

Making sense of FMF while smoke is still blowing

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Booyesen, Susan (ed) (2015) **Fees must fall: Student revolt, decolonization and governance in South Africa.** Johannesburg: Wits University Press. ISBN 978-1-86814-985-8 pbk. Pages ix + 350.

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Susan Booyesen, author and editor, of **Fees must fall** sets out to answer the key questions: what did the student revolt of late 2015 to mid-2016 mean for governance in South Africa? How did it affect higher education and national government? Booyesen states clearly that the answers to these questions “depend on the lenses worn and the directed angle” but she argues in conclusion that “from whichever angle it is approached it is evident that governance in South Africa and its higher education institutions has been irrevocably altered” (p 310).

The challenge which this review takes up is to cross-examine this conclusion not from hindsight but by drawing on various viewpoints within the book. The various chapter authors do not all align behind this assertion of irrevocable change – in fact, some disagree. Booyesen herself at times seems to retrack her own argument. The assertion of governance “irrevocably altered” is significantly moderated in other places in her own words: “political and social culture changed, but not the government. Seeds, however, were sown – the student generation had had a taste of power. Whether that taste will change the way in which power has been implemented ... can only be seen as the interregnum unfolds.” (p 48) While these apparent contradictions may weaken the overall thesis, they in fact strengthen the

book's overall contribution to making sense of this critical period in the history of South African higher education. As numerous authors point out the FMF evolved from multiple agendas and as a result hosted numerous contradictions. Chapter by chapter these perspectives provide ample evidence of this.

Before turning to the key argument a few words about the “lenses worn and the directed angle” – both what is illuminated as well as what is omitted.

The focus of the analysis is on a very specific period of the student protests – October 2015 to June 2016 – and largely focused on the protests as they unfolded at the University of Witwatersrand, referred to as the epicentre of FMF. The majority of the writers are academics and students from the Wits School of Governance. The disciplinary lens of political science and the specific issue of governance give the book a clear question and a strong but not overbearing conceptual framing developed by Booysen (chapter 1). The “lens” is by design multifocal and as a result multivocal as the book explicitly in part 2 entitled “Primary voices” brings in student activists and workers as authors and co-authors. These voices – their analytic richness and insight – are one of the highlights of the book. If there is anything that would give one hope in the midst of this on-going crisis is the prospect of these student activists and emerging academics as future South African leaders. Despite its very “directed angle” it devotes section 3 to locating the South African student protests comparatively with other protests on the continent.

This highly focused lens results, however, in at least two omissions. One omission is that with the exception of the RMF movement at Oxford there is no reference to other student protests around the globe and their impact on university governance. Some of the protest movements have a long history. Further studies need to broaden the case studies to include other movements such as Black Lives Matter and the involvement of students in various Occupy movements, for example. There are comparative lessons to be learned.

Despite its presence in the sub-title of the book, the second omission is a more thorough discussion of the call for “decolonization” (with the exception of Godsell & Chikane’s chapter 2, and Walsh-Mpofu’s chapter 3). To argue for the impact of #FMF on governance requires serious engagement with the multiple meanings and implications of ‘decolonization’ for governance. This omission may in part be a result of a decision by the authors to treat the #RhodesMustFall movement – with its more overt decolonizing theme – as an antecedent movement, overtaken by #FMF rather than an important strand in its own right. A stronger conceptual framing of the call for decolonization would see Rhodes, fees and even the ideology of Fallism itself as proxies for deeper underlying power struggles. As Godsell and Chikane (chap 2) capture it eloquently, “The protests

are part of an on-going battle to decide who has the power to shape the 21st century African university and what the nature of that university should be” (p 68). Mamdani (2017) reminds us that this is not a straightforward task: the modern African university is a European colonial project and furthermore we are “prisoners in an on-going colonizing project”. If we want to free ourselves “(our) task has to be one of subverting that process from within, through a series of acts which sift through the historical legacy, discarding some parts, and adapting others to a new-found purpose” (Mamdani, 2017). Depending on what one understands by “decolonization”, the meanings and even the possibilities for governance change will vary widely.

Having made the point that governance in South Africa and in higher education has been irrevocably altered, Booysen in her conclusion goes on to list wide-ranging changes in the domains of policy on access, funding and national budgeting, conditions of workers, institutional culture etc. Some of these specific changes include: the zero percent increase; better terms for National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) recipients; and a new spotlight on the “missing middle”; a recognition of an ineffective and unsustainable funding formula; changes in university culture and curriculum; a confirmation of a new ideological consciousness of the intersectionality of oppression; the rise of a new and assertive African feminism and the stepping in of LGBTIAQ creating a new struggle movement.

Anyone who has lived on a South African campus through the past 2 years of student protests will recognize these “changes”, or more tentatively “seeds” for potential change. The question is, to what extent has higher education governance been irrevocably altered? There isn’t the space here to deal with each of these but in this review one of the key assertions is singled out and cross-examined from the point of view of other authors.

Booyesen argues during this period #FeesMustFall won important higher education funding concessions and policy elaborations from the ANC government, and a 0% fee increase for 2016. She argues that in 2016 university managers realized that the university funding formula was not sustainable in particular the use of student fees to plug to gap. In the process, she argues, universities entered into a new phase of cooperation with the state.

But Everatt (chapter 6) is more critical in his assessment of the impact of #FMF. He describes it as a movement “for about two to three weeks” in the lead up to the call for 0% increase in fees. During this period #FMF had a “single clearly articulated goal” (p 135), was united across class and colour, and had public support. It was a short-term victory. Shortly after this victory, the internal tensions could no longer be contained and disintegrated into factions. Everatt concludes that ultimately the movement had

no broader strategy for change. Bond (chapter 9) takes this further to underscore that what was needed (indeed a missed opportunity) was a much broader strategic alliance-based approach to bring about changes in fiscal policy. In essence Bond argues that the demand for free high education will not be won by waging annual “fee increase” skirmishes against university management and even the State. The call needs to be one for financial structural change – what is needed is essentially a demand that #neoliberalism must fall. Bond elaborates on what students should have done and could still do in alliance with other key national and global partners.

In conclusion, it is a brave act to try to make sense of a moment of revolution while the smoke is still blowing over campuses and wounds are still raw. It is certainly pre-mature to assert that governance has been irrevocably changed. Despite however the over-reach of the key argument, the book is an important contribution to what is likely to be a growing body of international and local scholarship around student protests of the 21st century (see Brooks, 2016). In addition to a rich range of arguments and perspectives, there are also useful resources, for example, the annotated timelines of the South African and sub-Saharan African student protests provided in appendices 1 and 3.

Above all the book serves as an important reminder: Universities and South African society in general owe a great deal to the student movement. For 20 some years various sectors of society, have been crying and protesting against the unrealized expectations of the new democracy, and have been largely ignored by those with power to bring about change. The students in a short space of time forced upon the academy a new discourse, demanded a more urgent pace for change, and are fighting for a new ideological consciousness. For the historically and recently privileged of all races in South Africa, this was and continues to be an uncomfortable even painful space. It simply cannot be otherwise.

References

Brooks, R (2016) **Student politics and protests: International perspectives**. New York: Routledge.

Mamdani, M (2017) Decolonizing universities. TB Davie Academic Freedom Lecture. University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 22 August 2017.