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REVIEW ESSAY

Bad theory, critical violence, and the threat to freedom of thought

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Benatar, David. *The Fall of the University of Cape Town: Africa's leading university in decline.* Politicsweb Publishing ISBN 978-3-9822364-1-4 (eBook), 2021.

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This review is necessarily personal. As an undergraduate at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Professor David Benatar taught me an introductory course to moral philosophy and a second-year course in applied ethics.[1] Not only is Professor Benatar an outstanding teacher, but he is also decent, humble and courageous. It is apparent that this book was painful for him to write, but it is undoubtedly necessary for him to have done so.

My review of the book is personal on another level too. Not only did I have the privilege of being taught by the author in my first two years at the university, but I was either a student or employee at UCT for roughly 17 years (starting in 2002). I started a PhD in the School of Economics in 2013 and was largely away from campus during the time in focus in this book (2015 onwards). Nonetheless, like countless others, I looked on as the human excrement was flung, paintings and buildings were burnt, and academic freedom tortured.

[1] Professor Benatar and I differ markedly on some fundamental philosophical worldview questions, but in my engagements with him as a student, he was only ever polite, sharp-witted, and steadfastly committed to helping students identify fallacies in their arguments and to test arguments by pressing them to their logical end. For this I remain eternally grateful. Students who do not submit themselves or their arguments to intense scrutiny are doing themselves a disservice and undermining their ability to contribute meaningfully to the world.

The Fall of the University of Cape Town is an anatomical breakdown of what happens to a university when Critical Race Theory (CRT) manifests and gains ascendancy. UCT is not alone, but this book is the first, to my knowledge, that provides a detailed description and explanation of the repercussions of terrible ideas like CRT on a single institution.

Benatar's book is fruitfully located within the broader ambit of several recent books that deal with this subject in one form or another. The first is by Carl Trueman: *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Trueman, 2021). Trueman's case study is the LGBTQ+ movement but it could equally have focused on the demise of the modern nation state or the destructive impact of CRT on human relationships and institutions. Trueman argues that our current social imaginary exists in a world that is best categorised (in the West, anyway) as an anti-culture.

This observation needs some historical background. Historically, Trueman argues that the Protestant Reformation, for instance, was a schism within a world that largely shared fundamental beliefs about human nature and human flourishing: "A more careful look at the Reformation indicates that the Protestant elites were not committed so much to cultural iconoclasm as to what they considered to be cultural retrieval. Protestants and Roman Catholics may well disagree as to how well this retrieval was executed – indeed, they may disagree as to whether it was retrieval at all – but the Reformation was really a debate within a second world about the precise nature and implications of the Christian sacred order for society, not about its idntentional repudiation. One of the hallmarks of this reality is that the Bible as a sacred text lay at the heart of the 16th church reforms for both sides of the Reformation debate" (Trueman, 2021, p. 90).

This meant that people on either side of the schism shared an understanding of what they were arguing about. Our current era can be categorised, however, as one involving a different kind of extremity: people yelling at each other with no shared philosophical convictions or foundations. Witness Twitter for just one day for substantive evidence of the preceding statement.

Trueman makes the case that Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Reich and Marcuse laid the philosophical foundations for the proliferation of the revolutionary anti-culture in which we now live, a "third world" as opposed to the "second world" in which the Reformation occurred. He argues that this anti-culture now holds as sacred the notion that reality is a social construction. According to this view, socially-constructed "truths" we develop about the world include all the sciences – natural and social – and the upshot is that the notion that "hard" empirical evidence can

be advanced in support of any of our views of the world is itself questionable. As part of the process of identities becoming politicised, self-identification has become incontrovertible, with the result that self-proclaimed victimhood is now a major moralist currency. Genuine questions such as "what does it mean when a man says he is a 'male trapped in a woman's body'?" and "do women have any right to concern when trans-women gain entrance into women-only spaces?" are immediately dismissed or silenced as bigotry or transphobia, and so forth. Cancel culture ensues. The irony of the rise of this crude "intersectionality" as an assertion of "new" or previously ignored truths on university campuses is that it drowns out the pursuit of truth, knowledge and wisdom.

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, for instance, offer other arguments that address the gathering destruction of the university project in their excellent book *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Their book deals with recent developments in university life in the United States, but their arguments can apply equally well in other contexts, such as South Africa. In a nutshell, their book argues that current trends in thinking about such issues as truth, academic freedom and basic rights, are undermining the basic tenets of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)[2], with disastrous consequences.

