

## Some thoughts on “Where leaders learn”<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

I want to use this opportunity to reflect on the Rhodes slogan “Where leaders learn” – a slogan that often annoys me, sometimes irritates me but never pleases me. This is, in part, an attempt to understand my discomfort with it. I already know what I want to argue because I have given it some thought. So, it won’t be a spoiler to state from the outset that I don’t have a better slogan to offer and that I don’t necessary think we should get rid of it. Having said that, I think the slogan represents a very specific choice. The question I want to raise is simply this: Are we really content with the choice it represents? I’m not – hence my discomfort with it.

Let me start with an apology to those who have on previous occasions heard me interpret the Idea of the University with reference to Readings’ *The University in Ruins* (1996). I can assure you that I have read other books on the topic. I return to this particular text once again simply because it makes a very useful distinction that is pertinent to this issue of the Rhodes slogan. This is the distinction between the *historical* and *post-historical* university.

The university as modern institution, that is, the university as we know it, came into being at the same time as the modern nation-state. The state and the university have always existed in a symbiotic relationship: the state funds the university on condition that the university produces the kind of citizens needed by the state. Readings argues that this symbiotic exchange of money-from-the-state in return for subjectivity-from-the-university, has historically been regulated by three Big Ideas: Reason, Culture and Excellence. In other words, under the sign of these Three Ideas the symbiotic relationship between state and university has reproduced 1) historically specific *kinds of knowledge* that 2) embodied a specific notion of the human subject that 3) gave content to the specific self-understanding of the nation-state. For the purpose of this document I want to focus briefly on the Ideas of Culture and Excellence before I return to the Rhodes slogan.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonhard Praeg, Political and International Studies, Rhodes University. 17 June 2011.

## 2. History and the Idea of the University

The idea of Reason regulated the Idea of the western University roughly in the period 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> C. After that, around the late 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, the regulative Idea became that of Culture and in this there was a simple *quid pro quo*: “The state protects the action of the University; the University safeguards the thought of the state. And each strives to realize the idea of national culture” (1996:69). This positioned the university “as a fusion of process and product that both produced knowledge of culture (in research) and inculcate culture as a process of learning (in teaching)” (Readings, 1996:12). But Reason and Culture could fulfil this regulative function only for as long as the nation-state fundamentally mattered, that is, for as long as the state had the power to circumscribe the business of the university and encourage the reproduction of the kinds of citizens it envisaged for itself at that particular point in time. This kind of university Readings refers to as *historical* because it actively participated in the reproduction as the national subject as historical subject.

But the state as presupposed by the Ideas of Reason and Culture no longer exists. Although it has certainly not disappeared, the state has without doubt become “more and more managerial, increasingly incapable of imposing its ideological will, which is to say, incapable of imposing its will as the *political* content of economic affairs” (1996:47). *When this happens the Idea of the University is no longer regulated by a sense of history and place or by the fact that the historicity of the individual subject is a function of the historicity of his/her visible community.* As a result, the university ends up adrift in a sea of globalising neo-liberal corporatism and managerialism while the subjectivity reproduced by that institution no longer identifies itself with the trajectory of the nation-state as imagined community but rather with various globalising, cosmopolitan and imagined communities. This university is *post-historical* and it conducts its core activities, not under a sign associated with the life of the nation state – such as the need to produce rational subjects capable of republican politics (Kant) or individuals as bearers of a national culture – but under the vacuous sign of Excellence. To conduct itself under the sign of Excellence means that it does not

matter *what you do* or *who you do it for* (both of which are functions of locality, community and geography). What does matter is simply that you *do it well* (because you need to position yourself, compete). It is only in the facile imagination of neo-liberalism that “doing well” or “leading” can become ends in themselves. My sense, and this is perhaps the root of my discontent with the Rhodes slogan, is that *it situates the university firmly in this post-historical discourse*. There is a very real sense in which, for me, to claim that “Rhodes is a place where leaders learn” is as vacuous a claim as “Rhodes: Where our mission is to be excellent”. Leadership, like excellence, means nothing in the absence of a clear referent either to the *what* we do or the *who* that we do it for, that is, a referent to geography, community, people – in short: locality and purpose.

