

The Fruits of Arrogance and Neoliberalism

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While the Vice Chancellor (VC) of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) was calling the police to come silence students whose only demand was free education, another ex-VC of Wits threw a political grenade coated with racism in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in Britain. While these two events may appear to be very different and even unrelated, they have a deep relationship and spring from the same source of arrogance, lack of accountability to students, and a neoliberalism that breeds impunity among the elites in society.

When Professor Adam Habib was VC at Wits he got used to silencing students and academics to the point of police stun grenades. Like all neoliberal elites across the world, their world was the only valid one and other views that ran counter to austerity had to be silenced. In South Africa, Prof Habib was inserted into a ruling elite that had a history of violence, and a fictitious division of labour developed between the Prof and other sections of the elite. Pampered and praised by a media that slavishly followed the dictates of White Monopoly Capital, the Prof could pretend to argue or talk himself out of any controversy. Thus, when students were brutalised by the police, he found words to blame the students. When the students demanded free education, he cited Gramsci to tell us why they must all have loans from the banks!

Like all elites that pretend to be progressive while they drive neoliberalism, they delude themselves as to real basis of their power. They imagine that it is their arguments that make them superior to the “mob”, whereas it is the police (and private security) hiding in the dark alleyways of the universities that give them this power. Now, detached from the social context that gave him power, the Prof is fumbling about and is giving the most ludicrous explanations of why he used the “N-word”.

But the debacle at SOAS has revealed that the Prof is part of South Africa’s elite in another way. In his life as a VC of Wits, Prof Habib liked to point out the deep flaws of South African ANC and EFF linked elites (and only these elites!). We all know that no amount of scandal will make the ANC-EFF elites take accountability for failing the public. Now, faced with a vote of no confidence from staff and students, the Prof is pinning his hope on being saved by the British elite. There is no sense of public accountability which should make him take the only honourable road – to resign. No, the Prof is taking the road of the elite to which he belongs – obfuscate, and claim your rights to be presumed innocent, and if found guilty, declare yourself innocent and a victim of dark forces anyway!

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