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# Higher education and social justice: engaging the normative with the analytical

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# Higher education and social justice: engaging the normative with the analytical

Jennifer M. Case

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The notion of ‘social justice’ considers the distribution of wealth (and related aspects of wellbeing) in society as a matter of justice. In contexts like the USA and the UK, social justice tends to stand in for a broad critique of the neoliberal political project that has been associated with an erosion of public institutions and an increase in income inequality – a rolling back of the post-war commitments of the social welfare state. In these contexts of relatively high participation in higher education, questions around how class continues to impact on educational experiences and life opportunities have not been resolved, with elite institutions continuing to draw largely from middle and upper classes (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001) and questions raised around commitments to the discourse of ‘widening participation’. A social justice stance on higher education also provides the starting point for a necessary pushback to a related set of justifications for higher education that sees these predominantly in instrumental and economic terms, focusing attention on issues of efficiency with educational outcomes characterised in ‘evidence-based’ terms.

In post-apartheid South Africa, it is relatively recently that ‘social justice’ has entered the lexicon of higher education scholarship (see Hlalele & Alexander, 2012; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Wilson-Strydom, 2011) – these issues used to be more signalled with the term ‘transformation’ in the context of transforming a system from the legacy of apartheid. The emerging use of social justice can be associated with a sharply growing sense that the democratic government has not been able to address the inherited inequities from colonial and apartheid times – both access to and success in higher education remain skewed by race (Cooper & Subotzky, 2001).

Scholars such as Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter (2007) have found value in engaging with Amartya Sen's (2011) critique of the concept of social justice as brought into contemporary times by John Rawls (1971). In short, Sen finds Rawls's abstract ideal notion of limited utility when faced with real world contexts, where ideals are seldom attained but the necessity for moral judgements is important. Sen has offered what can be considered a more 'close-up' notion of social justice, grounded in his conceptualisation of human flourishing – the possibility for humans to accomplish things that they value doing in life. There is an immediate appeal to this argument in that human flourishing feels so close to an intrinsic understanding of the purposes of education.

In this paper I want to consider what are the implications and potential pitfalls especially for scholars taking a social justice stance on higher education. My thinking is particularly influenced by current developments in the South African context, where extreme social inequity sharpens the debate. I am also concerned that taking the lead from deliberations in contexts such as the UK and USA, with very different contemporary social arrangements, might lead to some blindspots in our thinking. It seems that in order to find a useful position around higher education and social justice we need to go back to some foundational issues.

Just over 20 years after the democratic dispensation, the South African social landscape continues to be structured by its legacy of colonialism and apartheid. These were systems that structured life opportunities for South Africans in distinct ways depending on their ethnic backgrounds. These structures have largely not changed even though we now have a democratic order: black children still attend schools that are little different to the Bantu Education system that was the cause of the Soweto uprising some 40 years ago. South Africa now has a growing middle class of all races, but nearly half of our population is still excluded from stable livelihoods (Southall, 2016). Significant progress has been made in provision of housing and sanitation but we still have statistics around maternal and child health that are completely out of kilter for a nation with this level of GDP. It is therefore not surprising that serious questions began to be asked by student activists in 2015, especially given that this was the point where the broader political order began to unravel. But the answers are not that straightforward. Yes, definitely, society needs to change. But how? And most crucially, what role should and could the university play in this regard?

## **Social change and the functions of the university**

From a number of different positions there are compelling arguments that the university cannot be the central locus for social change. Herewith an extract from a recent piece by Robin Kelly, a UCLA professor and committed activist (Kelley, 2016). Reflecting on the recent student protests across US campuses, he writes of universities:

...as institutions they will never be engines of social transformation. Such a task is ultimately the work of political education and activism. By definition it takes place outside the university.

Coming from a completely different perspective, the somewhat iconoclastic Stanley Fish says in his rather provocative book *Save the World on Your Own Time* that university professors should leave their political commitments outside the classroom (Fish, 2008).

Whatever your political stripes, it is clear that the domain for societal change will be the political, whether in a system of democratic institutions or on the streets (or both). The university cannot be a representative body, it cannot make policy and it cannot dispense health and welfare. So what can it do?

