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4. KNOWLEDGE AS A PUBLIC GOOD

A Critical Gaze at the African University

INTRODUCTION

Universities routinely carry out research, and through staff and graduate student ‘outputs’, produce knowledge. In recent times, however, demand for an increasingly mercantile feasibility of knowledge among academic knowledge producers has become significant. Economists consider higher education to provide both private and public benefits (Marginson, 2007; McMahon, 2009) and one of the central concerns of contemporary higher education policy debates is the extent to which higher education contributes to the ‘public good’. The definition of public good in relation to education nevertheless shifts from time to time and place to place (Williams, 2014). In policy formulation in a variety of national, regional and international settings, the expression of a commitment by higher education to the public good has gained currency (see Delanty, 2001, p. 98). In terms of private benefits, students, as consumers of higher education, receive significant post-graduate employment opportunities, higher salaries, and increased income over a lifetime, making having attended university financially beneficial (Dill, 2011). From an educationist viewpoint, some scholars (see Arendt, 1954; Brown, 2010; Calhoun, 2006; Rhoten & Calhoun, 2011; Singh, 2014) have criticised the economist perspective and argue that the introduction of privatisation and market competition into higher education systems in the name of neoliberalism has diminished the contributions to the public good that institutions of higher education are making, and is also compromising academic activity within universities.

In the academic terrain of the twenty-first century, anxieties have emerged about what the core functions of universities should be and how contemporary influences have changed universities’ academic missions, especially in the domain of knowledge production. African universities, in particular, face overwhelming challenges as agents of direct change and forces for social integration. The question of whether higher education *is* a public good or is *for* the public good is subordinate to the overarching perspective that views university education as the epicentre for addressing complex social challenges (see Chambers, 2005; Duderstadt & Womack, 2003).

We pose the questions: Is university education a public good or a tradable commodity? What is a university’s relationship with, and responsibility towards,

society and the public sphere? What *could*, and *should*, be ‘public’ about it? If universities were to close what ‘greater good’ would individuals and society lose? The traditional functions of a university and the social benefits it produces are well understood and are considered to constitute public goods in themselves (Tilak, 2008a). In this chapter we discuss the two opposing discourses on the purposes and value(s) of contemporary universities, that is, the neo-liberal and the public good paradigms (Singh, 2014). This is done by critiquing the nature of the structures and modes of production of knowledge under the dominant neo-liberal dispensation in the context of the African university. We argue that many of the problems at knowledge production and distribution levels stem from “a shift from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic neo-liberal knowledge/learning regime” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 8) and from a consequent failure to recognise the encroachment of the profit motive into the academy (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 210).

In order to understand and attempt to answer the philosophical questions posed above, we will examine the traditional functions of the university and then discuss the notions of public good as opposed to private good, as a means of critiquing the role of the university in society. The argument culminates in a contextualised debate over the case of African universities in which a critical gaze is cast over the ‘publicness’ of these institutions. The connection between knowledge production and change in the African university, and the impact this relationship has on the development of societal priorities and the amelioration of the so-called ‘African crises’, circumscribe the chapter.

FUNCTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Universities are “nurseries of ideas, innovations and development and gradually they become reservoirs of knowledge” (Tilak, 2008a, p. 453). They facilitate the creation, advancement, absorption and dissemination of knowledge through research and teaching. They play a critical role in “the production of highly skilled labour and research output to meet perceived economic needs” (Brennan, King, & Lebeau, 2004, p. 16) and contribute to industrialisation of economies through the provision of manpower with professional, technical and managerial skills. Universities can also be considered as “key institutions in processes of social change and development” (Brennan, King, & Lebeau, 2004, p. 16) since higher education serves to unlock human potential at all levels of society by enabling talented people to obtain advanced training whatever their background. This creates a pool of highly-trained individuals which forms a critical and key national resource. Highly regarded universities are magnets that attract educated researchers and talented students, and may even encourage business people and companies to locate themselves close by in order to tap into the various resources offered by the university.

Universities can assist individuals in building character and establishing moral values; they inculcate ethics, standards, and orderly habits. By providing a space

for the free and open discussion of ideas and values, they make attitudinal changes possible, and assist in socialisation of individuals. They protect and enhance societal values (Tilak, 2008a; Tilak, 2008b) and contribute to the transformation and modernisation of societies.

