

Closing address: Colloquium on Socially Engaged scholarship: Held at the Missionvale Campus of NMMU on the 27 May 2015

Enver Motala: CIPSET Associate

I have been asked to provide some concluding remarks to the day's proceedings and in doing so to capture some of the key issues that arose in the course of the deliberations today.

As we all know summaries are always partial since they reflect the proclivities, prejudices and the experiential background of the person doing the summary – in this case, myself. Others might have done this quite differently.

Let me start however by outlining what I thought were the purposes we set out to achieve today. I think we set out to *examine three questions*.

The first was to deepen our understanding, conceptualization, definition and even the theorization of the idea of **Socially Engaged Scholarship** - scholarship that engages the university in the production of knowledge through its co-construction with the communities of the university.

Secondly, we wanted to exemplify the problems of conceptualizing engaged scholarship through the practices of those who are directly involved in it. We wanted to see how the ideas about engaged scholarship are being taken forward in practice by academics and the communities of the university. This, we felt would allow us to understand the question of engaged scholarship in its diverse practices and further enrich our conceptualization and practice of engaged scholarship.

Thirdly, we wanted to explore the implications of engaged scholarship for the role of the university and by implication for that of its academics as researchers, teachers, and more generally as intellectuals and activists. And we wanted to understand this role at this historical juncture given the long history of institutions of higher learning, their evolution in the wide range of socio-historical contexts and the forces that have changed and propelled them over time.

Universities have always reflected (sometimes by contestation) many of the ideas that are socially dominant at any particular time.

The presentations today went a long way towards the exploration of these questions and we learnt many important things which I will return to shortly. But we also learnt, fourthly, that there are many complex issues which could not be resolved in one such event and that we will have to continue to explore these so that we achieve greater clarity and understanding over time. These discussions can never be exhaustive since they are likely always to reveal new questions for deeper reflection and practice.

What are some of the things we learned from the various presentations?

Naturally it's not possible to reflect on everything and so I select just a few of the very important insights we got about socially engaged scholarship.

- Every presentation was based – even if not overtly – on some or other conception of change. As one of the presenters said, the work they did was intensely 'political'. Of course this was not in the party-political sense but more deeply in the sense of relating to the underlying values, principles, social philosophies and choices it sought to explore. Although the presentations reflected in some cases on the question of social change, they were inevitably also about political and economic change. If they were situated in the domain of changes to gendered relationships or the environment, they were simultaneously about political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic change. In effect they were about a commitment to a transformed society – a society of changed social relations of power, privilege, accountability and democracy. They were intrinsically about a different society from the present and about a role for knowledge and its uses in the evolution of such a society.
- They exemplified the difficult struggles that participants engaged in when developing their ideas and practices in the democratic co-construction of knowledge while using the variety of approaches relating to public participation, 'action research', 'social voice' and other strategies to achieve engaged scholarship. In fact these examples were richly textured

and illustrated the possibilities for deepening the methods used to understand social reality more fundamentally through the building of relationships for the co-constructed of knowledge between academics and the communities in and of the university. These approaches went beyond the limits of 'inter-multi and trans' disciplinary knowledge even while maintaining the conventions of discipline-based knowledge. They transcend the limits of the unhelpful divisions pervasive in academia not by undermining the importance of disciplinary knowledge but by the process of co-constructing knowledge based on the diversity of its sources and forms – i.e. by re-constituting the very relations that are formed in the process of knowledge constructions in conventional academic approaches to this.

- We understood too that certain forms of knowledge are dominant and represent the power of hegemonic forces globally. These express themselves both locally and globally across nation states representing global interests which are the generative sources of inequality, poverty, unemployment and the militarization of societies that are recklessly committed to destructive and violent systems regardless of the consequences for both humanity and the planetary environment.
- These presentations were filled with the idea of agency – that is, that society, communities and indeed academics and their institutions were not without the power of agency - agency that could change existing oppressive systems, the cultures and practices associated with them and the ideas on which they feed. Agency represented the critical bulwark against the predations of those who can see nothing but self-interest through the power of accumulation, greed, unlimited consumption and the commodification of all things. These presentations about agency were at the same time about hope and possibility. They represented demonstrations of alternative ways of looking at knowledge production, different from some of the staid conventions of academia. They were a necessary antidote to the sense of hopelessness and defeat that strongly characterizes so much social analysis. Indeed if anything – these examples show us alternative possibilities for social organization, for other ways of

understanding work, the environment, housing, health and gendered relations, education and other human activities and ultimately - for our purposes today – the possibility of reconfiguring our view of the role, purposes, and forms of knowledge in society.

These ideas, as exemplified by the practices demonstrating them, were exemplary and purposeful. Yet there were a number of questions for which there was not enough time to reflect. If there was time many of the presenters would have provided their insights on these questions too. As we know they were limited to 10 minutes only and that is hardly adequate for the kind of work being done. I would like therefore to reflect on some of the issues which we might want to explore and engage with more fully in building our ideas about engaged scholarship.

