

# DISMANTLING THE FALSE POST-1994 NARRATIVE

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*The student movement demonstrates the failure of the post-apartheid narrative of rainbows and miracles to effect real change in people's lives.*

In terms of melodrama, coverage, impact, agenda-setting and far-reaching consequences, 2015 will go down in history as epoch defining. The students disrupted the routine way of seeing and being. In the fullness of time, this year might prove to be a point of no return and a catalyst for more radical changes in the political and socio-economic landscape of South Africa.

The speed with which the movement assumed a national character indicates the depth and pervasiveness of frustration in the country. It could be argued that, as far as the young people are concerned, the post-1994 narrative failed to appreciate the scale of historical challenges. While the movement was popularised with the #FeesMustFall hashtag, its key grievances coalesce around the seemingly anti-black, anti-poor, and anti-worker post-1994 agenda.

This agenda camouflaged itself by deploying the appealing language of reconciliation and non-racialism. Stripped of its beguiling tone, the agenda is more about reconciling

citizens to the material realities spawned by the logic of apartheid. Through policy choices and missed opportunities, these realities continue to play themselves out in people's daily experiences 21 years later. The country remains largely a country of two nations, as described by former president Thabo Mbeki. Addressing a house of assembly session on 25 May 1998, when he was deputy-president, Mbeki observed:

South Africa is a country of two nations. One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure... The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, with that right being equal within this black nation only to the extent that it is equally incapable of realisation.

The policy choices and misses can be attributed to a sleight of hand that was meted out to the ruling party during negotiations. Whereas apartheid had always been considered as a system of subjugation, it was repackaged as mere acts of terror, violence and violation ►►

committed by individual bigots. Thanks to the disservice meted out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, less emphasis was placed on how the rest of white society benefited from the oppression of black people. In one fell swoop, the entirety of white society was exonerated. The effect was to not only entrench the historical socio-economic inequalities but to provide them a cover of legitimacy.

Somehow the country was duped into believing that apartheid's structural challenges could be wished away by lofty phrases of reconciliation and rainbows. The country was fed the false notion of a miracle nation, and a majority bought into it. In politics and economics, there are no miracles. The idea was captivating, but wrong diagnoses and incorrect prescriptions to socio-economic ailments were bound to catch up with us. Columnist and author Jonny Steinberg (2014) drives this point home:

The freedom South Africans acquired in 1994 was mercurial and slippery. Politically, the changes were dramatic. The electorate expanded overnight to include every adult. But the structure of society stayed much the same. And white people remained white people, doing what white people had always done: running the professions, the corporations, the universities. Expertise, wealth, technical knowledge, social confidence – all of these remained deeply associated with whiteness.

In seeking to address the unfinished business of transition, the #FeesMustFall student movement places the post-1994 narrative in the dock. Nothing exposes the bankruptcy of the post-1994 narrative than the issue of access to higher education. Access requires not only academic capability but also one's ability to afford it. Thanks to apartheid's policy of systemic impoverishment, the dice were already heavily weighted against the black students. Financial handouts and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme could only go so far. The dispensation was anti-black from the onset.

The advent of managerialism and marketisation in higher education did not help. As universities embraced the language of the private sector, schools and departments were reduced overnight to cost centres. To cut costs, certain functions – unsurprisingly, those performed in the main by black and poor workers – were outsourced.



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In a split second, they lost the pension, medical aid, and leave days enjoyed by their fellow, mainly white, university workers. Their children could no longer study for free as their colleagues' children did. It is perhaps an indictment in the first instance that the department of education allowed this policy: it should have been obvious that it would entrench racial and class divisions and perpetuate the cycle of poverty. One would have thought that the new mandarins would remember the words of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela that they quote with monotonous frequency at graduation ceremonies:

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become president of a great nation.

The greatest indictment is perhaps of the black leadership and self-appointed spokespersons of the working class. They should know

better. The #FeesMustFall student movement proved that being black may be a necessary condition to advance transformation, but it is not enough. There is merit to the proposition that those appointed in historically white institutions are carefully chosen precisely for their incapacity to bring about any transformation. Having become invested in the system, they have become active propagandist of a system that is largely anti-black, anti-poor and anti-working class.

