

Continuing a debate:

The challenges of organising an academic conference in a divided society

Two important points were raised at the conclusion of the HSRC-IFAS-CUBES conference: the status of intellectual and academic debates and their legitimacy in a society with a dire need for practical solutions and immediate responses; and questions about transformation and affirmative-action practices within academia. CLAIRE BÉNIT-GBAFFOU, ALAN MABIN and AURELIA WA-KABWE SEGATTI provide some thoughts for debate.

IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA, researchers' activities traverse different planes. On one hand, workshops develop exchanges between researchers and activists, practitioners and politicians. They create links between research and policy-making by disseminating research results and by formalising answers to questions and problems encountered. They also help to re-scale research questions by giving academics contact with 'real-life' contingencies.

On the other hand, there are scholarly events – conferences, colloquia, seminars – whose objectives are to raise questions, build new ways of conceptualising a topic, inspire new ways of thinking and to place the South African case and debates within broader, international scholarly and theoretical perspectives. Both workshops and conferences have their own legitimacy, usefulness and richness. Both need to exist in a democratising and transforming South Africa.

At Wits in November, the audience was large, active and very mixed. Half of it was composed of vocal ward councillors and political activists, who sometimes understood the matters debated in their own context-specific ways, taking as political criticism what were merely analyses on how local democracy works – and does not work – in South African cities. The challenge of finding a common language was stimulating, but also frustrating at those times when the political issues deprived the researchers of the platform for scholarly debate. The conference organisers chose to open

attendance to the public free of charge to broaden access to scholarly debates. This is a way of being inclusive and participatory, but it is not common in South Africa – and it can work only if academic debates are given a legitimacy of their own.

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The question of the profile of conference presenters – predominantly white academics, as is often the case – was also raised. As this conference remained at all stages of its preparation an open process with a public call for papers widely advertised, the actual response is a reflection of the country's overall non-representative composition of academic staff. We might regret it and regularly attempt to counter it, but we nonetheless have to face it.

The reasons for this imbalance are manyfold. As black academics are a scarce resource, the few who have expertise in the focused field of research targeted in the conference are not necessarily available for specific

events. Some are primarily involved in activism or policy-making, which, while having their own social utility, are not necessarily in line with the objectives of a scholarly discussion. Some argue that the scarcity of black academics is a consequence of systematic discrimination by still predominantly white academic hierarchies. Furthermore, government and business positions may be financially more attractive to learned black individuals than academia.

What is the way forward? Training, integrating promising black students in research networks, allocating fellowships and study grants; making the research world attractive and exciting, if not lucrative, by aiming for excellence (and the presence of committed, brilliant black researchers shows this is possible); workshoping with activists, practitioners and politicians as a parallel activity to, not in substitution of, scholarly debates. These tracks can be pursued by state and civil-society institutions, both South African and foreign. These are, etymologically, the real *res publica*.

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