Higher education and a ‘cosmopolitanism without illusions’

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Abstract
When Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian university graduate, set himself on fire to protest his loss of livelihood and the humiliation he suffered when the government confiscated his fruit and vegetable stand – a situation that sparked the subsequent Tunisian revolution on 17 December 2010 – the purpose of higher education again came under the spotlight. The kind of dystopia experienced through the subsequent Arab uprisings in many northern African countries foregrounds what higher education institutions on the African continent are supposed to do in order to deal with the political and ethnic violence we are witnessing on a daily basis. In this article we argue, firstly, that higher education cannot turn a blind eye to the perpetual violence in several African communities and, secondly, that higher education institutions should take more seriously the call for a ‘cosmopolitanism without illusions’ – one that can engender moments of democratic iterations, the recognition of human rights, and the restoration of human dignity.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND COMBATING THE RISK OF VIOLENCE
Often, the assumption is made that higher education has a violent potential and that people cannot be taught to respect difference and value human rights, thus reducing the risk of violence. If the argument is used that educated people are more likely to be the driving force behind violent action because they have the resources, literacy skills and assertiveness to mobilise mass protestations through Twitter, Facebook and other communication and information technologies (Lange 2012, 190), then it can equally be countenanced that less education would invariably reduce the risk of violence. If one uses the example of Mohamed Atta, the leader of the 9/11 bombers, as an example of an educated individual who used terrorist techniques to perpetrate violence, then we can claim that his higher education instilled in him psychological traits such as high aspirations and aggressiveness, which increased his chances of participating in terrorist violence. But then, the assumption is made that higher education only has a violent potential and that people cannot be taught to respect difference and value human rights, thus reducing the risk of violence. Lange
himself contends that unemployment and limited opportunities have been the causes of anti-state violence (Lange 2012, 201), therefore minimising higher education’s contribution to violence. In fact, Dixon (2009) and Thyne (2006) found that (higher) education does not increase the risk of civil war, but actually reduces the risk. We agree with Lange (2012, 204) that it would be counterproductive to limit violence by restricting higher education.

So, if higher education potentially reduces the risk of violence, and hence dystopia in society, on what grounds can it actually happen? Of course, the argument can be used that, for many years, higher education has been responsible for educating highly sophisticated and skilful individuals. For long, higher education institutions on the African continent have been committed to their technocratic agenda to produce students who can serve their communities, whether as teachers, lawyers, doctors or accountants, as vindicated by the institutions’ vision and mission statements to produce students who can professionally, vocationally and technically be attentive to the demands of the public good (of course, as determined by the government). In the main, higher education on the African continent has been very successful in its production of ‘technicians of learning’. Following Derrida’s deconstructive analysis, ‘technicians of learning’ are in fact former students of the university who have been educated to perform functions to meet the ends determined by the state and not (always) the ends of science – the latter being the work of scholars at higher education institutions, like universities. ‘Technicians of learning’ wield enormous power, not only as a result of displaying ‘technical mastery’ within their professions, whether as doctors, journalists, lawyers, magistrates, accountants, geneticists, biochemists, engineers, teachers or theologians, but also as a result of their influence on and shaping of the public sphere. For Derrida (2004, 96), ‘they are all representatives of the public or private administration of the university, all decision makers in matters of budgets and the allocation and distribution of resources ... all administrators of publications and archivisations, publishers, journalists, and so forth’. In a way they are technical consumers of knowledge(s) who professionally serve their own interests and those of the public. Prospectuses of several higher education institutions confirm the interest of many African institutions in producing ‘technicians of learning’ who can vocationally practise their careers in a way that is of benefit to the public. But herein, of course, also lies a potential danger to higher education.

