

Neoliberal governmentality, responsabilization and deepening academic tribalism in the Zambian academy: a commentary

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ABSTRACT

This commentary advances the central contention that neoliberal governmentality has caused a systematic responsabilization of academics which has in turn caused academic tribalism to deepen. By neoliberal governmentality I mean the regulation of mind and soul of the academics to orient them towards entrepreneurial forms of thinking. On the other hand, my understanding of responsabilization corresponds to the definition offered by Davies (2003) who asserts that it is the process by which Schools and universities are reconfigured to produce the highly individualized subjects who become entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives. In this paper, the manifest forms and effects of neoliberal governmentality are discussed. The ways in which neoliberal governmentality may deepen academic tribalism are also illuminated. Finally, an opinion is offered on the role of neoliberal governmentality in deepening academic tribalism in the Zambian academy.

KEY WORDS: governmentality; academic tribalism; neoliberalism

In 1991, the government of the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD), led by Frederick Chiluba, came to power and moved the Zambia sharply away from Humanism towards a neoliberal platform, characterized by the reduction of government control in various aspects of national life, and a greater role for the private sector in higher education. The Zambian state, which had hitherto been responsible for the general well-being of its citizens, was transformed into an 'enabling' state which gave power to private entities, multinational corporations and bilateral and

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multilateral aid agencies such the IMF and the World Bank. These last 26 years of economic reform in Zambia have led to the emergence of a new scripting of the higher education in the image of capital. The reforms have manifested themselves in the form of tremendous shifts in the ideological, economic and political underpinnings of the higher education landscape. *Educating our Future*, national policy on education created in 1996 at the peak of structural adjustment, for instance systematically created an atmosphere in which the academy and its inhabitants were to be transformed and reconfigured into productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives. EoF fundamentally transformed higher education by declaring that public universities in Zambia needed to increase their sources of revenue and take initiatives to mobilize ‘non-government’ sources of finance. By non-government sources of money, EoF meant the commercial and industrial entities operating within Zambia’s “climate of economic liberalization” (p. 102). EoF expected the HEIs, for their part, “to become entrepreneurial and profit-motivated” (p. 102). By entrepreneurial, EoF was referring to the need for higher HEIs to conceive of the services they offered, “whether these be teaching, research, teaching, consultancies and use of facilities” (p. 102), as potential sources of revenue. Thus, EoF re-defined the services offered by HEIs as commodities, which could be sold to generate revenue for the institutions.

Such a transformation called for the re-orientation of the higher education system from the perceived over-reliance on government funding to a more responsible outlook which emphasized being able to fend for themselves individually as academics and collectively as members of the academy. Foucault (1997) describes such a transformation as governmentality: the regulation of

the mind and soul of the citizenry to fit the neoliberal palate. Davies and Bansel (2010) describe this transformation similarly as resulting from *mentalities* of government. These mentalities are expressed in terms of the discourses by which neoliberal subjects, in the Zambian academy for instance, understand and articulate their identities as newly appropriated subjects of the new social order. Simply put, governmentality means the ways in which the technologies of government have been deployed to re-shape and re-orient how the academy handles its business. In this paper, I contend that neoliberal governmentality has caused a systematic *responsibilization* of academics which has in turn caused academic tribalism to deepen. *Responsibilization* here refers to what Davies describes as the process in which Schools and universities are reconfigured to produce the highly individualized subjects who become 'entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives' (2003, p. 38).

Per Davies and Bansel (2010), higher education institutions that are refashioned through the neoliberal governmentality begin to experience three kinds of force. First, all products are redefined in terms of their monetary value. This is exactly what EoF proposed for the Zambian academy: that they begin to think of the services that they offered, as commodities that could be exchanged for money to sustain their institutions. By instituting a competitive culture among member of the academy, EoF began to pit academics against each other in deepened competitive systems for the 'governmental and non-governmental sources of finance'. Some academics would eventually go out of their way to make themselves so responsible as to become 'generic members of an *auditable* group'. Thus, I examine in this paper, the ways in which this competitive

epic may produce or enhance academic tribalism. I argue that competitiveness, as deployed by EoF, has caused academic tribalism by so *responsibilizing* the academy as to deepen academic polarization. As some members of the faculty seek to make themselves relevant and visible, the academy could become polarized into discreet disciplinary units.

