

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What Are We Witnessing? Student Protests and the Politics of the Unknowable

Dionne van Reenen*

Abstract

South African public higher education has been dogged by student protests since 2015. Many of these disruptions raise pertinent issues for the sector, as well as bring about valued awareness and change. Critical scholars have remarked that in every social or political movement, something of pronounced importance is being said – usually emerging from representatives of groups that have been marginalised, subordinated or even muted. In this article, a “logosemantic” theoretical perspective (Visagie, 2006), which is also referred to as “key theory” (Visagie, 2006; Van Reenen, 2013) is utilised to determine some driving conceptualisations emerging in the “languaging strategies” (Stewart, Smith & Denton, 2012) of contemporary student movement culture in South Africa. Not discounting significant research that investigates the impact of the digital age on the communication, mobilisation and sustaining of social movements, this article takes a critical look at grounding concepts that may be identified in the discursive formations of the movements. These are taken to be neither new nor unique, either in essence or manifestation. However, the divisions and polarisations they expose, signal an urgent need for some communicative reform in the “imagined community” (Anderson, 2016) of the academy.

Keywords

language strategy; legitimacy; logosemanitics; postmodern; student protests; social movement culture

Introduction

Wherever one’s sympathies may lie within the diverse racial, political and class histories of South African public universities,¹ it is a truism that since 2015, South African higher education (and broader society) has seen some rallying against inherited structures of power, establishment and privilege in the form of widespread student protests (Luescher &

1 Given my involvement at the University of the Free State (UFS) specifically, I make no assumption that this materiality is reflected elsewhere, although it may be. Readers are welcome to make such determinations and offer alternative assessments against dissimilar institutional involvements and circumstances.

* Ms Dionne van Reenen is a researcher at the Unit for Institutional Change and Social Justice at the University of the Free State (UFS), South Africa. Email: vanreenend@ufs.ac.za

Klemenčič, 2016; Van der Merwe & Van Reenen, 2016; Jansen, 2017).² In the academy, there have been persistent calls for ‘new’ ways in which to speak about, make sense of, and resolve problems in South African public higher education, which have arguably reached crisis stages as full-blown university shutdowns became spatial representations of communicative breakdowns in recent years (Manjra, 2016). These disruptions remain a powerful tool for both consciousness raising and coercion. However, it is not clear what is meant by requests for a ‘new’ language or even if there is some yet-to-appear vocabulary that one could access in order to understand or address such impasses. From Stewart et al. (2012), to whom I refer below in more detail, I would argue that a good deal of this rhetoric is not new; in fact, it is rather typical of ‘languaging strategies’ in movement culture generally. Likewise, underlying those strategies, one may find quite conventional examples of postmodern “conceptual structures” (Visagie, 1994, p. 12). What remains troubling in the post-#Movement era is that, those attempting to respond to problematic institutional politics seem to be struggling to find some consensus that could bring about either long-term solutions or workable interim resolutions in order that educational projects can continue unimpeded by polarising politics.

The fragmentations that have emerged between and amongst students, staffs, managements and government have not done much to yield wider agreements required to make decisions or plans and implement them effectively (Shaku, 2016).³ Further, when an apparent consensus has been reached, it appears to be a false one, in that it is only a matter of time before settlements are rejected and met with ever more dissatisfaction, followed by another round of protests and, indeed, more uncertainty about how to proceed or if the growing lists of demands and the institution’s inability to meet them will end. This article is a philosophical critique of “logosemantic kernels” (Visagie, 1994; 2006) and “languaging strategies” (Stewart et al, 2012) detectable in student politics discourse. The analysis accepts the premise that as long as there are large-scale social inequalities and resistance thereto, critical voices from the academy are important in exercising caution towards persistent, pervasive flirtations with “one-dimensional modes of thought” based on a “functionalised, abridged and unified language” (Marcuse, 2013, p. 98, 134), from which scholarly spaces are certainly not immune.

Managing the Fallout of Segregationist Thought

Benedict Anderson (2016, p. 4) claims that to understand nationalisms properly, “we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such powerful emotional legitimacy”. It would seem reasonable to assert that one thing South Africa has been doing

2 This includes various expressions of dissatisfaction with ongoing practices of inequality or discrimination primarily against people of colour in the academy. Similar resistance has occurred in the broader South African society, against a backdrop of international and global resonance. Jonathan Jansen, cited in this article, was the rector and vice-chancellor of the UFS at the time of the protests. The current rector and vice-chancellor is Francis Petersen, under whom protest action has continued.

