

BOOK REVIEW

Jansen, J. (2017). *As By Fire: The End of the South African University*. Pretoria, South Africa: Tafelberg.

Reviewed by Vicki Trowler*

Jacob Zuma chose to mark the Day of Reconciliation by reaching out to protesting students and promising free higher education, an unsurprising but contentious move. That act spurred me to finish reading *As by Fire*, Jonathan Jansen’s analysis of the responses of South African university vice-chancellors to the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (and associated) movements.

By pure chance, I happened to be on the UCT campus on 9 March 2015, the day Chumani Maxwele decided to douse the statue of Cecil John Rhodes in excrement, kicking off a protest movement that called not only for the removal of the offensive statue, but for a removal of the hostile organisational climate that many black students felt permeated UCT and other Historically White Universities (HWUs). #RMF was not the first to call for this at UCT – similar calls had been made for as long as I can remember, with organisational climate surveys, research projects and outbreaks of protest underlining the need for what we then called “transformation” – but things were different this time: firstly, a mere month (to the day) after the initial protest action, the statue was removed.

This concrete response, while limited, was nonetheless symbolic, and signalled a difference from previous responses, which were usually to appoint task teams to frame new policies, to investigate renaming a few venues, or to review systems and procedures to speed up recruitment and retention of black students and staff. Secondly, the movement spread like wildfire. LUISTER, a documentary about the oppressive experiences of black students at Stellenbosch University and Elsenburg Agricultural College spawned #OpenStellies, which was soon joined by #WitsSoWhite, #RhodesSoWhite and similar movements at other HWUs, as well as splinter movements abroad such as #RhodesMustFallOxford. Months later, fresh impetus came with the beginnings of #FeesMustFall at Wits University, spreading beyond HWUs to Historically Black campuses and institutions, where long-standing protests about fees and resources became part of a national uprising. Jansen notes that, while many seemed surprised at the outbreak and extent of the protests, university leaders were not: they had for some time been warning of the “perfect storm” brought about by “massification” on the one hand, and cuts to resourcing on the other.

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Many news reports, blogs and scholarly articles have been written about “the hashtag movements”, but *As by Fire* is the first comprehensive, systematic attempt at analysing the reflections on the movements from the perspectives of the leaders of those universities most closely involved. Jonathan Jansen is well-placed to undertake the task – the “servant-leader” of the University of the Free State at the time, himself no stranger to institutional climates hostile to black staff and students – and puts his privileged access to good use, soliciting accounts from his peers that are both frank and unguarded. Interviews with 11 vice-chancellors, and his own views as a 12th, form the bulk of the data around which the analysis is constructed. For this alone, this book is worth a read. The revelations go way beyond the carefully chosen responses which appear in newspaper reports, on institutional websites or in press releases. There is no attempt to balance these views with “student voice” – that is not the intention of the book, nor would such an attempt to provide “representative” views of a “leaderless” movement be feasible, as is underscored by accounts from several of the university leaders of constantly changing negotiating teams, priorities and positions, experiences which frustrated the university leaders but which reflect the dynamic nature of the protest movements.

Jansen locates the movements within the border political climate in the country, noting how the developments mirrored others happening within the ruling ANC, and traces the ideological trajectory within the movements from one initially apparently aligned with the ANC, to subsequent alignment with the EFF, Pan-Africanism and Black Consciousness. Noting that protest was neither sudden nor new to HBUs, which had experienced protests more or less consistently throughout, Jansen remarks that it was only when the HWUs experienced protest that the media, and the State, began to pay attention. Indeed, it is HWUs that draw the bulk of the focus in *As by Fire*, although HBUs such as UWC and NWU and merged institutions such as CPUT feature alongside. These very different histories imply very different trajectories, and these differences are drawn out together with similarities in the accounts and the analyses. For those whose exposure to the movements has been largely, or entirely, through the media, experiences on the ground from universities enjoying less media attention than UCT or Wits add nuance and texture.

