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2003-05-17

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http://hdl.handle.net/10539/12145

Huchzermeyer, Marie. 2003. From dominance to diversity in international cooperation: a view from South Africa. NA-ERUS. Network-Association of European Researchers on Urbanisation in the South. http://www.naerus.net

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From dominance to diversity in international cooperation: a view from South Africa

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April 2003

Abstract:
Critical research in the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa played an important role in exposing the implications of repressive and discriminatory urban policy and management. This critical urban research movement, which also engaged with approaches for a post-apartheid city, was subsequently replaced by a neo-liberal turn in urban research, largely informed by dominant international research thrusts. Within this context, what is the role of international cooperation?

The paper takes a critical look at north-south urban research initiatives involving research in South Africa, to which the author has had direct exposure. The paper also examines the changing conditions under which local research funding is made available in South Africa, using the example of current restructuring of research funding at Wits University, Johannesburg. The paper argues that these conditions broadly follow the (neo-liberal) institutional trends set by the Anglophone northern counterparts. Should north-south cooperation reinforce this trend?

The paper highlights the critical need for publication and dissemination in the south, of local as well as international research. Access in the south to academic literature, and the publication and dissemination of local research, are crucial in order for southern researchers to effectively cooperate. The paper points to the imbalance of facilities and resources in many north-south cooperations. Linked to this is the critical question as to where and by whom the research agenda is set. Far from assuming that research on South African urban issues is best initiated, conducted and funded locally, the paper argues that value is added when researchers from different regions apply different questions to the same problematic. Here the example is used of a group of young international and local PhD researchers addressing a similar urban problematic in South Africa, but with different theoretical approaches depending on the region of their academic home.

The complexity of the unevenly developed urban south requires many different questions to be asked. The paper argues that ideally north-south cooperation should lead to enrichment in terms of the research questions and the theoretical approach, rather than imposing one dominant framework as is often the case.

Introduction
The unique and rapid urban transformation in South Africa post 1994 has attracted many urban scholars of the north into collaboration with South African counterparts. This paper is in part a personal account of such initiatives. It is also a reflection that is built on my particular experiences in South Africa and the context within which I work at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. It places these experiences in relation to the shifts in urban/housing research in South Africa, the increased call for academic research to be relevant, and the neo-liberal dynamics and pressures that face universities (and their access to research funding) in the north and the south, though arguing that these are too often accepted as inevitable. The kind of research collaboration that emerges from this context is usually one that is initiated and dominated by the northern partners, and not necessarily relevant to urban problems and priorities in South Africa. From this angle, the paper calls for greater diversity in collaboration, through longer term collaboration in which responsibilities and liabilities are more evenly spread, and through which deeper and more diverse questions may be asked of the South African urban situation.

A shift in South African urban research from critical to neo-liberal
Throughout apartheid, leading South African universities were elitist 'ivory towers' in a literal as well as figurative sense of only very selectively opening their doors to black students and academics. Whereas Afrikaans universities enjoyed a cosy relationship with the government and produced very little critical social research, English universities such as the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg had a liberal

tradition, and therefore were at odds with the totalitarian apartheid state. South African urban research of the 1970s and 1980s, though emanating largely from such liberal 'ivory tower' institutions, played an important role in exposing the apartheid government's repressive urban policies. The informal settlement question, as well as the urban political struggle was the theme of many critical urban publications throughout these two decades (for instance Ellis et al., 1977; Howe, 1982; Hendler, 1989). In the early 1990s, the reforms within the apartheid system, the anticipation of the post apartheid city, and the spatial and institutional legacy that would be inherited, led to numerous edited collections of critical urban research (for instance Lemon, 1991; Swilling et al., 1991; Smith, 1992). Some of these emerged out of collaboration with UK-based urban geographers (David Smith and Anthony Lemon) who had a long standing interest in the South African urban question, and relationship with local urban researchers.

