

Burning Tyres and Rubber Bullets: the dystopic policing of university students in the South African fallist movements of 2015-2016

"The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays...It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" - Fanon p60.

I want to provide a backdrop to the history of policing in South Africa because permutations of this style of policing are very much evident in the way people are regulated today, but more importantly, this background helps historicize and elucidate the ways in which student protesters were policed during the 2015-2016 Fees Must Fall protests. Later, I will then engage with how students subversively fought back against the gratuitous, racialized and discriminating violence (both symbolic and physical) meted out against them.

The history of police

The SAP (South African Police) was formed in 1913, as a colonial police force focused on controlling race relations, specifically, to police the country's black population. Its methods for doing so were relatively crude and unprofessional, relying regularly on brute force. Controlling and exploiting the black population required an extensive and interlinked bureaucratic, judicial and coercive system. Inevitably, this system provoked resistance (Kynoch 67). Since the democratic dispensation, the inability of the police to reform long-established traditions of colonial-style policing, continues to threaten the transformation agenda (Brewer 1994). While the police's military rank structure has been abolished and the name 'Police Force' replaced with 'Police Service', we are now discovering that these are news names for old problems. Police ranks have remilitarized and the interactions between police and communities of color have been increasingly dystopic where police are seen, not as servants of public good, but rather as predators, even as they bear the same colour skin as those whom they are policing (Hughey 864).

Fees Must Fall

Let's fast forward to 2015 and 2016, which were volatile and transformative years for South Africa's higher education institutions, catalysed in part by student protestor, Chumani Maxwele who – in the second week of March 2015 - hurled faeces at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes that stood in the centre of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) main Rondebosch campus. Maxwele's performative act, motivated by persistent concerns around systemic violence and structural inequalities in higher education and society broadly, set in motion the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) campaign which then galvanized a series of national student activist movements. Most universities joined the protest under the overarching #FeesMustFall (FMF) banner initiated at the University of Witwatersrand over imminent fee increases (a projected 10.5% increase for the year 2016). Universities nationwide experienced shutdowns and unprecedented mass protest action calling for fees to fall. The term "Fallism" became a way to identify the shared aims in the movements' political philosophies, both as a literal description of the collapse of the statue and the whiteness it upholds, but also as a call to dismantle all the oppressive vestiges of colonialism that have no place in, and are damaging to, contemporary life i.e. to topple in order to rebuild (in many instances toppling was taken literally). In October 2015, the student protest action culminated in a march to the Union Buildings (the official

seat of the SA government) in Pretoria. Hours after the march, then President Jacob Zuma declared a zero percent fee increase for 2016, a small victory in the fight towards free and equal education.

FMF had an obvious overarching goal – a decrease in higher education tuition and the eventual doing away of university tuition all together. But as the movement grew, FMF became about identifying many other things that make South African universities unaccommodating spaces that are especially harmful to black youth. These other things include stifling and unsupportive institutional cultures, the issue of transformation (or lack thereof) which includes curriculum and staff, the historical edifices and cultural heritage objects (statues, monuments, building names and artworks) whose meanings have changed in a democratic South Africa, and the outsourcing of student residence and low income university workers.

In December 2017, then outgoing president Jacob Zuma, instituted conditional free education (for poor and working class students). Now, the department of higher education continues to be under immense pressure to revise policy that seeks to address the many issues identified by students.

Protest antecedents

Student activism has a long legacy of resisting dominating power structures in South Africa. The Soweto Uprising of 1976–77 represented the first *sustained* youth-led protests against the state. During the uprising, militant youth confronted state security forces with stones and Molotov cocktails, damaged school property and targeted fellow township residents suspected of colluding with the apartheid regime (Kynoch 67). Police shot down and killed dozens of running school children and youth but the uprisings were a pivotal moment that brought about significant change and started a chain reaction of resistance across the country. This signaled the beginning of a change of tactics of protesters to more aggressive styles that pushed along the movement.

Violence and Policing

In South Africa, violence is in the air we breathe. In protest, ‘violence is understood as a language, a message, a way of calling out to higher authorities about the state of things’. A certain level of violence is sometimes required to prompt government into a dialogue, but exceeding the bounds of acceptable protest risks alienating the very structure able to deliver the desired outcome so a balance is required (Kynoch 69). A culture of militant protest, nurtured by the liberation struggle has been difficult to shake and has even been romanticized in some ways. There is a learned expectation that the state, will respond only to violence and confrontation (Kynoch 77).

The notion of ‘public order’ has become one of the primary discursive languages through which neoliberal spaces are policed even for non-criminal behaviours. Policing produces (and reproduces) space as much as it regulates behaviour within it. Private police or security agents have come to play an important role in governance regimes (Kempa and Singh 2008). Private refers here not only to policing as a business, but also, in the context of governance, as outside the public realm and, in many cases, effectively outside public control and scrutiny. In their role as agents of governance within these spaces, private police have become, in a sense, both enforcers and producers of a new understanding of privatized citizenship linked to neoliberal urban spaces and, in a country like South Africa, to racial governance.

