

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FUTURE AND THE FUTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY: Perspectives on the Future of Higher Education in South Africa

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It is not possible to be a scientist unless you believe that it is good to learn. It is not good to be a scientist, and it is not possible, unless you think that it is of the highest value to share your knowledge, to share it with anyone who is interested. It is not possible to be a scientist unless you believe that the knowledge of the world, and the power which this gives is a thing which is of intrinsic value to humanity, and that you are using it to help in the spread of knowledge and are willing to take the consequences.

- J Robert Oppenheimer: *On the Atomic Age and Scientific Responsibility*, 1945.

I have never been more acutely aware as I am now that the vision enshrined in our Constitution is no longer being pursued even by those to whom it is entrusted. The Constitution boldly states in the Preamble, for example, that as a nation we seek to “lay the foundation for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law.” The texture of the Constitution is the conviction that it was possible to create a new society out of the conflicts of the past, to mold a people of vision and creativity and to find a place for all under the South African Sun.

It is only most recently that I have been struck by the reality that that vision is no longer as compelling to South Africans as it once was. The Constitution no longer commands universal support, and much of its assertions are openly contested. It would seem to me that if the first principles are being contested to the extent that one sometimes senses then there is no fundamental legal and system of values on which South Africa is constructed. And then also there can be no common or shared value system that binds South Africans together as was once believed. The question then is unavoidable: do we have what it takes to build this new South Africa that is declared in the Constitution? What I have in mind is the idea that South

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Africa is a society of many nations, and cultures, languages and religions who regard South Africa as their common patriarchy. Is this true any longer?

No doubt you must be aware that I seek to address myself to the disjuncture between words and deeds. You know, much of the rhetoric in the public square today appears to be far too belligerent and divisive, race determinism and essentialism may have reached a point reminiscent of the worst of the apartheid days. We find ourselves moving towards expressions of identity politics that are becoming narrower and narrower, and claims are being advanced or framed on the basis of narrow race or ethnic interests. The idea of a “one, sovereign and democratic state” or a South African identity, with rights-bearing citizens strikes one as a dream and a vision that no longer interests many. I mean at the more sophisticated level where does one find that meta-narrative of an equal and non-racial society finding expression? Statements from government spokespersons or politicians are defined by interpretations of history and expressions of the future that are exclusionary in nature. Values like justice are also expressed in a manner that suggest that it is possible to pursue justice at the expense of justice for the other. Have we given up on the vision for a new South Africa? I ask.

To try to understand this I am reminded that we come from the era of the liberation movement. This means that at the centre of life was this ideal of freedom. Freedom is the being, act, and experience of being fully and truly human. It is never to be subordinated to systems and policies that undermine that which one was capable of becoming; to restrict one’s intelligence, or to be subjected to that which captures one’s mind and restricts one’s ways of thinking, hampers one’s ability to make free choices and to live a life as free as a bird. Freedom was to unlock the shackles of bondage, to inequality and power over others, or to organize society, law and politics, resources and wealth such that everyone participates freely in one’s well-being and in the structuring of society, in the pursuit of value and of the wealth of the land. Freedom is creativity and the imagination. Such a system of freedom was also designed to enhance human creativity, to free the mind to undertake intellectual pursuits and to own one’s life. To be free is to make one’s world. Freedom was the word that defined everything we dreamt of about South Africa. The struggle was always about freedom, and not

just civil rights! Freedom is more than just the right to vote, to speak or to express one's thoughts and opinions. Freedom is the wholeness of life.