Post 1994, the South African government's education policy is concerned with transformation of its higher education institutions into relevant components of the transforming society. The extent to which the staff and student body represent the South African society has improved substantially. However, in terms of content of urban social research, other pressures have influenced transformation. As argued by Patrick Bond (2000) in his book 'Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa', the former critical urban research tradition was largely distracted by lucrative research commissions. Leading critical geographers of the 1980s, such as Jeff Mc Carthy, Dough Hindson and Paul Hendler distanced themselves from their earlier critical analyses, positioning themselves in a favourable light to the private sector (see for instance McCarthy et al., 1995).

There has also been a reorientation of research focus among critical urban researchers, towards an alignment with the priorities of multi-lateral and bilateral agencies, with themes of sustainable development, poverty alleviation, governance, and livelihoods, all directly linked to policy thrusts that are being promoted by these international agencies. These have come to dominate over critical analyses for instance of the ongoing contestation over access to urban areas, or questions relating to rights to the city. The rapid transition of the South African state and the multitude of new urban laws and regulations have resulted in a unique institutional and regulatory context. Much of the outcome of this rapid process of law-making is starting to be questioned. The new and unique urban condition regarding rights and obligations requires critical analysis of justice and citizenship that goes beyond the application of internationalised concepts of sustainability or good governance.

Pressing themes that remain unresearched relate for instance to current local government policies of zero tolerance towards land invasions (these policies are implemented with repressive efficiency in Johannesburg) in effect preventing rural-urban migration. Such exclusionary processes remain largely uncontested and undebated. Similarly, the uneven interpretation of the progressive constitutional right to housing and the international conventions on socio-economic rights to which South Africa is a signatory, remain untouched by critical urban analysis.

Within this context, it is interesting to consider the decisions of the South African government, concerning research funding. In 1999/2000, the newly transformed National Research Foundation announced nine focus areas, according to which it would release academic research funding:

1) Unlocking the future
2) Distinct South African research opportunities
3) Ecosystems and biodiversity
4) Sustainable livelihoods
5) Economic growth and competitiveness
6) ICT and the information society
7) The globalisation challenge
8) Indigenous knowledge systems
9) Education and the challenge for change

(National Research Foundations, 2002 / www.nrf.ac.za)

Each focus area covers a wide field, and interpretations of concepts such as sustainable livelihoods are not prescribed. The focus areas represent government priorities, and a requirement for academic research to have relevance to a transforming society. Academics are concerned less with the determined focus areas,

than the austerity in terms of funds allocated to these research thrusts. Academics are encouraged to seek funding partnerships with industry and with international counterparts who may attract bilateral and multi-lateral funding. Governments' funding policy is to directly reward (financially) University departments or schools that attract such external funding, alongside financial rewards for publications in accredited journals. This policy is accompanied with an internal corporatisation of universities, to which I return below. Broadly, this policy is in line with neo-liberal research and higher education policy trends in countries such as the UK and the US (see Castree and Sparke, 2000). Critical urban research may not require extensive funding in its operation, unless it involves large scale quantitative surveys. Much rather, it depends on well resourced libraries for access to critical urban debates in international journals. As is the case with libraries in the UK (see Demeritt, 2000:320), 'market discipline' applied to universities in South Africa has resulted in 'chronic' underfunding of libraries. Within the coporatised system whereby schools operate as budget centres, South African urban scholars are encouraged to develop or participate in elaborate proposals for external funding in order to earn brownie points (and thereby topslice-able income) for their schools/departments.

Reflection on UK-SA initiatives

The South African urban condition after liberation from apartheid rule in 1994 drew much international attention. A number of European-based urban scholars (e.g. Alan Gilbert, Jo Beall, Alain Durand-Lasserve and Geoff Payne) sought research partnerships with South African counterparts, mostly undertaking multi-country comparative studies that have been published internationally and to a lesser extent in South Africa. Whereas the comparison with other countries casts interesting light on the South African urban condition in relation to other democratising and unevenly developed situations, this research is seldom initiated within South Africa or by South African scholars. Its contribution is to an international understanding of the urban problematic, rather than addressing a locally articulated problem or priority.

