



Teaching and Researching Africa in an ‘Engaged’ Way: The Possibilities and Limitations of ‘Community Engagement’¹

Sally Matthews*

Abstract

An increasing number of universities around the world are making commitments to ‘community engagement’ or some similar term. The idea that universities should engage with their contexts is related to concerns about the relevance of the knowledge being produced by universities today. Such concerns about relevance are familiar to those working in African Studies where there have long been debates about the relevance of the knowledge produced by Africanists. In this article, I draw on some of these debates in African Studies to explore the possibilities and limitations of the idea of community engagement. I argue that it is not possible to produce knowledge that is broadly relevant to ‘the community’ as a whole. Rather, we need to identify for whom exactly we wish to produce relevant knowledge. In order to do this, questions around the politics of knowledge, which have been highlighted in many of the debates about African Studies, must be given further attention.

Résumé

Un nombre croissant d’institutions universitaires à travers le monde a pris l’option de privilégier « l’engagement de la communauté » ou quelque chose de semblable. L’idée que les universités doivent s’engager selon leur spécificité est une question en relation avec les préoccupations liées à la pertinence de la connaissance produite par les universitaires aujourd’hui. Ces préoccupations sont réellement prises en charges dans les institutions qui s’intéressent aux études africaines, institutions dans lesquelles il y a eu depuis longtemps des discussions qui tournent autour de la pertinence de la connaissance produite par les africanistes. Cet article s’appuie sur certaines problématiques débattues à propos des études africaines et envisage

* Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. Email: s.matthews@ru.ac.za

d'explorer les possibilités et les limites de l'idée d'« engagement de la communauté ». Il soutient qu'il est impossible de produire une connaissance qui soit largement appropriée à 'la communauté' dans son ensemble. Mieux, nous devons identifier ceux à qui est réellement destinée la connaissance pertinente que nous voulons produire. Pour y parvenir, davantage d'attention doit être donnée aux questions qui concernent la politique de la connaissance, questions qui ont été soulignées dans beaucoup de débats sur les études africaines.

Introduction

We believe that higher education institutions exist to serve and strengthen the society of which they are part. Through the learning, values and commitment of faculty, staff and students, our institutions create social capital, preparing students to contribute positively to local, national and global communities. Universities have the responsibility to foster in faculty, staff and students a sense of social responsibility and a commitment to the social good which, we believe, is central to the success of a democratic and just society (Talloires Declaration 2005).

This is an extract from the Talloires Declaration, signed in September 2005 by 29 universities from 23 different countries (Talloires Network 2009a). The signing of this Declaration led to the establishment of the Talloires Network, a network of institutions sharing a commitment 'to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education'. The network now has 190 member universities in 58 countries around the world, all of which have made some form of commitment to promoting community engagement or some related term, like social responsibility or civic engagement (Talloires Network 2011).* This emerging concern with community engagement is also reflected by the increasing prominence given to various forms of service learning at higher education institutions with students being encouraged to do some of their learning off campus and, in the process, also to 'give something back' to the community.

The increasing attention being given to community engagement leads some to describe it as a 'new movement' (Dragne 2007:9). It seems likely that more and more institutions will be making commitments like these and that individual departments and disciplines will be encouraged or even pressured into introducing forms of community engagement into their teaching and research practices. What are those of us working in African Studies and related fields to make of these new commitments? In particular, what should those of us whose commitment to African Studies entails a commitment to producing knowledge about Africa as part of the political project of empowering Africa

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and Africans and of exposing and eliminating the exploitation and oppression of the continent and its peoples, make of community engagement?

Advocates of community engagement argue that engagement with communities outside the university will push universities to produce more relevant knowledge (or, at least, help demonstrate the relevance of the knowledge they produce) while also helping communities to access knowledge and skills that would otherwise be out of their reach. This question of relevance is very familiar to those who have written about or reflected upon African Studies. As a field of study, African Studies has been the site of many disputes, and one aspect of several of these disputes has been the question of the relevance of the knowledge produced within the field. A consideration of some of the debates within and about African Studies reveals insights which are of value to those seeking to find ways in which universities can 'engage' with their contexts, particularly to those trying to introduce aspects of community engagement into academic programmes about Africa, whether doing this in Africa or elsewhere.

