

## Launching of Books: Chairpersons' Remarks

A book is the product of many months, even years, of disciplined, imaginative and inspired intellectual labour. Its launch is therefore always a celebratory occasion.

The University of Dar es Salaam is a fitting place for today's book launch, since universities are intended to be incubators of intellectual production that contribute to enriching the cultural life of their societies.

More generally, universities exist to serve three purposes. The first purpose is to *produce knowledge*, so that we can advance understanding of our natural and social worlds and enrich our scientific and cultural heritage. This means that we 'test the inherited knowledge of earlier generations', we dismantle the mumbo jumbo that masquerades for knowledge, we 'reinvigorate' knowledge, and we share our findings with others.<sup>i</sup>

We undertake research into the mysteries and hidden secrets of life and the 'most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge'. At the same time, we also strive to apply our discoveries for the benefit of humankind. We 'operate on both the short and the long horizon'. On the one hand, we grapple with urgent and 'contemporary problems' and seek solutions to these. On the other hand, we delve into issues and undertake enquiries 'that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit' for humankind.<sup>ii</sup>

Above all, at a university we ask *questions*. We don't immediately worry about the right answer or solution. Instead, we worry, *first*, about the right or better question. It is as Einstein has said: 'If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.' Well maybe not always in five minutes. But what is true is that it is the right questions, the proper questions that lead to great leaps in knowledge and science, to great discoveries and innovations.

As a university, our second purpose is to *disseminate knowledge* and to cultivate minds. Our goal is to ensure that students can think imaginatively, 'effectively and critically'; that they 'achieve depth in some field of knowledge'; that they can critique ideas and views and construct alternatives, and that you can communicate cogently, orally and in writing.

At the same time, we also seek that our students should have 'a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times'; that they appreciate how we 'gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves', and that they learn to should think 'systematically about moral and ethical problems.'<sup>iii</sup>

Our final purpose as a university is to undertake *community engagement*. On the one hand this involves the voluntary participation of students in community projects. On the other hand, it involves service-learning, in which through academic courses students take part 'in activities

where both the community' and students benefit, 'and where the goals are to provide a *service* to the community and, equally, to enhance student *learning* through rendering this service.'<sup>iv</sup>

Africa faces numerous challenges: economic growth and development; creating jobs and eliminating unemployment, poverty and inequalities; providing effective education, health and other social services; the rampant abuse of women; the threat of HIV/AIDS and other diseases; deepening and consolidating democracy, and defending and advancing human rights and social justice.

The knowledge that universities produce is vitally important for properly understanding our changing world, for living in greater harmony with nature, and for insight into the real nature of our problems and challenges. It is *knowledge* that must inform all our actions and efforts to bring about change if we are to avoid disastrous actions based on myths, ignorance, superstition and the like. Being at university supposes a commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, as vital means to self-betterment and the betterment of humankind.

It is said that a people without an understanding of its history and past has no future. Yet, the historian Eric Hobsbawm cautions that 'political pressures on history...are greater than ever before...More history than ever is today being revised or invented by people who do not want the real past, but only a past that suits their purpose.'<sup>v</sup>

This is a timely warning about a growing amnesia about our 'real past'. We must guard against sanitized histories and biographies of the kind that make us wonder how it was possible that colonialism was able to survive so long, if prior to independence there were no supporters of colonialism, no opponents of equality and freedom, and no opponents of justice and democracy. Instead, we must ensure that our history cultivates understanding of the 'real past', for this is the only basis upon which we can create our future.

Mac Maharaj writes that 'to hide the horrors of the past in a collective amnesia would leave posterity with a legacy of festering guilt and unrelieved pain,' while *Eduardo Galeano* says that 'if the past has nothing to say to the present, history may go on sleeping undisturbed in the closet where the system keeps its old disguises.' In similar vein James Baldwin has noted that 'not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.'

It must be posed whether our universities, as part of their knowledge producing function, are engaging sufficiently and critically with vital questions related to the past, the present and the future; with the epoch of globalization and the contemporary political economy of Africa and postcolonial societies. Moreover, whether, as the institutional location of a large number of intellectuals, and as part of their knowledge dissemination function, our universities are adequately serving as catalysts of public intellectual debate.

Such involvement has as its goals the intellectual and cultural development of citizens, and cultivating an engaged and critical citizenry. Its purpose is human freedom, through

continuously extending and deepening economic, political, social and cultural opportunities and rights, so that all may lead rich, productive and rewarding lives.

Prior to national liberation and immediately afterwards, universities were important sites of critical scholarship on crucial aspects of political economy, undertaken through a disinterested, critical and rigorous, yet socially committed scholarship, that spanned various disciplines and fields, including history, sociology, psychology, political studies, anthropology, philosophy, gender studies and education. Such scholarship often connected with the concerns of the national liberation movements, mass organisations, workers and rural poor, and found expression in various popular publications.

