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SOUTH AFRICA'S STUDENT PROTESTS: WHAT'S LEFT?

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2015 and 2016 were marked by widespread protests at South African universities. Under the banner #FeesMustFall, students ostensibly campaigned for the abolition of tuition fees, but were in fact pushing for more far-reaching change: they were calling for the decolonisation of their country's education system – a quarter of a century after the official end of Apartheid. They wanted to see an overhaul of universities' institutional culture and curricula, as well as a higher number of black professors. Two years on and it seems the state of affairs remain unchanged — but the question remains: what has changed? What happened to the demands and dreams of 2015/16? What became of the efforts of these multifaceted movements to bring about the end of the system's deep-seated colonial structures, as well as the more recent excesses of neoliberal policies, in post-Apartheid universities?

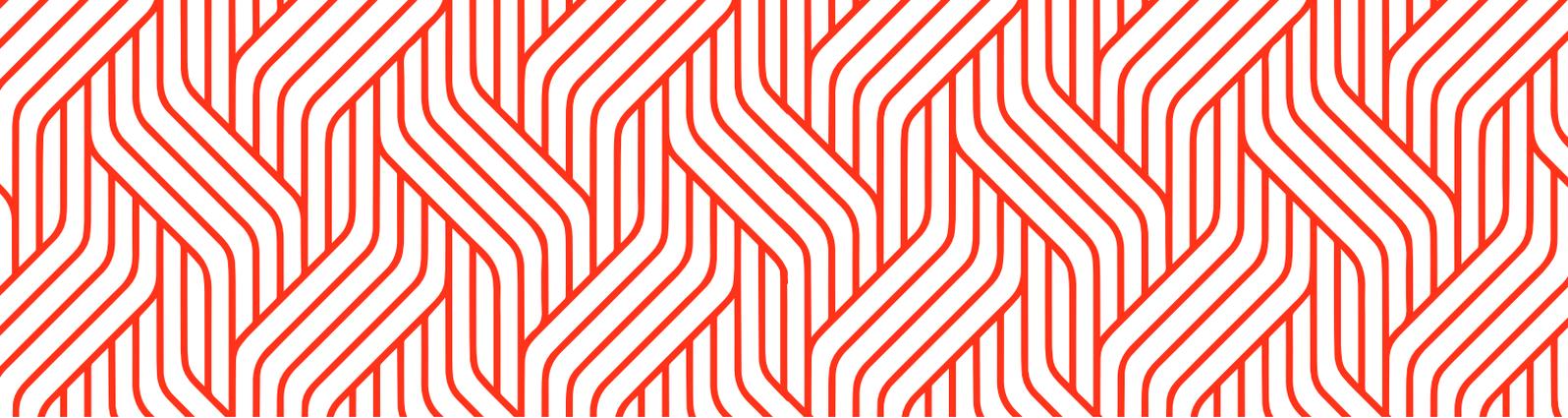
Looking back: the 2015–2016 student protests

2015 and 2016 saw a new generation of protesters in South Africa. Both years witnessed student demonstrations that lasted for months, with protests happening at universities, out on the street, at the parliament in Cape Town and at the country's seat of government in Pretoria. The protesters called for an end to the systemic racism that persists in South Africa to this day as well as for more social justice. But above all, these students demanded the 'decolonisation' of their universities and their society.

Three years have now passed since Chumani Maxwele, a university student, sparked the #RhodesMustFall campaign by carrying out an audacious act: on 9 March 2015, he hurled a container full of human excrement at a statue of British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes on the campus of the University of Cape Town (UCT). The incident triggered a series of events. Just one month later, the statue was removed in front of a cheering crowd after UCT's council bowed to the students'

demands. But if South Africa's university establishment thought that things would then quietly return to "business as usual", they could not have been more mistaken. By October 2015, the country was in the throes of mass protest. Initially, the protesters were voicing their opposition to the government's plan to increase tuition fees at public universities, but then they started calling for 'free education'. Primarily, this meant the abolition of tuition fees, but ultimately it was a call for far more significant change. Students were demanding no less than the intellectual and political liberation of a post-Apartheid society that the young activists perceived to still be profoundly racist. Drawing on the ideas of 20th century anticolonial thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon, and the 'Black Consciousness' ideology propounded by Steve Biko, the South African activist murdered in 1977, the students called for the 'decolonisation' of South African society¹.