3 Shaku was a student activist who worked at the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice at the time of the 2015 protests.

over the last two decades or so, is attempting to manage the fallout after the unbridled, nationalistic project of apartheid, with fluctuating levels of commitment and success.⁴ This effort has utilised various interventions involving reconciliation, reconstruction and redress as markers for policy and implementation under the overarching principle of social cohesion contained in the National Development Plan 2030 (2012). However, a new generation has come of age in South African society and is making its presence felt in higher education. This generation is far more focused on economic redress and advancement than its predecessors and frames this discourse in a social justice narrative which, in essence, is highly egalitarian.⁵ On one hand, students are fighting exclusions resulting from the “historical legacy of apartheid” and colonialism; on the other hand, they are challenging a current political administration that is perceived to be “a craven and corrupt political class” (Manjra, 2016). The public university structure is seen as connected to both.

In the preamble to the digital age, around the time that the ethics and concepts contained in postmodern thought were being engaged with more seriously as alternatives to classical ideals, South Africa formally entered the era of apartheid (in 1948), which was characterised by a diametrically opposed set of ethics, serving a rigidly segregated, conservative, oppressive system. I would suggest that, following various social and political destabilisations in the earlier twentieth century, the emergence of the postmodern era in the latter part of the twentieth century ushered in a set of “critical, strategic and rhetorical practices” that significantly changed the academy (Aylesworth, 2015). These have found expression in various social movements and their politics globally, but were incompatible with South African public higher education and society at the time.

After 1994, however, the push towards democratisation continues to grow. One might acknowledge an unprecedented, widespread visibility of this democratisation in the twenty-first century, presumably due to the massive expansion of mass media industries and their highly effective vessels of ever-evolving technology (Earl & Rohlinger, 2012, p. ix). The long-held faith in a conventionally authoritative, reasonably stable knowledge tradition has been shaken and so have its spaces for, and modes of, delivery. Exposed to the dynamism and speed with which information gets disseminated in the public sphere, the current generation seems to be very sceptical of all tradition; they seem genuinely interested in a politics of fragmentation and difference; they are very taken with a sense of crisis, disruption and apocalypse (cf. Kellner in Marcuse, 2013, p. xxxii). The latter framings

4 The UFS is a historically Afrikaans university (HAU) that served the nationalist vision with pride, promoting a strong ‘Afrikaans’ and ‘Christian’ institutional culture amongst an exclusively white staff and student body. A comprehensive history of the university is documented in *From Grey to Gold* (2006). This changed in the early 1990s, when people of colour were finally admitted to undergraduate programmes and could be resident on campus. A parallel language policy, incorporating English-medium instruction, was implemented in 1993 to make these inclusions possible (Van der Merwe & Van Reenen, 2016, p. 7). The policy changed again in 2016 with white students, many of whom did not select Afrikaans-medium instruction, now forming about 20% of the student body (UFS Commission for Gender Equality presentation, 2017). The university continues to struggle with transformation against this history (Van der Merwe & Van Reenen, 2016).

5 Some refer to this generation as the ‘born free generation’ (Cooper, 2017, p. viii), i.e. born after the end of apartheid.

have gained some significant currency amongst many observers in South African higher education (cf. Ray, 2016; Manjra, 2016; Jansen, 2017). Correspondingly, affective language containing appropriate measures of anxiety and dread, permeates commentary regarding the future of the sector, often described as being “in crisis”, “under pressure” and “on a precipice” (CHE, 2016, p. 5).

The disruption of the knowledge space, the core concept of which is deeply rooted in notions of fixity and endurance, seems to have left South African higher education embroiled in perpetual (individual and collective) existential crises of Nietzschean proportions. At the University of the Free State (UFS) these disruptions, coupled with an academic staff that is resistant to change, largely white and therefore reflecting the opposite demographics of the student body (UFS, Commission for Gender Equality presentation, 2017), has made transformation at the UFS difficult. Institutional responses remain polarised as evidenced in formal investigations into, and reports on, the protests, during which communications between groups routinely broke down (UFS, 2016; 2018).