Yet, curiously, today there tends to be a dearth of critical and engaged scholarship that rigorously illuminates the kind of society we are and are becoming, and what this could mean for social equity and justice, and for democracy and human freedom.

Moreover, if such scholarship is undertaken it does not appear to connect with or impact much on government, the state, political parties, social movements and civil society, to stimulate extensive public intellectual debate, or to find expression in the mass media.

Universities are well suited to disinterested, critical, yet socially committed and engaged scholarship. They must nurture rigorous, independent and critical scholarship and provide the space and freedom that is a necessary condition of such scholarship.

Such scholarship, even if it identifies wholly or in part with the social goals of the government, the state, political parties or other key social actors must, however, be free to interrogate the thinking, priorities and policies of such actors. There are two reasons for this.

First, as the eminent late sociologist and South African liberation movement stalwart Harold Wolpe has written, priorities and policies are the products of theory and analysis, and 'neither the theory nor the analysis ...can ever be regarded as settled.'<sup>vi</sup> Critical scholarship, therefore, must investigate both the theoretical foundations, and the empirical analyses that ground the definition of priorities and formulation of policies of key social actors. Such investigation could show that conventional wisdoms and their associated policies rest on shaky foundations, with possibly profound social consequences.

Second, as Wolpe further wrote, the 'fundamental point which cannot be overemphasised' is that critical scholarship must treat the priorities and policies of key social actors 'not as conclusions but as starting points for investigation'. That is, no undue limits can be placed on critical scholarship. For, 'if the role of research and writing is to be restricted entirely to providing the materials for and confirmation of already defined policies, then this is to reduce research to a purely ideological function and to deny any autonomy or value to intellectual work and hence to the critical yet essential function of such work.'<sup>vii</sup>

If scholarship is not approached in this way the dire consequence is that it 'becomes a mere political instrument, never producing any knowledge ...since it is already a political ideology'. However, as the Italian intellectual giant Antonio Gramsci insisted, research 'must produce knowledge for politics, without cutting itself off from the objective and scientific investigation of the world.'<sup>viii</sup>

There is no shortage of vital issues that disinterested, critical, yet socially committed and engaged scholarship in the field of political economy could pursue with imagination, creativity and rigour.

There are, of course, also other crucial issues that university scholars are well placed and suited to address. These include questions of the salience of land, culture, identity, diversity, citizenship, morality and ethics, and language. Scholarship on all these issues would be a major contribution to thinking and to public intellectual debate about contemporary Africa. At the same time, such scholarship would also significantly enhance the 'visibility' of our universities within African intellectual discourse and cultural life.

Today the competition for and concentration on economic advantage means that certain kinds of knowledge and research, especially that generated by the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering are privileged. The humanities and social sciences are the objects of either benign tolerance, or neglect or outright hostility.

However, as Thandika Mkandawire argues, 'attempts to improve Africa's prospects by focusing on scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford.'<sup>ix</sup> He is absolutely correct that 'it is vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place...if Africa's development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed.'<sup>x</sup>

Universities and the humanities and social sciences in particular, have a vital role to play in cultivating a 'prophetic memory.'<sup>xi</sup> Such a 'prophetic memory' must encompass *remembrance* of our traumatic colonial past; *critique* of the injustices that continue to blight our society; *consciousness* about how societies are made and remade, reproduced and transformed; *imagination* to conceive of new kinds of cognitive praxis, being and acting; and the *desire* to remake our country, including our universities.

The books that are being launched today are equally important in cultivating a 'prophetic memory.' It is in this context and with this understanding that I gratefully participate in the launching of today's books.

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<sup>i</sup> Boulton, G. and Lucas, C. (2008) *What are Universities For?* Leuven: League of European Research Universities, September, page 3

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., page 3

<sup>iii</sup> The Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000), page 84

<sup>iv</sup> Council on Higher Education (2006) *A Good Practice Guide and Self-evaluation Instruments for Managing the Quality of Service-Learning*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education/Joint Education Trust, page 15

<sup>v</sup> Hobsbawm, E (2002) *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 12 July 2002, pages 18-19

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<sup>vi</sup> Wolpe, H. (1985) "The liberation struggle and research". *Review of African Political Economy*, 32, page 75

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., pages 74-5

<sup>viii</sup> Buci-Glucksmann, 1980:15

<sup>ix</sup> Mkandawire, T. (2009) 'Preface' in *The British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (2009) The Nairobi Report: Frameworks for Africa-UK Research Collaboration in the Social Sciences and Humanities*. London: The British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, page vii

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Kaye, H. J. (1996) *Why do Ruling Classes Fear History and Other Questions*. New York: St Martin's Press