

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The problem of academic freedom in Africa

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Context and *dietrologia*

Critique is the most legitimate deployment of knowledge. (Arowosegbe 2010)

I am grateful to all the authors who contributed thoughtful reflections on my 2016 and 2023 articles; and to the editors of *Africa* for calling on me to have the last word and write back in a compelling conversation on knowledge production and the crisis of public universities in Africa. It is time to pull the strings together. As I seek to do this, my aim is less to answer – collectively or individually – the authors and their contributions to my articles. Rather, I endeavour to put on record further thoughts on issues about which I have been silent in earlier publications. In pursuit of a longstanding interest in (1) how knowledge is produced on non-metropolitan societies, (2) the future directions of postcolonial universities, and (3) the relations of knowledge and power in Africa, I ask further questions and examine new archives and bodies of evidence. I appreciate the difficulty of ignoring the economic determinants of Africa's material base – built as it is on dependent and disarticulated capitalist economies. In recounting my lived experience as an eyewitness to university life in Africa, and in shedding more light on the historical problems that I grapple with, I acknowledge change and continuity in historical explanations and the historiographies of my universe. In the present as in the past, the sense of sight shapes experience. I admit, with Ludmilla Jordanova (2012: 3), that vision has a history and that objects necessarily play a central role within it.¹ As Peter Burke (2008) has shown, looking at alternative evidence and records enables one to examine historical problems and subjects in a different and hopefully renewed way. Historians therefore ask different and new questions. Such questions are informed by the changing nature of the environments and universes of analysis, historiography and historical scholarship. These activities demand continuous examination of existing arguments and conclusions against the backdrop of changing evidence and facts. Understood as the best intellectual imagery of modern society, I turn to the postcolonial universities in Africa. Ultimately, this effort, together with my other works, should illuminate what one might safely conjecture about the future of the universities in Africa.

¹ I thank Katherine Rawling for sharing her thoughts with me on this in our co-taught course 'HIST5055M: Practising Modern History' (37236) in the School of History at the University of Leeds.

Introduction

Attacks on academic freedom and higher education are globally acknowledged. These undermine the safety and well-being of academics, public intellectuals, students and the universities. The trial of Socrates (470–399 BC) by the state in Ancient Greece is one of the oldest accounts of such attacks. From this period onward, the relationship between the intellectual and the state has provoked a huge genealogy of discourse.² Intellectual–state relations have remained controversial and tense (Wagner 2023). The resultant tussles have extended beyond the Renaissance to the development of higher education and the university as a specialized unit of the modern state. This was affirmed by Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1810) concept of the university (Remy 2002).³ Modern understandings of academic freedom have, from then, crystallized across the institutional sites of the university (Marini and Oleksiyenko 2022). Here, modernity was marked by the birth of institutionalized systems of thought; the disappearance of the Renaissance intellectuals; and the professionalization of disciplinarily trained academics–intellectuals–scholars.

The importance of academic freedom and the debates on it cannot be overemphasized. Its dynamics are underlined by changing contexts across space and time. In Europe and North America, this dates back to the entrenchment of social inequalities in the universities before and during the twentieth century. For example, in its 300-year history (1724–2024), the Regius Professorship of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, appointed by the Crown on the advice of the prime minister, has remained an exclusive male-dominated position.⁴ Historical collections in the special sections of the library of the University of Cambridge have documented the long and violent work on women’s exclusion in universities in the UK. Different accounts and dates exist for the granting of admission, graduation and membership rights to women in British universities.⁵ Women struggled to navigate

² This genealogy is broad. From Friedrich W. Nietzsche (1844–1900) to Julien Benda (1867–1956), from Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) to Michel Foucault (1926–84), and from Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) to Edward W. Said (1935–2003), the historical and theoretical literature on the intellectual and the state is expansive and vast. Such literature examines the critique of neoliberalism; the dynamics of power relations in society especially vis-à-vis the diverse and subtle ways in which power is transferred and social order is maintained across and within generations; their contributions to academic freedom and human rights; their roles in knowledge production; their duties – notably ethical desire and responsibility to speak truth to power; and their relations to the power structures of the societies that shape their operations and writings. Put together, these efforts target reconciling power to knowledge as a means towards building a just and well-ordered society through the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself.

³ Established in 1809 and opened in 1810 by Frederick William III pushed by Wilhelm von Humboldt *et al.*, the University of Berlin became ‘the model and mother of all modern universities’. Between 1828 and 1945, it was renamed Friedrich Wilhelm University. Given its location in East Berlin during the Cold War, the university was split into two in 1949 as Humboldt University of Berlin and the Free University of Berlin (see Wagner 2023: 189).

⁴ This has never been held by a woman nor by any scholar of colour. Other professorships exist at Cambridge, but not enough of these are occupied by racially marginalized scholars or women. On the history of inaugural lectures as a history of male dominance in the discipline of History at the University of Cambridge and the impact of this legacy in shaping our answers to the question of who has the authority to produce historical knowledge today, see Ian Anstruther (1983) and Jane Marcus (1985).

