

The Third Force in South African Higher Education Activism

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South Africa has a long history of ‘third forces’: the communists, the Central Intelligence Agency, the neo-liberal global conspiracy and, most recently, even the US Ambassador (who laughed when presented with this theory, although he has to admit that the two concrete bunker embassies in Pretoria and Cape Town at least look sinister). But the really serious third force, or ‘hidden hand’, which killed thousands of people in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal around the constitutional negotiations, was orchestrated from within the country (O'Malley 2014).

Is 1976 repeating itself?

On 17 June 1976, the day after June 16 in Soweto, the students burnt down the University of the North (Limpopo) library – which was not a great collection, but the only one the University had. What is quite shocking is that some people (even cabinet Ministers) now say that we are there again! Are we?

Fast forward to the University of the Free State’s (UFS) ‘non-rugby’ brawl in the week of 20 February 2106. Black protestors disrupt a rugby match, in which both teams are quite racially mixed (transformed). A group of white spectators attack the protestors, who then run amok – not fighting back against the spectators, but damaging university buildings. During 1976, the Turfloop library and the Afrikaans schools in Soweto were targeted as symbols of oppression. But, given that at the ‘transformed’ UFS, the buildings being damaged are those of the students themselves, is this mindless destruction of property, self-flagellation, or the so-called next round of transformation?

African exceptionalism

During June 1991, the Union of Democratic Staff Associations (UDUSA) held the first university transformation conference at the then University of Durban-Westville. The most anticipated speaker was Mahmood Mamdani, the author of *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Mamdani 1996). If we had taken this book more seriously we would not have been so surprised by the conflict that is tearing the ANC apart – the citizens (the modernisers) and the subjects (the traditionalists). We were totally taken aback when Mamdani told us that that what worried him about South Africa was that while the progressives thought that the country was different from the rest of Africa (South African exceptionalism), what he mostly observed were the similarities. Many late night debates later we agreed to disagree and that history would be the judge. Almost 25 years later, during late 2015 (at Oxford of all places), Julius Malema, with his poor

school record but astute political nose, stated that ‘South Africa will become just like other failed African states’ if President Jacob Zuma is not checked.¹

In the current South African debate on university fees, much reference is made to Norway, Germany and other countries which offer free higher education, but hardly a word is spoken about free higher education, and its disastrous consequences for Africa (see Langa et al. 2016). What do other African countries tell us about student activism? Two possible sources to look at lessons from Africa include the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) during the early 1990s, and a project on student engagement and citizenship competencies which includes universities from all continents, the Centre for Higher Education Trust and the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley (Luescher-Mamashela et al. 2011).

The University of Zimbabwe

Prof Walter Kamba returned from England in 1981 to become the first Vice-Chancellor of UZ. In England he had been Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Dundee. He was also a member of the Zimbabwe team at the Lancaster House negotiations for independence and the leader of the constitution writing team. Prof Kamba’s transformation of UZ is documented.² Apart from changing the name from the University of Rhodesia, he tripled the student numbers and the fields of study; brought back numbers of Zimbabwean academics and other foreign academics; changed the governance structures; and, of course, introduced a no-fees policy.

However, a decade later, the campus was wracked with boycotts and strikes. The demands related to over-crowded classrooms, hostels, poor food and libraries, but there was no mention of fees, nor the deep disappointment with the failed development project of Zanu-PF. The students were supported by some academics, particularly from departments such as development studies and sociology.

Not surprisingly, the police and even military troops came onto campus to restore order. But President Robert Mugabe and Prof Kamba both knew these protests were about much more than campus conditions. At the 1992 graduation ceremony – which turned out to be one of the dramatic and courageous events of African higher education – Prof Kamba resigned, with the Chancellor, his childhood friend President Mugabe, sitting next to him. Prof Kamba declared that he could not manage the University in the way a university should be managed due to the threats to, and interference with, academic freedom, by both the students and government.

Following this, Prof Kamba became the first African President of the International Association of University Principals (Paris); development aid agencies started withdrawing funding for the university; and, by 2008, CHET and its funders did not include UZ as a

¹ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/sa-will-become-a-failed-state-if-zuma-is-left-alone-malema-20151126>

² <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2010/06/21/2010-06-21-book-details-uz-transformation-under-kamba/>

flagship university in the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa project.³ In 2014, Grace Mugabe was handed a doctorate in sociology by the Chancellor of UZ – her husband, Robert Mugabe. She received this only two months after registration, but there is no dissertation in the Department or in the University archives. But she was not the first; other members of the Mugabe regime have also been given masters and doctoral degrees, without dissertations.⁴ In the words of Jonathan Jansen: ‘When does a university cease to exist?’⁵

Research on student activism in Africa

In reviewing some of the rather sparse literature on student activism in Africa, Taabo Mugume and Thierry Luescher (2016) write that following the student turmoil of the late 1960s, it was found that partisan political clubs of students and campus-based student branches of national parties provided systemic linkages between student politics, the higher education system, and the national political system. They argue that campus branches of national political parties compete for student support in an effort to influence university government and to have effects on national politics. Overall, the relationship was dynamic and beneficial to both student leaders and party leaders.

