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UCT under Apartheid, Part 1: From onset to sit-in 1948-1968

(Cape Town, Jacana, 2019 407 pp. ISBN: 1928232892)

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This is the second book, following the publication of *The University of Cape Town: The formative years* in 1993, in what will certainly lead to further volumes by Howard Phillips on the history of arguably the most prestigious (Phillip's has also claimed it the oldest) South African university. As the dates indicate, it covers a period when South Africa was in the most severe and deadening grip of apartheid. It ends with the sit-in of 1968. I recall this event quite clearly for it occurred in my first year at Natal University (Pietermaritzburg). While probably most of the white population were outraged by the photos of

“hippies” like Raphie Kaplinsky the “highly articulate zealot” occupying the UCT senate room, to us more provincial types it was like a beacon of light, a clarion call to force our university to act more decisively to take steps to resist the segregation of races on campus and to speak up against the country’s racial policies. Completing my doctorate at UCT just over twenty years later, it felt gratifying to be part of the alumni who have passed through this great university.

Phillips begins his account with an overview of the UCT leadership (the principals and vice-chancellors) TB Davie, RW James, JP Duminy and Sir Richard Luyt. He provides a sketch of their leadership styles and relations with staff, students and the state and relates their administrative successes and shortcomings on matters such as the financial control of the institution. These issues were of critical importance for two factors: after 1948, funding was increasingly dependent on a state that sought to segregate the higher education sector and to force the former “open” universities to end the intake of “non-white” students and secondly, because the influx of thousands of ex-servicemen into the country’s universities presented a range of unexpected problems to which UCT (and other universities) had to find solutions.

The second chapter deals with the building of what Phillips calls a “second UCT”. The iconic Groote Schuur UCT campus situated against the backdrop of Table Mountain was saturated by 1948 and could accommodate no further buildings. Consequently, UCT constructed another 19 buildings, including academic departments and schools, a residence and utilities such as the Baxter theatre. Most of these conformed to the “modernist” style of architecture that did not meet the tastes of all onlookers. It needs to be emphasised that this expansion was created on the back of the economic boom of the 1960s in particular and consequent generous state funding by the National Party that was intent on providing benefits to whites in general and Afrikaners in particular during these years. UCT’s top leadership, academics and students for the most part accepted this largesse with little compulsion. It is an unfortunate fact that the tremendous burgeoning of UCT and of higher education generally in South Africa was sponsored by a government that itself was subject to ever-increasing global criticism and condemnation. This generous funding of higher education by the apartheid state did mean, however, that UCT underwent considerable transformation in both its size and academic scope, as reflected in the physical expansion of the campus itself.

Chapter four examines the fields of teaching, learning and researching at UCT. Teaching during these years was undoubtedly regarded as the prime function of a university and higher education had not yet quite entered the “publish or perish” regime of the US and elsewhere. However, as the following chapters reveal, some of UCT’s academics were either established and esteemed researchers in their respective fields or were engaged in projects that would lead them down this path by the end of the 1960s. There was perhaps less progression in the art of lecturing itself; Phillips tells us that “it is clear that in 1968 didactic lectures still overbore all other modes of instruction at UCT and most of them remained lecture centred, promoting passive learning”, a conclusion that many readers may affirm was the norm at other South African institutions around this period or shortly after. This did not detract from the presence of many stimulating and innovative lecturers who graced the halls of the university in these decades.

The following five chapters make up the core of the publication. They provide a narrative of each of the UCT faculties those of Science, Commerce, Law, Education, Architecture, Social Science and the Arts (Musical, Liberal and Fine). This illustrates just how broad UBT’s academic reach was, for it provided an opportunity to study in almost every discipline of the students’ choice, possibly unmatched by other universities the country. Phillips describes and analyses the achievements or shortcomings of every department and sub-department within each faculty, providing readers with sketches of the lecturing staff from the professorial to the more junior support members. He gives us a dextrous and even-handed depiction of the academic staff that covers their particular interests, their lecturing styles, relations with colleagues and students and their relative academic and administrative abilities. Where applicable, Phillips highlights the exceptional talent and achievements of UCT academics. He is equally critical of deficiencies among them. Indeed the author pulls no punches when the occasion demands. The material that enables a writer to make these kinds of observations and appraisals is difficult to unearth – it lies, for example, in student newspapers, memoirs and interviews. The way Phillips employs this material allows for a lively, “insider” story of each department and requires immense research time and effort.

