# Repressive Tolerance in a Political Context: Academic Freedom in Apartheid South Africa

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My research examines the role of print culture and publishers in political contexts, especially in the twentieth century. Studying the history of university presses in South Africa led me to consider the multiple ways in which a society can attempt to suppress academic freedom, as well as the resulting forms of resistance and collusion. In apartheid-era South Africa, the universities were subject to the same polarizing forces as the rest of society, encouraging a choice between acquiescence and resistance or rather, as I found, a position on a broad spectrum between complicity and dissent. This led to the politicization of campuses across the country and the growing involvement of staff and students in political activities (both for and against the government). Intellectual repression, both structural and legislative, was one of the government's central tools: universities were racially segregated[1] and fairly closely monitored and, more broadly, a highly repressive legislative array of censorship and control was aimed mainly at "undesirable" publications. The state imposed intellectual censorship with a plethora of regulations intended to support separate development and the security of the state. This took the form of direct intervention, through banning both books and individual academics, as well as indirect influence and pressure that led to self-censorship.

But this should not be interpreted as a total crackdown on academic freedom. Even during the most repressive days of apartheid, academic freedom was tolerated, at least to some extent, at the universities. The government maintained a careful balance between the appearance of academic freedom, when it was not directly limited

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[1] This essay does not use the full array of apartheid racial classifications, especially not the exclusionary term *nonwhite*. Rather, it uses *black* and *white*, where appropriate, to refer to academics from different races.

by legislation, and the stifling effects of many other laws. These laws included the Suppression of Terrorism Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, and the Defence Act, the terms of which could be used to ban people who were seen to provoke or incite political action. The authorities could thus give the impression of promoting academic freedom while creating a repressive environment. This context has been called "repressive tolerance,"[2] which gave academics a measure of academic freedom so long as they did not overstep the boundaries on certain issues, such as race relations. This can be seen in academics' research outputs—their publications—and in their public activities: as Christopher Merrett, a scholar of library history, puts it, "A certain level of dissenting discourse was permitted, enough to encourage an image of a reasonably liberal society, while the influential channels of communication were denied."[3] Numerous examples of attempts to promote academic freedom exist within this climate of political repression, censorship, and ideology, although each university differed in how much dissent was tolerated and to what extent academics resisted or colluded with the system.

In South Africa, academic freedom has often been defined in terms of institutional independence rather than just intellectual independence. Hence, University of Cape Town (UCT) vice-chancellor T. B. Davie's classic 1953 formulation of academic freedom in terms of the "four freedoms": the right of the university "to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study." This definition—emerging from a liberal, white, English-speaking institution—implies a certain necessary distance between a university and the government, even if the latter is providing a large proportion of the funding. But an opposing view of academic freedom was the freedom "to develop and safeguard a group's language and culture."[4] This formed the basis for a number of academics, especially white Afrikaners, to argue the seemingly irreconcilable positions of supporting both academic freedom and the apartheid government at the same time.

To some extent, academic freedom was enshrined in the acts establishing the universities themselves, as they contained what was

[2]Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance" in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert P. Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr., and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 81–123.

[3]Christopher Merrett, *A Culture of Censorship: Secrecy and Intellectual Repression in South Africa* (Cape Town, S. Africa: David Philip, 1994), 7.

[4]John A. Marcum, *Education, Race, and Social Change in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 57.

known as a "conscience clause" that protected staff and students from discrimination on the basis of their beliefs and opinions. This clause was primarily intended to protect religious views, particularly to allow Jewish and Catholic lecturers to work at universities.[5] However, even this limited clause was omitted from acts establishing the historically black universities, which effectively "denied [them] academic freedom and undermined the status of the colleges as institutions of higher learning."[6] From their inception, then, black universities were conceived of in a more limited manner, and their staffing was much more homogenous as a result (largely white and Afrikaans). During the 1960s and 1970s, this led to "severe restrictions on the administrative autonomy of, and academic freedom at, the black universities."[7] Authoritarian management structures saw rules, such as dress codes, being strictly enforced, while teaching was prioritized over research. In the 1980s, a series of student boycotts led to authorities closing these institutions for months at a time rather than responding to student complaints.

