

Session 3:
**The Role of the University in Writing and Teaching History
in Africa in the Twenty-First Century**

HOWARD PHILLIPS
University of Cape Town

On three scores this session differed from most other sessions of the colloquium. First, in Professor Robert Addo-Fening from the University of Ghana it had a non-South Africanist as lead-in speaker; second, half of its panel of discussants consisted of educationalists whose primary focus was history in schools rather than history at universities; and third, the session was chaired by a 'historian *manqué*' (as he termed himself), the sociologist Professor Robin Cohen, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at UCT. These features gave to discussions an unusually wide range, which helped broaden the perspectives of the South African historians who made up the bulk of those present at the colloquium.

Addo-Fening began by sketching the dismal plight of history at universities in Ghana at present: heavily diminished student numbers compared to a decade ago, and depleted, disheartened and ill-paid staff in history departments, who provide unimaginative teaching and promote rote-learning, thereby producing a profession less and less able to reproduce itself. Over the last decade eight posts had remained vacant at the University of Ghana for want of suitable applicants.

This dire situation he attributed to the disappearance of history as an autonomous subject in schools and therefore of the need for specifically trained history teachers, inappropriate and out-dated university syllabuses, a widespread belief that a training in history led nowhere in the job-market and a general perception that history was irrelevant to problems of the present and the future. The result of this marginalisation of history throughout the educational system was a generation of Ghanaians with little national historical awareness; to Addo-Fening they seemed to be 'ignorant Westerners rather than real Africans'.

To reverse this grave situation he suggested that history syllabuses and teaching at universities be comprehensively overhauled: syllabuses should include dimensions of the past especially pertinent to development (e.g. history of agriculture, science and technology, the environment, medicine, architecture); teaching should be reformed to promote critical thinking and engagement by staff and students; and government should be made aware of the relevance of history to furthering exciting new continent-wide initiatives like the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD).

Recognising in this cheerless portrayal of the grim state of history in Ghana too many similarities (or potential similarities) with the situation in South Africa since 1994, most of the discussants focussed their comments on how to counter

such a deterioration which, going by remarks from the floor, was to be found elsewhere in West Africa as well as in Egypt.

Taking up one of Addo-Fening's recommendations, Associate Professor Rob Sieborger (School of Education, UCT) spelled out three critical competencies which university history departments should inculcate into students who wished to teach history in schools if history was to flourish at this level: historical imagination, historical literacy and the know-how to find information independently, and the capacity to turn this information into an exciting, challenging history lesson. To illustrate these he gave a concrete example of how a Grade 4 teacher had used prisoners' accounts as a basis for getting learners to think imaginatively about the attitudes of warders on Robben Island during the 1970s.

Dr Ciraj Rassool (UWC) introduced a fresh perspective to the session's by-now dispirited navel-gazing by reminding those present that university history departments were, of course, not the sole sites for the production of history which was then popularised for the public. Especially since 1994 in South Africa, popularly accessible history was equally produced at other locations like museums, heritage sites and community organisations. What university history departments had to do was to prepare their students to practise historical skills in such locations too, and not just in the school classroom. Such locations constituted a new job-market for historical skills, but in so doing they challenged departments to re-think their syllabuses and teaching methods to meet this new demand appropriately. As a functioning example of such innovation, he referred to the Postgraduate Diploma in Museum Studies which was jointly taught by UCT, UWC and the Robben Island Museum.

With Rassool's outline of new opportunities and new challenges to history departments Professor Nigel Worden (UCT) agreed entirely, citing his own experience of how a topic (slavery at the Cape) had been transformed in terms of who studied it and how over the last 25 years. In the 1980s it had been the preserve of a handful of university-based scholars, but since then their research has been popularised for a larger public, and nowadays non-academics who claimed descent from slaves were keen to carry out research themselves, insisting that they wanted to be able to explore their own history themselves. Appropriately in this regard, he drew attention to the community outcry in Cape Town within the last weeks over the fate of the (slave?) remains found in the burial ground at Prestwich Place near the Waterfront.

In terms of South African university history departments re-thinking who and what they taught and to what end, he outlined UCT's experience since 1999. With a fall-off in students wanting to teach history in schools becoming evident, the then History Department had introduced novel first-year courses with a wide popular appeal, especially those which put contemporary problems into historical perspective. The result had been a massive increase in enrolments, but with this difference, viz. the majority of students taking courses in the department were now

not planning to major in history. They were students pursuing other careers, but who saw in contemporary history an effective way of understanding the present.

However, Worden warned against offering only crowd-pleasing courses which were narrow in ambit, either temporally or geographically. An exclusive focus on African history, for example, ran the risk of fuelling a sense of African exceptionalism, unaware of illuminating comparisons to be made with Asia or Latin America.

The final discussant, Dr June Bam of the national Department of Education assured Worden that the new national curriculum for schools sought to avoid such narrow conceptions of the past by stressing South Africa's position in wider regional, continental and global contexts. It promoted the idea of common, shared experience across humanity, from the 'cradle of mankind' to South Africa as part of the developing world. Within these, a distinct but wide-ranging South African identity could be grounded. In developing these notions and turning them into school history, she invited university historians to participate, as some at UCT were already doing in her department's 'Turning Points in South African History' project.

In the discussion from the floor which followed, concerns were expressed that, in their eagerness for a place in the sun, hard-pressed history departments which responded positively to Bam's invitation might compromise their academic integrity. What, it was asked, would an appropriate relationship between universities and the state be: collaborative, complementary or oppositional? In the latter mode, the Department of Education's unilateral decision to republish for distribution to all schools the UNESCO *History of Africa* was questioned. Was this not too outdated and complex a work to impose on schools?¹ Would it not be far more effective to resort to a kind of *History Today* magazine to make current academic work accessible?

A different concern raised was that the concentration on popularising history would compromise the output of scholarly history aimed primarily at scholars, with the attendant loss of standing in the profession and thus in the eyes of the public. Rassool disagreed, believing that the two kinds of history production were not mutually exclusive.

In bringing the wide-ranging session to an end, Cohen suggested that, from his perspective as dean of the faculty in which the Department of Historical Studies was situated, he could point out to intending students and their parents the many new job opportunities for which history (as taught at UCT) was an ideal preparation: for example, in the heritage and tourist industry, in documentary

1. A reply to this question was made in Session 8 ('Unfree Labour') by another Department of Education official, Dr Thabo Raphoto, who said that the great virtue of the UNESCO *History* was that it located South Africa's experience within an African context. For him, this far outweighed any shortcomings it might have.

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film-making, in the media and in land-claim projects. With this positive endorsement the session ended, in a vein very different from that with which it had begun.