ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 43, 12 JANUARY 2011

IN THIS FIRST ISSUE OF 2011:

1   HERESIES AND MUMBO-JUMBO

During my last days in Oxford at the end of 2010 I came upon two books (or did they find me?) which provided me with much joy (and sleepless nights) during the December recess. Though they are in two different genres, both of the books address urban legends, popular beliefs and blatant lies in the world of popular culture, politics and philosophy.
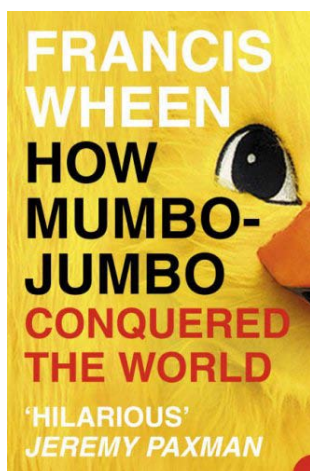
The more "popular" and in a certain sense "enjoyable" book is "How mumbo-jumbo conquered the world" by Francis Wheen (2004). The sub-title of the book is "A short history of modern delusions". Wheen (2004), a British journalist, writer and broadcaster confronts several modern-day delusions in the world of popular culture and international politics in a work that surprised me (and caught me unaware) with its well-informed references to philosophy, religion, world histories and the unreal world of world politics. Wheen (2004:7) states: "The sleep of reason brings forth monsters, and the past two decades have produced monsters galore. Some are manifestly sinister, others seem merely comical-harmless fun, as Nancy Reagan said of her husband's reliance on astrology". All of this mumbo-jumbo and this "proliferation of obscurantist bunkum is an "assault on reason are a menace to civilisation" (2004:7).

He deconstructs some popular delusions in the political world of Margaret Thatcher and the "war on terror". In his chapter titled "Old snake-oil, new bottles" Wheen (2004:40) takes to task an array of popular self-help books such as "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus" and general business literature such as Tom Peter's "In search of excellence" which sold five million copies; "Awaken the giant within" by Anthony Robbins and various books on leadership such as "The leadership secrets of Attila the Hun". He spares very few of the authors whose books are filling our bookshelves at home, or worse still, maybe in some of our curricula…

UNISA | university of south africa

Wheen (2004:53) writes "If the gurus offered nothing but cracker-mottoes, their appeal might have been limited to a few simpletons; but the *faux* naivety was cunningly seasoned with an equally *faux* sophistication". These authors, according to Wheen (2004:53), make liberal use of neologistic jargon (or fashion phrases) such as "re-engineering", "downsizing", "benchmarking", "to give their twee clichés an appearance of scientific method and intellectual rigour". Wheen (2004) does not spare anyone – neither Stephen Covey nor Deepak Chopra. Of the latter Wheen (2004:45) writes that "the marriage of mysticism and money-making reached its consummation in Deepak Chopra". In big (and confident) sweeping strides he exposes the fault-lines in the work of Samuel Huntington's "The clash of civilisations and the remaking of world order" (1996) and Fukuyama's book "The end of history" (1992). Wheen (2004:76) accuses Huntington and Fukuyama of being "grotesquely reductionist in their refusal to acknowledge the complex pluralities that constitute those vague abstractions 'history' and 'civilisation'".

Wheen (2004:81) also takes issue with postmodernist philosophies such as "deconstructivism" which "began as a heresy, soon turned into a dogma, and hardened into a theology, sustained by a network of evangelists and high priests and inquisitors". Wheen (2004:82) accuses "critical theory" as rejoicing in "a multiplicity of meanings" and acquiring "a status of doctrine, excluding all viewpoints but its own". In his book Wheen (2004) includes reflections on the popularity of "end-of-the-world-theories", the use of the notion of "with God on our side" in present-day politics, and future beliefs that will be believed and if penned down, will make their authors rich.

