
A QUIET CONTEMPLATION ON THE NEW ANGER

THE STATE OF TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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There is a disturbing vignette in *Memoirs of a Born Free*, by the young black activist Malaika Mahlatsi who renamed herself Malaika wa Azania. As a learner in a middle-class white school, she learns that her teacher's precious cat has died. Looking around at the teary group of learners and the heartbroken teacher, Malaika bursts out laughing. "In the township, cats and dogs die all the time," she smirks. The school calls young Malaika on her heartlessness, but the future author would carry the memory of her dismissal of the pain of others as a badge of pride.

I have studied the emergence of this new anger with a mixture of intrigue and concern. Intrigue, because the critics are mainly middle-class black students who attended white schools and white universities. Unlike the vast majority of young people who enjoyed access to premium institutions and used that experience to benefit themselves, their families and communities, this group of disaffected graduates is angry. Their complaint is very simple: they are still not free. They see a generational break between the old-timers' accounts of struggle and victory and a new generation caught in the daily grind of a white-dominated economy and



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untransformed universities.

But I also have a deep concern that, once again, radical behaviours from the past show up in the character of student protests. There was a glorious element to student and community protests that set us free. But there was also the dark side of unbridled anger, intolerance of dissent and violent confrontation which, while understandable in the heat of apartheid, cannot possibly define protests after apartheid. That dark side sometimes included complete disregard for the humanity of others, such as

the horrific "necklacing" episodes and the torture, even death, of suspects in camps. It included a disregard for education, teachers and teaching from which the post-apartheid school system has never recovered. That anger and intolerance shows up all too frequently in the way we protest on the streets, in parliament and on campuses.

We have lost the dignity of protest exemplified by people like Walter Sisulu, Beyers Naudé and Neville Alexander, radical forms of protests not reducible to violence, insult and degradation.



GRIEVANCES OF RECOGNITION

“F*** off, whites!” The shocking words that a young black man yelled out during the 2015 Ruth First Memorial Lecture found support in the crowded Great Hall at Wits University. I have felt the heat of this hatred among young people who have not spent a day living under apartheid or a night in the cells of the white regime.

But what exactly is the grievance? The institutional critique is much clearer: too few black professors, a neo-colonial curriculum, an unwelcoming institutional culture, everyday racism on campus. On that score, there can be little disagreement and most university leaders will acknowledge the complexity of overcoming these problems as quickly as we all wish we could.

The grievance becomes more complex, however, when it moves into the realm of black/white relationships. This was what the Ruth First Lecture promised to bring to light – the complexity of interracial friendships. At this point, what happens is a public baring of something long suppressed: an unrequited love. The anger becomes intense, even threatening. Some believe that interracial friendships carry no value. Others castigate whites along these lines: *We have to speak their language and they make no effort to learn ours. We are tired of smiling in friendships that demean us, make us feel less. We become like them on the outside even though our essence remains black. We are tired of living these two lives between our poor mothers and families and cavorting with whites in the realm of privilege. We are coconuts no more.*

It is important to pay attention to this strain of disaffection among black youth. In one sense, it is nothing new. In *The Rage of the Privileged Class*, Ellis Close described similar experiences of African-Americans inside the hostile corporate world in the US. It signifies that simply being allowed in is not enough; being accepted on one’s own terms matters. The problem of *social, cultural, intellectual and symbolic recognition* is a common and powerful lament in the

former white campuses in South Africa. Put bluntly, simply adding more black professors to the senate or broadening the curriculum or commissioning more studies on institutional culture will do little to pacify this rage. It could make matters worse.



Without solving the leadership problem at universities, large injections of state bail-out funding would be a terrible waste of resources.

It is important to distinguish patterns of institutional recalcitrance among South African universities. Some of the historically white Afrikaans universities still have a problem with the first order of business: basic access. The Open Stellenbosch movement was long overdue, and the *Luister* documentary is merely the start of an extended campaign to open up undergraduate studies to many more African students. It is really sad that the transformation of this otherwise top academic university was held back for decades by refractory language crusades to “protect Afrikaans” which kept the institution predominantly white and especially non-African. In the same way, repeated ugly assaults on the first black vice-chancellor of the North West University by white defenders of the Potchefstroom campus are nothing more than attempts to protect white dominance in language, culture and demographics.

In the historically white English universities, black student numbers have grown steadily, to a comfortable majority in some instances. The vice-

chancellors speak the language of transformation and senior colleagues drive change programmes. Their curricula are open, progressive and critical of their own foundations. There are funded initiatives to recruit older and promote young black scholars. So what’s the problem?

In the first instance, these institutions still convey an overwhelming sense of whiteness, from the complexion of the professoriate to the cultural rituals of everyday life. But there is more: they impose an English whiteness on newcomers that is hard to describe. Over the years, I have asked accomplished black scholars at UCT why they were so angry. Time and again, the answer was the same, conveyed with deep emotion: “It’s the way they make you feel.” I have been at the receiving end of those withering white putdowns by prominent UCT academics. I know exactly how it feels.

