Theorising the Interplay of Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability: An Urgent Need to Reconceptualise the 'Organic Crisis' in Universities in South Africa

Abstract

The functionality of a university can be conceptualised as emerging from the interplay of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability, conditioned by structure, culture and agency. Such a conceptualisation is more pertinent now given the current 'organic crisis' in higher education in South Africa. South Africa, along with many countries worldwide, is in the midst of a severe 'organic crisis,' marked by the disintegration of critical systems and institutions. The crisis is manifesting in various ways, including environmental degradation, infrastructure challenges, wars and social issues like poverty, crime, and gender-based violence. Among other things, this crisis is perceived as the dysfunctionality of universities to effectively pursue their obligation of the academic project and meaningful contribution to social imperatives. The argument presented in this article is that, for universities to be functional, and thus productive to their mandate, there should be a well theorised complementarity between academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability. This is because to effectively engage with the 'organic crisis', universities need to interrogate, critique and problematise the conditions that reproduce the same crises embattling higher education as a sector. That understanding can be realised when the interplay between these three concepts is interrogated, analysed and interpreted from the perspective of structure, culture and agency. I thus draw on literature on a contextualised approach to academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability, with some reference globally. Both critical realism and social realism are deployed to unpack the nature of 'organic crisis' facing universities. A decolonial gaze is adopted as an explanatory framework to critique the structural and cultural conditions of a postcolonial university.

Key words: Functionality of Universities, Critical Realism, Social Realism, Contextualised Approach and Decoloniality.