In a recent award-winning study Michael Neocosmos² provides a definition of freedom as the activism of solidarity a distance from the state. In his view the state by its nature seeks to control human freedoms or to subsume such freedoms within itself as the expression of democracy. He states that "state political subjectivity privileges interests, social place and political identities, which the state itself has the function of managing to the benefit of the oligarchy in existing society and its given structure" (2016:542). "The state" he argues, "cannot liberate anyone" (2016:534). Just like Hegel, however, he takes the view that there can be no genuine freedom in narrow identity politics because "there is little space left for reason as such, for reason may at times demand an exceeding of the simply social and a fidelity to a universal humanity" (2016:534). Neocosmos' call is for an alternative politics, one that provides a critique of the traditional understandings of freedom, what he calls, "emancipatory politics... a politics at a distance from the state" (2016:540). This is a novel and discomfoting thought, and yet so true. The state and the political elite that controls it are in the business of protection of their own interests, and of its survival³.

German philosopher GWF Hegel⁴ understood that freedom was the organizing principle of his social philosophy. He termed freedom "the last hinge on which man turns." Hegel was well aware that freedom was realizable to the extent that it was anchored in universal ideals of life that "it proclaims in principle but imperfectly realizes in practice." This was taken up by WEB du Bois in relation to the America of the Reconstruction For du Bois the challenge was for African Americans freed from slavery to be truly free. To live their lives in freedom like they truly believed that they were free men and women, subordinated or enslaved to no one any longer. For him human freedom "would release the human spirit and set it free to dream and to sing."

² *Thinking Freedom in Africa: Towards a Theory of Emancipatory Politics*; 2016, Wits University Press, Johannesburg. Winner of the 2017 Frantz Fanon Outstanding Book Award.

³ See du Bois below.

⁴ Without a doubt, one is aware of Hegel racist social philosophy. Much, however, has been done to liberate Hegel from Hegel.

Hegel, it has been suggested, does not quite express the ideal of freedom as merely that which is in the nature of being human by some God-given fiat, in theological language, but rather that being human is to be free to seek, to style and practice being free. That is the point I wish to make in this address. Is freedom and uhuru simply defined by the change of guard, by the transfer of the instruments of power? Du Bois believed that freedom becomes the “domination of political life by the intelligent decision of free and self-sustaining men (sic).”

George Orwell’s haunting novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* talks about many ways in which in a totalitarian society is reduced to Newspeak and the credo of Double-Think where thought is regimented, and thought-police are ubiquitous, and where one can hold two contradictory thoughts and not blink an eyelid. Most disenchanting is the idea that “you do not grasp the beauty of the destruction of words... whose vocabulary gets smaller and smaller every year... and whose aim is to narrow the range of thought?” Nigerian novelist Ben Okri captures this idea of freedom in his writings, *Tales of Freedom* and *The Freedom Artist* on how freedom is threatened by post-truth culture where the power of ideas diminishes the contestations about truth. Okri’s is a call to justice and freedom⁵.

In a recent essay by Elvira Basevich: *WEB du Bois’s Radical Critique of Reconstruction (1865-1877): A Hegelian Approach to American Modernity* there is an assertion by both Hegel and du Bois that a reconstruction of society is only possible through intelligent rational ideas and a system of social ethics that underlies human action. The principle of “public reasoning qua citizens” is about teaching a nation to value its own ideals.” These ideals are the recognition of the fundamental principles of democracy applied in an inclusive manner to all of society, respecting the democratic will but always challenging that democratic will to live up to its own ideals, to learn to honour that which expresses a common nationhood, and order society and its resources in such a manner as to realise that which is believed in common. Civil belonging as sketched above suggests that this is realizable only by an appropriation of human agency. In other words when the human is truly free, then not only does one espouse certain

⁵ These themes were canvassed by Nigerian poet and novelist, Ben Okri when he delivered the Annual Steve Biko Lecture at the University of Cape Town titled, *Biko and the Tough Alchemy of Africa*, 22 August 2012. Okri refers to Biko as someone “with rigour and high standards of expectation of the human and African spirit... one who pursues an exalted vision regardless of consequences.” (www.sbf.org.za, downloaded 15 October 2018).

democratic and human ideals but that one also recognizes one's agency in the realization of those ideals. The highest human ideals and not so much about self-preservation but in understanding that one's survival depends on the recognition of the humanity of the other. No man is an island.

