Article

Contesting Ideas of a University: The Case of South Africa

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Abstract: This article portrays four historically evolved ideas of a university, as they have developed in the South African context, namely the British liberal-humanistic education idea, the Afrikaner idea of an ethnically-oriented developmental university, the idea of an African university, and the idea of a university proclaimed by neo-liberal economics. The global significance of this contest, as it plays out itself on South African soil, is noted.

Keywords: African university; neo-liberal economics; liberal-humanistic education; South Africa; university

1. Introduction

Constituting the pinnacle of any national education system, the university occupies a very special place in society. Large amounts of (public as well as private) resources are invested in the university, it is accorded much respect, and, moreover, the university is given a huge task. This task includes, for example to equip the elite among the youth (those privileged enough to receive university education) with a hierarchy of values. In the developing world, the university, as the top education institution, is expected to serve as instrument of modernization and economic development of a nation. In an age of a knowledge economy, or with respect to its role with regard to a nation's competitiveness in a global economy (*cf.* [1], p. 46), the university assumes even more, and growing significance.

As is the case with any institution in society, the university, too, is driven and shaped by an idea of what a university is or should be. The concept of the "idea of the university" has also been thrashed out

in the scholarly literature on higher education, ever since the appearance, in the mid-nineteenth century, of John Henry Newman's [2] seminal book *The Idea of a University* [3]. While the university has, over the course of a long history, come to assume a series of generic functions, the idea of a university is shaped by the contours of national contexts in which universities are embedded. In this national context several contesting ideas of the university can be at play.

The South African case offers an interesting case-study of such a competing set of ideas of the university. Not only an interesting case, but noteworthy for the international community, given the commonality between South Africa and (at least large parts of) the rest of the world. These commonalities include (but are not limited to) a history of (British) colonialism, imperatives for forging national unity and for creating capital as well as for economic development and modernization, and the existence of a multi-cultural population.

The aim of this paper is to map out the constellation of ideas of a university rife in the South African context. The paper commences with a depiction of the functions in society which the university has come to assume, as a result of an evolution of well-nigh a millennium. The four ideas of a university which have developed within the South African context are then discussed. These are the British idea of a university as an institution offering a liberal-humanistic education, the Afrikaner idea of an ethnic-specific developmental university, the idea of an Afro-centric university, and the idea stemming from the global hegemony of neo-liberal economics. In conclusion the significance of the denouement of this play of forces of ideas, for the global readership is spelled out.

2. The Function of the University in Society

The history of the university can (arguably) be traced back to 11th century Europe, the first universities then being the University of Paris, the University of Bologna and the University of Salerno [4]. Of these three, the University of Paris has the longest history. The cathedral school at the Notre Dame Church on an island on the river Seine, which runs through Paris, has the longest history of these three proto-universities. The big drawing card of the cathedral school in Paris was the reputation of two very competent teachers, Peter the Lombard, and his student Abelard. Students from all over Europe flocked to be taught by these two teachers. The school became overfull, to the extent that the bishop found it difficult to fulfill his ecclesiastical duties. He therefore asked the two teachers to take their students and to leave the cathedral and the island, and to continue with the education activities on the left bank of the Seine (which is up to today the university quarter of Paris). Once they were on the left bank, the students and masters were no longer under the direct supervision and control of the bishop, and freedom and independence of thought and speech and intellectual inquiry, *i.e.*, academic freedom, developed. Soon tension built up between the bishop on the one hand, and on the other, the students and masters. When the bishop attempted to reassert his authority, the students and masters appealed to the pope (as head of the Roman Catholic Church). The pope feared he could lose this intellectual bastion in his (and Christendom's) battle against Islam, so he sided with the students and masters. In 1080 he issued a decree proclaiming the students and masters independent from the control of the bishop. This year 1080 is then taken as year one of the University of Paris. Thus the principle of autonomy from church and political authorities as a hallmark of a university came to be established. It should be added that this was no absolute autonomy, the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church in

Medieval Europe, also with respect to the creation and dissemination of knowledge was ever present. Other key features of a university, which distinguish it from a school were: (1) a university was for comparatively adult students, and engaged itself with advanced levels of education; (2) students came from far (in the case of the medieval university students hailed from all over Europe) and not only from the immediate environment; and (3) individual professors were the drawing card.

