

The Unspeakable in Pursuit of the Unbeatable: The Press, UCT and the O'Brien Affair

Eve Bertelsen

Prefatory Note:

"The Chickens of O'Brien"

This paper was written in October 1986 as an immediate response to events at UCT and in the local media, and apart from a brief reference to changes in the political climate since February 1990, I have made no attempt to update it. It is offered without apologies as a period document which captures some of the atmosphere of its time, and proceeds in a way which seemed to me appropriate then, but would now probably require elaboration. "The O'Brien Affair" has since found its niche in local folklore, and is periodically invoked as an object lesson whenever issues of free speech, university tradition or campus discipline become critical. The most recent example was a disruptive week-long strike by UCT campus workers, which, ironically, occurred almost five years later to the day. This was cast in an identical mould by both the university administration and the media. "Chaos at UCT", "Fiery Barricades Block Campus" and (the Dean of Arts' obliging contribution) "Professor on Fire!" were closely followed as running headlines by relieved "UCT Backlash" stories. For a major difference this time was the almost universal disapproval by students and academic staff of the tactics employed by the union and a small group of students, given the considerably altered circumstances of the country in 1991.

The O'Brien incident was nonetheless predictably recalled in

editorials and leading articles, and this latest "disgraceful display of hooliganism" equated with that earlier episode in which the University "sacrificed a hallowed tradition of free speech to the dictates of a mob" (*Cape Times*, 11 October 1991). Professor David Welsh (of whom more below) asked whether the "violence, intimidation and mindless thuggery of the mobs" might not be "chickens of the Conor Cruise O'Brien episode of 1986 coming home to roost?" (*Cape Times*, 7 October 1991). A thoughtful diagnosis of the present impasse remains to be written, but it seems worth noting that, as in the earlier case, both newspaper editors and academic commentators have exhibited an uncanny reluctance to contextualise such events in the historical moment and the political culture at large, falling back, rather, on easy and timeless absolutes of "civilised" versus "savage" behaviour.

On 7 October 1986 a group of students at the University of Cape Town protested against the presence on campus of a visiting lecturer. The event was experienced as a crisis of unusual gravity by both the press and the University itself. In the local newspapers it became a running story for a full fortnight. At UCT over the same period it monopolised campus debate and generated numerous meetings, motions, petitions and pamphlets in an atmosphere of considerable acrimony. There was a high level of interaction between the University and the press. This paper offers a reading of the event and this response to it, conceptualising the process as a struggle in discourse, a contest to determine the meaning of the event. I read it as symptomatic of both the wider popular rebellion of the period 1985-86,¹ and more particularly as an instance of hegemonic crisis within South African 'liberal' culture. My mode of reading is drawn from Marxist cultural studies, and my chief explanatory ideas are the Gramscian notions of hegemony and crisis of hegemony.²

The university and the press are here identified as sites of hegemonic struggle, inter-involved in a cultural crisis at a particular moment of South African history. I make no claim to exhaustive analysis. This is simply offered as one possible intervention.

Hegemony

It seems redundant to say that the South African state at the best of times, *rules* rather than *leads*. Over the past forty years, even in its ideological agencies, the tendency has been toward authority rather than persuasion. For example, the various social classes/racial groups

are subjected in their schools respectively (the names of the three separate Departments of Education) to Education (whites), Culture ('coloureds') and Training (blacks). On a national level the thresholds of permissible behaviour have been (until February of 1990, with the unbanning of black political movements) coercively fixed and policed, with political activity of a 'normal' kind being grouped together with criminal transgression. This is before we even begin to address the law, prisons or the absence of a universal franchise.

Within this system of enforced obedience to the state and its economic imperatives it may seem out of place to invoke the concept of hegemony understood as permanently organised consent. However, in this situation no less than in any other, dominant ideologies are not simply imposed as complete 'things' upon subordinate groups. Because of Apartheid's dual strategy of political oppression and economic exploitation, the task of an active and ongoing reaching into and structuring the daily culture and experience of people becomes a task of critical importance. Periods of relative 'normality' depend here, as elsewhere, on the success or failure of ruling interests to neutralise potential antagonisms: to produce, via discourse, social knowledge which will mark the limits of acceptable thought and action; to translate inequalities into terms which will ensure, if not widespread consent, then at least a modicum of compliance. Thus powerlessness and unequal distribution of material and cultural advantages are repetitively represented as natural or personal divisions between individuals or groups, and especially racial groups. During 1985-6 even this tenuous hegemony was in crisis. Such consensual terms of reference as did exist within the education system(s), the press and the university were challenged by the campaign of the United Democratic Front (UDF) to "make the country ungovernable".

