#FeesMustFall Protests in South Africa: A Critical Realist Analysis of Selected Newspaper Articles

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Abstract

Using Critical Realism, this article looks at articles from selected South African newspapers which reported on the #FeesMustFall protests. The study established that, arising from the protests, was a culture characteried by tensions and distrust amongst stakeholders such as students, university management and the government. This, the article argues, was a result of how each of these stakeholders perceived, and went on to exercise, their agency in an attempt to resolve the conflict arising from the protests. To avert a recurrence of negative consequences of student protests such as the destruction of property and development of toxic and adversarial relationships amongst different stakeholders, the article recommends collaborative approaches to conflict resolution in South African higher education. These approaches need to be framed differently from those in which some stakeholders seek to use their agency to achieve outright victory over other stakeholders – a recurring mode of engagement during the #FeesMustFall protests.

Introduction

Starting in October 2015, South African public universities experienced a wave of student protests initially over proposed fee increases for the 2016 academic year. The protests started at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and they soon spread to all the government-funded universities. However, students' disgruntlement with a number of issues in South African higher education had been boiling under the surface for a long time. For example, earlier in the year, the country had also witnessed the #RhodesMustFall protests which were triggered by students' unhappiness over the continued presence of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes and other symbols of colonialism at the University of Cape Town. By January 2016, the #FeesMustFall protests had broadened in scope to unhappiness with student accommodation and language of instruction policies at mainly the historically white universities as well as the outsourcing of support staff such as cleaners, gardeners

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and security guards. The protests therefore mutated and assumed different names such as #OutsourcingMustFall and #Shackville. At some universities, the protests were very violent and led to suspension of lectures and examinations; damage to property as well as injury and arrest of some students (Phaladi & Salavu, 2016).

The #FeesMustFall protests generated so much publicity that they were nominated the newsmaker of the year for 2015 (Africa News Agency, 2016). As the country takes stock of their financial and social costs, various aspects of the protests have become subjects of research (Langa, 2017; Booysen, 2016). Covering the period between October 2015 and February 2016, this article looks at reports on the protests from selected English language newspapers with a wide circulation in South Africa. The study was motivated by the realisation that the character of the protests is still contested amongst academics (Booysen, 2016). Using Critical Realism (CR) (Bhaskar, 1978), this article is a contribution to the debate around the character of the protests. The article argues that, emerging from the #FeesMustFall protests was a culture of engagement which was mainly a function of how different stakeholders belonging to different structures perceived and exercised their agency.

Critical Realism: The Culture, Structure and Agency Nexus

In trying to explain social phenomena, CR looks at the interplay of three elements, namely culture, structure and agency. The paradigm perceives the world as being made up of a plurality of structures, which through their individual and collective agency influence the events that take place and those that do not (Morton, 2006). These contribute to the architecture or form of the culture of society or that of the events that take place in specific entities within society. Drawing insights from Marxist thinking, CR proposes that, to understand and change the social world, we need to identify the structures that generate social events and the discourse used to describe them (Bhaskar, 1978). CR, therefore, advocates a holistic analysis of the historical and social contexts in which social events take place (Hartwig, 2007).

In the context of the article, the newspaper reports are therefore analysed from the perspectives of all key stakeholders such as university management, students and academics in a bid to holistically characterise the culture of the #FeesMustFall protests.

Culture: 'What do members of a social group have in common?'

Matsumato (1996) defines culture as "…the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people … communicated from one generation to the next" (p. 16). For Quinn (2012), culture is "…the ideas, beliefs, theories, values, ideologies and concepts which are manifest through discourses used by particular people at particular times" (p. 29). A key implication of these definitions is that the culture of group members and relationships amongst them is influenced by aspects such as the identities of the group members; how the group members perceive their roles in those groups and how they should exercise the power or authority attached to those roles (agency).

The definitions of culture given above provided scope for an analysis of the character of the #FeesMustFall protests from a cultural perspective as the protests and how they unfolded were a function of how different stakeholders related with each other. In addition, the protests had a long-term impact on the South African higher education sector. For example, for Mbembe (2016), the protests marked a significant cultural shift in political engagement at South African universities. Booysen (2016, p. 18) asserts that, as a result of the events of 2016, "an on-going thirst for activism is in evidence". Such evidence, is, for instance, seen in that, at the time of writing this article in 2018, the Soshanguve Campus of the Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria had been closed for several weeks as a result of student protests.