The other book, by the philosopher John Gray, "Heresies. Against progress and other illusions" (2004) also questions some of the present-day belief systems and expose them as heresies and illusions. I must confess that while I found Wheen's (2004) book entertaining, Gray's (2004) exposition of some of the present day illusions was deeply disturbing. Gray (2004:3) stakes his claim that the "belief in progress is the Prozac of the thinking classes". He further states that "History is not an ascending spiral of human advance, or even an inch-by-inch crawl to a better world. It is an unending cycle in which changing knowledge interacts with unchanging human needs. Freedom is recurrently won and lost in an alternation that includes long periods of anarchy and tyranny, *and there is no reason to suppose that this cycle will ever end"* (Gray 2004:3; emphasis added). I suspect it is Gray's bottomless skepticism in the illusion of progress that deeply disturbed my own belief in the possibility that education and scientific progress may, eventually, result in a more just and compassionate world.
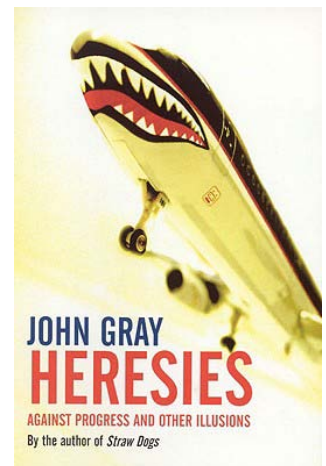
While knowledge does indeed increase the potential for progress, "the human animal stays much the same" (Gray 2004:4). Science, according to Gray (2004:4) is not the savior of humankind. He states that "Science enlarges human power. It cannot make human life more reasonable, peaceful or civilized, still less enable humanity to remake the world" (Gray 2004:4). Not only is progress (according to Gray) an illusion, but we are in for some tough times. "If the twentieth century was a time of political faith and state terrorism, the twenty-first looks like being one shaped by religious fundamentalism and privatised terror" (Gray 2004:11). Terrorist violence "cannot be tolerated. Even so, it cannot be eliminated" (Gray 2004:11). At the end of his introduction to his book, Gray (2004:14) bemoans the fact that "the aim [of knowledge] is no longer wisdom, but control of the natural world".

While the advances in technologies will herald new discoveries and developments, Gray (2004:19) expresses his fear that "our new powers [will be used] to remake nature and ourselves… in the service of hubristic fantasies". There is furthermore "no power in the world that can ensure that technology is used *only* for benign purposes" (Gray 2004:20; emphasis added). The advances in technology often "affect our lives in ways we cannot control – and often cannot understand" (Gray 2004:21).

The advances of biotechnologies also do not escape the scrutiny of Gray (2004:27). He states: "In future, as in the past, the development of science and technology will be governed by war and profit". The answer does not lie in regulation and the notion of universally accepted democratic values. Gray (2004:28-29) asks "How can we expect to regulate biotechnology when it has proved impossible to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction?" Gray's seemingly bottomless suspicion against the faith in universal progress and values has its basis in his statement that he finds no reason "to think that science will ever be used to achieve a sustainable balance with the environment… The combination of rising human numbers, dwindling natural resources and spreading weapons of mass destruction is more likely to unleash wars of unprecedented savagery" (Gray 2004:30). In future, like in the past, the main motivators for any action or inaction will be "war, profit and the vanity of leaders" (Gray 2004:31).

Gray's (2004:79) exploration of the history (and future) of *homo rapiens* as a "ferociously destructive creature" left me with a deep unease regarding the role of higher education and our views on the curriculum development. Gray(2004:70) states that knowledge "can be as much a curse as a blessing. If the superseded science of the first half of the twentieth history could be used to wage two hideously destructive world wars, how will the vastly superior science of today be used?" In the rest of the book Gray (2004) reconsiders and explores amongst other things the "war on terror", the "new wars of scarcity", the justification of torture in the service of "civilisation", and the rise of right-wing politics.

