

Higgins, J. 2013. *Academic freedom in a democratic South Africa: essays and interviews on higher education and the humanities*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

ISBN 978-1-86814-751-9 (print), 272 pp.

The publication of this collection of essays and interviews could not be more timely, arriving as South Africa celebrates 20 years of democracy. The essays collected in this volume were previously published as academic articles, chapters in books and reports between 1990 and 2013 and offer a scholarly analysis of key events in South African higher education over this period. The term ‘academic freedom’ has become something of a ‘received idea’ in South Africa; there is a tendency to label whoever is defending it as ‘reactionary’ or ‘conservative’. Higgins challenges these notions by engaging with academic freedom from historical, theoretical and critical perspectives, offering readers opportunities to re-visit many of the positions and decisions taken over a period of vigorous debate and policy-making in South African higher education.

Academic freedom is a concept that is closely associated with academic life, suggesting a freedom that is different from that of other professional occupations. It is even specifically referred to in the South African Constitution. Debates and discussions on academic freedom in South Africa have, however, tended to be fairly general, addressing, for example, issues around the autonomy of academic institutions and individual academics (du Toit, 2007), the role of academic freedom for the democratic project (Lange, 2013), and the legislative environment for protecting academic freedom (Barend, 2010). In contrast, Higgins’ *Academic freedom in a democratic South Africa* offers a more fine-grained analysis of actual events and texts, paying close critical attention to their discursive practices, nuances and contradictions. Taken as a whole, including the important connecting texts that link the essays, Higgins’ work provides something akin to a Foucauldian ‘archaeology’ that traces the evolution of academic freedom as a concept in South Africa.

Higgins begins with an analysis of the media coverage given to the academic boycott and the ‘O’ Brien Affair’, in particular, how the incident led to a re-consideration of the relationship between state and university by the apartheid government. This is the point of departure for re-contextualising debates on academic freedom and for revealing, through

incisive analysis, the evolving understandings of academic freedom. The ‘O’ Brien Affair’ provided much of the impetus for the so-called ‘de Klerk regulations’ and their (ironic) claim to safeguard academic freedom in South Africa. T.B. Davie’s formulation of academic freedom (‘our freedom from external interference in (a) who shall teach, (b) what we teach, (c) how we teach, and (d) whom we teach’) was itself a deeply contextualised understanding of academic freedom in South Africa at a particular time in our history. Higgins scrutinises the T.B. Davie memorial lectures over the period 1987 – 1996, showing how new expressions and different insights into academic freedom take shape in the struggle for democracy. Higgins also shows how, even while the lectures denounce the apartheid state’s restrictions on traditional academic freedoms, the seeds of a new discourse of utilitarianism starts to emerge – one that poses serious threats to the survival of the humanities, and their values of critical engagement, in post-apartheid South African universities.

Higgins then turns his attention to the difficult issue of higher education ‘transformation’ in South Africa. Like many universities internationally, South African universities have been subjected to New Public Management; in the South Africa context, the focus has been the attempt to steer the higher education system toward greater contextual relevance. Higgins ‘defamiliarises’ this debate by tracing the origins of an interest in institutional cultures to business studies in the United States (and its study of the Japanese motor manufacturing industry in particular); its subsequent transposition into higher educational discourse and practice has resulted in the undervaluing of academic freedom and the decline of academic leadership. The chapter on ‘Institutional Culture as keyword’ (with its ironic reference to Raymond Williams) is reminiscent of Birnbaum’s (2000) critique of how universities take up management practices and innovations that began (and were subsequently rejected) in the private sector. Higgins offers a more considered, but no less scathing, analysis of how managerialism has come to replace peer review and scholarly debate in higher education. Like Bozalek and Boughey (2012), Higgins argues that the current preoccupation with quality assurance, risk management, and managerialism in all its various forms and guises ‘mis-frames’ the key challenge of ‘the reality of the uneven distribution of cultural capital’ in South African universities.

In the chapter titled ‘Making the case for the humanities’, Higgins begins to pull together the threads of the preceding analyses, as he addresses a number of potential ways in which academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability can be understood and developed by greater participation in and valuing of the humanities in higher education.

In the second section of the book, there are richly detailed interviews with three key figures: Terry Eagleton explains the negative consequences of managerialism in British universities, Edward Said makes an argument for the role of the humanities in protecting democracy, and Jakes Gerwel reminds us of the importance of the humanities in the anti-apartheid struggle, and its potential for ensuring an informed citizenry in present-day South Africa. The focus is on the critical role of the humanities in a time during which there is unprecedented reshaping of all aspects of university life. The need to defend the importance and redefine the role of the humanities has never been more compelling. Higgins has made his case; academic freedom is too important in realising the ideals of a participatory democracy to give it up without a fight.

In his conclusion Higgins gives an overview of some recent challenges to academic freedom and the humanities in post-apartheid South Africa. It is clear that there is much work still to be done; the legacy of the past lives on in the current failure of universities to graduate most of its students, to produce sufficient science, engineering and technology graduates, to contribute sufficiently to regional and national economies, and to adequately govern themselves. These failures have ensured that academic freedom remains a contested concept in South Africa; like the humanities, academic freedom faces threats from a variety of sources, including state ‘steering’, the move to on-line environments, and the increasing use of business models to manage universities and quality assure their educational and research provision. There are additional expectations for universities to be relevant to the needs of local communities, to expand and diversify (without perpetuating historical inequalities) and to play a strong role in innovation, economic development, and social advancement. In order to understand how universities might contribute towards these goals, there is a need for all South Africans to engage in vigorous debate – a debate which, as Higgins point out, is not possible without nurturing the humanities and the critical engagement that they enable.

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