

THE NEXT FEW YEARS

By Philip E. Lewis



My title alludes differentially to a very fine comparative study, *The next 25 years: Affirmative action in higher education in the United States and South Africa*,¹ containing an essay entitled “Looking Back” by the honoree of the present volume, Dr. Stuart Saunders. In a history still to be written, the career of Stuart Saunders as a leader in South African education will not be limited to his role as a stellar contributor to the end of apartheid, which is chronicled in his memoir, *Vice-chancellor on a tightrope*.² The strong voice that speaks in his remarkable autobiographical narrative, in which the two decades running from 1975 to 1995 are central, has continued to be heard without let-up during a time when higher education in South Africa has been forced not only to reckon with the country’s continuing transition to democracy and its struggle to open up economic opportunity to all of its inhabitants, but also with globalisation and all that it implies for institutions of higher learning on the African continent, where South Africa’s wealth and relatively sophisticated institutions thrust it into a position of leadership in education and research. In this essay of tribute I propose both to extend the purview of *The next 25 years* to the full set of issues Stuart Saunders has been confronting over the past decade and to narrow the temporal focus to pressing present-day concerns.

THE HORIZON OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

The South Africa in which Stuart Saunders has continued to exert an invaluable influence since retiring from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and assuming responsibility for the Mellon Foundation’s grantmaking program for the entire country is something of a proving

¹ Dr. Stuart Saunders, “Looking Back” in *The next 25 years: Affirmative action in higher education in the United States and South Africa*, David Featherman, Martin Hall and Marvin Krislov, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009): 259–268.

² Dr. Stuart Saunders, *Vice-chancellor on a tightrope: A personal account of climactic years in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2000).

ground for western models of higher education. Like its analogue in the United States, the South African university system has long been under pressure to respond to social and historical imperatives that derive from a legacy of racial injustice. As Saunders's defiant measures at UCT in the 1980s demonstrated, the response in South Africa is no more a simple post-apartheid phenomenon that can be treated as a revolutionary break in continuity than affirmative action in the United States is understandable as a simple result, instantly productive of radical change, of the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Indeed, as an occasion for reflecting on the whole of the reformist's trajectory that Stuart Saunders has traced — from physician to educator to grantmaker, from the role of the intra-systemic colleague pursuing equity and excellence³ from within to that of the active retiree, seeking to promote educational opportunity and quality from without — invites us to take the comparative analysis beyond the contrast of two approaches to affirmative action, American and South African, and to examine the international socio-economic conditions under which the two systems Dr. Saunders represents — the American one as an agent of the Mellon Foundation and the South African one as a lifelong proponent of progress within the system — have been evolving. We may ask, in particular, how the current challenges each system faces as a result of the turbulent global economy affect the impressive comparative insight that the inevitable and crucial focus on affirmative action has generated.

In the typical account of the challenges faced by higher education in 21st century South Africa and in the United States, the reigning leitmotif of affirmative action draws attention to a salient contrast: whereas the American courts sanction only a narrow and provisional accommodation of affirmative action that attempts to enhance opportunities for under-represented minorities while minimizing “reverse discrimination” against the privileged white majority, the

³ I appropriate these terms from the superb study by William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), which contains a highly instructive appendix by Ian Scott et al concerning the trade-offs confronted by UCT's leaders before and after apartheid's end.

young constitutional regime in South Africa posits decisively the need to pursue a program of affirmative action designed to correct or compensate for the abuses of the country's racist past. In each case access for students from groups to which it was previously denied is the issue, and operationally it turns upon admissions practices. The United States of America approach relies on the value of diversity in college and university communities. It allows institutions to factor racial and ethnic backgrounds into a complex judgement about whom to admit as students in order to achieve a more diverse student body than the application of purely academic standards would produce. In sharp contrast to this cautious recalibration, the South African approach unequivocally requires the research university, in order to participate strongly in a mandated process of political emancipation and societal reorganisation, to accommodate substantial numbers of students from previously disadvantaged groups. At the point of admitting first-year students, a vital difference between the respective strategies stems from the dearth of qualified applicants in South Africa: too few high school graduates from areas other than those dominated by the white minority have acquired sufficient knowledge and skills to succeed in university-level courses. In the United States of America, by contrast, elite universities have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to recruit cohorts of minority students who, if they are on average less well qualified by conventional standards than typically admitted students from the white majority, prove themselves to be fully capable of succeeding academically and using their college experiences to close the gap between themselves and the more privileged majority.

