

## THE ACADEMIC VOCATION IN AN AGE OF COMMODITIZATION

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I begin with the commodity:

*The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as 'an immense collection of commodities'. The individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the individual commodity. (Marx, the opening sentences to the first volume of Capital)*

What is the mysterious thing '*the commodity*'? How do the everyday things we use turn into commodities? The answer is straightforward. Not only can they be put to use: in our case research and teaching. They also have value in exchange. They can be bought and sold in the market at a price.

Work produces goods for use. Labour, in the abstract, produces commodities for exchange. The commodity, then, brings our individual labours together through the money, the medium of exchange. In a capitalist society, labour-power itself becomes a commodity. Capital, as Marx defined it, is '*a social relation*': between the free workers and the owner of the means of production, to whom they sell their labour power.

Commodification is hardly new; neither is globalization. In a slave society, human beings are themselves commodities, bought and sold at slave markets. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, to cite but one example, was an element in a global economy, in which, in Marx's words, in *Wage Labour and Capital*, '*the wage slavery*' of the English textile industry was built upon the '*real slavery*' of the cotton states in the U.S. South. The questions we must ask are not about globalization, or about commodification, but about the forms that they have taken and are taking.

What do we mean by 'higher education'? Higher than what? Is it just '*schooling for grown-ups*': the very use of the term 'tertiary education' seems to give the game away. Or is it more than that? And if so, what are its distinctive virtues? What purposes does it serve? On what values does it rest? What are the institutional foundations of the academic freedom that we expect and of the autonomy that Universities claim? What responsibilities do these bring with them?

To take theories and investigation to the limits of reason has always been a source of suspicion or an abomination to the orthodox. It may bring specific beliefs into question. It does not destroy, nor does it validate faith.

Ibn Khaldun began the *Muqqadimah*:

*History is a discipline widely cultivated among nations and races. ... The man in the street, the ordinary people are eager to know it. Kings and leaders vie for it. ...on the surface, history is no more than information about political events, dynasties and occurrences of the past, elegantly presented and spiced with proverbs. ... The inner meaning of history ... involves speculation and at an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanations of the causes and origins of existing things and the knowledge of the how and the why of events.*

In west Africa, the spread of learning depended on travel and, above all, on books. The thousands of manuscript books of the scholars of the university at the mosques of Timbuctoo tell us of intellectual traditions encompassing legal, theological, scientific and historical forms of knowledge. They also remind us of the ways in which the city was linked with ancient networks of trade in the Sahel, the Sudan, North Africa, and beyond, carrying Islamic scholarship with slaves, cloth and gold.

Among the many texts anthologised as *Nigerian Perspectives* by Thomas Hodgkin is an excerpt from Al-Sa'di's *Ta'rikh al Su'dan*, which cites Ahmad B`aba's *Biographical Dictionary*, completed in 1596:

*... my grandfather ... was commonly known as al-Hajj Ahmad. He was a man of goodness, virtuous and pious, mindful of the Sunna, a very upright and distinguished man, full of love for the Prophet and devoting himself unceasingly to the reading of poems in honour of Muhammed and of the Shifa or iyad. Lawyer, lexicographer, grammarian, prosodist and scholar, he occupied himself with the sciences all his life. He possessed numerous books, copied in his own hand, with copious annotations. At his death he left about 700 volumes ...*

A very different form of learning, combining oral sources, participant observation, and, in John Peel's words, the '*compelling quality of its narrative structure*' is Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yoruba*. It was written in 1897 and published after an extraordinary series of mishaps in 1921; it has now been reprinted eight times. Johnson's motive was '*purely patriotic ... that the history of our fatherland might not be lost in oblivion*'. Johnson, says Peel, '*gave the notion of a Yoruba people real historical substance by making them the subject of a powerful story of growth, decline, and recovery.*' Johnson's achievements were shaped by a large vision. It was a product of research, but not as a professional vocation and perhaps all the better for that. What would a 'peer reviewer' have made of it in 1898?

The signboard at the Faculty of Science, University of Ibadan says, simply, '*Science is about Questions not Answers*'.