Here we know the standard answer – research / teaching / administration / social engagement – but these are internal organisers for academic activity. What does the university do, and what should it do, from the perspective of society? A perspective is offered by Saleem Badat (2009), a former vice-chancellor of a South African university, who says

The meaning of higher education and universities cannot be found in the content of their teaching and research, how they undertake these, or their admission policies. Instead, the core purposes of higher education and universities reside elsewhere. (p. 4)

From this, Badat identifies purposes and roles for the contemporary South African university slightly reorganised for the purposes of this paper:

1. research and scholarship – production of new knowledge (Badat quite purposefully puts this last on his list but I am simply ordering to make clear the links with our research/teaching/etc conceptualisation of what we do)
2. cultivation of highly educated and democratically minded people
3. engaging with society both on development needs and challenges, and with its intellectual and cultural life

Here you can see the familiar themes peeping through, but framed now in terms of external purposes – what the university offers to society.

At this stage it is useful to take a step back and locate this contemporary framing within a broader perspective put forward by the historian and sociologist Manuel Castells (2001). Castells notes that universities at all times and places have served four different (and potentially contradictory) functions, but that the balance and form of these differs in particular periods. Firstly, and contrary to a view that is often espoused, Castells points out that universities have always served an ideological function. This tends to represent the dominant ideologies in society, although in contexts of a repressive state the university tends more to foster challenges to this

domination in the form of counter-hegemonic ideologies. Secondly, universities have always served as mechanisms of selection of dominant elites. This is even so in present massified and even universal systems, where stratification within the broader system preserves this function (as predicted by Trow, 1973). With regard to the third function, Castells notes – as is widely recognised – that research is a relative newcomer to the university, emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and intensifying in our period not only due to the significance of knowledge in the globalised economy, but also, I think, in the context of increasingly cash-strapped universities looking for third stream income. The fourth and final function which Castells argues, and probably currently the most significant one, is the training of the bureaucracy, going back to the early church schools and changing form but not function when industrialisation required the production of engineers and other technically skilled personnel, and mass schooling and social welfare systems required armies of schoolteachers and social workers etc.

This perspective on the functions of the university helps to tease out our contemporary position on higher education and social justice. Social justice is an ideology. It is a counter-hegemonic ideology to the neoliberal discourse that has become so prominent across much of the Anglophone world. The ideology of social justice is an important extension of the democratic commitment that Badat recognises as a key function of the contemporary university. I need to clarify here my use of the term ‘ideology’ – this we can take to mean a normative view on how society should work and – in the context of the university – a view on what the roles of graduates will be in this regard. Ideology can function either to support a hegemonic order, or to contest it.

As noted, Castells emphasises that these functions of the university are often in contradiction and tension with each other. Most obviously, the ideological function will not always sit easily with the production of new knowledge. Ideology is the promotion (and expansion) of one viewpoint, while new knowledge in a university will often be about engaging in different and competing viewpoints. Furthermore, in a society in turmoil and competition over ideology, this tension will be seen in the university, most notably in the context of what we now term the ‘global South’. The trick is for the university to meld these potentially contradictory functions together into some form that is reasonably compatible with the present times, and this challenge means a periodic remaking of the question: what is the university for? With regards to the risks if this is not accomplished, Castells is clear:

The real issue ... is to create institutions solid enough and dynamic enough to stand the tensions that will necessarily trigger the simultaneous performance of somewhat contradictory functions. The ability to manage such contradictions, while emphasising the role of universities in the generation of knowledge and the training of labour in the context of the new requirements of the development process, will condition to a large extent the capacity of new countries and regions to become part of the dynamic system of the new world economy (p. 212)

Returning then to a position on social justice and higher education, this is of course a key point for ideological contestation in our present society, and it is not surprising, as noted by Castells, that the university is a key site for protecting and expanding this counter hegemonic discourse. And with Robin Kelley, and against Stanley Fish, it is entirely appropriate that students in their studies will be exposed to and expected to engage with what might be expected of our democratic societies and the degrees to which current arrangements are moving us forwards or backwards. These are powerful ideas and we do well to produce graduates who are critical and dissatisfied with the societies in which they find themselves. However, as Kelley notes, the university cannot be the central locus for effecting this change. We need to produce graduates who will go into the streets and/or the boardrooms to act on the knowledge that they have taken in. Here it is worth noting another inherent contradiction in the functions of higher education as outlined by Castells – we frame what we give graduates as tremendously precious and important – yet we work within a system that by definition can only extend these privileges to a portion of society (as noted above this is true even for so-called ‘universal’ higher education systems where the resulting stratification means that only a small segment gets the truly elite version of higher education).

