

Education

Students contest the status quo

Reparation and redistribution to stop generational inequality underlies the protests

COMMENT
Nic Spaul

Over the past two years, universities have become increasingly contested spaces. Student movements have rejected the status quo and are working to reorder not only the principles that govern universities, but ultimately the principles that govern the country.

The first order of business is challenging our assumptions about who should go to university, what it should look like, and who should pay for it. They have been phenomenally successful on all three fronts.

It is quite remarkable that a loose group of students who lack a political mandate, who have not been elected by anyone and who have almost no resources have managed to achieve so much so quickly. They have brought whole universities to their knees and prompted the creation of a presidential task team. Most significantly, they garnered enough support — essentially — to force the government to allocate an additional R17-billion to higher education in the medium-term budget.

About 200 years ago, Napoleon Bonaparte quipped that a revolution is simply an idea that has found its bayonets.

In the context of the various student movements it's worthwhile to try to identify the underlying idea, its animating principle.

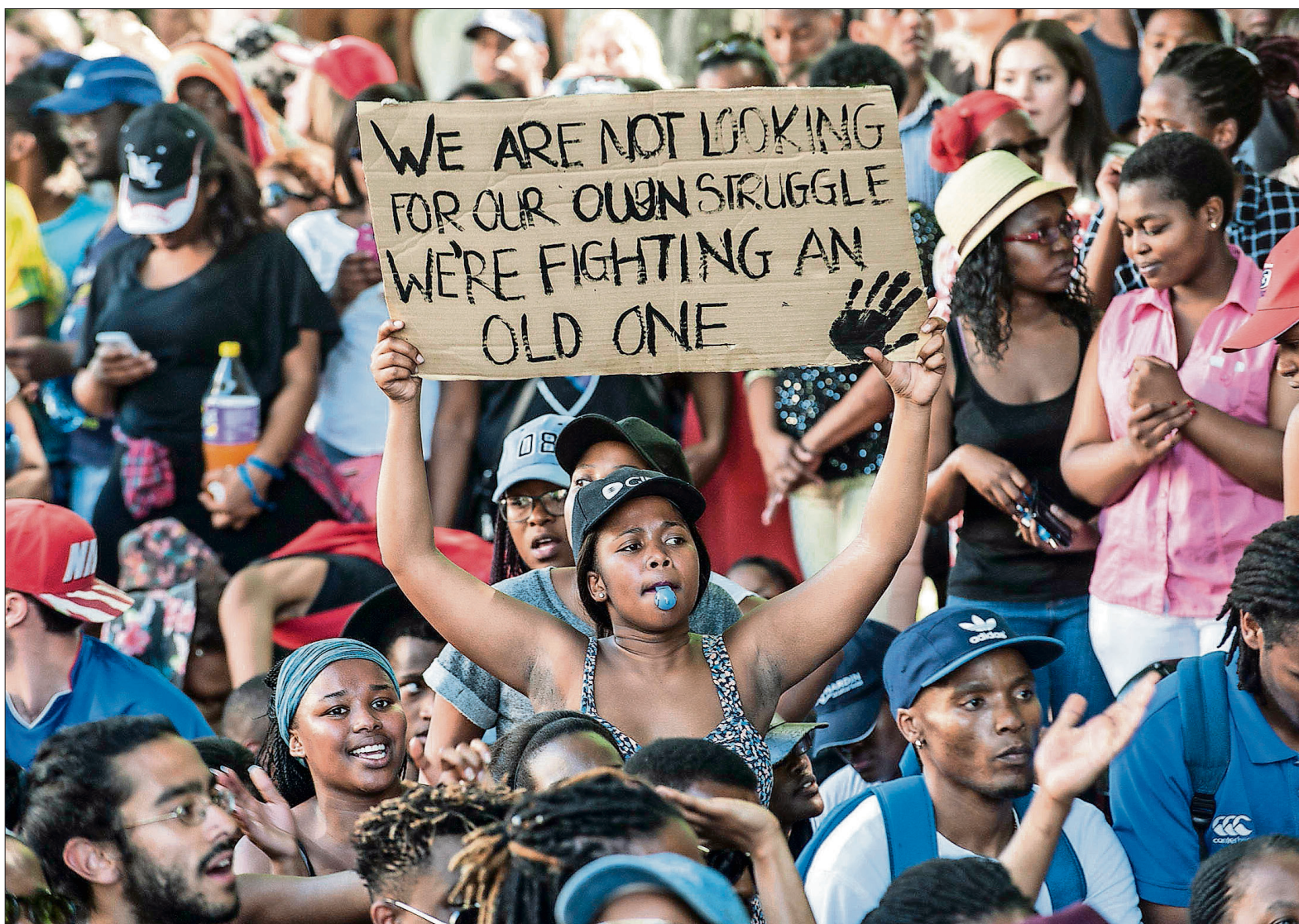
As the student movements assemble and reassemble under different names (seemingly quite effortlessly), I think there is a leitmotif running through all of them — the unfinished business of 1994.

