

Productivity amid Chaos: A Memorable Semester in New York

Sean Jacobs

It is ironic that the events of September 11 made my stay at the Transregional Center for Democratic Studies so much more involved and stimulating than it would have been otherwise. When I resigned from my job as a political researcher at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, a think-tank in Cape Town, I had promised myself a break from direct political involvement. I wanted a detached semester. However, the events of that day made the weeks that followed anything but boring.

More directly, I found myself relaying the horrible events and their immediate effects to listeners of news radio in South Africa and, later, to readers of a Cape Town daily *The Argus*. I spoke at a New School-wide teach-in shortly after September 11, and together with Jessica Blatt (who I met at the Democracy & Diversity Institute in Cape Town), I also contributed opinion articles, on the American response to the attacks, to the South African national newsweekly *The Mail and Guardian*. As the crisis unfolded, I did not want to be anywhere else but New York.

The events of early September aside, my professional development benefited from my association with TCDS. I managed to get myself invited to serve on a panel, Indigenization and African Economies, at the annual meeting in November of the African Studies Association (ASA), the premier association in the United States for social scientists with a focus on the African continent. I was fortunate to share the panel with two senior U.S.-based African Studies scholars, Anne Pitcher (a political science professor at Colgate University who studies economic liberalization in Mozambique) and Ron Akimwade (an historian at the University of Wisconsin who studies Tanzania). In preparation for the ASA conference, I was invited by Professor Pitcher to Colgate University in Hamilton, New York (population 2,500), to speak about democracy and development in post-apartheid South Africa at the university's Center for Ethics and World Societies.

The event was initially billed as a debate between Neville Alexander, a well-known South African leftist based in Cape Town, and myself. Alexander, despite being less involved in organized politics, is still considered somewhat of an intellectual giant in my hometown. A contemporary of the Rivonia trialists, Alexander spent ten years on Robben Island for treason against the apartheid state. Upon his release, he was placed under house arrest, and in my early teenage years, I remember him delivering copies of a radical student magazine to my school. I therefore looked forward to the challenge and opportunity.

In the end, Alexander declined to make the trip to the United States as a political statement against the apparent reluctance of university administrations in the United States to openly condemn the indiscriminate U.S. bombing of Afghanistan (his framing), so I ended up speaking alone at the event. I also had a chance to speak to an undergraduate geography course about developments in Southern Africa.

Back at TCDS, my writing gained immensely from my time at the New School. I had always wanted to work with Ron Krabill, one of the smartest and most balanced young scholars I know, and was pleased that he was also named a TCDS Fellow for the same fall semester. Ron's work is on South Africa and we also share an interest in the media. Our research at TCDS complemented each other's - Ron worked on media under apartheid, and I looked at more recent media issues.

I had met Ron in Cape Town in January 2000 when he was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Natal in Durban and was also in Cape Town organizing the TCDS Democracy & Diversity Institute there. At that time, we plotted to begin an online journal on media

studies in the third world/global south. Our idea was that graduate students would manage and edit the magazine. The first issue will come out sometime in 2002 (the explanation for the long "production process" is that we had not foreseen

A Memorable Semester continued...

the transition our lives later went through). Incidentally, the editorial board includes many TCDS alumni, including Tanya Campbell, Gibson Boloka, and others.

This fall, Ron and I also co-authored a chapter on media coverage of poor communities in South Africa for a book on the post-apartheid public sphere. The book, to which a number of younger South Africanists have contributed, is edited by Steven Robins, a professor at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa.

The weekly group meeting that was built into the TCDS Fellowship program was an invaluable testing ground for my writing. Ron, Kalina Kamenova, Tuija Parikka (a New York University student), and I had a great working relationship.

In short, such a stimulating experience would not have been possible without the TCDS Fellowship that brought me to New York City, and I hope that TCDS will continue to develop its commitment to the African component of its 'transregional' mandate. I believe other young scholars in Africa could benefit as much from the program as I have. q

Sean Jacobs, a TCDS Fellow last fall, is completing his Ph.D. at Birkbeck College, London.