

Badat S, Wolpe H & Barends Z (1994) 'The post-secondary education system: Towards policy formulation for equality and development.' In Bronwen Kaplan (ed), *Changing by Degrees? Equity issues in South African tertiary education*. Cape Town: UCT Press

The post-secondary education system: Towards policy formulation for equality and development

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The social-structural inequalities of a class, race, gender, institutional and spatial nature, generated by a particular trajectory of economic and social development during both the segregationist and apartheid periods, have profoundly conditioned the character of the post-secondary education (PSE) system in South Africa. In fact, social-structural inequalities are deeply embedded in, and reflected by, all spheres of social life. All this is well known. The task that lies ahead is one of moving beyond a discourse of radical needs to one of (radical?) means. It is crucial, however, to keep in sharp focus the range and severity of the inequalities that have to be addressed and, in particular, the massive social struggles, now somewhat less dramatic, for equality, democracy and a new path of economic and social development that they spawned.

The contradictions, possibilities and constraints of conjuncture and structural conditions; the transcending of the contemporary social structure; and, the institutionalisation of a social order representing new social goals constitute the frame for the formulation and specification of policies. Social goals, however, embody values; and policy formulation, far from being a technical cost-benefit exercise, is a process deeply concerned with values. Policies are not always simply action strategies. It could be argued that, ultimately, they are the authoritative allocation of values, embodying the social outcomes that a particular social group, an alliance of groups, or a society at large seeks to achieve.

Chapter One of this book, entitled “Equity policy: A framework of questions”, constitutes a useful introduction to many of the equity issues and themes that need to be addressed in policy formulation for the PSE system. The PSE system’s “centrality to human resource development”, both directly in the form of scientific person-power and trained professionals, and indirectly in the form of person-power for the human resource development of other social groups, is correctly emphasised. Moreover, the view that “there is currently no indication of a coherent national policy emerging which will inform the transformation process towards greater equity and prosperity” will find general endorsement. Finally, the warning that “there are difficult choices to be made in developing a national policy framework to ensure that prosperity is not compromised in the quest for equity” is appropriate.

However, the terms in which the “equity – prosperity” issue is posed in the chapter mentioned above is of considerable concern. It is around this that an alternative perspective, which has significant implications for policy formulation, is advanced in this paper.

A striking feature of contemporary South Africa is the extent to which certain actors, previously steeped in the practice and rationalisation of racism, sexism, inequality and authoritarianism, have adopted the discourses of non-racialism, non-sexism, equality and democracy. This shift is to be welcomed for it not only contributes to a sharpening of the intellectual and political contestation around the meaning of concepts such as equality and democracy, but also opens space for a dialogue about transition.

Even when there is broad consensus around the desirability and meaning of social goals, there appears to be a tendency to overlook a particular issue: not infrequently, specific social objectives stand in an uneasy relationship to one another, and the simultaneous pursuit of these objectives may necessitate the need to either priorities amongst them, or create a balance. It is not uncommon to find that in practice, if not in rhetoric, a particular objective may be eliminated in favor of another.

The object of this paper is to engage with the social goals of equality and development, in so far as they appear to be broadly endorsed as important objectives of the PSE system. It is argued that, in the light of the social consequences that are entailed, the elimination of the objective of equality in favor of development, or vice versa, cannot be sustained. Concomitantly, a failure to recognise that equality and development, as simultaneous social objectives of the PSE system, stand in a relationship of permanent tension, has the potential to result in purely populist or pragmatist positions which ultimately may advance neither social equality nor economic, social, political and cultural development. In order to move beyond simply critique, and as a contribution to the debate around the transformation of the PSE system, the proposition is advanced that equality and development goals must be balanced. It is this balancing that must constitute the essential frame for the formulation of policies for the transformation of the PSE system as well as its various sectors and individual institutions.

Equality and development propositions

The debates about PSE, and the university sector in particular, have revolved around two poles:

- the attainment of equality in relation to access to institutions, and the quality and resourcing of institutions and the range of disciplines, graduate programmes and research within them; and,
- the developmental role of post-secondary institutions in producing human resources and knowledge relevant to economic development and political management.

