THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY AND ITS FUTURE IN ZIMBABWE

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPERS
THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY
AND ITS FUTURE
IN
ZIMBABWE

International Conference Papers

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CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN DEVELOPMENT: SOME SOCIOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

by Professor Ralf Dahrendorf

From the point of view of the practical man — whether he be politician or administrator, businessman or whatever — universities are curious institutions. On the one hand, he needs them. If he has not been to a university himself, he would like to have been; in any case, he feels that universities add an important dimension to the knowledge which he applies. On the other hand, the practical man resents universities. He has found that those who came from them had to be retrained almost from scratch in order to deal with real things; moreover, universities are a nuisance. Strange things are said in them. Students and teachers alike behave in "objectionable" ways. If only they were exposed more to the issues and concerns of real life...

This conflict of views and of feelings is probably even more pronounced in developing countries. But make no mistake! It is there in Britain and America as it is in India and Zimbabwe. Moreover, the conflict has very real sources. It expresses what actually happens in universities. Nothing is more characteristic of universities than the tension between the requirements of theory and those of practice. Actually, "theory" and "practice" are rather highfalutin' words for what is meant here. What is meant is that universities need a degree of detachment, a protected free space, even a glass bowl, to do their teaching and their research, whereas the practical man never has such protection. Universities must have time; indeed, time is of the essence for their enterprise. It is not just job creation if a research officer applies for an extension of his grant; the timing of research results cannot be predicted exactly, however eager the government department or business management which has asked for them is to have them. It is not a waste of time either if universities have long vacations; both teachers and students need time to give their best and to absorb things properly. Turn a university into a knowledge factory and you have lost its very essence.

You may be surprised to hear such remarks from the Director of the London School of Economics; and indeed I shall retract a little as I go along, not because I am a Director of LSE, but because the subject demands it. But first of all, let me introduce what is perhaps a surprising witness for my position: Sydney Webb, the Fabian founder of the London School of Economics, a lifelong Labour politician, a radical reformer and socialist. By his own account, he was challenged quite early on about LSE. Was it not a Fabian, a socialist, institution? But he was not to be moved from his convictions, not even by his Fabian friends, such as George Bernard Shaw, who accused him of misusing Fabian funds by creating a "mere" academic institution. "I said," he wrote a few years after the foundation of the School in 1895, "that, as he knew, I was a person of decided views, radical and socialist, and that I wanted the policy that I believed in to prevail. But that I was also a profound believer in knowledge and science and truth. I thought that we were suffering much from lack of research in social matters, and that I wanted to promote it. I believed that research and new discoveries would prove some, at any rate, of my views of policy to be right, but that, if they proved the contrary I should count it all the more gain to have prevented error, and should cheerfully abandon my own policy, I think that is a fair attitude."

Fair indeed! What is more, Sydney Webb would have had to abandon his decided views a long time ago, if LSE was his standard. Even in his lifetime the Economics Department was dominated by Lionel Robbins and Friedrich von Havek, hardly socialists they; and Harold Laski has always remained an exception, if an influential and distinguished one. Not one of my predecessors as Director was a socialist; and the first Director, appointed after all by
Sydney Webb, became a Conservative MP. What this shows is not only the multifariousness and unpredictability of the London School of Economics, but above all that Sydney Webb was overly optimistic even in his own terms. Knowledge and science and truth do not prove, or disprove, political persuasions. I am not here advocating the overly ascetic position of Max Weber who thought that the teacher on his rostrum should never under any circumstances express value judgements. This is not only impossible but also undesirable, and in any case unnecessary if there are opportunities for discussion. But Weber was right when he said that however many scientific theories you heap on top of each other, they do not prove or disprove your convictions. Just as Neil Armstrong’s televised shuffle on the moon does not disprove the beauty of Sappho’s poem about the setting moon, so the economic theories of Milton Friedman or Friedrich von Hayek do not disprove the intention to finance a job creation scheme, or even to nationalise industries. Nationalization may be undesirable; but that is in itself a value judgement, and remains this however any allegedly scientific facts and theories are adduced to back it up. There is a science of values; science itself may be regarded as a value; but none of this bridges the gap between what we are trying to find out and what we believe. *Rerum cognoscere causes* (the motto of the London School of Economics, if you pardon my mentioning LSE for one last time), that is to say, discovering the causes of things is a human endeavour of its own unique and important kind.

