

BOOK REVIEW

**J.C. van der Merwe & D. van Reenen (2016).**  
***Transformation and Legitimation in Post-apartheid***  
***Universities: Reading Discourses from 'Reitz'.***  
**Bloemfontein: Sun Press.**

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What is the fuss all about? A storm in a tea cup! In August 2007, four boys prepare a video clip for the cultural evening of their university residence. It's a prank! The students get some residence staff to play the part of new students who undergo the initiation process of their residence. It's a dumb initiation; a humiliating one, for sure; but hey, that's the residence tradition. You piss in the food of the first-year students, make them drink revolting concoctions till they throw up. It's a dumb initiation; a humiliating one, for sure; but hey, that's the residence tradition; we all went through it. Now you're a Reitz man.

The authors of the book *Transformation and Legitimation in Post-apartheid Universities*, published in 2016 in the new series *Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation* (Sun Press, Bloemfontein), clearly do not see the video as just a prank; the problem runs much deeper, and neither did the South African Minister of Education. In March 2008, only a few days after the video became public, she announced the establishment of a Ministerial Committee on Progress towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions as a way to investigate discrimination and particularly racism in South African public higher education. The official reading of 'Reitz', offered by the Ministerial Commission led by Prof. Crain Soudien, goes as follows:

In February 2008, a video made by four young white Afrikaner male students of the Reitz Residence at the University of the Free State (UFS) came into the public domain. It showed the students forcing a group of elderly black (cleaning) workers, four women and one man, to eat food into which one of the students had apparently urinated. Predictably, the public was outraged. The video, which won first prize in a cultural evening competition at the residence, ostensibly sought to portray an initiation ceremony. However, its real intent was to protest against the University's recently introduced policy to integrate the student residences. [...] The public anger and condemnation that followed demanded that action be taken. The University swiftly instituted disciplinary proceedings against two of the students who were still registered (the other two had graduated at the end of 2007 when the video was made). However, it was clear that, while welcomed, the disciplinary proceedings in

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themselves were not sufficient. The incident brought to the fore the bigger question of how an event of such intense insensitivity could have happened after 1994. Moreover, the question was posed as to how an institution of higher education, which is supposed to be about broadening young people's minds and preparing them for engaging with social and intellectual differences in people, could produce this level of narrow-minded mean-spiritedness? (Soudien Commission, 2008: 23)

Clearly, the official reading prompting a national Ministerial investigation into discrimination and racism in public higher education, did not see 'Reitz' as a simple 'prank', a 'storm in a teacup'. Why? Because 'Reitz' is fundamentally about resistance to transformation in higher education, based on racism. The evidence supporting this conclusion can be generated relatively easily by means of a discourse analysis.

The analysis of discourse has become an important way of identifying the deeper meaning, the ideological content, of text and talk (and the attitudes and behaviours they reflect). Critical discourse analysis uncovers "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Van Dijk, 2003: 352). Discourse analysis examines a discourse in depth against the context of its production; it analyses the power relations infused in discourse from the point of view of different role players involved in the discourse, and considers the meaning and implications of the discourse. A few years ago I taught a way of doing critical discourse analysis to a third-year political science class that majored in my 'politics and ideology' module at the University of the Western Cape. We then critically considered Van Dijk's understanding of ideology as "the foundation of the social representations shared by a social group" (2006: 729). Ideologies are belief systems shared by specific collectivities of social actors; they involve an in-group, that is 'we', and an out-group, i.e. 'them'. Ideologies provide the members of the in-group with identity, guidelines for action (or inaction), shared beliefs, etc. and this is evident by means of four typical strategies of in-group/out-group polarisation or what Van Dijk calls "the ideological square" (Van Dijk, 2006: 734). Evidence for the ideological square can be found by analysing the main topics in a discourse; what is stressed and what is silenced; what is emphasised or de-emphasised; how social groups are depicted; various other linguistic strategies (like sarcasm, irony, hyperbole, misrepresentation, generalisation, and appeal to authority), as well as the actions that are involved in the text: consensus seeking, resistance building, indoctrination, etc. (*ibid.*). Doing textual analysis of this kind it is possible to unearth the ideological content of a discourse. The ideological square then involves identifying constructions of 'us and them', and 'good and bad' in a discourse. A successful ideological text does the following: it will emphasise 'our good', de-emphasise or omit 'our bad'; emphasise 'their bad', and de-emphasise 'their good'. Do that well and you have a perfectly working ideological text. Xenophobia works like that; racism works like that; sexism works like that.

