

ACADEMIC FREEDOM LECTURE

DAANTJIE OOSTHUIZEN MEMORIAL LECTURE - RHODES UNIVERSITY 1990

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INTRODUCTION

Each one of us who has attempted to take intellectual life seriously can quite easily reflect on moments of insight and remarkable individuals who helped one to experience them. No matter how busy one is, there are those quiet moments during the course of a day when one can nurse back into memory the excitement of such encounters. Such a person in my life was Daantjie Oosthuizen. He was one of the very important reasons I came to Rhodes University as a young lecturer in 1969. A gentle, humorous, kind person with an extraordinary compelling intellect. Just as it was the first time when I spoke at this occasion, so it is now, an honour to pay homage to him. I thank you for the opportunity.

I have addressed a few 'academic freedom' lectures over the last 25 years. Each time I re-read what I said at the time, two things happen to me. I realise that I did not quite manage to say what I intended to, and I experience belated pity for the audience who had to be subjected to my attempts. I am afraid this may happen again on this occasion, although at this stage, I do not feel pity; because I would like to think that I have at least begun to understand some of the things I could not say

properly on previous occasions. Like Sisyphus, I cannot be faulted for trying.

THE CONTEXT OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM LECTURES

In South Africa, Academic Freedom Lectures usually take place within the context of the Regime/State vs the University. They are largely confined to English/Liberal Universities and are seen as a protest against the Extension of the University Education Act of 1959. Academic Freedom lectures reflect a concern with the Regime/State's encroachment on the presumed autonomy of a University, ideological dogmatism, authoritarianism, repression and obviously in the South African case, racism and exploitation.

Whenever I have been asked in the past to talk on academic freedom I have spoken on these issues as well, and today, I feel as strongly about them as I did then. Perhaps even stronger. But, there were always other questions that bothered me when I prepared my talks. Questions that I could not properly accommodate without perhaps undermining the solemnity and solidarity of the occasion, but nevertheless that would not go away.

For example -

What would I say about 'academic freedom' if there was no Apartheid?

A university, almost without exception in any society, is a highly privileged community and in most of them the State, or

commerce and industry have awesome control over funding and development. What about the voluntary constraints that a university places on its own academic freedom?

Who is the university? The Council, Senate, Faculty, Students or Administration? Who speaks on behalf of "the university"; where? and on what?

Should a university be free to be undemocratic, authoritarian in the allocation of funds; prejudiced in the appointment of personnel? For example, should only those be appointed who will promote the university as the "intellectual guardian of Die Volk"; the intellectual home of "the Left"; the "masses", the "people"? Can knowledge be advanced only under conditions of academic freedom? If so, how did the Soviets get the first man into space? and Chris Barnard transplant the first heart in South Africa?

In short, why is 'academic freedom' really important? Really in the sense that it does not only have to depend on Apartheid to get us excited about it. Over all these years I still believe it is important, but I continue to find it very difficult to say exactly why. That is why I gave the warning confession at the outset. So let me try again.

WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY?

There are many ways of answering this question and like the proverbial blind men touching an elephant, each will feel a part

of the truth. One can physically describe a university in terms of its members and the diversity of their activities; or one can selectively abstract an aspect of university life, e.g. research, or teaching and give it special prominence; or one can define the obligatory role of a university in relation to the rest of society, or how it forms part of a universal community in pursuit of knowledge. For my purposes, given the South African context in which I would like to address the problem of academic freedom, I prefer to focus on the values related to a university. In this sense a university is for me "a precariously organised combination of values that encourage intellectual enquiry by those who become part of it." There may be others, but I would like to identify three such values.

- (a) Academic Freedom is one of them : this refers to the value that a university should be free to appoint anyone to teach to whomsoever about whatsoever.
- (b) University Autonomy - this refers to the degree of discretionary and functional freedom a university should have in relation to the State, Government, unions and/or commerce, or any other institution in society.
- (c) Institutional neutrality - refers to the fact that members of a university should not be coerced into taking a collective stand on controversial issues, either inside or outside the university.

