

South Africa: Academics in Student Movement Struggles

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Recently, I've found it both ironic and disturbing that in conversations about the complexities of the violence at campuses throughout South Africa (and in the Western Cape in particular), it has been far easier for me to listen to and talk among many South African workers, student parents, community leaders, activists and students than has been the case among many colleagues. I'm both appalled and surprised by the ease with which many academics (who have always seemed to me to be very progressive; people with whom I've had extremely productive and valuable conversations and collaborations) have retreated into moralistic condemnation of student violence, as though this violence existed in a vacuum, and as though there were not numerous invisibilised and naturalised violences at play at universities in South Africa.

These include: the violence of academics' silence (as a colleague at UWC recently described it); the violence of university management and governance being wholly out of touch with the student majority's voices and, most importantly not being accountable to the student majority (UWC managements' refusal to listen to the massive ReesMustFall (FMF) movement and its insistence on recognizing only the discredited SRC as a valid student leadership voice, as well as the recent conduct of the current chairperson of council, are grotesque examples of this); the violence of Management's unleashing paramilitary presences and police on university campuses - without any sort of consultation with or accountability to the various stakeholders (parents, lecturers, administrators) who work with and know the students; the routine and everyday violation experienced by many students, especially those at CPUT and UWC and possibly other Historically Black Universities who, for the past few weeks, have been living in constant fear and insecurity - about exams, about whether or how they will get their next meal, about whether they will wake up to find that their residences have burned down and their possessions have been taken by looters from neighbouring communities off campus, about how to communicate with friends, relatives and parents in homes far away.

Although academics such as Shirley Walters, William Gumede and John Higgins have been saying this for years, it seems to me that it cannot be said enough: South African universities have transformed horrifically under the impact of Gear and neo-liberalism. And events in recent months have made this abundantly clear. The university environment has changed dramatically in terms of what progressive academics do, how they have been positioned and, most importantly, *how they position themselves*.

Universities in South Africa now function in top-down systems in which many academics both on the right AND "the left" automatically close ranks when it comes to analysing and resisting hierarchical, neo-liberal and individualist institutional cultures, teaching and research environments and management arrangements. In these climates, even the most progressive decide to keep silent, to obey authority, to act alone in ensuring that they produce palatable publications for palatable journals. Many universities have also set in place tightly-knit boys clubs - with the members of these (often including ambitious men, women, and both black and white staff) using university resources and structures primarily to access power and networks for personal professional and economic gain.

Furthermore, universities have fostered terrifying degrees of self-interest and individualism among academics, encouraging many to believe that individual outputs, “job security” or prospects for promotion are far more important than any sort of collective or truly collaborative work among ourselves. This culture of auditing, regulation, managerialism, individualism and cut-throat ambition also generates “progressive” staff organisations that mirror the status quo they claim to challenge: exclusivist staff associations, and small groups of “critical thinkers” who claim to speak for the majority with little sense of accountability to or engagement with others, including support staff, students, those seen not to have “gravitas”.

To me, what may be especially disturbing is that the present situation is not calling upon progressive academics to put their necks on the line. The basic requirement of thinking critically and teaching students to think critically does not mean “committing class suicide”, or becoming a militant activist or student movement supporter. It simply means being committed to critical and rigorous thinking, writing and working with young people in ways that enhance their ability and independence in thinking and behaving critically, with sensitivity and responsibly; it does not and cannot end with preparing lectures and ensuring that all students write exams. It must surely extend to participating as far as one’s conscience takes one in talking to students, talking among colleagues and, where necessary, speaking out against certain colleagues, management and governance structures when they seek to shut down on critical and respectful debate and teaching.

And also remembering that if we effectively abandon students by not engaging with them in their struggles within institutions, we will actively help to create a situation where students become increasingly angry, cynical about both management and academics, and impatient with all leaders. It is noteworthy that South African university students, in fact very many young South Africans today, have tried very hard to have conversations about their visions of new, substantively post-apartheid futures. Yet they have felt horribly betrayed when many academics, community leaders as well as authority figures on both the right and the left have ridden roughshod not only over their dreams of better futures, but also over dreams that must surely resonate with all South Africans committed to true democracy.

In her personal battle to express this, the author of **Memoirs of a Born Free** (2014), writing before the rise of the FMF movement, insists:

“I realised that student organisations, as factories where future leaders are manufactured, should lead the revolution of the annihilation of ill-discipline. It begins with fighting against SRC corruption and misappropriation of resources. It begins with a culture of electing leaders on the basis of popularity as opposed to electing them on the basis of capacity to deliver” (Malaika wa Azania, 2014: 147-148).

Describing her restless journey to find ethical platforms to resist ANC corruption as well as the duplicity of leaders using populist rhetoric for their own ends, the author dwells on her use of Facebook, Twitter, visual representation and the printed word. Her sense of the struggle for freedom is therefore strongly linked to her sense of a struggle with and through language.

There are a few facts that I’m trying to hold on to. These are:

Firstly, that the university student protest started as a peaceful protest with leaders committed to opening channels of communication (with university management, with Blade Nzimande, with government, with other students) around fee hikes and a broader transformational agenda that included socio-economic ones and the role of the government (and these broader agendas are of course agendas that affect the well-being of all South Africans)

Secondly, that at most campuses student protests were met with (normalised) repression and violence

Thirdly, that academic groupings (as opposed to individual academics) have, in the main, been extraordinarily silent and reluctant to involve themselves in situations where connections between institutional dynamics and ideological ones have become inextricable.

I don't believe that the situation at the moment requires "concerned or progressive" academics to "lay their careers on the line", to mechanically side with students, to take up the battles of students, or to become activists. This belief is symptomatic of an inflated sense of our importance in the broader scheme of things. But it surely requires us all to do what we are paid to do and have been trained to do: namely to teach critically and with sensitivity, to apply our minds to careful analytical thought, to work with young people in encouraging them to undertake rigorous and sensitive analysis of the world they currently live in and the worlds they wish to see.

It is surely outrageous, then, for academics to be turning on students and saying things like: "we condemn your arsonist behavior"; "we condemn your violence"; "we will now side with management or governance structures because you have misbehaved".

Shame, shame, poppy-shame...

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P.S.

* From Amanda! - <http://amandla.org.za>

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