

Chapter Two

Patriotism, Relevance and the Capacity to Think: Whereto for the South African University in the Information Age?

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Introduction

In a wide-ranging lecture about the role of the university in the information age at the University of the Western Cape in 2009, Manuel Castells (2009:1) made the point that universities were primarily about *processing information*: “In a context of a technological revolution and in the context of a revolution in communication, the university ... (is) a central actor of scientific and technological change.” What he was drawing attention to was the *central* role of the university in being able to work with the extraordinary quantum and volume of information – ideas, concepts, discourses, policies, theories and analyses – that the technological revolution has made available to us, and to our ability to be able to engage critically with it, to see its strengths, weaknesses and, critically, that which it obscures.

Important about the intervention Castells was making, was the emphasis he lay on how much one should remain aware of the social dynamics surrounding the process of processing information. Universities, he argued, had to acknowledge how much inequality stalked the economies of the world. He urged that, along with becoming better processors of information, they should, simultaneously, “become the critical source of equalisation of chances and democratisation of society by making possible equal opportunities for people....[thereby] contributing to social equality” (Castells, 2009:1). In the way he framed the issues, Castells was talking to a fundamental challenge facing us in the South African university. How were, and are, we going to work

with the apparently oppositional projects of what he calls “equalisation” and the technology revolution and its extraordinary new possibilities? Elsewhere he brings together these questions of the social and the technological – the great challenges of inequality in the broader society and the possibilities inherent in the information age – to suggest that they constitute for us new questions about development and what we understand by it (Castells, 2014).

In this paper I attempt to sharpen the contradiction in Castells problematique. I use his foundational injunction in his major texts that we cannot, anywhere, step aside from the need to engage with the information revolution (Castells, 1996). In sharpening his contradiction, I argue that the informational explosion which Castells speaks of consists of more than the bounteous opportunities that come with new technologies. They also include, as part of the deepening democratisation through which the world is going, better understanding of information which we had previously not taken seriously, particularly in the colonial context, older knowledges, which we had historically ignored, marginalised and even delegitimised.

Important, then, about the contemporary era, is not just that we live in a knowledge economy, but that the knowledge economy is surrounded by and permeated with all the discursive contestations that would have been present and active before the world arrived at the state in which it currently finds itself. Critical about the technological revolution, therefore, is that the proliferation

of information happens as political struggles, economic wars and cultural contestations all continue. Important to understand, therefore, is that the volume of information at our disposal has increased but that it comes not as a neutral or impartial force. The South African university is having to confront this reality in heightened ways. While many institutions around the world have to deal with the realities, on the one hand, of colonialism and the subjugation of their *non-European* cultures, and, on the other, of their full absorption into the new global information revolution, what distinguishes the South African universities is that they were essentially founded on the principle of cultural superiority and inferiority. How the post-apartheid university, against this, understands development and understands its own agenda is deeply important. The question, in its fullness, speaks directly to the challenges that confront South Africa, and particularly to the way its colonial and racialised history of inequality at the local level pulls it in one direction while its dependence on the new global conditions over which it has little control pull it in another direction. What social, cultural and economic imaginations does a modern African social system cultivate for itself?

The university, I want to argue, is an important space for facilitating the emergence of new approaches to these questions. In presenting it as a critical site for facilitating this emergence, I want to develop for it a broader task than is generally constructed for it. At the heart of such a broader approach is knowledge and particularly the *informationally* dense form this knowledge takes. How does the university engage now with *all* that it knows?

The university for development: the two dominant approaches

In this paper the pathways that are being defined for the South African university in relation to these challenges, are critically explored. For ease of exposition I describe this challenge as the challenge of the *University for Development*. Because development is such a contested idea, it is