I was interested in Jansen’s choice to discuss first the financial “roots of the crisis” – the impetus for #FeesMustFall – before considering the cultural “roots of the crisis” (that gave rise to #RMF and associated movements), not only because chronologically #RMF preceded #FME, but because I had noted a shift in sentiment in the reception of the movements when the focus moved from the symbolic to the material. Nancy Fraser (2013, p. 176) distinguishes between “injustices of distribution and injustices of recognition”, stressing that while the latter are not reducible to the former, they are also not “merely cultural”, and that both need to enjoy attention if social justice is to prevail. Observing the responses to the movements, I wondered if public sentiment as reflected in the social/media had been willing to countenance the need for greater inclusivity in the climates on campuses – after all, I do not know a single person who felt any affinity for Rhodes, despite the childhood thrill of climbing onto the backs of the lions at his memorial – but when it came to questions about the public vs the private good of higher education and, thus, who

should carry the costs, well, that was another matter. Polarising debates predicated on the need for social justice versus “affordability” (also characterised as “prioritisation” – assuming that the money could be found – were there not far more urgent needs, such as health care, early-years development for children, or investment in basic education?) gnawed away at the earlier support for the movement/s, and was matched by a progressive shift in the movement/s’ rhetoric from the earlier intersectionality to a more Africanist, or as Jansen terms it, “nativist”, position.

“Nativism” is not a term in common parlance in South Africa, although the sentiments are not unknown: more commonly referenced as “xenophobia”, it is usually directed at *amakwerekwere*, who are constructed as “foreigners” from elsewhere in Africa. The term is seldom applied to foreigners from Europe,¹ the Americas or Australasia, for example, and has clear racial and class connotations. Choosing to use this term, which is most commonly associated with U.S. politics, Jansen appears to have in mind an American audience – backed up by his choices of U.S. comparisons when the more obvious ones might be found in the U.K. (where #RhodesMustFall had a splinter movement at Oxford, while the National Union of Students enthusiastically supported campaigns such as “Why is my curriculum white?”, and fees protests dominated the headlines a few years ago) and elsewhere in Europe (for example, Nieuwe Universiteit in the Netherlands staged sympathy protests with #RMF; fees protests in Germany led to free higher education) or elsewhere in the “developing world” (student protests in Chile leading to fee-free higher education). It may be that, having worked in the U.S., Jansen is more familiar with that context, but given the very great differences between the U.S. higher education system and that in South Africa, it appears counter-intuitive to non-U.S. readers, and leaps out as a sop to publishers to lend an “international appeal” to the work.

Jansen’s views on decolonisation are no secret – the discussion at <http://www.litnet.co.za/problem-decolonisation-jonathan-jansen-seminar/> provides a good primer – so it is unsurprising that he dedicates a chapter of this book to outlining his scepticism towards the decolonial thrust of the movements. While he criticises the appropriateness of “decolonisation” in a political context that, he argues, saw off colonialism more than a century ago, his main concern stems from the targeting of the university curriculum – which he positions as a convenient scapegoat, reducing student concerns around curriculum to “flag waving” and institutional responses to review curriculum in the light of such concerns to “regrettable bowing and scraping”. Anyone who has taught in a university knows that curriculum is not sacrosanct – while some disciplines do claim a “canon”, this is seldom universal and is always open to contestation. While students – by definition, novices to a discipline – may perhaps not be the best arbiters of the fitness of curriculum, dismissing such concerns out of hand – and the sincere efforts to consider these – risks smacking of reactionary high-handedness.

1 Francis Nyamnjoh’s *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa* takes the unusual position of situating Rhodes as *makwerekwere*.

