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Letter to my generation: A juncture towards conversation

I thought of writing to you some time ago, but the prevailing circumstances at universities offered no opportunity for me to do so. This piece of writing serves primarily to elevate a number of issues that seem to have escaped the prevailing conversations both nationally and institutionally.

I write to you reluctantly owing to having earlier in the year taken a position to provisionally retire from writing publicly so as to critically reflect on the past year. I am well aware that after the publication of this letter, I may very well lose favour in the eyes of several comrades. Unfortunately, the aversion of critic by political formation is a permanent unavoidable feature of politics.

Please regard the contents of this letter as my own views. I do not claim to speak on behalf of any political formation.

The deficiency of current political discourse

I find that we often read history out of context. Our current political situation is not only centered on coloniser versus the colonised axis but incorporates other struggles which were silenced in the past. This introduces a certain degree of complexity both in the articulation and contemporary practice of grassroots politics particularly on campuses. The annunciation and centering of black pain fails dismally to give expression to the different narratives of pain felt by the black community.

The 'white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, Judaeo-Christian faith, European, capitalist...' body has been placed in front of the jury and is accused of colossal ethical and human rights violations upon an aboriginal population. This emerging political discourse aims to provide a more nuanced analysis of our daily experiences by arguing that oppression functions as an interconnected phenomenon linked to our multiple identities.

Human beings have distinct characteristics and attributes which give rise to multiple identities. Our identities are based on perceptible or imperceptible attributes. Any single or collective identity we have or are perceived to have could serve as a marker of oppression or privilege. We must be cognisant of our positionality within this matrix of oppression. We each speak from a particular locus of annunciation which is influenced by our geo-political and body-political location.

The oppressed subject whilst wallowing in his/her/their destitute condition often fails to recognise their own privilege and the oppression they themselves inflict upon others, by virtue of their membership to a hegemonic group in a different characteristic of their multiple identity. Society's arduous position emerges partly from how we construct our identities which in turn lead to our egotistic pursuits to preserve and privilege our own identities in the social construction of the world. This process of preserving and privileging

some identities over others is undertaken with colossal violations of ethical principles and unspeakable violence.

This emerging narrative calls upon us to recognise that the colonial encounter was not just an imposition of racial dominance but further an enforcement of a social construction that oppressed identities which deviated from what the coloniser deemed as deviating from the norm. This 'new' narrative calls into question the centering of black pain and the adoption of single based struggles articulated by ideologies such as black consciousness, pan Africanism and black feminism.

Whether this new political expression of seeing the 'white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, Judaeo-Christian faith, European, capitalist...' body as the problem will find favour among black rural and township communities remains to be seen. Strands of contemporary feminist discourse can be found in the Unemployed People's Movement and Abahlali baseMjondolo. The churches are also starting to shift their attitudes towards homosexuality in significant ways. This suggests that we should not simply dismiss this new political expression as tendencies of the black middle-upper class, which is often accused of being fixated with identity politics.

On Black unity

The divisions that took place after the statue fell and subsequently after the government made a commitment to the zero percent fee increment for 2016 explain quite elaborately that the announcement of black pain is not in of itself sufficient to curtail the differences that exists among the student-staff-worker protestors. The announcement of black pain often shields the differences that exist within the category of 'black' and simplifies all the complexities of life down to absolute statements, it neglects the complexity contained in the social construction of markers of oppression and privilege. It further falsely assumes that if one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations they automatically derive their thinking from the epistemic location of the oppressed.

We have failed to articulate what the colonial encounter truly represented in its entirety. Colonialism, on the one hand, comprises of a global colonial matrix of dispossession whereby the global north seeks not only to exploit the people in the global south but to impose upon the exploited people a way of life reflective of the global north. Secondly, the colonial process entails the indoctrination of the oppressed people such that they shift their interests in ways that oblige them to act as the coloniser's functionaries in their absence. A simple of example of this is where you have black leadership that still continues to do the bidding of the 'master' because the master's interests and their interests are aligned. Therefore, one can be black but it does not follow that their interests will be aligned with the interests of the black people.

