4

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Mabel Erasmus

ABSTRACT

Contradictions and contestations seem to plague the notion of community engagement in South African higher education. This is surprising in view of its overt links to Utopian ideals espoused by policy directives for higher education transformation in a democratic South Africa. This situation has an impact on the knowledge enablement potential in the interaction between higher education and the third sector. In this chapter I propose a perspective on this state of affairs that is influenced by Marxism. Creative tensions between ideological limitations and Utopian impulses in the field were investigated, using Fredric Jameson's notion of the Political Unconscious (Jameson 1981) as an exploratory tool. Based on a review of literature I illustrate manifestations of the dialectic between ideology and the Utopian vision of a classless society. I contend that this reading deepens our understanding of political factors in the broader society that maintain contradictions between public pronouncements and the experience of scholars, civil society organisations (the third sector) and community members involved in engagement practices. It also enables engaged scholars to reimagine South African society and the role of higher education.

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

1. INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx famously said that the task is not just to understand the world but to change it. A variant to keep in mind is that if you want to change the world you'd better try to understand it. That doesn't mean just listening to a talk or reading a book, though that's helpful sometimes. You learn from participating. You learn from others. You learn from the people you're trying to organize. We all have to gain the understanding and the experience to formulate and implement ideas and plans as to how to move forward. (Noam Chomsky 2012:305)

Understanding the world in order to change it, as Chomsky suggests in the above citation, resonates well with my idea of what higher education should be about. Many others have also been cherishing ideals of higher education for the common good, especially after the first democratic elections in South Africa. Yet, almost two decades after the release of *Education White Paper 3* (RSA DoE 1997), questions may be asked about the nature of the response of universities to the challenges and opportunities posed by the distressing contradictions within society that still require action. Expectations raised by the adoption of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* in 1996 (RSA 2007), and many laudable policy directives to follow, have in most instances not been met over the first years of democracy. What exactly the role of higher education in society should be has become increasingly contentious, confusing and contradictory, specifically when one considers how the notions of community engagement (as an overarching concept) and curricular forms of engagement, such as service learning, have featured in policy directives over the past years.

A conspicuous example of confusing trends in higher education emerges when considering the following omission: *Education White Paper 3* of 1997, which informed the *Higher Education Act* of the same year, put forward an agenda for the transformation of higher education from "segregated, inequitable and highly inefficient apartheid institutions, towards a single national system that serves both individual and collective needs" (Hall 2010:3). *Education White Paper 3* and several later policy directives placed emphasis on the importance of 'community service programmes' and 'knowledge-based community service' as a means to demonstrate commitment to the common good. Community engagement was depicted as one of the core functions of higher education, along with teaching, learning and research, and thus the *Criteria for institutional audits* (RSA HEQC 2004:19) included Criterion 18 that is dedicated to community engagement. When the *Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training* (RSA DHET) was released during 2012, it was rather alarming to those who valued the previous directives that the newly

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

established Department of Higher Education and Training did not mention the role of community engagement as a mechanism to infuse responsiveness to regional and national challenges and social responsibility into the core activities of higher education institutions. The South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF 2012) responded to this conspicuous absence by putting forward possible explanations of this omission by mentioning several milestones along the path to entrench community engagement as the third ‘pillar’ of higher education and, in conclusion, by submitting that “it would be remiss of the Ministry to avoid contemplating the role that community engagement will have in the envisaged Post School system or do so without the involvement of advocates of community engagement” (SAHECEF 2012:3). Probably in reaction to SAHECEF’s submission, Section 4.8 on community engagement and graduate community service was added by the time the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (RSA DHET) was published in 2013.

The above-mentioned initial omission, and some other silences, tensions and contradictions that seem to plague the fields of community engagement and service learning in the higher education context remind me of the notions of the Political Unconscious and narratives as ‘socially symbolic acts’ that Fredric Jameson put forward in 1981. Seen as but one of many disconcerting features of the broader South African context, it is also a reminder that within higher education ‘History still hurts’ (in the overtly Marxist sense of the phrase).

It is acknowledged that higher education institutions in South Africa, as in many countries all over the world, have actively taken up the challenge of becoming more engaged with local constituencies and more responsive to the challenges faced by the various communities with which they interact. Those working in the field of higher education community engagement tend to experience obstacles and limited support that seem out of proportion with the emphasis that is placed on this third core function as a transformative mechanism (Erasmus 2007b). In the context of this book parallels may well be drawn with the precarious situation that organisations of the non-profit/civil society/third sector in South Africa find themselves. These organisations, which form one of the main constituencies that HEIs engage with, also face ever-growing expectations from both society and government which are neither acknowledged nor endorsed by an increase in funding or other forms of support (Habib 2002:viii-xi; Stuart 2014:2-4).

