**Book Reviews**


It is slightly over a decade since the historic event struck South Africa in ways that are both profound and as yet inconclusive. Democracy’s birth in 1994 was prickly and delicate. The profundity of the event lies entombed in the intricacies of the nature of the birth and the attendant midwives eyeing each other’s moves as that was the only way, it seemed, to assure the safe delivery of a baby that would safeguard the self interest of those witnessing this epochal spectacle: the delivery of the Constitution. It has turned out, arguably, that the self interest has transformed itself into an uneasy but pragmatic collective interest.

While the electric excitement of 1994 may have diminished somewhat, the possibilities unleashed by that emancipatory and cathartic moment have taken root in the public consciousness. Without a doubt, these first dozen years of democracy have been a dizzying whirlwind. Change has been the motive force and will remain so for a long time to come.

During the period following that historic event there has been a small but growing body of research around higher education transformation. These include Mabokela’s Apartheid No More: Case Studies of Southern African Universities in the Process of Transformation (2001); Cloete et al.’s Transformation in Higher Education (2002); Jansen’s Mergers in Higher Education (2002); Reddy’s Higher Education and Social Transformation: South Africa Case Study (2004); and Pithouse’s Asinamali: University Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa (2006).

*Democratizing higher education policy* by Chika Sehoole is an important contribution that is part of this small but expanding chronicle of higher education transformation in post-1994 South Africa. It is a penetrating study that casts a critical lens on the structures, processes, procedures, dynamics, and undercurrents of higher education policy formulation during the transition period (1994–97).¹

The transition period is likened to an *arranged marriage* with all the implications thereof. In arranged marriages the parties have to learn to live with one another even if there is no love; they must respect the tradition or, in this case, the applicable constitutional mandates; in short, they must, perforce, become pragmatic even if that is not what they really desire. But hasn’t it been said that ‘politics is the art of the possible’? If there was no love at the beginning, the logic goes, then time and circumstances will foster its germination.

Early on, Sehoole invites the reader to accompany him ‘inside the house, to the education living room or bedroom, to get a sense of what life inside this house was like, what the house rules were, how they were developed, the compromises and adjustments that had to be made . . . the arranged marriage was such that one of
the partners was living in the house already, having relinquished full ownership and power, and it therefore fell to the new partner to set the rules and take leadership (p. 7). Of course the assertion that full ownership was assumed by the new partner is a bit exaggerated and this fact is obliquely intimated in the observation that, ‘Relinquishing power is not easy’ (p.7).

What distinguishes Democratizing Higher Education Policy from other works of this genre is that it is not drawn into what has become a typical and facile refrain, evoking extreme ennui, which sees the inability to implement policy as solely a ‘lack of capacity’. Although the latter is undeniably there and sometimes manifests itself in states of virtual paralysis, it nevertheless is a partial explanation. Using higher education as a case study, Sehoole probes deeply into a series of explanatory factors such as the ‘constraints of the negotiated pact, the impact of the global and neo-liberal policies, and the dynamics of the establishment of the new bureaucracy, there was also a lack of policy literacy that was required for both the state and the bureaucracy to work together in facing the challenges of transformation and change to ensure the desired outcomes’ (p. 6). All these constituted the furniture and furnishings of the education living room or bedroom. They were deeply embedded in the structure and the psychology of the transition.

Apart from its central role of increasing world-wide integration of markets for goods, services and capital, encompassing a variety of other changes perceived to occur at about the same time, such as an increased role for large corporations in the world economy and increased intervention into domestic policies and affairs by international institutions (www-personal.umich.edu/~alandear/glossary/g.html), by extension, globalisation also means the spread of prevailing ideologies that may not necessarily be in tune with indigenous preferences. Sehoole argues that the debunking of the RDP is a vivid illustration of this phenomenon (amounting to a severance with long-established tradition of democratic practice) and the unilateral adoption of GEAR. The Treasury, he contends, assumed primacy and became ubiquitous in all decision making structures and processes including education in general and higher education in particular. The effects of this on higher education and the deleterious consequences are skilfully analysed.

The experiences and perceptions of various role players in government and other stakeholders are captured verbatim and shed great enlightenment on the tensions, dynamics during the transition period. The transformation ideals sought by the new incumbents of the civil service are frustrated by members of the old bureaucracy who remain entrenched. This leads to the retention of consultants who are not only expensive but in some cases unfamiliar with the authentic requirements of the new environment. This seeming cacophony in the early policy formulation exercises is poignantly illustrated by the composition of the NCHE with its varied membership; the ascendance of certain dominant voices and the concomitant silencing of others; and the blessing the NCHE received from international peers and experts. And, finally, how the ensuing Education Bill and
Higher Education Act departed in some significant ways from the NCHE recommendations. At the core of this entire exercise is a demonstration of what the author describes as the lack of policy literacy especially in those formative years.

Astutely, Sehoole employs the autobiographical device to enhance the reader’s understanding of the obstacles faced by many blacks in the journey to overcome apartheid’s strictures on the development of the oppressed majority. Born in a remote village of Marapyane in the Northwest, where he attended an under-resourced school; he later enrolled at an historically disadvantaged university after matriculating; earned a doctorate from an historically advantaged English-medium university; and eventually offered a teaching post at an historically advantaged Afrikaans-medium university. This is an amazing tour de force. The implied other side of this journey is the untold story of the thousands who have remained trapped in the dire circumstances of rural life thus denying them the fulfilment of self realisation and undermining their potential contribution to the general welfare.

It is important to note that the project of assessing social change is a daunting task especially in a relatively short time span. This is particularly the case in situations where the change has been dramatic as in South Africa, where centuries of colonial and apartheid domination with all their structural and superstructural implications have to be transformed. There is a particular theoretical tradition in the social sciences which conceives change as a dialectical process. This applies both to natural as well as social phenomena. Discontinuities, continuities and syntheses (or hybrids) are by-products of change and they vary in their expressions depending on a complex of variables (further compounded by their intensity and velocity). There is also the law of thermodynamics which states that ‘for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction’. These conceptual formulations help us in understanding social change. Nothing, especially in the social sphere, is pure and this is what social scientists in particular should understand. In real situations, policy intentions can never be realised in their pure form. Reform then becomes the devise frequently used to bring policy closer to reality.

As the process of democratisation proceeds and matures, we are bound to be entertained by a rising crescendo of assessments of the state of the higher education landscape. Some will be blatantly political (positive and negative, need less to say), some scholarly but laden with orthodoxies of the past and intolerant to current actualities; and some measured and blending multiple modes of critique. Democratizing Higher Education Policy belongs in the latter category. For this reason it will be assured endurance. Sehoole is to be commended for offering a critical reflection in a balanced, sober and strictly analytical fashion.

NOTE

1 This is the period during which the study was conducted and should not be construed as a generally accepted period of transition. Given the deep roots of apartheid ethos, it would be folly to believe that the deep imprint in the structures and social psyche can be severed in a few years. It is quite conceivable that ‘transition’ in the deep sense, meaning an effective
elimination of all the vestiges of apartheid and the full realisation of transformation, could actually take decades.

REFERENCES


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