Disruption, Inclusion and the Politics of International Higher Education

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"Disruption" is the defining word of the Anthropocene epoch. It describes almost all aspects of social life. Humanity's influence on the planet is now so profound that it is threatening its very existence. Technology's effects on humanity are so far reaching that they have fundamentally reoriented the nature of human life. These structural transformations and the political and social challenges and protests that they have spawned have destabilized our historical moment in profound ways. It must be said that these effects are both positive and negative, although this is not how it is often understood in the public discourse and even in the academic literature. It is true that in many instances, the outcomes of disruption are positive and progressive, but this is not always so. The most extreme example of this is, of course, the disruptive effect of human life on the essential functions of our planet.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to think through disruption within the contextual realities of our historical moment and geographic space. What may be positive in one historical moment or geographic space may very well be negative in another. Take, for instance, the widespread use of energy. The easy availability of electricity in one historical moment enabled positive outcomes – growth, inclusion, social services, poverty alleviation, food security. Yet in another historical moment, the over-consumption of fossil fuels has had a disastrous climatic impact and is eroding the very gains of an earlier epoch. Similarly, geographic space makes a difference. The energy transition may require the management of electricity demand in North America and Western Europe, but this same intervention could have very negative social consequences in Africa where so many do not have easy access to

such a resource. Space and time have differential effects, and they therefore require interrogation.

But despite these qualifications, disruption is the defining phenomenon of our times, and its potential needs to be harnessed for positive outcomes. The effects of disruption have created an uncertainty amongst economic and political elites and opened up serious questions about the foundational structures and civic values of our economic, political, and social systems. These systems are structured in a way that results in marginalisation as much as it produces growth. The uncertainty that disruption has provoked has created an opportunity to rethink those foundational elements, to mitigate against marginalisation, and to enable a far more inclusive growth and a shared prosperity. Yet this can only emerge if we approach political and socioeconomic reform – and even resistance – in non-formulaic terms. We cannot simply use past strategies of resistance and reform for the present historical moment. Yes, positive results must be built upon, but formulaic responses in which past strategies and tactics are unthinkingly implemented in fundamentally different socioeconomic and political contexts is untenable, as this could enable outcomes that are destructive to our collective human existence.

Let me take one example that speaks to those of us in the university context. The debate about internationalisation in the UK higher education sector is about its positive or negative effects. Those on the right see international students as a financial burden and a drain on fiscal resources. Liberal and left-of-centre intellectuals see international students as a net positive and so advocate for their continued recruitment. A recent report by London Economics (2021) for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Universities UK International makes this case by demonstrating that the 496,000 international students benefit the UK to the tune of £28.8 billion (2021). The report also suggests that the positive effects are broadly dispersed at both the local and national level, adding £millions to local economies, including '£290 million a year to Sheffield Central, £181 million to Cardiff Central, and £171 million to Glasgow Central'. This report dovetails neatly with the government's *International Education Strategy* (2021), which aims to increase international student numbers in the UK from 480,000 to 600,000. If implemented, this would be seen as a

positive outcome by both government, who see international students as a revenue stream, and liberal and left-of-centre intellectuals, who see them as having a wider social benefit.

But if you were to take a broader philosophical lens to this, one that is more global than national, you would realise that the debate in the UK is parochial and that the expansion of international students could have a detrimental effect on institutions and societies across the world. This is because all our challenges – pandemics, climate change, inequality, social and political polarisation – are transnational in character and cannot be resolved within the context of a single nation state. We are going to require institutional capacity and human capabilities across the world. We need more social actors, scientists, technologists, entrepreneurs, academics, and students to develop and adapt policies and technologies for their circumstances. For this to happen, we need enabling environments. We need universities and vocational colleges that train, research, and innovate; companies that are inclusive and entrepreneurial; and funding networks that can sponsor these initiatives.

