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Deconstructing the discourse of community service and academic entrepreneurship: the ideological colonisation of the university

In memory of Jacques Derrida

In my view the discourse on community service and academic entrepreneurship, currently fashionable in the circles of higher education (both as a field of study and in university management) could benefit from some deconstructive reflection. Such an exercise in (self-)critique need not evoke images of academic civil war within the confines of the university. In spite of the fact that we all tend to conceptualise argumentation as war (as George Lakoff and other cognitive scientists have shown), critique can also be a co-operative enterprise that shares an orientation to strong fallibilism; is (therefore) open to sharp criticism and self-criticism; creates and maintains communicative trust, and clings to the ethical hope of reaching mutual understanding (Habermas). This is the spirit in which I would like the remarks that follow to be taken.

Much of what I will have to say touches on what I shall term the “mother discourse” of “academic entrepreneurship” (henceforth AE), namely the familiar discourse on the university’s calling to “community service” (henceforth CS). Most of my observations will refer to the general logic and rhetoric informing the discourses at issue, but in conclusion I shall make some illustrative references to Prof Peter Rosseel’s (2004) thought-provoking paper entitled “Introducing academic entrepreneurship in the human sciences”.

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1. Converging lines of deconstructive analysis

To begin with, I would say that the CS/AE discourse is in need of three-pronged deconstruction. Note that I am not going to use the term “deconstruction” in Derrida’s technical-theoretical sense: since this sense is itself in need of deconstruction (which I have attempted elsewhere), I shall use the term in its more metaphorical and by now popular sense.¹ The deconstructions that I shall (very briefly) attempt here are aimed at the target discourse on three interrelated levels:

- the level of institutional analysis — where the structure and history of a life-form such as a university is at issue;
- the level of rhetorical analysis — where we are concerned with discursive figures and representations, in this case related to the university institution;
- the level of ideology analysis — in this case, a type of analysis in which relations of discursive (not social) domination are at stake; that is, where our ideas and actions betray configurations in which certain norms, values or goals come to dominate others in a way that is harmful to individuals and societies.

I shall elaborate on this three-fold deconstruction in a very informal manner, avoiding technical terms and theoretical architecture as far as possible, and omitting further mention of specific “levels” and their complex “interrelationships”.²

2. The university within/without the community

In essence, the institutional deconstruction of CS discourse involves the pretence of a particular connotation of the concept of “community service”, namely, that the “re-organised” university (in terms of both past and current political approaches in higher education) has gained a new structure, with community service being added to the university’s classical goals of research and teaching. As if the institution of the university, as it concretely exists, within a community, with all that this implies in terms of multiple and inescapable relations with that community, is

1 The term “paradigm” has undergone a similar transformation, straying quite far from Kuhn’s original intent.

2 Cf Visagie (2004) for an elaborate statement of my theoretical position.

not always and already involved in “community service”!³ After all, the university is the institution which community leaders, parents and their children, employers and their employees, and so on can attend to fulfil their educational needs and desires (at the tertiary level). And it offers an amazingly broad spectrum for the fulfilment of those desires. Are such educated people (with all the term implies) not what a society and a community primarily need?

One may ask: but what of the special needs of society? Well, of course universities have been known to study the very nature of society itself, both in general and with reference to particular (kinds of) societies. Traditional university courses over a spectrum of disciplines deal with society in terms of both historically contingent and systemic-endemic problems, with their causes and potential solutions.

Granted, one may still want to demand more “specificity”. But the doors of the “ivory tower” have been known to open to consultation with all kinds of social entities and professions: churches, public officials, lawyers, business enterprises, agricultural and city planners, and so on. Not only have the doors swung open to those on the “outside”, but through those same doors university teachers have “gone out” into the community, establishing professional practices and services of various sorts.

But perhaps this is indeed “nothing” — when compared to what the university has always done as part of its traditional core functions: returning a never-ending stream of graduates through its “ivory” portals “back” to and “out” into the community. Not just generally educated individuals, but specially trained professionals equipped to deal with specific areas, needs and problems in the community (clergy, doctors, nurses and other health workers, psychologists, engineers, lawyers, architects, social workers, and so on).