The authors hang the book on the claim that three Great Untruths (as they call them) are currently permeating university campuses: "what doesn't kill you makes you weaker"; "always trust your feelings"; and "life is a battle between good people and evil people". Two major problems arise from the growing influence of these ideas as the norms specifying the cultural context of academic life. The first is that violence (largely against liberal and conservative thinkers) is increasingly justified on the grounds that "heteronormative" (or throw in any other applied postmodern pejorative) orthodoxy does "violence" to the historically marginalised by upholding power structures of the privileged. This is frightening in the extreme, and some of the scenes depicted by the authors are indeed appalling. The degree of righteous anger devolving into righteous violence in the service of ideas is indeed disturbingly reminiscent of religious wars such as those that characterised the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in Europe for 200 years.

The second problem is that university students who imbibe these three Great Untruths as viable principles for life or academic development are literally being coddled into a state of more or less permanent adolescence. The characteristic

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[2] Their appendix on CBT is brilliant.

tone of people who find themselves encountering ideas that run contrary to the worldview with which they enter university is that of a teenage temper tantrum. Universities are places where ideas are tested and refined, and academic freedom respected, but for many people it would appear that ideas are indicators of some or other group identity, with those which are approved aggressively defended, rather than questioned, and those which are not approved aggressively attacked, rather than being tested by strong argument. And this approach comes with its own built-in account of any critical testing of its main ideas – dismissal, as notions tied to patriarchal norms or to "privilege". (The use of the latter term is particularly ironic, in that a tertiary education is in itself a sort of privilege.)

As James Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose point out in their excellent book, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity – and Why this Harms Everybody*, this revolutionary anti-culture targets even the "hard" sciences (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Activists increasingly call for science and mathematics to be "decolonised", for instance. Ironically (again) this drowns out a fruitful debate about the need for more African scholars in these fields, and so throws the baby out with the bathwater. Lindsay and Pluckrose paint a compelling picture of how the "applied postmodern" turn has created some of the problems described by Haidt and Lukianoff. Their account makes for difficult reading, and indeed strengthens the case made by Carl Trueman. Few people outside the privileged halls of academe will have heard of the likes of Derrida, Foucault, Reich and Marcuse, but their ideas, which centre on the idea that all power is in some way arbitrary or illegitimate, have increasingly stripped away basic tenets of liberal democracy such as freedom of speech. (Even more ironically, again, recent proponents of these views don't actually cite them, since they were all white men.)

All this is nowhere more apparent, perhaps, than in the way CRT has come to dominate difficult conversations that were previously orientated around how best to serve students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Discussions about optimal resource allocation have become mudslinging matches along the lines that anyone who does not check their privilege is part of the problem. Such mudslinging impairs real progress and undermines institutions like UCT, which in time will only further disadvantage those who are purportedly being represented by the CRT brigade.

This is where Benatar's book makes an invaluable contribution. Painstakingly, he shows that the tactics of race-baiters and a race-obsessed conversation will ultimately harm the most disadvantaged students while wrecking as august an institution as UCT. Many readers might want to speed-read through some

of the more granular details including emails, the lack of reply to them (and its governance repercussions), opinion editorials, media bias and so forth, but I would advise against this. The details matter to the story because they show how bad ideas erode basic governance and respect for colleagues, fellow students, and teachers. Unfortunately, the UCT leadership since the first #RhodesMustFall protest began in 2015, lacked the courage of conviction required to stand firm against criminality. Good governance will necessarily crumble if a university's leadership is unable or unwilling to oppose the tide of revolutionary fervour that will obliterate the bedrock of universities – academic freedom. Erosion is accelerated when leadership capitulates.

Benatar's book is not primarily a philosophical interrogation of the ideas that wrought (and continue to wreak) havoc at UCT. It is primarily a description of what happens when those ideas go unchecked. Ideas have consequences, one of the most devastating being the suicide of Professor Bongani Mayosi (former dean of the UCT medical school) as a direct result of the treatment he endured at the very hands of those he was trying to help. As Haidt and Lukianoff point out, CRT entitles its adherents to commit violence as a form of self-defence against those they deem to uphold existing power structures. Any call for evidence that such "power-holders" (code for liberals) are racist, is met with the axiomatic assertion that even the call for evidence constitutes evidence that the question-raisers are either racist or complicit in the system. Detractors cannot win.

When an entire system is deemed racist, individual agency does not matter. The only solution is to perennially repent and atone for one's "whiteness" by collective association, though salvation is not likely to be forthcoming given that the guilt cannot be sufficiently expiated in the eyes of the high priests of this new orthodoxy. Such is the incoherence of CRT ideology as espoused by the likes of Robin DiAngelo in her book *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. The other terror of the ideology is that it hardwires the very racial categories employed by the apartheid government to divide us. This is part of why Professor Benatar calls the Black Academic Caucus (BAC) a "Broederbond-like" organisation.

