

ARTICLE FOR LEADERSHIP

F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

August 1988

THE UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH

1. The University is in a beautiful place . Its town a striking reminder to whites that their past also had some grace and charm in it. The alumni share a reflexive, unambiguous loyalty, declared as a matter of course before they begin to argue about its significance. The setting of the University deepens the poignancy of alma mater rituals. I suppose the same can be said of Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, Princeton, Heidelberg or Freiberg - all charming and some very much older. But where, as in Stellenbosch, can one be so brutally and beautifully reminded that the future is not what it used to be? Where else can one reflect on a past that held such extraordinary promises for a society that was never really possible? Even today, it has the ability to make the impossible seem probable, as if life can go on like this forever.

2. The University for Students is an 'alchemistic' environment : what Peter Berger calls "an artificial social milieu within which the alchemy of transformation can occur" (1) Psycho-analysis talks about an environment in which 'transference' takes place and the individual constructs a new identity through interaction with it. I do not have in mind what is taught or how it is done. It is virtually impossible not to be transformed by the student life of Stellenbosch. Having taught at four universities in South Africa and been to many others, I cannot think of any of them which has, to the same extent, managed to preserve a Student Prince-like fantasy about being a European student in Africa. This is partly due to location - Stellenbosch is a true university town; partly due to population composition - it is less Black than any other university environment in South Africa and certainly due to University tradition and culture - student festivals and song have a marked European flavour to them. But I suppose most important of all would be the influence of life in the residences on students.

3. The University Residences of Stellenbosch are what Erving Goffman would call "total institutions" (2) i.e. forms of social organization which isolate their participants from the rest of society and cater for all their needs, like hospitals, asylums, prisons or religious orders. The only way the inmate can "beat-the-system" is to join it, i.e. discover the rewards of conformity and thus ensure the continuity of tradition. Life in residence is total and absorbing. Any concern with the outside world is lobotomized away by the immediacy of residence life. One only has to go to Coetzenberg on a Friday afternoon in winter to see the 1st XV defend the honour of "the

house" to realize that the Roman gladiators who did their "morituri te salutant" (those who are about to die, salute you), to the Emperor, were a bunch of light-hearted fellows. As a new student during, what was euphemistically called "my week of orientation", I was made to understand quite seriously that "Stellenbosch was a way of life", and life (and death for that matter), was in the residences. Mine was Wilgenhof - steeped in tradition, secrecy and an indestructable suspicion of outsiders, it made the concept of a "total institution" seem like an understatement. Once when we had to be disciplined for some of the age-old extravagances of initiation, half the elders on the committee who tried us, were responsible for introducing the rites we were being punished for when they were students. For the sake of "the House", we were proud to take our "medicine" and preserve the conspiratorial bond between us.

4. But at Stellenbosch, nothing anaesthetized the average student more against "the world out there" than sport. Or rather, for male students, there is Rugby and then Sport. It is not easy to get into a male residence in Stellenbosch - I served on the Residence Committee when I was warden of one of them. Unless you were third generation in the same residence, or in those days, such compelling Springbok material that you were obviously irresistible; you had to have a minimum of a first class matric to qualify. It never failed to amaze me how above average intelligence male students, some with a couple of matric distinctions, were unable, over a period of three years, to raise their social horizons or level of discussion beyond the game on Saturday and the rewards and deprivations that flow from its result. What amazed me even more, was that I was like that myself - I only

seriously started studying after four years when I was no longer in residence.

