Doing justice to social justice in South African higher education

MASEBALA TJABANE
Vaal University of Technology

VENITHA PILLAY
University of Pretoria

"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come to help me because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together" Lila Watson, Aboriginal Australian.

This paper attempts to develop a conceptualisation of social justice in higher education based on a close reading of the current literature in the field. An important assumption we make is that higher education is a valuable mechanism for social justice. We set the literature against policy documents that detail South African aspirations with regard to the achievement of social justice goals. Our aim is to stimulate debate on and engagement with issues of social justice in the local and global context that continues to manifest increasing socio-economic injustices. We argue that human liberation from global social injustice is intertwined at the individual and collective level and that it requires a collective human agency inherent in the radical tradition of social justice, which exhibits impressive credentials for facilitating the achievement of social justice.

Introduction

This paper attempts to develop a conceptualisation of social justice in higher education based on a close reading of the current literature in the field. We argue that social justice is an important mandate of higher education in South Africa (SA) as a developing democracy (Waghid, 2008: 20). Furthermore, higher education is particularly positioned in this context to produce higher knowledge that is responsive to its milieu (Morrow, 2009: 113). Finally we show that the quest for social justice is intertwined with the academic tradition of critique and the purpose of seeking just futures for the common good, and that the urgency for this is increasing in the context of the current economic recession and a general socio-economic environment that appears to be hostile to radically informed strategies.

Methodology

This paper emerged from a doctoral study on social justice, entitled *Higher education policy and social justice: A South African case study* (Tjabane 2010*).* The research questions that guided the study sought to address the marginalisation of the social justice agenda in higher education and focused specifically on three aspects of social justice, namely access into higher education, gender and HIV/AIDS.

The focus of this paper is not on the findings of the study, but the central analytic point of the thesis that there is need for the revival of a social justice agenda in higher education institutions. The paper offers a brief overview of current debates on social justice and proceeds to examine efforts in SA to achieve the goals of social justice through education, largely through an examination of South African education policy documents and current literature that seeks to address issues of social justice in a post apartheid SA.

Literature overview

Social justice is a contested concept in theory and practice, with various definitions. In this article, we adopt the position of Gerwitz (2002) who advances a plural conception of social justice. Hence social

justice is viewed as possessing a variety of facets that entail the equal redistribution of socio-economic amenities, as well as the recognition and promotion of difference and cultural diversity (Gerwitz & Gribb, 2002: 499; Taylor, 1997: 128). Plural conceptions of social justice enlarge the agenda of such justice, the complexity and multiplicity of which has been an issue of concern throughout modern civilisation. Its ancestry lies in the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality of all humankind. In modern times, the literature refers to three traditions of social justice: the conservative, the liberal and the radical.

The conservative tradition of social justice

The conservative tradition of social justice originated among classical economists and advocates of Enlightenment projects, such as Adam Smith (1723–1790) (1776) and Hayek (1899-1992) (1848), whose common belief was that government should follow a *laissez-faire* economic policy (Hill, 2003: 3). For its upholders the driving force for a socially just society is individual self-interest and the motivation for profit, operating under a *laissez-faire* economic policy (Rizvi, 1998; Starr, 1999).

Robert Nozick (1929 - 2002) can be regarded as an embodiment of the conservative tradition in the field of political and moral philosophy during the latter half of the 20th century (Feser, 2005; Otsuka, 2005). Nozick's theory regarding political and economic ethics is based on libertarian ideals and he is renowned for the "Entitlement Theory of Justice" in which he vindicates right-wing libertarianism and the advancement of individual rights of control over one's own mind, body, and life: a right to self-ownership (Feser, 2005: 20; Otsuka, 2005: 15). The centrality of self as the means to social justice, and the progress of the self as the goal of social justice are embedded in the views of both Adam Smith and Nozick .

The conservative tradition and its ideals, particularly libertarianism, would not be palatable to socialist-minded thinkers,. The position of the conservative tradition on social justice is a direct opposite of collective effort portrayed in the Aboriginal statement reproduced above. Despite its support of inequality, however, this tradition continues to exist alongside the liberal and radical traditions of social justice in a context of tension between individual competition and communal cooperation.