Affirmative action is thus a practice that elite American schools can implement successfully by making modest, relatively comfortable concessions. The taxing difficulty confronting South African higher education devolves from the wide range of disparities among the university's entering students. To make affirmative action viable for those who lack adequate preparation, the university is obliged to develop — via expansion of the undergraduate curriculum — compensatory educational strategies for dealing with the “articulation gap” between secondary schools and the university.⁴ Hence the doubly

⁴ Nan Yeld, “Admissions policies and challenges”, and Ian Scott, “Who is

greater challenge of affirmative action in South Africa: its corrective mission makes it more ambitious than its American counterpart, and its implementation places the country's top institutions of higher learning under much greater academic strain.

With this well-known background in place, I propose to shift the emphasis away from admissions and the immediate difficulties of educators working to make affirmative action succeed and toward the overarching dimension of social, political, and economic progress that higher education purports to serve. The conceptual superstructure — more or less universal — that presides over such a comparative horizon sets aside the antiquated view of the University as an isolated, ivory-towered institution given over to teaching and research, to the cultivation of knowledge that some might wish to pursue for its own sake. The more pragmatic view that now prevails stresses the institution's capacity to serve as an engine of opportunity, ushering its students along an academic itinerary that ascends from the continuation of general education in the basics — nominally the function of secondary schools — to high-level specialisation in a particular area of study. While nominally providing for entry into a broad-based world of scholarship and research sustained by a respected academic profession, its mission is increasingly oriented toward producing graduates with valuable credentials and research with economically exploitable applications. Quite like its American analogue, the South African university conceives of the ascent to the bachelor's degree or beyond as a guarantee, for the individual, of both socio-cultural and financial advantage.

Moreover, according to a ubiquitous conventional wisdom that pervades the tertiary system in South Africa no less than the systems of the more developed countries of the 'first world', higher education is appropriately a stratified system in which the best institutions — the

'getting through' in South Africa? Graduate output and the reconstruction of the formal curriculum" in *The next 25 years: Affirmative action in higher education in the United States and South Africa*, David Featherman, Martin Hall and Marvin Krislov, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009): 229-243 & 175-186.

academic elite — are the ones that matter the most because they lead the others in the pursuit of new knowledge and serve as the beacons of distinction that the others will emulate. For the less distinguished institutions, the defining, system-energising function of the elite is presumed to have a mediating function not unlike the one we encounter in the Girardian account of mimetic rivalry:⁵ the desire of the less privileged subject or group is transmuted from targeting an object or capacity that the privileged rival possesses or seeks into a desire to be like the rival — which is to say that the drive toward conflict over a desired object is displaced into a far more diffuse dynamics of cooperative imitation. Hence, in theory, the power of the elite stratum (the imitated) to mediate the potentially disruptive force of desire by making elite status accessible to adept emulators, to pull the rest of the system (the imitating) qualitatively upward by constructing and maintaining the possibility of successful imitation. The elite's self-justification and ongoing capacity to lead depend on allowing intra-systemic competition to develop without losing out to it, on embracing an openness to upward mobility while maintaining a dominant exclusivity.

In a brilliant essay in *The next 25 years*,⁶ “Democracy and the choosing of elites”, Glenn C. Loury describes the essential role of elites in American society and the vital contribution elite education makes to social stability both in rationing access to influence, power, and privilege and in rationalising the compromises between democracy and meritocracy, between the principle of equal opportunity and the recognition that free and democratic societies have to accredit an unequal distribution of wealth. The supposition underlying the Mellon Foundation's grant-making that Dr. Saunders has overseen in South Africa replicates the one that has informed the foundation's work with colleges and universities in the United States of America. The strategy of supporting the top institutions that will train society's most important leaders and most productive researchers, it is assumed, will

⁵ René Girard, *Deceit, desire and the novel: Self and other in literary structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

