

CHAPTER 9¹

PROTEST AS *PARRHESIA*: DIFFICULT DEMOCRACY AND SOUTH AFRICA'S STUDENT PROTESTS²

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"We had to leave the pain lingering in the minds and souls of white liberals." (Chumani Maxwele, 2016)

"He is useful because he battles, because he bites, because he attacks." (Michel Foucault, 2011)

Democracy is always difficult; democracy is in difficulties. Who today would disagree? As the historian and political theorist John Dunn has recently put it, the rise of authoritarian regimes around the world (now including the once champion of democracy and human rights, the United States) forces the question: is representative democracy "a regime form which has run out of promise?" (Dunn, 2014; 2025). As noted in the introductory chapter to this book, the idea *and* the practice of democracy are currently under threat from the combined pressures of a changing world economy and the effects on politics of the new

1 In Memory of Lis Lange, 1961–2025.

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communications landscape. As an example of these pressures, and a way of perhaps understanding them better, this chapter examines a certain disjuncture in thought and practice regarding democracy exhibited in the South African student protests of 2015 and 2016.

This disjuncture occurs between the democratising calls for social justice embedded in the protests, at the same time as these rallying calls also exhibited strong anti-democratic elements. The chapter seeks to throw some light on this disjuncture by examining several key aspects of the classical concept of *parrhesia* – free expression or, better, ‘fearless or provocative speech’ – particularly as these come through in Michel Foucault’s engagement with it in the final phase of his work. It concludes by briefly examining some of the consequences for the higher education system arising from this disjuncture between the social justice content and the anti-democratic form built into the protest by their particular reliance on the appeal of *parrhesia*.

South Africa’s student protests 2015–2016

In one sense, the South African protests were simply one national expression among a wider revolt against the global funding models imposed on higher education over the past 50 years or so (Cini et al., 2021). Student movements across the world – and notably in Colombia, Holland, Germany, Britain, and the US – also kicked back against the crushing debt trap students found themselves in, especially after governments responded to the 2008 financial crisis by imposing strict austerity measures on their citizens.

The financial models which provoked worldwide student protests were embedded in and expressed the broader redefinition and restructuring of higher education that has been taking place since the 1970s. In this redefinition, the public good functions of higher education promoted globally after the Second World War were confronted and gradually eclipsed by an alternative representation of the value of higher education. In this new representation, the common sense of serving the public good was replaced by a new idea of higher education as an individual and private benefit, as a question of the

most efficient use of “human capital” (Higgins, 2019b:7–16). As US theorist Wendy Brown has argued, this reconfiguration continues to have major consequences. “As it dispenses with the very idea of the public,” she argues, “neoliberal rationality recognises and interpellates the subject only as human capital, making incoherent the idea of an engaged and educated citizen” (Brown, 2015:183). In all of this, the once-accepted links between higher education and democracy are under enormous strain and are now visibly fraying (Halvorsen, 2017).

The #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 and 2016 were aligned in their anger and frustration with this neoliberal funding model, which was widely adopted from templates created by the World Bank (Zapp, 2017). At the same time, though, the South African protests differed from the global protests in their tight focus on key issues of race and racial inequality. In South Africa, this meant a significant challenge to the ‘rainbow nation’ narrative that had informed South Africa’s political life since the first national elections in 1994 (Chikane, 2018).

The simplest marker of this difference lies in the fact that the South African protests did not only assemble under the slogan of #FeesMustFall (#FMF) (largely addressed to the financing of higher education):³ the initial and galvanising moment of protest brought people together under the rallying cry of #RhodesMustFall (#RMF). This was the battle cry taken up in Chumani Maxwele’s inaugural protest (or as I shall refer to it below, the ‘Ur-Protest’) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) on 9 March 2015.

#RMF engaged the profound and energising sense of thwarted identity which gave a new substance, force, and direction to the student protests. Through the appeal to the reality of a black pain ignored by the dominant culture, a new (and previously politically dormant) mass of students thronged to join the ranks of the national protest movement. While the Ur-Protest only involved a dozen or so active protesters, just three days later, over 1,000 students joined a mass protest on the UCT campus, while students on campuses all across the country also

3 Largely but not exclusively. The students also sought alliances with workers on campus and promoted resistance to the now standard university policy of ‘outsourcing’ many non-academic staff (Satgar, 2016).

gathered together (Price, 2023:43; Booysen, 2016). By October 2015, a newly energised body of some 10,000 students gathered outside Pretoria's Union Buildings as then President Zuma met with selected student leaders and university administrators before capitulating (at least in part) on the question of fees.

To get a sense of the power and extent of #RMF's appeal to the new protesters, it is useful to compare it to and distinguish it from two previous periods of student protest: student protest in the apartheid period (1958–1994) and protest in the 'rainbow nation' period (1994–2014).

Three phases of student protest

Apartheid saw several distinct waves of active student protest. The notorious Extension of Universities Act was put in place by the new National Party government in 1958 as just one element of their grand project for total racial segregation and subordination in the new apartheid state. The act provoked immediate protests on campuses across the country, most notably at what became known as the Open Universities (Ray, 2016:108–126), with these leading to an intense interest in the idea of academic freedom in ways which later led to the unusual attention paid to academic freedom in the new Constitution (Higgins, 2019a).

