Finding Perspective in the Crisis in Higher Education in Africa and the United States, ~~or Social Science for What~~

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From the start, I wanted to call this talk "Comparing Crises in Higher Education in Africa and the United States," or "Finding Perspective in the Crisis in Higher Education in Africa and the United States." Knowing that either title meant very little other than providing the occasion to declare a crisis, which always yields attention and a sympathetic audience, I thought it should bear the subtitle, "Social Science for What?" But the very good title "Social Science for What" has already been taken by Alice O'Connor (2007) in her thought-provoking essay on the work of the Russell Sage Foundation, and her lamentation that social science research largely has shifted away from advocating, engaging, and refining progressive reform.

Nonetheless, the question of the role of the social sciences, the role of knowledge produced in the university more broadly, and the question of what this knowledge ought to be, lie at the heart of this lecture. Along the way, I will tell you a bit about my own work, about the ways in which grants programs and fellowship programs are conceived and to what end, and I will attempt to convince you that you should care about how grantmakers think about these matters for at least two reasons. First, you should care as professionals to whom these programs are oriented - and I think it is not always evident why grants are made available to support specific kinds of research programs. Second, I will insist that it is worth grappling with these questions as members of a public research

university community when the very question of the value of a research university, insufficiently and unsystematically described even by those who are supported by and whose work supports research universities, is under assault and not adequately articulated to policymakers, to tax payers, to the general public. But I also have something else in mind in the course of this talk, though related to all of what I have just said. I will examine two very different systematic problems in two very different university systems that I see in the course of my work. In doing so I will attempt to use each… dare, I say, "*crisis*"… that I see in the course of my grantmaking to put the other in perspective in order to arrive at a larger truth about the public significance of social science research in universities.

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I often quip that my work at the SSRC is a process of deskilling. I was trained in the discipline of anthropology, and wrote – sometimes even continue to write – on life, labor and politics in interwar India. At the SSRC, I currently oversee a grants program to bring academic research on Muslim communities and Islamic traditions out of the university setting and into the bright light of public discussions. And if it wasn't disorienting enough to move from something resembling expertise as a South Asianist to requiring facility in Islamic Studies and Middle East Studies, I also direct a program titled Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa that offers fellowships to faculty in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. One of my more generous colleagues, working at

the MacArthur Foundation, gently corrected my characterization of this work as deskilling and declared it to be serial expertise. (If only that were true…)

At first glance these different projects that occupy much of my time point toward very different problems at the heart of university systems in two different continents. And the problems and modes of redressing these problems, to be sure, are different. On the one hand, there is a grants program that seeks to encourage projects permitting the dissemination of academic expertise on Islamic traditions and Muslim societies to targeted constituencies, particularly to media and policymakers, a reversal from years of disengagement by scholars who work in area studies, which has had deleterious effects on public discussions, policy deliberations, and, arguably, on the field of Middle East Studies. Through this program my goal and that of the SSRC is to nurture and renew the public relevancy of area studies research in US universities by promoting strategic partnerships that will break down barriers and build connections between academic researchers, journalists, policymakers and practitioners.

On the other hand, I developed and direct a fellowship program to strengthen and retain the next generation of academic researchers in Africa. One way of thinking about this program is that it serves as an effort to offset high-paying consultancies that pull academics away from their own research and into policy-grounded research. You can begin to imagine a contradiction between these projects – one that insists that academic disciplines, modeled after the medieval guild system, cannot in this day and age afford to remain insular and instead must engage the pressing issues that animate public discourse

and another that protects academic research lest research be transformed into something that is produced on-demand and strictly in relation to contemporary social crises that animate public policy. This second project in a sense insists NOT that research must not remain cloistered but instead that it *must*.

How, I have often mused but only now find myself asking in a more systematic fashion, do two such dissimilar projects relate to one another, much less shed light on one another and the vital space that universities make possible? I'm grateful for this opportunity to think what I am doing. The chance to pause and reflect, and the requirement that one must articulate one's thinking, is a crucial space – both physical and conceptual – that universities allow.

