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The university in contemporary South Africa: Commodification, corporatisation, complicity, and crisis

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Abstract

Post-1994, the arc of university development in South Africa has resulted in commodified, corporatised, crisis-ridden universities, as part of the wider crisis of the South African political economy under neo-liberal hegemony. I illustrate the different dimensions of the crisis and offer some ideas on a different future for universities that breaks with their current dubious trajectories. I argue that important as they are, renewed and transformed universities will not come into being through intellectual, epistemological, and theoretical work alone, unless such work is itself part of political struggle and connects with political action and struggles by individuals and social groups committed to a different kind of society predicated on logics other than the destructive and dehumanising ones of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism.

Keywords: universities, South Africa, crisis, corporatization, complicity

Introduction

In this paper I ask discomforting questions about universities in South Africa in relation to social justice.[1] "Ruthless criticism" was "one of Karl Marx's principal maxims" (D'Mello, 2018, para. 1); "ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be" (Marx, 1843, para. 4). Marx "applied the . . . maxim to his own views too, constantly discerning what was genuine and what was false in what he had written," always "wide open to empirical evidence" (D'Mello, 2018, para. 1). His "concepts and definitions were open-ended and adaptable to new and changing historical situations." Judith Butler (2016, p. 460) clarified that Marx practiced the "ruthless critique not of 'everything existing,' exactly, but of

1 Social justice is part of the conceptual apparatus of classical liberalism that can take conservative (the minimal state) and radical forms (the welfare state). There is, therefore, a need to clarify what conception of social justice one has in mind. What kind of social structure, economic arrangements, and state are envisaged as underpinning social justice? I thank Prof Mala Singh for this point.

everything established, even institutionalised as the establishment over time." Critique of ideas, conditions, and the existing state of affairs, is the process of self-clarification and clarification with others to inform social action to transform "human society in the interest of its perfection and welfare" (O'Malley, 1970, p. x). It is a reminder that human societies are ultimately made by the ideas and actions of people and can be understood through reason of a "democratic, secular, and open character" that humans have the "capacity to make knowledge, as opposed to absorbing it passively, reactively, and dully", to enlighten themselves and emancipate themselves by changing their societies (Said, 2004, p. 11). Scholars and intellectuals have a pivotal role to play in critique. As Said (1996, p. x) observed, "[T]he intellectual always has a choice either to side with the less represented, the forgotten or ignored, or to side with the powerful," implying that no middle ground or neutrality is possible.

I offer a view on the fundamental foundations of universities, meditate on the processes and actions that have resulted in commodified, corporatised, crisis-ridden universities in contemporary South Africa and offer some ideas on a different future for them that breaks with the current dubious trajectories. I will argue that important as they are, renewed and transformed South African universities will not come into being through epistemological and theoretical work alone, unless such work is itself part of political struggle and connects with political action and struggles by individuals and social groups committed to a different kind of society predicated on other logics than the destructive and dehumanising ones of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism.

Universities

Universities are ideologically and politically contested terrains, with different social forces according them diverse social functions. Embodying both possibilities and constraints, they play contradictory roles, conserving and reproducing social relations and eroding and transforming them. Harold Wolpe (1991) warned that without economic and social policies that "contribute to the construction of a new South Africa" (p. 1), universities could "reproduce powerfully entrenched structures generated by apartheid" rather than serve "as instruments of social transformation" (p. 16). Post-1994, that has, indeed, proved to have been the case. Still, although the parochial focus has been largely on demographics, this has not eroded entrenched social structures but has created avenues for economic and social advancement for certain black classes and social groups.[2] Concomitantly, for many urban and rural impoverished students the lack of effective support and opportunity have meant high drop-out rates and low graduation rates. Socially transforming society entails fashioning economic and social arrangements that create equitable futures for all people. If universities are to be a liberating and "ennobling adventure for individuals [and] communities", and are to foster human dignity, social solidarity and the public good, they must "transcend the edicts of market accountability and narrow commercial calculations" (Zeleza, 2005, p. 54). They must, instead, embrace the ethics of social accountability and an expansive humanism that will elevate and empower all … people" (p. 55). This means embracing higher education as a

2 My thanks to Ahmed Essop for emphasising this. Personal communication, October 13, 2023.

public good that is deserving of proper public support, ensuring that meaningful opportunities exist for all to access and succeed and valuing the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Having entered university at the age of seventeen and becoming deeply involved in student activism, I have never left it. I am passionate about the promise of universities to advance knowledge, promote social justice, cultivate democratic citizenship, and foster intellectual, cultural, social, and economic development. But I accept, too, that universities can compromise aspirations and dreams and can be powerful mechanisms of social exclusion and injustice. They can be "expensive and ineffectual monuments to a status quo ante, yesterday's world preserved in aspic" (Dahrendorf, 2000, p. 106). Also, they can be maddeningly insular, parochial, inert, and lethargic in "sheltering mediocrity and bigotry" and "obstructing the progress of thought" (Ashby & Anderson, 1966, p. 4). Even at their best, their contribution could reproduce the status quo rather than transform it. Education at a university is not an autonomous social force; it is necessary but not sufficient for social transformation. For meaningful social justice, there must be state economic and social policies that underpin and reinforce the contributions of universities.