⁵ University of London (1878); Scottish universities (1892); University of Wales (1893); University of Durham (1895); University of Leeds (1904); University of Oxford (1920); University of Cambridge (1948). For material illustrations of male fragility, protests and votes against women’s education and

male-dominated workplaces. As historical actors and as interpreters of the past, their roles outside establishment knowledge-creating institutions – libraries, museums and universities – were largely marginalized. The male domination of the production of historical knowledge and the unsurprising fact of misogyny in male-only British academic institutions have been examined by Kate Dossett (2024).

During the 1930s and 1940s, the entire academic system in the USA was purged of its Jewish professors. For a long period, Black students could not attend many universities in the USA and many had no Black faculties. When these were eventually allowed, they were actively separated from their white counterparts. From its early colonial history to the Great Depression and the 1930s, different contexts and statistics illustrate the exclusion of women and overrepresentation of men in American higher education. With different dates and details in terms of admission, attendance, graduation and membership rights, all the Ivy League universities had quotas for Black, Catholic and Jewish professors and students. Barring Cornell, Pennsylvania⁶ and Radcliffe, these universities did not admit female students until the late 1970s.⁷ Their definitions of the best, brightest and productive students excluded women. Female students were first admitted to higher education in 1837 at Oberlin College. This was more than 200 years after Harvard College was established for men. It was not until the 1980s that the Ivy League universities began graduating female students. In 1902, Radcliffe College, a women's liberal arts college in Cambridge, Massachusetts, awarded its first doctorate degrees. Harvard Graduate School of Education admitted its first female students in 1920. Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences admitted its first female students in 1963. It awarded degrees to Radcliffe students in 1963. This continued into its merger with Radcliffe in 1977. Princeton and Yale admitted women in 1969, Brown University 1971, Dartmouth 1972, and Columbia University 1983 (Graham 1978; Evans 1992; Eisenmann 1997; Eisenmann *et al.* 1999).⁸ Many of the theoreticians of intellectual production in the USA – Theodor W. Adorno and Hannah Arendt, for example – responded to some of these burning contexts. Later, Edward W. Said and Joan W. Scott wrote about certain topics that were, and still are, taboo in the American academe. In South Africa, the genealogy of similar contexts dates back to the 1930s and 1940s, an era in which the National Party's government (1914–97) institutionalized apartheid segregation through official legislation and extended it to all places of learning. In the universities, this culminated in the Extension of University Education Act of 1959. This Act made it a crime for non-white students to register at the formerly white South African universities without the written approval of the Minister of Internal Affairs. This law

empowerment, together with other tangible and unusual reminders of the outrage felt by male students between 1881 and 1897 in relation to the admission of women to take degrees at the University of Cambridge, see MS Doc. 812, University of Cambridge Library (<<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-DOC-00812/1>>). See also Kate Dossett (2024).

⁶ Admission did not automatically guarantee graduation. Admission was not the same as graduation. During these early periods, admission right across the US universities was limited to attendance. It did not extend to either graduation or membership of the universities in all cases.

⁷ As exceptions among the US universities, Cornell University admitted women in 1870. In 1895, it became the first US university to award a Doctor of Science to a woman. Its first DVM degree awarded to a woman was given to Florence Kimball in 1910. The University of Pennsylvania admitted women in 1914.

⁸ Conversations with Bill Brown and Frances Ferguson at the University of Chicago.

evicted Black South African students from those universities for about thirty years. The role of Thomas Benjamin Davie, vice chancellor of the University of Cape Town (1948–55), in defence of academic freedom has been noteworthy.

Today, beyond the questions of what can be researched and taught vis-à-vis who can be offered admission and graduate, the impacts of neoliberal transformations together with the role of the commercial world and industry in influencing research – the corporatization of public universities – animate the problem of academic freedom in postcolonial universities. These affect and continue to define the institutional cultures together with the role of research funding, and how they close down or enhance spaces for free speech in these universities.

My consideration of the future of the universities in Africa is informed by the material conditions and political economy constraints of the states on the continent. These are illustrated by the harsh impact of the climate crisis in Central Africa, East Africa, the Horn and the Sahel;⁹ the conflict dynamics in Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Somalia; declining national currencies and revenues;¹⁰ dependent national economies; soaring debt profiles; and other effects of state dysfunctions raging unabated. These continue to undermine the attention accorded to healthcare, higher education and other social services. Africa is not alone in this misadventure: Latin America, South Asia and other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) share similar misfortunes and statistics with Africa. Statistically, the African context is gloomier than elsewhere. This partly explains the incapacity of home-based African academics to independently set research agendas. They underline the poor research infrastructures in African universities (Mills 2025) and the reduction of African scholars to local data gathering in the global system of knowledge production.

