

Identities, ideologies, market forces & social sciences



University of Cape Town 2007 (photo by HS)

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Abstract: Why does the theme of identities feature so prominently these days? What ideologies are at play in these discourses? What forces are shaping the academic agenda of our times? What is happening to the humanities and social sciences? How have universities changed over recent decades? How have academic disciplines evolved? Why do various forms of neopositivism and postmodernism prevail across various disciplines? Why the mania for metrics, the surveys of the surface, the exotica of deconstruction, the conclusions of inconclusiveness? Why does the most totalising system the world has ever known paralyse totalising thinking? Will marketisation marginalise all else? Will sociologists be stenographers of the surface or seers of the social order?

keywords: identities, ideologies, social sciences, universities, marketisation, positivism, marxism, postmodernism

Identities are so on the agenda these days. There are so many conferences, courses, articles, theses, books, funded collaborative research projects, media productions. Why? Why now?

One reason is that identities have become unstable, fluid and problematic. When identities were relatively stable and taken-for-granted, there was not the same imperative to address and analyse them. What does it mean now to be Irish? to be European? to be African? Can you say 'I am African', for example, if you are white? Can you be Irish if you are black? [Soccer has sorted out that one for us]. What does it mean to be man? to be a woman? to be a person? How are the answers forthcoming now different from those of a generation or two ago?

Our ancestors believed that they knew and tended not to even ask such questions, but we have had to make our own way through a minefield of complexities to become who we are. There are also questions relating to our work. What does it mean to be academic now as opposed to what it meant in the past? More specifically, what does it mean to be a philosopher, a historian, a sociologist now at a time when these disciplines, once at the centre of what it meant to be a university, are being overtaken in the overall scheme of things, surviving sometimes only as caricatures of the conception we had of them when we chose them.

We construct our own identities today in a way unprecedented in the history of the world, but we still do so within the rhythms of socio-historical forces, from waves of migration as they impact on local streets and shopping malls to global structures of power which colonise selves as well as states. We construct ourselves but not in conditions of our own construction. We are both the creators and creatures of history. I am paraphrasing two 19th century Germans who lived in very different times but might still have something to say to our times.

We do not all construct ourselves equally actively. Paradoxically it is those who understand most acutely the conditions outside their control who are most in control of their own construction. What is most basic to this active process is laying the foundations of our world view, which will shape how we think, how we make sense of our experience of the world, how we do our work. This is a most understudied aspect of identity.

We have many possibilities beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors. Beyond the nations of our birth, we have travelled to many others. Beyond that, we have taken in something from those where we have never set foot through reading, media reports, encounters with those who have travelled here from there.

Some of us have evolved identities that have taken us far from where we started. We have come to beliefs that are antithetical to the nations and religions that brought us forth and nurtured us. Many of us live far geographically, philosophically, politically and psychologically from where we were born.

That is when the process is coherent. The problem these days is that there is so much in play. New generations have grown up without the old orthodoxies. They have never stood on seemingly firm ground from which to feel swept by the winds of change. They have been blowing in the wind from birth. It has been flux all along. There have been so many ideas and possibilities in play. There have been so many images. There is so much noise.