This is an argument against — to use a fashionable word — “relevance”. Whoever demands from a university that it is relevant throughout, that it responds to external demands in everything it does, destroys by the same token the heart of academic inquiry and communication. In its core, universities are distinctly irrelevant; at any rate they do not intend to respond to external needs, nor should they do so. They are detached, and they are uncomfortable. By asking questions — all questions with no holds barred — they become of necessity a critical ferment in their environment. If universities start obeying the powers that be, they deteriorate rapidly and turn either into producers of cadres with blinkered and streamlined minds or simply into second-rate institutions which serve nobody and achieve nothing. The freedom to ask outrageous questions and to teach only what appears to be true is fundamental to the life of a university. Whoever destroys it, may as well cease to have universities at all.

But what if one ceases to have universities? Why are universities necessary? Why in particular does one need them in countries which have to concentrate all their energies and resources on creating a decent standard of living for all? Are universities not a luxury which the rich can afford but which has little relevance for the poor? These questions take me to the centre of my subject and to a few comments which are all born of the same fundamental conviction.

The first comment has to do with development. Development is a curious, even an objectionable, concept. Unintentionally perhaps, it seems to imply that there is one royal way to progress, and that all that is necessary for the rest to take this way is to untold the slumbering talents within them. If this is implied, then development is a very misleading concept indeed. There are many ways to improve human life chances, and no one example in the world in which we are living is a model for all. Per capita income is highest these days in Kuwait — but where would Kuwait be without oil? Per capita income is very high also in Switzerland — but how does one imitate centuries of peace and the unique consensus of the people? America is still regarded by many as a model — but do we really want the rat race, the crime, the suicides, the violence, along with the wealth? Britain is not quoted as an example very often any more; yet Britain has many an advantage over the rest. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Michael Manley talked about his younger days in London: ‘I loved much of my six years as a student in London. The intellectual life of the university was full of stimulus but was unforced and unregimented. It seemed to be predicated on an unwritten assumption that if you would go to the trouble of enrolling in a university you must have reasonably adult intentions.’ This too is a comment on our subject, and one which we shall bear in mind. But here, Manley’s next sentence is even more important: ‘I found, at another level, that the British have a genius for creating a neighbourly environment, even in one of the biggest cities in the world.’ Manley goes on to deplore the apparent inability of the British to extend their neighbourliness to their black compatriots — a very serious subject indeed! However, his main point is well taken: Britain may have missed the bus to wealth; at any rate, she may have sunk to the relegation zone of the first division of economic success, but Britain has nevertheless remained a rather agreeable country to live in right to the present day.
For the subject of development, these observations have a number of consequences. There are two things — two values, to be sure — which apply to all countries. One is the rule of law. Certain fundamental human rights are no less valid in the Soviet Union than they are in the United States of America, no less in India than they are in Britain. These include the inviolability of the person habeas corpus freedom from arbitrary arrest and the like as well as a fundamental freedom of expression. The other general value, which is not to be confused with the rule of law, is the guarantee of elementary citizenship rights for all. By citizenship rights in this sense I mean not only equality before the law and equal rights of political participation, but above all a decent standard of living; and since we are very far from this indeed, we must probably settle for the time being for the satisfaction of the basic needs of all (to use World Bank terminology). Since both the rule of law and a decent standard of living are universal needs and entitlements, safeguarding them is an international responsibility. So far as the rule of law is concerned, I often wish the UN Charter was taken more seriously; so far as basic needs are concerned, I wish the rich countries would recognize their responsibilities. The fact that both these are pious wishes must not mean that we tire in our efforts to see them realized.

Beyond the moral and economic essentials, however, there is no one royal way ahead. On the contrary, every country, every culture will have to find its own path. The examples of rich countries which I have given show that this was in fact the case in Europe and America, to say nothing of Japan. There are as many industrial cultures as there are industrialized countries, despite the apparent ubiquity of Coca-Cola bottles and Hollywood films. As more countries move forward economically, there will be more variants of modernization. Indeed, one of the discoveries of recent studies is that countries are well advised to try and build on their strengths rather than copy the structures of others blindly. Imposing institutions is not only painful, but very often ineffective. I would even include political institutions in this statement. No doubt you have noticed that I have not mentioned politics in my list of essentials. I have my preferences; but I would regard it as wrong to force them on others. Perhaps I can return to this point at the end of my lecture.