There are other illustrations of the crisis of the postcolonial universities. Examples of such failings include the abandonment of autochthonous, endogenous and indigenous knowledges, and the failure to Africanize the neocolonial universities and build a new humanism premised on restoring dignity to Black identity through the transformation of postcolonial subjects from their cultural and structural dependency as overseas products and representatives of the universities in post-Enlightenment Europe (Fanon 1952; 1961; 1964; Mazrui 1992), among other disappointments of decolonization and the limitations of nationalist elites. From the 1980s, the failures of African universities have been connected to those of the states. As international attention accounted for what went wrong with Africa (World Bank 2000; Veen 2004), much energy was sunk in the search for alternative frameworks for affirming the continent's economic and political development. The problematic character and

⁹ This region has been described as ground zero for the climate crisis. The impact of climate change-induced global warming and its severity are experienced in terms of the five-year-long lack of rainfall in Somalia, skyrocketing food prices and unabated conflict. People are dying from diseases, hunger and malnutrition. Parvin Ngala, the Regional Director of OXFAM for Central, East and Horn of Africa, calls it the worst hunger crisis in living memory. See 'The world with Keir Simmons. Scorched: East Africa's climate crisis', NBC News, 21 December 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZwZrVlhBM8>>.

¹⁰ 'Attacks on education in West and Central Africa on the rise', University World News, 7 March 2024 <<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240305103640261>>; 'Universities beef up security as Al-Shabaab threat grows', University World News, 17 October 2024 <<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20241016144859402>>, both accessed 31 October 2024.

nature of the state in Africa – together with the impossibility of doing without the state while also not doing well with it – have been widely acknowledged by scholars in the literature. The defining problem has been the neglect of the universities by states. The telling impacts of this neglect, together with the repression of academic freedom, have been accounted for in the literature (Arowosegbe 2016; 2021; 2023). In the postcolonial universities, the devastations of this crisis together with the failed responses to them are illustrated in the failure by African intellectuals to reinvent and transform the inherited colonial character of the post-Enlightenment universities in the new states. My elaborations on these problems draw largely on Nigeria.

As excruciating poverty mars living conditions in public universities, the federal government remains indifferent, insensitive and non-committal to the deteriorating plight of workers (Akinwole 2024a; 2024b; Osodeke 2024). Threats of unions embarking on fresh strikes fall on deaf ears in state quarters.¹¹ The current regime denies responsibility for agreements reached by past governments with university unions. It rather expresses commitment for fresh dialogue and negotiation.¹² Given the limited internally generated revenue relative to their needs-based expenditures and pathologically poor research funding from overseas sources, public universities in Africa are toiling under immense financial difficulties – unable to pay electricity bills among other running costs and utilities.¹³ With University College Hospital (UCH) Ibadan fast becoming a health-damaging centre¹⁴ and other university health systems dishing out

¹¹ 'Strike: another varsity union moves to join forces with SSANU, NASU', *Daily Trust*, 30 October 2024; 'NASU, SSANU begin indefinite strike over withheld salaries', *ThisDay*, 30 October 2024; 'No official response from FG on strike, says SSANU', *Punch*, 30 October 2024.

¹² 'FG reconstitutes committee to renegotiate 2009 varsity agreements', *Punch*, 15 October 2024; 'Yayale Ahmed heads FG/ASUU negotiation team', *Punch*, 16 October 2024; 'SSANU, NASU describe inauguration of renegotiation committee as charade', *Vanguard*, 16 October 2024.

¹³ In offices, staff accommodation and students' hostels, debilitating noise from private electricity generating plants – improvised from self-sourced generators – inhibits learning and serenity at the University of Ibadan. The real problem is not just the noise, but also the exhaust fumes that the overworked, petrol-powered machines emit, together with the risks to life caused by fires from petrol stored at home. Despite having one of the largest water reservoirs in West Africa – Awba dam, constructed by the British government in April 1964 – the proposition to transform this asset for hydroelectricity through research-informed funding initiatives has never been pursued. Faculties in Engineering and Renewable Energy continue to blame their failed agency on governmental neglect. Similar situations abound nationwide. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) has been cut off from the national grid due to debt. Students at the University of Benin (UNIBEN) and the University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID) are studying under street lights during examinations and tests due to extended power outages. In these nightmarish experiences, the question that begs an answer is how Nigeria has plunged itself into this situation. See 'ABU is cut off from the grid', *Ahmadu Bello University Special Bulletin* 16 (70), 29 November 2024; 'Blackout looms as 11 universities struggle with N2.92b bill monthly', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2024; 'Ivory towers in darkness: high electricity tariff threatens Nigerian universities' growth', *Business Day*, 1 December 2024.

¹⁴ Established by British colonial power in 1957 as one of the university health services in the Commonwealth, UCH is today a source of concern as it continues to dilapidate due to collapsed infrastructure and its desertion by qualified manpower. See 'Man seeks justice after radiotherapy at UCH damaged his sight', *Punch*, 16 November 2024 <<https://punchng.com/man-seeks-justice-after-radio-therapy-at-uch-damaged-his-sight/>>; 'Editorial: turning the page of decay at UCH, Ibadan', *Premium Times*, 26 November 2024; see also 'Japa: our hospitals will be empty in 2 years – CMDs', *Daily Trust*, 22 January 2025; 'UI students protest 82-day blackout at UCH', *Eighteen-Eleven Media*, 22 January 2025 <<https://eighteen-elevenmedia.com/ui-students-protest-82-day-blackout-at-uch/>>.

expired drugs, these universities continue to dilapidate.¹⁵ Death records¹⁶ and resignation statistics¹⁷ are also rising, to the detriment of institutional continuity and productivity.