A crisis of hegemony marks a profound rupture in the political and economic life of a society, an accumulation of contradictions. If in moments of hegemony everything works spontaneously so as to sustain and enforce a particular form of class domination while rendering the basis of that social authority invisible through the mechanisms of the production of consent, the moments when the equilibrium of consent is disturbed ... are moments when the whole basis of political leadership and cultural authority becomes exposed and contested.

(Hall et al, 1982, p. 217. My emphasis).

I am not competent to take on a discussion of the overall distribution of power within the South African social formation, and am aware that hegemony in the pure Gramscian sense can hardly be said to have ever existed within the racial-capitalist state. My task here is more modest. I wish to consider the power relations obtaining in that fraction of the system which is the locus of liberal English culture: that island of liberal ideology of which the University of Cape Town and the liberal English press form a part. How then, within the system, does minority liberal culture operate? With its considerable stake in the economy it is obliged, in spite of its tenacious commitment at a high level of abstraction to First World freedoms ('free markets', 'individual freedoms', 'free elections'), to negotiate a share in the power bloc. At the same time, within the cultural space that is secured through such an alliance, this fragment produces, through the institutions it controls, an ideology which serves to obscure these interests. In the period in question liberal culture was experiencing a serious crisis, which is still in process. One aspect of this crisis may be seen in the plethora of conflicting scenarios for reform which will restore peace without threatening economic interests. These are invariably accompanied by rhetorical fulminations at the Government's oppression of the masses coupled with a remarkable silence regarding their economic exploitation. Whereas up to a point the heterogeneity of this ensemble and its internal disagreements and debates has served to validate its claims to the encouragement of free discussion, it is quite clear at present that Gramsci's "accumulation of contradictions" threatens to rupture its limited sphere of consensus. Profound polarisation in the nation at large has exposed this innately unstable alliance to pressures of a radical kind, to contradictions which it can no longer recuperate. English liberal capital's political wing, in its protean guise over the past decade as United Party, Progressive Party, and more recently, the Democratic Party, can no longer sustain the myth that it represents a viable opposition to the present system. Since the 1989 election this function in Parliament has been taken over by the right-wing, and at the time this piece was written the DP was negotiating an election pact with the ruling National Party. Assaults from its erstwhile allies in the Western world (economic sanctions, unacceptable demands for political and economic redistribution); the realignment of the non-racial intelligentsia; the political mobilisation of the working class against reformist strategies, and the strength of the powerful black trade union movement, had

jointly worked to expose and contest the moral and cultural bases of liberal politics.

The Cape Times and the University of Cape Town appear to share equally in this crisis. They operate as institutions with a common discourse and common economic interests. By and large they function to support and service the interests of capital and of a class society. At the same time they have been engaged in an attempt to establish channels of communication with the ascendant political forces.

During 1985-6 they conducted a virtual shuttle service to consult with the ANC in Lusaka. There is considerable heartsearching as to how institutional procedures might be adapted so as to redress 'disadvantage' and appear more acceptable within a changing political climate. What is noticeably absent from this concern, though, is any sense that inequalities are generated by the underlying economic relations, and that a minimum prerequisite for any real change would involve not simply a rearrangement of perceptions via 'reform', but a major *paradigmatic* shift - a complete and radical reassessment of their value system, their professional practices and their underpinning structures *qua* institutions. This is the "unthinkable" of my title. For to think in this way would require strenuous self-criticism, an interrogation of how one's culture itself is constructed in all its differences, selections and exclusions. To allow the system, with all its interest and compromise to *reappear* is for our fearless seekers after truth, one task too dire to contemplate.

