Stellenbosch University Public Lecture

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Whose Side are We On?

The University's Moral Responsibility for Social Transformation

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I have argued for a long time – against the popular trend which addresses public impact – that public value is integral to the very nature of the social sciences, since they emerged as separate disciplines out of moral philosophy in the eighteenth century precisely in order to better diagnose and improve the social condition. Engagement with social and human progress, and with improvement and betterment marks their origins and contribution to the public good.

The public value of the social sciences gives the social sciences two qualities against which their ethical status should be evaluated: they not only generate information about society, they are a medium for society's reproduction. They are the way in which society can find out about itself and in so doing generate the *idea* of society itself.

My argument is thus simple and clear cut: making people aware of themselves as comprising a society helps in the development and dissemination of key social and moral values that make society possible – cultural values like trust, empathy, altruism, tolerance, compromise, social solidarity and senses of belonging. These everyday virtues assist in society's ongoing betterment and improvement. The social sciences help us understand the conditions which both promote and undermine these values and identify the sorts of public policies, behaviours and relationships that are needed in culture, the market and the state to ameliorate their absence and restore and repair them. It is for these reasons that social science is a public good.

How does this relate to the idea of the university? Let me begin depressingly, then more upliftingly.

The public university is dead. It has been a slow and lingering death, excruciatingly painful to those forced to observe it. Its corpse now lies lifeless in every senior managers' meeting, in every classroom and tutorial venue, in every staff office, and in every boarded-up common room and closed bookshop. The rise of uncivility and discourtesy in the management of the modern university is paralleled by a rise in the tendency of academic staff to whinge and

whine. Its death has not been the responsibility of any one university, nor any one government; its degradation began long ago with the neo-liberalisation and marketisation of higher education.

If you like alliterations, as I do, the public university has lost funding and function but must now find fidelity.

Fidelity means honesty, loyalty, faithfulness, reliability, dependability, commitment, responsibility, trustworthiness: these are words that describe moral virtues, moral purpose. In making universities business-like, universities have been turned into businesses, where profit and loss, market and product differentiation, unique selling points, and value-for-money have destroyed their sense of moral virtue and moral purpose.

If their value is *only* their contribution to the economy, then they have no value. Making money without a sense of what use you put the money to, is not value. Value is worth, value is esteem, value is social good. By turning universities into businesses, falling down on the profit side of the financial bottom line becomes their chief aim. Means replace ends, and the goal of universities becomes self-reproduction. Surviving as a business becomes the end itself.

In this lecture I seek to reclaim the public value and moral virtue of the university by asking them to take sides, take a moral stance.

We should now rebuild, reshape and refashion the university morally. Public universities began as primarily medieval institutions created by the church. Medieval institutions are no longer fit for purpose in a global late-modern world. Universities need to change to equip themselves for the 21st

century. I want to talk today merely about one of these changes – the pressing need for universities to recapture their soul – a phrase borrowed from Chris Brink, former Stellenbosch Vice Chancellor. We couch this deliberately in ecclesiastical language evocative of universities' medieval past. This is more than playful irony. We need to take back from the marketeers a moral dimension that I find in the idea of fidelity or Brink in the idea of soul. Rediscovering their moral purpose would truly make universities relevant to the 21st century rather than the 15th.

This requires them to redefine their public value and make themselves relevant to the complex problems threatening the future of humankind, including for social transformation and human rights protection. This requires *more* change to universities, not less; *broader* visions, not narrower ones; *greater* ambitions, not smaller ones. And it requires universities to be outward facing with a renewed sense of public purpose and civic engagement.   It requires an ethical obligation – to take sides as it were.

What the re-envisioned and re-imagined public university needs is to practise fidelity. Fidelity towards a public mission, being faithful to making a difference to people's lives, locally and globally, and being reliable and trustworthy in seeing through this mission despite the financial bottom line or the demands of the marketeers. This is what I consider to be the university's moral virtue, its moral value, its vocation if you will, that gives it back its soul.

This means that to be genuinely public in this sense, the university should operate by four key principles over and above excellence in learning, education and research, all of which are a given. These principles as more important than any neo-liberal strapline or fine sounding PR spin.

- Universities should have an obligation to the betterment and improvement of society;

- Universities should practise an ethic of responsibility for the society in which they are located;

- Universities should promote the advancement of *morally constituted knowledge* in teaching and research, in which objective science is directed toward the social good and the elimination of harm;

- Universities should commit themselves to helping understand the global challenges that risk the future of humankind and which threaten the social good.

