**Deciphering the Meanings, and Explaining the
South African Higher Education Student Protests of 2015-16**

Saleem Badat

Introduction

2015-16 witnessed the re-entry in very visible ways of South African university students onto the higher education terrain. This is not to say that students have not been part of steering and shaping higher education through institutional governance mechanisms, or that there have not been student protests post-1994, especially at the historically black universities and at institutions that were merged as part of the restructuring of the higher education landscape after 2000. However, it is suggested that there was something especially dramatic and distinctive about the 2015-16 protests. So wherein lay the drama and distinctiveness of the protests? Did they have to do with the breadth and depth of mobilization, the targets of opposition, and the nature of the demands? Or in serving as a salutary reminder of the tardy pace and limited degree of transformation in higher education and, given the connections between higher education and society, of unfinished business in the wider economic, political, and social domains? How are the 2015-16 protests to be theorized and explained, and their character and significance for universities, higher education, and the wider polity and society to be understood? Could the 2015-16 protests be one manifestation of the "organic crisis" of South African higher education, which necessitates major "formative action" on the part of the state and other key actors?

This paper explicates a number of concepts and poses various questions that it is hoped, when supplemented with additional concepts and questions, can constitute a robust framework for analysis of the 2015-16 student protests. The paper, in the first instance, is concerned with questions about the protests, rather than a rush for answers about their trajectory, dynamics, character, and significance. Above all, the paper is an invitation to engagement and critique. In his introduction to Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, O' Malley writes that "if one is to revolutionize human society in the interest of its perfection and welfare one must understand its nature, workings and failures, one must impart this understanding to others, and one must somehow effect the translation of this understanding into organized political action which will transform society in the interest of the common good. The unity of theory and praxis (means) the inseparability of these three efforts in genuine social criticism" (O' Malley, 1970: xiv).

'Organic crisis'

Writing about the period after the Soweto student uprising of 1976, Saul and Gelb characterized the apartheid state as being mired in an 'organic crisis' because of the existence of "incurable structural contradictions" of an ideological, political, and economic nature (1986:11; 57). The idea of "organic crisis" comes from Antonio Gramsci who, as Stuart Hall notes, "warns us in the *Notebooks* that a crisis is not an immediate event but a process: it can last for a long time, and can be very differently resolved: by restoration, by reconstruction or by passive transformism" (1988). Moreover, "organic crises…erupt, not only in the political domain and the traditional areas of industrial and economic life, not simply in the class struggle, in the old sense; but in a

wide series of polemics, debates about fundamental sexual, moral and intellectual questions, in a crisis in the relations of political representation and the parties — on a whole range of issues which do not necessarily, in the first instance, appear to be articulated with politics, in the narrow sense, at all. That is what Gramsci calls the crisis of authority, which is nothing but the crisis of hegemony or general crisis of the state" (Hall, 1988).

In South Africa in the late 1970s, there were, on the one hand, deep-seated economic problems, including sluggish economic growth, massive unemployment, balance of payments problems, and increasing state debt. On the other hand, the economic malaise was exacerbated politically by the racial structure of South African capitalism and the political challenge of dominated social classes and groups that were becoming organized and growing in assertiveness. Ideologically, the state was no longer able to secure the consent of the black oppressed and democratic whites, and despite the militarization of the state and severe repression it was unable to rule in the old way. Saul argued that an "organic crisis" was normally resolved either through social revolution from below or "formative action" on the part of the ruling class (1986:211). Purely defensive initiatives were ineffectual for preserving the hegemony of the ruling class. "Formative action" necessitated significant reforms and restructuring of an economic, political, and ideological nature. The efforts of a ruling class to resolve an organic crisis, their "incessant and persistent efforts form the terrain of the conjunctural" (Saul and Gelb, 1986:57). Conjuncture is the immediate terrain of struggle, and is shaped by both structural conditions as well as the various programmes and actions of the state and other social forces, and "it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise" (ibid.:57). The distinction between historical structural conditions (features that are relatively long-term, enduring, and permanent) and conjunctural conditions (more short-term and temporary, yet inextricably associated with the long-term features) is important. It alerts one to be sensitive to continuities and discontinuities in conditions in higher education and society, and "allows one to separate the analysis of the [long-term] pre-conditions of action from the [short-term] factors activating specific forms of collective mobilization" (Melucci, 1989: 49-50).

Might the concept of "organic crisis" be put to work to analyze fruitfully the state of South African higher education in 2015-16, or even the contemporary South African political economy? Or is the idea of "organic crisis" massively overstating the problems that afflict higher education and the South African state? Indeed, do the problems even constitute a crisis; are they not just temporary and relatively and minor difficulties that can be easily overcome? Could the notion of an "organic crisis", the idea that 'formative action' is required, in conjunction with other concepts yield a fertile 'problematic' for understanding the 2015-16 student protests; that is to say, "a rudimentary organisation of a field of phenomena which yields problems for investigation"? (Abrams, 1982:xv). As has been noted, "the organisation occurs on the basis of some more or less explicitly theoretical presuppositions – it is an application of assumptions and principles to phenomena in order to constitute a range of enquiry. One's problematic is the sense of significance and coherence one brings to the world in general in order to make sense of it in particular" (ibid.).

The economic dimension of the crisis

It is clear enough that the crisis of higher education has a number of dimensions. The 'economic' dimension is all too evident. First, and most important, South African higher education is inadequately funded by the state. One way of measuring the state's contribution is to consider the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that is allocated to higher education. The percentage increased between 2004/2005 and 2015/2016, from 0.68% to 0.72%, and from some R9.8 billion to R30.3 billion.[1] However, this level of funding is low in comparison with a number of other countries: in 2012, Brazil allocated 0.95% of GDP to higher education, "Senegal and Ghana 1.4%, Norway and Finland over 2% and Cuba 4.5%. If the state was to spend 1% of GDP on higher education, this would amount to R41 billion – an additional R11 billion" (Cloete, 2015). Second, the proportion of the budgets of universities that is funded by the state has declined considerably since 1994. Universities have generally made up the shortfall in state funding through significantly increasing tuition fees, seeking third-stream income (alumni and donor contributions, and income from consultancies, research contracts, short courses, and hiring out of facilities) and reducing costs through mechanisms such as outsourcing. While more equitable access has been achieved post-1994, student numbers have doubled, and black students comprise the vast majority of the student body, the block grant to universities has declined in real terms as has, therefore, the per capita contribution per student.

Third, the level of state funding for financial aid for students who are academically eligible for admission to universities and meet the criteria of the largely state-funded National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is inadequate to support all deserving students at appropriate levels for undergraduate and postgraduate study. This is notwithstanding that the funds voted to NSFAS have increased substantially over the years, from R578.2 million in 2004/5 to R4.095 billion in 2015/6.[2] The 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) observed that "a recent study commissioned by the Minster has found that 'fee-free university education for the poor in South Africa is feasible, but will require significant additional funding of both NSFAS and the university system.' Everything possible must be done to progressively introduce free education for the poor in South African universities as resources become available" (2013:39). Concern was expressed "about students whose family incomes fall above the NSFAS threshold for support, but below the necessary threshold to obtain commercial loans" – a category that has come to be referred to as the "missing middle" (ibid.). The DHET's Green Paper recognized that "an important challenge…is finding the resources to address those students who do not qualify for NSFAS loans because their families' incomes exceed the threshold of R122 000 per annum but who do not earn enough to qualify for commercial loans. This group includes the children of many teachers and civil servants – precisely the groups from whose children future professionals and academics come from in most countries. The government must find ways to meet this challenge" (DHET, 2012: 49). The DHET suggested that "partnerships will be essential to the success of student funding initiatives. These will include intra-governmental partnerships, such as cost-recovery support from the South African Revenue Service (SARS), scholarship support from other government departments in scarce skills areas, and government partnerships with the

[1] Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande: Speaking notes for debate on higher education transformation in Parliament, Cape Town, 27 October 2015.
[2] Ibid.

private sector and international partners" (2013:39). Was the idea of partnerships with the "private sector and international partners" wishful thinking, and what efforts were made by the DHET to pursue its own proposals and with what results?

Fourth, insufficient resources are devoted to academic development programmes in light of the support many students require to ensure that there is meaningful equity of opportunity and outcomes, and that they can graduate successfully; what resources have been devoted to such programmes have been often used ineffectively by universities, which have lacked the necessary academic capacities to mount high quality programmes. Fifth, since 2007, the state has provided considerable funding for "infrastructure and efficiency" to address backlogs and increase institutional capacities related to teaching, research, and student accommodation at all universities, and especially the historically black universities. Despite this, given the severity of the backlogs at historically black universities as a legacy of apartheid era inequalities, infrastructure funding has been inadequate to eliminate the range of conditions that impact on the quality of higher education provision. This compromises equity of opportunity and outcomes for the students at the historically black universities, who are largely from working class and rural poor families.

