

From Marikana to #feesmustfall: The Praxis of Popular Politics in South Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the forms of popular politics that rose out of massive student protests in South Africa at the end of 2015. By delving deeper into the way higher education has been structured in post-apartheid South Africa, the author explains the ways in which race and class privilege have been reified in South African universities. The spatial location of the university within South Africa and the place of the university within the African continent is not reflected in institutional culture of higher education but is deeply embedded in the student protests. By exploring the collective decision making structures of students the author explores students growing lack of faith in higher education institutions to effect any transformational change.

Keywords

South Africa, higher education, student protest, feesmustfall

Finally, there is in South Africa, a recent memory of a different kind of university life; above all, a different place for critical thought in the communities that were at the forefront of the battle against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s. In those decades, oppressed people around the country saw that the official version of events could be questioned, that ideologies and institutions could be analysed from their own perspectives, and that ideas and arguments could be a weapon in the collective struggle for liberation. At schools and universities, those concepts were developed and embodied in courses, seminars, publications, worker education projects, and the like. There was an alternative model of the university, however marginal and embattled it may have been. It is no longer a visible presence, and many would wish to forget it. But events could still awaken its memory and bring its energies back into play.

—Andrew Nash, 2006

It seems to me that each national context creates its own way of expressing its frustration. In the United States and parts of Europe, it has been called occupy or los indignados. In the case of Puerto Rico, it did not have a specific name but we did the same thing.

—Giovanni Roberto, 2011 (as cited in Fox, 2012)

The massive student protests that swept South Africa at the end of 2015, culminating in the ‘fees must fall’ movement resulted in a huge victory for university students, when President Jacob Zuma was forced

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to withdraw plans for a 11.5 per cent tuition fee hike for 2016, after students shut down universities all over the country. What began as a protest over proposed increases, soon led to a nation-wide call for free education, with thousands of students, workers, and parents on the streets in scenes reminiscent of the mass-based people's power movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Nash's words, written 10 years ago appear almost prophetic, as South Africa's born-frees—the first generation born after the end of apartheid—began to call for the decolonisation of the university at the beginning of 2015.

Only 22 years after apartheid, South Africa faces large amounts of unemployment and poverty, and remains a highly unequal society where one's class position is still, save a small black elite, determined by the colour of one's skin. In South Africa, it is still the case, that 'to be black is to be poor, and to be poor is to be black' for a majority of the population.

Within this bleak economic picture, the political crisis 20 years after democracy has been steadily deepening, with a growing number of people becoming critical of the African National Congress (ANC), together with the addition of a number of new political parties and an ever-increasing amount of NGOs and civil society organisations. This paper argues that although this political crisis has, for some time now, given rise to new forms of popular politics, the new waves of students' movements in South Africa must be seen as a part of the trajectory of popular forms of politics, particularly after the Marikana Massacre in 2012, that are rooted in political and historical memory—or older and alternative forms of politics.

Let me begin with a brief outline of events that led up to the #feesmustfall movement in South Africa at the end of 2015, and as part thereof, the #nationalshutdown which saw the successful shutdown of most higher education institutions in the country.