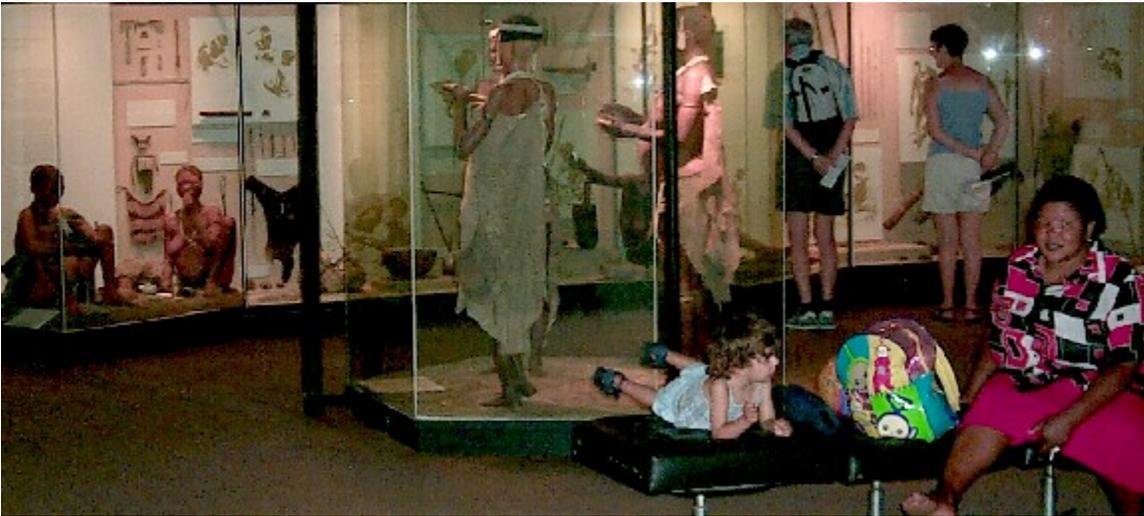
Thus the discourse on identities as unstable, intricate, contingent, complex, even contradictory, decentred, fluid and fractured. So fractured as to give rise to the assertion that only a fractured discourse is possible. Thus the emphasis on difference, on diversity, on plurality, a sense that the stuff of experience cannot be credibly unified, whether on the collective level as history or even on the individual level as biography. Thus the view that at most we can have knowledges as opposed to knowledge, perhaps histories but no history.

Much post-apartheid South African discourse is in this mode, assuming that the macronarrative of apartheid has been overthrown and now there can be only micronarratives, originating in multiple subjectivities, doomed to fragmentation, disorientation, turbulence. The battle of the songs *uMshini Wami v De la Rey*, the debates over which names are inscribed on the wall of remembrance at Freedom Park, the controversial renaming of places, the burning of t-shirts might be read as symbolic indicators of this.

Yet there are special features of the South African discourses about identities, much of it positive and progressive as well as problematic. There has been a sense of people caught up in new fields of force and some evidence of a transformative process at the level of identities. There might be much scarcely credible conformity in the new order, such that it is difficult now to find anyone who supported apartheid, justifying a cynical reading, but has there not also been much honest searching and a remaking of the self based on new assumptions and associations as well as opportunistic repositioning?

The reconstruction of identities in the present has reached all the way back into a reconsideration of past identities and their resonance with present ones, although sometimes the threads have been so drastically and violently broken that reconnection is quite ambiguous. Through so much brokenness, so much silence, who can speak for the Khoisan? Despite the difficulties, there is a struggle to incorporate their story, a revised version of their story in a new narrative, a relatively grand narrative. The ferment in museums, the creation of a new history syllabus, Afrikaners calling Krotoa/Eva their mother, the

funeral of Saartjie Bartmann, such phenomena suggest a searching for a new synthesis, a living of new identities in a new narrative. New interactions are developing and sometimes whites even toyi-toyi.



South African Museum (photo by HS)

Other phenomena represent a shallow, unreflective and reactionary eclecticism, even a glossing over of glaring contradictions. For example, a UCT BSocSci honours graduate, recently awarded a Mandela Rhodes scholarship to study for an MPhil in intercultural and diversity studies, was reported as saying that he believed that the scheme was 'designed for individuals who have in them a little Mandela and a little Rhodes' (*Monday Paper* 2006) UCT's institutional identity is a collage of contradictions. Paintings celebrating UCT in struggle, the people's education movement, the Steve Biko Building, the Cissy Gool Plaza exist side by side with the Otto Beit Building, the Chancellor Oppenheimer Library, and in presiding position on campus, the statute of Rhodes dreaming of empire from Cape to Cairo.



Cecil John Rhodes statue at UCT (photo by HS)

The identity of the nation too is a melange of mixed signals. Why were Mandela's first words as president of the Republic of South Africa 'Your royal highnesses'? Why did Mbeki as president of this republic bow to the British monarch? Why did his wife curstey to her? Why does a republic kowtow to royalty, whether foreign or domestic? Why do society pages show communists wining and dining at the castle celebrating the knighthood of Anthony O'Reilly? Why has Cape Town become a playground for rich and famous to frolic and imbue their conspicuous consumption with the aura of a liberation movement? Why all the photo-ops of Mandela with princesses and pop stars? Some coming together seems just too cosy and compromised, too unjustified, too unresolved in any intellectual or ethical sense. Many celebrations of the rainbow nation seem too facile and too easily gloss over the contradictions, many of them rooted in the glaring injustices of a historical compromise which has failed to expropriate the expropriators. Living in the squalour and danger in informal settlements also exerts a powerful impact on identities.