This, then, is the background of the work of the university in a country which is seeking its way forward. The conclusions which it suggests are both clear and important. On the first I have dealt already: the right to unfettered inquiry, and to teaching what to all intents and purposes is true, is a part of the rule of law. A country which does not have a university which enjoys academic freedom is quite likely to miss elementary liberties as well.

So far as basic needs, or a decent standard of living is concerned, the role of the university is more complicated. The picture of universities which I have drawn so far is clearly somewhat idealistic. Universities do more than just advance the frontiers of knowledge and allow students to take part in the process. They also impart the canonized knowledge of earlier generations. They train people. Here, universities in developing countries have a delicate task about which I speak with hesitation, because it cannot be my job to tell how to run your affairs. In my experience, however, it is important even in the training of professional people not to forget the cultural context in which they operate. It has undoubtedly added much to legal training in Britain, especially at the Bar, to have so many students from abroad; yet one wonders whether the attempt to apply English common law to different cultural conditions really makes sense. After all, it does not even work in Scotland. More generally, it seems to me that universities in developing countries have two jobs to do so far as training is concerned. One is to make sure that those whom they educate are aware both of abstract knowledge and of the concrete conditions to which it applies; this is a translating job. It requires the translation of existing knowledge to specific conditions. The other is to make sure that those subjects are given prominence which have an application to local conditions; this is a selection job. Most universities in developing countries cannot possibly teach all subjects. Even if one insists that they should teach some which are strictly "irrelevant", there remains the task of selecting particulary important ones and making sure that they are well represented.

Perhaps I can summarize what I have in mind here by drawing on my own experience, albeit an unhappy experience, which concerns what was the University of Malta. When I was first invited to help turn the University of Malta — with its 300 years of history an ancient place of learning in the Commonwealth — into one that made its contribution to the development of the country — I found a strange situation. The University had become ossified in its ancient ways. These meant that it was an appendix of the professional classes of Malta. Parents liked to send their children to do a bit of law, or medicine, or
theology — the three medieval faculties, as you undoubtedly realize. Government even permitted a little bit of the arts, such as English, and more recently Maltese. But there was no modern science to speak of, and no social science at all. There was no awareness of Malta's peculiar problems, such as the need for desalination in order to get pure water, or the interest in Mediterranean cultures, or concern with law of the seas, or the economics of tourism: one could go on listing such concerns. Thus, my objective was to help introduce new subjects, and gradually to give the University a place in the whole community, and not just in one of its classes. I talked about bringing the University into the 20th century — but of course as a university, that is within the confines of the rules of the game of higher learning and all that goes with it.

The Prime Minister of Malta is not known for his patience, nor is he a Sidney Webb with respect to knowledge and science and truth. He wanted the University to be immediately relevant to the country's needs; indeed he did not want students at all who were detached from the community as a whole. He therefore invented the notion of worker-student. He forced enterprises to finance young people who spend half their time at the "university", and forced students to spend half their time on jobs. He also, consistently as it were, abolished the newly established social sciences with their inherently critical spirit again. He did not want any protests from within the "university". The Rector, who did not budge, was sacked; many members of the faculty left; parents who could afford it sent their children abroad. The "university" was merged with a technical college. To all intents and purposes it has ceased to exist. You cannot see my manuscript, but if you could you would notice that the last few times I mentioned the word, university, I have put it in quotation marks: today, there is no university without quotation marks any more in Malta.

Why this makes the country poorer, I have tried to indicate earlier. Here, another point is worth making. It has to do with that vexing concept of university autonomy. Without doubt, university autonomy has sometimes been used to defend the indefensible; it is a convenient peg on which to hang many an alibi for failure and inaction. But then, most values can be abused like this. Despite all abuses, it remains the case, that universities simply cease to function if governments try to run them more or less directly. The jobs of translation and selection have to be done; but if both are imposed by impatient ministers of education, they will be done badly, if at all. What is necessary is something that is hard to describe. Despite the detachment and the glass bowl of academic life which I have tried to defend, the boundary between universities and the surrounding society has to be permeable. Both sides have to perceive each other, though neither side must try to dominate the other. Such mutual perception has to have an effect. A university like that of Malta before the reforms is indeed an expensive luxury. There was a need in Malta for appreciating the world around, for translating traditional teaching as well as research subjects of obvious importance to the surrounding community. But both translation and selection should have been done by the University itself. A little gentle nudging cannot be wrong; quite often, a university council with lay members can do the job, and at times, a parliamentary committee can help; but nudging is not doing, let alone forcing to do. Unless universities are allowed to take all academic decisions on academic grounds, they go down the dark road of the University of Malta.

