Places of Engagement

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In search of the South African university — Pages from a Stellenbosch diary

Peter Vale

Day ONE — From a shelf, I take down a book called Civitas Dei. This is not De civitate Dei, but like Saint Augustine's famous book, this one was written to chart a new understanding of man in the world. The volume in my hand is the second (of three) that broadcast a ‘gospel of democracy’: published in 1937, it was written by Lionel Curtis, who trained in the Classics and became what today we would call a ‘norm-entrepreneur’. The inscription on the title page reads: ‘To the Honourable, Dr Malan with every good wish from Abe Bailey, 31 August, 1937’. Joined together on this page are three white men — Curtis, Malan, Bailey — whose careers helped to chart how it was that South Africa was fashioned as a European state in Africa. To explain: the Utrecht-theology-faculty-trained Malan became the first Afrikaner Nationalist Prime Minister of South Africa (1948); the English-speaking, South African-born Sir Abe Bailey — who had no university training — was a successful businessman, financier, and sometime politician, and inherited the mantle of Cecil John Rhodes, the great champion of the British Empire. These men — and others, of course — used codified knowledge to organize the world around them. And as they did so, they created a form of “the truth”. Curtis was spectacularly successful at this: he was instrumental in establishing a chain of institutes across the world; founded an influential academic journal, The Round Table; and was core to the founding of International Relations as a distinct field of study in the social sciences. As I close the book, I reflect on how simple — perhaps simple-minded — the making of knowledge was 81 years ago and how intimately — certainly politely, if the
inscription is anything to go by — it was spread around: no formal peer review, just the self-confidence of knowing that it was possible to know, and to broadcast, “the truth”.

The room is called to order, and my attention turns to the business of the day: I am chairing a workshop to investigate how, if at all, a research programme can be drawn up to address the following challenging topic: ‘University and Society: Disruption, Discourse and New Directions’. Our host is STIAS (Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study); established thirteen years ago, it has shown how important it is to build (and sustain) free-standing spaces in which “slow scholarship” can promote real understanding — and maybe even “the truth”. Finding the creative space that STIAS offers is near impossible in an age of the managerialist university. Two short welcomes are spoken; then, the participants each introduce themselves. This gathering includes several leading local thinkers in the field of higher education but, importantly, there is a mix of young and old — with a good racial and gender balance. We plunge into the business of the first of two days of talking when a bright and increasingly well-known education economist helps the workshop grapple with understanding what statistics we know — or should know — about the post-secondary school sector in South Africa.

A few things quickly become clear: sometimes statistics obfuscate rather than enlighten; there are good statistics on the universities but very few on the technical-training sector of the post-school system; and local universities are not very efficient because it takes much longer than the designated number of years to complete a university degree in South Africa. But, mostly, we agreed that the problem of South African higher education does not lie in generating ever-more statistics.

Day TWO — 6.00 am: A gorgeous morning in the Western Cape. David Hornsby and I walk through the tree-lined suburbs of Stellenbosch towards the Jonkershoek Mountains — we talk politics, family, and, as expected, universities. En route, we pass files of young men dressed in T-shirts who are running in closed ranks;
this is a seasonal thing — it is mid-summer and the academic year has just started. These are university fraternities in their initiation rituals. This particular intake of first-year students will go down in history because it is the centenary year of the founding of Stellenbosch University. A dedicated social scientist, Hornsby recently moved from Johannesburg to the Engineering Faculty of London’s University College. Is this trans-disciplinary, trans-continental project what was once known as the globalization of higher education?

The second day of the workshop is devoted to the consideration of several long-term themes, but the two challenges laid down on the first day return again and again. The first challenge is this: ‘Who will speak for the universities?’ The second challenge is: ‘What are universities for?’ Some local background is needed to understand the first: in August and September 2016, South Africa’s universities were in flames, and the whole structure (many believed at the time) was teetering on the edge of collapse. How? Why? More than twenty-five years after apartheid ended, South African higher education remains embedded within a knowledge world that is remote from the country’s majority. It is not that its universities are not universities in the accepted sense of the term, it is just that they seem closer to the world of Lionel Curtis than the South Africa of today. This exclusion led students from the (once wholly white) University of Cape Town, in early 2015, to attack the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, who purportedly was the first benefactor of the university.

The university’s leadership responded by removing the statue, but the incident fuelled a movement to ‘decolonize knowledge’. Organized around the slogan #RHODESMUSTFALL — the movement spread far and wide, even taking hold at Oxford where Cecil John Rhodes and Lionel Curtis took their respective degrees in the Third Class! These protests were quickly followed by a campaign — which followed students across the world — for free higher education. The mobilizing slogan for this was #FEESMUSTFALL and it spread, like a bushfire, to every university in the country — at times with great destruction to its property. Free access
to higher education in South Africa was promised in the iconic 1955 Freedom Charter but has not (until recently) been delivered upon, ostensibly for budgetary reasons. The South African social theorist John Higgins brilliantly summarized the issue in this binary: an Abstract Right promised in another age clashed with Material Conditions of today. We know from history, of course, that this kind of clash has produced the overthrow of many a political regime. As the crisis over fees deepened, however, neither the government nor the broader South African public spoke up in favour of — or showed sympathy for — the universities. It was as if the country’s people had lost confidence in the universities and had no patience with the demands of the students!

The second challenge, a global one, is best understood in this doubleheader: ‘Every university can easily say what they’re good at, but few can tell you what they are good for’. A simple glance at the QS Rankings makes it easy to tell what a university is good at, but what is a university good for? It seems an obvious question, but a quick answer no longer readily trips off the tongue. It wasn’t always this way, of course: like Curtis, the first South African universities serviced the needs of British imperialism. The quintessential example was Rhodes University established on a contested frontier called Eastern Cape; it was named after Cecil John Rhodes. Like South Africa’s English-medium universities, Rhodes set out to show that the English language and the idea of Empire could successfully bring the country to order. In the late-1920s, South Africa’s Afrikaans-medium universities were drawn into the Afrikaner National project — both the language of instruction and academic disciplines were positioned to oppose the imperial project of higher education. This was a case of the labour of higher education operating for the nationalist cause — and this, by definition, was against the imperial project. But today in South Africa, these are both spent causes. So, what should South Africa’s universities be ‘for’?

Like universities everywhere and anywhere, there is no quick answer to this question — no quick answer, certainly but probably no satisfactory answer either. What we know is this: there are
deep-seated social and natural science-centred problems facing the country. Climate change suggests itself as one such. This is readily understood here, in Stellenbosch, which is experiencing the driest year since 1933. Restrictions on the use of water are in place, but, as usual, the poor are suffering more than the rich in the face of this crisis. Two decades ago, every one of the three universities here in the Western Cape was developing an institute that was devoted to researching water issues. But, so it seems, none of these was able to predict — let alone help plan for — the water crisis, which is now on everyone's tongue. Can these still help, or should the universities be exploring what, if any, solutions may be on offer by an indigenous knowledge system?

The day ends with a list of things to do written on the white board — and the inevitable agreement that, to understand the university, let alone change it, we will have to meet again. Is this what the university is ‘for’ — endless meetings? Or will this workshop be different?