I am delighted by this opportunity to speak on the work I direct at the Social Science Research Council precisely because this gives me a chance to think aloud about two divergent strands of my work – and the way two dissimilar projects that in many ways stand in direct contradiction to one another – that point toward the vital if disappearing role of public knowledge in universities and how we might cultivate this best aspect of universities. And so I will attempt something unusual. I will attempt to show not only what the US university system offers universities in Africa and elsewhere – as evident through the extraordinary push toward international partnerships that export the US liberal arts higher education model that we see so frequently today – but I also will attempt to show how debates in African universities cast light on an insufficiently understood role played by US universities in relation to knowledge production. And thus

we can learn about the American university by way of African dialogues and concerns expressed about their own system of knowledge production.

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Let me start with the grants program, titled Academia in the Public Sphere: Islamic Traditions and Muslim Societies, which among other things has funded several Title VI centers at this university for three years now.

The grants program helps university-based scholars find avenues by which to contribute to important debates currently unfolding about such issues as gender and Islam, the place Islamic traditions might occupy within secular states, the spaces for politics that religion can both accommodate and foster, and political and social issues within Muslim majority countries such as Pakistan or Afghanistan. Discussions of these topics, when they occur at all, too frequently have been dominated by widespread misconceptions perpetuated by non-specialists and poorly versed pundits, without benefit of academic expertise born of deep context-specific knowledge of communities, places, and relevant languages. The grants program attempts to counter this trend with the promotion of scholarship that is publicly oriented and through the development of researchers who are committed to addressing nonacademic constituencies.

The grants thereby promote a public social science that is engaged and purposive.

There are many ways to characterize this initiative. It is both founded in the belief that the research produced in area studies is of absolute relevance and cannot be replicated outside of university corridors, which makes the gutting of Title VI especially worrisome, but it also is a response to the fact that academic research generated from expertise within area studies has been increasingly displaced from public debates and, more often than not, from the policy process.

Certainly universities no longer – and perhaps they never did – hold a monopoly on the legitimate production of social science knowledge. An enormous range of bodies are involved in the production, diffusion, and communication of social scientific knowledge. These extra-university bodies include think tanks, corporate research centers, government research bureaus, and various entities that operate as corporate think tanks such as the McKinsey Global Institute. Collectively, like any university frankly, they produce an uneven range of research but this includes some genuinely important work on demographics, social statistics, and even methodological innovations. These research bodies outside of universities have exerted an enormous centripetal force, frequently serving to mediate or displace academic knowledge production and policymaking, either by translating university research findings for non-academic audiences or producing original research themselves that serves to supply data for policy discussions and public debate or to frame the very questions that propel these discussions.

Over the last forty years, this process by which university-based research has been displaced has largely accelerated. To my mind there is no single reason, but instead there

are a range of reasons. We can point toward the mid-1960s when, amidst a period of profound mistrust of government from both the left and the right, news of an academic research program dedicated to assessing insurgency movements in Latin America, funded through the Special Operations Research Office of the United States Army, leaked across diplomatic channels, angering U.S. ambassadors and senators as well as Latin American academics, government officials, and journalists. This research program, known as Project Camelot, remains a touchstone issue for many scholars whose work engages international research. The tarnished legacy of this program continues to reverberate today. Scholars from an array of disciplines, concerned about the contaminating effects of government funding of basic research programs, significantly retreated from direct engagement with the state (although the extent to which this hold varies from discipline to discipline to be sure). And, of course as we know, government funds for international research diminished equally swiftly, so that when adjusted for inflation the monies available for research on international studies never has equaled funding that existed in the mid-1960s.

We again can point toward other dynamics in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when college enrollment swelled and, quite significantly, so did enrollment in graduate programs. Today we speak frequently about the overproduction of Ph.D.s in academic departments, where many more individuals Ph.D.s are trained than universities in the United States can absorb, but much less attention has been paid to the impact of an expanding professoriate in the 1960s and 1970s. Where at an earlier moment in the history of the disciplines, relatively few faculty might work on a given topic, a limitation that necessarily propelled

them to engage a broader set of colleagues in quest of an audience. By the mid 1970s there proliferated more narrowly defined sections of professional associations dedicated to every possible niche approach. By way of an example, the American Anthropological Association, founded in 1902 to unify and coordinate the field, supported numerous of sub-sections by the 1970s, many with their own journals, and today features 38 sections that build networks and critical mass around a specific field but also serve to fragment the whole of the discipline. Where researchers might have necessarily engaged colleagues and specialists working on vastly dissimilar topics, increasingly discussions could be restricted to disciplinary debates that are arguments internal to very specific subfields. In the process of splintering audiences, it seems to me, both the opportunity and the imperative to engage broad audiences has been severely attenuated, and this has had consequential implications for the ability of researchers to engage nonspecialist audiences in particular.

