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# Critical reflections on the place of the university in the 21st century

*This Structured Conversation on the relevance and role of the contemporary university took place between Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni – two of the world’s most prominent thinkers on decolonisation. The discussion was moderated by Crain Soudien.*

The context of the question of the role and relevance of the university is important to foreground. It concerns, firstly, what Philip Altbach<sup>1</sup> described as ‘the perfect storm of external pressures and internal responses’ confronting the modern university. External pressures, he argued, were transforming it ‘from a public good to a private good’.<sup>1</sup> Behind these pressures were forms of economic and social thinking, essentially those of neoliberal free market thinking, which were shifting the university away from values, commitments and practices informed by public good ideals – ideals which understood and approached the university and its major function of knowledge production as a site for the development of society. In its ideal form, say scholars such as Altbach, the university should seek to produce people whose principal interest is that of working in and for the good of society. That they argue about the meaning and content of the public good is in itself an important stimulus of the social imagination. Bill Readings<sup>2(p.5)</sup> in his now well-known book, *The University in Ruins*, argued that the modern university no longer saw itself as needing to participate in ‘the historical project for humanity’. Instead, there is occurring what he and others have described as ‘the closing of the mind’, with the object of the university becoming that of serving the ‘private good’ – the interests of the individual whose primary interest is that of self-enrichment and self-aggrandisement. What these pressures have done is stimulate responses in the university towards instrumentality – teaching, in almost all of the disciplines, which has in mind the production of self-sufficient competitive human subjects and research, which is focused on the promotion of narrow competitive advantage.

The second concern prompting the discussion is the decolonial turn. Important in understanding the significance of the decolonial turn is its critique of the politics of knowledge of the modern university. This critique comes in a variety of accents, emphases and registers. Holding it together is a rejection of the centring of Eurocentric forms of knowledge for understanding and explaining the world and the place of human beings in it. It seeks what Walter Dignolo<sup>3</sup>, a prominent theorist of decoloniality, calls a plurality of ways of understanding the world. The modern university, he argues, has the task of engendering a multiplicity of knowledge frameworks. If the world is to solve the problems it is currently facing it has to draw on the whole treasure trove of its knowledge affordances and not simply those of the Global North. In its African rendering it seeks the recuperation of the African voice and African epistemologies and the restoration of Africa as a place not of objectification but a place from which to learn. Achille Mbembe<sup>4</sup>, speaking in the wake of the student uprising at the University of Cape Town, said that the task of decolonisation going forward was

*the demythologization of whiteness because democracy in South Africa will either be built on the ruins of those versions of whiteness that produced Rhodes or it will fail... For these reasons, the emerging consensus is that our institutions must undergo a process of decolonization both of knowledge and of the university as an institution.*

It is against the backcloth of these two globally prominent critiques of the modern university, that of neoliberalism and of decolonisation, that this discussion is set.

**Crain Soudien:** Tell us, colleagues, where we are with respect to the knowledge project in terms of our universities globally? We’re at this extraordinary juncture where we have almost 35 000 institutions around the world which claim the title of ‘university’. It’s a long way from where universities came from in the late 800s, with the University of Bologna and with also universities in places like Morocco and other parts of the Arab world. But these institutions now, in our present conjuncture, occupy a really particular kind of role – what is that role?

**Boaventura de Sousa Santos:** It’ll take me, all of us, a long, long time with such a history of this thing that we call ‘university’, because the corporation of communities of scholars and students that we know very well – were flourishing in Baghdad, in Timbuktu, in Egypt. Later on, they moved to Europe and Europe, in fact, inherited most of their methodologies. For example, since the 19th century, the scholastic method has been considered a specificity of medieval Europe directly inspired by Greek philosophy. It understood itself as being exclusively European and, in the process, stripped itself of its Egyptian and Persian roots. In fact, one of the basic features of the scholastic method, *disputatio*, that is to say, the dialectical confrontation of two opposite positions and the argumentation against and in favour of each of them, whether reaching a synthesis or not, has clear roots in teaching methods prevailing in Baghdad from the 11th century onwards. And so these universities from the 11th, 12th century, particularly in Europe, have developed immensely since then and still kept their name. This is the institution with the longest duration in the world. It’s even older than the state or many other concepts that we use in our world. Are they performing the same functions that they were performing then? I don’t think so. I think that major change occurred from the 17th century in this part of the world, particularly with colonial expansion. Then, universities became part of the state. The economic strategy of expansion, capitalism and colonialism and, with it, the expansion of the state, take place in association with the university. Universities as sources of knowledge were instrumental for that very large historical process of expansion. So much so that they were then developed and emerged in the colonies early on – 1536 already in Latin America, in Lima. Thirty-five universities were created throughout the subcontinent. In the late 18th century and 19th century, we have several universities developed in



colonial India, and then Wits itself, in 1897. That is to say, there was a model that was developed then, for what?