Community Engagement: A Brief Introduction

As mentioned above, community engagement is increasingly being understood as a core goal of higher education. To some extent, the new commitment to community engagement is a revival of earlier understandings of the role of the university (in the USA at least), but it is also the product of attempts to adapt to changes in the current socio-economic environment and in the positioning of higher education institutions within societies.

The change in mood that resulted in the increased prominence of community engagement had its beginnings around two decades ago. Ernest Boyer's 1990 Carnegie report, entitled *Scholarship Reconsidered*, is one of the documents which both reflected and shaped the early moves towards prioritising community engagement at higher education institutions in the USA in particular (Boyer 1990). Boyer argues that scholarship must be understood broadly, suggesting that research is often inappropriately emphasised and rewarded in higher education to the neglect of other scholarly pursuits. He identifies four aspects of scholarship: discovery, integration, application and teaching, and argues that all are essential and should be equally valued by universities (Boyer 1990:16, see also Boyer 1996). Later, what he first referred to as 'application' began to be understood as being more than just the application of the knowledge generated at universities. The word 'engagement' began to be preferred to the former term (see Barker 2004; Rice 2002; Sandman 2007). Unlike the notion of application, the idea of engagement suggests that university-community collaboration ought not to simply entail the application of 'expert' knowledge produced at universities, but rather that universities and community members

ought to collaborate in a way that allows for mutual and mutually beneficial influence.

One of the most important motivations for community engagement advocates is a concern that universities need to produce knowledge that is relevant to broader society. For example, Boyer speaks of how universities have unfortunately become 'a place where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation's most pressing needs' (Boyer 2003:145). His preference is to see this kind of university replaced by one that is a 'vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems' (Boyer 2003:143).

In addition to this desire for universities to produce more relevant knowledge, changes in higher education and research cultures can also be credited with playing a role in bringing about an increased emphasis on community engagement at universities (Dragne 2007; Checkoway 2001). Universities have grown rapidly in size and increasingly cater for larger numbers of 'non-traditional' students, making the student body more diverse in age, race, nationality and class background. In addition, trans-disciplinary and collaborative research has become more popular as evidenced by the influence of Gibbons's writings about so-called Mode 2 knowledge production which is supposedly 'problem-focused', collaborative and interdisciplinary (Gibbons et al. 1994; Gibbons 1998). While I will not describe these shifts in detail, it should be acknowledged that these changes play a role in popularizing community engagement. As universities cease to serve such an elite population and as collaboration with outside partners rises in popularity, universities are being pushed into thinking more carefully about their relationships with their surrounding communities and, more generally, about how to respond to and engage with their socio-political contexts.

Universities have also begun to build stronger relationships with their surrounding communities because of funding pressures in the wake of declining state subsidies for higher education in many parts of the world (for a discussion of the US experience, see Burawoy 2010). Universities have been encouraged to build relationships with various 'outside stakeholders' and this extraversion has influenced the increased popularity of community engagement, even though it is related to very different concerns than those which drove Boyer and others to push academics to look outside their institutions towards the surrounding communities.

Of course, 'community engagement' is interpreted in different ways by different institutions and in different parts of the world. The different drivers of its increased popularity have also resulted in quite different ways of conceptualising the notion. There have been various attempts at defining this

term (see for example Barker 2004), but most commentators accept that the term is a broad one that evades easy definition. It is often used interchangeably with similar terms such as 'civic engagement', 'social responsibility', and 'service', although each term has slightly different connotations. Generally, however, it is fair to say that the term 'community engagement' is usually associated with activities such as service-learning, sharing of knowledge and information, application of research findings, collaborative research and student and staff outreach. While early attempts have focused particularly on outreach and voluntarism, interest in service learning and collaborative research has become more prominent in the last decade or so (Barker 2004; Dragne 2007; Hollander and Meeropol 2006).

It is important to stress that the increased prominence of community engagement is not universal and differs greatly from context to context. It has been enthusiastically picked upon and promoted in some contexts, such as South Africa, but in other parts of the world (such as Europe), this idea remains fairly marginal. For example, in the US existing debates about public universities and a series of reports by the Kellogg Commission on the future of state and land-grant universities have helped drive the debate on community engagement (see APLU 2011). In South Africa, the concept has been promoted as part of broader attempts to transform South African universities in a post-apartheid context (see Kagisano 2001). The differences in the ways in which the topic is popularised in different settings will affect the way in which it is being conceptualised and promoted on the ground, making it difficult to generalise about exactly what kinds of programmes and ideas are associated with community engagement in different contexts.

