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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Decolonisation of institutional structures in South African universities: A critical perspective

Rene W Albertus*

Abstract: In 2015, using social media, a new generation of South African university students launched the social justice movement #FeesMustFall. The call for social justice, equity and equality has been a burning issue in South Africa's education system since the dark days of apartheid. In 1976, non-white students revolted against the apartheid government and many lost their lives during the protest. On 15 October 2015, 40 years later, students from all demographics mobilised to launch a protest under the theme #FeesMustFall against institutional racism which did not die with apartheid. The roots of this movement are symptomatic of deep social and economic concerns rooted in the apartheid history of South Africa. Through the use of social media, students mobilised protest marches in all regions of the country to demand justice, equality and equity. This paper discusses and describes the lack of transformation in South Africa's higher education which has perpetuated institutional racism for decades.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Critical Psychology; Higher Education



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Cultural alienation within the university system, racism, economic insecurity, poverty and bleak employment prospects after graduation are the everyday lived experiences of non-white South African university students. The "talk left, walk right strategy" adopted by the ANC government in 1994 has done nothing to bring about meaningful social and economic transformation; instead it has entrenched apartheid era social and economic structures, and an unequal post-apartheid society. The wealth gap has widened and the extant conditions are pushing another generation of South African youth into rebellion against colonial institutional structures that still operate within our universities and society at large. South Africa's elite are silent in the face of deepening poverty and suffering of ordinary South Africans; they resist and undermine any changes that would empower non-white citizens. The current social and economic structures have deepened the divide between the wealthy and poor, and this is fermenting a revolution that should have died with the birth of the new constitutional democracy.

Keywords: post-colonial theory; critical social theory; decolonisation; institutional racism; higher education; South Africa

“Experiences of suffering and struggle may take different shapes and forms, but the shadows of past pain still encroach on many lives making sadness linger”. Aristotle

1. Introduction

In 2015, South African university students launched a movement for social justice, equity and equality in South African universities. This new student protest movement, known as #FeesMustFall, was organised using social media (YouTube, WhatsApp and Twitter)¹ and continues to evolve in these media. Scholars refer to this as “digital activism” and as an “internet age” student movement, owing to its adoption of social media technologies (Bosch, 2016; Luescher, Loader, & Mugume, 2017). However, while adept and pervasive use of social media is a defining feature of this student revolution, the challenge is not new; it can be seen as a re-emergence of unresolved issues that existed prior to 1994 (Kruger, 2017). It is a reverberation of the 1976 non-white² students’ revolt against the apartheid government’s Bantu education policy (Baloyi & Isaacs, 2015; Mpfu, 2017; Ndlovu, 2017).

Twenty years into the so-called democratic South Africa, with the exception of allowing entry of non-white students into formerly white universities, the education system has not been changed. The social structures of colonialism and white privilege still manifest in the everyday experience of non-white university community members (Healy-Clancy, 2017; Heleta, 2016; Maringira & Gukurume, 2016). In 2014 the University of Witwatersrand (WITS) postgraduate students released the WITS Transformation Memo which called for decolonisation of the curricula, increase in numbers of black academic staff and an all-inclusive political, philosophical and historical intellectual tradition to help build a post-colonial university (Dlakavu, 2014).

The call for decolonisation of education and institutional structures by South African university students is rooted in the struggle for social justice, equity and equality. The conditions of inequality and the perception that promises of transformation of the unequal society are empty have pushed another generation of South African youth into struggle and advocacy for a dialogue with formerly white-controlled universities which seem slow or resistant to change. Feeling ignored, undermined and marginalised, students of the University of Cape Town mobilised for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes, an idol of South African colonialisation (Elgot, 2016).