At universities, groups were formed to explore ways to realise decolonisation in practice. Students campaigned for an overhaul of the symbols that embodied universities'



institutional culture, and also called for the removal of controversial monuments and for buildings to be renamed. The call to recruit more black teaching staff grew louder. There were also demands to reform curricula, which the students felt often perpetuated racist and colonial forms of knowledge while ignoring African traditions of learning and philosophy.

Calm now appears to have once again returned to South Africa's universities. When the new academic year began in February 2018, students up and down the country returned to attending seminars and lectures, writing essays and sitting exams. Graffiti slogans on university buildings have begun to fade and broken window panes, which had been smashed with bricks during the most heated moments of the dispute, have since been replaced. It also looks as though the state is trying to make peace with the younger generation: in March 2018, public violence charges against 23 students from the University of Western Cape (UWC) were dropped. What is more, the vast majority of those involved in the protests have now graduated.

But the question remains: What happened to the demands and dreams of 2015/16? What became of the efforts of these multifaceted movements to bring about an end to the system's deep-seated colonial structures, as well as the more recent excesses of neoliberal policies, in post-Apartheid universities?

What did the protests achieve?

The abolition of tuition fees: a partial success

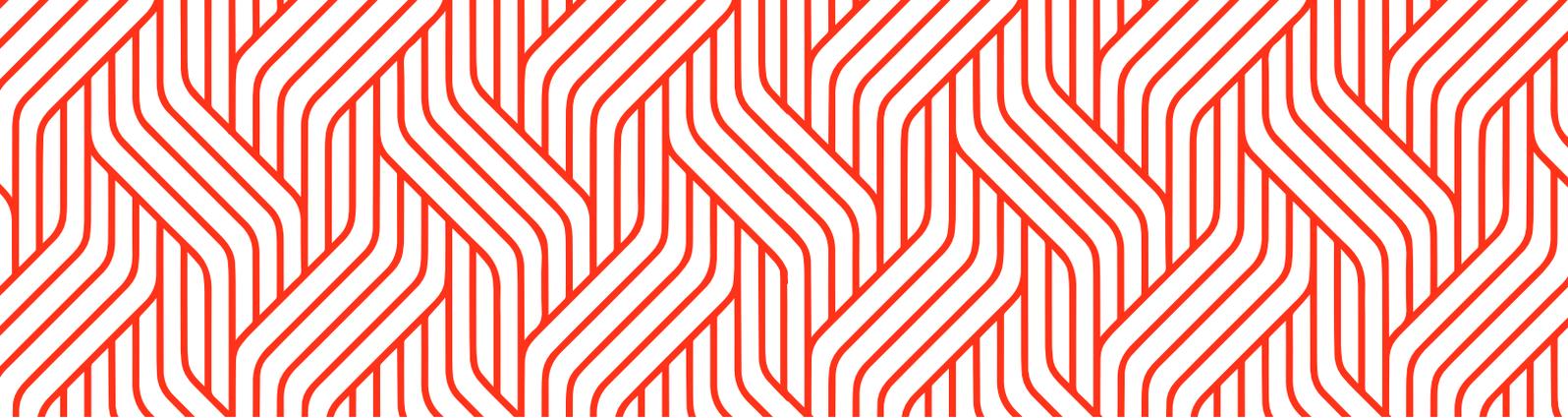
One of the movement's key issues was the call for the abolition of tuition fees. While the protests held in October 2015 were initially in opposition to a ten per cent increase in tuition fees, students eventually called for the total abolition of fees at all of the country's public universities. In August 2016 this argument was put forward by the South African Union of Students (SAUS) to the Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training, which had been set up by the government. They openly admitted that the complete abolition of tuition fees was

actually a long-term objective and that a gradual reduction of charges would be a more viable option².