Universities also have a nation-building function, deepening democracy by producing a citizenry which is more likely to participate actively in the civil, political, social, cultural and economic activities of the society. The university has a vested potential to produce social and political leaders of high calibre and broad vision (see Tilak, 2008a) by producing members of society who understand, interpret, preserve, enhance and promote national, regional, international and historical cultures in a context of cultural pluralism and diversity.

THE NOTION OF PUBLIC GOOD

The discourse on the concept of public good in relation to higher education has a long history, dating back to Immanuel Kant (see Williams, 2014). We subscribe to the view that “there is no single or fixed formula for stipulating the content of the public good, especially in abstraction from specific socio-political struggles (Singh, 2014, p. 103). In his book *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant describes the nature of university–society relations and describes university faculties as acting as “smaller societies, each comprising the university specialists in one main branch of learning” (Kant, [1798] 1979, p. 23). With the passage of time, the understanding has moved away from “knowledge as a public good in and of itself” to “objective knowledge outcomes which can be used to reap a national economic return”, and further, to “a focus upon social inclusion and social mobility in the form of individual employability, increased earnings and job security” (Williams, 2014, p. 2). Consequently, the social contract between universities and the state has also altered, shifting the longstanding relationship where, in return for autonomy, universities furnish the state with its cognitive requirements (Delanty, 2001, p. 2). Political theorist Hannah Arendt’s position is that educators have a moral and social obligation to initiate new generations into the pre-existing knowledge of society as well as to pursue individualised outcomes (Arendt, 1954).

The public good is composed of a large quantum of externalities known as social or public benefits. From an economist’s perspective (for example, Samuelson, 1954; Musgrave, 1959) the public good is non-excludable, that is, the benefits that accrue cannot be provided exclusively to some individuals with others being prevented from benefitting. They are also non-rivalrous, that is, their reception by some should not adversely affect the situation of others (Tilak, 2008). The consumption of public good benefits is generally accessible to all and they are not subject to competition. An important aspect of the public good is that it is financed by the state from general revenues, without necessarily being determined by reigning prices or charges such as student fees and market levels (Tilak, 2008a; 2008b). However, while we acknowledge that the distinction between public and private good tends to assume

a technical or an ideological orientation, the classification of public good is not an absolute one and we maintain that stakeholder interests, government policies, market conditions, level of development and political realities are all central in decisions made concerning the public good. After all, the public good has been a consideration since the Middle Ages, at least, and hence it needs to be redefined time and again to take into consideration the changing political realities (Desai, 2003).

The various conceptions of a public good can be better understood in the context of what is public about a university. In Mbembe's view, what is public is what pertains to the realm of *the common*, that is, what does not belong to anyone in particular because it is shared equally among equals who occupy a particular space. It has to do with ownership of a space that is a public, common good. But something cannot be said to be a public if:

every human being becomes a market actor; every field of activity is seen as a market; every entity (whether public or private, whether person, business, state or corporation) is governed as a firm; people themselves are cast as human capital and are subjected to market metrics (ratings, rankings) and their value is determined speculatively in a futures market. (Mbembe, 2015, n. p.)

Given this conception of a public good, is it defensible then to regard university education and its role in knowledge production as a public good? While it is true that entry into educational institutions is available and given to some, whereas others are excluded, and so consumption by some necessarily means a reduction in the possible consumption of others, is this a very shallow interpretation of the technical attributes of the public good and the consumption of education? Stiglitz (1999) argues that knowledge, specifically the fields of higher education and research, does satisfy this condition. Few deny the existence of externalities in the case of higher education. If consumption is interpreted as consumption of benefits from education (not consumption of a good per se) (Tilak, 2008), then university education, whose core concern is knowledge, and knowledge production and dissemination, satisfies the required features. It is not feasible to ration the public good, nor is it desirable to do so. While we accede that it may be practicable to limit admission to university education, we consider it undesirable to ration admission to higher education (Weisbrod, 1988) and the distribution of benefits that flow from it. University education is also an 'experience good' (McPherson & Winston 1993), whose end-product value, in terms of quality and price as well as profit, is difficult to quantify in advance. It can only be determined upon use. But can we distinguish the economic from the social benefits of university knowledge production, research and service?

