

REVIEW ESSAYS
MAHMOOD MAMDANI'S SCHOLARS
IN THE MARKET PLACE

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MAHMOOD MAMDANI. *Scholars in the Market Place: The Dilemmas of Neo-Liberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989–2005*. Dakar, Senegal: Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), 2007. Pp. 312. ISBN: 978-2-86978-201-3.

The redeeming qualities of higher education have received much positive press recently. And why not, all of the economic power houses and cultural centres of the world host one or more universities. The current obsession with expanding them is just the latest in a long history. The views of the optimistic advocates of higher education are also often justified. For example, the “land grant university system (...) worked agricultural miracles in the United States” (Nkwi 2006: 166). Some decades later it made sense when “the US government launched a massive program to help build and staff entire agricultural universities in Africa, based on the land grant model. Science and extension services would be the key to a new Green revolution” (Nkwi 2006: 166).

Universities, however, always appear to need to justify themselves, and the arguments do change over time. The current wave of growth rests on the idea of knowledge having value as a commodity so that university expansion is pushed along on the back of globalisation rhetoric. A highly skilled workforce is simply an economic imperative. There have indeed been huge increases in tertiary education (post-secondary-school) worldwide but the geography of the knowledge economy is extremely uneven. Graduation ratios (percentage of young people attaining a degree) vary hugely. Finland leads the league with well over 50 per cent while parts of sub-Saharan Africa do not even reach 1 per cent.

Against this background, *Scholars in the Market Place* reads as a devastating critique of global higher education policy, recounting the loss of academic capacity at Uganda's Makerere University while student numbers have gone up and up. But it is also a plea to think differently about universities and to dare to be explicit about the things about them that are cherished and that enrich.

Mahmood Mamdani is known both as an anthropologist and as a political scientist; he has worked as an academic both in Africa and in the United States, and has ventured to speak in public on a range of contemporary political topics. *Scholars in the Market Place* is, unsurprisingly, a remarkable book. It is an account of neo-liberal university reforms carried out in response to World Bank pressures, an insider's view from the global South, detailing the terrible costs of formulaic policies which have, Mamdani argues, had impacts both inside and outside the institution. Although I have no experience of Ugandan higher education or even of universities beyond the wealthy world, parts of it sounded horribly familiar.

Acknowledging the input of a committed research assistant, Mamdani uses his own experience and backs it up with exhaustively footnoted evidence from published sources—

reports, letters, minutes of committee meetings—to demonstrate both the positives (although they are relatively few) and the negatives of market-based reform. The book aims to keep discussion alive by breaking out of the simple tussle between the ‘private’ good and ‘public’ good arguments about universities that so often close off debate. Persuaded of the vital role of higher education, he suggests a way forward by unpacking the ideological commitments that underlie the World Bank’s and others’ determination to push ahead with reform. He also examines the premises of the blanket critique, specifically by distinguishing between privatisation and commercialisation in academia. These two processes should, he argues, be kept separate, in order for realistic alternatives for higher education to be constructively explored.

The book covers the period from 1989 to 2005 but its overall message will no doubt remain valid and valuable for years to come. In fact, in his treatment of the unintended intellectual consequences of commercialisation in the university, Mamdani touches on a very widespread phenomenon that goes far beyond academia, namely the loss of professional confidence and intellectual capacity that seems to beleaguer our age (see e.g. Power 2004, Sennett 2006). If the changes at Makerere left many there feeling undervalued, the same could be said of many places of work and not just in the developing world. As we all grapple with the additional aggravations of worldwide economic crisis, the lessons learned and so painstakingly recounted by Mamdani deserve to travel beyond the historical contingency and specificity of the story of Makerere.

Worldwide, research of an academic kind is apparently valued very highly. But alongside this endorsement of research, dominant higher education policies also carry assumptions that translate neo-colonial prejudices into a global division of intellectual labour. Mamdani outlines a widespread but problematic view according to which high quality education is a luxury the poor cannot afford; it is only efficient in rich countries. He also points to a less overt but equally debilitating assumption, one that sees globalisation as a single history or a single evolutionary line where the rich are at the head, the poor behind, following the same, necessary trajectory (see also Massey 2005). From such a narrow position, arguments for nurturing independent intellectual endeavour in poor countries are weak because it assumes they are better off passively consuming knowledge created elsewhere than nurturing research capacity. The result of this way of thinking was that Makerere was pressured into expanding vocational courses. This eroded morale as well as academic quality.