The commission released its final report in November 2017, in which it concluded that free education was a fanciful idea in light of the current economic climate. Instead, the commission proposed that the state should guarantee student loans offered by private banks that graduates would then repay once they had completed their studies. Unlike the current system, this would enable students to enrol for a course without having to pay tuition fees, which are unaffordable for many families, up front. Universities agreed to the proposal, and although there were some student protests, none reached the same level and intensity as previous demonstrations.

Then, in December 2017, on the opening day of the African National Congress's (ANC) conference in Bloemfontein – during which the party was to elect its new leadership – former South African president Jacob Zuma made a sweeping proclamation. The outgoing ANC leader announced that from February 2018, the start of the new academic year, students from “poor and working-class families” (defined as having an annual income under 350,000 Rand) would be exempt from paying tuition fees. Even though the new proposal was generally perceived to be well intended, universities and students complained that Zuma did not consult them before announcing his new policy. The general feeling was that Zuma's speech was less of a delayed concession to the students' demands and more the desperate attempt of an outgoing ANC president to sway the election of his successor in his favour.

However, by the time the new academic year started in 2018, little had actually changed. The new ANC leadership, under its recently elected head, Cyril Ramaphosa – who also became South African president when Zuma was forced to step down on 14 February 2018 – is still considering its next move with regard to tuition fees. And in the meantime, students at universities across the country are still having to pay for registration and courses.



The decolonisation of courses: curriculum reform initiatives

Alongside tuition fees, the other item high on the students' agenda was curriculum redesign. There was, and continues to be, widespread discontent with the usual Eurocentric 'canons', which continue to form the basis of most curricula.

There were concerns after some perhaps overstated rhetoric was used by some student representatives, such as one female student who, during a panel discussion at UCT's Faculty of Science in October 2016, argued that the decolonisation of academia required scientific theory to be completely scrapped as it was a product of western modernity. She then went on to say that South African universities should start again from scratch, drawing up their own theoretical perspectives designed from an African perspective. This suggestion led to uproar in the lecture hall and many critical, even sarcastic, comments on social media under the tongue-in-cheek hashtag '#sciencemustfall'.

More constructive results were achieved by the interdisciplinary Curriculum Change Working Group created in August 2016 by UCT vice-chancellor, Max Price. Chaired by two well-known black scholars at UCT, academics across various faculties worked together with student representatives to develop a comprehensive curriculum reform policy. It led to the publication of a provisional policy paper, but the measures have yet to be implemented. There are also similar initiatives at other universities. For example, at UWC, there is both a university-wide commission (established within the office of the deputy vice-chancellor for academic affairs), as well as a working group chaired by the dean of the faculty of arts. What the outcome of these institutional initiatives will be – besides official policy papers – remains to be seen.

More significantly perhaps, change has also been set in motion away from university councils and boards - in individual faculties grappling with questions relating specifically to their field. The Department for Social Anthropology at Wits University in Johannesburg is one compelling example. In 2016, the head of the department listened carefully to the concerns of students and launched a comprehensive reform process. Throughout the course of a year, teaching staff and students collectively discussed decolonial pedagogy in seminars, focusing particular attention on how it could be applied to the discipline itself; at the same time, department members participated in intensive workshops that focused not on individual modules but on the epistemological and political

