

# **EDUCATION FOR MULTICULTURALISM**

## **The challenge for institutions of higher learning (Draft)**

**Neville Alexander**

### **My approach**

I speak at a moment<sup>1</sup> when the Ministerial Committee on Transformation in Higher Education is about to make public its report. Since I am not privy to the contents of that report, the views I shall be expressing here today are mine and are based on many years of involvement in post-secondary education in South Africa and elsewhere.

On seeing the title of my address, the listener would expect to hear an analysis of the usual issues concerning the tertiary sector such as changes in enrolment figures, staff complements, drop-out and failure rates, and especially how these and other issues are responding to the Department of Education's attempts to change the racial proportions by which "transformation" are supposed to be measured. A typical statement in respect of such transformation would be the following randomly selected judgment by Professor Jonathan Jansen (2003:290-291):

... (While) there has been a slow but inevitable deracialisation of former white institutions, principally in the distribution of students, higher education remains visibly marked by racially skewed staffing patterns, resource disparities, differential research productivity, gross differences in student pass and progression rates, and resilient symbols of dominance and traditions of exclusion. ...

It is important, therefore, that I state clearly at the outset that I shall not be dealing with the question of transformation at this level. Instead, I want to deal with paradigmatic issues, with the values that ought to constitute the basis of our educational system and with the implications of this matrix of values and goals for the institutions of higher education, where a significant section of the leadership of the country is being nurtured. I shall, to put it differently, be considering some of the issues that influence what is called the institutional culture of "the university" in the new South Africa. The inverted commas are essential, since each university is unique. As a people, however, living at a given historical moment, one which is defined by a

---

<sup>1</sup> Public lecture delivered at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University on 19 November 2008.

distinctively transitional character, we have to identify the moral, intellectual and social parameters in which we can and should operate. Among other things, we have to identify and discuss critically the character of the new historical community we are trying to establish, the ethos that should inform our every thought and action as well as the economic, political, social and cultural desiderata that distinguish it from the old South Africa of apartheid and racial humiliation.

I speak, therefore, in advocacy rather than in academic mode and I should like to believe that this approach is appropriate to the occasion.

### **Dealing with the colonial-apartheid legacy**

No discussion about present trends and developmental possibilities in South Africa can begin without considering the legacy of the immediate and the remoter past. I am convinced also that we should speak candidly and unflinchingly about the trauma and the negative effects of colonialism, slavery, capitalist-imperialism, segregation and apartheid on the physical, psychological and socio-cultural conditioning of the oppressed people.

In order to do this, we have, among other things, to move away decisively from the national-chauvinist and simplistic approach of comparing “Africa” with “Europe” in an attempt to identify the distinctive contribution of African people to world civilisation. We have to undertake our analysis by assuming that the whole of humanity, beginning with its emergence on the continent of Africa, has contributed to the amalgam of “modernity” and the diverse “traditions” that make up the contradictory unity of the world today. To put it simply and bluntly: modernity does not “belong” to Europe or North America just because these were the geographical areas where the industrial revolution began. All human achievement has built upon prior achievements by individual and groups of human beings in different parts of the globe. Much of the advances that have been made were the result of unimaginable inhumanity and brutality. Thus, for example, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which Reginald Coupland called “the greatest crime in history”, was one of the main sources of the industrial revolution and the “expansion of Europe”, as the global accumulation of capital has been called euphemistically. What, would we say, was the contribution of the slaves to the “achievement” of the industrial revolution, especially to the

development of the textile industry? These are the kinds of questions we should be pondering, not whether Europeans are congenitally cruel and inhuman. If we think that this is an eccentric view, let us try to explain why African people in West and Central Africa as well as in East and Southern Africa have committed such awful genocidal crimes in the last two decades.