As few direct legal measures prevented academics from researching certain areas or expressing certain views, the suppression of academic freedom was mostly achieved indirectly. The government had a certain amount of influence on academic appointments, since universities are state-sponsored. At universities that were seen as noncompliant, liberal, or anti-apartheid, academics could be fired, arrested, or even deported. For instance, several academics at the University of Natal had their passports confiscated, while academic and anti-apartheid activist Rick Turner was banned and later assassinated. At UCT in 1968, the government intervened to prevent the appointment of a black academic, Archie Mafeje, in the Department of Social Anthropology. Mafeje was the natural candidate for the position, given his qualifications and research interests, but the university must have known they were taking a chance in appointing him. The incident had some contradictory outcomes: on the one hand, UCT gave in to government pressure and laws on appointments were tightened, while on the other hand it led to increasing

[5] The University of South Africa first introduced such a clause in 1916. Only Potchefstroom University was able to amend its conscience clause to maintain the institution's "Protestant Christian" character.

[6] Sean Andrew Greyling, "Rhodes University during the Segregation and Apartheid Eras, 1933 to 1990" (master's thesis, Rhodes University, South Africa, 2007), 58.

[7] Saleem Badat, *Black Student Politics, Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968–1990* (Pretoria, S. Africa: Human Sciences Research Council, 1999), 72.

radicalization of the UCT student body. Moreover, a number of black academics were thereafter appointed at the so-called "open" universities on temporary contracts in an attempt to circumvent government intervention.[8]

But mostly—and perhaps most worryingly when considering the present day—the universities themselves were the agents of suppression. They put pressure on their own academics in a variety of ways: limiting prospects for promotion, threatening them with loss of employment, refusing ethical permission for proposed studies, and censuring them through social disapproval or ostracism. Moreover, academics can limit their own freedom; not all academics have the courage to stand up to the power of the state and the prevailing social mores. Political scientist Pierre Hugo described the limits imposed on his own career after he elected to study "Coloured" politics—he reached a ceiling somewhat below full professor. In a perceptive article on academic dissent partly based on his own experience, Hugo categorized as "apprehensive" and "cautious activist" academics those who did not support apartheid but who wanted to promote academic freedom.[9] "Apprehensive" refers to those who may support a dissident view but who prefer to remain silent out of concern for the potential (especially personal) consequences—such as fear of not being promoted, having research grants withheld, and victimization, to name a few. "Cautious activists," in turn, "do want to stand up for their convictions, but they become strategists who hold their ammunition for situations where the aims seem attainable, and make concessions on the issues which, in the present temper of the time, they consider undebatable."[10] They thus prefer to attempt to "reform from within" and improve existing policies.

At the same time, a form of prepublication censorship or self-censorship served to limit the scope of what could (safely) be researched. Some research topics became "taboo" due to a lack of funding; there was subtle (and not so subtle) internal pressure; and academics, both black and white, deliberately selected apolitical research fields. Researchers required permits from the Department of Bantu Administration and Development to conduct research in the so-called "Bantu" or black areas and knew they would have to

[8]The term *open* reveals some of the contradictions of a liberal position in South Africa: these universities, mostly white and English-medium, attempted to admit black students and staff, with only limited success. But their opposition to the state was not wholehearted, and even they only really began to allow their academics real freedom in the last stages of apartheid, when it was clear it was coming to an end.

[9]Pierre J. Hugo, "Academic Dissent and Apartheid in South Africa," *Journal of Black Studies* 7, no. 3 (March 1977), 243–62.