The equality pole, grounded in conceptions of equal social rights and redress, finds strong expression among black students and parents, the broad liberation movement and historically black institutions.¹ The right to education has been, and remains, a powerful claim in South Africa and nowhere is this claim stated more explicitly than in the Freedom Charter:

The doors of learning and culture shall be opened!

Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit (Suttner and Cronin, 1986:265).

Similar generalised views stem from the people's education movement with its emphasis, echoing the Freedom Charter, on the right of people to have access to education and training (NECC, 1989). There is no shortage of propositions which emphasise the global need for, or right to, education, training and skills upgrading. And, in these proposals, virtually no explicit attempt is made to propose which

educational needs should be given priority. Perhaps this is because arguments based on education as a human right do not lend themselves easily to a hierarchical ordering.

At the PSE level there is a strong challenge to the status quo in respect of the race, class, and gender inequalities related to access to PSE institutions, the composition of staff and the distribution of resources to institutions. The demand is for both the enrolments and staffing of PSE institutions to begin to reflect the social composition of the broader society; for resources to be made available to historically disadvantaged social groups; and for the increased funding and qualitative development of the historically black institutions.

The financial and other resources required to redress the effects of the apartheid-capitalist system at the PSE level are not immediately available and, except in the long term, are extremely unlikely to become available. Enormous calls will be made on limited resources to meet not only the needs of the PSE system but also other basic human needs such as housing, health and welfare services.

The development pole² is rooted in an emphasis on the role of the PSE system: the role of certain historically white institutions in producing the human resources and knowledge relevant to economic development and political management. Given their research programmes, their professional and post-graduate teaching capacities, their reputation as centers of excellence, and their production of high-level person-power, especially in the fields of natural science, medical science and engineering, institutions like the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand constitute vital national resources. Any diversion of resources away from them would be detrimental to economic and social development. This position, although it has more recently begun to take on broad equality issues, is elaborated in Van Onselen's *Tertiary education in a democratic South Africa* (1991).

Van Onselen distinguishes between the white universities, which developed "legitimately and organically" in relation to the core life of the economy, and the "artificial" development, through social engineering, of the black universities at the periphery. Even though the distinction between "organic" and "artificial" can be seen as problematic, Van Onselen captures the duality of the system. Nurtured by their links to the core political economy, the white universities developed into centres of excellence indexed by high reputation ratings, access to resources, good student outputs and the development of talent or "value added" reflected in research and publications (Saunders, 1992). By contrast, the historically black universities (HBU) remained as they began, peripheral institutions with poor ratings on all these indices. (The adequacy of these criteria for judging the quality of institutions is an important issue, but one that cannot be dealt with here.)

As a result, it is the historically white universities (HWU) alone that have the capacity to produce the human resources and the research required by a complex economy; an economy, which *will* have to compete on international markets, and simultaneously meet the basic needs of the people in a democratic South Africa. Whatever policy is pursued to advance the black universities, the capacities of the white universities must not be endangered. Clearly the transformation of black universities into internationally recognised universities with both research and post-graduate capacity would require a massive input of financial resources. But these resources should not be redistributed to the black universities in a way and to a degree which would impair the maintenance and development of the HWU. If the black

universities succeed in getting greater state support to redress inequalities, this would “further diminish the amount available to those with commitments to running expensive high-tech facilities at the core” (Van Onselen, 1991:5).

But this begs the crucial question as to why the HBU should not acquire the capacity to have this commitment? After all, this “commitment” was not simply “freely” accepted by the HWU and “freely” rejected by the HBU. As Van Onselen recognises, the latter were formed by the apartheid system so as to preclude them from accepting such a commitment. In principle, the HBU could have been constituted so as to equip them to take on such commitments, just as the new white universities (for example, Rand Afrikaans University and the University of Port Elizabeth) were, and as has happened elsewhere. (In Britain, for example, a number of new universities were established in the 1960s - all of them within the model of British universities with a range of disciplines in the natural and human sciences and with research capacity.) Merely to register the historical origins of the institutional inequalities and to take these as an unproblematic point of departure leads to the reproduction of these inequalities and obviates the question of redress.

This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the existing functional division between the historically white research and historically white teaching universities is taken as the basis for the future development of the university sector.