THE UNIVERSITY IN SOCIETY

Mbembe asks, "[i]s today's university the same as yesterday's or are we confronting an entirely different *apparatus*, an entirely different rationality—both of which require us to produce radically new concepts?" (Mbembe, 2015, n. p.). The question

of knowledge and the university—society relationship needs contextualisation. While globalisation and concerns about economic competitiveness have impacted higher education strongly, they are inadequate in explaining the range of current pressures centred on forms of institutional responsiveness, including equity, nation building and human rights. We submit that the core functions of the university that are relevant to society have been emasculated. The structures of knowledge within and across the disciplines in universities have shifted from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge approaches (Gibbons et al., 1994) and are driven by academic/theoretical and professional programmes that prioritise skills, application and problem solving, with profound implications for research, teaching and learning in the university. This has paved the way for ‘an ethic of productivity’ and efficiency that Donoghue (2008) regards as an ultimate expression of utilitarianism. According to Slaughter and Rhoades (2004, p. 1), the theory of academic capitalism explains the integration of the university into the new (global) economy, and, more specifically, how faculty, students, administrators and academic professionals use “a variety of state resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions to the new economy”. This reflects the encroachment of the profit motive into the academy (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 210).

This position can be further explicated in the context of narrow utilitarianism centred on economic benefits and narrow conceptions of knowledge driven by workplace demands. Universities have experienced the entrenchment of narrow instrumentalism, with its accompanying emphasis on the economic (most often in terms of profiteering and meeting the demands of the markets) rather than social function. Utilitarianism vacillates between a narrow emphasis on economic benefits—through utility-based knowledge related to the world of work and pragmatic skills-based approaches (Kraak, 2000)—and an emphasis on wider societal benefits in terms of inculcation and promotion of social values such as human rights, social justice, equality and equity. Universities once focused on discipline-based knowledge, underpinned by an emphasis on academic, theoretical and conceptual enculturation, and they privileged particular modes of analysis and modes of argumentation, based on a mastery of discipline-rooted concepts. Instead, they are now turning to skills development and professionalisation of curricula for workplace readiness, at the expense of knowledge perceived as theoretical or academic (Gibbons et al., 1994). We contend that institutional managers are overseeing the subtle replacement of the idea of knowledge as a public good, with that of profit. Universities are affected by trends in the global economy, while the state is becoming increasingly unresponsive to local needs and powerless to meet the increasing (funding) demands of higher education.

THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY IN CONTEXT

How much university knowledge rearrangement is necessary for initiating economic and social change in communities in Africa, in particular, is subject to debate. In

this section we discuss whether an African university, for public good, is a socially-engaged or socially-embedded university. Besides the response to the demand for higher education in context, social embodiment commits institutions to striving to equip their graduates with the appropriate mental attitudes and pre-dispositions to operate on a complex continent that is riddled with poverty, social injustice, conflict, bad government, civil war, economic collapse, catastrophic epidemics like HIV/AIDS and Ebola, and the exodus of skilled and talented individuals (Wilson-Tagoe 2007, p. 238). Hence, it should equip them with a strong moral responsibility. Metaphorically, one could refer to social embodiment as *habitus in habitat*, or institutional habituation, in that institutions are open to both the opportunities and challenges offered by the socio-cultural environment in which they operate (*habitus*) (Fourcade, 2010). This means that institutions can be more or less *context-bound* or *context-independent* (disembodied) in their discourses, policies and academic practices, since the people and institutions surrounding them mediate what universities do. This, in our view, makes an African university, and the knowledge it produces, a public good.

Our point of departure is that, in the context of African universities, neo-liberalism, which emphasises the *economic* and market function of the university rather than its *social* function, has destabilised the articulation between higher education and society, particularly in the domain of knowledge. Today, academic work and institutional output are driven by global markets and narrow economic concerns (Kant, [1798] 1979; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), making them increasingly unresponsive to local social and cultural needs such as social cohesion. Commodification and commercialisation of knowledge, and the consequent changing professional values, norms, and beliefs dictated by market ethics, dominate university practices. Under such circumstances, progressive virtues (self-development, positive human relations and informed citizenship), democratic principles (equity and social justice), and a commitment to social transformation guided by altruism and the common good encapsulated in an African higher education vision, are fast disappearing.