From this brief sketch of Basevich's essay I draw some lessons for us. The first is that the establishment of the ideals of freedom is dependent on public and ethical reasoning that claims the right to be a free human being, but that also in a world of non-rationality it demands to abide by a compass of rationality. Understanding that this freedom is not one that is granted by the charity of the other, but one that is fully realized and realizable by reason of human agency. Second, that this freedom brings with it some responsibility. It is the responsibility to live one's life as truly free, to take on the responsibility of being a free citizen, and this includes the responsibility to shape the values on which society bases its ideals. It is also the responsibility to become part of the future that sets the tone for an ethical citizenry. Finally, it is the creation of civic values and in word and deeds to be faithful to that which is a shared responsibility.

You will understand that these thoughts are prized out of my consciousness, out of a desire to try to understand much that I fail to understand. In much of what one reads in public one is bound to find not only a society divided by race-speak, but also by class, somewhat understandably. What is missing is a language of race-expression that is not only neutral but that it also defines live reality. In other words race has become a default explanatory tool. All social ills, violence against women and girl children, the collapse of the family, crime, poverty, even an under-performing economy are all explained in crude race terms. It does not help very much that so much of the crudity is found in the racially pejorative and demeaning language, and standards of value and social practices of equality so often remind one of the dark apartheid past we believed was behind us. Alarming, short of resort to law enforcement, South Africa does not seem to have a collective response to much of this breakdown.

Whereas Nelson Mandela walked out of prison and he realized that if he did not put behind him his life of struggle and imprisonment, he would never be a free man, many today fail to live the lives of freedmen and women. We have become a society of conflicts: about language

and culture, about service delivery, about race and racism, about gender. It will not be very hard from the Man from Mars to observe that this is a nation without cohesion, without a common ideal and without a shared identity. Twenty-five years since the end of apartheid, and twenty-two years since the Constitution was adopted, we are still without a common or shared character or identity as a nation. One senses that as a nation we need to discover an ethic of living like free people.

III

One therefore turns to Mouffe's Theory of Agonistic Politics in order to understand and to carve a way forward. In other words it is possible to derive a more positive understanding of societal conflict. Agonistic plurality recognizes that societies have a variety of contrasting and competing visions about solving societal problems. These conflicts are very real and at times very bitter. Unlike Hegel post-modern social theory now understands that the world we live in is not as rational as we might wish, neither is it orderly and without complexity. However, conflicts must have some guiding rules if they are to result in positive outcomes. Chaos theorists tell us that instead of order there is most likely to be unpredictability, fractal shifts. This is no counsel for resignation, but that of being prepared for a world of disorder and unpredictability and then resolve to take charge and plan ahead. Chaos and disorder can become ordered.

According to the Belgian political theorist, Chantal Mouffe conflict is not to be understood as inimical to democracy. Instead conflict is the lifeblood of democratic practice. In her view, it is "the driving force, because only conflict reminds democratic politics... of their contingent configuration, and therefore of their alterability."⁶ In other words, conflicts provide the democratic society with alternative visions, as well as it holds up the possibility for change. Agonistic politics suggests a plurality of ideas with the recognition that such ideas could supplant the one's currently dominant. In a democratic society alterity is the order of the day. This is Mouffe's effort at redefining Left politics post Marxist and post-structuralism in search of a radical democracy.

⁶ Ferdinand G Munga: Conflicts as the Threshold of Democratic Orders: A Critical Encounter with Mouffe's Theory of Agonistic Politics. Chantal Mouffe's most influential work is her book *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, with E Laclau (2014).

But Mouffe is cautious that a line must be drawn. She does not suggest that all oppositions or revolution is definable as agonistic. Lawlessness and anarchy may not lead to the betterment of society, and it does not foster the dynamic of radical democracy. Rather, she argues, “it slips into an anti-institutional form of absolutised politics based on romanticizing spontaneity and horizontalism, and on the inadvertent reviving of fundamentalism in terms of taking for granted the pre-given unit of “we” ...” In other words to become agonistic conflicts require a fidelity to democratic principles and an ethical sense of cognition of the world of ideas. Agonistic alterity must accordingly disclose its intent and its tools of engagement. Any societal ideal, accordingly, must submit to some democratic refereeing otherwise it becomes mere anarchy as WB Yeats states in his poem *The Second Coming*:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
the ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
are full of passionate intensity.