The March 2015 launch of the #RhodesMustFall campaign galvanised other protests; by October 2015 the #FeesMustFall campaign erupted across South Africa’s university campuses. The focus of these student rebellions was decolonisation of higher education institutional structures, equal access to higher education for formally disadvantaged populations, and decolonisation of university curricula (Le Grange, 2016). Social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter were used to mobilise student activists across South Africa, and set the wheels in motion for country-wide student protests demanding free higher education and institutional transformation (Edwin, 2016; Vilakazi, 2016).

The new protest movement was led by the youth born after apartheid, known as the “born-free” or “Mandela” generation. This demographic group—children whose parents were the “struggle generation”—now accounts for 40% of the entire South African population. Until their awakening in March 2015, they were considered by the struggle generation to be profoundly unaware of the historical struggle against “Bantu” education that had ensued since the 1960s, and was indelibly marked by the riots of 1976. However uninformed and apolitical this born-free generation may have been, 2015 was their year of awakening and the start of a new era of student riots, once again aimed at bringing about institutional transformation in higher education and society (CMoloi, Makgoba, & Ogutu Miruka, 2017; Molefe, 2016). In their mobilisation and activism, the “born-frees”

made it clear to South Africa that they had come of age and were unwilling to accept the failures of the new democracy to deliver on promises of equal access to higher education, good paying jobs and a better life beyond what was offered in the marginalised apartheid state. These words of Nelson Mandela at the 1993 Cosatu Conference, became their mantra “If the ANC does to you what the apartheid government did to you, then you must do to the ANC what you did to the apartheid government” (Malila, 2015, p. 131).

Inaction from university management angered the students who escalated their protests, occupying and vandalising university residences, libraries and other facilities. At the beginning of 2017, President Zuma established the Heher Commission of Enquiry to investigate scrapping university fees, making higher education a democratic right. Seven months later, Judge Heher informed the President that “sound-minded South Africans did not believe that free education was feasible” (Zulu, 2017). Nevertheless, at the 54th ANC National Conference, President Zuma announced free higher education for all first-year students whose families earned less than R350 000 annually (Zulu, 2017). If this offer does not materialise, it could lead to more political action owing to the growing economic and social inequality in South African society. A deepening financial crisis from the falling value of the rand, rising unemployment³ and economic instability is adversely affecting the families of university-aged students who are depending on the offer of free education. Furthermore, the government offers no solutions to these families beyond the initial offer of free tuition for first year of higher education studies. How will these students finance their studies after the first year?

The lack of solutions to the students’ plight can only spell more trouble for South Africa’s higher education institutions in the years ahead. The social and economic conditions that gave rise to the student unrests and activism remain, and continue to intensify (Baloyi & Isaacs, 2015; Naicker, 2016). The formerly white-managed institutions maintain power by ignoring or undermining all attempts (such as employment inclusion, black empowerment and land reform) to solve the lingering disputes over inequality and unequal opportunities for groups marginalised under apartheid (Healy-Clancy, 2017; Heleta, 2016). For young activists, staying silent while observing the slow pace of transformation across key sectors of South African society, has had the effect of deepening their anger and frustration (Edwin, 2016; Langa, 2016; Ndelu, 2016). The critical psychologist Collins (2004, p. 22) suggests that anger and frustration over inequality and social injustice leads to disrespect for authority and deep suspicion that institutions controlled by the power elite will in fact “right the wrongs”. The defensiveness of university administrators and the South African elite who are unaffected by the problems resulting from the apartheid era marginalisation being exemplified.

There are different realities in South Africa: the affluent, who are white and privileged and who benefited from apartheid institutionalisation of economic and social exclusion of the poor—and the largely non-white population who suffered and continue to suffer marginalisation (Fine, 2018; Hino, Leibbrandt, Machema, Shifa, & Soudien, 2018; Masipa, 2018; Meiring, Kannemeyer, & Potgieter, 2018; Visser, 2019). The lack of critical debate or any debate on the continuing social and psychological impact of racism, inequality of opportunity in post-apartheid South Africa illustrates not only the lack of will to correct the wrongs of apartheid, but also a deep indifference to the life conditions of the marginalised people of South Africa (Chiumbu, Reddy, Bohler-Muller, Gumede, & Mtshengu, 2018; Gibson, 2004; Stewart, 2019; Villet, 2018).

