

Universities, Social Movements and Market Forces

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(photo by HS)

In my experience of universities over five decades and on three continents, I have seen universities change drastically several times over. I am struggling to understand and articulate what has happened. I am going to make a stab at answering, however sketchily, the following questions:

- What forces have shaped universities over recent decades?
- What has been the impact of social movements such as socialism, feminism, africanism on the process of the production of knowledge?
- Why was it deemed necessary not only to demand inclusion of the excluded in the domain of higher knowledge but to challenge the existing canon and to struggle for

radically new approaches to curricula?

- What has been achieved by history from below, gender studies, african studies, postcolonial studies?
- What has happened to all the passionate debates between contending paradigms?
- Are market forces marginalising all else? Is it desirable and/or possible to resist?
- How is the project of academic transformation in South Africa unfolding within this global field of forces?

My starting point is that the story of universities only makes sense within the story of human society. Universities might once have seemed to be ivory towers, but even then they were situated among cathedrals and market squares and caught in the same crosswinds as blew through all other structures. Today's universities are more like bustling bazaars with a few toppling ivory towers in the distance.

Universities are changing today in a way that is almost dizzying. So much so that few people, even academics, fully realise what is happening. Universities throughout their whole history have been in flux, subjected to conflicting agendas and demands, not only by internal factors, but most characteristically by forces within the wider society. This has become even more the case in our own time. The whole tempo has accelerated dramatically.

For much of their history universities were bastions of elite education. The classes born to higher knowledge could do much as they pleased, as they could in many other institutions of power. There was little scrutiny or accountability. This idea of the university came under massive challenge in the last century. The pressure came from social movements demanding that universities open up to include those who had been excluded. Many of us who inhabit universities today come from the excluded. We are the descendants of those who laboured from below rather than those who spoke from above. As it opens to us to speak on the stage of history, it is important to remember that we come from the silent, to consider how we got to be here and to reflect on what we do now that we are here.

In the past century there has been a growing realisation that the history of knowledge is rooted in the social division of labour according to class, race and gender. In primitive societies, all labour was required to produce material means of subsistence. As development proceeded, there emerged a social division of labour that became more and more specialised. There arose an increasing separation of manual and mental labour, as well as increasing specialisation within forms of both manual and mental labour. In this process, higher knowledge was confined to elite. Therefore, a series of profound cleavages run through the history of knowledge along the fault lines opened up by exclusions of class, race and gender, by the mapping of the world by imperial power.

Against this there have arisen forces for democratisation of knowledge. Powerful gains were made by the challenge to feudal authority by an ascendant bourgeoisie, but most profoundly by the liberation movements of past century, particularly by the labour movement, by the socialist movement, by national liberation movements, by a variety of social movements. Marxism, feminism, africanism have put forward profound critiques of existing knowledge, of the very processes shaping the production of knowledge.

These movements have had not only political consequences, but intellectual consequences. In relation to the production of knowledge, these movements have brought not only demands for inclusion of the excluded, but raised far reaching questions about the nature of knowledge produced by those who have been included. The history of knowledge has come to be perceived as shaped by the world view of those who held power. It has reflected the experience and interests of a tiny elite of the world's population. Therefore all existing knowledge has been tainted by the exclusions of class, race, gender, imperial power, necessitating scrutiny and a strategy for coming to terms with this legacy.

With respect to gender, the social division of labour according to gender has cut deeply into the process of knowing. It has done so most overtly through the historical exclusion of women from the process of philosophy, science, politics, etc. It has done so more subtly through the psychological severing of personality according to gender, such that the masculine has been identified with the rational, the theoretical, the scientific, the political and the feminine has been identified with the emotional, the experiential, the personal, the domestic

Knowledge has developed in a way which has included the 'masculine' and excluded the 'feminine', not only by including the male of the species and excluding the female, but by representing the perspective of male experience of the world and not the female and also by the dominance of 'masculine' characteristics within the process of knowing itself, leading to a distorted concept of rationality. Feminism has contested this, giving rise to a spectrum of positions representing different epistemological perspectives and political strategies.