A literature review was undertaken to investigate both limiting ideological factors and Utopian possibilities for community engagement to contribute significantly to higher education transformation towards serving the ‘public good’ in South Africa.

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

In this chapter I argue that the idealistic language and Utopian impulses of *Education White Paper 3*, and similarly inclined state mandates regarding the role of community engagement, could be regarded as socially symbolic (language) acts that signalled the resolution of contradictions at an imaginary level, while leaving the ideological realities and structural inequality that govern the harsh material conditions of the lives of the majority of South African citizens virtually untouched. The struggle to move forward in transforming higher education also places limitations on the potential for creating knowledge for mutual enablement in the interaction between higher education and the third sector. The arguments below thus have a bearing not only on what is experienced within higher education, but also on what can be achieved through its various engagements with external constituencies.

After highlighting relevant aspects of Jameson's theory of the Political Unconscious in the next section, I put forward evidence from literature of both the ideological limitation and Utopian ideals currently existing in higher education community engagement. A discussion of contradictions influencing the field will be juxtaposed by a section on the Utopian ideals espoused by curricular forms of community engagement in particular. In conclusion, suggestions are made for the coordination of the ideological with the Utopian as a way to move forward with the transformation of higher education towards becoming institutions of collaborative, enabling knowledge creation.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING: THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS

For the purposes of this chapter I intend to frame the tensions and contradictions that exist between the Utopian impulses contained in state-mandated community engagement as a transformative mechanism and some identified confounding, limiting elements within (my understanding of) Fredric Jameson's (1981) notion of the Political Unconscious. I argue that interpreting the role of the higher education community engagement 'narrative' as a 'socially symbolic act' could deepen our understanding of the juncture that South African higher education institutions are now in, half-way into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The concept of the Political Unconscious is embedded in the Marxist contention that, in the final analysis, everything is political (ie social and historical). This signals a negative diagnosis of contemporary culture and social life where ideological programming leads to false consciousness, class bias, and structural limitations. Westoby and Dowling (2013:56) point out that contradictions (both in individuals and in society) not consciously acknowledged and dealt with will be pushed into the unconscious realm, "only to manifest themselves at a later stage – usually in a more

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

destructive way than the original problem". To this I add the argument, inferred from Jameson's work, that narrative texts (or other cultural artefacts for that matter) often serve as socially symbolic acts aimed at disguising social contradictions by offering imaginary resolutions for repressed contradictions without actually effecting any real social change.

Jameson, a literary critic and leading figure of North American Marxism, published his seminal work, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*, in 1981. Westoby and Dowling (2013:30) point out that, based on reflections on and interpretation of Marx and Bakhtin Jameson argues that class discourse is essentially dialogical in structure and that the dialogue of class struggle is one in which two opposing discourses fight it out within the general unity of a shared code. Von Boeckmann (1998:41) adds the perspective of Marxist dialectics by pointing out that Jameson's dialectical critical methodology has both a negative and a positive moment, and thus is able to unmask ideological limitations and generate, through contrast, what lies beyond those limitations. Contending that the ethical oppositions of good versus evil that form the basis of Western thought can never be escaped, Jameson seeks to place them in a productive, dynamic tension through which a vision of collective relations might be imaginable.

For purposes of my own line of reasoning in this chapter I utilise aspects of Jameson's insistence on the simultaneously ideological and Utopian character of cultural texts. In the logically paradoxical nature of the dialectic of Utopia and ideology lies the possibility for the coordination of the ideological with the Utopian that has, according to Jameson (1981:298), "a theoretical urgency which is accompanied by very real political and strategic consequences". When focusing on Jameson's Utopian or positive hermeneutics, collective energies and the ideal of hope are activated. Within his notion of dialectic thought there is anticipation of the logic of a collectivity which has not yet come into being and which represents the achieved Utopian, classless society as the ultimate concrete collective life. In the next section of this chapter I point to examples from the literature on community engagement and service learning which resonate with aspects of such positive hermeneutics.

With reference to the ideological or negative hermeneutics which is the other side of the coin (or the other half of the yin-yang symbol), Jameson (1981:299) insists that "the will to domination preserves intact within the symbolic power of art and culture". This view points to the omnipresence of History (ie the sequence of modes of production) as the ultimate interpretive horizon. Jameson reminds us that History is what hurts, "it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ruses turn into grisly and ironic reversal of their

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

overt intentions” (Jameson 1981:102). And putting it in even more ominous terms: “History, as ground and untranscendable horizon, needs no particular theoretical justification: [W]e may be sure that its inalienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them” (Jameson 1981:102). In the concise literature overview that follows, this more negative side of Jameson’s hermeneutics speak from ideological aspects and inherent contradictions in how community engagement is currently positioned in South Africa.

3. IDEOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS AND UTOPIAN IDEALS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Literature suggests that after almost two decades of ‘higher education transformation’ in South Africa, key elements of what such transformation set out to achieve have not shown as much progress as might be expected. In particular, one might wonder to what extent the ideal that ‘community service’ – later to be termed ‘community engagement’ – would emerge as the third core function of higher education, on a par with teaching-learning and research, has been achieved by higher education institutions. To what extent has the (Utopian) promise of community engagement making a significant contribution to the transformation of higher education towards becoming more inclusive, responsive and democratic been fulfilled at this point in time? Are we actually moving closer to affirming community engagement as a core value of higher education as Gibbons (2007) suggests we should?

The background regarding the growth and development of community engagement in South Africa, and service learning as a curricular form of community engagement, has been chronicled in a number of sources. Some that illustrate my argument about contradictions that manifest themselves in the simultaneous presence of ideological limitations, and Utopian impulses in this field, are referred to below.

3.1 Contradictions affecting community engagement

For higher education institutions in South Africa, engaging deeply, respectfully and humbly with their external constituencies seems the most natural thing to do. Yet, in a discussion document prepared for the Council on Higher Education, Hall (2010:2) comments that higher education’s community engagement imperative is regarded as “radical, risqué and anything other than taken-for-granted”. So what seem to be limiting factors? Possible reasons for the ambivalence regarding higher education transformation through community engagement are put forward by several authors. According to Hall (2010:2), the limited unequivocal support for community engagement suggests “an epistemological ambiguity in the knowledge

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

project of our universities” which is also experienced within other higher education systems. Thus, broadly speaking, uncertainty about what the ‘knowledge project’ of a university should entail is regarded as a limiting factor.

In this regard Albertyn and Daniels (2009:409) contend that conflicting (ie contradictory) interpretations and imperatives, dichotomies in the conceptualisation of community engagement, as well as the concepts of knowledge and power, influence universities at the levels of management, the academics in their teaching and research, and the communities they interact with. In a neat synthesis of the literature they provide a representation of how research in relation to community engagement is informed by these three levels as South African higher education institutions exist in the global reality (Albertyn & Daniels 2009:411). Their suggestion for an extensive research agenda for the field resonates with the general contention that not enough conceptual and theory-based research has been done on community engagement and service learning in the South African context. It is noteworthy that a considerable research incentive has been launched by the National Research Foundation in the form of the Community Engagement Research Programme since 2011. This might have been in response to Hall’s (2010:48) recommendation to the Council on Higher Education that the National Research Foundation should be encouraged to make recurrent funding allocations for “research about third sector engagement”.

In a comparison of the manifestations of service learning and community engagement in three national contexts, the United States of America, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Thomson, Smith-Tolken, Naidoo and Bringle (2011:216) depart from the premise that higher education all over the world is undergoing rapid and dynamic change “as societies endeavour to align the local context to national priorities and global pressures”. They maintain that this was particularly true of South Africa when, after the first democratic elections, national priorities demanded transformation of all sectors of society. I argue that such Utopian impulses in early policy documents should be seen against the backdrop of a much broader transformation thrust in the country. For the higher education sector this started with *Education White Paper 3* (RSA DoE 1997) that was mentioned above.

Another limiting factor in the implementation of community engagement initiatives is the fact that it has not (yet) been funded by government and thus remains an ‘unfunded mandate’. Thomson *et al* (2011:221) point out that despite the fact “that community engagement is widely practised the then Department of Education (DoE) did not provide any material means to achieve the goals of these initiatives”. Thus the clear policy mandate from government regarding the pivotal role of the

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

university in the broader transformation agenda of the state and the insistence that these institutions “should become more responsive to socio-economic issues of the country” (Thomson *et al* 2011:221) have not yet translated into the allocation of enabling mechanisms to higher education institutions in the form of subsidies for human, physical and financial resources. Since 2013, however, the new Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has been taking a more encouraging stance. The *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (RSA DHET 2013:39), section 4.8, stipulates that future funding will be “restricted” to programmes that form part of the teaching and research function of universities. This is what engaged scholars are advocating for in any case. I also find it significant that the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities recommends that “only those kinds of community engagement programmes or activities that carry credit value as part of an accredited academic programme receive funding” (RSA DHET 2014:265). Until any of these possibilities have materialised, government’s community engagement and transformation ‘narrative’ could be regarded as a ‘socially symbolic act’ that could have little impact on the actual nature and functioning of higher education institutions.

