

# Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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## South Africa and the Czech Republic face similar challenges

In the last decade attempts by both South Africa and Central European countries to rebuild more equitable societies have touched the imagination of the world. **Liz Thompson** writes about the growing relationship between South Africa and the Czech Republic.

After the demise of apartheid in South Africa, the South African academic, formerly a leper in the worldwide community of scholars, was welcomed back to full participation on the international stage. In the subsequent period I was invited to spend a short sabbatical in the Czech Republic, where the support of the National Research Foundation encouraged the establishment of several research projects in the Central European setting. Today I would feel uncomfortable if I were to continue to teach in the traditional model of many departments in South Africa. Somehow the cultural and political impact of the work abroad catapulted me into becoming involved in human rights activities, some organised, for example, to pressurise the Czech government for institutional reform for the education of the Romani (gypsy). This made me see the world, and certainly the South African landscape, through a different lens.

The rapid changes brought about by the democratisation process, with the eradication of the aegis of communism in the Czech Republic, and the dislodging of the destructive force of apartheid in South Africa, have created remarkably similar historical patterning. Primarily, the two societies have comparable pasts: Consider the rule of the Communist and National Party governments, which unquestionably imposed certain immutable conditions on the lives of several generations. Whole societies were divided into bipolar oppositions between 'us' and 'them'. Yet when exploitation met an abrupt end during the last decade, the stories of the poor in Prague and Umlazi were not the euphoric narratives that political leaders create about momentous national transformations. For the ideals of democracy have not significantly entered the lives of marginalised communities in both societies. Here, I want to look at my students, but specifically the women, that I teach at the University of Zululand's Durban-Umlazi campus in South Africa and the Romani of Central Europe. Empowerment does not seem to have touched the lives of either of these minority groups. Indeed, each community suffers extreme discrimination. The chance of individuals rising above the prejudices of the surrounding societies is virtually impossible if race and gender are allowed to be the forces that shape and control the environment.

Tracing the changes occurring in the Czech Republic and South Africa is intriguing. Using comparative frameworks encourages the development of new paradigms relating to

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culture and invigorates new debates about the linkage of the South/North axes.

For many years both societies were cut off from participating in the West, to some extent isolated, secluded and strangely unknown. For centuries the depiction of an exotic 'other' was dominant. In reality, South Africa and the Czech Republic are regions of civilization as strongly defined as the West. The Greater Moravian Empire, the ancestor to Czechoslovakia, was established in approximately AD 800. African civilization has almost timeless kingdoms in the sophisticated cultures of the San and the Khoi. But while the societies have survived and retained their identities, the national borders have shifted with the inconstancy of a checkerboard puzzle arranged by a careless player. Partly on account of their position on the trade routes and the quest for dominance among the superpowers of the world, the nations of Central Europe and South Africa have perennially been subject to invasion, colonisation, great-power bargaining and sheer conquest.

But when transformation to the new order evolved people did not automatically internalise the values of democracy and freedom. In both the vistas of South Africa and certainly Europe itself, radical discrimination has been extreme against specific racial and gender groups in the past and regrettably also in the present. The majority of women in Southern Africa have not experienced change after the introduction of democratic ideals, and the treatment of the Romani in post communist societies in Europe has been extreme in their exclusions from the institutions of power.

In the same way as the legacy of apartheid education denied the existence of black society, past policies in Europe aimed at solving the 'Gypsy problem' have eradicated the identity of the Roma. Both in South Africa and in the Czech Republic there is the urgent need to ensure the basic human right to equal education for all. The Romani have to write an entry exam for school at the age of six. As most families speak a Roma dialect, the children, in most cases, are classified as retarded and are deprived of access to ordinary state schools. In South Africa, *The President's Education Initiative Research Project* suggests that good ideas are trapped in a system that fails to work properly, compromising quality on a large scale. Schools still struggle to admit all eligible pupils, fail to retain the majority beyond secondary level and the offer good to abysmal education.

The buzz of profitable business fills the streets of the Czech Republic, as 'pure' capitalism seems to take over. In the main streets of Prague, the large department stores, Marks and Spencer and Tesco, offer employment and training to the educated elite. I saw no Romani in full-time employment in the main centres. But I spoke to the few remarkable Romani students, who against all odds had achieved university entrance. Clearly access to university remains an extremely arduous effort for the Roma in the new democratic Czech society.