My definition implies that these values combine to create a normative framework in terms of which the activities of those involved with a university are judged or encouraged. This means that these values are related to one another and serve as a moral or value reference point in terms of which we judge whether we have a "good" university or whether we are "good" or "poor" members of it.

I also suggest that the combination of these values is precariously organised in the everyday activities of the university. By this I mean that there does not seem to be a self-evident and perfect harmony in the relationships of these values towards one another, nor is there a fixed order of priority between them. Sometimes a university tends to emphasise one value more than the other, or even ignore or contradict one of these values in favour of the other. For example, a university that demands complete autonomy from the State or Regime, but insists that as a corporate entity it takes a stand on being the "intellectual home of the left" or the gatekeeper of Afrikaans identity", prefers for these purposes to ignore the values of institutional neutrality and academic freedom. In the same way, a university can insist on academic freedom but be neglectful of how the State, or a political party or business, undermines its autonomy in more subtle ways.

What I am saying, is that as individuals we go through life without a fixed order of priority between the values we believe in, e.g. truth, love, loyalty, thrift etc. We sometimes

emphasise the one more than others in certain situations, or even contradict or undermine some of them in the manner in which we commit ourselves to one at a particular moment. I would suggest that a university as a corporate entity does the same. Someone who insists on an absolutely fixed priority between both individual or corporate values is seen as dogmatic, extreme, inflexible and sometimes simply unpleasant.

Not only is there no fixed, inherent order of priority between the values of academic freedom, autonomy and institutional neutrality, but it is highly unlikely that any university can confirm absolutely to any one or all three of them at any time. There is a "more or less" quality to all of them. The very fact that a university has to choose between these values at a particular moment implies that it can only approximate its conformity to others. Just as an individual's commitment to honesty may be absolute, his behaviour may sometimes be a poor approximation of this conviction because of special circumstances. So also with a university. At this very moment we claim "special circumstances" for once again dedicating this university to the value of "academic freedom"; we present arguments for explaining why those other two values, i.e. autonomy and neutrality have to take a back seat for the moment. We do not say these other values are no longer important in the life of a university, because if one did, we ourselves and not the Regime or the State would be threatening our own academic freedom. That would be self-defeating, i.e. if in the manner in

which we commemorate and affirm academic freedom, we ourselves become its greatest threat.

The combination of values : academic freedom, university autonomy and institutional neutrality are very closely linked to other values and norms related to the internal workings of a university. For example, in the lecturer/student relationship, values such as objectivity and involvement, commitment or disengagement, pure or applied knowledge flow directly from positions adopted on freedom, autonomy and neutrality. Similarly, in the administrative and financial structures of the university, values such as bureaucratic efficiency, rationality, economy and effectiveness are paramount. Relate them to freedom, autonomy and neutrality and one begins to understand how energy sapping those battles between administration and teaching staff, teaching and research and, the whole lot vs "the students" can be.

One begins to sense how ridiculous it would be for anyone to insist that a university, during the normal course of its operations has an 'official position' on all these values at any moment. This would at least imply that all the sections of a university : council, senate, faculty, departments, students and administration adhere to one 'official position' at all times. This is not only ridiculous, but impossible. However, in saying this, I am not suggesting that because these values are organised precariously, i.e. there is no fixed relationship between them, no absolute conformity and no order of priority, that a

university can act as if in relation to these values, everything is possible and nothing is necessary. On the contrary. My definition goes on to suggest that these values combine and are precariously organised because that encourages intellectual inquiry on the part of those who become part of the university. Intellectual inquiry becomes the primary defining value of a university. Historically and normatively 'intellectual inquiry' embodies the 'idea of a university'. The values of academic freedom, autonomy and neutrality are precariously organised to protect, encourage and sanction those engaged in intellectual inquiry as members of a university. To argue that there has to be a fixed official position between them is to cut off intellectual inquiry into the very idea of a university itself. There has to be an ongoing debate between the various sections of a university as to which of these values should enjoy primacy in the unfolding dynamics of the society in which a university finds itself. The absence of such a debate should be a very clear warning that a university is experiencing a crisis of relevance as far as its own intellectual inquiry is concerned.

