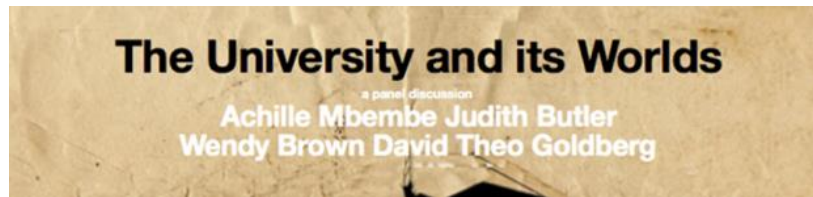


What is *The University and its Worlds*?



The University of the Western Cape together with the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) hosted a panel discussion titled, *The University and its Worlds*, on Thursday evening at 5:30pm. The



panel was made up of Prof David Theo Goldberg, Prof Judith Butler, Prof Wendy Brown and Prof Achille Mbembe, with Prof Premesh Lalu as the chair.

Achille Mbembe, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and David Theo-Goldberg at *The University and its Worlds* panel discussion

The first panellist, Goldberg, spoke

about the development of the University in the USA. He used the metaphor of an “uberisation” to explain the supply and demand dynamic in the context of higher education. His discussion also referred to the popular #FeesMustFall ongoing debate that started in October 2015 as South African universities announced a national fee increase which students refused to accept.

Brown's discussion provided a technical crash course on the crisis that universities will face if they give in to the privatisation and financialisation of the academy. According to Brown, neoliberalism has resulted in the privatisation of universities by “reformatting every level of structure of the university based on a

business model". Brown argued that privatised higher education loses its right as a mode of education and results in anti-critical spaces of learning. Her discussion explained the profit-driven focus that is at the heart of business and compared it to the ratings-driven focus that has become the heart of the university. According to Brown, the shareholder dimension has spilled into universities because the future value of the academy depends on speculation, which is needed to attract future investments. Thus, the ranking and ratings systems determine the value of the university.

Brown suggested that these ratings govern universities by shaping pedagogy and the lines of research that are pursued and prioritised, among other factors. This, in effect, results in disincentives to critical thought projects as the risk of relevance and funding becomes a central concern.

She argued that there are two important projects for the university in the 21st century. The first is to conduct and offer research that is orientated to this world, for instance, global integration, addressing climate change and unsustainably organised geographies. Brown emphasised that the purpose and ethos of universities remains critical and specific to the present time. Her second point was to "bring the outsiders in", thus, bringing the dispossessed and marginalised within the university to attempt to rectify the historic inequalities that have for so long divided communities including the university. This is especially difficult because it coincides with a time of privatization and entrenching of privilege. Thus neoliberalisation, privatisation and financialisation of the university is a threat to the project of decolonising the university.

Judith Butler took to the podium with an opening quote by



Gramsci: "Destruction is difficult; it is as difficult as creation".

Butler asked some very serious questions that have powered many of the debates around decolonising

Judith Butler speaking about violence on campuses

the university. Among

others, she asked whether a university could remain a structure for critical thought when its very knowledge structure is exclusive to a privileged minority.

Butler argued that in South Africa and the Global South more broadly, to have to conform to universal standards of 'excellence' is to conform to colonisation and racism. She suggested that in order for institutes of the academy in the Global South to reach what is called 'excellence', these spaces have to mimic European standards of education which is to a very large extent made up of colonial literatures and histories.

Furthermore, Butler affirmed that in order to allow for new forms of imagining the future, the university needs to write histories that speak to the people who have been marginalised. Speaking back to Brown's last important point, Butler reiterated that "we have to be outside when we are inside", so that we are able to transform spaces from ones of exclusivity to inclusivity.

Butler also posed some very controversial questions, such as: "What would it mean to emerge from apartheid? And should the tactics of radical critique be violent?" She noted that very often radical critique becomes criminalised (referring to the securitisation and censorship at universities that are enforced as a

response to disruptive students) once students reach the limit of tolerance and physically act out their disruptions.



The crowded audience at The University and its Worlds

Butler asked, “Why is disruption not welcome [on university campuses] when there is clearly still so much to disrupt?” A crowded audience applauded her question.

Mbembe’s discussion began with what appeared to be a caricature of decolonisation. He said there is no space today that is not saturated with the term decolonisation and even joked that he saw the call for papers to a conference titled “decolonising the orgasm”.

Mbembe argued that we are at a moment where everything and everyone must fall; however, while we are busy destroying we must ask whether, “there is anything that can be saved from destruction”. He was referring to the protest action by students in South Africa that has destroyed buildings and other university infrastructure as a means of protest. His telling comment was that “creating chaos as a way of governing is a way of privatising as well”.



[Mbembe at the podium](#)

Mbembe's discussion highlighted that there is a danger in the over-reliance of difference as the political motivation. He suggested that perhaps we are fighting something that is already dead [the university], "we are fighting things that are completely dead... and wasting a lot of time while the world is going somewhere else" he said. In order to transform the inherited "ethno-university" of South Africa, he said, "we have to recapitalise the university". Mbembe highlighted that the Vice Chancellor and other Vice Chancellors should be lobbying

government to recapitalise the university. Lalu thanked the panellists for their contributions and opened the floor for a round of questions.

The first question, which was in the style of a comment, instead, was asked by a student in the audience who seemed to be representing a larger number of student voices in the audience.



[Director of the CHR directs questions from the floor to panellists](#)

He remarked that, there is no use talking to academics or intellectuals because they do nothing during violent times on campus. He emphasised that "these talks will not reach the townships and it does not reflect the democracy".

A second question asked was: "Who is defining the term 'violence' and for what purpose?"

Another question, in conversation with Butler's comments about the importance of disruptions, asked was: "What is violence and what is disruption?" Butler responded that she does not think all disruptions are violent. It is very often the case that student protests that are disruptive are called violent so that police can be brought in, something she believes we have to dismantle. She did however state her own personal commitment to non-violence.

The next question, by John Higgins, was interested in finding out who the social and political allies might be for those of us in the universities.



Student from the audience questions the presence of White bodies in a space that is supposed to be opening up for Black bodies.

Higgins emphasised "who are they or how do we create them?" Butler responded briefly saying that the university needs to have a link between itself and the communities it serves, otherwise they will be disconnected.

Another question, which referred back to the first, translated the question into: "Can the Subaltern speak?" quoting Spivak. Butler highlighted that when Spivak asked if the subaltern can speak, she (Spivak) did not answer "no". According to Butler, Spivak thought we should subject dominant modes of speaking to decolonisation. Mbembe jumped in, remarking that "it seems to me that the subaltern speaks all the time – but who is listening?"

Brown responded to a critique of her technical breakdown of financialisation and why it matters. She asked what is the university for at this historical conjuncture and concluded that we are in a complex space.

So, why does financialisation matter? Our diagnosis of the current context matters, she said, because if we do not know how the university is governed, then we will not know what to bring into the classroom and what actually matters.

The floor was once again opened for a final round of questions at which point some conflict arose between a group of students calling for disruption and audience member, Xolela Mangcu, Professor of Sociology at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

At 7:30pm a group of students who are apparently aligned with the Black Consciousness movement raised their voices singing, clapping and dancing on tables, challenging the purpose and space of the panel discussion. Discussion ended because of disruption and the audience exited peacefully.



Protesting students disrupt panel discussion with singing and by occupying the audience's space

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