

Conclusion

Contradictory functions, unexpected outcomes, new challenges

Johan Muller, Nico Cloete & François van Schalkwyk

After considering the detailed empirical pictures sketched by the data collected in the four African papers, it is sobering to return to the very first paper by Castells in this collection and to realise again how prescient it was, and how many pitfalls it anticipated. It pays to reflect again on the kind of theoretical account he was putting forward. In Chapter 3 of this volume (pp. 35–36), he told us that, in contrast to Bourdieu's functionalist theory, his was a *conflict* theory, following that of Alain Touraine's. The important consequence was that we should always expect conflict when attending to functions: conflict was the normal, not the pathological condition. The four academic functions and one social function of universities he went on to anatomise were thus not to be understood as equivalent boxes that university administrators or policy makers could tick as if signing off on a list. Nor could increases or decreases in relevant indicators only be examined on a linear scale. They were social forces that were in collision with each other, and this collision needed to be understood, mediated and managed. His conclusion bears re-statement:

the critical element in the structure and dynamics of the university system is their ability to combine and make compatible seemingly contradictory functions which have all constituted the

system historically and are all probably being required at any given moment by the social interests underlying higher education policies. It is probably the most complex analytical element to convey to policy-makers: namely, that because universities are social systems and historically produced institutions, all their functions take place simultaneously within the same structure, although with different emphases. (p. 42)

What the crucial factors conditioning mediation are, is the question. The picture sketched by the empirical data provided in Chapters 6 to 9 helps to dramatise how this clash of functions and social interests play out in African universities still labouring to come out from under the shadow of their colonial parent institutions, trying to shake off the legacy of their subordinate status.

Chapter 6 shows how the genesis and tradition of the colonial-era African university is rooted in a role to serve a primarily ideological and elite socialisation function, though these two functions are not pursued further in the empirical indicators of the HERANA research. Nevertheless, the variable imprint of this legacy is clearly seen in the performance indicators of most African universities today. The chapter details the long road back from this legacy tracked in the changing policy documents accompanying the successive establishment of independence in national rule. The chapter speaks optimistically of 'revitalisation' as a new discourse of 'development' begins to emerge in response to influential voices calling for a re-orientation, Castells's included. The chapter ends by distinguishing between two strands of development discourse, one strand what the chapter calls an 'instrumentalist' sense, the other, what we can call, following Castells, an 'engine of development' sense.

But how did the universities interpret this changing policy environment? Chapter 7 examined the vision and mission statements of the eight universities making up the then-newly established HERANA project and conducted interviews with key informants. Castells had predicted that universities in developing

countries may react to the ‘new’ emerging global informational economy by ‘rushing’ towards the new mode of production and development – making rhetorical commitments to it – without fully appreciating what far-reaching changes this would imply for the economy and universities alike. HERANA documents a clear move, even if it is not exactly a ‘rush’, towards an economically instrumental and ‘engine of development’ view of the university in the public face the universities presented in their vision and mission statements.

This was the aspiration. What was the reality? Defining the ‘new’ paradigm of ‘development’ as ‘knowledge-led’, HERANA posited eight indicators of what they called the ‘academic core’ of the university – SET and postgraduate enrolment and graduation rates, especially of PhDs; international publications. They then compared the eight institutions across the indicators, using data from 2001 to 2007. Their conclusion was not a happy one:

With the exception of Cape Town, the other universities (in the HERANA sample) do not have academic cores that live up to the high expectations contained in their mission statements. (p. 125)

This indicated not only a disconnect between aspiration and performance; it also indicated that only one of the institutions in the sample could be considered to be making a knowledge-led contribution to development. True, they were responding to social demand, and had increased their enrolment of undergraduates, in some cases quite dramatically. But they had yet to increase graduation at the postgraduate level, especially at the PhD level.

Chapter 8 continued with the same sample of institutions, now called ‘flagship’ institutions, and using more granular data, compared them on the knowledge indicators between 2001 and 2014. Though more detail and nuance is displayed, the picture produced does not offer any greater grounds for optimism. As the chapter concludes:

African universities are unable to manage successfully the political and ideological functions alongside the academic teaching activities of the university. (p. 140)

This conclusion can be re-phrased in more Castellan terms. First of all, most African universities have retained their ideological and elite socialisation roles. As we have seen, they have made at least public commitments to increasing their research-based activities. But they have also responded to social demands for greater access by granting greater access at the undergraduate level. In a context where resources were not expanding (in contrast to the educational systems of the Asian Tigers, for example: see Castells 2009: 274 & 276; see also p. 26 above), existing staff were expected to teach more. Castells had predicted that, where universities accede to social demand without the corresponding addition of resources, standards drop, and academic teaching becomes little more than 'warehousing', in his resonant phrase. What we see in this chapter, especially in the case of Nairobi University, is that research-oriented scholars quickly find the teaching-heavy environment inimical to sustained high-level research. To simply add new commitments on to existing commitments is to place the system under intolerable strain, where something has to give. Invariably it is the latest addition to the functional roster - the research function, one which requires dedicated nurturance, that falls by the wayside. This is not how to balance the contradictory functions of higher education in an informational world.

