
South Africa's May 1968: decolonising institutions and minds

Heike Becker

Throughout 2015 students at South African universities rose up in a mass revolt. They made their voices heard from their campuses, from the streets, from the grounds of Parliament in Cape Town, and the lawns of the Union Buildings, the seat of national government in Pretoria. Students brought down a symbol of colonialism and exploitation, they fought against fee increases in higher education, they called for the end of racism and of neo-liberal outsourcing practices of support services at universities. Students demanded free education in more than one sense. As students are returning for the new academic year, and tensions have already flared up again at some universities it is appropriate to mull over the movement's practice and theory.

Decolonizing institutions, decolonizing knowledge, decolonizing the mind; have been the tags of the new generation of activists who have dominated South Africa's Fanonian moment, the term coined by the political philosopher of post-colonialism, Achille Mbembe, who is a professor at the University of the Witwatersrand ("Wits") in Johannesburg. The Fanonian moment, as Mbembe explains, occurs at a time when twenty years or so after the country's initial independence a new generation enters the social scene and asks new questions regarding the incomplete decolonisation. South Africa's student activists have asked new questions, they have challenged the country's old and new establishments; they have also forged new alliances and have engaged new political forms. Their activism has drawn on new, distinctive theoretical intersections combining recent theories of intersectionality with the writings of Frantz Fanon, the militant philosopher of revolutionary, anticolonial humanism.^[1]

From #RhodesMustFall to #FeesMustFall

The South African student uprisings attained much attention when mass protests took place across the country in the second half of October 2015. The mobilisation did not occur on the spur of a moment though but was the catalyst of a politicisation that had spread-out on South African campuses over the preceding six months. In March, students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) had begun a forceful campaign, dubbed #RhodesMustFall to have the statue of Cecil Rhodes removed, which had been sitting on the university grounds in a prominent position for the past eighty years. It all started with an individual activist's spectacular deed. On 9 March UCT student Chumani Maxwele threw a bucket full of human faeces onto the statue of a seated Cecil Rhodes.

From the initial defacing act, the movement got traction fast. Three days later, a well-attended meeting took place to discuss the future of the statue. A week later students marched to the seat of the UCT administration and demanded a date for the removal of

the statue. While Vice-chancellor Max Price was addressing the protesters about the removal of the statue, students occupied the Bremner administrative building, which they renamed Azania House, thus expressing an ideological affiliation with Pan-Africanist positions. Over the next few weeks, students occupied the building, supported by academics from UCT and other universities in the Cape Town area, along with members of the public. Azania House became a space of vigorous and at times controversial discussions around issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Activists successfully disrupted everyday business on the UCT campus, and initiated a debate about racism and demands to decolonise education. The movement succeeded to find the support of the university's governing bodies; on 9 April the objectionable item was removed under the thunderous applause of a large crowd who had gathered to watch this significant moment.

The movement quickly spread to other campuses, mostly those of the former white-liberal English-medium universities, such as Wits and the small university in the Eastern Cape, which bears the name of Rhodes, but also the conservative, Afrikaans, still overwhelmingly white Stellenbosch University in the Western Cape. Throughout the South African winter and spring of 2015 students campaigned for changes of their universities' symbolism; they demanded the removal of colonial memorials and renaming of buildings. They called for the appointment of more black academics. And they insisted upon the reform of curricula, which they said conveyed racist and colonialist forms of knowledge and ignored even scorned African intellectual experience.

Ostensibly the mass protests that shook South Africa in October and November 2015 were in response to an increase of tuition fees. Protests started at Wits. This time around they rapidly spread to universities across the country; now protests also affected institutions with a predominantly poor, working class student population, such as the University of the Western Cape (UWC) or the University of Johannesburg (UJ); even students at former technikons, such as the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) joined in.

