

The Newsletter

NGOs and Social Justice in Africa

Sally Matthews



The 2014 Annual Thinking Africa Colloquium will focus on the role of NGOs in achieving social justice in Africa. The NGO sector has grown considerably over the last few decades. The term covers such a broad range of organisations - from huge international organisations with large budgets and high profiles to small, locally based organisations with very particular mandates. It is therefore very difficult to make generalisations about their role in any particular country, and certainly in the continent as a whole. Nevertheless, there has been much debate about the increasing presence of NGOs in Africa with some seeing NGOs as essential players who help alleviate poverty and improve the lives of Africans while others accuse them of eroding the power of the state,

creating dependency and facilitating imperialism.

Many NGOs in Africa claim to be doing work that will bring about greater social justice in that they claim to be working to eradicate poverty or bring about greater equality, democracy and accountability. However, critics counter that while these may be the stated goals (and even the honest intentions) of many NGOs, the actual effect of their presence in Africa is not conducive to achieving greater social justice.

This colloquium will bring together academics writing on the NGO sector, people actively involved in NGOs, and activists involved in social movements in order to have a robust conversation about the role of NGOs in Africa. The aim is to reflect carefully and collaboratively on what role NGOs do and should play in Africa and to go beyond sweeping statements about their role towards a more nuanced and detailed picture of their contribution to a more just and equitable Africa.

The colloquium will be held from **27-28 September 2014** at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa.

The colloquium will consist of academic papers, panel discussions and open debates. Anyone interested in participating in or attending the colloquium should please contact Sally Matthews directly at: s.matthews@ru.ac.za

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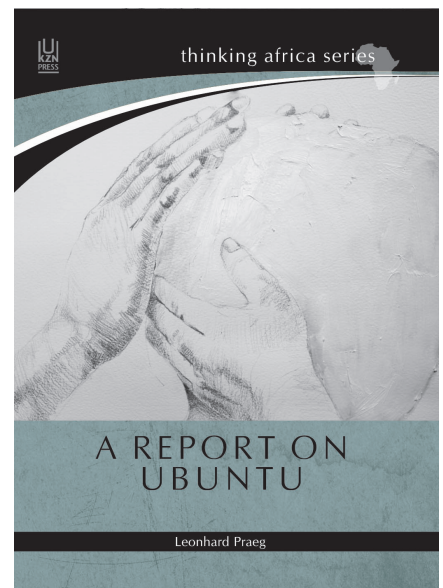
Sally Matthews and Lis Lange

Available now: the third volume in our book series

'This is the most brilliant work of postcolonial philosophy I have read in years. The way Praeg interrogates Ubuntu in order to rescue its emancipatory potential is mind blowing; so is the interrogation of Western philosophy that emerges from Ubuntu as unthought of Western modernity. This is radical postcolonial philosophy at its best, drinking in the deep waters of irredeemable losses and absences.'

- **Boaventura de Sousa Santos**, professor of Sociology, University of Coimbra, Portugal and distinguished legal scholar, University of Wisconsin-Madison, US

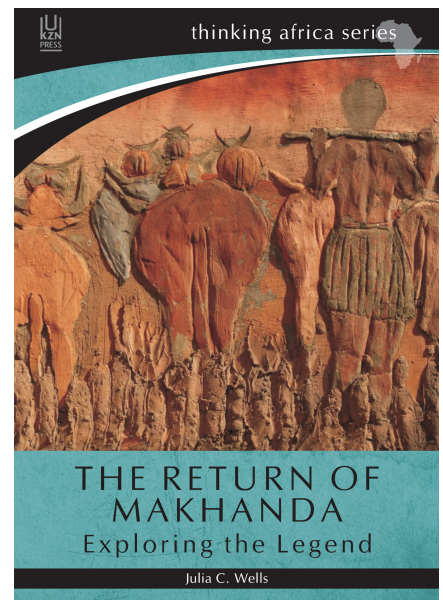
Published by: UKZN Press **Price:** R 335 **Publication Date:** 2014-02-07 **Binding:** Softcover **ISBN:** 978 1 86914 256 8 **Pages:** 305



'In a work of brilliant scholarship, combining both popular and academic history, Julia Wells has given us a new and deeper appreciation of the amaXhosa's struggle to defend their land. In the process she demolishes many of the myths surrounding the historical figure of Makhanda and the battle of Grahamstown.'

