

A Research Prospectus for the Humanities

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The humanities in South Africa (as elsewhere) face a crisis of credibility not so much from the perspective of their undergraduate intake – the constituent disciplines remain very popular with many students – but with educational authorities and society at large, influential public sectors which at the moment incline towards a vocational, career-orientated view of university education.

There is pressing need for the humanities to articulate their social and educational purpose more clearly, so that their academic value is recognized beyond the confines of academia. It seems tacitly to be assumed by the public that what the humanities offer a developing country like South Africa, or indeed any country, is vague intellectual cultivation, buttressed by some transferable and incidentally useful mental skills: the ability to treat complex questions, strong powers of analysis, the ability to write clearly, and so on. This is a colossal misapprehension. Yet, it is not uncommon for universities, and even humanities faculties, to market themselves under just this rubric. Such a state of affairs indicates a profound need to undertake substantial renovation of the way in which humanities education is understood throughout the South African education system. The lead element in this process should be the reconceptualisation of graduate education in the humanities, in the context of a bold and focused research agenda.

Identifying such an agenda is no easy task. To be sure, the general character of the research desired can be specified, and I shall make an attempt to do so in the course of this discussion, but such a description does not constitute a research agenda outlining national needs and priorities, nor should it. The argument here is that because the humanities address people's cultural, intellectual and spiritual aims and desires they form themselves against an infinite horizon of need: the natural and social sciences, on the other hand, compete for limited resource allocations within a bounded material research horizon in order to deliver predictable or at least specifiable social benefits. It follows that competitive

research funding decisions in these disciplines routinely take place within a pre-ordained framework in which social priorities have been decided in advance.

The social attractiveness of humanities research proposals should be judged on their intrinsic merits, since the social justification for what the researchers are attempting ought to be fully expressed in the project motivations. Measuring proposals against a limiting research agenda in any field encourages research concentration but also risks excluding the innovative, the exceptional, the unusual. My argument is that in the humanities there is no need to do this. The process of research development happens more satisfactorily in the humanities when it evolves through actual programme conceptualization and research practice, steered by peer-review without the constraints of pre-established priorities. Given a combination of effective general criteria for humanities research, and its relatively low costs, the need for a substantive national research agenda seems questionable. A far more urgent task than pre-emptive agenda-setting concerns the deep renovation of the humanities in this country.

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What are the humanities for? In an age whose mental landscape is dominated by the rapid development of the natural sciences, it is all too easy to dismiss them as effete or decadent, a dispensable adjunct to leisure-class values, or some kind of mental adornment in keeping with an outmoded gentility. What can knowledge of the aesthetics of Klimt, or the sources of Erasmus's *Adages*; the influence of Igbo orature on the Nigerian novel, or the character of millenarianism evidenced in the Xhosa cattle killing of 1856 possibly matter except to the specialist? If this is what humanities research produces, how can it be justified in terms of social value or utility?

We should recall here, not so much the origin of the humanities, but the historical moment which elevated them to social prominence. The fundamental aim of the European Renaissance was the reshaping of human character and society in the early modern period through close study of the art and writings of classical Greece and Rome. It was a collective project undertaken through personal study and reflection, scholarly debate, and artistic practice. This geographically disparate cultural ferment, extending from the fourteenth through to the sixteenth centuries, established the paradigm for the humanities both as a field of intellectual enquiry and as an educational model.

The aim of 'reshaping human character and society' remains the foundational impulse of the humanities – no mean ambition, and one which has been shared by both conservative and innovative forces through their subsequent history. Although, like many other fields, the humanities have been shaped and challenged by different critical and interpretive movements, waxing and waning in popularity, each asserting a fragile hegemony which subsequently dissipates as the next wave of conviction takes hold, there is perhaps an underlying unity of approach which characterizes the constituent disciplines and underpins their collective thrust. The humanities reshape character and society through the careful study of specially selected exemplary 'texts': literary works, fine art, social schemes, intellectual movements, historical episodes, philosophical and religious systems. These 'texts' are examined at depth to ascertain not only their meaning in context (social and historical), but their significance for a generalized discourse of human experience (ethical and philosophical).