The lived experience of the born-free generation is evidence that marginalisation (in access to quality education and jobs) which was institutionalised under apartheid remains in South African institutions and cultural practices (Healy-Clancy, 2017). Scholars have long argued that deeply rooted cultural practices of race discrimination do not abate on account of legislation (La Fuente, 2001; Seekings, 2008). Racism goes underground and racists go into denial, while racist cultural practices continue in institutions and everyday interactions, with no one taking ownership (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Linley, 2018; Rozas & Miller, 2009). The long socialisation into, and the institutionalisation of racist cultural practices will require longer and more extensive interventions to transform

South African institutions and to re-socialise racists into new ways of thinking and acting (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2008; Durrheim, Mtose, & Brown, 2011; Maylam, 2017; Sisk, 2017; Williams, 2018).

The challenge put to the government and university institutions by this new generation of activists has three important aspects: (1) decolonisation of institutions of higher education in order to break through the historical processes of marginalisation of non-white populations; (2) decolonisation of higher education curricula which was seen as denying the humanity of the non-white people of South Africa; and (3) the removal of financial access barriers which had worked to preserve university education for a small number of affluent students. All of these will require sustained student activism and public political action similar to actions taken prior to 1994.

2. The history of South Africa's higher education

The apartheid system created social and economic inequalities through overt racist policies. Central to the apartheid system were two important legislations: the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Bantu Education Act of 1952. The first determined where and how Non-Whites lived and work, and the second ensured that Non-Whites received a substandard education to perpetuate the social and economic inequalities (Christie & Collins, 1982; Mabin, 1992). According to Basebenzi (2019) Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of Bantu education, stated: "There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?" The Bantu education policy was designed to limit the development and mobility potential of the non-white population and keep them in the labouring class and lower strata of society. This policy determined the content and level of education with the goal of institutionalising racial inequalities by preventing access to higher education and entry into occupations requiring more than basic skills. The apartheid legislation stipulated educational opportunities for each racial grouping. Compulsory schooling was required for all Whites from age seven to sixteen, for Asians and Coloureds⁴ from seven to fifteen, and for Blacks from age seven to thirteen, while institutions of higher education were reserved for Whites.

Clearly, the less education that non-white students received, the fewer choices they had for work and economic mobility. While in post-apartheid South Africa all racial groups have the legal right to any level of education, access is still limited due to the lingering effects of apartheid policies that impoverished the non-white populations (Fine, 2018; Masipa, 2018; Meiring et al., 2018). Vast disparities in the development of educational institutions (primary to tertiary) still exist between white and non-white neighbourhoods. Educational institutions in urban and rural areas where non-white people live still have fewer resources and are far below the standards of those enjoyed by their white counterparts. According to Dreyer, Engelbrecht, and Swart (2012), the public primary and secondary schools of South Africa are far too under-resourced to address the needs of the learners. Furthermore, access to higher quality primary and secondary education is limited by income and affordability.

Educational inequality was also evident in funding mechanisms for different race groups. The Bantu Education Act (1952) created separate Departments of Education according to race, hence schools for black students automatically received less funding than schools for Whites. Funding is, after all, the determining factor when it comes to providing quality learning materials, facilities, and teachers. Disproportionate funding created disparities in the education sector. Apartheid funding resulted in an average teacher-pupil ratio of 1:18 in white schools, 1:24 in Asian schools, 1:27 in coloured schools, and 1:39 in black schools (Schuster, 2011). This system of segregation also affected the quality of teachers, in that 96% of teachers in white schools had teaching certificates, while only 15% of teachers in non-white schools were certified. In addition to affecting the quality of education, the Bantu Education Act also resulted in the closure of many learning institutions since it withdrew funding from schools affiliated with religion. Church schools provided education for a large number of Non-Whites during apartheid, and the withdrawal of funding from these church schools had a negative

impact on non-white education. Although the government explained its actions under the premise of separation of church and state, the abolishment of non-white students' education via the church was another form of educational injustice (Sturm, Groenendijk, Kruithof, & Rens, 1998).