As a researcher based at a South African university, I receive invitations to support/participate in proposals by a UK-based researchers to the UK funder DFID (Department for International Development). These are accompanied by a string of criteria that such funding proposals have to adhere to, and the invitations come from researchers that are experienced in navigating the DFID application procedure. These proposals have required comparative case studies in more than one country. They were to produce generalisable findings, or findings applicable to developing countries in general. Current concepts such as livelihoods, sustainability and governance had to feature centrally. By definition, the research agenda could not be defined in any one of the countries to be researched, but had to be defined externally by the UK-based research leader or team, who had some comparative understanding, but might not be aware of changing socio-political and legislative contexts in individual countries. Real applicability of the research approach or eventual outcome to the socio-political framework of any individual country could not guaranteed.

For a number of reasons, including the current pressures at higher education institutions in South Africa (to which I return below), I have been slightly relieved each time it was made known that the UK/DFID proposals I had participated in, had not been selected for funding. My relief is no doubt also linked to an exploitative case of north-south collaboration that I experienced in my first position as an urban researcher, at the University of Cape Town in 1995/96. I detail out one aspect of this project in Box 1, as it raises questions of ethics, agendas and dominance in north-south collaboration, particularly where fieldwork is concerned.

Box 1: Worst practice in international cooperation: ODA Research Scheme R6266
(The Integration and Urbanisation of Existing Townships in South Africa)

As part of an ODA-funded research project initiated by a university in the UK, with the University of Cape Town as partner, a group of 10 postgraduate students were brought out to Cape Town from the UK to conduct a week of fieldwork in a poor neighbourhood. Warned of the expectations that the presence of these students might raise within the neighbourhood, the UK-based research leader, on his brief visit with the students, requested a meeting with the leaders of the community-based forum in the area. After listening to the development problems articulated by the community leaders, he offered to raise funds in the UK for a community project, and requested that the forum draw up a proposal. The forum met (amongst tight schedules and local political pressures) and a formal proposal for a youth centre was produced. A potential site was identified. The UK Professor promised that his students would collect all the necessary

data for the design of the youth centre, and would design the centre as a studio project on their return to the UK. The students were exited about the opportunity to "give back" to the community, a concept they had not explored in previous field trips to the developing world.

Months later, there had been no follow-up with the community. The local researchers were not able to answer to enquiries from the community forum. It was later established that on their return to the UK, the students were asked to develop posters for the UNCHS (Habitat) conference in Istanbul, which their Professor was to attend and where the Cape Town project was to be exhibited. More than a year later, the local research team finally succeeded in obtaining a handful of copies of the students' fieldwork findings. Enquiries to the UK research leader about the promised youth centre design and fundraising were ignored, and finally, after directorship had changed at the university research centre in the UK, a letter of apology was sent with an undertaking to rectify any problems. Though appreciated in Cape Town, this remained a mere token. Two years later, efforts were made, to send a few copies of the ODA working papers that were produced by the project to the local research team (see ODA, 1995), of which one copy was to go to the community forum. Several letters to the relevant ODA official responsible for the research scheme remained unanswered.

The question of ethics needs to be central in any discussion on north-south collaboration. The physical distance of the northern team members and their funders can comfortably render them unaccountable to the local research team and other stakeholders and subjects in the research. Where research is poorly or even abusively conducted, as in the case of ODA project no. R6266 (see box 1 above), it may be impossible for the local researchers to get the international research leaders or the funders to even respond to local concerns about the operation of the project. Inevitably, the international partner relies on the local researchers as interface with "the community", be this government, a specific stakeholder group, or a residential community. Thus the international partner relies on the credibility the local researchers have developed within their socio-political context. It is this reputation or credibility that stands to be damaged, if the north-south cooperation is not founded on clear ethical standards. I should hope that ODA project no. R6266 was an extreme case. I have since experienced an extraordinarily generous and ethically sound collaboration with Alain Durand-Lasserve in France, who agreed to co-supervise my PhD at the University of Cape Town without gaining credits (an aspect that a number of UK academics I had previously approached were unable to accept, due to their institutions' policies of auditing credits – they required me to deregister from the University of Cape Town and re-register for a new PhD at their university in the UK, at a substantial cost and loss of time).