The stirrings of disgruntlement, with the slow pace of transformation, at formerly white institutions began with a document entitled 'WITS Transformation Memo 2014', which was released by a group of post-graduate students at the University of the Witwatersrand's (WITS) politics department at the end of 2014. The 'memo' called for, amongst other things, a decolonisation of the curriculum, an increase in the number of black academic staff, and a shift towards embracing the political, philosophical, and historical intellectual traditions of Africa and the African diaspora in order to build a truly post-colonial African university (WITS Transformation Memo, 2014). Yet, it was not until a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) threw a bucket of faeces at the Cecil John Rhodes Statue on campus that the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign began to gain serious momentum. Over the next few weeks, the RMF collective held a series of protests on campus that included performance art, graffiti, posters and demonstrations. In the month between 9 March and the removal of the statue on 9 April, they occupied a building on campus renaming it 'Azania House'. Azania was the black-consciousness inspired name that people used during apartheid as an alternative name for a liberated South Africa. Azania House, imbued with this historical symbolism, functioned as the headquarters for all radical activity on the UCT campus. RMF linked their campaign to the struggle for black liberation in a colonial space, not merely for the students but also for the black academic staff, the black workers, and support staff on campus (RMF Mission Statement, 2015). They used Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko to define the theoretical foundations of their movement, at the heart of which was the decolonialisation of the former white institution. Within a few days, new student movements began to mushroom all over the country. On 17 March, the Black Student Movement was born at the Rhodes University in Grahamstown after (mainly) black students had gathered in solidarity with RMF at the University of Cape Town. They too were troubled by the institutional culture at Rhodes, the composition of academic staff, and the curriculum, which did not reflect the locality of the university or its place within the African continent. TransformWITS began at WITS University soon after and was promptly followed by Open Stellenbosch, where the black minority on the former white Afrikaans speaking university felt extremely marginalised, excluded and

intimidated in a space that has functioned almost unchanged and unchallenged since the end of apartheid. The students who joined Open Stellenbosch were frustrated by still having to attend lectures in Afrikaans, a language they neither spoke nor understood thoroughly. In the coming weeks, they would face serious intimidation from white students on campus.

One of the students' other major concerns was a call to end the outsourcing of service staff at historically white universities, and to offer them better wages. At WITS, this took the form of a Worker Solidarity Committee. From 27 May 2015, together with workers they staged a three-day sit-in on the 11th floor of the Senate, occupying the offices of upper management after 22 outsourced workers were unfairly dismissed. On 6 October, the worker and student alliance would lead a massive action on the WITS campus to end outsourcing labour practices. While 2015 continued to be a tumultuous year at these institutions, it wasn't until October, when the Department of Higher Education (DHET) announced the massive proposed tuition fee (increased up to 11.5 per cent for 2016), that many other institutions joined in the protests.

What began as a sit-in and protest against proposed fee hikes at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg soon led to a complete halt of activities on campus, when students called their Vice-Chancellor to sit on the floor on two pillows at the centre of a mass meeting of students to discuss the proposed fee increases. Seven major universities shut down on 21 October, with almost all HEIs joining the #nationalshutdown soon after. The price hikes which would be unaffordable for most students around the country—even middle-class students at more resourced universities—called into question the liberatory, and now long forgotten promises made by the ANC that education would be free, or at the very least affordable after apartheid.

Thousands of students, workers, parents and supporters marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria during the #nationalshutdown and in Cape Town students and workers marched to parliament, entering the gates and demanding that the Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande address them. In scenes reminiscent of the 1980s' mass democratic movement, people filled the streets of South Africa once again, forcing President Jacob Zuma to concede a 0 per cent increase in tuition fees for 2016, and Vice-Chancellors to end the outsourcing of workers at UCT and WITS. In what became a historic victory for the born-frees of South Africa it shook the foundations of these institutions, which are still erupting in protests at present.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa: Continuities after Apartheid

In order to understand how the fees must fall movement began in the former white institutions and quickly spread, it is important to consider the ways in which race and class privilege have been reified in the post-apartheid era. In an insightful article in *Asinamali: University Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Andrew Nash (2006) outlined the framework for the re-structuring of higher education in South Africa, announced in February 2002. The policy, which made provisions for the reduction in the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 21, mainly through mergers of former white universities and technikons with former black universities and technikons (Nash, 2006, p. 1). He argues that this must be seen even in the context of providing more focus and stability to the higher education sector in South Africa, as a part of a broader shift to neo-liberal economic policies by the ANC government where, 'although the rhetoric of non-racialism and democracy was used to explain and justify the restructuring of higher education, this class project had a more consistent role in deciding the form of the new higher education system'. In addition to the new HEI's being inflected by racial and language divisions, this

restructuring was taking place at the same time as the US university system was establishing its dominance. Nash (2006, p. 5) argued that even in apartheid South Africa, universities came to 'internalise the norms of this mode but could never live up to them'. As a result, the university became far more closely attuned to the needs of capitalism, and its

distinctive features include a highly differentiated hierarchy of institution, academic specialisations defined in such a way as to establish precise norms of achievement and research 'output', concentration of massive resources behind the highest achieving individuals and institutions, and ethos of individual self-advancement and undisguised careerism, and a strong orientation to the marketplace. (Nash, 2006, p. 5)

