

ASINAMALI:
University Struggles in
Post-Apartheid South Africa

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This book is dedicated to Michael Makhabane who was murdered by the public order policing unit during a peaceful protest against the exclusion of poor students from the University of Durban-Westville on May 16, 2000.

Neoliberalism, Bureaucracy, and Resistance at Wits University

James Pendlebury and Lucien van der Walt

Over the past five years, the management of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) has busied itself with a thoroughgoing neoliberal restructuring project. Under pressure from declining government subsidies, arising from the South African state's neoliberalism, and influenced by the "market university" model, Wits management has, enthusiastically introduced measures to "transform" the institution. The overall effects on support service workers, on working class students, and on a significant section of academic and administrative staff, have been negative. This article examines the restructuring process, some of its internal contradictions, and the resistance that it has evoked.

The Neoliberal Context

There has been a general pressure on all South Africa universities to restructure in the post-apartheid period. While the initial impetus for "transformation" was the pressure to deracialize the fractured higher education system the actual content of "transformation" has been decisively shaped by the global neoliberal restructuring of capitalism refracted through the international state system.

In this context, the ANC's class project—deracialization of capitalism through the state—has been welded to neoliberalism. The adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution

(GEAR) macro-economic policy in 1996 marked not the start, but the culmination, of the party's shift away from the traditional nationalist advocacy of import-substitution-industrialization, a move from state capitalism to market capitalism. There are still minorities within the ANC wedded to the old thinking, but the dominant position regards private investment as the motor of the economy, economic liberalization as the fuel, and global competitiveness as the speedometer.

As a bourgeois party, the ANC regards neoliberalism as an unavoidable part of its class project; as a bourgeois nationalist party, however, the ANC has a particular commitment to the rapid expansion of the African fraction of the bourgeoisie. This contradiction can only be resolved through adapting neoliberalism to the ANC's project: African capital is to be given preferential access to state contracts, and to shares in privatized utilities (e.g., Telkom), and bailed out where necessary (e.g., Sun Air); the labor market will be deregulated everywhere except in the sphere of employment equity; state spending will be cut everywhere except where it provides opportunities for accumulation (e.g., arms deal).

Now, with welfare spending in 1996 constituting the largest single item of State expenditure, and education spending at nearly 7 percent of GDP, the ANC's project necessarily collides with demands from below for increased expenditure. In terms of the higher education sector, GEAR argues that there "is a need to contain expenditure through reductions in subsidization of the more expensive parts of the system and greater private sector involvement in higher education."¹ The commitment to the "creation of new South African higher education institutions based on the values and principles of non-racism and democracy" is thus coupled to a commitment to fiscal austerity and liberalization, arising in the first instance from the class nature of state policy.²

In addition to facilitating austerity, subsidy cuts have served as a disciplinary mechanism within higher education: given the highly decentralized nature of the sector, with key decision-making power residing at institutional level, and given the reliance of institutions on state funds for most income, subsidy levels and formulae remain the key instrument for sectoral reform. The 1997/98 Budget allocated R5.4 billion to tertiary education, representing an average funding level of 65.6 per cent, down from the 68 per cent level of the previous

financial year.³ Wits, for example, saw its subsidy decline by a third from 1995 to 2000.⁴

Wits and the Market University

Fiscal austerity placed great stress upon the fifteen technikons and twenty-one universities. However, government has stressed that "given the magnitude of our other priorities," public sector tertiary education could not and would not receive additional resources.⁵ It has instead stressed two solutions. On the one hand, mergers and disestablishments would rationalize the public sector tertiary education institutions from thirty-six to twenty-one. On the other hand, the State has promoted a model of university marketization in tandem with budget cuts. There is a strong emphasis on the need to generate funds through more "fee-paying" students, these being generated by diversification in feeder constituencies and program offerings, with courses made more narrowly vocational; equally importantly, there is a stress upon being more responsive to "social" and "economic" needs in order to generate "third stream" funding.⁶ "Third stream" funding refers largely to state and business contracts, and is distinct from traditional revenue streams: student fees and state subsidies.

This set of ideas has been widely adopted, especially when dressed up in the language of "mode 2" knowledge production. This argues that research must be simultaneously applied, transdisciplinary, and team-based, whilst based in, and funded by, different organizations.⁷ This sounds rather impressive, but is hardly earthshaking: disciplines have always overlapped, academics have often worked in groups, and universities have long cooperated with other institutions. What is new about "mode 2" is the funding model: institutions must now emphasize "third stream" funding, obviously in competition with one another and with other institutions.