Because it touches on many issues that resemble institutional, politico-economic and cultural conditions elsewhere, I consider it here in the context of a broader concern with the transformation of higher education. Amidst the hype about its new-found significance, there is a gulf between policy makers and academics, which leaves educations, landscapes and political cultures to grapple as best they can with policy fashions and political expediency. That universities can barely afford such a situation seems obvious, but Makerere’s experiences give further support to those who feel that the world at large cannot afford it either.

The next section deals with the situation of higher education within the knowledge economy. I will then try to convey some of the value of the analysis offered by *Scholars in the Market Place*. I suggest that Mamdani’s contribution is extremely valuable but, like a good piece of academic social science, also points to new questions.

The knowledge economy and universities

The knowledge economy, as Marilyn Strathern observes, appears to be made for research and researchers (2006a: 193). But academics in particular seem to want to question whether the knowledge economy is really all the good things it is said to be.

There is discomfort about how higher education policy has been developed to respond to globalisation and the need for knowledge and knowledge workers as competitive economic assets. This means that universities are, as Mamdani's title reminds us, no longer a network that constitutes an international community, but increasingly a terrain of ruthlessly competitive worldwide trade. It is on the back of this, and the sheer expense of carrying out certain kinds of research with cutting-edge technology, that universities have been required to account for themselves to society. They are expensive, they take up a lot of space, yet they seem—or seemed—to escape the business-world's frameworks for assessing costs and benefits. The result is that universities are talked about as having acquired new functions. In addition to teaching and research they are explicitly considered to have a 'third mission' or to 'engage the wider community', respond to their 'users' and so on. The universities, we are routinely told, must cease being 'ivory towers' and they must internationalise. They must be better managed.

Such exhortations are frequently heard in political and policy circles, but they are based on a flawed and hardly disinterested understanding. Although globalisation and the knowledge economy are touted as novelties, scholarship and science have always lived off international linkages. This was so even during the period when university work and university expenditure were primarily legitimated through nationalist projects. And so the state's role has always been great in the modern (say, post-Humboldtian) institution of higher education. In that respect, Edward Shils was right when he wrote that the idea of universities being "ivory towers", cut off from the practical affairs of society, was always "silly" (Shils 1992: 243).

Shils went on to argue that modern society cannot get by without universities. This is precisely Mamdani's point. *Scholars in the Market Place* leaves the reader in no doubt as to the value of scholarly critique. And scholarship, he shows, arises out of the conjunctions of local context and a changing global environment beyond. For him, like for Shils and many others, the university must have some kind of public or state support. In contrast, policy makers see no alternative to privatising higher education. In the knowledge economy universities can apparently only operate if they are responsive to markets, useful to commerce. Mamdani writes that the World Bank even pursued market-oriented reform with the "uncritical enthusiasm of a convert" and "tenacity of an ideologue" (p. i).

It is this ideological commitment that explains the fact that around the globe, higher education policies, like universities' promotional literature and websites, look much the same. That radical reform is needed to ensure unobjectionable goals like economic strength and social harmony is a routine exhortation. The overarching imperative, to change and to do so under global pressures, is often supported with heroic stories of institutions that have succeeded in entrepreneurial activities and in attracting top students and staff. It is also empirically incontrovertible that institutions that carry the title of university vary hugely, and that not all have, or need have, similar ambitions.

Change in higher education over the last few decades has been driven by intensified global commerce and increased individual mobility, by a technological shift towards post-industrial labour and by information technology itself. The result has been ‘massification’ in higher education, that is, huge increases in an age group’s participation in higher education. And another has been a need for quality control of the qualifications given to students. The new industry of benchmarking and quality assurance is not, of course, limited to assessing students, but is prominent within research. Beguiling new domains of expertise such as scientometrics have been created to help translate effort in scholarly practice into outputs intelligible to knowledge management, itself a practical domain that has emerged with an overall tendency to translate any and all activity into commercial value.