Conflating Subjects and Systems

Following a relatively unified, countrywide protest under various student leadership groups in 2015, some new groups entered the fray, with many rejecting recognised or established leadership (cf. Jansen, 2017, Chapter 5). One of the most interesting developments in the recent waves of protests has been a palpable aggression towards legitimately placed⁶ governing structures and the recognition of a number of alternatively established splinter groups and movements. This has been evidenced in a side-lining of conventional leadership structures such as students’ representative councils, recognised staff associations (with the possible exception of workers’ unions), as well as management, national structures and government departments. These actions have been accompanied by some anger and mistrust. Even though governing bodies have attempted to remain in negotiation with protest groups, many have been unable to reach agreements, and sometimes, even after agreements have been reached, they have soon been abandoned, with campuses shutting down, then attempting to re-open, only to shut down again within hours or days. Pathologies of instability and change are fundamental to movement culture (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995) as are pathologies of confrontation (Cathcart, 1978; 1980). While many institutions have claimed during shutdowns that the majority of students and staff want to return to lectures, protesting groups seem to have gained the upper hand and the academic calendar for 2016 was at risk of not concluding.

I would suggest that student movement groups have exhibited a distinctly ‘postmodern’ grammar in their approach but I make no assumption that this is deliberate; it may simply be aligned with global attitudinal trends. There are participants who explicitly identify themselves as ‘postmodernists’, which is somewhat ironic given that people espousing postmodern tendencies rarely want to be identified as such or be identified with any kind

6 By ‘legitimately placed’, I mean either by institutional election processes or by government and institutional appointment.

of nominal category for that matter. In this time of complicated identity politics, never have people been so weary of being identified. Accepting the shift, though, if ‘postmodernism’ is largely indefinable and Lyotard is to be taken in earnest, then it seems we might have entered such a space in the politics of the contemporary *knowledge industry*. I do not select that particular terminology arbitrarily.

While I acknowledge that many actors in a university system do *not* accept the term “knowledge industry” or “learning industry” (Jarvis 2001), I would agree with Jarvis (2001, p. 140) that as a result of rapid globalisation university systems often function in this way regardless of individual efforts against what has become known as the “commodification” of knowledge (Lyotard, 1984). Late capitalist societies have become “knowledge-based societies” in which knowledge is produced, packaged, authorised, marketed, sold, consumed, contracted and exchanged as part of the broader “knowledge industry” which feeds a job market that requires qualifications (Jarvis, 2001, p. 6). In the contemporary higher education landscape, then, the “use-value” of knowledge gives way to knowledge as commodity for exchange (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 3–5). Lyotard, whose name must be synonymous with the term following his publication *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), characterises the state of knowledge as not being “original” or even “true”. He states that his premises “should not be accorded predictive value in relation to reality, but strategic value in relation to the questions raised” and, further, makes a sharp distinction between the language of science and the language of ethics and morality (Lyotard, 1984, p. 7).

However, even when applied, such category labels neither exist in isolation nor are they neutral. Most often, they are multiple and, very often, they are partial. Because we are dealing with people, one simply cannot reason without inbuilt slides. If we could accept that, we could accept that categorisations are not absolute determinations; they merely represent a preference for, or comfortability in, one kind of “philosophical neighbourhood” rather than another. In this instance, what I mean by a “philosophical neighbourhood” is a theoretical schema or type that rests on a “propositional interlogic” entailing a conceptualisation structure and accompanying semantic field complete with associated aesthetic or value attachments, which, although sometimes loosely applied, are determinable, nevertheless (Visagie, 2006, p. 31; Van Reenen, 2013, p. 76).

As stated above, the South African knowledge industry, like many others, was established against an era that lauded ideals of scientific objectivity and politico-economic rationality. It placed great emphasis on a foundational approach to knowledge and human activity with what Visagie (2006, p. 89) terms “upper attributes” of *simplicity, finitude, universality, necessity, continuity, constancy* and *knowability*. These attributes, as one might expect, relate to a history that enjoyed a giddy romance with lineages lauding Ancient Greek and Christian ideals that were resurrected during various periods in history and, of course, in the Enlightenment. This kind of fixed grammar is both attractive and useful for those pursuing scientific and theoretical ends of explanation and prediction. Rapid advances in science, technology and industry have demonstrated the practical success of these pursuits but that grammar is not adequate for the human sciences which negotiate a more peripatetic subject. Historically, university knowledge systems were extremely elitist and access was reserved for a

privileged few. In the contemporary era, this has given way to mass education systems which house a larger, diverse membership to produce an effective workforce (Jarvis, 2001, p. 6). Habermas, a strong critic of postmodernism, concedes that human nature and interaction have proven to be notoriously unpredictable features of any social praxis debate and, consequently, far less suited to structural schematics; yet he does not argue for a rampant self-transformation but an intersubjective consensus which is rather more focused on the other as opposed to self-interest (Habermas, 1987, pp. 161-163).

