Education, the State, and Class Inequality: The case for Free Higher Education in South Africa[1]

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The events of 2015 confounded those who made unflattering observations about the social consciousness of students, allegedly consumed by the effects of being 'born-free' and without a sense of history or mission. These cynical assertions reflected ignorance about the simmering tensions at the chalk face of our education institutions, and indeed the coal face of our mines and in the impoverished communities around the country. Now the issue of the funding of higher education is writ large in the national consciousness.

It is widely accepted that higher education in South Africa is chronically underfunded. This is hardly contentious, since even the Minister of Higher Education has accepted the need to access additional resources for higher education. Similarly, the shocking levels of social inequality in South Africa is hardly in issue since South Africa ranks amongst one of the most unequal societies on earth (Southall, 2016).

Yet, there are important misconceptions in some of the arguments about the chronic underfunding of education and social inequality as it affects 'poor' and 'middle' class access to higher education leading to narrow conceptualisations of both the role of higher education and its relationship to social systems. The questions raised by students and other participants in the struggles around education are not simply about education, nor are they resolvable by better education policies, plans and strategies, or by increasing state budgets for the higher education system, alone[2]. They raised fundamental questions about the very nature of the 'decolonisation' and 'transformation' of post-apartheid society and how 'national development' and its political, socio-economic, and cultural goals are to be realised.

Because of space constraints we will concentrate on one issue alone – that is, the debate around the question of free higher education and whether it should be provided for the 'poor' or more universally 'for all'. We know that there is a raft of other issues that have been raised in the recent events around the role and purposes of universities bringing into focus conceptions of the decolonising of the university and simultaneously of its curriculum, forms of leadership and management, the racism and gender violence which has characterised university life at many campuses, the commodification of knowledge, the limited nature of its conceptions of scholarship and pedagogy, together with issues about intra-institutional inequality, matters concerning the governance of institutions, the 'culture ' of universities, language and other pertinent issues.[3]

[1] A fuller version of this paper of this paper was submitted to the editor of the New South African Review (forthcoming)in May 2016, the editor has agreed to the publication of this version given the immediacy of the issues raised in the paper and its potential uses for public engagement.

[2] In the book *Education, Economy and Society* (Vally and Motala, 2014 UNISA Press) the authors challenge the resurgent neo-classical and human capital theory assumptions related to the link between education and economic growth and that more and better education and training will automatically lead to employment.

[3] There is a new consciousness encouraging solidarity amongst significant numbers of youth that speaks more and more to the intersectionality of class exploitation, racism, different forms of oppression and patriarchy in concrete ways. This has over time expanded to include issues about privatisation and the outsourcing of work, the perverse pursuit of rankings and competitiveness, inequalities between universities and the 'decolonising' of the curriculum.

Ours is a more focused examination relating to the interpretations of what might be included in any discussion about the costs of education.[4] The focus on this issue should be obvious because it is in some senses central to the debates not only about the 'transformation' of universities but its relationship to social change, inequality and society more generally. We examine the approaches opposed to the idea of 'fee-free for all', relative to those that ostensibly favour the idea of fee free higher education for the 'poor'. As we will show the underlying rationale for opposing free higher education 'for all' is misconstrued. These misdirected approaches are reliant on an assessment of the quantum of available government finances for higher education in South Africa and reflect a particular orientation to the role of education in society. In our view this opposition to a more universal approach to free education reflects a particular perspective about the form of social reorganisation that is prefigured through it.[5]

Contestation around higher education and its social role is not unique to South Africa either historically or at this time. Over the last few years there have been similar stirrings and the emergence of student organisation and public protest in a wide variety of states in the North and South (Estian and Johan, 2016). These struggles are not only about the rising costs of higher education but also raise questions that go to the core of the socio-cultural and intellectual project that is represented by the process of knowledge production and its dissemination in society – and in particular about the role of the institutions of higher education in that regard.

We approach this issue from the perspective of alternative social choices, values and purposes not only for education but as a precondition for the realisation of a democratic society. Discussions about education are inseparable from an examination of the dominance of those approaches that have disengaged education from its broader social remit either deliberately or by omission. We are critical of the reduction of educational issues to the purpose of economic ends alone. Such instrumental approaches arise from the paralysing discourses about education as a 'human resource' avoiding its wider social purposes.

Essentially two arguments are used to support the view that 'free higher education for all' is not achievable.

The arguments against fee free 'for all'.

The most frequently referred to argument against 'free higher education for all' (which is more limited in some ways than the 'full cost of study')[6] is to be found in the writings, comments and

[4] Our approach would favour the more encompassing approach though here as will become plain, that is not the burden of the argument we make since we argue that much more fundamental issues need to be resolved before meaningful judgments about the quantum of costs can be resolved.

[5] Though use of these categories of analysis by the proponents of 'fee free for the 'poor' compounds the problem - since no definitional boundaries are set in the use of who is 'poor' and what is not beyond the quantitative definitions that are set out in the NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) framework for the purpose of supporting students who fall within its categories of funding support. The Working Group on fee-free university education (DHET 2013) for the poor had a similar problem defining the poor as those households earning less than the lowest SARS tax bracket.

[6] We use the phrase 'full costs of study' or simply 'free higher education for all' to avoid the confusions over what is entailed in 'fee free' the latter being limited to the costs of registration and tuition fees alone. Contrary to this 'the concept of 'full costs of study' is at least as encompassing as the costs of registration and tuition, accommodation, meals, study material and transport. Although the particularities of these issues should in our view be the subject of proper public discussion.

public pronouncements of Nico Cloete, Director of the Centre for Higher Education Trust and extraordinary professor at both Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape.