Can we blame “Europeans” and “Americans” for these crimes? What do our own classics tell us in this regard? In his famous work entitled *The Contribution of the Non-European Peoples to World Civilisation*, B M Kies wrote, among other things, that

There are four main reasons for ... (the) advance in civilisation whereby mankind in Europe was to emerge from a thousand years of darkness to bound ahead of all existing cultures. None of these has anything to do with a mystical *psyche* in persons of a particular colour or skull-shape. The first reason is the organisation of those gigantic plundering raids organised by the Popes, the feudal kings and the feudal nobility, and falsely described as ‘Crusades’ for ‘Christianising’ the ‘pagans’. ... The second reason for this tremendous advance of civilisation in Europe is that this sanctified robbery enriched not merely the Popes, kings and nobles, but even more so the merchants who transported the plunderers and, under their arms, extended and enriched their own commercial interests at the expense of their Mohammedan rivals...(Kies 1953:36)

Mnguni (1952:18), in another well known work of South African historiography, wrote matter-of-factly:

And so the whole colonial world was conquered and enslaved by Europe during the 15th to 19th centuries. And it was on the ruins of the colonial world that Europe rose to splendour, global mastery and ‘Western’ civilization. The hands of the dispossessed tribalists of the Americas, of Asia and of Africa built up Western, European, civilization. Africa made a particularly heavy and notable contribution to ‘Western’ civilization, for it was from Africa that the main supply of slaves came for two continents - the Americas and Africa itself. The slave traffic, traffic in human beings, was the most important and major trade of all. This traffic laid Africa in ruins. The total European slave trade in Africa cost some thirty million lives, ruined the tribal and feudal civilizations of the indigenous peoples, and enabled the masters of Europe to live in luxury and democracy.

Similar images of Europe are legion in the historiography of African and other scholars.

A class analysis across the centuries invariably leads one to understand that individuals and strata of people from Europe, Australasia, Africa and the Americas collaborated with one another in order to gain control of the labour power and the other resources (spices, minerals, land, etc.) that were present in the relevant country or continent. It was never simply a question of European conquest based on a more “advanced” military technology; there were always local collaborators who were prepared to betray their people in order to get a slice of the pie, no matter how small and humiliating. Of course, there were the heroes and heroines who resisted and all too often paid the ultimate price. Whichever way we look at the entire canvas of human history, it is invariably out of the combination of brute force and often inexpressible creativity and imaginative power that what we call civilisation and modernity have proceeded. And, this statement applies across the whole spectrum of the human species; no segment of it is exempt. Once we are clear about this state of affairs, it becomes easier to think dispassionately about who we are and where we are today.

Africa is justifiably considered to be the cradle of humanity. Yet, this crucial index to the significance of Africa’s contribution to world civilisation has not hitherto bestowed on the people of the continent a sense of their aboriginal importance. The overwhelming dominance of Euro-American power and ways of life has instead, generally speaking, induced a sense of underdevelopment and even inferiority among many African people, including the elites among them. Of course, the same can be said of many Asian and American peoples. However, and this is the point of this reference, it is noteworthy that imperialist conquest impacted differently on different parts of the conquered world depending, among other things, on whether or not there was a pre-existing culture of reading and writing. In this regard, for example, there continues to be to this day a significant difference between the effects of conquest on those parts of Africa where albeit limited to certain privileged strata there had been a pre-conquest culture of literacy, as in Egypt or the Horn of Africa, or in other North, West and East African countries that in an earlier period had been penetrated by Islam and, consequently, acquired the Arabic script.

Southern Africa, including South Africa, was very different in this regard. The abysmal technological gap between conquerors and conquered, including the

in/ability to read and write, produced the conditions for total alienation on the one hand and unavoidable assimilation on the other hand. To put it differently: the conquered either had to withdraw, or be pushed, into splendid isolation and extermination, as happened with the San and other so-called savage, i.e., “unassimilable”, peoples, or they were compelled to become integrated into the colonial template of the conqueror. This meant that, with the usual individual exceptions, the progeny of the privileged were endowed with skills, knowledge and other forms of headstart that the children of the oppressed could not even dream of. For, theirs was a chain of handicaps that tied them down to perpetual disadvantage and “backwardness”. As long as the template remained unquestioned, this was the fate of the black people of colonial South Africa and of the black youth more specifically. I believe it is superfluous in the present context to recount the well known tale of military, political, economic and legislative mechanisms and strategies that were deployed in order to prepare the white child for a life of superiority and privilege and the black child for life in a subordinate society, as Sir Langham Dale, the Superintendant-General of the Cape Colony, proclaimed towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dr Verwoerd, one of the architects of apartheid and Bantu education, in 1954, rubbed it in when he told the Senate of the all-white Union of South Africa that the “Native” should know that there is no place for “him” in the “white society” above “certain levels of labour”.