If a university is to be *socially embedded*, its programmes, interventions and strategies require an appreciation of institutional and social diversity, and a deep understanding of national historical roots as well as the world context at large. It is worth mentioning here the widening *social responsibility* demanded by the complex and constantly changing national and global environments. Redefined and institutionalised within the European Union by the Bologna Declaration (1999), a socially embedded university is “broadly accessible”, “socially useful” and “organisationally flexible”. For Williams (1997, p. 103), accessibility encompasses such topics as access (to information), guidance, funding and financial support, admission procedures, credit for existing skills and knowledge, knowledge and curricula that are relevant, facilities, the variety of courses and modes of study, differing learning processes, a supportive environment, a variety of certification and accreditation mechanisms, and a range of vocational and occupational outcomes. Social usefulness ties the university to social progress, that is, universities should

function as drivers of progress in a globally competitive environment. A good system is highly diversified, inclusive, relevant, and working for all. In the context of the then newly independent African countries, the 1972 Association of African Universities Workshop in Accra endorsed the importance of universities in Africa as *development* universities (Yesufu, 1973). In Sawyerr's view, a development university is "a new institution [that can] help African nations build up their capacity to develop and manage their resources, alleviate poverty of the majority of their people, and close the gap between them and the developed world" (Sawyerr, 2005, p. 2). The question is, to what extent are such institutions strategically poised to represent and produce knowledge as a public good?

While the idea of a development university is the ideal, neoliberalism is the major philosophy propelling African universities and the knowledges that they produce and disseminate. This position views the individual as pursuing his or her own interests in the market place, as an autonomous entrepreneur responsible for his or her own progress, position and success or failure (Hursh & Wall, 2008). The African university, while preaching rhetorically about its inclination towards serving the interests and putting the social good of the local and the African first is, in practice, operating according to the ideology and adopting the fundamentals of the neoliberal project, under the ambit of globalisation. In this system:

[e]very social transaction is conceptualized as entrepreneurial, to be carried out purely for personal gain. The market introduces competition as the structuring mechanism through which resources and status are allocated efficiently and fairly. The 'invisible hand' of the market is thought to be the most efficient way of sorting out which competing individuals get what. (Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004, pp. 137–138)

The role and function of the African university as an independent institution is progressively jeopardised by the interests of a corporation in both elusive and palpable ways. Knowledge research, expertise, and instructional faculty are all merchandises to be operationalised in engendering revenue and institutional profit. In the view of Slaughter and Rhoades (2005), such a situation can best be described as "an academic capitalist knowledge and learning regime" which, in its emergence, has substituted the "public good knowledge and learning regime".

Limited national budget allocations to universities are forcing African researchers to look for foreign financial support, and faculty members in the new capitalist academic setting are compelled to develop research that attracts funding, increasingly in the form of sponsorship from international corporations or funding institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Union, for example. African researchers are paid, fairly well, to produce new knowledge that will, in some cases, be sold under the patent of the sponsoring agency and exported back to Africa at exorbitant prices. As the trend towards greater entrepreneurialism in research gains momentum, the risk of narrower academic freedom emerges, as researchers are more likely to advance research that is fundable, and publish what is

permissible under funding agreements (see Mendoza, 2007). This example supports Sandel's (2012, p. 7) assertion that "[t]he reach of markets, and market-oriented thinking, into aspects of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms is one of the most significant developments of our time".

The mechanisms of hegemonic Western forms of knowledge and the manner in which they are expressed have succeeded in "universalising Western particularism through [an] epistemological colonisation that decentred pre-existing African knowledge systems" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 38) and drove African forms of knowledge to the 'savage' fringes. The adoption of an attitude of "epistemological mimicry and intellectual dependence" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 38) by African universities, that characterises what is taught and how it is taught, can be blamed on this colonisation. We observe how, in Africa, universities that claim to be ethno-provincial institutions attempt, in practice, to replicate the knowledge research and dissemination processes of Harvard, London or Cambridge. As Mbembe states:

[they are] "Westernized" if all that they aspire to is to become local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon. (Mbembe, 2015, n. p.)

In the attempt to equal the productivity of those international institutions by imitating them, African universities lose their 'publicness'. Being Westernised, they are not public African universities, hence they do not advance knowledge as a public good in Africa. Even fifty years after political independence, the knowledge systems furthered by universities in Africa continue to perpetuate the separation of the 'knower' from the 'world to be known'. In this system, if the knower generates knowledge, it has to be in the universal form, removed from an African context. We therefore posit that to recognise knowledge as 'true' merely because of its Western scientific constructions is tantamount to furthering the hegemonic notion of Africa as no more than an annex of the West. In our view, such knowledge is not knowledge as a public good, and for the public good, since the publicness is located outside the context of Africa.