Moreover, the student of the humanities is required to respond *in person* to both 'text' and the discourse of which it is an exemplary instantiation; for the humanities are concerned not merely with the notional apprehension of human value, but with its critical generation and subsequent internalization by human beings (cf. Nozick 620). They are deeply creative as well as analytical. They involve conscientious engagement with questions of value, with the scrutiny and assimilation or rejection by the individual of specific ethical decisions, belief systems, nuances of social deportment, conceptions of human nature, economic protocols, aesthetic preferences and so forth. Their ultimate purpose is the formation of social, ethical, aesthetic and religious judgment and responsiveness in human beings. This is the manner in which they act to influence character and society.

Humans benefit from engaging deeply with exemplary texts, as Schopenhauer among others has pointed out, in order to escape, temporarily, the egoistic strivings of the will. I mention Schopenhauer because he was the first western philosopher systematically to recognize the human cognitive and affective system (the brain) as an extension of primitive survival mechanisms, innately practical and self-interested (Vol. 2, 284-86; Young 242). The educational power of 'text' is to invite, even force, our sensibilities and intellects to pay attention – serious attention – to compelling phenomena beyond or extrinsic to this habitual purview. Tension between the modest intellectual resources inherent in our individual life-worlds – the legacy of our differently circumscribed upbringings – and the powerful challenge of 'text' calls forth both the imperative to judge, and the potential for change. Such a process, repeated over a range of texts and

mediated through intense discussion in language, results in a powerful form of individual, cultural and social self-fashioning.

It goes without saying that a university education in the humanities involves more than knowing an assemblage of discrete texts. The paradigmatic distinction is between knowing a text and learning a language. Texts studied in a humanities programme are there because they instantiate a particular aspect of the discourse of which they are a notable, perhaps even *the* notable, example (cf. Oakeshott 314). The skill of a university teacher lies very much in the ability to skilfully relate 'text' to 'language' in ways which speak to the student's particular stage of intellectual development. Retaining the constituent features of text strongly in view – this is after all the particular artifact the artist or thinker has devised to work upon our being and sensibility – students learn to attend to the layers-upon-layers of significance generated by the technical qualities of this unique object or performance, in relation to other texts, other performances, each urging us to deeper awareness of the multiple 'languages' humanity has created in its attempts to sustain meaning and pursue the quest for truth.

What is the social value of this type of education? How does it answer the charge that the humanities are really ornamental, a matter of private mental cultivation and refinement far removed from the realities of wealth generation and distributive politics? Charles Taylor has reminded us that in the Western world (and he is thinking primarily of the United States) the 'sources of the self' and the kinds of society they imply are very much more complex than, say, the post-Enlightenment legacy of critique tends to suggest. To illustrate, the optimistic historicist interpretation of self and society under the imprint of instrumental reason given by Marx, and its more pessimistic extension in the critiques of Adorno, Horkheimer, and in a different vein, Marcuse, simply do not match the complexity of the multiple forces currently acting to shape the self and its views of the world (504). There is nothing wrong with instrumental reason as such. Indeed, as Taylor concedes, it can be a useful tool in striving for 'an undistorted recognition of conflict between goods' (506). The problem is that citizens must first have a system of values they want to realize, and instrumental reason alone cannot supply this.