Less immediately, but of much greater importance, was what took place in the new black universities after 1958. Although the new universities were designed explicitly to educate black students in the skills and aptitudes necessary for them to play their role in the economy and administration of the country, while inhibiting the development of critical thinking skills, the campuses proved instead to provide the fertile ground for the development of the new Black Consciousness politics. As championed by figures such as Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, and Mamphela Ramphele, Black Consciousness stimulated and provoked the major political initiatives of SASCO (South African Students Congress) and SANSCO (South African

National Students Congress) (Badat, 2016a). In 1976, under the influence of Black Consciousness, protests in Soweto against the use of Afrikaans as the primary language of instruction in black schools renewed national and international opposition to apartheid after the brutal killing of at least 176 people (Brown, 2016).

Finally, in the dying days of apartheid, the increasing number of academic staff and student protests against the government resulted in what was to be apartheid's final frantic assault on academic freedoms: the De Klerk regulations of 1987. The regulations acknowledged the force and threat presented by campus activism by trying to regulate it out of existence. The proposed regulations were successfully challenged in a court action led by UCT and were eventually struck down as *ultra vires* (Higgins, 2013:11–41).

In all of the above, student protest was directed principally at the apartheid state, focusing on its racist higher education system, but also taking aim at the broader racial policies the system was intended to nurture and support. Post (formal) apartheid, with the former resistance movement, the African National Congress (ANC), firmly in power, the focus of student politics understandably shifted away from resistance to the state. Student protests entered a new and distinctive phase.

As Koen et al. have argued, post-1994 student politics moved away from “contesting state interventions in HE [higher education]” towards “the pursuit of narrower interests”, including student housing and “financial exclusions” (Koen et al., 2006:408). Significantly, in this new phase, student protest action lost something of its national address and came to focus on and target the specific administrations of individual campuses. As Koen et al. emphasise, this meant that despite the fact that all students “face the same financial problems”, no attempt was made at forging *national* co-ordination between the Student Representative Councils of the separate institutions (Koen et al., 2006:408). In the ‘structure of feeling’ of the immediate post-apartheid period, it was simply not imaginable to actively confront or criticise the ANC government. In higher education, as in housing and service delivery more generally, the ANC benefitted enormously from

what political theorist Susan Booysen has described as the “liberation dividend”: the powerful sense that a liberation party can do no wrong once in government and should remain unchallenged (Booyesen, 2015:4).

In this turning away from the system as a totality, student protest suffered a certain *de-politicisation* (in the sense of turning the student body away from mass national politics) but also, paradoxically, a *repoliticisation*. This took place as the office bearers of the Student Representative Councils affiliated directly with specific parties (ANC, Economic Freedom Fighters [EFF], Democratic Alliance [DA]), with a consequent alignment of their campus politics with particular parties’ political agendas (Jansen, 2017; Habib, 2019). This focus on affiliation and alignment meant a certain loss of contact between officials and the students they represented. Indeed, as was noted by some, student representatives were increasingly seen as using their tenure on Student Representative Councils more as preparation for later careers in politics rather than serving the interests of their constituents (Luescher et al., 2020:103, 105).

This situation (which characterises the period 1994–2014) meant that student protest generally lost its mass force and became dulled and somewhat routinised. Yes, there was a regular pattern of annual protests around issues such as fees and accommodation, but these protests failed to energise or connect to the mass of students.

This situation changed dramatically with the 2015–2016 protests. They arrived with an explosive force that was almost entirely unexpected (Lange, 2019:83; Habib, 2019). Far from the now habitual and routine protests of the ‘rainbow nation’ years, the new protests presented a powerful and unexpected challenge to the higher education system and to what had become the casual complacency of the ruling party and the broader society beyond.

In material terms alone, the protests did considerable damage to the higher education system. By the end of 2015, Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, estimated that the protests had caused ZAR150 million in damage to higher education infrastructure. By June 2016, this figure had risen to around

ZAR459 million, with the Minister of State Security going so far as to claim that “these protesters are undermining the authority of the state”, while the ANC-aligned Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA) accused the #FMF of becoming a “counter-revolutionary movement” (cited in Booysen, 2016:36).⁴ By August 2018, “infrastructural damages to universities and training colleges” had risen to more than ZAR800 million (Long, 2021:86). Damage included the burning of libraries, lecture halls and administrative buildings; paintings and artworks; and campus vehicles, including student buses; and the deliberate firebombing of the vice chancellor’s office at UCT.⁵

All in all, the 2015–2016 protests constituted a new and major challenge to the higher education system, unprecedented in the post-apartheid period. Already, at the very start of the protests, Saleem Badat, then vice chancellor at Rhodes University, had argued that they expressed an “organic crisis” for higher education in South Africa (Badat, 2016b). By 2017, in a study informed by interviews with a wide range of the country’s top administrators, Jonathan Jansen, the former vice principal of the University of the Free State, summed up the general feeling as a powerful sense that “integrity of the system as a whole is now under severe threat”: South Africa’s academics were witnessing “a full system meltdown in process” (Jansen, 2017:233, 239).