The “epistemological ambiguity” mentioned by Hall (see above) is also revealed in the Mode 1 versus Mode 2 knowledge debate (Albertyn & Daniels 2009:410; Hall 2010:18-20; Thomson *et al* 2011:218) in which there is a juxtaposition of knowledge for the sake of knowledge (Mode 1) with useable knowledge for the benefit of society (Mode 2). With the latter there is an insistence that universities generate contextualised, “socially useful knowledge” that integrates with other forms of knowledge in “the knowledge economy” (Thomson *et al* 2011:218). The most influential proponent of Mode 2 knowledge generation is Gibbons, who argued for instituting engagement not just as a core function but as a “core value in a Mode 2 society” (Gibbons 2007) at a conference in Cape Town in 2006. However, despite the pull towards the contextualisation of knowledge through engagement with the broader society, the close link between knowledge and power remains largely intact and manifests itself in a variety of ways. Hence some local academics have come to the conclusion that what lies beyond the ivory tower is “a desert called excellence” (Nash 2010:2), that is, an “intellectual wasteland” in which a managerial system is followed, with its concomitant emphasis on quantitative measures, ethical ‘neutrality’ and competition.

A further indication of the current ambivalence in the South African higher education sector about the positioning of community engagement can be gleaned from looking at two recent publications in the field. The first book is titled *Community Engagement*

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

in *African Universities: Perspectives, Prospects and Challenges* (Preece, Ntseane, Modise & Osborne 2012). In the introductory chapter the book's contribution is expressed as an effort to contextualise the "specific historical circumstances pertaining to higher education in African contexts and positioning the African university within contemporary world debates that give rise to a renewed global emphasis on universities and the notion of 'engagement'" (Preece et al 2012:1-2). The authors contend that the renewed focus on university engagement is a result of the movement on the African continent towards promoting development partnerships with the private sector and civil society (Preece et al 2012:9). Turning to South Africa, they point out that these trends were supplemented by the post-apartheid *Education White Paper 3* (RSA DoE 1997), "which explicitly referred to the need for South African universities to develop community service learning opportunities for students in an effort to encourage cultural tolerance and citizenship responsibility" (Preece et al 2012:9). They describe the development of community engagement over the past decade as a "rapidly moving feast" (Preece et al 2012:12) and point out that the earlier emphasis on 'service' has recently evolved into the notion of engagement as a mutual learning project and a means to contribute to the knowledge society, particularly in the form of Mode 2 knowledge (Erasmus 2007a; Gibbons 2007). In comparison with the book by Preece et al (2012), a publication bearing the title *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South* (Leibowitz 2013) includes no chapters devoted to the concepts of community engagement and/or service learning and there is hardly any reference to these concepts. However, several authors do refer to matters that relate to the argumentation followed in this chapter. Hall (2013:27), for example, points to some of the contradictory drivers of higher education mentioned before. He points to the inherently ambiguous nature of universities, playing "a progressive role in contributing to educational attainment and its benefits", but "operating at the same time as gatekeepers that advantage and protect elites and their concentrations of symbolic capital".

With regard to the field of higher education engagement for the common good, where scholarly insights are supposed to lead to social action for change, there seems to be a tendency to avoid the "unity of a shared code" (Jameson 1981). There are always new, more exciting academic 'contestations' to be explored, placing limitations on the ability to use the gained insights to move forward and act as agents of change. From the Australian context Pearson (2009:192), an Aboriginal activist, reaches the "desperate conclusion" that he needs to dismiss much of contemporary culture and academic life as "just a big confusion-producing mechanism in the service of social stratification".

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

From the examples provided above it is clear that contradictions and tensions are at play in higher education systems. This is underscored by the contradictory drivers of higher education to which Webb and Burgin (2009:41) refer when they note that dwindling government funding for Australian universities has increased the imperative towards attracting more and better students through being “a university of international standing and outlook”. The authors point out that there is a contradiction between this imperative and the increasing pressure for teaching and research to be “relevant” and engaged with the community. In arguing how international university rankings should be considered “a flawed tool”, Muller (2013:18) questions whether the ranking measures reflect what we want universities in South Africa to be emphasising, and adds: “Does it really make sense to assess a privately funded university in a developed country against the same set of indicators as a publicly funded institution in a developing country?” In my opinion, it borders on delusions of grandeur when world-class status is pursued by higher education institutions of a developing country situated in severely under-resourced environs.

