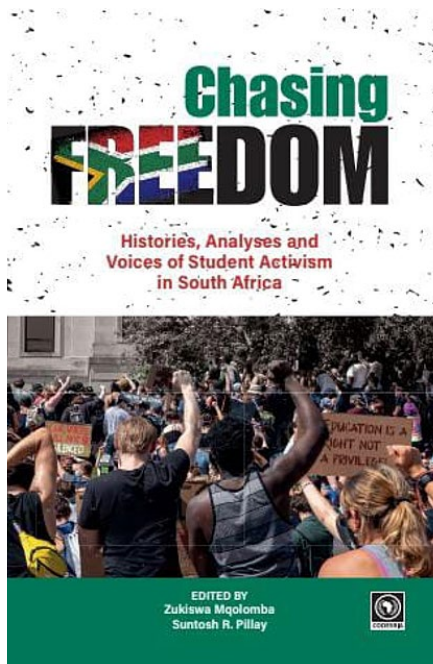


# Chasing Freedom:

## Histories, Analyses and Voices of Student Activism in South Africa



Edited by Zukiswa Mqolomba and Suntesh Pillay

Ebook – available from CODESRIA, Dakar (Publisher) \$15

Book Review by Mugabe Ratshikuni

One of the fundamental criticisms of the Fallist Movement was that it created celebrities out of the prominent leaders of the movement, without in any way drawing a connection between the struggle for free higher education in South Africa at the time of the Fallist Movement and the struggles of previous generations of student activists in South Africa, which includes the contribution of these prior generations to the advancement of the free higher education struggle in the country. This was a struggle that reached its zenith during the Fallist Movement, but did not originate from within that period, as ahistorical accounts of the period would have us believe.

It is within this context that one welcomes the publishing of the book, *Chasing Freedom: Histories, Analyses and Voices of Student Activism in South Africa*, edited by Zukiswa Mqolomba and Suntesh Pillay. It connects different generations of student activists, giving the requisite historical context that allows us to more accurately interpret and posit the Fallist Movement, within the broader historical struggles and contributions of student activists in South Africa, moving away from the celebrity pop culture of most contemporary interpretations and analyses of the Fallist Movement.

The book is a collage of articles, written by different generations of student activists, with no clear thematic alignment weaving them together, apart from their objective and subjective interpretations of their different epochs as student activists. However, instead of being a weakness, this actually gives the book more gravitas, as we traverse a journey with these writers across different eras. It gives us a greater appreciation of the role that young people, more specifically students, have played in the evolution of our common struggle for a better, more inclusive, more equitable South African society.

It clearly shows how this struggle is bound to be hijacked by conservatism

and “status quo-ism” if we don’t create room for the next generation of student activists to play their critical role (teleologically, existentially so), in pricking our collective conscience as a society that is meandering along towards what one hopes would ultimately be progressive ideals.

As one goes through the book, each writer’s contribution shows that student struggles are profoundly germane to the persistent struggle of each generation in society. During every era, the generations are linked together by their ability to construct a historical and contextual defence of their struggles, within the ambit of the particular societal challenges and problems of each era.

The book itself is a stark reminder of the contested nature of our history of struggle as a society. The different narratives stem from diverse subjective experiences as well as certain entrenched worldviews that have arrogated to themselves the right to dictate to us how we should perceive ourselves as contemporary South Africans who are intricately involved in this history of struggle, whether we are conscious of it or not.

The broad scope and range of essays by each of the contributors is an indication of the plethora of issues that ►

make contemporary South Africa such a complex and fascinating society to try and decipher, a society that continues to wrestle with the true meaning of its attempt to resolve the “historical injustice”, to borrow from the title of a very famous speech by former President Thabo Mbeki.

The different eras of student activism and subject matter that are covered within this book, in light of the Fallist Movement’s aims and objectives, give one a clear indication of the profound nature of these words from Frantz Fanon in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, to a developing country with colonial baggage like contemporary South Africa:

[U]nder the colonial system, a middle class which accumulates capital is an impossible phenomenon. Now, precisely, it would seem that the historical vocation of an authentic national middle class in an under-developed country is to repudiate its own nature in so far as it is bourgeois, that is to say in so far as it is the tool of capitalism, and to make itself the willing slave

of that revolutionary capital which is the people.

“In an under-developed country an authentic national middle class ought to consider as its bounden duty to betray the calling fate has marked out for it, and to put itself to school with the people: in other words to put at the people’s disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it has snatched when going through the colonial universities.

The struggle of the emergent national middle class within a post-colonial society like South Africa (perhaps neo-colonial would be a more accurate description in this regard) to assert itself; for self-determination within a multicultural modern environment that requires a “plurality of centres” and “moving the centre within nations”(not just between nations) to borrow from Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, is right at the heart of the prominent issues that were brought to the fore by the Fallist Movement and the struggles of student activists over

various epochs covered in the book. These are issues that still need to be wrestled with in contemporary South Africa as we strive towards nationhood and a society that is inclusive of all. Hence the essays in the book speak directly to progressive discourse within the country.

It touches on critical issues of social exclusion and economic marginalisation; of race and ethnicity; of culture, language and power; of gender and identity; of ubuntu versus materialism and hedonism within a pluralistic modern society with progressive aspirations such as contemporary South Africa. Ultimately, as one goes through the essays in the book, one is reminded of these poignant words from the poem titled “*Higher Education*” by the poet B.W Vilakazi:

Those I grew with, those  
unlettered  
When they meet me, they  
despise me  
Seeing me walk on naked  
feet while they travel in their  
cars  
Leaving me to breathe their  
dust:  
Those today are chiefs and  
masters **NA**