Taking both journalism and university teaching as hegemonic practices in which signs are referred via codes to 'maps of meaning' which have naturalised assumptions inscribed into them, I will read the signification of the "O'Brien Affair" in the press and on campus as an instance of hegemony-in-crisis. I will identify some of the signifying procedures - signs, codes, discourses - and trace their complicity with the consensual view. In conclusion I will suggest an alternative or oppositional reading of the event.

Event into story

Firstly, in order to be communicated, the 'raw event' must pass under the sign of discourse, be given narrative form, become a story. The formal sub-rules of journalism will produce the event as a message, giving it its necessary 'form of appearance'.³ From the numberless events of 7 October 1986 this event is selected as newsworthy by the application of 'newsvalues' interacting with local agendas and

concerns.⁴ Here I will tabulate for brevity.

- The protest took place in a single evening, fitting the production schedules of the local papers. Subsequent activities fulfilled this criterion as well.
- By local (white) standards the event qualified as sufficiently dramatic to warrant treatment and to justify follow-up reportage as a 'running story' over the period of a fortnight.
- In news terms it presented a clear profile: an insult to a foreign visitor of status and violation of a sacred space. As we shall see, any ambiguities were further reduced and anchored by its narrative construction.
- It was an event associated with central, official culture and a perceived threat to it. Proximity is also relevant here: it impinges on the 'home' culture both in national terms (black versus white) and local (liberal) traditions.
- The desire for the event by the media is of particular interest. As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that such an event has been anticipated, even prophesied, for some time both by UCT and the press, drawing in associated issues: maintenance of standards in the face of the increasing black enrollment; differing cultural norms; the cultural boycott etc.
- The unpredictability or rarity of the event figures. While this may seem to contradict (4) and (5) above, it is within the meaningful and the consonant that the unexpected is to be found: the 'newness' of the (largely black) student protest is produced within the frames and norms of local culture.
- The story has continuity. Once having passed the threshold (2), it continues in various forms as is thus covered for some time.
- In terms of the structured balance of the papers, their 'news-slots', this is a 'hard news' event, involving violence, and a precise event deemed to be 'factual'. In local conditions, due to stringent Emergency restrictions on the press, stories of this type have been hard to come by. It thus serves to flesh out the range of stories in both papers, as well as satisfying a certain local 'news-hunger'. (That morning's *Times* headline had read "Sanctions Details in Five Days" - a strong rival to "Dog Bites Man"!).
- The event involves, by local standards, an 'elite' person and institution. Boycott-buster O'Brien is "an international scholar and diplomat of status", and the University, which styles itself

as "the Oxford of Africa", has considerable local standing with the English press and populace. "O'Brien" and "UCT" dominate the headlines.

- The event is represented as the action of individuals (up to a point - see below). The students are seen as an *ad hoc* grouping of anarchic individuals, and O'Brien as a free agent, untied to any political strategy.
- Bad news is good news. As an event unexpected (6), unambiguous (3), that happened quickly (1), consonant with general expectations as to the state of the country (5), and passing the threshold of the dramatic (2), the negativity of the protest is high. I have tried to stress the way in which this selective paradigm of 'newsvalues' inherited from the Western media articulates in complicity here with local discourses of consent, their own peculiar certainties, differences and fears. The entire procedure of encoding is premised on structured deviations from a set of local norms: at their most reductive, what is white, European, bourgeois and conventional - in short - 'civilised behaviour'. In scrutinising the construction of the story, I shall concentrate on the two initial reports in *The Cape Times*, which offer a model for the routine procedures adopted in virtually every report on the issue. My texts are the front pages of this paper of 8 and 9 October 1986.

Day 1

The front page of 8 October gives the story a major headline. The frequency is slightly out here - the page had been laid out before the UCT story came in. But it gets equal treatment with a mine disaster and the threat of reprisals against Mozambique. (The next day it is the lead story. The picture is on page 3, but will also move to the front, in colour.)

Narration: The narration is routine. The story is structured around four narrative 'moments', in the process of which the event is framed, focussed, realised and closed.⁵ In the process the material is worked through and a signification achieved in which a unitary meaning is constructed for the event and any ambiguity contained or suppressed.