The empirical problem

My critique of home-based African academics, public universities and the state in Africa is familiar. This should not detain us here. The continued decline of Nigeria's first-generation universities evidenced by the downward plunge of the University of Ibadan and other Nigerian public universities in African and world rankings of universities – followed by the rise of Covenant University, as reported by the 2024 *Times Higher Education* – sorely confirms my claim that public universities in Africa are in crisis (Arowosegbe 2023).¹⁸ In Nigeria, beyond governmental neglect and state repression, the integrity of these universities continues to be undermined by a range of other challenges: academic compromises and corruption by lecturers and students; clientele-patronage politics; problematic and toxic collegiality; the appropriation and instrumentalization of office for bureaucratic aggrandizement and cake-sharing in the allocation of contracts and resource control through appointments, promotions and recruitments; and the resort to consultancy, neo-patrimonialism and other internal practices. Academics in all of Nigeria's public universities are getting promoted. Appointments and promotions committees are uncritically awarding *prima facie* approvals to all promotion applications. Nigerian academics perform poorly in their capacity for generating non-governmental funding for their research. This explains their dependence on state salaries for survival. This dependence illustrates their vulnerability to state control and impositions. It reduces the clamour for academic freedom and the struggles by academic unions for university autonomy to empty rhetoric. Administrative assignments and predatory publishing have been normalized as short-cut strategies to full professorship in all the first-generation universities. These practices have become popular culture and now define the shoddy scholarship taking root in other public universities.¹⁹ Internationally, none of Nigeria's public universities are advancing any measurable investment beyond the local ranking by the National Universities Commission (NUC) and other internal sources.

¹⁵ 'Nigerian government gives senators N21 million monthly and N15 million to a whole university to run affairs – ASUU president', Sahara Reporters, 4 October 2024 <https://saharareporters.com/2024/10/04/nigerian-govt-gives-senator-n21million-monthly-and-n15million-whole-university-run?utm_source=operamini&utm_medium=feednews&utm_campaign=operamini_feednews>.

¹⁶ '84 academics die in four months due to economic hardship: ASUU blames FG', *Kano Times*, 7 October 2024. This post-strike estimate excludes the record of deaths during the 2022 Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike. For other statistics, see 'Taraba varsity loses 3 lecturers in 3 days', *Daily Trust Newspaper*, 25 November 2024.

¹⁷ For Sa'adu Zungur University in Bauchi State: '30 PhD holders resigned in Bauchi varsity over poor pay – ASUU', Gistcore Media, 27 September 2024 <<https://gistcore.com.ng/2024/09/27/30-phd-holders-resigned-in-bauchi-varsity-over-poor-pay-asuu/>>.

¹⁸ See 'World University Rankings 2024', *Times Higher Education* <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2024/world-ranking>>; 'Sub-Saharan Africa university rankings' at <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/sub-saharan-africa-university-rankings#>>.

¹⁹ On this, together with the awarding and proliferation of academic doctorate degrees in Nigerian universities, see 'The shameful proliferation of PhD degrees: a crisis in academic integrity', *This Nigeria*. <<https://thisnigeria.com/the-shameful-proliferation-of-phd-degrees-a-crisis-in-academic-integrity/>>

Most professors are queuing and scheming for positions – as deans, directors, provosts and vice chancellors – in these universities. Regrettably, these neither understand the systemic problems nor how to restore and transform the universities to meet competitive world-class standards. Barring their opportunistic access to official cars, the allocation and determination of contracts and other kickbacks from their lucrative idleness, there is no justifiable explanation for the ruthless quest for administrative and political power in these universities. After several decades of post-independence existence, evidence regarding Nigeria's premier and other first-generation universities suggests continued decline in academic capacity and governance quality – underlined by empty delight in the years of past glory. The illustrious academic and intellectual traditions bequeathed to the postcolonial universities as overseas extensions and representations of the universities in Europe and North America that established them have been lost. The proud histories of the postcolonial universities are not corroborated by the disconnection with their local communities and the increasing dynamics of their ongoing failings. They have been overrun by irredentist and other institutionally destructive pathologies.