UNISA | university of south africa

These two books, though very different in scope and intended audience, moot some serious questions that we at Unisa may need to consider:

1. Will our graduates have the critical abilities to interrogate some of the urban legends and popular beliefs that they encounter and will encounter in future? Will they be skeptical enough to question statements by leaders (whether religious or political) or have our curricula (and the way we assess) not prepared them enough to question and to critique? Do our curricula and the way we assess encourage our students to interrogate, to look for alternative opinions and evidence or are we just too glad that they can repeat like brightly colored parrots what we have taught them?

2. While many of us are quick (and competent) to protest and go on strike regarding matters of representation and remuneration, how quick are we to protest against and deconstruct claims by some religious, political and academic leaders? Where are the public intellectuals at Unisa? *Do we ourselves have the critical tools that we wish our students would have?* How able (and willing) are our lecturers to interrogate modern-day illusions and claims? Have we become impotent parrots repeating (and prescribing) what others are saying?

3. Are our curricula in the service of the illusion that having more knowledge is a passport to a better society? Do we not underestimate Gray's (2004) claim that humanity is more aptly described as *homo rapiens*?

Wheen (2004) and Gray (2004) illustrate humanity's seemingly profound capacity to believe mumbo-jumbo and uncritically accept illusions. While it is already a sad state of affairs that humanity believe so easily, it is even sadder that the academy (and specifically Unisa) may actually uncritically teach mumbo-jumbo and ill-prepare our students for a world in which claims and counter-claims will increase, where religious fundamentalism and wars of scarcity may well be the shape of things to come, and where *homo rapiens* will reign undisputed.

For an overview of reviews of Wheen's (2004) work visit http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/sokala/wheenf.htm (accessed 12 January 2010). The Guardian in September 2004 ran the following review on Gray (2004) http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/sep/04/highereducation.news (accessed 12 January 2011).

2   BY THE END OF 2011…

Many of us would by the time you read this communiqué, have forgotten about those lists of "New Year's resolutions" we drafted or thought about in the first days of 2011. Those lists may have included resolutions such as the resolution to smoke less (or as a sign of deviance to actually smoke more) or to lose weight (or to be proud of being voluptuous). You may even have decided to print less, recycle, join a gym, read more, or watch less television.

UNISA | university of south africa

I am mercifully in no position to make resolutions for 2011 *on behalf* of its staff or the institution – to keep focused on my own lists of resolutions (those that I can still remember) is a big enough task… Would it not be great if by the end of 2011 we have moved closer to the following picture of Unisa by the end of 2015?

1. Unisa provides **open** (open and supportive of applied innovation, critical thinking, new horizon-exploration, evidence-based careers, curricula, and research and community engagement), caring and stimulating, centrally and distributed, **distance learning** environments in which employees and students flourish and achieve their career and study goals.
2. Unisa offers focused and well-structured qualifications which, on completion, result in **open futures** for sought-after and independent graduates making a difference in their communities, places of work and in the world at large.
3. Unisa's admission requirements are appropriately **open** (allowing freedom of choice embedded in institutional responsibility to optimise students' chances of success) and provide students with a range of supported pathways to reach their potential.
4. Unisa embraces, optimises and supports the affordances of a range of technologies for effective registration, administration and well-designed and technology-enabled teaching and learning.
5. Students have access to a range of online, printed and face-to-face (F2F) opportunities to assess *their own* potential and readiness and need for resources for studying through ODL and in specific disciplines.
6. All students, undergraduate and postgraduate, have access (from pre-registration to post graduation) to a menu of support services such as
   a. Counselling, academic literacy, career advice, study skills, etc (whether f2f, online, telematic)
   b. F2F tutorials
   c. A personal E-tutor (academic, affective and administrative support)
   d. A personal E-mentor (affective support)for coaching and life and study skills
   e. Orientation for their studies and examination preparation sessions through F2F, video-conferencing/satellite broadcasting
   f. The previous year's examination papers and memoranda – free of charge
   g. Receiving from and sending SMSs to Unisa
   h. 24/7 technology and system-related support
7. Online registration is easy and supported through well-designed registration processes, generic admission requirements and clear qualification structures.
8. Unisa qualifications make ample and appropriate use of a range of well-designed, effectively integrated, coordinated and supported experiential learning opportunities.