When the RhodesMustFall movement was started, we undertook to "suspend our differences" as black folk in order to focus on attaining a common goal. To a large extent the participants in student-staff-worker movements particularly FeesMustFall and RhodesMustFall have continued to conceal the differences that exist between them. Delays in speaking about the differences that exist among black folk will result in the demise of the movement.

On our differences

The alleged incident that took place in Fuller Residence dining hall, where Indian and Coloured students were denied access to their meals may very well point to the emergence of concealed negative attitudes held by some African folk towards other groups within the category of 'black'. There are attempts to give these negative attitudes expression through the decolonial discourse. Secondly, the expulsion of males from Avenue Hall speak to the need to engage on the dialectics of occupying a position that simultaneously places one as both an oppressor and oppressed. The disruption of the Rhodes Must Fall Exhibition, "Echoing Voices from Within" by the UCT Trans Collective further points to the need to formulate a clearer programme of action that will be inclusive of all oppressed identities.

The participation of some black academics in the student-staff-worker movement has been perplexing. Firstly, there were black academics that came to where the protests were taking place, spoke to a few students in order to scope out what the protests were about, and then left to write an opinion piece about the protests thereafter you never saw or heard from them again. Secondly, some black academics remained silent throughout the student protests until violence broke out on campuses. One can only assume that they spoke out against the violence because it threatened their interests, why else emerge from the shadows to condemn the violence of student protests? If it was justice that they were interested in then why do they only condemn the violence and not the injustices contributing to the violence? This cohort of black academics is more interested in maintaining 'order' than justice. There are however black academics, although few, who played and continue to play a symbiotic role in the student-staff-worker movement and they must be commended.

Failure to constructively discuss the vast differences between working class and middle class African students is also a cause of concern. The economic opportunities afforded to middle-upper class African students have allowed them to access a certain ways of living and a discourse on identity politics which seem foreign to African students who come from a working class rural or township background. As much as blacks often speak of whites while together, the reality is rural and township working class students, in the absence of middle-upper black class students, often speak of the class privileges of their middle-upper class counterparts. The hard truth to face is that the majority of rural and township students do not identify or understand feminist or queer perspectives, and this creates challenges when building mass-based student movements.

A discussion on decolonisation, religion and culture needs to urgently take place. The student-staff-worker movement is led by mostly black middle-upper class students and what emerges is a political ideology that expresses their political perspectives. Often the majority of students coming from predominantly rural areas and township won't openly express their views on issues they deem controversial or which may alienate them from the leading 'elites' of the student movement. So the space tends to silence students coming from poor communities instead of creating platforms that would enable robust discussions that facilitate a process of unlearning archaic religious and cultural attitudes.

On the native language

It is befitting to begin by exposing a rudimentary mistake on the part of the oppressed. The oppressed subject eager to express their debased position coupled with urgency to realise immediate change in his/her/their material condition employs a colonial language as a tool to express an emancipatory discourse. This implies that we view language as being neutral. But language can never be neutral. A colonial language can never serve the exploiter and exploited in the same manner.

On the one hand, language is used to shift the goal post by those who wish to retain the status quo. Many have simply accepted a language vocabulary that seeks to conceal the truth, so often I hear the words or phrases “disadvantaged”, “unearned privilege”, and “unfair discrimination”. Those words/phrases seek to conceal ‘intent’ on the part of the perpetrator by making it seem as if the subjugated were a victim of some natural phenomenon. I dare say I am not disadvantaged but subjugated. Those with a lighter hue ‘earned’ their privilege through immense violations of ethical principles and unspeakable violence. Tricksters will say its “unearned” however it was ‘unjustly earned’. By saying that one is disadvantaged, you are removing the actor which then allows for fluidity that enables the perpetrator to then engage you in a conversation about the proxies of disadvantage. This engagement around proxies of disadvantage seek to misconstrue the marker upon which you are subjugated and it will move you further away from what remains central-the fact that you continue to be intentionally oppressed.

On the other hand, by using a colonial language to express our emancipatory discourse we are accepting that the language of our oppressor as a vehicle of our liberation. This undermines indigenous languages by removing the urgency to revert back to prioritising their use and therefore developing them into academic and popular languages. Our tragedy is that we make use of colonial languages to not only mediate divisive tendencies within our own African communities but further seek expression of our hardships through the very lingual import that serves as tools for our subjugation.