It is not necessary to emphasize further the range of areas in higher education that are insufficiently supported by state funding. It is not that the state is unaware of the challenges or the measures that are required to ensure that higher education addresses effectively equity, quality, and development problems, or that the higher education budget has not increased, or that funds have not been provided to address important issues and areas. The simple reality is that state funding has been inadequate to support universities to discharge their critical purposes of producing knowledge, cultivating high quality graduates, and engaging meaningfully with diverse communities, to play the diverse roles they must to help realize environmentally sustainable economic development, equity, social justice, and a vibrant democracy, and do all this in a way that ensures that the necessary transformations related to equity, the nature and quality of learning and teaching, research, and institutional culture also occur simultaneously within higher education. As Adam Habib, vice-chancellor of Wits, has put it "while enrollment at South African universities has climbed dramatically, the per-student subsidy from government has declined. 'We've known this for a while now and there have been some concerns about this. The universities in a desire to maintain the quality of the programs have effectively compensated for this by raising student fees. We've been saying for a number of years now this is unsustainable and is going to blow" (Redden, 2015).

The consequences of the 'economics' of the "organic crisis" in and of higher education are pervasive, disturbing, and destructive. Starved of adequate funding, large (not all) parts of the higher education system evince high levels of inefficiency and a lack of effectiveness with respect to the quality of academic provision, the quality and numbers of graduates produced, and the volume of knowledge production. (Not all the problems of higher education and universities though can be reduced to insufficient funding; they are also connected to the effectiveness of leadership, the social composition and quality of academic staff, the lack of willingness of some academic staff to embrace changes, especially in learning and teaching, etc.). The lack of funding imposes greater demands on academics as a result of the increasing student-teacher ratios, and diminishes the overall student experience, especially for indigent students. Access to and success

in higher education continue to be conditioned by social class and 'race'. A combination of inadequate preparedness on the part of students *and* universities, means that very few students graduate in the minimum designated time for an academic program. 50% of students at universities and a higher proportion at universities of technology drop-out and never graduate, an incredible waste of talent that impacts large numbers of students negatively, results in student indebtedness, and wastage of scarce resources.

The 'economic' dimension of the "organic crisis" of higher education is all too real. Spending, say, of 1% of GDP – an extra R11 billion - on higher education may be a good target to realize immediately, but this figure may remain inadequate for the considerable and diverse demands made on higher education by the South African Constitution and the 1997 and 2013 White Papers on higher education. According to the Minister of Higher Education and Training, "an appropriately funded higher education sector would require an additional R19.7 billion per annum in the baseline for university subsidies," excluding contributions to NSFAS (ibid.). Of course, it could be difficult to argue that higher education must be allocated resources at levels that are disproportionate to other social sectors, and in a manner that is oblivious of other serious challenges that confront the state, such creating decent jobs, eroding unemployment, eliminating poverty, and providing adequate social and welfare services. The reality also is that the post-1994 African National Congress (ANC) government's economic policies, powerfully shaped by neoliberal prescripts, have not generated the kind or level of economic growth and development that is required, and that could provide the state more resources to invest in higher education. Whether this is a consequence of the embrace of neo-liberal ideology, or the lack of commitment or courage to make progressive political choices, or the inability to forge creative policies, strategies, and the effective development state that is required to address substantively the inequalities of income and wealth that have ensured that South Africa is one of the most unequal societies on earth are moot points.

Writing in 1991, the late Harold Wolpe observed that the "core structural conditions of apartheid" would "over a long period continue to place severe constraints on the pace and possibilities of any programme pursued by a new regime" to reduce inequalities and realize social justice (1991:3-4). He argued that "the economic and other resources which would be required to redress the effects of the apartheid system in all spheres of education and training are not immediately available and are extremely unlikely to be available, except in the very long term" (1991:7). In the light of this, Wolpe argued that great care and creativity would need to be exercised in how policies were framed and forged "if they are to contribute to the construction of a new South Africa" (1991:1). He warned that unless this happened, higher education policies could "reproduce powerfully entrenched structures generated by apartheid" instead of "serving as instruments of social transformation" (1991:16). Similarly, in a seminal 1978 article analyzing the relationship between education and development, and sub-titled 'From the age of innocence to the age of scepticism', Weiler advanced a similar argument: "There is little evidence to suggest that education, even with a tremendous effort at reducing its own internal disparities, is likely to have an appreciable impact on the achievement of greater distributive justice in the society at large, as long as that society is under the influence of a relatively intact alliance of economic wealth, social status and political power which is interested in preserving the status quo" (1978:182). Bobbio reminds progressive social forces that there continues to exist "two great blocks of descending and hierarchical power in every complex society, big business and

public administration. As long as these two blocks hold out against the pressures from below, the democratic transformation of society cannot be said to be complete" (1987: 57).

It has been argued that "ostensibly consensual and unifying radical visionary policy frameworks", such as the 1997 White Paper on higher education, which promise social equity, redress, and social justice "often obfuscate the reality of power and historically entrenched privilege" (Motala, 2003:7). And that "in reality, many of the articles relating to equity are not achievable without purposeful [even aggressive] and directed strategies, which set out deliberately to dismantle the core of historical privilege, disparities in wealth, incomes and capital stock, critical to unlock the possibilities for social justice and fairness" (ibid.:7). There is ample evidence that is the case. The questions that arise are is the ANC-government and the South African state willing to be "directive and interventionist", to take "positive discriminatory measures in favour of the poor", display "political courage in the face of administrative challenges" and do they possess "the will to defy public discontent from highly articulate and organized interests" (ibid.:7).

The ideological dimension of the crisis

The ideological (the concept 'ideology' is used capaciously) aspects of the "organic crisis" are evident in a number of features of contemporary South African higher education. Institutional change in post-1994 South African higher education has occurred in an epoch of globalization and in a conjuncture of the dominance of the ideology of neo-liberalism. The "origins, rise, and implications" of the doctrine of neo-liberalism are well-covered by Harvey (2008). Neo-liberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005:2). In terms of this doctrine, the role of the state is to "create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices", including the legal and repressive mechanisms "to secure private property rights" and ensure "the proper functioning of markets" (ibid). Neo-liberalism holds that "the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (Harvey, 2005:3). Importantly, "if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary" (ibid: 2).

Neo-liberal ideas, whether embraced voluntarily or as a result of the coercive or disciplinary power of financial institutions, have in differing ways and to varying degrees impacted on economic and social policies, institutions, and practices. For one, the conception of development has become essentially economistic and reduced to economic growth and enhanced economic performance as measured by various indicators. This is to be contrasted with development as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy" (Sen, 1999:3). Development reduced to economic growth has given rise to goals, policies, institutional arrangements and actions that focus primarily on promoting growth and reducing obstacles to growth. Not surprisingly, "the logic of the market has…defined the purposes of universities largely in terms of their role in economic development" (Berdahl, 2008:48). Public investment in higher education has come to be largely justified in terms of economic growth and preparing students for the labour market.

The notion of higher education as a tradable service and a private good that primarily benefits students has influenced public financing, which in turn has impacted on the structure and nature of higher education. As public universities have sought out 'third stream income' to supplement resources, this has often resulted in, as Nayyar writes, "at one end, the commercialization of universities (which) means business in education. At the other end, the entry of private players in higher education means education as business" (2008:9). Concomitantly, driven by market forces and the technological revolution, globalization is "exercising an influence on the nature of institutions that impact higher education", and on the "ways and means of providing higher education", is "shaping education both in terms of what is taught and what is researched, and is shifting both student interests and university offerings away from broader academic studies and towards narrower vocational programmes" (Nayyar, 2008:7, Duderstadt et al, 2008:275).

There must be caution to not glibly and simply read-off developments and conditions at South African universities and in higher education from this general portrayal of higher education in an epoch of globalization and the hegemony of neo-liberalism. The thrust of policy in the White Paper of 1997, A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, runs counter to neo-liberal precepts (DHET, 1997). However, as Ahmed observes on "law and policy as performatives", they cannot be read "as if they do what they say, as if they bring something into existence. If what they do depends on how they get taken up, then the action of policy (as law or letter) is unfinished" (2012:11). Higher education is conditioned by wider economic and social policies, and these have been major constraints on the pursuit of ambitious transformation goals. Even though 'transformation' has continued to be a popular motif, it is useful to pose "what recedes when (transformation) becomes a view", and "what (transformation) does by focusing on what (transformation) obscures" (Ahmed, 2012:14). The idea of 'transformation' and equity has in many cases been hollowed out to a concern largely with numbers and demographics. Instead of keeping constantly in play the pursuit simultaneously of equity, quality, and development within and beyond higher education, with all their paradoxes and attendant social and political dilemmas, 'equity' of a diluted and limited kind, has often triumphed at the expense of meaningful opportunity and outcomes and substantive transformation.