In response to concerns about innovation, change management and survival, new types of higher education institutions have been nurtured, such as the corporate university, virtual, life-long-learning and so on. Alongside the simple imperative to grow, such innovations are specifically promoted by supra-national agencies, including the European Union and the World Bank. Their visions of academic life are shallow and one-dimensional, perhaps necessarily so. But they are influential and, as Rosemary Deem argues, policy makers appear unwilling to see their limitations or engage in dialogue with academic educational researchers whose findings or arguments challenge their views (2007: 4).

Gaps between rhetoric and reality are not new, but the arrival of the knowledge economy has been marked by a particularly offensive kind of insincerity that knowledge workers, perhaps academics foremost, experience as difficult. The online journal *Ephemerera* dedicated a whole issue to the future of universities, where it gave space also to personal expressions of anger and disappointment. The editorial by Armin Beverungen, Stephen Dunne and Bent M. Sørensen, titled “University, Failed”, offers a short summary of the antagonistic and problematic history of the university. It is written in a scholarly tone but nevertheless conveys clearly the authors’ frustration as well as their view that the university must have a sense of its own interests and integrity if it is to change. And change is undoubtedly needed, for many reasons, but certainly to turn around “the ongoing grand failure of the university” (2008: 236).

The issue of *Ephemerera* and many other online and print critiques of policy and academic fashions offer intellectual resources to those who would cut through some of the hype. To that end, of course, it is not just expedient that anthropologists continue to study universities (to study themselves that is), but imperative. Anthropological perspectives on universities offer valuable critiques based on empirical specifics (e.g. Brenneis 2006, Strathern 2006a and 2006b). Anthropological and other scholarly accounts of shifts in the uses of knowledge certainly offer critiques of policy and, in more diffuse ways, resources to manage one’s own travels as part of a knowledge economy. Mamdani notes that it is not easy to appreciate real change while one is caught up in it. He also demonstrates that the deterioration of both the conditions and the quality of university work at Makerere proceeded in a decentralised way which nurtured mutual competition and ultimately hostility (p. 5).

As one steps back to grasp the bigger picture, it becomes apparent that if there ever was a standard model of ‘the university experience’ or ‘the university’ as a community of researchers and teachers (itself a debatable proposition), we now have fragmentation and divergence. On the other hand there are common trends. In the UK where I have looked into this (Building Futures 2009) there is a powerful trend towards higher education

becoming more like work and less like the rite of passage which so many members of the British elite were able to enjoy (or endure). Meanwhile, high-end research establishments offer luxury-style accommodation both for research activity and for the mixes of work and play that the much-vaunted creative class or techno-bohemian knowledge-elite require. Space is taken up by laboratories and libraries designed by star architects in one place, while elsewhere masses of mediocre, purpose-built, student accommodation get built, raising the spectre of tense community relations as the knowledge economy's haves and have-nots jostle, literally, for space.

If trends in the rich world endanger community harmony, differences between nations are having unhappy consequences for poor countries like Uganda both academically and in social terms. In keeping with the dominant assumptions of globalisation-talk mentioned above, the small and the poor will consume research carried out by the larger and wealthier. The poor, Mamdani suggests, are being forced into eroding quality through interdisciplinary, market-friendly courses of one kind or another. Not that this could be acknowledged. On the back of legislation and overseas aid in the early 2000s, Makerere was further restructured to correspond ever better to available commercial opportunities. The World Bank celebrated this, arguing that the university had thus been restored to its former academic glory as the "Harvard of Africa" with, to boot, a beautifully democratic management structure based on newly formed Colleges and a commitment to bottom-up and decentralised administrative principles (pp. 233–235).

As a parenthetical observation, let me consider what Paul Nkwi writes elsewhere (2006) about the politics of African anthropology. Under changing conditions the curriculum has often had to be changed, not least to answer to new needs under independence. In many universities, including Makerere, anthropology, a colonialist creation, was made palatable by subsuming it into other courses such as sociology (Nkwi 2006: 162). However, like many other disciplines, it continued to operate as an applied science and, as Nkwi writes, organised scholarly networks to "exchange information and experiences in dealing with human suffering and problems" (Nkwi 2006: 175). Later in the same article he notes that Northern colleagues' interest in collaborating with their African counterparts, in anthropology and related subjects that is, was nevertheless almost always guided by a need to get research clearance and vital background knowledge. Nkwi's unhappy observations about anthropology in Africa find a loud echo in Mamdani's analysis of Makerere.

