

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENHANCING SCHOLARSHIP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

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Professor Marshall Murphree first joined the University of Rhodesia in January 1967, and retired from the University of Zimbabwe at the end of 1996, after 30 years of service in the University. His first appointment was to the Department of Sociology. In 1970, he became the inaugural Professor of Race Relations. In 1982, the Centre for Inter-Racial Studies, which he directed, became the Centre for Applied Social Studies. As Professor and Director of this Centre, he became involved in research on peripheral areas of Zimbabwe, largely in fragile environments that are not suitable for intensive commercial agriculture. This has led to an interest in environmental issues, which he has pursued in teaching and research. His research over the years has included an anthropological interest in culture and values at the small-scale community level; he has also studied large-scale, institutional changes at the societal level, and the links between these broad changes and local communities.

At the end of his long and illustrious career in the University, Professor Murphree was invited to address the University community at a farewell reception. His observations on his time with the University of Zimbabwe, and on its strengths and weaknesses, are of interest to a wider audience. This article is the text of Professor Murphree's valedictory address to the University of Zimbabwe — Editor.

MY COLLEAGUES IN CASS, the Faculty of Social Studies and the Vice-Chancellor's office have accorded me a high honour in inviting me to deliver a valedictory address in this, the last month of full time service at the University which has been my academic home for 29 years. It is therefore a bit churlish for me to remark that I don't really want to give a valedictory address at this point in time. Procrastination has always been one of my many vices and my *magnum opus* on applied social science is not yet ready.

Nevertheless I have to admit that I am getting older, and I don't really mind growing old . . . particularly when I consider the alternative. And this occasion does provide the opportunity to draw inferences from 29 years as a member of this University, 27 of them in a department which was inaugurated and has developed with my involvement.

Not knowing precisely what the profile of my audience today was going to be, I have prepared this address with an emphasis on certain strategic aspects of our scholarship in the hope of providing something of University-wide relevance rather than focusing on theoretic issues more

specific to my own field. Clearly, I cannot be comprehensive and the comments which follow are selective, drawn from aspects of our past and present which my experience suggests are particularly important.

Any adequate institutional strategy for growth and enhancement, whatever the sector involved, must address certain questions. *What* is the enterprise about, what is its content? *Why*, and for what purpose does it exist? *Where* is the enterprise located in the larger scheme of things? And *How* is it to achieve its objectives? Let us now take these institutional questions and apply them to our own enterprise of scholarship.

First of all, what is our university enterprise about? For an answer we could of course turn to our current attempts to develop a U.Z. strategy and note that the draft Mission Statement speaks of our task as being that of 'the maintenance of excellence in teaching, research and community service'. This is however a statement of qualitative aspiration; it tells us little about content other than referring to three broad categories. To search for content we have to be more specific, and here the history of the tradition in which we stand is instructive.

The founding universities of this tradition identified content in terms of what, in the 13th and 14th centuries, were considered the three 'learned professions' — law, medicine and theology. Under the social conditions of the time these were considered the professions which required 'the incorporation of systematically studied knowledge into their practice' (Shils, 1977, 5). These provided the template for a tripartite division of content in the first universities. At the same time the inter-relationship between these categories was acknowledged and universities were to integrate knowledge, reflecting the etymology of the term they had assumed as their title.

Over time the cumulative results of 'systematically studied knowledge' and the expansion of the 'learned professions' led to further content differentiation and the emergence of 'disciplines'. We are now at the stage where this fission in content foci has produced a plethora of intra-disciplinary 'specialisms'. The result is that the 'what?' question concerning the content of our enterprise must be answered by a corresponding plethora of responses.

This fragmentation in content foci has both positive and negative implications for scholarship. Positively it provides the context for the selectivity and detailed concentration which is necessary today for scholarship. Selectivity is necessary because our current stock of knowledge is so vast that it can obscure rather than contribute to understanding.

Good scholarship today has become as much a matter of knowing what to ignore as it is a matter of knowing the necessary, of practising what might be called 'optimal ignorance'. Detailed concentration is

necessary since this is what provides the 'break-through' points in the frontiers of knowledge. The potential of these break-through points to advance our knowledge also provides the excitement and passionate curiosity which are essential components of productive scholarship, characteristics which are usually ignored in interviewing candidates for academic posts. The coalescence of a handful of bright and complementary intellects bound together by a specialist focus and the excitement of potential discovery constitutes the best dynamic that I know of for advances in scholarship.