Another justification for framing the #FeesMustFall protests on a cultural basis lies in that they inspired a number of other demands by students, albeit not of equal measure. Examples include #OutsourcingMustFall; #EndRapeCulture and #PatriachyMustFall (Ndelu, 2017). Such demands, and others, all of which aggregated into #FeesMustFall, despite being rooted in philosophies such as black consciousness and decolonisation, also represent a cultural shift which, according to Godsell and Chikane (2016), is driven by the search for a post-colonial South African university in which, amongst other things, students seek solidarity with fellow students and workers as well. Mpofu-Walsh (2016) also alludes to the rationale in looking at the character of the protests through a cultural prism in light of the spread of fallism and its programme of action to other parts of the world such as Europe and America.

Structure: 'We are because we belong'

Structure refers to those institutions that have the power to give direction to social activities (Westwood & Clegg, 2003). Their existence is demonstrated in the systems of interaction that occur between people or entities that belong to different social groups. As a result, social structures have the capacity to establish associations amongst positions, practices and roles (Witgren, 2004). Structure in the context of the #FeesMustFall protests refers to individual or collective actors that have an influence on university governance (Godsell & Chikane, 2016). Such structures as university management, the government and student representative councils, on the basis of perceived individual or collective power, influenced the events that took place during the #FeesMustFall protests and, ultimately, the form of the culture that characterised the protests. The existence and influence of structures at universities is exemplified by FitzGerald and Seale's (2016) contention that some of the formal university structures were subjected to pressure by some groupings whose legitimacy was questionable. This is in keeping with the contention by Archer (2003) that while some structures are formal, others can be informal.

Agency: 'What drives our actions?'

Jarvis (1985) defines agency as "…the vehicle by means of which institutions provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned" (p. 116). Archer (1996) says it is

the mandate (and the ability to exercise it), which individuals or groups have to influence the activities of the structures to which they belong. Implied in both definitions is the idea that it is through agency that structures influence events that take place in society and therefore the culture that characterises those events. In this study, structures such as student representative councils, university executives and government departments are seen as possessing various forms of agency by means of which they influenced events during the #FeesMustFall protests and the culture thereof. This is exemplified by the fact that the protests, according to Godsell and Chikane (2016) were, in part, ignited by mainly black students at historically white universities realising that they still lacked agency to influence the course of events despite their initial celebration upon gaining access to these universities.

Methodology

CR is a multi-method paradigm which is not based on a single research methodology and a fixed approach to data analysis (Carlson, 2005). This study relied mainly on a qualitative approach in the collection and analysis of data from the selected newspaper articles. This entailed trying to make sense of the individual and collective perceptions of members of the various structures involved in the #FeesMustFall protests with respect to the exercise of their agency. The characterisation of the culture emerging from the protests was based on this analysis.

A total of thirty-five articles from widely circulating newspapers in South Africa such as *Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *City Press*, *Sunday Independent*, *The Star*, *Daily Sun*, *The Citizen*, *New Age* and *Sowetan* from October 2015 to March 2016 were analysed. While the first four newspapers are weeklies, the last six are dailies. The major inclusion criterion for the articles selected was the extent to which, after an initial reading, the researcher identified the interplay of structure, agency and culture in them with respect to the protests. The study also made use of some online pictures of events that happened during the #FeesMustFall protests.

From a methodological perspective, the use of CR is interpretive in nature. It therefore entails re-articulation of the texts being analysed to yield new narratives (Kripendorff, 2013). In this study, the focus of the new narrative was on the form of the culture that characterised the #FeesMustFall protests.

While they are generally reliable as sources of data, one of the weaknesses which newspapers have is that, as an element of the media, hardly any of them is completely neutral as their editorial policies are guided by the ideologies of their owners. In many cases, they serve the interests of a privileged few in society (Duncan, 2003). This study brought balance to the discussion of the findings from the selected newspaper articles by tapping from literature on #FeesMustFall found in textbooks. Some of the literature was actually based on the voices of the students (Malebala, 2017; Ndelu, 2017; Vilakazi, 2017).

Research Questions

The two main questions were:
1. What is the form of the culture arising from the #FeesMustFall protests between October 2015 and March 2016?
2. How can this culture be explained in terms of the structure–agency–culture nexus?