The continuation of this model into post-apartheid South Africa is evidenced by the ways in which historically black institutions have had to compete for resources on the basis of 'performance indicators' which are set up by a global market, which, coupled with a strong 'managerial ideology' led to the creation of a class of managerial elites completely removed from their academic colleagues and no longer accountable to them (Nash, 2006, p. 7). In addition, the stress on research outputs and the pressure to publish in international journals, has also meant that academics are more likely to write about what interests or is fashionable in the American academy than reflecting on the needs of communities around them, or on art, music or politics from within those communities (Nash, 2006, p. 9).

What has happened since then, has been the proliferation of the kind of knowledge that is fashionable within a particular model of the academy that sees itself as part of a global knowledge market and network. Nash (2006, p. 8) foretelling the consequences of this approach to higher education wrote:

What is certain is that those students from a working class background who do gain access to higher education will find themselves in an environment where the needs and values of their communities are alien. Their communities will become objects of knowledge but there will be no place for the idea of a university that empowers working class people or provides them with the skills and resources that enables them to challenge their subjugation themselves.

Currently, South Africa has 23 HIEs, which includes traditional universities and universities of technology (DHET, 2013, p. 2). Of the four historically white institutions where RMF sparked intense debate and mass participation by 2011, UCT had just reached the 51 per cent mark of the total number of black contact students registered at the institution, where black included Indian, coloured and black African students. At Rhodes University black students numbered 59 per cent, at WITS 74 per cent of students were black, and Stellenbosch ranked the lowest with 32 per cent (DHET, 2013, p. 4). What is perhaps more striking is the composition of permanent black research and instruction staff at these institutions. At WITS, where the number of black students enrolled was the highest, the percentage of permanent black academic staff was just 32 per cent in 2011, at UCT it was 28 per cent, at Rhodes 20 per cent and at Stellenbosch a mere 18 per cent (DHET, 2013, p. 14). At the University of Pretoria, where students joined the #feesmustfall campaign later in the year, only 46 per cent of students were black, and black people accounted for only 20 per cent of their academic staff. These statistics reinforce claims about transformation of the curriculum and staff composition as the students keep saying, 'who teaches matters and what they teach matters more'. The skewed statistics of these former white institutions revealed a bigger gulf when compared to historically black institutions where black student enrolment remained above 80 per cent and so did the composition of academic staff (DHET, 2013). It is even more disturbing when one encounters statistics of degrees awarded at the post-graduate level, with the University of Pretoria having produced 206 PhD graduates in 2011 and WITS, coming in second, with 169 PhD

graduates (DHET, 2013, p. 10). While the University of Pretoria and Stellenbosch University (two historically white Afrikaaner universities) produced the highest numbers of masters' graduates (DHET, 2013, p. 10). It is, therefore, not difficult to see the ways in which the production and dissemination of knowledge becomes refracted through race and class disparities in South Africa's higher education system and how this produces certain kinds of intellectual trends at the level of discourse.

What produced this moment of disconnect at historically white universities, after years of silence and complacency is that the demographics of students at these universities started to change dramatically over the last 5–10 years, especially at the post-graduate level. The growing numbers of black students at universities like UCT, Stellenbosch, WITS and Rhodes meant that while the institutional culture and practices of the university remained decidedly white, the culture and practices of those students within the university came into direct conflict with the ways in which these elite institutions functioned. What became increasingly clear is that these protests, in addition to the demand for free education, also called into question the very foundations and practices of the liberal institution.