Those experts in higher education who find this accomplishment not worth mentioning (and who regularly play the — by now somewhat tedious — game of “ivory-tower bashing”) should perhaps reflect on something that actually makes this specific service rather special: the fact that the task of training students for community service is com-

3 Co-incidentally, in the deconstructive work of Derrida, attention to what precedes is crucially important.

monly so highly prioritised that it actually and continuously detracts from another (arguably the) core function of the university: the unconstrained acquiring of knowledge as a value in itself. This is a cause of major concern for universities. At issue here is something we hear little mention of these days: service (not only to the community) but to the knowledge enterprise itself — service without hedging, service without all sorts of barriers, constraints, or qualifications. Or has mention of this forgotten ideal — the one unique characteristic of the university as an institution — become a bit tasteless, a little tactless? But then, such “insensitivity” is actually what lecturers worth the title themselves experience when they are theoretically exploring some aspect of reality and some bored student inquires after “relevance”, some even demanding that only what is “usable on the job” be taught. That is not what the university is about. But, unfortunately, foolish students have found surprising backing (whether or not they know or care) in the “practical” (practically blind, that is) wisdom sprouted by many educationalists.

But even this predicament can be addressed by the university, in its very concern for society: a concern about what the political-economic hijacking of the university, and the resultant focus on “job training”, could do to society-at-large when it is ignorant of the possible consequences. For, ultimately, it is society itself that is in need of an institution like the university — insofar as such an institution has a unique contribution to make to society. This contribution is currently disparaged and systematically suppressed in the discourse of higher education itself. What is “accountability to society” if that which is to be accounted for in the first place, namely the unique type of knowledge responsibility entrusted to a university, is not even on the agenda? Clearly, it is not only the university which suffers.

3. Deconstruction in/out of context

It would be strange, and indeed an obvious mistake, to undertake any kind of deconstruction without taking careful note of context. I am well aware that the contemporary situation of the university within advanced techno-economic societies, as well as in the developing countries, has to be taken into account. I am even more acutely cognisant that the political history of South Africa has to be factored into the institutional analysis sketched above. But bringing in the matter of context

does not suddenly cancel out the analysis.⁴ Indeed, to realise what apartheid did to higher education in South Africa, one has to start with this kind of institutional analysis, which then provides ample room for analysing (among other things) the ways in which apartheid universities grievously failed in the reach of their community service.

But any kind of institutional analysis abstracting away from “trends” in order to evaluate these from the point of view of institutional norms transcending pure contextuality is glaringly absent from CS/AE discourse. This is one of the reasons, I suppose, for the apparent lack of intellectual depth that is, by and large, characteristic of this discourse.⁵

The obvious way for CS/AE discourse to proceed would be to start with a realistic picture of how universities have functioned and are functioning in terms of their “automatic” community service, accrediting the plus points, and then going on to suggest difficulties, faults, improvements, and additions — with a view to trends and specific contexts as well. But what one would expect of the field, since we are talking at the intellectual level of the university, is the emergence of critical-analytical discussions of trends and even of the whole concept of community service. For example, one would expect discussions probing the various hidden interests that may infiltrate the concept and the debates surrounding it. But this kind of approach, exemplified, say, in a subject like critical sociology, is virtually absent from the field. Not that models as such do not exist: it is just that they are taken from fields such as organisational and management theory (still rooted in folk positivism), and even from “leadership” books and business biographies.

True, in CS/AE discourse the concept of the “critical” is not altogether absent. It is just that it takes on a specific meaning. One is asked to become critical of where one currently stands, with regard to new trends. To become critical of what one is doing, because it is different from what other people are doing — which is known to be different from what they were doing (being “irrelevant”). To become critical also means noticing the fact that oneself, one’s department and one’s univer-

4 To put this into the jargon of deconstruction, it is not a case of “either/or” but “between”.

5 This may to some extent be remedied if the field of higher education can adopt genuine disciplinary modes of investigation.

sity are not getting enough acclaim. It may even mean noticing the fact that they are not making enough money (which is “out there”, for the taking).