The concern about the purposes of (higher) education goes back to Plato and Seneca and involves a distinction between education as training and education as the cultivation of the person. There are at least two reasons why the discussion of the purposes of higher education ought to gain prominence again: there now is a stronger focus on government control of higher education, and the unending emphasis on achieving measurable outputs and the lack of social morality that continuously undermine the conditions under which higher education should take place. Part of our concern in this article is with restoring the balance between higher education for technical purposes and higher education for the cultivation of moral persons. So, ‘technicians of learning’, like most state bureaucrats involved in the technical
administration of knowledge(s), often present themselves as judges and decision makers in the public practise of their careers. Mostly, they usurp the right to judge and decide on the performance of their professions without being subjected to the authority and censorship of the university and its faculties (Derrida 2004, 97). How common is it not for some doctors today to prescribe the inappropriate medication, or for some teachers to use archaic learning strategies without conferring with the university, or for some judges to wrongly convict an innocent person? The point is that ‘technicians of learning’ often use their university-acquired qualifications to parade as quintessential paragons of knowledge(s) who at any time usurp the power of scholars of knowledge to decide and judge. Yet this is not what they have been educated to do. But perhaps the university has stripped itself of its responsibility to judge and decide on the true and the false, with the result that ‘technicians of learning’ now masquerade as producers of knowledge(s). Following this, we want to argue that higher education institutions also have a social responsibility (in addition to their reasoned one). Instead, we argue that higher education institutions have a role to more than just reconstitute the place of critique – that is, a form of dissonance and questioning that is not dominated and intimidated by the power of performativity. Critique is a matter of enhancing the possibility of dissent and of a diversity of interpretations; of complicating what is taken for granted, pointing to what has been overlooked in establishing identities; an active opening up of your own thought structures that is necessary for other ways to find an entrance (Burik 2009, 301–304). And, for us, the social responsibility of higher education and its institutions ought to be about the cultivation of a ‘cosmopolitanism without illusions’.

Moreover, what is also wrong with society today, including society in Africa, is the advocacy of a dominant, expressive individualism that invariably finds its way through to higher education. This culture of expressivism involves ‘... making sure you get the most out of yourself, which means putting yourself in a job which is spiritually fulfilling, socially constructive, experientially diverse, emotionally enriching, self-esteem boosting, perpetually challenging, and emotionally edifying’ (Taylor 2007, 477). The implications of such a culture of expressivism are the following: firstly, the social life or practice that a person becomes part of must not only be one’s choice, but it must speak to one, it must make sense in terms of one’s development (professional and emotional) as one understands this, which means that there might be no necessary embedding of one’s link to the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether ‘church’ or state; secondly, as one exercises one’s individualism (say wearing one’s brand of Nike running shoes), one is aware of others’ mutual presence (such as identifying oneself with the heroes of the sport and joining millions of others wearing the branded items, thus expressing one’s ‘individuality’) – for instance, large numbers of people rubbing shoulders, unknown to each other, without dealing with each other, and yet affecting each other, forming the inescapable context of each other’s lives (being touched together); and thirdly, that one should not criticise the others’ values because they have a right to live their own life, just as one does (Taylor 2007, 484–490). These challenges of a
dominant cultural expressivism perhaps cause people to distance themselves from an understanding of (higher) education as a shared practice (what we shall argue for as a notion of cosmopolitanism without illusions), or even to move closer towards it (higher education). People exercise their choices and perhaps do not always want to be told what to do and when to do it, that is, to adhere to societal and at times institutional practices. Similarly, some people want to exercise the choice to retain and secure their identities, as the latter would publicly express who they are individually and collectivley. Likewise, for people to connect in ‘spaces of mutual display’ they actually break out of their confining spaces of family and tradition. In so doing, they invariably confront others’ ways of being, including the practices they hold on to dearly. And, when intolerance towards others’ ‘values’ is not tolerated, the pursuit of (individual) fulfilment gradually becomes eroded. Instead, people then increasingly aspire to holding on to their different views without being concerned that their views would be undermined by others.

Now if a culture of expressive individualism, which rests on individual choice, spaces of mutual display and recognising others’ differences, can undermine or consolidate people’s identities, how can higher education contribute towards enhancing or problematising what Taylor refers to as a culture of ‘authenticity’ (expressivism’)? Put differently, how should higher education be framed if it aims to take further the dispensation of expressive individualism or, alternatively, to undermine it? The point is, how does one begin to show the other that one must live one’s individualism or resist it? Cavell (1979, 443) claims that ‘all anyone knows or could know is what I am able to show them of myself’. A higher education agenda offers one criterion according to which we can show others who we are, where criterion refers to conditions under which we can think and communicate in language (Cavell 1979, 47). In a sense, higher education offers the opportunity for people to think and communicate in/through a language that they find palatable, and hence, possibly, to show themselves in the quest to enhance or resist expressive individualism. We now turn to a discussion of a cosmopolitanism without illusions that we think may countenance a culture of dominant expressive individualism that seemingly has manifested in the institutional and social practices of people.