According to Watson (2007:29) the historical role of higher education has been more profoundly structured around cooperation and mutual support than competition; he argues that merely chasing “world-class” status may be too narrow an ambition for individual universities and their societies. At the very least “it is not a priority likely to serve civic and community engagement” (Watson 2007:46). Universities have vital roles in the twenty-first century knowledge economy and in society that go beyond pursuing the suit of scores currently regarded as world-class criteria. Such roles include supplying relevant qualified professionals and supporting professions with research and development “in all sorts of areas that may not be sufficiently glamorous to attract the world-class ratings, especially in the public service” (Watson 2007:39-40). Watson emphasises collaboration and mutual support in the field, pointing out that cooperating rather than competing with other higher education institutions is required in order to meet specific local and regional needs. Jameson’s (1981:299) above-mentioned argument that “the will to domination preserves intact within the symbolic power of art and culture” is clearly particularly relevant in academia, no matter how much emphasis is put on a transformation agenda.

In addition to the above-mentioned national and international contradictions, the South African context imposes limitations on community engagement that are embedded in structural inequalities in society that have not changed significantly since the first democratic elections. Ramphela (2012:35) suggests that with a Gini coefficient that is the highest in the world, the limited progress could perhaps be linked to “ambivalence of the present actors towards entrenching constitutional

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

democracy". In similar vein Singh (2013:14) proposes a study of "what policy levers and incentives, if any, have been put in place [by the state] to steer higher education institutions towards a broader notion of social transformation". My inference is that much of what has been put forward by government can be regarded as socially symbolic acts in the form of good intentions, laudable policy directives and even quality assurance mechanisms. These have not yet created an enabling environment in a country where there has been limited social change in the form of "a change in the material conditions of existence" (Von Boeckmann 1998:33), and this puts serious limitations on what universities can achieve in terms of transformation through community engagement. So how does this affect curricular forms of community engagement openly aimed at reciprocal, collaborative creation of knowledge for purposes of mutual enablement?

3.2 Utopian ideals of curricular community engagement

Embedding community engagement in the curriculum has been linked to the transformation agenda, specifically through the introduction of service learning. As a pedagogical approach that was brought to South Africa from the United States one might say that, in comparison with community engagement, service learning carries an additional burden of suspicion because of its origins in the heart of capitalism. The concept espouses Utopian ideals about responsible citizenship, partnerships and participation, reciprocal teaching and learning, and collaborative knowledge construction in ways that seem to presuppose a classless society. As the main thrust behind establishing service learning in South Africa, the Community – Higher Education – Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative (1999 until 2007) was managed in a way that linked it to the various state mandates throughout (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna & Slamati 2008; Thomson *et al* 2011:221; Hatcher & Erasmus 2008:50; Stanton & Erasmus 2013:76-85). Service learning was regarded as a powerful point of entry for community engagement by integrating it in the curriculum of South African students. A scholar in the field (Naudé 2012:226), defines service learning as "an educational approach that integrates/balances learning experiences with service (addressing goals identified by a specific community) through active and reflective learning". Thomson *et al* (2011:214) refer to service learning as "a teaching approach that extends student learning beyond the classroom"; they contend that "service learning as a distinctive pedagogical approach remains a nascent field", again pointing to the need for more research to be undertaken on the various aspects of this complex educational phenomenon.

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Community engagement has been defined as “initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the higher education institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community” (RSA HEQC 2004:15). Service learning, which is but one of a variety of forms in which engagement finds expression, takes a much more Utopian stance. While this early definition of community engagement positions the university as the main agent that possesses specific forms of ‘expertise’ to be ‘applied’ to ‘its community’, advocates of service learning are intent on advancing a democratic, collaborative knowledge project in which all participants serve, teach and learn from one another through mutual, reciprocal knowledge sharing. Service learning has most of these characteristics in common with community-based research in higher education, as expounded by Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker and Donohue (2003). The model of community-based research that Strand *et al* (2003:8) propose is based on the following principles: It is a collaborative enterprise between academic researchers (staff and students) and community members; it validates multiple sources of knowledge, multiple methods of discovery and dissemination; and it has as its goal “social action and social change for the purposes of achieving social justice”.

In a comparative analysis of service learning in the United States and South Africa – informed by the educational philosophies of John Dewey and Julius Nyerere – Hatcher and Erasmus (2008:49) link this pedagogical approach to the dire need for “student education for responsible citizenship” in both the United States and South Africa. What differentiates service learning from other types of educational experiences that take place in the community is that “service learning is linked to a course and has the intentional goal of developing civic skills and dispositions in students” (Hatcher & Erasmus 2008:51). The authors state that the educational philosophy of John Dewey is valued as the bedrock for service learning in the United States. The role of education in a democracy was most explicitly defined by Dewey in *Democracy and education* (cited in Hatcher & Erasmus 2008:51), pointing to the need to find a balance between the tensions of social aims and individual development, among other things. He posed this pivotal question: “Who, then, shall conduct education so that humanity may improve?” Hatcher and Erasmus (2008:51) point out that Dewey posed the challenge of ensuring that education contributes to “social intelligence that will yield improvements in society and individuals who can develop to their fullest potential, in ways that will ultimately benefit society”. The socially responsible citizenship that Nyerere proposed from and for the African context had a similar thrust. In South Africa, service learning is valued by its supporters “as a means to cultivate social responsibility and prepare graduates equipped to work across racial and economic differences in post-apartheid society” (Hatcher &