Research pressures at South African universities

As mentioned above, there is a serious need for urban research with policy relevance in South Africa. The uniqueness of the South African situation, with its rapid transition and very particular challenges relating to a complex progressive but unevenly implemented legislative framework requires research proposals to be based on an understanding of this situation. Comparative research is relevant, but should be articulated from the perspective of the South African urban problematic. Alongside the national pressures for relevant research, and the international pressures for 'mainstream' research that does not challenge the neo-liberal status quo, South African urban scholars are also faced with pressures internal to their universities, where competitiveness (as a central component of corporatisation) is beginning to define research agendas.

The 'ivory tower' reputation of South African Universities is deeply rooted. Coe et al. (2002:12) quote a South African NGO officer stating that "[a]cademics are often isolated from reality, they deal in ideal situations which do not exist." As mentioned above, higher education policy seeks to address this problem, with programmes such as service learning (where teaching has direct relevance to a 'community' and its service provider) and through focus areas in research. Given the bad reputation of universities, it takes much time, effort and dialogue for South African urban academics to build credible links with NGOs, government officials and policy-makers. In South Africa, these sectors are immersed in real situations, but lack critical reflection. While adopting the mainstream concepts that international funders are promoting (see de Satge, 2002; Department of Housing, 2000), there are limitations in the way this is carried through into policy and implementation, particularly in relation to South African constitutional rights and obligations (such as the right to adequate housing and government's obligation to provide on a progressive basis), and in relation to contentious issues such as property rights versus housing rights in the city.

Development NGOs, as well as policy-makers, have yet to make sense of the internationally acclaimed Grootboom ruling on socio-economic rights in the South African constitutional court in 2000. Academic analysis that has been undertaken and published is seldom referred to by NGOs. Baumann and Bolnik's (2001) publication in Environment and Urbanisation contains an example of an NGO's misinterpretation of the housing right in South Africa[1], and also its isolation from academic urban debates and publications in South Africa. Hostility by this particular NGO and its UK collaborators to urban research by South African academics points to exclusionary dynamics and agendas that can emerge and be reinforced through selective, heavily funded north-south cooperation.

In the housing sector in Johannesburg, the Postgraduate Housing Programme/School of Architecture and Planning at Wits University provides a platform for critical debate through regular public seminars. International scholars that are networked with academics in this school, when passing through Johannesburg are brought into this forum to enrich the debate. The national and Gauteng Provincial Departments of Housing keenly welcomes this initiative, and would like it to be extended to involve high level officials in debates on strategic policy areas. National Department of Housing's real concern with the need to refine policy through research is reflected in its request for secondment of the housing researcher Dr Mark Napier from the CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) to the Department. His mandate is to develop a research agenda for the Department of Housing, which is to inform research collaboration and co-funding arrangements with universities and other research institutions. Towards this same end, Department of Housing recently commissioned (with funding from USAID) the compilation of a comprehensive bibliography of South African housing research from 2000 to 2003 (see Huchzermeyer, 2003; www.housing.gov.za). No less than 282 pieces of research were identified, though many of them consultancy reports with limited critique.

Expectations from the current national Department of Housing are that universities would respond to the housing challenge by 1) re-skilling the housing sector to an appropriate engagement with the urban reality; 2) training new housing professionals, 3) responding to a defined research agenda through supervision of postgraduate research on appropriate topics, 4) initiating and maintaining critical public debate on key policy areas. This invitation to a critical engagement with government on pressing urban issues is very welcome. However, the question arises as to whether university academics have the capacity to develop and maintain a critical and analytical research, teaching and lobbying position, given strong neo-liberal trends in university restructuring.