The policies and funding disparities in schools ensured limitations in access to higher education. Four Afrikaans-speaking universities and one English-speaking university admitted only Whites, while the other five had restricted admission and segregated classrooms (Bunting, 2006). Additionally, there were financial aid barriers, and banks did not make loans to Non-Whites. This meant that even if students could overcome poor instruction from under-qualified teachers in overcrowded classrooms, they still faced financial barriers to achieving their academic goals.

Disparities in access to funding and quality of education are not limited to primary and secondary schools. Inequalities are still prevalent in the higher education system, as evidenced by the #FeesMustFall movement. The lack of financial aid for higher education compounded the economic exclusion of Non-Whites by restricting them to working class jobs. This legacy of apartheid now poses real limitations on the ability of those families to fund an education for younger generations in the face of economic inequality. Furthermore, bursaries from organisations and overseas scholarships are still benefiting white students because of the privileged positions of their parents in South African organisations. At South African universities, regardless of colour, those who are entrusted to manage funding from government and European partners have their own agendas.

It is impossible to address the inequalities in education without considering the economic disparities resulting from the apartheid system. Contrasting tiers of the workforce linger in the wake of apartheid's separatist presence; a large population of working-class Non-Whites stand out against the elite professional workforce comprised mainly of Whites (April, 2019). This signifies that the education system needs to rely less on individual contributions from parents for compulsory education as well as higher education in order to be able to further their aim of "moving past the legacy of apartheid". This ideal of free public education for all and financial aid for higher education will require increased education funding. In 2017 only 15% of the national budget was allocated to education, and 22% in 2018, which is inadequate given the scale of the problem. It is crucial that the South African Department of Education explores creative reforms to re-allocate funds, or find resources through other avenues, such as tourism in townships (Padayachee, 2019). These efforts will further achieve the goal of moving beyond the past and towards a future of social justice.

3. Decolonisation of institutional structures

Institutional hierarchies at universities are dominated by white academics. According to HEDA (2018), Whites comprise only 7.8% of the total population, but occupy 74% of the permanent academic faculty at the top South African universities.⁵ Table 1 provides a summary of the 2017 distribution of white and non-white academic staff at five major universities. The latest data (2018) for these universities indicates that 88% of full professors are white (HEDA, 2018). Non-Whites in the university system are still made to feel and think that they are "not good enough" because they are constantly undermined and undervalued (Heleta, 2016). Job opportunities are still reserved for those who have benefited under colonialism and males are preferred to females in the new post-apartheid patriarchal state (Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). According to Zondi (2017), Non-Whites have unrealistic expectations placed on them for job opportunities regardless of the fact that some have only been given opportunities in the last 24 years to catch up with their white peers who have had access to funding for years to build their academic profiles. A study by Sadiq et al. (2019) found that white academics at the University of Cape Town were promoted approximately 1.85 years faster than Non-Whites.

Following the #FeesMustFall crisis, institutional racism became more prevalent. Overt racism which isn't a new issue, but have not been brought to the public's attention. In a period of six

Table 1. Distribution of white and non-white academic staff for 2017 (HEDA, 2018)