Our conquered forebears and even more so, we ourselves, were reared in a Europeanised world, one where the values, norms and customs of Europe were equated with modernity and propriety. Resistance to oppression and exploitation took many forms. Again, there is no need to dwell on this well known history. It is important, however, to draw attention to an aspect which, because of its insidiousness and ubiquity is hardly ever discussed or even noticed. I refer to the ambiguity that prevails among African intellectuals and those among the elite who, in whatever ideological guise, have struggled and still struggle against the physical, cultural and psychological oppressions that are the baleful legacy of colonialism and imperialism, and of apartheid and racism in South Africa. As an expression of their rejection of the imposed European template, the radical nationalist intelligentsia is at pains to make the point that the difference between pre-industrial Europe and ancient Africa was an accident of geography, in particular the fact of the impenetrable equatorial forests, the

belt of pestilence north and south of the equator and the aridity of the Sahara Desert. They are usually at pains to insist on the “Africanity” of ancient Egypt and Kush, the achievements of the great West African empires of the African Middle Ages, of Monomotapa and of the other well known high civilisations of Black Africa.

In other words, the imposing challenge of Europe has made many African intellectuals try to find in their past and in their cultural traditions events, artefacts and patterns of behaviour that are comparable to “the great tradition” of Europe, taken as a whole. Until recently, even the best works of African historiography were never written in the self-evident manner in which history ought to be written but always in a mode that, explicitly or implicitly, used European history as the yardstick of excellence or of significance. The sense of inferiority which is manifest in this behaviour is painful to record but too widespread to ignore. ...

Today, and this will become more pronounced because of Barack Obama, images of Europe are no longer the dominant ones among African peoples. The Americanisation of life on the planet is simply too overpowering for that. On the other hand, Europeans are seen, in general, as being in league with ‘America’ in stereotypical terms. Thus, for example, Haile Gerima, the Ethiopian film-maker, who lives in the USA, when asked about the prospects of the film industry in Africa, had this to say:

South Africa is crucial to the rest of Africa because it has the technology and the infrastructure. *But this could be a two-edged sword: it will be a platform for the USA and the rest of the West.* If South Africans merely exploit this by pumping out Hollywood movies and videotapes all the way from the Cape to North Africa that could be very frightening. But if South Africans develop their own cinema and create an easy platform for film-makers all over Africa, this will be to the advantage of all of us. South Africa is a cross-roads for African cinema (Quoted in the *Mail and Guardian*, 6-12 December 1996, page 29)

The ambivalence of his attitude is clear from the implicit fact that it is because South Africa is in some respects so ‘European’ that it constitutes this cross-roads.

### **Implications of the transition**

In 1994, we became a liberal democracy. Three years earlier, the Soviet Union and most of what it had stood for collapsed like a house of cards. We were told that “there

is no alternative” to the neo-liberal universe that had been fashioned, politically speaking, in the image and likeness of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. As we speak, that particular myth is being demolished in the wake of the implosion of the global financial and commodity markets.

It was, and is still, a world-historical moment. Far from witnessing Fukuyama’s precipitately decreed “end of history”, we are participants in epochal developments. All ideologies and social blueprints are up for grabs. This, incidentally, is why I find the recycling of the tired phrases of all the “isms” of our limited political lexicon so pathetic. Very few African, including South African, leadership elements seem to have grasped the fact that the new millennium has given us the golden opportunity of fashioning a new world, a new universe of discourse that takes us beyond the world of our parents and of our grandparents. In the struggle against apartheid, there was some consensus that we were struggling for liberty, equality and solidarity, abstractions that awaited the historically contingent moment to be filled with specific meanings. As it turned out, the neo-liberal hegemonic project was adopted almost without amendment by the new leadership of the country, no matter how this was spun, prettified and “explained”.

This is the straightforward reason why we are where we are today. Because of time constraints, I shall deal in some detail with only two of the fundamental challenges that this fact poses to those of us who work in the tertiary education sector. As it happens, these relate to what is normally discussed under the rubrics of “race” and “class”. I do this largely because I believe that all the other challenges, real and imagined, can be addressed clearly once these parameters have been clarified.