The liberal tradition of social justice

The liberal tradition is associated with the egalitarian position of 'justice as fairness' and the liberal principles of equality and freedom. The liberal tradition's point of convergence with the conservative tradition lies in the belief that social justice can be attained within the existing capitalist socio-economic framework. It differs, however, from the conservative tradition with regard to its position *vis-â- vis* the role of the state. The liberal tradition favours the role of the state as a protector of society and regulator of markets for the promotion of egalitarian principles, while the conservative tradition favours a weak, aloof state (Rizvi, 1998; Starr, 1999). In this liberal tradition, social justice would require redistribution to those who lack the basic socio-economic amenities, while emphasising the role of the state in ensuring this redistribution (Gale, 2000: 268).

The roots of the liberal tradition of social justice are found in the moral and political philosophy of 17th century theorists and the ideals of the Enlightenment. John Locke (1632-1704) is one of the seminal thinkers of the liberal tradition(Schwartz, 2007: 2; Tuckness, 2005: 1). Locke also exerted an influence on other Enlightenment philosophers, such as Kant (1724 – 1804) who was a central figure in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, and who defines enlightenment as the maxim of always thinking for oneself and finding just solutions. (Uzgalis, 2007: 21). During the 20th century John Rawls (1921-2002) emerged as yet another liberal social scientist and philosopher who championed freedom and equality equally in advancing the position of justice as fairness, with almost similar tones to Kant. (Rawls, 1971: 302-303). The premise of Rawls' "justice as fairness" is the creation of a more open society based on egalitarian social justice. Rawls has been hailed as one of the most influential and enduring moral philosophers of the 20th and 21st centuries (Nussbaum, 2001: 1).

Commentators on the conservative and liberal traditions, Rizvi (1998) and Starr (1999), classify them under the modernisation paradigm and neo-liberal philosophy. The education reform policies informed by the said paradigm advance the human capital position on education, where education is viewed as

an investment, and maintain that justice can be attained and individuals can be enabled to utilise their education in an open market society, by distributing the same amount of social good (education) to people of all classes (Whitty, 2000: 93). Human capital investments generate monetary and social returns and perceive education as a great equaliser.

Another common description of the proponents of the first and second social justice traditions is the term the New Right, or the conservative alliance. According to Apple (1993: 11) this social movement consists of three sectors: the neo-liberal, the neo-conservative and religious fundamentalism. In principle, the ideology of the conservative alliance appears to embody social justice, because it appears to preach the message of equality and distribution informed by human rights, which appeals to the marginalised and poor. In practice, however, owing to the unequal nature of capitalism, the distributive element of liberal social justice has come to be translated into the distribution of unequal socio-economic relations, characteristic of capitalism.

The radical tradition of social justice

Continuities exist between the first two, the conservative and the liberal traditions of social justice, and the third (radical) tradition, in their calls for democracy and equal participation in the socio-economic and political activities of the state. The third tradition, which is socialist in its outlook, has been identified by most social scientists as possessing the greatest potential to promote social justice (Starr, 1991: 22). It is couched in the language of transformation associated with leftist politics and is critical of conservatism and liberalism. According to this tradition, everyone is supposed to benefit equally from participating in the socio-economic activities and social institutions of a society (Starr, 1991: 23), hence the move towards the redistribution of social wealth, other social amenities and a more equitable socio-economic system.

The language of a transformation of the capitalist socio-economic order associated with the third tradition emphasises its strong affinity to critical theory and the Frankfurt school of thought (Kellner 2005: 2). While numerous social theorists are associated with leftist politics and critical theory, of particular relevance to this project are Habermas (1984) and Freire (2004), because of their clear position on democracy and collective human agency as an element of radical social justice. Habermas' position on social justice is heavily influenced by his belief that justice exists, and that reason or rationality can benefit society through communicative action leading to human emancipation . (Habermas, 1984: 86). In this regard, his project could be interpreted as transforming human oppression into an expression of more humane and democratic values through communicative action.

