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Our sixth annual colloquium #MustFall: Understanding the Moment, is organised and sponsored by Rhodes University (Thinking Africa), the University of Free State, and the University of Pretoria, with additional support from the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS) as well as scholars and students from the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch.

André Drainville (Laval) “Gatherings of academic crowds take place in deeply autonomous situations, with the whole of the world as their context. Looking into them, we are offered opportunities to think beyond conformist ideas (of what are right and proper ways of being and struggling), about what might be at stake in struggles over the contemporary reinvention of the university and beyond, in the making of the new world order.”

Steven Friedman: “The demand for free higher education would be won at the expense of, rather than in support of, the poor and marginal. The the credibility which this demand enjoys on the left is not a product of disingenuousness: left activists are not consciously clothing sectional demands in universalist language. Rather, that this way of seeing the world has deep roots in the intellectual culture of the South African left and that one reason for this may that, in a society characterised by racial domination, the interests of the weaker and more marginal among the dominated are likely to be eclipsed by the better organised and more articulate.”

Phiwo Qoza: “Although there is a consensus that anyone can weigh in on an issue, it has been observed that a ‘digital elite’ permeates underneath the surface, ‘publicly unacknowledged’, but entrusted with many decisions such as administration of the groups’ site, of donations and events. How the movement ‘administrators’ conduct themselves online- in terms of who they follow, like & retweet- sifts those on ‘the ins and those on the outs’.”

Karin van Marle: “I support that #MustFall be read in terms of a right to the university as a call for not only the right to free education; fair language policy; a transformed and decolonised curriculum but as an insistence on spatial justice, a demand for justice and an alternative notion of humanity.”

Credit: Greg Nicolson/Daily Maverick
Old habits and new times: the South African university in crisis - Angelo Fick

The South African university is in crisis: that much has now been admitted by both stakeholders and observers from across the political spectrum. The crisis, of course, is not new, and neither are the responses to it, whether in the analysis of the continuing and unfolding problems, or in the interventions by government actors as well as university managers against the activities of students and workers on campuses. The various movements involved in the current insurgency, which is being enacted against the backdrop of South Africa marking forty years since the 1976 student uprising against the repressive gesture by the apartheid government to impose Afrikaans as the medium of instruction across all Black schools in the country – which would have been only another step in a process of intellectual disenfranchisement which had begun under colonial rule, but had reached its symbolic apogee in the Bantu Education Act 1953 – were neither interchangeable, nor did or do they have the same goals and demands.

While much of the attention in the media after October 2015 tended to focus on the activities and campuses of historically white South African universities – on the campuses of organisations like the University of Cape Town (UCT), Rhodes University (RU), and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), which had styled themselves liberal white English South African spaces, and on the campuses of formerly Afrikaans organisations like Stellenbosch University (SU) and the University of Pretoria (UP) – the protests which were shifting into open revolt against both government officials and university managers in the last quarter of 2015 had been ongoing phenomena on historically Black campuses like the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and Fort Hare University (Fort Hare), as well as the comprehensive and other universities formed through the post-apartheid reorganisation of higher education in the late 1990s and early 2000s, campuses like those of the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and Walter Sisulu University (WSU). The question of free post-secondary education was not a new one, having been included in the Freedom Charter (1955), a document which encapsulated the demands of Black nationalist liberation movements against the apartheid government and its repressions, as well as the aspirations and vision of a post-apartheid order.

