

Human Development and the Transformation of the Academy

BY HOWARD RICHARDS

AN ADDRESS PRESENTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA,
SOUTH AFRICAN RESEARCH CHAIRS INITIATIVE: SARCHI
NOVEMBER 20, 2010

PEACE EDUCATION BOOKS



Keywords: Africa, ANC, Aristotle, categorical imperative, cool cosmology, confidence, cosmology, crime, critical realism, educational pessimism, Enlightenment, Freedom Charter, human being, human development, human, humanity, humanizing economics, humanizing, indigenous knowledge systems, intractable problems, knowledge, locational revolution, magic, Mandela, markets, metaphysics, modernity, namaste, persona, pneuma, post-colonial, pre-colonial, race to the bottom, ruach, seriti, transformation, ubuntu, unemployment, Wallerstein, zweckrationalität

The word *human*, is a word with many meanings. We are pushing the idea of *human* in our phrase *human development* in order to transform this academy. Yes, the word *human* means *agent*. Insisting on acknowledging and enhancing human agency is enough to trigger methodological options. It favours some. It debunks others. It is enough to give meaning to transforming disciplines by humanizing them, as in the—humanizing of law—the humanizing of economics—the humanizing of science—and the humanizing of education. The academy will be transformed when all its faculties are, indeed, humanized.

Thank you [Amartya Sen](#) and thank you [Margaret Archer](#). We needed you to rescue us from Newtonian social sciences where variables are the agents, and from post-structuralist anti-humanism; but, the word *human* means more than agent. Humans are the animals whose ecological niche is culture; humans are biologically programmed to be culturally programmed. As [Paulo Freire](#) says, our human vocation is to be creators of culture.

Here we reach another fork in the road, at least as important as the fork that separates the kind of so-called academic rigor that makes superficiality compulsory from the kind of realism about agency that makes the human sciences human. This second fork in the road, considered in the context Africa, divides the modernizing university whose function is to erase the cultures of its students from the humanizing university whose function is to affirm the cultures of its students. In the context of the world, it divides the university stubbornly clinging to disciplines designed in Europe in the 19th century, from the university welcoming the entire world as it is now.

The implicit curriculum and frequently the explicit curriculum of European universities transplanted to colonial and post-colonial soil has been to modernize the natives. The result of modernization in Africa has been that Africa now has the same problems the rest of the modern world has; namely, Africa has chronic unemployment, growing crime, chronic destruction of nature, and disenchantment in its various forms.

I hear the response of this [SARCHI](#) chair, as articulated by Professor Hoppers to be: humanize modernity. Humanize by enlargement. Make the university a celebration of what humans are and have been, and will be. Bring modernity's other into the curriculum, not to assimilate modernity's other into the categories the disciplines already have, but to transform the curriculum, transform research, transform community engagement..

Among the many cultures humans have created there are many that do not know unemployment. Julius Nyerere points out that before European contact there was no unemployment in Africa. Nyerere quotes a Swahili proverb—Host your guest for two days, and on the third day give him a hoe. This proverb lives and moves and has its being in a pre-colonial world where civil law in the *Roman Law* tradition did not yet exist; it is a world where in Michel Foucault's terminology the historical conditions for the possibility of unemployment did not yet exist.

We want to learn things that many indigenous peoples know that modernity does not know. This wisdom includes how to achieve social integration and social cohesion, and how to live in a sustainable harmony with the air, the water, the earth, plants and animals: all forms that share the planet with us.

Reorganizing modernity in the light of cultural resources provided by modernity's other is called second level indigenization. In development education as this SARCHI chair conceives it, we are all transforming the world together; we are all learners and we are all teachers. The word *human* does not refer to the *vernünftige wesen: categorical imperative* of Immanuel Kant's eternally imposing the categories of Newton and of [Ulpsian](#) on any possible experience. It refers to the flesh and the blood, the bodies and the souls, the music and the voices, of all Homo sapiens physically existing on the planet. Many of our brothers and sisters will tell us that the word *human* refers also to the ancestors who are called to join our parties by singing that invites them.