These forms of learning are far away from the world into which Lord Mandelson wishes to take us. Under the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, British Universities have become an aspect of 'regional economic development.' *Higher Ambitions*, the Department's policy vision for higher education has this to say on academic freedoms and the status of universities:

*to sustain the role of universities in urban regeneration, the Government will protect*

*the freedoms that higher education institutions currently enjoy, within the framework of current capital and investment approval processes to devise their own business processes and to borrow commercially to fund new developments. ...*

That's it.

International graduate students, paying very high fees, are now crucial to the income of British universities. Universities and their students in turn are crucial to the economies of the cities where they are situated.

Higher education has always served instrumental purposes, beyond the pursuit of learning in its own right. The first universities in Christian Europe prepared their students for careers in law and in the church. More recently, they provided a recruiting ground for colonial officials. Today, my own students at Oxford may well go on to qualify as lawyers, but they are far more likely to seek careers with Goldman Sachs than with the Church of England or with the Colonial Office.

The economic return to fees for University education, for local, out-of-state, and international students, whether in the U.K., the U.S.A., Canada, or Australia, to list the three most popular destinations for English-language education, lies in their enhancement of future opportunities, which may owe as much to the status of the University than to the quality of its teaching. Many universities are franchising the status of their degrees across the world by e-learning, distance learning, and on international campuses. These can be ways to extend access to higher education to students who could not otherwise afford it. More cynically, it is often cheaper and yields a higher return to Universities, when the costs of distance learning arguably ought be much as or even more not expensive and not less to provide.

Not only is higher education a commodity, traded in international markets. It can be expensive and, as government funding is withdrawn, is getting more so. It can bring very high returns, but is probably less so as the number of graduates expands.

Universities can be ranked, like teams in a football league, according to weights and measures selected by the institution or newspaper doing the ranking. Universities are not like football leagues: they don't play one another by the same rules on the same field. Or maybe they are like the English Premier League, where four teams and their godfathers can buy up all the world's best players and make it more or less impossible for others to get ahead of them.

'Research-intensive' universities derive a rising proportion of their income from research funds, from government, from charities, and from corporations, even if they have less discretion as to how to spend them. University research serves the interest of publics in numerous ways that cannot be counted in corporate profits or increases in the gross domestic product.

It is not all good news. Corporate investors are less likely than they might once have been to fund universities and the pursuit of scientific inquiry. They expect something back for their money and in this way, they affect the balance among research agendas. Governments and international agencies look to universities to undertake policy research. This does not mean the study of policies, how they are made, how they are implemented, and what assumptions they rest on.

To ask these questions subverts the enterprise. Ruling institutions expect researchers to tell them what they want to know and not to be told that they are asking the wrong questions.

Within 'international' universities, at least among those that can afford it, the balance between teaching and research is tending to move towards research. In the U.K., research performance, and the funding that follows it, is recognised by peer review, and by citations in disciplinary, and particularly international journals, as well as by the ability to bring in research overheads. Inevitably, research income and capacity, *and* teaching resources, perhaps rightly, are concentrated, nationally and internationally, in a few élite universities at the highest level of the status hierarchy.

Within Universities, it makes fiscal sense to reward research rather than teaching and to pass incomes down to the departments, and then among individual academics. Academics can then trade their abilities, their achievements, and reputations in international markets. This has the virtue of making it possible for the young and able to join the older and distinguished in the places where their talents can best be used. At the same time, it encourages rivalries rather than cooperation and rewards those who pursue their individual goals single-mindedly and know how to play the game.

A good argument for allocating resources according to market prices is that the process of exchange itself provides information about prices, across time and over distances. My friend and sometime colleague, Paul Clough explained how this worked in interlinked commodity and credit markets among Hausa Muslim grain traders. Profit provided the incentive to supply credit and buy grain. Shared *tijaniyya* religious allegiance and observance and an ethos of trust were the moral foundation of Hausa grain and credit trades and market information.