Van der Merwe and Van Reenen's book provides an in-depth analysis of the 'Reitz incident' that goes far beyond the reading of the Reitz video as text. Yet, who are the 'us' and 'them' in the discourses of the Reitz video itself? Well, it so happened that the Reitz residence at the time the video was made in 2007, was a segregated, all white,

male Afrikaans student residence at the University of the Free State, and the UFS was a typical post-apartheid university that grappled with ‘transformation pains’ (as the UFS management would have it). A typical post-apartheid university? Well, maybe the UFS was a bit different. At the time, the South African higher education quality committee, in its external audit report of the university characterised it as a rather strange institution; indeed one in danger of becoming two universities: “one that is black English-medium and operates at night, and another that is white, Afrikaans-medium and operates during the day” (CHE, 2008: 39). This ‘parallel mode’ of operating had developed over a decade and a bit, since the UFS in the early nineties started admitting black students in numbers and introduce English-tuition classes. Before that, the UFS was one of the exclusively white, Afrikaans universities, characterised by “a determinable white, conservative, Christian, Afrikaans cultural grounding” (p. 34); it was a racially, ethnically and linguistically separate *volksuniversiteit*, developed specifically to reflect “Afrikaner nationalist conceptions of a university [...] established specifically for the assumed needs of particular racial and ethnic groups” (Welsh, 1972: 32; Degenaar, 1977). It looked as if the *volks* university model was being maintained by splitting the UFS on the inside into two ‘parallel’ institutions operating from the same campus, at a time when post-apartheid higher education policy did away with the separate institution model.

The students who made the video for their cultural evening were all white Afrikaans boys in a campus residence well known for its conservative, exclusive, anti-black stance. In their imagination, the residence was an exclusive, ‘private’ space – not an academic facility, but a cultural institution. In this private space, the only ‘black presence’ tolerated were black workers, cleaners, as in the homes where the boys came from: nannies, cleaners, gardeners. The privileged social background of the students is pitched against that of the staff members which the white boys tricked into participating in making the video. They were from the historically most marginalised and exploited social group of South Africans: black staff members, custodial staff; working class, and all but one were women. The ‘us’ for whom the video was made were privileged white Afrikaner students residing in Reitz who were used to order around black servants; the ‘them’ in the video were black students (played by the staff) who, under the residence desegregation policy of the UFS, would start joining the Reitz residence from the 2008 academic year.

The power dynamics involved in the making of the video is one aspect of racism evident in the discourse on ‘Reitz’. When the black staff members asked to see the video that they participated in making, the most humiliating parts (like the scene where a senior white student in the movie looks like he urinates into the food that the new black initiates were served), were removed; meanwhile at the closed-function residence cultural evening, these episodes were the real show stoppers. The main topic of the video, however, was even more overtly racist (if there are degrees of racism): ‘We’ are opposed to desegregating ‘our’ residence; ‘we’ don’t want ‘them’ – that is black students – in ‘our’ residence: Just look how ridiculous it would be to have them. The fact that these privileged white boys would go as far as calling the grown-up, middle-aged black staff members ‘whores’ in the video, just adds insult.

*Transformation and Legitimation in Post-apartheid Universities: Reading Discourses from 'Reitz'* is an incredibly interesting, in parts traumatising, book to read. It is fascinating to know that it was written by two white Afrikaans academics at the UFS. JC van der Merwe and Dionne van Reenen are both working in the UFS Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice (IRSJ), which was established in the wake of the 'Reitz incident' to drive the academic and social transformation process at the UFS with academic activities and social interventions. Overall the book makes for diverse reading. In the different chapters, different kinds of conceptual frameworks are used to analyse the various discourses from 'Reitz' that the authors uncover from the analysis of media articles, institutional policies and plans, institutional correspondence, interviews with various role players, including institutional management, students, staff, and members of university governance structures. In order to understand the place of the video, which sparked off the 'Reitz incident', the authors make the important point in the Introduction: "'Reitz' is analysed metonymically [...] as a stand-in for larger and more harmful narratives. For these purposes then, we undertook a critical philosophical analysis of discourses and practices that, either explicitly or implicitly, reproduce resistance towards transformation" (p. 34).