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I will speak to implications of this displacement of expertise from public debates and policy discussions and the strategy of the grants program to repair this shattered relationship between university research and the nonacademic audiences. But first I want to dwell on another crisis in higher education that emerged in approximately the same era (though for different reasons) and has similarly consequential implications for the relationship between researchers and public debate, as well as researchers and the fashioning of policy.

If the 1960s and 1970s bore a fateful retraction of academic research from the public arena in the United States, the crisis of African higher education also has roots in the 1970s and the consequences for the university systems on the continent are certainly more severe. In this latter case it was the oil crisis of the 1970s and ensuing structural adjustment reforms that deeply damaged the prospects of knowledge production in African universities for two generations and counting.

Only in the last decade have we begun to see a renewal in investment in African higher education, but this renewal brings with it concerns of its own partially due to the uneven investment in certain aspects of universities. For example, university enrollment across the African continent has soared due to the demands of an economy predicated on knowledge workers with flexible skills and mobility, as well as due to the noble and correct push by governments to place youth into degree-granting programs. Undergraduate student numbers have increased at a rate of 8% each year over the last decade and this rate of enrollment, when compounded, indicates a doubling of the total undergraduate population every ten years. The enrollment rates in many of the university systems we engage are higher still – Ghana witnessed a 200% increase between 1998 and 2008, for instance, and Tanzania faced a 173% increase in a mere five-year period between 2003 and 2008 – meanwhile faculty hires lag far behind this rapid expansion of university services even as countries are pledging more money to faculty development. In addition, master's programs are proliferating, enrolling many more students, and current initiatives supported by external funders will increase these numbers substantially.

While the growth of both bachelors and master's degree programs is vital to economic growth and better government, public services, and civil society organizations, there has been not been a proportional increase in Ph.D. enrollments. Moreover, Ph.D. programs already were weakened by the loss of senior faculty who could serve as mentors to subsequent generations of academics due to retirements and a shortage of well-trained replacements in the decades following the 1970s economic crises.

African universities continue to face significant faculty attrition due to crushingly excessive teaching loads – imagine facing several classes a day *each* approaching 1,000 students. And the lure of significantly more lucrative and higher status work from the public and private sectors, NGOs, and universities in the North is likely the most significant source of faculty attrition. This situation has led to an increasingly severe shortage of experienced faculty in all social science fields. The result is a lack of well-trained teachers to staff the burgeoning courses and insufficient numbers of advanced researchers to produce knowledge needed for national and regional development and to address pressing public problems.

To try to keep up with expanding enrollment and the loss of trained faculty, university administrations have of necessity hired students completing master's degrees to join the junior faculty ranks.[1] These faculty are then stuck at junior ranks unable to advance in

[1] (Just to give some numbers: in Ghana, for instance, the percentage of faculty with a Ph.D. declined from 49% to 43% between 1998 and 2008. The numbers are comparable across Nigeria, while even at leading Nigerian universities such as Ibadan more than one-third of the academic staff are lecturers credentialed with only a master's degree or bachelor degree, and the overall percentage of faculty at the university has declined by 8% between 2000 and 2006. A similar trend is evident in South Africa. According to figures published in the South Africa Higher Education Monitor, outside of leading

careers unless they can secure doctoral degrees. Not only do the demands of teaching make it difficult for them to complete their doctoral requirements, Ph.D. programs at their home universities generally are underdeveloped and themselves understaffed. As a result the percentage of faculty with a Ph.D. has declined dramatically over the last decade, as lecturers increasingly possess only a master's degree.

Absent a major change, the current situation will lead to significant damage. It will deepen an already severe shortage of advanced teachers, and it will continue to dilute the next generation of scholars. Faculty without advanced degrees or significant research experience will be expected to mentor not only undergraduates but also graduate students. Inadequate support for early-career faculty, a concern in its own right, thereby also risks a cascading effect that will cause lasting damage for generations of scholars. The university system, which occupies a crucial public role in promoting stable democratic societies, good governance, and equitable economic and social development, will be undermined.

