Book review

Luescher, T.M., Webbstock, D. & Bhengu, N. (Eds.) (2020). *Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017*. Cape Town, South Africa: African Minds.

Reviewed by Imkhitha Nzungu*

Animated by the voices of 12 former student leaders representing Students' Representative Councils (SRCs) from a few public universities across the country, *Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017* situates the discourse-shifting #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements as an inevitable progression after two decades of governmental and institutional shillyshallying on urgent issues confronting the progressively diverse national student body. The compilation is the second in the Reflections series, counterbalancing its predecessor, *Reflections of South African University Leaders, 1981 to 2014.*

Chapter 1 of 14 features a literature review, outlining the legislative background of the SRC and the research project's methods and aims. The final chapter synthesises and makes recommendations based on the middle 12 chapters, which see transcriptions of the interviews conducted by the editors with the former student leaders. Due to the study's interview approach, each of the twelve interviewees is credited as co-author of their own chapter. This is alongside the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) affiliated editorial team consisting of project co-leaders Thierry M. Luescher (HSRC) and Denyse Webbstock (formerly CHE), and Ntokozo Bhengu (CHE).

Each chapter introduces a new personality distinguishable not only by name, but by their personal history, diction, experience, tone and ideological bent. It is also these idiosyncrasies which should curb generalising findings from these case studies to all sectors of the South African student population then and now. Moreover, and as the editors acknowledge, since the interviewees no longer occupy these positions, the accounts are retrospective and so benefit from hindsight in terms of contextualisation and potential rationalisation of past decisions and actions, which at the time may have been whimsical or not as considered as the distance of reflection under controlled conditions may make them seem. The reader is at the filtering mercy of both interviewee accounts and editorial focus. Limited in the former by the random distortions of human memory and, in the latter, by the scope of enquiry permitted by the mostly fixed questionnaire.

Despite the sample size, the relatively wide range of interviewee demographics reflects the diversity of the SRC electorate: South African university student bodies. Linguistic gender markers demonstrate an overrepresentation of male former student leadership.

* Ms Imkhitha Nzungu is a former student and master's graduate of Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Email: imkhitha@africanminds.co.za

In terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic background, most of the participants hail from varying degrees of historical structural disadvantage. However, due to the diachronic and longitudinal nature of the study, socioeconomic situation can be regarded as spectral for some of the participants, a product of class mobility. Therefore, while it may have been more varied during their student years, this may have changed at the time of interview recording. All interviewees were gainfully employed when the interviews were conducted; the sectors of the economy in which they were occupied vary from public to private to the in-between. Another unintentional commonality within the group concerns academic background during their SRC years, 'with most having studied broadly in the social sciences … and having been undergraduate students' (page 12).

All interviewees are politically aware, varying in involvement, degree, orientation and political party affiliation. Political orientation spans a progressive spectrum, from liberal to leftist, leaning more towards a left-wing populist orientation. Although mostly variable as regards type, location, historical and present-day (dis)advantage in terms of institution, considering that only university ex-student representatives feature in the study, it is a wonder that the editors chose to omit 'university' from the title. Moreover, the student leadership histories of some specific institutions are more fleshed out than that of other singly occurring universities. In this way the research project's representativeness is undermined.

SRC: Self or Special Interest? Popularity Contest? Vehicle for Redress?

Politics is mostly spectacle, but for many in a nation in which opportunities for social mobility are limited by avenues and access, politics can be reputation building and/or laundering spectacle. With many, as suggested by their short biographies, socialised into and accustomed to a politics of want and unmet basic community needs, some interviewees appear to have approached their membership in the SRC as a form of and forum for retroactive redress of wider economic and social justice ills.

Without undermining their career success or even the hardships many of these former student leaders had to overcome to make something of themselves, arguably, this outcome affirms David Maimela's observation that 'universities are instruments of hierarchy … inasmuch as they are also instruments of levelling the playing field' (page 123). Similarly, while lauding present-day student bodies for their participation in student politics, Muzi Sikhakhane problematizes this aspect of active participation by highlighting an observable characteristic of contemporary politics: "[the] fact that *politics attracts people who are in it for themselves*" [own italics] (pages 28-29).