The academic market place does not work quite like that. Trust and reciprocity are the moral foundations for a common enterprise. But prices are not set by supply and demand in an open commodity market with shared information. The market is administered, both within universities and among them. To allocate resources and to rank universities, their performances must first be enumerated. If they are to be ranked, they must be counted. So somebody must be paid to do the counting. And then somebody else to compare the counts. Rather than reducing transaction costs, administered markets increase them. Resources are allocated *as if* they were commodities, each being brought forward before the judges. Prices fixed outside the universities create a culture of commoditization inside them.

Within and among universities, there is increasingly a bifurcation of research and teaching. This describes how higher education is coming to be ordered. Governments and international agencies want universities to be centrally administered by a chief executive with his, or her, SMT, the senior management team, and organized hierarchically. Constitutional authority is placed outside the university, excluding the scholars who teach students and conduct research. Governments like to think they can then pull a lever at the top and rely on what Stalin called *transmission belts*' to relay them all the way down. Accountability is upwards, to the Administration. They are run by what, in 1752 in the *Theory of Modern Sentiments*, Adam Smith called, the 'men of system':

*The man of system, ...on the is apt to be very wise in his own conceit. He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, ...*

The terminologies of management are complemented by *devspeak*, or the language of 'Development'. Development is self-evidently a good thing. As Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton explained in the 1995, *Doctrines of Development* combine an evolutionary conception of Progress, under the direction of its Trustees, embodied in the practices of *Development*.

The responsibilities of trusteeship are exercised today by international agencies who oversee development projects and policies. Their macro-economic strategies have in many cases had positive results but have brought with them their own contradictions and unintended consequences. Development projects have typically failed to meet up to expectations. Whatever their rare successes, and their usual confusions and disastrous policies failures may be, their modes of operation are technical. Democracy is inefficient and cannot match up to the requirements of 'good governance'. The scope for the practices of democratic accountability and decision-making within institutions is occluded behind screens of 'participatory development', or of the Africanist values of '*ujamaa*' or of '*ubuntu*'.

So, institutions matter. So does language and the ways in which it is used. In his essay, 'Politics and the English language', George Orwell explains how political writing can debase the English language. Conversely, lazy English, to which we are all prone, obscures political processes. There are, he observes, '*a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have used up all evocative power and merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves.*' Britain went to war in Iraq '*shoulder to shoulder*' with the United States. The dying metaphor is not a preserve of the English language. Eric Honecker proclaimed as the slogan of the German Democratic Republic in 1989: '*Vorwärts immer. Rückwärts nimmer.*' He was unwittingly echoed in English translation in New Labour's 2005 election: '*Forwards not backward*'.

As writers and teachers, we should reflect on the ways we use language in teaching, in writing, and in thinking. We should be wary of the evasive passive: 'A thousand people were killed'. But who killed them? We should always be careful with abstract nouns. Even more so when they are joined together: 'The development process entails'. Nobody does anything. It just happens. Higher education is an 'investment' in 'human capital'. We don't educate people any more and train people to use their skills and enhance them. The abstract metaphor transposes the idea of 'capital' into education.

Economic incentives and academic fashions bring university teachers and students into conformity with dominant fashions. Academics and graduate students particularly in the social sciences, and academics in universities often adopt the ruling methodologies or the current fashions among NGOs, for intellectual reasons, or to promote education and social welfare, to advance their careers, get jobs and earn a living.

Management studies trains people to adopt the latest jargons, familiarise themselves with the current acronyms, and learn the latest management techniques. It rarely studies management. The sociology of the policies and practices of higher education are far less developed than the sociology of education.

Academics are rightly called to make their contributions to the national economy and to public policies. Weber identifies the economic, political, and scientific as vocations in the Lutheran, and in the Puritan sense, that God is to be served by actions in this world. Each of these three 'warring Gods' make their claims on us. To serve them all at once creates professional dilemmas and moral discomfort.