Given the obvious fact that many of the actual problems that the 2015–2016 protests engaged with – questions of institutional culture, frustrations over fees and accommodation – had been common cause since 1994 (and the occasion of multiple protest actions and responses from government and universities), what galvanised these protests? What was it that worked to bring so many students together in ways

4 The figure includes: North-West University counted ZAR150 million in damages; ZAR82 million to the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and ZAR40 million to the Tshwane University of Technology. Repairs to infrastructure at the historically disadvantaged universities of Fort Hare, the Western Cape, Zululand, Walter Sisulu, and Limpopo added a further ZAR40 million. <https://www.polity.org.za/article/da-violent-protest-action-at-institutions-of-higher-learning-has-cost-r800-million-2018-08-08>

5 The firebombing is usually passed over in silence in accounts which tend to explain student violence as a direct response to security and police violence. For a thorough survey of student attitudes towards the use of violence, see Morwe (2020). In general, she concludes, students saw violence as a reasonable response to either the indifference of the university authorities or as a reply to actions by campus security.

which constituted the powerful threat to the whole system described above (CHE, 2016)?

This chapter offers at least a partial answer in terms of the analytic resources available from Michel Foucault's discussion of the concept of *parrhesia*. Thinking through the idea of *parrhesia* helps to grasp the powerful appeal of the social justice (and democratising) content of the protests while also observing some of the de-democratising force of the often damaging 'monological' form of their address.

Fearless speech

In his final phase of work, Michel Foucault added a new dimension to his account of the conflictual relations between the 'will to knowledge' and the 'will to truth', the turbulent point at which (as Paul Rabinow put it) "the history of practices met the history of concepts" (Rabinow, 1997:xii). This was the dimension of *parrhesia*, a particular kind of frankness, openness, or even aggression in speaking the truth to power (Porter, 2023). In a series of lectures at the University of Berkeley in 1983, Foucault sampled some of the complex and ambivalent meanings of *parrhesia* in the century following its first deployment in the 5th century BC (Foucault, [1983] 2001).⁶

In *Fearless Speech*, the account moves briskly from the term's first uses in the tragedies of Euripides (5th century BC), tracing it across its appearances in the writings of Plato and Aristotle and down to its deployment to later thinkers such as Seneca and Epictetus, with a particular emphasis on the Cynical modes of *parrhesia*, which he developed in later lectures at the Collège de France (Foucault, 2001, 2011).⁷ At the theoretical centre of the analysis stands Foucault's main claim: that the different uses of *parrhesia* reveal the existence of a fundamental difference between truth-telling as it is understood

6 The Berkeley lectures contain in miniature the main themes and arguments presented in Foucault's final lectures at the Collège de France. I shall draw on the larger accounts where necessary.

7 According to Gros, "a large part of the 1984 course is devoted to a highly original and one might say abrasive presentation of ancient Cynicism" (Gros, 2011:350).

in ‘modern’ post-Cartesian epistemology and what it meant in this earlier epoch of Greek and Roman thinking. In *Fearless Speech*, he puts it this way:

If we raise the question of how we can know whether someone is a truth-teller, we raise two questions. First, how is it that we can know whether some particular individual is a truth-teller; and secondly, how is it that the alleged *parrhesiastes* can be certain that what he believes is, in fact, the truth. (Foucault, 2001:15)

In the period of antiquity, he suggests, only the first question is central: how is it possible to identify someone as a truth-teller, how does the public recognise them, what are their distinguishing marks or characteristics? The second question is, he writes, a “sceptical” question, and “a particularly modern one” at that. As such, it is, he insists, one that is entirely “foreign to the Greeks” (Foucault, 2001:15). Indeed, it is only possible to pose this second question from within the framework constituted by what he refers in this text as the “analytics of truth” (Foucault, 2001:170) (and elsewhere as the “Cartesian moment”). As we shall see below, Foucault’s distinction between these two questions proves to carry some significant and perhaps surprising consequences for the assessment of the democratising force of the South African student protests.

Even on the surface, it is striking how Foucault’s description of the identifying marks of the *parrhesiastes* captures many of the key features of the South African student protest movement. In particular, these parrhesiastic features characterise (and help to explain the subsequent power of) what I shall refer to as the ‘Ur-Protest’: #RhodesMustFall. This took place on 9 March 2015, on the monumental steps of the University of Cape Town, where the statue of Cecil John Rhodes looks out imperiously over the Cape Flats and continental Africa beyond (Nyamnjoh, 2016; Schmahan, 2016; Shepherd, 2022).

The Ur-Protest: #RhodesMustFall

For many students who took the protests to new levels of mass participation, the initial #RhodesMustFall protest served as the catalyst for their engagement. In this, the Ur-Protest's main instigator, Chumani Maxwele, acted as the original *parrhesiastes*: the truth-teller whose living example of fearless and provocative speech empowered the protest movement by expressing the unspoken reality of 'black pain'.⁸ As the UCT Rhodes Must Fall Mission Statement put it, the movement was sparked by Chumani Maxwele's radical protest against the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on Monday, 9 March 2015. This has brought to the surface the existing and justified rage of black students in the oppressive space cultivated and maintained by UCT (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015).

We shall return to this description soon. First, though, it is worth isolating what made this protest so singular and so empowering for a new generation of students. For, on the face of it, the 9 March protest appeared to be just another example of the small-scale, routinised student protests that had become the norm in the post-apartheid period. As UCT first reported laconically: "UCT confirms that about a dozen people, including some UCT students, participated in a toyi-toyi protest at the statue of Cecil Rhodes on Upper Campus this afternoon" (UCT News, 2015). Nothing to see here, move on.