Globally there are many studies now on identities, focusing not only on primary forms of identity: class, race, ethnicity, generation, nation, religion, occupation, ideology, but also looking at many other intricate markers of identity: teams, bands, brands, clubs, parties, movements. Sadly, identities are being forged more in terms of brands and teams than parties or movements. Many of these studies are of great value in shedding light on the dizzying kaleidoscope of our experience of ourselves and our social world.

However, I want to raise questions about the whole academic milieu in which we live and conduct our studies of identities and all else.



UCT and DCU (photos by HS)

I have a number of worries about this emphasis on identities: a suspicion of narcissism in the relative emphasis on gender and ethnicity as opposed to class; an unease with a suspension of critical faculties in a bland multiculturalism; a concern over epistemological paralysis in the face of plurality,

complexity, contingency; an anxiety over a tendency to skate the surface rather than scale the heights or probe the depths.

More generally: How much can we tell about our world from the research methods most in vogue in our universities today, whether quantitative or qualitative? How much can we learn from all the surveys, the graphs, the pie charts, the content analyses, the semi-structured interviews, the focus groups? Something certainly, but it is only the surface of what we need to know. Some of it is less than that.

Much of what I read in research reports and articles in prestigious peer-reviewed journals, what I hear in the way of conference papers and inaugural lectures of professors, what I scan in the profiles of rated researchers, tells me very little except about what counts as research in academe today.

The template is something like this: study the calls for funding proposals, manipulate the keywords of the call along with those of the strategic plan of your university, put together a team of researchers with whom you have networked, get ethical clearance from your university ethics committee, go out ask some people some questions, for example, what is their image of doctors, do they trust electronic voting, how do they use the internet in their homes, do they feel bullied at work, what did they think about an episode of *Fair City* or *Isidingo*, who is their favourite participant in *Big Brother*, then string some quotes from these interviews together, add some quotes from some kind of theory, no matter how ill-digested, no matter how awkwardly they do or don't connect, use the most esoteric vocabulary you can muster to cover the emptiness, come to a few bland conclusions and there you go.

Or for those who want to see themselves as more rigorous, more scientific, go for metrics. If it moves, count it. If it doesn't move, count it. A 1st world academic can have something to say about the 3rd world without ever having to go there and risk being mugged or getting dysentery. Get the published statistics for budget deficits, correlate them with the number of actors involved in budget submissions, show the results on a pie chart and there you go. Even if it comes to a null hypothesis, it still gets funding, counts as a conference paper and then a journal article for yourself and your collaborators. Do it enough times and you are a professor. Or maybe you have done the like of it many times before and you are already a professor. [That example comes from an actual paper by a professor of political science at a development studies conference in the past year. I could multiply such examples.]

It may be a career, but it is not a consequential contribution to knowledge. Banished from the world presented in this paper on Africa was the Africa I knew, where even budget submissions are full of life and breath, of singing and shouting and toyi-toyi-ing, of evoking the lives of babies who have died in shack fires, of members of the same party presenting the budget inside while others demonstrate against it outside until they faint in the sun after not eating for two days. This Africa did not appear on the acetates.

All this may seem to constitute a caricature, but I would argue not. It is certainly not all that is going on in universities today, but it is a definite career path and it is increasingly being followed. It is political science without the living pounding pulse of the political process. It is social science without the throbbing, terrifying, exhilarating heartbeat of a society.

It presents itself as neutral, non-ideological, but, however ironically, it is those who consider themselves to be most free of ideology that are often most under the spell of ideologies they have not scrutinised. They live in it, inhale it and exhale it, even if they do not see it, even if they do not believe in it. All academics think within a matrix of thought through which the world is perceived and conceptualised. Although it structures the very patterns of perception and conceptualisation, it may not itself be perceived and conceptualised. It often operates more in terms of implicit assumptions than explicit statements, shaping all that is seen, but remaining itself unseen.