- **Jacklyn Cock**, professor emeritus, University of the Witwatersrand

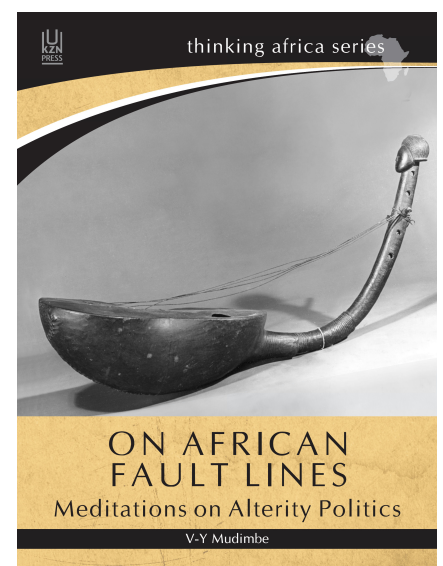
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'This book is highly innovative in its re-evaluation of alterity. It marshals a broad range of theories from Adorno to Marx to Walter Benjamin, all the while "grounding" it in African politics and aesthetics through the lens of Yacouba Konate. A veritable tour de force, if ever there was one.'

— **Kgomotso Masemola**, associate professor of English, University of South Africa

Published by: UKZN Press **Price:** R 420 **Publication Date:** 2013-08-02 **Binding:** Softcover **ISBN:** 978 1 86914 244 5 **Pages:** 480



Higher education policy and the fatality of nostalgia

Dr. Lis Lange



South Africa (SA) is celebrating 20 years of democracy and different social and political institutions are reflecting about two decades of work. Higher education is no exception to this. Institutional and system level assessments and reflections are being produced by a variety of people and organisations. Here, I would like to reflect not so much on where South African higher education is today in terms of the success or otherwise of policy implementation, but on whether a future for higher education can be steered away from discourses on an idealised past and the dreadful present. A chronology of the “idealised past” depends on institutional histories and therefore access to resources as well as on the personal experiences of students, academics and managers. In a society dominated by colonialism and apartheid the ideal past at “system” or even institutional level becomes particularly elusive and politically problematic, suggesting that nostalgia is always a longing for something that never existed (Badiou 2011). In 2004, on the occasion of the celebration of the first decade of higher education under democracy, Colin Bundy (2006), then head of SOAS and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, delivered an address that caused quite a stir in South African higher education circles. He argued that not only had the three pillars of higher education reform in South

Africa – massification, social responsiveness, and cooperative governance and partnerships – failed to deliver on their promises of change, but, more seriously, that SA’s higher education reform had sided with a globalised model of neo-liberal reform applied in most industrialised societies, thus accepting the predominance of the market, managerialism and performativity. Like other individuals involved in higher education policy development and implementation (Seepe and Singh), I took exception to important aspects of Bundy’s argument. I want to return to two aspects of my own critique – the dubious postmodern status of SA epistemologically and politically, and the issue of the use of knowledge for social change – in order to re-enter the discussion about knowledge of higher education from a different perspective. I argued against Bundy (Lange, 2006) that not only was there no evidence that an office in the then Department of Education had been tasked with implementing Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, but that post-1994 SA was itself precisely the opposite: the triumph of a master narrative of liberation and social justice realised in the new Constitution with its Bill of Rights and the policy that was being formulated. SA’s post-1994 political discourse was an affirmation of modernity and the possibility of social change. For change to be effective, I argued, we needed to know that it was happening and that universities reporting on different aspects of their core functions was not per se offensive and managerialist, but rather a necessary procedure to steer change and identify various reactions and modifications to policies introduced. It was possible, if

