

Comments on Adesina: “Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy in South Africa: Internal and External Threats in the Context of Transformation”

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SPEAKER NOTES

1. The keynote address provides an important extension of the ongoing debate on academic freedom (AF) and institutional autonomy (IA) beyond the liberal mantra of the TB Davie formula

“our freedom from external interference in a) who shall teach, b) what we teach, c) how we teach, and d) whom we teach”
(one problem with the Davie formula of academic freedom is that, strictly, it defines IA and *not* AF)

* Not all South African universities share the *liberal* tradition and its conception of AF: the Afrikaans universities subscribed to the traditional notion of a ‘volksuniversiteit’ implying a very different set off relations between the university and society (more compatible with some current notions of the developmental role of universities as national resources?)

* Adesina importantly locates the AF/IA debate in the wider African context: cf. Lima/Kampala Declarations and the instructive parallels between post-independent developments at African universities with South African post-1994 democratic transformation of universities.

cf. Lima/Kampala conception of AF as a human right inseparably linked to freedoms of other sections of the community (= “no academic freedom in an unfree society”?!)

cf. University of Cape Town Senate 1986 departure from annual TB Davie confirmation of academic freedom vs. threat of state interference: “academic freedom does not exist in SA (as an unfree society)”

2. Cf. Adam Habib paper at previous CHE Regional Forum similarly set out to widen the unduly narrow focus of the South African academic freedom debate:

Who are the enemies of AF in contemporary South Africa?:

- i) Traditional and standard liberal focus is on *state interference* as a threat to AF in the post-1994 context in essentially similar ways as under apartheid (also Jonathan Jansen paper)
- ii) André du Toit revision of Davie formula: currently threats to AF are not just *external* but as much and more so *internal* – cf. managerial revolution, marketisation and coporationisation of universities etc
- iii) Habib: adds to list of enemies of AF some *senior academics* themselves who are failing to uphold intellectual responsibility
Cf. Ashwin Desai paper (1998) on South African Marxist scholars of 1980s who had sold out in the 1990s and later, a South African “trahison des clerks” (Benda)

Essentially this amounted to a significant failure in *intellectual responsibility* (IR)

Question: what is the relation between academic freedom (AF) and intellectual responsibility (IR) in this context?

3. AF as *right* and as *duty* in relation to *intellectual responsibility* (IR):

Cf. Lima/Kampala Declarations conceive of AF as a human *right* but concurrently insist on the *responsibility* of intellectuals towards society etc (Adesina: “academic freedom ... immediately valorises obligations and responsibility ... as a mutually inclusive web of social obligations”)

Question: AF as *right* or AF as *duty*, and relation to intellectual responsibility (IR)?

NB that rights / duties should not be essentialised but must be seen in *relational* terms and with regard to the specific *correlation* between rights and duties of different parties

if I or academics generally have a *right* to AF then this is correlative with a *duty* on other parties (including the state & society) to respect this right and not interfere with it

ditto as with property rights, freedom of speech etc
unless other parties have correlative *duties* of this kind my right to AF would be of no consequence

and if I or academics generally have a *duty/obligation* to AF/IR then this must be in relation to other parties (the state/society/line manager) who has a correlative *right* to expect this from me/us.

Question: Are the (liberal) right to AF and (social) duty/obligation of IR *complementary* or *alternative* conceptions?

4. Instructive analogy of developments in post-independent African universities & post-1994 “transformation” of universities in newly democratic South Africa:

Cf. 1960s expatriate staff invoking AF “to be left alone”
= corresponds with South African predominantly English liberal enclave universities who invoke AF and IA in defence of unreformed institutional culture still marked by intolerance and authoritarianism

cf 1960s African intellectuals who defined the transformation agenda of post-independence universities converting colonial institutions (not as a state-initiated project)

& flourishing of indigenous intellectual traditions e.g. the Dakar/Ibadan/Dar es Salaam schools of history

= no South African equivalents of African intellectuals defining the transformation agenda of the universities (but the state)

& = no South African equivalents of flourishing indigenous intellectual tradition?!

Cf. initiative of “The Native Club” as symptom of the underlying problem: why are such initiatives necessary?

Questions: we need a fuller account of this analogy with African universities:

- 1) The account only refers to the role of academics (expatriates/Africans) in relation to the state – what about the relation to the developing economy and society and to civil society?
- 2) What about the later history of African universities after the 1960s = increasing involvement / interference by the state (why?)

Question concerns the wider picture, not just of academics and the state, but the presence or not of an underlying social pact on AF and IR in post-independent or transforming society

5. Perverse IA and AF?:

Cf. context of current IA and AF debates at South African universities, more especially of English liberal enclave

= “context of unreformed institutional culture defined by acute intolerance and authoritarianism ... socially incestuous relations that inscribes the institutions with markers of insiders and outsiders”

= “persistence of institutional culture steeped in subliminal racism ... and a fundamentally unreformed curriculum”

Cf. instances: University of Witwatersrand Makgoba affair, University of Cape Town Mamdani affair, Rhodes Rob Shell affair

In this context the invocations of IA and AF at these institutions are self-serving and perverse and amount to an evasion of “the responsibility of academia and academics to meet their responsibility to a new society”

These are serious charges: the discourse of IA & AF has the ideological function of dissimulating and justifying the basic lack of “transformation” of these institutions, their failure to meet the challenges of the new democratic South Africa

Conversely the imperatives of intellectual responsibility (IR) must be closely related to the agenda of “transforming” these institutions, converting them from colonial to national institutions on the analogy of 1960s post-independent African universities

Questions:

Are IA and AF to be regarded as *alternatives* to IR, to be discarded or transcended through the project of transforming residual colonial institutions?

Or would the sustained practice of IR result in proper and “unperverted” AF and IA? Would this amount to a different conception of AF than the liberal notion of AF (e.g. in terms of the TB Davie formula?)

More specifically: what is the relation between AF and the transformation of institutional culture at liberal South African universities?

- two sides of the same coin: inextricably connected with each other?
- related but distinct issues, each with its own criteria and objectives, not to be confused with each other?
- under what circumstances could the transformation of institutional culture, or even the demand for IR, become a threat to AF?

5. Revisiting relation between (liberal) right to AF and (social) duty/obligation of IR: complementary or alternative conceptions?

* note that AF is a *general* right applying to academic community across the board while IR applies more especially to some (= “public intellectuals”?)

* note that AF is a *constitutional* right like freedom of speech in SA, but IR not

cf. IA unlike AF *not* a constitutional right: implications?

cf. in US AF *not* a constitutional right like freedom of speech: implications?

Implications of constitutional position have not really been tested yet in South African context, but equally and more important may be underlying social compact