Results and Discussion

The discussion of the results is based on patterns of the structure–culture agency cross-links which emerged from the selected newspaper reports. The patterns emerged firstly, from an analysis of how each of the different structures involved in the #FeesMustFall protests was portrayed as perceiving its own agency. Secondly, the patterns were derived from the perceptions of the means by which such agency could be exercised to resolve the conflict leading to, and arising from, the protests.

The influence of structure

Two broad levels of structures identifiable from the selected newspapers were the macro and micro. At the macro level were political party-affiliated student organisations. Examples of these included the South African Students' Congress (SASCO); Democratic Alliance Students' Organisation (DASO) and the Economic Freedom Fighters Students' Command (EFFSC). When the protests started, these different student structures put their differences aside and fought as a united front. This was seen in the unanimous agreement amongst the different student organisations that fees had to fall (Watson, 2016b).

The initial unity amongst student organisations affiliated to different political parties was a defining characteristic of the protests to which the momentum that they quickly gathered could be attributed. It is noteworthy, however, that in interviews with Vilakazi (2017) some #FeesMustFall participants at the Soshanguve Campus of the Tshwane University of Technology said that protests at their campus could not be reduced to #FeesMustFall since they had been protesting for many years over issues such as poor student accommodation and financial exclusion.

In addition to student structures, other macro-level structures included Universities South Africa, a joint forum for all vice-chancellors of the public universities in South Africa; the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET); Department of Police; faith-based organisations; and political parties such as the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The responses of these social entities to the protests as reported in the newspaper articles were similarly closely reflective of how they sought to pursue resolutions to the conflict in ways that suited their interests. For example, the secretary-general of the ANC, in his response to the protests, argued that the provision of free education had always been an aspect of the ANC's policies (Mantashe, 2015). In his view, therefore, the ANC government was, in principle, not against the demand for free education by the students.

Given the demand by political organisations for consistency in responses to issues of national importance, it is ironic that there were often instances of contradiction between sub-structures belonging to the same entity. For example, contrary to the ANC Secretary-General's views on the #FeesMustFall protests highlighted above, the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) characterised the protests as "…part of a counter-revolutionary movement bent on overthrowing the government" (Cele, 2016, p. 14). Similarly, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) blamed the protests on inept leadership by the vice-chancellors (Ngobeni, 2016). Such apparent contradictions serve to highlight the complex form of the culture of the #FeesMustFall protests arising from the specific identities, perceptions and interests of sub-structures which, in some cases, belonged to the same macro-level structures.

Visible micro-level, structures included the Students Representative Councils (SRCs) of the individual universities; political party-affiliated student organisations and university management. Generally, the responses of each of these structures to the protests showed their belief in both the legitimacy and efficacy of their actions. For example, university management condemned the violence perpetrated by some protestors, arguing that it infringed on the rights of non-protesters. An example was a letter written to staff members by Adam Habib, the vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, after they criticised him for securitising the university. In the letter, he cited the case of an old man from Limpopo Province whose attempt to assist his grandson with registration had been violently disrupted. However, in a response to the letter, Bohmke (2016) argues that despite previously taking part in protests, which put the lives of staff and students at risk at the former University of Durban-Westville, Habib's material conditions had changed so much as to make it difficult for him to fully appreciate his own students' struggle.

Another example of university executives' position was that of the University of Johannesburg (UJ) spokesperson who reportedly warned that "… no intimidation or violence would be tolerated during the 2016 registration". (Watson, 2016a). This seems attributable to the belief by senior management, as a structure, in the principle of the managerial right to manage, a form of agency which, perhaps in their perception, legitimised their use of threats, rules and regulations to deal with the conflict arising from the protests. However, juxtaposed with such threats, the UJ vice-chancellor issued a statement appealing to students' appreciation of the transformative power of education. The statement, added to the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the culture arising from the #FeesMustFall protests as on one hand, within the same micro-level entity, threats are portrayed as the chosen conflict resolution tool while, on the other, persuasion is depicted as the preferred approach.

The influence of agency

From the selected newspaper articles, the responses of the different macro- and micro-level structures showed reliance on various forms of agency. These responses constituted the means by which they executed the protests, in the case of the students, or responded

to them, in the case of the government and university management. This also contributed to specific tenets of the culture of the #FeesMustFall protests identifiable in the selected articles. Examples of the different forms of agency relied on by different structures included the power of the collective; violence; access to state resources and power; and, in the case of academic members of staff, projecting themselves as the 'voice of reason.'