Basically, the university was really a project of the state, a national project which was the colonial project in the metropolitan societies, and in the colonial states. Most European colonies became independent in the early 19th century.

In Latin America, with the exception of Haiti, independence was granted to the descendants of the European settlers. The universities, originally created by the colonisers from the 16th century onward, were from the outset little academic Europes, to paraphrase Edward Said. Capitalism, Eurocentrism, and colonialism were intimately connected. For a long time, the dominant conceptions of academic prestige and performance led Latin American universities to develop cooperative ties with metropolitan universities, rather than to cooperate among themselves. The most notable attempt at endogenising the Latin American university was the revolt of the students at the University of Córdoba in Argentina in 1917/1918. Driven by a nationalist ideology, its main demand focused on the social responsibility of the university, its relevance vis-à-vis the needs and aspirations of Argentinian society, particularly of the emergent middle classes. This quest for an education connected with the people – a popular education – led to the creation of ‘popular universities’ throughout Europe and Latin America. The original drive for the creation of these universities came from anarchist currents, which considered the education of the working class as the preeminent means of raising revolutionary consciousness. In order to do so, in 1898, the first popular university was created. Its major objective was to spread the social sciences among the elites of the workers’ movement. These elites, like the working class as a whole, were excluded from university learning, as indeed from all formal schooling. The communist party was initially sceptical, for they believed that the education of workers might end up being a distraction from the most urgent task – class struggle – but, from the 1920s onwards, they began to get actively involved in the creation of popular universities and actually became their most enthusiastic and consistent promoters. In Latin America, the first popular university was created in Lima, Peru, in 1921: the Universidad Popular Gonzáles Prada.

For many years, universities kept the idea, even after the independence of the colonies, of the national project, which of course was racist and capitalist: it excluded the black and indigenous people in America. Women were also excluded. This very exclusionary national project was a national project because capitalism, at the time, needed a kind of national coherence and universities provided this coherence, therefore reproducing colonialism and patriarchy. Everything changed in the late 1980s. All of a sudden capitalism was no longer interested in national projects because neoliberalism had seized hold and moved economic relations onto a global platform. A national economy in South Africa, what is the sense of that? Or a Portuguese economy, it made no sense! Therefore, we have to globalise. In the midst of globalisation, universities – particularly of the Global South – started to undergo a very deep crisis. First of all, a financial crisis, because the state had to give less priority to funding the universities because, in fact, the elites of those states were not trained by their public universities. They were trained in the global universities of the Global North. Even today, most of them, particularly the people who take care of the business – the leaders of the economic activities in most of the Global South – were trained in a few global universities, all of them located in the USA, or in Europe. So I think that from the 1980s, we found ourselves in a very deep crisis because the universities don’t know what to do. And also, all of a sudden, they were being contested from below, from the student body. South Africa knows very well what that is with Rhodes Must Fall and we have that all over the place today, even the USA, also in Latin America. This is all about the decolonisation of the university.

Now the university is at a crossroads where top-down pressure is coming from global capitalism. This is being combined with conservative religious pressure in many countries – with the rise of the extreme right in many countries. Many professors are threatened with respect to what they might or might not teach. Academic freedom is under threat. Therefore, the liberal model is, in a sense, collapsing. But, on the other side, there is pressure from below, which comes from the students,