Unlike the Asian Tigers, universities in Africa have been left with vague talk of 'development', but with no clear idea what this might mean for specifying the choices universities might make towards an 'informational' economy. It is true that the lineaments of the informational economy are not yet fully evident in Africa; it is also true that without the resources to develop new areas to the requisite high level, these initiatives will wither. But a clearly enunciated development vision, more particularly practical steps to pursue it, is nowhere evident in either the projections of government, the plans of the universities or the academic activities

examined by the HERANA research. African universities have found themselves without effective development signposting, either from a directive developmental state like the ones in East Asia, or a robust market as might be said to exist in Europe and the USA, to signal the high-level needs of the present and future economy and the consequent requirements from universities.

In this context, Gornitzka and others (2007) have developed a middle-order governance concept of the *pact* as an explicit normative agreement between government and universities as to what each is expected to do to translate the high-level notion of the informational mode of development into a device that specifies guidelines that can be monitored in the interests of accountability, or turned into empirical indicators for purposes of research. Chapter 8 above shows that even when something like a pact has been enunciated, as it is in Mauritius (the only institution in the HERANA sample with anything resembling a pact), without concomitant targeted funding and government support, left to itself it will remain stuck in the default model for African universities, dominated by the social and not the scientific function. This radical disconnect from any development path of the economy might, with justification, be called ‘blind’ development.

At whose door should we lay this failure? It is plausible to suggest that this malaise of ‘blind’ development is the outcome of a state of paralysis created by a titanic clash of social interests unconstrained and unmediated by an encompassing framework of common purpose about the essential goals the university ought to pursue. The political elites in the society at large, and their representatives in government, seem unable to suspend their interest-based politics and patronage pursuits long enough to forge and agree on a broader common development framework for the country at large. Even when such a framework has been forged, its implementation is stalled by the interest conflicts that consume the energies of the political elite. This is particularly evident in South Africa in 2017; a common plan, the *National Development Plan* (National Planning Commission 2012), has in fact been accepted by the national Parliament, but its

implementation has been stalled by unbridled interest conflicts in the ruling party.

Student politics on campus likewise mimics the national scene. With political branches of national parties proliferating on campuses, student politics abandons student concerns and becomes a proxy battleground for national political tensions. The relationship between the student bodies and their leaders is cemented by patron–client relationships between the national parties and student leaders, held in place by what Luescher and Mugume (2014) delicately call ‘resource-exchanges’.

As for the professoriate; the picture painted in the chapters above shows them to be riven between rival visions of the university; some cling to a golden age vision of autonomy and independence partly superseded in the home countries from which it was transplanted; others are weighed down with teaching responsibilities and could care less; yet others turn to consultancies as sources of remuneration supplementation (Mkandawire 2011; Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015). This is paradoxical, to say the least: foreign donors and the state, the main sponsors of consultancies that divert academic energies away from academic publication and supervision, are also the loudest voices decrying the lack of research publications in the universities. In the absence of a common purpose, these activities spiral out as various kinds of individual survival or advancement strategies. As we commented above, this kind of academic milieu is not only unproductive for serious scholars, but is actively abrasive, and those that can, seek greener academic pastures, usually abroad.

A secondary consequence of this unmediated clash of social interests is also becoming apparent. In some institutions, students pursue their political battle not only against local and national opponents, but against science itself, epitomised in the rather chilling rallying cry ‘Science must Fall’ (Steerpike 2016), a possibility Castells warned against in Chapter 3 above (see also Chapter 2).

The second difference between most African universities and successfully developing university systems has to do with *differentiation*, or rather its lack. With the partial exception of

South Africa, African countries do not have a higher education system. Not infrequently, the colonial powers left behind them a national university with an entrenched ideological/elite-socialisation mandate, and the other universities that have since sprung up, public and increasingly private, have developed rather haphazardly in its wake. Insofar as universities are state-organised at all, they tend to be treated all the same, with the same policy tools and funding formulae. Consequently, when the policy emphasis changes, it triggers a chain reaction of mimicry, where less prestigious institutions try to emulate the more prestigious ones. The result, in the absence of any direction or incentive to do otherwise, is *institutional convergence*. There are signs of this isomorphic mimicry in South Africa where there are at least the basic lineaments of a differentiated system based not on design or direction but on differing historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid.

There is a third feature of African universities that marks it out from the universities of the first world. This is the particular form of evolution of the indigenous elite. The institutions Castells cites as performing the elite-socialising function in France – the *grandes écoles*, or in England – Oxford and Cambridge, are a far cry from the national universities of Africa. Where the former increasingly select and educate a highly skilled elite, capable, as in the French case, of training also for high level positions in the private sector (see p. 37 above), the latter are trained to staff the lower and middle layers of the civil service. We may call this cadre of university graduates a demographic or indigenous elite, one which is still also predominantly male. They can be compared with the educated elite in name only.

