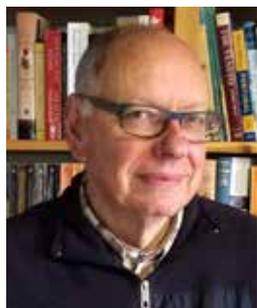


# Toppling Statues, Burning Books and the Humanities in South African Universities



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## Introduction

*Reflecting on Human Rights Month, Ahmed Kathrada and Kayum Ahmed conceded that while our Bill of Rights presents the framework for the development of a human rights culture in South Africa, the wounds of apartheid remain so deep that it will be generations before its principles take hold.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, when on 9 March 2015 Chumani Maxwele, a fourth-year Political Science student at the University of Cape Town (UCT), smeared the statue of Cecil Rhodes on campus with human excrement, a grotesquely vulgar gesture he says was intended to question still-entrenched ‘white power’,<sup>2</sup> did he for a moment take into account Article 31 of the Bill of Rights which assures persons belonging to all cultural groups that they may not be denied their right to enjoy their culture?<sup>3</sup> Or did he consider that the reason why statues of the colonial era are still standing untoppled is because of the peaceful, negotiated transition to democracy in South Africa, a crucial aspect of which was Nelson Mandela’s and the Government of National Unity’s determination to allay the fears of the formerly dominant group that their culture would not be assailed?*

Many commentators are in agreement that the crisis over the statue of Rhodes is only a highly visible but preliminary skirmish in a more fundamental struggle to ‘decolonise’ and ‘transform’ – or, more accurately, to Africanise – the governance of universities, their teaching staff and their curricula. Undoubtedly, as Zubeida Jaffer reminds us, many African students ‘struggle to connect university teaching to their own reality’, and need to be affirmed through studying African intellectuals<sup>4</sup> and artists. The issue is complicated, however, by a tendency among those prioritizing political agendas to confound the successful pursuit of academic excellence by world-class universities such as UCT with ingrained ‘anti-transformation’.<sup>5</sup> That said, the transformation project, in the words of Professor Vuyisile Msila, the head of UNISA’s Institute for African Renaissance, would require breaking down the ‘intransigent’, ‘ingrained’ and ‘subtle’ colonial culture ‘that marginalises emerging black talent and wants to maintain the status quo’.<sup>6</sup> It consequently can be argued that it is irrelevant that more than 80 per cent of the total student body (which

has doubled since 1994 to close to a million) is now African when, according to Dr Jeffrey Mabelebele, the Chief Executive Higher Education South Africa, institutional transformation has been ‘disappointingly slow in some areas.’<sup>7</sup>

*Traditionally, they include classics, languages, literature, philosophy, religion, and both the visual and performing arts. The picture is complicated because certain disciplines which have been regarded as falling within the Humanities are sometimes considered to comprise the Social Sciences because of their greater empirical content.*

## Transforming the Humanities?

Dr Harry Garuba of the Centre for African Studies at UCT believes that the curriculum is ‘a particularly good place to plant the seeds for transformation’ since it ‘helps to create people who think in a particular way’ and express themselves accordingly.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the transformation of higher education is nothing less than a culture war, hardly surprising, perhaps, in a society previously divided by apartheid along racial and cultural lines. The Humanities, by their very nature, must be in the forefront of this conflict because they encompass academic disciplines that study human culture, or what it means to be human. Traditionally, they include classics, languages, literature, philosophy,

religion, and both the visual and performing arts. The picture is complicated because certain disciplines which have been regarded as falling within the Humanities are sometimes considered to comprise the Social Sciences because of their greater empirical content. These might include anthropology, archaeology, communication studies, environmental studies, geography, history, law, linguistic studies, political science, and sociology itself.

Nowadays, where the Humanities are situated in a university structure seems to be a matter more of administrative convenience than pedagogical coherence. A glance at the academic calendars of the five most highly rated South African universities internationally (in order of excellence UCT, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Stellenbosch University, the University of Pretoria and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)),<sup>9</sup> shows Faculties of Humanities in four of them, a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch, and a hold-all College of Humanities at UKZN with Schools of Applied Human Sciences, Arts, Built Environment and Development Studies, Education, Religion and Social Sciences.