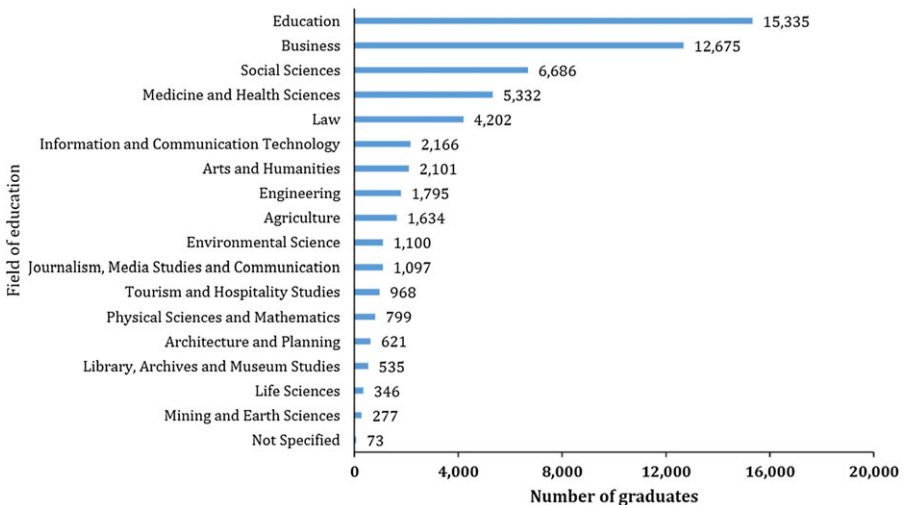
The worst impact of the crisis in African universities is on the employability, skills and training of their graduates. University degrees are meant to open more doors than they close. However, given the disconnect in university curricula between course content and market needs, disciplinary orientations and training, this expectation is deeply problematic. The record numbers of high-flying graduates produced by Nigeria's private and public universities are not complemented by either applicable entrepreneurial, independent skills or market-ready transformative training.²⁰ In a national outburst in 2014, Yoweri Museveni described the arts courses in Uganda as useless, and lamented as unfortunate the continued focus on such disciplines that end up delivering postgraduation joblessness (see Juma 2014). In her study on East Africa, Anna L. Mdee (2024) argues that the expansion of national education and public universities over the past twenty-five years has not significantly contributed to national transformation in Kenya, Tanzania or Uganda. She describes a 'financial and intellectual dependency dilemma', 'market demands for STEM graduates – neglected by the universities' and the 'skills–employment dilemma' as postcolonial illustrations of colonially rooted structures undermining national education in East Africa (see Table 1 and Figure 1). She observes that, given this gap, many of the graduates produced in record numbers from this process – agricultural extension workers, engineers, lecturers, medical doctors and teachers – are not absorbed into formal employment at commensurate rates (see also Fonn *et al.* 2018; Cochrane and Oloruntoba 2021; Kibona 2024). With about 87 per cent of graduates across the states battling with unemployment, the incentive for university

²⁰ See '206 students bag first class at Covenant University', *Punch*, 6 January 2023 <<https://punchng.com/206-students-bag-first-class-at-covenant-university/>>; '339 students bag first class at Covenant Varsity', *Punch*, 11 October 2024 <<https://punchng.com/339-students-bag-first-class-at-covenant-varsity/>>; '418 bag first class as UI graduates 6,664', *The Nation*, 13 November 2024 <<https://thenationonline.net/418-bag-first-class-as-ui-graduates-6664/>>; 'UI churns out 418 first class, 6,664 graduates', *Nigerian Tribune*, 14 November 2024 <<https://tribuneonline.net/ui-churns-out-418-first-class-6664-graduates/>>; 'ASUU raises concern over high number of first-class graduates from private universities', *Vanguard*, 28 November 2024 <<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/11/asuu-queries-number-of-first-class-graduates-from-private-universities/>>; '32nd Convocation: FUNAAB graduates 120 first class, 136 PhDs', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2025 <<https://guardian.ng/features/education/32nd-convocation-funaab-graduates-120-first-class-136-phds/>>.

Table 1. Gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education in East Africa by gender

	Tanzania	Uganda	Kenya
Gross enrolment 2013 (%) (UNESCO SDG 4.3.2)	Male: 5.33 Female: 2.43	Male: 4.61 Female: 4.03	Male: 9.33 Female: 7.67
Gross enrolment 2023 (%) (UNESCO SDG 4.3.2)	Male: 5.98 Female: 4.88	No data	Male: 20.48 Female: 17.99
Share of informal employment (%) (ILO-STAT)	93.3 (2020)	95.2 (2021)	86.5 (2021)
Unemployment youth rate (%) (ILO)	3.9 (2020)	5.2 (2021)	12.4 (2021)

Source: Afrobarometer statistics on unemployment; see also Savage (2024).

**Figure 1.** Graduates by their fields of education in Tanzania (2022)

Source: Tanzania Commission for Universities (2023: 28).

education has largely diminished among the youth.²¹ Africa's unemployable graduates are products of its decadent and impoverished institutions. Continued relocation overseas by qualified manpower continues to worsen the situation (Makoye 2023; Sirili 2018). As Mdee (2024) recalls, the fatal crisis and impact of ongoing emigration by medical personnel – doctors and nurses – in the health sector in East Africa are telling. Far from subsiding, the casualties and deaths are escalating.

In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx (1845) noted that other philosophers had merely interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it. Changing the problematic trajectory of public universities in Africa demands transforming them to produce Fanon's (1952) new humanism at all levels of citizenship education. This means addressing the disarticulated character of African economies and the statist nature of their political systems. It is to democratize access to national and public education – at

²¹ On the impact of the skills mismatch on graduate unemployment in Nigeria, see Onyeonoru (2024).

all levels – as a strategy for boosting the production of national economic surplus, thereby restoring political integration; faith in the political community and social contract; and the sense of a common will. It means enhancing the universities' capacity and contributions to the development of indigenous local capital and productive forces in the regions on a globally competitive scale. It should also halt the continent-wide dependence on the West in which the prescriptions of academic needs and programmes by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and other external authorities continue to destroy African capacity to develop critical thought and independently set original research agendas. I illustrate this below.