4. Rhetorical aspects of “new paradigm” discourse

Why? Why is this set-up the way it is? There are probably several, even many answers. Let us look at one possible underlying mechanism, in its rhetorical effects. It is not difficult to imagine various motives for creating the message that something new is on the cards. Individuals at all levels of university life, with different interests, could be interested in helping to create such a message, and assisting in “bringing it home”. (They can of course also be coerced into becoming interested — or at least behaving accordingly). The same goes for structures external but related to the university.

If something new is on the cards, if a “paradigm shift” has to be made, then the importance and urgency of the new needs to be emphasised. The “new” can be made attractive by relating it to innovativeness and creativity (which are indeed fundamental human needs) as well as to morality (the needs of the people “out there”), money, prestige, and administrative efficiency (a mix which does not actually seem all that moral).

It is this kind of situation that brings university leaders to confide to their audiences at staff meetings that some things may actually have been better for students in the old days, but Various kinds of statements then follow, generally reducible to warnings-with-encouragements that the “new” has arrived, is here to stay, and that consequently “we” must therefore come to understand and accept the concomitant upgrading of everything. In many instances, the raw contradictions seem to be lost on both the speaker and the audience.

What has been said so far accounts for (some of) the powerful appeal of “the new”. But the very “newness” of the new can dictate (to the unwary) a strong discontinuity with “the old”. And it is this discontinuity that helps to explain the perceived need for experts — those who have knowledge of the new in its stunning difference from the old — to explain to those lagging behind in the “old paradigm”, what it’s all about. The “discontinuity postulate” also helps to explain why

community service is such a “new” thing, and why any critique of the structurally inevitable and already costly community service of the university is a paradigmatic “no-no”.

Finally, just as all ideology thrives on enemy images, the discontinuity postulate also generates a confrontational stand-off with a necessary discursive opponent/enemy: “the bygone era/system”. The standard derogatory metaphor in educational “new-speak” for this enemy, is “the ivory tower”. “New paradigm” rhetoric forbids us to make anything of the way in which these “towers” did in fact have some towering strengths: in the sense of embodying certain normative ideals associated with the very idea of a university. An unfettered and unprejudiced analyst would want to see some historical continuity with these “towers” in the universities of today and tomorrow. But the rhetorical demand is for the tower to be branded a curiosity/monstrosity from a “bygone era” — a virtual enemy of “the people” who were and still are “out there”, apparently hungry for “action” (as we will see later). As if institutions like universities, colleges and schools do not in any case form part of a society, a lifeworld, a community!⁶

5. The ideological unconscious of CS/AE discourse

I turn now to the probable path along which an ideological deconstruction of CS/AE discourse would proceed. To put it in a nutshell, it seems to me that this discourse tends to align itself with a specific part of the ideological “steering powers” of modern Western culture. In themselves and as such, these powers are not ideological by any manner of means; they only become ideological when they are granted “hypernormative” status: when their own norms and goals (legitimate within certain normal and natural contexts) begin to dominate other norms and goals (operating within other contexts) in such a way that the thought and action of the individuals and lifeworlds that succumb to this domination become one-sided and distorted in various ways.

The complex of steering powers centrally at issue in CS/AE ideology would seem to be those of technology, economy, and administrative-

6 This fallacy is somewhat analogous to conceptualising “the state” as something separate from and confronting “the people”, when what is usually meant is “the government”.

organisational rationality. All three are in themselves obviously capable of huge networks of hypernormative domination, but the situation becomes more complicated (and frightening) when (as is usually the case in a university setting) they interact with each other and with political power. It should be noted that, in their pre-ideological presence, none of these aspects of the lifeworld has a normativity suited to theory or education or the university, as such.

The ideological “colonisation” of the university (to borrow a term from Habermas) thus begins to take shape when the central knowledge enterprise at the heart of the institution becomes dominated, at various points, by sets of mutually entangled norms and goals deriving from the “steering complex” just described. This happens, for example, where the goals of techno-economic progress in society begin to dictate what goes on in the offices, classrooms, laboratories and meeting halls of the university, even penetrating the planning and preparation that is done within the private space of the home study: perhaps the real nerve centre for the nurture and protection of genuine educational ideals. “Dictate” is a strong word: while some areas of the university may indeed be under such pressure, other areas and levels may “merely” be made to feel the intimidating presence of the coloniser (initially at least). Letting it be known that “official audits” lie ahead is an effective kind of wake-up call in this regard.