The tendency to reduce 'transformation' to numbers has had its corollary in the lack of significant u engagement with critical issues such as the decolonization, deracialization, degendering, and demasculanization of the academic and institutional structures and cultures of universities. Du Toit has noted "that the enemy" in the forms of colonial and racial discourses "has been within the gates all the time", and argued that they were significant threats to the flowering of ideas, discourse, discovery, and scholarship (2000: 103). At the historically white universities, a deeply embedded culture of whiteness, that has yet to yield to substantive respect for and affirmation of difference and creation of inclusive cultures, has been a major further impediment to change. To "talk about whiteness as an institutional problem", to "describe institutions as being white" is "to point to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others" (Ahmed, 2012:36). In such spaces, "white bodies become somatic norms" (ibid.:38). 'Whiteness' "is invisible and unmarked,…the absent center against which others appear as points of deviation", a "habit insofar as it tends to go unnoticed", and "is only invisible to those who inhabit it or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learn not to see it" (ibid.). It is arguable whether there has been any significant opening up of spaces for the flowering of epistemologies, ontologies, theories, methodologies, objects, and questions other than those that have long been hegemonic, and have

exercised dominance over (perhaps have even suffocated) intellectual and scholarly thought and writing.

Critical epistemological and ontological questions related to curriculum and pedagogy have received little attention, either because of a refusal on the part of academics to do so (sometimes in the name of 'academic freedom), or a lack of the capabilities and /or support to do so. Deep-seated conventional 'wisdoms' that consider quality and standards as universalistic, invariant, immutable, and largely technical matters rather than historical and social constructs have been a major impediment to serious critical engagement with the "educational process in higher education – including curriculum frameworks, the assumptions on which these are based, course design, and approaches to delivery and assessment" (Scott et al, 2007:73). At a number of universities, teaching and learning, which are critical to student success, tend to be neglected and overshadowed by research, perhaps because the former are considered as innate abilities or commonsense activities. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci, Wilfred Carr points out that "the distinctive feature of common sense is not that its beliefs and assumptions *are* true but that it is a style of thinking in which the truth of these beliefs and assumptions is regarded as self-evident and taken for granted. What is commonsensical is *ipso facto* unquestionable and does not need to be justified" (Carr, 1995:53-54).

It may well be that the so-called 'Mamdani affair' at UCT, which saw Mamdani contesting sharply curriculum in African studies and humanities more generally, and which was subjugated administratively, set back curriculum transformation in the humanities almost two decades. More recently, Mamdani has written that "the central question facing higher education in Africa today is what it means to teach the humanities and social sciences in the current historical context and, in particular, in the post-colonial African context" (2011). Moreover, what does it mean to teach "in a location where the dominant intellectual paradigms are products not of Africa's own experience but of a particular Western experience" (ibid.). It is not that prior to the student protests there had not been critical voices that had raised issues of epistemology, curriculum and the like, but that they have gained little traction at universities and in higher education and have remained largely marginal concerns. It is also not the case that there has been either a uniform unwillingness or no efforts to tackle colonial, racist, patriarchal discourses and the culture of whiteness. The reality is that for reasons that are important to understand, initiatives to date have yet to succeed in uprooting inherited cultures and practices, and bringing about the far-reaching transformations that are necessary and long overdue.

The political dimension

One of the most profound and moving placards displayed during the student protests had to be "Our parents were SOLD dreams in 1994. We are just here for the REFUND." Higher education holds the promise of contributing to social justice, economic and social development, and democratic citizenship. Yet, this promise often remains unrealized and higher education instead becomes a powerful mechanism of social exclusion and injustice. The reason is that education, of course, is not an autonomous social force. It is a necessary condition of positive social transformation, but not a sufficient condition. For education to become more equitable and contribute effectively to social justice in South Africa, there have to be bold and purposeful social justice-oriented policies and initiatives in other arenas of society. As noted, the ANC

government's post-1994 economic policies have not been oriented towards, nor have the laid the basis for, fundamentally addressing inequality even if there have been some pro-poor social policies geared towards addressing certain dimensions of poverty.

Politically, and in terms of social policy, a developmental and democratic state committed to "a better life for all" and that extends and deepens popular participation in the economic, political, and social domains has failed to materialize. Thus, "South Africa faces significant challenges" that, in the words of the ex- Governor of the Reserve Bank and an ANC stalwart, "require a co-ordinated and coherent range of policy responses" – "the government [needs] to be decisive, act coherently", demonstrate "a co-ordinated plan of action to address them" and "exhibit strong and focused leadership from the top" (Isa, 2013). Doing so "will go a long way to restoring confidence, credibility, and trust" (ibid). However, South Africa's failings are neither entirely technocratic nor managerial. They are political, associated with a government that is increasingly mired in short-term electoral politics, fails to distinguish between party and the state, is incapable of acting decisively against corruption, and lacks the will to act courageously and decisively to address problems at the levels of policy, personnel, and performance in a context in which the apartheid legacy remains intractably entrenched in various arenas.

What happens when you assemble among the most talented of your society within universities? One answer to this question is provided by the case of the newly created black universities in the 1960s. Given the repression of the period following the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, when the key liberation movements were also outlawed, it was difficult to see how any serious political challenge to white minority domination could be mounted and from where it could come. Any organization faced the prospect not only of immediate repression but also the unenviable task of breaking through the extensive and vigorous social controls, demoralization, fear, and enforced and sullen acquiescence that were major impediments to mobilization and organization building. Yet, as is well known, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), formed in 1968, was able to escape immediate repression, establish itself, and develop a mass following at the black universities. It was surprising that this challenge came from where it did. The black racial and ethnic higher educational institutions were not designed to produce dissidents. They had been charged with the responsibility of winning students intellectually and politically to the separate development programme of apartheid, and generating the administrative corps for the separate development bureaucracies. That, after all, was the purpose of the strict ideological control of the black institutions, their domination by Afrikaner nationalists, and the repressive controls on students.

That the revival of mass political opposition to apartheid emerged from within and spread outwards from the black higher education institutions is also understandable, though. For one, the institutions gathered together students who had survived the rigours and hurdles of black schooling but who, upon graduating from higher education, would still be condemned to a future of limited socioeconomic opportunities, indignity, and inequality. Second, a comment on an earlier time was still true of the black institutions of the 1960s: "Most students had common experiences in White South Africa, and there were few who had not encountered directly the humiliation of White superiority attitudes, while all suffered in some degree the effects of legal discrimination. The very fact of their common positions of inferiority in South African society, unameliorated by contact with white students, created a bond which formed a basis for their

political mobilization" (Beard, 1972: 158). These academic centres thus provided an ideal environment for developing shared grievances and aspirations. The fact that a large number of students lived in residences made communication, mobilization, and organization easier. The great irony was that "the concentration of increasing numbers of students in the recently established black universities provided a site, perhaps the only one in the repressive conditions of the time, in which a radical ideology (black consciousness) could develop. One reason for this was the relatively protected position of the educational institutions" (Wolpe, 1988: 72).

Fast forward to 2015-16: what happens when you congregate the brightest of your society within universities that are characterized by a tardy pace and degree of transformation and various shortcomings, including inadequate funding to undertake effectively their responsibilities? When you, then, also subject considerable numbers of these students to varying degrees of precarious existences because of inadequate financial aid. Hall observes about the University of Western Cape and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology that "these two universities serve Cape Town's low and middle income families, as well as substantial numbers from the City's townships. For these students, and their families, debt is raw, visceral and lived out through compromises; minimal living standards, not enough to eat, no chance of buying books. Universities are a promise of opportunity and the inspiration for dreams; debt crushes both" (Hall, 2015). As #FeesMustFallCPUT put it "We, your children at CPUT, are faced with a tremendous difficulty in terms of completion of our studies and consequently obtaining our qualifications. We are frustrated, vulnerable, emotional and injured – please intervene as CPUT is a public university" (ibid.). Students on financial aid are known to remit part of their scholarship and bursary funds to support immediate and extended families, so that that scholarships and bursaries take on a social welfare function.

On top of the insecurity associated with available funds for tuition, accommodation, academic materials, and subsistence, add the prospect of large debt, high drop-out rates, poor throughput rates, inadequate facilities and accommodation, largely unreconstructed epistemologies and ontologies, questionable quality of learning and teaching to ensure meaningful opportunities and success, and alienating and disempowering academic and institutional cultures that are suffused by 'whiteness', and are products of the historical "legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialization" (Du Toit 2000) At the historically white universities, those who are white and from privileged backgrounds experience those environments and cultures as natural, feel very much at home, don't see or feel any problems, and generally blossom. These social groups are largely oblivious to the association of the current cultures with power, privilege, and advantage, and how they disadvantage especially black students from working class backgrounds and women students (and academics) in myriad ways, affront their dignity, and generate bitterness, anger, pain, hurt, worries, and anxieties. Those who are black and come from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to experience the environments and cultures of the historically white universities as discomforting, alienating, disempowering, and exclusionary. These cultures exact a significant personal, psychological, emotional, and academic toll on black students and staff, compromise equality of opportunity and outcomes, and diminish the idea of higher education as an enriching and liberating adventure. They also impede the forging of tolerance, more fluid and new identities, reconciliation, non-racialism, non-sexism, and social connectedness.

