

Humanities Colloquium Address

**Rhodes University
11 November 2011**

Molweni, good morning, and welcome to this Colloquium on *The Humanities and Popular Struggles in South Africa*, and to Rhodes University.

This Colloquium, sponsored by the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust, is an opportunity to continue the conversation on the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences, as well as the Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa.

Both are useful starting points for discussion on the state and future of the humanities and social sciences; to what extent they are a *consensus* on the current situation and *chart* the way forward remains to be seen.

The late Harold Wolpe, whose Trust is sponsoring this Colloquium, was firm in the view that 'neither the theory nor the analysis of the liberation movement (or any body) can ever be regarded as settled but are continuously open to theoretical and empirical testing' (Wolpe, 1985:75).

Critical deliberation on the Consensus Study and the Charter must, therefore, interrogate both the theoretical foundations, and the empirical analyses that ground their narratives and definition of priorities and formulation of policies. The next two days are an opportunity to critically engage the two reports, both what is in them as well as their silences.

We should treat the two reports, to use Wolpe's words in another relevant context, 'not as conclusions but as *starting points*' for discussion and social action.

The Colloquium is also an opportunity to discuss the continuities and discontinuities, the breaks and breakthroughs within society, higher education and the humanities and social sciences over the past decades, and the role and contributions of scholars and intellectuals in these regards.

Permit me to advance five theses that are pertinent to the humanities and higher education. To what extent we have engaged seriously with the five propositions is debatable; perhaps part of our continuing problems is our lack of attention to the issues raised in the five theses.

Thesis one is that in South Africa it is vital that the concern of scholars encompass what Andre du Toit calls the historical 'legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialization.'

du Toit notes 'that the enemy' in the forms of colonial and racial discourses 'has been within the gates all the time', and argues that they are significant threats to the flowering of ideas, discourse, discovery and scholarship. These discourses are, of course, also threats to the cultivation of graduates as critical and democratic citizens.

Very importantly, du Toit links institutional culture to academic freedom: cultures characterized by colonial and racial discourses endanger 'empowering

intellectual discourse communities,’ and ‘ongoing transformation of the institutional culture’ is therefore a ‘necessary condition of academic freedom.’

Recently, Mahmood Mamdani has written that ‘the central question facing higher education in Africa today is what it means to teach the humanities and social sciences in the current historical context and, in particular, in the post-colonial African context.’ Moreover, what does it mean to teach ‘in a location where the dominant intellectual paradigms are products not of Africa’s own experience but of a particular Western experience.’

A recent article by Stellenbosch academics argues in relation to the Western Cape that ‘its universities, its artists and its centres of higher learning could play a major intellectual and cultural role in uncripping the region’s imagination and creativity, providing the Cape with critical vocabularies and concepts to transcend insularity, provincialism and nostalgia for a shameful and costly past.’

They suggest that ‘a first step in this direction would be to take the study of Africa more seriously than has been the case so far. Part of this process requires...thinking with the rest of South Africa and as an integral part of this country as well.’

The second thesis is that our universities, academics and students, to paraphrase Martha Nussbaum, need ‘the capacity for critical examination’ of ourselves and our ‘traditions,’ including our intellectual traditions.

We need, especially in South Africa, to also see ourselves ‘as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern.’ This

necessitates knowledge and understanding of different societies and cultures, particularly in the rest of Africa.

Furthermore, we need 'the ability to think' about the different experiences of other Africans, to become 'intelligent reader(s)' of the various narratives that portray Africa, and 'to understand the emotions and wishes and desires' of people elsewhere in Africa.

Thesis three is that a key task of universities and especially the humanities is to cultivate a 'prophetic memory.' Such a 'prophetic memory' must encompass *remembrance* of our traumatic colonial past; *critique* of the injustices that continue to blight our society; *consciousness* about how societies are made and remade, reproduced and transformed; *imagination* to conceive of new kinds of cognitive praxis, being and acting; and the *desire* to remake our country, including our universities.

Thesis four is that our concerns must also extend to important epistemological and ontological issues that are associated with humanities research, learning and teaching, curriculum and pedagogy.

To reduce 'teaching to that of simply "conveying knowledge"...fails...to acknowledge the need to develop a citizenry which can be critical of knowledge which has been produced and which can contribute to processes of knowledge production itself.'

The final thesis is that the dominant economic and political orthodoxies of recent decades have been hugely harmful to how we today think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about scholarship and knowledge.

They have emphasized practical utility, professional, vocational and career-focused programmes and 'skills,' and have sought to reduce the value of higher education to its efficacy for economic growth. The idea of higher education as invaluable for understanding and democratic and critical citizenship has become disdained, denuding higher education of its wider social value and functions.

It is critical that we defend and reclaim scholarship and knowledge as fundamental cornerstones of human development; that we restore to universities their social purposes of producing knowledge and understanding and cultivating minds, instead of their reduction to instruments of the economy and vocational schools; that we recover the vital public good functions of higher education, as opposed to the ideas of higher education as a market, universities as 'firms' and students as 'customers' and 'clients.'

This is fundamental if our universities are to play a pivotal role in helping us to think critically and imaginatively about and address the historical and contemporary challenges of the African continent.

Our higher education 'requires bold visions of internationalism, of alternative globalization, that transcend the edicts of market accountability and narrow commercial calculations and embrace the ethics of social accountability and an expansive humanism.'

Paul Zeleza is surely correct when he says that ‘we will have failed the future if we do not vigorously pursue the dreams of university education as an ennobling adventure for individuals (and) communities, if we do not strive to create universities that produce ideas rather than peddle information, critical rationality rather than consumer rations, and knowledge that has lasting value.’

Inherent in the five theses is a critique of current conditions and trajectories. As importantly, the theses also question whether as universities and humanities scholars we have grappled adequately with critical issues of intellectual and institutional transformation, and of the African university, as opposed to the university in Africa.

These questions include:

- The role of the humanities in the ‘decolonization’, ‘deracialisation,’ demasculanisation and degendering of our inherited ‘intellectual spaces’
- Whether we are opening up spaces for the flowering of epistemologies, ontologies, theories, methodologies, objects and questions other than those that have long been hegemonic, and that have exercised dominance over (perhaps have even suffocated) intellectual and scholarly thought and writing?
- Whether as humanities we are contributing to building new academic cultures and, more widely, new institutional cultures that genuinely respect and appreciate difference and diversity – whether class, gender, national, linguistic, religious, sexual orientation, epistemological or methodological in nature.

- Whether as part of their knowledge generation function, the humanities and universities more generally are engaging sufficiently and critically with vital questions related to the contemporary political economy of South Africa.
- Finally, whether there is (proactive) *engagement* with society at the intellectual and, more generally, cultural level. This is a matter of the involvement of universities in reflexive communication - not simply the transmission of an established body of knowledge to 'users' in the wider society, but an argumentative, critical and thoughtful engagement that shapes the very constitution of knowledge (Delanty, 2001:154).

On the one hand, these challenges relate to social inclusion and social justice in the domain of knowledge making and diffusion. Concomitantly, they also have implications for epistemological access for African youth and people of working class and rural poor social origins.

On the other hand, they also go to the heart of higher education transformation in South Africa: to the question of 'the very institution of the (humanities and social sciences and the) university itself and to the role (they) can play in a new democracy such as South Africa.'

I wish this colloquium well.