In conceiving of universities, we must avoid three traps.[3] One is the essentialism that accords unvarying purposes, functions, goals, and roles to universities across time, space, and place. The second trap is relativism since this suggests that we can apply the term university to any kind of institution. The third trap is universalism or the Eurocentric idea that universities everywhere must be epistemologically, academically, culturally, and institutionally identical to, or facsimiles of, modern European universities, whether of the Oxbridge or Humboldtian varieties. Yet, as Mbembe (2016, p. 32) wrote, "[P]art of what is wrong with our [universities] is that they are 'Westernized'" in being "local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon . . . that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production" and "disregards other epistemic traditions." This is not a rejection of universalism entirely nor of universal knowledge. It is to insist on its being rescued from the hegemony of Eurocentrism and the Western canon and on epistemological diversity that is predicated on "open dialogue and the interdependence of—and porous boundaries between—different knowledge traditions" that enables "the reclaiming and affirming of African knowledge traditions" (Essop, 2016, para. 16). Rather than see the Humanities canon "as fixed and bounded [and as] a rigid tablet of fixed rules and monuments bullying us from the past," (Said, 2004, p. 23) it can be considered as "expressing motion, playfulness, discovery and . . . invention and "open to changing combinations of sense and signification" (p. 25).

In a forthcoming book on the idea of the university in South Africa I look at how the university has been thought about since the colonial, segregation, and apartheid periods up until today and the continuities and discontinuities in thinking on the part of various actors. It

3 For Professor Ahmed Bawa, this signalling of the three traps is useful but requires further exploration. I agree. His questions of how one manages these traps to learn institutionally and facilitate engaging with the complexity with which universities are interwoven is important. He points out rightly that there is a tension between and among these three axes that needs to be explored. I intend to do so in my forthcoming book on the history of universities in South Africa. Personal communication, October 11, 2023.

means locating the university in changing social structures, conjunctures, economic, political and social conditions, intellectual and scientific milieus and analysing struggles and their outcomes in and beyond universities. I am learning that the

> beautiful thing about history is that it can help us develop a more complex understanding of the things we consider natural in our daily lives. . . . [H]istory can show us that what appears to be timeless is, in fact, deeply historical and dependent on the actions of people with ambitions and agendas. (Arndt, 2023, para. 1)

Universities are shaped profoundly by their contexts and by social struggles. Perennial struggles, visible and violent, hidden and routinised, to define the character of universities and their functions and roles permeate universities and society.

Universities serve fundamental purposes and contribute to societal and individual goals in distinctive ways. The philosopher Gordon Graham (2005, p. 158) noted that universities "cannot have a satisfactory sense of [their] worth if [they have] no sense of what [their] purpose" is. National university systems today evince highly differentiated and diverse institutions with a range of missions and varying education and social goals. Universities differ in size, and have different academic programmes, admission requirements, and academic standards in accordance with their functions, roles, and goals. The meaning of a university is not to be found in these characteristics. Universities are institutional assemblies of scholars, students, and support staff whose *raison d'être* is associated with knowledge and advancing the common public good. They are places of learning and scholarship, of engagement between and among scholars and students and between them and the wider society. They are institutions that make one wonder and free one from wonder. To undertake their work, they require academic freedom and institutional autonomy to buttress that freedom. At the same time, they must be publicly accountable in meaningful and reasonable ways. Increasingly, this meaning is under severe threat. For Sawyerr (2004, p. 45) it is "vital to rehabilitate and preserve the notion, and to fight to reclaim the reality, of the university as a place of learning, reflection, and debate;" "such spaces [must] be retrieved, nurtured, and defended;" in doing this, universities must resist sacrificing core values for the "survival of the institution." Today, universities are under pressure to undertake multitudinous roles. Metaphorically speaking, the *University World News* is a litany of "universities should . . .", "universities should . . .". They must especially be "entrepreneurial" and produce entrepreneurs. The synonyms of entrepreneurial—commercial, capitalist, empire-building—could aptly describe some universities.

Universities have two fundamental purposes. One is to disseminate knowledge to form and cultivate the cognitive ability of students. The goal is to produce graduates who, ideally, "can think effectively and critically," achieve "depth in some field of knowledge" and possess a "critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves" (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). University graduates must have "a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times" [and be] "able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it", have "some understanding of and experience in thinking

systematically about moral and ethical problems" and should be able to "communicate with cogency" (p. 84). Beyond students, universities are also duty bound to enhance the knowledge of other social groups, as part of creating an informed, cultivated, and critical citizenry. Newman (1907, p. ix) argued in *The Idea of a University* that the object of universities is "the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement," contending that "if its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a university should have students." Newman overstated the university's knowledge dissemination purpose but is correct to have drawn attention to the centrality of "the diffusion and extension of knowledge" and the importance of learning and teaching, something that is neglected increasingly in the often indecent scramble for research outputs or, more accurately, the resultant research subsidies.

