

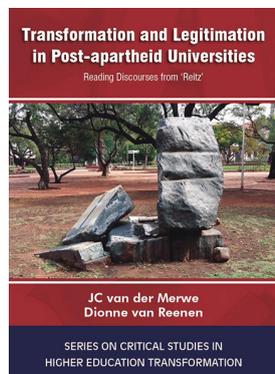


Racism: The 'soft touch' does not work

BOOK TITLE:

Transformation and legitimisation in post-apartheid universities: Reading discourses from 'Reitz'

BOOK COVER:



AUTHORS:

J.C. van der Merwe and
Dionne van Reenen

ISBN:

9781920382605 (softcover)

PUBLISHER:

SUN PRESS, Bloemfontein;
ZAR350

PUBLISHED:

2016

REVIEWER:

Brenda Leibowitz

EMAIL:

Brendal@uj.ac.za

AFFILIATION:

Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

HOW TO CITE:

Leibowitz B. Racism: The 'soft touch' does not work. S Afr J Sci. 2017;113(9/10), Art. #a0230, 1 page. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2017/a0230>

The authors of this book – J.C. van der Merwe and Dionne van Reenen – both work for the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice at the University of the Free State, in Bloemfontein, South Africa. It was at this university that the infamous 'Reitz incident' occurred in 2008, in which a group of university students enlisted the participation of a group of black, mainly female, workers, in a video which mocked the workers without them realising it immediately, and which mocked the idea of racial integration. One would assume that the authors of this book would be highly invested in the prevention of such crudely racist acts at this university, and in the country – the book should contribute towards an understanding of how to create the kind of milieu in which racism does not occur. So does this book succeed in this task?

If one believes that careful reporting, sober analysis based on ethics, as well as theoretical readings are necessary to understand racist behaviour and to contribute to its prevention, then this book certainly succeeds. The book is divided into six chapters which cover a historical period leading up to the production of the racist video, the screening of the video and the aftermath. It carefully documents the events, using interviews with eight staff and four student leaders, minutes from internal meetings, and reporting from the media. In order to analyse various dimensions of the events, it draws from several theories: critical theory discourse and the work of Foucault and Hook; legitimisation theory and the work of Habermas; and postural theory, drawing from the work of Johann Visagie.

From the detailed reporting and analysis in the book, two impressions remain. Firstly, that the Reitz incident was not an isolated incident. It was typical of much sexist and reactionary – but according to the authors, primarily racist – behaviour on the campus. This culture was tolerated, encouraged and even enforced by the university practices, for example by 'hazing' of first-year students in the residences. Secondly, it is very evident from the book that the forces of racism and intolerance did not emanate solely from the students, but also from amongst academics, parents and outside political formations. It was in response to these endemic trends that the leadership of the university at the time of the production of the video could have been seen as too soft.

I recognised many of the debates and tensions described in the book from an institution at which I worked for 10 years – although it was not as crudely racist as UFS. The authors seem to have taken care not to be sensational or overly essentialising and judgemental (the reporting is possibly even underwhelming in places). They bring many of the complexities and nuances of the situation out carefully.

The authors advance the idea of a legitimisation crisis as a reason for the crisis, in that there was not a firm enough basis with which to establish dialogue within a robust democratic culture:

It is suggested here that mature, differentiated, discursive actions required for legitimisation were not present in the UFS on a large enough scale because there was extreme hesitancy in adopting and applying democratic values. For this reason, from the first mummings of 'transformation' on campus, the UFS was rendered vulnerable and open to the threat of a legitimisation crisis and it is still not free from that hazard. (p. 152)

The authors propose dealing with the lack of legitimacy by the following means: changing the institutional culture; instituting a rights-based approach; creating space for 'being political' on campus; doing anti-racism work; and establishing pre-conditions (p. 247). The elaboration of the final action – establishing pre-conditions – is the most interesting. It includes:

1. An effective governing apparatus through which collectively binding decisions can be implemented.
2. A clearly defined 'self' for the purposes of self-determination and self-transformation to which collectively binding decisions can be ascribed.
3. There must be a membership that can be mobilised for participation in institutional opinion-formation and will-formation orientated to the common good.
4. There must be an educational and social milieu in which a democratically programmed administration can provide legitimacy-enhancing steering and organisation. (p. 265)

These four pointers suggest what legitimacy of leadership, on a sound democratic basis, could look like. This legitimacy did not exist in the period leading up to and at the time of the Reitz incident, partly because of the institutional culture, partly because of the lack of a critical mass of progressive students and staff that could be mobilised, and partly because leaders did not see the need for a more robust and less evolutionary process to unleash the sorely needed process of transformation at the university. A firm, robust and visionary approach towards transformation might be needed at the UFS, but a similar point can be made for the other previously white, Christian, Afrikaans universities in South Africa. Surely the need for a less-than-soft touch in a democratic context with a clearly defined 'sense of self', could be offered as a solution at many other South African universities, including the previously white, liberal English universities? One could argue that in the light of the 2015–2016 student protests against fees and colonial education, there has been a crisis of legitimisation at all South African public higher education institutions, and that this less-than-soft touch in a democratic context, is required in the system as a whole.