What all these multifarious disciplines have in common is that they are not the natural sciences which are based on experimental methodology and rigorous training in acquiring the necessary and internationally accepted fundamentals of scientific knowledge. Or, to put it another way, they are ‘soft’ subjects and consequently far more easily subject to transformation or Africanisation than are the ‘hard’ sciences. When Dr Max Price, the Vice-Chancellor of UCT, advocates transformation in the sciences at his university, he means making the sciences more attractive to black people, particularly women, and training more black science graduates. Both he and Professor Wim de Villiers, Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, are eager to foster collaboration with international researchers to present an African perspective on scientific problems in fields such as health and the environment.<sup>10</sup> Neither is suggesting that the basics of scientific training be changed. What can be transformed is the effectiveness with which the sciences are taught. Professor Suellen Shay, Dean of the Centre for Higher Education Development at UCT, points out that the completion rates in Bachelor of Science degrees ‘are most worrying and where the needs of the country are most pressing.’ For her, the remedy lies in improved foundation courses and standard required entry ‘gateway’ courses in



the sciences that better take into account the all-too-often low levels of academic preparedness, particularly among black students.<sup>11</sup>

But what about purged and transformed South African literature, history or philosophy syllabi? They could certainly be adopted without any risk that they would cause a bridge to collapse, an epidemic to take fatal hold or an aeroplane to fall out of the sky. Immediately after the Second World War the newly-established Communist governments in East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia fully understood this when from 1948 they launched systematic attacks on the disciplines in the Humanities, all of which were 'transformed into vehicles for the transmission of [Marxist] ideology, just as they were in the Soviet Union'. The Communist authorities were delighted when 'reactionary' scholars in the Humanities fled to the West; but they were dismayed when physicians, mathematicians and scientists also decamped since the new society badly needed their skills which could not be readily replaced. In the Humanities, on the other hand, it was easy enough to recruit new Communist, working-class professors to take over from the discredited bourgeois intelligentsia.<sup>12</sup>

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### The Rhodes Must Fall Movement

It is in that light that one should consider the activities of the so-called 'born-frees', young black South African students whose 'youthful energies' Imraan Buccus (Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at UKZN) lauds for having shaken 'the most reactionary of the liberal universities'. As he put it, 'the question

of race and the colonial legacy has been central to this re-emergence of students as an important political force' because they 'have made it quite clear that they are no longer willing to accept the normalisation of colonial symbols and practices.'<sup>13</sup> Ntombizikhona Valela, Masters student in History at Rhodes University and a member of the Black Student Movement, was even more blunt, referring to a 'new kind of student in a different political moment in which young people nationwide are challenging the notion of the rainbow nation and [questioning] whether we can truly say we are in a post-apartheid era.'<sup>14</sup>

*However, anyone with the stomach to trawl the social media will be appalled to read the intolerant, racist vitriol hurled at whites who dare participate in the debate about 'decolonising' the universities and that aggressively denies them any legitimate voice.*

Such rhetoric unambiguously represents a deliberate move away from the principles of reconciliation and cultural tolerance enshrined in the constitution. Certainly, Chumani Maxwele and his Rhodes Must Fall movement at UCT have unleashed the racist demon. Maxwele has complained that in the course of the 'heated debates' their actions have elicited – many of them taking place on social media – he and 'many other black students have experienced direct racist attacks'.<sup>15</sup> He insists this is because the 'white people are scared' and it is them 'fighting back'.<sup>16</sup> That well may be, and Maxwele and his supporters have

undoubtedly experienced considerable personal abuse. However, anyone with the stomach to trawl the social media will be appalled to read the intolerant, racist vitriol hurled at whites who dare participate in the debate about 'decolonising' the universities and that aggressively denies them any legitimate voice. This is an aspect of the controversy which is sedulously ignored by two UCT Psychology lecturers, Dr Shose Kessi and Professor Floretta Boonzaier, when they laud the 'shift in power relations' at the their university.<sup>17</sup> But it is pivotal in Maxwele's two-month suspension on 17 June 2015 from UCT for 'intimidating, harassing, threatening and racially abusing' a female lecturer on 1 May 2015. The lecturer claims that in the course of their confrontation Maxwele said that 'white people should be removed from UCT and killed'.<sup>18</sup> Maxwele has laid a counter-complaint asserting that he has been 'victimised and racially profiled' by the authorities for daring to question the 'white power that dominates the University of Cape Town'.<sup>19</sup>