But does Readings’ analysis not suggest that we have little choice in this? Does it not argue that the world has moved from being state-centred to being globalised and that the university has therefore inescapably changed from being a historical to a post-historical institution? No, there are at least three reasons why nothing here is inescapable, why there is choice:

*a) Theoretically:* It would be tempting to fault Readings on presenting a linear, modernist reading of history. But he is clear on this point:

The historical narrative that I propose (reason – culture- excellence) is not simply a sequential one, however. There are earlier references to excellence that precede recent accounts; likewise, there continue to be references to reason and culture. What I want to emphasise ... is that the debate on the University is made up of *divergent and non-contemporaneous discourses*, even if one discourse dominates over the others at certain moments (1996:14; emphasis added).

The role played by Culture has not disappeared; it is implicit in the discourse on Excellence - for instance, “excellence as a matter of doing better than our rivals in the international league tables etc., *is what national culture has turned into*”

b) *Historically*: Globalisation has simply not been as complete as Readings anticipated in 1996. The state has not been eclipsed - it really just diminished in importance but still plays a very important role as bulwark against the very forces of globalisation that decentered it. By implication - *all contemporary universities at once post-historical (i.e. outward looking, subject to globalisation, dislocated) and historical (inward looking, located)*.

c) *Politically*: Readings consciously excludes from his analysis the history of colonialism and post-coloniality. In fact, he is concerned really with the history of the western university. But that does not mean we cannot flesh out his analysis. We must, I believe, and we can do so simply by stating four points:

- a. like all contemporary universities, post-colonial universities conduct their business under both the *historical sign of culture/nationalism* (which means placing a cultural imprint on knowledge – eg. German Idealism, French Philosophy, the Africanised Curriculum, et cetera) and the *post-historical sign of globalisation* (excellence and neo-liberalism);
- b. In other words all universities – irrespective of where they are in the world – have to find a way of balancing their historical mission (related to culture) and their post-historical mission (related to neo-liberal positioning, excellence et cetera).
- c. In the post-colony this tension is particularly acute since, in order to realise its ongoing historical mission, the university in the post-colony must transform its epistemic knowledge-scape in order to put its African imprint on knowledge (the *sine qua non* of a quality education).
- d. And this is where generally where the slogan comes in. *The slogan positions the institution, locates itself in the tension between the historical and the post-historical.*

Rhodes is among a small number of South African universities that self-identify as “research intensive.” This is how some of these are currently choosing to locate themselves in this tension between the historical and post-historical.

Those who emphasise location, historicity:

- UCT – increasingly repositioning itself in terms of “Afropolitanism”
- UKZN – “The premier University of African scholarship”

Those that emphasise dis-location, post-historicity:

- Stellenbosch – “Your knowledge partner”
- Rhodes – “Where leaders learn”

### **3. Conclusion:**

As I said from the outset, given the tension between the two forces that constitute the Idea of the contemporary university – i.e. the global post-historical and the local historical – it’s not a matter of saying that it is wrong to go with a post-historical slogan. My question is simply this: is that really what we want to do? Is that really where we want to locate ourselves, place the most emphasis on what we do at Rhodes?

Rhodes has certainly stepped up its transformation agenda and I get the sense that many of us are re-imagining the role this institution can play in transforming higher education in South Africa. Sometimes I even get the sense that there is a certain ambition at this institution to set the agenda for that conversation on transformation (I mean this in a positive sense). But if that were the case, why not be consistent and adopt a slogan that reflects this commitment to locality, time, place, history? It seems ironic to me that in the one place where we increasingly seek to re-position ourselves, namely Transformation, we are explicitly *not leading* because we’re vacuously staring over there. Why not focus on the here and now, our time and place? Whether we do that well and produce leaders in the process is something that will take care of itself. “Doing well” and “producing leaders” are a function of what we do, they’re not ends in themselves.