A certain dialectic has been played out in these struggle towards liberation. At first, those who are outsiders to the dominant forms of social power demand inclusion, more or less within existing structures of power and modes of thought. Thus demands for participation of proletarians or africans or women within mainstream institutions within an epistemology of empiricism and a politics of liberalism, neo-liberalism or social democracy.

For some, however, there comes a realisation that patriarchy / racism / capitalism / imperialism have shaped the very essence of the social order and penetrated to the very core of personality. Therefore to adopt the dominant modes of working, thinking, writing, living will not do any more. Rationality itself is seen as distorted through its association with the male / white / ruling class experience of the world and its exclusion of the other. For some this moves to the impulse to negation, rejection, separatism, giving rise to various forms of radical feminism, black power / black consciousness. It veers from an ontology of essentialism to an epistemology of social constructivism to a politics of sectarian isolation or postmodernist fragmentation bordering on nihilism.

The best of movements mobilising on gender or race have done so within larger narratives and broader movements.

With respect to Africa, there has been profound ferment leading to a radical retelling of the story of Africa. Starting from a critique of eurocentrism as intellectual rationale for colonialism, as an ethnocentric particularity claiming false universality, it has generated a whole variety of positions. Within african liberation movements, africanism contended with

marxism in a struggle to analyse the problem and point to a solution, both raising profound questions about colonisation at the level of consciousness. However, neo-liberalism, pushing aside such questions, prevails for the time being.

Nevertheless it is contested. An extreme reaction is afrocentrism, stronger in enclaves of America than in Africa, but its position put forth in South Africa, for example by the VC of UKZN. Afrocentrism is understandable as a corrective to a racist, colonialist, imperialist view of Africa, but problematic in its preoccupation with a romanticised rural past, its tendency to a static, essentialised, homogenised view of african personality and thought, myopia about gender, class and global structures of power, an ideological position of identification with kings rather than their subjects and slaves, with oppressors rather than oppressed.

Fanon is still a serious voice on this, warning against an emphasis on racial identity over colonialism and its ongoing effects, against a retreat into blind alleys of seeing past glories as pathways to the future, against the ideological position of a national bourgeoisie, a parasitic class mediating between metropolitan capital and african masses. There are in S Africa critiques of black economic empowerment along such lines.

Through all of this, marxism is still there, sadder, wiser, quieter, still seeing race and gender within a whole field of interacting forces, struggling through hard times.

These movements, these debates, those I have so sketchily outlined here, as well as many more, have shaped the university as I have known it. These movements demanded inclusion of the excluded, not only in admissions, but in curriculum as well in ways that I have only briefly indicated. The role of the university in society, the very foundations of academic disciplines, have been subjected to the deepest scrutiny.

Ideas sparked and passions flared in debates between contending paradigms in classrooms, common rooms and conferences as well as on the streets. Large scale contending paradigms were in collision: positivism, neo-positivism, marxism, pragmatism, postmodernism. There were also feminism, ecology, black power / black consciousness. There was a demand for history from below, history from the point of view of the working class, of women, of the colonised. New fields came into being: gender studies, african studies, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies.

The energy of this engagement has subsided. It is not completely gone (and as long as I have breath in me, it won't, because it has decisively formed my sense of what a university should be). There are many reasons for this falling off. It is not as if any of the problems at core of these great debates have been solved or that contending paradigms have been defeated. It is that many have learned to live with problems unacknowledged or unresolved or to settle for resolution at a less than fundamental level. The confrontations of world views have given way to unreflective particularity or low level eclecticism. There is a narrowing of perspective and a retreat from engagement, whether through myopia, ignorance, shallowness, confusion, fear or careerism.

Almost without anyone noticing, all of the great debates that set minds racing and passions flaring have been marginalised to near extinction by the dominance of neo-liberal ideology and its agenda of marketisation of universities.

