

Lecture

Goals and means: reimagining the South African university and critically analysing the struggle for its realisation¹

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2015 was a tumultuous year for the higher education sector in South Africa. Transformation moved to the heart of the national discourse through two sets of events: the '#RhodesMustFall' and '#FeesMustFall' movements. Collectively, these became the largest student social movement since the dawn of South Africa's democracy in 1994. It shook up the state, changed the systematic parameters, and began the process of fundamentally transforming our higher education sector.

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements emanated from two major challenges facing higher education: alienation and access. The #RhodesMustFall movement, in which students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) demanded the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, captured the alienation of the largely black student population at UCT and reflected valid concerns about institutional racism and/or the slow pace of transformation at all of our universities. Transformation movements were established at all of the historically white universities, and while they were focussed on specific institutional challenges, all questioned the institutional identity of the university and what it meant to be an African institution in the twenty-first century. The #FeesMustFall movement began at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and spread across the country, culminating in student marches to parliament and the Union Buildings. Its high point was when President Zuma, after negotiating with student leaders and vice-chancellors at the Union Buildings, conceded to a zero per cent fee increase for 2016. In that moment, the students had achieved in a matter of ten days what vice-chancellors had been advocating for at least ten years,

namely bringing down the costs of higher education. The #FeesMustFall movement, whose principal concern was access for poor black students to affordable, quality education, gave notice that the zero per cent fee concession was merely the first step in a broader struggle for free education.

The discontents of the students are undeniably legitimate. It is unacceptable for black students not to feel at home at South Africa's public universities. Neither is it acceptable for talented students from poor communities to be denied access to higher education. Both challenges need to be urgently addressed by all stakeholders, including university management, academics, students and government. Addressing these challenges is not only positive for the students, but it would also enable the agenda of inclusive economic development and help to challenge the high levels of inequality within our society.

Of course, I may not be the best person to undertake a critical review of the struggle to reimagine and transform South Africa's universities. After all, I am an in-system actor constrained by the burden of managing within the parameters of existing resources and other institutional limitations. Moreover, it was the announcement of the fee increases at my institution which sparked the nation-wide protests. I was also part of a team that had to manage the protests and think through how to enable the evolution of a social movement for the legitimate struggle for affordable higher education, without allowing it to undermine and weaken our institutional commitment to being a free and safe space for ideas. In this process, we also had to balance the competing interests and rights of a variety of stakeholders, including those within the student community who were intent on completing their academic year.

Nevertheless, there may also be merit in my thinking through our transformation struggles and the student protests simply because I bring a particular perspective. As an in-system actor, I was not only part of a team managing an institutional protest, but also a member of various institutional and national initiatives trying to negotiate and fashion solutions to the challenges generated by the students' collective demands. However, I am also mindful that despite bringing a particular critical lens to the analysis of the protest, as a conflicted party, I can only be one small voice, among a plurality of louder voices, undertaking the critical review of the transformation struggles and student protests of 2015.

This is of course not a new debate in the global academy. It is in part related to the one that took place in the late 1960s between Herbert Marcuse

and Theodore Adorno. Marcuse, in his desire to find a social movement capable of overthrowing capitalism, ignored the student movement's shortcomings, its illiberal expressions and its sometimes violent actions. Adorno, who had been a direct target of these actions, was appalled by its Stalinist tendencies, its brutality at significant moments, and its embrace of the politics of humiliation. He feared as a result that it would tip over into a fascist movement. Achille Mbembe's recent reflection on this debate and its relevance for the student marches on the Union Buildings in October demonstrates that these hopes and fears animate South Africa's transformation and student struggles.² But it also suggests the need to learn from those earlier social struggles and the analytical reflections thereof within the global economy so as to avoid the mistakes of our collective past. It is to this end that I engage in this reflection.

Reimagining or transforming South Africa's universities

For universities to lead social change, they have to exist within a higher education system that is responsive to the diverse and multiple needs of the economy and society. Any serious analysis of the higher education system over the last two decades must confront the challenge of trade-offs among equally important, competing imperatives, and the contesting philosophies that have come to define the post-apartheid education project at South Africa's universities.

Two compatible sets of principles should govern the executive and strategic operations of South African universities. The first, found in the preamble of the South African Constitution, demands that its public institutions simultaneously address the historical disparities bequeathed by apartheid and build a collective national identity. The second, written in the manifesto and architecture of any great university, is the imperative to be both nationally responsive and cosmopolitan at the same time. The responsibility of the executive in the university is not to undertake one or the other. Their real challenge is to advance all of these priorities simultaneously. Managing the balance between these competing imperatives is then the real challenge confronting executives in South Africa's universities.

The practice of managing these competing imperatives has also spawned two distinct approaches to student enrolment and staff recruitment at universities: multiculturalism and non-racialism. The former is the practice of some institutions which see racial and cultural groups as homogenous,

and directed by the imperatives of the South African transition, they plan the enrolment of these groups as distinct entities. At the most basic level this entails enforced implicit or explicit quotas, often with the intention that a university retains a historical racial or cultural character. At its most notorious level, this approach is reflected in the university adopting a principle of racial federalism in which distinct campuses come to represent distinct racial and cultural interests.