Negatively this disciplinary fragmentation has a centrifugal influence which inhibits the ability of a university to be synthetic in the sense Comte assigned to this term, that is to integrate knowledge in an all-encompassing totality which spans the entire spectrum of experience. Instead we push ahead knowing, as the saying goes, 'more and more about less and less'. Furthermore, we know less and less about each other within the university community. Disciplinary walls are erected by our intra-university structures and reinforced by the esoteric idioms peculiar to each specialism. To compound this fragmentation we have pushed these barriers down from the level of staff and graduate scholarship, where they have a certain rationale, to the level of first year undergraduates where the rationale is far weaker.

Is there, can there be, any strategy which can contain the fissionary dynamic of specialisation within the synthetic role that universities assign themselves? I am tempted to be frivolous and suggest that we follow the American model and strive to have a first division football team. More seriously, however, I note one relatively recent development which holds promise. This is the attempt in some universities to reconfigure content foci at research and graduate levels and in certain fields to reflect issue sets which concern policy and practice in the societies in which they exist. This demands a new coalition of multi-disciplinary scholarship. This is beginning to happen at the University of Zimbabwe in a number of areas, and I have been privileged to have been involved over the past eight years in one such innovation, the collaboration between the Department of Biological Sciences and the Centre in developing a trans-disciplinary Tropical Resource Ecology Programme. It has not been easy. Our ecological colleagues have had to understand and speak the language of social science. We on our part have had to go back to school and strive to grasp at least that modicum of ecological science insights necessary for us to conjoin our scholarship with that of our partners. But the difficulties have produced their rewards. Reflexively we are better social and ecological scientists because of the conjunction. Collectively we have found a new inter-disciplinary synergy which is pushing us to the cutting edge of scholarship on natural resource use and management internationally.

I have spoken positively of new, issue-defined configurations of multi-disciplinary scholarship. But multi-disciplinarity does not mean non-disciplinarity, and the success of multi-disciplinary collaboration rests on disciplinary strength. Scholarship enhancement occurs primarily in the departmental and disciplinary context. Departments constitute the intellectual engine rooms for scholarship in the University. It is here that the conjunction of specialist knowledge and collective curiosity creates the combination required for analytical advances. It follows that if this University is interested in enhancing its scholarship its first priority must be the intellectual health of its departments. While the coalescing instruments of the University — the Council, the Administration and Senate — can facilitate and monitor this health, they cannot in, and of themselves produce intellectual excellence. That can only be generated and flourish in departments. While this may seem self-evident to some it is also clear that others see departments as mere adjuncts to some nebulous and bureaucratically controlled collective scholarly enterprise. My vision stubbornly rejects this image. For me the university is essentially a guild of disciplinary practitioners and specialists, each with their apprentices and each practising a craft. Their essential unity derives from mutual interest and a common ethos, not from bureaucratic structures.

Turning to the why? question, the purpose and *raison d'être* of academic scholarship, we are all familiar with the dichotomy which usually frames the debate, the polar types of the intrinsic and the instrumental values of scholarship. These polarities pit scholarship for some specific application against 'scholarship-for-its-own-sake'. In reality the distinction is far less clear-cut. The search for *contingent cognitive truth* — by which I mean the best available summations of knowledge available at a given point in time derived from rational analysis and disciplined observation — should be the goal of any discipline.

However 'technological' or 'practical' a department is, if it avoids this goal it loses its claims to academic status. The application of this cognitive truth should equally be a goal for all disciplines. If they reject this responsibility they lose the rationale for the support they receive from the societies which pay for them.

The paths linking truth and application follow, however, different maps. For some disciplines the linkage between knowledge and practice, between science and skill, is direct and intrinsic. Thus, for instance, I have yet to encounter a department in a medical school which styles itself a 'department of applied surgery'. For other disciplines the path to application is far more convoluted and mediated. A department of philosophy, for instance, often finds its proximate audience in other disciplines. They in turn pass on insights received to other broader audiences, adding to the conceptual repertoires used by societies to

understand themselves and plan their futures. Impact is usually diffuse and difficult to gauge.