African Studies as a Contested Field

The concerns about relevance which are an important impetus for the increasing attention being given to community engagement are familiar to those working in African Studies and related fields. The term 'African Studies' includes a wide variety of studies and is conducted in very different ways in different contexts. While African Studies is often housed in particular departments and centres in the West, in Africa, what might be called African Studies is often conducted within particular disciplines, rather than housed separately.² In this article, I take 'African Studies' to refer very broadly to the study of Africa, both within and across disciplines, though with a particular focus on the study of Africa within the social science and humanities disciplines.

African Studies has always been a disputed field and many of the disputes in the field relate in some way to concerns about relevance. Even the origins of African Studies are disputed, with some recognising certain early African-American writings as the first examples of African Studies, while others trace its roots only as far back as prominent white Africanists such as the American

anthropologist Melville Herskovits. Yet others seem to consider African Studies (and Area Studies as a whole) as a post-Second World War phenomenon (see Keller 1998; Uchendu 1977; Wallerstein 1995; Zeleza 1997; Zeleza 2006b). Another set of disputes relates to the way in which African Studies has been conducted and about who should conduct African Studies. An important aspect of the latter set of disputes is the concern about the relevance of African Studies to Africa and Africans. Here, there is some dispute about whether or not African Studies ought to be relevant in the first place, as well as dispute about what exactly 'relevance' entails.

This question of relevance was one of the key issues leading to the much discussed disruption of the 1969 Montreal meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA), a US-based association of Africanists. At this meeting, the Black Caucus – a group of African-American, African and other black scholars – insisted that the ASA as a whole be radically transformed in response to a number of perceived shortcomings. Not least among these was the sense among members of the Black Caucus that the ASA needed to 'direct its energies toward rendering itself more relevant and competent to deal with the challenging times and conditions of Black people' (Black Caucus 1968:19). The demands of the Black Caucus shook the Africanist establishment, leading to much introspection and further debate and division (see for example *Africa Today* vol. 16, no. 5/6). This question of the relevance of African Studies was by no means resolved after the 1969 Montreal meeting, however. As Zeleza points out, discussions about African Studies appearing nearly three decades later in an edition of *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, reiterate many of the concerns which provoked the 1969 conflict (Zeleza 1997:205). Once again, the question of the relevance of African Studies is raised. Writing in *Issue*, Martin and West, for example, warn: 'There is a spectre hanging over African Studies: the spectre of irrelevance both within and outside the academy' (1995:24). In African universities, there has been a related debate about the relevance of the knowledge produced by universities in general. This debate formed part of discussions of the 'Africanisation' of African universities in the immediate post-independence era, but the issue has resurfaced regularly (see for example Hagan 1993; Mkandawire 1997:20-21; Yesufu 1973).

The assertion that African Studies is in some way irrelevant to Africa is multifaceted. One facet is a sense that Western-based scholarship on Africa is more attuned to the dictates of the Western academy than to the needs and interests of Africans. Another aspect relates to allegations that African universities and intellectuals are alienated from African communities and so fail to achieve relevance – even though they typically place more value on relevance than do non-African universities and intellectuals (see Mamdani 1993;

Mkandawire 2005; Yesufu 1973). A third concern is that the concepts and theories used to study Africa are drawn from non-African experience and fail to be helpful in understanding Africa (see Uchendu 1977; Mbembe 2001). Related to this concern is the sense that African Studies has not taken seriously the perspectives and agency of African people and has not attempted to seek out and understand African explanations of the African experience (see Asante 1995; Mbembe 2001). Finally, African Studies is charged with producing misleading and damaging accounts of the African experience, thereby aggravating racist and imperialist attitudes towards Africa (see Black Caucus 1969; Challenor 1969; Mbembe 2001; Turner and Murapa 1969). What is evident is that the question of the relevance of African Studies is a question that has been persistently posed, but not yet resolved, and also that the accusation of irrelevance is directed at both Western and African scholars of Africa, although it is particularly white Western Africanists who have been accused of producing irrelevant knowledge.

