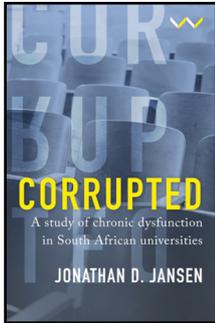




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Corrupted: A study of chronic dysfunction in South African universities



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# A timely, deeper, and complex analysis of dysfunctionality in South African public universities

In his own words, the author of the book under review, Professor Jonathan Jansen, points out that the existing accounts of malfunction in dysfunctional universities in South Africa cannot give us the complex and deep analysis we need to understand the persistent instabilities in South African public universities. Jansen cites publications on “corruption and mismanagement in these dysfunctional universities” (p. 2), but these are limited and often lack empirical data and theoretical rigour. The purpose of this book is, thus, to go beyond immediate experiences and observations of dysfunction in public universities to excavate more deeply into the root cause/s of persistent dysfunction. In what is a profound contribution of Jansen’s book, he provides a deeper theoretical and layered understanding or explanation of persistent dysfunction.

A key issue in the book is an awareness and critical analysis of mechanisms in the structural domain (social structures, finance system, education system, corruption, resources, power and so on); cultures (discursively constituted sets of ideas in language and other sign systems that constrain and enable an emergence of events, observations, and experiences); and agency (peoples’ thoughts and actions enabling or constraining them to do or say what they can or cannot).<sup>1</sup> Like Archer<sup>1</sup> and Bhaskar<sup>2</sup> Jansen is of the belief that, to come as close as possible to the ‘truth’, a layered understanding or explanation is necessary, where structures, culture and agency are analysed separately. In other words, Jansen is asking a question and is providing an alarming answer to the role that structures, cultures or agency play in contributing to persistent dysfunction in public universities. Based on this understanding, Jansen argues that a deterministic view is too simplistic to provide us with a nuanced explanation of persistent dysfunction. In his analysis, he does not dismiss history, race or class. He acknowledges that the legacy of apartheid neglect and inequity may well be a key contributor to dysfunction in historically disadvantaged universities. Historically, white universities were institutionally supported, in material and symbolic terms, by the apartheid regime, with far less support given to historically black universities. But a key contribution of Jansen’s analysis is that he goes well beyond a narrow, simple and deterministic view of history – he shows that the real and root causes of persistent dysfunction in public, particularly black, universities are far more complex.

Using political economy as a theoretical framework, Jansen is able to provide a deeper analysis, explanation and understanding of persistent dysfunction in public historically black universities in South Africa. His central thesis is based on the idea that structures like the financial system, in which 26 public universities receive billions of rands annually in state funds, could be one of the reasons such universities end up not paying needed attention to their mandate, which is the academic project. Instead, vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors, chairs of council and council members, students’ representatives, and unions compete for scarce state resources – a scramble which is compounded by political interference. The result is an industrial scale of corruption in these institutions. In relation to this point, Ngcamu and Mantzaris<sup>3(p.7)</sup> argue that, in these institutions, “The university systems that detect corruption have been deliberately weakened by university leaders to enable fraudsters to access funds through corrupt means.” This is the central thesis of the book and, in my view, accurate.

Jansen shows that these events and patterns of corruption in universities are hardly obvious or visible in the eyes of the public, given that most of us in the public domain, at most, view universities only as places for education. We do not think of them as places to be associated with corruption. This perception itself may provide some scaffolding for the compromise of the academic project in these institutions.

Jansen does not dispute that there is corruption in historically white universities, but the extent of it cannot be equalled to that occurring in historically black and disadvantaged universities. In historically black and disadvantaged universities, there is blatant stealing and looting of resources in the form of state funding, in its various forms.

The credibility of Jansen’s analysis and thus argument is based on empirical evidence of “more than a hundred interviews with senior people involved in, and knowledgeable about, South African universities”, having been involved as “assessors and administrators in various universities” (p. 13), as well as his direct involvement in some of these institutions, either as the deputy vice-chancellor or an administrator. Such evidence forms the basis to understand the problem. This book is unique in that Jansen puts a human face and biographical experience to a problem of political economy.

In the final chapter of the book, Jansen proposes that, to address the current chronic dysfunction, among other things, universities need to go back to their mandate, to pursue an academic project. This is no more and no less than the production of knowledge (through research), which can be achieved only if universities genuinely subscribe to the ideals of integrity, argues Jansen – doing the right and the correct thing at all times.

Jansen further notes that, for this idea to be realised, universities need to reduce the numbers and depoliticise university councils, the highest governing structures in universities, and appoint professionals with integrity. Such persons are likely not to conflate their roles of governance with the roles of management. The same thinking, in terms of depoliticisation, extends to students and unions. Jansen argues that students are at universities to learn. He does not dispute that students should be involved in politics. If, however, their involvement is geared towards securing tenders for constituencies outside university as they sit on procurement committees, this can have dire consequences. For example, where procurement decisions do not favour their preferred candidates (and by implication their own interests), students may make the institutions ungovernable. Jansen suggests further that

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where trade unions narrowly pursue their own interests in universities, such involvement will derail and compromise the academic project.

A major and important contribution of this book is the core notion that the academic project must be revived. I think therefore that the book would have benefitted from a clearer indication by Jansen of how people involved in universities may come to understand what an academic project is. What do academic leaders, academic teachers, students, and so on, need to do to realise, truthfully, the academic project, especially in the midst of violence that has engulfed these universities? Whilst this book has many strengths, it is less strong at taking full account of the fact that the contexts of our universities and the espoused academic project have a long history of being dominated by “white and neoliberal world views”<sup>4</sup>. Jansen, very importantly, redresses an imbalance in

our understanding of corruption in our universities. Building on this scholarship, we now need a more complete and synthesised analysis of the core issues.

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