**EVOKING A COSMOPOLITANISM WITHOUT ILLUSIONS**

For the aforementioned view on a cosmopolitanism without illusions we turn to the seminal thoughts of Seyla Benhabib (2011), who, in her latest book, *Dignity in adversity: Human rights in troubled times*, argues that majorities and minorities should engage in the public sphere in defence of justice for all. This implies that higher education should educate students to advocate for both hospitality (a matter of exercising human rights in a world republic) and hospitability (a matter of evoking a dangerous indeterminacy or mutual suspicion). If higher education were to advocate for hospitality, then students would learn how to exercise human rights (without violating such rights) and, equally, if they were to be initiated into practices of
hostipitality, they would become mutually suspicious of dystopias such as genocide, totalitarianism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

Benhabib (2011) contends that the establishment of justice can happen through the exercise of democratic iterations; restricted rights practices; and the eradication of socio-economic exploitation. But the exercising of democratic iterations, through which citizens may articulate their specific content of their scheduled rights, continues Benhabib, requires a space in which members of a society can engage in free and unrestrained dialogue about their collective identity in free public spheres. She describes this unrestrained dialogue as being enabled by ‘uncoerced democratic iterations’ that can only be understood as a continuing conversation, ‘... which challenges the assumption of completeness of each culture, by making it possible for its members to look at themselves from the perspective of others’ (2011, 76). The notion of an incompleteness of culture is an especially significant tool in the cultivation of an individual and, by extension, that individual’s culture. An incompleteness of culture, and by implication an incompletion of the individual, offer two avenues towards an engagement from the perspective of others. Firstly, an incomplete culture and/or individual means that there is always something about that culture and/or individual that is yet to be uncovered or known, not unlike the construction of a narrative, which is continuously unfolding in a dialectical motion. Secondly, an incompleteness of culture and/or individual necessitates the movement towards a perception of completion – in which the individual moves towards self-understanding and self-reflection, but this can only be done when and if in dialogue with the other. So, the presence of the other is critical to the individual’s, and by extension the culture’s, own sense of being and self-knowledge. Stated another way, the individual can only be an individual if there is an other. Likewise, a culture is unique and constructed as a culture if there are other cultures different to it. Had they been the same, there would be no need for a differentiation of cultures. When Benhabib (2011), therefore, writes about looking at ourselves from the perspective of others, she is in fact calling upon us to challenge what we see in and about ourselves and, in so doing, to realise that we can only be us when we are in conversation with others.

It would be feasible, therefore, for us to state that the nurturing and development of our capacity to challenge the completeness of our culture can be used as one way of elevating our consciousness in how we articulate our collective identities in the public sphere. We say this because an elevation of consciousness is only possible when the individual has (1) an awareness of his identity by virtue of how that identity has been shaped – historically, culturally and emotionally; (2) an awareness of how the individual chooses to exercise and participate that identity both within the private and public spheres; and (3) an awareness of how that identity, although established and understood, is in uninterrupted interaction with others or with the ideas, perceptions and actions of others. Leading from this, we would argue that, while it is the individual’s right to lay claim to his or her identity and how he or she chooses to enact it, because this enactment is always contextualised in relation to
others, each enactment can be framed as either a moment of justice or of injustice. Every action or reaction, therefore, can be constructed as just, or deconstructed as unjust. And so the same humanity that binds us as cosmopolitan beings can divide us as unjust moral beings. This means that when we argue that higher education should educate students to advocate for both hospitality (a matter of exercising human rights in a world republic) and hostipitality (a matter of evoking a dangerous indeterminacy or mutual suspicion), we are arguing for a renewed understanding of what higher education ought to do. And what it ought to do is critically reflect on the ever stronger forms of government control of higher education; it ought to interrogate the lack of social morality that undermines the conditions under which higher education should take place; and it ought to shift from its pre-conditioned emphasis on training to a cultivation of the individual as a moral being. Of course, it is the purpose of higher education institutions to achieve outcomes and to produce the architect, the biochemist, the economist and the teacher. But the purpose of producing educated and trained professionals should not be divorced from producing cultivated and nurtured individuals. So, what is required is a re-articulation of the purpose of higher education, which is a restoration of the balance between the technical purposes of higher education and the cultivation of moral individuals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