A new orthodoxy has taken command, not so much by winning arguments, but by wielding systemic power on a global scale. Some predict the end of universities in this century. Already commercial content providers and their customers are lining up to replace universities, professors and students.

Imperatives of decreasing public funding, commercialisation, privatisation, competitiveness are repeated and recycled as if there were no alternative. We should not concede that there is no alternative. There has never been such wealth in the world, yet we are told that public spending in education must decrease. Why? It is particularly absurd in Ireland at the moment, where the economy is booming. The demand for privatisation of public property, of the whole public sphere, is an ideological orthodoxy, not an economic necessity and it is not in the public interest.

On one level there is a flourishing of research in the sense that there is a lot of it going on. There is much funding, many metrics, all sorts of empirical studies. Much of this is interesting and valuable, although a lot of it is bland, trivial, useless. Many studies are short and shallow and driven by market demand and fast-track careerism.

Theory is not thriving in this arena. Universities are being harnessed to operate by market norms and survival of the fittest in commercial competition is outstripping other forms of validation, particularly truth criteria, theoretical depth and breadth, moral responsibility, political engagement. There are powerful pressures disincentivising, eroding, marginalising critical thinking, creative thinking, systemic thinking, especially systemic thinking.

So much of what I hear, read, review is so half-baked. Conceptualisation is weak and confused. Contextualisation is thin and random. Conclusions are bland and shallow. Writing is pretentious, clumpy, uninspired and uninspiring. It is not high quality. It is being driven by metric dashboards and promotion prospects and not by curiosity, exploration, conviction.

There are many problems, many reasons. There is a forcing of the pace of publication as the pressure of university league tables ramps up and the prospect of fast-track promotion up the academic ladder opens up to those who produce the metrics that create competitive advantage in this new scenario. Publish or perish is overproducing mediocre work, creating clutter, valuing quantity over quality. There is anyway a huge problem about quality. By what criteria do you judge it in a culture that has undermined criteria? This is particularly true in our own disciplines. Instead of facing up to the epistemological problems, it is easier just to count things.

Much of what has gone on in a number of disciplines under threat of marginalisation has contributed to that marginalisation. There has been an unravelling of powerful explanatory concepts into a confused dissipation of explanatory energy.

Across disciplines, various forms of neopositivism and postmodernism prevail. While they may be very different in many ways, from the plodding particularity of the one to the deconstructionist exotica of the other, they have much in common. They are both plays of the plural, skates along the surfaces, evasions of the heights and the depths.

I could elaborate on the origins of each of these isms, the studies conducted under their influence and ideological bases of their methodologies and conclusions. However, I would like to crystallise all of this into one major point.

It is a central paradox of our times: never has there been such a totalising systematising force as contemporary global capitalism and yet never has there been such inhibition of synthesising systemic thinking. The centralising market decentres the psyche. It thins out public space and breaks the bonds of social solidarity. Instead of addressing and challenging the disintegration, academics have been paralysed by a profound disorientation in the face of these forces.

Universities are contested terrain, but not to the extent that they should be. The humanities and social sciences are in a particularly weakened state. Many academics in these areas are colluding in the dessication of these disciplines. I do not mean disciplines as opposed to interdisciplinarity, a debate going on here. I mean the whole *mélange* of what has been called the humanities.

The marketisation of our universities, as part of the overall commodification of knowledge and all else, is the biggest driving force in academe today. I challenged the president of my university to a debate about this last year. There was massive attendance, interest and expression of unease, but unease is a long way from resistance. We need more debate and more than debate about what is happening to our universities. Academics at UKZN went on strike a year ago with demands about their pay and conditions but also raised the question of the marketisation of universities. However, I see no sustained resistance on any systemic scale when I look around me. I would be quite pessimistic about the possibility of reversing this current any time soon, but that is no excuse for blowing in the wind. We have scope for resistance and for alternative activity in how we teach, write, supervise, participate in meetings, in all aspects of our work. Keeping the terrain contested is itself an achievement in the current climate.