Makerere's reform

In seeking to be as constructive as possible, Mamdani does not shy away from suggesting that academics might be competitive or ambitious, or from recounting unedifying encounters and shocking abdications of responsibility by faculty. But he has a social scientist's eye for structural constraints and opportunities that puts the entire story into a new light that illuminates politics in important ways.

For me, the key contribution of *Scholars in the Market Place* is how it shows the mechanics by which lofty and abstract but lazily thought through policies translate into reality. As the book describes it, Makerere university turned in part into a glorified vocational school under the deceptively attractive guise of being 'responsive' or 'engaged' with the broader

community. Local academics were either driven abroad or stayed at home and adopted a new role and new financial arrangements. The new role they were given was that of facilitating knowledge transfer rather than doing their own research. The new financial arrangements involved doing this on a commercial basis. Mamdani notes that subjecting these shifts in the university's mission to critical scrutiny by academic staff was not considered necessary.

The conceptual distinction he makes between privatisation and commercialisation is a key part of his critique. Privatisation in his definition opened up the university to fee-paying students without altering the curriculum or ethos of the institution. Fees, for some students at least, he suggests, are a likely and perhaps even healthy development in higher education. Commercialisation, on the other hand, is the process of responding to markets through internal transformation, changing the curriculum and letting non-academic considerations determine the university's priorities and intellectual activities. It was commercialisation that was responsible for the deterioration of academic quality as revenue-earning courses were set up by individual academic units in competition with each other and without oversight of the academic competence to run them or to ensure adequate staff or facilities. Vocationally oriented and part-time evening-classes and traditional full-time day-students were rearranged to enhance commercial benefits, not academic ones. Also rearranged were the relations between faculties. As each one was made more responsible for its own revenue, relations between them became commercialised as well. Mamdani talks at length about "poaching" innovative classes or teachers and different faculties "servicing" each others' supposedly inter-disciplinary courses. The reform gradually became reduced to two sound-bites: "multi-disciplinarity" and "market-orientation" (p. 98). Very interestingly, as rifts between units within the institution became more and more apparent, it was science-based teaching and research that lost most, in terms of revenue, students and faculty. Meanwhile the administration was able to market a proliferation of humanities-linked vocational and job-oriented courses "responding" to external need and, arguably, fashion. Tourism management, secretarial studies, communication skills, urban planning and other similar programmes proved popular among fee-paying students but were not subjected to academic quality control (p. 68). Their successes were followed by more innovations, for example in "social anthropology and community transformation" and masters courses in "peace and conflict resolution", many of which also proved to be cash earners.

As is so often the case when it comes to the knowledge economy, critique is difficult to mount (Strathern 2006a). If Makerere could wax lyrical about its contribution to good things like sustainable development, gender studies or health studies, and if it could honestly claim to be spearheading efforts to nurture interdisciplinary studies of the kind that will translate into jobs for its students and technology transfer in an impoverished part of the world, this was surely to be applauded. Makerere's website (March 2009) shows an institution which has branded itself as world-class, catering to society's needs in relation to sustainable development. It had 33,488 registered students (31,862 Undergraduates and 1,626 Postgraduates) as of July 2007. But before the reform, according to Mamdani, the student population was barely one tenth of this. The average teaching load grew from 6 to 20 hours, and as Mamdani carefully describes, staff morale as well as the quality of teaching took a massive dive. Therein lies the crux of one side of the critique.