Indeed, video footage of the event shows no more than students walking by on their way to classes, pausing only to show a casual moment of brief curiosity about the protest, but never ganging together to form a crowd of active protesters.⁹

The video focuses on the figure of Chumani Maxwele, wearing placards marked 'EXHIBIT WHITE ARROGANCE @UCT' and 'EXHIBIT BLACK ASSIMILATION @UCT', and dressed in a mine worker's hard

8 For instance, see Athabile Nonxuba's comment: "For centuries, universities have been sites of white supremacy and opulence. In 2015, for the first time, black working-class students disrupted this privilege by bringing their lived experiences to the fore. On the 9th of March 2015, Chumani Maxwele threw human faeces at the statue of the colonial master, Cecil John Rhodes. Together with other UCT students, I joined the #RhodesMustFall movement." (Cele, 2021). See also Chikane (2022).

9 The recording is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWr9YNLF67w>

hat (though a gay pink rather than the usual yellow), blowing on a whistle and toyi-toying around the statue. At one point, he is recorded attempting to engage a campus control officer in an altercation.

So far, so unremarkable.

Indeed, the protest might have faded into insignificance were it not for a single action, noted in the immediate UCT report as “[t]wo members of the group threw excrement on the base of the statue”. Despite the wry accompanying comment that the “statue does not appear to have been damaged”, it was this excremental action which transformed the limited local protest into an unlimited and proliferating virtual event. Social media took the relatively small-scale of the immediate #RhodesMustFall demonstration onto the phones and laptops of thousands of local and national students, and ultimately, worldwide, in a trumping of the virtual moment over the moment of the event.

Here we can observe the political power of the provocation associated above all with cynical *parrhesia*, as multitudes of students across the country felt impelled and empowered to join the protest movement, encouraged by how the Ur-Protest spoke the truth about their own occluded experiences.

The Ur-Protest was a well-thought-out and carefully planned event. It involved not only its central protagonist, Chumani Maxwele, but a close group of his friends: students and former students at UCT.¹⁰ Well aware of the deliberate provocation and offence they were planning to stage (in a manner fully befitting the parrhesic act as one that takes place under the fear that the criticised institution “may become angry, may punish him, may exile him” (Foucault, 2001:16)), they chose the day of the protest to coincide with the opening day of the “Infecting the City” public arts festival (a staging of shows at galleries and street performances around the city organised by UCT’s Institute of Creative Arts).

At the centre of the event was the faecal assault on the statue, an act of deliberate provocation, in the offensive mode associated with Cynic

10 These included Wandile Kasibe, Baxolele Zono, Sabelo Mcinzima, and the artist Dathini Mzayiya.

parrhesia. For Foucault (as for others), Diogenes the Cynic embodied the deliberate insolence and provocation associated with *parrhesia*, engaging in public masturbation, urination, and defecation and breaking with the elementary rules of civic and socialised behaviour (Porter, 2023:377). As is well-demonstrated by the many angry public responses, the Ur-Protest carried its truth-telling “to the point that it [became] intolerable insolence” (Foucault, 2011:165). In its use of excrement, the Ur-Protest was an act of the “expressive, embodied shamelessness” (Porter, 2023:378) and carried all the “explicit, intentional [...] aggression” associated with the “Cynic scandal” (Foucault, 2011:280, 234).¹¹

The use of excrement in social and political protest is a powerful but rare event due to the high levels of social and individual inhibitions gathering around it. As one scholar puts it in their suggestive analysis of the IRA’s ‘dirty protests’ of the late 1980s, faecal matter is “a transgressive, aggressively anti-social material” (Kim, 2023). It is custom-built to become at once a “primordial symbol of revulsion as well as a primary mechanism for aggression and the assertion of will to power” (Aretxaga, 1995:129).

Indeed, as Freud had already reminded us (in his Foreword to John Bourke’s *Scatological Rites of All Nations*), “civilised people are annoyed by anything which reminds them of anything unequivocally of the animal nature of man”, and particularly with regard to their corporeality and its basic and unavoidable physical functions (Freud, 1934: vii). It is only under “the influence of education [that] the coprophilic tendencies and impulses of the child are gradually repressed,” he argues. The child “learns to keep them secret, to feel ashamed of them and to feel disgust at them” (Freud, 1934:viii).

Overcoming this built-in disgust and forcing the attention of the social world onto what is usually kept out of sight is a sure way of generating shock and the consequent attention of a social media world in which outrage rules the algorithm. Indeed, prior to the

11 It should be noted that Porter argues that Foucault misrepresents Cynic *parrhesia* in his desire to align it with his own interests and arguments around the figure of the ‘philosophical hero’ (Porter, 2023).

#RMF event, several delivery service protests in Cape Town had already used excrement as a way of generating valuable publicity and expressing deep levels of anger and frustration. In these protests, the use of excrement constitutes “political dynamite” (Robins, 2014). The parrhesic performance becomes a piece of “political theatre” which taps into multiple taboos, including Xhosa notions of hygiene, civility, and respect, together with their opposite, gross disrespect and insult directed against another person (Shepherd, 2022:63).