In an article entitled 'The flawed ideology of 'free higher education' Cloete (2015a) argues that despite its 'revolutionary appeal' the idea of free education is both 'financially impossible and morally wrong, as free higher education privileges the rich'[7] in the context of a developing country. He argues in favour of '(A)ffordable higher education for all', making a case for differential costs for separate groups of students supposedly addressing inequality through such an approach. He points to the distinction between the idea of 'free higher education for the poor' and 'for all' and asks whether the latter is achievable, answering as follows

> The short answer is: *"No, and there is not enough money in any developing country for free higher education."* …… The examples they usually cite are Norway, Finland and Germany – the richest and most developed countries in Europe – but never Africa or Latin America[8].

This leads him, a-contextually, to Mahmood Mamdani's[9] view that higher education in developing countries was for a 'privileged elite' since its purpose "'was to train a tiny elite on full scholarships which included tuition, board, health insurance, transport and even a 'boon' to cover personal needs'" (Mamdani, 2008). This, according to Mamdani was to lead inevitably to 'commercialisation' and the growth of private colleges, full scholarships to the children of the elite, and because of the negative impact of these policies on access for the poor, their enrolment in fee-paying private institutions. The further effect of these policies was 'regressive' since (according to research by Sean Archer) 'poorer members of society end up subsidising the rich' (Cloete 2015a: 3). Cloete uses Barr to suggest that the reality is that 'the overwhelming subsidy in public universities accrues to students from middle- and high-income families' (Ibid).

Cloete examines government's contribution to the costs of education relative to students' contribution, and provides data about the comparative expenditures for higher education in various countries. He points to the reality that the proportion of the gross domestic product spend on higher education in South Africa is markedly below that of many other developing economies, let alone developed ones.[10] In addition Cloete (2015b) makes a number of other claims relating to the mismanagement of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)[11] and gratuitous comments about the lack of financial analysis skills in the higher education bureaucracy. He refers also to the policy of 'fee-capping' opposed by university Vice Chancellors because of its many adverse effects, including on 'the autonomy and flexibility of individual higher education institutions'; on 'higher education becoming cheaper for the rich'; discouraging 'institutional differentiation' while

[7] Page 1. Later re-asserting on page 10 that it is 'financially, empirically and morally wrong'.
[8] The italics are our own.
[9] Referring to Mamdani in this way is extraordinary given his writings of the impact of World Bank policies on African higher education. See in particular Mamdani (1993).
[10] From 2012 data, the proportion of GDP for Brazil is 0.95%, Senegal and Ghana 1.4%, Norway and Finland over 2% and Cuba 4.5%. In South Africa, the 2015-16 budget for higher education is R30 billion. If the government were to spend 1% of GDP on higher education, this would amount to R41 billion – an additional R11 billion and almost four times the reported shortfall due to the 0% increase (Cloete, 2015a).
[11] Elsewhere he explains this as follows: 'Cadre deployment and poor management within the DHET have contributed to the financial crisis. The financial reporting system is broken. It does not accurately reflect the financial state of the institutions, nor does it allow for a diagnostic analysis of their financial health' (Cloete, 2015b).

advancing 'institutional homogenisation'; and also its effects on quality and the possibilities for the cross subsidisation of 'needy students' (Cloete, 2015a: 7).[12]

Cloete's solution to these problems is the establishment of what he calls a 'war room'[13] to devise a strategy, to increase the higher education budget to 1% of the GDP, deal with systemic inefficiencies, rethink the idea of loans to the 'very poor' because of their non-recoverability, the prescribing of higher fees for the 'rich' since 'For the rich, higher education in South Africa is a bargain (Ibid: 9).' He (Ibid: 10) strongly prescribes support for those not presently covered by NSFAS funding and not able to fund their education (the 'missing middle') to avoid 'Arab Spring type uprisings' and because as he revealingly asserts,

> The 'missing middle' is not only the backbone of higher education worldwide, but a productive and well-educated middle class is also the glue that holds society together.

Elsewhere, following these criticisms about government underfunding and 'inefficiencies', he asserts that the undergraduate education system is "too expensive", unable to produce "highly skilled graduates (to drive down the exorbitant rates of return); neither can it absorb large numbers of successful (academically and materially) poor students." His judgement is that the present mode of funding of higher education "is not only morally questionable, but also a lose-lose situation for the poor students and the economy". Cloete (2016a) discusses the ineffectiveness of the "revolving door" outcome of the present system where "poor students are enabled to enter the higher education system, but being unable to complete their studies, are 'revolved' back into poverty, but in this case, with the additional burden of a student loan debt they are unable to repay because they lack the qualifications to secure formal employment," and makes the extraordinary claim bordering on the kinds of hysteria and sensationalism of some media reports that

> there is considerable anecdotal evidence that the ones who tried to burn down university administration buildings containing fee records were the ones with bad debt and bad academic records (Ibid: 5).

Drawing on human capital theory about rates of return to investments in higher education he avers that "the system must change". Such systemic change, we are informed a la Piketty, being dependent on higher investment in higher education since "education and technology are the decisive factors" (Ibid: 5).

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[12] Cloete repeats these views substantially in his interview with CapeTalk's John Webb and suggests that dealing with corruption might be a 'good solution' to the fees problem. (sic)

[13] The 'war room' as suggested by Cloete is to be comprised of "representatives from a number of other ministries, experienced business leaders and a few academics." David Cooper responds (Personal correspondence November 8th, 2015): "The latter is Cloete's 'solution.' In my view this is exactly the global solution-type of government/business/academic elites who have since the 1980s given us the new form of global capitalism across a range of policies including in higher education. This framework in fact (globally and nationally) underlies (i) the thinking of our 1996 National Commission of Higher Education (in which Cloete played a leading part) which so under-stressed the issues of equality in our university system that we have now the serious and almost irreparable divisions between our new system of 26+ university institutions; (ii) the new system of outsourcing at our universities which has led at UCT to professors earning close to R1 million a year compared to outsourced cleaners earning less than R50 000 a year i.e. a differential of 20:1, unimaginable when I first joined UCT in Sociology in 1981; and (iii) a serious lack of transformation of our university curricula (especially in the social sciences) which are still deeply rooted in our colonial past."