At the Afrikaans universities, racism comes blatantly in a Nazi salute or urinating into black people’s food or wearing blackface. At the English universities, it is the snub in the hallway, the put-down about your promotion, the clipped accent and Oxbridge references, the biting criticism of your manuscript, the talk behind your back, the fear of reprisal if you speak out, the inability to hug or deliver an unconditional compliment, and the constant reminder that you are not part of the club.

COMTSOSTIS AND OTHER HOOLIGANS

That said, there is a kind of gangsterism masquerading as progressive politics at the core of many of the disruptions at the former white English universities, a vile *comtsotsi* hooliganism that beats up other students, violently disrupts meetings, assaults members of staff, spews anti-Semitic and anti-white froth, and gratuitously attacks the dignity and integrity of leaders. When, in scholarship or journalism or everyday observation, we conflate this element with the progressive element, ►

we undermine the seeds of what could become a very powerful movement in student protests. This is a crucial point.

Where does this hooligan behaviour come from? There is no question that it mimics the off-campus behaviour of political parties, to begin with. The ongoing fracas in parliament is a model for some of these youths. Often they come from political and community contexts where intellectual disagreement and tough debate must escalate into verbal abuse and physical confrontation.

Needless to say, this violence is worrying in terms of our country's future, as it sustains conditions embedded in our society by apartheid and colonialism. The role of leadership and education is to change that behaviour and to tame those passions. The failure to discipline this particular angry mob is a failure of education and leadership at home, in schools, in community organisations and in our universities.

But to simply dismiss this rage as irrational is not helpful either. The angry black students are hungry on campus, struggling to find finances for tuition, and hustling to secure cheap accommodation. Then, perhaps with a dodgy quality of school education behind them, they find themselves in a laboratory or lecture hall with a white person standing in front and make a direct connection between their miserable state and the race of the lecturer. Where institutions fail to *recognise* this student's estrangement, fire and oil meet.

In this tight and twisted bundle of raw emotions, the anger is not always clearly articulated and there is no particular enemy, so everyone is. The political philosophy is similarly dense and confusing, ranging from a broad pan-Africanism to narrow black ethnic nationalism with more than a hint of poisonous anti-white racism. The language is straight out of an introductory social science course, such as repeated references to "the black body": simply to go to classes at Rhodes or UCT is to "subject the black body" to

an unrelenting oppression.

All kinds of figures are invoked in these angry flashes, from Biko to Fanon to Cornel West – but not, unsurprisingly, to King or Gandhi or Mandela. If Mandela gets any mention at all, it is as a sellout, the man who led South Africa into a soft transition that left white privilege undisturbed and black poverty undiminished. This instant re-interpretation, and dismissal, of Nelson Mandela is the most marked feature of the new anger.



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WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

These problems are not insoluble. They can be solved through a different kind of leadership. The students are not the problem.

Will the leadership of top universities like UCT and Stellenbosch truly accelerate the deep transformation of their institutions in ways that satisfy the demands of justice? If they retreat into their pre-Rhodes-Must-Fall or pre-Open-Stellenbosch slumbers, those universities themselves will threaten the future stability and academic standing of higher education in South Africa. To blame the students in this case would be disingenuous.

Which raises the question of the historically black universities, and here we need to be frank. There has to be a radical new financing model that effectively makes university education

free and accessible to all poor students for purposes of undergraduate studies. Until this happens, the chronic violence that keeps so many campuses in turmoil is not going to go away. It is as simple as that.

In the meantime, the historically black universities need courageous leaders who, with government support, can steer these institutions into stability so as to provide students with the depth and quality of training required for their degrees. Some of these universities are under threat of losing accreditation for some qualifications due to the lack of focus on the academic project. This means disrupting regressive union "activism" that holds universities to ransom with single-minded salary agendas. It means appointing leaders with political savvy and strong, disciplined management teams who can anticipate staff and student demands and redirect crises towards positive resolution.

Let me say this clearly: without solving the leadership problem at universities, large injections of state bail-out funding would be a terrible waste of resources that could have been deployed elsewhere. And only when leaders can win the confidence of students by actively and personally demonstrating their commitment to financial, academic and emotional support for students – when an ethic of care and compassion is threaded through the management of everyday student life – is it possible to require a discipline of student organisation and politics.

If we fail to do this, South African universities will remain a mirror of the national school system: a small elite group of functioning institutions and a large, chronically dysfunctional set of institutions surviving from one month to the next in a state of stable crisis, without being able to attend to the academic project. The small elite group of universities, under the constant demands of students, staff, government and business, will also unthread in time, until they too become part of an all-too-familiar postcolonial tale. [NA](#)