WHY ARE THESE VALUES IMPORTANT?

One could present a philosophical or logical case why the precarious organisation of these values are important for intellectual inquiry and this has been done many times before. I wish to add to these arguments by making the claim that historically, i.e. through experience, these values have crystallised around the process of intellectual inquiry associated with a university and whenever such inquiry is

threatened or questioned, one would find them coming to the fore in arguments. In other words, the birth and growth of the idea of a university down the ages has shaped and articulated the precarious organisation of a nexus of values that have become associated with intellectual inquiry that is called "a university". I have now said the same thing twice just to make the point.

The evolution of the idea of a university did not occur smoothly and without trauma. For example, universities have always been in an uncomfortable relationship with the powers that be, irrespective of the dominant ideology. Rigorous intellectual inquiry almost invariably is subversive to the dogmatic confidence that rulers and politicians wish to exude. What was said of German universities in the 18th and 19th centuries in relation to Government is not untypical of the position of universities in relation to the State in modern times :

"That status and the privilege of the universities were granted to them by the military aristocratic ruling class, and were not achieved as part of the growth of free human enterprise. It was therefore a precarious status based on a compromise whereby the rulers regarded the universities and their personnel as means for the training of certain types of professionals, but allowed them to do this in their own way and use their position for the pursuit of pure scholarship and science (which the rulers did not understand, but were willing to respect). The universities

had to be, therefore, constantly on the defensive, lest by becoming suspected of subversion, they lose the elite position which ensured their freedom" (1)

From this, it is clear that a university has no absolute or divine right to autonomy. The relative degree of autonomy it enjoys in relation to its environment, e.g. the State, commerce or political party, is a matter of constant struggle and debate. A university constantly has to justify and deserve its autonomy.

It would be comforting to think that the only threat to the combination of precariously organised values which we call a university comes from its external environment. This is demonstrably not so. There is ample evidence of how historically, universities have voluntarily destroyed their own academic freedom and institutional neutrality. Consider the following : (2)

- (a) In 1339 the Faculty of Arts at the University of Paris prohibited the reading of the works of Occam. This was because Occam insisted that logic should be recognised as a branch of philosophy distinct and separate from theology.
- (b) A few years after the ban on Occam's works, the university of Paris progressed to book burning. In 1346, on papal instruction, the university deprived Nicholas of Abrecourt of his Mastership of Arts, and after burning his books on the campus of the Faculty of Arts, forced him to confess and

retract his philosophical errors in a solemn ceremony before the assembled university.

(c) The philosophy of Descartes was deeply disturbing to theologians in many universities. In 1653 the University of Marburg banned Cartesian philosophy; in 1663 the theologians of the University of Paris had his works put on Index and in 1676 the University of Leiden expelled Professors espousing Cartesianism.

(d) The University of Jena was a little bit more lenient, when in 1696 it declared that only with the unanimous consent of all professors might a teacher point out mistakes in Aristotle's writings.

It would be even more comforting to believe that these examples belong to an era of growth and development which can now be judged from a more peaceful and mature vantage point. But it was only as recently as 1916 that Bertrand Russell was removed from his post at Trinity College, Cambridge, after he had been convicted under the "Defence of the Realm Act" for his pacifist convictions. Russell's own account of his lecture tours to American universities also makes interesting reading in the context of academic freedom. And what about German universities during World War II? At many German universities the academic senates and faculties, in full professional splendour, spoke out, and made solemn pronouncements, in support of the Fuhrer, and his policies, endorsing measures to attain Aryan purity by means of

academic purges. People like Einstein, Popper and most members of the famous Vienna Circle fled their homeland in the face of a Nazi onslaught. Already fascinating comparisons before and after "glasnost" and the ideological collapse in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe on university life are beginning to emerge. One dominant theme emerges from these examples : however and wherever universities, for whatever reason, sacrifice or lose the precarious organisation of values which encourage intellectual inquiry, they become less of a university. That is why not only logically, and philosophically, but also historically, the values of academic freedom, university autonomy and institutional neutrality have become associated with the process of intellectual inquiry that has defined the character of a university.