Soon the institution of the university spread all over Europe. In 1167 the University of Oxford came into being as the first university in England, and in 1385 the University of Heidelberg as the first German university.

After the Middle Ages the university receded in the background in Europe. Neither in the Renaissance nor in the life of figures of the Eighteenth Century Europe such as Voltaire or Montesquie did the university figure. At the time of the French Revolution, the Universities in France were abolished in 1793 ([5], p. 17). The next major event in the evolution of the university was the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, and the pioneering work of Wilhelm von Humboldt.

After the humiliating defeat of the Prussian armies at the hand of Napoleon at Jena in 1806, the Prussian king looked for ways of restoring Prussia's greatness. He saw in education a means to that end, and for this purpose he founded the University of Berlin, as the pinnacle of the new Prussian education. Friedrich Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) was tasked to establish this university.

Berlin University was not intended to be a mere addition to the set of existing universities, but was to be the embodiment a totally new concept of the university. The main emphasis was laid on scientific research rather than teaching and examining, and with this in view the professors were chosen for their capacity to make original contributions to the furtherance of learning. Secondly they (these professors) were granted freedom in teaching and in research, confirming a principle set by the Medieval university, as explained above. The university, moreover, was, as its medieval counterpart, granted autonomy to manage its own affairs, without any fear of interference by the state. Through the opening of Johns Hopkins University in the United States of America (USA), in 1876, this model spread to the USA ([6], p. 49) and eventually it made its impact felt all over the world.

The next milestone in the development of the modern university was the establishment of the "Land Grant Colleges" in the United States of America, following the Land Grant Act (or the Morrill Act) of 1862. The Morrill Act funded educational institutions by granting federally controlled land to the *states* for them to sell to raise funds to establish and endow "land-grant" colleges. The mission of these institutions as set forth in the 1862 Act was to focus on the teaching of practical subjects such as agriculture, science, military science and engineering. These institutions strengthened the nexus between community and university, and brought to the fore another function of the university, namely (community) service.

Historically, the university has come to fulfill six functions in society. These *de facto* functions should be distinguished from the *idea* of a university, which is a mental construct harboured by people; although every particular idea of the university includes a view as to the function(s) of a university. The first of these is teaching. This function has been present ever since the days of the first universities of the late-Middle Ages. Teaching of a dual nature took place, namely a general academic grounding in basic disciplines, and secondly a more vocationally directed teaching, originally for the higher professions (such as Medicine, Law and the Ministry), but in recent times these have been expanded to

the full round of lower professions (such as teachers, pharmacists, nurses or travel agents) and even beyond.

The second function is that of research. Research too has a dual nature. Firstly basic (or "blue sky") research takes place, with the aim of pushing back the frontiers of knowledge. Secondly, applied research takes place, using knowledge to solve practical problems experienced by society. Thus the university is involved in promoting knowledge exchange and to see to it that knowledge generated make an impact in the lives of people. These two basic functions, teaching and research, are believed to exist in symbiosis and mutually reinforcing each other. Indeed, empirical research has shown that teaching proficiency and research productivity of academics, are positively correlated (*cf.* [7]).

A third function of the university is service. Of the above functions, *service* is perhaps the vaguest and least well circumscribed. Some definitions understand faculty *service* as "engagement", others as "out-reach" ([8], p. 175). Ward [9] gives a thorough and clear explication of the range of activities which (could) fall under faculty service. These he classifies as internal and external service. Internal service could, in turn, be divided into on-campus and off-campus (discipline/scholarly field oriented) service:

- on-campus service entails activities such as advising or counseling students (on matters outside the narrow scope of the curriculum), academic oversight, institutional governance and institutional support
- faculty are also involved in service activities to their disciplines or scholarly fields through various associations, e.g., professional/scientific societies (such as membership committees, program committees), or publication-related activities (e.g., serving on editorial boards or as reviewers) [8].
- external service is the way for higher education to put its expertise to use for various external stakeholders and can include consulting, service learning, community action-based research, community upliftment projects, participation in cultural activities and civic service.