IV

I have taken a rather round-about and a theoretical route to the subject of this paper. I do not apologise for that. It is to understand how we could best understand and structure a mission for the university in society today. It is also to assert the truth that my approach to knowledge and therefore to higher education suggests that essentially knowledge is tied up with the wellbeing of humanity. For me the starting point is that vision that I expressed at the beginning, the idea of freedom.

University education and the pursuit of scholarship functions best in an environment where a free intercourse of ideas is possible, although, scholarship can also be pursued as a subaltern, subversive culture in society. The freedom to challenge and to dissect received wisdom, to dream of a world beyond what already is, is the burden of a scholar. This freedom to dream and to experiment in secluded conditions is what justifies the cloistered

environment of the academy. It also means that the scholar must embrace the idea of freedom not just for himself or herself but ultimately for others, including students. The scholar is a perpetual learner set on a voyage of discovery. Both government and the management of the institution must embrace the business of enabling such an environment to persist within institutions and to make it possible for scholarship to flourish. Scholars seek intellectual freedom. Freedom in the Hegelian sense requires rationality, and ethics of life, and a systematic association with reality including the challenge of agency. In other words as free thinkers scholars must forever be mindful that the rights they exercise as free agents also belong to others as interlocutors and students, hence rationality and ethical approaches are essential elements of the practice of intellectual life.

The scholar also understands that freedom is not license. This means that scholarship surely must be exercised in an ethical environment hence Codes of Ethics in medical experiments are necessary, the unleashing of destructive nuclear power is regulated by international treaties, the regulation of carbon emissions and the danger of global warming is now universally acknowledged, and the expression of ideas that are considered *contra bono mores* as in the advancement of ideologies of hatred, or prejudice, or discrimination, for example, are now universally accepted. In other words academic freedom is exercised within the ambit of a rational and moral circle designed to advance human freedom and the realization of full humanity.

And yet, the academy must prepare for as well as mirror, and create the kind of society of scholars that it wishes for society itself. It seems to me that the burden of the academy is that it must both be secluded and yet be included in the society it seeks to serve. A true university is a community of scholars and students collectively in a search for the truth.

V

It is therefore apt to turn now to a seminal essay by philosopher Alasdair McIntyre, *The Very Idea of a University: Aristotle, Newman and Us*⁷ first published 30 September 2009.

⁷ British Journal of Educational Studies; Vol 57, No. 4 December 2009, pp347-362.

In this essay McIntyre recalls John Henry Cardinal Newman's seminal *Discourses* where his *Idea of a University*⁸ receives treatment. This must have arisen for McIntyre through the revival of interest in Newman from some scholars in recent publications, but also in the recognition of crisis in the university. To do so, for him, one could do no better than to revisit some of the seminal classics that articulated the idea of the university.

There are three arguments of Newman's that have come under scrutiny. One, his idea of the unity of all knowledge. For Newman knowledge referred to "the intellect... properly trained to have a connected view or grasp of things." Knowledge is the perfection or virtue of the intellect that "when it is acted upon, informed... impregnated by reason... which grasps what it perceives through the senses... which takes a view of things; which sees more than the senses convey; which reasons upon what it sees, and while it sees, invests it with an idea."⁹ Simply put Knowledge is a philosophy of life, a practice of the intellect informed by reason and evidence.