University	Head Count	White	White %	Non-White	Non-White %
Wits	3200	1,733	54.2	1467	45.8
Cape Town	3037	1,798	59.2	1239	40.8
Pretoria	2840	2,022	71.2	818	28.8
Rhodes	738	497	67.3	241	32.7
Stellenbosch	2396	1,805	75.3	591	24.7

months from October 2017 to March 2018, a barrage of racial slurs emerged in the media where white academics attacked the integrity of non-white academics. However, many non-white members of the academic community believed that to publicly contest racism and the various forms of structural discrimination would be career-limiting for most. Racism manifests in many different forms, and white racists feel quite comfortable attacking anyone using the flimsiest rationale to support their point of view (Isaacs, 2018). For example, a senior academic at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which is a prestigious and well-respected institution, mocked a student for her religious beliefs. During Ramadan of 2018, a student asked her professor for time to break her fast during the exams, for which he berated her (Isaacs, 2018). When exposed for being insensitive, he responded with the following statement:

I see now that my response was appallingly ill-considered and hurtful, and has caused offence to the student in question, as well as to the broader UCT community and beyond. I am deeply ashamed at the lapse in judgement present in my communication, and the hurt it has caused, and hope that my sincere apology can be accepted. (Isaacs, 2018; Shelly, 2018)

Such excuses have a long history in colonialism and apartheid but continue in post-apartheid South Africa. The 1994 constitutional change inhibited some racist behaviour, which went underground for some time but is now rising again. In public places and social media, Whites can be frequently observed making derogatory statements about Non-Whites. Such behaviour is also common in many of the former white universities. Month after month, year after year, white academics offend and disrespect non-white members of the community as if it is their right and privilege to do so. According to Isaacs (2018), there seems to be no accountability and “flimsy” apologies are used to cover obvious racists’ resentment and disrespect for non-white colleagues. White privilege and power from decades of colonialism and apartheid still manifest in the everyday reality of this fractured society. Jackie Cameron of BizNews reports the following observation made by UCT Emeritus Professor, Tim Crowe:

Although the institution appeared to be non-racist, non-sexist and not overtly aligned with colonial masters, in practice UCT has been experienced as a place in which racism and sexism have thrived—just as they did everywhere else in South Africa. (Crowe, quoted by Cameron, 2017)

White privilege and racist behaviour are also exemplified by recent public attacks on Professor Phakeng. Nine months into her tenure as Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Internationalisation at UCT, a smear campaign was launched against her by two UCT alumni. In an email to 40 recipients (including a former vice chancellor, university council members and senior professors), the two alleged that Professor Phakeng’s qualifications were fake and cast doubt on her credibility. Professor Phakeng responded via the media:

[T]hey’re targeting me, as a black African woman in one of the highest offices at the university, who represents something conservatives associated with the university don’t want. I represent what conservatives are scared of. They think people like me are here to

take over or destroy. There are many white academics who are given professorship but don't have any doctoral qualifications Nobody questions their credentials or their academic track record and they don't even have. They can get away with it because they are white. Me, a black woman who doesn't only have a PhD but a rated scientist, and yet I have to explain myself." (Phakeng, quoted by Zondi, 2017)

A second example of the escalating racial conflict concerns Professor Ramugondo's legal action against UCT for allegedly hiring a "less qualified" white academic for the post of Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. Professor Ramugondo, at the time a full professor at UCT, had been acting Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning for some months and applied for the permanent position. However, the hiring committee chose Associate Professor Lis Lange, a white woman. Msindisi Fengu of City Press reports:

University of Cape Town Professor Elelwani Ramugondo is taking the university to court for hiring a "less qualified" white academic as its Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. Joining her in court is the university's Black Academic Caucus (BAC), which claims the institution flouted the rules when appointing Professor Lis Lange in December. Ramugondo, a full professor, lost out to Lange, an associate professor and former University of the Free State Vice-Rector for Academics. She claimed on Friday that she was overlooked because of institutional racism at UCT. "Institutional racism is a blind spot. A diagnosis must be done by an independent body and a court of law is best placed to do this. It is for this reason that I would like for this appointment process to be placed under legal scrutiny." She was going to court reluctantly after first trying "to engage all appropriate internal structures to resolve the issues". (Fengu, 2018)