The comprehensive adjective *human* refers, also of course, to the quarrelsome twerp. You have all met him and heard what he has to say; he appears on every campus; sometimes she appears, if the campus happens to have a quarrelsome twerpette. Let me briefly refresh your memory on what they say:

First: They say that modernity has brought us hot and cold running water, civil rights, smallpox vaccine, the emancipation of women, increased life expectancy, the right to a fair trial when accused, flush toilets, Facebook, and Twitter.

Second: They say that in traditional non-modern societies, female infants are exposed to die, disease is attributed to evil spirits and treated by magic, enemies defeated in war are given a choice between gruesome death and gruesome enslavement, whole settlements and sometimes whole tribes go extinct from starvation, and the majority of the population can neither read nor write nor figure.

This SARCHI chair holds a twerp-proof position which can be misunderstood, but which cannot be refuted. It is transformation by enlargement. It holds that a more rational choice is one that considers more options. It holds that a more scientific science is one that as the historian of science Gaston Bachelard says, "... leaps into abstraction by broadening its categories." It includes modernity, with all its ups and downs, as one among thousands of cultures, with all their ups and downs, that homo sapiens has created as it has evolved during its four million or so years on this planet.

What is modernity? Let me suggest, with all due openness to carrying on anytime anywhere the long nuanced discussions the topic requires, that what we call *modernity* and single out as a single distinctive culture, albeit an infinitely ramified one, is what Max Weber said it was. Weber in turn can be heroically simplified by saying he said modernity is capitalism plus bureaucracy. Both capitalism and bureaucracy rely on instrumental science, Weber's *zweckrationalität*, and on the legal framework derived mostly from Rome that organizes exchange and defines individual juridical subjects.

In important ways all modern nation-states are successor states of the Roman Empire, starting with the states that formed when that Empire broke up, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and so on. Those were the states that later became the colonial powers ruling the rest of the world. The global world-system, as Immanuel Wallerstein has shown, is an expanded version of the European world-system of the 16th and 17th centuries. Modernity is the resulting global system whose basic normative structure is Roman. Modernity's other includes all the cultures Europe conquered. It can be stretched to include all the future cultures that have not yet been invented. In practice, as Nestor Garcia-Canclini and others have shown, today's really existing cultures are hybrids, partly modern and partly non-modern.

As Immanuel Wallerstein has shown the social science disciplines as they exist today were founded in Europe in the early 1800s as part and parcel of the liberal world order that took form after the French Revolution, the rise of Napoleon's Empire, and Napoleon's defeat. If today we are re-framing the social sciences in the light of indigenous knowledge systems, we are not asking anything unreasonable. We are simply asking them to be in fact what they always pretended to be in theory: worldwide human sciences. We are asking them to untie the apron strings that tie them to the particular culture that gave them birth.

So the SARCHI position is impeccable; it is not romantic, just rational. It is more scientific than the narrow disciplines that pass for sciences in today's un-transformed academies because it includes all the science they include plus more. It includes more because it takes a wider view of nature and of social possibilities. Its wider view of nature is a *critical realism* that takes as the object of natural science to be nature itself as it really is. No culture, much less any scientist or group of scientists, has the privilege of authoritatively declaring what nature really is. It is more realistic, not less realistic, to acknowledge that different peoples conceive reality differently.

Let me say two things more before closing; let me venture forth from the safety of impeccable claims that are true by definition; let me say two things that might be false. First, *indigenous knowledge systems*: IKS lead us back to metaphysics. Second, IKS can lead us toward solutions of the intractable problems of modernity, which is metaphysics. One would have thought that after Bertrand Russell and the logical positivists thoroughly destroyed metaphysics in the first half of the twentieth century, there would be no metaphysics left to destroy in any department of any respectable university. But, no. In the second half of the twentieth century Jacques Derrida and the deconstructionists destroyed metaphysics all over again—what the positivists had already expunged from the books of knowledge. But now, indigenous knowledge systems are leading us back to metaphysics.

The path back to metaphysics begins when *knowledge*, in the contexts of most human cultures turns out not to be the same as the *factual knowledge* that modern western universities mainly produce and disseminate. IKS cannot be separated from worldview, from social structure, from personal

relationships, from spirituality, from respect for plants and animals and all beings, from art and music, from religion, from cosmology, from way of life. Then we realize that an indigenous knowledge system is an essential part of a cultural *cosmology*. In a moment I will explain why we can say it is an essential part of metaphysics.

