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Jonathan D Jansen, *Corrupted: A study of chronic dysfunction in South African universities*. Wits University Press, 2023, pp. 322. ASIN: B0BHY2XT66.

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Reading this book during a troubling period in South Africa's efforts to deal with perceptions of corruption, I could not help but find myself slipping into hopelessness. Two of South Africa's premier universities were embroiled in accusations and counter-accusations involving their Vice Chancellors, governance oversight systems, and other constituencies. One vice chancellor has since separated with the University, whilst the other is under immense pressure to step down. The reportage and running commentary in the media brought an uncomfortable and perhaps unwanted glare on South Africa's higher education sector. As if this was not enough, in the last few weeks (April 2023) the media has featured the riveting story of a man accused of murder and sexual violence. With the help of a medical doctor and several other people as his accomplices, he escaped jail, lived large, and continued with a spree of criminal acts including daring efforts to elude rearrest. As this story unfolds, the role of state institutions, law enforcement, and private firms tasked with protecting citizenry were brought under the spotlight. The question of how deeply corrupted, corruptible, and competent the system is to maintain law and order and guarantee state functionality was on our minds.

This book used the University, as an institution in South South Africa's ecosystem, as a case study to highlight the nature of corruption across state institutions and other sectors. It does not attempt to sanitise the storylines but takes a hard look at events across time and space showing how the manifestation of corruption plays out and how intractable addressing the problem becomes for the few who try to do so. The author, Professor Jansen, places himself at the core of the story, presenting an almost autobiographical account of how universities in South Africa came to be in the state they are in. The author's tone is at once authoritative and desperate as some of the current events unfolding continue to cast a pall over South Africa.

South Africa's capacity to deal with corruption, human security, and well-being, beyond the traumatic past that the country has endured, is probably frayed. I can relate to the lived experience of the author, and all others who are featured

in this book, having had my fair share of bad experiences in the higher education landscape of South Africa. The metaphoric question “are we bewitched?” sums up the perplexing and unfinished story of South Africa’s fight against crime and criminality. The temptation to attribute the current situation to a darker force beyond our collective abilities to resolve can be felt by the continent. Africa faces multiple challenges such as conflict, weak governance, and food insecurity which mar the everyday lives of people. The hope that we can emerge from the intertwined challenges of corruption and dysfunction remains dim.

Professor Jansen is a seasoned academic with a wealth of experience. He provides a critical reflection on the causes, drivers, and reasons why dysfunction continues to plague South African universities and by extension the wider polity. Drawing on personal leadership experience and a well-researched corpus of information, Jansen provides a context which sets out the history of the university in South Africa. He draws on a rich literature which highlights how universities came to be institutions facing challenges of dysfunction, instability, incapacity, and integrity issues among others which the author mentions throughout the book. The author draws a binary distinction between highly functional universities and highly dysfunctional universities.

Highlighting the historic roots of institutional dysfunction, Jansen points out the debilitating “costs of institutional instability” (p. 3) which is rooted in laws and policies of the apartheid era. Rural-based universities designed for Black learners were deprived of resources and their curriculum designed as a poorer version of the exclusively white universities which were mainly urban based. The persistence of inequalities and bad governance in the largely Black institutions led to a vicious cycle of dysfunction and chronic instability. On the other hand, historically white universities especially those located in urban areas enjoyed stability and functionality which has sustained their strength to date. The author notes how the “deeply racialised and fragmented histories of South African Universities” (p. 23) have continued to plague the culture, character, and values of universities to date. Previous writings on the cartography of apartheid and Jansen’s lived experiences during this era informed this book.

The first five chapters of the book outline, in a clearly well-articulated narrative, the context to the book’s subtitle, chronic dysfunction in South Africa’s universities. The book then takes a microscopic lens to the problem by providing an account of how the dysfunction happens, how it is sustained, and how it is wilfully entrenched in dysfunctional universities. By adopting what the author calls a “micropolitical perspective,” the author dissects the way chronic dysfunction was inflicted on institutions of higher learning. What was supposed to be an academic project degenerates into a “looter takes it all” scenario where learners and communities are deprived of opportunities to use education out of poverty. The author highlights how multiple constituencies, internal and external

to the university, all staked a claim on resources meant to drive the academic project and succeeded in ensuring that the resources of the various institutions were diverted for the benefit of individuals and organised groups. This benefit has come to be termed institutional “capture” in the parlance of South Africa to describe looting of state institutions because of poor governance.