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

Erasmus 2008:50). Thomson *et al* describe service learning as a vehicle to realise the potential of universities “to influence students to involve themselves in civic matters and develop the capacity to act efficaciously” (Thomson *et al* 2011:218). This they link to the need for “actively engaged citizens” in a well-functioning democracy (Thomson *et al* 2011:214).

In another comparative study Stanton and Erasmus (2013:78) refer to “partnerships as core practice” in South African service learning and mention the CHESP partnership triad model as one of the distinguishing features and departures from United States practice. In the original triad partnership that was regarded as vehicle for engagement during the CHESP initiative, the triad consisted of an academic partner, a community representative and a service provider. According to Stanton and Erasmus (2013:78), the importance of ‘community voice’ in the service learning partnerships points to the fact that democratic participation and inclusive partnerships were viewed more seriously in South Africa, as these concepts were linked to “national development challenges that the government required in its higher education transformation agenda”. According to the ‘bottom-up and inside-out’ versus ‘top-down and outside-in’ argument of the article by Stanton and Erasmus (2013), it is mentioned that the service learning initiative in South Africa “seems to have been more of a top-down, policy-driven movement, instigated and legitimized by the new government’s education ministry, and catalyzed by an outside organization, the Joint Education Trust” (Stanton & Erasmus 2013:90). However, the substantial funding that was given to participating universities by the Joint Education Trust during the CHESP initiative was not followed up by government funding ring-fenced for service learning or community engagement in general, leaving universities that participated with the choice of allocating funding from their own central budgets, finding (mostly unsustainable) *ad hoc* funding or terminating the work.

Literature about service learning is often produced by staunch supporters focusing on the many benefits of the pedagogy. From within the United States context, Butin (2010:xix) warns against complacency and invites academics and other practitioners to experiment with rethinking and constructing a service learning “made stronger by critique”. According to him, dominant conceptualisations of service learning privilege a ‘first wave’ mentality that poses service learning as “the answer no matter what the question is” (Butin 2010:144). The reason behind this is that the service learning movement attempted to position itself as a “theoretically and pedagogically unproblematic practice to be embedded within higher education” (Butin 2010:xix) instead of admitting (or realising?) that it is an ideologically driven practice (Butin 2010:37). In his book Butin attempts to strengthen a ‘second wave’ of questioning

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

and critique by providing “a flexible academic underpinning that accommodates the strengths of service learning instead of containing and constraining it” (Butin 2010:144). He further states unequivocally that the academy is by its very nature a space for examination and critique, especially when confronted with issues as complex and contested as what transpires within and across various constituencies and communities. In terms of Jameson’s dialectical critical method one could frame Butin’s call for committed, serious, scholarly examination as an attempt at coordinating negative and positive moments of community engagement for purposes of generating, through contrast, what lies beyond ideological limitations.

Before drawing some conclusions I present a framework constructed to summarise the dialectical trends that I have described in this chapter (see Figure 4.1). I commenced with the theoretical underpinning related to how the Political Unconscious manifests itself in terms of ideological limitations and Utopian impulses in the global context. Next I discussed how the higher education sector, especially in South Africa, is subject to manifestations of the dialectic of ideology and Utopia, similar to what determines the state of South African society. Finally, in the next section, I propose that it is possible to reimagine society by coordinating the ideological with the Utopian. In this, higher education can play a significant role through community engagement. If not, History is bound to judge us harshly.

4. CONCLUSION: COORDINATION OF THE IDEOLOGICAL WITH THE UTOPIAN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In this chapter I pointed out that there are inherent contradictions between state commitment to community engagement as a transformative mechanism in South African higher education and the limiting realities experienced by advocates in universities. As exploratory tool I utilised Fredric Jameson’s (1981) notion of the Political Unconscious in which he considers narrative texts as socially symbolic (language) acts that signal the resolution of contradictions at an imaginary level, while leaving the structural inequalities that govern the lives of South African citizens virtually untouched. My contention was that viewing the ‘narratives’ of higher education community engagement as socially symbolic acts could deepen our understanding of both ideological limitations and Utopian ideals in the broader society that maintain contradictions between public pronouncements and the experience of practitioners and community members involved in community engagement across the globe.