It is painfully clear that the greater presence of black students and staff has not automatically translated into genuine respect for difference, appreciation of diversity, and meaningful social and educational inclusion, whether social, linguistic, cultural, or academic. Instead of dismantling and displacing previous institutional arrangements, norms and practices, and paving the way for genuine inclusion and meaningful participation the practice, if not the policy, has been one of *assimilation*. Blacks, women, gays, and lesbians and other historically disadvantaged or marginalized groups have been expected to accept, integrate, and assimilate into the discomforting institutional cultures of universities. Biko had voiced his strong opposition to assimilation and integration, "if by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behavior set up by and maintained by whites" (1978:24). If there has been inclusion of black students, there has been a simultaneous exclusion of them so that the inclusion has been of a subordinate nature. Consistent, concerted, comprehensive, diligent, and sustained efforts to change what exists, to forge new inclusive cultures, and build universities that genuinely include all have been either lacking for one or other reason, or have failed to yield results. Some social groups and individuals have been content with the existing institutional cultures, and unwilling or slow to appreciate how what they are comfortable with and consider to be natural could be discomforting for others, and to embrace necessary and long overdue changes. The responses to the student protest movements at UCT and Rhodes are all too familiar and no less disturbing: the spewing of racist invective, patronizing comments about the benefits of colonialism, and generally avoidance of the real issues. Telling black students and staff at UCT and Rhodes to 'stop living in the past,' that 'apartheid is over,' and to 'forget the past' when racism, sexism, prejudice, and intolerance continue to rear their ugly heads and undermine their dignity is not helpful.

To imagine that South Africa is a 'rainbow nation' is to seriously confuse aspirations with realities. 'Rhodes Must Fall,' 'Rhodes So White', and the demand for changing the name of Rhodes University are metaphors for much larger and deeper issues. They are a reminder that there is unfinished business, that there can be no reconciliation or peace without social justice at universities and in the economy and society more widely. Pretending that there are not major problems at the historically white universities won't make them go away. Not addressing the problems diligently means that they will fester and undoubtedly explode in the future. The fact is that higher education is a killing field of ambitions, aspirations and dreams, in a context where it is well-known that those who graduate from higher education have the prospects of much more decent jobs, higher earnings, and standards of living than those without university qualifications.

The key political dimension of the "organic crisis" of higher education, however, is the offensive mounted during 2015-16 by black students and supported by some white students, black and white academics, and support staff. One higher education specialist describes it as "the largest and most effective student campaign in post-1994 South Africa" (Cloete, 2015). On the one hand, it is surprising that the largest higher education student protests post-1994 took as long to erupt as they did, given the continuities between apartheid and 'post-apartheid' higher education and South Africa. On the other hand, having occurred, analysis has to now distinguish between structural and conjunctural conditions, and separate out the "pre-conditions of action from the factors activating specific forms of collective mobilization." The trigger in early 2015 at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was disenchantment with the continuing presence on the campus of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. 'Rhodes must fall' was, however, a metaphor for

dissatisfaction with a much wider set of issues, expressed in demands related to the 'decolonization of the university', the highly skewed social composition of the academic work force and especially the professoriate (the dearth of black South African scholars), and institutional culture. Also a target of the student protests was the UCT policy of outsourcing that was instituted under Mamphela Ramphele in the late 1990s. At Rhodes University, the 'Rhodes So White' movement raised a similar set of issues. There, 'we can't breathe' was an allusion to a supposedly suffocating institutional culture. The 'Open Stellenbosch movement added the question of racism more directly, and together with the protesters at the University of Pretoria that of language policy.

By late 2015/early 2016, the issues raised at UCT, Rhodes, and Stellenbosch were overtaken by the demands of students at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and elsewhere related to proposed tuition fee increases, student debt, financial aid, and the idea of "free higher education." The immediate trigger appeared to be the announcement by Wits of a 10.5% fee increase for 2016, which evoked the response '#Fees must fall'. Whether in late 2015/early 2016 the important matters related to decolonization of the university, curriculum, staff demographics and institutional culture were displaced or relegated to the backburner for the time being for strategic, tactical, or other reasons is a matter for investigation.

The key intervention from the side of the Ministry of Higher Education and Training was the convening of a "transformation" summit in mid-October 2015 attended by key stakeholders. The summit communication on 17 October noted that the "summit on transformation takes place at a critical time for South African public universities…. 2015 is a watershed year for the sector, marked by deepening student and staff activism on many university campuses. Students and staff are fundamentally interrogating the nature and pace of transformation at our universities" (DHET, 2015). The summit statement pronounced that "gains" had "been made in achieving transformation goals", and that this was "as a result of the successful steering of the system to achieve policy goals" (ibid.) It was claimed that "the deeper engagement about transformation goals that is now taking place is partly a result of these achievements, as we reflect on where we have been unsuccessful and what a new vision for the university system might be" (ibid.).

The summit statement said there was agreement on a number of issues such as the character and role of higher education, that "the term transformation must continue to be interrogated and discussed at deeper levels, and that "curriculum change is at the core of university transformation initiatives". It was also agreed that there was "increasing levels of frustration at the slow pace of transformation in the university sector, with respect to…insufficient levels of student funding; inadequate levels of funding to match the growth in the system and concerns about sustainability; institutional environments that continue to reflect the broader inequalities in society and result in experiences of alienation by many staff and students, including persistence of racism, patriarchy, homophobia, able-ism, and classism; university curricula and forms of knowledge production that are not sufficiently situated within African and the global South contexts, and are dominated by western worldviews; language practices at universities, which create barriers to effective teaching and learning" and, significantly, "the need for further interrogation of the balance between institutional autonomy and public accountability" (ibid.).

The summit participants claimed to recognize "the urgency of addressing the big and enduring questions of transformation." They resolved "in the immediate term" to "actively support current initiatives to urgently address student funding and debt problems" in the interests of "poor students" who qualify for university; ensure "greater transparency and engagement around fee structures and increments"; strengthen NSFAS; and "make university environments less alienating for many staff and students". Resolutions related to the "medium term" included: increasing funding for universities; establishing "more supportive and expanded student funding models" in order to "progressively introduce free quality education for the poor"; conducting "research and dialogue on curriculum transformation", and providing resources for "curriculum development initiatives"; the enhanced "representation and improved retention of blacks and women in the academic workforce, professoriate, and university management and governance structures" through development programmes, and greater support for the development needs of historically disadvantaged universities (ibid.). The key actors were asked "to report annually on progress made with respect to each resolution that forms part of their scope of responsibility" (ibid.).

The summit's critical analysis of higher education is much the same as that undertaken in the DHET's 2012 Green Paper and 2013 White Paper. Similarly, while there may be a greater sense of urgency, the summit's statement of goals and objectives is not very different from what is expounded in existing policy documents. Like with many policy documents, the summit declaration is expansive on goals and objectives, but largely silent on how precisely problems and challenges will be addressed and overcome, over what periods, and what are the specific responsibilities of different actors, such as the state and universities. As usual, there was a silence on how higher education would be adequately funded to address various needs, including student demands related to fees and financial aid.

A few days after the summit, there were large student protests at a number of universities with the demand for a zero percent fee increase in 2016. In some instances, student demonstrations that took to the streets or where protestors attempted to march to key public building, as with the case of the University of Western Cape students, were treated with an especially heavy-hand by the police. In Cape Town, students marched to the national parliament and there were clashes with police. On 23 October 2015, following a meeting with university and student leaders, president Zuma announced that there would be a zero percent fee increase in 2016. The president's authority to take such a decision and its profound implications will be addressed later. If the summit was an attempt to defuse the 'Fees must fall' movement and steer the student protests into more institutionalized channels, it was a failure. It is also clear that no durable social compact, in any event not one that the student leadership were prepared to accept, or could sell to the students, emerged from the summit.

A key question is which 'student leaders' attended the summit, and how representative they were of the configuration of social forces that appear to constitute the student protest movement. During the student protests at some universities, protestors questioned the positions adopted by the formally elected student representative councils and how adequately they represented student interests. There have also been references to the student protestors being 'leaderless' or having a highly distributed leadership. An argument that Friedman has made in a different context might be pertinent: "there is little point in negotiating a compromise (or compacts) unless the parties are able to secure consent from it from those who will have to live with it. The fact that 'leaders'

have accepted a compromise is unimportant unless this means that their 'followers' accept it too. This implies that the parties must be able to ensure support for the contract from a constituency" (1992: 610). The dynamics of the student protests suggest that negotiating change, forging a social compact, and securing the support of students are likely to be no easy matters. To return to the question of student participation in the summit, it will be interesting to establish, in light of the protests that erupted days later, whether the summit was used by student leaders to meet, jointly strategize, and plan the next steps of the protests.