The power of the collective

Seven years before 1994, Ndebele (1987, p. 2) predicted, "Surely the children of the masses are destined to invade the universities." This came true with the eruption of the #FeesMustFall protests in 2015, ironically under a democratic government. A critical aspect of the students' mass participation in #FeesMustFall was their belief in their power as a collective. Illustrative of this, as shown in Figure 1, was the large number of students who marched to such centres of national political power as Luthuli House, the headquarters of the ANC, and the Union Buildings in Pretoria, which is the seat of government as well as parliament in Cape Town. According to Booysen (2016, p. 22), a placard held by one of the students during protests at Parliament also emphatically expressed the students' belief in the power of the collective as it read, "The people have more power than the people in power".

Figure 1: Mass attendance at the Union Buildings
(Source: https://bit.ly/2O7G0hl)

To demonstrate their power when they marched to Luthuli House, the students did not allow Gwede Mantashe, the then secretary of the ANC, to address them as all they wanted

was to hand over their list of demands to him. Similarly, as captured at Wits University in 2015 in Figure 2, the students prevented the vice-chancellor of the University, Adam Habib, from leaving the auditorium in which they were gathered until he called a meeting of the University's Council. This incident demonstrated the power of the collective in that, in all likelihood, it would have been impossible under normal circumstances for an individual student to prevent the vice-chancellor from leaving the auditorium. According to Soudien (2016, p. 205), Habib's posture, though, did not mean that he was being held hostage by his students, but it was rather one that demonstrated "…the full amplitude of the complexity of, and in some ways an experimental response to, the leadership question of higher education". This confirms the view that the culture of the #FeesMustFall protests was multi-dimensional and therefore should not be looked at from only one angle.

Figure 2: Wits vice-chancellor, Adam Habib (centre), held hostage by students
(Source: https://mg.co.za/#feesmustfallpictures)

Thirdly, in January 2016, students threatened to disrupt the local government elections in the whole country if their demands were not met. (Watson, 2016b). Such a threat could only come from social entity with a strong belief that as a collective, it could achieve such a feat. No individual student or students' structure would have dared to issue such a threat and hope to be taken seriously by the authorities. The threat by the students to disrupt the local government elections is demonstrative of the influence of the students' faith in the power of their collective agency on the culture of the #FeesMustFall protests.

Violence as a form of agency

In addition to relying on the power of the collective, the selected newspaper articles depict the students as perceiving violence as a form of agency through which the conflict in the #FeesMustFall protests could be resolved as shown in the pictures that follow.

Figure 3: Violence on campus
(Source: https://bit.ly/2GnFsNS)

Figure 4: Violence on campus
(Source: https://za.pinterest.com/#feesmustfall)

The violence depicted in the photographs gave rise to newspaper headlines such as:

- 'Varsities on the brink of collapse' (Monama, 2016, p. 1);
- 'Varsities on thin ice' (Malingo, Ramothwala & Selapisa, 2016, p. 1);
- 'Varsities ablaze' (Phaladi, 2016a, p. 2); and
- 'Campus strife flares' (Monama & Molosankwe, 2016, p. 1).

As a result of the increasing levels of violence as implied in these headlines, one vice-chancellor expressed the fear that there might be loss of life, warning, "What really worries immensely with escalation of violence is … the day is not far off when a parent will have to fetch their son or daughter in a body bag…" (Macupe, 2016, p. 5). However, in the same article, one of the EFF Student Command leaders reportedly expressed the students' determination to continue with the fight until their concerns were heard, even in the face of death.

The sentiment expressed by the EFF Student Command leader is in keeping with the philosophy of *fallism* which, according to Cele (2016), is "an oath of allegiance that everything to do with oppression and conquest of black people by white power must fall and be destroyed" (p. 6). The destruction of artworks at UCT, the torching of a bus at UCT; the burning of a science centre at North-West University and the burning of an auditorium at UJ could perhaps be attributed to this ideology. It is also perhaps on the basis of this philosophy that a former Wits SRC president is cited as arguing that, to merely talk about violence on campuses without addressing the students' demands, is to miss the point (Macupe, 2016, p. 5). In an interview with one of the #FeesMustFall leaders Malabela (2016) was told that the students saw violence as the only way they could get the government and university authorities to listen to their demands because the neoliberal ideology on the basis of which the South African university is currently being run does not believe in anything being given to anyone for free. According to Ndelu (2017) the students' frustration, to which the violence might also have been attributed, was the realisation that since 1994 the South African government had sold the black populace in the country a falsehood about liberation and created a deceptive illusion of a "rainbow nation".