A second purpose of universities is to create knowledge that advances understanding of the natural and social worlds and enriches humanity's accumulated scientific and cultural inheritances and heritage. This means testing the knowledge produced by previous generations, dismantling the beliefs and claims that masquerade as knowledge, reinvigorating knowledge, and sharing research findings openly. It involves undertaking research into the most arcane and abstract issues and the "most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge" and striving to apply scientific discoveries for the benefit of humankind. The pursuit of knowledge has both short-term and long-term concerns. On the one hand, universities grapple with urgent and immediate issues and problems and seek solutions to these. On the other, they delve into issues "that may not appear immediately relevant to others but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit" (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 3). Above all, universities are concerned with asking questions, formulating the right questions or, at least, the better questions.

Community engagement[4] in the form of service learning, which connects teaching-learning, research, and service, is today an accepted third purpose of universities. Community engagement is more than a university's responsiveness to its context. Seeing a university as being sensitive to conditions and challenges does not mean that it is engaged with communities, however community is defined. At different moments, in differing ways, and to differing degrees, community engagement has also encompassed civic duties such as community outreach and student and staff volunteer activities. Its more recent conception as service-learning links creatively the university's knowledge creation and dissemination purposes with service. No longer an add-on, disconnected from the university's core activities, service-learning is an important "curricular innovation" (Stanton, 2008, p. 2).

4 Prof. Bawa asks whether engagement rather than community engagement should be considered the third purpose so as to also take into account engagement that leads to industrial innovation, engagement with government and the state, and other extra-university actors and institutions, i.e., a knowledge mediation role between the world of scholarly endeavour and that of the world of applications. He suggests that the idea of loops in knowledge processes becomes important here in shaping knowledge production pathways that involve applications imperatives and thinking about co-creation approaches. For him, this would help to tease out the inherent tensions in the purposes of universities. I concur that there are inherent tensions in the purposes of universities, whether one has an expansive notion of engagement or a more limited one. I am pondering his proposition, mulling over whether his more capacious notion of engagement is not already encompassed by community engagement as service learning or whether it is an aspect of the other core purposes of universities.

If the three purposes outlined, all of which are associated with knowledge, are indeed the core purposes of universities, they are not entirely parallel vectors. There are paradoxes and tensions between and among the purposes that involve social dilemmas, difficult choices, and trade-offs. It is precisely why deliberative and democratic decision-making that meaningfully involves all key actors is critical. Concomitantly, universities pursue their purposes in a wider societal context that impinges on their success. In this regard, South Africa currently manifests a pervasive crisis of governance under a liberation movement that, post-1994, has abandoned its principles, displayed remarkable ineptitude, been mired in corruption and has undergone morbid deformities. If corrupt elites and their foot-soldiers gorge on state enterprises, public universities are not immune. Jansen (2023) documented vividly the nature and forms of corruption. The focus on governance and finances at the expense of core academic activities, however, may not capture fully the scope and extent of the corruption and corrosion at universities.

Gramsci advances the idea of an "organic crisis" (cited in Saul & Gelb, 1986, p. 11), to denote the existence of "incurable structural contradictions" of an ideological, political and economic nature. Such "organic crises . . . erupt . . . in a wide series of polemics, debates about fundamental . . . moral and intellectual questions, in a crisis in the relations of political representation and the parties . . ." (p. 57). This is what Gramsci calls "the crisis of authority, which is nothing but the crisis of hegemony or general crisis of the state" (Hall, 1988, p. 167–168). Hall noted that for Gramsci "a crisis is not an immediate event but a process: it can last for a long time, and can be very differently resolved: by restoration, by reconstruction or by passive transformism" (p. 167). An organic crisis is normally resolved either through "formative action" by the ruling class or social revolution from below (Saul & Gelb, 1986, p. 211). Purely defensive initiatives cannot preserve ruling class hegemony. "Formative action" entails economic, political, and ideological restructuring and significant reforms. South Africa and its universities are mired in an "organic crisis" that requires "formative action." Prior to the 2024 elections, the ruling party conflated itself and the state, was mired in short-term survival electioneering, and was incapable of uprooting pervasive corruption and decisively and coherently addressing serious economic and social challenges.

At the root of the ideological malaise of universities is the embrace of neo-liberal prescripts. Harvey (2005, p. 2) described succinctly the "origins, rise, and implications" of neoliberalism as a doctrine. Neo-liberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade." It holds that "the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (p. 3). If there are no markets "in areas such as . . . water, education, health care, [etc.], then they must be created, by state action if necessary" (p. 2). "Development" is reduced to economic growth and enhanced economic performance, as opposed to "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy" (Sen, 1993, p. 48). Neo-liberalism and globalisation have entrenched a "market society", an associated rampant "culture of materialism" and "Narcissist hedonism" (Nayyar, 2008, p. 5).