A cultural cosmology, such as the IKS, organizes several things at once. It organizes livelihoods; it organizes social cohesion, keeping violent conflict down to a tolerable level; it meets the deep emotional needs of bodies that have evolved for four million years under the stars, close to plants and animals; close to the soil and the waters, close to sisters and the brothers, under the moon, under the sun. A cultural cosmology, such as the IKS is magic. One thing we learn from the comparative study of cultures is that magicians have played a greater role in most cultures than they do in modernity. But, magic refuses to disappear into the dust bin of history. As God and Harry Potter are my witnesses, magic is still fun; people like it. Please allow me now to use a slightly technical terminology. A cosmology that organizes the interchange of human labour with the environment, a cosmology that meets the basic needs for food and security, a cosmology that keeps everybody singing and dancing, a cosmology that organizes a sustainable and harmonious relationship with nature; and that gives divine meaning to birth, to rites of passage, and to death; that kind of multifaceted and multifunctional cosmology is defined in technical terms as a *cool cosmology*. Here at this SARCHI chair we do research on cool cosmologies night and day.

These cosmologies that organize cultures and lead us back to metaphysics, also lead us back to where this lecture began: to humanization and to the idea of what it means to be human. From the very beginning of the process of human development in the academy, from the moment that we start using ideas like *ubuntu*, from the moment we say, "I am because you are," from the moment we start talking about humanizing, we are already re-enchanting a disenchanted world with a cool cosmology. The very idea of a *human being* is a magical idea; the very idea of *human* is a divine idea.

Let me give some examples. In the Setswana language and in several related languages to talk about respect for a human being, or the dignity of a human being one uses the word *seriti*. *Seriti* means *shadow*. If one goes back now to the Bible and to Greek philosophy, to the ancient days of western culture before modernity set in, one finds that respect is expressed by thinking of the human as a soul. The Greek word is *psuche*, which in Greek also means *butterfly*. The related word translated as the word *spirit* is *pneuma* in Greek, *ruach* in Hebrew. The words *ruach* and *pneuma* mean *breath* or *wind*. The Hindus have their famous *namaste* gesture when humans salute each other by joining the palms and bowing to the divine essence within. What do these examples tell us? They tell us that when we are treating a human being as a human being, what we respect is not precisely the physical body. It is something magical associated with that body, something that blurs the boundary between the material and immaterial: a shadow, a butterfly, a breath, a wind, a God within; or, to use still other examples from

still other cultures, one respects a totemic identification with a bird, a leopard, a cloud; one respects the living representative of a myth of origin, or of the ancestors of a clan.

If we now turn around to look at modern western culture again, we will find that its knowledge industry is not separate from the rest of its culture either. Its institutional assumptions are imbedded in a cultural cosmology. What is true of indigenous knowledge systems is true of the modern West, and of its world-conquering extension the global economy.

In the civil laws stemming from the Roman tradition, respect for human beings is defined as respect for persons. The word *persona* is the Latin word that means *mask*. Respect for persons as the juridical subjects who own property and exchange commodities in markets is an idea that began in heaven and later descended to earth. The Latin word for mask was first used by theologians to explain the holy trinity: God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—God in three masks. Later the jurists employed that theological term to define the human being worthy of respect—the person. With the protestant reformation, with democratic ideals, and with modern civil codes came the principle of equal respect for all persons. Humanizing the academy, humanizing law, humanizing economics, humanizing science, humanizing education, is therefore already re-enchantment; it is already divine magic.

And then we will be led back to the ancient idea Aristotle expressed in his *first philosophy*. Aristotle's idea founded traditions called *metaphysics* in the Islamic, Judaic, and Christian worlds. It is the idea that there are basic categories that tend to run through everything people think and do. I have said a bit about categories naming subjects, but there are also categories naming objects, times, places, and so on. Nowadays we can say not only that those categories exist, but that there are different sets of those categories in different cultures. Cultures have patterns. I have been using the world cosmology to refer to organizing patterns that run through whatever the members of a culture think, say, or do. We can also use the word *metaphysics* to refer to a culture's categories of thought.