In a chapter discussing “Shackville” and the “welfare university”, Jansen presents as a new phenomenon the expectation of a generation of students that “the university” (as a proxy for “the state”) will take care of their needs, not just their education. This argument is premised on “born frees” having grown up with access to social grants, a new phenomenon unknown by previous generations. Yet, this argument reads a little disingenuously – those of us who studied on bursaries or scholarships in the “old days”, before “massification”, did indeed have our living expenses taken care of through such bursaries or scholarships at the more generous end. For others, student loans from banks were a possibility – working parents could sign surety against assets such as future paycheques or property, an option not available to many of the poorer students trying to make ends meet today. Is it unreasonable that today’s students expect the same package that previous generations had access to – especially when discourse around making universities accessible to poor students neglects to spell out the limitations of resourcing not only in terms of numbers of beneficiaries but also in terms of what will, and will not, be covered by provision such as NSFAS? In the past, too, many students were able to secure part-time (or even full-time) work to support themselves while studying. In a massified context, a smaller proportion of the student body has access to such opportunities, and in a climate of heightened unemployment, that reduces still further. These are system-level problems, and students who experience them are right to raise them as such. If the system cannot accommodate the absolutely poor, but only the relatively poor, it should be honest about doing so and not mislead students for whom the wherewithal to feed themselves, travel to lectures or take care of their personal hygiene is simply not there. On a related note, the “black tax” – particularly the practice of sending remittances home to support the extended family – provides another example of the system’s lack of comprehension of the requirements of what in international terms are referred to as “non-traditional students”. It is slowly being accepted that, if access and participation are to be truly widened to “non-traditional” students, these students cannot simply be expected to adapt to the system, but the system reciprocally needs to adapt too. If the system does not adapt to the differing needs of a changing student population, the failings of the system become privatised and projected onto the individual students, who become pathologised as deficient – an argument that Jansen appears to be falling into in his discussion of the “welfare university”.

It was while reading Jansen’s chapter on the “anti-social media” that I struggled to continue reading. I began to wonder whether we had witnessed the same movements, whether we inhabited the same universe, never mind the same universities. Jansen laments the attributes of social media that shaped the movements in management-hostile manner – from the use of hashtags and WhatsApp groups to organise protest action speedily, to the university leaders’ loss of control over the narrative through the spread of “fake news” through edited video clips shot on mobile phones. Personally, I do not see social media as bad, nor the democratisation of information authoring. The “higher” aspect of higher education, I would argue, involves engaging students critically, socio-culturally and politically – the latter requiring them to assume an authorial voice themselves instead of

merely commenting critically on others' authorship. While technology may have made containing the protests more difficult, as it most certainly did, it also provided tools for the university leaders and their own teams. Jansen's own descriptions of receiving late-night messages from a WhatsApp group of university managers show that this was used to some extent, while comments he cites of other vice-chancellors illustrate how the bureaucracy of university management was ill-suited to capitalise on the immediacy offered by social media in terms of constructing their own narrative. Decrying the tools because one lacks mastery demonstrates a lack of creativity in analysis, in my view.

Jansen really comes into his own with his discussion of the personal costs of leadership (by which he means university leaders; the personal costs of leadership amongst students can be surmised from allusions on social media and elsewhere, but have to my knowledge yet to be systematically analysed in the same way). He lists the high turnover rate amongst his sample – though, as his sample contains only vice-chancellors, the true extent is lost, since some universities are set to experience an almost entire turnover at senior leadership level. This focus on vice-chancellors only is both a strength and a limitation. In focusing on the individuals carrying the can, a nuanced picture of individuals, the people behind the statements, emerges. This, though, sets up a “hero” narrative – and there are indeed anecdotes where the VC is presented almost as a “saviour”, stepping in to finance individual students' dire emergencies, for example – and raises questions about the role of the senior leadership team, and how this may have differed from institution to institution. One interviewee alludes to “disappointment” that his staff did not support the decision to securitise the campus, raising tantalising questions about the process and accountability for that decision, and the extent to which it was shared across the senior leadership team. Having watched over the years how differently different incumbents inhabited the role of vice-chancellor in a single university, I cannot help but wonder how differently the different VCs in Jansen's sample inhabited their roles, and the extent to which some leaders acted as Lone Rangers while others led as a team – and how this may or may not have affected both the handling of the crises on their campuses and their personal responses and costs to self.

Jansen closes his text by considering, when does a university cease to exist? He argues that underfunding, interference and instability have doomed SA universities, before offering the “ray of hope” that ordinary citizens recognise the value of the university and fight for its survival. Yet, Jansen's argument is predicated on recognising only a single valid model for criticality, for scholarship, for knowledge. I would argue that the university ceases to exist when it cannot conceive of possibilities outside of its current form, outside of the current body of knowledge and current limits of imagination. Universities should foster creativity as well as technical knowledge, and in the process of confronting their own limitations new possibilities emerge. I do not share Jansen's pessimism – universities have survived since the Middle Ages through far worse than student protests – but rather see the Fallist movements as providing opportunities for honest, thoroughgoing reflection in South African universities to consider how best to fulfil their mission, in their context, at this time.

References

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