The headline (in the absence of a photo) supplies the primary framing: O'Brien's UCT talk disrupted. The elements are named and the basic oppositions established. O'Brien is a 'known', as is UCT. A

famous speaker has been silenced in a site respected for speaking-freedom. On reading the whole story, we find that little is added to this initial assertion. The framing throughout repeatedly identifies these referents: the speaker, the University and those who refuse or violate speech.

The moment of focusing tells us what the event is 'about'. It is about freedom of speech, bad manners and contempt for freedom. The overall disposition of the narrative makes this clear in its use of key words: "broke through", "disrupted", "demanded", "shouted down", "intolerance", "contempt", "disrepute" etc. *versus* "lecture", "meeting", "decided", "communication", "intellectual communication", "principles", "academic freedom", "the good name of UCT".

The topic is made "real" by accessing the voices of witnesses who offer an interpretation of the event or provide "actuality" in the form of a graphic account. While the reporter is constrained by the professional code to give an "objective", if compelling, account, s/he is free to choose those who will offer comment. In this case there is a complete equivalence between the two. (In cases where oppositional views are admitted, the hegemonic narrative, anyway, recuperates such views.) In this instance we are offered glosses by:

- O'Brien himself: he is given 10 of the total 55 lines, and is accorded direct speech. He tells us "what universities are about"; defends "intellectual communication", and recommends that the University "make a stand" since "there is no place for such people on a university campus";
- the SRC president: she is vouchsafed 5 lines of indirect speech in which she supports the Principal's decision to permit the protest;
- the Moderate Students Movement (conservative, pro-government), by contrast gets 13 lines, and makes a full statement regarding "the intolerance of left-wing students" (*sic*), "disregard", "contempt", "disrepute", and (surprise) "academic freedom" and "freedom of speech".

It would be tedious to pursue further the cohesiveness of this account. At every level of the narrative the foregone conclusions of the framing headline are systematically reinforced. So that what purports to be a piece of "hard news" turns out on closer inspection to be closed even before it begins. However, let us dignify the story by summarising its strategies: a multivocal event has been produced as a heavily redundant univocal item by the constraints of headline, narrative

structuring, semantic control and supportive voices. This is the moment of ideological closure.

Since all discourse is constructed in differences, it is instructive to look at what is *not* represented, what has been altogether excluded from the account. The most glaring omission is the absence of the speech of the second major party to the dispute, namely the protesting students themselves. This is apparently the name of the game in free speech. The net effect of this omission, taken with the procedures outlined above, is to suggest that this group does not *have* a point of view, that such a position simply does not *exist*. In other words, there can be no reason, motive or justification for such behaviour (apart, that is, from the one that has been repetitively encoded, namely that it constitutes a naked act of barbarism). It is, in short, unspeakable.

The photo on page 3 deserves a passing comment. Spatially divided into two parts, it depicts O'Brien (RHS) at the podium delivering his lecture, while on the left security guards, spreadeagled across the door, contain the incoming students.



A University of Cape Town security guard, his shirt ripped open in tussles with students, struggles in vain to stop them invading a lecture hall last night where Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien (seen below at right) was delivering a lecture.

Picture: Guy Tillim

The picture is unduly ambivalent for a newsphoto, which would normally be constructed so as unequivocally to convey its message (angle of shot, visual codes anchored in much the same way as the report). In this case we see several adult, white, uniformed men restraining what appears to be (left background) a couple a fairly innocuous black students. But all is not lost (for the message or our hypothesis), for we are supplied with a hefty caption which fixes all of these unstable elements and urges us to a preferred reading: "a UCT security guard his shirt ripped open in tussles with students ... struggles in vain to stop them invading a lecture ... O'Brien (seen below right) ... etc."

Day 2

By the time *The Cape Times* of 9 October appears the shit has hit the fan. And this is where our task becomes more interesting. For it becomes apparent that the Cape Town press are not going to rely on their normal routines in this event. Ideological closure notwithstanding, the editors themselves are going to intervene, firing volley after volley of didactic prose at their readers. The headlines do not let up, but these are now reinforced by explicit position statements, as the papers' regular contributors (local figures whom we have been assured speak from positions of scholarship and objectivity) are rapidly promoted from the ranks and move into full exposure with polemics on the centre page spread. I stress the word exposure, for the way I read this development is not so much a reaction to the crisis 'out there', but an index of another crisis, a crisis of confidence and leadership in the liberal hegemony itself. As Stuart Hall phrases it: the contradictions of the South African liberal position are here precipitated. And so the press shifts from a mere *translation* of reality into its own terms, into a more coercive mode. The continuum may be briefly summarised as follows. For the press: from almost subliminal rearranging of perceptions to implicit position-taking to didactic editorialising. For the University: from reading/teaching to examining to rebuking to punishing (rustication). In either case, crisis allows the system itself to reappear.