The argument presented so far has one consequence which you will not like, but on which one may as well be candid. A university in a developing country which teaches professional people in the old and the new professions, and does so with a view to local needs, and which concerns itself in both research and teaching with certain subjects for which it is favourably located, is in a certain sense not a "complete" university. It does not have everything, that is teaching and research in the whole range of subjects which could conceivably be offered by a university, and which is perhaps offered by the Sorbonne, or Oxford, or Harvard University. But then, few universities in the rich countries are truly complete, and those which are, are either intolerably crowded like Paris (as the Sorbonne is characteristically now called), or in themselves differentiated into incomplete parts, like Oxford or Harvard. Completeness is an unnecessary ambition; what matters, is quality. A university which offers everything, but fails to stand out in anything is certainly a much sadder sight than a first-rate institution with a limited range of subjects or intentions. Places like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or the great American undergraduate colleges are quite rightly the envy of the world. It is presumptuous of me to make any recommendations to a University which has itself by now a distinguished tradition and which knows best what to do; but perhaps it will be accepted if I say that what matters is to do well what one is doing, not to do everything.
There is one further argument in favour of such self-limitation, and that is the international nature of the university world. I doubt whether there is a more effectively international community than that of university teachers and students. While businessmen when they travel are faced with clients or suppliers or competitors, and professional people with numerous obstacles erected by national tradition and pride, to say nothing of politicians who almost invariably assume a negotiating posture when they leave their home countries, academics including students find friends. Scholarship is by its very nature international. There is no German physics and no Soviet biology; and when both were tried, they merely turned their authors into a laughing stock of the rest. Despite all translation and selection that goes on all over the world, both students and teachers can often be transplanted without pain — and so it should be. For the internationalism of scholarship is once again under pressure today. Along with the galloping protectionism in trade, and a spreading tendency to look inward politically, there is an attempt by governments to close borders for universities in the world. Whereas at Harvard and the other "Ivy League" universities of the United States, a student pays $10,000 for tuition as well as room and board, fees alone are, in Britain, anywhere between £2,500 in the arts and £5,000 in medicine to which some £3,000 at least have to be added for living. This is a scandal. It is also a sign of shortsightedness. It is above all an assault on the very freedoms by which universities lived. Openness for the world is a part of university freedom. Deliberate attempts to close universities to outsiders are no better than other measures to curtail the freedom of scholarship.

The relevance of such developments for my subject is evident. Already, there are dozens of students from Zimbabwe in Britain who cannot afford to continue. Most of them are postgraduates. The Government of Zimbabwe has, understandably, decided to limit its support for postgraduates severely. At the same time, an international division of labour makes sense by which the richer countries offer postgraduate courses which could not be offered at the same level in the universities of the poorer countries. But of course, offering such courses involves a special responsibility. It means that these courses have to be accessible. Indeed, it is hard to think of a simpler way for a rich country to assist progress in the poorer countries than by inviting students from these countries to come to universities. What is needed is not high fees, but a generous scholarship programme. Dare one hope that, with the help of the Commonwealth Prime Minister's Conference in Melbourne, and the North-South Conference in Cancun in Mexico the British government will at last see the light?

There is an academic point in this connection which I once again raise with hesitation, and with a plea for not misunderstanding my intention. When Fritz Schumacher, the author of Small Is Beautiful, advocated the greater use of what he called "Intermediate technologies" in developing countries, he did not meet with much public approval in the Third World. (I emphasize "public approval", because privately there may have been rather more understanding.) People felt insulted by the implication that while the rich countries should continue to engage in high technology, something rather less advanced was good enough for the poor. If this was meant, it would indeed be hard to defend. There is no reason at all why microprocessors should not be used as widely in developing as in developed countries; indeed the introduction and application of modern technology may well be one of the tasks of translation which universities in developing countries have. But it is a task of translation. Somehow or other technology has to be related to people's customs and beliefs. It is no good throwing modern technology at a traditional environment.