On 23 October, while thousands were protesting at the Union Buildings, the national government conceded that there would be no fee increases. This, partial, victory was not the end of the protests. While at some universities the end-of-year exams were concluded in a volatile return to 'normality', at others, protests continued well into November. Local circumstances now prevailed, e.g., demands for debt relief for poor students. At a number of institutions, the attention shifted to alliances with lowly-paid workers, such as cleaning services and security staff. Under the hashtag #EndOutsourcing the protests called for higher wages for low earning university staff who worked for private contractors and for them to be employed directly by universities.

The uprising of a new generation

The student protests arose in a situation, which has been marked by growing socioeconomic inequality in post-apartheid South Africa and by the ANC government's policies of neoliberal restructuring. The positions of both poor students and lowly-paid labour have been rendered precarious in the corporate university, which has fast been emerging with the neoliberal restructuring of the higher education sector. On the other

hand, an increasingly corrupt patronage politics has been the hallmark of the Zuma administration.

South Africa's new affluent elite, with connections to those in government, ostensibly asserts its Africanity. As pointed out by Nigel Gibson (2011), a neoliberal (or: corporate) Black Consciousness discourse prevails today. This exclusionist ideology has little in common however with the militant Black Consciousness philosophy, associated with Steve Biko. Rather, in the 'new' dispensation the 'dehumanising and derogating attitudes formerly projected towards all Blacks are now channelled towards the Black poor'. Put together, these developments have caused a disaffection of urban youth with the ANC government. For many youngsters the older generation's claim to respect on the basis of struggle credentials doesn't hold true anymore.

Students constituted the first social movement since the end of apartheid that engaged mass protest on a national scale. However protests have been occurring in informal settlements and townships ever since 2004, generally dubbed 'service delivery protests' because of their demands of access to services such as sanitation, new land occupations, etc. Forms of disruptive activism had been practised in the struggles of the urban poor. On many occasions roads have been blocked, human faeces were dumped at the Cape Town International Airport already during the so-called 'poo protests' in June 2013 etc.

Now it was university students, however, who threw human excrements to emphasise their point, who blocked roads, who occupied – and 'renamed' – buildings on their campuses, who held mass meetings, which forced senior university administrators into negotiations. Campuses across the country were brought to a standstill just before the end of the year exams were about to start.

The students took protests to the streets. Black and white students together marched through Cape Town's Central Business District toward the national parliament. Some broke through the police cordon and entered the parliament precinct. In downtown Johannesburg thousands descended upon the ANC headquarters. At the end of this extraordinary week in October, thousands demonstrated in Pretoria at the Union Buildings. Protests and marches took place throughout the country, in the major cities, but also in smaller towns, and even from rural campuses.

Behind the protests were, generally, not the official Student Representative Councils (SRC) [2]. The ANC and its allies, such as the South African Students Congress (SASCO) repeatedly articulated suspicion of independent student politics. The protesters were manipulated by 'political masters with dubious motivation' for their own ends, which they considered a 'sinister danger' was claimed, for instance, by Thabo Masemola, who in his day job writes speeches for Higher Education Minister Blade Mzimande (Sunday Tribune, 3 January 2016). Nor did groups of the South African organized left play much of a role. Conspicuous was the silence of the massive National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), which has, since withdrawing its support from the ANC in 2013, called for an alternative movement of the working class. The uprisings were organised by independent, informal and flexible leadership structures. As indicated by the hashtag names of campaigns, social media played a major role; some quipped that the revolution

was being tweeted.

Decolonisation & intersectionality

Central to the movement's pursuit was the aim of 'decolonizing the mind'. Palpable was the hunger for new forms of knowledge, the extraordinary return to critical black intellectual traditions, to black feminism, queer theory, and critical race studies. Activists drew particularly on theories of intersectionality, which they fused with radical thought, which was inspired by the writings of Fanon.