Comrades have further gone to suggest that English is a viable alternative to both the use of Afrikaans and our indigenous languages. This is not only preposterous but displays plain ignorance that borders on self hate. Ours should not be an attitude of reservation based on false perception of complexity and strenuous work whenever the question around prioritising African languages arises. The very change we seek encapsulated by the discourse of decolonisation is hampered by the inherent contradictions in using a colonial language to express the hardships of dispossession. Colonial languages seek to obliterate the experiences of black folk by constantly producing and reproducing the very conditions that hold us in bondage.

On the question of moral responsibility

I have recently concerned myself with the question of moral responsibility. When is it, I ask myself, that one becomes morally responsible for his/her/their actions or inactions?

To illustrate the course of my inquiry:

Imagine a closed system where all things being equal. You have a product [x], which its production was undertaken with colossal violations of ethics and human rights. You have an individual who is faced with a moral question of whether to purchase the product or not. To purchase it, it may be argued, means that the individual to some degree is morally complicit in what took place during the production process. I however do not wish to concern myself at this stage with this part of the argument. Prima facie, the suggestion that one is morally responsible should they purchase the product seems highly plausible. There are two other positions I would like to explore. One is the position where the individual chooses to simply not purchase item [x] and do nothing further. And the other, is the position where the individual chooses not to purchase item [x] and then decides to take action that would halt or reduce the production of item [x].

Surely it is morally impermissible to take the position of refusing to purchase the product and yet not do something about the known injustice especially in situations where the individual is able to act to bring about an end or reduction of the production process of item [x]. To choose not to purchase the item [x] alone does not seclude the purchaser from moral responsibility should they be in a position to take further steps. An important question to consider is whether there are moral limits in the means used to bring the reduction or halt of the production process.

RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall at no point made any explicit attempts to articulate their ideological position within a framework of morality. This has partially allowed the movements to navigate controversial situations and further avoid having to bind themselves from a discourse about ethics in protest action. The task of the movements has not been to articulate a new genre of the human that operates within certain ethical terrains. But a question needs to be asked, what ethical principles bind a decolonised society and are these principles part of the means to achieving the decolonial project? Hopefully, an inquiry into moral responsibility may assist in building an ethical basis for a societal transition to a decolonised society.

The basis of critique of the student protests has not been geared towards appealing to the hearts of white folk or the proposition that society should adhere to a higher moral standard. The central focus has been the annunciation of pain upon bodies that are labelled black, female and queer. One can extrapolate that the call is to then reduce/halt whatever inflicts this pain.

Concerning violence

While not wanting to get drawn into the dichotomy of whether one condemns or approves of the violence on campus, I do wish to provide a level of context. A significant stumbling block to the decolonial project is that the colonial administrators are not only white folk but also black folk. In reducing the “postcolonial” period to the absence of white colonists within the political administration of a given country we created a very powerful myth about decolonising the colonial administration. However, we still live under the same colonial matrix of dispossession and to assert that we are living in a postcolonial period simply reveals one’s ignorance about what colonialism is.

Violence as a means to the decolonial end calls upon black folk to take up arms against other black folk who remain part and parcel of the system. It calls upon cousins, brothers, sisters, and families to go to war against each other. An even more worrying fact is that capital will compel those it benefits regardless of their skin pigmentation or orientation to identity politics to defend it.

Reform or revolution?

Some cadres have asked me why concessions lead to more demands. Let me use this opportunity to provide clarity and to end my letter.

The aim is to get the university to reach a stage where they will be unable to concede to any more significant demands and therefore resort to use the state policing apparatus and private security to repress student protests. The expectation is that this will detach the black masses from the hegemonic bloc of the ruling party and thereby awaken the 'sleeping' masses that will then redirect their frustrations and rage towards not only the universities but the state. This in turn will initiate a more substantive ideological and policy shift in the ruling party. Should the ruling party fail to change then an overthrow of the current government will be imminent.

Yours in comradeship
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