

A PERSPECTIVE ON UNIVERSITIES

S J Terreblanche

1. THE POWER GAME, UNIVERSITIES AND THE RISE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

I am obsessed with the phenomenon of Power - Political, Economic and Ideological Power. A powershift takes place periodically.

Lord Acton: Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The need for countervailing power. The need for cross-cutting cleavages.

The Modern Society and pluralism: The classical theory of pluralism and Neo-pluralism. The need for a well-balanced civil society.

Robert Dahl was in his younger days a strong exponent of the classical theory of pluralism. He claimed then the "power is (in America) effectively disaggregated and non-cumulative" and that a wide-spread pluralistic network of power blocks exist to ensure a tendency towards a "competitive equilibrium". He also claimed that in this "global equilibrium" democracy plays a key role because of the existence of "multiple groups and multiple minorities".

Since 1985 Dahl no longer supports the idealistic point of view maintained by the Classical theory of pluralism. He now stated quite clearly that due to the unequal distribution of property and power, and due to the unequal access to information and propaganda, modern corporate capitalism "is inclined to produce additional inequalities in social and economic resources so great as to bring about severe violations of political equality and hence of the political process".

Miliband, a somewhat more radical Neo-pluralist, alleged that the capitalist class (and especially the managerial elite) is highly cohesive and constitutes a formidable constraint on Western governments and state institutions, ensuring that they remain "instruments for the domination of 'society'".

Any account of the task and/or position of the modern university (also in South Africa) must be interpreted against the unequal network of pluralistic power blocks in modern corporate capitalism.

Question: What political role must Universities play as a countervailing force, and as part of the civil society in modern society?

Allan Bloom published his controversial book: *The Closing of the American Mind*. in 1987. The sub-title is: "How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the soul of today's (American) students".

2. THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

"Although universities go back far, the university as we know it, in its context and its aim, is the product of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment was not only, or perhaps not even primarily, a scientific project but a political one. It began from the premise that the rulers could be educated

The problem of Enlightenment was not merely to discover the truth, but to solve the conflict between the truth and the beliefs of men [in positions of power - i.e. the conflict between philosophers and kings]. Enlightenment begins from the tension between what men are compelled to believe by city and religion. [i.e. by King and Pope] on the one hand, and the quest for scientific truth on the other ... The innovation of the Enlightenment was the attempt to reduce [this] tension and to alter the philosopher's relation to civil society. The learned society and the university, the publicly respected and supported communities of scientists - setting their own rules, pursuing knowledge according to the inner dictates of science, as opposed to civil or ecclesiastical authority, communicating freely ^{among} ~~among~~ themselves - are the visible signs of this innovation

The Enlightenment proposed a political science that could be used by founding nations, such as America, in establishing principles and arrangements for a sounder and more efficient politics, and a natural science that could master nature in order to satisfy men's needs

The Enlightenment was a daring enterprise. Its goal was to reconstitute political and intellectual life totally under the supervision of philosophy and science. No conqueror, prophet or founder ever had a broader vision, and none had more stunning success. There is practically no contemporary regime that is not somehow a result of Enlightenment, and the best of modern regimes - liberal democracy - is entirely its product The academies and universities are the core of liberal democracy, its foundation, the repository of its animating principles and the continuing source of the knowledge and education keeping the machinery of the regime in motion.....

The Enlightenment is connected with Plato's most powerful image about the relation between thinker and society in the cave. In the Republic, Socrates presents men as prisoners in a dark cave, bound and forced to look at a wall against which are projected images that they take to be the beings and that are for them the only reality. Freedom for men [and women] means escaping the bonds - civil society's conventions - leaving the cave and going up to where the sun illuminates the beings and seeing them as they really are. Contemplating them, is at once freedom, truth and the greatest pleasure [For the Enlightenment] education is the movement from darkness to light ... Enlightenment meant to shine the light of being in the cave and forever to dim the images on the wall.