What happened at South African universities culminating in the #feesmustfall movement, can be seen as a proliferation of the kinds of political praxis that is often used, and seen as, outside the institutional space. Mainly black students, who felt marginalised and excluded from institutional culture and practices of the liberal university, adopted political practices that are closer to urban social movements and independent strike committees than traditional trade unions and political parties.

This was clear from the ways in which students organised themselves. From the time the statue of Cecil John Rhodes was removed at UCT, mass-collective action and spontaneity were the immediate forms that the struggle took. Thereafter, there was at UCT, Rhodes, Stellenbosch and WITS a rejection of representational structures like the Student Representative Councils, political parties or student organisations like the ANC-aligned South African Students Congress (SASCO), which even lost traction at WITS where it has had the largest numbers of support. Rather than opt for allies within civil society, an elite space usually dominated by donor-funded NGOs and the mainstream media, or for those in opposition parties, students began by making connections with groups outside the elite space of university and civil society.

At UCT and WITS, alliances were made with the workers on campus. At Rhodes University, the Black Student's Movement (BSM) reached out to workers and the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) in Grahamstown. Students began to realise that their freedom cannot come without the freedom and support of those around them, especially outsourced workers at these institutions who are heavily exploited and are the most vulnerable members of the university community. The collective decision-making structures, large meetings of thousands of students communing together and the direct challenges to the hierarchical structures of the liberal university revealed that the growing number of black students at these universities had lost faith in the potential of these institutions to enact any real transformation and they found and used other forms of politics that run contrary to the order and logic of liberal institution.

Thus, the forms of popular politics that have for a while now functioned outside of the 'official domain' of politics, to use Guha's turn of phrase, last year entered the space of the most elite universities. There are many ways to interpret the timing of these protests, and although spontaneous, they must be seen as happening at a particular moment in South Africa's political trajectory. The use of historical figures like Biko and remembering the students' movement of 1976 and the Black Consciousness (BC) movement as well as mass protest could definitely be seen as historically informed and rooted in the idea that the anti-apartheid, anti-colonial struggle is far from over. However, the act of rejecting the ANC, representative student bodies as well as student organisations and other political parties, must be seen as part of a present political movement.

Calling out UCT for having shares in the Lonmin Platinum mines and telling the university board that they had the blood of mineworkers on their hands is just one indication that students saw themselves not merely as part of a post-apartheid South Africa, but also increasingly as part of a post-Marikana South Africa (Naicker, 2015; Valela, 2015). The significance of this should not be understated. The Marikana Massacre of 2012, where 34 mineworkers were gunned down by the police at Lonmin Platinum mines, was the first post-apartheid massacre that laid bare the failures of our fairly young democracy. The mineworkers at Marikana refused trade union bargaining structures, and instead decided to occupy a mountain near the mine where they communed together for weeks demanding that the mine manager address them and their demand for a living wage of R12500 directly. In fact, the decision of a few rock-drill operators to go directly to management before consulting their union, taken perhaps spontaneously, would later lead to mass scale organisation after and consequently the constitution of independent worker committees outside of union and bargaining structures.

The reactions of the mainstream liberal media, the National Union of Mineworkers, and government officials were strikingly similar. All sought to delegitimise the workers and their independent committees, presenting them rather as crazed criminals who were incapable of reason or rationality and were destroying hard-won bargaining structures.

While President Jacob Zuma took a month to speak publicly about the violence used by the police at Marikana, which he did at the funeral of cleric in KwaZulu Natal (Mgaga, 2012), the chief of the South African Communist Party (Blade Nzimande, who is ironically, now the minister of higher education) described strikers' actions at Marikana as 'criminal'. Nzimande's response was in fact a defence of Cyril Ramaphosa, a board member at Lonmin, now Deputy President of the ANC and formerly the first president of the National Union of Mineworkers. Ramaphosa, according to Dali Mpofu (the lawyer representing the slain miners and their families), sent emails to Lonmin management and government officials, on the eve of the massacre, saying that the strikes 'are plainly dastardly criminal acts and must be characterised as such', and then called for 'concomitant action' (Citypress, 2012). It is not unlike the comments made by Nzimande, that the students should fall, and that they were hooligans.