The character of the student protests

How are we to understand the character of the 2015-16 student protests? This requires insight into the ideologies, and political affiliations and orientations of the organizations, groups, and individuals that have constituted the student protest movement, their goals and targets and how these came to be defined, how they have conceived the relationship between student-centred issues and demands and the struggles of other social forces, their attitudes towards forms of mobilization and collective action, including their views on the use of violence, and a host of other issues. Cloete suggests that the student protest movement "strategy of a non-party-aligned, no-formal-leadership mobilisation through social media is remarkably similar to how Manuel Castells, in *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, describes the new forms of social movements – from the 'Arab spring' to the Indignadas movement in Spain and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the USA" (Cloete, 2015). Perhaps the key student protest movement intellectuals and other protestors have been reading Castells, but there is evidence that they have also been reading Biko and Fanon. We can ask whether the South African students have taken notice of student protests in Chile and elsewhere. However, we should be cautious in making claims about from where the student protest movement has drawn its inspiration, what literature has been circulating within the movement, and how this has shaped ideologies, politics, strategies, and tactics. These are all questions for detailed empirical investigation. We should also be careful to not pigeon hole and explain the student protest movement in terms of existing frameworks and theorizations, or to view them as simply replicas and mimicry of protest movements elsewhere. The use of social media for mobilization does not make the 2015-16 student protest movement the same as other movements. Even if it has borrowed, critically, deliberatively, or uncritically, from struggles elsewhere, the 2015-16 student protest movement could be largely home grown in nature. It is vital to analyze the student protest movement in all its empirical richness and to generate thick descriptions as part of establishing a fertile interplay between data and theory.

Burawoy has defined politics as "struggles over or within relations of structured domination, struggles that take as their *objective* the quantitative or qualitative change of those relations", with the rider that "we must choose between politics defined as struggles regulated by *specific apparatuses*, politics defined as struggles over *certain relations*, and the combination of the two" (Burawoy, 1985: 253). He notes that "in the first, politics would have no fixed objective, and in the second it would have no fixed institutional locus. I have therefore opted for the more restricted third definition, according to which politics refers to struggles within a specific arena aimed at specific sets of relations" (ibid.:253-4). Could this be a fruitful way of approaching the student protests of 2015-16: to consider them as an instance of student politics, which occurs within the arena of universities and higher education and has as its goal and targets certain "sets

of relations." However, depending on the issues and social relations being contested, the arena may not be restricted entirely to higher education but could include the wider political economy, in so far the changes that may be demanded cannot be addressed by the DHET on its own.

Beyond understanding the 2015-16 protest movement as an example of student politics (which is to treat it seriously, as opposed to an episode of mindless hooliganism or vandalism, as some claim), what fertile avenues of analysis may be opened up by conceiving the student protests as a social movement: as "a form of collective action (a) based on solidarity, (b) carrying on a conflict, (c) breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs" (Melucci, 1985:795). The sense of solidarity comes from people's "mutual recognition that they are part of a single unit", while that of "conflict presupposes adversaries who struggle for something which they recognise as lying between them" (Melucci, 1989:29). To say that a social movement breaks "the limits of compatibility of a system" means that "its actions violate the boundaries or tolerance limits of a system, thereby pushing the system beyond the range of variations that it can tolerate without altering its structure" (ibid.). In April 2016, I wrote that that the developments at UCT and Rhodes marked "the beginnings of a social movement", and that "this social movement is likely to extend to other universities, expand, and strengthen over time" (Badat, 2015:1). I argued that "those who constitute the movement are exasperated and angry at the slow pace of change in the institutional cultures, in the academic staff body, and in important aspects of the academic programs of the historically white universities. Invoking the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and higher education policies, they are demanding greater social justice in higher education" (ibid.).

It would be wrong to view the student protests "either as an effect of structural conditions or as an expression of values and beliefs. Collective action is rather the product of purposeful orientations developed within a field of opportunities and constraints" (Melucci, 1989: 25). That is to say, social movements are "at once conditioned by the historical contexts in which they emerge, their particular time and place, and, in turn, affect that context through their cognitive and political praxis" (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991: 62). 'Cognitive praxis', however, is not just aspects of thought but also forms of social activity. The 'cognitive identity' and 'cognitive praxis' of the student protest movement are important issues to investigate, as it illuminates their active roles in formulating their ideas and views and disseminating among people ideas and information. Key ideas and viewpoints do "not come ready-made to a social movement" (ibid.:55). How did the ideas articulated by the student protestors come into being, and how did they evolve over the course of 2015 and 2016?

Notwithstanding suggestions that the student protests were 'leaderless' or had "no-formal leadership", were there in fact "movement intellectuals who articulate(d) the collective identity that is fundamental to the making of a social movement", who were central to the production and dissemination of ideology, to the theoretical and empirical definition of the opposition, and to the education of new members? (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991: 114-118). A second dimension of 'cognitive praxis' concerns the issues that the student protest movement identified for criticism and protest and that were the targets of opposition; why and how were a particular set of themes and issues identified by the student protestors and accorded priority in early 2015, in what ways and to what extent did they change over time into 2016, and why? The third aspect of 'cognitive praxis' concerns how things happen in a movement – how information is disseminated, how calls to action are made, styles of planning, the vehicles and

instruments that are used, internal practices related to agenda-setting, discussion, decision-making, participation, and so on. All these issues need to be investigated in order to acquire a rich understanding of the 2015-16 student protest movement.

Despite their seeming ubiquity, visibility, and strength, social movements should be seen as "fragile and heterogeneous social constructions. Collective action is always 'built' by social actors, and thus what needs to be explained in concrete terms is how movements form, that is, how they manage to mobilise individuals and groups within the framework of possibilities and constraints presented them by the institutions of our complex societies" (Keane and Mier, 1989: 4). Moreover, "collective action must be understood in terms of the processes through which individuals communicate, negotiate, produce meanings, and make decisions within a particular social field or environment. They establish relations with other actors within an already structured context, and through these interactions they produce meanings, express their needs and constantly transform their relationships" (ibid.). The advantage of approaching the student protest movement in this way is that it opens up fruitful lines of inquiry on questions such as the recruitment networks and processes that drew students into the protests; the basis of appeals for involvement, and how the movement created its collective actions. The idea of 'social construction' also obliges one to think about how a collective identity is formed within a movement. Identity is not something that a movement begins with; it is the outcome of various processes and activities. This means that doctrines, political orientations, objectives, strategies and tactics, sites of struggle, movement processes and forms and repertoires of collective action cannot be regarded as ready to hand or static. How they are socially and collectively formed and developed, and what are their social and political determinants have to be objects of enquiry.

There is often a tendency to treat social movements as a "personage with a '*unitary character*', and to reify collective action "into an incontrovertible fact, a *given* that does not merit further investigation" (Melucci, 1989:18). Rather than viewing the student protest movement as homogenous, it is necessary to examine it in all its likely variety and diversity across time and space. What were the levels of involvement, and similarities and differences of the student movements at institutional, local, regional, and national levels, and at different kinds of universities ('research', comprehensive, universities of technology, historically white universities, historically black universities, urban universities, and rural universities)? What was the class, 'race', and gender composition of the movements? What were the different social forces that were involved, and what were their ideologies and political orientations? Questions have to be asked about their collective actions, such as how did groups and individuals coalesce and unite; what alliances, and of what kinds (principled, strategic, tactical), were forged, and so forth (Melucci, 1985: 793).

It is important to avoid seeing the student protest movement in purely political and instrumental terms, for this could miss possible cultural, expressive, and symbolic aspects of the movement. Although the collective actions of social movements may have visible effects – helping bring about institutional changes, serving as recruitment grounds for new elites, cultural innovation, etc. – much of their activities may take place on a symbolic plane (Melucci, 1989). The symbolic challenge of social movements can take three main forms. One is *prophecy*, the proposition that alternative frameworks of meaning, in contrast to the dominant ones, are possible. Another is

paradox, where by taking an extreme case of something that dominant groups would call irrational, movements can show that it is actually very true. A third is *representation*, when visual forms like theatre are used to show contradictions in the social system. Recourse to all these elements helps to render 'power visible' (Melucci, 1989:76). In this sense, the student protest movement may not only be a challenge to dominant cultural codes, but also a possible laboratory of cultural innovation. Social movements can operate as a sign or message for the rest of society in that they may not just be means to an end; sometimes "the organisational forms of movements are not just 'instrumental' for their goals, they are a goal in themselves. Since collective action focuses on cultural codes, the *form* of the movement is itself a message, a symbolic challenge to the dominant codes" (ibid.: 60). Thus, the ostensible lack of visible leadership, the idea of a leaderless movement, and certain forms of participation and collective actions may have deeper significance than imagined.