important to bring to the surface those meanings about it that circulate in the South African environment. In the first part of the paper, I distinguish between two prominent approaches, that of the national patriotic university and that of the human capital-intensive university. How, I ask, do these two dominant approaches help us in *processing* all the information we are aware of in front of us? What do they help us see and what do they obscure for us? In the second part of the paper, through a critical engagement with the alternatives, I attempt to develop a new synthesis for where the university could be going. In the course of getting to this, I keep in mind Castells' warning about how universities should be managing themselves in critical times such as this. He makes the point that universities, as one of the primary sites for the processing of knowledge, should not just depend on the availability of technology itself. The technologies by themselves, he warns, introduce into institutions cultures that they themselves do not have full knowledge of, and, more critically, are not in control of (Castells, 2009:1). What this raises is the reality that we may not always be able to take full control of all the factors in the environments in which we function, but we do need to understand them better. In the South African context, where we have historically struggled with understanding the full complexity of the factors informing our social circumstances, it is in our interests to be better informed about the options before us. In doing so, I keep in mind Castells' caution that "the quality, effectiveness and relevance of the university system will be directly related to the ability of people, society and institutions" (Castells, 2009:1). He is talking about us, we who now operate in these institutions.

The national patriotic university

How does the state think we should be operating in these new conditions? The approach of the state is, as might be expected, by no means singular, coherent and consistent. Different ministries bring different emphases to their approaches. Formally, the state's agenda is defined by White Paper 3 which defines the task of the

university as being that of “meet(ing) the challenges of a new non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society committed to equity, justice and a better life for all” (Department of Education, 1997:5), while, simultaneously, striving to grow and enhance the country’s already strong research culture. Interpreters have taken away from White Paper 3 a number of emphases. How this base commitment to *non-racialism*, *non-sexism* and *democracy* is interpreted by the state is important to understand.

An important interpretation of this commitment is evident in recent comments made by key government figures about the university. In what follows, I try to show what this view is all about.

In June 2014 the Minister of Science and Technology at an Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) conference on the humanities asked, “What is the language that the humanities have to offer to policymakers to contribute to the government’s vision of a prosperous, non-racial nation?” (Soudien, 2014a). She had suggested that the universities were not in their policies (and she had in mind a recent decision by the University of Cape Town to broaden its understanding of disadvantage beyond the use of ‘race’), reflecting the agenda of the state. What she meant was unclear, but she intimated that the University of Cape Town was not promoting the interests of black people. The president of the country, Mr Jacob Zuma, weighed in on the discussion and suggested that the mission of the university should be that of patriotism. He did not say that the universities were unpatriotic, but found himself in the midst of his closest allies who were of the view, as Jimmy Manyi, spokesperson for government at the time, said, that “universities could not ignore local issues in favour of ‘internationalism’”. Mr Zuma said that South Africa was a developmental state and ‘therefore its approach and attitude cannot be informed by European dictates’ (Redelinghuys, 2014: para 2).

What Mr Zuma meant by ‘patriotic’ is not without its subtleties. He argued that:

We must do everything possible to ensure that our universities never become what Antonio Gramsci described as ‘incubators of little monsters aridly trained for a job, with no general ideas, no general culture, no intellectual stimulation, but only with an infallible eye and a firm hand’. Graduates must emerge from universities as complete humans who have full appreciation of the history of our country, its present and its future. Students must emerge from universities as patriotic citizens willing to participate both in the conceptualisation and implementation of our progressive programme to transform society. We therefore need to reflect with regards to what extent our universities now reflect the changes that our country has been undergoing since 1994. (Zuma, 2014: line 75)

Implicit both in the tone and content of their questions of our universities was a sense of irritation with the universities. Academic freedom yes, but, as the President suggested, this academic freedom had to be used behind an already established progressive agenda – that of the state.

Central to this critique was and remains the contention that the foremost characteristic of the former white universities was their whiteness. They remained white in their orientation and, critically, white in whom they appointed. The *Report of the Ministerial Committee into Transformation and Social Cohesion in Higher Education*, prompted by a racial incident at the University of the Free State in 2008, found that there were problems of transformation at every institution. It made the comment that not a single institution in the country was free of challenge (Department of Education, 2008).