Note here that these principles require universities to become reconciled to a fundamental change in their self-image. They remain places of learning, they remain inherently scientific, but they should now also see themselves as inherently moral at the same time.

By practising fidelity, we get universities committed to the collection and interrogation of evidence undistorted by the values they hold, but, fundamentally, also committed to the objective analysis of ethical problems. Universities should address themselves to injustice, inequality and suffering, to the analysis of the structural processes that promote or inhibit the realisation of social betterment, and to meeting human needs and wants. Universities should not practise moral *in*difference under the guise of being business-like. It is this side we should be on, not the marketeers.

The vital moral purpose and moral virtue of the new public university therefore is to be a civilising and humanising mirror for societies to see themselves and learn about themselves, enabling debates and judgements about the social good and social suffering. The new public university would advance teaching and research that is publicly-engaged, driven by local and

global societal challenges, and capable of scientific and objective practice that is based on explicit ethical responsibilities.

I am not here talking about research impact. Much to the chagrin of fellow academics, I have said before that impact is a *sheep* in wolf's clothing – I will repeat since it may be hard to get your head around at first hearing – a *sheep* in wolf's clothing: that is, it is not as problematic as it appears. All research should – and can – have some benefit. The problem with impact as higher education managers see it, is reliably measuring it. I am talking today though about principles much wider than impact. I am referring to universities coming to recognise that they have explicitly ethical and moral responsibilities more than business ones.

It is, of course, easy for universities to pay lip service to such rhetoric. Words are not enough. Universities must *practise* ethical responsibility and promote it in staff and students, porters and professors, cleaners and clinicians. This means *more* change to universities, not less; broader visions not narrower profit and loss ones; and taller trees to climb not shrubs.

This means that public universities must themselves reorganise to reconfigure their teaching and research landscapes to facilitate ethically responsible teaching, research and civic engagement. That is, to repeat, a commitment to enhancing the social good, devotion to engagement with human betterment and the elimination of harm and want. This means disciplines should come out from their professional silos; and universities should dismantle their ivory towers and be on the side of moral virtue.

The research and teaching landscapes should be reconfigured so that we develop public knowledge as much as professional knowledge. This means that we facilitate the post-disciplinary innovations necessary to deal with 21st century problems which are currently hindered by essentially medieval academic structures and disciplines. Public universities should transcend the gulf between universities and society by encouraging an ethos of civic engagement as well as scholarship. In our teaching and research we should not so much aim to train minds but to *change* minds – and change them in ways that change society.

The public university is too important to be left to marketeers. Universities belong to us all. The way to take back such ownership is through what I call the re-enchantment of the public university.

My language of re-enchantment is again ecclesiastical, fitting the idea that universities should reclaim their soul. Re-enchantment, however, has a sociology, a political economy, if you like. As a sociologist I locate the re-enchantment of the public university in structural and material conditions that have reawakened moral sensibility and which is generating the need for morally constituted knowledge about the world. There is, if you like, a political economy to moral sensibility into which this re-enchantment fits.

Late modernity is characterised by great technological advances but also significantly increased vulnerabilities and inequalities. I want to emphasise four features of what I call the political economy of re-enchantment, which helps explain why we are here today talking about universities reclaiming their soul.

1. The political economy of late modernity is characterised by an increase in wealth disparities, and increased impoverishment of the Global South but also impoverishment in growing sections of the Global North left behind as casualties of neo-liberal economics. The concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands is matched by increasing vulnerabilities amongst the rest; increased risks to global economic trends, to climate change, and to organized violence, amongst others. Late modernity is a risk society, as sociologists say; with increased risks and increased sensitivities to risk. With increased risk comes a sense of increased vulnerability. Late modernity has become aware of what Bauman calls the human consequences of globalisation. The lived experience of globalisation is not just one of new opportunities of hope; it is simultaneously one of fear, anxiety, suffering, hate, and genocidal othering.

2. The growth in organized violence and its changing nature in late modernity, has led both to more war and to an increase in the moral degradation of what Mary Kaldor calls new wars. New wars are not between identifiable armies on set battlefields observing the Geneva Conventions of war. There is no longer a distinction between civilian and combatant and the human body has been turned into a battlefield; particularly women's bodies. Moral enervation of the enemy – stripping them of human dignity – has led both to the wide availability of sophisticated weaponry to attack whole communities as well as the use of de-technological forms of weaponry against the body. This has seen the return of the machete and indiscriminate suicide bombings as weapons. Re-enchantment in late modernity is in effect the return of genocide to contemporary experience.