The book tells the story of 'resistance towards transformation' over six chapters, always coming back to 'Reitz' and its significance and role in these narratives. For those who are unfamiliar with the 'Reitz incident', Chapter 1 provides a transcript and analysis of the Reitz video itself, and introduces the main protagonists in the incident: the Reitz students and workers. In Chapter 2, the book analyses the higher education transformation process in South Africa and at the UFS in broad strokes. The focus, especially when it turns to the UFS, is on institutional culture and residence cultures, and the failures of the university – the mostly white management, white academics, white students, and white alumni – to come to terms with the reality of the UFS being a *public* rather than *volks* university. The scope of analysis is wide enough to show that the dominant white group had both black and white detractors, as well as black staff and students that were ready to accommodate themselves within the hegemonic institutional culture. At its core, the chapter tells the story of the university's failed post-apartheid residence policy in three moments, along with other milestones in the UFS post-apartheid 'transformation', like the incorporation of two campuses of historically black universities into the UFS, as well as the adoption of various transformation charters, policies and plans. The authors' assessment overall is one of leadership failure: a lack of consistent and valid conceptualisation of transformation, a lack of decisiveness in implementation; flawed conceptions of the university and its relation to its social environment; all of which appears captive to the 'old'.

Chapter 3 is perhaps the most traumatising part of the book: the in-depth, highly insightful analysis of residence cultures using an analytical framework that focuses on ways of understanding social relations between students, between students and residence workers, and residence traditions and initiation practices. Against the background of Van der Merwe and Van Reenen's analysis of the history of the Reitz residence, and student resistance to residence integration in particular at the UFS, the 'Reitz incident' gains a specific, historical-political context. Moreover, the intersectional analysis of student residence

cultures is particularly enlightening, as the authors identify the dominant characteristics of the typical white Afrikaner male residence culture:

Some of the dominant characteristics of a typical white Afrikaner male residence can be listed as follows: a culture of seniority characterised by absolute authority; a shared, homogenous identity; clearly designated roles and intolerance towards non-conformity; an unconditional loyalty to the residence and its occupants; clearly articulated codes and punishments for violations of those codes; a commitment to being present and participating in residence life; curbing individuality and honouring traditions. (p. 117)

At the core of this utterly unacademic residence culture is the ‘pa-seun’ (father-son) system: new students would have a ‘pa’ who takes the role of a strict father figure on campus. More often than not, and more so in Reitz’ case, the ‘pa’ became a sadistic-militaristic authoritarian. This system was upheld with day-to-day practices of humiliation and punishments for non-conformity and would culminate in the initiation ceremony, not unlike the one depicted in the video. The extent of this shocking culture is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 then steps back and considers the ‘Reitz incident’ and its context in terms of different notions of legitimacy and strategies of legitimation. Particularly interesting is the part dealing with various ways in which the UFS management sought to save the reputation of the UFS in the wake of the public outcry over the Reitz video. The story of the aftermath is continued in Chapter 5 but now focuses on the strategies that go beyond ‘saving the reputation’, mainly those that occurred during the term of the first black UFS vice-chancellor and rector, Prof. Jonathan Jansen: reconciliation, restoration, and social justice. While a lot of good is said about Jansen, this is not a praise poem to the man who was appointed shortly after the Reitz crisis. It shows, however, a break in the way the UFS did things, and how it approached the students and staff involved. It also shows the wider circles the ‘Reitz incident’ continued to produce: the court cases against the students; the complaint with the SA Human Rights Commission; the process of reconciling the students and staff members, with the university as the third party involved; and the debates the ‘Reitz incident’ sparked off far beyond the UFS.

After a brief revisiting of the meaning of ‘Reitz’, the final chapter entitled ‘Rethinking Transformation at the University of the Free State’ looks closely at the way forward. What can be learnt towards addressing transformation challenges such as diverse student and staff demographics; institutional culture; curriculum transformation and enhancement of democratic practices? Van der Merwe and Van Reenen do not propose a blueprint; more of a roadmap for thinking through key points, and considering certain practices is laid out. They are discussed in relation to five points: (1) changing the institutional culture; (2) instituting a rights-based approach; (3) creating space for ‘being political’ on campus; (4) doing anti-racism work; and (5) establishing pre-conditions. In this manner, they argue, universities will eventually become “havens of democratic habits” (p. 270). Their conclusive call is for the universities – for governing structures and the academy – to remember that they ultimately are there to serve the public.

Overall this is a very interesting and important book, particularly for academic and Student Affairs staff involved in university residences and university transformation more broadly. While the ‘Reitz incident’ at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein provides the core, the book shows its parallels and reverberations in the South African higher education sector in such a way to make it highly relevant to Student Affairs professionals across the continent and beyond, as Student Affairs grapples with ways of ‘managing’ socio-cultural cleavages of various kinds on university campuses. In the South African context a dominant issue remains racism and the whiteness of institutional cultures; in other countries very similar dynamics of discrimination are evident, including sexism, homophobia, ethnicity, religious intolerance, party-political strife, and so forth.

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