because the idea is that it is not enough to decolonise the student body and to have affirmative action, but also to decolonise the curriculum, the faculty, which is not in any way, decolonised, so to say diversified. Therefore, I think that universities are at this very problematic turning point, and they don’t know how their mission could continue. Is there a future for the university? There are many forces at work today for whom the university of the future has nothing to do with the university that we know. In my work I call this ‘university capitalism’. By university capitalism I mean the phenomenon that has turned the university into a capitalist enterprise, one that functions according to criteria proper to capitalism. The university is capitalist not because it is at the service of the reproduction of a capitalist society. This has always been the case, at least in the non-communist world. Rather, it is capitalist because it has become a business corporation producing a commodity whose market value derives from its capacity to create other market values (e.g. diplomas that give access to highly paid jobs). There is pressure from capitalism to transform the university into an enterprise which is hierarchically ranked in terms of ‘excellence’, and we know that most universities in the Global South are considered second or third tier, with consequences that are difficult to imagine, such as the ranking and proletarianisation of professors where their prioritisation has become those of publishing or perishing. Many are doomed. In many countries in which English is not the native language they are being forced to write and publish in English, in order to advance in their careers. So this university capitalism pressure on the universities will be telling. If this kind of university is to prevail in the future, it will be another business and business as usual, and therefore I doubt whether the name will coincide with the thing which was there originally.

**Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatseni:** There are some nuances which we need to bring in as we try to understand why the university is in crisis. I’m thinking here about Africa and dealing with the fact that, actually, there are about three or four traditions of the university. Of course, the ones which we all know, the pre-colonial universities in Egypt, in Morocco, in Timbuktu, in terms of cultures, drew from Islamic and African traditions. It is from there, then, that we have what I would call a ‘discontinuity’ in those universities. This discontinuity arises because of slavery and colonialism. If you check with the early colonial period, it looked like the colonialists were not really in a position to offer higher education for Africans. The colonialists were actually content with leaving the education of Africans with the missionaries. You will find the early African elites, such as Edward Blyden, Casely Hayford, really agitating for the university in Africa, or African – let me not say university in Africa, let me say an African university – as early as the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. If we go here, we will begin to understand that the whole issue of decolonising universities is not actually a new issue on the continent because by then Blyden was in fact saying: ‘we don’t want transplanted institutions from somewhere else and introduced in Africa – we will want institutions which actually grow from the African’. These figures also posited that African universities must actually be in tandem with African culture and African languages. However, the colonial state was not forthcoming in this. That is something we always miss, as though the colonialists were generous with the introduction of universities in Africa while in fact, they were reluctant to begin with, and then do exactly the opposite of what the early elites were agitating for. The colonialists introduce metropolitan universities, such as Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone and Achimota in Ghana which are the first institutions to acquire university status as colleges of the University of London. The universities in Africa, interestingly enough, really begin to emerge in greater numbers after 1945.

But again, we need to be careful to distinguish between North Africa, Middle Africa and South Africa because there’s a variation in terms of the emergence of universities. They don’t emerge in a similar way, and in a similar period. But what is interesting – and this is the question – what is the mission of the university? We can begin to talk about the mission of the universities that were transferred to Africa. In this way, we can grasp the whole problem of what we are talking about today in terms of universities actually coming into Africa to commit to a distant science, trying to introduce another knowledge and displacing what used to be the knowledges of the continent. In that early period, universities came with



colonial languages of instruction of research and tuition, and – over time – colonialist university cultures too. With this context, the problem of an alienated African educated elite arises – people who are alienated from their history, their cultures, their languages – who speak these other modern languages from the six colonial powers. What's important too is that most of the universities in Africa are the gift of African nationalism, more than a gift of colonialism. The idea that the attainment of sovereign status came with one state, and also one nation, one university. The issue is African nationalism comes, of course, with the whole issue of Africanisation in the 1960s. You will see this issue of Africanisation become very topical: attempts to indigenise 'universities in Africa' into 'African universities'. This has a long history. The major problem about that period, was that the definition of Africanisation, rather than decolonisation, was very narrow. The issue was you changed the profiles of the Vice Chancellors. They became black. You change the profiles of the professoriate to black, and you increase access of black students to the university. But you don't change the pivot, that is the curriculum on which the epistemology is standing. If you come to this question simply in terms of numbers, there is a problem. If you conclude that by changing the staff or even bringing in literature as written by African people we have been decolonised, you're actually bringing in a pre-existing Eurocentric epistemological structure and that is where the problem is.