Over the past 5 years, Wits University has departed from the democratic model of elected Heads of Schools and Deans of Faculties, to a rationalised and corporatised structure of fewer faculties, and appointed managers at School and Faculty level. The enormous cost of this restructuring is to be recovered by more efficient running of the university's affairs. A branded marketing thrust is to ensure increased student numbers (and therefore university income), substantially increasing staff-student ratios, and to some extent compromising research capacity. While new School and Faculty structures were in place by the end of 2001, difficulties with financial management experienced by the new structures (in part blamed on the restructuring process) have led to a serious financial deficit and the recent announcement that all new posts are frozen.

The university's primary corporate governance concern is with its competitiveness. In terms of research, the university has decided to market itself through 13 "strategic research thrusts":

- Johannesburg as a Global City
- New materials and manufacturing
- Origins of the species
- Information Technology
- Finance

[1] Baumann and Bolnik (2001) make the assumption that the right to housing is directly translatable into an entitlement to a capital subsidy for housing, when in fact it is the government's constitutional obligation only to develop a programme through which it will progressively meets the housing need according to available resources, be this though a system of capital subsidies or though other forms of state assistance or partnerships.

- Development
- Revisiting globalisation, rethinking South Africa
- Environmental sustainability
- Education for a changing society
- Molecular biosciences
- Community health and development
- Mining, mineral resources, exploration and energy
- HIV/AIDS

Although Wits University staff are assured that these thrusts were drawn from a survey of current research at the university, therefore merely reflecting existing research strengths, the University Strategic Research Plan (University of Witwatersrand, 2003) states that "there are numerous studies, which demonstrate that this is a worldwide phenomenon in higher education institutions and it is not a strategy unique to Wits." It further refers to a UK report titled "The Role of Selectivity and Characteristics of Excellence: Final Report to Higher Education Council for England," quoting that

> "Selectivity is nothing new. There are always more good ideas to investigate than resources to investigate them…Selectivity is made among scientific priorities when decisions are made about which new programmes might best be funded and which older programmes should be wound down."

In South Africa, this corporatisation is largely accepted as inevitable, and little resistance is voiced by staff at Wits University. All the more I was surprised during my July 2002 visit to the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, that attempts at similar models of coporatisation were successfully resisted through industrial action. Progressive Brazilian academics strongly perceive corporatisation to undermine the universities' critical intellectual position. It is this consciousness of the limitations of a neo-liberal framework at all levels, that is absent in South Africa. Collaboration with neo-liberal northern counterparts arguing that 'selectivity is nothing new' would probably serve to reinforce this weakness in South Africa.

Towards diversity in north-south cooperation

What then is the role for north-south collaboration? Should it focus merely on concepts of sustainable development, governance and livelihoods? Should it play to the South African academics' need to attract external funding? Should it create opportunities for South African scholars in completing components of externally defined research? Should it reinforce South African scholars' belief in the inevitability of a neo-liberal transformation of all spheres of life, including the academic workplace? If the neo-liberal trend is so irreversible in the north, is it not wiser to avoid such collaboration, and rather strengthen ties with economically comparable countries such as Brazil, where strategies may be learnt from academics' resistance to corporatisation? Or are there conditions under which north-south collaboration can lead to a deeper understanding of the urban problematic in South Africa, and inform an effective policy process?

Collaboration through north-south networks make an important contribution to research dialogue and exchange that is not dominated by one partner or concept. Networks may take the formal shape of N-AERUS or IRGLUS (International Research Group on Law and Urban Space), or may emerge informally at a smaller scale through common interests in a particular research field. One such informal network emerged as a group of contemporary PhD students in South Africa researching different housing/informal settlement related questions. Registered at universities in France, Britain, Germany and the US, and South Africa, all these researchers spent sufficient time in South Africa to build relationships with other researchers. A loosely constituted network met regularly in Cape Town, and others were linked informally through encounters at conferences, or personal acquaintances. This allowed for debate over research approaches, theoretical underpinnings, and fieldwork experiences. While each candidate developed his/her own means of local dissemination to those directly involved in data-collection, the French and German students were under pressure to publish in acclaimed journals in their own language, and UK students were under pressure to publish in acclaimed international journals. This limitation in terms of access of the research findings to the South African readership led to the compilation of a special issue of the South African urban journal, Urban Forum 13(2) (2002), under the title 'Contemporary Processes in Informal Settlements in South Africa.'