The idea for Newman was that specialist knowledge is by its nature insufficient because it excludes other forms and means of understanding. In other words, knowledge based on one conception of discipline is bound to be partial and incomplete. In some ways this expresses itself these days in the bold moves to promote inter-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity, and to allow disciplines, however contrasting, to learn from each other, inform each other, and critique one another and together. The result may be that disciplines would pursue knowledge with a measure of humility and a consciousness of incompleteness, such as to promote collaborations across disciplines. Above all, knowledge, all knowledge is only as good as no new knowledge has been discovered to supplant the old ideas. McIntyre goes on to caution that Newman's university of the liberal arts need not be translated into a diminishing of the value of the research-led university, but to suggest that research will be enriched by,

⁸ This may be rather confusing. Newman published the first of two books *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (1852). *The Idea of a University* (1873) being occasional lectures Newman prepared as a prelude to the establishment of the Catholic University College of Ireland. The third is *Lectures and Essays on University Subjects* (1859). All three were published as *The Idea of a University*. For a full explanation see Ian Ker: *Newman on Education; Studies in Catholic Higher Education*, published by The Cardinal Newman Society, December 2008. www.CatholicHigherEd.org

⁹ Quoted in Ian Ker (above).

especially, an undergraduate programme that draws from different disciplines, and can then delve deeper into the specialist arena of knowledge. In other words, Newman was a champion of interconnected knowledge.

For McIntyre, the purpose of the university demands rethinking. It is not unusual that the choice of studies may be influenced by some utilitarian ideal or to be in pursuit of public policy or ideological persuasion. For Newman the motivation for academic learning and research is its own internal drive – the being of and for itself, *id esse*. Of course, one is also aware that such sufficiency may translate into the satisfaction of the stated objectives, but that is hardly the starting point of the pursuit of knowledge.

McIntyre raises, on behalf of Newman, the basis or purpose of education. He says that Newman has forced upon the academic consciousness the idea that to be educated is not so much what knowledge principles one has accumulated, as it is the ability to value "the quality of knowing what they are doing and valuing that quality in others..." Education is more than acquiring certain professional skills, it is the ability to critically evaluate and assess the knowledge systems one is exposed to, apply that knowledge, think through the implications and freely arrive at new and untested ways of imaginations. In Newman's typology, this process would be assisted by an awareness of the varieties of knowledge systems and their applications, and for him with the relevance of theology in that processing of knowledge. More seriously, in McIntyre's view Newman also makes possible that sense of incompleteness and ungluing and progressively revelatory nature of knowledge, and by so doing one that enables self-criticism, and avoids final and absolutist answers.

VI

South Africa faces many challenges in its understanding and application of higher education. The first, I suggest, is that more than 20 years since the Commission on Higher Education produced its Report in 1995 society faces even more intractable challenges. The Higher Education Act, 1997 reflects the vision articulated in the 1995 Commission report. It is undoubtedly a vision informed by the need universally expressed that South Africa needed to overcome apartheid and undo its legacy. Today, we find that having overcome apartheid we discover that apartheid in higher education is a lot more stubborn than may have been

envisaged in 1995. For example, the higher education landscape is still very much structured along the lines of a racialized geography notwithstanding the best efforts at transformation. The best universities in the country remain the historically white apartheid institutions, and those within the newly merged universities feeling and experiencing cultural and intellectual alienation as expressed in the #FeesMustFall Movement. It has taken #FeesMustFall for South African higher education to recognize that the Western paradigm of academic thought and practice continues to shape the distinct character of South African education. This has been conceptualised in the calls for a “decolonized” and Africa-oriented education. The earlier ideas of transformation have been localized as inclusion and representivity. Today the challenge, I like to think, is a lot deeper.

With the NDP it is now recognized that higher education is a critical component of national development and that knowledge production is important not just for its own sake but also to create a rational and democratic citizenship. Such a democratic citizenship also entails the development of soft skills like empathy, decency, integrity, tolerance, listening skills, respect – love, an appreciation of beauty and aesthetics - qualities often lacking in much of the student community as demonstrated during the #FeesMustFall protests. Such values of life are essential tools for meaningful citizens.

