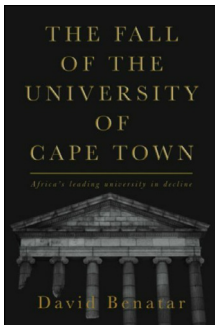




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BOOK TITLE:

The fall of the University of Cape Town: Africa's leading university in decline



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Ivory towers as contested spaces: A review of *The fall of the University of Cape Town*

The year 2015 saw widespread student protests, which started at the University of Cape Town (UCT), and grew exponentially across South Africa and indeed beyond its borders. Protests against rising student fees, 'colonial' statues on campuses and indeed the imported Euro-American curriculum, with little attention to African contexts and theorising, were central to debates and protests. The very issues that led to widespread protests and property loss in 2015 had been highlighted in a report by Steyn and Van Zyl at UCT in 2001 already.¹ Little attention was paid to these warnings about student dissatisfaction which, by 2015, had become a sea of discontent and burning rage and which manifested in poo throwing, fire and falling statues.

The Rhodes Must Fall and #FeesMustFall movements, in particular, generated a flood of South African writing. Some of the many books that were produced include *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa* by Francis Nyamnjoh (2016, African Books Collective), *As by Fire: The End of the South African University* by Jonathan Jansen (2017, Tafelberg Publishers), *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall* by Adam Habib (2019, Jonathan Ball) and now, *The Fall of the University of Cape Town* by David Benatar.

Benatar's book is, at 414 pages and 24 chapters, by far the most hefty of these books. The book constitutes a collection of previously published work (letters and opinion pieces) and new chapters. It is written in a journalistic style that blends Benatar's personal experience of official university meetings with selected student and staff interviews, as well as commentary on press reports. The journalistic style is a welcome respite from many academic texts written in convoluted and, at times, inaccessible language. There is, however, some repetition, which Benatar acknowledges. He provides a useful guide to reading the book.

The book provides an account of the organisational dynamics and institutional culture that shaped UCT during the student protests of 2015 onwards and the dynamics that continue to shape the anticipated demise of UCT. Benatar, a UCT insider, claims that 'this book tells the sad, true tale of what has been transpiring at UCT' (p. iii). The book centres on the perceived driving force of UCT's impending fall: 'racial toxicity'. It covers topics such as affirmative action, academic freedom and the rule of law in the context of democracy. To illustrate the perceived flaunting of principles central to higher education, the author cites numerous examples of various iterations of student protests and (flawed) appointment processes in senior academic posts, particularly leadership positions. In other words, the book covers what can perhaps be referred to as incidents in the everyday life of a higher education institution. Even though the title of the book focuses on the decline of UCT, Benatar acknowledges that there is much that is good about UCT. He cites strong leadership in some faculties as core to UCT's success. His, at times, impassioned analysis extends beyond UCT, to touch on 'dominant narratives' by an ANC-led government. He argues strongly, especially in the concluding chapter, that the mainstream press fuels skewed representation of opinions that challenge dominant narratives. His own opinion pieces, he argues, have fallen foul to an unfair press. He believes that this book is a warning to the leadership of the institution, and that strong leadership is necessary to avert UCT's decline.

It is no secret that higher education institutions are contentious spaces. What is clear from this book is that we live in a divided society and universities are microcosms of this society where dynamics of resentment and mistrust proliferate. We move in cycles where there are times of apparent peace, with vigilance, but the battle lines are sharply drawn during times of intense conflict, such as when student protests occur. The acidity, at times evident in the writing style, may attest to bitter battles so eloquently described.

I found a discussion of the impacts of neoliberalism in higher education missing from this text. It is an ideology that engulfs all institutions globally and asks from all of us to do more with less. It continuously demands increased performance, measured in economic terms, accompanied by an accelerated pace of learning and thinking and incessant audits and policies. All academics, and especially university managers, are having to find solutions to massification of higher education with accompanying budget cuts. This they must do while balancing periodic discontent and historical struggles with contemporary realities of higher education and then dealing as compassionately as possible with disgruntled staff and students. This is no easy task. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these tensions. Neoliberalism deeply tests the humanity of academics. Destructive competition (for resources), selfishness, backbiting and bullying amongst many academics, in local and international universities, is rife. Collaboration, support and genuine delight in others' achievements is less common than we would expect. Apart from the human impacts of neoliberalism being well documented in the academic literature, we simply have to watch TV series such as Netflix's *The Chair*, to gain some insight into the dynamics of everyday life in academia!

I was hoping that the concluding chapter would provide some direction for joint futures that will address some of the challenges faced by UCT (and other institutions). Instead the book disappointingly issued only a warning and strong leadership as a solution without guidelines as to what that strong leadership may entail.

This book is very readable and adds to the literature informed by university managers and academics' perspectives about institutional cultures, in this instance UCT. It is recommended for all who have an interest in higher education. I would suggest that it is read in conjunction with other books and articles, to provide a composite view of the cut-throat institutional dynamics that operate in universities.

Reference

1. Steyn M, Van Zyl M. Like that statue at Jammie Stairs: Student perceptions and experiences of institutional culture at the University of Cape Town in 1999. Cape Town: Institute for Intercultural and Diversity Studies of South Africa, University of Cape Town; 2001. Available from: <https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/7569/Like+that+statue+at+Jammie+stairs.pdf>