

'Knowledge in the Blood?': Race, Consciousness and Understanding in South African Higher Education

Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past. By Jonathan Jansen. Pp. 336. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California. R250. ISBN 978-1-91989-520-8. 2009.

Jonathan Jansen's *Knowledge in the Blood* is one of the most important books on higher education to have come out of South Africa in recent times. It has been widely reviewed in the South African press and has, on the one hand, evoked fascination, admiration and respect, but on the other, ridicule and condemnation. Much of the latter is written in criticism of Jansen's initiatives around the notorious 'Reitz Four', the young men at the University of the Free State who made a video in which they are seen to humiliate five workers in their university residence. One reviewer even describes the book as a 'tear-jerker' (Claire Jackson, 'Tear-jerking Jansen' in *Mail and Guardian*, Friday October 30 to November 5, 2009, p. 21).

That *Knowledge in the Blood* has elicited the strong responses it has is hardly surprising. South Africa, Desmond Tutu's 'rainbow nation', stands at a pivotal point in her history. Has the country been able to transcend its heritage of intolerance and inequality? What are we to make of an apparent resurgence of suspicion amongst people of different background? Where are our young people going, at least in their heads? The book attempts to speak to this complexity, and South Africans are looking to it to help them think their way through it. For the purposes of a review, the question has to be asked whether the book manages to do what people seek from it? Does it speak to this complexity?

It certainly does so, and in ways which are both courageous and innovative. It is this very combination of courage and innovation which makes the work methodologically a challenging enterprise: Jansen is seeking to take his own personal experience and to use it as the empirical substrate upon which to develop a theory of pedagogy for conditions

of conflict such as our own. The work is, in these terms, simultaneously a memoir, a political analysis and also a scholarly text. Jansen is able to traverse all of these terrains, having honed his craft as a scholar of curriculum theory over two decades; having worked as a journalist; and most recently having operated in the public domain, where his own life story has served as the backcloth against which he has sought to engage South Africans of different backgrounds in the process of finding their common humanity. But, as he discovers in writing this book, holding all of these together at the same level of intensity in a single text is intellectually difficult.

This difficulty notwithstanding, *Knowledge in the Blood* is important for several reasons: it is a partial biography of an extraordinary South African; it tells the story of the contemporary encounter between South Africans of different experiences and histories; it engages with the challenge of learning in environments of social conflict; and, most critically, it seeks to make sense of the intensely puzzling phenomenon of the university as a site of human bigotry.

Knowledge in the Blood uses Jansen's experience as the first black dean of education at the University of Pretoria to describe his experiences of working in a historically Afrikaans-speaking university. The text itself is framed around his experience of entering the University of Pretoria and his first encounters with its liberal rector, Johan van Zyl, and its profoundly complex institutional climate, characterised by deference to authority. The text uses this framing to describe the contradictions that he encounters daily—incredible civility and an apparent sense of humaneness in one context; and its very opposite, inexplicable incivility and inhumanity, in the next. He begins the

book by telling the story of his arrival at *Tukkies* (the University of Pretoria); his committee-work and the role he was called upon to play in supporting the path opened up by the rector; his meetings with parents of young Afrikaans-speaking men and women who come to assure themselves that this new black dean will pass muster; his decision to make sense of the psychology of the Afrikaans white community and his consequent immersion in its world of patriarchy, faith and conservatism.

As a story-teller Jansen is powerful. The book is rich in the carefully narrated description of his weekly meetings with his students, black and white. It tells of his work in leading the make-over of his faculty and particularly that of bringing in new sophisticated young black scholars who present a view of people of colour that his older white colleagues are not only surprised by, but which actually intimidates them. He contextualises this story through an analysis of the sense of loss of control which white academics feel: 'but the empirical status of transition is not what impresses whites. It is the psychological state of being defeated that clouds any interpretation of what is happening in the country' (p. 29).

How do the 'defeated' then bring their children up? It is one of the central objectives of the book to explain this process. Jansen looks to the literature of the Holocaust to help him explain how environments of 'perpetrators' and 'victims' work as pedagogical spaces. In this he comes to look at intergenerational relationships, the role of the family, the church, sport and schools and so on. It is here that the paradox of 'knowledge in the blood' surfaces. Working his way through many theories and explanations he arrives at a crucial point in his analysis to argue that 'some knowledges are imbued with determining attributes of which individuals may not consciously be aware' (p. 181).

It is here, in his disquisition about knowledge, I want to argue, that the book demonstrates its most critical significance. For many in South Africa the book will provide a rich repertoire of stories of

the shortcomings of South Africa. Many will see in it the failure of the democratic project. They will find evidence there of the moral venality of South Africans. Others will find in it a confirmation of the miracle of the new South Africa and will see in Jansen the hope that Mandela, Tutu, Beyers Naude and many others represented. But for the academy, its significance has to be looked for in what it says about the university and what—somewhat clichédly now—some of us have been referring to as the *knowledge project*.

What is this knowledge project? What is the purpose of the institution which has come to be called *the university*? There is a great deal of debate surrounding the question of the purpose of the university. I want to argue here that the university is the pre-eminent inheritor of the extraordinary contribution which the enlightenment makes to modern civilisation. At the heart of the enlightenment, which fed into cultural, religious and social discourse in Europe during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, lay the idea of using knowledge to widen the boundaries of

human inclusion, to expand the range of those for whom the label 'human' would come to apply. In the modern era it is to the intellectuals and their universities that this burden is effectively entrusted. But what does the South African expression of this development—the University of the Free State, for example, but by no means alone—do with this mission entrusted to it by history? Effectively, it chooses to turn its face away from this almost sacred mandate and, instead, finds the *knowledges* for how it ought to present and bear itself not in the insight of scholarship—wonderful work which in the last 20 years has decisively shown, for example, in fields such as genetics and sociology the nonsense of racial biology—but in the grip of *popular culture*, that which is unable to see beyond the notion of 'race is in the blood'.

It, tragically, presents itself as a purveyor of the ideology that Jansen describes above—'knowledges of which they are not aware' but ought to be because of the responsibility placed upon them. The academy, as a result, finds itself in a state of deep difficulty. In choosing

not to, or more generously not being able to, describe the social exclusion—particularly that of race—which is its purpose to uncover, never mind explain, it appears, instead, to languish in a trough of deep hypnotism and has come to be a parody of the very situation it is required to describe. Its gestures in relation to this exclusion have been deferential, submissive and at virtually every turn profoundly unreflective. At the very moment when the formal procedures of epistemology in modern knowledge breakthroughs have become available for the purpose of deconstructing reality, it has submitted instead to its wiles and seductions. It is here that Jonathan Jansen points us in the right direction and forces the question on to the table of *whither* the university. For this reason alone, *Knowledge in the Blood* is a deeply important intervention in higher education in South Africa.

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