Characterisng the culture of the protests thus were two contrasting perspectives on the efficacy of violence as a form of agency that could be used as a vehicle through which the conflict could be resolved. While those in university management such as the vice-chancellor who expressed the fear that violence might eventually lead to the death of a student, perceived violence as a destructive tool, some student leaders, seemingly on the basis of insights from scholars such as Franz Fanon concluded that it was the only weapon at their disposal for the attainment of their goals. The violence that erupted during the protests might also be viewed as inevitable as protests are inherently disruptive of current social arrangements. Consequently, they call attention to urgent societal problems (Duncan, 2016). Some students at UCT felt that while condemning the physical violence perpetrated by students, the university management was sadly oblivious of the violence that is suffered by both black students and staff members through deprivation, alienation and, especially during the protests, police brutality (Ndelu, 2017).

In addition to violence, the acrimony and toxicity in the culture of the protests was demonstrated through the threats and insults that the then Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, received from some of the students. For example, during a meeting of student leaders, one of them reportedly warned the Minister, "Blade, we are coming for you … I hope we are very clear on this matter, Blade. We will show you that we are serious, if need be, by force " (Watson, 2016b). In another instance, at Wits, the Minister

was actually insulted by one student reportedly shouting, "Voetsek Blade" while others chanted, "Blade must fall! Blade must fall" (Molosankwe, 2016, p. 1). This is demonstrative of the loss of respect for government officials emanating from the students' frustration with failure by the government to meet their demands.

Another dimension of the culture of the protests was the disapproval which the violence that characterised them received from some observers such as journalists. For example, without absolving university authorities and government of culpability in the crisis, Makhanya (2015, p. 2) observes that "…the destruction of property and the violent intimidation of fellow students is totally unbecoming of people who have overcome obstacles to arrive at institutions of higher learning". Similarly, Mthombothi (2016, p. 21) cautions, "Violence is unconscionable in a democratic society … Reason, not savagery, or boorishness, should reign in our tertiary institutions."

Jansen (2015, p. 16) draws a parallel between the violence that erupted during the #FeesMustFall protests and apartheid-era violence, lamenting that although it brought South Africa its freedom, "…it sometimes included complete disregard for the humanity of others, such as the horrific *necklacing* episodes and the torture, even the death, of suspects in camps". This comparison projects the culture of violence that was exhibited at some universities as a zero-sum game, "…a kind of gangsterism masquerading as progressive politics" (ibid.). Perhaps, to an extent, the death of Professor Mayosi of UCT through suicide, reportedly as a result of depression caused by how he was treated by students during the #FeesMustFall protests, serves to demonstrate this culture of lack of compassion for others, which emerged from the protests.

Interestingly, by the end of February 2016, some students had begun shunning violence and the racism often associated with it. For example, at UCT, one female student lamented: "They (the violent students) are taking something that was pure and good and turning it into a fight: black against white. It's that narrative, these generalisations which I don't like" (Huisman, 2016, p. 6). This student's disapproval of violence demonstrates that even though members of a group confronted by the same form of adversity may initially be assumed to belong to a homogenous group, there may come a time when, spurred by the power of individual agency, some of them begin to differ in the way they may interpret the events happening around them. On the basis of such differences of opinion amongst students on the efficacy of violence as a tool for resolving conflict, the protests might be said to have become characterised by internal contradictions and ambiguities with the potential to slow down their momentum.

Othering and denigration as forms of agency

In addition to reliance on the power of the collective and of violence, the students who took part in the #FeesMustFall protests also used othering and denigration as forms of agency. Crang (1998, p. 61) defines othering as a "…process through which identities are set up in an unequal relationship". This implies that an individual who engages in othering simultaneously constructs the *self* or *in-group* in unequal and mutual opposition to the *other* or *out-group*. They do this through identification of some desirable traits, which the

self or *in-group* is deemed to possess and the *other* or *out-group* is perceived not to have (Brons, 2014). Alternatively, the *other* or *out-group* is perceived as having some undesirable characteristics which the self or in–group does not have. As a result, the relationship between the two is characterised by implicit, but in some cases explicit, expressions of superiority and inferiority in referring to *self* or *in-group* and the *other* or *out-group* respectively. Often this leads to denigration of stakeholders with whom the individual holds contrary views. Denigration thus becomes a form of agency which is embedded in othering (Cole, 2004).