We are familiar, in Britain or in Nigeria, with how political office may be traded up to economic benefit. Weber's account in his 1918 lecture, *Politics as a Vocation*, of how political machines in the U.S.A. lived '*off politics*' marks out the logic but not the enormous scale and dishonesty of Nigeria's '*contractocracy*'. The academy is not immune to the temptations of politics. Nolutshungu, writing in 1990, identifies a place for '*some elements from the [Nigerian] universities*' in the fragmentation and circulation among military, bureaucratic and political elites. They commit themselves to the world of politics without accepting responsibility for the consequences of their actions, the ethic which, for Weber, is demanded of those who engage with the vocation of politics.

Where then do our own responsibilities lie? If we take the calling of the academic life seriously, we pursue learning to promote knowledge. From this view, the division between research and teaching is between two different aspects of learning. Learning involves inquiry, skills, discovery, communication, teaching and reflection.

We do not start from certain knowledge but from puzzles, whether of a mathematical, theoretical, practical, historical, cultural, ethical or philosophical kind. We cannot know in advance where we they will take us. At the University of Stellenbosch, my philosophy teacher, Johan Degenaar, would always pose ideas as problems. It could be: '*Now, "Freedom". That's an interesting idea. What sort of thing is that? Let us set it as a problem.*'

At Oxford University, we are exceptionally fortunate to have the means to provide tutorials, in which we set weekly essays and discuss them with students. They are an expensive way to 'use academic time' but create possibilities for intellectual engagement. They are not limited to the humanities and social sciences. Innovative researches in the natural sciences combine creative imagination and experimental practice. It can be as important to find out which experiments don't work as it is to advance careers by publishing only those that do. The first task is not to teach science but to introduce students to scientific methods.

My colleague, Bernard Sufrin, a computer scientist, explains in *The Oxford Magazine*:

*I take a positive ... view of the role of the "mistake" in learning. Many scientists are trained in school that mistakes are **B A D**, and ... try to avoid getting into situations where their mistakes are exposed. ... I try to take them beyond this mentality, ... showing that what is important is learning to recognise a dead end when they see one, and having the stamina to explore other avenues, and the skill (and "courage") to recognise a point at which an argument or proof or design went astray.*

Oxford undergraduate students enjoy fewer contact hours with their lecturers, and thus have the chance and are under the compulsion to read more books. The virtue of the system is that the students do the work. We try to enable them to learn to think for themselves. (Some don't, and some become prime ministers instead.)

These ambitions are difficult to realise, all the more so to with very constrained resources. It is in pursuing them that we can find the intellectual excitement that university studies gave us and that we can offer to our students. Knowledge and critical reflection are what defines the distinctive aims of higher education as going beyond training and schooling.

Universities serve many purposes, some of which are inconsistent with others, and they derive their incomes in multiple ways. Academic salaries provide us with income, far more modest in some countries and in some universities than in others. Academics all have several obligations and take on many commitments, whether for career advancement, foreign travel, personal enjoyment, the public good, or a combination of these. Regrettably, there are those who fail to fulfil their responsibilities to their students, to their institutions, and to the taxpayer. We must all live with the world of commodities of which we are part, or not live at all. Its mundane values are not, in principle, in line with the vocation to which academics are called. There is a necessary tension between them.

What is the distinct vocation, or calling, of academic life. It does not lie in telling people how they must think or what they should do. In his lectures 'Science as a vocation', given in Munich, first in 1917 and then in 1919, Max Weber cites Tolstoi: '*Science (Wissenschaft) is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question: what shall we do and shall we live?*' As scholars and teachers, we may, even should, reflect on this question. We cannot expect to answer it. For answers we must look elsewhere. As scientists, we can study political processes and try to explain them. We cannot answer Lenin's question: '*What is to be done?*'

Weber went on to say:

*Fellow students, ... you will put the question: '... what then does science actually and positively contribute to practical and personal 'life'? ... First, of course, science contributes to the technology of controlling life by calculating external objects as well as man's activities. ... Second, science can contribute ... the tools and training for thought. Fortunately, ... the contribution of science does not reach its limit with this. We are in a position to help you to a third objective: to gain clarity.*

Whatever a persons religious or ethical commitments may be, for the shared moral values which make possible the pursuit of the *academic* vocation, we can only look within: to the duty, so hard ever to fulfil, '*of plain intellectual integrity*'.