This condition leads some disciplines into the danger of a retreat from the imperatives of relevance, emptying the concepts with which they deal of any clear and empirical consideration of application. In the social sciences, where critical analysis of the *status quo* is normative, this is frequently the case. Social scientists are strong on criticism, weak on workable solutions. In my career I have read numerous draft theses which provide incisive analyses of what's wrong with whatever socio-economic condition they address. In tutorials I have commended them and then asked, 'so what?' This is a question that tends to make social scientists squirm since it requires responses which contain workable solutions contextualised within on-the-ground realities and constraints. This pervasive syndrome forms part of the rationale for the existence of a department of applied social sciences such as mine.

But the search for applied relevance can lead academic scholarship into an equal danger in the opposite direction. In the social sciences, for instance, there is an escalating demand for research in 'social engineering', i.e. research of a managerial and manipulative nature. The demand is beguiling because it brings with it the resources required. The demand is dangerous because it can align scholarship with the politico-economic bureaucracies that sponsor it. The realignment can be in content since these bureaucracies become our clients rather than the public. It can be one which changes the way we put things together, with my vision of the university as a guild of disciplinary specialists being replaced by the idea of a university as a hierarchy of research bureaucracies. Finally, the alignment can turn scholarship into fragmented empiricism, one which trivialises the momentous and complicates the obvious. Within the university this produces intellectual technicians, academics who, in the words of C. Wright Mills, are 'less restless than methodical; less imaginative than patient and who are above all . . . dogmatic' (Mills, 1970, 118).

If scholarship allows the instrumental imperative to drive itself to these extremes it will fail in its efforts to produce the goal of contingent cognitive truth. My definition of this term, given earlier, implies a professional ethic for scholarship. It is synoptic, providing summations of all that is relevant. It is disciplined in its observations, responding to methodological rather than client-driven agendas. It is rational, placing the integrity of logic above the demands of partisanship, and it is honest in accepting the contingency of its findings.

This professional ethic imposes a moral obligation on scholarship and it is only when scholars, individually and collectively, accept it that they can justify their role as mentors to society. The sign of a healthy society is that it recognises, and supports, the need for continuously

updated contingent cognitive truth, derived from scholarship with the necessary independence to produce it. To put this in the idiom of local culture, the university should be a guild of intellectual *masvikiro* for the nation of Zimbabwe. But, as we know, *masvikiro* can be charlatans and the antidote to this comes not from bureaucratic controls but from an internalised ethic of intellectual and personal integrity. As Shils has put it,

The safeguards which the society has lie in the scientific conscience of the advisers, in their inhibitions about saying more than they know, and in their self-discipline in not asserting as true propositions which have only the merit of supporting a desired policy (Shils, 1974, 21).

These considerations take us to the next strategic question, where are we located, what is the context of our scholarship? On this issue I have to be brief, and will note only two aspects. The first is to note that we are part of an international intellectual establishment, but that we are located on the periphery rather than at the centre of this establishment. For a variety of historical, economic and other reasons this centre is concentrated in a few countries, largely in Western Europe and North America, and it is this centre which through debate and consensus, determines which scientific discoveries and innovations are recognised as advances in human knowledge (Stolte-Heiskanen, 1987, 189). Conventional colonialism may be in eclipse, but intellectual imperialism remains alive and well. For much of the intellectual mandarinat at the centre, scholars in the periphery remain as research assistants, something clearly demonstrated when one reads proposals for international academic collaboration.

Clearly scholarship in the periphery, such as ours in Africa, can no longer be content with this satellite intellectual status. But the irredentist strategy I sometimes hear in various forms on this campus, the advocacy of some kind of autarkic scholarship based on ethnocentric principles or nationalist sentiment, is not the answer. We should rather be aiming to move into the international centre through a scholarship robust enough to influence the modes of discourse that occur in disciplinary cognitive contexts, methodology and analysis. In Africa we have the intellectual talent required to do this if it is synergistically organised and applied to subject matter and fields where we have a comparative advantage. In fact this is already happening. I instance the change which is occurring in international paradigms of environmental conservation, where Southern Africa generally and Zimbabwe in particular have led in the shift from conservation through segregation to conservation through sustainable use.

The second aspect of our location which I note is the obvious one — our scholarship is situated in Zimbabwean society. There are two aspects to this. One is the relationship between scholarship and its enviroing society at a particular point in time. Raymond Aron, for many years

Professor of Sociology at the Sorbonne, once said, 'When one knows that the revolution is either ahead or behind, one has a clear historical perspective' (Aron, 1965, 12). The point he was making was that if you situate your revolution behind you, you accept the essence of your society and concentrate scholarship on fine-tuning the detail. If you see it as still ahead you reject the essence and look for a new starting point. A bit, perhaps, like the comedian Dave Allen's parody of what he calls Irish lateral thinking. If you ask an Irishman for directions to get somewhere he will start by saying,

Well you can't get there from here. Go down this street for three blocks and you'll see a Cathedral on your left. Ignore it, because its not important. Go on two blocks further, and you'll see McGinty's pub. Start from there.