A pointed critique of this situation has been issued by a number of scholars in Africa, with Mahmood Mamdani the most eloquent critic who has written withering challenges to this state of affairs. As he has noted, these early-career faculty without a Ph.D. not only are less well-trained than they should be but most significantly they have had few

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universities such as the University of Cape Town and the University of Witwatersrand where 59% - 70% of faculty possess Ph.D.s, the rates of faculty holding doctoral degrees are little higher than elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. Nation-wide as many as 60 % of all faculty in universities hold only an M.A. or B.A, slightly worse than the figures for faculty in public universities in Tanzania, for instance. In Uganda, finally, the national numbers are especially worrisome, where only 16% of academic staff hold a Ph.D. according to figures from the Uganda National Council for Higher Education.)

opportunities to pursue independent research projects in which they frame the questions that drive their studies. Instead, and this is crucial, in a vast number of cases university lecturers are drawn into a series of consultancies for government agencies, multilateral organizations, and nongovernmental organizations. In the process, university-based researchers who have never completed a significant research project of their own conduct analysis and the production of raw data in response to questions formulated by others, often those outside the university. In the process, as Mamdani has chillingly suggested, a new kind of native informant is produced through consultancies and the efflorescence of short-term methodology training courses that have propagated throughout Anglophone Africa which seem above all to serve the needs of these consultancies. Thus while there are significant linkages between research developed by African researchers and the policymakers who consume the research findings, the space for researchers to formulate their own questions that frame the interpretation of social issues is diminished as is the ability of scholars to provide rigorous independent analysis of the questions that they themselves have posed. Instead, and this insight propels many internal critiques of the various African university systems, too often one witnesses something that resembles a research-for-hire model which weakens the capacity of scholars to undertake rigorously independent scholarship that might allow for new perspectives on economic, political, and social questions.

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We have then a need to produce knowledge for public consumption that speaks to the pressing challenges of the day or risk that universities – particularly public universities – continue to suffer reductions in funding and challenges to the support for research at any serious scale outside of the STEM disciplines. Yet in various African universities we also bear witness to a very real risk that inheres in this injunction for research to be relevant and to develop knowledge of use to state agencies, to private entities, and (often implicitly) for the public good.

But this central tension, which I see as a *productive* tension, also helps us to clarify the form in which knowledge (public or otherwise) should be cultivated in universities and how we can best cultivate this kind of knowledge. It becomes rapidly apparent that researchers, even when responding directly to public concerns, at the very least cannot be in the service industry. Social scientists, cannot become mere consultants to state or industrial needs or the entire mission of the university is badly distorted. *But that is entirely obvious.*

More importantly, we must recognize that sound public research that can be brought to bear on issues of immediate public relevance requires the cultivation of extensive research expertise on topics for which there is not immediate demand and which might not have immediate or obvious public relevancy. Furthermore, the ability to undertake sound research, generate and interpret sound, independently produced data is paramount and it must take priority even over the demand that scholars address pressing public issues.

But there is a tension – again, a productive tension – between the gradual pace of consensus formation in universities and the rapid pace by which consensus formation often takes place in both the public and international policy arena. On September 10, 2001 we could not anticipate the extraordinary importance that Middle East Studies and Islamic Studies might assume both in universities and in public discourse. On September 12 things changed utterly. For one, over the next several years universities began hiring in these fields at a rate that would have been unanticipated by students who were pursuing degrees in these fields at the time or by faculty training those individuals. And even so during most of the decade after September 11, 2001 more often than not journalists and policymakers turned to terrorism experts, transitologists, and scholars who studied the former Soviet Union, but not Islamic Studies faculty who asked very different questions of the administration and analyzed very different sets of data when assessing the wars. It took nearly a decade of war before the policy community turned toward scholars who could provide deeper analysis of the history of the region and perhaps it took the Arab Spring to truly propel scholars of the region into public debates. It also took efforts by foundations such as Carnegie Corporation and organizations such as the SSRC to build the scaffolding to support researchers who sought to sway opinion leaders or broad publics. What is vital is that researchers in the United States university system were afforded space and opportunities to frame the research questions that they then systematically attempted to answer. Although their research did not speak to the questions asked by policymakers at a time even when it might have proved valuable and might have spared the United States costly mistakes, eventually public debates and policy

discussions aligned with the questions being asked by scholars in Middle East and South Asian studies.