This critique provides one with a clear view of the kind of *development* in our society that this dominant approach would like to see. Professor Malegapuru Makgoba of the Transformation Oversight Committee, a committee instituted by Minister for Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande, suggested that the sector was in deep transformation trouble. He had developed what he called an *equity index*, which purported to

measure the degree to which institutions had transformed in terms of their racial composition and in relation to their capacity to produce research. He found that “It could take 43 years to achieve racial balance among staff in universities” (Jenvey, 2013). His own institution he declared to be in the middle of the range of institutions which had made progress. It was both demographically more representative and more research productive than most. It presented itself, according to Makgoba, as the foremost institution in the country in terms of addressing its development challenges. In contrast were the *problem* institutions of the country. Amongst these were UCT and Stellenbosch which, as he said, would take hundreds of years to transform. While they were doing well in terms of their research, they were not including the country’s black people. This development took a further twist in the context of the debate around UCT’s admissions policy which had moved away from using ‘race’ as the sole basis for its affirmative action measures.

Makgoba, drawing on his equity index went on to make the point that:

Almost 20 years post freedom, the Equity Indexes for students and staff in the higher education sector show that transformation is not only ‘painfully’ slow but also embarrassingly so. It is an open question whether this self-regulation (in the guise of autonomy) should be allowed to continue or should be reviewed. Given the vast investment in higher education since 1994 (over R238 billion up to and including 2013), the equity return needs to be interrogated. The equity index study shows that it is difficult to transform ‘privilege’ voluntarily and suggests that extraordinary measures are needed.

The question remains as to the reasons behind this slow progress: is it passive resistance or a denial of failure by the sector? Is it the abuse of autonomy or an abhorrence of accountability by the sector? Has government failed to provide clear unambiguous steering or monitoring mechanisms or has it been cowed by the voice of the ‘privileged’ at the expense of the

disadvantaged majority, shying away from doing that which is common sense in a democracy? Or is it another intrinsic problem inherent or integral to higher education such as conservatism? (Govender, Zondo and Makgoba, 2013: 1-11).

I will return in the concluding section of the paper to a larger assessment of the significance of this view for working in a knowledge rich environment. But let us look first at the human capital view of the knowledge economy.

The human capital imperative

The way in which the human capital argument lands and takes flight in the South African context is essentially to argue that apartheid distorted the distribution of skills amongst the people of the country. The task of the new state and its knowledge producing institutions is then to ensure that these skills are available to everybody. In this the universities become drivers of opportunity. Writing from the vantage point of the universities of technology, De Beer (2010:91) describes them as not merely “old institutions with new names but (as institutions which) are facing the challenge of earning their rightful place in the South African higher education sector.... as sites of innovation and economic development....”

Two important illustrations of this argument are to be found in the *Human Resource Development South Africa Draft Strategy for Discussion 2010-2030* (HRDSA, n.d) and in the *National Development Plan (NDP)* (National Planning Commission, 2011). Neither document, it needs to be said, presents itself as a straight blueprint for human capital development. In both documents there is awareness of the issues of inequality. Nonetheless, the essence of the position taken is that human resource development is essential for “supporting national economic growth and development” (HRDSA, n.d: 7). Kraak (2003: 661) spelled out the problem as follows:

The skills problem is found not only at the high-skills end of the spectrum, but also in the intermediate and low skills. Each of the skills bands

is experiencing acute problems in human resources development.

Kraak's argument situated itself firmly in the dynamic of the global economy and its shift in orientation away from a focus on low-cost labour and cheap materials towards

high-quality, high value-added export orientated manufacturing and services. ... A necessary corollary to this new production regime has been the attainment of high participation rates in general education and in particular, the development of multi-functional skill capabilities.... (The latter) can be acquired only through high levels of general education on which appropriate forms of vocational and career-oriented training can optimally be built. (Kraak, 2003: 662).

A major issue in this analysis is the low participation rate in higher education. As Kraak (HRDSA, nd: 17) argued elsewhere, low enrolments in further education and training, poor outputs of middle-skills levels, poor throughput rates, declines in the number of full-time researchers, all point to the important role of the higher education sector and particularly the universities. The HRDSA (nd:17) went on to say that "These developments in education and training had a dampening effect on the economy at a time when there was increased need for priority skills due to economic growth and renewal."