It is also critical to grasp the relationship between the visible and latent aspects of the student protest movement and collective action. In a latent phase, "the potential for resistance or opposition is sewn into the very fabric of daily life. It is located in the molecular experience of the individuals or groups who practice the alternative meanings of everyday life. Within this context, resistance is not expressed in collective forms of conflictual mobilisations. Specific circumstances are necessary for opposition and therefore of mobilising and making visible this latent potential" (ibid.: 70-1). Phases of latency, far from being periods of inaction, can be crucial in creating and growing the capacities for mobilization and struggle. They deserve as much attention and analysis as phases of visible mobilization do. It is necessary to ascertain what happened within the ranks and milieu of the student protest movement during the autumn, winter, and spring vacations during the 2015 protests, and what happened during the summer vacation in light of the protests in early 2016.

As noted, the student protest movement overall, and at each university, was very unlikely to be homogenous; movements hardly ever are. Unlike organizations where the basis of affiliation is ideological, political, cultural, and so forth, and which tend to have a more unitary character, movements tend to be constituted by a variety and diversity of ideologies, political affiliations, and concerns. A student movement has been defined as "the sum total of action and intentions of students individually, collectively and organisationally that are directed for change in the students' own circumstances and for educational and wider social change" (Jacks, 1975:13). Not all student organizations may at any point in time be part of the student movement. And the student movement is not reducible to a single organization, nor is it an extension of one or even many student organizations. It is a broad and dynamic entity, which includes individual students who are not formally attached to organizations, and whose size and boundaries are likely to vary depending on economic circumstances, political and academic conditions, time of the academic year, and the issues being confronted. Moreover, individual students may stand in different relationships to the student movement and student protests. Some may be defined as 'militants', who are actively involved in student and national politics; others as 'sympathisers', who, while not consistently active, may or may not support demonstrations and other activities; and yet others as 'non-participants', who for a variety of reasons stand aloof from student politics (Hamilton, 1968: 351-2).

Another way of conceiving of the student body in relation to the student protest movement is in terms of at least four kinds of students and groupings. One kind is affiliated to, and represents particular political positions. A second kind of student grouping is 'indifferents' – those that are unresponsive and detached from the student protest movement. A third kind, 'reactionaries' are opposed to the protest movement. A fourth kind, 'academics' believe that student movements should be concerned solely with academic issues (Lenin, 1961d: 44-5). What groupings made up the student body overall, and at different South African institutions? What were their relative sizes? How did they stand in relation to the students that were actively involved in protests? Was the protest movement a majority or minority phenomenon? How did participation differ by 'race', gender, class, and geography, and along other social axes? How were students mobilized and educated? An astute analyst of higher education suggests that "there has been very little attempt to unpack the social class issues - this was largely driven by middle class students from Wits and UCT with support from the middle classes and media as if this was a new issue - ignoring the perennial student protest on fees" at the historically black universities (Anonymous, 2015). Is it true that the media paid much attention to the student protests at UCT and Wits, and has not always done so with respect to protests at historically black universities?

An important object of investigation is the relationships that the student protest movement developed with other non-student class, popular, and professional groups, organizations, and movements. Such relations have a bearing on judgements about its character and significance, and could also condition its activities and role. Did the student protest movement reach out to and draw in other social forces, and with what results? What was the involvement of academics, different categories of support staff, and other constituencies, and what views and positions were adopted by these social groups? Student movements often need to achieve a confluence with other social forces, otherwise they can become characterized by immediatism, populism and adventurism, "brief brush fires and relapses into passivity by the majority", and "frenzied ultra-left gestures" (Hobsbawm, 1973: 265). Whether, in what ways, and to what extent a confluence was achieved between the student protest movement and other popular formations requires analysis.

The role of the leaderships of universities, of Universities South Africa, the Ministry of Higher Education and Training, and DHET in addressing the student protest movement and their demands needs investigation. Did the views, positions, and responses of these key actors calm and mediate principally and effectively the protests, or did they fuel and exacerbate the protests? Were the grievances and demands of students seen as a criticism of the leadership of the universities, or the Ministry, or both, and how did this shape the responses of the different actors. Were there genuine attempts to meet and communicate with protestors and to keep channels open at all times? Or was there too quick, as has been alleged by some students and academics, a recourse to summoning the police and hiring private security companies. The responses of non-student and university actors, including political parties and organizations, cultural formations, and religious bodies and the like are, of course, important in shaping the terrain on which students move and operate, and in creating conditions that either facilitate or constrain the student protest movement and the extent to which their demands are met or not.

It is alleged that at some institutions the student protests were associated with intimidation and violence on the part of some students or/and security companies and/or the police. Some

observers generally sympathetic to the student protest movements contend that a few students rationalized the use of violence to achieve demands. If this was so, what accounts for the willingness to engage in violent actions? What justifications were advanced for the use of violence? What conditions and specific triggers gave rise to violence on the part of students?

The significance of the protests

What has been the significance of the 2015-16 student protests and the movement associated with it, both with respect to individual universities and higher education, and the wider political terrain?

First, the protests were a dramatic reminder of unfinished business in higher education, and forcefully placed on the agenda key issues: the 'decolonization of the university', the social composition of academic staff, institutional culture, the inadequacy of state funding of higher education, the level and escalation of tuition fees, student debt, and the question of free higher education. It is not necessary here to set out the views, and demands of the protestors on these issues. Any thorough investigation of the student protest movement will need to describe and analyze their utterances, statements, and discourses, the presences, absences, and silences in their discourses, shifts that may have occurred over time, and the like. It should be noted that it may well be the case that the student protest movement exaggerated certain conditions, made assertions that are perhaps incorrect, or presented as facts data, statistics, and statements that can be disputed. These are not of huge importance; what matters is how conditions are perceived and experienced by students.

Second, the Wits Student Representative Council (SRC) represented the protests as "the biggest student protest and instance of student rallying under one banner since the dawn of democracy. It is us the youth of 2015 that has revised student activism in the broader discourse of society. We have made history as students in 2015 though this movement" (Wits SRC, 2015). These are large claims. Are they indeed true?

Third, have the protests announced the possible re-entry of a potentially powerful constituency on the higher education and political terrain, which could have considerable impact at the level of institutions, policy, and practice? According to the Wits SRC, it "has taken on the revolutionary burden" of a number of conditions that give rise to student anger (ibid.) The SRC goes on to note that the "zero percent fee increment is a short-term victory that we applied a short-term strategy to achieve. We remain steadfast in our call for free education in our lifetime and we acknowledge that this zero percent increment is not just a step in the right direction but is also a turning point to attaining free education" (ibid.). There is already talk among student leaders that the zero percent fee increase will also be a demand for 2017 and future years. This has massive implications for universities, unless there is a considerable increase in the funds voted to higher education and universities.

David Dickinson of Wits is reported in late 2015 as saying "'that things are returning to normal – but it's a new normal. Everything is different and there are flash points that have potential for putting us back into protest mode.'" (Redden, 2015). A potential flash point is "when the new academic year begins and students will have to pay up-front fees. If some students can't afford to

register…that could spark new protests" (ibid.) A student leader is quoted as saying that if student demands are not accommodated "a strike of even greater magnitude is inevitable" and that "it will not be registration as normal in 2016" (Cele, 2015). Another student leader contended that "discussions are now a futile exercise. We keep having the same conversation with no results. They know there are demands. We are tired of talk with no action" (ibid.). One commentator worries that "demands backed by protests (some violent), that are so rashly and ignorantly acceded to, produce the understandable notion that the next round of demands will also result in acquiescence" (Butler-Adam, 2015:1). However, in what could portend to be a different approach to future protests, the DHET has been reported to be working with the police to prepare for new student actions. It has warned that it will "not tolerate acts of hooliganism, where students go outside structures like the SRC and decide to start a strike" (ibid.). The depiction of actions taken outside the channels of the SRC's, whose credibility has been called into question in instances, as "hooliganism" is unfortunate, as is the seemingly hostile attitude to student strikes, even if they are mobilized by groups other than the SRC.

Fourth, is it a case that students have discovered that through mobilization and collective action they can wield power, and that through this power they can achieve results? Have they learned the lessons of the anti-apartheid movement of the 1970s and 1980s, or perhaps of the Arab Spring and other recent movements - the power of mass action? Equally, have they learned the limits of social media, and the distinction between mass mobilization and mass organization? Given the diverse and loose nature of the protest movement it is hard to know, to paraphrase Bobbio, "how it will develop and how far it will go", whether "it is destined to continue or to come to a halt, to progress slowly or in bursts" (Bobbio, 1987:56). Hobsbawm has drawn attention to the danger of student movements evincing "brief brush fires and relapses into passivity by the majority." Jacks' definition of a student movement included the idea that it is directed at "wider social change" (Jacks, 1975:13). Whether the protests will be a catalyst of far-reaching transformation in and beyond universities and higher education remains to be seen. The transitory status of student means that institutional memory and organizational continuity and sustainability are major challenges. Mobilization (and the use of social media) has its place in the armoury of struggle but, as those involved in the 'Arab Spring' have learnt, it is not a substitute for robust and durable organization.