In the new SA - as in the old - but for reasons no longer predicated on considerations *of* race alone, there *will* be a continuing need for a wide range of institutions *of* tertiary education operating at different levels which *will* seek to address the needs of a complex and diversified economy, a society informed by several cultures and traditions, and a political system that is sensitive to imperatives encountered over a vast terrain (Van Onselen, 1991:3).

Here, it seems, lies the solution. Since functionally differentiated institutions are necessary, the black universities can continue with their chief role as undergraduate teaching universities – upgraded and improved at relatively little cost.

What this conclusion amounts to is this: since the development of the HWU was “organic” to the core political economy and hence “legitimate”, and since they fulfil a necessary function, the state funding and policies which facilitated this and produced the disparities must continue and can now be justified, not on racial, but functional grounds. The triumph of development over equity, so to speak.

It is pertinent, at this stage, to register the first of two criticisms of the Framework Paper. The caution: “to ensure that prosperity is not compromised in the quest for equity”, while distinguishing between the needs of equality and the needs of development (albeit somewhat narrowly conceived), contributes to the irreducible privileging of development over equality. Our concern is that bold declarations about equality and transformation may be accompanied by ultimately modest policy proposals. This modesty, if previously justified by the structures of apartheid, could now be legitimated by appeals to the non-compromising of prosperity, growth, development, and so forth.

The equality-development relationship

If the Framework Paper, perhaps unwittingly, privileges development on the one hand, it signals, on the other, the need for “a coherent national policy ... which will inform the transformation process towards greater equity and prosperity”. In this instance, equality and development are conjoined. However, and this is our second criticism, in linking equality and development, there appears to be no recognition of the fact that a fundamental tension exists between these two objectives.

In *Unthinking Social Science* (1991), Wallerstein writes that political movements, both liberal and socialist, that came to power in the post-1945 period had the following in common: they “set themselves the double policy objective of economic growth and greater internal equality” (115). In answer to the question: “What is the demand for development all about?”, he suggests that:

the twin goals indicate the double answer. On the one hand, development was supposed to mean greater internal equality, that is, fundamental social (or socialist) transformation. On the other hand, development was meant to mean economic growth which involved ‘catching up’ with the leader (i.e. the US) (Wallerstein, 1991:115).

In such political movements, conceptions of development as equality or growth coexisted and the “organizational cement” was the notion that the twin objectives of economic growth and greater equality were correlative. The ideological statements of both liberals and Marxists asserted that “growth leading to catching up and an increase in egalitarian distribution are parallel vectors, if not obverse sides of the same coin, over the long run” (116). However, Wallerstein argues that experience shows that social transformation and catching up are seriously different objectives.

They are not necessarily correlative with each other. They may even be in contradiction with each other (115-6).

He concludes that:

It should be clear by now that we have to analyze these objectives separately and cannot continue blithely to assume their pairing, which developmentalists, both liberal and Marxist, as well as many of their conservative opponents, have for the most done for the past 150 years.

The rhetoric of development has masked a contradiction that is deep and enduring. What has happened since 1945 and especially since the 1970s is that this contradiction is now a glaring one, and we are collectively being required to make political choices that are quite difficult and quite large (Wallerstein, 1991: 116-7).

As an aside, it is interesting to note that if equality and development have mistakenly been assumed to be correlative, and the historical tendency has been for the former to be sacrificed to the latter, a reverse kind of logic has operated in relationship to development and democracy in Africa, though with a similar outcome. In some quarters it is argued that democracy is impossible without particular levels of economic development. Claude Ake notes that many regimes have tied

the issue of democratisation to economic development, asserting that the quest for democracy must be considered in the context of Africa’s most pressing needs, especially emancipation from ‘ignorance, poverty and disease’. The pursuit of democracy will not, it is argued, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. Nor

will it give shelter to the homeless. People must be educated and fed before they can appreciate democracy, for there is no choice in ignorance and there are no possibilities for self-fulfillment in extreme poverty (1991: 35).

The questions then posed are: Must one wait for economic development to ensure democracy? Can the democratic process net impact positively on the development process? Is democracy a constraint on economic development?

Ake's rejoinder is most pertinent:

Africa's failed development experience suggests that postponing democracy does not promote development ... Even if it were true that democracy is competitive with development, it does not follow that people must be more concerned with improving nutrition than casting votes, or more concerned with health than with political participation. The primary issue is not whether it is more important to eat well than to vote, but who is entitled to decide which is more important (Ake, 1991: 35).