In terms of the mission of the university, the early nationalists were actively involved, even more than the intellectuals themselves, in calling for change. You will see Kwame Nkrumah at Legon in Ghana engaging with the intellectuals at the University of Ghana, and the intellectuals were saying 'no, we want to maintain the standards, we want to maintain the standards from London'. Instead, Nkrumah tried to say, 'but Africanise, you need to Africanise, you need to bring in African cultures, African languages'. It is in this way that we come to the complaint about African studies being a township within a university. It is a misnomer in the sense that the whole university needs to be driving the African cultural agenda. But, if we have Africanisation only in African Studies – what is the rest of the university doing? This is the question we are facing today. Prof. de Sousa Santos has already spoken about the issue of the neoliberal intervention from the late 1970s onwards. This led to the collapse of the decolonised public institutions. They were starved of funding, leading to the development of new tensions and new problems. This opens the gateway for reimagining the university in corporatist terms and the emergence of private universities where knowledge then becomes really commodified and students become customers. Thus, when we speak of decolonising the university, de-corporatisation is essential too.

**Crain Soudien:** The story of this trajectory is an enormously challenging one. Where in the world might we begin to look for and see examples, either in the institutions themselves or in faculties or in directions that are being pursued, in particular segments, corners of a university, where the ideal of the critical and open cultural agenda is being cultivated? Where do we see institutions or faculty holding on to practices that represent an alternative to that which has become dominant, for the possibility that the university can be anything other than the site for the reproduction of a particular kind of hegemon?

**Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni:** One of the major problems is that the structures of power of universities have a tendency to speak in two languages every time: in the language of transformation and the language of the status quo and, also, the language of incorporation of the anti-systemic forces as they try to come in and change the university to accommodate and perpetuate itself. And I'm speaking here, practically, with an example of a university which I worked for whereby the whole rhetoric was really about transformation. They were not even comfortable about the word decolonisation. It was really transformation. But at the end of the day, at the top, it was not really the issue of transformation which mattered: it was the pacification of those people on the ground who were rising up against the university. So, the imperative of pacification and the current transformation were always in tension.

The other issue is that universities, by their very nature, are problematic institutions in the sense that they are not like political parties, and they are not like religious institutions. The major problem with universities is that they always take pride in the issue of dissensus rather than consensus.

In that process, some people take advantage to try to maintain the status quo instead of changing. How then do we get buy-in to actually agree that we must change the institutional culture of the university? We must change the curriculum of the university. We must change the particular cultures of the university.

In Uganda there was an attempt to establish the Marcus Garvey University. It was a novel idea of trying to establish a university with another curriculum, to really reimagine everything. However, the first problem they encountered was accreditation by the state itself. Second, the funding became a problem, and I understand the project collapsed. We were perhaps naïve to think that we could follow the linear approach of transforming one university within a country of 26 universities. I think we need to mobilise across universities if the state is to listen to us. And the question which arises is: Can you really have a transformed, decolonised university within a still-colonised state? This becomes a major problem because even on minor things like rupturing the disciplinary nature of knowledge, you will find that we always hit a wall because the certification of courses and syllabi is always disciplinary. The certification bodies, unless you change them, will always discipline you back to the discipline, even if you taught in a non-disciplinary way. The state must then be engaged in multiple ways.