For those concerned with addressing this long-standing question of the relevance of African Studies, recent calls for universities to become more 'engaged' with their surrounding communities, and with the communities they study, sounds promising. This new discourse of community engagement appears to be providing new impetus for universities – and hence all those who study Africa at universities – to go 'out there' and build connections outside of the university, and in this way become more sensitive to needs and more able to apply our knowledge meaningfully to social problems. Such an approach, and the funding and university support that go along with it, could open up possibilities for studying Africa in a way that is 'relevant' in the many senses suggested by the long-standing debates on the discipline. However, not all forms of community engagement are likely to be able to realise these possibilities. When thinking of how to achieve such relevance, attentiveness to some of the nuances in this debate could be helpful. In the sections to follow, I reflect on some of these debates in African Studies, drawing from them to make some comments about the possibilities of producing relevant knowledge through community engagement.

Reflections on Relevance

What does it mean to produce 'relevant' knowledge? It is clear in much of the writing about community engagement that there is a desire to move away from knowledge that is distant from and irrelevant to surrounding communities. Thus, Boyer speaks of how universities need to direct their attention towards 'larger, more humane ends', and the Kellogg Commission's discussion of community engagement calls on American public universities to 're-

turn to [their] roots' and 'build on [their] legacy of responsiveness and relevance' (Boyer 1996:20; Kellogg Commission 2001:1). In some sense at least, there is, then, a desire to produce and apply knowledge that is useful to communities outside the university. But what does it mean for knowledge to be 'useful' and to whom exactly should the knowledge being produced by an engaged university be useful?

An exploration of debates in African Studies is helpful here. An overview of some of the arguments being made all the way back in 1969 by the Black Caucus at the Montreal ASA meeting suggests that members of the Caucus felt that the knowledge being produced in mainstream African Studies was useful to some, but was not ultimately useful for the majority of African people. The Black Caucus did not complain that African Studies produced knowledge that was generally irrelevant, but rather decried mainstream African Studies for producing knowledge 'irrelevant to the interests and needs of black people' (Black Caucus 1969:18). ASA Africanists, the Black Caucus complained, treated Africa as an 'object for ... scrutiny and experimentation' rather than as 'the home of people' (Resnick 1969:14-15; see also Mhone 1972). The concern here is that Africa ought not to be studied in a way that allows scholars to demonstrate the relevance of their studies to existing theoretical debates, but does not bring any benefit to those being studied. In the words of Zeleza, Africa ought not to be treated as 'a tropical laboratory [that can be used] to test and refine the methodological and theoretical frameworks of the disciplines' (1997:195). Members of the Black Caucus, as well as contemporary writers such as Zeleza, argue that many Africanists produce knowledge that is useful in furthering their careers and in refining existing (and, it is suggested, Eurocentric) theories, but is not useful to those being studied.

Similar issues have been raised as part of debates about the role of universities in promoting the 'public good'. For example, Calhoun (1998:21) asks 'Whose public? Whose good?', and warns that 'Positing a community as the basis of the public good is apt to obscure contests over collective identity and disempower those whose projects are not in accord with those of dominant groups'. (Calhoun 1998:22; see also Singh 2001). It is very difficult for universities to act in such a way as to benefit 'the community' or 'the public' as an assumed whole.

In addition to arguing that knowledge on Africa was often not useful to Africans, critics of mainstream African Studies argued that much of mainstream African Studies is complicit in the oppression and marginalisation of African people. During the 1969 ASA dispute, the Black Caucus argued that much Africanist research was 'a subtle, but potent mechanism of social control and exploitation of African people and resources', and that it functioned as the 'hand-maiden of white Western, industrial and political international inter-

ests' (Black Caucus 1969:18; Turner and Murapa 1969:14). More recently, similar sentiments have been expressed by Mkandawire who argues that knowledge generated in African Studies has profound political effects, and that in the history of African Studies, many of those political effects have been negative for Africa. As he puts it:

Too often in our history the quest for knowledge of Africa has been motivated by forces or arguments that were not for the promotion of human understanding let alone the welfare of the Africans ... [knowledge about Africa served] to reinforce preconceived prejudices, or [to master] instruments of domination of our societies. Although much has changed over the years, considerable research driven by these motives still exists, feeding African suspicions of even those whose quest for knowledge about Africa is driven by genuine interest in understanding the African continent as an important site for the performance of the human drama (1997:27).