However, it was only in 2015 that the demand for free higher education, which had up until then been rendered as a fees crisis on specific, mostly historically Black campuses, became part of a larger question about the nature of post-apartheid tertiary education. Even though much debate and work on ‘transformation’ had been going on across the sector – the Ministry of Education led by Sibusiso Bengu released the Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation in December 1996, and the White Paper on Higher Education Transformation in August 1997; these measures shaped much of what happened in the subsequent education ministries led by Bengu’s successor, Kader Asmal, and after him, Naledi Pandor – 2015 saw the first time under the second period of Blade Nzimande as Minister of Higher Education that the protests moved beyond individual campuses and became the...
What had begun across specific campuses as concern by sectors of the student and staff populations with the ‘un-transformed’ components of campus life – whether in the monuments, names, or curricula, or by the conditions under which people laboured and studied on campuses – had by the end of 2015 become a call for the wholesale transformation of higher education in movements like #DecoloniseWits, #RhodesMustFall, and beyond these, #FeesMustFall. The call to transform higher education beyond undoing the specific project of apartheid ‘Bantu education’ was not new. The ‘Mamdani Affair’ (1998) at the University of Cape Town centred precisely on the ways in which the insularity and isolation of education in apartheid South Africa had shaped the ways in which the intellectual project *tout court* had been distorted even in post-apartheid South Africa, especially in its relations with the intellectual work of the rest of Africa. Old colonial patterns and the white supremacist racism they were founded on, Mamdani and Amina Mama (1998) pointed out, continued to shape the post-apartheid scholarship of both Black and white South Africans, across the academy, and would require active steps to dismantle if the South African university had any true desire to transform from the mediocrity of its past into a projected excellence in its future. Later Saul Dubow (2006) would trace the ways in which whiteness – both the possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz, 1998), as well as the articulation of white supremacy in and as scholarship (Roediger, 2003) – had been central to the educational history and research record of South African higher education, from the 1820s to the millennium. That the ‘unfinished business’ (Bell & Ntsebeza, 2003) of colonial and apartheid South Africa would not only haunt the post-millennial post-apartheid republic was hardly surprising. That it would return, 22 years after the abolition of legislated white supremacy with quite the violence – literal and symbolic – was perhaps entirely predictable. However, many, in government, but also in the academic spaces in which the protests were erupting, seemed at sea in how to respond.

The resort by university managers to the judicial system – taking out interdicts against what they misperceived to be political or student organisations in the old, twentieth century sense, the infamous ‘hashtags’, demonstrated how out of touch those who were in administrative charge of higher education campuses were with the groundswell of social change they were having to engage – quickly foundered. Old structures were unsuited to addressing the new forms politics took in higher education protest. The government’s 2015 response of imposing a moratorium on university fee increases across the board for 2016 hardly addressed the problem, merely engaged in ‘extend and pretend’ manoeuvres, and its 2016 recommendation to cap fee increases at 8% alongside promises of more money for and an elaboration of student loan schemes for 2017 did little to address the central demands of what had now become #FeesMustFall: free, ‘decolonised’ higher education in South Africa.

Quo vadis? As the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education Funding (2016) has yet to give its findings, and its composition and extended deadline become the focus of critical scrutiny, and the abdication of responsibility from the Minister of Higher Education for the 2017 fees increase onto university managers, once more the causes of the protests remain unaddressed, and the symptoms are focused on: student violence, property damage and destruction, and the interruption of the core
activities of universities in South Africa. The crisis itself remains unaddressed, and will only deepen in 2017, as it has between the events of 2015 and the last quarter of 2016 we find ourselves in. 2016 looks eerily like 1986, and we seem to have learned little from 1976 40 years on.

A moment with Aryan Kaganof

Whilst Artist In Residence at the Film & TV Department of Wits University in August 2014 I noticed that there was a lot of what used to be called "agitation" going on around the campus, led primarily by students aligned to the EFF. The disjuncture between what was happening "on the ground" and the way film was taught in the department was acute. There was something surreal about the way students were lectured about Dziga Vertov in the subterranean basement where the Film department is located, without ever being encouraged to train their camera eyes on the reality around them. This was clearly what the program to decolonize education was all about; making arcane, obscure Eurocentric curricula relevant to the times and the condition of the black student body. I spent the 5 weeks I was at Wits following the activities of the students who were mobilising for decolonisation, a call that, in March 2015, would be taken up by the Rhodes Must Fall movement at UCT. Exactly a year later, in August 2015, I took advantage of my position as Artist In Residence at STIAS (Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study) to film the Open Stellenbosch movement that was challenging the remnants of white power operating at Stellenbosch University. OS gave me full access to their meetings and organisational activity for the five weeks I was there, resulting in a film they were bitterly unhappy with and that STIAS refused to screen. Extreme polarisation and a breakdown in the possibility of communicating between students and University management appears to be the current state of affairs. I have made these films in the hope that they will contribute to a better, deeper, understanding of the issues fermenting in this incendiary generation. These are not traditional documentaries but constitute episodes in what Zimasa Mpenyama describes as "a living archive".