On another level, in addition to the simple shock value of this ‘political theatre’, Maxwele argued that the #RMF faecal assault was also intended to carry multiple connotations, which created overlapping concerns with politics and culture. In these overlapping concerns, we can also observe a further dimension of *parrhesia*. This is Cynical *parrhesia*’s concern with ‘changing the currency’.

Challenging and changing values

We have seen that a key feature of the Ur-Protest lay in the simple fact that through it, Maxwele was expressing (as Foucault puts it in his Berkeley lecture) “something dangerous”, something “different from what the majority believes” (Foucault, 2001:15) (noting that majority in the case of #RMF does not refer to the majority of the (black) population, but to the fact of the hegemonic power of white opinion at the university). A few months later, in his lecture course at the Collège de France, Foucault referred again to the special nature of the challenge to majority belief issued by the cynic *parrhesiastes*. The aim of the parrhesic task is, as Gros puts it in his commentary on Foucault, “to explode the hypocrisy of accepted values” (Gros, 2011:354).

In such parrhesic action, the anger and revulsion likely to be generated by someone confronting the hypocrisy that allows a social order to claim a principled commitment to justice, while in practice everywhere betraying any such commitment, are at play. “Cynic courage of the truth”, insisted Foucault, consists of getting people to condemn, reject, despise, and insult the very manifestation of what they accept, or claim to accept at the level of principles. It involves

facing up to their anger when presenting them with the image of what they accept and value in thought, and at the same time reject and despise in their life. This is the Cynic scandal (Foucault, 2011:234).

As Caraus has insisted, in a critical elaboration of Foucault's account, at the heart of the Cynic scandal is the imperative to "change the value of the currency". This, she argues, is "the most fundamental Cynic principle" (Caraus, 2022:248).

Standard accounts of the life of Diogenes the Cynic often refer to his question to the Delphic oracle, 'How can I become famous?', and its gnomic reply, '*parakharaxon to nomisma*' – alter the currency. As Caraus (2022:248) explains,

Nomisma means not only 'currency' but also *nomos*, law, custom, so the principle implies changing the customs, rules, habits, conventions, laws and the polis itself as the ultimate convention. The change implies adopting a critical standpoint towards all these conventions.

'Adopting a critical attitude towards all these conventions' – insisting that a 'change in the currency' is necessary, whatever the cost – describes exactly the stakes intended by Maxwele's excremental protest.

In an interview with *Business Day*, Maxwele (2016) explained the logic at work behind or within the excremental protest, one which went beyond its simple capacity to shock and offend. Here, he described the motive forces at work in the initial #RMF protest, the series of overlapping concerns that the protest sought to engage through the deliberately offensive excremental protest. Taken together, these concerns gather around the question central to Cynical *parrhesia*: the question of hypocrisy. This arises from the stark contrast between the social justice pretensions of UCT and the social and political order of which it is a part ('the image of what they accept and value in thought'), with the actual material practices which impact on the lives of black students and citizens.

In the Ur-Protest, excrement is literal but also figurative. Figuratively, it works to identify and attack an overlapping series of

hypocrisies that are performed daily at the university, in the higher education system, and in the larger social and political system beyond.

The first and overarching hypocrisy for the protest movement is the South African Constitution itself, usually recognised and celebrated as “the world’s leading example of a transformative constitution” (Sunstein, 2001:125). #RMF addresses the substantial gap between the constitutional promise and the lived reality of blackness in South Africa.

As Maxwele puts it, “We made use of the ‘human excrement that runs through Khayelitsha [one of Cape Town’s largest townships]’ to ‘speak to the urgent need for human dignity for the black people living in shacks [...] in inhumane conditions and indignity” (Maxwele, 2016).

It is the reality of these inhumane conditions (which include poor sanitation and the pervasive use of the undignified porta-potties of the kind used in the protest) which makes a hypocrisy of the Constitution’s proud and pivotal claim that “[e]veryone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected” (Republic of South Africa, 1996). For the truth-teller, such hypocrisy has to be identified and attacked if the ‘currency’ of social and political life is to be changed for the better. The use of excrement here has an almost literal metaphorical force: as the excrement is literally carried from Khayelitsha to UCT, it becomes a symbol of the inhumane conditions in Khayelitsha.

The second object of criticism is the continued anti-black racism active in South African society. This is the product of Britain’s original colonising project, so powerfully driven by Rhodes (Brown, 2015). “By throwing poo at the statue of Rhodes,” Maxwele explains, “we could symbolise the filthy way in which Rhodes mistreated our people in the past” and also “disgust at the manner in which UCT, as a leading South African institution of learning, celebrates the genocidal Rhodes” (Maxwele, 2016).

All in all, he concluded, in a deliberately cheeky and provocative reference to the institutional audits conducted by the Council of Higher Education (CHE), “the poo would be an institutional appraisal of UCT” (Maxwele, 2016). Again, the distance between the guiding

aspirations of the CHE – to eradicate racism in the higher education system – and the reality of everyday life for black students constitutes just the kind of hypocrisy or self-willed blindness that an institution is comfortable with, but the Cynic will not allow.