In the *Times* of 9 October and over the succeeding two weeks, we are treated to saturation coverage, not only of the precipitating event itself, but also dissections of the Academic Boycott; the Cultural Boycott; the Anti-Apartheid Movement; insidious groups of 'left-wing' students and academics; AZASO; NUSAS; the SRC the UDF and the

ANC - it is open season on the acronyms, which are all characterised as inimical to civilised society, academic freedom and freedom of speech. What is happening is a symbolic transaction. Pervasive and generalised fears about black 'unrest', the increasing numbers of blacks at UCT, threats to 'civilised standards' etc., which cannot, within liberal discourse, be signified and confronted head-on as a racial problem, are all focussed on one symbolic incident, economically affording a relief of tension. How else does one explain the gross over-reaction to a fairly run-of-the-mill campus event?

But back to the *Times* of 9 October. A major headline extends the issue: "Boycott Row: O'Brien vows to stay at UCT". The hidden line-up emerges. O'Brien is not, as signified heretofore, simply a man of letters, a diplomat and a disinterested scholar. Rather, he is someone who has expressly come to South Africa as an act of *defiance*. In his own words "I deliberately broke the *alleged* boycott" (my emphasis). The language gains momentum: a "boycott", a "vow", he "throws down the gauntlet", he "challenges" the protesters to keep him away from UCT. (On the state media, both radio and TV he has already told interviewers in strong terms what he thinks of the Anti-Apartheid Movement: in Ireland it is dominated by Sinn Féin, who are a front for terrorists; he has debunked "so-called" Peoples' Education; he has identified "radical" forces within education as "sinister" etc.).

On this particular front page a colour photo of O'Brien is centered in the lead story and linked to a large flanking colour photo of the event of the previous night. This time the picture has been taken from behind the student lines and from a high angle. It presents a melee of heads, clenched fists and tangled arms. The caption summarises the event. Within the collage of the page O'Brien (white, adult, reasonable) gazes down disparagingly on the fracas (youthful, black and angry). The primary visual anchorage is strong. Two journalists have spent the day on campus, and to their credit, they do access the voice of one student protester (unnamed) as well as using a full statement from the SRC president. But the professional narrative holds these voices in check. There has been a second "storming" of a lecture by "wave after wave" of protesters "fist-fights", "battle", "fray", an "occupation" of the Political Studies Department (hosts to O'Brien) etc. The protesters (black and radical) call for the removal of a "provocative reactionary"; the SRC (white and radical) contextualises the matter and calls for a moratorium; the Principal promises an enquiry and possible action; O'Brien says he will certainly return. In

this case oppositional material is recuperated by the overall framing. O'Brien as VIP is given both first and last word on the subject, and is permitted to close its meaning.

The Running Story

Over a period of two weeks the story is kept alive by reporting of related events: UCT Council and Senate meetings and resolutions; petitions by staff (the 'Gang of 81' radical lecturers otherwise known as 'intellectual terrorists'); petitions and meetings of every student society etc.

The SRC and Ad Hoc Boycott Committee organising the protests are offered space in the *Times* to state their case (13 and 14 October), but both times this is derisively contradicted in a flanking editorial. O'Brien and Welsh (Professor of Politics and his host) are quoted ad lib in editorials and contribute numerous leader page articles. Welsh threatens to resign: "unless the University takes steps to prevent this kind of action, they should close down or cease calling themselves a university". And so on. Until 18 October, the paper's co-editor Tony Heard returns from abroad and changes the tone. He makes a plea for calm, admits to privilege, suggests that we deal with "root causes" and even ventures that the whole affair may turn out to be "a blessing in disguise".