Post-1994, neoliberal ideas, embraced voluntarily or sullenly, globalisation, the South African political economy and state policies have shaped universities powerfully. The "logic of the market has . . . defined the purposes of universities largely in terms of their [economic] role" (Berdahl, 2008, p. 48), with public investment being justified largely in terms of preparing students for the labour market. Universities are considered "just supermarkets for a variety of public and private goods that are currently in demand, and whose value is defined by their perceived aggregate financial value" (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 17). Driven by market forces and the technological revolution, globalisation has shaped the "ways and means of providing higher education . . . what is taught and what is researched," and has shifted "both student interests and university offerings away from broader academic studies and towards narrower vocational programmes" (Nayyar, 2008, p. 275). The harnessing of universities for economic advantage has resulted in natural, medical, and business sciences and engineering research being privileged. There is benign tolerance or outright neglect of the arts and humanities and, to a lesser extent the social sciences.

Yet, the arts and humanities have a critical contribution to make to culture and society, with the responsibility to investigate and interpret human activity and history in all its rich variety, to present it in many different forms and to conserve it in the form of archives. While "the modern and global world constantly confronts humanity with the far-reaching effects of politics, economics, science and technology, the roles of image and word, of song and story in the understanding of self and other, of society and nature remain primary" (Lewis, 2011) It is through the arts and humanities that "humanity constructs its image of and discourse about itself and in which its anchors human dignity and collective understanding. Their work must be advanced in tandem with that of the sciences if a hospitable world is to survive." It is their task to "recreate the narrative . . . of humanity, which may be told or sung or depicted or enacted and ultimately needs all those forms of expression to attain what we grasp as its integrity." They alone are able "to capture human experience persuasively and carry forward the values of humanity as we have come to understand them, historically and philosophically, as the collective tissue of collective identity" (p. 1). It has the task, too, to interrogate critically ideas on development, progress, democracy, equality and inequality, their meanings, and their articulation within divergent discourses. Research must engage with diverse developmental challenges without being reduced to purely utilitarian uses and to economic needs alone.

The economic crisis of universities is amply evident. Inadequate state funding has compromised the ability of universities to discharge their critical purposes, to transform the nature and quality of learning-teaching and research and institutional cultures, and to promote equity and inclusion. Burgeoning student enrolment, from 473,000 in 1993 to 1,094,808 in 2020, has been accompanied by a decline in the per-student subsidy, and the average teacher: student ratio has increased over 50%, from 20.5% in 2003 to 31% in 2020 (Essop, 2020, p. 90). Nationally, an average of 65% of academics are on contracts. During the past decade, the higher education ministry and department have demonstrated little serious and consistent leadership on important issues. The consequences of inadequate funding are pervasive, disturbing, and destructive of the quality of academic provision and graduates and diminish

success, with extensive negative impacts on academics and growing burnout. Access, opportunity and success remain conditioned by class and "race." Inadequately funded, the pursuit by public universities of "third stream income" to supplement state and tuition income has often resulted in "the commercialization of universities (which) means business in education" (Nayyer, 2008, p. 9).

The political problems of universities are evident in perennial student protests as well as governance and management crises associated with inadequate or inappropriate leadership. The assessors' report on the University of South Africa concluded that its management is "part of the problem" and that it lacks "the maturity required to effectively manage a complex university." The assessor added that he cannot fathom how some of the members could be "entrusted with such a colossal responsibility to run the institution of this size and depth" (Sobuwa, 2023, para. 17). There is "overwhelming evidence that the functioning and efficacy of both council and management fall below an expected standard of an effective university that looks after the best interests of its students, staff and resources" (Sobuwa, 2023, para. 18). Those comments could apply to several other universities. The important principle of "cooperative governance" has been eroded. Increasingly, universities resemble business hierarchies, with continual diminution of academic self-rule and senate authority over the academic project. A corporatist centralism has emerged in the absence of effective senate and faculty oversight, with extensive powers vested in the administrative leadership and management. The results of corporatisation combined with dubious leadership and management capabilities are gory, even as they make for salacious reading.

Whether it has been because of the political dispositions of the state and of university leaders and managers, or because of ineffectual state steering and support, commodification, commercialisation, corporatisation, and managerialism have triumphed, corrupting academic values, compromising core academic functions, corroding quality, breeding individualism, neutralising meaningful academic citizenship, and triggering perennial student protests. National chauvinist, populist, and individualised parochial identity politics disconnected from questions of social relations and material issues animate struggles. Radical vocabularies, including those in decolonial guises, mask narrow and career-based self-interest, as opposed to "building reflexive solidarities within universities" (Badat, 2022, p. 1) and the serious pursuit of progressive and "emancipatory higher education imaginations and futures" (p. 16).