A third and tragic example of the intensity of racial conflict is the suicide of a black UCT academic, Professor Mayosi. In heated exchanges, some student activists referred to Professor Mayosi as a "coconut"—a derogatory term to portray a black person as acting in the interests of white oppressors. While the reasons for Professor Mayosi's suicide are not clear and were not made public, there has been much speculation that he suffered from depression (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Msila, 2018). Was it being labelled a "coconut" by aggrieved students, during the period of #FeesMustFall, which triggered his depression? Was he feeling betrayed by students who labelled him as such, not realising the vulnerabilities of black academics in white institutions, or had he suffered from an untreated mental illness? While one cannot definitively state that the racial conflict in the university is to blame, yet another South African has died.

Many non-white members of the university community feel invisible and marginalised and suffer silently, fearing reproach from their white colleagues. They feel silenced by institutional structures dominated by the white and privileged whose hubris knows no limitations. The institutional hierarchy of colonialism and apartheid has put white academics at the pinnacle and the non-white members of the community at the bottom. And this social programming is presently manifesting in the everyday lived experiences of everyone in the major universities of South Africa. Under apartheid, white people were socialised to think of the university as an exclusively white arena. According to (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Msila (2018) one cannot be surprised that after the death of Professor Mayosi the university is now an arena of racial conflict. Resentment is palpable; as some colleagues of Professor Mayosi observe:

Demands for decolonisation have elicited character assassinations and personal attacks. At the leadership level of universities, management is still killing collegiality and academic citizenship. Trust between staff and students is at its lowest. Trust between staff and leadership is tenuous. Leadership is fragmented as people compete against each other rather than working closely for transformation. It's a strange world, an unenviable environment that shatters dreams and hopes for the future. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Msila, 2018)

4. Transformation failure and political crisis

While the university is a flashpoint of activism, problems of tenacious post-apartheid white privilege are affecting every area of life in South Africa. The economic structures of apartheid South Africa have not changed, and the result is continued exclusion and intensified poverty of non-white populations (Van der Berg, 2011). Poverty is deepening in South Africa and it seems that government anti-poverty policies are ineffective (Soudien, Reddy, & Woolard, 2019). A 2016 report indicated that 10% of the population owned 95% of the country's wealth (Orthofer, 2016). Koko (2019) reports that 30.4 million South Africans live in poverty, an increase of 11% since 2011. A study by Zizzamia, Schotte, and Leibbrandt (2019) of the distribution of poverty and affluence illustrates the enduring legacy of apartheid social structures in a society where Whites constitute only 7.8% of the population but 65% of the elite, while Africans and Coloureds comprise 100% of the chronic and 98% of the transient poor. Recent studies also show that 65% of non-white university students suffer from food insecurity. To put it plainly, they do not get enough to eat and it affects their academic performance (Van den Berg & Raubenheimer, 2015; Michael et al., 2018). The #FeesMustFall protest is a sign of growing discontentment among non-white South Africans in general. The crumbling economy, growing unemployment, the widening wealth-poverty divide and ineffective government are deeply frustrating to ordinary South African citizens. South Africa is witnessing a repeat of the 1976 student activism and it is clear that the current generation of university students is determined to eradicate the vestiges of apartheid. The current student activism is a radical critique of the unfulfilled transformation promises of equality, social mobility and Nelson Mandela's narrative of peace, reconciliation and forgiveness (Pillay, 2016). What should have been a progressive and thriving country for all, regardless of race, colour or creed has left the youth and many citizens disillusioned about the future. The violent protest that continues to plague South Africa is rooted in the bleak conditions of life experienced largely by the non-white population, and in the failure of the government to change the trajectory of the country.