Historical context: the case for decolonization

The contradictions in Africa's educational system are irresolvable within the existing economic and political systems that are structurally colonized and technically steered from abroad. As with its civil wars and violent conflicts, accentuated inequality and poverty, debt distress, high unemployment, low productivity and other problems in Africa's educational systems are manifestations of deeply rooted dilemmas that are connected with its colonial background. Colonialism left behind divided and fragmented societies – with ideologies of divisionism, poor infrastructures and weak institutions in Africa and in the global South more broadly. From the post-independence period to date, the structural traps imposed on the continent have reduced its contribution in the global capitalist system to the consumption of industrial outputs and technologies from the global North; the outsourcing of obsolete technologies – no longer needed in the North – in the name of development cooperation, job creation and technical assistance; and the supply of cheap raw materials. In knowledge production and research, this takes the form of exporting theoretical knowledge from the global North and supplying data by African academics and their universities. As various neocolonial operations continue to undermine Pan-Africanism's capacity to produce its own liberation, these realities underline decolonization, nationalism and postcolonialism as uncompleted projects in Africa.

The twentieth century was marked by many geopolitical transformations. In this period, several shifts have taken place in global political economy and world history. Empires have risen and fallen. World Wars One and Two – and the Cold War – have been fought. In 1900, London was the centre of the world. There was no Communism, no Soviet Union. There was the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. The United States of America was largely isolationist and stayed on its own side of the Atlantic. By the 1940s, England was demolished by the World Wars. The Ottoman Empire was dissolved. The Soviet Union emerged while Germany took over France. These events were followed by other unprecedented developments. The 1980s and 2000s illustrated substantially different global pictures. These changes make certain historical continuities rather astonishing. Amid the radical changes that swept over every element of international relations, the West's relationship with Africa has remained unchanged. This continuity explains the paramount nature of that relationship for the West. Over the past 800 years, this relationship has been ruthlessly extractive. This remains the case even in the twenty-first century. The importance of this relationship underlines the necessity of its preservation by the West. As Samir Amin (1972; 2014), Walter Rodney (1972) and Immanuel Wallerstein

(1974) have shown, the West's continued impersonation of a superior civilization in economic development, knowledge production, material progress, military technology and state building is not based on its acclaimed intellectual, moral or spiritual superiority. Rather, it is premised on the West's exploitative subjugation of Africa and the violent extraction of its human and natural resources. This underlines the unequal trade relations between the two regions – in which Africa has been permanently reduced to raw material production: cash crop production under colonial rule and raw material extraction in the postcolonial period, with manufactured products and technology coming from the West. In knowledge production, African academics and African universities have been reduced to data generation while philosophical knowledge and seasoned theoretical reflections and thought have remained the exclusive preserve of the industrialized West.

The most visible illustration of these problems is Africa's external debt – debt denominated in foreign currencies. The structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) began in the late 1980s and were intensified in the 1990s; from 2000 onwards, the practice has been for the states in Africa to plunge their economies into unregulated external debts and foreign loans without undertaking debt sustainability analysis.²² This takes a huge amount of fiscal policy space that constrains African governments from investing in basic health, infrastructure, public education and other building blocks of development and prosperity. This derives from the commitment to prioritize paying back the external debt. External debt, however, results from deeper structural tensions that have colonial roots – deficits in energy, food and manufacturing.²³ As a mark of its economic disarticulation, Africa consumes what

²² A debt sustainability analysis demands that, before borrowing, you run the numbers and relevant statistics for the states. This confirms whether the states intending to borrow can pay back and service their debts. The Debt Management Office (DMO) runs the Debt Sustainability Profile. This enables one to know whether the existing or projected revenues can cover the debt service and still allow the states to embark on projects as well as pay pensions and salaries, among other competing financial commitments. States can keep on top of their debt profiles by looking at their debt service to revenue ratio. Statutorily, the DMO helps states do that. However, given the reckless way in which African states have resorted to foreign debts, this process has been circumvented and largely ignored. As African states have lots of entrepreneurial activities going on, these states are not providing the enabling environments and services needed for medium and small-scale services to grow and take root domestically. Hence the resort to capital flights that remains unabated.

²³ The colonial state constrained the production of food crops in colonial Africa. It encouraged and invested in the production of cash crops – bananas, coffee, hide and skin, tea and tobacco – and other raw materials needed for immediate export to Europe for industrial production. This privileged focus on the production of cash crops stimulated international trade between the colonies in Africa and the metropolitan economies. It stabilized the material bases on which the Industrial Revolution took place in Europe. However, it created artificial food scarcities in the colonies. It also laid the foundation for the post-independence crisis of Africa's dependence on the West for food supplies. This has been reinforced by subsequent policies of various international organizations and the United Nations and the failure of the postcolonial state to arrest the situation. Other complementary colonial economic policies included the imposition of forced unpaid labour, which saw to the construction of colonial infrastructure; the financialization of African economies; and the imposition of colonial taxes payable strictly in colonial currencies. According to 2023 figures from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Africa imports 85 per cent of its food. Historically, this situation resulted from the colonial design and policy of encouraging the production of cash crops at the expense of food crops. The combination of conflict, poor investment in the agricultural sector and other instances of governance failure intensifies Africa's food crisis situation – hence the continent's continued dependence.