In other words, it is not simply the *criteria* by which policies are formulated that is at issue; the *process* by which policies are formulated is a crucial question. The nature of the process (the extent to which it is or is not democratised) has an important bearing, not only on the content of the policies themselves but also on the legitimacy of the policies adopted (Badat, 1991: 17-38). In much the same way a concentration on either equality or development has extremely limiting effects on the shaping of policies appropriate to the contemporary situation in South Africa.

The exclusive focus on equality leads to the formulation of policies which are divorced from the conditions in which they must be applied. That is to say, policies are developed in isolation from the concrete conditions of society and from the development programmes which may be appropriate to transform those conditions. To assert the right of all to PSE assumes that there are no limits to access to institutions, to the number of institutions, or to the resources available. Furthermore, the formulation of policies which ignore the needs of development, the labour market and hence of the jobs which are or may become available, is likely to result in serious imbalances and a further aggravation of the already existing anomalies between education, training and the labour market. It also fuels the notion that equality is fully and immediately attainable in education and employment as soon as the apartheid regime is replaced with a non-racial, non-sexist democratic government. This is because it fails to take into account the fact that equal access to and equality between institutions may be achieved in some respects but not in others and that new forms of stratification may result from new policies.

Implicit in the equality position is the notion that equality of education is the key to the achievement of equality in the social order. The assumption is frequently made that changes in the education system, including the equalising of access, will have transformative effects on the economy and will systematically level all forms of inequality, including class, race, gender. Insofar as the class structure is defined in terms of relations of production, it is clear that education and training will have little effect. Education and training (or certification) may well provide entry into employment, but their relevance to class relations is limited to the fact that high levels of training may eventually give access to capital ownership through employment in corporations and the state sector. Where this process does occur, the beneficiaries, if not already property-owners, will be drawn from the already privileged strata.

Education and training is not a means to the acquisition of ownership in the means of production. Rather, it is the means by which that class becomes equipped to exercise the functions of control and management.

It is frequently supposed that education and training provide the means of entry into employment and that access to education is part of the process of equalising the social structure because it facilitates social mobility. There is ample evidence that social mobility between strata is extremely limited and that inter-generation mobility is highly restricted. Access to education and training, particularly PSE, tends to be structured by a number of social structural conditions of which race, however important, is only one.

Nonetheless, the stratified job market is not impermeable to hitherto excluded categories - even under apartheid some black people were able, to a small degree, to penetrate "privileged" occupations. However, it is crucial to note that changing the racial/gender/class composition of those being employed does not eradicate the stratification which expresses the differential allocation of income, status, authority and power. This stratification is a product of multiple determinants, not solely education. The function of education has to be understood in terms of its location in broader society, and it is in this respect that questions about the meaning of development become highly relevant.

The exclusive focus on economic development - on the grounds that without the production of the skilled human resources needed by an advanced economy, the basic economic and social needs of the people cannot be attained - prioritises development and effectively retards or delays the equalisation process. This position is sometimes coupled with the contention that economic development necessarily entails equality, but this is far from self-evident. While such development may result in a general rise in living standards, it is (not infrequently) accompanied by an intensification of inequalities among the population. Rising standards of living, a desirable phenomenon, may have little to do with growing equality. It is also contended that the production of human resources can simultaneously produce a process of equalisation. However, this is only true for certain layers of the job market.

This concentration on the exclusive relationship of education to economic development (or to political democracy and management) tends to accord to PSE a purely instrumental role. As a result, concerns of general cultural and intellectual development are neglected. Similarly, little attention is paid to the role of PSE in relation to democratic institutions of the state and of civil society.

Towards equality and development

The way out of this impasse requires an important conceptual shift as well as a fundamentally different departure point for PSE policy formulation.

Firstly, the competing, yet important, claims of both equality (redress of social structural inequalities) and development (human resource development to effect socio-economic, political and cultural development) need to be recognised. On the one hand, it is imperative to accept that equality demands regarding access and institutions cannot be relegated to some future period when development has taken place. There are two reasons for this: the goal of equality motivated the struggle against apartheid

and continues to be an extremely persistent and pervasive demand; and, there is no guarantee, given the circumstances under which the transition is occurring in South Africa, that development will also entail redistribution and a secular trend towards general equality. On the other hand, human resource development, even where this entails a degree of inequity, cannot be neglected. Economic development is vital to the enhancement of social conditions even without the generation of greater equality.