Now that we have recovered a vocabulary that includes the word *metaphysics*, we can say something we could not say before: metaphysical differences make it both difficult and rewarding to engage in intercultural dialogue. The other, the one whose culture is different from ours, not only has different opinions, different interests, different values, and a different vocabulary. The other may have a whole different way of organizing experience; a different cosmology, different categories. Thinking of intercultural dialogue as the encounter of one metaphysics with another metaphysics makes the dialogue in the beginning more respectful and in the end more authentic. Am I being clear? Metaphysics typically frames knowledge and magic simultaneously. The number one item in the magic category is the soul: the person: the human being.

Now, I am engaged in a love-hate relationship with what is called *post-modernism* or *post-structuralism*. I refer to Friedrich Nietzsche, a 19th century thinker ahead of his time who anticipated

and inspired post-modern ideas, to Michel Foucault and his friend Gilles Deleuze, to Jacques Derrida, and to their many followers. It is a love relationship because they have deconstructed the Enlightenment. When Africa, Asia, and Latin America were conquered and colonized, when their traditional institutions were to a large extent destroyed and replaced by property rights and commercial exchange organized by the principles of Roman Law, Europeans were able to appeal to the ideals of the Enlightenment to rationalize what they could call a *civilizing mission*. Europe had civilization whilst Africa only had culture. Europe had a rational legal system whereas Africa only had customs. Europe had science while Africa had superstition. Europe had universal human rights as Africans had local traditions.

Now the recent leading lights of European thought have deconstructed the Enlightenment. It is no longer possible to say that the modern culture of which Europe imposed by force on the rest of the world is authorized by universal and eternal rational principles. It is one set of socially constructed institutions among the many sets of socially constructed institutions humans have created, and will continue to create unless we destroy our species by high-tech warfare or by destroying our habitat: the biosphere. For this we have the post-modernists to thank; they have levelled the playing field.

The part about hate is about their anti-humanism. In deconstructing metaphysics they have sought to deconstruct in particular one central metaphysical concept: man, the human being, humanity. For example, in his book *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault attacks the idea of *man (l'homme)*. *Humanity* was, according to Foucault, a bogus idea invented by Immanuel Kant and other early modern philosophers to supply a bogus moral authority to replace the declining moral authority of the church and the declining moral authority of kings and queens. Foucault echoes Nietzsche's concept that *the death of God implies the death of man*. If there is no divine authority, then there can only be sham and perverse reasons for regarding human beings as somehow divine and therefore worthy of sacred respect.

Here we do not agree. Our response is intellectual, strategic, and pragmatic. Intellectually, it is a fact about the human species that we are active agents who create cultures. Notable among our cultural inventions are ideas that make a physical human body a social object worthy of sacred respect, including among others: seriti • ubuntu • psuche • pneuma • ruach • soul • spirit • person, and, • human rights. Strategically, human development is a promising path toward transforming the academy. Pragmatically, magic does its work; don't knock it.

Second and last, are the intractable problems. It appears to be impossible to change the system. I do not know how many of you immediately feel that you see what I mean. I would like to have a show of hands on this. When I will say just these nine words, "It appears to be impossible to change the system." Do you have an immediate sense that you understand what I have in mind? I have in mind that the intractable problems, among them unemployment, crime, destruction of the biosphere, and disenchantment are

an essential part of the modern world-system. If the system cannot be changed, then they cannot be solved. Apparently the system cannot be changed; therefore, they cannot be solved.

In several books that have been featured on the New York Times Worst Seller List, I make this point crystal clear at great length. I do not know how to make myself clear about this in a brief way, but I will attempt it now by approaching the topic briefly from six different angles:

Angle one: The school of thought known as *educational pessimism*: Pierre Bourdieu and Alphonse Passeron have argued that education necessarily reproduces the basic structure of society as it is. Education cannot possibly change the system.

Angle two. The rejection of the Freedom Charter by the ANC: Nelson Mandela said in 1992, "Chaps, we have to choose. We either keep nationalization, which will get us no investment, or we modify our own attitude and get investment." *

Angle three: The excellent book, *Power in Motion: Capital Mobility and the Indonesian State* by Jeffrey Winters'. Using data from Indonesia and other places, Winters describes what he calls a *locational revolution* that is still in its early stages and whose full consequences are yet to be felt. Others have called it a *race to the bottom*. As employers move from one location to another in search of better labour at lower costs, employees and their children can expect for the foreseeable future lower wages, fewer benefits, and more precarious employment. There appears to be no way to avoid this result.

