

# Public Higher Education in Peril? A View from Down South\*

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EDITORIAL  
Mr. Trump's 'Deportation  
Force' Prepares an Assault  
on American Values



FRANK BRUNI  
Milo Is the Mini-Donald

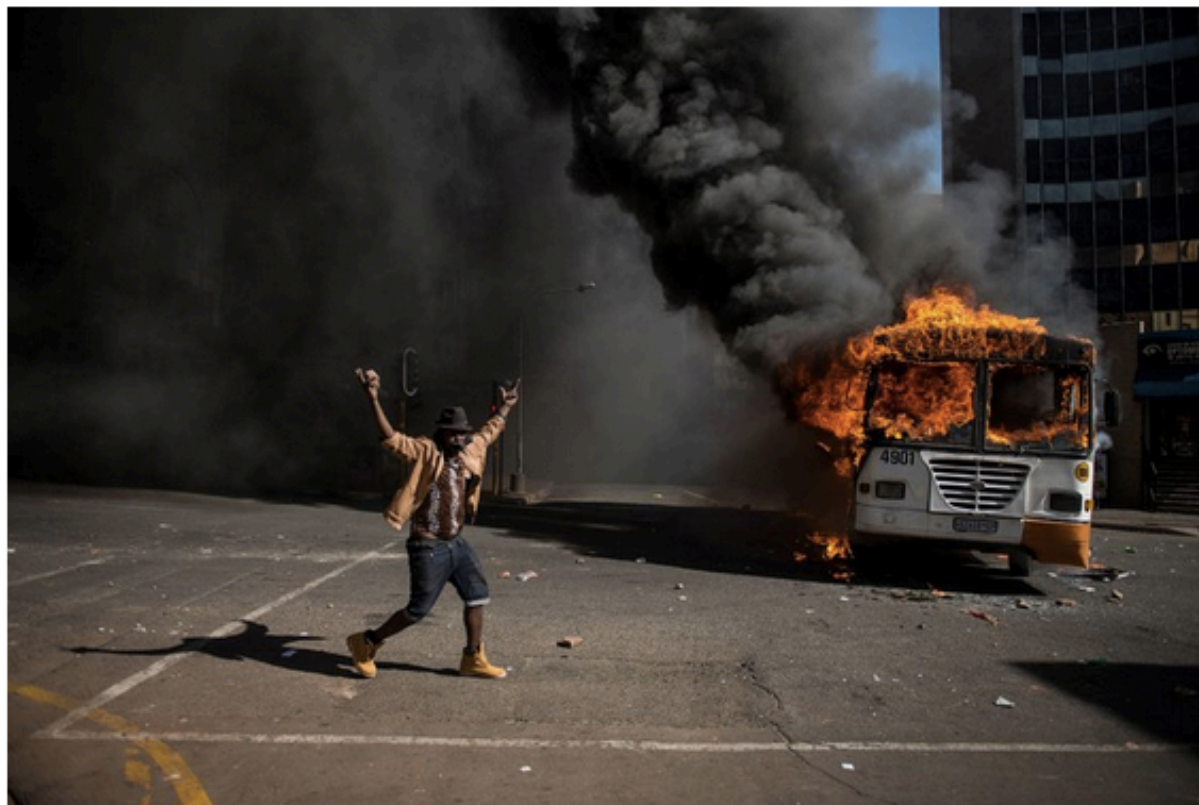


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## A Chokehold on South African Universities

By IMRAAN COOVADIA FEB. 16, 2017



A student near a burning bus during clashes with the police after a protest over tuition fees in Johannesburg in 2016. Mujahid Safodien/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



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A student near a burning bus during clashes with the police after a protest over tuition fees in Johannesburg in 2016. Muzahid Salodien/Agence France-Press — Getty Images

Can we think about the events in South Africa in the broader global context of contemporary public higher education and the challenges it faces?



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Article Contents

## Questioning 'Fees Must Fall'

Rebecca Hodes

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In 2015, A CLUSTER OF NEW STUDENT ACTIVIST GROUPS emerged at South African universities. Their initial names differed across campuses, reflecting the institutional particularities of their concerns. While the



It is to the value and meaning of higher learning, both within South Africa and beyond, that scholars of Fees Must Fall must turn.