The Ford Foundation (of which I have the honour to be a Trustee) has had many an experience in this connection. There are Indian villagers who are used to carrying their goat milk to the nearest market place, but who can only carry so much which means that enough remains for their children and for themselves. If you give them a car to transport the milk, the probability — and more often than not the reality — is that all the milk will be sold, transistor radios and the like will be bought and the village children will be badly fed, even underfed. In other words, there is a context to be considered, a social context which is as important as technical progress. The Ford Foundation and World Bank together have come to appreciate that population control is by no means primarily a matter of the availability of contraceptives. Improving the education of women is at least as important. Once again, it is not gimmicks, but wider social and economic developments which matter. Once this is appreciated, technology falls into place; and it is quite likely that it will often be fairly simple technology, "intermediate" if one likes the word.
The application to universities is not just one of underlining the concept of translation which I have introduced earlier, and of emphasizing the usefulness of the social sciences. It is also another point which you may find it harder to take. It seems to me entirely right that universities in developing countries should have spent much of their time in the past on undergraduate teaching. This is not only the first need, but it can be done at a level of quality which bears comparison with the best. But of course it is not the end of the story. Beyond undergraduate teaching, in the fields of research and postgraduate training, there are three ways forward. One is the international community, and notably postgraduate study abroad and the exchange of teachers. We need more of it and not less. The second is the selective development of research in subjects which are of particular importance locally, indeed where local experience can inspire and advance research. Research developments are of course always also developments in postgraduate training.

Then, thirdly, there is the need for more co-operation between developing countries, with developed countries involved wherever necessary. There is a place for a chain of research and training centres around the world which enable countries with limited resources to establish their own division of labour and at the same time reap the benefits of research elsewhere. This is what the United Nations University is intending to do. Its new Rector, Soedjatmoko, is an economist with a rare understanding of the cultural needs of developing countries. He is not likely to make the mistakes of technocrats. Moreover, being an Indonesian himself, he knows the growing pains of development well. He has already drawn the attention of his Board to the strategic needs of research and postgraduate training. I would hope that the UN University will increasingly become a kind of reference point for the universities of developing countries. I have gone over a great deal of ground in a necessarily general and often more allusive than conclusive manner. I hope it has nevertheless become clear how important in my view the role of universities is in developing countries. It is a general role in so far as all universities share certain values and objectives; it is also a specific role in so far as universities exist in very special circumstances in developing countries. Before I finish my address, let me return for a moment to the central theme of my remarks, and to the loose ends which I left with respect to politics in developing countries.

Whether one accepts the word, development, or not, most of the countries of the Group of 77 are going through rapid and painful processes of change. Quite often, it is uncertain where this change will lead, though one hopes that it will enhance the life chances of as many people as possible. Suffice it to say that this country like many others has embarked on a process of movement which embraces all its institutions, and above all its people. On the whole people do not like movement. They would like to be at the end of the road, but the road itself means sweat and grime and pain. This is a strange circumstance for democratic politicians. They know where they want to take their countries, but they cannot really hope to maintain the support of their citizens. Is it wrong to assume that this is one of the reasons why leaders of developing countries almost invariably find it difficult to maintain democratic institutions? Indeed, does it not appear as if developing countries can remain democratic to the extent to which they do not make progress, whereas progress tends to ride roughshod over democratic institutions?

If this is so, if there is even a grain of truth in this unhappy suggestion, universities find themselves in a very difficult position. They have to defend their autonomy and the fundamental freedom which their work both requires and symbolizes; but they are also called upon to make their own contributions to the great social changes around them. Here, the outsider cannot give sensible advice. Indeed, he stands full of admiration before those who have taken on responsibility for a university. Clearly, both demands, that for freedom and autonomy, and that for a contribution to the national process of development, are justified. Equally clearly, they may well be incompatible at times. Academic detachment and political relevance do not go well together. What is required therefore is a balancing act, or better perhaps, a combination between the confident defence of academic freedom and sensitivity for the justified needs of the community which sustains universities. This is not easy; but it can be done — especially if the powers that be appreciate that whatever dents are made into the institutions of democracy, the rule of law and all that goes with it, including the freedom to teach and to do research, are sacred.