Following a logosemantic model, the postmodern dialect can be characterised as implicitly directed towards an anti-foundational approach which rejects any so-called “grand narrative” and privileges; instead, “lower attributes” of *complexity, infinity, individuality, contingency, discontinuity, flux* and *unknowability* (Visagie, 2006, p. 30). Inevitably, though, these attitudinal adjustments become ideological and form grand narratives of their own (cf. Aylesworth, 2015; Visagie, 2006; Habermas, 1987). Students seem to have become far more accustomed to the particularistic zone of the lower attributes in their conduct and reasoning. Functioning with the lower attributes entirely, naturally connects to individual life-historical and own-group narratives but becomes problematic for institutions and diversified, large clusters. The rhetoric emerging from this grounding is not new, as Visagie’s theory would argue, but it highlights a large, divisive communication gap between students (in movements) and those who govern them. No doubt, perhaps in concert with Habermas, Visagie argues effectively for a balance between the two attributive poles.

The Language of Social Movements

In their work on theorising social movements as communication, Stewart et al. (2012, pp. 2-13) offer a useful working definition: “Movements are organized collectives (possibly minimally or loosely arranged) that purposefully function outside of established structures and institutional systems, often with flat leadership, around a common goal.” In this case, the goal is free, decolonised, quality education. Movements are typically large in scope, often intended to extend beyond their immediate situationality and they promote or oppose changes in societal norms and values in an “agonistic ritual” most notably expressed in confrontation (Cathcart, 1978). #RhodesMustFall began at the University of Cape Town and extended quickly into a national movement: #FeesMustFall. Movements often encounter opposition in a ‘moral struggle’ as is demonstrated in #FeesMustFall’s widely voiced attempt to show the moral bankruptcy of managements, staffs and government (clearly evidenced in Shaku, 2016). Stewart et al. (2012, p. 49) propose that movements utilise persuasive tactics of “affirmation”, images that strongly promote group identity and “subversion”, and images that undermine the ethos of the opposition. Furthermore, movements make use of five “languaging strategies” that Stewart et al. (2012, pp. 143) discern which are of particular interest here and should be recognisable.

Identification

Identification relies on a firm establishment of an ‘us’ group based on common histories and goals that index common realities in order to form some solidarity in the movement

as a base for mobilisation. When movements are establishing identities, they commonly use shared race, gender, ethnicity, background, class, and so on. #FeesMustFall is no exception and has relied particularly on identities of race and class to unite protesting students. This may be read from representations in the media landscape as students being victims suffering from the trauma of institutionalised racism, racialised poverty, financial exclusion, and broader social injustice (Schlebusch, 2015). Tensions concerning student access and success, deregistration, proxy politics, the curriculum, gender discrimination, patriarchal and paternalistic management, have also been present in the movements' demands but remain secondary to race and class (Pather, 2016; Pilane, 2016; Mbongwa, 2016). This might be one reason that students have aligned with workers in the associated #EndOutsourcing struggle, which is largely seen as a positive development of the movement. However, the reluctance of the movement to connect with the struggle in basic and secondary education as well as the everyday struggles (particularly gender issues) of the majority of South Africans has been broadly criticised (Shuaib, 2016). At the end of 2016, there was a real possibility that the academic year could not conclude. One consequence would have been that thousands of potential health workers could not graduate and therefore would not be able to be placed in the public health sector (Harvey, 2016). Students and their sympathisers argued that they were regretful of this problem but quickly pointed to the dysfunction in the public health sector as also needing exposing and addressing, in their justifications.