He argues that although the government's position about free education for the poor "should be supported" questions of "how will free education be undertaken and for how many?" remain since (unsurprisingly for us) there is indeed "no evidence anywhere in the world that large numbers of the poor can, through higher education alone, take one giant step into the middle class" (Ibid: 6).

In a more recent article Cloete[14] argues that

> 'international research shows that there is broad agreement among economists of higher education funding that government subsidies are "regressive", meaning that subsidies favour the rich.[15]

He has obviously not heard of other 'international' research (or chooses to ignore it) such as by Johnson which after a systematic examination of the argument propounded by Hansen and Weisbrod about the allegedly 'regressive' nature of the subsidies which had 'stirred up a hornet's nest of controversy by claiming that public support for higher education could well be regressive'[16] found that

> ... while high income households receive larger benefits on average than low income households, the taxes they pay to finance those benefits are even greater, so that benefits net of taxes are not regressive and low income households receive positive net benefits while very high income households receive negative net benefits.[17]

Similarly, Vanderberghe found as follows:

> Using Belgian data on higher education public expenditure and income taxes paid by both graduates and non-graduates over their lifetime, we show that the implicit reimbursement rate ranges from 37% to 95%. It is much higher for bachelors than master graduates, and for males.[18]

As for the argument by Cloete and others that free higher education advantages the rich because they 'are overwhelmingly drawn from high income families' and come from 'the new political and business elite who have the significant social, cultural and economic capital' is hardly a discovery since it is well known that they are so advantaged. The real question is how to deal with their social advantage in ways that reduce their advantage as a class and by reference to their structural location in relation to their high net worth and income and assets.

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[14] Cloete. N, September 2016, The wrong questions are being asked in the free higher education debate, The Conversation.

[15] This argument is repeated by Damtew Teferra 'Free' higher education: unrealistic expectations, unsustainable solutions, September 27, 2016 6.14pm who also makes the startling discovery that higher education is never free since it is paid for by taxpayers.

[16] Some of the important contributions at the time were Hansen and Weisbrod (1969), (1971), Hansen (1970), Hartman (1972), and Pechman (1970), (1972).

[17] Are Public Subsidies to Higher Education Regressive? William R. Johnson* Department of Economics 2006 American Education Finance Association: page 3

[18] Vincent Vandenberghe. 2005. Free Higher Education. Regressive Transfer or Implicit Loan? HAL Archives., page 4 See also Jandhyala B G Tilak (2004) Higher Education Between the State and the Market, UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge. Also Rati Ram, Feb, 1982, Public Subsidization of Schooling and Inequality of Educational Access: A New World Cross Section Study: Comparative Education Review, Vol. 26, No. 1 pp. 36-47

For Langa et al (2016), the argument for free higher education is "illusory" (see also Cloete, 2016b). They criticise its proponents by referring to the alleged record of free higher education in post-independence African states – using these as comparable contexts for South Africa and abjuring "lessons from the global north". For them if one "looks to Africa it will find that free higher education failed to achieve universal access or social inclusion" (Ibid: 1), arguments not dissimilar to Cloete's earlier argument drawing on Mamdani.

These arguments go beyond Cloete's earlier views in which there was support for 'free education for the poor'. Now however these authors (including Cloete) raise a different perspective. Now it is argued that despite the demand for free higher education from as far back as the 1960s the state failed to achieve 'universal access or social inclusion'- leading to a crisis for higher education in the 1970s. The consequence of this *inter alia* was that it engendered

> post-colonial inequities with regard to distribution of schools and privilege, and therefore of the beneficiaries of free higher education' (advantaging) the new political and business elite who mostly gained access to the free education (Ibid: 1).

We are further informed that Kenya introduced a dual track fee payment system as from 1991 differentiating between fee paying and subsidized students.

This is followed by a discussion about the inadequacy of the NSFAS system funds in South Africa and suggest that s follows 'higher education has become a very crowded but narrow ladder of opportunity into the middle-class' (Ibid: 3-4).

Yet they concede contradictorily that

> Given general dissatisfaction with the present tuition fee regimes *vis-à-vis* the higher education participation inequalities in the country, *a policy of free higher education is a potentially useful strategy for compensatory legitimation* by a government whose 'core' constituency is becoming increasingly dissatisfied with service delivery. On the face of it, *a policy of free higher education would be consistent with the country's overarching post-apartheid policy of transformation and social justice* (Ibid: 3-4).[19]

Other commentators (Adam, 2016) have echoed aspects of Cloete's position citing Piketty's view that 'free education for all is primarily a benefit to the wealthy' while berating the position of those 'who *ignore economic reality and government expenditure patterns* in order to claim that free higher education for all is undoubtedly possible' and also 'point to the failure of free higher education in other African countries'. [20]

Some Vice Chancellors too have aligned themselves with the pro-free education 'for the poor' approach while rejecting the wider approach of free education 'for all'.[21] Mabizela and Habib's (2016) orientation is to call on the private sector to 'better fund our students, to partner with

[19] our italics

[20] Our italics

[21] Other than those reflected here there are other VCs who have expressed themselves in public meetings on this issue making plain their disavowal of the idea of free education 'for all' and favouring the more limited 'pro-poor' approach.

government and universities so that we can collectively generate the high-level skills and knowledge we need to move our economy forward'. They berate those who ignore the 'many concessions' made by government and the universities concerning funding and complain that 'Yet we are continuously subjected to even more demands and protestors have suggested that they do not care whether universities are bankrupted or burnt' (Ibid: 3).