⁶ Glenn C. Loury, “Democracy and the choosing of elites”, in *The next 25 years*, Featherman *et al*, 317-33.

best serve the system as a whole, whether it is a mammoth, multi-tiered construct developed over more than a century, as in the United States of America, or a small, in many respects nascent construct with fewer strata, as in South Africa. But in each case one is now obliged to ask how the prospects of the respective educational elites and their relations with the less privileged institutions arrayed beneath them will be affected by recent trends in higher education. Furthermore, given the world-wide influence of the American model and the international outreach of American-based programs, it seems appropriate to ask, in particular, what the adjustments that began in the American system with the Great Recession of 2007-10 may augur for South Africa's leading universities, and in particular whether their vigorous commitment to affirmative action may face structural/financial obstacles parallel to those that trends in the American system bring to light.

THE CURRENT IMPASSE IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Much studied by experts, American higher education is a mammoth hierarchical system that reflects the structure of a stratified society-at-large. While the flood of writing about the system reflects the diversity within it, two broad views seem noteworthy. The primary or mainstream view observes in institutions of all kinds at all levels what is often termed *corporatisation*, *i.e.*, colleges and universities take on the characteristics of businesses functioning in a market and making ends meet by balancing revenues and expenses.⁷ Forced to prioritise their business operations, they purport to maintain their not-for-profit educational missions as separate enterprises designed to serve the public good. The optimistic hypothesis is that a competent administration will keep the business solvent while protecting the faculty and students from untoward interference by the external forces — the state or private investors — that provide them with resources. Such outside in-

⁷ For a cogent account of this framework, see Burton A. Weisbrod, Jeffrey P. Ballou, and Evelyn D. Ash, *Mission and money: Understanding the university* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

fluence, the mainstream view imagines, might compromise academic freedom or the disinterested pursuit of knowledge if it were not kept in check.

A concern often expressed in the wake of the Great Recession, even among proponents of the mainstream view, holds that the business model of higher education is broken or soon will be. As costs increase and income streams falter, the business, it is feared, could stagnate. According to the alternate, revisionist view, the business or administrative model is already unable to protect academic freedom and the integrity of research. It has become so immersed in the development of a knowledge-based economy that its institutions are, like the voices defending the mainstream view, agents participating in the construction of what Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter term a “capitalist knowledge/learning regime”.⁸ That regime has bred a global system that depends on information technology; it is building new networks of actors and new organisational arrangements that “span and blur the boundaries between public and private sectors”; it subjects the public interest to the vagaries of a vast marketplace for insight, treating knowledge as, precisely, *capital* rather than a public good. The mechanisms of the knowledge-driven economy are at once of a piece with a new and growing system of for-profit higher education and conducive to the “vocational veer”, *i.e.*, the surge of pre-professional programs that has invaded undergraduate curricula in the still preponderant not-for-profit sector as students and their families insist that their costly investment should provide them with skilled know-how guaranteeing gainful employment to successful graduates. The spectacular sign of this privileging of pre-professional programs is the current ascendancy of business majors in much of undergraduate education in the United States of America and, concomitantly, a dilution of the commitment to liberal education that was once the hallmark of the undergraduate experience.

Notwithstanding episodic symptoms of crisis, in its colossal, monumental cast the system eschews crisis in favour of inertia; it keeps on

⁸ Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter, *Academic Capitalism and the new economy* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004): 7.

inching along, adjusting to hard times. While both the mainstream and the revisionist viewpoints offer compelling insights into the way it operates, neither is entirely commensurable with its unmanageability, which is a function of such heterogeneous factors as size, complexity, fragmentation, unpredictability, creativity, passionate commitments to learning and intellectual life, and the special social and moral responsibility that derives from the privilege of being educated. If the system remains a powerful national asset, its current state leaves worried observers at something of a loss: we no longer have a confident understanding of how our society can preserve and strengthen it. In recent years the worries have been intensified by the fiscal problems of state governments and a consequent move toward privatisation in the great state university systems, which grew rapidly after World War II and now serve over 80% of the student population. This massive growth during the 1950s and 1960s took place while government-sponsored research was reinforcing the position of the research university as the dominant model at the pinnacle of a system of knowledge production-and-preservation. The rapid expansion coincided with a shift in the normative assumptions of American society, for which the college degree displaced the high school diploma as the standard educational endpoint. The system's growth was also accompanied by dramatic increases in the cost of a college education. These increases have accelerated since the 1980s. Beyond positioning higher education as a negotiable commodity in which individuals and families invest, the evolving cost structure has had the major socio-political effect of shifting more and more of the financial burden away from the public and onto individual students and their families. The profound consequences of this evolution for educational institutions, their students and faculties are beginning to be manifest.