UNISA | university of south africa

9. After graduation Unisa's alumni become part of a pool of qualified and experienced professionals from which F2F, E-tutors, E-mentors, and full-time employees are drafted.
10. All assignments can be easily submitted online via *my*Unisa using a range of affordable devices.
11. Students choose from a range of delivery options from full-online learning with no materials provided to all materials and correspondence provided in print. These options are differently supported and priced.
12. All postgraduate examinations are non-venue based with an increasing number of undergraduate examinations being non-venue based.
13. Lecturers deliver up-to-date and just-in-time academic support using a range of audio and video, synchronous and asynchronous options, which are available online (or sent to students) and in the case of recordings, downloadable on iPods and mobile devices; or on CD-Roms and DVDs.
14. Students have access to *all* prescribed materials and recommended materials in E-book or electronic format.
15. Unisa has an efficient and world-class student profiling and tracking system which follow all student activity and interaction with the institution and provide actionable intelligence to lecturers, F2F tutors, E-tutors and E-mentors, administrative and support staff.
16. Unisa employees and students are supported by effective, integrated and coordinated systems, procedures, policies and structures.
17. Our campuses are Wi-Fi enabled and students and staff have sustainable and affordable access to the Internet wherever they are.
18. Unisa as employment and study environments are characterised by care, compassion, commitment, quality and the well-being of all.
19. Our regional centres are valued for the unique opportunities to be centres of support and care for the communities around them.
20. Our graduates
    a. are independent, resilient, responsible and caring citizens who are able to fulfil and serve in multiple roles in their immediate and future local, national and global communities
    b. have a critical understanding of their location on the African continent with its histories, challenges and potential in relation to globally diverse contexts
    c. are able to critically analyse and evaluate the credibility and usefulness of information and data from multiple sources in a globalised world with its ever increasing information and data flows and competing worldviews
    d. know how to apply their discipline-specific knowledges competently, ethically and creatively to solve real-life problems
    e. are critically aware of their own learning and developmental needs and future potential

UNISA | university of south africa

3   IMPORTANT FORTHCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

Friday 14 January: The small working group finalising the guidelines on the use of social media at Unisa will meet in TVW10-24 (Kopanong Chambers) from 08:30-10:00.

Wednesday 26 January: You all are invited to a very informative and critical discussion in the Senate Hall from 10:00-12:00 on the possibilities and challenges for "peer assessment" at Unisa. A panel consisting of academics, the *my*Unisa team and the Assignment section will critically explore "peer assessment".

Thursday 3 February: ODL 2011 launch, Senate Hall, 10:00-13:00. Looking back at the achievements of the ODL project since 2007 but even more critically, sharing and discussing the next steps.

Monday 7 March: Join us in the Senate Hall from 10:00-11:30 for a critical and informative interrogation of the possibilities, challenges and challenges for using portfolios as alternative assessment strategy. A panel consisting of academics, the *my*Unisa team and the Assignment section will critically explore portfolios and E-portfolios.

4   ODL REPOSITORY AND BLOG

All the ODL task team reports, the overview of the recommendations of the STLSC and other ODL documents are available on the Unisa Library's Institutional Repository at http://uir.unisa.ac.za/dspace/handle/10500/3072 (accessed 11 January 2011). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo
ODL Coordinator, Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa
11 January 2011

+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office)
 +27 (0) 823954113 (mobile)
prinsp@unisa.ac.za

UNISA | university of south africa