Polarisation

Once a movement has united an 'us' group for the cause, it will inevitably position itself against a 'them' group, the purpose of which is separation and division in a good-versus-bad dichotomy. In the case of #FeesMustFall, there are several levels of polarisation. Amongst students themselves, one pro-group seems to have been established as those who share a common experience of 'black pain' and the con-group is seen as those benefiting from 'white privilege'. Again, this terminology is not unique to South African contexts. An almost blanket perception in an unequal society like South Africa is that the black masses suffer because of a retention of economic capital by whites which was bequeathed to them by colonialism and apartheid. Amongst others, Cooper (2017, p. 2) has noted, that under a post-1994 ANC-led government, despite "some admirable legislative and service delivery developments, material transformation has been frustratingly slow". Many younger students in the movement rage against the ANC government now and reject the legacy of Mandela, often framing those in his administration as 'sell-outs' who left black poverty and white privilege untouched (Jansen cited in Bond, 2016). In spite of possible exceptions in social reality and many who might not want to be identified with either of these two designations, both terms remain racially qualified and seem to have become normative in the vernacular. Other than an expressed irritation with the ruling class, students seem reluctant to take on big issues such as private interests of power elites, a possible state capture, problematic multinational interests, widespread corruption and mismanagement, and so on. They mostly focus on privilege maintenance in the form of 'white economic capital' (also called 'white monopoly capital'), and, more specifically, the lack of redistribution of wealth (Spies, 2016).

Other divisions exist between managements and students; security/police and students; managements and government; students and government; university and society; students and media; academics and students, and so on. Within these, there are also visible antagonisms fuelled by proxy politics and generation gaps. The result is an impatience, intolerance and mistrust, both between and within groupings, which does not allow for lengthy, co-operative communication that might be the only way to move forward. Amidst persistent conflict, a different way of speaking or being is not readily tolerated in campus discussions (Malala, 2016). The student movement members predominantly see themselves polarised against white South Africans, the university managements and staffs, the government, and the various systems that maintain the status quo who are seen to be unsympathetic to their struggles or unable or unwilling to resolve grievances (Fisher, 2016; Chabalala, 2016). Justice Malala opines on the persistent silencing of vice-chancellors and dissenting others: “The truth is that a small, radical, violent elite is intimidating everyone else into silence ... is holding our children, our future, hostage” (Malala, 2016).

Framing

Framing involves establishing a central, organising idea around which events, issues and related concepts are arranged. “Facts are neutral until framed” (Malesh in Stewart et al., 2012, p. 150). Just as in any prominent social movement, people rally around relatively simple, but politically powerful slogans that typically use the rhetorical tactic of a few short terms to accomplish a larger strategy. Slogans are pervasive in public movements and they have significant persuasive power in realising the goal of “agitating and threatening the powers that be” (Malesh in Stewart et al., 2012, p. 154). #FeesMustFall has associated slogans such as ‘End outsourcing now’, ‘Students must rise’, ‘Aluta continua’, ‘Free, decolonised, quality education now’, and so on. The term ‘Fallist’ has become associated with protesters as many slogans and banners call for a falling of something or someone associated with campus symbols and prominent leaders in the higher education sector. The sentiment driving the student protests, then, is not one of revision and reconstruction; it is revolutionary in character which implies a complete break with tradition and authority and, sometimes, violence or destruction (Manjra, 2016).

This language manifests in a decidedly *anti*-framing: It is anti-establishment, anti-authority, anti-structure and anti-procedure. At times, this discourse emerges in a seemingly irrational manner. Take the example of the (by now, well-known) ‘Science must fall’ debacle at UCT in which a student proposed the decolonisation of science as follows:

Science, as a whole, is a product of Western modernity and the whole thing should be scratched off. Especially now ... if you want practical solutions as to how to decolonise science, we have to restart science from ... an African perspective ... from our perspective of how we have experienced science ... for instance ... there's a place in KZN ... and they believe that, through black magic ... you are able to send lightning to strike someone, so can you explain that scientifically because it's something that happens?

(*Science must fall?*, 2016)

A member of the audience, who disagrees with the speaker, is chastised for “...disrespecting the sacredness of this space ...” and asked to apologise by a person who appears to be the discussion leader. Of course, the higher education sector has seen this before: demands for an (individual or particular) cultural consideration in a (universalisable) scientific space – a scrapping of science and replacing it with (African) science, which implies that science conducted from an African perspective or by Africans, would result in something other than science in its current form. The nature of science does not seem suited to cultural/racial/ethnic categorisation of those who conduct it, yet it could be argued that those who conduct it determine the kind of knowledge emerging from it and I think this extremely important issue might be lurking at the crux of a badly stated premise. Successful science should win out against competing hypotheses because it is able to withstand testing, not because of the racial/ethnic (or any other power-determining) identity markers of researchers, subjects and learners. Decentralising Western conceptualisations or decentralising the white subject is not simply a matter of eradicating a European work product or Europeans themselves. Here is where one would hope for robust, yet productive and reasonable scholarly work, which falls beyond the scope of this article and would hopefully be taken seriously by disciplinary experts.