The inadequate responses to the killing by police of 34 miners during the Marikana strike at Lonmin Mining on March 2012 is one more example of government failure. This incident revealed the callousness of the neoliberal economic agenda pursued by the South African government in which corporate interest trumps living wages for workers (Ashman, Fine, & Newman, 2011; Bruchhausen, 2015; Stewart, 2013). It also sparked for many South Africans a painful reminder of the police brutality experienced during the Sharpsville massacre of 21 March 1960 (Head, 2018; Twala, 2012). The tactics of the South African police at Marikana and other encounters with student and community protesters have awakened memories of physical and psychological violence perpetuated by the apartheid regime (Bond, 2019; Mkhize & Madumi, 2019). Instead of offering compensation and justice for the miners, the government compounded the violence, when President Cyril Ramaphosa who was a non-executive director of Lonmin Mining at the time of the Marikana massacre referred to the miners as "plainly dastardly criminals". He told the media that "concomitant action" must be taken against the miners (the action "naturally associated" with a situation like this) (Head, 2018).

South Africans have come to realise that on this issue, the current government is no different from the apartheid government; history is repeating itself. This rhetoric further ignited student activists who were joined by protesters of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a radical leftist political party. Since 2013, the EFF has been aggressively challenging the government. In 2015 South Africans witnessed the first of many disruptions of the State of the Nation Address by the EFF. These disruptions ensued until 2017 when public citizens protested, calling for President Zuma to resign owing to mounting corruption and grand larceny charges (Mckenzie, Swails, & Clarke, 2018).

South Africa is now reaping the results of its neoliberal economic accommodations which preserved the vested interest of the privileged Whites of the apartheid society at the expense of its non-white citizens (Bond, 2019; Simon, 2018). The revolutionary promises of social and

economic freedom, land return, equality and justice have given way to kleptocracy, corruption and state capture (Khan, 2019; Madonsela, 2019; Meyer & Luiz, 2018; Noyoo, 2018).

The promise of a job after graduation is as distant for students as the idea of free education, for which generations of South Africans have fought. The idealism of the born-free generation of university students is now igniting rebellion reminiscent of the apartheid era. Robbed of their hopes for a life free of the shackles of apartheid, a brighter future and non-racial society, they are angry. They are angry at post-liberation politicians and a government that claimed it was free from the dominance of colonialism and its social and economic exclusion (Beresford, Berry, & Mann, 2018; Msimang, 2015). The government is weak and incapable of turning the situation around (Padayachee, 2019). Many ANC leaders have lost their moral compass and are otherwise powerless in the face of neoliberal global pressure to reshape the status quo (Ansari, 2019; Ndhlovu, 2019). Since the ANC accommodation of white privilege and global neoliberal economic interests in the mid-1990s, their dominant interest has been self-enrichment and the consolidation of power in the hands of a small elite (Ansari, 2019; Southall, 2008; Van Wyk, 2009). The continuous pillaging, corruption, state capture, mismanagement of state enterprises and scandals have left little energy for addressing the challenges of land reform, poverty, poor housing and equal access to higher education for the larger population (Bracking, 2018; De Juan & Wegner, 2019; Meyer & Luiz, 2018; Van Wyk, 2009). The social compact between the ANC government and the people has been shattered (Madonsela, 2019; Southall, 2019; Zizzamia et al., 2019). South African citizens have lost confidence that their government has the interest, will or capacity to implement the transformation ideals for which they fought during the years of apartheid (Bracking, 2018; Padayachee, 2019).

5. Conclusion

Social protests in South Africa are increasing daily and are already the highest in the world, now numbering more than 10,000 different protests each year (Alexander et al., 2018; Bond, 2019; von Holdt & Naidoo, 2019). This should not surprise; institutional repression breathes rebellion. Many segments of society are agitating for change—however, as in the apartheid period prior to 1994, it is the students who are at the vanguard of critically questioning the government’s modus operandi for building an equal and democratic society. They are the leading lights of non-white South Africans’ hopes for a better future and the completion of the transformation of society defined in the constitution. As in the days of apartheid, they refuse to be silent and obedient. Silence in these conditions would ensure that the privileged classes maintain their privilege, which would mean even more violence on the repressed.