The racial integration approach, by contrast, rejects cultural homogeneity and believes in constructing an organisational space in which new national identities are built. Students and staff from a variety of racial, religious and cultural backgrounds are enrolled as individuals, and the university is organised to enable constant intermingling and reciprocal engagement of these individual students and staff. This approach holds that through these processes, students and staff come to interact with each other as individuals and not as representatives of racial or cultural entities. In the process their identities are intended to evolve into a non-racial one where one can simultaneously be Afrikaner and South African, African and human. This approach then speaks directly to the substantive intent of the South African Constitution.

The former approach is perhaps best reflected at the Universities of Stellenbosch (US) and North West. This approach has spawned universities in South Africa where today – more than 20 years after the first democratic and non-racial election – the University of Stellenbosch still has 62 per cent of its student enrolment white. The North West University (NWU), by contrast, has a much better demographic profile at the macro level, but it has essentially established a federal university comprising what effectively are distinct campuses of racialised ethnic groups. Racialised campuses are not simply the burden of the US and NWU. Most of the historically black universities (HBUs) have continued to remain completely black. But in most cases the racialised enrolments in the HBUs exist by default, rather than by design. Where these racial enrolments are a consequence of design, they should be criticised. Where they are a consequence of systemic default, we need to think through mechanisms that would enable us to de-racialise these institutions.

The real concern about the segregated white campuses of NWU and US is that they have such student enrolments because of an explicit political agenda to keep them largely white or Afrikaner. It is important to underscore the fact that the problem is not that the language of instruction is Afrikaans

in both of these institutions, as some of the public debate has tended to suggest. There may indeed be merit for Afrikaans to be one of the languages of instruction in some of the institutions. However, the real problem is when Afrikaans is used as a mechanism to promote an ethnic project and undermine the emergence of non-racial and cosmopolitan institutions.

This is defended by some on the grounds that the South African Constitution allows for multilingualism and a diversity of cultural expression. It is certainly true that learning multiple languages, in particular the indigenous languages of South Africa, is an important means of enhancing our mutual understanding of one another. Multilingual graduates are also more capacitated and effective in the workplace. At my institution, Wits, we are aiming to create the resources and instruments to enable staff and students to develop competence in one of at least two African languages located within the two major language clusters of Nguni and Sotho. Our language policy also suggests that we adopt South African Sign Language as part of our linguistic repertoire.

However, perhaps the most explicit argument for multilingualism and a diversity of cultural expression based on the provisions of the South African Constitution has been made by Theuns Eloff, the previous vice-chancellor of NWU. In saying that the Constitution allows South Africans to receive educational instruction in the language of their choice, and noting that almost 11 million South Africans, including many black and coloured citizens, speak the language, he essentially argues for Afrikaans universities that house and represent minorities. In an open letter to Blade Nzimande, Theuns Eloff argues that, 'It is section 29(2) of our Constitution that we laboriously negotiated – and which we should be a champion of – that ensures a place for Afrikaans on the Potchefstroom campus'. Eloff, however, is oblivious to the fact that, in his argument he has effectively morphed a legitimate debate for the protection of a language into the promotion of an ethnic project. This is because recruitment, both at staff and student level, was implicitly directed around racial communities, with whites being directed to the Potchefstroom campus and blacks to the Mafikeng and Vaal campuses. The net effect is that under Eloff's tenure in NWU, its Potchefstroom campus was not only for Afrikaans-speaking students from a variety of racial backgrounds, but largely for white Afrikaners.

It is precisely this equation, in practice, of a linguistic with a racial identity that violates the South African Constitution. The South African Constitution requires its state and public institutions to address both the historical

disparities of its past and to build a new national identity among all of its citizens. In its essence, the Constitution is a clarion call to build an integrative and cosmopolitan identity, where citizens are not only white or black, English, Afrikaner, Zulu, Sotho or Xhosa, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Jew, but they are all these things and simultaneously so much more, South African, African and human. Those who defend the racialised or ethnic campuses and universities are essentially paying lip service to South Africa's Constitution, while subverting its very essence.

But they do so much more; they tend to undermine the educational process and training of their own students. The pace of globalisation has accelerated in the last few decades of the twentieth century and in the first decades of the twenty-first century, transforming societies and forcing an interaction and integration of cultures and identities. The workplace of the twenty-first century, whether in South Africa or elsewhere in the world, is a highly cosmopolitan environment where people are expected to work across racial, cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries. Increasingly, research on graduate employment suggests that it is imperative that educational institutions provide their students with soft skills to operate in diverse cultural settings. Achieving an appropriate balance between diversity and cosmopolitanism is thus essential not only for realising the non-racial vision encapsulated at the heart of the South African institution, but also for creating the necessary social environment that prepares South African students to thrive in the non-racial work environment of the twenty-first century both in the country and across the globe.