Service can be paid or unpaid, but the common factor among all service activities is that it is based on the expertise of faculty.

A fourth function of the university is to act as the conscience of society, to critique society (*cf.* [10], pp. 3–4). This function assumes particular significance in an era where societies and governments are subscribing to the Creed of Human Rights, and where humankind is facing challenges and critical issues such as the eco-crisis, biotechnology or genetic manipulation. The university can fulfill this function only if it operates on a basis of autonomy, and not stand under the influence of government or any interest group in society. In order to be articulate as the conscience of society, the university should not fear any sanctions of harm from the side of those who are the object of the social critique emanating from the university. While there is no guarantee that the university will act as the conscience of society (knowledge on for example genetic manipulation can be used in ways antithetical to the goal of acting as conscience of society), absence of being under the influence of any interest group in society with devious motives, maximizes the chances of the university acting as conscience of society.

A fifth function of the university is the preservation, transmittance and the promotion of culture, of the best and highest products of culture bestowed by and for humankind (*cf.* [11]). This is most salient, but by no means limited to the objects of art, *i.e.*, literature, language, painting.

A sixth and final function of the university is with regard to innovation. This pertains to innovation requiring high levels of expertise knowledge of a scholarly type. This is evident in the number of patents flowing from universities, and this function has assumed importance especially in the era of a knowledge society/economy which is currently dawning.

Expectations of and Regard for Education in Modern Society

The role of the university—as the top educational institution—in contemporary society should be viewed within the context of the surging expectations and regard for education harbored by modern society. After centuries of being at the fringe of society, and being part of the lives of but a tiny minority of people, education moved to the center of public and private life after the middle of the twentieth century.

The post-war decades ushered in a dynamic period for education, with the development of UNESCO (founded in 1945) and the slow inclusion of educational issues within institutions such as the World Bank and USAID. This post-war era, also a time of decolonization worldwide, focused considerable attention on the relationship of education to national development.

The sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) could be regarded as the founder of structural-functionalism, a sociological theory which took center stage in theories of society in the decades after the Second World War, reaching its zenith in the 1960s. Structural-functionalism views society as a harmoniously functioning whole. Every system (such as the economic system, political system, education, *etc.*) performs a function and contributes to the smooth, successful functioning of society as a whole. Similarly, every institution (every school, family, church, enterprise, cultural organization, *etc.*) contributes to the successful functioning of society as a whole. Changes in one system or institution will inevitably lead to changes in all the others; indeed change could deliberately be planned in one system to effect desired changes in others. From there, the ceilingless belief in the potential of education to induce any kind of change desired by society—economic growth, social mobility, eradication of unemployment, combat of crime or whatever, could be effected by just providing more education. Theodor Schultz' human capital theory, the thesis of which was that (educated, trained) human capital is the single most important factor of economic growth, heralded a revolution in thinking about economic development [12].

Modernization theory, a derivate theory of structural functionalism, held that the developing countries needed economic, social and political development; and the fastest and cheapest way to effect these developments, would be to just to supply the people in these countries with more education ([12], p. 49). Modernization became the most important theoretical framework in Comparative Education during the 1960s and early 1970s ([13], p. 516). Although there later has been much critique against modernization theory's narrow conceptualization of development in terms of economic development only, and even—from the side of dependency theory the accusation that education in its present form reinforces Western hegemony and third world dependency [14], the belief in education lingers on in the minds of politicians, policy makers and the public at large.

The limitless belief in education, held not only by educationists, but also by politicians, financial, industrial and business leaders, developmental experts, newspaper editors and the public at large, explained above paved the way for a massive expansion of education worldwide during the decades following

the Second World War, reaching maximum momentum in the 1960s. This expansion is well documented in two classic publications in the field of Comparative Education, Philip Coombs' *The world education crisis: a systems approach* (1968) [15] and *The world crisis in education: the view from the eighties* (1985) [16].

