Social Justice, Higher Education and the Oneness of Humankind

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Abstract

Although their operations remain crucial at national and local levels, universities should no longer be presumed to have primarily a national or local function; today they are the knowledge institutions and global actors responsible for our collective survival as humanity. Paradoxically, universities have moved away from notions of public good and have been reconfigured as commercial enterprises competing for economic power precisely at a time when exploding social inequality between different sectors and substrata of humanity demands we redefine the human being in a global manner. From this perspective, a unifying notion of social justice should be developed that can challenge structural inequalities in relation to global processes, engaging directly with long-term processes of marginalization based on nationality, ethnicity, race, social class, gender or disability etc. Such definitions of social justice would have to go much beyond the typical half-heartedly asserted concern with widening access or participation and, essentially, also beyond a focus with inequality at only the level of the nation.

As it stands, there are serious limitations. From the outside, universities are severely constrained by an agenda of competition in the world market and their pursuit for global status as well as pressures to act as influential agents on behalf of competing nations. Having been captured for the reproduction of elites and particular social groups in society, they are heavily invested in long-term processes of marginalization. From the inside, universities are constantly being internally reconfigured according to marketization principles and management-type ideologies, while also facing great epistemological uncertainty in terms of their main mission and goals.

In this paper, I attempt to explore how notions of social justice be reconfigured and connected to a positive project or ideology for the university through the notion that we are all first and foremost human beings and that the process of globalization can be understood to ultimately highlight this basic unity existing in the body of humanity. While the first part of the paper proposes the notion of the oneness of humankind as a potent overarching concept in addressing multiple aspects of social justice, the second part discusses how this could be attempted through the medium of universities.

Keywords: social justice, oppression, inequality, higher education, globalization

I.   The Manifold Issues of Social Justice in the Era of Globalization

I think it can be ascertained that current discussions of social justice have tended to center on economic inequality (income and wealth inequality) and particularly, on class-inequality and poverty within the nation-state, typically in the West. Thomas Piketty's (2014) discussion of income inequality and wealth inequality in five developed countries (United States, Japan, Germany, France and Great Britain), Danny Dorling's (2014) book on "Inequality and the 1%" and Martin Hall's (2012) stimulus paper "Inequality and Higher Education: marketplace or social justice" are very pertinent examples of how these issues have been reflected in academic or public discourse within Great Britain. This has been a powerful perspective and argument, with many merits, and which must be continued. However, I would like to challenge this particular lens in four areas.

Firstly, I would like to suggest that discussions about economic inequality and poverty should be cast wider so as to reposition notions of social justice around long-standing issues of pervasive oppression and violence. I am referring here, for example, to the colonial and neo-colonial genocide and cultural genocide of indigenous populations comprising 370 million people divided amongst over 70 states (Logan and McDonald, 2015), to the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and the neo-colonial persistence of "racial states" (Goldberg 2002) and their production of "the new racism of the twenty-first century" (Winant 2004, p.213), to the Holocaust and current forms of anti-Semitism, and generally to those amazing tragedies inflicted on the body of humanity

which stem from preventable instances of war, ethnic-cleansing and genocide, religious conflict, famine, structural poverty or environmental degradation and mass-migration, etc. – issues to be largely associated with an unequal and unjust world order in the construction of which one race has been in the position to dominate others. Significantly, this perspective also has to account for the fact that both in relation to economic inequality and processes of oppression social markers such as nationality and ethnicity, race, gender, class (or even caste), disability, political belief or religion interact in very complex ways that cannot be overall quantified and which can remain largely invisible. In my opinion, this should be taken to mean that there are limitations to how far a legalistic process can go in terms of establishing justice, thus shifting part of the responsibility on issues of education, social dialogue and collective consciousness. A balanced process between the two must be found which allows individuals and groups to escape the nature of their prejudices and their participation in forms of oppression while simultaneously allowing those who have long suffered from such processes agency, voice, redress, healing and self-fulfilment. I think a disastrous tendency has been to overlook the fact that none of these dynamics can occur without the other. Overall, however, such a process of overcoming oppression and prejudice would require a common shared identity (or aim) of some type and it is not clear at present what could bring together this unquantifiable diversity which such complex interactions of social markers have established in the body of humankind.