Readers will no doubt relate to the numerous individual academics whose time at UCT is recalled in these core chapters according to their personal and academic interests and fields. For historians, and broadly social scientists however, among the more notable figures one encounters are Leonard

Thompson, Monica Wilson, David Welsh, Sheila van der Horst, Jack Simons and Rodney Davenport. That the trail blazing (though intensely maligned by the “radical” school of historians) *Oxford History of South Africa* emerged from this coterie of UCT scholars shows just how far advanced they were in promoting an “Africanist” perspective in these disciplines which permeated not just into other sections of UCT but throughout the country and abroad. One of UCT’s more memorable moments was of course the world’s first heart transplant operation in 1968. Chris Barnard was given much of the credit for this “first” in the field of open-heart surgery but it was predominantly a UCT medical and nursing team effort.

The remaining chapters cover UCT and the wider community, UCT and its relationship with the apartheid state, student life and a short analysis of UCT’s international standing. In the first of these the topics discussed include UCT’s “outreach” programmes and extra-mural offerings. Among those that stand out were the SHAWCO (Students Health and Welfare Centres Organisation) which, despite drawing justifiable criticism for its flaws did a sterling job of offering health and other facilities to the poorest communities of Cape Town and the UCT Rag. The second theme examines the way UCT both “colluded and “collided” with the state. As suggested above, the racially “Open” universities struggled to resolve the contradiction between their stated policies and the determination of the state to enforce university apartheid. This reached an intensity in the early 60s when the government banned or restricted academics and students for their political views or activities. Readers might remember the case of the medic, “Bill” Hoffenberg who was forced out of the country and the actions of the Pan Africanist stalwart, Philip Kgosana, who led the acclaimed march from Langa to Cape Town in 1960. Despite its oft-proclaimed promotion of non-racialism and its liberal image, UCT in fact frequently “acquiescent in observing apartheid regulations”. It also remained a very male-dominated institution with only a handful of women being appointed to the lecturing staff and female students confining themselves mainly to the kind of degrees that would lead them into careers open to women in the job market.

The third topic, student life, discusses what one would expect, namely UCT’s sporting prowess and the intensely competitive inter-varsity rugby (and other sporting codes) with Stellenbosch that was in essence a “reflection of the heightened political rivalry between English-and Afrikaans-speaking whites nationally”. It looks also at the nature of life in the student residences,

student frolics and the more serious side of student life focused on political organisation (NUSAS was probably more entrenched at UCT than at any other university despite the presence of a large number of mostly conservative Rhodesian students at the institution), student societies and publications – the whole gamut of student life that many ex-students cherish among their memories of their time at university. Some may find the attention given to sport at UCT rather brief. The chapter ends with an account of the famous sit-in of 1968 which erupted as a consequence of UCT Council’s decision in 1968 to reverse the decision to appoint the black social anthropologist Archie Mafeje as a senior lecturer. The sit-in radicalised a section of the student body (right-wing students physically threatened the protesters), broke the mould of more dignified student protest on campus and put the university administration more firmly in the cross-hairs of students’ political targets. Some of the other members of the UCT radical alternative left were also central to this agitation – in particular Dr Rick Turner who was later assassinated by the apartheid security apparatus. The sit-in became as Phillips writes, “part of UCT’s own institutional memory”.

In short, there is basically something of interest for everyone in these final chapters. The last one is more of a conclusion. The twenty years covered in the volume were, in the author’s opinion, “partially transformative”. The university underwent enormous growth and expansion and made minor changes to the content of syllabuses and lecturing methods. In many respects, it set high academic standards that other universities struggled to emulate. Its graduates went on to occupy prominent roles in South African society (though a significant number emigrated as apartheid intensified) but it remained fundamentally unchanged. On the basis of this volume by Howard Phillips we await with keen anticipation the final story of what will surely prove the most contested and difficult years that awaited UCT; the demise of apartheid and beyond, the transformation of UCT from a mainly white and colonial past to a more representative institution and the attendant convulsions this engendered.