Suspect or Prophet? Private Higher Education, Hope and the Social Good

Public inaugural lecture as Cornerstone Institute Executive Dean

Rev Dr BR Rudi Buys

3 September 2019

Centre for the Book, Cape Town, South Africa

What makes hope? When debates on the ghosts of our fraught past revisits us in new debates on apartheid symbols; when commissions of inquiry into state capture abound with ever-increasing revelations of decay; when the economy grounds to a halt; when a women student is murdered and raped at a post office; when mayhem seems the only headline; what hope do we speak of?

How do we reconstruct hope when our aspirations fade to recapture the half forgotten dream of a restored nation? Is hope not more than a 'thing'; more than a private or public good to work for; more than projects of economic growth; more than the outcome of a set of circumstances; more than a belief or an attitude – more than its reduction by symbolic representation, social imaginary or political rhetoric?

Is hope not rather a face; a voice; a body; and a togetherness? Hope as an embodiment of our being human; an embodiment of lived experience that takes shape when people from vastly different realities are near each other, see and hear each other, reach out to and embrace the other. Hope as the proximities and connectedness, the shared vulnerabilities and new solidarities that we each hold together with those who on the face of it are most different from us – hope as a 'relational reality'.

Hope, I submit, is a 'Who' and a 'Who with'.

If we accept that it is the actual relationships of different people from diverse lives – lives lived amidst the complexities of a society ever in transition – that determine hope, what then is the social good?

Is the social good a realised sense of national cohesion; a collective sense of resilience that citizens draw on to overcome seemingly similar struggles in very different lived realities? Is the social good not more than the best interest of society at large; more than the private good of each of its citizens; more than the public good of the collective; even more than a resilient democracy that ensures basic rights and freedoms are realised? Is the social good not rather 'not a good at all'?

Is it not rather a deeply rooted sense that we are capable to reflect and act? A human agency as the social good; as an appreciation of self, others and the world that persuades us of our inherent authority to triumph over our failures; an agency to re-imagine and enact hope; agency as a togetherness that draws us nearer to one another when our fears would drive us apart. Human agency is a way of being, knowing and doing – or in meta-theoretical terms, as an ontology, epistemology and methodology of the social good (Morrow & Torres, 2002).

Agency, I submit, is the socially good and the social good we yearn for.

If we accept that hope and the social good is relational, embodied, and best represented in the lived realities of citizen agency, then it follows that our daily lives must be the theatre where the struggle to prosper plays out. Our lives, which are scarred with how disconnected we are; scarred by the social distances we all live with, enact and, yes, importantly, also protest; scarred by the societal hierarchies that permeate all aspects of South African life.

A first frame: Social hierarchy

This is the first interpretive frame I propose we use to consider the possibility of hope, the social good and higher education: the lived reality of social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1973; Mamdani, 2001; Spivak, 1988).

Social hierarchies determine some to be the powerful and others the powerless, some to have voice and others not. It sets and determines a daily struggle to shift positions on that continuum – a continuum that places you closer or further from the center of power and voice. Such a hierarchy promises mobility, but it only offers suspicion. Suspicion of the other when the powerful must protect its power and the powerless must gain or disrupt it – binaries that leave everyone a 'perpetual suspect'.

That is where we find ourselves, having to negotiate our positions and positionalities of power and voice.

However, in-between the places we are each bound to negotiate, there is a positionality that seeks to disrupt the established order; to break new ground, to build a new imaginary that sets citizen agency as its goal. That is the space of the 'prophet' – in-between, with new knowledge, new identities and new courage and energy to enact hope and the social good (Popkewitz, 2010).

Do private higher education as an arena of knowledge intersect with a nation's hope to achieve what is socially good, and if so, how? In what ways do higher education respond to a relational view of hope and agency as the social good? What place does agency have in the social and corporate architectures of private higher education? Does higher education conform to the established hierarchies of society, and of knowledge production, of the powerful and powerless – to be the suspect – or are there instances of a prophet; of the renegade driving at a new imaginary?

This is the question I raise: is private higher education the suspect or a prophet?

Two considerations make the question of private higher education and the public (social) good an urgent one.

Firstly: a *persistent ambivalence* regarding private higher education in higher education policy, in a protectionist engagement with the sector by public authorities, and in declarations by political actors of private education as a haven for class and racial biases (Council of Higher Education, 2016).

Secondly: what is considered an *explosive growth* of higher education mainly for private benefit as a sector of the economy (Council of Higher Education, 2007).

Political and governmental regard of private higher education in South Africa during the first decade of democracy were initially very positive. The sector was considered a partner for the expansion and massification of higher education, such as with an initial phase of partnerships between public and private institutions to offer combined qualifications, among others. However in the latter part of the decade the emphasis shifted to suspicion for several reasons. In the main this was due to concerns for the quality of education offered by the sector, concerns for the impact of a growing private sector on the sustainability of public institutions, and concerns for private institutions' commitment to and contribution to the public good.