What is happening in and across these overlapping circles is, above all, a failure of the ‘rainbow nation’ narrative, which pledged that Constitutional promises would be realised in the short term. Being forced to recognise this is precisely the kind of challenge to a complacent self-image which it is the task of the Cynical *parrhesiastes* to shatter.

The Ur-Protest is best understood as a parrhesic action. It is a prime example of the Cynic scandal, embodying to the full its capacity to shock and to call into question the hypocritical complacency with which an accepted culture tends to regard itself. In this action, Maxwele occupies the position so well described by Foucault as that of the thinker who addresses a sovereign or tyrant to tell him “that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice” (Foucault, 2001:16).

As mentioned previously, students were attracted by the ‘radical’ nature of the Ur-Protest and how it “brought to the surface the existing and justified rage of black students” (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015). For the young Marx, to be radical means “to grasp things by the root” (Marx, [1844] 1992:251) and (as Caraus has usefully amplified in relation to Cynical parrhesia), “to the extent that they are not normally visible”, roots “imply an element of concealment” (Caraus, 2022:259). This means that radicalism always involves “a dismantling and making visible the invisible roots, uncovering them [...] some kind of destruction is always implicit in reaching the concealed roots” (Caraus, 2022:259). Because of this, the parrhesic act involves “a disruption of the normal life of the *polis*” (Caraus, 2022:255), such as that we have seen characterise the student protests of 2015–2016. As Caraus sums up, *parrhesia* “takes place in the public space and the truth is told in the face of the power with the intention to make possible another world, a truer and more just one” (Caraus, 2022:261). This intention of making possible another world, a ‘truer and more just one’, was indeed central

to the social justice demands which powered the protest movement.

However, it is at precisely this moment in which the social justice claims of the protest movement are at their strongest in democratic terms, in their calls to ‘change the currency’ of not just the university but the whole social order, that they also begin to turn away from the deliberative practices which are essential to democracy, and particularly so in any complex multi-cultural society.

Monologism and difficult democracy

If, as Caraus has convincingly argued, Cynic protest can be read as essentially cosmopolitan in inspiration, then its point is never to seek to replace “the plurality of polities with the one true polity” (Caraus, 2022:248). It is at this point – the point at which the practice of democracy is associated with the values of cosmopolitan dialogue – that the #RMF protesters can be seen to break decisively with the forms of Cynic protest. For sitting uneasily alongside the social justice content of the protest movement are the essential and essentialising forms of interpellation practised by the #RMF movement. These are calls to a racially exclusive and excluding black nationalism, one quite at odds with the movement’s social justice and democratising imperatives.

Maxwele is quite open and explicit about the exclusive black nationalism which fires his project. He understands it as a present-day activation of the Black Consciousness Movement, which he sees himself as heir to (though neglecting its own consistent appeals to the category of the human, so characteristic of the thought of Biko and, beyond him, Fanon (Mba, 2018)). As he moved towards the planning of the Ur-Protest, he explains how he came to realise that the main source of his pain and alienation, the ‘nervous condition’ which he shared with all black students, and which led so many to ‘suicide and despair’, was simply the presence of white people on campus:

I realised that the problem at UCT was that most registered students in my political science lectures were white. Most, if not all, of my lecturers in political science were white, and

my political studies department was full of white professors and lecturers. (Maxwele, 2016)

I read this racial exclusivity – even when raised in opposition to the still evident white hegemony in South African society – as a damaging form of ‘monologism’. I take the term ‘monologism’ from the work of the Marxist literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, writing under the increasing pressure of the Stalinisation of Soviet thinking from the mid-1920s onwards.¹² In his early study, *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin was concerned with the implications of what he described as the “monological conception of the world” (Bakhtin, [1929] 1984:292). Such a conception promotes an attitude which “denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities” (Bakhtin, [1929] 1984:292); it prevents any “genuine interaction of consciousness” and renders “genuine dialogue” impossible (Bakhtin, [1929] 1984:81).

While Bakhtin’s argument undoubtedly prefigures the closing down of dialogue and debate in the coming period of Stalinist terror, it is also useful in helping to identify and locate anti-democratic elements in the protest movement. These come through with particular force in the deliberate rejection of dialogue, as this figured in the original ‘Rhodes Must Fall Mission Statement’. This deserves some careful attention because of what turn out to be the material consequences of the ‘monological’ stance it advocates.

This monological stance comes through as the Statement notes its displeasure with and rejection of UCT’s ‘Have Your Say’ campaign: “We also find it infuriating that management is attempting to open up a process of debate through their ‘Have Your Say’ campaign”:¹³

Alumni have been emailed and asked for input, and notice boards have been put up near the statue to allow for comment from the broader student body. This is not meaningful

12 For details of Bakhtin’s arrest and the execution of several of his friends around the time of the publication of the Dostoevsky book, see Clark and Holquist (1984).