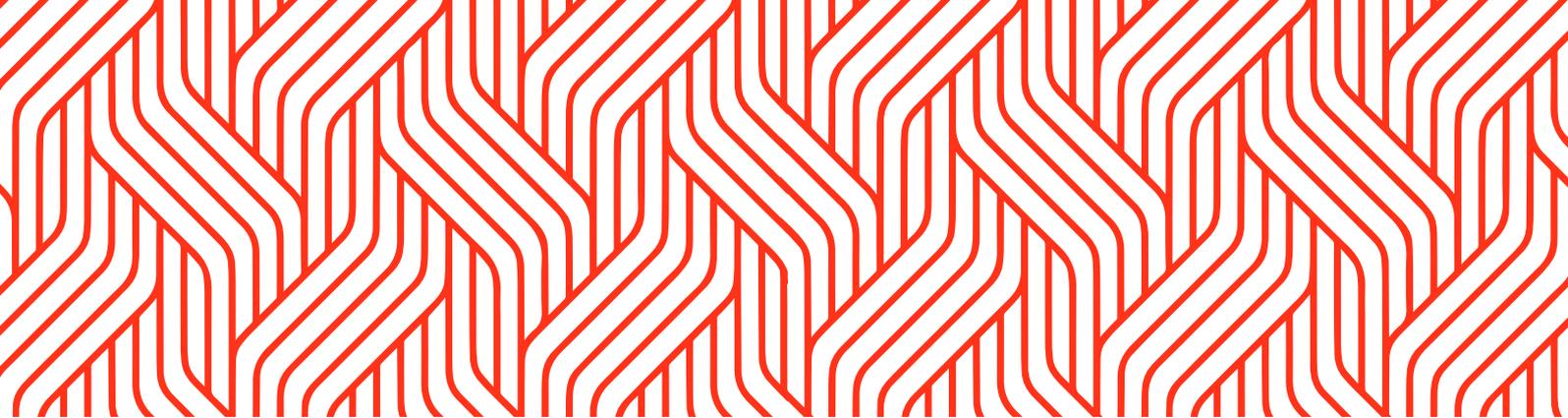
question of 'How can social/cultural anthropology from the African continent help shape a new perspective of the world in the 21st century?' Ultimately, the department's members came up with new courses, which they presented within the councils to mark the official adoption of the reform. And their actions did not stop at just developing new course content: They also put forward new teaching approaches. This was by no means a straightforward process. There were heated discussions between department members, but the outcome was not only a brand new curriculum but also plenty of impetus to energetically tackle the challenges of decolonisation together with students.

Black academics in leading university roles

One of the protest movements' other key demands was the recruitment of more black professors at institutions of higher education, and the appointment of black academics into senior management roles. Schemes were created that allowed greater flexibility in how management positions could be filled. At UWC, for example, there is a fund that enables professors to be recruited outside of the usual staff appointment process. These 'targeted appointments' are intended to have an impact where there are a number of especially highly qualified black South African candidates. Schemes designed to encourage competent black scholars have already long been in place. In the past, however, they were mainly aimed at younger academic colleagues and black lecturers with a PhD who were believed to have leadership potential. For example, since the start of 2018, my department at UWC has been led by a black South African social/cultural anthropologist, who some years ago completed the mentorship scheme run by UWC's Arts Faculty.

Appointments to high-ranking positions at universities have also recently garnered widespread attention. A prime example is the process that took place in March 2018 to elect a new vice-chancellor at South Africa's oldest university, and one of its most prestigious, UCT, where the decolonial demands of the student movements had emerged in 2015 with #RhodesMustFall. The university had come under fire as an institution seen to be deeply rooted in the 'colonial' tradition.

This happened in spite of the 'liberal' tradition of the university situated on the slopes of Table Mountain. Whilst UCT opposed the Apartheid regime, and was even a pioneer in the development of South African Marxist theory in the late 1970s in some subjects, such as social anthropology, the culture at the university remained firmly 'British'. This can



be seen not only in its ivy-clad buildings, but in its statues – the bronze statue of British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes, which was targeted by students, is a prime example – and the naming of buildings and roads on campus. Furthermore, during the recent protest movements, UCT was led by a white vice-chancellor – Max Price, a qualified medical doctor – who, despite being firmly to the left of the political spectrum and thus a thorn in the side of both conservative groups within the professoriate and the key alumni lobby, aroused the suspicions of the more radical student factions and groups, such as UCT’s Black Academics Caucus, for his rather tentative attempts at reform. For example, there was much disagreement with the statement he made during a discussion in 2014, saying that the small number of black professors teaching in South African universities was mainly due to the fact that it generally takes 20 years between an academic receiving a PhD and becoming a full professor.