What about the South African universities committed to a more non-racial integrative vision? There are of course two sets of institutions to be considered here. The first is the HBUs, almost all of whom are in theory committed to the non-racial agenda. But these universities are almost completely black, especially in student enrolment. There is no cosmopolitan environment within these institutions, even though many of their leaders would desire it. Moreover, many of these universities are continuously in crisis both at the managerial and financial level. They are prone to student and staff strikes and financial crises. They have also been most prone to political interference, further exacerbating their institutional challenges.

Elsewhere I have argued that the HBUs are caught in a structural underdevelopment trap, where they have essentially become the educational reservoirs for the children of the most marginalised communities in South Africa.³ Obviously adept management at some of these universities like the

Universities of Fort Hare and more recently Venda – have enabled them to be stabilised, but at an equilibrium far below that which is desired or acceptable for a succeeding university. Essentially these rural HBUs are unlikely to overcome their institutional predicament, unless their development comprises part of a broader socio-economic development of the region within which they are located. Until now government has lacked the political will or imagination to do this, despite all of its developmental rhetoric. Yet until it does so, many of these HBUs will continue to be mired in a sub-optimal educational trajectory.

The final group of universities – both the historically Afrikaans and English – is urban and committed to a non-racial agenda. Many of these have, to different degrees, begun to de-racialise and have established more diverse and cosmopolitan environments. Many of them have also enhanced their academic performance – especially in research, but also in teaching – even though this may have not yet reached an acceptable level appropriate to South Africa’s needs and requirements. Yet these universities have also not risen to the transformation challenge. Despite the fact that many of them have achieved significant demographic diversity at the student enrolment level, many black students continue to feel marginalised. This is true at Wits, even though black students constitute the majority, and our attempts to address this include strategies around curriculum reform, institutional naming, and efficient and expeditious investigative and disciplinary processes for the many allegations of racism that are continuously received from both staff and students.

But the essential question around these universities is what to do about transforming the demographics of the academy? The academic staffing complement of these universities is still largely white, especially at the most senior academic levels. In many of the nation’s leading universities, black African professors constitute less than 10 per cent of the professoriate. The lower levels of the academic hierarchy have better representation of black African South Africans – 19 per cent of all senior lecturers and 35 per cent of all junior lecturers – yet the situation is far from what can be described as even adequate.

A number of scholars have recently blamed this situation on university executives and the opposition from the senior professoriate. While there may be an element of truth in this, it seems that these scholars themselves are not sufficiently appreciative of the challenges in this regard. Much of what is suggested – increasing full-time doctoral students, expanding the

number of postdoctoral students, establishing endowed chairs – are initiatives already under way in many of the universities in the country. Some universities like Wits have gone even further by reserving at least 50 per cent of vacancies for equity appointments. We have also mobilised R45 million from our own resources to underwrite two initiatives – firstly, the appointment of a number of new African and coloured academics in tenured track positions; and, secondly, a special programme to advance African and coloured academics who are currently within the system towards promotion to the professoriate over two to five years. It must be stressed that the promotion criteria for the candidates have not changed. Rather, we are creating an enabling environment for them to achieve the existing promotion requirements.

If South Africa's scholars have not risen to the challenge of fashioning solutions for transforming South Africa's academy, its government has not been much better. Government officials and those close to them have also too quickly laid the transformation failure at the door of university executives. But some self-reflection may be warranted in their case. Has government created an enabling environment for the transformation of South Africa's academy? Has it made the difficult fiscal and political decisions required for the creation of a new generation of scholars? Has it made the required infrastructural and human resource investments in a university sector that has essentially more than doubled from 421,000 students in 1994 to 1.1 million students in 2012?

The essential conundrum in the equity challenge of South Africa's universities is how to avoid two extreme positions that have emerged in the public debate. The first of these, on the right of the political spectrum, suggests that post-apartheid South Africa is either now an equal playing field or cannot afford an affirmative action programme. It therefore argues against a programme for historical redress. Yet the consequences of apartheid self-evidently continue to live in the contemporary era.

The counter view is that the Employment Equity Act, passed by the South African government to enable the transformation of the country's human resources, can simply be implemented in universities without any deliberation and understanding of the institution's contextual specificities. Too often politicians and others imagine the university as no different from any other institution in the public and private sectors. But a university is fundamentally different. It is a place where knowledge workers are produced. To train a professor at a university requires on average at least ten years of continuous

study followed by another ten years of teaching and research productivity. There are exceptions to this process, but those exceptions can never become the norm. Were this to be the case, it would undermine the academic quality of South Africa's universities, and reproduce the academic failures of its secondary education system at its tertiary level.

What does this mean for the challenge of equity in our universities? There are two issues to consider. The first is whether exact demographic representivity in our institutions is realistic or even desirable. No great university in the twenty-first century, whether in the developed or developing world, can manage to fully reflect the demographic specificities of its society.