The Republic's formula, that power and wisdom must coincide if evils are ever to cease in the cities, is the perfect expression of what the Enlightenment means. The necessary unity of power and wisdom [in Plato's philosopher king] is only a coincidence for the city state. But in other circumstances knowledge is not in itself power, and though knowledge is not in itself vulnerable to power, those who seeks knowledge and possess it, is most certainly vulnerable to power

[Before the Enlightenment] wise men saw clearly what was wrong [in civil society and in the church] but their wisdom did not generate power to do anything about it. The philosophers of the Enlightenment claimed to have discovered the means to reform society and to secure the theoretical life - the means were universities with an uncompromised political agenda

The Enlightenment took Socrates' ironies seriously. It was intent on philosophers' ruling. If they did not have the title of king, their political schemes were, all the same, designed to be put into practice. And they were put into practice, not by begging princes to listen to them but by philosophy's generating sufficient power [at universities] to force princes to give way.

According to Allan Bloom the university in the tradition of Socrates and the Enlightenment came near its death when Heidegger put philosophy and the university at the service of Nazi-Germany. Shortly after Hitler's accession to power, Heidegger addressed the university community in Freiburg as the new rector and urged commitment to National Socialism

Bloom conclude his chapter on "The University" by stating that "the university, of all institutions, is most dependent on the deepest beliefs [in the principles underlying academic freedom]. Our present educational problems cannot seriously be attributed to bad administrators, weakness of will, lack of discipline, lack of money, insufficient attention to the three R's, or any of the other common explanations that indicate things will be set aright if we professors would just pull up our socks. All these things are the result of a deeper lack of belief in the university's vocation. One cannot say that we must defend academic freedom when there are grave doubts about the principles underlying academic freedom. In order to find out why we have fallen on such hard times, we must recognise that the foundations of the university have become extremely doubtful to the highest intelligences. Our petty tribulations have great causes. What happened to the universities in Germany in the thirties is what has happened and is happening everywhere. The essence of it all is not social, political, psychological or economic, but philosophic. And, for those who wish to see, contemplation of Socrates is our most urgent task. This is properly an academic task..

3. TWENTIETH CENTURY CAPITALISM, THE RISE OF THE PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY AND THE "USEFULNESS" OF UNIVERSITIES

While the Enlightenment gave a rather broad political agenda to universities, the rise of corporate capitalism after the F.W.W. gave a somewhat narrow economic agenda to universities. Modern capitalism has one domineering aim, i.e. to maintain a high economic growth rate.

What cause economic growth? In the 19th century it was mainly more labourers and more capital (capital deepening) and a little bit of technological progress. In the 20th century more labourers and more capital still play a role, but a rather subordinate one. The main causes of growth is now:

- (a) investment in human capital (or education and especially the training of the fast growing professional class) and
- (b) the progress of knowledge and technology (i.e. capital modernisation).

It is estimated that these two factors - education and new knowledge - are responsible for more than 80 per cent of economic growth. Due to the important role universities now play in the training of professional people and in technological research, it is clear that in the 20th century the University has a pivotal contribution to make towards the maintenance of a high economic growth rate. Due to the important role the universities are playing in supplying both educated manpower and the new knowledge and technology to the modern economy (i.e. to both the Big Corporations and Big Government), the Universities have become such an integral part of the "production process" that they have lost their independence. Consequently they cannot play its political role as an countervailing force as was envisaged by the Enlightenment.

To emphasise the "co-option" of the modern universities by the modern system of corporate capitalism, I want to refer to Prof. Hennie Rossouw's articles on "Tendencies at Universities". He distinguishes three tendencies that is perhaps inevitable, but nonetheless matters of grave concern: He calls the three tendencies:

- (a) Professionalisation,
- (b) Corporatisation,
- (c) Commercialisation.

(a) **Professionalisation**

This tendency has to do with the expectation that universities should adapt their courses and the content of their degrees in such a manner that they will supply the trained and educated manpower needed in the labour market. According to this approach the Universities must keep themselves busy with what is "practical", what is "useful" and what can promote "profitability".

The idea that universities must educate people for specific professions is not a new one. This tradition went back to the Middle Ages. Except the liberal art faculty, the oldest universities have had faculties to train priests, medical doctors and lawyers. But the emphasis on professional and "useful" education has increased tremendously. A great variety of so-called "professions" are now trained at universities. This development not only has a qualitative dimension, but also a quantitative one.