What is going to happen to Academic Freedom now that Apartheid is going? And I do not mean simply what is going to happen to annual ceremonies where predominantly English speaking universities dedicate themselves to the principle of academic freedom as an indication of their opposition to Apartheid. The collapse of Apartheid has farreaching consequences for South African society in general and universities in particular. For example, we know that even during the Apartheid period, South African universities battled under a funding formula which severely underlined their vulnerability to State control. In the transition to this "new South Africa", it is quite evident that there is going to be enormous pressure on social spending to redress the inequalities and imbalances brought about by

Apartheid policies. From the Regime's side as well as from its major challengers, it has been accepted that education in general is going to come in for a major overhaul. Calculations indicate that if there is to be fiscal parity in education, housing, pensions and health, spending would have to more than double as a percentage of the GDP from 10,7% to 27,7%. Education would have to increase four times according to 1986 Rand values. Economists of all persuasions are aware that there simply is not enough money in the current kitty to do this. What is to be done? Either "white" spending has to drop dramatically to equalise current expenditure, or new money has to be found somehow, or massive rationalisation and innovation of educational techniques and facilities have to take place, or a combination of all three has to happen. Whichever course is followed, major and painful adjustments are due in education. Universities will not escape their consequences. For example, Afrikaans speaking universities are undergoing a major redefinition of their role and contribution in society. There is a growing awareness that as a non-discriminatory resource base they can no longer labour under the illusion that they can indefinitely depend on institutionalised discrimination as a basis to be the cultural and intellectual home of "Die Volk" or "Die Afrikaner".

English speaking universities have for decades, because of the very Extention of Universities Act which they have protested against, been insulated from the community concerns which were prevalent amongst the very people they insisted should be free to attend their universities. When this began to happen, those

very same universities found themselves pulled into wider societal conflicts that posed as difficult challenges to the values of academic freedom, university autonomy and institutional neutrality as Apartheid did. For example :

Students were intimidated because they "undermined the struggle";

Academic/university traditions were ignored;

Lectures were forcibly disrupted and speakers prevented from stating their point of view;

The university was pressurized to take a collective stand on a whole range of issues : June 16, Consumer boycotts; police brutality; detention without trial, etc.

Some argued that as a counter to the coercion of Apartheid, Universities should become the "intellectual home of the left" or "people's universities".

Although these developments have a peculiarly South African flavour, I hope I have indicated that they are not unique to university life in general.

Two years ago, in Beijing, China, a young interpreter and guide showed me around during my stay. His parents were both University Professors and during the "cultural revolution" the young Red Guards took his parents forcibly to the rural

countryside to be "re-educated" as peasant workers because they and universities, had become "bourgeoise and decadent" and were betraying the "class struggle". The son was forced to go with them and work as a child labourer in the fields. He missed 6 years of education. Fortunately, his parents could teach him; he learnt English and so became an interpreter. I asked him what had become of the Red Guards of the "Cultural Revolution". He said, "Here in China, we call them the lost generation, they cannot be employed."

Towards the end of last year and the beginning of this year I twice had a straightforward academic lecture disrupted at the same university by the same group of students. They came dancing into the auditorium chanting "one settler one bullet" and pointing at me. I had never seen or met them before, but on enquiry was told that they believed "Whites had no part in the struggle" against oppression and were particularly suspicious of "liberals" like myself. In the new South Africa, "whites" would only be accepted if they accepted their definition of what an African was and if they believed in scientific socialism.

There is a universal quality to the desperate dogmatic confidence of undergraduate students who believe they have discovered immutable laws of historical development and see it as their collective responsibility to help "destiny mature". But, as I have pointed out, not only students - Professors have burned books, banned lectures, supported Nazism and expelled their colleagues who did not agree with them. And, Governments, Kings

and Despots have competed favourably in this regard. In 1723, King Frederick William I of Prussia, expelled the philosopher and mathematician Christian von Wolf and threatened to hang him, because he thought von Wolf's teachings encouraged desertions from the army. Three weeks ago here in South Africa, a young priest was taken in leg irons out of the court after being sentenced to one year's imprisonment for refusing to do military service.