In 2010/11, 10 per cent of all staff in higher education in universities in the UK were from a black and minority ethnic (BME) background, 7 per cent of UK national and 30 per cent of non-UK national staff were from a BME background, 7 per cent of UK academic and research staff (combined) were from a BME background, compared with 28 per cent from a non-UK background. Seven per cent of UK national professional and support staff were BME, compared with 36 per cent from a non-UK background. Universities in the twenty-first century have to strike a balance between national responsiveness and global competitiveness, between demographic representivity and cosmopolitanism. No university can be truly global without a significant proportion of international staff and students. In addition, there are numerous practical problems, some of which are discussed below, that make it impossible to match the demographic distribution of the society exactly. This is completely ignored in the public discourse, by government officials and even some within the higher education system who think that transformation targets can be reduced to mathematical formulae. This problem is made even more complex when one considers that universities struggle to attract sufficient numbers of South African black students into postgraduate degrees because many are under immediate pressure to start earning a salary and supporting their families.

The second issue that needs to be addressed is why universities have struggled to achieve appreciable progress in appointing black South African academics, even in cases where their leadership has been committed to this goal. Two reasons come to the fore: one representing the failure of government, and the other that of the university executive. South Africa cannot talk about transforming the demographics of its professoriate unless it enhances the quality and size of its academic pipeline. Too often politicians

complain that South African universities do not have black professors when they have refused to make the systemic interventions and investments required for this to happen. In the last 20 years South Africa has not provided adequate support for Masters and PhD students, and without black postgraduate students, one cannot get black lecturers and senior lecturers, and therefore one cannot get black professors. Berating vice-chancellors and universities does not change this fact. The country needs a national systemic investment in providing a significant academic pipeline.

Second, South Africa needs to do more to create enabling environments where black professors and women professors feel comfortable. This means addressing issues of institutional culture. Moreover, it requires university managers to be cognisant of the challenges confronting newly appointed young academics – many of whom are black – who are expected to produce equally good scholarship and teaching, yet deal with excessive administration, bureaucracy and onerous student numbers which reduce the possibility of their achieving the former, thereby inhibiting their promotion in the academic hierarchy. It also means that senior executives in universities have to transcend the racialised networks they have inherited. They have to learn how to identify emerging black talent and attract these academics to South African universities. Many universities have reserved special funds for the recruitment of Black scholars and some reserve a significant proportion of vacancies for equity appointments.

Yet, clearly these measures alone have not been adequate. In part this has to do with the fact that South African stakeholders have looked for easy solutions and tried to find scapegoats. Moreover, the transformation debate has been constructed in the most generic of terms and, as a result, has not grappled with the true complexities of transforming universities. But there does seem to be light on the horizon: the Department of Higher Education and Training (DOHET) recently engaged University South Africa (USAf) – on whose board sit all the vice-chancellors of the country's public universities – on the establishment of a new generation of academics. Essentially, DOHET has agreed to mobilise significant public funds – the first wave of which is approximately R500 million – to be invested in the training of a new generation of scholars, all of whom would be expected to serve in the academy. Universities are meant to partner DOHET in this initiative and take on the employment obligations of these new academics, once they have qualified. There is also the possibility of engagements between universities and DOHET so that institutional transformation plans and investment are

dovetailed with those managed by the department.

This partnership represents the best hope for transforming South Africa's academy. It should probably be premised on a broader educational and institutional pact between DOHET and the universities, in which the former is respectful of the universities, their mandate, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, in exchange for universities collectively committing to the transformation agenda. This pact need not be a violation of academic freedom and institutional autonomy which are rights that must be accompanied by public accountability if they are to have any popular resonance and legitimacy. This is especially so in a context like South Africa, so as to ensure that institutional autonomy and academic freedom do not become levers that enable privileged elites and apartheid's beneficiaries to defend their privileges against a broader transformation and inclusive development agenda.

Developing a differentiated higher education system

National responsiveness and global competitiveness are not likely to be realised by South Africa's higher education system simply by individual universities establishing an appropriate mix between diversity and cosmopolitanism in their recruitment of student and staff. It is as necessary to develop a differentiated higher education system that produces the diverse professional and human resources skills base required. The best exemplar of this is Finland. The country does not have a single university in the top 50 of any of the global ranking systems. Yet it consistently tops the competitiveness ranking and the human development indicator charts. This is because its educational institutions are differentiated, each with different mandates and responsibilities, independent and yet connected to one another, thereby creating a seamless system that is both nationally responsive and globally competitive.

A differentiated higher education system enables responsiveness to the diverse and multiple needs of an economy and a society. In South Africa, it would allow some universities to play a bigger role in the teaching of undergraduate students and the production of professionals, which is necessary if the economy is to become more productive and competitive. But it would also allow other universities to focus on postgraduate students and undertake high level research, which are equally essential if the country is to develop a knowledge based economy of the twenty-first century. This higher education system should have a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector comprising colleges focussed on producing

graduates with vocational and applied skills. These different responsibilities require very different skill sets, institutional environments, and investment patterns. This is why they cannot simply be undertaken by a single type of institution.