Fifth, at some institutions, such as UCT, Stellenbosch, and Wits, which comprise larger cohorts of wealthy and middle-class students, the protestors returned to class and wrote final exams. Other universities such as UWC and CPUT, which have a largely lower middle class and working class student body, experienced arson and damage to buildings running into the millions, were closed early, and had final examinations postponed until early 2016. What may this mean for student unity in 2016? Moreover, how will relations between university leadership and management and students be repaired in light of student complaints about curbs on the right to protest, the securitization of some campuses, and allegations of violence against students?

Sixth, while they have given universities, the ANC and the state, much to think about with regard to the current funding of higher education, tuition fees and increases of fees, recalibrating the dimensions of equity, quality, and costs, the pace of transformation, and a host of other issues, how much of a challenge does the student protest movement represent on the political terrain and in the wider social arena. Some scholars note that youth born after 1994 are "considered by some

to be politically apathetic, more interested in social media than in social engagement. The student protest have highlighted how superficial these observations are" (Hornsby et al, 2015). They contend that the student protest movement was more than about affordable fees and access; "they also represent a bigger issue. This relates to how active and engaged the country's university students are in seeking to better society. Not quite the slackers that many were lamenting, then" (ibid.) However, the scholars provide little argument for this judgement, and their claim about student action towards a "better society" has to be interrogated critically (ibid.).

Mckenna writes that "it's no surprise that student movements are shutting down university campuses all over South Africa. More than two decades have passed since the advent of democracy and change in higher education appears to be stuttering. Students and many academics are fed up with high fees, a teaching body that remains stubbornly white and male, and a curriculum that needs more relevance in an African country" (2015). She goes on to argue that "it is a mistake to reduce this to a single story. This student movement is not just a call for change at institutional level. It is a reaction to the failure of the human capital model of education. We must look at how demands for free education and more black professors are part of a larger critique of crass capitalism in society" (Mckenna, 2015). Mckenna's explanation for the student protests is unobjectionable. However, it may be quite a leap to claim that the student protest movement is also an implicit or explicit critique of the "human capital model" (which deserves to be strongly critiqued, and discarded) and of capitalism, crass or otherwise, and an offensive against one or other form of capitalism. Again, what are the ideological and political orientations of the student protest movement, and therefore its character, has to be the object of careful analysis. As she observes, it is unlikely that there is "a single story".

An astute and experienced observer of higher education argues that there is "a lot of hyperbole about the impact of the student protests - beginning of a revolution; shift in power away from the ANC, etc." (Anonymous, 2015). He notes that "the students, aside from linking with campus workers on the issue of outsourcing, have singularly failed to raise any broader social and economic issues, let alone broader educational issues such as poor throughput and drop-out rates, etc. (ibid.). He goes on to say that nor has the student protest movement created "an organisational form that could link with other social grouping going forward" (ibid.). These are pertinent observations and useful cautions. Still, the significance of the movement cannot be judged purely by its size, doctrines, demands, alliances and so forth; it must also include how it affected the higher education and political terrain on which it operated. Ultimately, "what was won must be judged by what was possible" (Piven and Cloward, 1979: xiii). The questions to ask are whether the student protest movement contributed to reproducing, undermining, or transforming social relations in higher education, institutions and practices; whether it on the whole "made "gains or lost ground", and whether it "advanced the interests" of the economically and socially marginalized classes and social groups or set them back (ibid.). The relationship between the student protest movement and the prevailing social structures and conjuncture "has its real existence in the immediate world of history, of sequences of action and reaction in time" (Abrams, 1982: 7-8). The relationship between action and structure needs to be "understood as a matter of process in time" (ibid.: xv). Thus, even if the activities of the 2015-16 student protest movement did not constitute an immediate and serious threat to ANC political hegemony and the overall system of class relations, its struggles might nonetheless weaken the pillars of that system so that the ANC is compelled to restructure the institutional mechanisms that maintain the

current system and its own hegemony. In this process, new conditions and a significantly altered terrain of struggle could be established which may be more favourable to the efforts of class and popular movements that seek a different political and policy trajectory and a different kind of society than the one over which the ANC appears content to preside.

While the student protest movement has set forth a number of demands, these have not always been uniform nor clear, making the political nature of its demands difficult to judge. At the same time, the demands cannot be expected to be well-defined and comprehensive, given the complexity of the issues that are involved, the diversity of the student protest movement, and the different ideologies and political forces that appear to comprise the movement. Take the issue of 'decolonization of the university.' To 'decolonize' is to uproot, displace, substitute and replace what, and more formatively to undertake and achieve what precisely at the levels of the purposes, roles and functions of the South African university, epistemology, theory, methodology, knowledge production, scholarship, curriculum, institutional structure, culture, conventions, and practices? What are the capacities of universities and capabilities of academics to undertake far-reaching and thorough going decolonization? Or take the issue free higher education that came to the fore in late 2015 and early 2016. The Wits SRC statement cited earlier expressed a commitment to "free education in our lifetime." How is this statement to be interpreted? As a demand for free education immediately? Or as a very astute formulation based on the understanding that free education may not be immediately possible but is worthwhile having as an ideal? But a demand, nonetheless, for free higher education, as opposed to free higher education for the poor?

There should be no blanket objection to the ideal of free higher education or, for that matter, free health care for all, even though these ideals may be a great anathema to neo-liberal economic and social orthodoxies, which laud the 'free market' and minimal state, and advocate the privatization of all aspects of economic and social life. Neo-liberalism scorns any notion of the public or social good, or collective well-being. Yet, the aspiration to live in a South Africa that puts human development and well-being first and that prizes a highly educated, informed, and critical citizenry is entirely consistent with South African constitutional ideals. Free higher education exists in a number of countries, as one of the markers of a just society**.** It can be possible in South Africa, and is a question of making reasoned public choices, and of understanding the consequences of public policies of free for all, free for the poor, and non-free higher education. A policy of free higher education requires fundamental re-thinking of and changes in social goals, priorities and policies. In addition, the state would have to provide universities their full running costs, part of which they currently derive from tuition and residence fees from students. This would total tens of billions. Absent this, without fees universities would collapse. South Africa is one of the most unequal societies on earth, in which there are huge inequalities based on wealth and income. Free higher education would be a great boon for wealthy and middle-class parents that can afford to pay university tuition/residence fees and associated costs; in effect, it would be a public subsidy to the very rich and well-off middle classes, and further entrench inequalities. An alternative approach could be to strive to progressively realize free higher education, beginning with those most in financial need, alongside a parallel process of a wider reformulation of social goals, priorities, and policies. Outside of such an approach, the call for immediate free higher education, will reproduce

inequalities. Under current social structures and in the current conjuncture, it is hardly a radical, let alone revolutionary, call.

Without doubt, the achievement of a zero percent fee increase in 2016 was a major victory for the student protest movement. Yet the sheer rapidity of the victory is somewhat astounding. Butler-Adam claims that Zuma's response was a "clearly panicked response" (2015: 1). A seasoned observer states that it was "largely an attempt by VCs and government for different reasons to buy the peace. I understand it was the VCs who proposed the 0% increase, which is mind-boggling given the long-term implications" (Anonymous, 2015). According to Universities South Africa chairperson Habib, "university leaders did not initially support the zero percent fee increase demand but swung their support to the students during the height of the October protests. What the students did in seven days was what we've been trying to do for 10 years, which was get the state to rethink its subsidy" (Redden, 2015). Was this an audacious gamble on the part of university leaders, especially if the state does not make up the shortfall fully for 2016, and does not significantly "rethink the subsidy"? The Minister of Higher Education and Training stated that "to resolve the immediate shortfall of an estimated R2.6 billion required to cover the 0% fee increase, we are working out exactly what different sectors will contribute. From our side we have identified sources of funds that can be reprioritized, obviously at a cost to our other planned programmes. The wealthier universities have committed to make a contribution."[3]

Butler-Adam suggests that the president's fee decision was an "inopportune and alarmist response without (it would seem) any consideration of the short- and long-term consequences of his announcement" (2015:1). Hall argues that "the decision by universities, negotiated with government, that will see no fee increases in 2016 may be good politics; it's terrible economics. Because the government has agreed to recompense universities proportional to their loss of anticipated revenue, the universities with the highest fees and the largest proposed fee increases will receive the most cash. In order to find the funds – which are unbudgeted against tax revenues – the Department of Education and Training will probably have to abandon projects that were intended to enable universities like UWC and CPUT improve their facilities and support for the least well off students. The overall consequences will be economically regressive, both at the institutional level and at the individual level. The worse resourced universities will receive little to help them catch up. And students from well-off families, who had anticipated a 10% fee increase in 2016, will be better off" (Hall, 2015). There is speculation that even before the zero fee increase decision, at least eight universities were experiencing severe financial difficulties. The University of Fort Hare, which celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2016 had to be granted permission to use R35 million of its earmarked allocation for infrastructure funding for operational expenses (Bozzoli, 2015).