I used Aron's quote recently at the World Conservation Congress in Montreal and was asked during question time, 'Prof. Murphree, where do you situate *your* revolution?'

Now I have been, technically, a member of four universities during my 29 years here. First it was the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Then it was the University of Rhodesia. Then, for a brief window of time, it was the University of Zimbabwe Rhodesia. And now it is the University of Zimbabwe. This mirrors revolutionary times, and there can be no doubt that Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 marked the climax of a revolution. Since then Zimbabwe has been a far, far better place to live. For me personally, as a scholar who was under a restriction order from 1972 to 1980 by the *Powers That Were*, prohibiting me from entering any communal land because I was alleged to be a 'subversive influence', it has been a better place for scholarship to thrive. Now, 16 years later, Zimbabwe has a proud record of accomplishment in many fields. And yet there remain problems unsolved and opportunities lost. We have a Shona proverb which states, *Ganda rinopetwa richinyoro*, 'A hide is best folded when it is raw and wet.' Some things should have changed earlier, and because they haven't yet it is now more difficult to change them.

The revolution has happened, the revolution is still in process. *A luta continua*.

So, when I was asked the question in Montreal, I had to back away from Aron and suggest that his statement, insightful as it is, forces us into a mode of thinking which is too antithetical, too binary. The line between evolution and revolution, between what needs to be changed and what needs to be improved, is not as clear as we sometimes claim. Good scholarship analytically holds element and entity together, recognising process and contingency. For us this means a recognition that Zimbabwe is itself an experiment. An on-going experiment in applying the resources of a nation to the needs and aspirations of its people. Like any habitat, it is bounded and organic, natural but cultivated, designed but open to seasons.

change and abuse. To make this habitat sustainable and humane is the collective challenge and experiment of its people and one to which scholarship can contribute. But it can only contribute when it provides truth and when it has the necessary freedom to do so.

This brings us to the second aspect of our location in Zimbabwe, which is our relationship with our sponsors. To fulfil their role universities need sponsors who are willing to pay for the pursuit of truth even when it is not in their proximate, instrumental interests to do so. The willingness of sponsors to do this varies, and is rarely if ever absolute. This is why the 'autonomous university' in any categorical sense is a fiction. For the university there are only degrees of relative autonomy, subject to a continuous bargaining process between the institution and those who provide the means for its existence.

Now in Zimbabwe our sponsorship base is a narrow one. Our principal sponsor is Government, our main subsidiary sponsor the international donor community. The four other categories of sponsorship which support established universities in the developed world — the business community, national private sector benevolence, student/parent/alumni contributions, and endowments — are largely absent. On one hand, this situation has its healthy aspect in that it emphasizes the reciprocal responsibilities which exist between the University and the principal power brokers in our society. That our Government and international donors have been as supportive as they have is a sign of the importance they assign to our enterprise.

But this narrow base also locks us into their agendas which often are short term and instrumentalist. It also marginalises our relationships with other and broader constituencies of the University. Clearly this narrow sponsorship base calls for strategic attention, and the strategic key lies in the advice that any financial consultant would give: diversify your portfolio of clients and investments.

The general profile of my vision for scholarship at this University should now be apparent, perhaps incomplete and a little opaque, but there nevertheless. Like that of other great universities, this scholarship should be dedicated to the generation, transmission and application of truth. It derives this dedication and achieves this function through an ethos of professional integrity, not through bureaucratic conformity. It stimulates excellence by the coalescence of scholarship in disciplinary and trans-disciplinary specialisms, located in departmental contexts. While holding service to its own society as a fundamental imperative, it is not content to be provincial. It seeks a place on the centre stage of international scholarship through a focus on subject matter and fields where it has a comparative advantage. And it achieves the freedom to do these things through a social contract with its enviroing society of reciprocal rights,

responsibilities, and expectations. How is this profile achieved, the last of our strategic questions? I don't have the time, nor you the inclination, to run through a long list of prescriptions. Instead I single out one pervasive variable: motivation.