This is well recognised in South Africa by all of the stakeholders in both the university system and the broader society. Why then has South Africa not been able to progress towards an explicitly differentiated higher education system? The answer, of course, lies in the country's history which has saddled the evolution of its higher education system and its current choices with the burden of a racialised legacy. The universities with the greatest potential to produce more postgraduate students and increase high level research are the historically white universities. Yet there is reluctance by many in government and in the university system to accept this. In fact, many higher education executives at the HBUs want to transform their institutions into what their institutions were prevented from becoming in the apartheid era. Not only has this proved to be impossible given the scarcity of resources, and the long time frames required to mould universities, but it has also prevented the system from evolving into one that is capable of addressing the diverse and multiple needs of contemporary South Africa.

To escape this impasse, South Africa's political and its higher education executives need to rethink the debate and fashion the establishment of a differentiated system on four distinct principles. First, it needs to be underscored that the research enterprise must be common to all of the universities. Even the universities focused primarily on the teaching of undergraduate students must be engaged in research. How else can they guarantee that their academics are at the forefront of, and teaching the latest developments in, their disciplinary fields? The only difference between these institutions and the more research intensive ones should be on the quantity and extent of the research obligations, and maybe even the type of research activities.

Second, South African university executives and policy makers need to rid themselves of a status conception of the university system where research intensive universities are seen as more illustrious than their undergraduate teaching counterparts. The global ranking systems have also fostered this illusion, further burdening the imagination and ambition of university executives, with the result that too many have chased the elusive goal of evolving into a research-intensive university.

Third, and related to the above, South Africa's public financing of

universities must not implicitly assume this status hierarchy. Too often in the public discourse, executives at research intensive universities have simply assumed that they should receive a larger allocation of funds. In fact, executives at research intensive universities are often heard to make the argument that one cannot turn the clock back on the history of privilege which enabled only some of our institutions to evolve into research universities, and that as a result South Africa should position these universities through the generous provision of resources to compete with their counterparts elsewhere in the world. This argument is of course contested by HBUs who use their history of disadvantage as a leverage to also make a claim for a bigger share of resources. The effect is an implicit and explicit fight for who is entitled to a bigger share of what is, effectively, an inadequate state budget for higher education.

Finally, South Africa's higher education system must be flexible enough to allow institutions to progress from one institutional variety to another, should they so decide. Societies' needs change over time, and institutions must be given the right to evolve in order to become responsive to these needs. Moreover, allowing for institutional evolution enables university executives to be more pragmatic in their current decision-making since their institutions are not forever limited to being one or other institutional type.

However well these principles are implemented, though, South Africans are unlikely to make progress so long as its universities and higher education institutions do not learn to work with each other. These partnerships must be explicitly directed to overcoming the racial and linguistic boundaries that traditionally defined the evolution of the higher education system. But they must also go further than simply the formal interactions at the national level through organisations like USAf. The partnership must encompass the very core activities of the universities and be directed towards joint degrees, combined teaching programs, joint research initiatives, support for the building of institutional capacity, and enabling the mobility of staff and students. There is evidence that some of this is happening. The Universities of Limpopo, Venda and the Witwatersrand, for instance, have announced that they are experimenting with how this can be done. Among many ideas being considered is the possibility of innovatively rethinking degrees beyond institutional boundaries, so that the universities can jointly produce graduates with skill sets needed by the economy. For example, Wits' Engineering Faculty is considering working with Limpopo and Venda's Science Faculties. Graduates from either a particular stream in the faculties

of the two HBUs, or those who graduate with a particular pass rate, may get direct entry into the 3rd year of Wits' engineering programme. This would allow these graduates to then earn both a science degree from the Universities of Limpopo and/or Venda and an engineering degree from Wits. Should these universities succeed, they will enable not only a seamless movement between their institutions, but they will also jointly produce graduates with urgently required skills sets.

Critically reviewing the #FeesMustFall campaign

Many media houses concluded 2015 by declaring it the year of the student. In many ways it was deserved. The students put affordable, quality higher education and the insourcing of vulnerable workers on the national agenda in a way that has not happened before. Many of us, vice-chancellors included, have been lamenting the underfunding of higher education for over a decade with little effect. But it was the students with their marches on parliament and the Union Buildings that shook up the state, changed the systemic parameters and began the process of fundamentally transforming higher education. As I have suggested elsewhere, they achieved in seven days what we had been talking about for over a decade.

Yet we are only at the beginning of this social movement of transformation in higher education. 2016 has seen a new round of student protests, and their trajectory will fundamentally influence the transformation dynamics of higher education itself. For this reason, if not any other, there is an urgent need to critically review the 2015 protests, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and learn lessons for the social struggles that lie ahead.