Angle four: The *Régulationist school of economists* centred at the University of Grenoble expresses a thought that goes back at least to Adam Smith: whatever else governments do, they must guarantee the conditions that make the accumulation of profits possible. Profits are the mainspring that starts production. Therefore, it is imperative to do whatever must be done to keep them flowing. The Grenoble concept of a *regime of accumulation* refers not just to politics and governments, but also to every dimension of culture. Everything must be compatible with the one needful thing: the *accumulation of profits*. The system cannot be changed because system change tends to undermine accumulation. When it is challenged, the regime of accumulation fights back with weapons such as capital flight, unemployment, inflation... The penalty for not surrendering to reality, as Nelson Mandela did in 1992, is chaos.

Angle five: John Maynard Keynes says just about the same thing in the eloquence of his *General Theory*, Chapter Twelve. Keynes uses the term *confidence*. It follows from the overriding need for confidence that the system does not change. Efforts to change it frequently tend to undermine confidence. The need for confidence wins; change loses.

Angle six: In the early 1970s, in Chile we had a government that sought social justice by strengthening labour unions, reducing inequalities, raising wages, and increasing the size of the public sector; thus,

the economy collapsed. After a *coup d'état*, a military government broke unions, increased inequality, lowered wages, and privatized the public sector; thus, the economy recovered. Chile is one example of many we can cite.

Perhaps the glimpses available from these six angles will make it easier to see a reason why in spite of a knowledge explosion that has produced more books and scholarly studies on any given human problem than anybody has time to read, humanity's principal problems remain intractable. We are in the presence of what Thomas Kuhn calls an *anomaly*. There are more universities than ever before, more PhD, more students, more research, more data, more publications, but at the same time there is more unemployment, more crime, more environmental destruction, more disenchantment, and so forth. In Kuhn's terminology, we need to change paradigms. Normal science does not resolve the anomaly. Perhaps we can change paradigms, and perhaps IKS can help us to do so.

The intractable problems may be inherent in the institutional assumptions of the scholars who are studying how to solve them. They may be inherent in their epistemologies and in their methodologies. Perhaps, after all, the system can, in fact, be changed, because, perhaps, modern institutions can be reconsidered and revised. Indigenous knowledge systems might, indeed, show us the way of reconsidering and revising modern institutions.

Humanizing the university, we are claiming, leads to re-framing the production of knowledge in ways that focus on modernity, as Amartya Sen advocates, focussing on markets. A transformed academy would treat modern institutions as one path among others, though not always the best path. Modern culture is available to be chosen and followed (or partially chosen and partially followed) for the purpose of enhancing human capacities. The end as goal governs the choice of means to the goal. It is the commitment to the service of humanity that should define the university, rather than a preconceived idea of what knowledge is supposed to be.

In closing, I would like to suggest two theses to examine in our time together. The two are as follows:

Thesis one: the intractable problems of modernity cannot be solved within the paradigms of modernity, and, **Thesis two:** a humanized academy, transformed by the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and the consequent re-signifying of modern institutions, can contribute to solving modernity's intractable problems. I mean to suggest for discussion not only whether these two theses can be sustained as true, but also how they might be interpreted, qualified, and suitably amended. I know that the numerous speakers have many things to say about a lot of topics. I suggest that these two theses can be themes that will tie together and connect the numerous ideas that we will be considering during the next eight days.

[Nelson Mandela](#), quoted in Anthony Sampson, *Mandela, the Authorized Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. p. 429

Keywords: Africa, ANC, Aristotle, categorical imperative, cool cosmology, confidence, cosmology, crime, critical realism, educational pessimism, Enlightenment, Freedom Charter, human being, human development, human, humanity, humanizing economics, humanizing, indigenous knowledge systems, intractable problems, knowledge, locational revolution, magic, Mandela, markets, metaphysics, modernity, namaste, persona, pneuma, post-colonial, pre-colonial, race to the bottom, ruach, seriti, transformation, ubuntu, unemployment, Wallerstein, zweckrationalität