

BOOK REVIEW

**Luescher, T.M., Webbstock, D. & Bhengu, N. (Eds.) (2020).
Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017.
Cape Town, South Africa: African Minds.**

Reviewed by Birgit Schreiber*

The book, *Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017*, edited by Thierry Luescher, Denyse Webbstock and Ntokozo Bhengu, presents an original perspective on the period before and during the university student protests of 2015 and 2016, not only as it is made up of student leaders' voices, but also in that it adopts a 'bottom up' approach where students themselves contextualise their own experiences. A lot has been written about the university managements' experience of this period – see for instance Jansen's *As by Fire* (2019) and Habib's *Rebels and Rage* (2018) – but this collection of student leaders' voices and the discussion of their reflections is a significant first.

This book is part of a South African Council on Higher Education series, following the *Reflections of South African University Leaders, 1981 to 2014*, which covered the reflections of eight university vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors. The new book is made up of select 12 student leaders' voices and it offers us unique voices and personal narratives to help understand the period prior to and during the escalation of South African university protests of 2015 and 2016.

What is particularly captivating is that the chapters offer the 'raw' data from which the final discussion is drawn. This rich data in the form of verbatim narratives offer the reader an opportunity to draw own conclusions and follow the arguments presented in the final chapter, and to establish authenticity of material.

The book is well presented with easy overview and solid coherence. The introduction lays out the format and this is revisited in the final chapter. The headings in the chapters are well structured and because this structure is repeated in each chapter, it is easy to follow, quick to read and has great logic throughout. The chapters are simultaneously stand alone and part of the coherent whole.

The interpretation in the final chapter takes a particular position and, in my view, neglects some, perhaps, more 'uncomfortable' analyses. Perhaps this is so because the student leaders give themselves, retrospectively, somewhat more purpose and a higher moral ground than the burning ground on which they stood during student activism. I am somewhat missing a broader discussion of alternative explanations of why student leaders chose to behave and lead in a particular way. Some of the alternative reasons for student leaders'

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behaviours may include personal socialcultural experiences: some of the student leaders themselves describe their social and cultural background as being shaped by, to quote the students themselves as saying ‘township culture’ (while this is an uncomfortable concept for me, I am letting the data speak for itself, see page 71: “... we would see people doing the toyi-toyi in the street and we would just join them not knowing what was happening”). Socialisations in and by ‘township culture’ as described by some of the students may have been a significant influence.

Student protest is not a neat affair; some protest becomes destructive action. It is possible that some students transferred particular ways of engaging from previous environments to the campus environment, thus making assumptions about how difference and disagreements are resolved in the world (including the university). Using combative ways to engage is not an obvious result of having been frustrated by a university. Using combative ways to engage is a particular feature of some South African ‘township culture’ (as was mentioned by the student leaders, page 71) where issues around public services, schools and welfare functions are sometimes contested via these combative means (after other means failed, perhaps). This kind of engagement style is transferred from sociocultural contexts prior to arrival at university to the university itself. This is the kind of engagement style that the universities are not ready for and with which they need to find mechanisms on how to engage with and how to use these engagement styles as an opportunity for development.

The interpretation in the final chapter could also include other influences on student leaders’ behaviours, decisions and plans. One student leader explains that “I think for SASCO, the contradiction was that SASCO falls under the ANC, so they can’t sort of boycott their own government” (page 213). There was a powerful, toxic and openly secretive relationship with national political offices, which commandeered and puppet mastered the campus-based political parties. I was personally and powerfully involved with these dynamics as senior Student Affairs executive in the South African university space. Students themselves were often at the mercy (via payment and funding, via promises of future political positions, etc) of national political influences. This is briefly mentioned on page 226, but could be given more prominent status as a significant influence on university protests of 2015/2016.

The book, certainly in the final chapter, argues explicitly that the student campaigns drove the decolonisation agenda and perhaps this, to me, is a somewhat romantised view on the university protests of 2015/2016. The universities themselves, staff, academics and management were part of this drive, motivated for it, theorised it, made significant changes in curriculum, in institutional culture markers, in budget allocations, and in various other aspects that manifest decolonisation. I would not agree that students’ mobilisations were *the* key driver as suggested by the book. The changes in decolonisation which have started at universities is also a function of the staff and academics’ age and culture. The ‘old ivory tower’ culture, which hides behind discussions on academic autonomy to avoid change, has been replaced by social justice activists who are now in senior positions, and are of substantial numbers and calibre to create enough momentum at universities to make significant changes.

Perhaps overall, it seems that a particular voice and type of leader was selected, and mention is made (page 17) that some student leaders opted to not participate and this could have been more elaborated on: if the book aims to be a broad representation then it is important to consider why some student leaders did not wish to reflect on their role as student leaders, on their experience or their time as student leader. This is an area that could have received more attention: which student leaders are speaking here, who is not speaking? Inevitably, one does not hear all voices, and yet it is the neglect of some voices that may offer versions of reality that are most uncomfortable to us. I am missing a more critical discussion and interpretation in the final chapter of student leaders' reflection. The overall argument seems to propose a generalisable position that student leaders were informed, deliberate and motivated by social justice ideals. I cannot share that view, and I do not think the data support such a purist interpretation and that a more nuanced offering could be made. Student leaders are part of the South African combative and complex sociocultural landscape; this could, in my view, be more emphasised. Student leaders reveal in their narratives that there was manipulation from national political offices, that the need to support families motivated some arguments to increase NSFAS, that decolonisation was a nebulous notion, that using memoranda and marches were often used to coerce. This view is perhaps 'uncomfortable' but is offered by the student leaders themselves and needs to be engaged with.

Overall, reflecting on university protests of 2015/2016, the question remains if perhaps intense university protests is an ongoing feature of our university lives, given what we have seen since 2016 where GBV and poverty keep marring student and institutional life. We have seen the #socialjusticeactivists mobilising the collective power during the 2016 GBV marches and the 2020 #BlackLivesMatter movement, and universities would do well to support these social movements with students, with and along student leaders. The question is less about whether student and university leaders disagree or agree on issues, but how these are contested and debated: via virulent protest or via deep transformation that is sustainable and enriching to the overall educational project. Perhaps these two aspects are part of one process. Either way, it is up to universities to use the protests as a period of opportunity for student and institutional development.

I recommend this book to all students, student leaders, university staff and leadership – it was a rare feature of the 2015/2016 protest to hear calm and reflective student voices, so this is a chance to catch up on that.

References

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