A UNIVERSITY WITHOUT RUINS: SOME REFLECTIONS ON POSSIBILITIES AND PARTICULARITIES OF AN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

Y. Waghid

Education Policy Studies

Stellenbosch University

Stellenbosch, South Africa

e-mail: yw@sun.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Ron Barnett's (2016) *Understanding the university* announces that 'the university is a task *without end* ... [and] since the university is always on the move, always moving in its spaces – economic, social, political, cultural, institutional and so on – its possibilities will always be moving on' (Barnett 2016, 9). I concur with Barnett's cogent analytical take on the contemporary university, and draw on his three-pronged analysis, namely that a university is an institution and an idea; it is an institution in the present with future possibilities; and that it embodies a set of particulars and universals. As such, the particulars and universals on offer, are firstly, a defence of a university as a democratic institution. Secondly, in line with Jacques Derrida's (2004) novel thoughts on a contemporary university, I make a case for a university as a responsible institution-in-becoming within an African context, thereby bringing into contestation the notion that a university can ever be 'in ruins'.

Keywords: university, Africa, responsibility, particulars, universals

INTRODUCTION: DEPARTING FROM BILL READINGS'S *UNIVERSITY IN RUINS*

Although Bill Readings's (1996) pessimistic conclusion that the contemporary university is 'in ruins' is a monumental idea that held sway for more than two decades since its publication, it might neither be plausible nor helpful to think of a university in that way. This is so, because one cannot assume that global capitalism, enmeshed in a consumerist ideology, accentuates the importance of graduate throughput and success for national and international markets and, hence, undermines a university's status as a free, open and responsible institution of higher learning. Furthermore, one would not expect of a university to remain the vanguard of national culture and therefore perceived to be in peril if it undergoes cultural change. Such an idea of the university in any case rests on an erroneous assumption that culture and society remain the

same over time. Ron Barnett's (2016) *Understanding the university* announces that 'the university is a task *without end* ... [and] since the university is always on the move, always moving in its spaces – economic, social, political, cultural, institutional and so on – its possibilities will always be moving on' (Barnett 2016, 9). I concur with Barnett's cogent analytical take on the contemporary university, and draws on his three-pronged analysis, namely that a university is an institution and an idea; it is an institution in the present with future possibilities; and that it embodies a set of particulars and universals. The particulars and universals want to offer, firstly, a defence of a university as a democratic institution. Secondly, in line with Jacques Derrida's (2004) novel thoughts on a contemporary university, I make a case for a university as a responsible institution-in-becoming within an African context, thereby bringing into contestation the notion that a university can ever be 'in ruins'.

BARNETT'S 'THREE PLANES' OF UNDERSTANDING A UNIVERSITY

Barnett's (2016, 9) take on a contemporary university can be construed as an attempt 'to open a space for imagining the university anew'. No longer can a university be conceived strictly in the liberal sense as solely a 'space for free inquiry' (Barnett 2016, 17). In the first place, a contemporary university has to respond to the predicaments of our time, and this implies that inquiry ought to be responsive to debased and violent narratives of terror, war, racial injustice, ecological abuse, state violence, and so on (Giroux 2007, 10). Stated differently, a university has to be responsive to the perceived 'ruins' within which it finds itself. This, however, does not mean that a university itself is in 'ruins'. By implication, inquiry ought to be responsive to, and exercised freely 'in concert with larger concerns over social justice' (Giroux 2007, 5).

What follows from the afore-mentioned, is that the exercise of free inquiry ought to be looked at concomitantly with a particular understanding of a contemporary university. In doing so, I find Barnett's (2016) three planes of understanding of a contemporary university quite appealing to ascertain why and how a university ought to position and present itself in relation to the contemporary era. The latter idea puts a different spin on how one construes a contemporary university, say, on the African continent. Firstly, to look at a university in terms of being an institution and an idea, has to be tied to universal concepts of openness, service to society, and a commitment towards global communities (Barnett 2016, 49). A university that is at once not open to diverse and contending (dissensus), or contentious, ideas, for that matter, would undermine academic freedom and subvert its independent thought processes and institutional autonomy. Such a university, argues Giroux (2007, 10), not only undercuts critical thinking, speaking and acting, but also 'positions the university as a site that is losing its claim

as a democratic public sphere'. Unless a university is considered to be moving on a configuration of openness in which 'ideas are openly traded' and openness with society and the world for that matter widened (Barnett 2016, 47), one would not remain hopeful of the new educational paths for such a university. For example, I cannot imagine a university in the contemporary era not enhancing the possibility of increasing its use of multimedia, or constructing massive open online courses (MOOCs) as new pedagogical spaces for openness and open engagement among university staff and students.