One example must suffice to illustrate the point I am making. I refer to the role model effect of the political leadership on the youth in particular. It would be invidious in this context to point a finger at particular individuals. The simple fact is that the incoming leadership – whatever they might have said in public - objectively did not accept that we live in a poor country in which the division of the social product is highly unequal because of the capitalist mode of production and distribution and that this fact imposes on the democratically elected leadership of the people the duty to ensure that we do not entrench such maldistribution of resources and rewards.

Apparently without any deeper consideration of the historical moment, the new elite fell into step with what had gone before in most of the rest of Africa and in South Africa itself. The well healed, chauffeur-driven, body-guarded leader who, with his or her family, lived in at least one mansion in one or other of the formerly “white” group areas and whose children were sent to former model-c or private schools, became the model to be emulated. Private ownership of wealth, becoming even “stinking rich”, was encouraged as the be-all and end-all of “the good life”. This, in a country with a Gini co-efficient hovering around 0,7 and a rate of unemployment of plus-minus 40%! The result? Programmed frustration for the vast majority of young South Africans, a predictable crime wave, the result of frustrated ambition and, let it be said, of feelings of entitlement and revenge. This role model phenomenon and its effects ought to be the subject of intensive research in our departments of sociology and psychology. Understanding it might help to get us on to a more promising trajectory.

### **Efficiency and sufficiency**

As university students specifically and as young people generally, you have to pose and answer the question, with due acknowledgement to Andre Gorz: is it possible for us to retrace our steps - recognising that there have been fundamental technological and attitudinal changes since the rise of the capitalist system – such that the pre-capitalist relationship between “need” and “work” based on the principle of sufficiency can be re-established? This question foregrounds a profound insight which I cite here in the words of Gorz (1989:113):

... (The) ‘spirit of capitalism’ severed the link between work and need. The goal of work was no longer the satisfaction of felt needs, and effort was no longer matched to the level of satisfaction to be attained. The rationalizing passion became autonomous with respect to all determinate goals. In place of the certainty of experience that ‘enough is enough’ it gave rise to an objective measure of the efficiency of effort and of its success: the size of profits. Success was no longer therefore a matter for personal assessment and a question of the ‘quality of life’, it was measurable by the amount of money earned, by accumulated wealth. Quantification gave rise to an indisputable criterion and a hierarchical scale which had no need of validation by any authority, any norm, any scale of values. Efficiency was measurable and, through it, an individual’s



ability and virtue: more was better than less, those who succeed in earning more are better than those who earn less.

In this paragraph one of the fundamental problems<sup>2</sup> of the “new” South Africa is enciphered. It is my view that our young people, especially those at the universities and other institutions of higher learning should take up this challenge and set themselves the goal of finding the solution. *This* is the new struggle and it is in this struggle that the mettle, the quality and the value of the next generations will be tested. Let me put the issue as simply as possible: regardless of how we eventually deal with the current inequalities that divide and disfigure our society, we have to figure out how in our daily lives while earning a living and helping others to do so, we can get people to accept that “enough is as good as a feast”, that it is not “cool” always to want to be the “top dog”, that being good or excellent is not a reason for demanding more than one needs and that others are good and excellent at other things. The challenge, in short, is to find the organisational institutional and attitudinal mechanisms that will promote this set of values as against the prevailing capitalist norms of aggression, individualistic competition, top-dogism, more is better, etc.

I want to stress that this insight leads us to more than the usual commitment to fighting against class exploitation and class inequality. It is about shaping and nurturing patterns of behaviour, based on human solidarity and sharing, that will help to break the mould of capitalist brutalisation and individualism even while we are still confined by the structures and dynamics of the system. That is why it is a challenge to the intelligentsia and to students especially. The working youth and their elders to the extent that they are members of trade unions or co-operatives, are already to some extent exploring these patterns of behaviour, even if they do not articulate their actions in these particular terms. We have in short to create new role models, people who do not measure their worth by how much money they have, how big their houses are, how fast and sleek their motor vehicles, how glamorous their clothes and how opulent their dinners and their feasts.

---

<sup>2</sup> For the full range of societal and individual implications of the position outlined here, see Gorz 1989:109-125.

If we can initiate this trajectory, we will change radically the logic and the dynamics of the system at all levels. The kinds of questions we pose and research will assume a very different character from those that preoccupy us currently. The university would become a very different kind of place. This is the main challenge. We have to dare to pose this question and we have to deploy our best intellectual and cultural resources in order to do the necessary research and set up the institutional and organisational impulses that will realise this ideal. In 1968, in Europe and in the USA, the university youth and the intelligentsia more generally initiated this kind of social interrogation and, though the effort was soon smothered by the reactionary forces of the 1970s, it had lasting effects in important strata of those countries.