The Marikana moment, for many, signifies a loss of trust in representative structures like the party, the union or the corporation. After the Marikana massacre, there were massive waves of strikes across the country and across all sectors of labour. It also spread to urban land settlements in Phillipi in Cape Town and Cato Crest in Durban. In both places, this led to very violent and frequent clashes between the community, the police, and land invasion units who routinely tore down people's homes. It would surprise many, who are not familiar with South Africa, to know that this went largely unacknowledged in most mainstream media publications or within middle class society itself.

Student politics has replicated through its internal contradictions the same kinds of disillusionment which points to a broader trend within South Africa of the ways in which ordinary people, who feel marginalised and excluded, practice politics differently. This politics is more linked to everyday lived experiences and to the ways in which other and older forms of political practice, which are more participatory and direct and reject representative politics, are invoked when new ones fail. Older forms of politics—although more radically democratic—are not authorised through the idea of the liberal constitution which only recognises representative politics through institutions. What has become increasingly clear is that whenever people challenge the liberal institution or reject representational forms of politics, they are criminalised, delegitimised, and called violent, mobs or hooligans.

As a result, these forms of politics are usually met with violence from the state and the police. This has also meant that protesting students even at historically white universities now also face the militarisation, violence, and repression, although to lesser and varying degrees than subaltern classes face when they organise themselves. The militarisation of campuses and the use of tear gas, stun grenades,

and water cannons against students at protests proves the ANC's inability to deal with people organising outside the party and their easy resort to violence whenever people step out of their allotted spaces.

What is different, however, is that unlike shack dwellers, mineworkers or students who attend the historically black universities in South Africa, students who attend former white institutions often have the resources and access to fight back in the mainstream liberal media. They have done so by editing newspapers as collectives, making videos about the situations on their campuses, seeking solidarity internationally and making alliances with some media outlets, and academics.

This cannot, however, be said for students at historically black universities, or those who live on the urban peripheries and occupy land illegally. Even when the police used rubber bullets, tear gas and chemicals against students, the protests at former black universities were often more violent and lasted longer.

The students have showed their willingness to make connections to political practices and people outside of the elite university, especially by taking on the struggles of workers on campuses who are outsourced. However, this needs to be seen in a broader perspective of neo-liberalisation of higher education that was adopted soon after the end of apartheid, and from which historically white universities have been exempt until now. There is a sense that we need to go back to the debates and conversations that were happening very soon after the end of apartheid, when the ANC began to accept and implement home-grown structural adjustment policies at historically black universities. While students today are singing *Asinamali* (We don't have money), students in the late 1990s and early 2000s were already singing this song at South African and African higher education institutions.

The struggles against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment policies introduced into African universities have a long history of resistance. A 2003 Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA) Newsletter contains a chronology of African Student Struggles from 1999 to 2001. The Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA) is mentioned under January 1999, when students protested 'the university policy of not registering students who had not paid their outstanding fees that totalled R50 million. In response the university authorities closed down the university.' In July at the University of Durban Westville (UDW which is now subsumed under the merger which led to the formation of the University of Kwa Zulu Natal), students 'protested against moves by the university to de-register 67 students who failed to make payment arrangements with the university. The students wanted the university to pay the shortfall of R3.5 million', while at WITS, they protested against a proposed registration fee of R1500 (CAFA, 2002, p. 14).

In *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles Against Structural Adjustment in African Universities*, George Caffentzis (2000, p. 3) argued that:

The World Bank's attempt to cut higher education stems from its bleak view of Africa's economic future and its belief that African workers are destined for a long time to remain unskilled labourers. This would explain why the World Bank has made the shrinking of Africa's higher education institutions the centrepiece of this policy and has identified the improvement of academic life with this reduction.