it does not produce and produces what it does not consume.²⁴ This explains its marginal position in export orientation relative to its high import profiles. It underlines the food insecurity across Africa and the global South. This gives birth to a global value chain that keeps Africa and other LMICs in Latin America and South Asia in permanent deficit situations. The combined effect of these arrangements produces trade deficits across these regions. Trade deficits are best understood in terms of their value-added content systems in which the value of exports from the global South is low while the value of its imports is high. As Africa remains locked at the bottom of the global value chain, its structural trade deficits depreciate the continent's currencies relative to the US dollar and other foreign currencies. With weakened national currencies, critical imports – food, fuel and medicine – are procured at very high prices. In this asymmetric arrangement, Africa imports inflation in the most sensitive areas of its economies, thereby hurting the most vulnerable segments of its populations. The resort to protectionism – that is, the national drive to preserve the existence of poor citizens – leads African governments to subsidize food and other imported necessities. This is unsustainable over the long term. State withdrawal from protectionist policies forces African farmers out of agrobusiness.²⁵ As African governments invite their central banks to contain inflation and stabilize exchange rates, this is often pursued using a band-aid approach that further relies on borrowing more US dollars and keeps external debts in an unsustainable vicious circle. This forces African governments to prioritize economic activities that enable them to rapidly earn more forex and thereby service their debts. This, however, deprioritizes basic health, public education and other transformational activities that are central and foundational to development and prosperity. This neocolonial architecture partly explains the continued neglect and underdevelopment of Africa's public universities.

From the mid-1980s public education as a public good has been neglected by the state in Africa. I have argued elsewhere, following Joan W. Scott (2019), that higher education provides humanity with a shared public good, a set of benefits that advances the common will and well-being of the nation (Arowosegbe 2021: 278–82). National education is, therefore, a core obligation of the democratic, modern state. It is a legitimate demand by the citizenry. As part of private property, private education, at all levels, should at most complement public education. It must never be deployed as a replacement for public education. The early post-independence elites pursued this path of national education. This grounded articulation, prioritization and understanding of public education as a common, public good has, however, been jettisoned by the postcolonial state. With the commercialization, liberalization and privatization of higher education as recommended by the major international economic institutions – IMF and the World Bank – together with the introduction of SAPs and other macro-economic stabilization policies, the attention once accorded

²⁴ This is complicated by elite aspiration to maintain Western consumption lifestyles and standards of material prosperity through corruption and primitive accumulation.

²⁵ This is because, without such protective policies, African farmers can hardly compete with heavily subsidized food crops from the global North. Resolving the food security problem in Europe took place at the Treaty of Rome in 1955. This informed the introduction of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) based on heavy agricultural subsidies to produce the core food crops in Europe – corn, soya beans and wheat – and other security items.

public education has been lost. Market-driven, neoliberal, profit-oriented policies currently determine the state's investment in higher education in Africa. The government's agenda in Nigeria is aimed at outright privatization and total withdrawal of state involvement in public education. Not surprisingly, from the 1990s, Africa's defence expenditures and other state investments in Western-produced military hardware and technologies have continued to rise and soar beyond agriculture, education, health and infrastructure put together.²⁶ These dynamics and the problem of state capture continue to undermine the equitable and just distribution of national resources and wealth.

Conclusion

Given its context, the decline of public universities and rise of private universities spell doom for the future of public education in Africa. An educational system dominated by private capital can take root only in an imposed future on the continent. This cannot be based on popular will. Nor will it happen as an agreeable, democratic decision premised on the popular consent of the people. This will reverse the achievements of the early post-independence period when national education minimized discrimination – by age, class, ethnicity, gender and race. Drawing on the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) (1790) advanced an early defence of the idea of individual rights based on reason and advocated the importance of national education to the intellectual, moral and spiritual development of modern society. Arguing that merit is the best justification for private property, she critiqued custom, hereditary systems and tradition as mechanisms for projecting inequalities in hierarchy, position, power and wealth.²⁷ She presented national education based on universal ideals of merit, rationality, reason and virtue as the best foundation for a fair and just society. This is key for building a free, non-discriminatory and non-hierarchized society based on an identification with humility, national uniformity and shared interests and purpose. Freedom is the essence and meaning of politics. Modern revolution must establish a form of politics and state capable of securing human freedom. It must offer humanity the opportunity to explore the possibility and reality of a new beginning (Arendt 1963).

The future of public education in Africa is bleak and unprotected. The failure of the postcolonial elites to transform the inherited structures of colonial society underlines the withering away of the state in Africa – Fanon's (1961) thesis on the dangers of decolonization and pitfalls of national consciousness. Given the lack of redemptive capacity and will on the part of states, the sector might not survive threats from domestic competitors and other externalities that are looking forward and working hard towards its collapse. The most serious threat to national education in twenty-

²⁶ Such lopsided investments in military weaponry have not positively affected its conflict profiles. Africa is still the world's theatre of civil wars, humanitarian emergencies and internecine conflicts. This is especially the case in Nigeria. See 'Defence, security received N3.25tr in 2024 alone', *Daily Post*, 16 December 2024 <<https://dailypost.ng/2024/12/16/defence-security-received-n3-25tr-in-2024-alone-speaker-abbas/>>.