Making a similar point, but focusing particularly on writings on the African state, Dunn argues that dominant discourses on the African state not only 'limit the view of African politics and international relations, but ... also produce troubling and dangerous policy prescriptions' (2001:62). As Mkandawire, Dunn and others show, knowledge produced on a topic (in this case Africa) is not politically neutral knowledge that can be used to good effect by anyone with access to it, but rather it may serve very particular (and possibly oppressive) ends.

The thoughts expressed by these writers are not unique to African Studies. The argument that knowledge is not neutral, but rather always comes from a particular political standpoint and has particular political effects, has been made in various ways by a number of theorists over the last few decades. Think for example of Said's (2003 [1978]) *Orientalism* in which he demonstrates that the apparent neutrality of the knowledge produced by Western Orientalists is spurious and shows how writing on the Orient is 'produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power' (2003 [1978]12). Likewise, in Robert Cox's much-cited 'Social Forces, States and World Orders', he argues that all theory is produced 'for someone and for some purpose. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space' (1996 [1981]:87). Both Said and Cox accept that some forms of knowledge manage to be less partial than others, but the point they both make is that no scholar can be completely neutral and objective. As Haraway and other feminist writers have pointed out, no scholar can do the 'god-trick' and present a neutral view from nowhere (1991:191). This kind of argument is also presented by Foucault in his discussion of discourse, where he declares that: 'We should admit ... power produces knowledge ... power and knowledge directly imply one another...' (1977:27).

Because this point about the politics of knowledge has been made in so many different ways by so many prominent social theorists, it may seem trite to make it here. However, I reiterate it because its implications have not been considered at length in much of the literature on community engagement. If knowledge is never politically neutral, then those seeking to promote community engagement ought not to ask 'How can we produce knowledge that is relevant and useful?', but rather 'Who is the knowledge we currently produce useful for?', and 'How can we produce knowledge that is useful for others?' If knowledge is always amenable to being used by some at the expense of others, then a commitment to providing knowledge that is useful to 'the community' is a little vague. Which community, where? And, even if we are to identify exactly which community it is we are keen to benefit, we still need to recognise that no community is a united, homogenous entity and that the needs of some in the specified community may run counter to the needs of others. It is thus important that community engagement advocates be pushed a little to think about the politics of knowledge.

Furthermore, if all knowledge has political effects, then all knowledge produced at universities does in actual fact influence communities outside the university. In some, though certainly not all, community engagement literature, one gets the sense that a contrast is being drawn between irrelevant, 'ivory tower' or 'blue-sky' knowledge which is isolated from and does not affect the surrounding society, and on the other hand, relevant, responsive knowledge which is produced in collaboration with and serves the interests of the community. However, if we accept the arguments presented above regarding the politics of knowledge, we then admit that all knowledge has political effects and that what is at stake is producing knowledge that will have different political effects.

But if we accept this, then it becomes harder to make a distinction between 'engaged' and 'non-engaged' knowledge. Instead, we are pushed to see all knowledge – even the most abstract, seemingly esoteric – as having effects on surrounding communities. When introducing community engagement into a particular university programme, attention thus needs to be given to the curricula because what is being taught already has implications 'out there' in the real world. Yapa provides an illustration of the point being made here in relation to the study of the Third World. He argues that what American universities teach students about the Third World contributes to the development of the 'patronizing, ethnocentric attitudes [American] students have towards the people of Africa and Asia', and 'conceals and marginalizes the innumerable ways in which we can creatively address problems of basic needs' (2002:44). The point that Yapa makes here and elsewhere is that academic discourse on poverty is 'deeply implicated as a causative agent' in the production of the prob-

lem (poverty) it apparently seeks to solve (2002:33; see also Yapa 1996). But then, as Yapa (2006) argues, introducing elements of community engagement into university programmes without critically reflecting on the ways in which current theories and discourses affect communities, may be counter-productive.