Without strong input from the humanities, the value systems on offer (religious or traditional) tend these days to speak to the inwardness of the individual, building a private moral outlook ill-equipped to engage fruitfully with the conceptual, technological and industrial energies unleashed in contemporary society; they foster an ideational world that fails to get to intellectual grips with

the lived world, in all its extremity, specificity and evasiveness. The result is necessarily a society very much more alienated and fragmented even than the early industrial scenario excoriated by Marx could anticipate; more so perhaps than the modernist nightmare explored by Eliot, Joyce and Pound. (We recall the alienated cosmopolitans De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, in Eliot's *Gerontion*, 'whirled/ Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear/ In fractured atoms'.) The public arena becomes a chaos of instrumental energies flowing from fractured, competing and under-examined value systems, while ethical reflection and the search for meaning are relegated to the sphere of what the nineteenth century called 'private judgment', according to which we have a private self, with its own beliefs (true or not), and a public self that performs (uncertainly) in relation to the demands of society. In Dickens' novel, *Great Expectations*, the problem is satirized in the split between the inhumane legalistic nightmare of 'Little Britain' (where 'professional' Wemmick serves as one of Mr Jaggers' clerks) and the warm, accepting eccentricity of his home in Walworth, replete with the 'aged P'. Here are, perforce, two completely different Wemmicks inhabiting the same physique, as the ethical structure of this society demands. Today's equivalent might be the discomfited South African executive who finds herself bound to fulfill traditionalist expectations on visits to her extended family at their rural homestead, when her inner world has long ago left those thought-ways. Or we might consider the advertising 'creative' who during the week uses a smattering of rhetoric and pop psychology to drive a powerful campaign manipulating the public into buying trivial and possibly harmful products, and who then spends weekends at 'New Age' seminars trying meditation in order to recover a semblance of psychic balance. The trivializing nadir of such dissociation, as Taylor himself observes, is found in the Californian search for private expressive fulfilment (alternative therapies, reclusive life-style communes, weekend mysticism), while aggressive capitalist instrumentalism dominates the public arena virtually unchallenged. (Are Sandton and Constantia in South Africa so very different?)

In these societies, Taylor avers, the search for justice tends to be replaced by a passion for mere procedural fairness (496). As Iris Murdoch expresses it, in public such societies are dominated by 'axiomatic' ethics, with social utilitarianism the adjudicating ethical impulse (493). Meanwhile the individual is in grave danger of sleepwalking through this world because the complexity of the social and cultural forces in play, shaping his or her cultural self, vastly outstrips the resources available for understanding them. Such a way of life may be complicated, but it is no more 'examined', in the Socratic sense, than the inherited customs of traditional societies (*Apology* 38a). How is any individual to

develop a cultural, social 'self' capable of engaging critically and creatively with such a predicament except through the humanities? It is precisely the fostering of a socially aware ethical conviction in human beings, a powerful vision of social and human possibility, that society needs in order to better control its own development. This is what the dialogue of the humanities is about.

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So far, I have attempted to establish that there is useful and necessary work for the humanities to do. The question before us, however, concerns the humanities in South Africa, and specifically their post-apartheid incarnation. If the contemporary mission of the humanities is roughly as I describe it – I have said nothing about their specific content – how can South Africa build this mission into the education system? In particular, what kind of research agenda is required to feed the humanities, both in the broad education system and in public life? At present, South African humanities research seems to comprise an insignificant adjunct to research agendas set and driven largely by Europe and North America. In the international context, it is painfully evident that the much-vaunted globalization of academic research translates in practice to domination by the European-American academy. Some modest resistance is in order. South African humanities research should set out deliberately to establish itself as a specific concentration of focused research excellence in the context of a developing polycentric global cosmopolis (Willison 1), rather than continue to behave as a diffuse array of scattered research initiatives making minor contributions on the periphery of a North American/European-centred research empire.

In all likelihood, this can best be achieved by focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on South African research data. A critical mass of research energy in the humanities is unlikely to emerge from other-than-South African concerns, nor is anything less going to be valued by the global research community as a distinctive South African contribution to knowledge creation. This aim probably also implies a degree of concentration on Southern hemisphere issues and South-South cooperation. But first, how are we to relate to the massive academic power and influence of the Western academy?