### **Racial identities, social cohesion and transformation**

The previous section dealt briefly with the general issue of elitism and class consciousness. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, university youth should be leading the struggle against racism and racial prejudice as well as against all other forms of discrimination. While it is undoubtedly true that anti-racist, anti-sexist and other anti-discrimination moves can only succeed if they are backed up by radical changes in the political and social economy of the society, this should not deter us from initiating those moves that constitutionally, legally and socially are possible in a liberal democracy. Agency may be limited but it is not negated by structure. We have no reason to be fatalists. Transformation can be initiated from the smallest of interventions – like the proverbial flapping of the butterfly’s wings at the other end of the planet – if the circumstances are right. And, as I have indicated already, the conditions could not be better than they are at this moment in this country. One of the main reasons for this statement is the fact that ordinary citizens have once again realised that they have to rebuild civil society, help themselves as they had to do under the apartheid regime, since they can no longer depend on government to deliver on the post-apartheid mandate of “a better life for all”. The demobilisation of civil society that followed on the establishment of the democratic order has at last been recognised as a major strategic lapse. People are ready to take their destiny into their own hands.

It is a matter of grave concern to those of us who have held that precisely because of the extremes of racist policies and practices under apartheid, the South African

liberation movement would necessarily be in the vanguard of the anti-racist forces in the modern world, to realise that this expectation is about to be rubbished because of short-sighted policies that are reinforced by vested interests of (mainly) middle class black South Africans. I should like to put the matter as clearly and bluntly as possible, since I believe that unless the new generation of South African youth address this problem with the seriousness it warrants, we could be staring down the path of genocide sooner rather than later.

According to Section 1(b) of our post-apartheid constitution, the new South Africa is committed to becoming a non-racist society, among other noble goals. This constitutional mandate, the result of centuries of struggle against racism and racial discrimination, essentially means that in the new South Africa, racial identities are a category of sub-national social identities that will be discouraged, deprived of sustenance, phased out. Nobody expects that this will happen overnight. The struggle for a non-racist, non-sexist and democratic South Africa will take generations rather than decades. The political and cultural leadership of our country, those people who are the role models for the youth, have a heavy responsibility to help to create the conditions for realising these goals.

Allow me to state some of the most important insights about racism and race thinking that we have gained over the past century or so as simply but as closely to the current state of our knowledge as possible.

A reputable study undertaken on behalf of the UN Conference Against Racism by the International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP) in 2001, based on a wide variety of case studies of racism, asserted that

... it is helpful — indeed essential — to recognise the systemic nature of discrimination and stigma. ... In all the societies studied, racial discrimination reinforced economic marginalisation and vice versa. Members of victimised groups came to be exploited and marginalised economically and, at the same or at separate times, they came to be considered inferior. From the perspective of dominant groups, their inferiority ‘justified’ their exploitation and their consequent impoverishment ‘demonstrated’ their inferiority. The two processes confirm one another. With the passing of time, moreover, the social, political and economic inequalities that result came to be entrenched. The

assumption that one group was ‘naturally’ poor because it was inferior became established intergenerationally — and differences of opportunity (access to health, education, employment, and so on) became systemic. In the absence of a countervailing force for reform, the victimised group cannot easily escape its poverty or the stigma that reinforces it, and time merely deepens the divide between the dominant and dominated group. To complicate matters further, often enough some members of the victimised group internalise (and thereby confirm by their behaviour) some of the assumptions that underpin their treatment by the dominant group. (p.6)

It ought to be obvious, on the basis of such comparative studies, that unless the economic basis of social inequality justified by means of racial ideology (race thinking) is tackled, the racial order is simply reproduced. In South Africa, too, unless a radical redistribution of material resources is realised within the lifetime of this generation and the next, all the glib rhetoric of social transformation, national democratic revolution and African renaissance will come to mock their authors and exponents. The late Reverend Beyers Naude once said that

... true reconciliation was only possible when we bridge the economic gulf, for you can’t build a society of justice on the increasing gap between rich and poor’. Only if the government moved towards an equitable distribution of wealth, land property and income could the political ‘miracle’ begin to uproot the evil of racism which was ‘deeply rooted in South Africa’. (See in Murray 1997:8).