Secondly, I would also propose that, when it comes notions of social justice, issues of economic inequality, poverty and oppression should be correlated with present global trends that could accentuate or result in new crises and dimensions of oppression in the future. Environmental degradation and, in particular, climate change and access to drinkable water, are probably the most obvious examples here, with poor countries likely to be most affected (UNESCO 2015, p.21). Since "for the first time, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas" according to "patterns of consumption and production" detrimental to the environment and climate change, and the projection is that this number will increase to two-thirds of the world-population by 2050, with 80 per cent of it concentrated in the cities of the global South, it is clear that the next challenge of the century will be "sustainable urbanization" (idem). The rise in global income inequality, global unemployment and vulnerable employment, modern slavery, terrorism, drug production and trafficking together with issues such as the rise of state-surveillance, the erosion of privacy and of public access to information (through the commodification of knowledge), all assisted by massive financial corruption through off-shore banking systems clearly also implicated in forms of neo-colonialism are just some of such worrying trends. To these can be added "rising levels of ethnic, cultural and religious intolerance, often using … communication technologies for ideological and political mobilization to promote exclusivist worldviews" (UNESCO 2015, p.23) as well as resultant forms of populism that can disrupt regions or even the global order.

Thirdly, I feel it is essential to emphasize something that strangely is very rarely at the center of such discussions, namely, "that over the last two centuries nationality has become the crucial ascribed characteristic shaping the status of people within global stratification" (Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009, p.xix). This is how Milanovic (2016, p.132) explains this in terms of income inequality: "It is hardly necessary to point out that the world is unequal in terms of individuals' incomes. The global Gini value of slightly under 70 is significantly greater than the national Gini value in even the most unequal countries in the world, such as South Africa and Colombia. But as we have just seen, the world is unequal in a very particular way: most of the inequality, when we break it down into inequality within countries and inequality among countries, is due to the latter. When income differences among countries are large, then a person's income depends significantly on where they live, or indeed where they were born, since 97 percent of the world's population live in the countries where they were born." Korzeniewicz and Moran further illustrate this reality by referring to the lives of dogs in the United States. If these US dogs could be thought of as a distinct nation – "Dogland" - with their average maintenance costs envisaged as their average income (1,425$ per dog in 2007-2008 broken down as "$749 in health care, $217 in food, and $459 in grooming, boarding, toys and treats"), Dogland would rank "as a middle-income nation, above countries such as Paraguay and Egypt" and "above more than 40 percent of the world population" (idem, p.xv). Moreover, as sociologist and religious scholar Nader Saiedi (2010, 17-19 mins.) explains, the biological accident of the place of one's birth determines not only the income but the entire span of life-chances and opportunities of an individual, from life expectancy to health-care and welfare provision, to educational and occupational opportunities, social and political rights and so on: "Nationalism –what it means – that the rights, opportunities of the human being are going to be determined primarily by the accident of the place of their birth – is the ultimate form of dehumanization. A child is born in Sub-Saharan Africa, the entire life of this child, whether this child has the right to remain alive ten years from the birth or is already dead because of high infant mortality rate, let alone the rights to education, the rights to have an occupation, the rights for freedom, expression and a variety of things; all these things are predetermined by the accident of birth, the place of birth. Now, this child has done nothing so this phenomenon is purely meaningless, absurd and accidental. Another child is by another accident born in a part of the world in which there are a lot of

resources and a lot of social rights for everybody. So the prospects of life, the opportunities and so on are completely predetermined. Predetermined by what? By this meaningless accident of birth." From this perspective, therefore, immigration and refugees are key symptoms of the highest form of global inequality and social injustice, meaning, the criterion of nationality or citizenship.

Lastly, I feel obliged to question whether meaningful engagement with instances of oppression can take place without major reevaluations at the level of human values, ethics and in terms of resultant definitions of human nature. What concept or principle, then, could bring together a global diversity of interacting social groups, challenge and remove the hierarchical structures that contain them, or in other words, bring the oppressed and the oppressors together towards justice and unity? How could this be achieved when the force of nationalism has failed lamentably in this regard, and when the legalistic approach, with its safeguards of human rights and its anti-discriminatory legislation, has only produced limited results?