The official appointment of Price’s successor, mathematics professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, in March 2018 was thus seen as an important step. As UCT’s current deputy vice-chancellor for research and internationalism, Phakeng knows the institute’s strengths and its weaknesses. As she prepared to take over the role, she outlined her vision for an “unapologetically African” and, at the same time, cosmopolitan university where everybody should feel welcome. She stressed that it could no longer be the case that those from black and ‘coloured’ townships felt out of place at UCT and that their only option was to conceal their cultural and social heritage under an assumed ‘British’ identity. She stated that academic success should no longer be tied to such cultural assumptions. Phakeng also declared that her vision would see the university become more closely involved in social action. With this statement, the new university head addressed key points of criticism that had been raised by the students’ movements. Her appointment was subsequently not only endorsed by the overwhelming majority of representatives in the relevant university councils, but was also welcomed by students and representatives of the Black Academic Caucus and by large sections of the media³.

Creative energy unleashed by protest

A great deal has changed within South African universities since the protests took place. But it is also true that the movements in South Africa were a source of inspiration for innovative artistic activity. The most obvious example is a theatre performance, which has since gained widespread international recognition, that was developed by young black

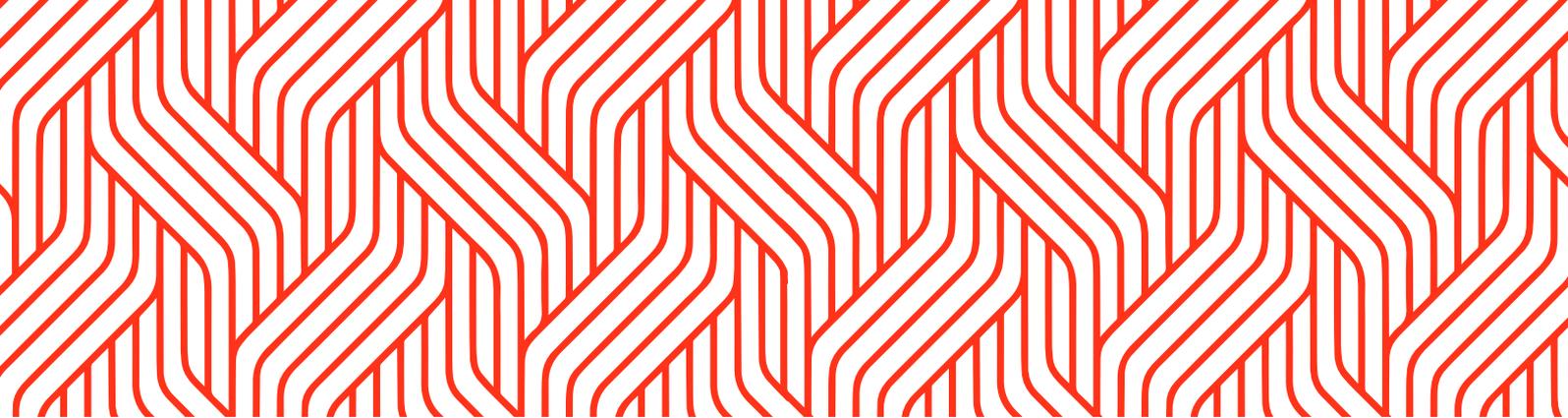
artists who drew upon their experience of the protests. The Fall, which features a clever play on words in its tagline (‘All Rhodes Lead to Decolonisation’), premiered in October 2016 at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town. The actors were eight graduates of UCT’s Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies. They wrote the piece together and directed the performance themselves. Based on the actors’ real-life experiences, the piece offers a self-critical reflection on the hopes and fears of the 2015/16 student protest movements. But *The Fall* is by no means a typical agitprop production. In dialogue, interior monologues and songs, the actors deliver a nuanced exploration of the spontaneity and idealism, as well as the traumas that accompanied their political campaigns. This extraordinary workshop theatre production won the ensemble theatrical awards both at home and abroad.