Storytelling

One of the distinguishing marks of postmodernity is its preoccupation with narrative (Schrag, 1992, p. 90). Movements in their on-going mistrust of ‘upper’ attribution framing have become particularly enamoured with the power of narrative and individual storytelling (Isaac in Earl and Rohlinger, 2012, p. 20). Storytelling involves personalised, biographical accounts and explanations that people in movements use to “digest experience and dramatize processes of becoming” and pivotal moments for change (Malesh in Stewart et al., 2012, p. 151). Added to this, students in movements do not seem organised or united enough to work together in formulating documentation and drive that through given procedures and structures, notwithstanding the submissions of memoranda. The problem with personalised narratives is that a single experience, if reiterated sufficiently, transmutes quite rapidly into an assumed, broader ontological reality. While the importance of the (singular) lived experience is not to be underplayed, it is equally important to integrate it into a network of interdependent and competing experiences and narratives in order to yield a full panoply of student experience. Inevitably though, in movements, the majority of those differing voices is excluded and often referred to in student movement discourse as ‘the silenced majority’ (Nicolson, 2016).

Power

“Virtually all political and protest communication is about power, domination or control” (Stewart et al., 2012, p. 151). I would assume that protesting students would inevitably have a problem with this statement as they see their cause as primarily one of social justice and redress. They have gone to great lengths to highlight injustices committed by the established structures and at the same time, highlight trauma and pain inflicted upon them and their

families. However, there is more to a power matrix than polarising victims and villains. There are issues of coercion and threat, violence and victimisation, damage and deceit on *all* sides of the political divisions. Protesting students, and their detractors alike, are not above reproach when it comes to these concerns. We have seen members of movements and protests operate in ways that are as bad as, and worse than, those they class as their oppressors. Protesting students have threatened and intimidated those who do not wish to take part in protests, those who wish to continue with classes or university activities, and those who do not agree with their cause or tactics, in spite of either side supposedly having rights to exercise their choices. They have become violent towards people and damaged property both on campuses and surrounding areas and they have negotiated in bad faith.

In the recent documentary, *Fees in Crisis* (eNCA, 2016), when students' transgressions are exposed and questioned, they tend to justify their behaviour by contextualising it as a response to police and security brutality, racialised exclusions or simply a consequence of youth. They have been dismissive of property damage, stating that universities are insured, so this is not important. De Vos (2016) affirms that the Constitution of South Africa (1996) preserves "the right to assemble and to protest in order to advance a particular cause", but cautions that this should be done "unarmed and peacefully". Ideological thought translates swiftly to problematic actions, excluding groups, restricting movement, public disruption, and dismissing alternative voices within students' much-desired safe spaces. Movements have demonstrated time and again that their members are not always able to practise the democratic and constitutional values they are assumed to want to realise. The intellectual acceptance of principles does not necessarily imply a practical application of them. Closer to the truth, perhaps, is that when protestors believe so vehemently in their cause, they not only judge theirs to be the single most important issue amongst an array of other social ills; they seem to be able to abandon commonly accepted patterns of reasonability, conduct and engagement with some facility. This is not because of a lack of rationality, but partly because a politics of fragmentation and opposition implies that excluded or misrecognised groups are demanding access to different resources or rewards, and because they have been excluded from these, they are prepared to go beyond norms of acceptable conduct to get them. As Habermas argues: "In the revolt of a dissident will, there all too often also come to expression, as we know, the voice of the other who is excluded by rigid moral principles, the violated integrity of human dignity, recognition refused, interests neglected, and differences denied" (Habermas, 1993, p. 14).

Conclusion

I regard the student movement culture as a rejection of the remnants of the imagined community of a united Rainbow Nation in the sense that the myth of a "deep, horizontal comradeship" has given way to the reality of "the actual inequality and exploitation" of the current dispensation (Anderson, 2016, p. 7). Within that post-1994 imaginary, education is frequently billed as an antidote to social suffering. In other words, education is offered to members of societies more as a means to better oneself, to rise above one's circumstances, to end cycles of poverty, and less as some sort of civic responsibility. Higher education, no longer high school, has often been framed as a "ticket to the middle class" (Carnevale, 2012).

This promise carries with it the very real expectation that with a degree, one can access better levels of employment, improve one's living spaces and head for circumstances enhancing personal advancement. This translates to an individual means for transcending undesirable and systemic social realities; it is not really a means for undoing these realities.