In the South, these capacities are being eroded by the character of our international partnerships. In this era of globalisation, we have had more global partnerships, more scholarships, and more mobility across the world. Yet this has also been the period in which the brain drain has escalated dramatically. This is because these partnerships are defined by the principal of solidarity but structured at the level of individuals. They identify talented human beings, offer them scholarships, and bring them to London, New York, Berlin, and even Beijing. The assumption is, of course, that these students will return home. But the evidence for this is sketchy at best. It is worth noting that when these students come here, life happens. They fall in love, they have families, they get jobs and stay. At a conference on the diaspora which I attended at the African Union in Addis Ababa in 2019, Abdoulaye Gueye (2019) reviewed the history of student mobility in the world and demonstrated that 83% and 90% of students from India and China respectively did not return home. He suggests that this had significant consequences for the quality of their scientific institutions and their human capabilities. This trend may have been reversed in the case of China in recent years as a result of their increased investments in higher education, but it is unlikely to be the case in much of the rest of the developing world with the exception of Singapore.

The net effect of the increase in international students to universities in the UK will be the erosion of institutional capacities and human capabilities in the developing world, through an acceleration of the brain drain, at precisely the moment when we are urgently required to build such capacities and capabilities. And this is not a challenge for only the developing world. We in the North should be as concerned about this outcome, for the weakening of capabilities to address transnational challenges puts us at risk as well. To take one recent example, the global inequality in vaccination rates for Covid-19 has enabled the emergence of variants that compromise all of us. None of us can be safe if all of us cannot be made safe. The increase in international students may therefore be in the short-term financial interest of the UK, but it will come at the cost of the developing world and the long-term sustainability of humanity itself.

Our policies, strategic interventions, and, dare I say, protest pedagogies require a reinvention in this era. We need to eschew the formulaic responses of the past. In higher education, this does not mean a retreat into autarchy or a closure of national borders. Rather, it will require global partnerships to be structured at an institutional level where individual universities are concerned less about brand and far more about their collective mandate. It will require thinking about teaching and learning at scale. It will require a reinvention of higher education so that co-curriculation, co-teaching, and co-credentialling become the norm. It will require split-site scholarships that will enable students in the South to gain scientific knowledge, develop a global consciousness, have access to new equipment and funding networks, and yet be sufficiently rooted in institutions of the developing world to allow for such knowledge and skills to be deployed within their local contexts. Such a model of global higher education would also allow students from the developed world to have the opportunity to visit the developing world so that they, too, can understand different contextual circumstances and develop knowledge and skills that are more universally applicable. And it would require a reimagining of the current business model of higher education that is excessively and unfairly reliant on international students paying fees that are three times the cost of domestic students, all of which is ironically done in the name of solidarity and building a collective human community. In essence, it will require a greater

appreciation of the tension between our short-term need to build financially sustainable institutions and our long-term desire to be part of a global academy that is capable of responding to the global challenges of our time.

Reimagining higher education is necessary not only because of the developmental outcomes it may portend but also because it will improve the quality of scholarship itself. After all, we need a greater integration of global science technologies with local knowledge and applications. For example, you cannot think through the management of a pandemic without understanding the cultural norms and practices of local communities, however good the clinical interventions that may exist. During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2015, the virus was spreading more quickly because of the nature of burial practices in those societies, and the lack of understanding of these cultural beliefs disabled efforts at managing the pandemic. It was only when Red Cross volunteers understood the link between burial practices and transmission of the virus, and enabled modifications to the former, that the virus was brought under control.

Custom-made solutions are thus required to enable positive outcomes in this historical era. This is relevant not only for higher education but also for almost every other sector of human life. Formulaic responses from the past can lead to adverse outcomes that undermine social inclusion, human capabilities, and, ultimately, human survival. Crude ideological and formulaic responses from the past are not an appropriate solution to disruption in the Anthropocene epoch. Yet our political practice, behaviour, and, frankly, thinking is out of step with what is required. We require a deeper and more nuanced conversation than we are currently having.

This is the biggest challenge of our time. There is a desperate need to disrupt the politics of our historical moment. This disruption should apply not only to mainstream politics but also to the politics of resistance, for it is amongst progressives where the righteous belief in the cause has enabled the greatest certainty and the least rethinking and reimagining of strategies and tactics. It is this certainty that needs to be disrupted if we are to

bring about a more inclusive world. Otherwise, we may act now in a manner that destroys our collective future.

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