The effect of such approaches is that research becomes driven primarily by financial, as opposed to intellectual, concerns, and that the research process evolves by being of potential use to the ruling class, ensuring its direct subordination to capital and the state. Dressed in the language of "relevance" to "society," such research is, in fact, frequently secret, and typically private (producing copyrighted intellectual property),

while having little positive public results of “relevance” to the needs of the working class.

This enclosure of the collective, potentially emancipatory project of “scientific knowledge” is central to the notion of the “market university” in which institutions are reconceptualized as producers of intellectual commodities. Priorities, procedures, research projects, workforces, and curricula are restructured along business lines with profitability a key criterion; strict cost recovery for services rendered to students and other “clients” is emphasized; and corporate management styles and hierarchies are introduced. It is to this model that Wits aspires.

The 1999 Wits Strategic Plan argued that the university must, given declining subsidies, compete for funding, staff, and students with other universities.⁸ More and better (and, crucially, better-heeled) students had to be attracted to increase government subsidies. At the same time the university had to become more cost-conscious and less reliant upon state support. This meant that entirely new sources of funding had to be tapped—in particular, the government and corporate sponsorship and contracts.

Several conditions promoted the shift to a market model at Wits. First, neither the university management nor popular constituencies were able to halt the process of subsidy cuts inaugurated in 1996. This was despite a rare convergence between factions in management and activists—exemplified by the appearance of arch-conservative Vice Chancellor Robert Charlton at a public protest organized by the left-wing Wits Against Cuts, or WAC, in 1997. Defeat led many otherwise sympathetic academics to accept the inevitability of painful change. It strengthened the hand of ANC-linked “modernizers” in management in their ongoing struggle against Charlton’s conservatives. These modernizers would play the key role in marketization from 1999: their public face was former academic lefty, Colin Bundy, appointed Vice Chancellor in 1997.

Secondly, student and staff groups were unable to develop a systematic program and oppositional movement to the neoliberal agenda at Wits. Confusion about the class nature of the ANC led many formations, particularly those associated with the Congress tradition, to go with the neoliberal flow. The national leadership of the South African Students’ Congress (SASCO), publicly endorsed the cuts of 1996 and 1997 as “redistributive” in nature, and Wits SASCO shied away from initiatives such as the WAC.⁹ The National Education Health and

Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), by far the largest and most militant campus union, with a base amongst manual and menial workers, was also crippled by its ANC alignment. Alternative movements, on the other hand, were simply not strong enough to pose an alternative. Coupled to growing student apathy, and academics’ cynicism, this shifted the balance of forces powerful in favor of management.

Wits Inc.

The argument for repositioning Wits as a market university was elaborated in a case for the “formation of a University company for optimization of revenue opportunities from intellectual property and from entrepreneurial activities,” the promotion of “revenue-generating activities” and “opportunities for entrepreneurial approaches across the University.”¹⁰ An Income Generation Program (IGP) was launched with corporate sponsorship, as an explicit step towards redefining Wits, and was a vehicle to promote academic involvement in fund-raising.¹¹ At the same time “Wits Plus” was launched to introduce part-time classes.

In 2002, Wits Enterprise was launched, described on its web site as a “University-approved commercial company,” “a business vehicle jointly owned by the University and the staff,” which offers a “world of short courses, training, consulting, contract research, and intellectual property.” According to Peter Bezuidenhout, Wits’ Marketing and Business Development director, it is a “new entrepreneurial business venture,” a “channel” between “the university and the eternal commercial world” with a “mandate” to “promote and innovatively manage increased income-generating opportunities that could follow from the effective capitalization of present and future intellectual property assets of the university and its staff.”¹²

It is not so very important whether Wits Enterprise actually becomes the main “channel” for research commercialization. Even in 2001, according to then-Acting VC Loyiso Nongxa, 83 percent of Wits’ research income was already “externally sourced” from “partners in commerce and industry, as well as the science councils” of the state.¹³ The significance of this autonomous company resides in what it symbolizes (embrace of the market university) and what it promotes (the capitalist ethic of linking research to “income-generating opportunities” and the

"capitalization of present and future intellectual property assets"). It may indeed, as Nongxa hopes, "accelerate external funding" through "identifying and leveraging the business opportunities for research,"¹⁴ but a serious impact on organizational and occupational culture would be revolution enough.