In an interview with ***DespatchLive***, Mabizela reiterates the view about that 'free education would serve only to benefit the wealthy, who do not require assistance with university fees, and would therefore widen the social and economic inequalities in the country'.

Minister Nzimande has supported the idea of free education for 'poor' students unequivocally and has made public pronouncements about this issue on several occasions. For Nzimande too, the idea of free higher education for all is simply 'impossible' (Shange, 2016) and moreover 'populist.'

> You can't have free higher education for everyone in a capitalist society… That would be saying that as I, as a minister, government must pay for my child... I must pay for it myself because I can afford it. …You would be taking money from the poor to subside the rich. That is my view.

Mduduzi Manana, Higher Education Deputy Minister has echoed these sentiments too

> we must progressively introduce free education, it must be free education for the poor because the reality is we will not have the money to fund free education for all. It is just not feasible."[22]

A Critique of arguments against free education 'for all'

The argument about fiscal limits

The *first o*f these arguments is based on assertions about the limits of the quantum of money required to support those who had previously been excluded from higher education by Apartheid. It rests on the assumption that there simply is not enough money to do anything other than what is envisaged by NFSAS expanded to cover the 'missing middle' and other contingent costs. It is against free higher education 'for all' but not supported, to the best of our knowledge, by any empirical evidence about 'affordability'. In effect we are simply asked to accept the unqualified assertion that it is 'unaffordable' on the grounds *inter alia* that it would be fiscally reckless since there is no likelihood of expanded fiscal provision through the prevailing tax base, poor economic growth and the competing demands on the state's resources. Even in the most 'advanced capitalist economies' it is argued, not everyone is enabled to achieve higher education and there are other institutional issues pointing to the alleged failure of universities to manage resources effectively. In other words, 'unaffordability' is arrived at without any examination of the state's resource capabilities except *in relation to the present allocation for higher education in particular and without reference to how and what choices are made by institutions in the distribution of state and other resources.* It is

[22] SABC, Thursday 7 April 2016 16:04, Free education for all not feasible: Manana, SABC http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/cd65af004c50f448a2cdbe8be7d9f0df/Free-education-for-all-not-feasible:-Manana--20160407. In the public media Trudi Makhaya has argued that 'I also quarrelled with the notion of free higher education for all, especially wealthy students'. Trudi Makhaya, Reclaiming Africa's history of economics Apr 12, 2016 http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2016/04/12/reclaimingafricashistoryofeconomics?

simply an assertion based on what could be presently allocated by the fiscus. There is no rigorous scrutiny of the underlying premises of the fiscal strategy. Nor is there any analysis of the social structures and how these militate against a wider approach to funding higher education. In effect we are left with no more than a pragmatic response and the judgement that the call for free education is not possible.

We believe that the issue of student fees is much less about such pragmatic approaches and uncritically limits higher education's role to what might be achieved on the basis of the quantum of resources available in an untransformed pattern of state expenditure. We think that a perspective less submissive to fiscal 'realism' pointing to the reformulation of social goals especially as these concern the 'case for higher education' is necessary – whatever its complexities. This would require an interrogation of the state's fiscal capacity more broadly, the critical examination of political and social choices enhanced or impeded and an examination of what interests are dominant in present policy and practice. The fallibility of the claims about 'unaffordability' lies in their inability to ask the question about what goals need to be achieved -- i.e. about the nature of the society envisaged in the prescriptions about fiscal rectitude. Whether or not free education is 'unaffordable' is hardly a neutral or technical determination. As Robertson remarked - when asked what the relevance of the Panama Papers was to the idea of public education and democracy, he answered that they were important

> because they tell us something about the kind of society we have become, and why it is that a public good, like education, is increasingly viewed as *unaffordable.*

The fiscal argument is therefore pre-emptive since it relies on the assertion that the problem is one of fiscal resources alone and government 'underfunding' without reference to the purposes of higher education. If anything the example of Germany drawn on by Langa *et al* is illustrative of the need for much higher levels of public sector investments in both higher and other levels of education for all in a context where even the earlier reforms, forced on the German government by Social Democrat and Green parties, have been truncated by the reactive policies derived from neo-liberal economic orthodoxy. Arguments by Cloete and others about the chronic underfunding of higher education do not seek to examine the responsibility of democratic states regarding the provision of education, more fundamentally. They accept the theoretical and policy imperatives of the ideas of fiscal discipline untrammelled by a critical examination of its underlying ideological, political and social premises negating the possibilities for any meaningful social change.

Moreover, the comparisons made by Langa *et al* (2016) to post-colonial states are simply odious as they are devoid of any contextual or historical analysis and ignore the body of contemporary and historical writings which examines and explain the impact of colonisation and post-colonial economic, financial, trade and other regimes on post-colonial governments in Africa and elsewhere. Even a perfunctory reading of these texts about '*How the west destroyed the global south's best shot at development'* (Hickel, 2016) will show how the objectives of post-colonial nationalist and other governments were ruined by a host of 'structural adjustment' and other policies led by global lending agencies supported by the power and military capabilities of predatory Northern states. The relevant literature on the subject makes a compelling case for understanding the hypocrisy of ''development' and 'AID' policies pronounced by the governments of the UK, US and France in particular. As Hickel (Ibid) has shown the arguments by Langa and his colleagues have succumbed to 'collective amnesia' and the 'fairy-tale-like version' of the relationship between developing states and the North. We are reminded that

> After the end of European colonialism in Africa and Asia, and with the brief cessation of US intervention in Latin America, developing countries were growing incomes and reducing poverty at a rapid pace. Beginning in the 1950s, countries like Guatemala, Indonesia, and Iran drew on the Keynesian model of mixed economy that had been working so well in the west. They made strategic use of land reforms to help peasant farmers, labour laws to boost workers' wages, tariffs to protect local businesses, and resource nationalization to help fund public housing, healthcare, and education. This approach – known as "developmentalism" – was built on the twin values of economic independence and social justice. It wasn't perfect, but it worked quite well.