Unequal social structures, for all intents and purposes, then, remain intact. While university students seem to be well aware of the economy that a degree holds as a personal good, less so is the focus as a public good. Hull (2015, para. 9) has argued that, "To the extent that higher education is an individual good, the individuals who benefit from it should pay for it; to the extent that it is a public good, it should be paid for from the public purse ... full public provision is not always the route to social justice." That said, protesting students are not against higher education. They are against the higher education system as it stands and they want it transformed. However noble that intent may be, when protest reconstitutes itself from being a legitimate form of resistance to being the sole form of communication in the academy, the transformation is a shaky one that "hypercontextualises" (Visagie, 1994) individually premised narratives and morphs them into systematic platitudes, regardless of the presence of valid, competing discourses. If this imbalance between attributes (Visagie, 2006) continues unabated, the entire discourse will be permeated with what Habermas (1993), a vehement critic of postmodernism because of its contradictory self-reference, cautioned against: arbitrarily validated norms, unchecked self-interest, and an unrestricted relativism – a perfectly postmodern moment, indeed.

References

- Anderson, B. (2016). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. Revised edition. London, U.K.: Verso.
- Aylesworth, G. (2015). 'Postmodernism'. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Zalta, E.N. (Ed.). Retrieved on 1 October 2016 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/>
- Bond, P. (2016). Why South Africa should undo Mandela's economic ideals. *Mail & Guardian*. 12 January. Retrieved on 30 December 2016 from <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-01-12-why-south-africa-should-undo-mandelas-economic-deals>
- Boodhoo, R. (2009). Justifications for qualitative research in organizations: A step forward. *The Journal of Online Education*. Retrieved on 7 January 2016 from <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keef/waoe/deeprosh2.pdf>
- Carnevale, A.P. (2012). For a middle-class life, college is crucial. *The New York Times*. 9 April. Retrieved on 7 January 2012 from <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/03/01/should-college-be-for-everyone/for-a-middle-class-life-college-is-crucial>
- Cathcart, R.S. (1978). Movements: Confrontation as rhetorical form. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 43(Spring), 82-88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417947809372383>
- Cathcart, R.S. (1980). Defining social movements by their rhetorical form. *Central States Speech Journal*, 31(Winter), 267-273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510978009368066>
- Chabalala, J. (2016). UFS students hand over memorandum to management. *News24*. 26 September. Retrieved on 7 January 2017 from <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/ufs-students-hand-over-memorandum-to-management-20160926>
- Cooper, A. (2017). *Dialogue in places of learning: Youth amplified in South Africa*. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315638775>

- De Vos, P. (2016). Student protests staunchly backed by Constitution. *Daily Maverick*. 21 September. Retrieved on 16 January 2017 from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-09-21-student-protests-staunchly-backed-by-constitution/#.WH0NblN96M8>
- Earl, J. & Rohlinger, D.A. (Eds.). (2012). *Media, movements and political change*. Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Group Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-786X\(2012\)33](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-786X(2012)33)
- Fisher, S. (2016). UCT protestors sceptical of management resolving their grievances. *Eyewitness News*. 6 October. Retrieved on 7 January 2016 from <http://ewn.co.za/2016/10/06/UCT-protesting-students-sceptical-of-management-commitment-to-their-grievances>
- Habermas, J. (1987). *Knowledge and human interests*. J.J. Shapiro (Transl.). Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. (1993). *Justification and application: Remarks on discourse ethics*. C. Cronin (Transl.). Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press.
- Harvey, J. (2016). Medical field will be hit hard if student protests continue. *IOL*. 20 October. Retrieved on 18 January 2017 from <http://www.iol.co.za/southern-suburbs-tatler/news/medical-field-will-be-hit-hard-if-student-protests-continue-6431512>
- Hull, G. (2015). Free university education is not the route to social justice. *The Conversation*. 27 October. Retrieved on 7 January 2017 from <https://theconversation.com/free-university-education-is-not-the-route-to-social-justice-49755>
- Jarvis, P. (2001). *Universities and corporate universities: The higher learning industry in global society*. London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Jansen, J. (2017). *As by fire: The end of the South African university?* Cape Town, South Africa: Tafelberg.
- Johnston, H. & Klandermans, B. (Eds.). (1995). *Social movements and culture*. London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Luescher, T.M. & Klemenčič, M. (2016). Student power in twenty-first century Africa: The character and role of student organizing. In: R. Brookes (Ed.). *Student Politics and Protests*. Guildford, U.K.: Surrey University. <https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v3.i1.99>
- Lyotard, J.F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Transl.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772278>
- Malala, J. (2016). Justice Malala: SA's universities – hostage to a small, radical, violent elite. *BusinessLIVE*. 26 September. Retrieved on 30 December 2016 from <http://www.businesslive.co.za/politics/2016-09-26-sas-universities---hostage-to-a-small-radical-violent-elite/>
- Manjra, S. (2016). GroundUp analysis: 'Making sense of the students' protests, their demands and strategies'. *Daily Maverick*. 9 October. Retrieved on 18 January 2017 from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-10-09-groundup-analysis-making-sense-of-the-students-protests-their-demands-and-strategies/#.WH8GXVN96M8>
- Marcuse, H. (2013). *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrialized society*. London, U.K.: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995211>
- Mbongwa, K. (2016). The unheard voices: LGBTQ+ people in student movements. *The Daily Vox*. 31 March. Retrieved on 7 January 2016 from <http://www.thedailyvox.co.za/unheard-voices-lgbtq-people-student-movements/>
- National Development Plan 2030. (2012). *Our future – make it work*. National Planning Commission. 15 August. Department: The Presidency. Retrieved on 18 March 2018 from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/NDP-2030-Our-future-make-it-work_r.pdf
- Nicolson, G. (2016). Student protests: Only the start of greater pain. *Daily Maverick*. 28 September. Retrieved on 18 January 2017 from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-09-28-student-protests-only-the-start-of-greater-pain/#.WH-Q31N96M8>
- Pather, R. (2016). Wits #FeesMustFall: A movement divided. *Mail & Guardian*. 5 April. Retrieved on 7 January 2017 from <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-04-05-wits-fees-must-fall-a-movement-divided>