All this inflamed and ugly racist animosity on campus poses a direct challenge to the Humanities which, as taught nowadays in progressive tertiary institutions worldwide – including South Africa's liberal and apparently 'reactionary' universities – champion the principles of multicultural education. This pedagogical approach emerged some forty years ago in the United States as a response to the accelerating diversification of the student body that called for improved ways of preparing students to take their places in a pluralistic, multicultural world. It addressed the challenge through deliberately inculcating in students an informed and empathetic engagement with others which enables them to operate as responsible 'world citizens' in a democratic society. Inherent in this programme is the validation of previously excluded groups along with the acceptance of the culture of minorities.<sup>20</sup> Wits unambiguously spells out these same goals in its Humanities Outcomes which include an exiting student's ability to 'recognise and value diversity' and to 'respect and value the complexity of multiple perspectives of people' along with the competence to 'apply knowledge and understanding to the complexity of contexts and the existence of multiple perspectives.'<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, students agitating for wholesale (if amorphous) transformation are not abiding by these multicultural principles,<sup>22</sup> even if many of them are students in the Humanities which espouse them. Indeed, those who whipped Rhodes's toppled statue as it was being carted off were indulging in all the anthropomorphic notions of power embodied in an image which has characterised fundamentalist Islam when it has defaced and otherwise humiliated figurative works of art. Certainly, as Robert Bevan has pointed out, the cosmopolitan concept of 'living companionably with the artefacts of another culture, even a long dead one,' is something neither al-Qaeda, the Taliban nor Islamic State (IS) can tolerate.<sup>23</sup> When deploring IS's recent and heinous destruction of the archaeological site of Assyrian Nimrud, Said Habib Afram of the Syriac League of Lebanon saw clearly enough that the thugs with hammers and bulldozers were determined 'to erase our culture, past and civilization.'<sup>24</sup> Unhappily, in that unfortunate region IS is not alone in committing cultural terrorism. Since Saudi-led bombing began in Yemen in March 2015 twenty-five historical sites and monuments have been destroyed including the old city of Sana'a, a UNESCO heritage site.<sup>25</sup>

Truly, when the artefacts of a group's cultural heritage are deliberately destroyed or removed, it can leave no doubt that the group as a whole is under attack. Stalin's famine-genocide (the Holodomor) launched in 1932 against the independently-minded Ukraine began with the destruction of its historic monuments; while the Cultural Revolution unleashed in China in May 1966 saw the systematic demolition of almost all monuments associated with pre-Communist China and its elites. These precedents were surely in the mind of Kallie Kriel, the Chief Executive of the Afrikaner lobby group, AfriForum, when he reacted on 17 April 2015 to the resolution of the government's consultative meeting on transformation in the heritage sector that statues representing the colonial past be moved safely out of the way to a memorial park. Mr Kriel uncompromisingly declared: 'We are against the creation of concentration camps for monuments.'<sup>26</sup> It would not have been lost on the meeting that he was deliberately making the connection to the British internment camps of the South African War of 1899–1902 which have become a symbol of the martyrdom of the Afrikaner people.<sup>27</sup>

*There is a certain irony that this requirement should be voiced by a holder of higher degrees in Fine Art, World Heritage and Museum Studies.*

From this perspective, we can see that the removal of Rhodes's statue – and the copycat desecration of other colonial monuments across the country – are intimately intertwined with calls for university transformation into a focused assault on the culture and heritage of a particular group in our society. This is made plain enough by Gcobani Qambela, lecturer in Social Anthropology in the School of Social and Government Studies at North-West University in Potchefstroom, who castigates universities as 'custodians of borrowed traditions' and laments 'the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum'.<sup>28</sup> Qambela is vehemently echoed by Wandile Gozen Kasibe, a doctoral candidate in Sociology at UCT who is an ardent apologist for Maxwele's actions. His programme for the 'decolonization and transformation' of UCT kicks off with the demand that the university 'remove all statues and plaques on campus celebrating white supremacists'.<sup>29</sup> There is a certain irony that this requirement should be voiced by a holder of higher degrees in Fine Art, World Heritage and Museum Studies. It is certainly not a view endorsed by Nithaya Chetty, Professor of Physics at the University of Pretoria, published on the same page of the Cape Times as Kasibe. He believes rather forlornly that 'it is time that we embraced our

collective history as our own' because 'we are all responsible for moving into the future together.'<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

What are the implications of all of this for the Humanities in our universities with their avowed commitment to multiculturalism? Hitler required a united Nazi intellectual establishment, so when Josef Goebbels headed up the new Nazi Ministry of Propaganda and Popular Entertainment he proclaimed that all intellectual life in Germany should be 'put into the same gear', and that there should be 'no dissonance...between cultural expression and the political-ideological propaganda of the state'. To regulate this, in September 1933 he created a national Chamber of Culture to which all 'makers of culture' had to belong, and initiated many 'actions' against designated 'enemies of the German spirit'. These took various forms such as the purging of museums and galleries, the black-listing of dissident intellectuals and the dismissal of all Jews on racist grounds. In 1933 the

German Student Union (thoroughly meshed into gear) organised the spectacular book-burnings in thirty-four university towns of some 25,000 volumes of political, historical, philosophical and literary works deemed 'un-German'.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, when Dr Kessi and Professor Boonzaier deplore the 'cultural hegemonies' that currently 'hold sway' at UCT,<sup>32</sup> they implicitly favour their replacement by dominant new ones more to their taste. It is reasonable to enquire whether their reformed university culture would exclude existing elements in the national narrative deemed illegitimate or inconvenient to the prevailing dogma,<sup>33</sup> and to wonder just how far they believe we should go in crashing the Humanities in South Africa into ideologically

acceptable gear? Considering that so many of the disciplines in the Humanities lack obvious utility beyond personal intellectual enrichment, perhaps the most sensible strategy for lecturers would be to follow the advice of Professor Msila and focus on producing Humanities graduates 'who are ready for the workplace immediately after completing their studies.'<sup>34</sup> And certainly, in their exit level outcomes statements the Humanities are valiantly asserting that qualifying learners are being taught to 'make connections between university knowledge and skills, in the world of work.'<sup>35</sup>