I agree with Heard that there is a blessing in disguise somewhere here, but probably for different reasons. One of the things that it reveals to the media critic is the radical instability of the liberal alliance at this time, especially the crisis of confidence it is experiencing as it begins to lose to the ascendant forces its long-vaunted role as keeper of morality and freedom in South Africa. The sheer vehemence and bulk of editorialising on this particular event signals also a crisis in hegemonic practice within the press itself.

For example, on 10 October, under the heading "Intellectual Terrorists" the leader turns on all who do not share its point of view: the students are equated with "sjambokking policemen" and phrases like "intellectual terrorism", "brainwashing" and "malignant growths which must be eradicated" are the key. On the other hand, in the midst of this extraordinary battery of intolerance, it offers "the liberal tradition ... its concern for human values ... its broad tolerance of other points of view (*sic*) ... the real middle ground".

6 Cape Times, Thursday, October 9 1986

Cape Times Intellectual terrorism

THE violent disruption by a group of students of Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien's lecturing programme at the University of Cape Town raises the question whether such students belong at a university at all.

If they are opposed to the free exchange of ideas which is the essence of a university, should they not go elsewhere to pursue their "studies"? In some rather more congenial brain-washing institution, perhaps, dedicated to the advancement of totalitarian ideology?

If this suggestion seems somewhat crass, it is open to the students concerned to explain precisely why they wish to stop their ears to the words of a man whose distinction of character, background and experience equip him so admirably to offer South Africans some insights into areas of intractable ethnic conflict, as in Ireland, Israel and the then Congo.

All reasonable people, who maintain the scholarly practice of open-minded communication, will concede the students the right to state their case and to be heard. They are endeavouring to give effect to an academic boycott, it appears, which has been initiated by the anti-apartheid movement abroad. It is not only Dr O'Brien's presence which offends them, it seems. They are against any boycott-breaking visits by any academics from abroad, whoever they may be.

The students concerned, we do not doubt, are for the most part articulate young people of some intellectual grasp who uphold the highest ideals. Presumably they have thought through the purpose and consequences of their actions and so are able to offer an explanation of their disgraceful and unbecoming behaviour.

Unless this explanation is quickly forthcoming and proves to be compatible with the essential values and ideals of a university, it will be concluded that the students who favour the academic boycott are essentially anti-university in their philosophy. And the university will need to protect itself and its values by the application of appropriate disciplinary measures.

Our contributor, Robin Hallatt, recently noted on this page the view that any progress so far has been due to the scholars and scientists rather than the politicians and generals. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how any advance at all is possible in human affairs in the absence of a free flow of ideas. As Hallatt noted, scholarship is concerned with exploring the complex reality of the world. Only the free mind can conduct such explorations — not the mind that is censored, bullied or intimidated. Intellectual freedom is a moral necessity. To a university, it is the breath of life.

And its defence, surely, requires a preparedness to fight all those who seek to erode it. Should the University of Cape Town be held to ransom by a small group of bigoted zealots? Or have the students been grievously misunderstood?

● Let UCT hear what they have to say — and then act accordingly in the interests of freedom.

UCT's Response

The University's response to the event presents a profile almost identical to that of the local press: the bulk of its members demanded that the offenders be rusticated, with a minority adopting a more mollifying stance. There is no space here to discuss the meetings, motions and ephemeral literature generated by the event. Suffice it to say that the language and standards applied at UCT were identical to those used in the press. I shall conclude with a brief alternative interpretation of the event.

When an apparently minor event elicits an over-reaction of the type described above it soon becomes clear that one is witnessing what is sometimes described as a 'moral panic', a situation that I have preferred to read in Gramscian terms as "a crisis of hegemony". I am not about to suggest that one can identify a single 'true' meaning for an event which is clearly multivocal and susceptible of a number of explanations and as many narrative representations. I shall simply try to contextualise the "O'Brien Affair" within the current cultural crisis as it is experienced by South Africa's liberal universities.