Several cases of othering and denigration could be identified in the newspaper articles reporting on the #FeesMustFall protests. For example, in the article in which one student leader warned the Minister of Higher Education that the students would go for him, referred to earlier, the juxtaposition of the minister's name, 'Blade' with the pronoun 'we' which refers to the students demonstrates that the student leader perceived the minister and the students as occupying opposing positions in the conflict.

Denigration is also evident in the threats issued by students such as "Blade must fall! Blade must fall" and insults such as "Voetsek Blade" (Molosankwe, 2016, p. 1). In the placard in Figure 5, through a sarcastic and metaphoric play on the Minister's first name, the students portray him as ineffective.

Figure 5: Denigrating the Minister of Higher Education and Training
(Source: https://bit.ly/2LF5vVl)

The then President, Jacob Zuma, was also not spared the denigration as shown in Figure 6.
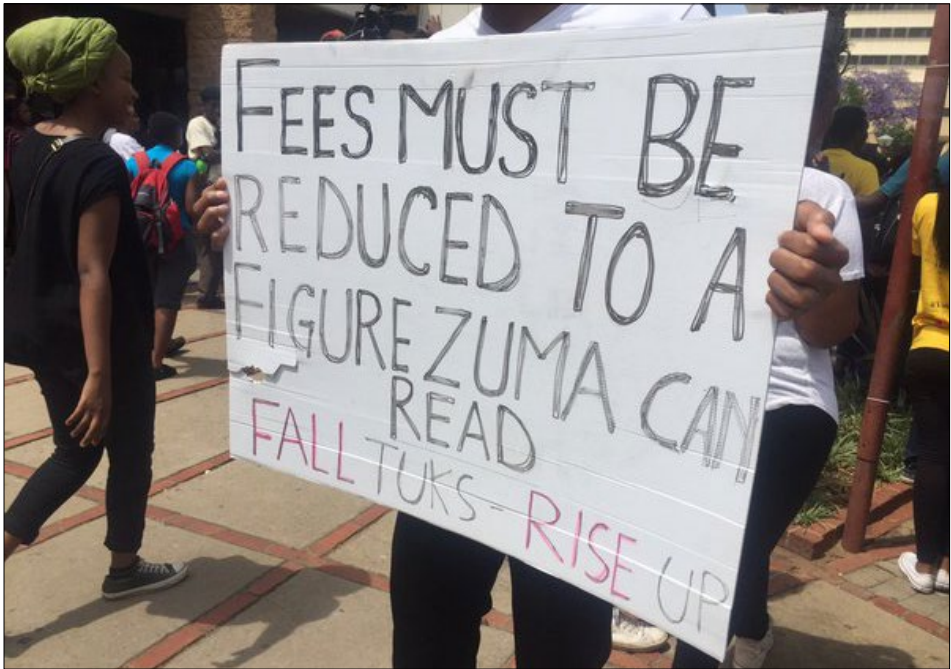
Figure 6: Denigrating the President
(Source: https://za.pinterest.com/#feesmustfall)

The message in the placard is another sarcastic reference to the president's difficulties with reading. Denigration of the president in this way might also be seen as a form of agency through which the students hoped to achieve their goals.

State power and resources as forms of agency

In an attempt to assert its authority, the government had by March 2016 taken the view that, while students had a democratic right to protest, resorting to the use of violence and destruction of property "constitute a criminal act that must be prosecutable" (Chernick & Kalipa, 2016, p. 6). The Minister of Higher Education and Training therefore reached an agreement with the Minister of Police on the deployment of police to those university campuses rocked by violence. He also called for the prosecution of perpetrators of violence to protect life and property at university campuses. Such measures demonstrate belief in the agency of state power as a possible effective tool for containing the violence at university campuses. Similarly, some of the universities are reported in the newspaper articles to have flexed their muscles as exemplified by the contracting of private security companies to secure campuses; using the courts to interdict students from protesting on campus; and, in some cases, the issuing of threats and subjecting protesting students to disciplinary procedures – all inherently forms of agency used by university authorities to contain the protests.