5. Such are the ingredients which go into the making of the myth that is Stellenbosch : beautiful location, "alchemistic" student environment, "total institution" residence life and sport. But when this magic has been appropriately assessed and secularized, those who run, or think they represent the University : Council, Senate and Faculty members, like to think that irrespective of the diversity of disciplines and learning that "Stellenbosch stands for an Idea"! What this Idea is, is certainly not unambiguous and immutable : rather it is a concept awaiting periodic redefinition as the University interacts with a changing political/social and economic environment. The "Idea" of Stellenbosch is changing as the 'character', 'identity' or 'role' of the University is redefined to meet the changing perceptions of the future. Twenty years ago it was easy to say : Stellenbosch stands for the Idea of "Service to Die Volk!" Who Die Volk was, as well as who should be trained to provide the services were unproblematical. "Die Volk" was the unquestioned beneficiary of one's higher learning, Stellenbosch was the uncomplicated avenue of mobility to the higher echelons of "volksdiens". One was constantly reminded that five heads of state came from Stellenbosch. The University was a force to be reckoned with in the affairs of state. It had connections, it had to be taken very seriously. The political establishment in power watched trends and tendencies like a hawk and acted pre-emptively to nip "undesirable" developments in the nub. But somehow the centre of gravity has shifted : the Party is no longer monolithic : Afrikaner hegemony has fragmented; the style of

Government has changed perceptibly away from "volks"-accountability to Executive accountability and some Universities in the North seem to have easier access to the corridors of power and influential special interest lobbies. But even these lobbies appear to service more specialized interests. Is the Broederbond evenhanded in its loyalty to both the NP and CP? Where does the DRC and cultural organisations stand?

6. The point is, of course, that Afrikaans speaking Universities have no longer a self-evident sense of establishment and Stellenbosch being the oldest and most traditional has to marry "the myth" to a "new idea". This is a painful process, but not dissimilar to what virtually all universities in South Africa are going through as they respond to changing demographic and economic realities. English speaking universities with a strong liberal tradition find themselves challenged to the core by inevitably allowing the conflicts of the wider community to spill over into "normal" university life. Even so-called "Bush Colleges" originally conceived to pacify and streamline "separately developed consciousnesses" of higher learning have become hotbeds of revolt and in some cases depend on the militia to play the role of campus control officers. And UWC determined to become the "intellectual home of the left" finds that this can involve a house with many mansions, some of which have only a coincidental bearing on "the left" or "intellectual life". But for Stellenbosch to "open up" to the wider society poses special problems for readjusting its collective identity - its "idea". Can a "Coloured" or "Black" or an "Indian" be a Matie? What if there are more black Maties than whites in the year 2001? - (only 13 years away!) There are alumni who

will go into a state of catatonic immobility at the thought. Others will immediately withdraw their support. (But of course this will never happen - after all Stellenbosch stands for an Idea!)

7. But all this is perverse speculation on my part - a bit of provocative self-indulgence. But where did I learn to think like this? At Stellenbosch, of course. Despite the intellectually soporific under-graduate existence, (not uncommon to most universities), I did experience genuine intellectual challenge and debate there. As a teacher I was genuinely free to teach what I wanted to, even though I was not free to teach it to whom I wanted to - (the "idea" of Stellenbosch is changing precisely because this is becoming more possible.) The academic tradition of Stellenbosch has a dynamic which can cope with its own changing environment, but whether it will do so depends on the relative freedom its academic community can enjoy in searching for its "new idea" in this environment. Our country is caught up in an intense struggle of nation-building. What kind of Nation is South Africa going to be? This question lies behind the struggles in education, religious life, management and labour, community and constitutional development. It is going to be the difficult task of Universities in South Africa to interpret and reflect on the unfolding of this struggle. But that is not all. They will inevitably have to actively respond to their roles in the struggle as well. This will involve them in re-defining their relationships with the State, interest groups in the external environment and, of course, with their own constituent bodies. I have a secret hope that if allowed to flourish in its search for the "idea" that Stellenbosch stands for in the future, it will demonstrate that

"service to Die Volk" need not be incompatible with "service to the Nation".

Footnotes

1. Berger, Peter L. Invitation to Sociology , a Pelican Original 1963, p.122.
2. Goffman, Erving. Asylums , Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday Anchor ,
1961.