Considering the country's recent and costly experience with corruption at the highest levels of government, it stands as testament of the limiting nature of a fairly fixed questionnaire that no follow-up questions were posed in response to Sikhakhane's comment (e.g. whether that view could be applicable to himself or others and their roles in the SRC). This is remarkable because reference to corruption within SRC ranks is made in the ex-student leader accounts. Further, as some interviewees acknowledge, there are some student leaders – seemingly unaffiliated to university sanctioned structures like the SRC –

whose lives and aspirations may have been stalled or halted due to their activism. Students who were either expelled from their respective institutions of higher learning or even imprisoned as a result of security force intervention in student protest action. The treatise presents us with the stories of only those who *made it*, failing to represent the experiences of those who did not.

Interests conflicting with that of university management and the strained relations and misunderstandings between the two groups likely to attend that; the extra responsibility that comes with such a position are to be expected of student leadership experience. However, although certain powers come with student representation, restrictions abound. An example of such constitutional limitations is the term length of SRC office (particularly as opposed to university management term lengths): a year. This leaves little time for students to find their bearings, receive training (which is not guaranteed), define their mandate as a body, negotiate ideological differences, familiarise themselves with wider student body concerns, delegate positions and tasks, prepare for sessions in student body assemblies, Senate and Council; all while still being, in most instances, full-time students – not to mention human beings.

Without diminishing student leadership gains, one wonders about the potential efficacy of such an overpressurised structure. But, especially considering the recurring student body concerns that went unaddressed for two decades and eventually culminated in the Fallist movements of 2015/16, what even is the metric for SRC success? Whose interests are (better) served by short SRC term limits? Because, arguably, errors in continuity are likely to have contributed to these perennial student demands going unanswered by management all the years since 1994. Similarly, in some cases, lack of solidarity between incoming and outgoing SRCs and failures in institutional memory may also have stalled progress on these issues – at least on the student politics front. Relatedly, a further source of division is the seeming mirroring of national political party partisanship in student politics. While it is somewhat justifiable (due to skewed student-institution power dynamics), the intervening years have seen modestly tangible, far-reaching benefits from the involvement of national political parties in student affairs.

Petrifying Progress

(*Mandela unleashed*)

A recurring theme in the former students' recollections of their experience in leadership is the goal of representing majority student body interests, especially concerning issues of accommodation, financial and academic exclusion, governance, alienating institutional culture and transformation. For all the gains it tracks, the compilation serves just as well as a general disillusioning time capsule, particularly of the time-honoured South African tradition of fraught student-institution-government relations. The complex dynamics are captured in the following recollections by Muzi Sikhakhane (Wits SRC president, 1994/95):

> As students … we needed [the ANC] to help us by engaging with the institutions of higher learning so that we could not just use the new political dispensation to blunt student struggles, but use it to tell universities it's time … to confront their own prejudices.
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> (page 26)

Prishani Naidoo (Wits SRC vice-president, 1995/96):

> From about '95, '96, you got … two representatives to Council, two representatives to Senate … We would put things on the agenda, and I can remember one of the senior professors saying … in a debate on fees … *'Your voices have been heard and you have been consulted.'* And I said to him, *'But consultations don't just legitimise a process. It means, if you were heard, you must have some impact on the process.'* [own italics]   (page 50)

In his instance of national government and institutional collusion in stymying student leadership advocacy for student demands, David Maimela (UP SRC member 2003) echoes an incident similar to one recalled in Prishani Naidoo's chapter about that very issue and both stories feature a towering figure:

> … it must have been '95 when there was a total national shutdown of universities. Madiba called in the National Executive Committee of SASCO, and … said … that, 'Your demands are basically legitimate, and we hear them, and we are going to deal with them. Agreed?' And the SASCO leadership said, 'Agreed.' And then … he said …, 'You will also call off the protest. You know students have to go back to class.' *There was no agreement there, because Madiba walked out of the meeting*, faced the journalists, and announced that, 'SASCO has agreed with me, and the national shutdown is called off and students are going back to class.' And then the SASCO leadership was shocked, but Madiba was Madiba, so you cannot say no now … [laughs]. [own italics]   (page 125)