Compare the assessment of the Council of Higher Education in this regard in its review of the first decade:

"The second major change in the higher education system was the spectacular growth in private higher education, which has challenged, if not undermined, the public higher education system just as it was emerging from its apartheid legacy. This unforeseen expansion of private higher education has created political, policy, and legal dilemmas about the appropriate nature and degree of governmental action in response to what has become a powerful, transnational phenomenon in the post-Cold war period." (Council of Higher Education, 2007: 163).

The subsequent second decade focused on increasing regulation of private provisioning. Increased regulation limited the freedom of private institutions to claim an equal and comparative status to public institutions – they were not to be registered as universities, but only as "private higher education institutions". They were not to name senior academic positions as per higher education practice, e.g. not vice-chancellors, but only chief executive officers. They were not to award professorships; and all public funds for scholarly research and student fees were directed to public institutions.

The resulting environment entrenched the divide between public and private higher education and limited the ability of provide providers to contribute to national policy discourses and, more critically, to knowledge production through research, if not undermining the sustainability of *non-profit* private higher education institutions especially.

However, in recent years several developments improved the relationship of the private higher education sector and public authorities. These include firstly an increased efficiency of quality control systems and oversight of the South African Qualifications Authority and the Department and Council of Higher Education.

Secondly, a greater responsiveness to oversight by private higher education institutions, and thirdly greater participation of private institutions on their own initiative in national policy discourses.

As a result a second major shift in higher education is emerging that promises a return to the initial appreciation of private higher education as a partner in transformation of society in general and higher education in particular[1]. The shift arguably results from two factors, namely the difficulties public higher education faces to respond to societal demands, as well as progress of private higher education in becoming a (academically) well governed and managed sector.

Higher education in general and public institutions in particular faces an increasing realisation that we've achieved insufficient progress in transforming the sector. The funding crises of public higher education, and the slow pace of institutional transformation in the main represent this assessment (Breetzke & Hedding, 2018; Luckett & Naicker, 2019; Luvalo, 2019; and Mbembe, 2016).

In addition to increasing student numbers in, and the diverse corporate models of private institutions, the sector struggles to position itself in relation to public institutions in terms of scholarship and institutional identities. So for instance, the fact that private institutions may not as yet be registered or are recognised as fully-fledged universities does not in any way diminish their efforts to increasingly specialise in teaching and learning, research and community engagement – the requirements for university status, and as a result increasingly identify as universities. Still, due to the current limits, private higher education institutions struggle to attract research funding and senior academics.

An established hierarchy of higher education seems to unintentionally limit the private sector's contribution to the public good, if not the social.

Whereas the argument for higher education as a public good is uncontested, as is the right to private education, how the private sector engages the *tension between public and private goods* remains in flux (Marginson, 2018; and Tilak, 2008). Different institutions in mission and programme offering locate themselves on a continuum of priority commitment to the public good on the one hand, and priority commitments to share price on the other – as represented on the face of it in non-profits on the one and more corporate models of mergers and acquisition on the other (Marginson, 2011)[2].

The sector must also deal with a second *tension of a closer or more distant engagement* of higher education policy and curriculum discourses, such as on decolonisation, among others. The private sector, for instance, only has limited representative bodies that mediate its contributions to national policy – it is a sparsely organised sector; and in reality the sector at best has a lacklustre uptake of the project to decolonise curriculum – its perceived emphasis seemingly remains on curriculum in service of market demands, rather than curriculum in service of social transformation[3].

---

[1] The Higher Education Amendment Act, Act 9 of 2016, which allows for additional registration categories for private institutions, such as to be registered as fully-fledged universities, illustrate this shift.

[2] It is important to note that the view that profit-driven educational enterprises and institutions are unwilling or able to contribute to the public good is a contested one, which I do not explore in this paper, but consider a critical investigation for further inquiry. The view reveals to what extent the dynamic of suspicion, as an expression of social and knowledge hierarchies, has taken hold of the higher education landscape.

[3] See note 2.

Using the notion of 'social hierarchy' to make sense of the place and future of private higher education, I conclude that the sector finds itself at the margins of higher education – the place of the 'suspect other'.

This is so not only because public policy and the need for expansion and massification foregrounded public education. It seems private providers have played to the suspicions held by the broader higher education community that it engages only for private interest – a role as the suspect that private higher education in general adopted, continuous to enact and struggle to break free from.

To be fair, deeply entrenched and dominant social and knowledge hierarchies disallow those at the center and those at the margins to construct other roles than what the hierarchy determines. At the center one must struggle to retain your powerful position, and at the margins you have little option but to conform to the landscape to survive. The #MustFall-movements arguably represent the mirror that reveals this dynamic in South African higher education.