Until very recently UCT, along with the other English-speaking South African universities, was successful in establishing and maintaining its moral leadership in the classic hegemonic manner. An educational institution is ideally placed to influence perceptions, to translate potential antagonisms and to incorporate threats into forms acceptable

to the dominant culture. This is the function of liberal education in South Africa, given that its paradigms, codes and approved discourses are all, as we are repeatedly reminded, European. Members of UCT were, until the mid-1980s, always drawn from the dominant group or the petit bourgeoisie, people who either fully shared its discourses in the first place, or whose interests were readily realigned. Thus UCT has always been able to depend on its ability to lead rather than rule. This renders rather tautologous the central idea of the 'liberal' institution: it is free to such members as will accept incorporation, since all of its structures and intellectual practices from top to bottom are distinctly class and culture-bound. Credos of academic excellence and the pursuit of truth and the assumption that all are equal before the examination ensure the maintenance of order in the lecture hall, and the traditional hierarchies of cultural authority are secured. What has occurred during the 1980s with the opening of the 'white' universities to blacks (who now number some 30% of UCT's intake), is that contradictions have accumulated in spite of these refined mechanisms for the production of consent (book knowledge; approved modes of argument; course content; examinations). These new students are mostly first generation literate, from working class homes. In addition to this class position, their political orientation, influenced by the radicalism of grass-roots black movements, is nationalist and socialist. This opposition of interests has created a symbolic crisis in the universities, an *impasse* which is difficult to describe in liberal terms. Lacking the conceptual framework with which to make sense of contradictions arising from the antagonistic interests of *classes*, UCT translates the tensions into the terms of its own discourse - into divisions between persons, albeit a collection of persons who are seen to be severely 'disadvantaged'. In all this the University persistently ignores the possibility that these students may be *consciously resisting the process of incorporation as such*, that they may perceive the world in a globally different way, and that their interests may not easily be aligned with the 'neutral' values of the university as institution.

This response is remarkably similar to that in other sites of liberal control. On the one hand there is a marked stepping up of public relations: glossy brochures are issued advertising UCT as a model "melting pot"; foreign money is solicited for black bursary schemes; support programmes are mounted to orientate blacks to the University's ways of seeing and doing. Mission Statements are issued

and special University Assemblies convened at which the liberal litany is ritually chanted by the participants. All of which appear to impress the new intake of students not a jot. They seem obstinately resistant to having their perceptions rearranged. How to account for this? It is clear from black student discourse that to these South Africans the apparatuses of the South African state are by no means 'taken for granted', shared or transparent, a case of simply 'the way things are'. As they make their daily trip from township to campus, they not only perceive but physically experience their society as unequal and exploitative. Their experience of Bantu Education has left them with few illusions about strategies of neutralisation and incorporation and the ways in which education services the economic system. Insulted by both economic and political structures, they finally manage to cross the difficult threshold to UCT only to find themselves up against yet another discourse of incorporation, and they must sink or swim.

Which brings us back to O'Brien. Given this immediate context (never mind the volatile situation in the country at large), a visitor arrives at UCT. He not only breaks a boycott mounted by (banned) organisations respected by this group, he does so militantly, throwing down the gauntlet on the day of his arrival. In the name of 'free speech' he uses platforms such as the suspect state media to denigrate the peoples' organisations and their allies abroad. In the press he is given column inches ad lib to pursue his cause. (Many black papers had been banned at this time, as were all of the major political organisations). Under the circumstances it would not be too difficult to construe this degree of calculated insensitivity as deliberate political incitement. At any rate, this is how his performance was read by the students.

It has not been my view in this paper that because the black students at UCT represent the interests of a major constituency in the country at large that their view should be preferred to O'Brien's. I have tried to think around this event as a cultural transaction, and to try to move towards an explanation of why a clear-cut piece of *political opposition* should have been so broadly signified within liberal culture as *violent and meaningless disorder*.⁶ It would appear that the press and the university have re-arranged perceptions to the furthest extent that their paradigm will allow.

The changes of February 1990 challenge us more than ever to be prepared to "think the unthinkable". To do that we will probably have to change the rules.

Notes and References

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6. A recent article which explores the philosophical and contextual dimensions of the concept of "freedom of speech" as deployed in the O'Brien affair is: John Higgins, *The Warrior Scholar Versus The Children of Mao: Conor Cruise O'Brien in South Africa*, in Bruce Robbins (ed.), **Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics and Academics**, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990.