The concern of Habermas, to open up communication, resonates with Paulo Freire's (1927 – 1997) concern with democratic dialogue as a tool to emancipate the oppressed from the debilitating effects of capitalism. Freire was critical of capitalism and the resulting crises such as abject oppression and injustices and advanced that it would take critical education to achieve a socialist utopian vision (Glass, 2001: 15; Morrow & Torres, 2002: 11; (Gibbon, 2006: 4; McLaren & Faramandpur, 2005: 53). According to Freire, education for critical consciousness is closely related to the quest for transformation as found in radical social justice. In a Third World context, closely similar to that of South Africa, Freire contends that education could help men and women assume an increasingly critical attitude towards the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1974: 30). The pursuit of transformation is crucial to this study. Equally important is the concept of mutuality, because for social justice to be a lived reality for all humanity, there has to be mutual human agency.

The agenda of the third tradition is much broader, in that it advances social justice beyond redistribution to recognition and absolute freedom. This is embodied in Young's (2000) theory of justice as freedom from the five faces of oppression, namely exploitation, marginalisation, violence, powerlessness and cultural imperialism (Young, 1997, as cited in Gerwitz, 1998; Young, 2000: 35). Each of the five faces of oppression represents a form of injustice that a member of society might experience. Justice as freedom from the five faces of oppression envisages a society in which socio-economic justice is achieved through the equal redistribution of the resources of society, humane treatment of all, equal recognition of the worth of all members of society, empowerment and celebration of diversity (Gerwitz, 1998: 477; Young,

2000: 48). Young's (2000) broad conceptualisation of social justice is constructive, because it improves on a more restrictive liberal and conventional conceptualisation of social justice. In addition to its broad agenda it also encompasses the notion of collective human agency, indicating that human emancipation is closely intertwined with individual liberation, as embodied in the Aboriginal maxim cited earlier.

Social justice and South African policy initiatives

In South Africa concerns with social justice, in line with the liberal and radical tradition, have always been high on the agenda of the anti-apartheid movement. The dawn of political independence in the 1990s led to a re-emphasis on the social justice agenda in the government's attempts at nation-building, reconciliation and addressing the injustices of the past. The foundation of the social justice discourse can be traced to the anti-apartheid movements, culminating in the formation of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) in the 1990s, a policy initiative informed by a progressive philosophy of education and reform, evident in principles of democracy, non-sexism, non-racism and a unitary system. The NEPI-framework could be seen as an attempt to democratise education policy formulation, because its researchers comprised a wide range of people, including political leaders and academic practitioners (Chetty, Chisholm, Mkwanazi, Motala & Tickly, 1993), who participated in a collective, inclusive process to formulate policy options, taking into account the diversity and multicultural stakeholders of the education enterprise.

A plethora of policy documents focusing on transforming and reconstructing higher education has been published since 2000, including the "Size and Shape"-document: Towards a New Higher Education Landscape – Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century (June 2000), the National Plan For Higher Education (NPHE) (February 2001) and the New Academic Plan for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education (January 2002). Common recurring themes raised in these documents are framed in the language of democracy, transformation, human rights and progressive critical academic culture (White Paper, 1995: 11-12, "Size and Shape"-document, 2000: 24-28). The NPHE, for instance, recognises the important role higher education plays in consolidating democracy and social justice, while contributing to socio-economic development (NPHE 2001: 6-5). The enhancement of the culture of democracy is closely linked to the promotion of social justice, particularly as the country is an emerging democracy. The founding principles of the South African Constitution, particularly the advancement of the culture of human rights and democracy (The South African Constitution 1996: 3), are contained in the NPHE .

In terms of the three traditions of social justice discussed above, the language and tone of the social democratic view appear to dominate in SA policy documents. This is evident in the emphasis on open participation in the economic and social spheres, of previously disadvantaged people. The above policy documents, because they are informed by an inclusive and democratic discourse, may also be regarded as reflecting the concept that human emancipation is a collective effort, similar to that in the Aboriginal proverb at the beginning of the article.

