

THE FABRIC OF DISSENT:

Public intellectuals who have shaped SA's history



What is a public intellectual? And why do we need them in these 'wicked' times? Launched at the [Science Forum South Africa 2020](#), *The Fabric of Dissent: Public Intellectuals in South Africa* looks at the role of these thinkers in shaping the history of the country. This article by *Antoinette Oosthuizen* is based on the book launch and correspondence with two of the editors.

Globally, countries have consulted their best scientific experts to mitigate the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, many failed as infections continued to surge and economies buckled. This pandemic may be what social scientists call a 'wicked problem': one that involves a complex interplay between a catastrophic health threat and many other social, economic, environmental or political challenges.

Also, as massive vaccine rollouts commenced, it became a case of dog-eat-dog, with superpowers scrambling to secure vaccine stock first [and the most vulnerable in society being left behind](#). Getting through this crisis requires more than traditional academic or expert input, but also the attention of society's most critical minds, people who relate to society, who value equality and justice, and who are not afraid to speak truth to power – a current generation of public intellectuals.

Released in early 2021, *The Fabric of Dissent: Public Intellectuals in South*

Africa features 76 public intellectuals who helped change the course of South Africa's history during turbulent times. Edited by Vasu Reddy, Narnia Bohler-Muller, Gregory Houston, Maxi Schoeman and Heather Thuynsma, the book began its journey to publication long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, it is timely for sensitising the reader about the complexity of the world's wicked problems and the kind of thinkers who may help us find the answers.

What is a wicked problem?

Wicked problems involve complex interactions between social, health, economic, environmental or political challenges. Resolving them requires multidisciplinary interventions by academics, experts, those with practical experience on the ground, and importantly, input from those with a deep understanding of, and empathy with, the most vulnerable in society.


"One could claim that COVID-19 is one such wicked problem because it touches on virtually all aspects of our lives," says Reddy, dean of

the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria (UP). "It is a public-health problem with deep consequences for physical and social survival and the economy. In South Africa, this is worsened by existing poverty and inequality, which are wicked problems themselves. Along with the interconnected struggles around race, class and gender, these are global challenges," he says.

Who is a public intellectual?

Reddy describes public intellectuals as people who perform intellectual labour in the service of the public. They are deeply engaged, committed and enquiring thinkers who, through their ideas and work, leave deep imprints on society.

"They are dissatisfied with the status quo and are willing to take a stand on issues. Through their life work, public intellectuals expose social evils and wicked problems in the broader service of democracy and humanity ... by speaking out for liberty, equality and justice and prioritising criticism over pure solidarity.



The late singer and civil rights activist Miriam Makeba is one of the cultural public intellectuals featured in *The Fabric of Dissent*. Here, she performs at the launch of the International Year against Apartheid at UNESCO's Paris Headquarters on 21 March 1978. **Photo:** Dominique Roger, Wikimedia Commons

"In *The Fabric of Dissent*, we adopted an inclusive definition featuring public intellectuals from diverse communities, not only from universities but from all of society's institutions, creative cultures as well as participants in social, class and political struggles."

Speaking truth to power

The work of the Palestinian cultural critic and literary scholar, [Edward Said](#), informed much of the thinking for the book. "At the heart of Said's views is that the intellectual is someone whose place it is to publicly raise embarrassing questions, to confront dogma, and who cannot easily be corrupted by states and corporations ... someone whose *raison d'être* is to represent those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug," said Reddy at the [book launch](#) at the 2020 virtual Science Forum 2020 in December.

"We are in a moment where intellectual activity is at risk of being subsumed by populism, nationalism, fascism, fake news and, very often,

social media. The book values public activity, intellectual activity, and celebrates the role it has played in South Africa. We feature people who challenge convention and who have risked everything in that process. They have confronted the undemocratic, the inhumane that goes counter to truth, equality, kindness and dignity."

Four types of public intellectuals

Bohler-Muller, who heads the HSRC's Developmental, Capable and Ethical State research division, says the process to select the 76 intellectuals was robust. The editors and the contributors come from various disciplines and the book was also peer-reviewed.

The individuals are categorised in four parts – political, cultural, academic and organic public intellectuals – presented as short vignettes with an introduction to each section.

Among the 24 political public intellectuals featured are Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Walter