As you would expect from one of the world's leading philosophers, though, and the former head of UCT's Philosophy Department, Professor Benatar does provide substantive philosophical arguments against the kind of destructive thinking on display within the university since at least 2015 (though as the book points out, the seeds were sown well before then).

The book is solidly structured, and the preface explains why terms are defined and used the way they are, and why the decision to publish such a book was

taken. Benatar emphasises the essential elements of liberalism such as emphatic tolerance of views one dislikes. He also points out that classic liberalism tends to irritate extremists on both sides of the political spectrum. Haidt and Lukianoff point out in their book that liberals and conservatives have increasingly common cause, at least in terms of emphasising individual agency and responsibility, while the "regressive left" across university campuses tend to inflame "extreme right" responses outside the university. The details in *The Fall of UCT* tend to focus largely on the former, rather than the broader societal repercussions.

As with all good books, the opening chapter delineates the major themes and introduces the main arguments and why they are important. These are accompanied by useful data points. There are 24 chapters in all, which makes for lengthy reading, but the book would be incomplete without the chronological details. For anyone with an interest in UCT, or simply the future of the university in the world, the book is a page-turner. Those with young children (like myself) will find the material deeply unnerving. The rise of cancel culture and the totalitarian upending of academic freedom indeed bode poorly for the prospects of younger generations.

It is incumbent on any reviewer to highlight which chapters in such a vast book were most elucidating. This is necessarily a subjective exercise, but the chapters I thought most useful were those that laid out objective cases for academic freedom and what happens when it is undermined. Chapter five is called "A blow to academic freedom" and takes serious aim at the university's decision to rescind an invitation to Danish journalist Flemming Rose to deliver the 2016 TB Davie Memorial Lecture. For various reasons, Rose is a controversial figure, but UCT's capitulation raises significant questions about its commitment to free speech. As Benatar rightly points out, "the real test of freedom of expression occurs when people are asked to tolerate the speech of those whose ideas they do not like." It was the University Executive that asked the Academic Freedom Committee to disinvite Rose. When it refused (as it absolutely was justified to do), the Executive acted unilaterally and disinvited – *cancelled* – him.

A lengthy discussion of the substance of academic freedom and the practical processes by which it has been tarnished at UCT follow the fifth chapter. The 15th chapter then deals with a particularly opprobrious matter, that of "collections of words that are unclear, and which cannot be made clear" (Benatar, 2021, p. 180).

Unprincipled people can hide behind this purposeful lack of clarity. The author is, on principle, reluctant to use people's names unless their views are in the public domain. One name that comes up repeatedly is that of media studies Professor Adam Haupt, who accused Benatar and Jacques Rousseau, a lecturer in critical thinking and ethics, of "liquid racism" and "possessive investments

in whiteness". Such accusations, argues Benatar, are a useful distraction when someone like Haupt cannot be seen to be saying that criminal behaviour is acceptable, but nonetheless does not condemn it because it is being committed by his "ideological comrades".

The chapter goes on to analyse in depth a paper that Adam Haupt wrote on Rose's disinvitation. Haupt had also written that Benatar's call for the force of the law to be used against activists who stooped to criminal means was tantamount to undermining principles of academic freedom and the right to peaceful protest. However, Benatar points out that arson and violence are hardly peaceful and not all protest advances academic freedom. Haupt justifies his defence of marauding thugs thus: "Subaltern polities create multiple publics to contest for attention to ensure that their concerns are addressed. They do so by engaging in contestation on their own terms, and not by criteria for deliberative modes of engagement" (cited in Benatar, 2021, p. 185). This is hard to understand, but the basic point is that protesters should not be confined to generally accepted modes of engagement; this would be a form of acquiescence to those already in power. Benatar engages extensively with the problems in Haupt's arguments and analyses them in terms of section 16 of the South African Constitution, which upholds the right to freedom of expression.

There is a very serious discussion, too, in this 15th chapter about the limits of freedom of expression, which every global citizen should grasp. It is only evident incitements to violence that may provide "sufficient conditions under which the law should restrict freedom of expression." Benatar has been a demonstrably avid supporter of free speech, and thus Haupt's argument that Benatar only utilises the principle "to mask possessive investments of whiteness" is shown to be hollow, if not deceitful.