It can, then, be argued that the introduction of any community engagement initiative needs to be accompanied by critical reflection on curriculum content. However, some – although, I should stress, not all – literature on community engagement treats the concept as something that can effectively be 'added on' to existing university knowledge production and teaching. Barker (2004), for example, talks about how advocates of community engagement do not seek to eliminate other forms of scholarship. He says: 'The idea is not that other forms of scholarship are radically flawed, but that they are incomplete' (2004:127). However, if we think back to the critiques of mainstream African Studies or of the point about poverty made by Yapa, it becomes evident that just 'adding on' some kind of community engagement element onto university programmes may not be sufficient to make these programmes significantly better at addressing the social problems at stake.

The Politics of Knowledge: Contrasting Community Engagement with Critical Pedagogy

Current literature on community engagement is diverse and advocates of community engagement appear to include people with very different political ideologies and agendas. While there is often some reference to the way in which community engagement involves a 'commitment to the social good', and entails universities being 'agents of democracy' (Talloires Declaration 2005; Boyte and Hollander in Dragne 2007:9), community engagement literature rarely includes an explicit commitment to a very particular political project nor, as emphasised above, is there generally much sense of awareness of the politics of knowledge. When reading through community engagement literature, one picks up on several different – and even contradictory – political projects. Many consider community engagement to be a pro-poor initiative building on previous university outreach attempts. In literature taking up this perspective, there is talk of the need for the work of the academy to be 'directed towards larger, more humane ends', and insistence that universities must not 'remain islands of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty in seas of squalor, violence, and despair' (Boyer 2003:147-148).

However, other quite different approaches to community engagement have emerged. For example, in her overview of community engagement literature, Dragne lists 'the development of regional economy by collaborating with business, industry and the social partners' as one of the key goals that emerge in

recent writings on community engagement (2007:10). In this kind of literature, community engagement is about universities collaborating with various outside actors (which could include businesses and large industries) in pursuit of shared goals. In a similar vein, a document produced by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) presents community engagement as entailing the production of knowledge 'through a network of policy-advisers, companies, consultants, think-tanks and brokers' and talks about universities needing to be accountable to 'voters, taxpayers and industry' (ACU 2001:i, iii). This suggests that community engagement is about universities collaborating with powerful 'stakeholders' in the wider society so as to produce the kind of knowledge that suits their needs. As mentioned earlier, to some extent the increased prominence of community engagement is associated with a general turn away from the state as universities try to establish stronger relationships with other 'stakeholders' as a response to the waning of state subsidies for higher education. Thus, many attempts to encourage greater general collaboration between universities and 'the community' are motivated by self interest on the part of universities rather than a commitment to the promotion of the 'social good' or some other noble sounding end.

As the earlier discussion of the politics of knowledge suggests, knowledge being produced by universities does not function as a toolkit which could, for example, be used one day by a mining company in pursuit of improving its profits and the next by a mineworkers' trade union defending employee rights. Thus, it is not enough for advocates of community engagement to talk about how important it is to produce knowledge that is useful and relevant to 'the community'. Rather, if we want to argue that the knowledge being produced by universities ought to be 'useful' and 'relevant', we need to decide for whom we seek to provide it. Knowledge that benefits one group within the community (say, for example, a big mining company) may well work to the detriment of another (say, for example, mineworkers). To put it in another way, when community engagement is considered to involve the production of knowledge that will empower the poor as well as strengthen the collaboration with big business and industry, then those who suspect that the interests of the poor and of big business and industry are unlikely to be served by the same knowledge may grow concerned.

At this juncture, it is useful to contrast talk about community engagement in higher education institutions with an earlier conversation about education – so-called critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy, commonly associated with the writings of Paolo Freire (1976; 1989; 1996 [1970]; 1998), Henry Giroux (1988; 1997; 2006) and Peter McClaren (1994; 2003; 2005) among others, is an approach to education which views the world as a place 'rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege', and which views educational

institutions as 'sites of both domination and liberation' (McClaren 2003:69-70). Critical pedagogists believe that it is not possible to teach in a 'neutral' and objective way, and advocate open partisanship rather than the pretence of objectivity. Those who adopt this approach thus explicitly aim to teach in a way that will empower those disempowered and marginalized in the societies in which they work. As Brookfield stresses:

Critical pedagogy ... springs from a deep conviction that society is organized unfairly and that dominant ideology provides a justification for the uncontested reproduction of a capitalist system that should be seen for what it is – as exploitative, racist, classist, sexist and spiritually diminishing. Organizing to teach people to realize and oppose this state of affairs is what critical pedagogy is all about. As such, it has an explicitly transformative dimension. It is concerned to teach people how they can recognize and resist dominant ideology and how they can organize to create social forms that are genuinely democratic and that reject capitalist domination (2003:141).