The government, through the DHET, also used its control of the national fiscus as a form of agency. For example, the then Minister dismissed the influence wielded by student leaders who had earlier walked out of a meeting with him in Ekurhuleni. Reportedly, the student leaders later contacted him requesting continued engagement (Makatile, 2016). If true, then the students' turnabout is an acknowledgement on their part, even if not explicitly expressed, of government's agency as a stakeholder in the pursuit of a solution to the protests. This can be said to be particularly so in light of the pledge by government to commit R9 billion to make up for the shortfall arising from the 0% fee increase, clearing historical debt dating back to 2013 and sponsoring the so-called 'missing middle' students.

To assert government's authority and the authenticity of its promises, the then Minister of Higher Education and Training further warned students to "… be careful of wolves in sheep skins" (Makatile, 2016, p. 13). The metaphor was directed at the so-called 'Third Hand' which, the Minister claimed, was trying to use students to achieve nefarious ends in the South African local government elections scheduled for 2016. This force was thus projected as lacking in honesty and its power could only lie in deceit and manipulation. However, the fact that the Minister did not name the so-called wolves in sheep skins seemed to imply that his warning was premised on a conspiracy theory on the basis of which the students were stripped of their own agency.

Academics' responses to the protests

Some articles written by academics or those reporting on their views appeared in some of the selected newspapers. In many such articles, the general view seemed to be that the academics were the voice of reason. The articles portrayed them as holding a position on the matter that would help to resolve it with greater efficacy than what both the government and university executives were capable of. The academics therefore perceived themselves as having a form of agency which can be added to the complexity of the culture of the #FeesMustFall protests. For example, at some universities, some academics marched in solidarity with students as exemplified in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Protesting academics
(Source: https://bit.ly/2GhPD6L)

The academics' sympathetic response to the crisis seemed to stem both from what they saw as genuine demands by students and heavy-handedness in the responses of some university executives to the protests. In an open condemnation of the adoption of measures such as the hiring of bouncers to man university entrances, Swart (2016, p. 47) says, "By inviting the police and security on to campus, management opened the door for indiscriminate force and disproportionate measures against students."

Mangcu (2016, p. 18) concurs with this view, asserting that there had been "…greater peace at those universities that have not brought in any private security or police" and goes on to argue that this is simply attributable to the fact that "police and private security almost always aggravate already volatile situations". This observation concurs with the Bourdiean view that the police represent repressive state power so their deployment to university campuses would naturally ignite violence. The blame for the culture of violence which erupted during the #FeesMustFall protests is therefore laid squarely at the doorstep of university executives.

Painting a picture of contradiction and inconsistency in the culture that emerged from the #FeesMustFall protests, Swart (2016, p. 47) laments the chameleonic behaviour of some vice-chancellors of South African universities when she points out, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that those propelled into power and privilege often forget where they came from."

The vice-chancellors are thus projected as belonging to a powerful structure in terms of both their management positions and the agency of authority that accompanies this. Their implied ill treatment of students is therefore all the more frowned upon in light of the parallels between their own backgrounds and those of the majority of their students whose voices they are projected as shutting up coercively. Instead of being role models, the vice-chancellors, in Swart's (2016) view, are sell-outs who have betrayed not only the present struggle but the old one which they were part of too. According to Swart (ibid.), they therefore created a culture in which they exposed "…their own fear and paranoia and exacerbated existing tensions". This view was echoed by another macro-level structure, COSATU, when it pointed out:

> Vice-Chancellors are all talk and no action and have been exposed by the student protests. They have barricaded themselves behind police and security walls and are not behaving like people in charge of foundations of knowledge, but like paranoid securocrats running concentration camps.   (Ngobeni, 2016, p. 4)

Similarly, accusing the vice-chancellors of a culture of brinkmanship in dealing with the protests, Amato (2016, p. 6) identifies Adam Habib and Max Price, the Wits and UCT vice-chancellors respectively, of having "…veered into *kragdadigheid* (display of power or vigour) by hiring private security whom they have allowed to suppress peaceful protest", their initial deft response to the #FeesMustFall protests notwithstanding. The metaphor used to characterise the vice-chancellors' behaviour in this case is indicative of academics using their agency as intellectuals to subject the vice-chancellors' competencies to closer scrutiny than they might have done before.