Not the least was the explosion of higher education enrolments and gross higher education enrolment ratios. This surge of higher education enrolments and higher education enrolment ratios have picked up momentum since 1950 and are still showing no signs of abating. Indeed in the first decade of the twenty first century enrolments have almost doubled while the global higher education gross enrolment ratio has grown by approximately 50 percent, from 19 percent in 2000, to reach 30 percent in 2010 [17]. Several scholars have remarked that the world is currently experiencing a higher education revolution. Foremost is surely the UNESCO report on higher education, authored by renowned higher education scholar Philip Altbach and his co-authors [1]. This revolution can be summarized by one key word, namely "massification" [3]. The past quarter of a century, since 1990, a global higher education has taken off, the signature feature of this revolution is massification. This revolution, this spectacular expansion of higher education, has been made possible by a combination of factors. These include higher levels of affluence (the global economic upsurge which put higher education within reach of ever more people), the information and communications technology revolution, and the wave of democratization (with its attendant Creed of Human Rights, making more and more people felt they are entitled to higher education) (*cf.* [18]).

3. Ideas of the University on the South African Landscape

The above outlined generic idea of a university and its function in South Africa, gets distorted or fine-tuned by a play of forces in every national context. In the South African context, four different and contesting ideas of the university are evident, namely the British liberal idea, the Afrikaner ethnic-oriented development idea, the Afro-centric idea, and the neo-liberal idea of a university.

3.1. The British Liberal-Humanistic Education Idea of a University

The first university in South Africa was the University of Good Hope founded in 1873 under the auspices of the then British colonial administration. This university was not involved in teaching but instead, laid down syllabi, conducted examinations, and awarded degrees for teaching done at colleges such as the South African College (Cape Town) and the Victoria College (Stellenbosch). The University Act No. 12 of 1916 made provision for the establishment of a federal examining university to be called the University of South Africa, located in Pretoria. This university would incorporate the University of the Cape of Good Hope. In time its constituent colleges became autonomous universities: Stellenbosch University (Victoria College in 1916), University of Cape Town (South African College in 1916), Witwatersrand University in 1922, University of Pretoria in 1930, University of Natal in 1949, University of the Orange Free State in 1950, Rhodes University in 1951, and Potchefstroom University in 1951. Once its constituent colleges became independent universities, the University of South Africa became a correspondence (distance teaching) university in 1951. All these institutions were meant to cater for the White population. Tertiary education for Black South Africans commenced in 1916 when

the South African Native College was established at Fort Hare. This institution became putatively autonomous in 1949 under the name of the University of Fort Hare.

These institutions, all founded in the era when South Africa was a British colony (since 1926 a Commonwealth dominium), were copies of universities in the motherland, Britain, which means they were based on the template of the British liberal-humanistic education idea of a university.

The idea of the British liberal-humanistic education university was for the first time extensively articulated in the publication of Newman [2] cited above, and was still very prominent in the Report of the Robbins Commission of 1963, which set the course for the massive expansion drive of universities in the United Kingdom in the 1960s.

The liberal idea of a university contends that education is an endeavor worthwhile in itself ([19], p. 75), and also that knowledge should be pursued for its own sake, for the sake of knowledge ([20], p. 10). This contention therefore eschews an instrumental view of education, *i.e.*, viewing education narrowly as preparation for a vocation. In as far as there does exist an aim or objective of education, the aim of education is character building. In as far as knowledge serves a purpose, it is in seeking truth. Secondly knowledge serves to mold the cognitive faculties, such as critical and independent thinking. As far as the curriculum is concerned traditionally great value was attached to the study of the classics (Greek-Roman culture and languages, *i.e.*, Classical Greek and Latin). To this was later added the Humanities. This view of the university is a very elitist one: that the university is only for the elite and for the education of an elite.

While the advocates of this idea in South Africa have been mainly academics of an older generation located in the English medium historically White universities—and they make up an ever decreasing percentage of the South African academic profession, they are by no means the only ones harboring these views. Internationally this view, or at least part of it is still very much alive, for example the value attached to the study of the Humanities, in the writings of Higher Education scholar Philip Altbach ([3], p. 249) or Martha Nussbaum [21].