Between the pressures for universities to produce research that articulates with immediate societal concerns and the need to cultivate an enormous font of expertise that can be called upon in the event of unforeseen issues and changing circumstances (or in the context of a new consensus around older issues as happened in the case of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, though perhaps a decade too late), universities cannot ignore the need to provide expertise for pressing problems. Yet it is neither practical nor even always desirable to demand immediate relevancy from research. Nor should we demand that our scholars in universities serve as public intellectuals in every instance.

Instead, and this idea lies at the core of the Academia in the Public Sphere grants program, we need to create within universities more and more effective mediating spaces to engage public discussions. Universities, as decentralized institutions featuring individuals who work in relative isolation from one another while pursuing projects that speak to relatively small research communities, offer structural barriers to efforts to recalibrate academic discourse and the audiences to whom it is pitched. Yet while the decentralized nature of universities inhibits communication between faculty and nonspecialized audiences, it simultaneously allows for a number of schools, departments, and centers that have extraordinary proficiency in engaging specific constituencies and specific issues. (As an aside, it is fairly remarkable that in an era that champions flexible work arrangements and teams composed of diverse professional backgrounds to address

any specific topic that universities have resisted this sort of reorganization and no number of calls for interdisciplinary research alone will change what is an institutional arrangement and even an institutional failing.)

There are modest and achievable undertakings that universities need to implement more effectively in order to cultivate spaces that protect individual researchers and their research priorities even while answering the call to provide expertise that can help publics both better understand an issue and ask better questions about pressing issues. One action available to universities with immediate impact would be to encourage strategic partnerships between these siloed institutions that exist on campuses in order to create the basis for effective public engagement around specific issues. These partnerships can create institutional spaces around specific research topics that both serve as a buffer for scholars pursuing basic research and allow for coordinated efforts by networks of scholars to either engage publics or test the assumptions underlying their basic research against its application around pressing public issues and social questions.

As an example, the SSRC's Academia in the Public Sphere grants program funds a partnership between the Title VI area studies centers here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the local public radio affiliate. The affiliate, like many around the country, is based on campus although under normal circumstances there exists a genuine lack of engagement between the academic departments and the public radio stations or the professional schools more generally. In funding this project the SSRC supports a collaboration that brings faculty with expertise on Muslim societies onto the

exceptionally good program Here on Earth: Radio without Borders. This award-winning collaboration has supported hundreds of interviews with academics that were initially broadcast on Wisconsin Public Radio, which boasts approximately 66,000 listeners each day, and have since been rebroadcast across the country and has brought attention to a range of arguments and experts who were otherwise buried in university settings. This strategy is echoed in additional investments we have made to cultivate partnerships between area studies programs and journalism schools at Michigan State University, the University of Michigan, and Washington State University. The projects yield a range of outputs, including curricular content for the training of the next generation of journalists as well as radio and television programs that offer new and simultaneously accessible insights into Muslim societies. The projects funded through the grants program encourage faculty to apply and often test their expertise by entering into discussions with nonspecialists, without demanding that their basic research be subsumed to applied research.

In so doing, the Social Science Research Council grants program adheres precisely to one of the most important roles that grant making can offer. The grants enable institutions to remain true to their core values and strengths even while innovating at a faster pace than they otherwise might, in this instance by cultivating partnerships between aspects of universities that otherwise operate in isolation from one another. But grant investments, even from the largest foundations, are modest in size. If the grants program incentivizes the formation of collaborations, partnerships, and networks, only universities themselves can scale up these initiatives to the size required to foster ongoing public engagement on

the range of issues that occupy policymakers and the public. Only universities and the legislatures that fund them can support the number of networks and institutes needed to promote responsive scholarship that is engaged with emergent issues that occupy public discussion and public or international policy. And it is imperative that institutions, not individuals, recognize their obligation to find avenues by which to ask better questions, promote better understanding, collect better data, and offer better analysis in a way that renews the central place of universities in addressing social questions even while protecting their ability to shift the terrain of the debates. The very question of adequate public funding for universities and an answer to the question of why we need public research universities in the next century depends on institutional, not individual, commitments to both basic research and the public sector and finding creative ways to align these while engaging the social questions that animate public and policy discussions.

Works Cited

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