The relationship between political parties and student leaders in an established democracy is beneficial; it ensures a flow of politically astute, young minds into the party system. Student politics then acts as a training ground for 'big politics'. However, where democracy is fragile and underdeveloped, and where partisan competition is a zero-sum game, political parties are the first to turn student politics into a battleground for positions, visibility and resources, and the university turns into a hothouse of political activism (Luescher-Mamashela et al. 2011).

In 2013, Mugume and Luescher-Mamashela undertook a more detailed study of Makerere University in Uganda. In this, they found that different kinds of resource exchanges are key to understanding the various relationships, which include the financial and political strength of a political party and student leaders' ambitions of a future political career. They concluded that the main negative effect of this relationship is that student leaders are inducted into a patron-client relationship with the political party, thus constantly rewarding the student leaders as they submit to party control. The relationship distracts student leaders in the process of representing students' interests, rather than enhancing their ability to represent such interests.

Other negative impacts include high levels of competition between parties, especially around election time. This allows for national politics to invade student politics, and for student leaders to become so 'captured' that they represent not student but party issues. The 'capture' is typically the result of resource exchange; that is, student leaders owing the party for their election, receiving bursaries and so on from their party, and hoping for a

³ <http://chet.org.za/programmes/herana-i>

⁴ <http://www.newsdezimbabwe.co.uk/2015/04/anger-at-uz-as-zanu-pf-apologist-gets.html>

⁵ [http://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/340/Jansen%20\(2005\)d.pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/340/Jansen%20(2005)d.pdf?sequence=1)

job/political career from the party after graduation. The party in return recruits future leaders, new members and volunteers for party work. In some cases this can also lead to interference and contestation with institutional management.

South Africa: Interpenetration of student politics and parties

A Ministerial Task Team into the breakdown of academic and social activities at North West University Mahikeng Campus (Cloete 2008) heard frequent reports about competing party political activities on the campus. The burning and destruction of property at the Campus⁶ around 20 February 2016 had very little to do with race or colonialism; rather, it was a political fight around who would be on the student representative council (SRC).

The SRC President at the UFS, Lindokuhle Ntuli, issued a statement on 24 February 2016 with the first demand that the Vice-Chancellor be removed. Some of the other demands seem quite sensible. However, on the same day on national television (and in front of a more public political audience), the SRC President's main reason for wanting to dismiss Jansen was that he had 'banned' political parties. According to reports from UFS, the SRC President relied mostly on the South African Students Congress (SASCO) for his election. Jansen is the only Vice-Chancellor who, in light of experiences in the rest of Africa, has on the Bloemfontein Campus of the UFS prohibited political party affiliation. The SRC is non-partisan; candidates must be non-partisan although they do at times wear their party insignia.

Other universities where party political interests coincided with SRC contestations and the destruction of property were the University of the Western Cape, the Tshwane University of Technology and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It was at these institutions where administrative buildings were first targeted by protesters. But at the Mahikeng Campus of North West University, protests resulted in a modern science block being burnt down.

Universities as contested high-resource institutions

A study by Adam Habib (2001) on the crisis at the University of Transkei drew the conclusion that the primary structural factor informing the crisis was the location of the institution that serviced financially-poor and academically-disadvantaged students. Furthermore, he concluded that this left the institutions in a quagmire of vicious cycles of student strikes, political instability, falling enrolments, high failure rates, declining subsidies and, ultimately, financial bankruptcy.

But universities are also contested resources in a different way. The 2014 World Bank study on private returns to higher education in 140 countries showed that the highest private returns in the world were in South Africa (40), followed by Rwanda and Ghana (around 30), and significantly lower, the much-quoted free higher education systems (Norway 14, Germany 14 and Finland 13) (Montenegro and Patrinos 2014). This data suggest that there is a relationship between inequality and returns to higher education; in other words, the

⁶ <http://ewn.co.za/2016/02/24/Protesting-NWU-students-set-building-alight>

higher the inequality, the higher the private returns. With such incredibly high private returns to tertiary qualifications, and in the absence of a diverse post-secondary school system, South African universities are very narrow and contested ladders between poverty and the middle class.