The introduction of the language and management approach of private capital into public services such as education has eroded the ethics, language and style of public service and duty. While traditionally, the involvement of non-governmental organisations in education, most often religious organisations, was on a non-profit basis, in recent times there has been an upsurge in for-profit activities. University education is no longer the social institution it once was, and the knowledge produced therein has been subordinated to international market goals, as has the language and self-conceptualisation of educators themselves. Hill and Kumar (2009, p. 21) consider that:

the language of education has been very widely replaced by the language of the market, where lecturers "deliver the product," "operationalize delivery," and "facilitate clients' learning," within a regime of "quality management and

enhancement,” where students have become “customers” selecting “modules” on a pick ’n mix basis, where “skill development” at universities has surged in importance to the derogation of the development of critical thought.

With specific reference to knowledge research in the African university, Mohamedbhai (2011) is of the opinion that the inevitable result is that:

[t]he relevance of the research carried out is ... questionable. Most faculty undertake research for personal gain, with the aim of publishing in internationally refereed journals for promotion purposes. The chosen topic is often not appropriate to national development. Most faculty do their research as individuals; there is insufficient multidisciplinary research, essential for solving development problems. Much of the research is externally funded, and being determined by the funders, the topics may not be of direct relevance to national development. Research publication comprises another challenge. (p. 21)

The woeful state of knowledge production by African scholars is compounded by the lack of funding. It is estimated that Africa spends less than 0.5% of Gross Domestic Product on research (Mouton, Gaillard, & van Lill, 2015), a level of funding that compromises the continent’s development and poses a major challenge for the future. The absence of capacity with regards to research and knowledge production further marginalises the African university, and pushes knowledge research to the periphery instead of benefitting Africans directly. This renders knowledges and their processes of production private commodities, subject to manipulation by those who wield the financial power.

Given the unprecedented social and economic upheavals that have taken place in Africa, what options are there for African universities to re-invent themselves so that they act in response to particular local and global circumstances? In the following section we propose a paradigm shift that emphasises epistemological, ethical and political responsibility in research-based knowledge production and utilisation according to which an African university might fulfil its mission as a public good.

REPOSITIONING THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

We argue that the nature of the knowledge contribution a university makes to society is at the core of effective university – society relations. A university in Africa should engage with and reflect the identity of the society it is supposed to serve, and the knowledge it generates should be relevant and responsive to the needs of the people. It should primarily be a site for the production and distribution of new knowledge in the context of the African experience, alongside the global experience. The production of such knowledge necessitates a great deal of epistemological, ethical and political responsibility. Our argument is built on three important premises namely responsibility, embeddedness and world-classness. First, we suggest that the

responsibility associated with being an African university demands that knowledge production be rooted in the university's historico-cultural milieu (its comparative advantage), and grounded in African experience (its epistemological basis) without being insular or parochial (ghettoised from the global world). This reflects the standpoint of one of Africa's greatest leaders, Kwame Nkrumah (1956), who stated "[w]e must in the development of our universities bear in mind that once it has been planted in the African soil it must take root amidst African traditions and cultures". The African experience is not only the 'foundation' of all forms of knowledge, but also the 'source' for the construction of that knowledge (Ramose, 1988). It draws its inspiration from its environment, as an indigenous tree growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in African soil (Magkoba, 2005). It is from its *embeddedness* in its context, and its translation of the experience of that context into locally and globally relevant knowledge – its embodiment and engagement – that the strength of its own competitive advantage on the international stage is derived. This is the route along which much-desired international reputation and recognition can be pursued, that is, global recognition through local excellence. Ngugi wa Thiongo writes about his conception of Africa as the personal centre of education and knowing:

Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves ... After we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective. (Ngugi, 1986)

This resonates with Molefi Asante's call for Africans to stand by "the belief in the centrality of Africans in post-modern history ... placing African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture or behaviour" (Asante, 1987, p. 6). It follows, from the above statements, that if African universities are to offer knowledge as a public good, then knowledge research and production should start within the continent, embedded in the African milieu, before gazing outwards to the global. African universities can only play a strong and sustainable role on the global stage if their international reputation derives from local excellence, such that their *world-classness* becomes an expression of their *Africanness*. University knowledge processes that are genuinely world class should have a strong sense of self, and should play a transformational role in the development of the society in which they are located. A university should operate in ways that stretch local knowledge horizons into the global arena 'without losing its soul' (Downing, 2003). This will ensure its contribution to global knowledge is meaningful. As Makgoba (2005) states:

... our universities should be unmistakably African, in the same sense that Harvard, Yale and Stanford are unmistakably American; and in the same way that Oxford, Manchester and London are English; and in the same way that Edinburgh, St Andrews and Dundee are Scottish. (p. 24)

A professor at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) recently elaborated on the sort of transformation that is required with reference to his home institution which, historically, was for white students only:

The university as it is thought of is an African university cut off historically from the continent. If it is a national institution, it's going to respond to what the priorities of the government and the nation are ... it must engage with the rest of Africa. If it is going to have the pretension ... that it is a world-class university, it is not going to be a world-class university by trying to replicate ... Harvard or Oxford or the orientation northward ... The way this University will be a world-class university is if it's perceived by the rest of the world as the place to go to for expertise. On what? 'Africa' (quoted in Cross, 1992, p. 86).

The traditional role of African universities, and universities around the globe, is the fulfilment of their "obligation to their social milieu for the preservation, the imparting and the generation of knowledge" (Makgoba 1997, p. 179). He warns, however, that "it is important to recognise ... that the imparting of inappropriate or irrelevant education, even of the highest calibre, would ... lead to a poor and ineffective product" (1997, p. 179). Thus university education should be relevant, not only to the people receiving it, but also to the cultures and the environment in which it is being imparted. We support the view that the quest for public good possibilities in higher education should encompass not only community engagement, but should also be viewed as an essential part of the teaching and research functions of higher education (see Chambers & Gopaul, 2008, pp. 78–82). Ali Mazrui (2003) is of the opinion that:

African university systems have grown up with structural or other links with metropolitan universities in Europe and North America, [and] the African university has continued to be heavily unicultural: it has been more a manifestation of Western culture in an African situation than an outgrowth of African culture itself. (p. 153)

According to Mazrui, a university that considers itself African should be in the process of repositioning itself by moving "from being a multinational corporation to a multicultural corporation" (Mazrui, 2003, p. 153).

The fact that university managers and leaders in Africa are themselves responding to the Western scientific orientation that nurtured them, makes it very difficult for them to escape gazing towards and mimicking Western scholarship in the institutions they lead. They are only paying back in so far as they are serving the good of the present research and knowledge production of the institution in their hands, as well as those who funded their education. We argue that this has done much to imperil the public good aspect of knowledge in the university. However, we are sympathetic to their position since "mental colonisation is the hardest part to decolonise and the worst form of colonialism" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 50).

In repositioning the knowledge of an African university as a public good, we are in agreement with the *Campaign for the Future of Higher Education*, which took a strong stand against the commodification of university education and argued that:

... students are neither customers nor clients; academics neither facilitators nor a pizza delivery service. Universities are not businesses; producing consumer goods. Knowledge and thought are not commodities, to be purchased as items of consumption, whether conspicuous or not, or consumed and therefore finished with, whether on the hoof as take-away snacks or in more leisurely fashion. Education is not something which can be “delivered,” consumed and crossed off the list. Rather, it is a continuing and reflective process, an essential component of any worthwhile life—the very antithesis of a commodity. (Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, 2003, n. p.)

Since universities on the African continent have not been spared the baggage of irrelevance bequeathed by colonialism and apartheid, we regard *epistemological emancipation of university education* from the hegemony of Western-imposed knowledge systems as a pre-requisite for authentic knowledge production relevant to Africa. Universities in Africa have been criticised for being mirror images of Western epistemology and for operating in rather imitative and replicative fashion (Makgoba, 1997, p. 174). Contemporary epistemologies in African universities suffer from Euro-centrism characterised by a biased and skewed mainstream scholarship rooted in Western scientism that coerces faculty and students into adhering to “paradigms that do not reflect their knowledge or experience of the world” (Lowy, 1995, p. 728). Recent literature is flooded with an abundance of epithets and descriptors of this problem: “epistemological imperialism” (Osha 2011, p. 152), ‘epistemicide’ (Ramose, 2003), ‘epistemological authoritarianism’ (Kaphagawani, 1998), ‘epistemic injustice’ (Fricker, 2003, 2009) and ‘paradigmatic tyranny’ (Rahnema, 2001).