I do not identify ideology necessarily with false consciousness. I see ideology as a set of interconnected views and values systematically generated by specific socio-historical conditions. To assert that our views of the world are shaped by the vantage point from which we view it does not mean that we cannot view it accurately and astutely. In fact I would argue that we can perceive and conceptualise the world all the more accurately and astutely by being aware of the socio-historical conditions of perceptions and what is at stake in alternative conceptualisations.

Contending ideologies, in exceedingly intricate and complex ways, are rooted in the specific division of labour generated by particular modes of production. The more highly developed the mode of production, the more complex the social order, the more specialised the division of labour, the more abstract the modes of mediation, the more sophisticated and diverse the process of representation of the totality or even the positions that the totality cannot be represented.

It is not, of course, a matter of any simple one-to-one correspondence between ideas and class interests. The connections are not always direct, immediate or conscious. Ideologies often function all the more effectively by indirection, in a subtle and extended pattern of incorporation, and below the threshold of consciousness.

The notion of academic autonomy, of objectivity, is profoundly ideological. It has its source in the ever escalating separation and specialisation of mental and manual labour, generating ever more one-sided and partial versions of the whole and making any coherent view of the whole more and more difficult to attain or even imagine.

Every academic work, at least implicitly, embodies elements of a world view, in the sense that it symbolically conveys certain premises about what sort of world it is, about how the social order is

structured, about what the rules of the game of life are. In doing so, it either acquiesces in the status quo or it queries it, challenges it, dissents from it or poses alternatives to it. It either exposes or eclipses the underlying structures of power. It either normalises or subverts the idealisation of its hegemony, the taken-for-granted assumptions which legitimate it and make its ideology seem to be only common sense. It either induces or inhibits the exploration of alternatives to it.

I think that the excavation, identification and analysis of ideologies is a core task of the academy. However, dominant trends in the humanities and social sciences tend to deny or evade this.

For example, texts in cultural studies often start with a ritual incantation against ideological analysis, caricaturing it as preoccupied with stratagems of domination over a passive populace with no capacity for resistance, asserting that they are sweeping away old orthodoxies and implying that they are transcending it with some superior paradigm. They put forth the concept of pleasure as if it were a conceptual alternative to ideology and assume that the pleasure that audiences derive from media productions is somehow self-justifying and immune from ideological analysis.

Even when they see dominant ideologies in the frame, they put much of the weight of emphasis on alternative, subversive, oppositional reading of hegemonic texts. I do agree that there are complexities in both the production and reception of media. Nevertheless, soap operas do often function to make the poor dream the dreams of the rich and whatever counter-hegemonic readings might be in play, women watching soap operas are not engaging in subversion or resistance. There is an enormous literature on women and soap operas arguing otherwise.

What is actually happening is the unravelling of powerful explanatory concepts, such as ideology, into a confused dissipation of explanatory energy.

Across disciplines, various forms of neopositivism and postmodernism prevail. While they may be very different in many ways, from the plodding particularity of the one to the deconstructionist exotica of the other, they have much in common. They are both plays of the plural, skates along the surfaces, evasions of the heights and the depths.

I could elaborate on the origins of each of these isms, the studies conducted under their influence and the ideological bases of their methodologies and conclusions. However, I would like to crystallise all of this into one major point.

It is a central paradox of our times: never has there been such a totalising systematising force as contemporary global capitalism and yet never has there been such inhibition of synthesising systemic thinking. The centralising market decentres the psyche. It thins out public space and breaks the bonds

of social solidarity. Instead of addressing and challenging the disintegration, academics have been paralysed by a profound disorientation in the face of these forces.

The rate of change in universities today is almost dizzying. So much so, I think, that academics hardly realise what is happening.

Universities throughout their whole history have been in flux, subjected to conflicting agendas and demands, not only by internal factors, but most characteristically by forces within the wider society. This has become even more the case in our own time.

For much of their history universities were bastions of elite education. The classes born to higher knowledge could do much as they pleased. There was little scrutiny or accountability.

This idea of the university came under massive challenge in the 1960s and 1970s. The pressure came from social movements demanding that universities open up to include those who had been excluded, not only in admissions, but in curriculum as well. The role of the university in society, the very foundations of academic disciplines, were subjected to the deepest scrutiny. Ideas sparked and passions flared in debates between contending paradigms in classrooms, common rooms and conferences as well as on the streets.