An important observation here is the silence of white South Africans on the issues of poverty, economic inequality and access for non-white students to higher education. A 2018 report from the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation states: “A large majority of white South Africans continue to be silent on racist events that continue to mushroom in South Africa” (Kambule, 2018). Silence in response to the suffering of non-white people has a long history in South Africa and other colonial states. White bystanders (not directly involved in an incident) would watch when “others” were being abused verbally, physically and sexually (Coetzee & Du Toit, 2018; Price, 2018; Schaller, 2010). This white-bystander-socialisation is endemic in South Africa and manifests in different forms in daily life. It is indicative of beliefs of separateness, and of a lack of common bonds of humanity with non-white citizens. This ability to be detached can also be observed in white South African academics who can inquire into social issues of inequality and racial discrimination and still perpetuate the same on their non-white colleagues (Cornell, Malherbe, Suffla, & Seedat, 2019). Studies have shown that white racism in South Africa is on the rise (Van Zyl-Hermann, 2018) and silence is not an appropriate response from those who claim to support liberal democratic principles of equality, justice and equity for all. As Pillay (2016, p. 157) reminds us: “When privilege is being challenged and justice is being demanded, these silences become forms of violence against decolonisation”.

Student protests have a long and important history in the struggle for freedom and equality in South Africa (Morrell, 2002). That non-white university students have embarked on rebellion at this time is not surprising. They are young adults with hopes for a better life, which they see no possibility of obtaining. Moreover, they belong to communities that expect them to contribute to the livelihoods of others in their families and communities and change the legacy of poverty. They have responsibilities for the next generation of youth in their families and communities; in this regard, they feel real pressures from the lack of economic opportunities and possibilities for social mobility.

The second important aspect of this rebellion is the use of modern communication technologies. Social media is the primary mode for organising and communicating the current South African students' rebellion. Technologies like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp and Twitter in the hands of these economically impoverished non-white student activists of the born-free generation are powerful weapons of resistance. They are easily accessible via smartphones and university computing infrastructure, are low cost and are not constrained by geographic proximity. Moreover, applications such as WhatsApp are commonly used by South Africans of all ages to maintain community connections and family bonds with mobile individuals who must leave the rural areas for employment and educational opportunities in the cities and urban areas.

Hashtag names also symbolise the emotions of activists and they demonstrate the vital importance of social media to the student revolution (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Molefe, 2016; von Holdt & Naidoo, 2019). Some examples of the scope and sentiments embodied in the hashtags are: #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall, #AcademiaMustFall, #ZumaMustFall, #ANCMustFall, #RamaphosaMustFall, #OppressionMustFall, and #RapeCultureMustFall. These hashtags are of psychological importance to ordinary South Africans whose culture of resistance is rooted in the toyi-toyi and protest music (Twala & Koetaan, 2006). They also play a role in providing continuity with the historical liberation struggle while invigorating it with the ethos of the new generation of freedom fighters.

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Correction

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Notes

1. A search of YouTube using the term "FeesMust Fall" will return more than 100 videos of the student movement. Searches of Twitter will also reveal thousands of posts since 2014.
2. The 1950 Population Registration ACT of the Republic of South Africa defined a "white person as one who in appearance is obviously a white person who is generally not accepted as a coloured person" and a non-white as all others inclusive of Bantu, Khoisan, South and East Asians, and mixed-races such as Cape Coloured.
3. The 2019 Trading Economics report state youth unemployment was 54.7 in fourth quarter 2018.

4. Coloured (Afrikaans: Kleurlinge) is a multiracial ethnic group of peoples whose ancestry include Khoisan, Bantu, European white, East and South Asian.
5. The top seven universities are Cape Town, Wits, Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Johannesburg, KwaZulu-Natal and Rhodes.

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