Ironically, one of the vice-chancellors at the time, Jonathan Jansen, who might have been expected to defend his fellow vice-chancellors, concludes that it is disingenuous to blame the students for the crisis that rocked South African universities as they were not the problem. Rather, he advised that "… without solving the leadership problem at universities, large injections of state bail-out funding would be a terrible waste of resources" (Jansen, 2015, p. 8). In this view, therefore, real power lies in good leadership and not in managerial or state-assisted agency to solve the problem through throwing money at it. FitzGerald and Seale (2016) concur with this view when they argue that at the height of the #FeesMustFall protests, vice-chancellors' managerial inadequacies were seriously exposed as many of them did not know how to deal with the dilemma of allowing the protests on their campuses concurrently with guaranteeing the safety of staff, students and infrastructure.

With respect to vice-chancellors who boast about their struggle credentials and yet react dictatorially to students' protests, a parallel is also drawn between them and some national leaders in post-colonial Africa, liberators who became oppressors using the same instruments of power which the erstwhile oppressor used to employ. Confirming this characterisation, Mangcu (2016, p. 18) concludes that "… protest is by definition a process of disruption of the normal order: Democrats respond to it with patience, authoritarians with violence". In this view, therefore, such vice-chancellors use their power to unfairly perpetuate the oppression of students coming mainly from previously disadvantaged demographic groups, thus subverting the gains of the democratic trajectory the country has been on since 1994. This becomes paradoxical in that universities, especially in the South African historical context, are supposed to be agents of empowerment of those from historically disadvantaged sections of society. In this regard, as a reminder to the universities of their obligations to the larger South African society by virtue of their position, Ramphele (2015, p. 5) says that "the education system, including higher education, must acknowledge that it is time to provide intellectual leadership to effect radical transformation".

In further condemning the securitisation of campuses, Swart (2016) appeals to academics and students' right to academic freedom, which she, however, sees being eroded by those structures that leverage their access to power either at state or institutional level to suppress their voice. Acknowledging the critical role of youth's inherent power, Swart (2016, p. 47) says: "There is nothing as powerful as youthful anger constructively employed. We should convert the intense anger into something new and existing; the creation of a culture of non-violent protests in which the police have no place and in which no bully or black shirt can mute us."

In light of this suggestion the protests could be said to have generated a culture of mistrust between academics and university executives with respect to the handling of the students' protests. The academics project themselves as the voice of reason which, if listened to, would bring normalcy to campuses while some of the vice-chancellors are portrayed as insensitive dictators.

Mangcu (2016) advises that universities need to listen more closely to students and devise a new governance model. Whatever its form, such a model would imply a realignment of the power structures and relationships amongst the different role players

involved in the governance of the universities. In concurring with this suggestion, the Wits vice-chancellor called on "…all stakeholders in higher education to collectively take the blame for all the wrongs in the sector and come up with solutions" (Macupe, 2016, p. 5). The Wits vice-chancellor's suggestion is indicative of a realisation on the part of some university executives that a culture of intransigence would not be helpful to attempts to end the #FeesMustFall protests.

Conclusion

The selected newspaper articles show that, emerging from the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 to 2016 was a culture which was demonstrative of the structure-culture-agency nexus. The form of this culture was shaped firstly, by the identities of the different structures involved in the conflict and secondly, by these structures' perceptions of their agency as well as how they deemed it possible to exercise this agency. Aspects such as mass participation and speaking with one voice exemplified the character of the culture of the protests, especially at the beginning. The different stakeholders are also portrayed as having relied on different forms of agency in their bid to resolve the conflict. While the students relied on such forms of agency as the power of the collective and violence, the government relied on its control of the national purse and security apparatus. On the basis of their belief in the managerial right to manage, university executives relied on threats of expulsion and other forms of discipline. Articles by academics and those reporting on their views projected them as the voice of reason – a form of agency that added complexity to the culture of the protests. In light of the time that was lost during the protests, the level of destruction that took place at some of the campuses and the attendant financial losses as well as the acrimony, adversity, stakeholder polarisation and toxicity which the protests generated in the relationships amongst the different stakeholders, different approaches to conflict resolution in South African higher education are recommended. Such approaches should be such that less focus is placed on positions which stakeholders occupy in different structures and the agency which is perceived to come with these positions. Rather, for effective conflict resolution, all stakeholders should seek to leverage forms of agency predicated on collaboration and the pursuit of win–win outcomes.

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