Colonialism and apartheid shaped universities profoundly in South Africa, establishing patterns of systemic inclusion, exclusion, and marginalisation of institutions, social classes, and groups. This legacy continues to impose onerous conditions on transforming and renewing universities. Universities continue, in functionally differentiated ways, to reproduce a highly inequitable social order. All universities have the challenge of becoming South African/African universities, as opposed to being universities in South Africa/Africa and replicas of European universities. All have to engage creatively with the historical "legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation" (Du Toit, 2000, p. 103) and patriarchy. All must create institutional cultures that genuinely respect and appreciate difference, diversity, and inclusion in relation to class and gender, to national, linguistic, religious, and sexual

orientation, and in matters epistemological and methodological, and cultivate spaces for the flowering of epistemologies, ontologies, theories, and methodologies, and encouraging questions other than those that have dominated recent scholarship.

It is not mysterious, powerful, ideological, and technological forces, ineffectual state steering and inadequate funding alone that have carried universities to where they are today. Ideologies and technologies require social carriers. Complicity, by commission or omission, consent, voluntary or sullen, fatigue, fear and apathy in differing ways and to differing degrees have also played their part. Depending on positionality in terms of rank, authority, power, and influence in universities, some actors have been the agents of commercialisation and corporatisation. Self-justifying, defensive, self-serving platitudes abound such as "You don't understand the realities" and "You don't understand the financial situation." Dilemmas of choice are not the absence of choice. Other actors, in woeful neglect of their academic citizenship duties, have failed to hold the leadership and senior managers accountable, resulting in the erosion of the authority of university senates.

Motala et al. (2023) contended that

> a critical factor is the indifference of the vast majority of academics, and their single-minded pursuit of individualist goals also driven by the corporatised regimes of knowledge production.[5] They remain unconcerned about the very effects of their narrow pursuit and its diminution of their *collective and individual* rights. At this very time there is a wide range of issues that must be of great concern to academics—which it is not. (p. 7)

They bemoan "the unprepossessing pursuit of ranking and rating, the lure of executive mobility in place of serious social scholarship and a host of other troubling characteristics, which are becoming more and more pervasive in academia" (p. 7). Yet other actors, owing to their status or their workloads or being perennially on contract, have been effectively relegated to being, or have for understandable appreciable reasons become, observers. Genuflection to so-called inclusion aside, at many universities there is no meaningful involvement of academics in university governance and especially in matters that affect the academic project.

What is to be done?

What is to be done? We need, first and foremost, deep institutional conversations and a national conversation on the nature and meaning of universities. This conversation must avoid both essentialising universities and expressing nostalgia about idyllic past conditions that either never existed or existed only for some. At the same time, this conversation must

5 This recalls Althusser's (1971, para. 112) comment: "I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they 'teach' against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero. But they are rare and how many (the majority) do not even begin to suspect the 'work' the system (which is bigger than they are and crushes them) forces them to do, or worse, put all their heart and ingenuity into performing it with the most advanced awareness . . ."

discuss the South African society, economy, and state given how powerfully these all shape the circumstances of universities. We must enter this conversation understanding that being scholars is a profession, "a special class of occupation" different from employment in the crafts. Skill is important, but a profession involves more: it is marked by the "incorporation of systematically studied knowledge into . . . practice" (Shils, 1977, p. 5). University teaching is not in the first instance about the application of knowledge; it is about disseminating knowledge that is either discovered or acquired, including the methods of the "discovery, interpretation and application of knowledge." Even where application may be the aim, "the university teacher's concern is with knowledge about application" (p. 6) and not immediately the practical application of the knowledge that is taught. Moreover, and as a fundamental point, the academic profession "is not primarily or exclusively oriented to the market. It does not produce to meet an effective consumer's demand" (p. 5). Universities and academics will never cover their costs, and it is puerile to imagine that they should or might do so. This is not to condone the profligacy sometimes observed at universities. But appointing academics and academic managers for their fund-raising abilities rather than their intellectual leadership and their contributions to knowledge is sad testimony to what is prized. Being a university student entails obligations related to knowledge, a commitment to intellectual labour, and a duty to society, not the pursuit of a parchment in purely private interests. Our conversation must grapple seriously and imaginatively with the purposes, functions, goals, and roles of universities in South Africa, taking both the public good and the idea of place seriously.