Rebecca Hodes

# The talk

## 1. The South African case

- Shutdown signalled agreement with the claim that the university lacked legitimacy

## 2. A loss of purpose?

- This can be traced to a shift in defining the purposes of the university in extrinsic terms
- This is not a trend unique to South Africa

## 3. Regaining purpose

- Need to urgently reclaim the argument around the public good purposes of higher education



<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34592523>





Photo: Jenni Case



<http://www.groundup.org.za/article/rhodes-must-fall-protesters-destroy-uct-artworks/>  
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● 20 Sept



● 25 Sept

“We need to create space again to be engaging with protesters in a less hostile environment ”

“I am convinced that bringing security and police onto campus will make things worse if we have not first engaged with all parties in an

● 2 Oct

“I write this evening with a heavy heart. I had hoped to report an agreement arising out of a mediation process that has continued all weekend, but it has now concluded without resolution. ... The student group reported that they would not sign the agreement and that they wished the university to remain closed for another two weeks at least. ...After further negotiation they reduced the demand to one further week, but were unwilling to commit that after that week the university would be open.”

● 3 Oct

“...the academic year is in jeopardy.”

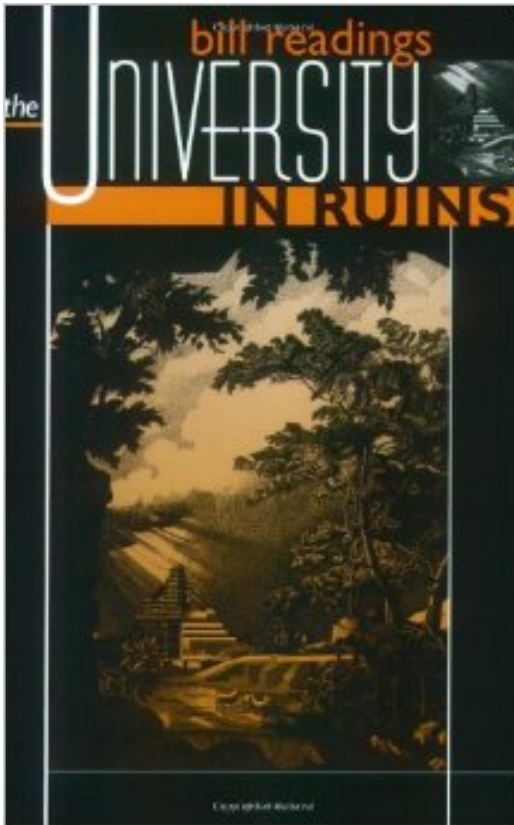
● 15 Oct

“... we have to accept that, for the moment, the leaders of the protesting students do not yet accept the need to continue the academic programme without disruption.”

How is it that the arguments from a smallish group of protesters coming from a relatively extreme pan-Africanist<sup>1</sup> view, came to somehow resonate so deeply with the insecurities of this university? Ultimately this group came in effect to direct the course of the academic programme for the latter part of 2016, which almost certainly will have long term consequences for this university.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-12-12-the-price-of-negotiation/#.WldeK5JXCnc>



Three phases of the modern university:

1. Centred on Reason (Kant)
2. Centred on Culture (Humboldt)
3. Centred on ... (“Excellence”)

As an integrating principle, excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or to put it more precisely, non-referential.



<http://maxpixel.freegreatpicture.com/Africa-Portugal-African-Planisphere-Map-World-1816896>  
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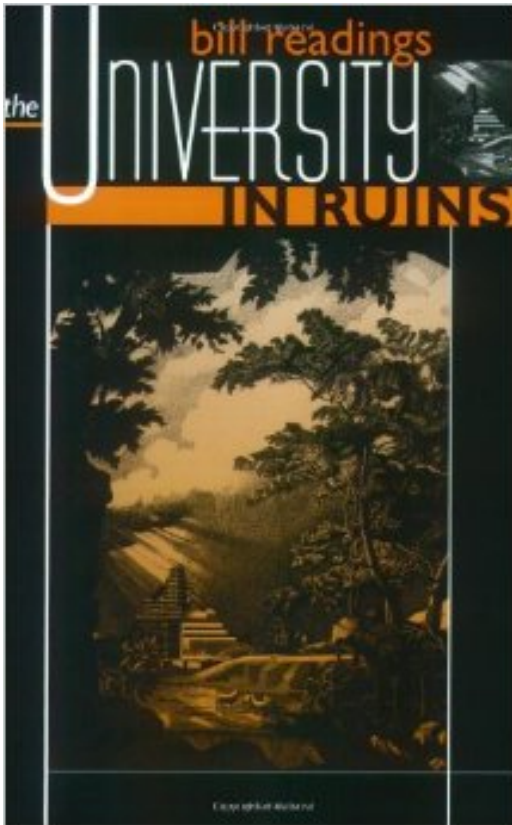
The drama we are seeing is that we are asking the university to do things it was never meant to do. I mean welfare is the domain of the state, it is not the domain of the university. We can't be asking the university to do things it was not designed to do. Not only because it costs a lot of money, but also because it's just not what it is supposed to be doing. It is not supposed to be creating jobs, for instance.