It is interesting to note that, albeit for a different part of the world and in somewhat different terms, the equality-development relationship has been perceived in a remarkably similar way by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean:

Environmentally sustainable growth with equity, in a democracy, is not only desirable but possible. Indeed, just as social equity cannot be attained in the absence of strong, sustained growth, such growth likewise calls for a reasonable degree of social and political stability, and this in turn means meeting certain minimum requisites of equity. It is clear from this interdependence between growth and equity that it is necessary to advance towards these two objectives simultaneously rather than sequentially, and this represents an unprecedented challenge (ECLAC, 1992: i1).

Secondly, given this “unprecedented challenge”, it needs to be recognised that the crucial question for policy formation is this: “How is the relationship - the balance - between these two poles, always in tension with one another, to be determined?” (Wolpe, 1991: 5). Wolpe’s assertion that equality and development objectives are “always in tension” goes beyond Wallerstein’s weaker formulation that “they are not necessarily correlative with each other” (Wallerstein, 1991: 115-6).

Kraak, while acknowledging that there exists a tension in simultaneously addressing the needs of both equality and development, argues that the Cosatu education and training model “provides the opportunity of satisfying both equity and development demands” (Kraak 1992:1). He also suggests that in Wolpe’s work “equity is not problematised, and it is assumed to be an automatic good”. Kraak’s argument is that in a low skill, low participation framework, the tension between equality and development will certainly be fundamental and here “the equity-development trade-off is direct and brutal” (Kraak, 1992: 5).

However, in Cosatu’s high skill, high participation (HS/HP) macro-institutional framework equity-development demands are not always in tension In this case, equity and development can be viewed as complementary elements of a unified and comprehensive construction plan. They are simultaneously about equity and development (Kraak, 1992: 5).

Thus a particular macro-institutional framework determines whether or not a tension exists between equity and development goals, and the Cosatu model is the key to dissolving the equity-development tension.

There are three problems with Kraak’s thesis. Firstly, the tension between equality and development is not, as he sees it, a potential one. It is internal to the equality-development relationship and therefore not dissolved by a particular macro-institutional framework. Secondly, the extent of this equality-development tension is under-estimated; and here Kraak fails to follow his own sound advice concerning the need to “problematised” equity. Equality is crudely reduced to arguments for the right of all to, for example, PSE - an easy position to pole-axe. However, accepting (as he

does) that full equality is not possible, trade-offs have to be made between different kinds of equality. In other words, within an equality framework itself, tensions exist between different kinds of equality (race, class, gender, institutional) and uncomfortable and difficult political choices have to be made.³

Finally, Kraak is over-optimistic with regard to the ability of the Cosatu “high skill, high participation (HS/HP) macro-institutional framework” to dissolve the equality-development tension. It is only when they begin to be disaggregated, when the tensions between the simultaneous pursuit of different kinds of equality and development come to be recognised, that it can be understood that the Cosatu education and training proposals could reproduce or generate inequalities in some areas while reducing them in others.

Clearly, a range of tensions exist in the equality-development objective, and within equality and development goals. Trade-offs are implied, and difficult political choices entailed. The absence of a coherent, democratically devised development programme for South Africa strengthens the tendency to advance piece-meal and *ad hoc* PSE policies. Given that the transformative potential of education is extremely limited outside of simultaneous political, economic and social transformations, such policies may contribute minimally to a process of social transformation, and may serve to reproduce the powerfully entrenched structures generated by apartheid-capitalism. Policy formulation in relation to spheres like PSE is made more difficult in the absence of a development programme and because key political and social movements are unable to, or do not seek to, unequivocally specify more detailed policies.⁴

Finally, it must be understood that in so far as both equality and development are prized but exist in a relationship of permanent tension, the challenge for a new government and PSE institutions is clear: “to find a path which to some extent satisfies both demands as far as existing conditions permit” (Wolpe, 1991: 5). A viable policy for the post-secondary education system has to balance both equality and development policies. **This approach, particularly if the balance is the outcome of a democratic policy process, enjoys broad legitimacy and contributes effectively, and simultaneously, to equality and development.** While the consequence of this approach is a relative slowing of the process of both equalisation and development, this would be a small price to pay.