Social justice versus globalisation

The above section has indicated that the South African government, in an attempt to break the mould of apartheid education, embraced social justice, which is evident in the commitment to the adoption of democratic principles, the human rights culture and transformation in general, while at the same time attempting to meet the demands of the global and knowledge economy. These concerns show that SA has not been immune to globalisation. In SA, like in other countries, concerns with global competitiveness and the knowledge economy have been translated in terms of the corporatisation and commodification of higher education, a trend that is eroding social justice concerns in higher education. Progressive social researchers advance the view that the South African reality and the illiberal elements of neo-liberalism are obscured by the language of human rights freedom and equality: according to Vally (2002: 6) "Acting as if certain rights exist or all, inhibits people's ability to recognise when they are in fact illusory, and why society does not act to protect these rights".

Proponents of the radical social justice agenda, the progressive intellectual forces in the country (Chisholm & Fuller, 1996; Muller, 1998; Vally, 2002) lament the manner in which social justice is downplayed in policy due to the macro-economic regime under which the government has placed itself. The developments in question are the replacement of the RDP by the Growth, Economic and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR). GEAR has been regarded as a policy option with a rightist agenda, which has thus succumbed to the agenda of the Washington Consensus that is neo-liberal to the core (Bond 2007: 128). At the macro-level, progressive social scientists call for the re-insertion of the transformation agenda of the RDP in addressing the impact of globalisation. (Kallaway, Kruss, Donn & Fatar, 1997: 1)

Writing in the mid 1990s, Chisholm and Fuller (1996: 713) critique South African policy formulation and implementation, indicating that the broad transformative agenda of the pre-1990 period was being narrowed down to promote the concerns of a market economy associated with globalisation. Although the macro policy development points in a direction opposed to the progressive social justice agenda, social researchers in the South African context continue to argue for the promotion of an atmosphere conducive to transformation and the promotion of the elements of radical social justice that entail the fostering of higher education for the public good, accompanied by a courageous critical scholarship informed by a human rights culture, e.g. Badat (2001: 1), Ntshoe (2002; 9) and Singh (2001).

Public intellectuals responding to the social justice agenda

In order to illustrate the complexity and multiplicity of social justice, this section will look at some of the ways in which intellectuals and academics have responded to or interpreted the call for greater equality and social justice in education. In other words, this section attempts to answer the question as to what constitutes social justice in a transformed higher education system in South Africa, as conceptualised by intellectuals with the moral responsibility of promoting the common good. It also attempts to identify themes from the higher education environment that illustrate the Aboriginal proverb that holds the view that human emancipation requires for collective human agency.

One of the emerging interpretations of social justice in the South African context is its association with inclusive education. In this regard, a socially just education system entails the celebration and valuing of diversity, accommodation and tolerance of all learners, creation of equal opportunities and the promotion of the capabilities of all learners (Pendlebury & Enslin 2004: 50). Inclusive education also encompasses other mechanism of social justice, viz. increased and broadened participation of previously excluded and disadvantaged people. In the South African context, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has been used for this purpose (Motaung 2009: 78). RPL opens up the educational boundaries and thus contributes to greater inclusivity. In this context, social justice agenda is advanced through optimal social and educational inclusion. The agenda of inclusivity is also portrayed the call for intellectuals to engage with Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and thus contribute to socially just knowledge systems (Adora-Hoppers 2001: 84).

In a context where there is great concern with breaking the mould of the injustices of the past and ever-increasing global injustices and suffering, it stands to reason that progressive educators would advance and dream of ideal situations. At the classroom level, in the context of the enactment of social justice, researchers advance the position that transformed university teaching and learning entails reflexive praxis. Waghid (2001: 77) suggests that this entails rationalising, acting and asking different questions with the aim of transforming current unjust realities. The quest for the ideal in alleviating injustices has its roots in critical pedagogy which has as its central object the transformation of society for the mutual benefit of all who live in it (Keet, Zinn & Porteus 2009: 109).

The importance of adopting collective responsibility to address global injustice is emphasised in maintaining that nurturing possibilities for communitarian liberalism could contribute towards deepening democracy and social justice at higher education institutions (Waghid, 2002: 106). The specific elements of communitarian liberalism likely to promote democracy are identified as conversational justice and shared rational deliberation (Waghid 2002:112), in almost the same vein as Habermas's communicative action.

Implicit in this suggestion is an atmosphere fertile for the germination of the ideal of social justice. Thus it needs to be explored further, but with caution, lest attempts at promoting it relapse into neo-liberalism.