The notion of intersectionality was central to discussions and practices. One placard, for instance, held up next to the contested Rhodes statue proudly proclaimed: 'Dear history, this revolution has women, gays, queers & trans. Remember that.' Later in the year new alliances of students and workers, the recognition of class as a profound category for understanding a grossly unequal, racist society. The concerns of socioeconomic inequality, in turn, inspired new intellectual desires. Mbembe observed that to the preoccupations of critical black studies were now being added a renewed critique of political economy, which aimed at bringing together, dialectically, questions of race and property, of class and inequality, and of identity and lived experience.

Steve Biko was read again by young students who regarded his call to autonomous Black action as still relevant for contemporary South Africa. Most notably however the new generation celebrated the writings of Fanon, taking up especially his philosophical critique of racism and insisting, as he had done, the need for Blacks to seize recognition. At the peak of the #RhodesMustFall campaign UCT students put Fanon's notion of mutual recognition as a precondition of true humanism into practice when they walked around campus with 'recognize me' written on placards hanging around their necks. This extraordinary initiative got students and academics engaged in vibrant conversations about inclusion and decolonisation. Radical critics furthermore took up Fanon's incisive comments on the perils of the postcolonial period as applicable for post-apartheid South Africa. Fanon has been engaged by the student activists also for his militant critique of the normative compulsion to non-violence.

Violence and media representations

'Violence' became a significant topic in several respects. During the #FeesMustFall protests police responded initially in a heavy-handed manner while media reports condemned the 'violence', allegedly perpetrated by activists' blocking of roads. With the mass marches though much of public opinion came out in support of the protests.

Even then media reporting sharply distinguished between the protests of students at the country's formerly 'White' universities and at those institutions whose students are mostly of poor urban and rural backgrounds. While the protests at universities such as UCT and Wits were given fairly sympathetic attention, the incomparable experience of violence and repression that struck historically 'Black' institutions received almost no consideration. If the mainstream media reported at all on what was happening at universities such as UWC, the protesters were portrayed as 'savages' and prone to violence. For instance, it was inaccurately asserted that UWC students had danced around smouldering timbers inside the Student Union. Unfortunately, there were indeed violent turns at some

institutions during the last stage of the protests, provoked and escalated, to an extent, by what some observers described as failures of executive management.

South Africa's 1968 moment?

Broadly sympathetic veteran activists, academics, commentators, and members of South Africa's organized left have at times criticized the ideological orientations of the young students for what they considered an over-emphasis on racial identity politics at the expense of class analysis. Mbembe, who had accompanied the movement with critical analysis and engagement, worried in a widely publicized blog that 'decolonization' was 'in truth a psychic state more than a political project in the strict sense of the term' (Mbembe 2015). Student activists of course refuted this suspicion. Some commentators have dubbed the protests 'South Africa's May '68 moment'. In 2015 in South Africa like in Paris 1968, a nation was forced to ask itself what it believed in, and in both instances, the answer seemed to be something like, 'We can't really say, but we can't stomach what the grey-hairs are telling us to believe' (Bloom 2015). If anything has become crystal clear through the protests it is this: The ANC has completely lost touch with many among the new generation, who are challenging the country's post-1994 dispensation.

References

- Kevin Bloom, 'We'll always have Paris: South Africa's May '68 moment', *Daily Maverick*, 25.10.2015.
- Nigel Gibson, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg 2011.
- Achille Mbembe, 'The State of South African Political Life', *Africa is a Country*, 19.9.2015. <africasacountry.com/2015/09/achille-mbembe-on-the-state-of-south-african-politics/>

Notes

[1] Christopher Lee, *Frantz Fanon: Toward a Revolutionary Humanism*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press and Johannesburg: Jacana, 2015.; Leo Zeilig, *Frantz Fanon: The Militant Philosopher of Third World Revolution*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2015.

A different version of this article will appear in German in *iz3W* No. 353 (March/April 2016)

[2] There were some notable attempts by the ANC to 'hijack' the movement with the aim of incorporation; this was the case especially during the Pretoria march of 23 October.