13 For details of the campaign, see Price (2023).

engagement of black students by management, and in fact shows a complete disregard for the black experience. (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015)

What is important here is the attention paid to ‘meaningful engagement’. While the inference that UCT alumni are largely going to be white is undoubtedly correct, as perhaps is the implicit contention that the alumni may well demonstrate a lack of sympathy for the #RMF movement, there is more of a problem with the assumption of opposition from the ‘broader student body’. Two things are important here. First, the reality that the #RMF demonstrations actually enjoyed at least some support from white students, and this may undermine (at least to some extent) the validity of the assumption. Second, and this goes more to the heart of the major theoretical and political point about dialogue, the assumption is then used to entirely negate the possibility of productive dialogue and deliberation. This is expressed in the statement which follows:

It is absurd that white people should have any say in whether the statue should stay or not, because they can never truly empathise with the profound violence exerted on the psyche of black students. Our pain and anger is at the centre of why the statue is being questioned, so *this pain and anger must be responded to in a way that only we can define*. (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015:15, italics supplied)

At the conceptual centre of this is the ambivalent uncertainty around the term ‘empathy’, and particularly here when what is involved is what it means to ‘truly empathise’. Basically, there are two contesting versions of what it means to empathise.

One is close to the older term ‘sympathise’, which is used by 18th century thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith to stress above all the *involuntary* nature of sympathy: we automatically sympathise with the suffering (and other emotions) of those around us (Hume, [1739–1740] 1969:406–414; Smith, (1759) 1982:4–21). But it is important to note that this movement of sympathy has its limits: the

one we sympathise with must (as in the account put forward in the Statement) be recognised and regarded as being the same as us, or at least like us in conspicuous ways. Sympathy depends on a mutual (and socially specific) shared sense of identity (Williams, 1983).

Any emphasis on the involuntary nature of sympathy neglects what was to become central to the new 20th century term ‘empathy’: the insistence that to empathise is always an imaginative act, one of deliberately seeking to enter into and appreciate and understand the mental state of another, as opposed to sympathising with on account of already having the same experience to draw on. It is, as psychologist Hogan suggested in 1969, the “intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another’s condition or state of mind” (cited in Newton, 2023:32).

The Statement’s use of the term, particularly as ‘truly empathise’, belongs more to the involuntary 18th century sense of sympathise. In denying, or having no place for, deliberate acts of empathy, which can cross the barriers of difference and identity, the Statement effects a monological closure and puts in place a kind of monadic solipsism. If, as the Statement asserts, ‘pain and anger must be responded to in a way that only we can define’, the possibility of constructive dialogue is not only denied but held to be impossible.

Hence, it is the monological stance which leads to the entire rejection of the possibility of rational discussion and exchange in the university or anywhere else. As the Statement sums up:

The conception of the university as a space for rational discussion has been dealt with in our previous statements. Briefly put, we as black people will not have our pain silenced or attacked, nor will we concede to demands that it be rationalised – all of which inevitably occur in any process of “rational discussion” which includes the very university stakeholders at whose hands we are oppressed. The strict demarcation of legitimate discourse at UCT to only such rational discussion is violent and silencing to black voices –

which is precisely why they have been silent until now. We will not compromise our pain. (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015:15)

Conclusion: ‘We had better not just be sincere, but correct’

Monologism, wrote Bakhtin, “manages without the other” (1984:294), but, in a complex society, is this desirable or even possible?

Politically, the monological stance soon leads to a core rejection of democratic principles. As Adam Habib, then vice-chancellor at the University of the Witwatersrand during the height of the student protests, observed, this ends up in a situation in which “suddenly you are saying some rights are available to some people, but not to others, and whether they are or not depends on whether you like or approve of their ideology” (Higgins & Habib, 2017:165).

In more general theoretical terms, this takes us back to Foucault’s concern with truth-telling. For nagging at the centre of his arguments in *Fearless Speech* is the answer he feels inclined to give to the question, “does the *parrheastes* say what he *thinks* is true, or does he say what is really true?” (Foucault, 2001:14). “To my mind,” he responds (in a way which seems to accept a certain ungrounded partiality in this response), “the *parrhesiastes* says what is true because he *knows* that it is true; and he *knows* that it is true because it is really true” (Foucault, 2001:14, emphases in original).

But a certain level of uncertainty about this is, I think, apparent in the very insistence which he lends to this view as he finds it necessary to continue (and to repeat): “The *parrhesiastes* is not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he *knows* to be true. The second characteristic of *parrhesia*, then, is that there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth” (Foucault, 2001:14).

A useful way of grasping the roots of the uncertainty (apparent in Foucault’s very insistence on the point, ‘his opinion is also the truth’) is provided by Bernard Williams’s cautious warning about the

differences between sincerity and accuracy with regard to the truth: “If we are to rely on what others tell us, they had better be not just sincere but correct” (Williams, 2002:94).¹⁴

Not just sincere but correct. This differentiation takes us to this chapter’s closing point: the damage which the de-democratising force of monological closure has inflicted on the social justice goals of the student protest movement, at least with regard to education and higher education.

Ten years after the protests, it is becoming clear that the monological focus assumed by the protest movement is, paradoxically enough, doing some damage to the ecology of the higher education system it initially set out to improve. This paradox manifests as an ongoing vicious cycle with particular reference to student fees and student financing.

For many, the high point of the protest movement came with former President Zuma’s at least partial capitulation to student demands in October 2015, the announcement of a zero-increase in fees for 2016, and the promise of a deeper investigation into the problems and possibilities around student funding.