Academic Restructuring

Wits' repositioning had important implications for the management hierarchy of command and surveillance, and for staff and students. In 1999, management established a Task Group on academic restructuring. On September 27, 1999, the Task Group took its recommendations to the University's Senate, where it argued for the rationalization of academic structures: the existing nine faculties would merge into six, each under the control of executive deans, and the ninety-nine academic departments would merge into forty schools, each subordinate to a faculty.

These proposals were subsequently adopted, with Senate noting, politely, that it was "probable" that the restructuring "could have staffing implications." Two days later, the University Council established an Academic Restructuring Review Committee to take the Task Group's recommendations forward. The committee's brief included reviewing the size of academic entities, and establishing "appropriate" staffing levels and staff: student ratios. This implied that "redundant" courses would be closed, "redundant" disciplines phased out, and "redundant" staff closed out: initial estimates set the number of academics likely to be retrenched at twenty-five.¹⁵

The September 1999 Council meeting decided that these recommendations would be implemented over three years. At faculty level, Academic Planning and Restructuring Committees would propose measures for implementing the restructuring, to be implemented by the new executive deanships. Justified as a means of promoting "multi-disciplinarity," the academic restructuring was, in fact, governed by the application of private sector "best practice" to the institution. In particular, it was underpinned by a drive to power.

Power, including control over budgets and appointments, would move from department to school. More importantly, power would move from school to faculty, where it would

concentrate in the hands of executive deans, whose role is basically to act as middle managers in the envisaged Wits Inc. This centralization is part of a drive to increase surveillance, to link job security to management targets, and to replace the guild-like structures of collegial governance with private sector managerialism.

A parallel process took place at the central level: Council, largely a rubber-stamp in the past, now increasingly marginalized the Senate, representing mainly senior academics, as decisive a policy-making structure; within Council, power was in turn concentrated in the Senior Executive Team (SET). Established in 1999, SET was made up of the VC, the key deputy-VCs, and consulted closely with the chair of Council. For the first time, a professional director of finance was included in the executive: in "keeping with a worldwide trend, the University saw the need to appoint a business-oriented person in this post rather than an academic professor as in the past."¹⁶

The emphasis on mergers and auditing the "redundant" was rooted in a new concern with implementing "cost-centering" financial systems. The aim was to phase out cross-subsidization between faculties—in particular, the traditional transfers from management, law, commerce and engineering to arts and education. From late 1999 onwards, in-principle decisions were taken on this issue; staffing in each cost-centre would depend on the ability of that centre to stay within its budget and raise funds to meet shortfalls.

Centralization and cost-centering were coupled to an increasing concern with surveillance. Using instruments such as a performance appraisal system from 2001 onwards, faculties were able to closely monitor the performance of individual lecturers; further, by making an implicit link between performance appraisals and job security, and an explicit link between individual ratings in the performance appraisals and discretionary wage increases, management was able to train its staff to work harder. The language of "human resource management" permeated Wits academia: the performance appraisal system was described as a method to "reward good performance and to create a culture of performance management and staff development."¹⁷

Gutting Support Services

In 1999, Wits also embarked on a Support Services Review process, investigating options for restructuring services as diverse as building maintenance, transport and the library system. It also announced that academic and support service restructuring would be jointly managed as "Wits 2001."

Undertaken by consultants, the University Management Associates (UMA)—paid R4.5 million for their time—the review process was, on paper, open-ended and participatory. In practice, as a close reading of the review itself shows, the UMA systematically ignored the views of academic and support service staff in favor of complete outsourcing.¹⁸

The UMA's final report, completed in 2000, advocated outsourcing cleaning, catering, maintenance, grounds, and transport. This would, supposedly, save Wits about R30 million over five years (later this figure was raised to R68 million, no reasons given), greatly improve service levels, and bring in expert management. Two basic ideas underpinned the UMA recommendations: first, support services were not part of the "core business" of Wits, and wasted money better spent on the research and teaching "core"; second, outsourcing was always efficient and infinitely preferable to internal restructuring.