An issue that has received little attention concerns the implications of the manner in which the decision of a zero percent fee increase was taken for the future autonomous governance of the universities. By what authority did the president and the vice-chancellors and chairs of councils agree that there would be a zero percent fee increase in 2016? It is understood that universities and the state were under severe pressure, but such a decision is the sole prerogative of the university council. In any event, why was the ANC government so ready to settle with students

---

[3] Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande: Speaking notes for debate on higher education transformation in Parliament, Cape Town, 27 October 2015.

so quickly, when it has not done so in the case of large and lengthy strikes and community protests? Were vice-chancellors and chairs of councils mandated by university councils to take such a momentous decision on fees, given their huge implications especially for universities without significant reserves or weak balance sheets? The ramifications for governance in and of higher education in the future could be significant if the agreement on fees struck between the state and universities becomes a trend.

Conclusion

The Notes above, which draw on political economy and social movement theory, are an attempt to carve out a possible framework for a dispassionate analysis of the student protest movement. The term 'movement' has been used in this paper; in reality it is perhaps a multiplicity of *movements* that need to be the objects of analysis. How, in what ways, and to what extent they constituted an overall movement, has to be a question for investigation. The framework that has been elaborated is not intended as a blueprint for analysis; it is an invitation to critique, and to help develop a more robust framework for analysis or to forge alternative approaches that can provide understanding of the 2015-16 protests. It is vital that there is imaginative theorization, extensive description, and rigorous analysis of the 2015-16 student protests, and that the trajectory, dynamics, character, and significance of the student protest movement that emerged and grew during the course of 2015 and continued during 2016 is documented.

Scholarship on the 2015-16 student protests has to avoid both spectacular claims about their meaning, as well as fanciful predictions about their future trajectory and their significance. Above all, it is critical to avoid seeking to find and see in the student protest movement what are the political hopes of socially committed scholars and activists for South African universities and higher education, and society. The purpose of scholarship has to be to illuminate and convey understanding of the protests in all their richness and complexity.

References

Ahmed, S. (2012) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life.* Durham: Duke University Press

Anonymous (2015) 'Personal communication'. 9 December

Abrams, P. (1982) *Historical Sociology*. New York: Cornell University Press

Badat, S. (2015) **'**Address at the Commerce Faculty Graduation Ceremony on the Award of an Honorary Doctorate by Rhodes University'. 10 April

Beard, T.V.R. (1972) 'Background to student activities at the University of Fort Hare' in van der Merwe, H.V. and Welsh D. (eds.) *Student Perspectives on South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip

Berdahl, R.M. (2008) Developed Universities and the Developing World: Opportunities and Obligations in Weber, L.E. and Duderstadt, J.J. (ed.) *The Globalization of Higher Education*. London: Economica Ltd

Biko, S. (1987) *Steve Biko*: *I Write What I Like*. Stubbs, A. (ed.). London: Heinemann

Bobbio, N. (1987) The Future of Democracy: A Defence of the Rules of the Game (London, Polity Press)

Bozzoli, B. (2015) 'R35 million to keep Fort Hare University's doors open'. PoliticsWeb, 9 December. http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/r35-million-to-keep-fort-hare-universitys-doors-op; accessed 10 December

Burawoy, M. (1985) *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism*. London: Verso

Carr, W. (1995) *For Education: Towards Critical Educational Inquiry*. Bristol: Open University Press

Cele, S. (2015) 'State readies for fees chaos'. *City Press*, 8 December
file:///C:/Users/SB/Documents/Work%20in%20Progress%20for%20Transfer%20-1December2015/Badat%20Writing/Student%20Protests/Resources/State%20readies%20for%20fees%20chaos%20%20City%20Press.htm; accessed on 11 December 2105

Cloete, N. (2015) 'The flawed ideology of "free higher education"'. *University World News*, Issue No. 389, 6 November.
http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20151104111825416

Department of Education (1997) *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*. Government Gazette No. 18207

Department of Higher Education and Training (2013) *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System*. Pretoria: DHET

Department of Higher Education and Training (2012) *Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training*. Pretoria: DHET

Department of Higher Education and Training (2015) 'The 2015 Durban Statement on Transformation in Higher Education, 2nd National Higher Education Summit, 15-17 October 2015'. 17 October

Duderstadt, J., Taggart, J. and Weber, L. (2008) 'The Globalization of Higher Education', in Weber, L.E. and Duderstadt, J.J. (ed.) *The Globalization of Higher Education*. London: Economica Ltd

Du Toit, A. (2000) 'Critic and citizen: The intellectual, transformation and academic freedom', *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 9 (1): 91–104

Eyerman, R. and Jamison, A. (1991) *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach.* Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press

Friedman, S. (1992) "Beyond symbols? The politics of, economic compromise", in Schire, R. (ed.) *Wealth or Poverty: Critical Choices for South Africa.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press

Hall, M. (2015) 'Indebted and Angry'. http://martinhallfacilitation.org/2015/11/26/indebted-and-angry/?fb_action_ids=10156272480635603&fb_action_types=news.publishes; accessed on 10 December

Hall, S. (1988) *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2448-stuart-hall-gramsci-and-us

Hamilton, W.L. (1968) 'Venezuela' in Emmerson, D.K. (ed.). *Students and Politics in Developing Nations*. London; Pall Mall Press

Harvey, D. (2005) *A Short History of Neoliberalism*. London: Oxford University Press

Hoare, Q. and Smith, G. N. (eds.) (1971) *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.

Hobsbawm, E.J. (1973) *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson

Hornsby, D.J., Arvanitakis, J. and Moore, R. (2015), 'Why the time is right to create a new generation of 'citizen scholars'. *The Conversation Africa*, 9 December

Isa, M. (2013) 'Marcus in strong plea for "decisive leadership" in SA'. Business Day, 7 June. http://www.bdlive.co.za/economy/2013/06/07/marcus-in-strong-plea-for-decisive-leadership-in-sa, accessed on 10 December 2015

Jacks, D. (1975) *Student Politics and Higher Education*. London: Lawrence and Wishart

Keane, J. and Mier, P. (1989) 'Preface' in Melucci, A. *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Lenin, V.I. (1961d) 'The tasks of the revolutionary youth' in *Collected Works*, Volume 7. London: Lawrence and Wishart

Mamdani, M. (2011) 'Africa's post-colonial scourge. *Mail & Guardian Getting Ahead*, 27 May - 2 June

Mckenna, S. (2015) 'Five trends South Africa's universities must reject if they really want change'. *The Conversation Africa*, 20 October

Melucci, A. (1985) 'The symbolic challenge of contemporary movements'. *Social Research*, 52 (4): 789-816

Melucci, A. (1989) *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande: Speaking notes for debate on higher education transformation in Parliament, Cape Town, 27 October 2015. http://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-blade-nzimande-debate-parliament-higher-education-transformation-27-oct-2015-0000; accessed on 12 December 2015

Motala, E. (2003) 'Policy analysis and politics: Clarifying some contested assumptions and contradictions' in *Wits EPU Quarterly*. Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Education Policy Unit

Nayyar, D. (2008) 'Globalization: What Does it Mean for Higher Education', in Weber, L.E. and Duderstadt, J.J. (ed.) *The Globalization of Higher Education*. London: Economica Ltd

O'Malley, J. (ed.) (1970) 'Introduction' to *Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Piven, F.F. and Cloward, R.A. (1979) *Poor Peoples Movements: Why they Succeed, How they Fail* New York: Vintage Books

Redden, E. (2015) '#FeesMustFall', *Inside Higher Ed*, 18 November 2015 file:///C:/Users/SB/Documents/Work%20in%20Progress%20for%20Transfer%20-1December2015/In%20South%20Africa,%20push%20continues%20for%20free%20tuition%20and%20adequate%20support%20_%20Inside%20Higher%20Ed.html; accessed 8 December

Saul, J.S. and Gelb, S. (1986) *The Crisis in South Africa*. London: Zed Books Ltd. Second edition

Scott, I., Yeld, N. & Hendry, J. (2007) A Case for Improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education*: Higher Education Monitor No. 6.* Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Weiler, H. N. (1978) 'Education and development: from the age of innocence to the age of scepticism', *Comparative Education,* 14 (3) pp 179-198

Wits SRC (2015) 'Statement on the #FeesMustFall movement'. http://www.wits.ac.za/studentservices/studentrepresentativecouncil/27541/wits_src_statement.html ; accessed 10 December 2015

Wolpe, H. (1988) *Race, class and the apartheid state*. London: UNESCO and James Currey

Wolpe, H (1991): 'Education and social transformation: problems and dilemmas', in Unterhalter, E., Wolpe, H. and Botha, T. (eds.) *Education in a Future South Africa: Policy Issues for Transformation*: London: Heinemann