The colonisation process is also driven by bureaucratic-administrative pressures coupled to compromised concepts such as “quality assessment”, “excellence” and “accountability” (cf Readings 1996). These and other concepts (like CS and AE) are compromised because their specific content is ultimately controlled by steering-power ideology — not by intrinsic educational norms related to the epistemic freedom, creativity and responsibility one hopes to find within the university. In the meantime, lecturers are swamped by mountains of paperwork that actually interferes with their research, teaching and even their “community service”.⁷

7 This is an example of the inter-ideological tensions that often complicate colonisation processes. Ironically, when/if this kind of contradiction is picked up by management or educationalists, the first kind of solution that will typically be tried will relate to monitoring processes which involve . . . more paperwork. But this is the price that has to be paid, the human sacrifice of time, talent and energy, to keep the ever-expanding and updated surveillance machinery functioning.

The colonisation process also involves the economic market-modelling of university teaching as a “client” relationship (with a steady impetus to scrap even the metaphorical trappings of the latter term). The proponents of this model are apparently oblivious of the fact that the teacher-student relationship differs fundamentally from an entrepreneur-client relationship. The institutional structure of the university binds teachers and students into the social totality of a lifeworld — where both are members of the same social structure, which has an inherent and unique form of guidance coupled to institutional authority. In real client relationships this is of course totally lacking. Comically (or tragically) enough, the more students become “clients”, the more they will be deprived of what the university really has “to offer” them.

Often the “client” status of the student is linked to something called “source-based learning”. This is basically a school-oriented practice (and unworthy of the university institution, except in the case of distance learning) that is oriented to the model of prescribed textbooks merely being facilitated by the teacher, and seeks to comply with bureaucratic correctness in terms of childish manuals that describe each “contact session” in terms of lists of “concrete outcomes”. In the process, what is largely eliminated is the person of the lecturer, the very person that (residential) students actually come to the university to engage with, but whose class-room “contact” with students can no longer accommodate something like the non-bureaucratically defined theoretical insight that occurred to the teacher just before the class (such insights not being part of the logic of strictly organised courses and study-guide authorised sources).

There are many other examples of teaching and research at the university having to be formatted to suit certain goals of bureaucratic surveillance and organisational “legibility” — goals set by administrative officials inside and outside the university. Obviously the normative structural relation, in the case of an institution like a university, should be the other way round. Administration and organisation should be suited to the unique internal dynamics of teaching and research that take place at the institution we call a university.

The colonisation process becomes ideologically even more complex through the unreflected ties of higher education as a “field of study” to the old positivist approaches of a (this time, legitimately) bygone

era in the history of philosophy and the philosophy of science. I am thinking here, for example, of the curious notion that in some objective way one can measure, with reference to numbers, the inherent quality of a piece of research, or a theory, or a research programme, or a lecture. If everybody even remotely acquainted with the philosophy of a “hard” science — in fact the “hardest” like physics⁸ — knows the absurdity of such a proposal, why are university administrators still struggling to impose all kinds of ridiculous measuring devices on phenomena that simply cannot be measured in this way? Why do exponents of the “field” of higher education not even attempt to discuss how exponents of the ultra-foundational discipline of physics have long since despaired of settling matters of truth (and corresponding “quality”) by way of readily available methodology and procedure? (Not to speak of administrative/bureaucratic measures and procedures!)

The ideological picture worsens still more in terms of complexity when the “steering” logic to which I have been referring links up with yet another ideological discourse, namely the narcissistic achievement ideology with which our mass-mediatised culture is drenched. This infects all of us in some way or other, but that does not mean that we should not attempt to be critically aware of it, and make efforts to counteract it. The moral and ethical truth is that personal achievement is not “what it’s all about”. But if we do accord hypernormative status to this goal we will be tempted to study for recognition in terms of degrees and promotions; to publish for recognition in terms of CV length, accredited article income, and so on;⁹ to impose a prestige culture on our students (giving them to understand that it’s all in the percentages); to slant our departments towards “community service” for institutional recognition, and so forth.

