

Research is at the mercy of plutocracy

10 Aug 2012 11:36 - Mathew Blatchford

When corporate entities fund think-tanks it puts paid to intellectual integrity or political engagement.

In last month's Getting Ahead, Professor Fred Hendricks argued that academics could become more relevant to the needs of South Africa essentially by getting foreign corporate funding for their research ("[Cut off from the real world](#)", *Mail & Guardian*, July 6 to 12). This seems to me to show deep-seated misunderstanding of the problem. In any funded research environment, the funder can control the research performed. The Mellon Foundation, which funds the new Rhodes University humanities research unit Hendricks described in his article, might be more flexible than most, but he must be aware that such situations are rare.

Instead, the trend is towards ever more politicised funding processes, as with the situation where the right-wing think-tank Cato Institute has been taken over by the still more right-wing Koch Foundation.

South African academic research institutes are funded (often quite lavishly) by corporate entities. This has not led to a surge in intellectual integrity or in political engagement of any particularly effectual kind. On the contrary, the bulk of this research appears to consist of crass propaganda for right-wing causes of dubious merit, whereas a small amount constitutes left-wing propaganda for special-interest groups, usually ones with scant political efficacy or significance. For instance, how much academic time and money has been devoted to the shackdwellers' movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, and what has the outcome of all this been, intellectually or politically?

On the rare occasions when South African academia is politically engaged these days, it is often devoted to comparatively trivial issues. However, is this, as Hendricks suggests, a matter of the structure of universities? Universities were dominated by conservative administrations in the 1970s and early 1980s, and yet managed to generate an intellectual climate that was of modest use to the anti-apartheid struggle — especially by promoting political engagement among faculty and students.

Today, it seems that universities are dominated by corporate ideologies and aspirations, not substantially more repressive than the conservatives of the past. Yet far less intellectual activity is evident, and there is a near complete absence of real political engagement among faculties or students.

It seems to me that this absent engagement is not simply caused by a change of management style. Far more likely, it is caused by a change of political circumstances, of which the changed management style is a symptom. In the 1970s and 1980s South Africa was passing through a quasi-revolutionary phase under which academics could direct their labours towards, in the broadest sense, support for the liberation of the country. The fact that their research was sometimes slipshod and shallow hardly mattered provided that their hearts were in the right place. Today, there are powerful ideological tools, their use heavily funded by the corporate sector, through which neoliberals can appropriate and neutralise such intellectuals and make them subordinate to an essentially repressive system. There is little room for intellectuals to apply independent principles unless they move away from their comfortable status in the bourgeois community, whereas it is easy for an intellectual to speak out in support of ruling-class hegemony (retaining bourgeois status) and still pretend to be taking a radical stand.

It would be excellent to use Hendricks's critique of tertiary institutions as a tool for undermining the corporate dominance of those institutions. That might have little impact on society as a whole, but it would possibly make universities better teaching and learning establishments, and also better suited to serve society as a whole.

Instead, Hendricks suggests that little enclaves should be set up with plenty of money from somewhere to do useful research. It seems to me that such enclaves will be ineffectual at best and probably easily co-opted towards conservative ends. It is not a political solution — and yet it is obviously tempting for individuals frustrated by the absence of any room for their voice in the public arena.

The problem is that across the political spectrum, in South Africa and everywhere else, the voice of the individual has been replaced by that of the corporate "thought leader". This affects universities just as much as it affects political parties. It has not come from universities or from political parties, it has come from the desire of the ruling class to gain more political power by eliminating all other centres of political power and thus secure greater affluence.

I do not think that Hendricks's project, attractive as it might seem, will lead to the overthrow of the dominant corporate elite. We can try to struggle for greater intellectual freedom within universities — which is not the same as "academic freedom" but I doubt that university faculty members should aspire to much more than that. There is no sign of any effective struggle against the oligarchic plutocracy under which we live, and I would argue that the university — certainly in its current form — is not the place to start one.

Mathew Blatchford is head of the department of English language and comparative literature at the University of Fort Hare