Due to the professionalisation of universities the value of "liberal education" - i.e. education with no practical or short term "market" value - is questioned more and more and have been marginalised to a large degree. Consequently universities' ability and their opportunity to think and act critically about the broader society of which the universities have become a useful appendix, have become much smaller than what was the case previously. To put it in a nutshell: the growing economic agenda of universities in corporate capitalism is threatening the political agenda of universities. Or, to put it differently, the universities have become such a "useful" part of the power structures of modern society that they can no longer play their countervailing role. In many cases the administration and the councils of universities have become, to such high degree, part of the "managerial elite" of corporate capitalism, that the academic freedom of universities has become seriously compromised.

(b) **Corporatisation**

Since the 1960s important changes have taken place in the management of almost all universities. Due to the size and the growing complexity of universities it is now deemed necessary to manage a university like a big corporation. Previously a university was regarded as a "republic of learned people" in which all the professors partake in the "running" (instead of the management) of an university. The rector of a university was earlier regarded as a "primus inter pares". He has now become a "chief executive officer". He now manages the university according to a hierargical structure. Authority is delegated to deans and to directors. If things moves smoothly, the rector gets the praise. If things goes wrong, the deans and the directors get the blame.

The new management structure has brought with it also a new "management culture" - a "management culture" in which the senate is playing a lesser role and in which the traditions of tolerance and freedom of speech do not enjoy the same priority as was the case previously. As is

the case in the corporate sector, the functioning of the university as a corporation - with a hierargical management structure - cannot tolerate that high level of academic freedom typical of universities in yesteryears.

(c) **Commercialisation**

Almost all modern universities has comes under financial pressure. Consequently it has become necessary to search for alternative sources of income and to run the university as a commercial concern or as a business. Because of the commercialisation of universities the business of a university is now-adays regarded as business! It was bad enough when President Coolridge said in the 1920s that the business of the United States is business. It is much worse when all the divisions of a modern university is run like a business and as an income generating concern that must be cost-effective in all its parts.

Traditionally the "business" of a university was approached as a social service of general cultural and educational interest in which the concern was not about short-term financial interest but the long term public interest. Due to commercialisation, "knowledge" is now regarded as a commercial product "produced" and "traded" in the market by universities. In this way the "service" of universities has become a consumption article, while the different departments at a university come under the same kind of pressure generated by consumerism as is the case with corporations in the private sector.

Given these tendencies at universities, we must ask ourselves to what extent universities can still play an independent countervailing force.

4. **SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES DURING THE PERIOD OF TRANSFORMATION**

When we talk about transformation we talk about the changing (or restructuring) of the power relationships and of the ideological orientation in South Africa.

We also talk about the eradication of the remnants of apartheid and how the privileged minority should bend backwards to compensate those that have been exploited and/or deprived by the system of radical capitalism and apartheid.

During the period of negotiation a sharp polarisation existed between two main power blocks. On the right hand side of the ideological spectrum we had the (white) Bourgeois Establishment (comprising the corporate sector, the bureaucratic sector, the NP, the Media and the organised professional groups). On the left hand side we had the (black) Alliance of the ANC, SACP and COSATU. (In this polarisation I omit the right-wing parties and the IFP).

The Bourgeois Establishment was a formidable "compact of power" from an economic, political, media and professional point of view. Its main weakness was the lack of moral legitimacy. All the main stream (white) universities gave overt and covert support to this Establishment in spite of its legitimacy crisis.

The Alliance, on the other hand, was rather weak, looking at it from an economic and an organisational point of view. It derived its strong position at the negotiations from its high moral position. The Alliance was supported by some of the "ethnic" universities, like the U.W.C.

After the Election of 1994 political power shifted to the ANC. During the last 18 months the ANC succeeded in capturing large parts of the bureaucracy... At this point in the transitional process a new kind of polarisation has developed - on the one hand, the ANC, COSATU, large parts of the bureaucracy, the black Media and the SABC - on the other hand, the Corporate sector, professional groups and the white Media.