- Pilane, P. (2016). Politics and power struggles define student protests. *Mail & Guardian*. 22 January. Retrieved on 7 January 2017 from <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-01-21-politics-and-power-struggles-define-student-protests>
- Ray, M. (2016). *Free Fall: Why South African universities are in a race against time*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Bookstorm.
- Schlebusch, N. (2015). Student protests: A textual analysis. *Focal points*. Retrieved on 18 January 2017 from <https://www.newsclip.co.za/temp/student-protests-a-textual-analysis.pdf>
- Science must fall?* (2016). YouTube. 12 October. Viewed on 22 November 2016 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9SiRNibD14>
- Shaku, T. (2016). *The struggle for free education*. Retrieved on 30 December 2016 from <http://workers-socialistparty.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Pages-8-9-Student-struggle.pdf>
- Spies, D. (2016). NMMU students to appear in court after protests. *News24*. 22 September. Retrieved on 7 January 2017 from <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/nmmu-students-to-appear-in-court-after-protests-20160922>
- Stewart, C.J., Smith, C.A. & Denton, R.E. (2012). *Persuasion and social movements*. Sixth edition. Long Grove, IA: Waveland.
- UFS (University of the Free State). (2006). *From grey to gold: The first 100 years of the University of the Free State*. Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State.
- UFS (University of the Free State). (2016). People, not stones. Report to the Council of the University of the Free State from the independent panel appointed to investigate the Xerox Shimla Park incident and related events at UFS in February 2016. Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State.
- UFS (University of the Free State). (2017). University of the Free State presentation to the Commission for Gender Equality. Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State.
- UFS (University of the Free State). (2018). Report by Independent Panel on the Conduct of Private Security Companies and Police on the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa Campuses during October 2017. Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State.
- Van Reenen, D. (2013). *Key structures in philosophical discourse: A universal semantics of kernel phrases*. Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State. Retrieved on 17 January 2018 from scholar.ufs.ac.za: 8080/xmlui/handle/11660/4755
- Van der Merwe, J.C. & Van Reenen, D. (2016). *Transformation and legitimation in post-apartheid universities: Reading discourses from Reitz*. Stellenbosch, South Africa: African Sun Media. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781920382612>
- Visagie, P.J. (1994). *The name of the game in ideology theory*. Bloemfontein, South Africa: The University of the Free State.
- Visagie, P.J. (2006). Discourse archaeology, anthropology, spirituality. A post-humanist critique. Unpublished manuscript. Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State.

How to cite:

Van Reenen, D. (2019). What Are We Witnessing? Student Protests and the Politics of the Unknowable. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 7(1), 15–27. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v7i1.3690