²⁷ This is an important component of Wollstonecraft's critique of absolute power and the British aristocratic system.

first-century Africa is the externally suggested financialization of higher education and public universities. The neoliberal agenda of the IMF and World Bank to commercialize and liberalize public education through the ruthless privatization of this sector is not likely to be halted. Rather, the entry of China and other international actors as active players in this sector will continue to undermine self-determination and weaken state sovereignty through aid dependence and external debts. The active presence of Chinese Confucian Centres and other culturally loaded programmes by new active international players – preying on the limitations in funding available to state institutions in East Africa – is an illustration of the continuity of external influences. These will leave the continent with little manoeuvrable policy space for independent action.

Within African states, governance failure – illustrated by conflict, debt peonage, poor service delivery and state dependence – will neither allow nor encourage focused funding of public education. In 2024, rising public debts, exacerbated by limited fiscal space and multiple shocks, pose a significant challenge to Africa's development. Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, the Republic of the Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe and Zambia are among the most indebted states in Africa (Were 2024).²⁸ Unlike the debt crisis of the 1980s, which was largely driven by multilateral debt, the current public debt comprises mainly bilateral and commercial debt. This follows increased access to international financial markets and China's emergence as a significant source of bilateral credit. This debt attracts higher interest rates; it is costlier; and it is subject to higher interest rate volatility than the concessional multilateral debt of the 1980s. It is thus more difficult to either negotiate or pay off. Debt servicing undermines national planning in Africa.

Within the universities in Africa, there is no foreseeable action to arrest the ongoing dynamics of collapse. This situation is highlighted by the corresponding collapse of national institutions of indigenous knowledge valorization on the continent. African universities remain increasingly alienated, with diminished relevance to their immediate societies. In Nigeria, the internal decay of public universities and their neglect by the state are sharply contrasted by the aggressive injection of funding into private universities by their owners and stakeholders. As research and teaching infrastructures continue to collapse in public universities; as African academics continue to respond poorly in generating non-state-dependent, international funding for their research; as the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) and other national students' union bodies continue to compromise their popular mandate, lobby and work as government spokespersons and stooges; as pliable and willing members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and other national academic unions continue to collaborate with state officials for self-preservation and survival to the detriment and neglect of core institutional and societal interests; and as university administrations continue to be dominated by reckless, shady characters and beneficiaries of perilous impunity, these developments

²⁸ See 'Bloomberg report: two-thirds of Nigerian families go hungry as food prices soar', *Business Day*, 22 November 2024; 'Tinubu: Nigeria's public debt soars to N134.3tn amid infrastructural deficit', *Daily Post*, 24 October 2024; see also 'Nigeria's public debt hits N142tn as borrowing rises', *Punch*, 22 January 2025.

might all entrench the beginning of the collapse of national, public education and the end of public universities in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent. Whither the future?

A number of factors are likely to constrain the efforts of the continent's private universities towards improved performance in future world university rankings. These might limit Nigeria's private universities from rising beyond sub-Saharan Africa universities' rankings. To be sure, these universities generate their highest points through their acquisition of cutting-edge laboratory equipment, libraries and other facilities needed by modern universities. They also perform much better in funding their faculties at international conferences. However, it takes more than facilities and funding to improve one's ranking among world-class universities. The third and most important factor is the quality of the faculty.

Unfortunately, given their continued violations of academic freedom (Arowosegbe 2024) and violent conflicts – due to al Qaeda and Boko Haram insurgencies in Nigeria and the Sahel²⁹ – beyond data gathering, fieldwork and other marginal collaborations, world-class academics and students will hardly be attracted to study or take research and teaching positions in these universities. Nigeria's private universities are not paying globally competitive allowances and salaries. They can therefore hardly attract some of the best overseas-based and overseas-trained academic workforce (Proverbs 22.29, KJV³⁰). Predictably, for the next half century, the fate and fortunes of these institutions will depend on the families and inheritance patterns of their ownership structures. These neopatrimonial networks will neither democratize nor make room for the normal functioning of these universities.

As I indicated earlier (Arowosegbe 2010), beyond the euphoria of past glory, it is time for home-based African academics and the postcolonial universities to reclaim the illustrious heritage of the early post-independence period and retrieve the lost visions of Black consciousness (à la Biko) and Pan-Africanism, both of which are indispensable to produce Fanon's (1952; 1964) new humanism on the continent.

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²⁹ On the relevant statistics, see '614,937 Nigerians killed, 2.2 million abducted in 1 yr – NBS', *Daily Trust*, 18 December 2024; see also 'Boko Haram kills 22 soldiers, many CJTF', *Daily Trust*, 27 January 2025.

³⁰ Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings; He shall not stand before mean men [i.e. Nigeria's private universities and their owners].

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