That being said, whether in the future lecturers in the Humanities concentrate increasingly on narrow vocational training, or continue to reflect – though in suitably transformed mode – on humanity's experiences, human culture in its widest sense must remain their core concern. And they will know from their studies that if you intend to eradicate a human group it is not necessary to go so far as to actually kill it. It will serve as effectively to erase its historical memory, topple its monuments and burn its books. True, the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide confines its definition of genocide in Article II to the physical annihilation of a group.<sup>36</sup> That means that the destruction of a group's collective culture, including its monuments, is not technically a measure by which a genocidal action can be judged. Yet, as Robert Bevan persuasively argues,

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to overlook attacks on a group's cultural patrimony is to fail to understand how it is linked to a people's cultural survival, to the very things that make for group identity.<sup>37</sup> That is why the jubilant overthrow of Rhodes's statue is no small thing. It turns the formerly oppressed into the new oppressors.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sunday Times, 22 March 2015.
- 2 Cape Times, 12 May 2015.
- 3 Chapter 2 of the Constitution of South Africa, Article 31 (1).
- 4 Cape Times, 9 July 2015.
- 5 See the commentary by Nithaya Chetty, Professor of Physics at the University of Pretoria (Cape Times, 23 June 2015).
- 6 Mail & Guardian, 17 to 23 April 2015.
- 7 Mail & Guardian, 27 March to 1 April 2015.
- 8 Mail & Guardian, 17 to 23 April 2015.
- 9 See the 2014-2015 edition of QS World University Rankings and the 2014 edition of Centre for World University Rankings. The 2010 Centre for Higher Education Transformation report differed in that it put Rhodes University in the Red Cluster of top research-intensive universities in place of UKZN.
- 10 Cape Argus, 28 May and 4 June 2015.
- 11 Mail & Guardian, 19 to 25 June 2015.
- 12 Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain. The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944–1956* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 307.
- 13 Mail & Guardian, 10 to 16 April 2015.
- 14 Mail & Guardian, 27 March to 1 April 2015.
- 15 Cape Times, 12 May 2015.
- 16 Cape Times, 15 May 2015.
- 17 Mail & Guardian, 22 to 28 May 2015.
- 18 Cape Times, 12 May 2015. UCT provisionally suspended Maxwele on 7 May and a two-month suspension order was made final on 14 May. However, on 11 June an independent disciplinary tribunal set aside the suspension on the 'technical grounds' that Maxwele had not been given a hearing within 72 hours as required. UCT issued a new provisional suspension order on 15 June followed by a hearing on 17 June within the required 72 hours that handed down a new two-month suspension order. (See Cape Times, 12 and 18 June 2015.)
- 19 Cape Times, 15 May 2015.
- 20 For a full definition of multicultural education, see *The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 3rd edit. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).
- 21 University of the Witwatersrand Humanities Rules and Syllabuses 2015, p. 83; Humanities Outcomes: Degree of Bachelor of Arts, 6.1 and 6.2.
- 22 It is to be seen to what extent Associate Professor Elewani Ramugondo, who was appointed on 18 June 2015 as special adviser on transformation to the Vice-Chancellor of UCT and who – among other tasks – will head up 'task teams being established to review names of buildings and artworks' (Cape Argus, 16 June 2015), will be sensitive to multicultural principles..
- 23 Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 126.
- 24 Guardian, 6 March 2015.
- 25 Cape Argus, 8 July 2015.
- 26 Sunday Times, 19 April 2015.
- 27 For the legacy of the camps, see Elizabeth van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2013), pp. 309-323.
- 28 Mail & Guardian, 10 to 16 April 2015.
- 29 Cape Times, 23 June 2015.
- 30 Cape Times, 23 June 2015.
- 31 Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 645-646, 649.
- 32 Mail & Guardian, 22 to 28 May 2015.
- 33 See Jared McDonald's perceptive article on the nature and purpose of South African history in the supplement to the Mail & Guardian, 22 to 28 May 2015.
- 34 Mail & Guardian, 17 to 23 April 2015.
- 35 University of the Witwatersrand Humanities Rules and Syllabuses 2015, p. 83; Humanities Outcomes: Degree of Bachelor of Arts, 5.3.
- 36 For the text, see Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff (eds), *Documents of the Laws of War*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press (2005), p. 181.
- 37 Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory*, p. 27.