Policing in Fees Must Fall

One of the discursive strategies of the Fees Must Fall movement was to expand the intellectual frames of violence and oppression to include symbolic, structural, and epistemic forms (Hodes 2016). Various forms of violence were used within the movement; hate speech, burning tires, petrol bombs, burning

(buildings, cars, artwork worth millions of dollars), looting (computers, food etc.), sexual assault, physically harming faculty and detached students, incarceration and police brutality. We can analyze, argue and question whether these various forms of violence were justified in discussion.

At the height of the protests, it was common to see an increase of police officers, private security and armoured vehicles at various campuses. In an eerie echo of apartheid tactics, “gatherings” of any sort were forbidden. Police employed tear gas, rubber bullets, water guns, intimidation and detention with some students claiming police had attack dogs (a traumatic apartheid trope that recalls the June 16 uprising) (Joseph: 19). In effort to quell the unrest, some universities hired private security companies. These men were heavily armed – and students and faculty questioned what place armed security guards have in an institution of higher education. In response to the hiring of private security at UCT, student protestors issued a memorandum to the vice chancellor asking for a full list of protocols for the use of force and descriptions of powers of the private security forces. UCT’s response to this was to say: The nature of crowd control or protesting crowds is such that local SAPS local are not equipped to deal with it. UCT was reluctant to default to SAPS for two reasons (a) as they will not enter private property without a formal charge laid, which delays deployment, and (b) once SAPS is deployed, tactical command is assumed by the SAPS commander on site and they do not take instructions from UCT. The fear around these security companies prompted a StudyIn (a gathering of students studying for their exams at the parking lot in front of one the campus’ main academic buildings) for which the motivation was university management’s fostering an environment of fear, targeting, paranoia, depression, intimidation and securitization. This is one of the peaceful way student’s fought back against violent policing.

Students fight back

While some students employed violent tactics that bordered on criminality, there were, over the 2 years of protest, more subversive, peaceful and creative tactics that were used to counter the violence meted out against them. Because of time restraints, I will only discuss a few interventions that illustrate the point.

The human shield: In late October 2015, black activists of the Rhodes Must Fall movement called on white student allies to form a shield around black protesters to protect them from police, infuriating some and moving others. The group noted that because of the privileged position South Africa’s white minority has had, police may have been less likely to use violence against white protesters. The intervention was said to have worked, but it’s unclear as to whether police had plans to open fire on black students anyway. Columnist Pakama Ngceni, offended by the gesture wrote, “Being a human shield on the “frontlines” without too much fear of police violence and the privilege of being recognised to be rationally and knowingly protesting, though visually dramatic, doesn’t fix systemic issues”.

Shackville: At the start of the academic year, on 15 February 2016 at UCT, students erected a shack with corrugated iron and other found objects, on campus to protest against a lack of housing for black students. The intervention was aptly named, Shackville. Activists claimed those without housing were predominately black students, and called for action against the discrimination. The following day, the Shackville protesters burned historic paintings that they deemed colonial objects, housed by the university. Later that evening, police arrived at the site and asked them to leave. When the students refused, violence erupted as the police attempted to remove them physically. Private security and the police were deployed to the campus to demolish the shack and disperse protesting students. Some activists were suspended. Others were permanently excluded. Activist Lindiwe Dhlamini became the only one of five students whose suspension was lifted and she has since graduated, 2 years later she

reflects: “You have to occupy for the statue to come down, you have to occupy or put a shack on campus for people to get residence...we need to fuck shit up for the university to just listen to us, we can't just be civil with each other”.

Naked protest: In October 2016, several black womxn participated in what was called ‘the naked protest’ at the University of Witwatersrand, protesting against the brutalisation of womxn at the hands of law enforcement and private security companies employed by the university. Several womxn protestors stripped off their tops and bras outside the Great Hall to stop police officers from firing rubber bullets and stun grenades at the students who were demonstrating on campus. Explaining her role, Hlengiwe Ndlovu, one of the womxn who stripped down, said that “the moment that we stepped into the protest, because as much we were displaying the intolerance of violence, at the same time, it was a form of resistance to say the very same woman’s body is capable of ceasing fire and no one from national or local government could stop it”. The womxn achieved their objective for the intervention; police officers withdrew and ceased fire against the shield of naked black bodies. Ndlovu alludes to the literature that talks about the political significance of naked protests in Africa especially where the naked black body – in particular a womxn’s body - is often demonised and policed.

Conclusion

Fanon reminds us that colonialists implemented violence originally, and any violence from the colonized is in response to them. Fanon argues that the only way to decolonize is by retaliating with the same methods used against the people, that violence is the only feasible way to overthrow the system of oppression. This single reading of Fanon was adopted by the student activists as an epistemic retaliation strategy. That activists are not the initiator of violence, they are merely acting to protect their bodies from (symbolic and physical) harm.

The protests were fraught with problems but what they ultimately did for South Africa is important. While it described itself as seeking to fight oppression and injustice, the movement’s strategic use of violence as a tool of punishment, humiliation, and control reveals how it replicated forms of violent sociality. Through analysing the use of violence by Fees Must Fall activists, as well as police and private guards called in to secure campuses, the movement may be understood not merely as a response to, but a conduit for, violence in South Africa (Hodes 2016: 147).