Thus, critical pedagogists choose to take up an explicit political position, one that is anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-sexist and that aims to fight for the improvement of the lives of those marginalized by current economic and political systems. In producing 'relevant' knowledge, they thus aim to produce knowledge that is of use to those who are currently oppressed and marginalized. In order for knowledge to be relevant, it is suggested, we must decide whom it is to be used for, and to do this, we need to make an explicit political commitment.

A similar point has been made in debates about African Studies. Those opposing the irrelevance of much of African Studies to Africa and Africans argue that mainstream African Studies is irrelevant because it lacks political commitment. In the words of Wallerstein:

The second charge [made by the Black Caucus] ... was that the work of white scholars has not been relevant to the problems of black men [sic], either in Africa or in the United States, and that it has not been relevant basically because it has not been committed to the cause of black liberation from white domination (1969:12).

Similarly, Mhone (1972:13) argues that Western Africanists are often unable to produce relevant knowledge because their 'emotions and destinies' are far removed from Africa. He insists that it is not enough to simply be 'intellectually motivated' (1972:11). Critics of mainstream African Studies stress that in order for the study of Africa to be relevant to Africa, scholars need to have more than just an intellectual commitment to Africa.

Most literature on community engagement lacks the bold political commitment evident in critical pedagogy and in the arguments of those criticising mainstream African Studies. Rather, much community engagement literature

makes cautious statements about how university education should strengthen democracy or increase 'social capital', but does not explicitly embrace – or reject – the radical politics of critical pedagogy. An important reason for this political vagueness is, no doubt, that advocates of community engagement (many of whom are drawn from the ranks of university management rather than from academia) seek to present community engagement as a broad and inclusive project and thus resist any explicit commitment to a particular political standpoint. However, if, as argued above, the production of knowledge is an inherent and unavoidable political process, then this reluctance to explicitly embrace a particular political stance simply obscures and avoids questions about the way in which community engagement initiatives are likely to shift – or, on the other hand, shore up – current distributions of power and privilege.

Of course, if advocates of community engagement did tie their concerns about engaging with the community to a clear political project, this would limit the likelihood of community engagement being embraced by entire university communities and thus make it less popular from the point of view of university managers. Furthermore, understanding community engagement in this politicised way would limit the funding possibilities open to those embarking on community engagement initiatives. The content of current programmes of this nature is largely a reflection of the interests of university management and of funders, many of whom are not at all concerned with shifting current distributions of power and privilege.

Conclusion

When viewed from the perspective of African Studies, the idea of community engagement holds some promise. For those whose commitment to researching and teaching Africa forms part of a broader commitment to opposing the exploitation and oppression of African people, any attempt to bring researchers out of universities and into contact with communities excluded from higher education institutions seems commendable. However, as suggested above, the move towards getting universities to 'engage' with communities can have varying effects.

Early community engagement literature (such as that of Boyer) seemed to have at least some bias towards producing knowledge that would empower the poor, although this commitment was certainly not framed within the radical political agenda of critical pedagogy. However, this literature did suggest that the idea of community engagement had its roots in concerns around poverty, inequality and similar issues. If community engagement is indeed to be part of a political project aiming at the realization of social justice and the ending of oppression, then the following key points need to be reflected upon.