Related to the notion of communitarian liberalism is the cultivation of democratic and compassionate citizenship education as an element of social justice and transformation (Waghid 2003: 159). The point regarding compassionate citizenship resonates with one advanced by Kissack and Enslin (2003: 47), who argue that citizenship education is a crucial element and goal of tertiary education, particularly for fostering transformation and social justice. Nieuwenhuis (2004: 63) expresses a similar view: "equality of treatment should promote the core human values of respect, compassion, just treatment, fairness, peace, truthfulness and freedom" (2004:63) In this regard mutual compassion is important in the realisation of social justice.

At the micro-level, the agenda for the promotion of social justice lies in the call for more participatory and democratic policy formulation and implementation involving all social agents. De Clerq (1996: 144) promotes this position, saying that policy documents separate policy formulation from implementation. Similarly, Unterhalter (1998: 232) contends that for policy to be more inclusive and gender sensitive, a different and more socially just form of analysis is needed, i.e. an analysis informed by a more inclusive and open discourse of social justice.

The above elements of inclusive education, reflexive praxis, critical pedagogy, communitarian liberalism, democratic and compassionate citizenship and collective agency, fit the agenda of transformation and popular democratic discourse informed by socialism. This re-emphasis of the agenda of reconstruction and development in dealing with issues of equity and redress echoes the position of one South African radical social justice scholar, viz. that in the context of increasing global injustices and intolerance to radical social justice, there is an urgent need for the renewal of radical social justice in the tradition of Marx, even in a global context that is vehemently opposed to Marxism and has declared the end of its history (Muller 1997: 196).

Radical social justice, referred to earlier as the third tradition, possesses a broader agenda in the South African context because of the historical legacy of the country and its specificity. For instance the consideration of the forms of 'mode two'- knowledge as social justice issues. The breadth and scope of the agenda further illustrate the inclusive and accommodative stance of the radical conception of social justice. Radical social justice, however, has been criticised for being overly utopian (Starr, 1991: 24). With reference to its position on education, radical social justice has also been criticised for adopting an inclusive emancipatory and political stance that would produce a cadre of social activists without adequate skills for the marketplace. Its proposal of full inclusion has also been criticised for lowering educational standards by burdening educators with students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds Another criticism of the radical position of social justice comes from postmodernist scholars who accuse it of being a totalising meta-narrative that excludes other ways of knowing, particularly those of feminism (Burbules & Berk, 1999:57).

Despite this criticism, this radical tradition stands a better chance than the other two of achieving a socially just education and training system because of its socialist and redistributive agenda, as opposed to the restrictive and neo-liberal agenda of the other two traditions. The tenets of the radical position on social justice, such as participation parity in all societal institutions, far outweigh the issues of marketable skills, the lowering of standards and a totalising meta-narrative. Also neutralising this criticism are the broad and inclusive agenda of radical social justice and the language of possibility to which Giroux (1998) alludes. Therefore, the challenge is to revitalise social belief in the alternatives to neo-liberal social justice, such as found in the radical social justice agenda.

Some concluding thoughts

There are no sources in the current document.

In the context of the narrowing of the policy agenda, the shifting of policy alliances and ambiguities, this study contends that the pursuit of social justice is critical. Our argument after reviewing research concerned with social justice issues in South Africa is that the national policy documents appear to serve and legitimate the current socio-economic context that is informed by neo-liberalism. In principle, the social justice agenda is expressed by the recurring focus on equity, redress and social responsiveness, as well as democratic and inclusive education. This scenario tends to leave existing and traditional institutional practices intact. The question arises as to how institutional practices can be directed to support the social justice agenda. This study therefore sought to extend the scope of existing literature on social justice education by providing a reconstructed, revitalised and relevant version.

Furthermore, while evidence gleaned from the literature appears to indicate that history and the broader macro-economic framework of neo-liberalism stifle the concerns and practices of radical social justice, and that the essential structure of neo-liberalism remains integrated, new hope is to be found in the establishment or creation of the progressive voice and practices of dissent. These beacons of possibility provide significant potential for the restructuring of the social justice agenda along progressive and democratic lines. This is an important consideration for the creation of a holistic and sensitive citizenry committed to a just world.

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