More bad news is that, in typical ideological fashion, all of this can be hidden from others as well as from ourselves by masks (assumed by others and ourselves) that seem to portray merely an innocent and inno-

8 Cf the work of Popper, who wanted to take credit for killing positivism, Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, Laudan, and post-Kuhnian critical realism.

9 Note the central role of positivist measurement in such assessments — enshrined and hallowed numbers provide oracular revelations about the real identity of the smartest people among us, at least at the present moment.

vative interest in “new paradigms”, “quality and excellence”, “public relevance”, “community service”, “academic entrepreneurship”, and so on.

The upshot of all of this seems to me to be something like the creation of a new kind of “class system” at the university. There is the upper class, which is in fact the intellectual “working class” in the sense of being materially, actively, “hands-on” engaged in serving the real needs of the “masses out there”, thus gaining the new kind of educational recognition, making money for itself and for the university to boot.¹⁰ Then there is a “middle class” with the potential to get into the thick of things in the future — but at this stage still needing to acquire a new vocabulary and a list of new goals and purposes. They are, so to speak, caught between paradigms. Finally, there is the new “under-class”: poor sods interested only in outlandish stuff like superstring theory (physics) or GB theory (linguistics). Obviously, in terms of “relevance”, there is no way one can “service” the community with these abstractions — even though they may be extraordinarily beautiful and have extraordinary explanatory power; even though they may open up all kinds of secrets and mysteries to genuine students with inquiring minds, who may perhaps not only be interested in making money but in questions about the nature of thought, or space, or time, or reality itself. The unfortunate fact of the matter is, however, that marvelous though such theories may be, if they cannot say something that makes socio-economic sense, or even be measured and evaluated for some practical use, the dreaming theorist and inspired lecturer had better wake up. Something like M-theory might perhaps be trying to tell us what reality is ultimately made of, but it cannot even be laboratory-tested, for heaven’s sake!

Again, I know perfectly well that we live in a troubled country with huge social problems that need to be addressed with the utmost celerity. I am, in fact, in favour of the university, in times and circumstances like these, going beyond its ideal “job description”, even more — much more — than it has already done in the past, to assist wherever possible. However, entering into such special projects should take its

10 Rosseel (2004: 116-7) seems to agree with the concept that universities “produce, broker[!] and disseminate relevant[!] knowledge” — which is “research” — and “train knowledge workers” — which is “teaching and learning”.

point of departure from the kind of structural-normative and ideology-sensitive awareness that I have tried to sketch above. This awareness should continually frame the bigger picture, and continually be debated with reference to what we are actually doing. Also in the sense of: doing to others and to ourselves ...

But this critical and crucially necessary awareness I find lacking in CS/AE discourse. On the contrary, it is (“unconsciously”, I take it) generally manufactured by consent of the ideological steering complex sketched above. Whereupon the discourses of higher education and university management actually become the manufacturers of (public and university) consent; unwilling and unconscious enforcers of ideological relations of domination — even while all pride themselves on the way in which the university is rocketing away from its ideological past, guided by the (steering) powers of the future.

All of this is not to say that there are no “elements of truth” or helpful perspectives in the discourse that I have targeted here (even in terms of getting something like ideology-critique to the people “out there”). But these elements and perspectives actually stand in relations of high tension (unrecognised of course) to all the other standard ingredients of the discourse. It is this discursive tension that the field has to recognise and come to grips with.

6. Brief comments on the paper on academic entrepreneurship

I shall close with just a few comments on the paper by Prof Peter Rosseel. As a whole, I think I can indeed understand what he says, against the hermeneutically-usable background sketched above. Obviously, the paper is confined to the AE theme, so much of what I have touched on above does not enter explicitly into his discussion. Nevertheless, I think that the whole discursive complex that I have reviewed above in terms of basic ideology and selected examples is indeed the broad framework that informs a paper such as this, and countless others like it.