In an article titled, 'South Africa: Between Repression' and 'Home Grown Structural Adjustment', which appeared in a 1997 newsletter of CAFA, Franco Barchiesi (1997, p. 13), argued that 'the neoliberal shift by the ANC in the first half of the 1990s shows a remarkable continuity in the ideologies, strategies and policy choices between South African and African "structurally adjusted" countries' which challenges the idea of South Africa as the African exception. The massive strikes that took place and routinely take place at historically black institutions, at the beginning of each financial year, showed us that as Mamdani warned, post-colonial policies with 'an accent on affirmative action (Africanisation)

and not democratisation, tended to strengthen and legitimate colonial institutions and practices by removing them from the racial stigma of [the past]' (Pithouse, 2006, p. xviii). Pithouse (2006, p. xviii) noted that 'as Fanon famously argued, a culpable laziness can lead intellectuals to buy into the idea that progress should be reduced to the de-racialisation of domination'. These are important lessons to recall when thinking about the kinds of political practice the new movements will employ and whether they will be able to link to the broader economic and political crisis in the country.

We should recall too that these protests are taking place in a context of growing neo-liberalisation of the higher education institutions across the globe. The massive occupations by workers and students at the University of California campuses in 2009 after a fee hike of 32 per cent which became a precursor to the Occupy Wall Street movement two years later was 'interpreted by both campus administrators and the general public as challenging the shift toward a model in which students are forced to finance their education by taking on increasing levels of debt' (Levensen, 2011, p. 26). There, too, protests were met with violence from the police and de-legitimation in the mainstream media. In Puerto Rico and Chile, students were able to effectively shut their campuses two years later. In 2011, in Chile, young students, the first generation to be born after the dictatorship, also saw themselves undoing the legacy of Pinochet and finishing the transformation to a more equitable society that Allende had started. Hundreds and thousands of people took the streets in Chile in May 2011, chanting 'It will fall, the education of Pinochet, now it will fall!' (McSherry & Mejia, 2011, p. 29). What began as calls for the democratisation of education quickly led to further calls and demands for structural change, like nationalising natural resources, increasing taxes and reforming the 1980s constitution. For the students the transformation of education demanded and necessitated a systemic change of the neo-liberal model. In Chile too, it was as if people had emerged from the silence of years of trauma and repression by the dictatorship and there too people began to feel a deepening crisis of the political system, which many viewed as 'unable to respond to, or even hear, the demands of the people', at a time when Chilean universities were the most expensive in Latin America (McSherry & Mejia, 2011, p. 31). Students saw themselves as alienated from political parties and the political system itself, choosing rather to express themselves by creating new forms of protest and dissent, unseen since the dictatorship. The music, art and poetry, which sampled from and harkened back to Victor Jara, Violetta Para and Allende himself, quickly became a popular movement of people who filled the streets where the 'inequality principle (became) the key organiser of social relations and social compact' (McSherry & Mejia, 2011, p. 32). The radical uprising, which refused representative structures and political parties, also refused attempts by the government to appease students with promises of bigger scholarships and more funding and even a proposed \$4 billion in university grants 'because they wanted to make it clear that they were rejecting the structure of the system itself—the idea of for profit education' (McSherry & Mejia, 2011, p. 33). Facing a crisis of legitimacy, the president agreed to meet with the students in a series of meetings, where the movement also began taking up the demands of other marginalised groups in Chilean society including the Mapuche people, miners, workers, professionals, and young people (*ibid.*, p. 34).

There is no doubt that what we are witnessing in South Africa is definitely a transformative moment. It is clear that students have linked their struggles to the 1976 Soweto Uprising; they have also seen it as continuing the unfinished task of undoing the legacy of apartheid. However, will students be able to see the difference in access to resources or class divides in order to bridge them and furthermore, whether this will translate to a broader recognition of a sphere of subaltern politics that has for some time gone unrecognised, or misrecognised, by the elite publics of South African society? Beyond that whether there will be firm links made between students, as a collective, and then to other sectors of marginalised and severely repressed society will be the big question as the struggle for free education plays itself out in South Africa.

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