3.2. The Afrikaner Idea of an Ethnic-Oriented Developmental University

The White segment of the South African population consists of two sub-sections: the Afrikaners (65 percent of the White population, and descendants of mainly Dutch immigrants, who settled in the erstwhile Dutch colony of the Cape) and the English (35 percent of the population, this sub-section began from immigrants from the United Kingdom since the Cape became a British colony in 1806). At the beginning of the twentieth century the Afrikaner subsection was still, financially and educationally, far behind the English sub-section of the White segment. However, as they caught up during the first four decades of the twentieth century, they also became more assertive, and as part of that drive, took over the Universities of Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Free State, and Potchefstroom, changing the language of learning and teaching of those universities from English to Afrikaans and imbuing those institutions with an Afrikaner character and ethos.

A key date in the history of South Africa is 1948. In that year the National Party came to power. It implemented a program of rigorous *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation policies (apartheid)—a typical colonial setup, *de facto* racial segregation had always been a characteristic of South African society. The advocates of apartheid believed that the separation of the races (and of the various ethnic

groupings within the Black race) would enable each grouping to develop to prosperity upon the basis and along the lines of its own culture. For this purpose, 10 putative autonomous states (so-called homelands) were created within the borders of South Africa for the various ethnic groupings. Each was to have its own government, school system, universities, and so forth. Consequently, such universities were created, each exclusively for students of a particular ethnic group. In this way, on the basis of this idea of a university, in the next four decades the University of the North, the University of Zululand, the University of Durban-Westville, the University of the Western-Cape, the University of the Transkei, the University of Bophuthatswana, the University of Venda and the Vista University came into being. The mission of the University of Fort Hare (mentioned above) was also reconceptualised along these lines. Furthermore, two additional White universities, the Rand Afrikaans University and the University of Port Elizabeth were established, also upon the apartheid ideological basis.

This Afrikaner hosted idea of a university sees the university as serving a particular ethnically-defined constituency, by playing a pivotal role in supplying the human resources for the upliftment of that community; not only the economic upliftment, but also the socio-cultural. Such a view of the role of the university in a developing country and community, as the liberal model, sees the university's role as primarily that of teaching, rather than research.

3.3. The Africanistic Idea of a University

The idea of segregated education was widely condemned among Black South Africans as inferior education meant to perpetuate inequality and White domination (*cf.* [22–24]). In fact, in the socio-political turmoil in the run-up to the 1994 Constitutional reforms, education was one of the major rallying points of Black dissatisfaction. The South African government did not succeed in selling its policies to the international community either. Especially after 1961 (when the country ceded from the Commonwealth and became an independent republic), South Africa was subjected to a barrage of international sanctions and isolation measures across a wide field of trade, economic, political, diplomatic, educational, cultural, sports, and other matters. In the field of universities, the international academic boycott took effect (*cf.* [25]).

Under the growing Black intellectual community another idea of a university, that of the Africanist university has grown. This idea links with ideas of other scholars in Africa on what the African university should be, which has been forged ever since the countries became independent in the 1960s. This idea was perhaps first elaborately explained in Yesufu's landmark book published in 1973 [26]. This idea also links with the broader philosophies of Pan-Africanism, *Négritude*, and the Black Consciousness Movement; and resonated well in an era of the decolonization of Africa and with the African nations and countries coming of age.

The Africanist idea of a university, as expressed by for example Izevbaye [27], strives to transform the Western imported university in Africa into an institution reflecting African values and philosophy, playing its role in the shaping of an authentic African identity and in the assignment of combating post-colonialism/neo-colonialism, and wants the curriculum of universities to reflect and to teach the natural and cultural heritage of Africa, instead of teaching the curricula taken over from Western universities. The university should also not exist as an "ivory tower" in society, or train some tiny elite; but

those who have been through university education, should be equipped with what is needed to be of service to communities in Africa.

3.4. Neo-Liberal Economics' Idea of the University

1994 is the next key-date in South African history. A new constitutional dispensation commenced, based on a liberal Western democratic type of Constitution and universal adult suffrage (up to 1994 the right to vote was limited to White South Africans). After the first elections, the ANC (African National Congress) took over the reins of government from the National Party (the party which represented the interests of the Afrikaner Whites). While the ANC is by nature of its history, basic philosophy and constituency, sympathetic towards the Africanist idea of a university, they were in formulating and implementing policy constrained by three factors. Firstly, existing legislation, and certain sections of the Constitution safeguarded the autonomy of universities, precluding wholesale state intervention. Secondly there was the existing historical legacy, in many instances with powerful interests behind it. Thirdly, as was the case with economic policy (where the historic inclination of the ANC would have been towards a state-regulated distributed economy), with respect to higher education policies the party as government found themselves in the straightjacket of the new world order, the hegemony of Neo-Liberal Economics (*cf.* [28]).