A standard (if threadbare) response to this question has been to invoke the Afrocentric/Eurocentric contrast. If Afrocentrism is taken in its strong meaning to imply the realignment of the humanities around the belief systems of the indigenous African people, there is no doubt that such an approach will be

inadequate to the educational challenges facing South Africa. These belief systems are the intellectual heritage of close-knit, small-scale pastoral communities embedded in traditional modes of economic and cultural organization (see, for example, Hunter). The challenge of modernity, comprising a shift to large-scale, abstract modes of social formation, adaptation to industrial and post-industrial systems of production, and increasing ideological differentiation, makes a return to reliance on these ancient 'thought-ways' deeply problematic. (This is a major challenge for traditionalist interpretations of the African Renaissance.)

Such a realization need not imply that the role of the humanities is to steam-roller students into the thought-ways and value-systems of western modernity. Nor should it suggest that African tradition has nothing to contribute to modernity; but it will take scholars well-versed in the traditions of both historical African and contemporary western thought to seek out the fruitful conjunctures, demonstrate their cogency, win acceptance for them and then find ways of infusing them into the society. Such a process will no doubt also involve a deliberate rejection of inappropriate and ethically moribund elements in these old traditions, as much as in the new.

As far back as most of us can remember the Eurocentric/Afrocentric contrast has been a staple of debate concerning the future of the humanities, for Africa in general and South Africa in particular. To date, it has not taken us very far, culminating as it generally does in some contingent demonstration of catch-all notions such as 'hybridity' or 'syncretism', or dispiriting waffle about 'ubuntu'. We need to take seriously the Marxian claim that forms of social life are intimately related to modes of production (or survival), and then move forward from this insight to investigate the complex forms of ethical and social being portrayed in the offerings of South African and other writers and artists. Their work bears testimony to a zone of contingent ethical freedom, a power of self-fashioning, enjoyed not only by people on the margins of society (think of Toloki and Noria in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*), but also by those at its intellectual heart (like David Lurie in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*). Jane Alexander's art (see, for example, *Butcher Boys* in the National Gallery, Cape Town) and some of Pippa Skotnes's work on the /Xam, is exemplary in this regard. These are not exercises in merely private vision (though they are that too) but essays on the ethical dialectic between self and society, powerful tools for understanding and re-evaluating ourselves and our relation to the social and natural worlds. They articulate sources of value.

Study of distinctive South African art and intellection of all sorts may prove fruitful in illuminating South African *realia*. It is nevertheless inconceivable that a credible university education in the humanities could confine itself to South African or African artifacts and ideological issues without betraying the range and depth of the constituent disciplines and, in turn, falsifying the character of the very societies and people such intellectual activity sets out to serve. The humanities are, by their very nature, both specific and universal. The powerful modes of cultural and artistic analysis developed in the western academy, for example, can and should be challenged where they are inappropriate or distorting, but they should not be dismissed *a priori* as not apposite in South Africa. Nor should it be forgotten that the humanities are comparative in their very essence. Precisely because humans are biologically identical the world over, the cultural and artistic deliberations of other societies and other times remain permanently relevant and stimulating – *for South Africa*. We need the challenge of cultural differentiation to make intellectual progress. Yet while accepting this as an operational principle, there remains a fundamental requirement which the humanities in South Africa must meet if they are to be true to the society they serve. It would be inimical to the character of the humanities were they to be used as a means of escaping rather than addressing the emerging character of South African society. Artists like Dante, Proust, Borges and Rilke – to cite random literary examples – are immensely relevant to South Africa; but only for those whose sensibilities are attuned to what matters here, who are prepared to investigate and present these artistic and cultural resources as vital contributions to the problem, not of some essentialist ‘South African being’, but of being in South Africa. An approach to the humanities that ignores their implications for the society in which they are being studied runs the risks of decadence and ineffectuality. The humanities in South Africa must be *for* South Africa.