**Boaventura de Sousa Santos:** Thank you very much for the question, Crain, because sometimes I think that we are very eloquent in our criticism, but we lack alternatives. And this is a disease, a malaise, of critical thinking both in the North and the South. First of all, I think it would be important to make a plea for complexity. I remember very well beautiful things that were happening in African universities, particularly, my times in Senegal, Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi. There was a sense of excitement. I remember there were some European scholars and a lot of American scholars. They were there for learning, not just teaching, with this awareness that something new was coming. For instance, Prof. Ndlovu-Gatsheni mentioned Ghana where, at that point, many of the black leaders of the United States came to Ghana, people such as Maya Angelou, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Why? Because at the time, Ghana was the place to be because there was a sense of renaissance, of something that could happen. There were moments that were more luminous, more hopeful, than others. In fact, the disaster, in my view, for Africa (and agreeing with everything that Prof. Ndlovu-Gatsheni said) came when a UNESCO report about the majority of African universities drew a dramatic picture of all sorts of shortages: the collapse of infrastructures; almost total lack of equipment; poorly remunerated, unmotivated, and easily corruptible teaching personnel; and little or no research investment. The World Bank diagnosed the situation in a similar way and, characteristically, declared it irreparable. Unable to include in its calculations the importance of the university in the building of national projects and the creation of long-term critical thinking, the World Bank concluded that African universities do not generate sufficient 'return' on their investment. As a consequence, African countries were asked to stop investing in universities and to concentrate their few resources on primary and secondary education and to allow the global market of higher education to resolve the problem of the university for them. That was the beginning of university capitalism and that was really a destruction, an utter destruction of the university scene in Africa. The case of Mozambique is remarkable in this regard, as in the period immediately after independence there was much research and teaching innovation in which the value of endogenous non-Western ways of knowing was paramount. In other words, epistemic decolonisation was viewed as a central dimension of political decolonisation. The Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo was a flagship university with so much innovation, a weapon to stand against apartheid South Africa. During that time Ruth First was based in Maputo and she created a centre of African Studies with a very high profile. Really path-breaking studies took place there. As you know she was assassinated by the secret police of South Africa, together with a dear friend of mine, Aquino de Bragança, and many other people.

But the disciplinarian aspect of neoliberalism really destroyed much of what was beginning at that point in time. When I wrote *Decolonising the University: The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice*<sup>5</sup>, I was paying



very close attention to the case of South Africa. I thought there was something moving that would be important not just for South Africa, but for the world and for the perspective of the epistemologies of the South. When I look now, I have to say that I see some interesting signs of hope. I was familiar with Catherine Odora-Hoppers, in fact, I visited twice the Unisa executive to work on the curriculum when she was there. The model that we had was very North-centric and the Eurocentric way is to have grand-scale type of transformations and large curriculum transformation. At that point, there was a university professor who was creating the revolution, but nobody really recognised him as such. I'm talking about Mogobe Ramose, a great philosopher – I had the pleasure of having several conversations with him and Prof. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, at my Centre. It was really a completely different conception of philosophy that didn't rely on the Western philosophers that were in South Africa. A true ubuntu philosophy. The book by Mogobe Ramose<sup>6</sup> had been published in Zimbabwe by an obscure and very small publisher, and it was very difficult to have access to the book. I am one of the fortunate people to have a copy.

But today I don't think these large-scale type of transformations are taking place. I see a kind of interstitial transformation that is occurring, and I'd like to give you some examples of my own teaching and my own experience. I see today, for instance, some indigenous professors, indigenous people who are coming to the university from throughout the continent and since I have a long interaction with this, the colonial, post-colonial epistemologies of the South, I have been present in hundreds of live transmissions like this, about them. And the question is, I'm now a professor at university and I have a study plan to teach at my university, but what I'm teaching is against my people, is against my own being, it's against my own instinct. What shall I do with the university? Shall I refuse? But if I refuse, I'll be expelled from the university. What shall I do? Well, what they have been doing – what I've been advising them – is to build the counter-university inside the university. They have to teach in ways that contextualise everything that they teach, telling the other story because we always have two stories in the world, the story of the winners and the story of the losers (which are not victims of course). They are the people who have been resisting; they are speaking for those who have been resisting and have been vanquished by colonialism and capitalism. And it's their duty because the worst thing that could happen to them would be that they would internalise their official history and become white masks, black faces (and vice versa). That is the danger that I see. But I see that they are changing the curriculum in this interesting interstitial way – it's almost like contextualising status – they don't destroy the status, but they contextualise in such a way that you can clearly see that this so-called hero is also the slave trafficker and so forth.

The second thing is that what you see in several universities in many different continents (I discuss this in my proposal in *Epistemologies of the South*<sup>7</sup>), and often in decolonial studies, is a kind of an anti-science type of stance. I don't share this attitude, as I've learned with Amílcar Cabral, that you should really discard all the science that the coloniser has produced. It could be very helpful to us, but we have to select, and therefore, in the epistemologies of the South, I try to see to what extent science is valid. What I'm saying is that science is not the only valuable knowledge, there are other ways of knowing, there are other knowledges, and therefore I claim, and I struggle for an ecology of knowledges. And now I see, in Brazil, in Colombia, in Argentina, several departments and now groups of professors and students are developing what I call the 'ecology of knowledges'. For instance, Porto Seguro is a city in Brazil, where they practise ecologies of medical knowledges; their students not only take the lessons from Eurocentric medicine, but also from the traditional medical people. They have developed what they call an ecology of medical knowledges. The university in Manaus (also in Brazil) has done the same in the forest with an impact on the curriculum, with professors who are not, in fact, physicians, but they are medical people in their ancient medicine. Similar things are occurring in India with schools of indigenous law. But I have not seen this in South Africa: I'm now a visiting professor at Wits, and I hope to explore this possibility at Wits – what we call ecology of legal knowledge. Not just the official Western centric knowledge but other knowledges – what traditionally was conceived of as legal pluralism. However, it is only