For the university, the author deftly brings out how different groups, often acting in collusion, work to undermine the academic project and undermine structures, rules, and governance instruments. The abuse of power by different offices in the institutional leadership and governance structures such as Council, executive management and individual staff members and students all converged as destructive forces which led to chronic dysfunction. The author highlights how the abuse of power and resources at several universities cited as case studies throughout the book play out often without consequences for those responsible. As a result, a culture of impunity has embedded itself in and across systems which make it impossible to rehabilitate these institutions despite interventions (p. 36). The author highlights how poverty and inequality especially in rural areas have contributed to the wanton abuse of resources meant for the development of institutions and the academic project. One such example is how projects for infrastructure development were hijacked by “*tenderpreneurs*” who found their way into management and government structures of universities. Without adequate checks and balances, such acts of corruption were allowed to thrive and even became normalised over time (pp. 34- 44).

The author illustrates how corruption operated with evidence from, at least, ten universities across South Africa’s higher education landscape. All these institutions have been plagued by mismanagement, corruption scandals, and attrition of staff and leaders. What is especially troubling is the observation made by the author that some of these institutions were subjected to several interventions, including being placed under administration and trying to revamp their systems and restore functionality, only to descend back into the same practices of criminality and dysfunction.

He highlights how the diversion of resources from building credible academic institutions compounded the deprivation of learners and communities who should have benefitted from the universities which were plundered. The state funding agency NSFAS was not spared from the dysfunction (pp. 122 -135). An area the author mentions briefly but should have been a big part of this nexus of corruption is the issue of sexual harassment and violence (p. 153). Gender based violence (GBV) remains an enormous challenge across all social levels of South African society, and it would have been good to get more insights on how it played out in the universities in this case study. It is likely a dedicated study is needed to focus on GBV in institutional cultures across universities.

One cannot help but reflect in a subjective moment tinged with trauma how these systems thrive or are aided to thrive often at a high cost to those who try to take a principled stand against corruption or at the risk of fatal consequences. Reading through the text of those who were interviewed, the consequences of trying to stem corruption in South Africa's universities has been costly for those who tried to promote integrity. The loss of lives for whistle-blowers and investigators continues in respect to corruption cases in other state-owned institutions. The case cited above of the escapee murder and rape accused comes to mind and the question remains - how does the criminality escape law enforcement and punishment? The author draws attention to the macro level discourse of state fragility and "micropolitics of corruption" (p. 169) which have enabled the normalisation of corruption when he states that "when a critical mass of corrupt citizens become involved in corrupt activities, those irregular or criminal activities are viewed differently" (p. 170). Social media has been a useful barometer of the tolerance to corruption and criminality with some glorifying the man and woman accused of the jail-break scandal. This is unnerving when one considers the victims of the crimes of the pair and their accomplices.

A plus in the book is the observation that the functional universities, which are also the historically white, urban based and well-resourced universities, are not absolved from having elements of corrupt practice or dysfunction. The author underscores the point that these universities, which also tend to be high-performing in terms of academic excellence, are not without their fair share of problems. The difference in what makes these institutions functional is that they have well-developed and functional systems to ensure separation of powers between the governance, management, and administrative levels of the university. Further, there is a collective focus and prioritisation of the academic project including collective integrity which ensures institutional integrity (p. 196 – 208). While the arguments presented in defence of these institutions is persuasive, the continued challenges plaguing these university in addressing diversity and inclusion, inequality and the progression of Black academics and addressing gender inequalities suggest there are more complex issues that need further research in order to unpack some of the intersecting issues affecting academic justice in South African universities.