However, irrespective of your position at the center or the margin, what defines your thinking and doing is what the hierarchy decides – a directive from outside of yourself to determine who you think you are, what you think you know and what you think you are capable of, or not.

A second frame: Transitionality

However, hierarchies enacted in the lived experiences of our people and institutions make for only half the story. If our daily lives create the theatre where the struggle for hope and the social good plays out, then its backdrop is painted by the transitions of an emerging society – 'transitionality' as a second interpretative frame I propose we use to explore who we are, suspects and prophets alike (Buys, 2017).

As a rule, theories of change locate societies in transition on a pathway from a past to a future. These approaches position the present as a temporary location troubled by our struggles to break free from the past and realise an imagined future.

In the same way as the landing in-between the two staircases that lead from one floor to the next in a high-rise building is only a temporary stay, societies in transition are considered in a temporary moment en route to elsewhere (Bhabha, 1994).

This understanding causes what we think and do at that landing to be determined by the floors you come from and head to – we consider the landing to have less meaning in itself. In such a space and at such a time the social imaginary holds sway over both the floor I came from and the floor I go to – from and to what you perceive those places to be. Since you are present not at one or the other of the two floors any longer, what is, was and will be is a matter of memory and imagination – the social imaginary.

This reality makes the in-between space a transitional landscape of society with its own structure, demands and hopes (De Zepetnek, 1999; and Kalua, 2017).

Such is our society – a transitional space where our shared imaginary for our future is largely based on a contested imaginary of where we come from and where we're at, and on its underlying social architecture.

What a transitional, third space offers us is the never-ending option to re-imagine (Bhabha, 2009) – the understanding that we are not our past, but that much of our past remains our present; that we are not our future, but that much of what we imagined for our future is already present; and that we are the authors of the twists and turns of that storyline of our nation. It is in the transitional spaces that citizens discover their agency. This is so because transitional spaces lead people to particular ways of being, knowing and doing.

Inbetweenness defines who we are.

Inbetweenness is a sense of self that yearns to meet the stranger, to discover new worlds and to embrace the unfamiliar. It makes for a community of strangers and bridge-builders that represent a new togetherness (Buys, 2017 and 2018).

Inbetweenness represents a new way of knowing that counters hierarchy; seeks new designs and translates meaning for a society facing the residues of past injustice; a continuous struggle with ambiguities, contradictions and complexity; a fluidity of meaning that requires a society to reinvent itself without pause. It is a new way of doing change that invites difference and reaches across divides to build solidarities; that uncovers what lies hidden; that struggles not to avoid the past, but to drive through our imaginaries of its legacy to reconstruct hope and the social good.

The struggle of transitionality for me remains best illustrated in the 'Talking Heads', by Storm Thorgerson, used as the cover of the Pink Floyd album, Division Bell (Thorgerson, 2015).
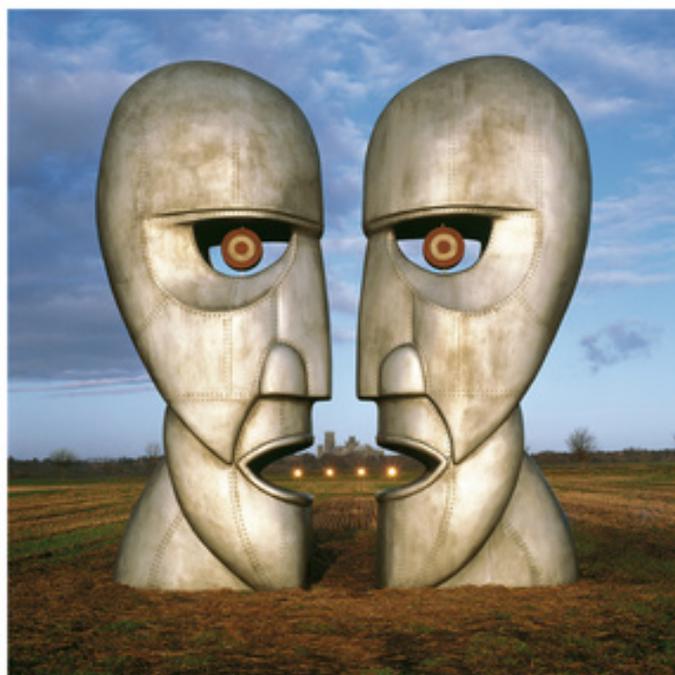
The single eyes of the two faces looking at each other become the two eyes of a single face looking at you – an optical illusion that reveals an underlying in-between reality of being, knowing and doing; of transitionality.

The 'third face' of transitionality is at once there and not there… every day offers new perspectives on the three faces of the Talking Heads even as all three are always there, without pause present in the field.