II.   The Oneness of Humankind as Social Justice

It is in relation to the four points raised in the section above that I propose for re-consideration the concept of the oneness of humankind.

1) At a basic level, the oneness of humankind can be thought of as a moral principle stating that the earth is one home and mankind one human family. It is to state that we all form one human race, that ontologically we represent the same reality, that we are made of the same substance, that our being is essentially in this oneness. Such an outlook would admit that, since the human world is essentially one, distinctions of race, national or political borders and divisions and any criteria "favoring one people over another" (indeed, "any thoughts singling advantages to one group") are both imaginary and without foundation (Abdu'l-Bahá, 1984):

> The compass of his thinking is so vast that he recognizes in the gain of all mankind the basis of the prosperity of every individual member of his species. He considers the injury of any nation or state to be the same as injury to his own nation and state, indeed, the same as injury to his own family and to his own self. Therefore, he strives with heart and soul as much as possible to bring prosperity and blessings to the entire human race and to protect all nations from harm.

2. Inasmuch as this principle assumes and relies upon a certain view of human nature, it presents the advantage of constituting a matter open to scientific and religious investigation. Should we then not ask, after so many recent advances, what the human sciences and fields such as anthropology, physiology, psychology and physics can tell us about the reality of the human being, and whether they "recognize only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life" or not? (National Race Unity Committee 1986, p.4)

3. Due to the nature of globalization as global flows leading to "the compression of the world as a whole" (Robertson 1995, p.35) and the "crystallization of the entire world as a single place" (Roland Robertson, cited in Cole 2005, p.55) the principle of the oneness of humankind concerns itself not only with the individual but "primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family"(Effendi 1991, p.43). In other words, the principle of the oneness of humankind must be fundamentally connected with the issues of world order and global governance and the creation of global institutions and global policy. The acute need for a collective security system (Knight 2015, p.12), for a modern and global system of redistribution [see Piketty's (2014, p.471) admission that "the ideal policy for avoiding an endless inegalitarian spiral and regaining control over the dynamics of accumulation would be a progressive global tax on capital" and that this would also "expose wealth to democratic scrutiny"), for a "a single code of international law," for a supreme tribunal with powers and jurisdiction well beyond the terms of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, and ultimately, for a federal type of government acting as a world-superstate, with an international executive and a world parliament (Effendi 1991, pp.40-41), are all some of the key features this principle advances as a way of containing the disintegrative forces of globalization. This has been and is considered utopian, but such global architecture has crystallized considerably in the last century.

4. Until now, the oneness of humankind has been depicted as a unifying moral principle and matter of scientific and religious truth implying a global governance architecture and policy program. However, it could also be emphasized as a potent overarching concept in addressing issues of social justice, a category with legal ramifications, and a methodology for social justice and social change. I will only sketch out the first two areas here. Matters of social justice always revolve around issues of prejudice and discrimination but the singling out of categories such as ethnicity, race, class, gender, religion etc. without attracting the interest of the rest of

society has tended to reify such categories and expand social divisions within the larger society. The issue must be blamed on education and on the consciousness and blindness of the perpetrators. However, the inability of advocacy movements and anti-discriminatory legislation to highlight the connectedness inherent in all forms of prejudice and discrimination, and between all social groups (particularly, between the oppressive and the oppressed groups) has not helped. The principle of the oneness of humankind provides a reconceptualization of the notion of prejudice that can uncover such connections. In simple terms, instead of defining prejudice and discrimination solely in relation to a limited category and, thus, negatively, as discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity or class etc., for example, we could also try to define prejudice positively as a deviation from a universal norm. That positive content to which we could refer back all forms of prejudice can be the notion of the oneness of humankind. Why? Because any form of prejudice or discrimination can be conceptualized as the singling out of a segment of humanity for marginalization, away from the human family. If the earth is one, and we are one human race, "prejudice of every kind - race, class, colour, creed, nation, sex, degree of material civilization, everything which enables people to consider themselves superior to others" (UHJ 1985, cited in NRUC 1986) must be renounced, "injustice anywhere [being] a threat to justice everywhere" (MLK 1963). Significantly, in terms of Allport's (1979) theory, this would be equivalent with defining humankind as the supreme and only essential in-group, thus challenging the very basis of prejudice, i.e. in-group formation. In terms of legal ramifications, the principle of the oneness of humankind can be compared with the original concept of multiculturalism (see "The Multiculturalism Act" of Saskatchewan, originally passed in 1978), except that instead of only safeguarding the diversity existent in a national state, it aims at safeguarding the diversity existing in the body of humankind.