By academic tribalism, I invoke the meaning proposed by Nicholls (quoted in Reisz, 2014) who describes the phenomenon as "both a domain to be investigated and the methods used in that domain...emphasizing characteristics that separate discrete units of knowledge as opposed to those that might relate them". Becher and Trowler (2001) similarly defines an academic tribe as an assemblage of individuals who are unified by common backgrounds, conventions, and devotion to largely common epistemological and ontological standpoints. Academic tribalism is, thus, typified by academics tending to reason and act in a manner that divides the academy into discrete, and often tightly regulated, disciplinary blocks (Sternberg, 2014). These academic tribes tend to fail to serve the needs of students and society. In addition, Balch (2004) asserts that the academy can be characterized into two broad categorizations: The collegial and adversarial disciplines. The former is characterized by uniformity of purpose as well as a general collegiality in the resolution of disciplinary disputes. Balch notes that although "rivalries exist among hypotheses and investigators, there is general agreement on the means of resolving them and a strong sense of shared intellectual mission" which enable "internalized checks" to "keep things on the straight and narrow" (Balch, 2004., p. 4). He further enumerates physics, chemistry, and mathematics as examples of such *collegial* fields. On the other hand, the humanities and social

sciences are characterized as having an absence of shared purpose among the sub-disciplines and should thus be conceived of as adversarial disciplines. In the adversarial disciplines, epistemological differences: "shade into enmities, bear heavily on methods of verification as well as the substance of disputes, involve judgments of value as well as of fact, often reveal an absence of shared mission, and produce results whose employment outside academe is very frequently polemical" (ibid., 4). This appears to imply that the adversarial disciplines are not very receptive to multi-disciplinarity. Yet, as observed by Gill Nicholls, deputy vice-chancellor (academic development) at the University of Surrey, the various social, economic, political and environmental problems that confront contemporary society "do not come in discipline-shaped blocks". By this Nicholls means that nothing less than a multi-disciplinary approach can be equal to today's problems. The problem, she continues, is that "academics are deluged by vast quantities of new information, and, to avoid drowning, and to attain some kind of security, (they) seek to come ashore...on ever smaller islands of learning and enquiry." In manner, academic tribes and territories are formed.

At University of Zambia (UNZA), one sees the possibility of such tribalism, as the various departments seek to consolidate their identities in this era of reduced government funding. The alternative sources of funds proposed by EoF, have mainly been in the form of tuition fees paid by registered (and, sometime unregistered) students. Accordingly, the Zambian academy has witnessed, in the last couple of years, the proliferation of degree programs, as departments that had previously been situated within a multi-disciplinary milieu, seek to assert their separate and

visible identities in the form of degree programs, within the fast shrinking space opportunities. Because of the competitive epic espoused by EoF, UNZA, has been relegated from a privileged position of solitude as the highest learning institution in the Republic of Zambia, center of excellency and seat of knowledge, (and until 1988, the only university) to a life at the margins of society. The institution has been reduced to having to compete for increasingly meagre funding from governmental and other non-governmental actors alongside several public universities established in the last 26 years, such as corporate entities, religious bodies and other non-governmental organizations. Thus, questions are beginning to be asked about the relevance of some departments, the value of paying the salary of members of staff in unit that do not generate income for the institution. Thus, departments have had to realign themselves to appear relevant and worthy of a continuing monthly pay. In this vein, some departments have been put at risk of extinction, because as “servicing departments”, they have never had degree programs of their own, save for those that involve students in other departments. As each department articulates its identity through the introduction of degree programs, some servicing departments have found themselves servicing increasingly reduced student bodies. The fear is that, in the likely event of having no students enrolled in their courses, such departments may find themselves being closed by the university authorities, who, quite understandably may not want to continue paying high salaries to faculty that are not generating any income for the institution.