Hickel refers to Robert Pollin's research showing that these 'developmentalist' policies gave rise to sustained growth rates of 3.2% for at least two decades. They provided a check on the appetite of multinational corporations for cheap labour, raw materials and an easy access to the type of consumer markets that characterised colonial rule. These policies however soon found resistance from especially US, Britain and France who set out "on a decades-long campaign to topple the elected governments that were leading it and to install strongmen friendly to their interests – a long and bloody history that has been almost entirely erased from our collective memory". This history also provides testimony to the growing inequality between the regions of the world and especially as Sundaram (2006) has shown between the developed capitalist economies and 'developing states'.

Cloete and others pay little attention to the considerable arguments about the larger developmental role of education in democratic states; arguments once made by some of the purveyors of the views now referring to fiscal considerations *a priori*. The arguments made in the 'case for higher education' often pointed to the complicity of weak clientilist post-colonial states trapped in the ideological presuppositions of global policy advisory and financing institutions about the commodification of education and other services and of user-pays ideas, subverting social policies and the 'public good' using the hegemonic power global corporate capital over nation states, markets, trade regimes and financial systems (Mamdani, 1993).

Long before Piketty provided the evidentiary material for the rise of global inequality there was already a great deal of consternation about the impact of the World Bank and IMF policies for education. The underlying ideology of the approach adopted by the opponents of fee free education 'for all' (whether they realise it or not) is echoed by the policy pronouncements of governments whose choices are dictated by a particular orientation to macro-economic policies. These policies prioritise cost containment regardless of its consequences for the delivery of public goods and generally favour the role of private capital against the interests of the poor and marginalized communities. As we know, state expenditure of certain types of mega capital projects are not struck by the considerations of 'limited resources' while others are. The logical consequences of austerity approaches applied to public services is their privatisation and an erosion of their capacity to fulfil their public mandate. It is appropriate therefore to ask the question whether these criticisms are no longer applicable? Is the global corporate world less powerful now, are the prescriptions of the neoliberal regimes less prevalent, has state capture by market fundamentalism less pronounced and is inequality less egregious? What exactly is the conceptual basis for the *volte face* in the perspective of those erstwhile exponents of the ideas of 'public good' who now proclaim the cause of fiscal rectitude and rebuke those who are 'irresponsible' for seeking free public education for all.

The idea of 'limited resources' is therefore itself based on a particular history of economic orthodoxy in support of corporate capital. Moreover, these policies are never open to proper interrogation and public and democratic scrutiny since they are mostly driven and planned by a coterie of officials, bureaucrats and consultants who have little knowledge of and interest in citizenship and democratic rights or about the role of a democratic state in its delivery of public goods and services including education. The justification for these policy approaches lies in the ideological flagship of neo-liberal dogma derived largely from a particular interpretation of neo-classical economic theory (Harvey, 2010 and Ha-Joon, 2014).

The critical issue for us is not simply about the funding of education as an end in itself but as essential to the achievement of the socio-political, cultural and transformative goals of a society characterised by the cleavages of racist oppression and exploitative social relations. Interventions by the state towards the full cost of education must be seen as a lever for wider social ends since even the fullest funding of education will not by itself resolve the contradictions of post-apartheid capitalism in South Africa. *Policies that are designed to provide for the full cost of study are essential to the goals of a democratic and socially just society.* Educationalists and other critical thinkers can show the way towards such a society by pointing to the relationship between the wider view of education and training and the necessary goals of democratic social transformation – an issue we return to later.

Against selective affirmation

The *second* and related argument is about free higher education for 'the poor' rather than for 'for all' which would ostensibly disadvantage the 'poor' and privilege the 'rich'. This argument is ultimately based on an interpretation of the state's role in engendering the affirmation of 'historically disadvantaged' individuals so that more such individuals are provided access to an expanded middle class. This latter approach as we will show is ultimately selective and misconstrues the wider role of education in society. It argues that class mobility is necessary for poor students and not for rich ones who are already mobile by virtue of their class status. Ancillary to the above argument is that 'as it stands' higher education is for privileged members of society and free education 'for-all' will further privilege them.

Somewhat ironically this reasoning is consciously about the need to augment the middle class by supporting entry into it by those who have in the past been excluded from it. The concern about widening the relative advantage of the middle classes is in effect 'resolved' by providing greater access to that very class by increasing the numerical proportion of black middle classes relative to that which exists historically. This process of 'affirming' those who will now enter this social class, we have to assume, is acceptable – indeed desirable - for those who were forcibly excluded by history. In that sense it is avowedly about the creation of a middle class and *not about how unequal social relations are reproduced*; not about whether social class differentiation is itself desirable in the first instance or whether these relations need to be reconsidered more fundamentally. In effect it is about the continued application of the present approaches to affirmative action without reference to its contradictions (Alexander, 2013).