There still exists in South Africa the vital need to confront the brute force of discrimination and prejudice. Czech society can learn from the South African experiences, particularly from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Active intervention to make attempts to deal with the corrosion of human dignity was, perhaps, the only way to bring about active reconciliation. The severe mental and physical damage to human beings could not heal without a purposeful effort. Nevertheless, deep suspicion continues to persist in South Africa and the effort to instill the new values of the post-apartheid society is a responsibility for teachers and practitioners to address in

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theory as well as in immediate action.

At a conference titled *Respect Tolerance and Human Rights* held in Prague in January 2000, a South African plenary session was almost disrupted when a participant refused to accept the ideals adopted by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. These ideals were that the gross contravention of human dignity by the apartheid state and certain individuals needed exposure in order to heal the deep wounds and that forgiveness was the most appropriate way to 'move on' and ensure progress in South Africa. The participant argued that forgiveness was too soft and justice was equivalent to harsh punishment. The issue, I think, hit some raw nerves for Central European academics as little has been done, as yet, to redress the political crimes of the past in the Czech Republic. Extraordinary political pressure rendered many professionals powerless. There remains an ominous silence about the human rights violations of the previous regime. Consequently, I believe that the two societies, South Africa and the Czech Republic, may engage in worthwhile conversation that can be of mutual benefit.

Of course, the past is still alive in South Africa and Central Europe. Almost simultaneously, South Africans shrank in horror with the showing on national and international television of video footage of police 'training' sessions with dogs. One dog in particular, called 'Jakals' tore an illegal African immigrant to pieces. A policeman involved spoke, in his court appearance, about a few "punctures". While at almost the same instance, scenes of resistance to the global movements in the Czech Republic during the meeting of the World Bank in Prague last year, seemed to mirror the images of the police brutality in South Africa. Brutish young Czech policemen were seen kicking and beating up protestors and innocent by-standers. It is interesting to deliberate the role of the Czech government in the acceptance of the continual violence, demonstrated by the police, which raged for several days. There was no declaration from the government to dissociate itself from police action.

So in the debris of the Cold War and post apartheid conditions, is there anything we can salvage? I suggest there are definite programmes educators and NGOs can adopt in teaching and in practical action. As educators we need to devise alternative curriculums for our students that move outwards into global co-operative ventures, as prevailing projects do not address the pitfalls of the systems. Instead of treading the precarious path towards reform on our own, we can share with others involved in the process elsewhere.

Educational projects that have been undertaken by South Africans in the Czech Republic in the past two years include the introduction of isiZulu to Palacky University in Olomouc, where the acquisition of a South African indigenous language is linked to specific career interests of Eastern European doctors. The largest training hospital for medical students in Eastern Europe is situated at Palacky University and graduates who wish to seek employment in KwaZulu-Natal perceive the Zulu credit as an enhancement to an application. Charles University in Prague welcomes additional African languages in their Department of African Studies and the Netherlands Department at Palacky University seeks to promote Southern African languages as an extension of a cultural programme to preserve minority cultures.

So where should change actually begin?

Fundamentally, an emphasis on human rights and social justice is the central touchstone

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in the linkage between the two countries. As educators we need to find ways to incorporate values of equity, tolerance, multi-lingualism, openness, accountability and honour in the nitty-gritty of every day situations of teaching various disciplines. Current core course structures at universities are too middle class to be attuned to our history and the liberal discourses about gender and race are not sufficiently involved in strategic action.

I suggest modifications may come out of developing dialogues with other societies and educators should be alert to issues that are paramount to the student body, and not some configuration of the Western learner. The trip to another society, which did not hold the trappings of the advantages of Western democracy, made me see new directions. Nevertheless, one should be tentative about making explicit statements for other teachers because the student body profiles in South Africa are radically different, even within one region such as KwaZulu Natal.

I have introduced the traditional stories of the society I teach to the curriculum since my entry into the discourses about societies marginalised by the power blocs of Europe and the United States. Stories are used to develop an awareness of various perspectives and not just to grasp the underpinnings of local situations. In working on the structures of mythological representation, students begin to see their own prejudices.

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