III.   Higher Education and the Oneness of Humankind

Never before have we been so close to seeing, because of the disintegration which visits our lives in wider and wider circles, the need for a principle which would prevent against the manifold divisions engulfing our societies and which render all human life disposable in irregular but sure cycles out of which some will never be 'marked safe.' It is this context that positions HEIs as the knowledge institutions and glonacal agents responsible for our collective survival as humanity. The question to ask is the following: could the principle of the oneness of humankind shape the agenda of the university, and in what manner?

1. First and foremost the university would have to re-establish the search for truth as its absolute key function. This could be a pragmatic return, engaging a scientific investigation looking specifically at whether we humans form only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life" or not? (National Race Unity Committee 1986, p.4) This matter would then have to be decided upon by all the key sciences, according to their specific standards and methodologies. If a positive answer were to be found, this would then trigger a number of important consequences. Firstly, if all human beings were found to equally share in the same type of humanity, there can be no doubt that the most important features of being human would be identified as the capacities to reason and to develop moral qualities. Even with these notions remaining largely undefined and loose, this would signal a return to the university as an institution of reason and would deal a heavy blow to the current ideologies and models of materialism aimed at profit-maximization. The current "international education for profit model" (Luke 2010, p.49) pushing for "increasing commercialisation and intensive competition for international students, fuelled by world rankings of elite universities" aimed at attracting rich students and leading to the social reproduction of an international elite (Pike 2012, p.133), would, for example, have to give way to the global project of educating world citizens where graduates (and audiences) drawn from all social classes and nationalities can become "cosmopolitan, tolerant of pluralism, understand the world's economic, political, social, cultural, technological and environmental processes, identify with the whole planet as much as any subset, accept ethical responsibility for their actions and recognise their obligations to the future" (Haigh 2008, p.427).

This would happen for two reasons. Firstly, because of the realization that to remove reason as the primary aspect of life in the name of profit-maximization is itself a form of dehumanization. Secondly, because an understanding of the reality of the oneness of humankind would lead directly to concerns with issues of social justice and with addressing the forms of oppressions engulfing sectors of humanity now conceptualized as parts of who we are, i.e., as us. While ideologies, methods, concepts and values might differ and be weakened by postmodernist critiques, what universities would have in common would be the guiding paradigm of saving humankind and a desperate need to expand processes of knowledge-creation to formerly silenced, oppressed and marginalized communities. This project of facing up to a "world problematique" (Botkin et al. 1998, p.1) would be enough to allow the university to ride on the wave of supercomplexity without being lost in its currents.

2. To the scientific investigation described above, a religious investigation of a similar kind could also be added. Here, a second positive confirmation would allow the principle of the oneness of humankind to become a central moral principle in the structuring of world affairs. At this point, the university could make its findings known in the global media and at the level of global consciousness, which is the main mode through which ideologies of division and of major forms of disunity are being currently asserted. Key changes could also affect their curricula, now tuned to explore the notion of whether or not we all form one human family, and aimed at undermining the essentialist categories we have used for centuries to distinguish between segments of humanity. Here, it would not be enough to deconstruct once again those pernicious ideologies that assume superiority for one group or another purely on the basis of biological criteria (see discussion of Saiedi in this paper), for such distinctions can transition to more ethereal realms of self-definition. We know, for example, that faced with the disappearance of their biological foundations entrenched hierarchical classifications of races, nations, classes, castes, ethnicities, social groups and gender have surreptitiously transitioned to the realm of culture, morality, and, in particular, to the province of economic development. The same way the economic argument was invoked, after the Second World War, to sanitize the colonizer/colonized state dichotomy into one of developed/underdeveloped societies the same way unequal relationships between classes today have been obfuscated by assumptions that underclass formation or the production of the poor is largely or entirely self-generated because of a deficit in culture or morality.