First, let us consider society at large. The percentage of the American population achieving a bachelor's degree ceased to rise in the 1970s. In recent decades many first-world nations have moved past the United States of America in levels of average educational achievement. This competitive reversal put at risk not only a collective advantage to which the country's rise to 20th century global economic and technological pre-eminence is attributable, but also the long climb toward a progressively more educated general population that characterised

American society from the start of the 20th century until the 1970s. According to the influential account expounded by Harvard economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz in *The race between education and technology*,⁹ such progressive socio-economic development is a function of research and education; research that produces new technologies and education that provides skilled workers capable of applying those technologies. The process they describe has two key effects: it results in interesting, well remunerated jobs that make for a solid labour market, and it enables the growth of a satisfied middle class that, especially in the United States after World War II, steadily improves its lot both economically and culturally. In this national narrative, education comes to be valued as the key institution both socially and psychologically: producing jobs, workers, and well informed citizens in a growth-oriented economy, it allows the whole of society to advance in a spirit of solidarity, and it permits every persevering individual who reaches a high level of proficiency in a field of study to partake of the upward mobility built into the educational system. The difficulty at present is that this story of progress has given way to one of stagnation. On the one hand, recent graduates have discovered that successful degree completion does not guarantee a well remunerated job; on the other, political support for broad access to worthwhile post-secondary education for the middle and lower classes has eroded.

Second, let us note succinctly some broad features of life inside American academic communities. Among the numerous disquieting phenomena, five — all of which are heavily influenced by the cost structure — are particularly telling. (1.) An alarmingly high percentage of college students drop out without completing a 4-year degree.¹⁰ (2.) A number of recent studies assert that academic progress by large numbers of post-secondary students is marginal and describe a degraded academic culture in which it is normal for students to spend too much time either working at jobs to support themselves or just loafing, and thus too

⁹ Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, *The race between education and technology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ See William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos and Michael S. McPherson, *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

little time studying.¹¹ (3.) The teaching corps is increasingly casualised — that is, made up of contingent or part-time faculty working under demeaning conditions.¹² (4.) The restructuring of the professoriate dovetails with ever-narrowing specialisation in the ranks of advanced, tenured faculty, for whom scholarly achievement in their fields is crucial and the optimal, upper-level teaching assignment privileges their own research interests over students' needs.¹³ (5.) In the middle and lower tiers of the system and in several important states, a broad retreat from affirmative action and equal opportunity has occurred.

THE CHALLENGE FOR THE ELITE

As little as three years ago, it was possible to extrapolate from this degraded picture of higher education in American society and in its own educational institutions the vision, imagined and then vigorously criticised by Frank Donoghue in the last chapter of *The last professors: The corporate university and the fate of the humanities*,¹⁴ of liberal education surviving only at the top: it would be the province of the most prestigious and wealthy colleges and universities (perhaps fifty or so) that continue to dominate access to the corporate-and-political “power elite”, to use Mills' dated but still apposite term.¹⁵ In 2008 Donoghue's

¹¹ See, among others, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) and James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Lowering higher education: The rise of corporate universities and the fall of liberal education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

¹² Among many accounts of the decimated academic workplace and marketplace, the most compelling is the opening chapter of Marc Bousquet's, *How the university works: Higher education and the low-wage nation* (New York, New York University Press, 2008).

¹³ See Louis Menand, “Interdisciplinary and anxiety,” in *The marketplace of ideas* (New York: Norton, 2010): 93-126.

