

**VENTER J J. A HUMAN(E) 'UNI-VERSITY':
RESISTING SCIENTISM, TECHNICISM, AND ECONOMISM**

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Up until quite recently, it was quite difficult for many in the human sciences to develop projects – departments were small and teaching loads quite heavy. Mostly one had academic lone rangers who took up a topic and worked on it for some time until circumstances enforced another direction.

During the restructuring of our universities, the conditions of work did not change for individual disciplines; in fact, especially in the humanities, the situation became much worse. For disciplines were simply lumped together in schools for teaching and focus areas for research, and told to be creative in finding common ground in training programs and research projects. The more 'practical' disciplines (often an arbitrary eclecticism of materials from other disciplines presented as a new 'science') dominated the process and pushed the foundational ones to the fringe, with no respect for the integrity of any discipline. One could create a marketable new 'science' in thirty seconds by appending terms such 'industrial' in the front or 'management' at the end of the description of any practical skill. All of the university had to be straight-jacketed into this mould – academic freedom was traded in for 'needs-based projects' – the term 'needs' all too often reduced to that which could bring in more money.

I grew up as an academic in the old school. The majority of my articles, though based upon research, have been 'occasional reflections'. Needs-based surely – the deeper need of assessing the sensibility of what we are doing, of where we come from and where we are going; of rethinking method, epistemology, institutionalisation and ideology.

Even when I did take up research projects, such projects have been prompted by such occasions. Thus I have constantly returned to the issues around the university – this started off as a research project in 1973 at the Free University of Amsterdam, in the then *Centrale Interfaculteit*.

In many cases somebody organ-ised a conference or a seminar and approached me for a paper. I have always taken such events much too seriously. Usually I

would then be approached to publish my paper, and all too often the paper grew into more than one article. I often wanted to stop thinking about the university's pains, when another occasion prompted me to study issues from another angle and write again.

I have tried to teach all students – not only philosophy majors – to work in this way – thinkingly, reflectively, doing. When I asked students why they study, they often began to tell me the grand things: 'I study law for the sake of justice ... I would ask them: 'What about a pay cheque?' Usually they would be embarrassed about a question like this. I would then tell them: 'Of course you want a pay cheque. And there is nothing wrong with that ... But one question must always be on the surface of your mind: 'Am I earning my pay cheque *responsibly*?' But if the very institution where they have to learn to be responsible professionals, does not itself earn its keep and its fame within the limits of responsible professionalism, then it fails its calling ... by teaching in the worst way one can: *having high profile people – such as academics – set the wrong example.*

In the case of the two articles about 'humane' university, the occasion was a deep concern that developed among so many of us after the restructuring of our University, given the new South African political dispensation that came into being in 1994. What we got was a hybrid between the quasi socialist demands of the new government and a sudden worldwide tendency worldwide to follow a 'business model' with exaggerated internal competition, with a top heavy management, Thatcherite burocratising of quality, rationalisation of staff to the detriment of the basic humanitarian disciplines, and most seriously: managing of humans via the accountant's office. What was formerly a (all too often half-hearted) Christian university, had become unrecognisable in its inhumanity.

At that stage I did believe that studying the issue, and publishing about it in a campus-rooted journal, could lead to at least some debate and hopefully some corrective measures. I did not realise that I was launching a boomerang.

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Abstract

A human(e) ‘uni-versity’: resisting scientism, technicism, and economism

This article focuses on the issue of dehumanising knowledge-generating procedures in the contemporary university. For this purpose different practical examples are analysed. It is argued that these dehumanising practices are rooted in present-day techno-scientific elitism that has gone ‘beyond’ the distinction between good and evil, and has developed into capitalistic pragmatism. Furthermore it is argued that these practices suppress critical reflection and creative alternatives in favour of gainful advantage within paradigmatic limitations. Real post-modern relativism thus does not exist; it is rather

the absolutism of the economy and the market that determine the nature of knowledge-building processes.

Opsomming: 'n Mensgevoelige 'universiteit': weerstand teen sciëntisme, tegnisme en ekonomisme

Hierdie artikel fokus op die vraagstuk van die ontmensliking van kennisontwikkelingsprosedures binne die hedendaagse universiteit. Vir hierdie doel word verskillende praktiese voorbeelde geanaliseer. Daar word aangevoer dat dié ontmensliking gewortel is in die hedendaagse tegno-sciëntistiese elitisme, wat die onderskeiding tussen goed en kwaad 'transendeer' en agterlaat, en derhalwe ontwikkel het in 'n kapitalistiese pragmatisme. Daar word aangevoer dat hierdie praktyke kritiese nadenke en kreatiewe alternatiewe onderdruk ten gunste van winsgewende voordeel binne paradigmatische grense. 'n Werklike post-moderne relativisme bestaan dus nie; dit is eerder die absolutisme van die ekonomie en die mark wat die aard van kennisgenerende prosesse bepaal.