3. Promoting a vision of world unity and the identity of global citizenship while undermining categories of oppression can never take full effect without identifying and participating in the regional and global structures, institutions and policies that could make such a vision reality. There is no doubt that, at this point in time, this matter constitutes the most difficult part to implement for any university. Embedded in the nation and its processes of nation-building and state formation, and caught up in processes of being restructured for economic and status competition on the global market (Marginson 2011i) and so as to "assert sociopolitical influence wordwide" on behalf of competing nations (Naidoo 2011, p.47), universities would have to find ways around both national agendas and global trends (global rankings, for example) in order to participate in the establishment of global institutions and global policy that could promote a just global order. In this, educational disciplines would have a key role in speaking truth to power and challenging national perceptions and those of the leaders of educational institutions. A frank assessment would probably indicate that such voices would fail repeatedly until processes of disintegration would result in global survival becoming an overriding concern for all. Nonetheless, by having the issues of world order and global governance and the creation of global institutions and global policy become fundamental concerns for HEIs (via the principle of the oneness of humankind), steps would have been taken to prepare, both conceptually and, depending on the charting of a course of true leadership by universities, also in practice, for such a scenario.

4. Speaking after the Baton Rouge shootings president Obama impressed upon the nation that it 'is so important that everyone, regardless of race or politics or profession, [that] everyone right now focus on words and actions that can unite this country rather than divide it further.' This shows an increasing awareness that disunity can lead to injustice and violence, and that unity can be a powerful force in society, although it does not say much about justice being a prerequisite for unity or about racism being the most challenging issue in America. Restricting the principle to the confines of the nation and to the level of personal attitudes, moreover, masks both awareness of nationality as the greatest criterion of inequality in the world and the fact that distorted perceptions and forms of oppression relating to it are the main force triggering our social divides. In this silence and form of blindness, universities and the social sciences have been largely complicit. Universities, like their nation-states, are embedded in asymmetrical relations between nations that are key not only to promoting global inequality, but also in promoting inequality within the home population. One can imagine how radical it would be for universities to establish the same level of tuition fees for domestic and international students, to demand changes that dismantle the visa system and current immigration policy or to advocate for international human rights, the rights of refugees (and a global solution to the refugee crisis), the acceptance of reparations, a global system of redistribution and rebuilding higher education in post-conflict situations (Naidoo 2015). That is, generally to demand that governments renounce the idea of passports as a key form of assigning privilege and see their strength in diversity, multiple nationality, transnational identity and the creation of a post-national state (Sassen 2002). Of course, both racism and processes of inequality based on the idea of the nation are linked by underpinning notions of ethnicity: the weak support from the wider society for Black Lives Matter or movements for the rights of indigenous populations is a case in point. The rise of the far right and xenophobia in Europe and elsewhere are other examples. To these, the criteria of class, religion, gender, disability and so on, add multiple dimensions. In real life, oppression unfolds in simultaneous multiplicity. Thus, few questions must be asked. Shouldn't oppression be conceptualized and engaged with by both the oppressed and the oppressors in a participative process in order for social divisions to be healed successfully? If social markers, or the categories of oppression are so heavily interlinked should we

not focus on all of them at the same time? If that is the case, is it not clear that the only way to do that is to open a collective process of knowledge formation across borders, barriers and social divides between all segments of humankind? However, what kind of ideal or common vision could motivate such openness and effort in both each individual and at national and global levels? Considering how tragic and disheartening is to live with even a single form of oppression and how difficult to recognize and dismantle privilege and forms of oppression in oneself, what could be that ideal which could motivate us to fight prejudice, what could be that positive concept that could be the source of strength for all? Could we even find such a silver bullet ever? I suspect that positive ideal could be something on the lines of the oneness of humankind. If we accepted that humankind is the supreme and only essential in-group, that our togetherness is the essence of our being and true meaning in life, then maybe we could all confidently walk this path of moral and social transformation together instead of facing collective destruction. Globalization could then be understood more positively as the process demanding we reveal this common unity.

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