[10]Hugo, "Academic Dissent and Apartheid in South Africa," 251.

submit drafts of their writings ahead of publication. Some areas of academic interest were subject to closer scrutiny and ran a greater risk than others. Historian Antoon De Baets compiled a list of topics—a wide-ranging list, it should be added, and yet probably not comprehensive—that were likely to bring an academic into conflict with the state and to incur sanctions. These included "contemporary history; the emergence of African nationalism (including the history of the various political organizations involved) in South Africa, South West Africa (Namibia), and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa; the development of Black Power organizations in the United States; and the history of communism and communist parties in Europe."[11] A number of academics who wrote on such topics experienced harassment, banning, and even exile. Academic Jack Simons, for instance, was banned in the 1950s for his involvement with the South African Communist Party and went into exile as a result, while educator and activist Dennis Brutus was given a one-way exit visa. This threatening environment led academics to avoid more controversial or politically charged research themes, and it can also be seen in the lists of the university presses:

> The heart of the problem of social research in South Africa [is] the elimination at an earlier stage of the very questions which might lead to answers embarrassing to those who seek to maintain White supremacy. The simplest way in which this is done is by not addressing questions of race relations at all but joining in academic and intellectual debates which are concerned with other matters.[12]

This avoidance, it has been argued, led to the diminished social relevance of research. There were more studies at this time, for instance, of Scottish labor than of the color bar in South African industry. But academic freedom does not automatically imply a concern with social justice, and not everyone agrees that academic freedom implies that universities have a responsibility within their societies. Academics can quietly continue researching and publishing freely on topics of their choosing, while ignoring what is happening in the country around them. In such cases, academic freedom is couched in terms of scientific neutrality. For example, Theo van Wijk, principal of the white University of South Africa (Unisa) in the 1970s and 1980s, argued in favor of the university's "independence" and attacked those who, as he saw it, were attempting to draw Unisa into "the

[11] Antoon De Baets, *Censorship of Historical Thought: A World Guide, 1945 to 2000* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 429.

[12] John Rex, ed., *Apartheid and Social Research* (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 19.

maelstrom of social and political movements."[13] The role of the academic was, in his eyes, "non-political," as "a university should not pronounce officially on controversial issues, largely because individual academic freedom is protected by institutional non-partisanship." But others argue that this position of academic neutrality was in fact a smoke screen for complicity with the government and its policies. They note that the apartheid state "provided the basis for considerable autonomy and freedom, so long as the university did not jeopardize this freedom by engaging in 'political ideology and public action' that would bring it into conflict with society or the state."[14] Sociologist Mary Alice Beale supports this position, arguing that "rationalisations were also offered in support of a notion of science as apolitical and value-neutral, thereby freeing scientific communities of taking responsibility for the ends and consequences of their research."[15] This implies that academic freedom has to be linked to issues of social justice and social change: "A university is a powerful institution that has the means to change society, but refraining from doing so when justice is being denied beyond its own walls and calling it university neutrality, is in fact acquiescence."[16]

This argument, linking academic freedom with social justice, is particularly important in South Africa. Perhaps, as a result of our history, it is still strongly believed that universities have a social role—hence the significance of the "Rhodes Must Fall" and "Fees Must Fall" movements since 2015, which are calling for a renewed look at the independence of the universities. However, there is also the counterargument that state censorship has now been replaced by market censorship. In the post-apartheid period, threats to academic freedom come from forces such as managerialism, commercialism, quotas, and the shifting mandates of universities. Looking back at the history of the fight for academic freedom during the apartheid era offers a cogent reminder of why we need to resist these nonacademic forces and protect academic freedom.

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[13] Quoted in Mary-Lynn Suttie, "The University of South Africa Library: From the Soweto Rebellion to the Beginning of the End of Apartheid, 1976-1990," *Mousaion* 24, no. 2 (Oct. 2006), 290.

[14] John Higgins, "Paying Lip-Service to Academic Freedom," *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 5, no. 1 (Jan. 2000), 8.

[15] Mary Alice Beale, "Apartheid and University Education, 1948–1959" (master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1994).

[16] Greyling, "Rhodes University during the Segregation and Apartheid Eras," 13.