There is a generation of young black South Africans who believe the terms of the negotiated settlement were unjust and let white South Africans off the hook. Dr Amos Wilson, a theoretical psychologist and social theorist, makes the logic behind this position explicit in the following quote: "Justice requires not only the ceasing and desisting of injustice but also requires either punishment or reparation for injuries and damages inflicted for prior wrongdoing. The essence of justice is the redistribution of gains earned through the perpetration of injustice."

"If restitution is not made and reparations not instituted to compensate for prior injustices, those injustices are in effect rewarded. And the benefits such rewards conferred on the perpetrators of injustice will continue to 'draw interest', to be reinvested, and to be passed on to their children, who will use their inherited advantages to continue to exploit the children of the victims of the injustice of their ancestors."

"Consequently, injustice and inequality will be maintained across generations as will their deleterious social, economic, and political outcomes."

Thinking that the various



Academic agenda: University of Cape Town students express their views about fees, opportunity and content. Photo: David Harrison

incarnations of the student movements are primarily about universities is a mistake. #RhodesMustfall was not about a statue — it was about reclamation and power and history.

Similarly, the challenge today is not only about who should pay fees but who should own the land. The discontent and anger about the "pay-to-play" market system we have — where only those who can pay for quality get it — is as much about private hospitals and model C schools as it is about universities. The true contested space at our universities is about the principles that order our society and reimagining different ones.

There are students who look at our country and refuse to accept that the way we are doing things is the only way they can be done. How is it that in a country with considerable wealth and resources that we still have 10-million people living on less than R10 a day?

Whenever I land at Cape Town International Airport and get an aerial view of Khayelitsha, I think to myself: "How the heck can we, as a country, not find a dignified solution to housing for the poor?"

In Cape Town we have 400 000 people living in shacks a mere

40-minute drive from the house that sold for R290-million in Bantry Bay. We have decadent opulence living next to extreme poverty. It's not right.

And so we come back to the contested space at universities where people have different ideas about how we get from where we are to a better future.

Students associated with Black First Land First argue for land expropriation without compensation. Nobel Laureate Thomas Piketty motivates for much steeper wealth and inheritance taxes to level the playing field. The student representative council at the University of the Witwatersrand has proposed a once-off "apartheid windfall" tax on "companies that benefited unfairly by abusing state resources" under apartheid.

But the current discussions at universities are still centred on fees and access to university, so let's start there and think about what 2017 might hold for universities, and put some numbers on the table.

I think we will find a sustainable solution to student financing at universities, possibly even in 2017.

Sizwe Nxasana, the chairperson of the presidential task team, has developed a highly sophisticated and workable model of student funding called the Ikusasa Student Financial Aid Programme that is being tested at seven universities this year, focusing on students studying medicine, engineering and accounting.

This is essentially a public-private partnership aiming to "significantly increase the funding and resources which are made available to support students from working-class families to graduate and find

employment by leveraging private-sector funding".

One can think of it as a three-tier model with the poorest students being fully funded with grants and the missing middle with a combination of grants and income-contingent loans (to be repaid only if the recipient does graduate and earns above a certain amount). Then, finally, those who can pay fees do pay fees.

Although it isn't free education for everyone — and the vanguard may therefore not accept it — if implemented properly it has a good shot at ensuring that no student is excluded from university on financial grounds. That would be a significant achievement.

Thankfully, many in the sector are now realising that needs-blind allocations to higher education — where all students are equally subsidised — are socially regressive and anti-poor. This is largely because the children of the wealthy attend fee-charging schools that give them a much better shot at qualifying for university than the children of the poor.

We know that fewer than one in 10 children from the poorest 70% of households qualify to go to university compared with one in two or three children (40%) among the wealthiest 10% of households. And because of this, if one allocated an additional R10-billion to higher education in a blanket fashion, then about R6.8-billion (68%) would end up benefiting the wealthiest 20% of South African households because it is their children who are disproportionately at university (according to two fiscal incidence

studies).

A recent study showed that 60% of students who qualified for university came from the 30% of high schools that charged fees.

What is the point of raising revenue by additional taxes on the richest 20% only to give two-thirds of that money straight back to them in the form of indirect subsidies to their children?

If we agree that the rich should not be subsidised (usually defined as those in households with an annual income of more than R600 000), how many students would need funding?

Professor Servaas van der Berg's analysis of household surveys has shown that about 60% of the current university-going population would be eligible for funding. (This assumes that income is under-captured in surveys by about 30%.) Importantly, this would cover 73% of black African university students and 30% of white university students.

Although ending financial exclusion at university won't solve the thornier issues — about land, inequality, restitution, primary education, unemployment — it would serve as a powerful and invigorating example that things really can be different to what they are now.

It would be poetic if the start of a successful campaign for a different South Africa could trace its origins to the toppling of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes.

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