This is where the debates about affirmative action and black economic empowerment belong. Given that South Africa has not experienced a social revolution such as that in Cuba in 1959 and in the 1960s, in which case the properties and the assets of the ruling class would have been confiscated under conditions of civil war and traumatic violence, affirmative action of some kind was, and remains, a political imperative for the liberation movement. Any post-apartheid government has to observe the imperative of the redistribution of economic, social, cultural and political power and resources that constituted the fundamental reason for the struggle against racial capitalism in general and apartheid in particular. Otherwise, its social base or its constituency will write it off as a neo-apartheid regime. Only reactionaries and hide-bound conservatives are opposed to these objectives of the post-apartheid government. The vast majority of the people support them as a matter of course.

Given the neo-liberal capitalist economic reality within which we have to operate, it is clear that any such reformist programme, if nothing changes fundamentally, will take

a very long time. Whether it will “succeed” is, to put it bluntly, a matter of class struggle in the classical Marxist sense of that term. The struggle continues, as we see on a daily basis. Only apologists of the privileged minority will not argue that currently the beneficiaries of these initiatives are virtually always the not so poor. That is the nature of the system. The *transformation* measures, especially at the socio-economic level, that will empower poor working class communities require radical interventions in the way the capitalist system works in this country. Some of the measures adopted by the Chavez government in Venezuela – in a totally different context, let it be said – seem beyond the imagination and the compromising macro-economic policy positions of the South African government at present.

In the present context, I am more concerned, however, about the ways in which programmes based on the notion of historical redress are implemented and the consequences they might have for the future of our children. This is the reason why I think we have to pose the question: *are we building a new historical community?* One could also ask: are we using the historic opportunity that the 1990s made available to us for creating another South Africa, one where race thinking and racial prejudice, among other things, will eventually become as anachronistic and as pitiable as the belief in witches.

There are definite processes and pathways that we can and should initiate immediately. To begin with, we have to ensure that affirmative action and related measures do not have the unintended consequence of entrenching racial (and other) stereotypes in the consciousness of the people. As we all know, stereotyping is humanity’s natural way of coping with the complexity of the world out there. By placing people (and, indeed, most other things) in categories or boxes, we simplify matters for ourselves and construct entities, such as “racial groups” and “cultures” that help us to deal with individuals in stereotypical ways. However, the mark of civilisation is precisely the distance we, as individuals and as social entities, have travelled away from such stereotypes by, for example, judging and relating to individuals in terms of their actual, not their stereotypically ascribed, behaviour.

It means, fundamentally and among other things, that we have to see to it that the entrenched inherited racial identities that disfigured the popular consciousness of

colonial and apartheid South Africa are changed and eventually eradicated. This is not an easy task and we will not succeed completely in the next few generations. The mere casting of a vote in the 1994 election did not have the miraculous effect of removing from the consciousness of the people the inherited racial stain. However, it must be the goal of all creative and thinking people in this country to ensure that, among other things, labels such as “black”, “white”, “coloured” and “indian” become irrelevant as a means of identifying groups of people in the new South Africa.

Today, there is no question anymore that “race” is not “a valid biological entity”. This does not mean, however, that we should deny the social reality of these identities. Denial is no solution to any social illness, whether we think of AIDS or of racial prejudice. Most South Africans continue to believe in these racial categories because they have been conditioned to accept them as real. They continue to see the world through glasses that are tinted by the outdated concept of “race”. More than 60 years ago, “race” was called “man’s most dangerous myth”. After the horrors of the race based genocide of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, in Nazi Germany, ex-Yugoslavia, Ruanda and in so many other places during the last century, nobody can doubt that “race” is indeed one of the matches that can burn down all the most brilliant achievements of the human spirit.

It is common cause in the social sciences today that social as well as individual identities are constructed, not “given”. The state, or more generally, the ruling classes, in any society have the paradigmatic prerogative of setting the template on which social identities, including racial identities, are based. Subaltern groups and layers of such societies necessarily contest or accept these identities over time. In our own case, recent examples of such contestation are the categories of “Bantu” and “Coloured”. We must remember, however, that even though they are constructed, social identities seem to have a primordial validity for most individuals, precisely because they are not aware of the historical, social and political ways in which their identities have been constructed. This is, ultimately, the psychological explanation for the well-known tenacity of such identities. That they can be deconstructed and reshaped is manifest in the unravelling of the supposedly immutable “Afrikaner” identity which is taking place before our eyes at this very moment.