The UMA cynically added that the workers themselves would benefit from the "greater career opportunities, training and accreditation" and "a degree of employment stability" created by outsourcing. It had to admit, however, that there were "human resources implications" that would obviously impact upon "career opportunities." SET endorsed these recommendations, and championed the review in Council. Doubtless it knew outsourcing would also gut the membership of the troublesome local NEHAWU branch, revolutionizing labor relations. A draft document to potential contractors suggested, in addition, that

The MC [Management Contractor] shall discourage its employees from participating in any industrial action. In the event that the MC's employees are guilty of participating in industrial action, the MC shall control its personnel, restore order or, if requested by the Client, remove them from the Client's premises.¹⁹

On 25 February 2000, the UMA recommendations were endorsed by Council, although transport was later moved from

the firing line when it became obvious to even the laziest Council member that the UMA had no idea at all about Wits transport. In effect, 613 workers, roughly a quarter of Wits' total staff complement of 2377, would be retrenched on June 30, 2000, their places to be taken by cheap non-union contract workers.²⁰

NEHAWU organized pickets and marches, and refused to endorse the voluntary severance packages and counseling that management offered. However, NEHAWU relied mainly on a legal challenge to the retrenchments; campaigning was an appendix only. Radicals within SASCO pushed the organization into demonstrations in February and June 2000, and activists assumed control of the Post-Graduate Association, an SRC-type structure.

Links between academic restructuring and support service restructuring also rendered a fair amount of academics sympathetic to the workers' cause, but most were frankly disinterested or hostile. A small "Concerned Academics Group" played an important role in publicizing Wits 2001, and wrote a scathing critique of the Support Services Review.²¹

From about March, a radical "Wits Crisis Committee," drawing in people from a range of structures, played the main role. International allies were found, and placed pressure and a spotlight on Bundy. Direct action was taken. In early July, the committee helped organize an occupation of Bundy's office on June 20.

On July 14, 2000, a crowd of retrenched workers—plus student and academic activists and supporters of the "Anti-Igoli 2002 Forum," which campaigned against municipal privatization initiatives—stormed the Great Hall at Wits, where Bundy and head of Johannesburg Metropolitan restructuring Kenny Fihla were due to conclude a high profile "Urban Futures" conference. Perhaps the most important outcome was helping lay the ground for the subsequent merger of the Committee and the Forum in July to form the Anti-Privatization Forum (APF).

After Wits 2001

Bundy initially lashed out against the disruption with interdicts against workers and students, and moves were made to discipline certain academics. Cooler heads, however, prevailed, and these proceedings were quietly withdrawn. Bundy resigned in September and left the country, and was replaced in May 2001

by the amiable but naïve Norma Reid, an outsider with little knowledge of the issues but with no principled objection to marketization. Even before formally assuming office Reid advocated “working with the business and commercial sectors in mutually advantageous schemes for wealth creation” and the “commercial exploitation of intellectual property.”²²

It is significant that the APF failed to maintain a real presence at Wits. A mood of defeat after the retrenchments, coupled with widespread apathy, led to a sharp drop in campus struggles. NEHAWU lost over half of its roughly 800 members, including experienced shop-stewards. While maybe 250 Wits workers were reemployed by the contractors, NEHAWU failed to make an attempt to organize outsourced workers, or to keep its unemployed members together as a pressure group. Its strategy remained centered on a protracted legal battle, with legal depositions replacing popular mobilizations.

Vocal union actions were never linked to an attempt to forcibly stop the retrenchments; after June 30, outsourcing was rarely on the agenda at NEHAWU meetings, and then only in relation to the court case. The case was finally settled out of court in early 2003: the details of the settlement remain obscure. The stress on legal action reflected, on the one hand, NEHAWU’s statist politics, and, on the other, its refusal to draw links between the retrenchments and ANC policy. ANC speakers even attended a union meeting mere weeks after the retrenchments to canvass for votes; the workers were told that opposition leader Tony Leon was actually the villain behind Wits 2001.

The conditions and wages of the outsourced workers were, it must be stressed, dramatically worse than those previously experienced by workers in Wits employ: the wages of cleaning staff dropped from around R2227 per month, plus access to medical aid, pensions and loans, with bursaries for children, to R1200 per month, without benefits.²³ This was coupled with a dramatic increase in workload and a pervasive fear of victimization, which undermined unionization.

Wits saved money at the expense of its lowest paid staff—executive salaries were never subjected to the same logic of cost cutting—and academic centralization found its complement in union-breaking in the support services. Most academics remained apathetic, with some even hoping that support staff cuts would mean academic benefits. There were, indeed, wage increases in late 2000, but these must be weighed against pervasive insecurity, individualization, and demoralization.

Academic workloads increased sharply: posts were routinely frozen whilst student numbers increased dramatically, reaching an all-time high of 24, 473 in 2003, as did pressure to increase research productivity. “Outside” work, formerly regarded as an unholy vice distracting from real university work, was now formally transmuted into a glowing virtue, an example of entrepreneurial skill and “relevance” that counted heavily in the performance appraisal system.