One of the first things that struck me about the paper is the way that “academic entrepreneurship” and “community service” are said to “refer to the same concept” (Rosseel 2004: 113). This is qualified by

the statement that “in this paper” such an equivalence holds — which makes it uncertain whether the author is assuming something only within the context of his paper, or whether he is making a general conceptual connection, honoured in the paper. Somewhat confusingly, it is then stated that it is important to define both terms adequately to avoid confusion, but this is then deemed “beyond the scope” of the paper. Yet, the article expresses concern that separate entities at universities, one for AE and one for CS, may “stimulate bureaucracy” [!] and “demotivate entrepreneurial academics” (Rosseel 2004: 113). My impression is that the paper is actually making the case that AE and CS (ideally) are one and the same thing. If so, this is a startling example of the already ideologically narrowed concept of community service being discursively delivered up to the hypernormative rule of mere economism. Even any kind of ideological “democracy” (a coalition of hypernormative logics) seems to be ruled out here.

In addition: with reference to situations where separate AE and CS entities exist, the paper expresses concern that such “complexity” may be “used” in a way that will endanger careers and/or “the university’s reputation” (Rosseel 2004: 113). I find the reasoning here hard to follow; the norms invoked (careerism and institutional prestige) are much clearer (cf my remarks on how achievement ideology is linked to the larger steering ideology behind CS/AE discourse).

Interestingly, it is also claimed that when AE aims are followed, the result for one’s classes can amount to another aim, namely a “contextualising” or even an “upgrading” (Rosseel 2004: 113). Note how economism here comes to rule hypernormatively on (and thus overrule) educational judgments about the quality of teaching. In line with typical hypernormative logic, the idea is more or less that, when AE as a goal is related to the classroom it takes on the guise of an educational meta-norm, so that simply teaching within the framework of this goal-become-norm ensures educational progress. In more or less the same vein, there is also talk of AE-orientated researchers “improving” the more “traditional and fundamental” research done within the human sciences (Rosseel 2004: 114).

I find rather ominous the paper’s observation that it is “nowadays” difficult for a university to “accept” that new faculty members might want to choose two options out of the three (research, teaching, and

community service) — with community service not featuring as one of their options ... (Rosseel 2004: 113-4). Here, the inner core of university culture, the value placed on uncompromised knowledge, as well as the academic freedom to participate in this culture, are blatantly threatened by rampant economism.

As for the administrative “measuring logic” that I have described above, the paper mentions without comment that the “development of mathematical models to measure and value the impact of research articles” is an example of “inward-bound” AE (Rosseel 2004: 117). The implication here is that research can be “valued” by means of “measuring”, and that both are related to “impact”. Administrative rationalism, positivist number-crunching, and the “culture of narcissism” (Christopher Lasch) — come together here to form a complex hypernormative apparatus.

How would such an apparatus deal, for example, with one of the founders of superstring theory, John Schwarz, who is recognised today as being creatively involved in one of the most amazing paradigm shifts in the whole history of physics, but who was academically marginalised for many years of his professional life — his institution consistently refused him tenure, and he was even the butt of his colleagues’ jokes — while he, virtually alone, believed in what he was doing from day to day, which was thinking and writing symbols on a blackboard.

Perhaps the most astounding example of economism in relation to knowledge is the paper’s assertion that no university can any longer restrict itself to “inward-bound” AE “even when it includes the study of current problems in their communities of practice”. Immediately afterwards, the rhetorical device of adducing ancient (Chinese) wisdom is utilised blandly declaring that “[t]o know and not to act is not to know” (Rosseel 2004: 119). Here the hypernormative binding of analytical knowledge to economist goals advances (or descends) to a new level: the economic hypernorm appropriates to itself a mediating concept of “action”, which serves the ideological purpose of distancing “study” even further from its “own” colonising/legitimising norm. The captured slave can now only approach his master through the mistress whom the master has taken.

These few examples, all culled from the first few pages of Rosseel's paper, are enough, I think, to illustrate my analysis of the ideological complex that is currently "steering" higher education by means of various hypernormative logics which are often interwoven, but which also strain under relations of inner tension. What are the possibilities for "deconstructing" this machine, which was created and is being maintained with the help of international political and educational "discursive consortiums"? One has to be extremely sceptical about such possibilities, in spite of the cult of critique that "postmodernism" has brought with it, and in spite of the international renown of the arch-deconstructor and educational re-thinker, Jacques Derrida. We are probably headed, educationally speaking, for Adorno's and Foucault's nightmares of the "administrated" and "normalised" world ... in spite of university management's rhetoric about how well our institutions are doing, and (somewhat paradoxically) how much better things will be in the future.

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