The present approaches to affirmation are simply inadequate, both in their conceptualisation and in practice. They do not speak to the provision of quality public education to the vast majority of students given the extremely selective and privileging admission requirements of higher education institutions in the first place. Few students who don't come from private or well-resourced urban

schools make the grade for admission into university courses and even fewer for some highly prized courses. It is ultimately a proportionately small percentage of 'poor' students who gain entry to the first year of study at universities. The suggestion that 'fee free' education for the 'poor' will provide real access to quality higher education is contradicted by the evidence. Besides the historical and context related issues there is a host of costs and other difficult hurdles for working class urban and rural families. These not only bar access to higher education but also – as the throughput figures show - result in high rates of exclusions *after admission*, based on 'push-out' for debt, unpaid fees, social, psychological and other conditions that affect even those who have managed to secure admission into the 1st year of study[23]. In effect those who do make it are a relatively small minority of the 'poor' since as is generally agreed the financial resources needed for higher levels of admission are simply not available for most.

Consequently, fiscal latitude alone will have a limited impact on the question of access for the 'poor' in the absence of a more thoroughgoing approach to restructured social relations. The support for a limited reorganisation of social relations (largely based on 'racial' criteria and even more limited in relation to gender and geographic location), is an argument essentially about widening access to middle class status. This approach as one can see is about upward social mobility for a select number based on 'affordability' and interprets social affirmation without reference to the wider considerations of historical justice or the re-conceptualisation of social relations more fundamentally. It is not dissimilar to that in social systems where meritocratic social policies prevail - in which 'merit' (attained and recognised by dint of higher education, tenacity, business sense, 'hard work' and other such attributes) allegedly provides the opening to 'limitless' opportunities. Such an approach moreover is based on the idea that 'people's success in life depends primarily on their individual talents, abilities, and effort' and that those who don't make it fail because of the 'bad choices' they make. In reality though, even this selective affirmative and funding approach is hardly 'generous' as the record of the NSFAS and its limitations has shown. The policies and process of affirming those students who are 'poor' (and the criteria for this has been the subject of criticism), continues to limit access even to the very students for whom it is intended since fees alone is only a part of the costs associated with the opportunity for higher education. A whole raft of other costs – as the students have demonstrated – has not been factored into the calculation of what makes access possible.

These distracting approaches therefore constitute a barrier to the fundamental question about what role education might have in a social system that must be radically transformed. Even if a small minority of parents have the resources, that can hardly be a major criterion for national planning or obviate the necessity for free public education.[24] It is a confirmation that even the affirmative policies are not for everyone at all. In fact, these policies are largely for a small and selected minority of the population - in this case an admittedly wider but nevertheless socially defined aspirant middle

[23] David Dickinson (2015) makes the following apposite points: "Many of the students entering South African universities are bright but underprepared by schools in townships and rural areas. This compounds the problem of inadequate funding by imposing a burden on already stretched academic resources. It also limits students' abilities to raise funds by working part time… Students from the new black middle class may be better prepared having come out of private or well-resourced public schools. But their families are juggling competing demands on their resources with limited intergenerational transfer of resources that established middle classes can utilise…"

[24] This apart from the inevitable problems of definitional questions about who is the 'rich' and the administrative requirements of complicated criteria, and the inevitably 'unintended' and perverse effects of any bureaucratic system in this regard.

class. [25] To that extent, whatever the philanthropic or ethically penitent imperatives of the prescriptions about supporting the 'poor' (as envisaged in the arguments of those opposed to fee free 'for all'), they are no less a seductive trap since they avoid the more fundamental issue of social redistribution and equality.

Upward social mobility may or may not itself be a problem. The real problem with the selective affirmation approach is its failure to reckon with a framework of values that is inherent in all class, gender, racist and geographic conceptions of access to public good – such as in the case of privatised education – even with the most 'liberal' curriculum. The problem, therefore, with the fee free for the 'poor' approach is that its effect would be to entrench class and social division permanently in society.

If it is argued that in fact this approach is only the first stage of a wider process, then here too the arguments around fiscal resources is a fundamental barrier against real change since it would require an entirely different approach to both a fiscal regime (based on social choices not determined by economic efficiency alone for such a wider set of choices) and an alternative and more fundamental orientation to the concept of affirmation. Even more, the record of staged approaches in respect of the delivery of free education and other services cannot ignore the real contested history of such approaches in post-colonial nationalist regimes about which a great deal more can be said.

We observe also that in all the criticisms against 'fee-free for all', no attention is paid, nor have we found any reference, to the voice or the opinions of students on these issues. Once again, despite all the events of the past, their perspectives are ignored or patronisingly referred to as 'unrealistic' or 'unachievable'. Once more 'experts' so called make important value and socio-political judgements about the efficacy of fee-free 'for all'. Meaningful participation in framing the issues based on deliberative participation of at least those directly affected by the implications of state policy, before any decisions are made, fall aside. Without the necessary social agency of students, academics, community activists and all those socially conscious and committed to an alternative society (and a clearer conceptualisation of the role of education in that), instability in the public education system, the conflict between institutional managers, students and parents, the closure of institutions, the sacrifice of learning time and a whole host of other negative effects, are assured. We regard the neglect of the central role of students and their support networks in engendering ideas about a firmer relationship between education and a society as simply inexplicable.