So who are the contestants? The first group is the middle and upper middle class from model C and private schools, who express feelings of alienation and the guilt of the privileged. This enhances their social conscience about inequality, the plight of the poor and, perhaps above all, their great disappointment with the prospects of a failed development project and the fading 'rainbow' aspirations of the new South Africa. But this group also knows that getting a university degree will, in Thomas Piketty's terms, protect their 'iron cage of privileges' (Piketty 2014). This group has not tried to burn down buildings; they have targeted paintings and monuments as symbols of colonialism. However, the burning of pictures of Molly Blackburn and Di Bishop in this group at the University of Cape Town shows a disappointing combination of progressive intention and ignorance. And, it needs to be noted, this is a largely racially-mixed group and their political affiliation probably lean towards the African National Congress (ANC) and Democratic Alliance.

The second group is a mixture of the 'missing middle' and the poor. They have gone beyond disappointment; they are angry. They know that the development project has failed them. They also know they are not part of the 'rainbow' group and, above all else, that the university, not the state, is their last chance of finding their way into the middle class. This group also has debts that they have little hope of paying back, and they probably suspect that they will be disproportionately represented in the 50% of undergraduates who never graduate. For the first group the future looks uncertain; for this group it is bleak. They probably do not think that in the new South Africa the buildings are theirs. And, in 1976 style, they have attacked university property – mainly administrative structures, where the management and their academic and debt records are housed. Notably, this group is mostly African, not 'black', and class-wise much more homogenous than the first group. This group would lean more towards the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party and also include students who are simply disillusioned and angry.

Into this cauldron of different levels of disappointment and anger emerges the 'third force'. This group, either financially-supported or hopeful for cushy positions after university, drives a political agenda that ostensibly appears to be (as is the case in other African countries) a contestation between different political parties. However, in the context of the fragmentation of the ruling party, there is also more than one ANC faction on the campuses; not to mention that while ANC Minister Blade Nzimande condemns violence and destruction, it is not clear that the branch members on the campuses adhere to these warnings. These competing parties and factions recruit and incite different groupings from amongst the disappointed and the angry. Furthermore, the upcoming, first seriously contested local election could be an incendiary factor. Ironically, those university engagement activists, who always wanted the boundary between the university and the community to be blurred, may now have their dream fulfilled!

The most disturbing illustration of the degree to which party politics has penetrated South African university campuses was the so-called accord reached on Sunday 28 February 2016 at the University of Pretoria. The meeting was attended by the ANC and its youth league, the South African Communist Party and its youth league, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the South African National Civic Association, SASCO, AfriForum and AfriForum Youth, and the trade union Solidarity. The EFF was excluded and, in turn, threatened retaliation. The *Times Live* reported this event under the cynical headline: 'Parties agree to bring peace to University of Pretoria'.⁷ This is ironic since the parties had a hidden hand in disturbing the peace. In exasperation, Vice-Chancellor Cheryl De la Rey said that 'each time we think we have dealt with a demand and we move to the programme of academics, then something new surfaces.'⁸

On a knife's edge

The Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes, Sizwe Mabizela, stated that South African universities are on a knife's edge.⁹ But it could be argued that it is the country as a whole which is on a knife's edge, and that the universities – with their strategic location in the contestation for resources (both material and social capital) – are merely a symptom. Rather disingenuously, both students and the government are blaming the universities by accusing them of colonialism, racism and lack of transformation, but remaining silent about how, in some cases very legitimate demands have become entangled and embroiled in party contestations and the struggle for access to resources, and the maintenance of privilege.

However, if the disintegration of the political system and the systematic weakening of institutions is not countered, the universities could, like in many African countries, become institutions where the children of the global elite go overseas, the national elite attends a few public universities (largely undergraduate institutions for the training of civil servants) with no fees, while the rest scramble for fee-paying private colleges who call themselves universities. Mamdani may have seen something we did not!

Perhaps, for once, the Vice-Chancellors of Universities South Africa should go beyond asking for more funding from government, and unite in their demand that political party activity on campuses be strictly regulated. In addition, the universities, following the model of the global network of research universities, undertake citizenship education in a systematic and intentional co-curricular development of attitudes, skills and competencies that supports the approach of universities as training grounds for democracy, and not as political hothouses (Mattes and Luescher-Mamashela 2012). This is one of a number of possible ways in which the thus far silent academics could contribute within their area of expertise, rather than be self-blaming, or self-righteous or continue to think that they may be living in Africa but they are exceptional.

⁷ <http://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2016/02/28/Parties-agree-to-bring-peace-to-University-of-Pretoria>

⁸ <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2016/02/26/protests-with-rolling-demands-are-a-problem--tuks-vice-chancellor>

⁹ <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/sa-varsities-on-a-knifes-edge-1986272>

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