Firstly, advocates of community engagement need to acknowledge that knowledge is neither 'relevant' or 'irrelevant', rather it is always relevant to some and less relevant (or useful) to others. Thus, engagement with 'the community' and the production of knowledge useful to it in general is not possible; rather, we need to decide which community or exactly who within a particular community we wish to benefit. Secondly, community engagement initiatives cannot just be tagged onto existing research or study programmes. If we take into account the arguments about the politics of knowledge referred to above, then any attempt at making knowledge relevant to a particular societal group requires that critical attention be given to the knowledge itself, to reveal the political perspectives informing the particular body of knowledge. To illustrate this point, not all forms of African Studies will benefit Africans, even if they are, as is indeed typically the case in African Studies, accompanied by initiatives involving 'engagement' with African communities through fieldwork, participatory research, outreach and the likes. Finally, and relatedly, advocates of community engagement need to be willing to take up an explicit political position. Of course, this means limiting the appeal of any given community engagement initiative, as the adoption of one political position rather than another, will inevitably alienate some while attracting others. As indicated above, this also means limiting funding opportunities for community engagement initiatives as the adoption of the kind of political position suggested earlier is likely to alienate many potential funders. But, as argued above, to avoid taking up an explicit political position is simply to obscure the politics of community engagement.

My overview of community engagement literature has, as is evident above, made me fairly sceptical of this new trend in Higher Education in terms of its ability to produce knowledge that will empower the poor and marginalized, and, in particular, the poor and marginalized in Africa. However, I should point out that while there is certainly cause for scepticism, there is much that is promising in the idea of community engagement and in the work and writings of some of those involved in it. Firstly, the whole discussion about community engagement is valuable in that it opens up debate about how universities and the knowledge produced by universities affect surrounding communities. Each university which adopts some kind of community engagement policy will have to consider how the university should fit into and relate to the surrounding community and such discussion may very well prove beneficial. Secondly, there are some who work within community engagement initiatives who do recognise the politics of knowledge and who are willing to tie their engagement with communities to a clear political project. Take, for example, Mark Falbo, the director for community service at John Carroll University in the USA, who was one of the around 40 people asked to contribute an essay as

part of the twentieth anniversary of Campus Compact, an organisation committed to promoting community outreach and engagement. In his essay, he recognizes many of the points made above, asking:

What does engagement for global citizenship look like in the context of educational institutions who serve the world's privileged, a people whose economic and social lives reflect the experience of a small minority of the world's population? That American higher education is engaged in the world is a fact. The challenge is to reflect as a guild of scholars or as an industry (you pick your preferred metaphor) on how we are to be engaged in the world and on whose behalf (Falbo 2006).

Further in his essay, Falbo 'admit[s] to a preferential bias in favour of those who are voiceless or marginalized in the dominant cultural and economic system' (Falbo 2006), in this way making explicit his political position. While Falbo is not alone, community engagement literature on the whole lacks the awareness he has of the ways in which all knowledge has effects on communities and of the need for us to favour some communities above others.

For those of us working in African Studies who regard our work as part of a political project committed to social justice and are keen to produce knowledge which, as desired by the Black Caucus in their 1969 petition, is 'relevant and competent to deal with the challenging times and conditions of black people in Africa, in the United States, and in the whole black world', the notion of community engagement offers both great potential and serious limitations. Our aim should be to push the community engagement discourses of the universities where we work in a direction that recognises the politics of knowledge and that encourages critical reflection on curriculum content as part of the process of changing how we engage with the various communities who are affected by the knowledge we produce.

Those of us who teach about Africa at African universities may find the community engagement discourses here more suited to emancipatory purposes than those outside of Africa. The idea that universities should produce 'relevant' knowledge is perhaps less controversial in Africa than in other continents, and enthusiasm for community engagement in Africa (and particularly in South Africa) appears to be higher than elsewhere.³ Thus, we should be able to use existing debates on the relevance of African Studies (as well as on the relevance of university education in Africa) in order to think carefully about how best to respond to the rapid development of community engagement policies and programmes on our campuses.

Notes

1. I would like to thank my colleagues and friends, particularly Pedro Tabensky, Peter Vale, Richard Pithouse and Thad Metz, for their helpful comments on an earlier version.
2. For a discussion of the reasons for these differences and for an overview of the discipline of African Studies in different contexts, see Zeleza (2006a).
3. One indication of this is that Africa has about the same number of members of the Talloires Network as does Western Europe, despite having a far smaller number of universities. Another is that the Association of African Universities has a particular project focusing exclusively on this issue (see AAU 2011). In South Africa, almost all major public universities have detailed community engagement policies and community engagement is actively promoted by the Council on Higher Education (see for example CHE 2006).

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