Just as there are varying and contesting ideas on social justice and development that range from thin anaemic conceptions to thick, strong, and extensive conceptions that are linked to different notions of what we think of as a good society, the same applies to ideas about the public good. It is, therefore, important to clarify the meaning of the public good and the public and social interests that are to be advanced by universities. The notion of a public good implies, at a minimum, a substantive commitment to values such as anti-racism and anti-sexism, equity, diversity, and inclusion. It should also embrace expansive conceptions of social justice, development, and democracy and a bold refutation of doctrines that seek to yoke universities to narrow private and parochial interests. Mala Singh (2014) rightly refuted the idea that the public good is merely "one goal and policy plank among others" in a 'marketplace of ideas and narratives" about the goals of universities. Rather, it trumps "all other values and approaches and . . . constitute[s] the foundational narrative and platform." The idea of the public good is an "alternative social imaginary" for "wrest[ing] higher education away from its neo-liberal" (p. 107) obsessions and trajectory. One cannot assume support for public good ideals among either university staff or students, because "both constituencies benefit from private positional goods availed by higher education." To "get beyond commitment 'noise' or ad hoc and special projects, concrete questions have to be confronted about what public-good obligations and responsibilities accrue to different role players in the core functions and activities of higher education" (p. 111).

Insofar as place is concerned, Louise Vincent (2016) argued rightly that issues "related ultimately to the purpose of the university entail a deep engagement, both literally and theoretically, with the notion of 'place'" (p. 9) with the idea "of the university as situated in

'place'—geography, history, social relations, economics and politics—all the forces that combine to make an empty space a 'place'" (p. 16). To "engage with place is to reflect on people in a place and to ask how they might inhabit that place. The ability to inhabit, as opposed to just be resident, requires detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness." Place and space are dynamic, "never finished, never closed" and enmeshed with "heterogeneity, relationality, liveliness" (Massey, 2005, cited in Desai and Vahed, 2023, p. 11). Fundamental to the idea of place "is the idea of an open yet bounded realm within which the things of the world can appear and events take place." Place possesses "enough breadth and space" and "room enough to allow an engagement with the world" (Malpas, 2018, p. 13). "Place" is where people "form relationships and social networks, develop a sense of community and learn to live with others. It offers a helpful way of answering the persistent problem that plagues a 'public good' framing of higher education: which public and what 'good'?" (Vincent, 2016, pp. 6–7). Far from being "objective or neutral", 'place' is "inscribed with relations of power" and how "power works in and through places has to be confronted…". Drawing on Freire's idea of "reading the world" to "read the word", "place" speaks

> to knowledge as context sensitive rather than decontextualized and the need for a close relationship between theory and practice, as at least part of the measure of the significance and validity of the knowledge produced and disseminated. Instead of [immunising] themselves from their surrounding communities universities, understood in this frame, actively seek exposure and collaboration because that is what they are 'for'. Such an approach has wider implications not just for pedagogy alone, but also student recruitment, the content of curricula, and for research practices and priorities. (p. 7)

For Vincent (2016), a "critical pedagogy of place" offers two potentially fertile possibilities. First, it permits imagining "what forms of connection and action might emerge" from an engagement with the notion of place "and sees the cultivation of these possibilities as central to education, and to what the university is 'for'" (p. 8). Inherent in this approach is the opportunity to root the university within the fabric of its society and to pursue its social purposes in close connection with its diverse economic, social, and political challenges. Second, it offers the possibility of a "transformed epistemological practice" that is "both embodied and contextualized" as opposed to current epistemologies that are "disembodied (they assume that their standpoint is universal when in fact it is gendered, 'raced', classed, sexed, etc.) and decontextualized (rooted in the dominance of Western paradigms, histories, and priorities)" (p. 8).

To mention epistemology is to draw attention to the connection between biography, geography, epistemic location, and social location, and to ideas on what knowledge is, the making of knowledge, and which knowledge is to be valued and shared with others (Grosfoguel, 2007). Overcoming dominant Eurocentric epistemologies means producing "knowledge that is decolonial in intent and practice" (Bhambra, 2014, p. 149) and forging a "decolonial epistemic perspective" that is predicated on a "broader canon of thought than

simply the Western canon." It cannot be based on an abstract universal (one particularly that raises itself as universal global design) but would have to be the result of the critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic/ethical/political projects towards a pluriversal as opposed to a universal world. (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 212). It is, however, not about imposing a decolonial canon that becomes a new orthodoxy. It is about robust engagement about knowledge that reveals other kinds of knowledge and that recognises, as part of "cognitive justice", the existence of "diverse communities of problem solving." This enables knowledge creation to become "a collaboration of memories, legacies, heritages, manifold heuristics of problem solving" (Visvanathan, 2009, para. 37).