The movements gave rise to tremendous creative potential right from the very beginning. This was partially expressed in semi-professional formats, such as Sethembile Msezane’s powerful performance that accompanied the removal of the Rhodes statue on 9 April 2015. Activists’ (at times astonishingly nuanced) protest poetry has also been vital, as evidenced by the pieces that appeared in the young protest movements’ first publications. At Wits University in Johannesburg young performance artists took part in a live performance outside the university’s main lecture hall in October 2015, where they critically expressed their experiences at the ‘colonial’ post-apartheid university. These are just a few examples of the multifaceted forms of artistic expression: some built on more established forms of protest theatre, but others also found innovative ways to express the new, different experiences of the generation leading the latest series of protests. Social media plays a significant role here as it has been vital in helping people understand the movements of the past few years.

Neoliberal politics and the future of the student movements

So, what happens now? Do the recent attempts at reform seen at South African universities mark the end of the recent protest movements? Might there be left-wing political activities that could embody the spirit of the protests in years to come?

The question of what direction the movements may take next is relevant, and not only because a majority of the activists have now finished their studies. A leading activist eloquently expressed this recently in an article in which he described the partial success of the students’ demands for the



abolition of tuition fees at South Africa's public universities as "bittersweet"⁴. The problem, according to Brian Kamanzi, who has just completed his master's degree in engineering at UCT, is that the cash injection of 57 million rand allocated to the university sector on 21 February for the 2018 fiscal year by South Africa's then finance minister, Malusi Gigiba, was funded through cuts to social spending and settlement upgrading. Over the next three years, there are plans to further reduce social spending by 85 billion Rand. The 2018 budget would also see the first VAT rise since the end of Apartheid, increasing the rate from 14 to 15 percent – a move that would disproportionately affect the poor. The poor contribute most of their share of taxes through VAT whereas those with incomes in the higher brackets pay most of their contributions through income tax, and can benefit from various deductions.

Kamanzi argued, correctly, that redirecting government money away from services that benefitted the poorest members of society and towards the higher education sector would drive a wedge between the student and the workers' movements. There had been acts of solidarity between students and workers, particularly in the #endoutsourcing campaigns that started at the end of 2015. These coalitions demanded that poorly paid workers, such as cleaning and security staff, be employed directly by the university and not by external companies. This followed the systematic outsourcing of such services during the neoliberal post-Apartheid years.

Kamanzi also called for an end to a myopic focus on the issues of students. The divisive (partial) success of the campaigns to abolish tuition fees, which was at least partly funded by cuts to social services for society's poorest, illustrated the privileged position that the student protests had occupied until that point. Kamanzi argues that what matters is widespread resistance to the austerity policies of the neoliberal ANC government, suggesting that the #FeesMustFall generation would be wise to increasingly get involved in helping fight other social and political battles.

This is already happening in some places. In Cape Town a number of former student activists have become involved in the Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education. The centre works together with social movements to run an impressive programme of courses in left-wing politics. The subjects taught range from health and education to the environment and transnational political struggles in Africa and elsewhere. In April 2018, for instance, I received an invitation to the centre to speak at a panel discussion on protest movements in Africa, which forms part of a Tshisimani course developed especially

for young people and which explores the topic of 'Marx in Africa' and aims to consider the relevance of Marxist theory in the current struggles and movements taking place on the continent.

Looking forward: what's next?

Such initiatives give us hope that change may be lasting. Of course, many of the tens of thousands of young people who took to the streets in 2015 are no longer involved in organised protest groups. Of course, those movements that, for better or for worse, grew out of local, open and 'flat' organisational structures – without any formal leaders – have disbanded. Of course, those activists that remain are now pursuing different visions within the unresolved tension surrounding dialectic thinking on 'race' and property, class and inequality, identity and lived experience. And yet, even if the mobilisation of students at South Africa's universities has largely ground to a halt for now, there is hope that the tremendous political energy unleashed by the recent student movements has not simply fizzled out.

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