legal pluralism because there was a legal mono-elitism with only the official law recognised as a law. South Africa has a rich experience of these pluralities, but they are not taught as such at the university. And therefore, I see people who are more advanced outside university. This is not surprising; we know that the most innovative knowledge never came from the university.

Indeed, if a student is going to do research – doctoral research with a community such as a popular marginal community or a community of any popular classes – and for a year they interact with those people and write the PhD, who is the author of that? Is it just the student? Well, in fact most of the information came from the wise, the people of the community. There are already universities that are considering this kind of thing and that was a proposal that I've been putting forward in many places, the co-authorship. Because they are co-authors. The problem is just accepting that there are different knowledges involved.

And finally, another example of how things are moving, never on a large scale, always here and there, because as things fall apart, as Chinua Achebe said, they come into place not at large scale which is a very Eurocentric way of things. Instead, we could look at developing knowledge from the bottom up. In fact, we now have, in some PhD committees, people without PhDs. They are what we call the informants, but they are knowers, they have their own knowledge, they are the leaders of the community that know much better probably about their dissertation than the other colleagues at the university. There are also what are called popular committees, in which we have a majority of PhD professors, of course, but also already two, three members who bring other ways of knowing, and sometimes, these dissertations are not defended and discussed on campus, but they are discussed in the communities where the students belong. So that you can see the contradictions and paradoxes. One of the universities in this case was in Brazil and was brought to court by a professor when he saw that the university was holding their PhD committee meeting in the village of the indigenous people and not on campus. The argument there is that the university is autonomous as a campus so all evaluations should take place inside the campus. The court, luckily in my view, in a very intercultural way argued the following: 'yes, the universities are autonomous, yet because it is autonomous it can decide to hold the committee meeting in the village'. This may seem meaningless, but it is not. By these several examples we see that the system's system has no legitimacy anymore. But the inertia is enormous.

**Crain Soudien:** It's crucial for us to be holding on to and showcasing these examples where they arise. I'd like to say though that I am demoralised, often, by the speed with which those outstanding innovations are undone, and the extraordinary mimetic desire, instead, for looking to the standards, as you put it Prof. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, we see in play in what we think are the globally leading universities. The way in which that particular criterion of standards kicks in, in ways which completely undo all of these possibilities is a major problem. But where is all of this going Prof. de Sousa Santos? Shouldn't we now come to a kind of acknowledgement that these 35 000 institutions that we have got around the world which go by the name of the university, are now, actually, manifestations of a plurality of particular forms of the university. And I include these corporate universities where institutions like Coca Cola and Colgate will set up their own universities, Toshiba, and so on, in their own backyards. They will train people to high levels of expertise in those institutions. But, alongside of this, you also have this university that you're talking about, which is beginning to explore the form of legitimacy and the legitimacy of knowledge in completely different kinds of ways. And by democratising, if you like, in the fullest sense, the idea that there is a plurality of understandings of a particular problem in a particular setting, is it not the case that we need to be finding ways of putting these forms of knowledge in a space of recognition and acknowledgement? But, I would argue, we would need to give appropriate names to these different forms. If popular knowledge, the knowledge of the masses, is uncritical, it is not a university in my view. We may allow an institution like that but we shouldn't be in this, as this proliferation of different types of institutions is arising; we should not be encouraging universities of populism – universities where we lose the capacity to be able to be reflexive and to think critically, on ourselves, to



be able to deconstruct our own histories and come to the point where we can see our histories, in as full a way as we can. So, I'm making the argument here that we're destined now for a landscape of total plurality. And this idea now of the singular, the ideal university, is one which has gone. Your response, please.

**Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni:** Well, may I start by going back to your question about what the hope is. I think Prof. de Sousa Santos is actually going there to give some instances where the hope is, such as the work of Mogobe Ramose here at Unisa. It doesn't mean that in all these years the universities never produced academics who are actually doing interesting transformations of curriculum and teaching. They are there. There's a lot happening. The problem is that we're not documenting from below, we're always looking at the bigger politics above. But I'm certain at Unisa that there were a lot of people who passed through the hands of Catherine Odora Hoppers; through the hands of the philosophers, through the hands of Ramose. You can tell by the way they are thinking, the way they are teaching, the way they do their curriculum. That is important. It takes me to a third point that perhaps the hope really lies not with the older professors and the administration. It lies with the younger generation and those people who are actually on the ground, who are making a lot of changes to the curriculum and in the universities, which are often not noticed and not acknowledged. And I wanted also to posit this rather provocatively, but I think for the South African universities, I don't think it would be right to say they will be the same after Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall. They won't be the same. They can maintain some of their old characteristics; but they were actually pushed into a ferment, which is still going on, even if there is silence from the students themselves. So, I thought that would be important to actually think about because Unisa, particularly, as it has been a home, not only for Catherine or Ramose, but also for the decolonial projects with the decolonial summer schools. It produced a variety of thinkers, some of whom we can say are populist, but others who are very thorough in what they are doing and they are spread through the faculties, and into the department centres. They are making a lot of changes from there: they are putting a lot of pressure on the older professors and also on the administration.

**Boaventura de Sousa Santos:** It's a very relevant point, this idea of populism. And it's dangerous, in my view, because I want to make a plea against relativism. I'm for diversity and decolonisation, but against relativism, the idea that anything goes. I think it would be the end of critical thinking. So, I'm trying to develop a kind of non-Eurocentric – as far as I can – critical way of thinking and from the critical point of view it is very important that you never seek to reduce reality to what exists. That is to say, reality is much more than that. It is, too, the possibilities of a different reality: the possibility of an alternative of developing more than that which is currently there. It is the possibility of a different reality: the possibility of an alternative of a more just society: the possibility of an anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, and an anti-patriarchal society. Therefore, there is no place for relativism. That's why the capitalist and the reactionaries now, the Christian-right reaction particularly in Africa and the Indo reactionaries in India at this point, are really against the university. Why? Because it's still the location for critical, free, independent thinking in the struggle for plural knowledge. And they don't want that; in India, Narendra Modi wants universities to teach that Hinduism is the only religion and the only philosophy of the country. Well, Nehru University never did that.

So, the university – this place, this marvellous place in my view – must think about two things. On the one side, to create or maintain conditions for the production of free and critical and plural and independent knowledge. Not ideally but to the best of the ability of the people at the university. And here again I could give you a good African example. It is of Odera Oruka, a professor from Nairobi who influenced me a lot. Odera Oruka wrote a book called *Sage Philosophy* in which he expresses a position against this idea that we could critically accept all traditional knowledge.<sup>8</sup> In the villages, he discusses, you distinguish between two types of sages: the sages that were acritical of traditional ways and traditional philosophy, *vis-a-vis* those who knew traditional values well but kept a critical distance from them. And these were the ones that Oruka decided to interview. With the transcriptions of these interviews

he published this marvellous book about the sages of philosophy. That's why I think that reflexivity and critical thinking are absolutely fundamental.

In this post-pandemic period, I have just written a book, now in Portuguese, Spanish and Italian editions, and the English edition is being prepared, called *The Future Begins Now: From Pandemic to Utopia*. I see three scenarios after the pandemic. And the third scenario is that the pandemic, the way I'm reading it, is the opportunity to show that this civilisatory process that started in the 17th century, came to an end, is coming to an end, and is collapsing. The virus is a pedagogue, a cruel pedagogue because it teaches killing people, but it is telling us that we cannot go on destroying Mother Earth, nature, because we are 0.01% of the life on the planet, and yet we are arrogant enough to destroy the life of the planet. So the life of the planet will take revenge and resist against what is happening. It is resisting, so much so that we are not going to be in a world free of pandemics. We are entering a world, which I call, of 'intermittent pandemics' where we are going to confine, deconfine, another virus, another mutation, for a long, long time. So, this third scenario calls for a civilisatory process for civilisatory change, for the idea that this model of development, these conceptions of nature, conceptions of the state, conceptions of the distinction between the rural and the city, all of them, collapse. I myself am now in a village to protect myself. So the villages are good, or are they just the past, and the retrogressive aspects of our society? No, in fact, Shakespeare, as you know, wrote most of his plays in a village in order to flee from the plague. So, I think that we are at a time in which we have to question this civilisatory process. This fossil economy, this mass consumption, why can't our laptops or our cellphones last for ten years instead of two? It is because we have a planned obsolescence in our system. We have to change this. Which is the institution that can still go on thinking about these things, about this future? It's the university. The university is still the place where we can do that, without the boss telling us that idea will not be profitable, there are no customers for that. No, we can really still discuss these things here for now. That's my sense of hope for the mission of the university.