First, the argument that we need to take place seriously is not advocacy to limit the horizons of universities to their immediate local geographical vicinities and communities. Place, as noted, is "never closed", characterised by "relationality and provides scope for 'the things of the world' to enter and for "engagement with the world." Moreover, the "public good" cannot be conceived of in purely local and national terms. By virture of their core activities, universities are distinctively connected to the global while straddling the local. They are imbricated in the wicked problems of humanity and the global challenges of climate change and its effects, clean air, political turmoil, and with the hardships of refugees and the like, all of which have implications for research and teaching. Addressing these challenges effectively entails acting globally and implies a conception of the public good that is global rather than just local. In a differentiated system of universities such as that of South Africa, different universities will, of course, connect in different ways and to differing degrees.[6]

Second, in 2001 the Council on Higher Education observed that in 20 years we will need to revisit our national institutional landscape. Is it time for another comprehensive size and shape exercise that analyses the value, strengths, and shortcomings of the current number, sizes, types, distribution, and academic configurations of universities, reflects on the previous mergers and incorporations, and addresses how many students the university system can sustain meaningfully in light of available finances. Does the balance in types of universities need to be changed, or do their qualification and programme mixes need revision? Do their sizes need to be capped or do new universities need to be created through hiving off the distant campuses of some universities? It is important to locate the question of the size and shape of universities within the wider higher education system and confront its continuing inverted pyramid. This would be an opportunity to address current and future needs proactively in relation to envisaged development trajectories and student enrolments and would obviate whimsical sudden announcements of new universities.

Third, the funding framework for research urgently needs overhaul in respect of its assumptions, purposes, and goals, and performative nature, and allocation rules and mechanisms. It has fostered perversities that corrode knowledge and research quality such as monetary incentives for scholarship, predator journal publishing, academic malpractices, dubious peer-reviewing and external examining, approving postgraduate theses of questionable standards, affiliation of fellows by universities for financial reasons, inflated

6 My thanks to Prof. Ahmed Bawa for the engagement on this paragraph.

publishing outputs, and an unholy chase by universities for publication and graduate output subsidies. University scholars seem to share gaily in their university's financial largesse for research outputs, even if they criticise rightly performance bonuses for senior administrators. Financial rewards for research in academics' pockets diminish the available research funds. A new research funding framework is needed that eliminates current perversities and prioritises equity, quality, and development. It must support early career researchers, postdocs, and postgraduate students effectively, research infrastructure such as journals, and local academic presses. It must support basic and applied research optimally and mobilise funds for research on the key wicked problems that face South Africa and humanity to be carried out by equitable, diverse, and inclusive multi-institutional and multinational research teams in consultation with key communities.

University reward systems signal powerfully the triumph of research over teaching, even though over 70% of students exit before undertaking postgraduate studies. There are no performance bonuses for the art and craft of diligent and effective teaching. Increasingly neglected because of the supposed prestige and weight of research in global rankings or because it is considered an innate ability or a common-sense activity, we must eschew the misguided naturalisation of teaching and learning practice. Approaches to teaching that assume that teaching can be improved through workshops on so-called skills or by tips on better teaching are inadequate. We need a rigorously theorised approach to teaching that engages contextual realities, is based on research, and that builds scholarship on teaching and learning.

Fourth, genuine cooperative governance must characterise relations between and among councils, university leaders, senates, scholars and students and between and among universities and the state. The independence and authority of university senates and faculty boards must be wrested back from administrators. I commend the assessors' report on the University of South Africa (UNISA) that states that the senate must reclaim its "status as a custodian of curriculum transformation, high academic standards, robust engagement on teaching and learning, research and innovation, social justice . . . and a caring culture for students and academic staff" (Sobuwa, 2023, para. 20). This call applies to the senates of other universities too, not just UNISA alone.

Fifth, the interventions needed entail a properly capacitated and capable higher education ministry and department that are interested in addressing key challenges, and capable of steering and providing effective leadership. More generally, we need a developmental state and a ruling party that is committed to substantive social transformation. On all these scores, the prospects are bleak. The inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the wider ecosystem of universities means that universities will have to navigate the challenges of massifying enrolments, equity, quality, development, underfunding, the pervasive and myriad forms of social violence, increasing mental health issues, and ensuring consistent power and water supplies and, not least, student protests, by and large on their own. Do universities have the

capacities to cope with this "demand overload" What does this mean for the future of universities?[7]

Sixth, discourses of state officials and university leaders continue to be peppered with the term "transformation" but whether it remains a policy imperative is a moot point. Paraphrasing Sarah Ahmed (2012) we can pose "what recedes when (transformation) becomes a view' and consider 'what (transformation) does by focusing on what (transformation) obscures" (p. 14). As Mahmood Mamdani (2012) warned, (cited in Sikhosana, 1993) transformation has been reduced largely to equity and a concern with demographics, rather than with academic and institutional transformation and democratisation. Instead of creatively pursuing equity, quality, and development simultaneously in and beyond universities, with all their attendant paradoxes and social dilemmas, the state and universities have sacrificed or prioritised one or other value with grave consequences. For various reasons, the designated instruments of planning, funding, and quality assurance have been ineffectual for steering and transforming universities, The arc is the triumph of a diluted and limited "equity" and individual historical rectification at the expense of quality, development, and institutional transformation. The dominance of "corporate power", "the continuing rise of right wing, populist nationalism", the avarice of business and political elites and an ineffectual state, all make a more egalitarian South Africa "as remote as ever" (Maylam, 2020. para. 19). Perhaps the best that can be hoped for currently by those social forces committed to transformation and decolonisation is to fight for non-reformist reforms.