One way for higher education institutions to realise their social responsibility for cultivating moral beings is through Benhabib’s democratic iterations, which she describes as ‘processes of linguistic, legal, cultural, and political repetitions-in-transformation – invocations that are also revocations. Through such iterative acts a democratic people, considering itself bound by certain guiding norms and principles, reappropriates and reinterprets these, thus showing itself to be not only subject to the laws but also their author’ (2011, 80). Who then participates in these processes of repetitions-in-transformation? All of us – in our incompletion of culture and in our incompletion of being, because for as long as we converse, and for as long as we absorb all that is around us, we are never complete. Every other that we encounter has the potential to bring a new perspective and a changed perception, or what Benhabib (2011) refers to as the ‘enlargement of perspectives’. But she cautions that, if the conversation that contributes to democratic iterations is not executed by the most inclusive participation of all those involved, then the iterative process is unfair and illegitimate. This means that it is not enough for higher education institutions to talk about the rights of others. There has to be a stated and conscious commitment to an establishment of justice, which reverberates through an intolerance of any constructions of exclusion or discrimination, or any moral harm. Of course, we cannot know the hurt of exclusion, or the pain of moral harm, unless we have had these experiences. Minorities in South Africa, for example, might not necessarily comprehend the full devastation of apartheid on the lives of majorities. And so, in terms of Benhabib’s ‘enlargement of perspectives’, she suggests that we
‘need to exercise the powers of “enlarged thought” through our moral imagination, in order to understand the perspective of the concrete other’ (2011, 193). When we use our imagination, then we can realise the utopia of exercising hospitality and we can extend our compassion to the other. When we use our imagination, then it is precisely the unknown utopia of the other that should evoke in us the desire to move towards, rather than away.

How, then, can we imagine ourselves to be Mohamed Bouazizi, so that we experience his dystopic collapse in order to collectively realise his utopic being? What are the implications for teaching and learning at higher education institutions if they should take more seriously the call for a ‘cosmopolitanism without illusions’ – one that can engender moments of democratic iterations, the recognition of human rights, and the restoration of human dignity? Arguing from the premise that, as a collective moral community, our incompleteness of being is always framed by others whom we may or may not encounter but whose right to a social utopia should nevertheless matter to us, the implications for teaching and learning are encapsulated in cultivating and extending an ethics of care. So, while higher education institutions, and education generally, are designed to produce what Noddings (2006, 339) describes as a uniform product, she also asserts that ‘[a]n education worthy of its name will help its students to develop as persons, to be thoughtful citizens, competent parents, faithful friends, capable workers, generous neighbours and lifelong learners. It will try, too, to develop aesthetic, ethical and spiritual sensitivity’. In order to cultivate students who are competent, thoughtful and generous, higher education requires a teaching that is competent, thought-provoking and generous in its cultivation of all its students. A generous cultivation of all students, to our minds, needs to be couched in a particular community of engagement that prefaces a rhetoric devoid of exclusion, intolerance and prejudice. It is a community of engagement in which the expression of otherness is encouraged so that it becomes known and understood, and it is a community in which both teachers and learners learn that the privilege of higher education is not attained through the acquisition of training only, but that it is lived through the compassionate recognition and restoration of human dignity for all of humanity. When teachers and students take responsibility for their own human dignity, they will be disinclined to stand by idly when the same human dignity of others is vandalised through the brutality of acts, such as apartheid and genocide, or when witnessing the tragic self-mutilation of Mohamed Bouazizi. And, if students and teachers learn to sanctify the dignity of all others, then, as moral beings, we can all begin to collectively hold each other accountable for what should be our collective utopia. A ‘cosmopolitanism without illusions’, therefore, is not so much about how well we attach ourselves to the others, but rather to which extent we honour our consciousness by valuing our social imagination.

Finally, if Taylor is right that we no longer all live in societies in which the widespread sense can be maintained that faith in God is central to the ordered life we partially enjoy, and that we live in a pluralist world in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle and hence fragilise each other, then it would not be inappropriate
to argue for a defence of consolidating higher education. This is so for the reason that the fate of beliefs depends on ‘powerful intuitions of individuals, radiating out to others’ (Taylor, 2007, 531) – those persons (like us) who shape and guide the minds of students. With an increase in fragilisation, and the sense that, for some, this life seems to be empty, flat, devoid of a higher purpose, many young people are following their own spiritual instincts and in fact are looking for greater immediacy, spontaneity and spiritual depth (Taylor 2007, 506). In our view, higher education constituted by a cosmopolitanism without illusions should become more and more the quest to restore our apparent fragile civilisational order. We require an educative restoration of the self and its wholeness – a spirituality that will lift one up and move one to be a better person in relation to others and their otherness. After all, human beings bear an internal relation to all others (Cavell 1979, 442). In a way, higher education holds the promise of a fuller human flourishing – one that can rescue people collectively from a deep disorder in their lives.

REFERENCES