One striking feature of the protests is that they were organised beyond party and ideological divides. It was this fact, more than any other that brought thousands of students and their supporters onto the streets at parliament and the Union Buildings. It was also this multi-class and multi-racial alliance that shook up the state and prompted it to be partially responsive to the students' demands. Yet this united student movement fractured soon after president Zuma announced the zero per cent fee increase for 2016. This was partially due to the natural process of the mainstream of the student body withdrawing and concentrating on completing the academic year after their immediate collective demand had been achieved. But as important a causal factor in the fracturing of the student movement was that political parties and ideological groups reasserted themselves to project their own agendas onto this social struggle. The result was that the

movement fractured into a cacophony of ideological and protest voices, each with their own distinctive blend of educational and political demands.

If the student movement is to again be brought together across class and racial boundaries, and have the political potency that it demonstrated in the week when it marched to parliament and the Union Buildings, then it will be necessary for it to address a number of strategic issues. Perhaps the most immediate is the racial essentialism that afflicts certain strands of this movement. This racial essentialism is particularly pronounced in certain sections of the 'Student Transformation' movement and in some of the political parties. It is of course driven in part by the cultural alienation that black students have experienced, particularly in the historically white universities. It is also intellectually justified by selective readings of Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko.

But rejecting an assimilation into western mores and historically white norms, or asserting the importance of black leadership, does not need to lead to an automatic degeneration into the crude racism that is sometimes displayed by certain factions of the student movement. Neither is it intellectually legitimate to read racial essentialism into the ideas of Biko and Fanon. It is especially an injustice to Biko given that he wrote in the crucible of apartheid. To now interpret Biko literally in 2015, without understanding the distinction between apartheid and democratic South Africa, is to do a disservice to the intellectual legacy of one of South Africa's fallen heroes.

The problem is in part with the broader narrative that has come to accompany some parts of the students' political resurgence. Too many students glibly dismiss both the contributions of earlier generations of activists and the 1994 political settlement itself. Particularly obnoxious is the dismissal of the contribution of Nelson Mandela by some young activists who have accused our collective icon of having sold out. Even if we ignore the temerity of a group of born free activists to pronounce on the contribution of a leader who gave 27 years of his adult life to imprisonment for the anti-apartheid cause, one still has to question the intellectual wisdom of reading the 1994 political settlement from the perspective of 2015.

This is not to suggest that the 1994 settlement cannot be criticised. I myself have been very critical of its compromises, neo-liberal character, and propensity to corruption. I have also been particularly scathing of its enabling of increased economic inequality. However, this must not result in the misleading conclusion that no successes were recorded in the struggle for emancipation by the 1994 settlement. It is worth underscoring the fact

that the generation that preceded the current students, whatever their mistakes, left the world a far better place than the one that they inherited. And while the current students may be correct to demand a measure of humility from our political elite and institutional leadership who have become complacent by the entrapments of power, the leadership and activist base of the student movement itself could do with a dose of the humility that it demands of others.

Equally worrying is the propensity to violence by some strands of the student movement. Again, it is important to state that the vast majority of student protestors respected the boundaries of peaceful protest. I recall a moment at the height of the protest in the Wits concourse when private security entered the premises unauthorised, leading to a serious momentary altercation with the students. The student leaders who I was with at that moment – including two of the most militant – immediately surrounded and protected me. At no point during my engagement with the students did I feel threatened. Yet, despite my personal experience, it would be hard to deny that there has been a greater propensity to violence by certain strands within the movement.

At the most basic level, this was reflected in the attempt across campuses to close off the entrances and exits of universities by lying in front of the gates. No attention was given to the fact that this violated the rights of others. It prevented parents from picking up their children, staff and students from leaving the campus, and even in one or two cases, individuals from visiting their doctors. Protestors were so focussed on their rights that they had forgotten their obligation to respect the rights of others. And while it is the goal of peaceful protest to create inconvenience and disruption, it is definitely illegitimate to violate the rights of others on such a wide scale.

The propensity to violence manifested itself at its most extreme level as the protests wore on. It was most volatile at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and Tswane University of Technology where there was widespread violence, residences were set alight, and the universities had to be closed. But it also manifested itself at other institutions including the Universities of Cape Town, Stellenbosch, and the Witwatersrand. At the latter, when some protestors partially set alight a bookshop and a university vehicle, police were called in. At Cape Town, a university bus was set light, as were a few vehicles at Stellenbosch. Protestors suggest that the resort to violence was prompted by university authorities who called in the police. While this was definitely the case at

some institutions, in many others including Wits, police were only called in once protestors had already resorted to arson and violence. In Wits' case, prior to the police being brought in, some students in the men's residence had to protect their own residence from arson.

There is no doubt that the resort to violence was in part facilitated by strands of the movement that deliberately adopted a strategy of violence. In part this was prompted by particular interpretations of the writings of Frantz Fanon who was seen as an advocate of revolutionary violence. It was suggested that poor black people are daily confronted with structural violence as they have to experience the consequences of inequality, poverty and corruption. In this view, it is therefore legitimate to respond with black violence to protest this structural violence.

