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Reflections on the messages and activities of the #mustfall movement

SAAIR 2016 Conference
UNW, Potchefstroom
Tuesday, 18 October 2016

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1. Introduction

- The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (2008) identifies some socio-economic challenges within the post-1994 South African higher education setting that remained unaddressed at the time. Among other things, the submissions in the report constituted the progress that was made, by then, and the *challenges that remained in giving effect* to the transformation agenda as set-out in Education White Paper 3 (RSA DoE 1997). In essence, the recommendations of the report constituted what can be regarded as the Programme of Action (PoA) of the socio-economic transformation of the post-1994 higher education setting in that it focuses on the restructuring of unjust structures of power and dominance.

- More than two decades since the dawn of democracy it seems very little progress has been made, and this is what the messages and activities of the #mustfall movement have brought to the nation's public space. The messages and actions of the #mustfall movement fundamentally challenge the unjust structures of power and dominance that continue to polarize the South African society. Meaning they are about reframing of the South African national discourse on poverty, inequality and unemployment. Is this not part of what can be regarded as effects of a deferred Programme of Action (PoA) of the socio-economic transformation project of the post-1994 South Africa? Makgoba (1997: 181) defines transformation as “an act or process whereby the form, shape or nature of something is completely changed or altered, a blueprint change.”

- In as far as the messages and actions of #mustfall are concerned the post-1994 South Africa in 2015/16 is faced with “crises that are all expressions of the unfinished business of the democratic breakthrough of 1990 to 1994, and the codification of the political settlement of the national liberation struggle enshrined in the Constitution which was adopted in 1996” (City Press 2 October 2016:3). In this relation Ramphela (in City Press 2016: 5) observes that, among other things, what has been missing is “a commitment to socio-economic restructuring and investment in programmes of education for democracy.” Basically there is an unending disjuncture between good policy and political will and capacity.

- The aim of this paper is to reflect on some of the messages and activities of the #mustfall movement and how they relate to the post-1994 South Africa's transformation project within the higher education setting. The conceptual foundation of this paper is the principles of the transformation agenda for the HE setting as outlined in the Education White Paper 3 (RSA DoE 1997). As a strategy to re-vitalize the PoA of the transformation project, as it relates to the South African higher education setting, the paper considers Daft and Lengel's (2000) idea of dialogue as an intervention in initiating change in people and organizations. This is about negotiating a life beyond the #mustfall campaigns and seriously engage in constructing a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights as outline in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996).

2. The relationship between the messages and activities of the #mustfall movement and the deferred Programme of Action (PoA) of the transformation project of the post-1994 South Africa

- There is an agreement amongst higher education researchers and political analysts that the messages and actions that have become part of the #mustfall movement are a revelation of the unfinished business of the reconstruction of the post-1994 South African society in all its facets – **from** “past values and practices defined by racism, sexism, inequality and lack of respect for human rights **towards** the values reflected in [the] national Constitution” (Ramphela 2008:13). More emphatically, Tyatya (www.news24.com) points out that “if the surge in student protests in 2015 alone is anything to go by, South Africa should brace itself for a social transformation revolution. Driven by young people and students in particular, this revolution is targeted at elements of society that have failed to significantly transform the first revolution; the fight against apartheid.”

- As Luesher (2016:22) asserts, “#RhodesMustfall became the first iteration of the 2015 student movement in South Africa. Black students learnt to voice their experiences of being ‘black on campus’ and throw the white masks handed to them by institutional culture, along with Rhodes, onto the ash heap of history.” Considering the latest developments that followed one can safely conclude that the #RhodesMustfall action marked the beginning of the social transformation revolution of the post-1994 South African society – a revisit of PoA that has been deferred for too long. This is based on post-1994 South Africa’s new democratic government which committed itself to transforming higher education as well as the inherited apartheid social and economic structures and more importantly establishing a new social order. Given this background, the action was among other things meant to highlight the need for those in political and academic leadership to take seriously the unfinished business and issues of social cohesion.

- In the conversation(s) that evolved out of the #RhodesMustfall action, of paramount importance were issues of access, equality, redress, success and participation in higher education by students from historically disadvantaged social groups. In this relation Tyatya (www.news24.com) observes that “a Council for Higher Education (CHE) study in 2013 found that only 1 in four students in contact institutions graduate within regulation time and a more damning finding was that about 55% of the intake will never graduate.” The action made it possible for the material conditions of black students, which have an effect on their success in their studies within universities like Rhodes, to be brought to the fore. In addition, the action became a platform to call for an education that embraces all other knowledges that are empowering and progressive, and have a potential to advance the society at large.

- In an attempt to understand and explain the messages and activities of the #mustfall, from the perspective of her experience of the apartheid education and the effects it had on the poor and marginalised communities, Christina Qunta (in City Press 15 May 2016: 5) refers to the following message that was carried in the placard of one of the students who marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria during October 2015, “***Our parents were SOLD dreams in 1994. We are here demanding a REFUND.***” The message goes back to where the narrative about the social transformation revolution started in 1994 and in the context of student experiences it reminds us about the unfinished business and its implications for their education.

3. The call for a dialogue and its meaning and implications

- In order to address some of the challenges that continue to inhibit giving *effect to the higher transformation agenda* as it is set-out in the White Paper 3 (RSA DoE 1997) and other related socio-economic factors there has been a call from various community leaders for a dialogue. Considering the messages and actions of the #mustfall movement and what has been revealed as challenges for the post-1996 democratic South Africa, the purpose of the distinct dialogue will be to review the progress that has been made in as far as the social transformation revolution is concerned and seek ways of leveraging factors that inhibit further progress and map the wayforward. But first we need to define the kind of dialogue South Africans should engage in and what will be its expected outcomes.

- Daft and Lengel's (2000) regard dialogue as an intervention that can be considered in initiating change in people and organizations. In the post-1994 South African HE setting with its challenges of a deferred PoA of socio-economic transformation revolution there is a need for the distinct dialogue that will be used as a process that will bring about "stream of meaning" (Daft and Lengel's 2000) – a steam flows easily when it is not hindered by anything that does not support it. In this regard subtle factors or forces that can be a hindrance to a substantive conversation must not be allowed to be detractors. The purpose thereof will be to develop shared meaning that will glue South Africans together. It is obvious that participants in this form of dialogue will be stakeholders who do not have a good relationship, who are polar opposites, but are committed to discover common issues and common dreams on which they can build a future.

- The main agenda item of what will be an authentic conversation should be the socio-economic transformation revolution programme of the post-1994 South Africa as an unfinished business that cannot be delayed anymore. Among other this during the dialogue the participants should all be prepared to acknowledge the fact that more than two decades later the country continues to be characterised by inequitable distribution of wealth, income and opportunity based on racial discrimination and domination (Mbeki 1998: 44). The purpose of this position will be to work towards establishing a sense of one nation that is prepared to struggle together to address its socio-economic challenges and map a wayforward that will enhance the development of the country.

4. Conclusion

- Reflecting on some of the messages and actions of the #mustfall movement as they relate to the delivery of higher education within the post-1994 South African higher education institutions the paper has attempted to highlight the fact that the socio-economic transformation revolution that was started in 1999 remains an unfinished business. In order to map a wayforward the paper supports the call for a national dialogue which should have as its ultimate objective to address issues that continue to hinder the socio-economic transformation revolution. Issues of poverty, inequality and an curricula that still needs to be decolonised were identified as key to the challenges that are faced by the country's higher education setting. The need for commitment by both political and academic leadership is regarded as key in ensuring that the objective of the socio-economic transformation revolution of the post-1996 South Africa as outlined in the Constitution are achieved.

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