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RESPONDING TO RECENT STUDENT PROTESTS AT SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES THROUGH CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Abstract:

South Africa has recently seen escalating student protests at universities, involving calls for the thorough 'decolonization' of university curricula and the related dismantling of 'white privilege.' Yet, what has emerged on the ground is that these protests – increasingly characterized by intimidation, violence, and the destruction of university property – represent the concerns of a relatively small segment of the student body. Furthermore, while the student protesters employ many of the tropes and images of the erstwhile anti-apartheid struggle when articulating their grievances, they persistently ignore the disconnect between such sentiments and the politico-economic transformation of South Africa over the last two decades. Transformation that has seen previous struggle leaders, now in government, actively endorse the neoliberal organization of South Africa, while also benefiting many black South Africans through mechanisms such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), which have contributed to the rapid rise of a black middle class. Admittedly, this has come at the expense of much of the black working class, who have faced workforce rationalization, and contract rather than full-time employment, along with heavy-handed reprisals when workers protest low wages – of which the Marikana massacre is an example. Yet instead of recognizing the related continued socio-economic suffering as deriving largely from neoliberal policies implemented by a predominantly black government – headed by the African National Congress (ANC) – the protesters continue to blame South African socio-economic ills on 'whiteness' and/or 'whites.' This much is evinced in calls by participants in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements for the removal of white thinkers from university curricula and indeed white professors from universities. This paper argues that such calls can be understood in existential terms, as part of a process of mourning the loss of the 'new South Africa' dream. This is a dream woven in the euphoria of 1994 from assumptions of precolonial harmony and related expectations of an imminent better life for all, but one with little historical basis and one that has not been able to withstand the exigencies of South Africa's imbrication within the global economy. In the interest of contributing to socio-political stability in South Africa, what is advanced is the importance both of recognizing the pain that such loss entails, and of incorporating such recognition into university curricula, while at the same time avoiding the potential pitfalls of identity politics.

Keywords:

neoliberalism; #RhodesMustFall; #FeesMustFall; decolonization; curriculum; identity politics

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