Large-scale contending paradigms were in collision: positivism, neo-positivism, marxism, pragmatism, postmodernism. There was also feminism, ecology, black consciousness / black power. There was a demand for history from below, history from the point of view of the working class, of women, of the colonised. New fields came into being: gender studies, african studies, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies.

The energy of this engagement has subsided. It is not completely gone. There are many reasons for this falling off. It is not as if any of the problems at the core of these great debates have been solved or that contending paradigms have been defeated. Some of these theoretical positions have undermined the very position of theory in universities.

People have learned to live with problems unresolved or unacknowledged or to settle for resolution at a less than fundamental level. The confrontations of world views have given way to low-level eclecticism. There is a narrowing of perspective and a retreat from engagement, whether through myopia, ignorance, shallowness, fear or careerism.

Almost without anyone noticing, these debates have been marginalised to near extinction by the dominance of neo-liberal ideology and its agenda of marketisation of universities.

A new orthodoxy has taken command, not so much by winning arguments, but by wielding systemic power on a global scale. Imperatives of decreasing public funding, commercialisation, privatisation, competitiveness are repeated and recycled as if there were no alternative. We should not concede that there is no alternative. There has never been such wealth in the world, yet we are told that public spending in education must decrease. Why? It is particularly absurd in Ireland at the moment, where the economy is booming. The demand for privatisation of public property, of the whole public sphere, is an ideological orthodoxy, not an economic necessity and it is not in the public interest.

On one level there is a flourishing of research in the sense that there is a lot of it going on. There is much funding, many metrics, all sorts of empirical studies. Much of this is interesting and valuable, although a lot of it is bland, trivial, useless. Many studies are short and shallow and driven by market demand and fast-track careerism.

Theory is not thriving in this arena. Universities are being harnessed to operate by market norms, and survival of the fittest in commercial competition is outstripping other forms of validation, particularly truth criteria, theoretical depth and breadth, moral responsibility, political engagement. There are powerful pressures disincentivising, eroding, marginalising critical thinking, creative thinking, systemic thinking, especially systemic thinking.

So much of what I hear, read, review is so half-baked. Conceptualisation is weak and confused. Contextualisation is thin and random. Conclusions are bland and shallow. Writing is pretentious, clumpy, uninspired and uninspiring. It is not high quality. It is being driven by metric dashboards and promotion prospects and not by curiosity, exploration, conviction.

There are many problems, many reasons. There is a forcing of the pace of publication as the pressure of university league tables ramps up and the prospect of fast-track promotion up the academic ladder opens up to those who produce the metrics that create competitive advantage in this new scenario. 'Publish or perish' is overproducing mediocre work, creating clutter, valuing quantity over quality. There is anyway a huge problem about quality. By what criteria do you judge it in a culture that has undermined criteria? This is particularly true in our own disciplines. Instead of facing up to the epistemological problems, it is easier just to count things.

Universities are contested terrain, but not to the extent that they should be. The humanities and social sciences are in a particularly weakened state. Many academics in these areas are colluding in the dessication of these disciplines. I do not mean disciplines as opposed to interdisciplinarity, a debate going on here. I mean the whole mélange of what has been called the humanities.

The marketisation of our universities, as part of the overall commodification of knowledge and all else, is the biggest driving force in academe today. Academics hardly know what is steamrolling over them. I challenged the president of my university to a debate about this last year. There was massive attendance, interest and expression of unease, but unease is a long way from resistance. We need more debate and more than debate about what is happening to our universities. Academics at UKZN went on strike a year ago with demands about their pay and conditions but also raised the question of the marketisation of universities. However, I see no sustained resistance on any systemic scale when I look around me. I would be quite pessimistic about the possibility of reversing this current any time soon, but that is no excuse for blowing in the wind. We have scope for resistance and for alternative activity in how we teach, write, supervise, participate in meetings, in all aspects of our work. Keeping the terrain contested is itself an achievement in the current climate.

I have found the strength of these global trends particularly disturbing here in SA where they function to subvert the project of deep transformation. There has obviously been a dramatic demographic shift, easily evident in traversing this campus, but the reduction of transformation to racial profiling is far short of the prospect of people's education raised in the days of struggle. I have been looking for signs of a transformative intellectual project striving to fulfill the promise of a liberation movement come to power. I have sometimes found here in academic studies, conversations and seminars a more active and meaningful intellectual engagement than I find elsewhere, particularly in celtic-tiger-land, where I live my everyday professional life.