Finally, any higher education system must reckon with the fast-changing developments in science and technology, and the see-saw in world affairs and the continuing economic dominance by world powers. In other words, we live with the ambiguity of living in a one-world, but one which is significantly localizing and nationalistic. The big questions of development as in the Sustainable Development Goals, conflicts, poverty and hunger and the destruction of the soul of the human remain hugely defining of an unfair, unjust and unequal world. I referred above to the speech by US nuclear scientist J Robert Oppenheimer and his ideas are as compelling today as they were in 1945:

We are not only scientists; we are men, too. We cannot forget our dependence on our fellow men... These are the strongest bonds in the world, stronger than those even that bind us to one another, these are the deepest bonds – that bind us to our fellow men.

Two factors must be discussed in this regard. One, that South Africans are yet to come to a fuller appreciation of freedom. There is the continuing inclination of reference and referral on matters that as a nation we have become responsible for twenty-five years after apartheid. In other words, we need to take more seriously the obligation to govern according to democratic and constitutional principles. What we cannot do is to refer back to some other as if we are not taking responsibility and recognizing our agency. As Steve Biko constantly stated, fear is inimical to the idea of freedom. Free men and women cannot be dictated to by fear, fear of the other.

One cannot believe that it is not within the realms of possibility for South Africa to have dismantled the apartheid structures higher education system by ensuring a policy of integration of the sector by making resources available to develop the towns where HDIs are established, attract scholars and students to all the institutions without regard to race, and improve governance and facilities in all institutions. It may also be necessary to provide incentives for enrolment and ultimately provide for an enrolment policy based on integration. To be candid, I do not believe that state and academy have had the courage of their convictions in this regard. The result is that we continue to live with a system of inherent inequality.

Secondly, one must be mindful of the fact that as it currently stands the higher education sector is established almost predominantly as a public higher education system. And yet it is clear that the public system cannot cope with the demand for higher education from all population groups. The result has been that a private higher education system has been allowed to function and regulated, at times one thinks, rather grudgingly! And yet a situation can be envisaged where the private higher education system can coexist equally with the state system, and in such a manner that students are not prejudiced whatever system they get to choose. Needless to say, not all private higher education is for profit. Some of the higher education provision is by not for profit public interest organisations as in the churches, but others are established solely to provide higher education both comparable to that which the public sector provides, but also to make it as affordable as it is in the public sector. The Heher Commission recently recognized that private higher education needed to be understood in

policy terms as part of a seamless system of provision of higher education within the available models of regulation in South Africa.

Besides the above, much has also changed in the environment if one takes account of new ways of learning as in technology advanced learning, and in the context of critical discoveries in technology, medicine and in human sciences. eLearning, blended learning is fast becoming regularized and mainstreamed as a model of teaching and learning provision of choice at universities. That has to be welcomed. Of necessity, therefore, the models of higher education, as well as mission imperatives and differentiation are bound to be affected by these developments. To equip students, and to undertake cutting edge research in such a brave new world that is constantly changing demands a boldness of insight and adventure.

It cannot be denied that higher education has become so caught up in the frenetic pace of a modern capitalist economy; in the modern systems and philosophies of management and leadership, and the ethics of good and success, and competition that one wonders at times whether this modernization has not undermined the very idea of learning and production of knowledge for the love of it. Indeed, the university must always be mindful of the debates that engage society, shape and contribute reason and rationality as well as evidence-based inputs. Scholarship thereby shapes public consciousness about the questions that demand answers. With it, have we not lost that sense of value and idealism, of curiosity and adventure that has been the stock-in-trade of academic pursuits since time immemorial? That, for me, is yet another reason that we should subject ourselves to a rethink, a re-evaluation, taking stock once again.

For all the reasons mentioned above it seems self-evident that South Africa is now ripe for another Commission of Higher Education in order to structure policy in a more cohesive fashion rather than the short-term approaches that have been forced on the system in recent years. We need a renewed vision for a new generation university in South Africa, one shaped not just by the stand one takes to apartheid but some way of opening up the thought-spaces for higher education *de novo*.

Pretoria, 15 October 2018.