The question here, then, is what kind of formative intellectual education at graduate level is requisite to enable people to explore the significance and impact of our complex human heritage in shaping a common yet richly differentiated South African life-world? South African humanities research is hampered by being undertaken in a research environment heavily influenced by the undergraduate teaching role as a career model. Graduate studies in the humanities are still very largely an ‘add-on’ consideration in predominantly undergraduate teaching departments. (This is not always the case in the social sciences.) Often in these departments there lingers an ethos left over from the 40s and 50s in South Africa, one which saw university education as very much a process of transmitting metropolitan knowledge and excitement in a colonial situation. Research was a private taste, cultivated on random impulses stemming

from individual predilection, and by no means an intellectual obligation. There was little sense of research as the primary intellectual duty of a university teacher, primary in that a university is a site for the creation of new knowledge, not merely for the circulation of what is already known.

Remnants of this legacy could usefully be discouraged more thoroughly than has been the case to date. Graduate students in the humanities need in some sense to be separated intellectually (and possibly physically, too – environment conveys an important message) from the undergraduate world. They need to interact on a daily basis with each other and with senior researchers in cognate disciplines. They need to be exposed to extended seminar programmes in research methodology, in intellectual history, in critical theory. At the same time, they require additional discipline-specific graduate education and mentoring. A research *habitus* which lumps humanities and social science graduate students together in an intellectual environment dominated by the social sciences would be counter-productive, unless balanced by high-powered input relevant to humanities disciplines and their intrinsic research procedures.

Asked flat out what kind of graduate education a young humanities researcher needs in South Africa, I would suggest at least the following:

1. An introduction to bibliography and documentary research methods in the humanities (including electronic research). The module should include effective writing skills and techniques for encouraging academic productivity.
2. Practical experience in archival research.
3. Major international themes in political, aesthetic and critical theory.
4. History of the western humanities (from classical times).
5. Selected instances of synthetic African humanism (for example, Blyden, Kaunda, Mbeki, Ngugi, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Senghor, among others).
6. Themes in African and South African history.
7. Detailed introductions to historical African culture.
8. Modern transformations of African culture in art, music and literature.
9. A specialization in a non-African culture, appropriate to the discipline.

This is the kind of general graduate education which should be available to students in the humanities no matter their field of specialization. With this background, young researchers would be well-equipped to focus on explicating the cultural, artistic and documentary riches stored in our libraries, galleries and archives. They would also have sufficient intellectual background to ensure that

the humanities speak to the society they serve, even when their particular research specialization is rooted elsewhere.

Many such students might also benefit from participating in coordinated research programmes focused on South African or international research data, where they could play an independent role that adds up to more than a solidly conceived thesis or dissertation that will eventually gather dust on library shelves. Their individual projects might well contribute to larger, cooperative research which trains them to work with primary research materials and to cooperate with colleagues in complementary disciplines here and abroad.

South Africa is patently a very complex society, comprising cultural and intellectual influences and features from Africa, Europe and America, the Middle East, the sub-continent of India, Australasia and the Far East. This cultural complexity should to an extent be reflected in the character of graduate education and research training available in the humanities. Since the desired range of specializations cannot be offered at all tertiary institutions, these institutions should, through negotiation with each other, and taking into account their particular research resources and strengths, arrive at appropriate areas of research concentration and sensible protocols for cooperating and sharing research expertise, graduate training facilities and resources. One possible model would be the Australian peripatetic Postgraduate Advanced Training Seminars (PATs) organized, for instance, by the Network for Early European Research (NEER) and funded by the Australian Research Council. These are specialized three- or four-day seminars in particular research areas, which take place at different sites round the country, to serve postgraduates and early-career researchers (See <http://www.neer.arts.uwa.edu.au/postgraduates/pats>).