Similarly, seen and not seen, definitive and not, the different ways of the being, knowing and doing of inbetweenness are clearly visible when you look at its performances, but only intuitively present when you focus on the more familiar performances of social opposites in the lived realities of our social (and knowledge) hierarchies.

A new direction

This is precisely what a transitional society makes possible – an underlying new knowledge that struggles to emerge against a rampant hierarchy, and thereby offers direction to higher education as a performance of hope and for the social good.

Its positionality in-between the opposites of the established hierarchies of higher education offers private higher education the opportunity to uncover and embolden new communities of togetherness and design.

Its *shape* allows for integration of citizen agency as a practice of knowledge and, most critically, a theme of curriculum.

Its *nearness* to established academic hierarchies and the corresponding identities and commitments to academic (senate) governance and deep learning enables private higher education to reshape the landscape by redefining its sense of self and place.

The sector will run free when it takes hold of its underlying third positionality – not to yearn for the center or live with the winds at the margins, but to become a driver of change – the prophet status of inbetweenness.

In order to do so the sector must lead its own way to build a new scholarship. A scholarship that is responsive to a continent's need to recast itself; responsive to a nation's need to hear new voices and see different faces; and responsive to a sector's need to find its agency in a landscape burdened with remnants of (colonial) power hierarchies and vast social distances. Agency enacted through combined voices and focused reflective practice – agency as it emerges from an intentional enactment of hope as a social good of a transitional society.

For our part, as Cornerstone, we hope to build a third positionality and voice by strengthening scholarship on and for the sector.

We'll do so firstly with an inaugural scholarly journal to publish its first edition by June 2020 – the 'African Journal of Non-profit Higher Education'.

Secondly, we call on our sector to build a policy voice through a representative forum for non-profit institutions – that part of the sector that as yet has no dedicated platform for engagement – a call to establish a forum we propose to be named, 'Non-Profit Higher Education South Africa' or NOPHESA.

However, most important of all, we will engage the struggle for human becoming (Freire, 1996); to teach our nation to embrace the stranger; to build (global) citizens that reach across divides, uncover hidden worlds and together design and construct futures beyond social hierarchies; we aim to embrace our inbetweenness and become prophets of agency; of hope and of social good that matters.

Thank you

Bibliography

Bourdieu, P. (1973). *Cultural reproduction and social reproduction*. London: Tavistock.

Breetzke, G.D. & Hedding, D.W. (2018). The changing demography of academic staff at higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, *Higher Education* (2018) 76: 145-161.

Buys, B.R. (2017). *An epistemological study of the racial knowledge and identity of student leaders engaged in reconciliation*. Doctoral dissertation. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.

Buys, B.R. (2019). *Brugbouers*. Cape Town: Penguin Random House.

Council of Higher Education. (2007). *Review of Higher Education in South Africa, Selected Themes*. Pretoria: Council of Higher Education.

Council of Higher Education. (2016). *South African higher education reviewed: Two decades of democracy*. Pretoria: Council of Higher Education.

De Zepetnek, S. T. (1999). Configurations of Postcoloniality and National Identity: Inbetween Peripherality and Narratives of Change, *The Comparatist* 23, 89-110.

Freire, P. (1996 [1970]). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (revised edition). London: Penguin Books.

Kalua, F. (2017). Intermediality: A Paradigm for African Identity in the Twenty-First Century, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 33:1, 24-41.

Leibowitz, B. (2012). *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*. Staffordshire: Trentham Books.

Luvalo, L.M. (2019). The relationship between transformation and institutional culture, *South African Journal of Higher Education,* 33(1), 184–199.

Mamdani, M. (2001). Beyond settler and native as political identities: Overcoming the political legacy of colonialism, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43(4), 651-664.

Marginson, S. (2011). Higher Education and Public Good, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(4), 411–433.

Marginson, S. (2018). Public/private in higher education: a synthesis of economic and political approaches, *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(2), 322-337.

Mbembe, A. (2016). Decolonizing the university: New directions, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 15*(1), 29–45.

Morrow, R.A. & Torres, C.A. (2002). *Reading Freire and Habermas, critical pedagogy and transformative social change.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Popkewitz, T.S. (2010). The University as Prophet, Science as Its Messenger, and Democracy as Its Revelation: John Dewey, University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper, and Colonel Francis Parker, in Tröhler, D., Schlag, T. & Osterwalder, F. (eds) *Pragmatism and Modernities*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Spivak, G.C. (1988). 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L. (eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Thorgerson, S. (2015). Mind over Matter: The Images of Pink Floyd by Storm Thorgerson. London: Omnibus press.

Tilak, J.B.G. (2008). Higher education: a public good or a commodity for trade? *Prospects*, 38, 449–466.

END