It is unacceptable, unconstitutional and plain immoral for any South African to think that after apartheid we can light-mindedly go about entrenching and promoting racial categories as though it is some harmless game. It is most embarrassing and demeaning in a post-apartheid situation to be faced with forms that ask one to state one's "race". We who fought against that practice, refuse to do this today. The fact that the universities are complicit in this is a shameful blot on their autonomy and on academic freedom. It is high time that the academic leadership of the country summon up the courage, if I may be allowed to use a very tired phrase, "to speak truth to power" and simply refuse to perpetrate this profoundly reactionary policy. There are other ways than using the short cut of "race" in order to achieve the legitimate goals of affirmative action<sup>3</sup>. That is what we should be dealing with in our public debates and in the often tedious and mindless talk shows on radio and TV. It is our duty to do everything we can in order to undermine and weaken the hold that these ideas have on the minds of our people. It is one of the main tasks of an anti-racism educational programme to bring to full view the underlying structures that have to be changed so that we can create the conditions in which racism and racial prejudice can no longer grow. This is the second fundamental challenge that faces all of us in the academy.

We have to re-imagine ourselves as a people, examine the existing and other possible sub-national identities with which we identify ourselves and deliberately promote those that do not undermine national unity, social cohesion, democratic ways of being, and counter those, such as race-based categories which, for historical reasons, tend to deepen divisions and excite resentment and group prejudice. In my view, we should debate these re-imaginings openly and at length. If the new South Africa has one great democratic strength, it is the fact that matters such as "race" and gender continue to be discussed in public and openly, often with great passion, in all the media. Unlike polities such as Cuba or Brazil, we are not willing to sweep the issue under the carpet and pretend to be colour-blind "racial democracies" even if that is the destination we hope to arrive at.

---

<sup>3</sup> I have begun discussing some of these in various articles. See, for example Alexander 2007.

### **Other significant challenges**

By way of concluding this note on some of the main ethical, moral-political and social-psychological challenges facing higher education institutions in South Africa today, I want to mention some of the more urgent reforms that are essential if a sense of hope and progress is to be sustained in the system. It is pertinent, however, to point out that the approach to these issues will be decisively influenced by what position a given institution adopts with respect to the pivotal questions on which I have trained the analytical spotlight.

The size and shape of the tertiary education domain should be defined in line with the principles I have suggested above. It is irrational, to put it kindly, to insist that all the institutions that have come to us from the past should continue to be treated as “universities”. Each of the institutions, whether they derive from the period before or after 1948, has to be considered in terms of a definition of “the university” that is consonant with the kind of middle-income, highly unequal society we are, and be organised to perform the functions it is potentially capable of realising at this stage. For all of them to want to be some economode photocopy of an Oxbridge ideal is a sign of intellectual inadequacy and inferiority complex. Universities, after all, are no more important as components of a social formation than are crèches and vocational schools. Elitist illusions about the prestige of universities are precisely among the consequences of the neoliberal model that we have to eradicate along the lines I have suggested.

The public purse has to finance the basic curriculum of the university, i.e., the humanities, social, natural and exact sciences have to be promoted in a balanced way. The private sector, in the current situation, can be depended upon to endow those disciplines in which it has special interests, but even here some democratic monitoring is called for, otherwise we will end up with a glut of computer programmers, software writers, commercial lawyers and a chronic shortage of primary and secondary school teachers! We have to insist that big business is not the only, indeed in a poor country such as ours, not even the most important, constituency to which the university is accountable. The urban and rural communities of poor people who need the best research and practical implementation plans and training in order to help them out of



the poverty trap are our main constituency. Again, the previous analysis ought to be a guide to the university's policy and strategy in this regard.

Similarly, in a multilingual country, the way in which we approach the language issue at tertiary level can make the difference between success and failure. Time does not allow me to canvas this issue at all<sup>4</sup>. Suffice it to say that it is a research area that has been sorely neglected mainly because even the best of our university managements have not yet been able to comprehend the economic and pedagogical centrality of the language question in post-apartheid South Africa.