The main difference, and the one critical to success in the informational economy, is what Castells has called *self-programmability*. The high-level elite trained in France and England are trained to self-adapt; the skills of the indigenous elite, on the other hand, rarely rise above the generic, produced as they were and are to perform reproductive functions for the colonial and post-colonial state. This form of labour, Castells has repeatedly

stressed, is uniquely incapable of driving a developmental project towards the informational mode of production.

It is thus not exactly wrong to refer to students in African universities as an elite. In Trow's (1973) terms, they are still part of an elite system that has yet to be massified, even though the increased enrolments and lack of adequate resource allocation leads to overcrowding. We may call these universities 'overcrowded elite institutions'. In Mamdani's terms, these students are still considered indubitably privileged. But unlike Bourdieu's (1973) elite, which comes from the social elite and is, according to him at least, destined for it, what Castells means by an 'elite' is neither the university system they are part of, or the social stratum they come from. *To be part of the sustainable elite in the informational world means to be self-programmable.* To be fair, the colonialists in Africa assumed that this top layer of the colonial elite would be trained back in the home institutions, hopefully to be inducted into self-programmability, as Castells has pointed out. But that was never likely to be a long-term solution after independence, yet another solution has simply not been planned for.

What this elaboration of differing senses of 'elite' has highlighted is the following: African universities have not only succumbed to the social function of letting in more students than they can cope with, which 'suffocates' the performance of the generative scientific and research function, they have also continued to produce an indigenous elite increasingly unsuited to the networked world and informational economy Africa is inexorably headed towards. In other words, African universities and their overseeing states have yet to recognise and respond to their historical mission in the emerging informational economy – to develop numbers of highly qualified labour that is essentially self-programmable. It is this quality of their teacher corps that distinguishes the teachers of Finland, say, who top the PISA and TIMSS performance tables, from teachers in more modestly-performing countries like Norway (Afdal 2012). This is the lesson that all high-performing developing countries have learnt.

Chapter 9 switches focus from functions to networks, a dimension so far little attended to in the previous three chapters. Yet the larger concern, that of mediating tensions, is the same. The chapter identifies two characteristic kinds of network that universities are involved in; the network with the scientific community, and the network with the world outside the university, often called ‘engagement’. Each kind of network can act as a ‘block’ to the other. This is not for reasons of bad faith. The more that academics engage in high level research that will draw the attention of the international peer community, the more the work runs the risk of being so decontextualised as to make its relevance to local contexts difficult to describe and discern; this is the basis for the long-standing animus against the ‘ivory tower’. The converse is also true; the more the work focuses on the local context only, the more that local context consumes its relevance, and the less the work will concern itself with relevance to a broader context – say, to the country, to regional Africa or to the scientific field. It is this potential conflict which must be mediated if the university is to be successful in both these key networks.

The particular focus in the chapter is on whether work which is directed to the local context is also directed to the scientific context, the tension above notwithstanding. The chapter finds examples of work that does both, and it is clear that careful design of the project at the outset is key. Certain academics are thus particularly adept at acting as ‘switches’ between the two networks. Equally, however, these are few and far between, and by and large few contextually directed projects also manage to contribute productively to the science function.

The conclusions of these chapters should not be taken as cataloguing the failure of African academia only. The intention is the opposite. We already know from international indicators that African universities do not perform well by comparison with their global peers. The question is why and how. This is the path opened by Castells’s trilogy. His work shines a particularly powerful light on the developmental predicament, and is especially valuable

in pointing to the many structural impediments that must be acknowledged and strategically accommodated if they are to be overcome.

Envoi

We ended our previous book on Castells with a reference to World Book Day on the 23 April 2001, which had the happy dividend of also paying tribute to Catalonia, Castells's spiritual and literal homeland. We end this volume on 18 July 2017, International Mandela Day, a day which saw some of the Mandela Elders¹ march through central Cape Town to launch the global project 'Walk together', to commemorate his 'Long walk to freedom'. Unhappily, this day of re-affirmation of our global hopes and dreams was also a day of anger, recrimination and fear as South African political elites continue to struggle for the power to determine the direction of the modernity of our country. The titanic struggle between the global and the local is not one easily ended, for all the reasons that Castells has given throughout his incomparably rich work. Yet the continent, and its higher education systems, is uncontestedly in a better place than it was in 2001 when we ended the previous book, and the indices, also those shown in this book, are mostly on an upward trajectory. Castells has always enjoined us to take the long view, the basis for what Gramsci called the 'optimism of the will' and for any optimistic vision for the future. We hope to continue this intellectual adventure with him for a while yet.

1 The Mandela Elders are: Nelson Mandela (founder), Martti Ahtisaari, Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon, Ela Bhatt, Lakhdar Brahimi, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Fernando H Cardoso, Jimmy Carter, Hina Jilani, Ricardo Lagos, Graça Machel, Mary Robinson, Desmond Tutu & Ernesto Zedillo.