

Introduction

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The necessity of periodic 'retraining', due to the increasingly rapid change of basic labour skills, now spreads to the domain of intellectual labour; it even creates within the framework of capitalist reforms of the university, marginal tendencies towards permanent part-time study, thereby fulfilling one of Marx's prophecies. But within the limits of the capitalist mode of production, this potential tendency naturally cannot prevail. It is accompanied and stifled by a neutralizing and repressive counter-tendency to make the university and the teaching system as a whole directly 'profitable' (Mandel 1978:581).

Whatever the merits of Mandel's grand narrative, the contentious hypothesis of the incompatibility between life-long learning at the university and profitability is relevant. With this in mind, and as the doors of learning at some historically black universities are closing, I would like to note some general features of the current reforms of South African universities.

What, if any, is the difference between making something 'profitable' and instilling 'efficiency' and due regard for sparse resources? If profitability is equated with financial surplus, an investment ultimately recouped, then, clearly, efficiency demands the quickest possible return. However, it can, as we know, be inefficient to be profitable—that is, to be too profitable and inadvertently inflate or destabilise a market to the point of 'overheating' the values accrued via the virtuous cycle. But, on the other hand, can it ever be profitable to be inefficient? Doubtless inefficiency can function as a self-destructive resistance to invasive modernisation identified with the commodity and sheer instrumentality. It all depends on how you perceive the envisaged returns.

Moreover, the efficiency = profitability equation can be broken down into a form of teleological causality in which the end (profitability) explains the means (efficiency). The direction of this efficient causality is not linear and the means-ends nexus can be reversed, profitability leading to efficiency (the latter now being an effect of the former). It would seem that efficiency is itself as ideal as the end it subserves. In which case we have the following configuration: the effect (profitability) is the determining ground of its own cause (efficiency), or, 'the product of a cause whose determining ground is merely the representation of an effect is termed an end' (Kant 1989:64). In this kind of circularity the intertwined relation of means and ends signals not irrationality but rather a different type of argument from the purely mechanical.

It would seem that the hegemony of the economic genre based on exchange is composite. Consider that the faculty acting according to ends involves a unity of principle usually identified with the will and the purposiveness of human action. Around this voluntaristic agency gathers the inspirational rhetoric of resolution and national unity. Key to the idea of development and transformation is the matter of bringing together and combining the parts as determined by an idea of the whole. From this perspective the end of efficiency/profitability is more than an economic terminus. The drive for competitiveness in a global economy is a means to a greater end connoted by the proleptic slogan 'a better life for all'. In addition the universal aspiration of national-humanism requires that patriotism be distinguished from partisanship, since what is good for the country is not always synonymous with what is good for the ruling party. And in so far as this imperative transcends the national liberation struggle then the end is ultimately the Idea of free humanity. The victory over apartheid is then a sign (*Begebenheit*) of the universal history of humanity progressing toward the better. Even if what ought to happen frequently does not, the obligation to take up the struggle of humanity is an Idea that - like politics - is not (yet) entirely assimilated to economics.

What has this got to do with the alternation of obsolescence and innovation characteristic of the transformation-as-rationalisation process at the University of Durban-Westville? A colleague recently seconded to a lucrative management post (*umungu*) observed to me: 'While management is accountable in terms of financial returns, in terms of performance and delivery academics are strikingly unaccountable. This can't be right, can it?' The dogmatic recoding of academic autonomy in terms of bureaucratic autonomy and the mimesis of the bureaucratic career subordinate to the norms of productivity assumes an evangelical aura. Gramsci's (1971:186) observation that the problem of functionaries partly coincides with that of the intellectuals is confirmed, though in this case the *frôleuse*-like contortions of administrative nihilism take the place of party loyalty. The specious

hope is that the system growing around us will build us into its own body-walls. This antiphlogistic balm of entitlement and opportunism has some other features worthy of a passing introduction.

Self-imposed academic underdevelopment (*ukuvilapha*) perversely proffers a tentative bridge to management and eventual transcendence via the pulverisation of the old and substitution of new relations and unknown possibilities. Inadvertently what is revealed is that 'backward' areas are not anomalous to development; rather they are integral to a process that, although it includes an integration of disparate elements, generates a 'core' and a 'periphery' within the same overall framework (cf. Greenberg 1980). The university as a medley of peoples (they mix but do not combine) manages to provide a unique symmetry to this familiar pattern as the development and growth of the managerial core is dependent upon the stagnation and marginality of the academic periphery. Hence, as the bellicose subservience of my colleague signals, it is essential to incessantly find efficient new ways to reinforce the pre-requisite for coercive supervision and the rhythm of punitive auditing expeditions. Is a chilling vignette of the death-lock of dependency and under-development being played out in the corridors of learning? *Cui bono?*

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* This edition of *Alternation* on the function of intellectuals is dedicated to the memory of Michael Matsope Makhabane, killed at the University of Durban-Westville, 15th May, 2000.

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