In trying to decipher the key messages from this book, the questions that stand out are "where do we go from here?" and "who takes the lead in restoring faith and trust in the academic project in South Africa's universities?" To widen the question, we can ask, "is there a future in the academic project in South Africa and the continent?" As highlighted at the start of this reflection, the loss of faith in state institutions to provide oversight and law enforcement to ensure the security of citizenry remains a challenge. South Africa is facing its darkest season with the breakdown of service delivery for basics such as electricity, water, and sanitation. Higher education seems like a luxury in the face of these urgent needs.

As the author notes, the “intensification of the relationship between politics and resources carries enormous institutional costs” (p. 239) as the political landscape becomes increasingly fragmented and as political actors clamour for authority at various levels. What role can the academy play in restoring the faith of ordinary citizenry in good governance when leaders use resources to capture constituencies? Academics are not often the best communicators and or influencers of policy decisions. That said, they can redirect their energies towards the revitalisation of the academic project to ensure that the next generation of intellectuals regain trust in the integrity of the academic project and recommit to scientific research, quality, and excellence.

For South Africa and the continent, where the contribution of research to development remains negligible, it is critical that scientific productivity remains a beacon of hope for the continent’s youthful population. The lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic and other disasters which continue to threaten livelihoods on the continent are compelling reasons why South Africa and the rest of the continent need integrity in institutions of higher learning. The message one can extract from the lived experience of the author is that those who dare to be courageous can speak truth to power in the hope that truth can triumph over “cultures of corruption” (p. 241).

However, fostering ethical leadership in universities and other institutions is still far from being realised. It is tempting to wallow in self-pity, to feed our collective self-loathing in the face of such evidence of our capacity. There is a more compelling need to, moreover, pursue institutional integrity and to create positivity and hope for the future. The ideals of the liberation project should continue to inspire Africa’s people to realise intellectual liberation and excellence. Professor Jansen notes this in reflecting on the crimes of colonialism and apartheid vis-à-vis institutional dysfunction and instability post-independence.

This book remains an admirable project because it was daring to document an unpleasant story which needed to be told. It is only a drop in the ocean in terms of what still needs to be told. Professor Jansen has done some justice to the topic, and by his own admission, more needs to be said on the university in South Africa. This is not the definitive narrative and most likely other traumatic stories will be told. From the comprehensive notes, references and appendices offered in this book, many more books need to be written on the academic project in South Africa and globally. The increased consciousness and documentation of multiple forms of injustice and abuse of power and resources both in South African and global universities where African diaspora are located and work suggests that the discourses of how the academic project functions will remain key and needs to inform the broader development agenda.

The subject of epistemic justice in respect to African studies is an example one can cite. Another example is the lack of promotion of Black academics to leadership positions in universities in the global north even where they are highly qualified. Current debates on Africa's positionality in an increasingly polarised world especially with intensified global scramble for resources must remain part of the academic project within African institutions especially universities. Knowledge informs decisions and the quest for knowledge societies and economies makes it imperative for African intellectuals and citizenry to take ownership of how African futures are being shaped at local and global levels. Beyond the fights for the small pie that is academic resources in South Africa, there is a bigger pie out there to fight for. Professor Jansen has several other book projects to follow up this topic to share his experience in, for example, international funding for research has contributed to or added to the problem of managing resources in universities in South Africa.

I hope that many of us will be challenged by this book to also write our own stories and share our experiences of the university in Africa to demystify the idea that the university is a hallowed space without politics and malice. Professor Jansen aptly notes that where there are resources, there will be a hand lurking to pillage unless institutions are fortified to resist such temptations. We should all take responsibility for this task as there is a real danger of the academic project being completely side-lined as other pressing needs such as security compete for funding and attention of leadership. It is not enough to assume relevance of the academic project or to assume the necessity of universities in Africa when other competing needs face decision makers and political leaders.

Overall, this book is not just about the university in Africa but resonates with all universities in the world established and emerging. How we contribute to changing practice to instil a culture of excellence and integrity will be worth pursuing as a noble and novel project for South African academics who have long lived the struggle towards freedom. Amandla! Uhuru!

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