THE ALTERNATIVE – DEMOCRATIC SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHOICE

Education has the pre-eminent role in the development of public consciousness and value systems and in the process of generating new knowledge useful for engagement about social, scientific and environmental issues together with the competencies necessary for participation in complex modern societies and the skills required for socially useful livelihoods and work. Indeed, such knowledge properly contextualised is essential to the making of public and democratic choices. A discussion of the funding of education as a socially necessary public good is no less about a wider remit of policy choices and values than is generally recognised in discourses about the 'economics' of education, its costs and benefits, rates of return, 'efficiency and effectiveness' and the compendium of other human capital criteria and their theories for evaluating the provision of education. Ideas about 'efficiency

[25] We leave aside for the moment, the complaint that in fact the present reality in respect of affirmative action is even more limited that that – since it is dispensed largely on the basis of patronage, is often the preserve of those called 'tenderpreneurs' and in effect to a select few individuals and families.

and effectiveness' are much too often predicated on a particular reading of the value and purposes of education and a set of assumptions intent on ascribing the principal (sometimes exclusive) defining role to considerations of economic and fiscal efficiency. Ironically, these accounts of the role and purposes of education sometimes refer to a framework of rights – even Constitutional rights – even while they interpret these in ways that are limited to a 'juridical' discourse, mystifying its real purposes in a welter of rhetorical declamations.

Our approach is based on a different conceptualisation of why free higher education is necessary. Its starting point is neither selective affirmation nor fiscal stringency. Fiscal considerations are not determined *a priori* to trump democratic social choice and social policy is not dependent solely on an examination of fiscal 'responsibility' abstracted from any discussion about social and political choice. Fiscal questions are not ignored but placed in their proper place following determinations arising from questions about 'what kind of society' and what role education and other social rights would play in arriving at such a society. Most importantly we defer to a set of democratic, political and social choices which arise from an ecological, humanistic and solidaristic philosophy based on some fundamental considerations.

For example, we place the *relationship between* the political and economic system, education and society as the key to such an approach. The public good represented by public education is *not simply about* a 'pro-poor' approach or limited by the tenets of constitutionalism since we problematise the very issues which are largely avoided by 'pro-poor' approaches – issues about social class, racism, gender discrimination and oppressive social relations and power. We regard society as a whole as implicated in the criteria for choice making. We seek to further democratise decisions concerning the overall issues of planning and the use of resources. We favour a concept of citizenship which engenders ideas about cooperation, collegiality, social sharing, social responsibility and caring – and not the conceptions of citizenship that reduces them to 'subjects' or 'clients'. Our view is predicated on the idea of social equalisation and not on selective affirmation. We regard education from its earliest stages as necessary to a range of intellectual and social attributes to enable citizens to develop meaningful, productive and socially useful relationships, knowledges and lives for themselves, their communities and the nation. Most importantly this approach seeks to bring all of society – not only the 'historically disadvantaged' into the process of social reorganisation. It implicates those who are presently endowed with wealth and those who are not in a meaningful process of social reorganization dependent on wealth redistribution through a systemic focus on the nature, causes and effects of inequality in society. It regards universities and other educational institutions, the agency of students, academics and all those seeking alternatives to the present, as critical to this process. It does not regard class, racialized and gendered relations as a given but places these very relations under scrutiny. It is therefore not based on the continuities of class relations by virtue of the affirmation of some and not the majority in society.

In an epoch of global corporate capitalism, this approach also seeks to problematise the relationship between the state and global corporate capitalism, while advancing ideas about inclusive social relations not based on privilege and the effects of racism, class, gendered oppression and exploitation. We are critical of the narrower commodification and managerialist ideologies relating to the availability of public goods and the processes of privatisation accompanying these. These ideologies trump and reshape the capacity of the state to favour the hand of market mechanisms (or 'public-private partnerships' so called) in ways that insert the agendas of private gain into the domain of public good and open the door to 'user-pays' approaches to the provision of services to a democratic citizenry, supporting

> the conception of education as a sector that is increasingly globalized and managed by private organizations. That is, we are seeing the emergence of the idea of education as a sector for investment and profit-making, where organizations, practices and networks engaged in these endeavours take on an increasingly global scale. Even though — or perhaps, because — education is often funded through public resources, substantial avenues are available for penetration by private actors and organizations. Now we are witnessing the emergence of whole trade associations dedicated to optimizing opportunities for investors looking to capitalize on the education sector (Verger et al, 2016).

Our orientation is likely to attract the charge of naiveté, a charge sometimes laced with false pragmatic 'solutions' and derisive criticisms about 'left-wing ideas,' which are 'impossible to achieve in practice,' referring to the 'ideological position' of those who are charged with such naiveté, while simultaneously proclaiming their own 'objectivity'. In some ways we regard the stance taken by such 'realists' as much more damaging to the possibilities for transformation than of the adherents of right wing ideologies. The criticisms against fee free higher education 'for all' represent not only a failure of the political and social imagination but also an abandonment of the critical intellect. It is unremittingly subservient to the given framework of social relations which it regards as unassailable. Supposedly pragmatic approaches serve only the predilections of conservative approaches deepening existing relations of power and inequality. The alternatives we propose are about setting a conceptual framework around which practical possibilities can be built. They are not about the 'seizure of power' but about the mobilisation of public will and democratic accountability as a minimum condition for possibilities toward transformation. They provide a framework for thinking more rigorously, philosophically and politically about *universal free education and the provision of the full costs of study as a constitutive condition for democracy and the public good.*

What can be done?

We set out several proposals that could be considered. We are fully cognisant that fee free higher education *by itself* cannot resolve the contradictions wrought on society by corporate global capitalism and its social consequences. We regard these proposals however as important both symbolically and in practice because they provide an alternative framework for thinking about the role of education in society and give content to a set of 'transitional' demands which can widen access to higher education especially for working class and rural communities. To that extent they could be useful for prizing open the possibilities for achieving the broader social goals envisaged here and push back the dominant neo-liberal approaches to policy and practice.