risky, I argued, to use tools associated with the evaluative state and audit cultures for progressive ends. Policy implementation had just started in earnest and systems for planning, funding and quality assurance in higher education institutions were being rolled out. Another decade of implementation in conditions of progressively more stringent and intrusive reporting in relation to the state, and greater bureaucratisation inside higher education institutions provide a good opportunity for revisiting the debate. I concentrate not so much on the relationship between universities and the state but on the relationship among higher education internal stakeholders (staff, students and management) and the relationship between higher education and society. Neave (1998) has observed that two of the consequences of the rise of the evaluative state have been (i) the introduction of routinised evaluation focused on outcomes as part of the regular reporting of universities to the state and (ii) the creation of a variety of specialised bodies with function in relation to the development of policy frameworks, the implementation of policy, and the interpretation and verification of information. This was reproduced at the institutions themselves: quality assurance offices and institutional research or management information offices mushroomed at most of SA’s universities as a consequence of state, or state agencies, policy implementation. More interesting, this process marked the rise of a new type of knowledge in higher education: institutional knowledge, and a class of professional managers (Rhoades and Maldonado, 2007) who had as their responsibility the gathering,

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interpretation and dissemination of knowledge about the university to be used for reporting purposes but also as part of the performance management of academics and as steering mechanisms in the implementation of universities' strategic plans.

It seems that, like in the UK, this knowledge has often been perceived by academics as not a real part of the knowledge with which universities should be preoccupied. It is often regarded as alien, epistemologically suspect, and incapable (in its worst manifestations) of providing any real understanding of what it is to be a university, or what it is like to teach or research in the different disciplines. This conceptualisation or misconception of institutional knowledge, in turn, created greater distance between embattled academics and management teams perceived as not only managerialist, but, in some cases at least, also as philistine in relation to the value and purpose of university education. In disciplinary areas like the humanities or the pure sciences, less able to attract state funding and more questioned in terms of their contribution to the proverbial knowledge economy, this has generated, to varying degrees, a depressive lack of purpose, or, worse, an attempt at a repurposing of the disciplines that alienates academics and deadens generation after generation of university graduates. But this feeling is not exclusive to disciplines regarded as endangered. The alienation of the academic and the growing lack of interest in the academic profession as a life choice are probably among the most serious consequences of the ascent of

bureaucratised knowledge and the marketisation of higher education.

Yet, once again and from a more precarious and urgent position, this is only one possible narrative. It is the case that some of Bundy's analysis sounds truer today than 10 years ago but that does not mean it is impossible to retrace our steps to find where we lost the fundamental element of the academic enterprise: the academics themselves and the need to deliberate about different types of knowledge. It seems to me that the "need to know" about higher education can and must be steered away from its association with neo-liberal models and imported global policy repertoires without negating the historical origins of these tools. For this to happen we need to admit first, that the epistemological basis of the knowledge of higher education (institutions) is complex and resides in a variety of academic disciplines and is not independent from disciplinary theoretical and methodological debates; secondly, the validity of this knowledge has to be open to questioning and therefore knowledge of the university has to become simultaneously more reliable and more tentative and cautious about the processes about which it is trying to give account; thirdly, knowledge of the university requires an examination of the notion of evidence and an understanding that evidence is not the end but the beginning of a process of evaluation; finally, it is important to internalise that the purpose of "institutional knowledge" is to generate understanding and that this is often about incommensurable educative processes and outcomes.

So far I have focused on how to steer away from a seemingly dreadful present. What about steering away from the idealised past – that is, the imaginary moment when academics and institutions did not have to account for their role in teaching new generations of professionals or scientists, for their role in widening human knowledge or in the conservation/unsettling of society's *habitus*? Again, contra Bundy since he did not consider the democratisation of the university as organisation an important aspect of SA's political transformation, it seems to me that the process of democratisation cannot leave its institutions untouched. What is being asked from universities is a certain level of transparency in relation to *what* and *how* they are spending funds provided by the fiscus or private families. It is imperative that we realise that in the 21st Century knowledge of the university and its knowledge processes is a necessary part of the life of the academics, because it is precisely this knowledge that confronts the university with itself, its changing purposes and value, thereby creating the possibility of public deliberation both inside the university and between the university and society. Only a consensus about the role of academics in producing and using this knowledge will allow for the de-bureaucratisation of educational processes and the revalorisation of the academic role in thinking the university as social institution.

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