Chapter 20 then addresses the problem of the self-named Black Academic Caucus (BAC), which has not published a public list of its members. Operating under anonymity, it has created governance chaos for UCT. It has also inflicted untold harm on individuals within the university who have dedicated their lives to thorough scholarship. One such person is Professor Nicoli Nattrass, who published a commentary in the *South African Journal of Science* (SAJS) in June 2020. Nattrass is a world-renowned economics academic whose work on race, class and inequality in South Africa is formidable.

Her commentary "had presented some preliminary research on why 'black' South African students were less likely than others to consider studying biological sciences". The research was birthed out of a desire to understand why the University's Institute for Communities and Wildlife in Africa was struggling

to attract black students. The findings suggested that variables such as "career aspirations, attitudes towards evolution and experience with, and attitudes to animals", explained most of the variation in the data, and that these variables were themselves functions of socioeconomic inequalities. Nattrass's hypothesis that "wealthier people might have more experience of companion animals [which] might play some role in determining interest in a career involving animals" caused a predictable furore.

The BAC, in an open letter, called for the retraction of Nattrass's commentary. Benatar notes that the "intensity of the BAC outrage was, as usual, inversely proportional to its justification". While there is – as is normal with any academic research – plenty of room for criticism of the study, it does not warrant outrage, and certainly the charge of racism does not bear up under scrutiny. But the BAC's response to the hypothesis (grounded on the empirical correlation between companion animal experience and desire to study biological science) was: "Apparently, judged from the vantage point of whiteness, how can black people possibly care for wildlife and the environment if they don't fill their lives with pets? Because nothing shows care for an animal quite like owning it, restricting its movement, dominating its life and using it for emotional comfort."

Benatar argues that the appropriate academic response is to respond to the substance of the argument without any reference to the racial category to which one deems the author to belong. As he points out, he did not rush to Twitter to call for Haupt's "ideological drivel" to be censured. On the contrary, the UCT Executive tweeted condemnation of Nattrass's research to its 200,000 followers. Worse, the Vice Chancellor (Max Price's successor, Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng) called Professor Jane Carruthers, the editor of *SAJS*, and asked her to withdraw the paper. The journal's editorial advisory board did not agree to the request. The Vice Chancellor then contacted Nattrass directly to advise her to withdraw the paper, though she would not debate the grounds on which Nattrass was meant to do so, despite claiming that the paper contained methodological and conceptual flaws.

Some of the outrageous comments aimed at Nattrass on Twitter – by fellow academics – are contained in the book and shall not be here repeated, suffice to note that they are defamatory in the extreme. Benatar makes the case that instead of preventing this kind of response, or at least defending Nattrass, the University Executive actively enabled it. They failed in their primary duty, that of defending academic freedom. The appropriate response was ultimately followed by SAJS, which ran a special edition of the journal with several responses to Nattrass's initial commentary, including a response to those responses from

Nattrass herself. As Benatar writes, though: "Attempts at infringement of academic freedom are not justifiable merely because they fail" (Benatar, 2021, p. 310). Indeed, the strength of the attempts undoubtedly has a chilling effect on academic research and is a blow to the delicate principle of academic freedom.

The remaining chapters of the book do not make for pleasant bedtime reading. They include vivid details of the behaviour of student activist Chumani Maxwele, who poured human excrement on the statue of Cecil John Rhodes back in 2015 and went on to engage repeatedly in criminal behaviour. The upshot of the university's entirely inadequate response is well captured by Benatar: "This was another case in which the decent people were betrayed by a university pandering to its worst elements. Immeasurable damage was done." There are also the details of the antics of political scientist Dr Lwazi Lushaba, which could fill a review on their own. Benatar's engagement with Lushaba's arguments is critical reading on the subject of freedom of expression.

Benatar closes his book with a few key words: "All I have sought to do in this book is to document and analyse what has been happening, and to offer caution about what is likely to result. Nobody at UCT can later claim that they were not warned" (Benatar, 2021, p. 422). Indeed, the book accomplishes far more than that. Both the documentation and analysis have profound relevance to the global university project and indeed how human beings now engage with each other in the growing culture wars.

In their book, Haidt and Lukianoff note that most universities profess their mission to be the search for truth in one way or another. CRT and its evident manifestations are destructive of the university project because they ignore substantive reasoning and uphold the three Great Untruths. In the process, not only are students becoming more fragile (less resilient in intellectual activity), but academics are becoming more withdrawn and reluctant to engage in the marketplace of ideas for fear of being labelled a racist by the likes of the BAC. Everyone with an interest in UCT and the "applied postmodern" employment of CRT should read this book thoroughly. Professor Benatar is to be commended for his bravery in exposing the destructive impact of bad thinking in the very heart of an institution entrusted with training future generations to think.

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