Reflecting on the tactical differences she observed between the SRC during her term and that which emerged around #FeesMustFall, Zukiswa Mqolomba (UCT SRC president, 2006/07) posits:

> So, this SRC is more destructionist and we were more reformist. [sic] Believing that we could actually use the structures in governance. I think … students became frustrated that things were not changing through mere representation of students in different forums of the university. I think it's because … the old guard is pretty much still dominant at universities across the country, in particular the previously advantaged universities … So, the transformation agenda is progressing slowly … And they are the ones who would determine the curriculum and the agenda of the universities, they are the ones taking up the majority of positions in Senate and Council.   (page 169)

What even is Cooperative Governance?

Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017 introduces the concept of cooperative governance as the philosophy underpinning legislatively mandated student representation in public higher learning decision-making bodies and structures. However, as the excerpts above suggest, the theory still has a way to go towards becoming credible and reliable practice. Inconsistencies in implementation and quality of outcomes could be observed

soon after its establishment and so went on to colour the experience of subsequent ex-student leaders.

For many first-years of previously disadvantaged backgrounds universities remain alienating and disorientating. This is an experience echoed by many of the ex-student leaders upon their arrival at these institutions. As Jerome September recalls his initial experience of institutional culture at UCT: 'It was a very foreign world, a very alien world. It was that stuff [streaking traditions and drinking in residence during first-year orientation], but it was also more subtle things: behaviours in the dining halls; what is appropriate and what is expected of you' (pages 62-63). Thinking about the pernicious and specific forms institutional alienation can take at university, Mpho Khati (UFS SRC vice-president, 2015/16) highlights the intersection of race and socioeconomic status as a significant determinant inaugurating the university experiences of underprivileged students in the process of seeking accessible and affordable accommodation:

> …universities I don't think were created with black people in mind, because of how it is difficult for us to navigate university space. For example, if you come from Limpopo or wherever, and you have to look for space or for res, there is no waiting residence or area where you can stay in this window period while you are still looking for accommodation. There are a lot of students that, after registering, they are going back to the train station or are just trying to sleep wherever they can. *This institution, was it created with us in mind?* Maybe it is one of the things that need to be addressed now that large groups of people are still coming and they don't have the resources like the other group. [own italics]
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> (page 275)

Interviewee analyses of the student and national political situation during their terms and in light of the Fallist movements are incisive and informative. This encompassing sociopolitical commentary further exposes the narrowness of the study's focus. While the discriminating impulse is a focused research project rule-of-thumb, the study seems to presume the implicit justice of the SRC's existence as a body as it insufficiently engages the subject critically. Some participants remark on the necessity of setting personal political inclinations aside in the name of wider student body representation. However, that this is, ideally, a politician's function is never addressed as a counter, particularly in instances where former student leaders – even rightfully – criticise the deficiencies of and distance themselves from current national politics. Without such editorial steering, in many of the accounts one perceives a tendency to view the SRC solely as some form institutional watchdog, when, in practice, it is more akin to a parastatal.

Desperate Hope

Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017 makes a valuable contribution to understanding the leadership experiences of the post-1994 crop of former students. This is relevant not only to budding student leadership, but, as a reader and former student interested in democratic South Africa formal education, exposure to the perspective of ex-student leaders on relations between student representatives and university management was instructive for me too, having never directly participated in these structures. It provided

a window, albeit limited and retroactive, into some of the familiar and unique histories, hardships and the groundwork born thereof of a previous generation of students that may have facilitated my own university experience.

The study is also useful as a resource for charting a course for future institution–government–student (leadership) relations. The success thereof must hinge on recognising that, while they plague cooperative governance progress, failures in understanding and communication – on all sides – are to be expected and mitigated; and that each group has and recognises different kinds of languages of communication for different reasons, including history, ideology and urgency. Frank communication and deliberate attempts at mutual understanding are required to facilitate the process.

Nevertheless, although relations between university management and student representation are ultimately variable from one institution to the next, depending on the year and the personalities involved, that these problems persist even after the groundbreaking Fallist student movements reveals a wider legacy of structural failings.