## **Contestation in the postcolonial university**

In the middle of one of our recent campus shutdowns at the University of Cape Town I found myself asking the question “Can you run a functional university in a dysfunctional society?” Well of course you have to. Understanding the key functions outlined above that no other institution in society is placed to accomplish, we have to keep our universities going. But Castells, from a survey of post-colonial Africa, notes the severe challenges in this context – what tends to happen is that the ideological functions of the universities come to dominate at the expense of others, most notably at the expense of the production of knowledge and the necessary education of professionals for all domains in the modern society. With great irony, this situation means that these universities are not able to achieve what Castells calls their developmental function (the training of professionals), which of course will be centrally important if these societies are actually to accomplish the social changes that their ideological position might value – the building of strong and inclusive economies, the provision of services to the citizenry, etc.

Further analysis of the African post-independence context for higher education comes from the incisive work of Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani. In a piece delivered to South African academics on the eve of the democracy, and noting early portents of what might come, Mamdani firstly urged the audience to abandon their idea of South African exceptionalism (Mamdani, 1993) – the idea held by many South Africans at that time that we would somehow be exempt from the social, political and economic difficulties that have plagued the postcolonial African context. Crucially, in running through the course of events as experienced in his home

university, Makerere in the 60s, he shows how the prominence of an Africanist ideological position in the post-independent university had severe and crippling consequences for its ability to ultimately function as a university. Once the now fully “Africanised” university was fully subservient to the new nation state it lost its autonomy and could no longer hold together its functions, most especially in the domain of production of knowledge. Makerere, once the global site for intellectual ferment, became a stagnant pool. Reflecting on these events, Mamdani asked the assembled South African academics:

... are you condemned to suffer a replay of the old African script or are you in a position to learn from our experience? (p. 9-10)

At this point it is useful also to reference the key debate between Jakes Gerwels and Neville Alexander in 1987 at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Gerwels had famously declared UWC the “intellectual home for the left”. Alexander, although most probably more radically left than most of the others in the room, stridently disagreed with this position, arguing that such a commitment would condemn the university to becoming a ‘leftist bantustan’, rather than being open to a broad set of ideas. Given the political mood of the time it is perhaps not surprising that Gerwels won widespread support for his position. However, with the benefit of hindsight, Premesh Lalu comments of this move:

It was a profound move, but it had some unforeseen consequences. The university continued to write itself into a marginal space. We were always lodged within a certain referentiality, always ‘that’, the other university of the left. It short-circuited other possibilities and gave rise to some dogmatic thinking. (Davis, 2012)

## **The task for education researchers**

If we are to retain to contemporary commitment to social justice (in the face of a narrow neoliberal hollowing out of higher education), alongside the other potentially contradictory functions of the university, what will this mean for us as higher education scholars and teachers? In order to take this forward, I have found productive the simple challenge posed in a recent keynote by Sharon Todd (2015), who challenged an audience of education researchers to be sure that they are asking educational questions. We cannot evade our own role in generating new knowledge to broaden our understanding of contemporary problems. Here I was struck by a recent comment of the higher education editor of a social media outlet, who noted how hard it was these days to get South African education academics to write about their research findings – in these heady times everyone wants to write op-eds but no one wants to make a contribution to the long haul. In order to expand on Todd’s challenge I would like to refer to Castells and the broader context for the work that I discussed earlier. In 2000, a series of seminars was arranged with South African academics to engage with Castells’ emerging work on the contemporary

condition of globalisation, what he terms ‘informationalism’ and its implications for emerging economies such as South Africa, with an especial focus on education. Castells reportedly lamented that South African academics seemed stuck in the mode of asking ‘how to’ questions rather than the analytical focus that he deemed more important in research. Thus the questions were focused on ‘how’ we can resist the pernicious impacts of globalisation, rather than an analytical understanding of the conditions – constraints and enablements – of the present context. Part of this can be related to an over-prioritising of the ideological mode. Castells is quite frank in his assessment of this mode of academic work:

What is to be done? Each time an intellectual has tried to answer this question, and seriously implement the answer, catastrophe has ensued. (Castells, 1998, cited in Muller, 2001, p. 273)

Therefore, we need to ask analytical education questions. In this regard our ideological commitment to social justice is a potentially rich and productive store, and a useful metric for a contemporary society in which it is often hard to find a moral compass – but we need to use this to frame educational questions rather than rhetorical statements or prescriptions for action. In a broader sense the flagging of social justice also links with calls by Andrew Sayer and others for the bringing back in of normative concerns to social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Sayer, 2011). There is a rich emerging literature on the public good purposes of higher education and here, I suggest, is a more nuanced framing of the normative that we need to guide our deliberations (see, for example, Lagemann & Lewis, 2011; Marginson, 2011; Nixon, 2011). An important point to make at this juncture is that any real discussion of social justice in society would need to centre on the full post-secondary education system, not just higher education. This is a serious concern in current South African discourse on the matter. Recent evidence from the OECD points again to the crucial (although complex) role of vocational education in advancing social equality in the long term (Busemeyer, 2014).