See Kaganof’s work here:
https://vimeo.com/126498994 Mcebo Dlamini vs. Adam Habib
https://vimeo.com/135187062 decolon i sing Wits
https://vimeo.com/146886694 Bra’ Geoff Mphakati on Afrikaans
https://vimeo.com/176843376 Stephané Conradie Opening Stellenbosch
https://vimeo.com/176701145 Majaletje Mathume Opening Stellenbosch
https://vimeo.com/178217681 Opening Stellenbosch: From Assimilation To Occupation
https://vimeo.com/156418554 Babylon is Falling
https://vimeo.com/170916416 Song For Hector

www.ru.ac.za/politics/thinkingafrica
Social Movements have always been extremely powerful. While the so called ‘old’ or ‘historical’ social movements were by and large driven by a single concern (eg. class or race) which emerged from the fault lines of society in one mode of historicity (class in the case of industrial societies, race in market societies), New Social Movements (NSMs) such as #MustFall are constituted as a wide range of issues and their momentum becomes a function of the number of issues it can accommodate more or less coherently – fees, racism, institutional culture, decolonization, access, gender and so on. There is significant strength in the hybridity that characterizes NSMs because issues gain salience in association with others, so that when one issue is more or less adequately addressed (for now), the network of associated concerns simply shifts and reconfigures in order to keep the momentum alive. For instance, it is almost unimaginable that the rape culture protests at Rhodes in 2015 could have taken off the way it did were it not embedded in a network of already existing race and fees related protests. At many points over the past two years race, class and gender took turns to drive the #MustFall movement in what promised on several occasions to manifest a perfect storm. As such, NSMs wield enormous power, and rightly so. We are less and less inclined to believe that party politics is the solution to political problems – never mind the ability of governments to do so, particularly when we have a ruling party that continues to support a president who has been accused of fraud, rape, constitutional violation, playing tombola with executive power and spending millions on redecorating his house: in itself a perfect storm of incompetencies. Yes, thank God for the power of NSMs at a time when people are still getting raped and they still use buckets for toilets and have inadequate access to health care and basic education. Viva indeed.

In South Africa’s case #MustFall derives its arché (originary, founding and perpetuating) legitimation in what Ramose calls ‘an original injustice’, an injustice so profound that it cannot be addressed by the system because the system itself is function of the ‘original injustice’ it would seek to redress. This original injustice is of course the continued reality of colonialism: white men stole our stuff: race, class, gender – coalescing into an all-encompassing legitimation for collective revolt. In a constitutional context one of the consequences of such a comprehensive legitimation of collective revolt is that it produces an ‘impossible politics’. If, in Ramose’s reading, our entire constitutional order is premised on an originary injustice so profound and all-embracing that every attempt to address it (through the law) can only compound the injustice (by prioritizing western over African law), then you have a Big problem, an impossibly Big problem that will constantly invoke, without ever legitimizing as possible, certain responses to it. Taken on their own as isolated injustices, one can address the question of racism at institutions, or its entrenchment in institutional cultures; one can productively engage the call for decolonizing the curriculum, for reducing fees, increasing access and so on. All one would need to do is pour a good dose of ‘vanish’ on the whole lot, toss them into the revolutionary washing machine one by one and spin them until their whiteness becomes visible. But here’s the problem with an ‘original injustice’: there is no response or washing machine big enough to contain it in its totality because the original injustice is the ‘outside’ that haunts the entire inside (including the washing machine).
In order to address the outside one would need something equally fundamental, a contesting arché that will allow us to leverage the system in its entirety. We know this is not possible. But some of those who are calling for ‘free education for all’ don’t. In its worst and possibly misunderstood form, this calls means that parents of the so-called missing middle will end up, through their taxes, paying for the education of the rich who will be sitting in Mauritius sniggering into their selfies at the cleverness of a revolution that thought it could solve the Gini coefficient overnight by holding higher education ransom. In more refined versions free education is funded, in part, by leveling a ‘wealth tax’ precisely so that the rich contribute to the cost of education. My contention is that a ‘wealth tax’ cannot escape the need for a justification and possibly the best justification we have (other than just taxing people more because they have more to tax) is to conceive of a ‘socio-economic tax’, not of the wealthy but of the corporates that never paid restitution for the money they made from apartheid, an idea articulated at the time of the TRC but never executed. However this ‘tax’ is conceived, the question of holding higher education ransom until the funding mechanism required for a more progressive realization of all socio-economic rights is in place, remains. And with ransom, comes the question of legitimizing the requisite violence.