But the rationality of this argument breaks down when it is subjected to even a little scrutiny. First, Fanon wrote about revolutionary violence in the crucible of the colonial struggle. It is not legitimate to transpose those ideas to a democratic era which, however flawed, provides the space not only for protest, but also the right to vote out the political elite. Second, how is the struggle against structural violence advanced by attacking other students and destroying university property that is intended for the housing and teaching of the students themselves? If anything, such actions are likely to consolidate the very effects of the structural violence against the poor and marginalised. Finally, such actions compel the state to respond with force in order to protect public property thereby creating a militarised atmosphere that works against the immediate interests of the protestors and the legitimacy of the protests itself.

Finally, equally damaging to the realisation of the goals of the movement is the failure of some strands within it to recognise that success will result not from a single event, but rather from a process of continuous struggle, engagement and negotiation. The achievement of quality, affordable higher education is going to require trade-offs, both within the institution and the society as a whole. The Department of Higher Education and Training estimates that the total cost will be in the region of an additional R56 billion per annum, R19 billion for increased subsidy and a further R37 billion in increased funding to National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Some strands within the movement are not prepared to think through trade-offs. Some are sometimes not even interested in negotiations, whether at the institutional or national level. But such an approach is damaging to the movement for it allows the decisions around trade-offs, and therefore the

substantive outcomes, to be determined by a narrow group of political and institutional leaders.

To be fair to the student leadership, not all of them are averse to engagement and negotiation. In the presidential task team and even in the national negotiations on the zero per cent fee increase for 2016, student leaders were at the heart of striking the compromises that were required. Similarly, at the institutional level at Wits, not only were student leaders important to negotiating solutions to the financial challenges confronting the student body, but they were also instrumental in fashioning compromises in the task team on the insourcing of vulnerable workers. But the problem is that the broader narrative of the movement has been opposed to trade-offs and compromise, with the result that negotiations have been continuously bedevilled by issues of legitimacy.

Reflections on the solidarity of academics

But students cannot be the only stakeholders within the movement that must be subjected to critical scrutiny. Perhaps it is even more necessary to subject the conduct of some of the academics who supported the movement to a critical reflection. Again it is important to note that the broader academic support base of the movement behaved impeccably within the boundaries of legitimate solidarity action. But again, there were strands within this support base that acted in ways that must be questioned. First, there was a shocking level of casualness about violence among some members of staff. Not only were many silent about the abuse of the rights of other non-protesting students, but some even had the temerity to articulate views that suggested that violence may be a necessary protest strategy in certain institutional contexts. Second, a number of academics actively participated in the de-legitimisation of institutional structures of governance. Under the pretext of democratising the Senate and Council – a legitimate demand – they proposed a series of solutions that demonstrated a worrying lack of understanding of both context and the post-apartheid history of reorganising governance arrangements in the higher education system. Indeed, many were oblivious of the fact that a number of the recommendations that they advanced had been attempted some 15 years earlier in some institutions with disastrous consequences. These academics had forgotten the cardinal rule of progressive transformation – namely, that thoughtful activism and appreciation of context is necessary if unintended consequences are to be avoided.

But perhaps the most damaging feature of the engagement of this strand of academics was their failure to understand the importance of trade-offs in enabling progressive outcomes. Many of these academics were at the forefront of struggles to increase salaries, enable insourcing of vulnerable workers, and reduce fees without any recognition that there may be a tension between these demands. Some have opposed all of the trade-off recommendations that have emerged – including increasing student numbers or introducing more measured salary increases for academics – around how to sustainably finance the costs of simultaneously addressing all of these demands.

In the same vein, a colleague on the Wits Council suggested that other councillors were too focussed on their fiduciary financial responsibility. Implicit in his argument was a suggestion that councillors should be willing to sacrifice their financial fiduciary responsibility in favour of their academic and social responsibilities. It is necessary to think through the wisdom of this strategy, in particular because it is premised on a widespread assumption among the left that the state would be compelled to bail out the university were it to get into a financial crisis. But this strategy has been tried before with devastating consequences. In the late 1990s what was then the University of Transkei effectively embarked on a strategy to address its historical infrastructural disparities by deliberately pursuing a deficit financial strategy. Within years the institution was on the brink of insolvency and while it was eventually bailed out by the state, it was never at the levels required or within the time frames necessary. The net effect was that what was then one of the strongest historically black universities was academically destroyed as the financial crisis prompted the departure of both top academics and students. It is an academic crisis from which the university has never truly recovered.