The impact of governmentality on the proliferation of academic tribalism can be observed in the following ways: First, some disciplinary tribes’ unwillingness to consider the perspectives of

disciplinary ‘outsiders’ can be observed in some schools within UNZA (Sternberg, 2014). For instance, in the realm of teacher education, debate appears to be raging about the respective merit or worth of content/theoretical knowledge versus pedagogical aptitude. Thus, questions are beginning to be asked about much theoretical knowledge should be given to a student being trained to teach a subject such as physics in a secondary school. Quite often I have happened upon conversations in which the suitability or desirability of ‘overly’ theoretical content knowledge for prospective teachers is roundly questioned. Therefore, a trend is emerging in which the School of Education has started to increasingly develop curricula that “befit” the training for future teachers. Unfortunately, departments that have traditionally drawn their student body from the School of Education are beginning to bewail the downward trend in their student numbers. I once attended a forum in which the critical implications of these trends were extensively discussed and a conclusion reached that something needed to be done: “or else, we all will be out of employment in a matter of months”. Within the School of Education, the introduction of insular programs, replacing the decades-old programs located at the School’s intersection with the Schools of Natural Sciences (NS) and Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), bears testimony to an intra-school uniformity of purpose that accords with what is being defined as academic tribalism here.

Second, one can recognize, among some disciplines at UNZA, an emerging tendency to distrust *outsiders* (Sternberg, 2014). It is hardly uncommon to see some academics disparaging those who think differently: For instance, academics in the “hard” sciences such as NS, Agricultural Sciences,

Engineering, Medicine and Mines cannot, with certainty, be said to harbor no suspicions about academics in the art based disciplines/tribes; humanists and vice versa. At times, even within the HSS, a not so concealed disdain can be sensed between the ‘Social Scientists’ and the ‘Humanities’. Similarly, HSS’s own suspicions about the School of Education cannot be said to be entirely absent. Between 2009 and 2016, for instance, UNZA’s School of Education has introduced more than ten degree programs that correspond with the disciplinary specializations of the School’s ten departments. The motivations for the introduction of these degree programs are varied, but we cannot discount the need to assert a sense of relevance and identity in this time of tremendous financial constraints. But more importantly, such a move by the School of Education, may likely be the result of distrust of *outsiders* such as the faculty in Natural Sciences who are presumed to teach sciences that are too theoretical to be of any value to a student training to become a secondary school teacher.

Third, one can infer what Sternberg (2014) calls a general disinterestedness in interdisciplinary from some overt and covert talk and texts taking place within the Zambian academy. Again, the School of Education has been implicated in discouraging its students from enrolling in courses located outside the School, because not only do they have no value for the students’ future teaching pursuits, but also the lecturers handling such courses are too pompous and full of themselves. Attempts to cross or get transferred from one school to another, within UNZA, have been known to have been roundly opposed by the members of a receiving school or department. As noted, elsewhere, by Sternberg (2014) ‘academics may end up praising interdisciplinary only

if it does not take away valuable positions from their tribe'. Common sense might appear to suggest that when multiple academic tribes 'co-exist' within the university's shrinking space for opportunities and resources, it is perfectly natural for them to intensify their battles for such resources and opportunities. With the introduction, in 2014, of an almost centralized system of apportioning slots for Staff Development Fellows (SDFs), trainee academics selected from the best-performing undergraduate students, who are then trained and employed as lecturers afterwards, it is likely that there may be recruitment wars. The centralization of this selection process means that the numbers of SDFs that each unit, school or department can recruit, is now decided centrally by management with representation from each of the university's nine schools. I would not be surprised to hear that behind the closed doors of senate and council, the apportionment of SDF, and even graduate-student slots may be bitterly contested, as each unit or department or school seeks to benefit more from the apportionment. More SDFs means an improved staffing levels and the resultant moderation in the workloads of departmental members. Thus, the ground is rife for recruitment wars to occur as the departments and academic units compete for limited SDF slots.

It is therefore clear from the above analysis that there is a connection between neoliberal governmentality and the deepening of academic tribalism in the Zambia academy. In this commentary, I have argued that the national policy on education in Zambia, EoF, transformed the higher education landscape by re-orienting the academy towards a neoliberal platform marked by responsabilization and competition for governmental and non-governmental sources

of finance. Such a transformation created conditions for the deepening of academic tribalism by pitting several academic units against each other as the politics of visibility and relevance came to the fore. I have offered some speculative thoughts on what might result from such increased intra-institutional competition for dwindling resources. I have argued for instance that the proliferation of degree programs has been anchored on a need for academics and the disciplinary communities they represent to be visible and relevant. I have also argued that such competitive mechanisms have put some departments or tribes at the risk of extinction as the move away from inter-disciplinarity gains currency within the Zambian academy.

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