Where do the universities (and especially Stellenbosch) fit into the new polarisation between power blocks? U.W.C. and some of the "ethnic" universities are on the side of the (new) ANC-Establishment. What about the traditional "white" universities? Let us concentrate on the big five: UCT, Wits, Natal, Stellenbosch and Pretoria. The first three are for decades the fortresses of English liberalism. Looking at the so-called English universities from the perspective of Stellenbosch, I think we are inclined to underestimate the ideological soul-searching that is taking place at these universities. It will not be easy for the traditional Liberal English universities to make common cause with a (new) ANC-dominated Establishment. The indications are, nonetheless, that Wits is going to become the flagship of the new Establishment. The same may happen with UCT and Natal. I sincerely hope that these three universities will succeed to keep the necessary distance between them and the new Establishment. If not, they will in future not be

in a position to challenge the ANC if and when it starts to encroach on the independence of universities and academic freedom.

The two ~~being~~ Afrikaans universities are in an even more precarious situation. Due to their close (ideological and organisational) relationship with the NP and the Afrikaner bureaucracy, a very uncomfortable and even hostile relationship exists between them and the (new) ANC-Establishment. There are indications the UP - realising that the bureaucracy is becoming Africanised - has done quite a lot to build a working relationship with the new political powers that be.

What about Stellenbosch? Stellenbosch has developed a very close relationship with a large part of mainly the Afrikaner corporate sector (including a large part of the Afrikaner media). I sometimes get the impression that the Afrikaner corporate sector is less inclined to build a working relationship with the new Establishment than the English corporate sector.

It looks as if we have to accept that a rather uncomfortable and strained relationship between Stellenbosch and the new political authority is going to continue for quite a long period. The ideological gap between Stellenbosch and the new political authorities is rather big and probably unbridgeable. While Stellenbosch's relationship with the government will remain strained (and can get even worse), its relationship with the Afrikaner corporate sector and the Media may become even closer. This places Stellenbosch in the awkward position that it is too close to the Afrikaner corporate sector and media to take a stand against it, and too far removed from the new government to have any meaningful influence. If we add all the complexities around the Afrikaans language clause, a distinct possibility exists that Stellenbosch may become marginalised by the new political dispensation. Against this background it is rather important that Stellenbosch should take the initiative to withdraw the clause on Afrikaans in the Stellenbosch law. Stellenbosch will be in an unbearable situation if the government should decide unilaterally to withdraw the clause.

Up till now Stellenbosch has not nearly done enough as far as affirmative action is concerned. It will only do enough if in the next five years the percentage of students other than white increase from the present 13 per cent to at least 30 per cent. It is rather important that the percentage of African students should increase from the present 3 per cent to 15 or 20 per cent. To make

Stellenbosch attractive enough for African students, something will have to be done about the Afrikaans-issue.

In his speech at Stellenbosch last September, President Mandela stated it quite explicitly that "the crucial challenge facing Stellenbosch is to turn away from racial privileges and sectarian use of power and to serve all of South Africa". He added the following sentence: "The University of Stellenbosch belongs to the whole of South Africa and it is your duty - I would say: challenge and privilege - to bring your actions in line with this reality".

These are rather strong words. We should ask ourselves the following question: What has been done visibly since last year to bring the actions of the University of Stellenbosch in line with the new political and economic reality in South Africa?

Although the University has a bridging and development program, very little has been done about the popular perception - rightly or wrongly - that Stellenbosch is not positively orientated towards the new political Establishment. Some said it is only a marketing problem. If so, why? Others are of the opinion that Stellenbosch - as an integral part of the Afrikaner corporate sector and media - is not prepared to acknowledge the fact that Stellenbosch now "belongs to the whole of South Africa". Irrespective of whether the problem is one of perception or of substance, the danger is that Stellenbosch can be marginalised. As long as Stellenbosch remains something of a "sitting duck" in the eyes of the new political Establishment, we will have neither the independence nor the credibility to criticise where criticism is necessary.

In conclusion, it is rather important that a new modus vivendi should develop as quickly as possible between the new government and the universities in South Africa. We can only hope that the new government will not be too prescriptive and allow them - and especially the big five - to maintain the independence and the academic freedom to develop into that kind of university envisaged by the Enlightenment. South Africa needs that kind of university very much in the interest of a humane system of democratic capitalism. **But the chances that this will materialise, look rather slim at this stage.**