3. There has been a collapse in the public-private distinction in late modernity, in which public space has been domesticated, with a range of behaviours and emotions once reserved for the private sphere now entering public and political discourse. The language of modern politics in

the public sphere is the language of emotion, religion, identity, authenticity and, in some cases, hate. Hate speech, xenophobia, and ethnic and religious othering has been normalised by a public discourse by politicians and media broadcasters that has rendered victims' suffering into entertainment or political rhetoric. The penetration of formerly private emotions into the public sphere has turned shame, outrage and offense into public display.

4. This fear of the enemy within is matched by a feeling of moral responsibility to strangers and to what Boltanski calls their 'distant suffering'; but only so long as they remain distant. Globalisation compresses time and space in a way that brings the distant suffering of others into people's living rooms and their social media screens and smart phones, to the point where images of distant suffering bombard late modernity and underpin significant and increased philanthropic and charitable giving. When the stranger ends up on our shores as refugees and migrants, however, or gets to sleep in doorways on our rich streets, the collapse of the distance turns the stranger into the enemy within, and any moral sensibility is restrained. It is for this reason that late modernity is morally contradictory, as moral responsibility to the distant other is matched by anti-foreigner sentiment and aggressive xenophobia.

The political economy of re-enchantment has, at one and the same time, increased moral sensibility to suffering, harm and the human consequences of the social condition *and* increased the moral enervation and degradation of our enemies. We are both sensitive to the suffering of strangers and fearful of them. We show greater levels of emotional empathy to people just like ourselves but draw ever more rigid boundaries to exclude those who are different. Moral sensibility and moral enervation are parallel processes in late modernity.

Two things follow for the public university. First, universities should meet the need for morally constituted knowledge; that is, knowledge oriented to promoting the social good and eliminating

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social harm. In this way, the currency of their teaching, research and civic engagements is a concern with eliminating poverty and disease, promoting health, jobs and good housing, ending social suffering and promoting human dignity, and all the rest. I am not suggesting medics or engineers become social scientists or philosophers but that science, medicine, humanities and the arts refresh their teaching, research and civic obligations with a moral responsibility to engage with the challenges that threaten the future of humankind in the 21st century.

Secondly, public universities need to restructure, to realign their teaching and research, in order to promote inter-disciplinarity. Each university silo tends to see itself as providing immaculate perception, the single, virgin analysis. The 21st-century challenges facing the future of humankind require university structures that facilitate dialogue and collaboration between social sciences, medics, theologians, climate scientists, philosophers, oceanographers, humanities scholars and the like. The re-enchantment of the public university therefore promotes inter-disciplinarity rather than disciplinary silos, which university structures should facilitate not hinder.

I want to conclude by reflecting on what this means for Stellenbosch University. It is in a society emerging out of conflict, but while *in* such place, it should not be *of* this place. That is, it has a responsibility to assist local society while also being global in the challenges they address. In research, teaching and civic engagements, it must address the morally constituted knowledge necessary to create citizens of the new South Africa, helping ordinary men and women with the issues that dominate their lives as they learn to live together after violence: issues of health, transport, infrastructure; it addresses road building as much as emotional healing, medical advances as much as forgiveness. This requires administrative restructuring to ensure mediaeval university structures and disciplinary units are equipped to deal with 21st century problems. It means developing value statements and social charters that describe the virtues they wish to represent and uphold as

universities and employers, and it means revisiting the curriculum to ensure it reflects 21st century needs not 19th colonial ones.

This task is both local and global at the same time. If Stellenbosch is to become a global university, it must generate morally constituted knowledge that creates citizens eager to change immediate homeplace and through it, the wider world. People equipped as global citizens, working in local and global contexts, active in local and global civic society, and contributing to solving the moral challenges that face humankind in the new South Africa and in the world as a whole.

Stellenbosch is dominated by the immediate needs of a society emerging out of conflict, changes in which still need to be embedded locally despite the passage of time. But morally constituted knowledge is not place specific; it addresses the threats to humankind globally, and Stellenbosch will better find its place as a university if it creates employees, students and citizens with a commitment to global transformation as much as local change.

This should be the goal of their administrative restructuring, curriculum reform, research and teaching ambitions and civic responsibilities: to think *and* act globally to change the local *and* the global at the same time. Therein lies the side it should be on as a route to finding its soul. Thank you.