Another part of the critique addresses the relationship between the university and its

outside. Mamdani identifies academic institutions in Africa as predominantly nationalist projects. According to his summary, many of Africa's universities flourished at independence when their mission was defined as helping to develop the wider society and when they came to symbolise nationalist sentiment and politics. This created the 'developmentalist' university, oriented above all towards "correcting the distortions of a colonial economy" (p. 212). The market-oriented university which has replaced it has "tended to slot into and reproduce these distortions" (p. 212). Makerere's history is fleetingly recounted in the book. Established as a vocational school to service Britain's East African colonies in 1922 it evolved into an institution for "a tiny elite meant to take the reins of leadership in the newly independent country" (p. 1). Ugandan independence in 1962 marked a disjuncture in the personnel and in the curriculum, but it was not until the 1980s that anything more than serial crisis management was considered necessary across the university as a whole. When it came, reform ushered in commercial relations that made deep inroads into the academic culture. Even according to a student organisation quoted in the book: "Professional excellence has dropped in this University" (quoted in Mamdani p. 175).

For Mamdani these experiences raise the perennial question: what is the university for? His answer is unequivocal. Higher education is "where a society comes to understand both its weaknesses and its potential, through research and reflection" (p. 262).

Gains as well as losses

In a critique of the idea of 'good practice', now enshrined in administrative language as a technical term, Marilyn Strathern captured something familiar to any academic caught up in the ongoing metamorphosis by writing that, "[p]art of the problem is how to complain, how to criticize good practice and still appear moral, credible, and public spirited, and thus offer a critique that is edifying" (2006: 199). It leaves one with a set of mundane and banal demands that amount to little more than a cry to restore meaning (Strathern 2006: 200). Instead of talk and critique amounting to deliberation that changes things, she points out, they increasingly get gobbled up by processes of management, audit and user-responsiveness. These then become proxies for responsible decision making and so we get more audits, less critique.

In Makerere as described by Mamdani, something similar was going on. Good practice meant democratic consultation with all stakeholders, including students. But Mamdani's book itself operationalises a quite different but still familiar conception of 'good practice', namely careful empirical research, historical contextualisation and, as he puts it himself, reflection. Distinguishing privatisation of higher education from commercialisation is but one aspect of this valuable contribution.

The book raises important questions also about the relationship between expertise as technical know-how, not just in the African context where global-speak and its phoney optimism clash with everyday reality, but also among the more privileged. In the rich universities academics are also increasingly faced with pressures to flatten out, hollow out and generally reduce the intellectual contribution of universities to the level of a commodity-form of knowledge. And if vocationalisation at Makerere was extreme, the drive towards 'relevant' and inter-disciplinary higher education is pervasive elsewhere too. And as in

Makerere, the intellectual arguments for treating boundary-crossings, frenetic activity and user-responsive curriculum as unquestioned improvements on the past, remain for the most part unquestioned.

As far as I am aware, no other detailed account of market reform in a university has been published as a book. This in itself is noteworthy. But so is Mamdani's non-negotiable imperative to nurture independent intellectual endeavour. This does contrast with similar texts (see references) written from positions of relative privilege. For Mamdani there seems no need to restore meaning to academia since as an imperative and a passion it has never lost it. The institution has suffered, but students and staff have identified the losses and appear to have no trouble appreciating their meaning.

Academics in the rich world have become hesitant in determining their own role as much even as they/we enjoy the work and life of a scholar. And so external forces have, as the editors of *Ephemeris's* special edition on universities noted, determined it for them. And so the universities have become creators of market value. Mamdani ends by hinting that Makerere's 'successes' in that area in fact mean that it no longer deserves to be called a university.

The story is surprising and illuminating as well as depressingly familiar. The Ugandan account highlighted experiences that I have had and read about in North America, Australia and Europe. Like all good scholarship, however, it raises new questions. What is really going on in the rush towards inter-disciplinarity? How is professional identity reproduced under conditions where professional judgement within a discipline is subordinated to external criteria of usefulness and value? How can universities defend their existence if individual disciplines from anthropology to biology and physics find little government support (p. 102)?

Universities have been a resilient and distinctive institutional form, surviving through a commitment to disciplined learning even whilst changing along with other social and political transformations. The World Bank's (and, to be fair, many others') notion of a world without true history or diversity has, it seems, been a key underlying factor in the losses suffered at Makerere. Intuition suggests it has something also to do with the fix in which we all find ourselves. Reflexive, careful and yet outspoken critique like Mamdani's is needed now more than ever. So is the courage to judge when research findings should be acted upon.

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