**Crain Soudien:** Prof. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, you made the comment that you cannot have institutions that are going to, if you like, turn themselves inside out in a society as it remains in the form of dominance which continues to be the normative order in that society. What prospect have we got in this economic environment of neoliberalism for sustaining the possibility of alternatives? How do we do it? We may think of scholars and intellectuals from our own mix foregoing the comforts of our current lifestyles, for example. They lead exemplary lives in the ways in which they live. They live according to what they profess in their classrooms. But it is difficult. For all of us. How do we 'be', how do we comport ourselves in an economy which is so based on a reproductive model which is about economic growth? I mean, what's the possibility here of operating in an order which is so normatively loaded?

**Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni:** Our concern with the university is because we love it, not because we want to destroy it. A situation in which I was involved is relevant here. There was a very good young person who came from the World Bank, who had actually studied at the University of Pretoria. And when she came back to the University of Pretoria, she was very critical about the university. One of the panellists in a discussion there asked her, 'how did you know that the university is such a problem, isn't it because of the knowledge which you gained from that very problematic university?' This idea that the university, despite the fact that it is a cog in a westernised world, also produces very critical thinkers who actually then question it, is very important. This gives us some hope one way or the other. And then I want also to comment on the issue which is cascading from all the discussions which we're having – this issue of turning knowledge into populist slogans or something like that. I think one of the issues which is emerging, which we need to underscore, is that when we are recovering other archives, the epistemologies of the Global South, the indigenous knowledges, the work done by African scholars, we need to do so with care. We need to avoid this issue of then turning them into a shrine of worship. We need to then subject to them to the same critical view we adopt for other knowledges. Indeed, by doing that we're actually taking them seriously.



**Boaventura de Sousa Santos:** I think that you're right. On the short range of the sustainability of the economy. On the long range, what is now sustainable means unsustainability: the model itself isn't sustainable. All the knowledge that comes from the United Nations' scientists tells us that global warming is probably the greatest threat of our time, the largest one to life on the planet. This together with refugees: we already have 80 million refugees in the world, and, probably, most of them in the future will become ecological environmental refugees because we have allowed ourselves to live in a very short range of temperatures and this range is diminishing and shrinking. The time to have this discussion is not the political time. Political time is four years, and pandemic time is months: the first wave and the second wave and the third wave. And now we live under the time constraint of the vaccine. It's the time before the vaccine and after the vaccine. So under these conditions, it is impossible, as a matter of fact, to distinguish. I'm a tragic optimist. I'm not romantic because I work with social movements and see all the problems and the corruption that goes on with our movements. But I refuse not to see the possibilities of change and I see the changes that are coming. Because, for instance, you're familiar with the future of the concept of development. In spite of everything South Africa is protecting the lives of South Africans better than the United States is protecting the lives of the Americans. Who is more developed? Who is the fragile state today? You know the concept of failed state was created by the United States, but now the rooster returns home to roost. There are many ways in which our concepts are being really questioned and I see that now in your news. Not only are economists on the front page, but also scientists, virologists and epidemiologists and so on. While it's not an ecology of medical knowledges example which is proliferating in the world today, we are moving in a different direction and at least we have seen the possibility of difference and change, even in such a tragic

situation. If we struggle, probably, we can see, not the light at the end of the tunnel, but that there are many tunnels. Some lights are there, and others are illusions, and sometimes we'll be lucky and sometimes we won't. Thank you.

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