat within the South African democracy. It is not. Instead, it hosts a number of pieces that do not, as a collection, adequately speak to the book's overall inspiration. This is unfortunate not just because the provocative question that the book seeks to answer is poignant. It is also unfortunate because many of the contributions are excellent self-standing pieces on the issues which they do speak to and so are done an injustice to be located within an anthology about something else. A piece by Mahmood Mamdani, for example, does not address the topic of 'Africa intellectuals' (despite its deceptive title to that effect) but rather narrates elements of broader colonial history (and mainly outside South Africa, the book's supposed locus). Mamdani's piece – like others – is fascinating but misplaced.

The Poverty of Ideas' failure teaches two things. First, the shortcomings are themselves a dramatic expression of the poverty of ideas within public discourse in post-democratic South Africa. It betrays, to be blunt, a lack of conceptual rigour. Second, the role of editor is tougher than might seem the case when thinking about putting together an anthology whilst sipping cappuccino.

If there is a takeaway thought that surfaces consistently, it is the powerful insistence by some contributors (for example, Jeremy Cronin and Dan O'Meara) that public intellectuals should not be preoccupied with mere theorising and conceptual analysis. They should *also* seek to have a practical impact on society. This should be sought, as Jonathan Jansen argues in his contribution, even in the face of institutional and other threats to academic and intellectual freedom.

The conceptual framework: what sub-questions should drive an inquiry about the role of intellectuals?

The authors claim in their introduction to the book that intellectuals in South Africa remain invisible some fifteen years after the birth of democracy. The problem is that they fail to build a conceptual framework that can act as scaffolding for the book's journey.

First, the very notion of an intellectual is slippery. What, for example, is the difference between an intellectual and a public intellectual? Who are intellectuals and by the light of what criteria? What is the relationship between academics on the one hand and public intellectuals on the other? From a normative viewpoint, what ought that the relationship to be, quite independent from what it actually is? Where does public commentary end and (public) intellectualism start? Can the roles of 'analyst', 'commentator' and 'public intellectual' be regarded as pretty much co-extensive?



The Poverty of Ideas: South African Democracy and the Retreat of Intellectuals
 Edited by William Gumede and Leslie Dikeni.

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What is the source – ethical or otherwise – of public intellectuals’ duties? What are those duties at any rate?

The editors do not show enough concern for these definitional debates. This is a fatal weakness of the book since these questions would catalyse more substantive engagement of the issues. This is not a mere plea for conceptual rigour and clarity. These questions constitute the set of sub-questions that any book on the role of intellectuals must engage. This book does not do so.

A diagnosis of the problem: what do public intellectuals (not) do?

Gumede correctly argues that democratic cultural norms are a more important driver of long-term democratic stability than formal rules, regular elections and even the existence of democratic institutions. He repeatedly refers to intellectuals who have failed to help build a democratic culture, allowing themselves to be co-opted by the African National Congress government. But there is not one single illustrative example of this. One is left wondering who Gumede counts as ‘intellectuals’ since the chapter remains stuck at the general level, hardly ever anchoring itself in specificity.

The second chapter, by Leslie Dikeni, represents the poorest contribution to the anthology. It is filled with *ad hominem* attacks rather than rigorous argument, and thereby illustrates the very dangers of poor public intellectual life that he is trying to warn the rest of us against. He spends the bulk of the chapter listing and discussing so-called “celebrity intellectuals”, “commercial intellectuals”, “policy analysts” and “late-coming, new gender activists”. These are all supposed to be pseudo-intellectuals. But not once does he discuss an example of even a media article by a person from any of these groups to demonstrate the impoverished nature of their work. Dikeni comes across as someone who wishes he had more media exposure himself.

At any rate, the chapter’s main claim is not cogent. Rigour and popularity are not mutually exclusive. Intellectuals such as Steven Friedman and Achille Mbembe write countless academic articles, anthology contributions and books while still making useful and regular media contributions to debates. It is lazy, false and dishonest to assume that media appearances constitute the whole of their academic and intellectual life. And even if that were the case, Dikeni should dismantle the content of their work through counter-examples or exposure of poor reasoning rather than bemoaning the mere fact of their media presence.

Dikeni also fails to tell us who should count as public intellectuals and why. He ends off by simply *stipulating* that Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Nelson Mandela are intellectuals. This stipulation, to the extent that it is an argument, is a circular argument in the context of a book that cries out for a) a list of the criteria to be awarded the title ‘public intellectual’, b) a justification for said criteria and c) an explanation of why, say, Walter Sisulu and not Joe Soap meet the requisite standard. The entire chapter lacks that sort of theoretical rigour and systematic argument.

The saving graces

Some of the contributions, despite not engaging the main theme head-on, are worth reading and engaging. Two examples will suffice.

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Albert Nolan argues that “there is an unavoidable link between intellectual work (the pursuit of truth) and the inner work of spirituality (recognising and coping with the truth about oneself).” It is perhaps unfortunate that Nolan uses the term ‘spirituality’ since many might dismiss the concept’s invocation as a whiff of religiosity. In fact, the essence of what he is getting at has nothing to do with any particular religion. It speaks instead to a certain orientation – a certain attitude – that intellectuals need to have in order to succeed. If one is very intelligent and academically gifted but lacking in spirituality (as defined by Nolan) then there is very likely the possibility of early demise as a public intellectual.

Jansen argues, in his turn, that many former anti-apartheid intellectuals have found it difficult to critically engage the democratically elected government, comprising former friends and allies. Various developments within institutions have reinforced this silencing of intellectuals. For example, there has been – in various senses – what Jansen calls an increased ‘managerialism’ within universities which has contributed to a diminution in academic freedom.

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These contributions needed to be engaged with by the editors. However, they only touch cursorily on the conceptual and definitional complications I sketched at the beginning.

Besides lack of engagement, there was also a failure to reign in poor writing style. Chapter five, entitled *Meta-intellectuals: intellectuals and power*, written by Grant Farred, is easily the most obscure, impenetrable and incomprehensible contribution. It is littered with pseudo-profound post-modern statements. I refuse to believe the editors understood these sentences beyond recognising them as vaguely similar to ones one might find in the English language. Allowing individual writers to write in their preferred voice should never be at the cost of lucidity. Here are three random illustrative gems:

“The state-centred act of thinking is the precondition of meta-intellectuality; it is the performance of thought, the thinking in public of thought, both in the service of the state, that makes the meta-intellectual different from every other functionary of the political.”

And: “It is precisely this powerful sitedness, which, in turn, produces a powerful citationality, so that the meta-intellectual never speaks ‘only’ as an intellectual but as power and for the state, that demands the theorisation of the meta-intellectual within its localisation.”

And, finally: “The meta-intellectual interiorises and animates the state’s power over and of [sic] truth”

Concluding thought

Gumede and Dikeni posed the right question but failed to provide contributors with editorial guidance that could have led to wrestling with the relevant sub-issues that the main question entails. The book cannot be rewarded for posing a sexy question or carrying chapters by well-known folk. It failed to deliver on its promises. It would be intellectually dishonest, and therefore contrary to the book’s spirit, to assert otherwise.