There are several lessons that the students protests have brought to the fore:

1. The movement exposed the inadequacy of intellectual critique that is not rooted in working class struggles. Tomes of studies critiquing the current dispensation accumulate dust on library and office shelves without leading to any change in policy. It is only when these critiques are coupled with the blunt instrument of mass actions and mass struggles that they are likely to bring about any effective change. The protests show the effectiveness of organised struggles to bring about transformation.
2. The movement exposed the racism and white supremacy that continue to afflict institutions of higher education.
3. The movement exposed the leadership weakness in higher education. It can be said without fear of contradiction that a majority of the highly paid and esteemed vice-chancellors were found wanting. It was embarrassing to see some running for cover and refusing to address their own students. In a majority of cases, they resorted to the use of police. The use of force indicates a deeper intellectual crisis and crisis of leadership. It says that vice-chancellors have not been able to take the students along with them. It reflects poor stakeholder management. Can the current management regain the respect it had prior to the protests? Or, put



differently, what kind of leadership does South Africa require to address the fundamental questions raised by the student movement?

4. Lost in the hurly-burly of analysis is the racial dimension. Protests around academic and financial exclusions have played out routinely in historically black universities without raising eyebrows, and have somehow been resolved without assuming the spectre of a national crisis. It is only in historically white spaces that protests invite national attention and require presidential attention. The message is quite clear – white concerns matter more.
5. The student protests have also exposed the hypocrisy of the so-called analysts, a majority of whom are university academics. Societal protests are routinely described as reflecting a crisis of legitimacy and leadership, yet we have not seen this description accorded to their own bosses in response to the students' protests and demands that include the decolonisation project.
6. There is probably a bigger question raised by the form and nature of the protest. That the most privileged in our society can resort to wanton destruction of property in the face of meagre resources, as well as the violence that has been witnessed, call into question the nature of intellectual engagement students find on a daily basis in the lecture halls.
7. Through organised mass action, the students have been able to force institutions to review policies on hiring practices and conditions of services – a feat that unions such as National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union had failed to achieve. It is commendable that students linked their struggles with those of a broader society. This is mark of political maturity and should also not come as a surprise. After all, the very workers who are exploited by university management are their

mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers.

8. Students have embarked on a process of decolonising their institutions. The first and probably the easiest step is that of dismantling apartheid and colonial symbols adorning their campuses. They have initiated the process of renaming institutional spaces and buildings with names of struggle icons. In doing so, they have rejected the rewriting of history that has taken hold and challenged the narrative of capitulation that allowed offensive symbols of oppression to remain unperturbed in our midst, such as the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. It is also a serious indictment that this matter escaped both the esteemed vice-chancellors and those who parade themselves as progressive intellectuals.



**In politics and economics, there are no miracles.**

9. Young people are not impressed with simply having black faces at the top. These were allowed to getting away with incompetence on the basis of black solidarity. Professor Malegapuru Makgoba is one of the notable exceptions. In a few years, he transformed the University of KwaZulu-Natal. First, Makgoba proved that the common mantra that black and women scholars are hard to find and expensive is a blatant and racist lie. Second, UKZN demonstrated that diversity does not necessarily lead to the lowering of standards. Under Makgoba's leadership, the number of staff with PhDs increased and so did the university's research productivity. Third, Makgoba did not suffer from the "I am the only black" syndrome that

has afflicted blacks when they assume positions of power and influence.

In the final analysis, the #FeesMustFall student protests have raised fundamental issues about our transition and the assumptions that informed it. The linking with broader struggles is correct, as the pace of transformation will be constrained by general social and cultural attitudes. A resolution of this challenge cannot be achieved without debunking social myths regarding transformation, as the case of UKZN demonstrates. The process of change requires courageous, politically conscious and astute leadership. The student protests show signs of how this can be done.

The #FeesMustFall student protest achieved what political parties failed to do in twenty years. Unfortunately, the speed with which both university management and government capitulated to the students' demands cements a view that both government and university management only understand the language of protest. In itself, this is not a problem, but a responsive government should not wait for protest. While university academics and management have routinely castigated the political leadership for not caring, for being out of touch and for mismanagement, the #FeesMustFall protest suggests that they are not any different. If anything, the higher education sector has avoided scrutiny for a long time. [NA](#)

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