The first relates to the university itself. The university is a contradictory space that struggles to reconcile a number of competing demands on its mandates. Some of these demands seek to reconfigure the very nature of those mandates refashioning them for narrower and narrower purposes privileging those already privileged in society. In its contradictoriness the university seeks to live up to its public purposes in the context of the global pressure of competitiveness, generated mainly by the impetus of corporate capital and its demands for appropriating knowledge for private purposes. The university has to reconcile the interests of the individuals who 'live' in it with the interests of the 'public' to which it is meant to be oriented. It has to be 'responsive' to a number of competing 'communities' and constituencies and 'role-players,' local and national, and of course its funding and legislative mandates make inroads into its 'freedom' to act as 'independently'. But in this diversity of constituencies there are unquestionably dominant players in the definition of the university as highly organized constituencies. In this, academics themselves and their immediate interests driven by a mixture of status mobility and financial imperatives make them key players in the development of the university. Their 'responsiveness' as expressed in their approaches to students, their academic colleagues and associations, the disciplinary conventions and rules shaping their practice and increasingly their role as consultants to corporate interests and the government,

often defines the very nature of their calling and commitments and their academic 'being'. The contradiction this engenders – especially to the wider public purposes of universities – requires critical self-reflection about our roles as academics and how we interpret these. In particular this requires much greater introspection about the value to society of academic work since, despite the great body of knowledge produced in academia and the rapid accumulation of scientific and technological knowledge, dystopia abides in many parts of the world where poverty, oppressive and exploitative practices, violence and inhumanity remain. In effect therefore issues of power and powerlessness need to foreground the production of knowledge and the role of academia in society since power is unavoidably implicated in any discussion about knowledge.

Secondly, these contradictory characteristics of the university are compounded by the tension between the demands of producing 'outputs' which attract funding based on the policy criteria governing the financing of higher education relative to the demands of the kinds of engaged scholarship we saw today. This latter remains largely un- and under-funded or funded through 'external' funding outside the priorities of dedicated financing policy. Moreover a great deal of the work we saw today is intensive and time consuming if it is to be done with integrity. The challenge this implies for every university relates to how such work can be sustained as very much a part of the scholarly mandate of universities and not simply as a nice-to-have appendage to its 'core' mandate.

Thirdly, the old and unhelpful division about the 'two cultures' (separating the physical sciences from the humanities and social sciences) remains pervasive in the culture of universities. This makes the reconciliation of a wider range of perspectives – social and scientific, natural and humanist, available for the analysis and resolution of social and planetary crises, impossible. Most academics seem committed to the disciplinary divides that mar the possibilities for understanding phenomena more comprehensively and completely. Conceptions of certainty, driven by misplaced ideas about the potential value of 'factual' and 'evidence based' data (as inherently bad or as 'empirically' necessary) lead to uninformed prejudice and bad practice. In reality facts and ideas are only as good as their critical evaluation would permit. The old debates about the 'two cultures'

and about the divisions between quantity and quality are misleading since the real issue about any useful data or set of ideas is the analysis to which they are brought for the social and other choices which they inform.

Fourthly, the discussions today raised questions about how we conceptualize the idea of transformation as it affects the university. I could say that the way transformation is generally conceived in the public media and especially in the business practice, often emulated by state institutions, are inadequate for our purposes. In these conceptions of transformation the issue is far too often essentially about the single question of 'demographic representation'. Sometimes added to this issue is the references to governance and institutional structures, 'outputs' and markets – i.e. the discourse about the need to 'transform' all these things to meet the greater goal of competitiveness for profitability or public 'efficiency and effectiveness'. These are minimalist approaches to the idea of transformation so that even if we do these things in relation to the university (a la a factory, business or government bureaucracy) we only scratch the surface attributes of transformation. The transformation of the university and how it is conceived and acted on has to go considerably further. It implies most fundamentally how a public university understands its role in society and how its practices relate to this role. This raises a number of non-sequential and therefore contemporaneous questions. Transformation in this sense means a critical examination not only of its demographics, structures, modes of organization, 'performance' indicators, 'outputs' and the like but much more fundamentally what the process and purposes of knowledge construction are in relation to society and the public mandate. This in turn raises questions about everything the university does, its curriculum, teaching and learning, support for students and its academics together with the relationship between these and the administrative and financial structures choices governing the university as also the alleged 'culture' of the university and its very interpretation. Here the discussions about toppled statues are pertinent but they remain only the beginning of the road to transformation. In other words there is no doubt about the offensive nature of the egregiously celebratory symbols of apartheid and other oppressive regimes. There is little doubt about that in the minds of the great majority of the citizenry.

But the offences symbolized in these symbols must be used to open up a broader and more fundamental discussion about how we understand transformation so that it is not an end in itself. Otherwise it will stultify any attempt at genuine transformation. In other words issues like the question of statues can be very productive once they are used to take forward a broader and encompassing agenda for change - a process that must go well beyond the limits of changing the symbols of apartheid and oppression – to the heart of the nature and purposes of universities as public institutions of society.

In effect therefore the discussions today, whether we recognized that or not - were about the very idea of 'university' – what it means to whom and for what purposes and the contestations around this. This discussion is therefore not only about 'community education' or engaged scholarship but about the heart and soul of the university and what it represents. And all of this implies the ability to mobilize the agency and power that lies in the communities of the university through the intellectual and other forms of engagement with and within the university.

It requires a deepening discussion, debate and dialogue, rethinking how we re-conceptualize the construction of knowledge socially while we widen the remit of these engagements. These processes – because they are not an end-point - must be deeper, more conscious, continuous and evolving within and outside the university and bring together the university and its communities in meaningful dialogue about what is meant by engaged scholarship and its framing premises. The struggle to achieve a higher level of understanding about the co-construction of knowledge that simultaneously reconfigures its social relations (in knowledge production) is what we should strive to achieve.

It is something that the organizers of this event will hopefully continue to strive for as they take this process forward.

Thank you.

29.05.2015