Internally, within the University, scholarship needs the right kind of motivation to flourish. I have already mentioned the core motivational components of intellectual curiosity, analytic synergy and professional integrity. Beyond these scholarship needs stability and space. The stability which comes only when a university can attract the best intellectual talent through adequate conditions of service and then keep it through adequate increments in career incentives. Space, in terms of the prioritisation of scholarship over the time-consuming routines of administrative and bureaucratic detail.

Regrettably I have to observe that prevailing trends in this University inhibit this profile of incentives. Remuneration packages have been both inadequate and poorly configured to promote long service. Recent changes in salary scales are a marked improvement, but they still contain aspects of doing the right thing but in the wrong way. I instance the matter of augmenting academic salaries through an annual bonus. Academic salaries need to be increased, but the bonus system is antithetical to the professional ethos. While a bonus system may be appropriate for certain modes of employment, it is not an appropriate incentive for scholarship to produce the quality which is intrinsic to its nature. Beyond this, the rewards for exceptional performance must lie in the status conferred by one's peers and the satisfaction of positive self-assessment.

As to intellectual space, the opportunity to prioritise scholarship above organisational routine, the trend is equally negative. The bureaucratisation of our academic culture, the mechanisation of our accountability, can in part be attributed to changes as the University has increased in size. The role of peer pressure diminishes, that of formalised controls expands. But this shift in emphasis to compliance, often devoid of content, can demotivate quality performance. Not only demotivate but also obstruct it, as The Form (in quadruplicate) begins to dominate our time. While changes in scale dictate this to an extent, much of it is unnecessary. Deviance must clearly be controlled, but the deviance of the few should not result in petty dictates which burden the production of the cooperative many. The abuse of scholarship should not become the excuse for confining its use. The medieval maxim still applies: *Abusus non tollit usum*. Unless we grasp this, and unless our tendency towards bureaucratic hypertrophy is not reversed, scholarship of necessity will end up at the bottom of our collective agenda.

Externally, outside the University, there is a similar need for an incentive package motivating support for scholarship. This external world

is however made up of a number of diverse constituencies, each with their own perspectives and demands on scholarship, and each with their own idioms in which scholarship must be communicated.

It follows therefore that the interpretive articulations of our scholarship should be multidirectional and polyidiomatic. Unfortunately, I find few signs that it is generally so. Our interpretations are unidirectional, addressed primarily to an intellectual and policy elite; to each other or to government and donor agency bureaucrats. Few consider audiences at locality levels, or indeed to political, as contrasted to bureaucratic, audiences at higher levels. When they do, they are usually couched in form and language which are unintelligible to their audiences. 'Give us the results of your research directly, and not through our bureaucrats', said one Member of Parliament to academic researchers (including myself) at a regional conference on Parliamentary Research and Information Needs held in Harare last year. 'But give it to us in four pages, not 400'. This is a formidable challenge, and one that will be difficult to answer. To address audiences at these levels requires too much professionally unrewarded effort, and requires communication skills for which our academic apprenticeships have not prepared us.

Our motivational strategy should address this issue. The effective articulation of scholarship must be high on our agenda, since this is what links the voice of science and the voices of democracy. We need to train ourselves in the necessary skills, and we need to recognise professionally and reward those who practise them. Until we do so our scholarship will remain mute to important sectors of our constituency, and they will in turn lack the incentive to support it.

I started this lecture with a vision and continued it with a critique. The intent of the critique is constructive, because I believe in this University and its ability to achieve the vision. And so I end the lecture with an appreciation.

My career here has given me the chance to travel the world of universities. During sabbaticals I have held Visiting Professorships at Oxford, Duke and the University of North Carolina. I have had offers to join other, more internationally prestigious universities — at better pay. I have rejected them all. I have no regrets. I would make the same choices today, because I know of no other university which can provide a better context for developing a career of scholarship than this one. For all its faults, it provides a unique combination of talented and ambitious students, lively and intimate links with a dynamic society, and an intellectually stimulating relationship with academic colleagues. To my students, past and present, I say thank you — I have learned more from you than you have from me. To the people of my society, and particularly those who have made their remote villages my home, I say *maita zwenyu*. Your wisdom has so often

transcended the fumbblings of my scholarship. To those academic colleagues of the past now gone I pay homage. And to those who are here I offer the challenge of the vision of scholarship I have sketched, with appreciation and confidence.

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