In relation to this, the NDP places a great reliance on the universities: "The country's higher education system will make a critical contribution to economic and social progress, but performance of existing institutions ranges from world-class to mediocre" (National Planning Commission, 2011:18). And so it seeks to mobilise the country around critical education targets.

It is what these targets are that it is important to understand. The targets in the NDP relating to higher education are to:

- increase the higher education participation rate from 17 percent to 30 percent. Enrolments... will need to increase to 1 620 000 from 950 000 in 2010.

- increase the number of students eligible to study maths and science at university to 450,000 per year. The department has set a target to increase the number of learners eligible for bachelors programme to 300 000 learners by 2024, 350 000 learners who pass mathematics, and 320 000 learners who pass physical science.
- by 2030, to have 75 percent of academic staff with PhDs. The present figure is 34 percent.
- produce 100 doctoral graduates per million per year. That implies an increase from 1420 a year in 2010 to 5 000 a year (National Planning Commission, 2011:34-35).

In the HRDSA (n.d:37) strategy plan, which preceded the NDP, these translate into specific commitments and activities: "To increase the supply of skilled personnel in areas of science, engineering and technology."

How have universities worked with this injunction? The University of the Witwatersrand announced (University of the Witwatersrand, 2011, para 6) in its 2011 research report that its newly established Directorate for Research Development would focus on five priorities, namely:

- skills enhancement – developing non-technical skills;
- knowledge transfer – through one-on-one mentoring and coaching engagements between experienced and emerging researchers;
- recognition – recognising achievements in the realm of research;
- exploiting networks – linking researchers with appropriate funders; and
- removing barriers – assisting to remove or reduce (internal) hindrances to research (University of the Witwatersrand, 2011:9).

The *University of Technology* movement in the country has added impetus to these developments and has seen the establishment of new kinds of universities. While it is important to be

aware of how much these universities keep the social context in their sights, how they do this is significant. The primary mechanism for achieving social impact is through what De Beer (2010:94) describes as knowledge transfer: "They should be serving society, (assisting in) poverty reduction; establishing national infrastructure...; stimulating innovation and economic growth...." In this the universities are, as Hattingh (cited in De Beer, 2010:92) says, "among the most important actors in a national system of innovation.". There is even, in their rhetorical explanations of themselves, the commitment that they will include indigenous knowledge. But it is their emphasis on technology, as institutions which present themselves as the major interpreters of the information revolution which we should be understanding better. As Du Pre (2010: 10) says:

The aim of technology is to improve the lives of human beings. In relation to a university of technology it means that all teaching/learning programmes are related activities of a university of technology.... At universities of technology, then, science, engineering and management would have top priority.

Where to Now?

How does one make sense of these two dominant approaches to agenda-setting in the country? How do they help us to become better *processors* of all the information we have in front of us? How, to return to the approach to *processing* I introduced at the beginning of this essay, do they help the universities make sense of what an appropriate agenda for themselves might be? If one is to work with the opinions of the agenda-setters themselves, the sector is beset by challenges. The view of the state is that the universities have failed to align themselves with its project. They have failed to bring into their midst the majority of the country's people, its black people. In terms of the second, the country is inadequately addressing its skills crisis and this then has a "dampening effect on the economy at a time when there was increased need for priority

skills due to economic growth and renewal" (HRDSA, nd: 17).

How do we respond to this? How do we make sense of these positions and how do they condition and influence our capacity to be better processors of knowledge?

I would like to suggest that neither the *state's view* nor the *human capital* approach presents a sufficiently penetrating framework for understanding the density and complexity of our informational demands. Neither provides the academy with a clear enough socio-cultural orientation to guide its *processing* work. Neither sees the challenge confronting the universities in its full complexity. What the approach of the state represents is a narrowly Africanist position. The state presents itself as a developmental agency acting for 'its people'. It sees 'its people', however, in racial terms. It constitutes the problem of the universities through a symptomatic emphasis on the effects of apartheid. What apartheid did was to systematically impede opportunity for access by people it classified as African into the university. And so, goes the response of the post-apartheid government, the agenda of the university must be to address this basic injustice. Access becomes then the determinative priority.