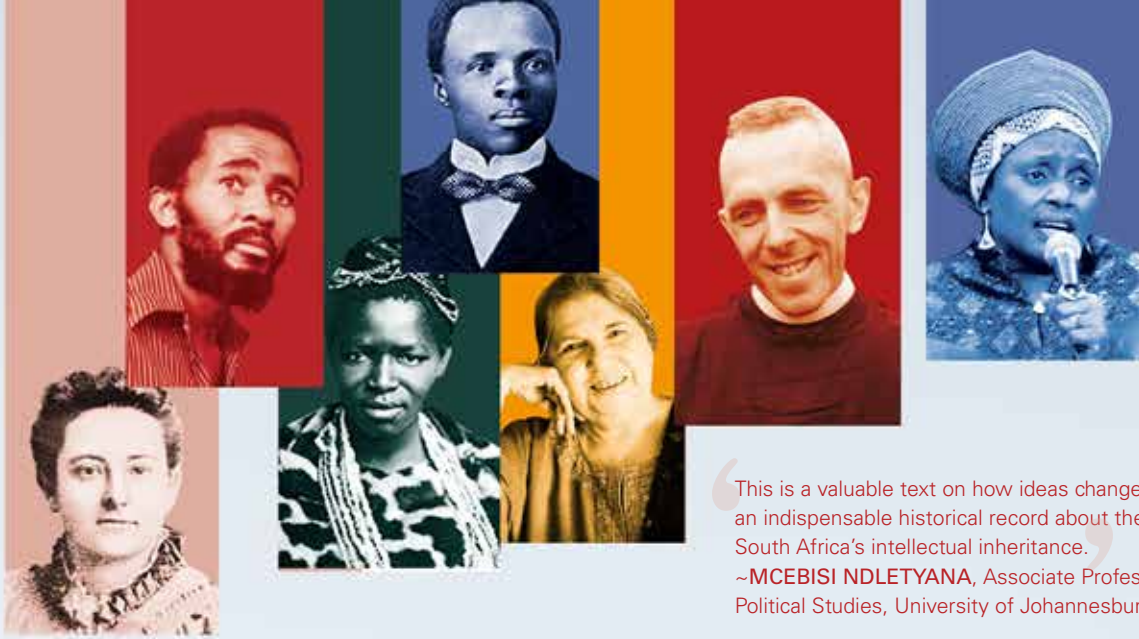
Sisulu, Beyers Naudé and Helen Suzman; people whose discovery and advocacy of significant political and social ideas have helped to change the course of history.

Cultural intellectuals are creative artists, including musicians, actors, satirists and stand-up comedians. The 21 people in this section include Nadine Gordimer, Miriam Makeba, Pieter-Dirk Uys and Trevor Noah.

"Academic intellectuals are usually but not always located in a university or science council," says Reddy. "These academics live for more than their academic pursuits. Their insights are about focused discovery and advocacy of significant ideas to intellectually reshape society."

Archie Mafeje, Fatima Meer, Jakes Gerwel and former HSRC CEO, Olive Shisana, are among the 14 academic intellectuals featured.

Solomon Plaatje, Elinor Sisulu and Zackie Achmat count among the 17 organic public intellectuals featured in the fourth part; people who have been instrumental in class struggles



This is a valuable text on how ideas change society, and an indispensable historical record about the richness of South Africa's intellectual inheritance.

~MCEBISI NDELETYANA, Associate Professor of Political Studies, University of Johannesburg

In the context of place and time, dissent comes through not as a negation but as a constructive foundation of society. *The Fabric of Dissent* is an excellent introduction to an understanding of the making of South African society.

~ROMILATHAPAR, Emeritus Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, author of *Voices of Dissent: An Essay* (2020)

and social movements and who focused on the marginalised and oppressed, says Reddy.

Are we hearing out our public intellectuals in the current crisis?

Public intellectuals enable us to see the world differently by exposing us to alternative ways of seeing and re-envisioning the world, says Reddy. "We should be listening to a range of voices, including those of intellectuals, global leaders, activists and ordinary people who are driven by a sense of obligation to social commitment and civil courage."

At the book launch, Professor William Gumede, an associate professor at the Wits School of Governance, warned against an "ideology" of intellectual conformity, be it to governing or opposition party lines, culture, religion, or fixed political and economic ideas. "Uncritical conformity undermines innovation, intellectual vibrancy and diversity ... and, in the long term, undermines development," he said.

Gumede also warned of the corruption of public discourse.

"Increasingly, it seems, to become a public intellectual in this country depends on who shouts the loudest,

who sounds the most radical and is the most extreme." Only those who are seen as like-minded are allowed to express their views in public.

"Honest public intellectuals who can bring new ideas, policy options and leadership, often censor themselves and withdraw from public engagement for fear of being denigrated. This undermines public debate."

Dr Sithembile Mbete from UP's Department of Political Sciences emphasised the importance of including more contemporary figures in future volumes, especially women who have helped to shape the concept of womanhood in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as individuals from the Fallist movement and younger members of political parties, such as the EFF, "to really test the boundaries" of what we define as a public intellectual.

Who should read this?

Reddy and Bohler-Muller believe the book will have a broad public appeal.

"It has relevance to policymakers, scholars, students, interest groups, activists, academic libraries and the general market both in South Africa and globally. It will appeal to readers who have a deep interest

in the formative ideas and legacies of prominent South African public intellectuals," says Reddy.

There have been books and volumes written about public intellectuals before in South Africa, but this is something different and pioneering, adds Bohler-Muller. "We present a 'broad church', which includes public intellectuals from a range of ideologies and perspectives."

"The narratives in the book are inspirational and [will] continue to change the way we perceive ourselves as South African and how we perceive [those] who we consider as other. These are narratives that endure over time and space."

The vignettes for a second volume are ready for peer review and it will cover about 82 public intellectuals, some of them more contemporary and younger. The working title is *Stitching together stories of dissent*.

Note: *The Fabric of Dissent: Public Intellectuals in South Africa* is a collaborative book project jointly conceived between UP's Faculty of Humanities and the HSRC's Developmental, Capable and Ethical State division. It is part of a multi-year project titled *The Public Intellectual in Times of Wicked Problems*, led by Reddy and funded by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation.

Order the book [here](#)