Ideas are utopian not because of what they seek to achieve but because they are conceived of outside of humans and actors. Transformation is a chimera in the absence of strong democratic radical student and staff organisations, and alliances between them and wider social forces, that contest social relations in and beyond universities. Organised radical movements reveal the "stakes", make "power visible", struggle for radical reforms and "make society hear their messages and translate these messages into political decision making, while the movements maintain their autonomy" (Melucci, 1985 p. 815). The aftermath of the 2015–2016 student protests has demonstrated the limits of student political action. Student organisations created a new higher education terrain and agenda, but since then there has been little national and institutional-level engagement with that agenda. Without a confluence with other social forces, student movements will be characterised by "brief brush fires and relapses into passivity by the majority" and by "frenzied ultra-left gestures" (Hobsbawm, 1973 p. 265). While critical as a catalyst for reforms and transformation, deep reflection is needed about the nature and content of student political activism. There are many illusions about universities in class societies as engines of social transformation. Despite talk of what is known as intersectionality, there must be doubts about the transformative potential of focusing on personal pain, trauma, and identity in ways that are unconnected to the question of political power and the material conditions for social justice (Kelly, 2016.) If students are critical in initiating, if not always sustaining, change, equally vital are academics. Post-1994 though, academics have failed to contest ideologies and administrative power moves that

7 My thanks to Prof Ahmed Bawa for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper and posing these issues.

have eroded academic values and academic rule. The absence of strong radical academic and support staff organisations that mobilise around both academic and employment issues is a serious weakness. It raises questions about the interests, consciousness, and agency of academics and about who will "educate the educator" (Marx, 1845, para. 3) as part of a transformative praxis in universities and within society more generally.

Conclusion

Celebratory back-patting about performance in relation to dubious global rankings, research outputs, and the like aside, the realities of universities are disconcerting and distressing, whether in terms of their prospects of substantive institutional transformation or their contribution to wider social transformation. Considering the conditions, killings, and attempted assassinations at some universities, Mandela's comment that "many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountain-tops of our desires" is far from dramatic (Napier, 2017, p. 152). Still, a "pessimism of the intellect" must not give way to despair and demoralisation but must coexist with an "optimism of the will." Mandela noted that "there were many dark moments when [his] faith in humanity was sorely tested, but [he]would not and could not give [himself] up to despair. That way lays defeat and death" (Nelson Mandela, 1994, para. 15).

Notwithstanding the challenges that confront scholars and universities we must, in Mandela's words, keep our "head pointed toward the sun, [our] feet moving forward" ("Nelson Mandela," 1995, para. 15). Mandela stated, "I have walked the long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter. I have made mistakes along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb". He added, "I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But, I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended" (cited in Napier, 2017, p. 152). For Soudien, "[T]his realisation that 'there are many more hills to climb' brought Mandela to a central insight about the *self*…This *self* had to make a commitment to never stop learning. It is this commitment… from which *hope* springs because it is through learning that alternatives present themselves to one." Mandela observed that the post-1994 state "cannot do it all for you [and that] you must do it yourselves" (cited in Napier, p. 153). There is another important message that we must take care of ourselves "to rest" and recuperate, to reflexively "look back" and appreciate what has been achieved since 1994 and to recognise that the "long walk is not yet ended."

We can have few illusions about the commitment and capacity of the current state and "government of national unity" to advance, let alone complete the long walk. But despite the constraints, we can create South African universities and advance Madiba's call to "act together as a united people . . . for the birth of a new world", to ensure "justice for all" and foster living "in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others" (Rhodes University, n.d.). Transforming our universities entails confronting complicity, resistance, inertia, fear, and apprehension. Human agency is critical. It requires academics, students, and other actors

to contest the logics that underpin and suffuse our universities and to purposefully set them on a different path that valorises their great promise. Said (2004) wrote that invention requires "reassembling from past performances, as opposed to the romantic use of invention as something you create from scratch. That is, one hypothesises a better situation from the known historical and social facts." There is a need for "intellectual performances on many fronts, in many places, many styles that keep in play both the sense of opposition and the sense of engaged participation" (Said, 2004, p. 140).

This work, as Bourdieu recognised, cannot be undertaken "by a single great intellectual, a master-thinker . . . or by the authorized spokesperson for a group or an institution presumed to speak in the name of those without voice, union, party, and so on" (cited in Said, 2004, p. 138). It calls for "the collective intellectual," formations that work on common questions and "play an irreplaceable role, by helping to create the social conditions for the collective production of realist utopias" (p. 198). Alongside coordinated efforts, there is always place for individual intellectual and practical actions, for "everyday acts of resurgence" by "individuals committed to change" (cited in Ritskes, 2012, para, 1). The South African university will not come into being through epistemological and theoretical work alone, only through political action and struggle.

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