The student movement also declined sharply. Wits activists in the APF, including most of the new body’s media section, soon focused their energies off campus. As activists withdrew from SASCO, the organization moved sharply to the right, forming a close alliance with the ANC Youth League and focusing on SRC elections, with intent to oust the dominant “non-political” Independent Students’ Alliance (ISA). In late 2003 SASCO/ ANCYL narrowly secured control of the SRC, but aside from Congress-style rhetorical radicalism, there has been very little change in actual SRC activities.

The tragedy is that the “enterprising” university has already generated a range of student grievances. Support service outsourcing has led to repeated complaints of worsening conditions in student residences, where numbers of cleaning staff have halved.²⁴ Undeterred, Wits has (quietly) announced its intention to outsource the development and management of entire student residences.²⁵

Wits has also forged ahead with policies of cost-recovery, introducing upfront fees payments from 2001, with an upfront payment of R2000 due at registration, and the remainder to be paid by the middle of the year. This is more than a little difficult for black working class students: in the same way that prepaid electricity meters lead the poor to self-disconnect, high upfront fees lead the poor to exclude themselves from the university rather than accumulate debts; the upfront fees serve as an automatic mechanism to regulate the class composition of the student body.

Important initiatives on several fronts have, however, come from smaller more radical student formations, such as the broad-left Socialist Students’ Movement (SSM) and Keep Left. Formed at the beginning of 2002 the SSM played a key role in attempts to organize the outsourced workers, and to establish a workers’ support committee. Frustrated by the Municipality, Education, State, Health and Allied Workers (MESHAWU) union, many outsourced workers left to set up a committee of their own,

organizing a series of protests and moving, possibly, to an independent union.

Bureaucracy and Neoliberalism

It should be clear from this account that there has been a general drive towards the reconstitution of Wits as a market or "enterprising" university. It should not be assumed, however, that this means that everything runs smoothly and quietly. Instead, the restructuring of Wits is filled with contradictions and instabilities, characterized by bad planning, and shaped by the traditional bumbling of the Wits bureaucracy.

The fate of Norma Reid exemplifies these issues. Within eighteen months of her appointment, Reid was asked to resign by Council or face an internal inquiry into her activities. In line with the new stress on centralization, Reid's supposed sins were never made public, and she was forced out by the end of 2002. Reid had, it seems, erred mainly by failing to work in concert with the SET to drive the Wits restructuring process forward; it lagged noticeably during her term. The Wits bureaucracy had continually slowed the restructuring process; Reid's indecisive approach removed any real pressure for change, with the result that the bureaucracy sprang back into its old patterns.

The effect of the Reid period was that Wits restructuring only regained momentum in late 2003. After Reid's exit, the VC post was hurriedly transferred to Nongxa, first as acting VC, and then as VC proper in September 2003. The appointment was carefully managed: a Wits 2001 loyalist, Nongxa was the only VC candidate shortlisted, and thus, the only one allowed to campaign; his appointment was a foregone conclusion. Clearly, the Council and SET wanted to avoid a repetition of the Reid fiasco. Nongxa has been feted as a heroic figure; his defining characteristic is, however, his loyalty to Wits 2001.

If the ability to stage-manage the election of the VC is indicative of the extent to which power has already been centralized, then, the Reid affair is equally indicative of the limits to which the new regime has been consolidated. Poor planning by management has also played its part. The rapid increase in student numbers generated increased subsidies, but management failed to compensate for the increased pressures arising from this "fee-farming." Academic posts were frozen at the very moment that student numbers grew to unprecedented

levels. Increased teaching pressures on staff meant, in turn, that Wits' strategy of generating "third stream" income was undermined.

Meanwhile few lecture venues at Wits could cope with the huge increase in numbers, the library system was increasingly out-of-date, and a disastrously recurrent incompetence became characteristic of the student registration process. At the same time, the Financial Aid Office overspent by R30 million in an attempt to increase student numbers, generating a deficit that wiped out the revenues generated through increased student numbers and setting the ground for a new hysteria about impending financial crisis.²⁶

In Conclusion

Wits is, in short, well on the way to reconstitution as a market university. However, the restructuring process has continually generated contradictions and antagonisms, and management has proved far from an omnipotent entity. There are thus spaces for resistance, spaces that can grow into a more substantial challenge to the university as currently configured. In 2004, there are already signs of increasing student mobilization, whilst the outsourced workers appear to have again begun to move towards unionism. Amongst academics, few would now defend the Wits 2001 plan. From such seeds, something substantial might yet grow.

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