What has followed since then is an ever-increasing government allocation of funds to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). According to Stan du Plessis (Chief Operating Officer at Stellenbosch University), for the academic year 2017–2018, the government allocated ZAR31 billion in subsidies to the university sector to cover all running costs, while it allocated ZAR15.4 billion to NSFAS. For the academic year 2023–2024, the NSFAS budget had increased to ZAR50.1 billion, while the university subsidy had only increased to ZAR44.5 billion, a figure now conspicuously lower than that provided to NSFAS.¹⁵

The problem here is that of a vicious cycle. As NSFAS support grows, government contribution to the running costs of universities shrinks.

14 Williams’s own late work presents an interesting parallel to Foucault’s thinking, though one never explored as such, though Foucault is twice mentioned (Williams, 2002:20, 300n31). For some consideration of Foucault’s own relations to the analytic tradition to which Williams belongs, see Foucault (1978) 2018 and, more broadly, Davidson (1997) and Gillot and Lorenzi (eds.) (2016).

15 Slide from conference presentation supplied by author.

This means that for most higher education institutions, student fees have to be raised to keep the institutions running. As fees rise, support for NSFAS must also rise, meaning that the allocation for universities shrinks, meaning that fees must rise, meaning that NSFAS must have more money, meaning that ...

As Adam Habib warned at a recent conference on ‘The Future of the University’, “[d]o this for another five years and you’re back to #FeesMustFall. We need to figure out a sustainable solution to finance higher education because if you want to achieve social mobility, higher education is one of the pathways” (Universities South Africa, 2024).

Paradoxically enough, the original social justice demand of the protest movement, which understood higher education as one of the pathways to equity and social mobility in society, turned away from this. The monological perspective provided by student experience and student interest alone, eschewing as it did a broader dialogue with other members of the higher education system, resulted in an overemphasis on the question of funding. What was lost was the need to look at the system as a whole.

Several crucial things are lost in the adoption of the monological perspective: not only the damage done to the higher education system as a whole by the vicious cycle of the populist funding solution (damage to academic staffing levels, infrastructural development, including libraries, provision of IT, security, etc.), but also its likely effects on funding for primary and secondary education as well as other pressing social needs such as the public provision of or at least support for healthcare, housing, transport, policing, food security, and all the other demands of democratic governance. (And noting as above the extensive infrastructural damage and costs.)

In all of this, we see that there are limits to adopting the monological perspective. While it is undoubtedly correct that – as Foucault says – the *parrhesiastes* is useful “because he battles, because he bites, because he attacks” (Foucault, 2011:335), that usefulness is severely curtailed if it results in “trying to manage without the other” (Bakhtin, 1984:294). Trying to manage without the other in any complex multi-cultural society by denying the possibility of dialogue and full democratic

deliberation is likely to result in providing merely imaginary solutions to social and political problems which demand real solutions.

As this chapter is dedicated to the memory of Lis Lange, a key critical thinker in South African higher education policy discourse, it is appropriate to recall here some of what finding those real solutions would likely involve. In the first instance, it would mean recognising that in many ways the student protests emerged from the failure of South Africa's higher education policy to pay sufficient attention to its responsibilities for fostering critical citizenship through a transformed project of humanist scholarship and citizenship education.

As Lange noted in an important contribution to the Academy of Science's *Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa*, while the general goals of South Africa's transforming higher education system were to help create a "stable, participatory, non-racist and non-sexist democracy" (ASSAf, 2011:42), these were almost immediately eclipsed by the imperatives for innovation, understood as "the application of new ideas which can be introduced into the market place" (ASSAf, 2011:42). The humanities came off "second-best in relation to policy positioning [...] in the new science dispensation" (ASSAf, 2011:53) and little if any thought was given to their essential role in fostering the commitment to 'critical citizenship' that differentiated South African policy from the global templates of the neoliberal capture and redefinition of the aims and goals of higher education.

Indeed, the limited support for the humanities, which did become available, actually worked to support the monological perspective this chapter has argued was central to the student protests: a perspective in which support for the recognition of black identity becomes a call for an ultimately nationalist and exclusive Africanisation (Lange, 2019:89, 95).

Against this, Lange, in her final writings, issued a powerful call for the university to become a space for (though not her term) dialogism, one devoted to the creation of a "knowledge base" that is "open to critique" and is ready and willing to consider different perspectives, and imagine the position of the other is a necessary condition for the

exercise of citizenship as pedagogy. In fact, a pedagogy of citizenship can only take place within contrasting knowledge, where students are taught but also invited to imagine, understand and act together (Lange, 2012:6).

A first step in attempting to create such a space would, however, mean recognising the capture of higher education policy by the ideology of innovation, and the full extent to which universities have become “subject to globalising culture, and especially, market transactions in the definition of their purpose and identity” (Lange, 2023:56).

In the now necessary re-assertion of the democratic contents of higher education, the university has first to recognise the degree to which it has been ‘captured’ by neoliberal definitions to reactivate the idea that university education needs to be rethought “in relation to a collective responsibility for the future of states, regions and global society” (Lange, 2023:62). The urgency of the moment demands that, as Lange puts it, we engage and question the received ideas of higher education policy (“the ‘innovation, entrepreneurialism, and disruption’ mantra”) in terms of an analysis of their real-world consequences and the identification of the underlying interests which power them. We now need to assert a political project in which the university is no longer seen as ‘neutral’ but rather becomes “an active agent of change and a collective political actor” (Lange, 2023:64).

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