Based on a study of the literature in the field I illustrated how the dialectic of ideology and Utopia, that is inherent in (a Marxist-oriented analysis of) South African society,

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

FIGURE 4.1 The Political Unconscious of community engagement in South Africa

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

plays itself out in the field of community engagement. Manifestations of this dialectic include a number of apparent contradictions in higher education and in the broader society as indicated in Figure 4.1. My contention, based on Jameson's call for the coordination of the ideological and the Utopian, is that these contradictions can (and should) be turned into creative tensions that enable the reimagining of society and the role of higher education in it.¹ In this manner socially symbolic acts are turned into real action as drivers of change in terms of mechanisms created through collaborative, engaged scholarship.

What keeps the will to dominate intact and contradictions alive is the tacit, unconscious realisation that inequalities cannot be eradicated or even addressed without putting the privilege of hegemonic groups in jeopardy. Understanding this about the world is vital when we intend to formulate and implement ideas and plans as to how to move forward, as Chomsky (2012:305) suggests. In his discussions on the future of community engagement in higher education, Butin (2010:133) shows us how it is possible "to ground the ideals and ideas of a social movement firmly within an intellectual one". Butin thus argues for reimagining collaborative practices and interdisciplinary inquiry, and for studying community engagement in its various manifestations "as a wonderfully complex and situated practice" that truly disturbs and forces us to rethink the normal patterns of thought, belief and the very nature of scholarship. According to Butin (2010:133) what we as practitioners and scholars must do is work through how to do and teach it well.

Ramphele (2010:3) contends that South African society is characterised by "a growing gap between laudable public policies derived from our *Constitution* and implementation that makes a difference in the daily lives of ordinary South Africans". This rings true within the context of higher education as but one of the sectors affected. In this regard Singh (2013:15) claims that "making social justice issues explicit and real within the notions of higher education responsiveness and accountability is likely to prove enormously difficult if not impossible". She insists that this task requires "not only tenacious commitment but also clarity of conception about what is required and the mobilisation of a range of role players around it". In my opinion the tendency not to build on courageous, commendable processes, such as the CHESP initiative, that were put in place before, shows a lack of commitment from the higher education sector itself.

1 This resonates with De Beer's proposition in Chapter 5 that a third sector, reimagined for sustainability, can contribute to fostering an abundance mentality in its engagement with local communities and universities.

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

Von Boeckmann (1998:47) notes that Jameson's dialectical theory of ideology and Utopia foregrounds both the necessity of collective struggle and what makes this difficult for local political action to achieve, namely "the ways in which the material conditions of social life predispose us to self-enclosure and create boundaries for our vision of the future". In order for us to negotiate the boundaries of self-enclosure and limited vision of what is possible in the future, we have to acknowledge that we need to set modest goals because the work is so complex. Butin (2010:139) reminds us that doing legitimate community engagement is extremely difficult, but so are many other academic endeavours and these are, "simply put, our jobs as academics".

Those of us who, at times, still view the world through a Marxist lens need to keep reminding ourselves that achieving success in any field that threatens entrenched hegemonic positions will always require struggle. I believe that this knowledge also enriches our understanding of the position in which the majority of South African civil society organisations find themselves. History will always hurt in South Africa and no matter how much we try to forget it, we can be assured that it will not forget us, as Jameson (1981) reminds us. Working proactively with the Political Unconscious of higher education through community engagement will require persistence, humility and resolute collaborative action by those who commit themselves to scholarships of transformation and engagement. Striving to 'make' a better future, as Chomsky (2012) suggests, requires consistent effort to work towards resolving contradictions in ways that actually change the material conditions of people's lives, albeit in small (but significant) ways.

REFERENCES

- Albertyn R & Daniels P. 2009. Research within the context of community engagement. In: E Bitzer (ed). *Higher education in South Africa: A scholarly look behind the scenes*. Stellenbosch: SUN PRESS. 409-428.
- Butin DW. 2010. *Service learning in theory and practice. The future of community engagement in higher education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chomsky N. 2012. *Making the future. Occupations, interventions, empire and resistance*. London: Penguin Books.
- Erasmus M. 2007a. Service learning: Preparing a new generation of scientists for a Mode 2 Society. *Journal for New Generation Sciences*, 5(2):26-40.
- Erasmus M. 2007b. Supporting academic staff as champions of service learning. *Education as Change. Special Edition on Community Service Learning*, 11(3):109-126.
- Gibbons M. 2007. Engagement as a Core Value in a Mode 2 Society. In: *Community Engagement in Higher Education – Proceedings of the Conference*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education (CHE) Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) and JET Education Services (JET) Community – Higher Education – Service Partnerships (CHESP).

THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

- Habib A. 2002. Editor's introduction. In: M Swilling & B Russell (eds). *The size and scope of the non-profit sector in South Africa*. Johannesburg and Durban: University of the Witwatersrand and University of Natal. vii-xii.
- Hall M. 2010. *Community Engagement in South African Higher Education (Kagisano Series no 6)*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education. 1-52.
- Hall M. 2013. Public good and private benefits of higher education. In: B Leibowitz (ed). *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*. London: Institute of Education Press. 17-29.
- Hatcher JA & Erasmus MA. 2008. Service learning in the United States and South Africa: A comparative analysis informed by John Dewey and Julius Nyerere. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 15(1):49-61.
- Jameson F. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. London: Methuen.
- Lazarus JM, Erasmus M, Hendricks D, Nduna J & Slamet J. 2008. Embedding community engagement in South African higher education. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 3(1):59-85.
- Leibowitz B (ed). 2013. *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*. London: Institute of Education Press.
- Muller S. 2013. University rankings a flawed tool. *Mail & Guardian*. 4 January, 18.
- Nash A. 2010. A desert called excellence. *Mail & Guardian*. 26 November, 2.
- Naudé L. 2012. At the cultural crossroads: Intergroup psychology among students in a service learning programme. *Current Psychology*, 31:221-245.
- Pearson N. 2009. *Up from the mission. Selected writings*. Melbourne: Black Inc.
- Preece J, Ntseane PG, Modise OM & Osborne M. 2012. The African university and community engagement in context. In: J. Preece, PG Ntseane, OM Modise & M Osborne (eds). *Community Engagement in African Universities. Perspectives, Prospects and Challenges*. Leicester: NIACE. 1-25.
- Ramphela M. 2010. Beyond the talk of the deaf. *Mail & Guardian*. 19 February, 3.
- Ramphela M. 2012. *Conversations with my sons and daughters*. Johannesburg: Penguin Books.
- RSA (Republic of South Africa). 1996. (2007 Edition). *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Act 108 of 1996*. Cape Town: Juta & Company. [Retrieved 17 March 2014] www.constitutionalcourt.org.za/site/theconstitution/english-09.pdf
- RSA DHET (Republic of South Africa. Department of Higher Education and Training). 2012. *Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training*. Pretoria: DHET.
- RSA DHET (Republic of South Africa. Department of Higher Education and Training). 2013. *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training. Building and expanded, effective and integrated post-school system*. Pretoria: DHET.
- RSA DHET (Republic of South Africa. Department of Higher Education and Training). 2014. *Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities*. October 2013. Pretoria: DHET.

CHAPTER 4 • ERASMUS

- RSA DoE (Republic of South Africa. Department of Education). 1997. Education White Paper 3: A Programme for Higher Education Transformation. *Government Gazette*, No. 18207, 15 August 1997. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- RSA HEQC (Republic of South Africa. Higher Education Quality Committee). 2004. *Criteria for institutional audits*. Pretoria: RSA CHE. (Republic of South Africa. Council on Higher Education). [Retrieved 22 April 2014] www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/CHE_Institutional-Audit-Criteria_June2004.pdf
- Stuart L. 2014. The South African nonprofit sector: Struggling to survive, needing to thrive. *NGO Pulse*. [Retrieved 2 April 2014] www.ngopulse.org/article/south-african-nonprofit-sector-struggling-survive-needing-thrive
- SAHECEF (South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum) 2012. Response from the Board of SAHECEF to *The Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training*. Letter to the Director: Office of the Director General, Department of Higher Education and Training (April 26).
- Singh M. 2013. Re-inserting the 'public good' into higher education transformation. In: B Leibowitz (ed). *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*. London: Institute of Education Press. 1-15.
- Stanton TK & Erasmus MA. 2013. Inside out, outside in: A comparative analysis of service learning's development in the United States and South Africa. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 17(1):63-96.
- Strand K, Marullo S, Cutforth N, Stoecker R & Donohue P. 2003. *Community-based research and higher education. Principles and practices*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Thomson AM, Smith-Tolken AR, Naidoo AV & Bringle RG. 2011. Service learning and community engagement: A comparison of three national contexts. *Voluntas*, 2011(22):214-237.
- Von Boeckmann SL. 1998. Marxism, morality, and the politics of desire: Utopianism in Fredrick Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. *Utopian Studies*, 9(2):31-50.
- Watson D. 2007. *Managing civic and community engagement*. Series: Managing universities and colleges: Guides to good practice. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill, Open University Press.
- Webb T & Burgin S. 2009. Engaged Service Learning – Implications for Higher Education. *Journal of Learning Design*, 3(1):41-56.
- Westoby P & Dowling G. 2013. *Theory and practice of dialogical community development: International perspectives*. London: Routledge.