Secondly, a university that comes to be in the present, and which is concerned about future possibilities is one that is attached to the real world but simultaneously sees its way to be detached from it. The idea of a university remaining attached to its presence is one that can be responsive to challenges faced by it, whereas a university that is detached from the real world is one that discerns imaginative possibilities for itself (Barnett 2016, 49). In turn, a university with an imaginary ethos is one that commits itself to taking risks – that is, 'to help open regions that were not present before' (Barnett 2016, 97), especially in combining innovative explorations in medicine and the humanities, biology and archaeology, genetics and sociology, and computing and philosophy. Likewise, taking risks under the guise of pursuing imaginative possibilities, implies that a university should be 'sensitive to the potential callings of the wider world' (Barnett 2013, 154). In other words, such a university reaches out into communities and makes available the institution's course texts, research data and publications in order to contribute more imaginatively to an ever-evolving public understanding of a university's intellectual resources. By implication, a university intent on seeking new imaginings, new possibilities for itself, opens new 'line of flight' that may even lead to a re-territorialisation of itself (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, as cited in Barnett 2013, 155). Invariably such an imagining university becomes both an engaging and listening university, one that is willing to be self-critical – aspects of a university's openness to new democratic visions.

Thirdly, a university that embodies a set of particulars and universals, focuses, organises and applies its research to the interests of the nationalised structures within specific countries and simultaneously leaves open the possibility that research would also serve universal aims. For instance, particular research that is technically profitable for a specific nation could also be considered as advantageous for humanity. The point is that the benefits that might ensue from research on preventing terrorism and war, particularly of interest to a specific nation, might be considered universally relevant, perhaps for curbing such violence occurring elsewhere.

In summary, a university that is oriented towards exercising thinking (whether in the form of ideas, institutional structures, possibilities, particularities or universals) in an autonomous

way, acts with sufficient risk tantamount to enacting its goals with a renewed responsibility (Derrida 2004, 151). It is to a discussion of such a responsibility of a university in Africa to which I now turn.

AN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY AND THE ENACTMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

Following the examination of the notion of a university in relation to Ron Barnett's (2016) compelling theoretical framework, which constitutes a university in relation to its idea and being an institution, its possibilities, and its particularities and universals, I now look at how a university could present itself responsibly in the sense that responsibility is linked to all three aspects of its representation. Jacques Derrida (2004, 154) contends that a university reproduces society's 'scenography, its views, conflicts, contradictions, its play and its differences, and also its desire for organic union in a total body'. The latter implies that a university reflects society and through enacting its responsibility responds to 'crises' in society on the basis of 'renewal' of what it does not have 'and of what is not yet' (Derrida 2004, 155). And, being responsible for what a university 'does not have, and is not yet' (Derrida 2004, 155) calls upon a university to risk its future such as for its academics knowing how to shut their eyes 'in order to be better listeners' (Derrida 2004, 131). My interest in a university which acts responsibly, such as to take risks for the future, is connected to adopting attitudes of improved listening, which invariably provoke more informed, nuanced thinking. If university academics were more intent on listening, they would have learned to give more thought to ground, to justify and to account for the practices of a university (Derrida 2004, 137). If academics do not seek to understand the norms and values that constitute their own institution, they would not be acting responsibly. To merely construe a university on the basis of mediocrity and innuendo and 'to say whatever comes into their heads' (Derrida 2004, 147), academics would not act with a 'watchful vigilance of the principle of reason', which invariably has obscurantist and nihilist effects on the institution. Put differently, without a community of thinking, a university and its academics 'lose all sense of proportion and control' (Derrida 2004, 147). In this way, a university loses its prestige and by implication its authority.

Some (South) African universities are in chains because of the absence of thinking, making judgements and assuming responsibility. When a university (or faculty for that matter) lacks critical thought, judgment, dialogue and imagination itself, the 'possibility and a culture of openness, debate, and engagement ... are now at risk in the latest and most dangerous attack on higher education' (Giroux 2007, 182). For example, when a faculty does not publicly acknowledge its research interests and pioneers, or when a faculty fails to provide students with

the skills and knowledge to expand their capacities 'both to question deep-seated assumptions and myths that legitimate the most archaic and disempowering social practices that structure every aspect of society and to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit' (Giroux 2007, 182), then such an institution has lost its soul. And, when such an institution's unconditional freedom to question and assert – through research and student throughput – is threatened, its commitment to a future democratic project will be curtailed. Democratic pedagogy should always represent a responsible commitment to the future, and it remains the task of academics to ensure that the future points the way to a socially more just world in which 'the discourses of critique and possibility in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom, and equality function to alter, as part of the broader democratic project, the grounds upon which life is lived' (Giroux 2007, 181).

Recently, I have become concerned with the lack of research production and students who have the critical human agency both to question freely and to assert themselves authoritatively, and academics who do not enter the fray of critical engagement through awareness and listening. Maybe it is by time that academics seriously rethink their responsibility to higher education in relation to a university without ruins! Such a university would be one committed to the democratic project of always questioning itself and preventing itself from ever being conceived as a finished product.

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