To the extent that such an approach is the outcome of a democratic policy process, enjoys broad legitimacy and contributes effectively, and simultaneously, to equality and development, the consequence of this which is a relative slowing of the process of equalisation as well as a relative slowing, of the processes of development would appear to be a small price to pay.

In concrete terms, this approach involves an assessment of the human resources needed for political, economic and intellectual/cultural development, followed by the operation of policies geared towards race, class and gender equalities and to the equalisation of institutions. The simultaneous consideration of equality in relation to the human resources required to reconstruct South Africa leads to a new model of the

PSE system and, within this, the transformation of each sector and individual institution of the system.

Conclusion

It is questionable whether PSE institutions, if left to themselves, would carry out the transformation of the PSE system in order to meet the goals of equality and development. The involvement of, in particular, the state as well as the business sector, professional associations and other interest groups, is crucial. As Bundy argues:

Unless the future could somehow be uncoupled from the past, state intervention and policies specifically concerned to redress historic inequalities will be a *sine qua non* of a more equitable 'new' South Africa. The historic 'solution' to the 'Poor White Problem' owed much to the specific economic conditions of the 1930s and 1940s; but it was due, too, to conscious and far-reaching programmes of affirmative action, job creation and social welfare. Latter-day enthusiasm for market forces and a 'lean' state will have to be challenged if parallel policies and programmes are to have any purchase in the decades ahead (Bundy, 1992: 37).

The task is to fashion instruments that will allow planning for a transformed PSE to be democratic, effective and occur in a manner that does not "turn its back on individual realisation and social variation. Equality is not in competition with liberty" (Wallerstein, 1991: 122). This obviously has implications for the governance of the PSE system and may involve, with due regard to the issues of autonomy and academic freedom, what the National Education Policy Investigation PSE Report terms a "state-supervised system" that brings the PSE system to greater public accountability.

The outcomes of restructuring and transformative initiatives are never guaranteed. As with all policies, the policies that embody the trade-offs between equality and development may have unintended results and there is also a need to be "aware of possible side-effects on other valued ends" (Terreblanche, 1992:549). Policy monitoring and evaluation need to be integral elements of policy implementation, and the instruments of democratic planning need to be responsive to unanticipated outcomes and consequent adjustments to policies.

Finally, no matter how rational the approach of balancing equality and development policies may appear for the formulation of PSE policy, it is important to emphasise that, ultimately, policy change is a fundamentally political process. Indeed, to assume that education policy could be the result of simply identifying and choosing the *best* alternative is to ignore the obvious political fact that *best* has to be determined in the political crucible of competing interests (Scoufe, 1985: 116).

The dynamics of the negotiation process have politically marginalised previously important social groups such as black students and youth. In so far as the "political crucible" that has been structured by the negotiation process continues to marginalise these formations, excluding them from the "competing interests" that accept the balancing of equality and development goals, the need to convince these constituencies of the legitimacy of the trade-offs and compromises entailed becomes vital. Friedman writes:

... there is little point in negotiating a compromise unless the parties are able to secure consent from it from those who will have to live with it. The fact that 'leaders' have accepted a compromise is unimportant unless this means that their 'followers' accept it too. This implies that the parties must be able to ensure support for the contract from a constituency (1992: 610).

Securing the support of the student and youth constituencies is likely to be no easy matter. What may be *rational* will still have to weather interest group claims and challenges - long after the trade-offs and compromises have been negotiated.

Endnotes

¹ This and the next paragraph draws on Wolpe (1991: 6-7).

² The characterisation of the development pole and engagement with Van Onselen draws on the paper, "A perspective from within the African National Congress on quality in South African higher education", prepared by H Wolpe and Z Barends of the UWC Education Policy Unit for the South African Association of Research and Development in Higher Education Conference, 1-2 October 1992.

³ It should be noted that when "development" too begins to be disaggregated (economic, political, cultural and so forth), competing claims arise and trade-offs are necessitated.

⁴ For more on the issue of trade-offs and compromises and the understandable reluctance of political movements to pronounce unequivocally on very specific policies, see Friedman (1992:608-622).

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