I have found the strength of these global trends particularly disturbing here in SA where they function to subvert the project of deep transformation. There has obviously been a dramatic demographic shift, easily evident in traversing this campus, but the reduction of transformation to racial profiling is far short of the prospect of people's education raised in the days of struggle. I have been looking for signs of a transformative intellectual project striving to fulfill the promise of a liberation movement come to power. I have sometimes found here in academic studies, conversations, seminars a more active and meaningful intellectual engagement than I find elsewhere, particularly in celtic-tiger-land, where I live my everyday professional life.

There is a continuation of history from below, a literature and literary criticism probing the intricacies of a society in transition, studies of hiv/aids, land reform, gender, housing,

unemployment, poverty, black economic empowerment, social movements. There is active engagement and not just pursuit of research ratings. Yet I get the impression that the best is behind not ahead, that the energy of intellectual engagement was in the liberation movement not in liberation, however problematic the nature of liberation. While progressive work continues, there is sense of each being alone or nearly alone with it, a thinning out of public space, the absence of a strong sense of a collective project.

Meanwhile commercialisation proceeds. What I believe should be opposed is not any commercialisation whatsoever, but the dominance of a culture of commercialisation and its effect on the idea of the university, the ethos of the university. What should be opposed is the downgrading of epistemological and ethical norms and their displacement by market norms. What should be opposed is the death of the intellectual, the birth of the salesman, in our universities. It is not the market as such that is the problem. It is the dominance of the market vis a vis other forces, the inroads of the market into where it does not belong, particularly in core activities of education and health.

What is really causing disquiet is the growing university-industrial complex, its threat to the intellectual integrity of the university, its erosion of the public sector ethos of the university.

As market priorities take hold, there is an upgrading of some disciplines and downgrading of others. Biotechnology and IT are up; history and philosophy are down. There are universities now without departments of history or philosophy. Not that such departments are the only ways to carry these forward. But more profoundly there is a waning of historical and philosophical consciousness on a larger scale and it has consequences. We don't see the big picture, we lose the plot of the story in which we are living, we don't scrutinise the nature of the system generating the imperatives by which we live and work. Sometimes I am stunned by how unintellectual, even anti-intellectual, universities can be these days.

We need to scrutinise these new orthodoxies, particularly the way that market imperatives are driving teaching and research. There is a downgrading of teaching in relation to research, and much of it research of questionable value. There is a distortion of research by questionable priorities in research funding, but also by preoccupation with research funding. Funding is increasingly being shaped by a market ethos, rather than a public service ethos, even when it is public sector funding. Research is being judged by the funding it brings in even more than what it puts out. Outputs are assessed in terms of numbers of articles in specific peer reviewed journals deemed to be of high quality. Whether they are high quality is another matter.

The league tables for universities, the star system for researchers, off-the-scale salaries, ruthless careerism: these are not what have driven knowledge forward. They will not nurture wisdom.

We need to ask how the funding of research in all areas is shaping the nature of projects, choice of methodologies, disclosure of results. There are worrying cases of slanting or suppression of results. There are conflicts of confidentiality v collegiality, private interests v public good.

Our criteria must be primarily epistemological and ethical, not commercial. We must give the questions: is it true? is it moral? is it socially useful? absolute priority over: will it sell? We cannot allow survival of the fittest in commercial competition to outstrip all other forms of validation: truth criteria, theoretical depth & breadth, moral responsibility, social engagement.

A primary task of our work as academics is to scrutinise the dominant agenda of universities and the dynamics of the global system in which universities are embedded. There is still space for critical, creative, systemic thinking in our universities, even if there are pressurising, corrupting, disincentivising pressures against it.

How are we using that space? We may be witnessing a marginalisation of crucial areas of knowledge within the overall scheme of things, but we will only accentuate this by playing the game as it is being presented to us, by capitulating to the dominant agenda, by trimming our sails, by producing the required metrics, by doing small studies and evading the big questions.

The core activity of the university must be to seek truth and, when necessary, to speak truth to power.

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