The arguments above ultimately imply a need to create specialist graduate research centres for the humanities (and some South African universities have made a start in this direction), distributed between tertiary institutions on a negotiated basis, each with a defined range of research interests. Their focus on formative graduate education would set them apart from existing and future 'Centres of Excellence' supported by the NRF, but there is no reason why the latter could not be nested within these broader institutional arrangements for graduate humanities research and education. The collective goal of such centres, staffed by the country's leading researchers, would be to train humanities researchers to explore South African materials, to share the results of this research worldwide, and to make the data itself available for international scrutiny and comparison. In other words, South African humanities research

should not only make individualized use of such resources, but should collate and present these resources in such a way that they can be utilized by researchers across the world: reproductions of crucial documents, accessible databases and scholarly websites are important means of enriching the global dialogue, of offering fresh South African data, shaped by our own informed exposition and analyses. This not only furthers the reputation of South African humanities research, it offers important opportunities for comparative studies that will take the careers of South African scholars onto the global academic scene, not as interlopers operating in someone else's backyard, but as genuine contributors to the international growth of knowledge.

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We have a long journey ahead of us. The NRF research funding process is currently on the receiving end of applications in the humanities which, both in their paucity and, with notable exceptions, their quality, reflect the current weakness of humanities education, at all levels, in this country. It is therefore probably a waste of time to proceed on the assumption that identifying a core research agenda (a list of more or less urgent themes and topics for research) will in itself remedy the situation. The national system needs reviewing and rectifying from the ground up. What follows is the merest sketch of what is required.

The humanities ought to provide the kind of education which makes people 'at home' in this country, an education which prepares and motivates them to remedy its intellectual and cultural weaknesses and build on its strengths. At the school level this means rigorous intellectual preparation to participate in global civilization as well as a broad acquaintance with the histories, cultures and belief systems represented in this country. We live in a radically hybrid society in which intellectual cross-pollination needs to be identified and encouraged from the earliest possible stage in the education system. This does not mean an uncritical lauding of any particular tradition or way of being-in-the-world, nor does it imply the dragooning of learners into other peoples' life-worlds. Rather, it implies a deliberate intellectual acquaintance with a wide range of belief systems, aesthetic preoccupations, and social mores.

At the higher end of the school system, in particular, education must provide for critical and creative responses to the assumptions underlying traditional and contemporary society, its disparate ethics, ambitions and values. Curriculum 2005 provides for just this approach: we now need to support the teachers and

renovate the education delivery system so that this is the kind of humanities education learners in our schools actually receive. The potential of the new curriculum is being realized only patchily in our schools. There is desperate need for teacher re-education and renewal, not merely in the mechanisms and philosophies of OBE, but in the teachers' grasp of content in the humanities (see South Africa, Department of Education).

Improved post-graduate education, on the lines sketched above, should result in university teachers having a better grasp of the history of the humanities, their aims and educational practices, as well as a surer sense of their social mission. It might also be, though the argument here exceeds the scope of this discussion, that the intellectual demands of undergraduate humanities education need to be increased, not so much in range, but in depth and accuracy of knowledge. Better post-graduate education would equip university teachers to service this demand; it might even create in them a conviction that such an elevation of intellectual standards is indeed necessary.

A final note of caution. The scope and depth of the South African knowledge base in the western humanities is shrinking rapidly, and it needs to be revived. Because of the hybrid nature of South African society, and the globalized intellectual culture that characterizes tertiary institutions worldwide, it would be very unwise for South African institutions to pursue an isolating Africanist agenda. Already it is apparent that although selected metropolitan topics are still taught in undergraduate courses, few of those doing the teaching could be called specialists. In other words, South Africa is becoming dependant on metropolitan scholarship for all but African and South African humanities topics. What little expertise remains in these areas is largely within the purview of aging white academics who will retire to leave the humanities scene even more impoverished. Unless we attract and support South African *and* international researchers in our universities, we will be in danger of inadvertently reproducing the predicament of the colonial university, where South African lecturers purvey second-hand knowledge in a transmission model of tertiary education.

Overall, my conclusion is that if the humanities in the South African education system were to be gradually, systematically, and with whatever stresses and strains, renovated and refurbished on the lines outlined above – and this is a very big 'if' – questions regarding research priorities and emphases would be answered, not perhaps in relation to programmatic prescriptions, but in terms of a vital and innovative tradition of indigenous research practice. This would be

the 'bold and focused research agenda' we collectively miss and are currently seeking.

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