Against this background, universities in Africa must act to *change themselves* both in changing borrowed or imposed epistemologies, and changing their priorities in response to the social imperatives that press upon them. This involves catering for the complex challenges posed by life on this continent. Decolonising the university by reordering spatial relations is necessary, that is, by de-privatising and rehabilitating public space through the creation of a new set of mental dispositions (see Mbembe, 2015). In plotting the way forward for knowledge processes in the twenty-first century, Mbembe (2015) concludes that:

[w]e need to reconcile *a logic of indictment and a logic of self-affirmation, interruption and occupation*. This requires the conscious constitution of a substantial amount of mental capital and the development of a set of pedagogies we should call *pedagogies of presence*. (n.p.)

We argue that different foundations exist for the construction of pyramids of knowledge depending on the social, economic, political and historical conditions

of the people they serve and the environment in which they operate. Each pyramid is unique by its very nature and should enter into genuine and *critical dialogical encounters with other pyramids of knowledge* as an equal partner. Each pyramid should facilitate a critical emancipatory approach to solving the problems of its people and should produce the material and capacities for Africans to determine their own future(s). This requires the production of knowledge that is relevant, effective and empowering (Letsekha, 2013). Worth mentioning here is the promise made by post-modernist discourse in the late 1980s, which dealt with the recognition and legitimation of subjugated knowledges or silenced voices. The post-structuralist understanding was that “all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and to have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate” (Harvey, 1989, p. 48). This discourse created spaces for marginalised voices to speak their own knowledges, and drew attention to “other worlds” and “other voices” that had for too long been silenced (Harvey, 1989, p. 48). This was a novel idea at the time and we seem to have forgotten it in contemporary higher education. We argue that it is time to place the concern for teaching, research and community engagement that foregrounds African self-knowing, self-understanding, self-regeneration, self-definition and self-rule in African affairs, at the centre of the African university as the purveyor of knowledge for the public good,

CONCLUSION

The idea of the public good as a key factor underlying university education relates directly to the roles that academic institutions ought to play in society. We noted how previous debates about university education and the knowledge-bases therein related to whether it are a public good—increasing value to society by educating its people, who in turn become productive citizens—or they are a private good, essentially advancing personal profit such as earning more money, and allowing an individual to enjoy other returns from education. The gist of the argument is that in the sense of the private good, beneficiaries of education should pay for the process of acquiring knowledge, while in the domain of the public good, society should bear responsibility by providing support.

University education budgets in many countries have declined or been cut significantly. The neoliberal spirit has invaded public academic institutions which, requiring to fund an increasing portion of their costs themselves, have raised tuition fees and are converting themselves into commercialised entities that market a product. The limitation of resources has put immense pressure on African universities to follow the neo-liberal paradigm that foregrounds knowledge for profit and economic competitiveness under the sponsorship of external determinants and stakeholders.

We challenged the narrow utilitarianism that has framed university knowledge according to constricted economic goals and private interests. We found the publicness of university knowledge systems to be weakened by the struggle

to be entrepreneurial and market-relevant. We argued the need for a reorganised and reconstituted space, where epistemologies acknowledge the diversity of both local and external human ideas and knowledge and thus become tools with which individuals negotiate the complexities of everyday life. We argued that teaching and research in the African university should provide social and economic benefits to the environments in which they are located by speaking to the necessities of their social context. We accede that both the neo-liberal discourse and the public good view of university knowledge in Africa emphasise obligations to society, but argued that, as institutions of higher education, universities in Africa should take the lead as socially accountable institutions and should dispense social benefit through their core functions. The need for African universities and African scholars to transcend dependence on Western models cannot be overemphasised. Universities in Africa have a vital role to play in safeguarding and advancing the national interest on all economic, social, cultural, and political fronts, through the generation, synthesis, adaptation and application of relevant and responsive knowledge. We appreciate that there is a need to raise African scholarship to the global standard while at the same time making African scholarship global by producing knowledge that speaks to and illuminates the challenges and opportunities of the peoples, economies, societies and cultures of Africa. We therefore issue a clarion call for African universities to foreground knowledge production and dissemination through research and teaching and learning activities that have local relevance, in order to enhance the social and economic worth of knowledge as a public good. We argued that if knowledge processes in African universities are to be genuinely effective, they should foreground the public good paradigm for social advancement of African priorities and challenges instead of the private good approach that is embedded in neoliberal ideology.

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