In this complex network of systemic injustices and the various forms of resistance to them, universities have effectively become focal points or nodes in a network of systemic revolts because, as institutions that ostensibly aspire to be something more than just metonymic representations or microcosms of existing systemic injustices, they have been particularly vulnerable to the accusation that this aspiration is radically at odds with the lived reality of many university students; that in fact, universities have come to represent the very institutionalization of the local and global historical, macro-economic and patriarchal causes of continued oppression. And so, universities have become the drains where the whirlpools of a whole range of entirely justifiable responses to the original injustice in each of its manifestations, get sucked in. Instead of institutes of higher learning they’ve become the national toilet for an abject disgust with ourselves. Is is because universities are those kind of places or because they’ve become them? Universities have become the place, the easily identifiable, locatable place on the map – both in geography and in the imagination - where a cosmopolitan postcolonial student body of students from all races, classes and genders, rural and urban, local and global, congregate by virtue of the (troubled) hospitality of an institution that enables them to do just that. Here, as nowhere else in the country, do students have the agency to resist the original injustice in its various, always partial and never complete, institutionalized manifestations. That is what allows #MustFall as NSM to have such a powerful grip on the university and the country.

Having considered what the injustice is and why the university in particular has come to bear the brunt of this stand-off between an irrecouperable original injustice and an often sentimental longing for total redress, we need to briefly address the question of legitimation. Is the violence students are bringing to bear on the institution, in particular the forceful shutdown of these institutions, legitimate? Considered an all-encompassing response to an all-encompassing injustice aimed at the ultimate goal of free education, of course. Considered in the context of democratic institutions in a constitutional democracy, no; not by any stretch of the imagination. Why not? The answer emerged clearly during the heated debate on Dennis Davis’ “Judge for Yourself” show on eNCA, 25 September. First observation: we have become such a desperately violent society that nobody any longer has the grace to start a debate by acknowledging: “kudos for you for taking up this struggle. If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t have been on TV tonight and the very idea of free education for all down the road would not have been ‘in the bag’ already”. Neither did the opposition have the grace to say “thank you for recognizing our demand. Yes, free education for all down the road is great so let’s talk about the shortest way there”.

www.ru.ac.za/politics/thinkingafrica
Where there is no grace, there can be no politics and where there is no politics, there is only war. Which brings me to what some are blithely referring to as the ‘new fascism’ – not necessarily a description I share, but let’s see where it goes. When student activists freely acknowledge on national TV that ‘yes, we don’t have the numbers to back up a call for a national shut down of all universities; we know we are a minority and we know that free education for all prioritises one public good over others but we will insist on shutting universities down because we have the leverage, when we have such a perfect storm of paradoxes we are, some would and indeed are arguing, already in the grips of a new fascism; freely, one that is almost impossible to name as such because of the infinite number of irrefutable legitimations (racial, gender, class) that make up the vague notion of an ‘original injustice that any interrogation is deferred to; one that is fearlessly willing to re-enact Mallet du Pan’s observation that every revolution devours its own children (or more colloquially, that an own goal is the surest way to revolutionary success).

So what are universities meant to do? My contention is that impossible politics is making it impossible for us to conduct politics. When did it become unimaginable for university authorities to say some such thing as: “After much turmoil, significant gains have been made and we are now left with two options: 1) free education for the poor while the academic programme continues; or 2) free education for all and the willingness to shut down all universities until we get it. Let’s vote on this.” This is in effect what Dennis Davis asked the student activist in the debate: do you have the votes to support a nation-wide academic shut down? The reply? “No, but given more time to conscientise our fellow students, we will. In the meanwhile we have the leverage and we will not hesitate to use it.”

Really? Really? The legitimacy of our present violence derives from our future (imagined, possible) majority? This must be the sentimental heart of it all; sentimental because, much like the romantic hero who is in love with being in love, who recognizes the logic of love but not the reality of love, our activist recognizes the logic of democracy (majority matters) but not the reality of democracy (you need the majority before and not after you enforce your will). At some point, in order for politics to become possible again – and I emphasise the ‘again’ here as a reminder of grace, of the need to pause and take stock and recognize the gains we have made - we have to insist on returning to basics. For something as profound as a nation-wide shut down of universities to happen, we need a clear sense that this is indeed what the majority of role players want; that consensus must precede the enforcement of consensual politics and not follow at some indeterminate point in the future when the question will have become moot as to whether or not people were persuaded or intimidated into consensus.

References:


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