The special issue comprises a diversity of approaches to understanding the unique situation of informal housing in South Africa. The French researchers addressed residential strategies (Morange, 2002), territorial strategies (Guillaume and Houssay-Holzschuch, 2002) and the interaction between social division and government intervention (Benit, 2002). The German researcher examined socio-spatial change or the interaction between informal settlements and spatial planning (Haferburg, 2002). The US researcher (though based in South Africa) examined governance and consensus-building in the context of partial upgrading (Oldfield, 2002), and the UK researcher asked questions about the usefulness of social capital for development practitioners (Thomas, 2002). As the South African researcher, I addressed the implications of individualisation for individual and collective strategies (Huchzermeyer, 2002).

This then is the form of North-South collaboration, through personal engagement in networking, that can lead to a richer understanding of the uniqueness of the South African urban condition and its policy challenges. The above-mentioned initiative was not funded, although each PhD student was relying on individual funding sources. The kind of support that would strengthen such initiatives would be funding for network meetings and for local publications. It is unfortunate that the only peer-reviewed South African urban journal, Urban Forum, is now published in the US. Most private subscribers in South Africa have cancelled their subscription due to prohibitive cost. The journal's contribution to disseminating research findings in South Africa is therefore substantially reduced. Publishing the same collection as a book with a South African publisher would have required funding to subsidise production of the book. In a subsequent initiative on urban fragmentation, with a different network of scholars, we are producing a locally published book (Harrison et al., 2003). Here we were fortunate to tap into generous EU funding though the South African Foundation for Human Rights, also enabling us to workshop the content of the book with the local and international contributors. The book will retail around R100 (US$13), whereas similar books resulting from north-south collaboration (e.g. Durand-Lasserve and Royston, 2003; Beall et al., 2003) and published with UK publishers such as Earthscan retail in South Africa around R300 (US$40), and are therefore accessible only to an exclusive market. In our case, the Foundation for Human Rights did not influence the content of the collection in any way. From a South Africa perspective, this form of funding is extremely welcome. It enables international cooperation that promotes a deeper understanding of the South African urban condition through a diversity of interdisciplinary questions and approaches, rather than the dominance of a single conceptual framework prescribed by a funding agency.

PhD students from universities in the north continue to be attracted by the fascinating urban situation in South Africa. One would hope that they have opportunities to engage in north-south networks and to publish in South African collections, be they journals or books, and not merely succumb to pressures to publish back home. There are also South African PhD candidates who would benefit from co-supervision from scholars in the north, a process through which such scholars may access the contemporary South African condition and contribute meaningfully to South African urban debates. Within a hostile neo-liberal policy environment, both in South Africa and in many countries of the north, such initiatives will depend on generous individuals willing to work creatively within the corporate requirements of their institutions.

Conclusion

Various dynamics internationally and in South Africa have resulted in type of project-based north-south collaboration that may serve the corporate ethic at South African universities, while producing research that does not unravel the uniqueness of the South African context, but rather seeks to generalise within the mainstream of conceptual approaches. The current South African urban context and the situation in higher education institutions suggest that the kind of north-south collaboration that is required is one that enables long term partnerships of dialogue and enquiry, enabling a diversity of critical questions to be asked, and resulting in accessible dissemination through local workshopping and publication. Questions of ethics and accountability would be resolved through longer term engagements, within which interfacing with the local urban sectors would be more evenly spread among the research partners. Co-supervision of senior research students may form part of longer term collaboration.

The form cooperation suggested here might have to be initiated by South African scholars. Engagement in north-south networks such as N-AERUS may be a useful context for such initiatives to emerge. In my case, involvement in N-AERUS, IRGLUS and informal networks of generous colleagues in the north have encouraged me to initiate research activities in South Africa that involve scholars in the north. Whether

these lead to relevant outcomes and actual policy shifts depends largely on our credibility within the current socio-political context in South Africa, and our ability to engage the public, private and NGO sectors through constructive debate and accessible publication.

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