The tragedy of this proposed strategy is not that it is likely to fail, but rather that it repeats past failures simply because it is dislocated from any understanding of the history of transformation of the higher education system in this country. It reminds me of a lesson once taught to me and other colleagues by noted educationist and political activist Neville Alexander. Alexander often remarked that while he may have been a noted Marxist theoretician and scholar, his socialism only developed a political relevance when ANC notable Walter Sisulu taught him African history while on Robben Island. It is this nationally responsive and contextually relevant Marxism that lies at the core of his magnum opus, *One Azania, One Nation*,

written soon after his release from Robben Island. This is the lesson that this group of academics need to learn. If we do not understand our history, and if we do not understand the relevance of our context, we risk repeating the failures of our past.

Where to from here?

So what are the achievements of this student social movement thus far? First, they have not only achieved a zero per cent fee increase for 2016, but they have also compelled the state to cover the fiscal burden of the decision through an additional grant of R1.9 billion to the universities. Second, the Presidency has accepted the recommendations of its task team on short term financial challenges for the university system which include, among others, a further additional grant to universities in 2016 of R4.6 billion to cover the costs of underfunded and unfunded NSFAS students. Third, there is now an explicit commitment at the highest levels of government, NSFAS, and the private banking system to establish a new funding vehicle in 2017 to assist middle and lower middle class students with financing the costs of their higher education. Finally, a presidential commission has been established to investigate free education for the poor and a sustainable fee regime for universities. The 2015 student protests then not only won short terms gains for immediate fee concessions, but also opened up the systemic parameters to enable an investigation into the restructuring of the fiscal foundation of post-apartheid higher education.

But the establishment of a new sustainable fiscal foundation that is progressively grounded on the principle that higher education should be available to all qualifying students without any financial hindrance will not magically appear. It will still require ongoing public action and institutional engagement. For this reason, if no other, the following lessons of the 2015 student protests need to be learnt:

- Avoid racial essentialism and racism, and challenge it whenever it rears its head. It de-legitimises the cause and undermines the unity in action required for success.
- Avoid public violence and the violation of the rights of others on principle and because it undermines public support for the cause and provokes a securocratic response from the state.
- Recognise that successful social action requires both public action and institutional engagement. Each is necessary if progressive outcomes are

to be realised and the fear of leadership co-option must not lead one to avoid the latter.

- Recognise that progressive outcomes will entail trade-offs. Ensure that such trade-offs are part of a public deliberation and not the preserve of a narrow political and institutional elite.

Conclusion

The events of 2015 have forever changed the South African higher education system. The student movement has opened up the systemic parameters in ways that were previously unimaginable. They have succeeded where other stakeholders, including vice-chancellors and other higher education executives, have failed. As a result, South Africa is now in the second stage of a fundamental overhaul of its post-apartheid higher education system. 1994 was the first stage, with de-racialisation at a macro level, but this failed to address the class and philosophical narratives of what it means to be an open, inclusive and cosmopolitan African university.

Now, the latter stage is upon us. As we begin to conceive of the possibility that it will culminate in a successful, sustainable, progressive outcome, we need to be mindful that this will require hard debate, social action and imaginative thought. There is a danger in this moment that if we allow the current populism to be unconstrained, it could result in a higher education system that enables access, but destroys quality. This is the history of the continent and it would be a tragedy if it were to be repeated. 2016 onwards is going to be a political and intellectual struggle between these two outcomes. We need to not only collectively support the student movement, but also to learn the lessons of our past actions. We need to think through the consequences of our choices, we need a thoughtful activism, and we need to be principled in our solidarity.

Returning to Achille Mbembe's reflections on the Marcuse-Adorno debate: he concludes that Marcuse was wrong in both excusing 'the politics of brutal practicism' and in his belief that the student movement would lead to the destruction of capitalism. Instead Mbembe argues that capitalism was emboldened. Yet Adorno also miscalculated when he suggested that the student movement would evolve into a fascism. Both Marcuse and Adorno, Mbembe believes, also failed to comprehend the security-freedom conundrum. 'Not all security arrangements', he maintains, 'are inimical to freedom. Freedom in and of itself does not automatically guarantee security.'

Each needs to be supplemented, for which neither angelism nor callousness will suffice'. Mbembe's solution is for 'an ethical pragmatism – a pragmatism that is open at its ethical core to being constantly contested. The conundrum will never be permanently resolved'. It has to be continuously deliberated upon. As Mbembe indicates, 'we will have to learn to live with irresolution'.

But it is the practice of this ethical pragmatism which holds the ultimate prospect of a South African higher education system that is accessible and transformed, nationally responsive and globally competitive, diverse and cosmopolitan. This would not only be good for the nation, but also for the global academy. It would allow South African institutions to develop and imbibe the corpus of scientific knowledge, apply it to our context, reimagine and innovate it, and contribute it back to the global academy. It will also allow us to produce graduates who are simultaneously African and human; citizens of both the nation and the world. This is, after all, the primary responsibility of any university in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. African Voices at University College London: January 25, 2016
2. <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/AchilleMbembe.Adornoand%20Marcuse2015.pdf>
3. Adam Habib (2001) 'Institutional crisis of the University of Transkei', *Politikon: South African journal of political studies* 28.