1. One approach to public funding of university education could be based on a set of fairly simple principles and we draw on various writers on this subject (Moss, 2015). For instance, it could be agreed that no student who meets the requirements for admission to a university course should be excluded for financial reasons, students be funded for the costs of study which should cover registration and other fees, accommodation, costs of meals and accommodation, travel and books. Naturally this approach is based on the idea that universities should receive sufficient funds per student to discharge its obligation to provide quality free education i.e. to ensure what has been called both 'financial and epistemic access to university education'.
2. A determined state could reasonably rethink (for instance) the structure of personal taxation which could be levied for the top 10% of income earners in the country. As Piketty (2015) observed in his recent Mandela memorial lecture, the share of total income going to the top

10% of income earners in South Africa is between 60% and 65% of total income. This income bracket could generate a substantial increase in available public revenue.[26] An approach which concentrates on the structural aspects of inequality and uses tax revenues for the purpose is preferable to the idea of a differentiated approach to the 'rich' and 'poor' In regard to te payment of fees. It supports the idea that those identified with the top 'net-worth', pay for their children's education through taxation, and the distribution of public funds, rather than through an individually-based 'wealthy user pays' model. Contrary to the dominant view, user-pays mechanisms are consistent with market-led approaches to the commodification of education. The view that the rich can afford to pay fees obfuscates the larger issue of transforming social relations. The approach we suggest is also a more democratic model of public interest and public funding than individual philanthropy or subsidy. We do not here set out the more detailed arguments around approaches to taxation but would refer in this regard to the ideas set out by Forslund (2015) and Rudin (2015).[27]

3. The further implication of this approach is that all students are regarded as beneficiaries of public funding necessary to the public good. As such, students should be expected to contribute to society when leaving university – possibly through community service and by working in public institutions after graduation. In effect equal participation in the benefits of public funding by virtue of citizenship would support the creation of socially cohesive attitudes amongst students. Such an alternative approach to that seeking to differentiate between 'rich' and 'poor' students would have consequences for far-reaching structural and systemic change.
4. The government needs to increase the funding by <u>at least</u> an aggregate amount equal to the ratio achieved in OECD countries to address the issue of the chronic underfunding of the higher education system. In 2011, South Africa's state budget for universities as a percentage of GDP was 0.75% (DHET 2012g), which is more or less in line with Africa as a whole (0.78%). When compared to OECD countries (1.21%) and the rest of the world (0.84%), South Africa lags behind in this regard.
5. Consideration must be given to the difference between a 'progressive realisation' of the goal of free higher education 'for all', and a deliberate or 'gradualist' approach. In the first case too much reliance is placed on the untrammelled judgements of political decision-makers alone. In the latter case which is more deliberate (even if gradualist), a determination is made about the exact time frame for the achievement of fee-free education 'for all' together with the relevant milestones to be achieved for that purpose. In other words, such an approach will ensure a roadmap through determining a set of binding covenants about the achievement of free education 'for all' and the effective mechanisms by which this would be achieved. This follows the approach adopted in Article 13 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is instructive.[28] . In any event, the idea of 'progressive' should be interpreted

[26] For instance, in supporting this sort of extension to progressive taxation, Joseph Stiglitz (2015) has suggested, in his latest book, that a five per cent increase to the tax rate of the top one per cent of earners in the US would raise as much as US$1.5 trillion over 10 years.

[27] For Forslund (2015) "To further increase revenue the Treasury could reintroduce the 45% tax bracket for incomes above R1 million. It would yield R5-6 billion (based on the 2014 Tax Statistics). An important point must however be made about our millionaires. In 2013, there were about 4,200 individuals registered for an income of R5 million or more. Their average income (3,337 tax forms assessed) was R9.5 million, and the tax they paid was R3.7 million per person. Cap Gemeni's "New World Wealth" 2014 report estimates that there are about 48, 800 High Net Worth Individuals (HNWI) in South Africa. A HNWI has an income of more than R7 million, or R70 million in accumulated wealth. If only 10, 000 of these HNWIs paid income tax like the 3,337 income millionaires did in 2013, instead of hiding outside the tax system, this would yield an additional R37 billion in tax revenue."

[28] Section 13.2.5 our italics

more meaningfully as we have suggested – and not left to the caprice of individual policy decision-makers without reference to a deliberate approach.

6. Recently a spate of articles have appeared in the public media about the possibility and the mechanisms for funding 'free education'. The ideas contained in them should be the subject of wide public discussion as they contain many valuable ideas on this issue which together with more detailed research could begin to find sustainable and longer term answers. In order to place the right to free education 'for all' in its proper social context serious consideration might be given to the idea of responsible 'public service and citizen work' by the recipients of its benefits. This could, if applied consistently to engender greater social consciousness about the important relationship between knowledge and society and especially its role in resolving some of the intractable social and environmental issues facing all societies. Such a 'fellowship' would not only develop forms of social solidarity but develop a new consciousness beyond the narrow and largely self-interested limits imposed by the requirements of the form as there is no one job market.

We do not pretend that these goals are achievable 'tomorrow.' The approach adopted towards the stated goals – democratically and socially driven – would be based on a process to get there and be dependent on both the social and political agency required. Especially important would be the avoidance of choices left to 'experts,' 'advisors' 'consultants' and the agents of global institutions alone. Indeed, the failure to reckon openly with the extraordinary power and dominance of global corporate interests in shaping both the agenda for public education and the values which these foster and reproduce, would result inevitably in a continuation of social inequality, oppressive relations and catastrophic environmental effects. A wider socially engaged exploration of the alternatives to the present fiscal and selective affirmation approach is essential. In this the perspectives of those most affected by the policy choices related to higher education as a public good must be properly engaged. This would call for colloquia, dialogues, workshops and debates at every university with communities that are outside the university to broaden the impact of democratic dialogue and alternative visions and practices. In such discussions questions about the wider role of higher education in relation to a more rigorous conception of social transformation (or 'decolonisation') would be central.

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