There is a continuation of history from below, a literature and literary criticism probing the intricacies of a society in transition, studies of hiv/aids, land reform, gender, housing, unemployment, poverty, black economic empowerment, social movements. There is active engagement and not just pursuit of research ratings. Yet I get the impression that the best is behind not ahead, that the energy of intellectual engagement was in the liberation movement not in liberation, however problematic the nature of liberation. While progressive work continues, there is sense of each being alone or nearly alone with it, a thinning out of public space, the absence of a strong sense of a collective project.

There is the question of where have all the marxists gone. Here and elsewhere, there are a number still around, more than people think, sadder but wiser, certainly quieter, struggling on in a more difficult milieu. Then there are quasi-marxists, post-marxists or ex-marxists. They have become discouraged by defeat, disarranged by demobilisation or decentred by postmodernism. It was one thing when the wind was at their back, but they have been swept off their feet by crosswinds they could not withstand.

Meanwhile commercialisation proceeds. What I believe that we should oppose is not any commercialisation whatsoever, but the dominance of a culture of commercialisation and its effect on the idea of the university, the ethos of the university. What we should oppose is the downgrading of

epistemological and ethical norms and their displacement by market norms. What we should oppose is the death of the intellectual, the birth of the salesman, in our universities. It is not the market as such that is the problem. It is the dominance of the market vis a vis other forces, the inroads of the market into where it does not belong, particularly in core activities of education and health.

What is really causing disquiet is the growing university-industrial complex, its threat to the intellectual integrity of the university, its erosion of the public sector ethos of the university.

As market priorities take hold, there is an upgrading of some disciplines and downgrading of others. Biotechnology and information technology are up; history and philosophy are down. There are universities now without departments of history or philosophy. Not that such departments are the only ways to carry these forward. But there is a waning of historical and philosophical consciousness on a larger scale and it has consequences. We don't see the big picture, we lose the plot of the story in which we are living, we don't scrutinise the nature of the system generating the imperatives by which we live and work. Sometimes I am stunned by how unintellectual, sometimes even anti-intellectual, universities can be these days.

We need to scrutinise these new orthodoxies, particularly the way that market imperatives are driving teaching and research. There is a downgrading of teaching in relation to research, and much of it research of questionable value. There is a distortion of research by questionable priorities in research funding, but also by preoccupation with research funding. Funding is increasingly being shaped by a market ethos, rather than a public service ethos, even when it is public sector funding. Research is being judged by the funding it brings in even more than what it puts out. Outputs are assessed in terms of numbers of articles in specific peer-reviewed journals deemed to be of high quality. Whether they are high quality is another matter.

The league tables for universities, the star system for researchers, off-the-scale salaries, ruthless careerism: these are not what have driven knowledge forward. They will not nurture wisdom.

We need to ask how the funding of research in all areas is shaping the nature of projects, choice of methodologies, disclosure of results. There are worrying cases of slanting or suppression of results. There are conflicts of confidentiality v collegiality, private interests v public good.

Our criteria must be primarily epistemological and ethical, not commercial. We must give absolute priority to the questions: is it true? is it moral? is it socially useful? over the question: will it sell? We cannot allow survival of the fittest in commercial competition to outstrip all other forms of validation: truth criteria, theoretical depth and breadth, moral responsibility, social engagement.

A primary task of our disciplines is to scrutinise the dominant agenda of universities and the dynamics of the global system in which universities are embedded. There is still space for critical, creative, systemic thinking in our universities, even if there are pressurising, corrupting, disincentivising pressures against it.

How are we using that space? We may be witnessing a marginalisation of our disciplines within the overall scheme of things, but we will only accentuate this by playing the game as it is being presented to us, by capitulating to the dominant agenda, by trimming our sails, by producing the required metrics, by doing small studies and evading the big questions. The core activity of the university must be to seek truth and, when necessary, to speak truth to power. To paraphrase a sociologist of my generation:

We must cease to coast down the currents of least resistance.

We must stop being stenographers of the surface. (Gitlin 2006, 86)

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