The question of university autonomy and academic freedom has to be revisited, given the fact that post-apartheid South Africa has, necessarily, to strike a careful balance between social planning and individual freedom. The tendency towards managerialism and the "marketisation" of university education is one that has to be countered if we are not simply to reproduce carbon copies of efficient, politically correct but soulless institutions that tend to be dictated to by wherever the money is coming from.

Finally, I should like to end off where I began. Elites are the inevitable result of asymmetrical power relations which are themselves the consequence of historically evolved class societies. Elites are not necessarily elitist. University students, for example, who in all societies continue to be among the privileged few – hence an elite – don't *have to* behave in an elitist manner. Elitism is an aspect of the ideology of a ruling class that has become a class-for-itself, i.e., one that consciously acts on the assumption that if all people did as its members do, they would be doing the right thing. In the era of capitalism, it is an ideology that justifies privilege and inequality in terms of merit based on individual competition, regardless of how and why some of the individuals are endowed with a headstart while others are hobbled by handicaps at the starting blocks. Because capitalism is an integrated world system, this phenomenon is global in scope. It shapes the consciousness of all modern elites. Oscar Lafontaine (2006), one of the leaders of the German Party of the Left, in a critique of

---

<sup>4</sup> Besides my own writings on this question, I refer those who wish to explore the issue in more detail to various articles and books by, among others, Anne Marie Beukes, Theo Du Plessis, Rosalie Finlayson, Hermann Giliomee, Kathleen Heugh, Mbulungeni Madiba and Victor Webb.

the dominant neoliberal ideology, cites a statement by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, to the effect that the efficiency and productivity of the strong and powerful is the driving force of democracy and freedom. According to her, more freedom is dependent on “us” having many more strong and powerful people so that they can pull everyone else along with them and, thus, make available more to the weaker ones. “We” need a country where performance is the heart of the system and if “we” have the stomach for performance, then we should also have the stomach for more and ever more performance. To this, the left social democrat, Lafontaine responds with words that capture exactly the point I wish to make:

The fact that the weak and the strong ones go to the starting blocks endowed with very unequal skills, wealth and social capital is not discernable in this way of seeing the matter. To take account of this would entail recognition of the right to freedom and to equality of opportunity of every individual. We see, therefore, that the neoliberal idea of freedom represents a regression to the prevailing ethos before the era of the French Enlightenment when it was already clear that it is the law that establishes equality between the weak and the strong and that freedom without law is tantamount to oppression. Neoliberalism does not believe in strengthening the weak and promoting equality of opportunity. Their wellbeing is, instead, supposed to depend on the “generosity” and the “uplifting example” of the “stronger ones”. The weak are social ballast, able to relate to the strong only as dependants and beggars.

In my view, the conclusion we have to draw from this insight is very clear. The important point is that *the alternative to promoting the neoliberal hegemony is to strengthen democracy*. It is the inadequacy and the inconsistency inherent in bourgeois notions of freedom and democracy that have to be exposed by the intelligentsia, especially by the university communities. This, too, is one of the tasks set for us by a genuinely transformative agenda. It is a challenge that lies at the heart of the ideological class struggle, one that we have to shoulder by virtue of the fact that we are located in the domain of higher education.

Cape Town

November 2008

## References

- Alexander, N. 2007. Affirmative action and the perpetuation of racial identities in post-apartheid South Africa. *Transformation* 63(2007)92-108.
- Gerima, H. 1996. ... *Mail and Guardian*, 6-12 December
- Gorz, A. 1989. *Critique of Economic Reason*. London: Verso.
- ICHRP. 2001. ... International Council on Human Rights Policy.
- Jansen, J. 2003. The state of higher education in South Africa: From massification to mergers. *State of the Nation. South Africa 2003-2004* (Edited by John Daniel, Adam Habib and Roger Southall). Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council Press.
- Kies, B. 1953. *The Contribution of Non-European Peoples To World Civilisation*. Cape Town: Teachers' League of South Africa.
- Lafontaine, O. 2006. Privatisierung bringt keine Freiheit. Die Neoliberale Politik beschädigt das Gemeinwesen. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 23 September 2006.
- Mnguni. 1952. *Three Hundred Years*. Cape Town: New Era Fellowship.