The university circumscribed by the dictates of neo-liberal economics is based on the principles of neo-liberal economics. These are the profit-motive, efficiency, accountability, performativity, and managerialism (*cf.* [18]). State financial support for the university is scaled down, as the burden of funding is shifted towards the clients (students) (*cf.* [18]). Education is seen as having a pure instrumentalist value, of creating human capital (*cf.* [28]). It is clear that with a university based on this idea, not only functions such as the preservation and promotion of culture, or the critique of society, but the very founding principle of academic autonomy of the university are all thrown out of the window. The combined power of governments and the industrial-financial complex in the Global North, together with that of multinational companies and international organizations such as the World Bank-International Monetary Fund, the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and International Aid organizations, exercise a strong force on especially universities in the countries of the Global South to conform to the neo-liberal economic revolution's idea of a university.

4. Conclusions: International Relevance of the Denouement of the South African Experience

In the two decades since 1994, amidst government policies of desegregating education, and vigorous affirmative action appointment and promotion policies in the public and private sectors of employment, the number of Black academics at all universities has steadily been rising. While—at the risk of overgeneralization—it could be stated that they will subscribe to, and to various degrees promote, the Africanist notion of a university they will encounter, in this quest, a number of obstacles, even counter-forces, in the form of historical legacies, proponents of other ideas of a universities, and a powerful neo-liberal world order.

What is taking place in South Africa is not without relevance for the international world. Traces of the forces between the main ideas of a university, playing out in South Africa, can be found in the rest of the world too. The (British) idea of a liberal university stems directly from the Medieval through the

Humboldt University, has informed the establishment of universities all over Europe, in the Commonwealth and erstwhile European colonies in the Global South and beyond, is still present to various degrees all over the world, and still find its advocates in leading intellectuals (such as Martha Nussbaum) and Higher Education scholars (such as Altbach) alike. If the segregation facet (which has since the inception of Afrikaner idea based universities) can be taken out of the equation, then it can be said that the idea of a developmental university, oriented to the needs of one section of society, is rife in many parts of the world. Here comes to mind for example Ain Shaims Women University in Cairo, Al-Azher University in Egypt forming the pinnacle of the Al-Azher Islam education system in Egypt, the Women's Colleges in the USA, Tuskegee and the other 106 HBCU Colleges and Universities in the USA, which historically focus on the education of Afro-Americans. Then there are also attempts such as the Chinese community in Malaysia who wanted to establish Murdek University, for the Chinese speaking community in Malaysia; or attempts by the Kurds in the Middle East to establish a Kurdish University. That such universities, however parochial their missions might seem, can reach the league of the top universities in the world, is clear from Rosso's (2011) [29] publication. Rosso [30] discusses a number of mission-driven universities which attained world-class status, e.g., Aligarh Muslim University in the North of India, Banains Hindu University in India, and Chulalongkorn University (founded on the mission statement to protect and promote traditional Thai values and culture, in the face of creeping Western hegemony) in Thailand. As far as the Africanistic idea of the university is concerned, this idea will surely resonate throughout the Global South, where concern about Northern dominance and post-colonialism or neo-colonialism is ceaselessly heard. Finally neo-liberalist idea of university is putting its stamp on universities in all corners of the world, much to the chagrin of those (and it could easily be said without gainsay, the majority of the academic profession) harboring other ideas of the university. As these ideas play out itself in a Hegelian pattern of thesis-antithesis-synthesis on the terrain of South African universities, they will form a rich source of material feeding international studies on the idea of the university, contributing to ensure that such studies and informed debate on the basis of such comparative international studies lay ultimately the basis for the best university or kaleidoscope of universities for humankind.

Author Contributions

Each co-author has had a fifty percent share in the production of the paper, including the design of the research, the conduct of the research and the writing of the paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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