The university, therefore, has to make its primary task that of correcting the demographic imbalances in what universities look like. South African universities, of course, have the historic obligation of widening and accelerating access into their midst. This obligation is unchallengeable. They are morally, politically, and on the simple basis of the good sense of diversity required to be open. Openness is a value which they have to propagate. But a university can never construct its agenda on a limited understanding of access. It cannot use racial demographic representivity as the primary point of reference for the agenda it would wish to follow. Representivity can be made a desirable condition, but it cannot be projected as the basis for how the university should function. The point needs to be made that many South African universities have already achieved

what this agenda of the state is demanding, but show little sign of an increase in their capacity to *process* the information which is in front of them. They are complying with many of the policies developed by the state. What they are not doing is to innovate in relation to the problems which the society is facing. This requires complex information-gathering and information-processing capacity. This capacity is, of course, in the laboratories and in the seminar rooms where scholars are debating and making sense of the issues. But it is also in the libraries which are called upon now to be able to anticipate the kinds of issues and the quality of the information needed to make sense of these issues.

The libraries and their staff members thus have to understand much more clearly what the most relevant and pertinent information is that should be available to the scholars and the scientists in the university. It also bears emphasizing, as the example of many African universities demonstrates, that it takes more than replacing white figures with black figures to create the conditions inside the university for it to engage with the essential challenges in society. An important African intellectual Babuuzibwa Luutu commented in a recent address to a conference on transdisciplinarity that many universities in Africa had attempted what he called the Africanisation route and failed. The Africanisation he was talking of was the wholesale overhauling of the professoriate (Soudien 2014b). It had to be alert to the complexity of the information and their knowledge frameworks. It was not simply taking knowledge as it came from the West, but also knowledges which may previously have been suppressed and were now, as the world was becoming more open to alternative explanations of how the world worked, very much more available.

The human capital approach, similarly, reveals itself as a limited framework. Again, as in the approach of the state, it has the virtue of drawing attention to real challenges. It is a reality that apartheid produced a skewed labour market in

which high-level skills were reserved for people classified white. But the human capital approach sees the problem in exactly the same symptomatic way as the state's Africanist approach does. People were denied skills and so, therefore, it is the obligation of the state to redress this injustice. Appealing as this argument is at one level, and correctly requiring a systematic response on the part of the state, how the meaning of skills is constructed in this argument is problematic. It effectively narrows it down to a restricted idea of competence. The task of the universities is to make competent those who lacked this capacity before. The university's task is then effectively instrumentalised. What is not addressed is the selection and the substance of the competences. Not clearly brought into perspective are questions of whether the competences are by themselves sufficient, how they address questions of people's capacity to cope with the new conditions of the economy, and, critically, whether they provide young people emerging from the universities with the attributes to engage with the complexity of their society and the knowledges that may be required to operate in the society in critical and socially productive ways.

The point to emphasize is that neither the narrow Africanism of the state nor the limited instrumentalism of the human capitalists sees the complexity with which an information processing institution has to work.. I want to suggest that the circumstances we confront in South Africa demand even more. The racialised nature of our South African inequality has come to produce complex epistemological and ontological silences which we in the university are required to process. We now know this. We now know that the particular modernism that developed through colonial and apartheid South Africa structurally placed African systems of knowledge – customs, cosmologies, belief systems – in a position of inferiority. Out of this grew a modern scientific complex which at no stage engaged with African knowledge. Its assumption that African knowledge was inferior by definition meant that

none of the whole complex of what Africa had in its scientific repertoire about everyday life, about the relationship of human beings to the ecology in which they found themselves, about physical and psychological phenomena, counted for anything. The point now is that the ascendancy which dominant western knowledge enjoys in the university is enjoyed by virtue of the sheer assertion of power. Historically outstanding is the need for a reckoning, on completely different discursive terms, of what the value of this delegitimated knowledge is. The university has to acknowledge the historical condition of alienation that has accompanied its ascendance in the last 100 years. It is not just African people's physical access into the university which matters, but the full array of knowledges which have accompanied and supported their capacity to survive which the university needs to understand. At the core of the issue of the discussion is the full repertoire of approaches which African people have used to pose and solve the problems of their daily lives.