¹⁴ Frank Donoghue, “Prestige and prestige envy” in *The last professors: The corporate university and the fate of the humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008): 111-137.

¹⁵ C. Wright Mills, *The power elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), especially chapter 12, “The power elite”: 269.

task was to explain why the evanescence of liberal education and the humanities in the nation's public universities and a widened divide between them and the elite bastions of a different, conceptually *higher* education reserved for the socially, economically, technocratically privileged would be a grave misfortune for the United States of America. What has changed since then? In essence, as responses to the Great Recession have unfolded we have passed from the speculation of labour theorists attentive to globalisation, which Donoghue duly noted, to a struggle with grim realities: the employment-guaranteeing promise of higher education has collapsed even for the highly qualified graduates of the elite, research-oriented institutions supposedly fuelling the knowledge-based global economy that was expected to produce the intellectually demanding, gratifying, well-remunerated jobs of the future. As Paul Krugman wrote in his March 7th *New York Times* op-ed essay,¹⁶ “technological progress is actually reducing the demand for highly educated workers”. While high-level work in the professional and technological spheres is being automated by computerisation, the globalisation of higher education and especially of professional training programs is making the sophisticated positions of the so-called knowledge economy just as “off-shorable” as many manufacturing and service occupations have become over the past few decades. In sum, the elite itself — insofar as it is an intelligentsia that melds corporate, political, and educational forces — is vulnerable to the destabilising effects of under or unemployment. Its capacity to preside over and sustain the system of higher education is in doubt.

In *The global auction: The broken promises of education, jobs, and incomes*,¹⁷ Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder, and David Ashton subject the globalised marketplace for highly skilled, technologically sophisticated labour to the kind of extensive, empirical analysis that sociologist Richard Sennett carried out for the changing American workplace in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ The new economy depicted by Sennett calls for individuals capable of adjusting periodically to the swings of a global

¹⁶ Paul Krugman, “Degrees and dollars”, *The New York Times* (7 March 2011): A21.

¹⁷ Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder, and David Ashton, *The global auction: The broken promises of education, jobs, and incomes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Among Richard Sennett's many compelling volumes, see especially *The culture of the new Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

economy and constantly changing markets, of reshaping their identities as they navigate through a series of different careers, of coping confidently with instability. Brown, Lauder and Ashton go further, describing the emergence of a new global workforce made up of highly-skilled labourers willing to toil for low wages; their findings refute the conventional wisdom according to which more and better education is the key to economic success for both the individual and society. In any society, upward mobility through education can be undermined by a global auction that affords insecure employment to the lowest bidder; the employer-auctioneer takes advantage of the technologically enabled capacity to deploy cognitive labour anywhere and transmit its results everywhere instantaneously. The logic of the auction — one of relentless cost-cutting and downsizing that boosts profits by shedding jobs — spares no sector of an economy, no class of a society, no stratum of higher education.

So what does the spectre of unemployment for the well educated mean for the elite colleges and universities that are the preserves of liberal education? Does it mean something different for American and South African institutions and their societies, or is it likely to be a great leveler that subjects them to the same dynamics? If it is clear that the lot of graduates emerging from training programs with career-oriented credentials may not be stable, long-term employment in a profession or corporation or institution, can we still claim that the products of elite schools who enter the world with less focused vocational objectives but also with a liberal education and its multiple competencies are better prepared to deal with the turbulent socio-economic environment they are destined to confront? Perhaps. But in both a highly developed society like that of the United States of America and a developing one like that of South Africa, the main social and intellectual challenge for a beneficent educational elite seeking to preserve itself and the long-term viability of the system over which it presides has become more complicated. It is no longer merely to determine, collectively, how to maintain the modicum of upward mobility a democratic society requires of its educational system and how to rationalise the degree of unequal distribution of income it deems acceptable; it is also, increasingly, how to manage equitably the distribution of the high-level cognitive labour that is the university's core function. To confront the problem is to

consider a degree of regulation — of affirmative action for the public good — that hardly seems thinkable in the current American context, where the next few years seem likely to bring further retrenchment. We can only hope that the determined pursuit of affirmative action in South Africa's elite universities may eventually be recognised as an exemplary agenda of structural adjustment.



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