The point is, of course, that universities have no self-evident right to be absolved from the impact of intolerance, prejudice, dogmatism, ideological inflexibility, polarisation, racism and so forth. They are as much part of the society they live in as anyone else. However, the manner in which universities have developed historically seems to reinforce the view that they see it as their role to pursue intellectual inquiry wherever it may lead them. In particular, and for its own survival and contribution in history, a university will have to also direct such inquiry towards the very factors which threaten its self-proclaimed reason for existence. Those threats can often originate from outside the university, e.g. poverty, inequality, racism, political tyranny, etc. In South Africa, one such threat involving all of these has been the ideology of Apartheid. But those threats can also originate from inside the university. It is a matter of deep concern to any society when a university remains indifferent to the external threats to its own integrity. But it becomes self-defeating when a university, in the manner in which it deals with such external threats, undermines its own

reason for being called a university, i.e. that precariously organised combination of values that encourages the pursuit of intellectual inquiry amongst those who are part of it. It is ridiculous to resist Apartheid or any other perceived, or real, external threat in the name of academic freedom, if in the manner in which a university does so, it negates academic freedom in any case. There are those who are so supremely confident of, not only the justice of their cause, but in "the only" way to struggle for it, that they will quite cynically manipulate "academic freedom" as a "liberal hang-up", in order to deploy hidden agendas. My view of such is, that they do not understand, or care, what a university is all about.

The pursuit of intellectual inquiry is not an "ivory tower" pre-occupation. It can become so only if a University indulges in it, in total indifference to the problems and challenges that exist in the society in which it functions. The more urgent and pressing those problems, the more a university will be called to account for the manner in which it pursues intellectual inquiry. I have said on a previous occasion that "when it (a university) demands academic freedom for itself, that society caught up in its historical struggles will not allow the university to escape the question : For what? The answer would seem to be, if one looks at history, "For the sake of society itself", but then it is also the duty of a university to prove it." (3)

It would seem to be the case that the wealthier a society, the easier it is to be a university, although in the case of

potentates and despots one could no doubt find exceptions. What seems to be far more unexceptional is the dictum that the poorer a society, the more difficult it is for a university to be a university. Now that South Africa is moving into the so-called post-Apartheid era, universities in particular are going to discover how poor a country we really are and how difficult it is going to be for universities to be universities.

CONCLUSION

What can universities do? They cannot physically fight, coerce, repress or suppress without bringing into question their status as universities. Yes, they have to protest and take disciplinary measures whenever their integrity is threatened from inside, but such actions are usually reactive, after the damage has been done.

If what I have said so far is construed to mean that a university can only be a university when those precariously organised values of academic freedom, university autonomy and institutional neutrality are in perfect harmony so as to maximise intellectual inquiry, I would have been totally misunderstood. There is no such university in the world. What I have tried to say is that each one of these values : freedom, autonomy, neutrality and inquiry have to be accounted for separately, in relation to one another and continuously. To put it more bluntly, if the only time a university thinks collectively about "academic freedom" is at annual rituals of affirmation such as these, they have already half way lost the battle to be called a university in the

"new South Africa". The battle for "academic freedom" is not over when Apartheid ends, it simply intensifies and acquires new meaning. Particularly, given the enormous challenges that our country faces, it is the duty, and even an act of self-interested survival, for universities to continually keep alive a debate within their own ranks why they deserve freedom, autonomy and neutrality in order to pursue intellectual inquiry.

In the memory of Daantjie Oosthuizen who epitomized uncompromising intellectual inquiry, I wish you here at Rhodes University "Good Luck" in trying to be a university in the new South Africa that is beginning to take shape.

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Footnotes

1. Ben-David, J and Zlocgower, A : "Universities and Academic Systems in Modern Societies: in European Journal of Sociology III, 1962
2. Machlup, F : European Universities as Partisans
3. Slabbert, F v Z: The System & the Struggle, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1989, p.37.