In confronting where we are now, the university needs to engage with the fullness of what we as a human species now knows. It is not just the affordances of new technologies and their extraordinarily powerful insights to which the university needs to apply its mind, but also how these new technologies relate to older apparently less useful and relevant understandings of the world. The critical unarticulated question is how we South Africans, who find ourselves in a socio-cultural environment in which the most advanced technologies exist side-by-side with older knowledges that have been deliberately marginalised, but which retain their significance in many people's lives, develop a new socio-cultural literacy which is radically multi-cultural. It is here, I suggest, that the university needs to assist. As a site which processes knowledge, how does it develop in its students the capacity to process the knowledge of the future and of the past? In doing this the university locates itself much more fully and more self-consciously in the full expanse

of history and possibility. What a modern and self-aware knowledge system that is acutely sensitive to its African locatedness looks like, is an especially important task of the university to address, and to become, as Castells (2009:1) argues, "the source of cultural renewal and cultural innovation which is linked to the new forms of living which we are entering".

In terms of these "new forms of living", it is important to note how new initiatives that have come into being in the country, such as the new Centre for Excellence in Scientometrics and Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (SciSTIP), approach the question of working with these changed information conditions. They emphasize the necessity of building the knowledge economy in South Africa in *inclusive* ways. In doing so they make clear an awareness of inequality (Making the Connection between Science and Society, 2014: 2). Signalling an awareness of approaching knowledge-production from a conscious ethical stance is important. Approaches such as these are important. They constitute critical developments for thinking about how the university presents itself as a site for the processing of complex information. But even they do not go far enough. What is needed is a clear response on the part of the universities that they understand the cognitive injustices in which they have been complicit as major participants. There has to be a new dialogue.

The terms of this dialogue need to begin with an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of the forms of information and forms of knowledge we have at our disposal. Critical in this is a recognition of the plurality of paradigms of knowing. This is what one might call an epistemic challenge. What do we do with this? We need to begin with the acknowledgement that historically we overlooked other approaches to making sense of the world around us. This is the beginning of a process of engaging with the historical questions of recognition amongst us. When we have done that, we need to begin a serious dialogue around the value of all the knowledges in our intellectual

orbit. This is at one level a matter of sharing what we know, the democratisation of knowledge. The principle behind this sharing needs to be clear. We need to assert the basic value that our stores of knowledge, our knowledge systems, our understandings of life and of our relationships with one another, can no longer be projected and defended on the basis of ethno- religio-, class- or cultural-centric claims. We are in a situation *now*, and this is important to understand, where we can no longer present ourselves to each other without explanation. We now need civilising procedures for how to deal with ourselves in each other's presence. Given how badly we have managed this challenge of being alongside of and in relation to each other in the past, our utter failure to appreciate our complex capacities, and our inability to see beyond our skins, the task before us is great. But, and this is the incredible learning opportunity before us, nothing can be taken for granted and so we are going to have to come to a much deeper appreciation of each other and of what we know. Hopefully what will come out of this is both self-affirmation and humility: the affirmation that we bring something different and the humility that we always have much to learn.

This is the challenge with which this set of readings grapples. This text emanates out of

South Africa, that complex child of modernity with its often unacknowledged and therefore unexamined racialised scientific epistemologies is an extraordinary moment in the sociology of knowledge. The modern South African university library has to place itself at the heart of this process. It has to see itself as a resource, as a site of facilitation for learning and so as constantly being able to anticipate the needs of knowledge-seekers. But, as knowledge is democratised and is available more freely, it has to learn how to work much more closely with everybody within its reach, including the makers of knowledge. It has to come to this new phase in which we find ourselves with an awareness of how political knowledges are, and that knowledges have histories. The demand on librarians is now great. They need to, as would have been the case in the past, know their subjects well. They now need to go beyond that. They need to see their subjects in their full complexity and be able to mediate the possibilities and the challenges that come with these knowledges. In this sense, the library is a powerful site for development, a space in which the value of information, data and knowledge, from all quarters, can be explored, critiqued and built upon.

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