Currently there is a growing scholarship tracking the dramatic expansion of participation in higher education, particularly in Asia over recent times (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010). The trend seems unstoppable and driven mainly by aspirations of families rather than by government fiat (Carnoy, Froumin, Loyalka, & Tilak, 2014; Marginson, in press). These are times to make sure the questions we are asking of higher education are not trapped in thinking of the past. What are the particular dynamics of the expansion of higher education in South Africa – how is a system that massified early on for a small racially defined segment adjusting (or not) to the needs of broader massification across the population? How can we understand the protests of 2015 in this context, bearing in mind Trow’s original analysis? What are the forms of capital that South African students from less privileged backgrounds are drawing on in order to succeed in South African higher education? What are the forms of pedagogy that are supporting the needs of these students? What do graduates make of the knowledge and dispositions that the university has fostered in them – how do these translate into their lives post university?

With regard to addressing the central educational questions of the day, I argue that the contribution of close-up research remains completely undervalued. Sadly this is a world that wants metrics, rankings and statistical correlations. In higher education I would be bold to say that yet another study which shows how students with high levels of motivation/self-efficacy/self-regulation tend to perform better academically is really a waste of everyone's time. There are important questions that are not being addressed, partly because these require an audience sophisticated enough to understand complex causality. Researchers need to be able to build explanatory accounts which draw on close-up data, but in analysis are able to locate it carefully in its historical and social context. We need to find ways to work with large sets of narrative data; to become more sophisticated in using observational and documentary data; to learn to work comparatively across contexts in a close-up mode. We need to listen closely to student voices; at the same time we need more than ever to avoid the 'epistemic fallacy' (Archer, 2007) which takes people's accounts of the way things seem to be the way they are. It is difficult to make sense easily of the challenging and fast moving times in which we are living. Crucially, there is much work to be done in interpreting findings and presenting these to multiple audiences. If the world out there has been raised on a diet of metrics and correlations, then the duty is going to fall to us as higher education scholars to raise the level of the conversation.

In closing I want to end with something of a provocation. Readers will be aware that the University of Cape Town took the decision early in 2015 to remove the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the campus. There was widespread agreement about this symbolic break, and only a few lone voices who troubled the moment. A colleague Nicoli Nattrass<sup>1</sup> wrote the following:

Removing the statue will provide the illusion that we have rid ourselves of Rhodes' legacy. It would cloak UCT in a false mantle of radicalism, hiding the embarrassing truth that we are an elite institution that reinforces social inequality on a daily basis. The statue should be moved – but let's keep it somewhere on campus to remind us that we are the living legacy of Rhodes' elitism, and have a corresponding debt to society.

This thoughtful challenge resonates with an earlier piece written in November 2013 by the then vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town (UCT), Prof Njabulo Ndebele. Aware of the longstanding debates about the location of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on the UCT campus – these go back to the 1930s – he provides a provocative engagement with the perspective that the statue is designed to invoke:

A concrete balustrade just below Rhodes allows you to stand there, your back to him. You too can assume his pose ... For a while you might even experience the gaze of contentment: there, spread before you, is the world you had a hand in shaping.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www-uct-ac-za.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/mondaypaper/archives/?id=9992>

...

Although you and Rhodes command a view, the vista before you is too far and widespread to show its imperfections. At some time past you may have read about, heard about, or seen smoke rising from rampant fires in the informal settlements of KwaLanga along the highway to and from the airport; and from farther afield, in the townships of Gugulethu and Crossroads. You might have contemplated lives charred and belongings incinerated, families traumatised; and you might recall the clamours of tragedy in the newspapers, on radio and television, of political accusation and counter-accusation, and stories of poverty and wealth deposited on the deliberative tables of commissions of inquiry. (Ndebele, 2013)

What is the relationship between the university and the world that surrounds it? The deliberate colonial siting and architecture of UCT embodies the idea that the university is set apart, with an elevated view from which it can gaze upon and contemplate the world. Ndebele's inversion of Rhodes' gaze – to look closely at the misery that is also part of the colonial legacy and to avoid the comforts of an ideological blanket – is a useful reminder to higher education scholars of the important analytical work to be done if we are to make any progress in really alleviating the injustices of the past.

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