Achille Mbembe, interviewed by Hans Pienaar

<http://www.litnet.co.za/interview-the-end-of-public-universities-in-south-africa/>

# The argument so far

- Shift to instrumental discourse on purposes of higher education
  - Central role in societal transformation
  - Global rankings
- Cf. Readings “The University of Excellence”
  - Hollowing out of core purposes
- University now vulnerable to assaults on its purpose esp. as HE cannot play central role in societal transformation



And consequently there is no way back to 1968; a repetition of the radical postures of the late 1960s is not adequate to resist the discourse of excellence. This is because the discourse of excellence can incorporate campus radicalism as proof of the excellence of campus life or of student commitment. .



Photo: Gary Hirson for UCT



# The University of Dissensus?

The university has to be radically open. Metaphorically and practically. It will never close. The last thing in society that will close is a university. When we close a university, that's it. Then there is nothing left, it is time for us to disappear.

Achille Mbembe

Removing the statue will provide the illusion that we have rid ourselves of Rhodes' legacy. It would cloak UCT in a false mantle of radicalism, hiding the embarrassing truth that we are an elite institution that reinforces social inequality on a daily basis. The statue should be moved – but let's keep it somewhere on campus to remind us that we are the living legacy of Rhodes' elitism, and have a corresponding debt to society.

Nicoli Nattrass

<https://youtu.be/qLEEEyn4Hi0>

<https://www-uct-ac-za.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/mondaypaper/archives/?id=9992>

# Reworking the public good purposes of HE

- the expansion of human capability
- advancing collective reasoning
- supporting the development of a sense of purpose in individuals



Nixon, J. (2011). *Higher education and the public good*. London: Continuum.

Photo: Gary Hirson for UCT

## Personal growth

You are just thinking of getting better and better and not like just wanting to sit at home and doing nothing.

## Gaining knowledge

... I got so much satisfaction of finally understanding Maths problems, especially when it is really difficult and you know that most of the other students can't do it...

## Analytical way of thinking

What my humanities [degree] gave me really is the ability to critically analyse everything and not to take everything as it is ... and you sort of get good at solving problems and arguing through things and seeing flaws in your own arguments ...

## Being around intellectually minded people

In university you are meeting other people who are top learners while when you were in school you were exposed to few people.

## Exposure to diversity

I had to mingle with people from other African countries and other South Africans speaking different languages so it made me learn more about people's languages and behaviour and backgrounds ... University life has certain things such as promoting gender equality, fighting racism and xenophobia. ... So you are able to handle yourself in ways that you would not be able to if you hadn't been to university

## Critical consciousness about society

... People graduate not necessarily enamoured by the university institution. You can graduate frustrated. You see the problems with the institution, with the privilege of the institution.

The apartheid-imposed limitations on my movements were countered by **an internal sense of expansiveness** I and many of my peers experienced as the very meaning of “black consciousness”. ... My fear of “white” people, no matter how economically or militarily powerful they may have been was replaced by an enormous sense of inner possibility and power .... Despite the overt power of the racially oppressive system, there was something in me beyond its reach. But something in the national environment today, articulated on some university campuses in 2016, appeared to have reached that inaccessible inner core in “black” students and appears to have destabilised that core significantly such that the “black” so affected appear to have lost control over the emergent means of self-definition in the evolving, free and democratic social realm.

Njabulo Ndebele

When these institutions stand for nothing more, nothing deeper or more collective, no greater public good, than the aggregation of self-interest (like the monasteries in China and England, that accumulated vast social resources but came to exist only for themselves and those who used them) then the institutions are vulnerable.

Simon Marginson

My worry is that what is going on on campuses with the current impasse is many will begin to wonder whether it makes sense to invest so much money in these enterprises – which is exactly what happened in the rest of the continent, that the university ceases to be seen as a public good and more as a burden. And a place out of which not much is coming, except disorder, chaos and disturbance.

Achille Mbembe, interviewed by Hans Pienaar



Photo: Silindile Mhlongo