

As by fire: The end of the South African university, by Jonathan Jansen, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2017, 352 pp., ISBN: 978-0-624-08030-5.

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Jonathan Jansen's book, *As by Fire: The end of the South African university*, predicts an apocalyptic spectre, one which will become a reality if it is not immediately confronted and contained. The subtitle evokes an imagery that echoes, though with perhaps less certitude, Francis Fukuyama's declaration in his *The end of history*, that the demise of communism and the triumph of the free-market liberal democracy system (Fukuyama 1992) should awaken any slumbering citizen and most certainly the government.

In all fairness, the book's subtitle is a warning, rather than the ideologically-inspired pronouncement of Fukuyama. Jansen's dire prognosis is an inference drawn from the historical downward spiral of many African universities. A rejection of this seeming inevitability might appear to confirm the myth of South Africa's exceptionalism. In reality, South Africa is not immune to the imperfections afflicting the rest of the pan-African fraternity.

Parenthetically, let me hasten to say that recovery from the wanton physical and psychological damage wrought by the recent student protests could take a century. Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor, Sizwe Mabizela, one of the VCs interviewed, estimates a "20- or 30-year time horizon" for recovery to take place. In a similar vein, about five decades ago, E. G. Malherbe, who at the end of his checkered career was the Vice Chancellor of the University of Natal, predicted that apartheid education had caused so much damage that it would take two to three generations (Malherbe 1977, 617), that is, roughly sixty years, to achieve parity between blacks and whites. His prediction was premised on the assumption that the equality goal could be achieved only if herculean restorative efforts were immediately implemented. Alas, that has not happened to the extent required. With these time estimates as a backdrop, the hundred-year prediction is not an irresponsible thumbsuck or hyperbole. The long-term socio-economic implications of this wreckage are profoundly disturbing.

As by Fire is an earnest undertaking, the declared purpose of which was to study the “leaders of those universities [South African] and how they managed and led within their particular environments” during the 2015–16 period. It was a period which seemed, literally, to mark the beginning of the end of universities as libraries, laboratories and vehicles were torched; artworks were indiscriminately destroyed. Vice chancellors and other academic staff were either threatened, physically assaulted, driven to resign or to emigrate or, to varying degrees, suffered cardiac episodes. The “bizarre” behaviour of the students was what Njabulo Ndebele sought to unravel in his insightful Helen Joseph Annual Memorial lecture, “They are burning memory!” (Ndebele 2016). Jansen similarly probes the enigma through the voices of the vice chancellors.

While some of the motivations behind the protests were legitimate, they caused bewilderment among many experts and ordinary citizens, who failed to see the logic behind destroying the very infrastructure whose purpose was to facilitate not only the acquisition of knowledge but, crucially, its valued production of knowledge and the consequent innovations that the latter spawn.

Jansen trains his analytic arsenal on the critical role players who are charged with managing the universities, that is, the vice chancellors. Eleven out of a total of 26 were interviewed in a bid to solicit their experiences. By any measure, this is a significant sample and is reasonably representative of the spectrum of university types: historically white and historically black; well endowed and inadequately resourced; urban and rural; large and small. From these sources, diverse but sharing a common vocation, Jansen draws a rich portrait of a collective of vast experience, specialisation and commitment. The challenges faced by this coterie were monumental and arguably exceeded the level of violence and destruction of valuable property compared with student protests elsewhere on the globe, both historically and contemporaneously. The vice chancellors’ perceptions, assessments and perspectives are carefully elicited and help to engender an appreciation of the complex institutional habitats they occupy.

Jansen was prompted to carry out this study by the dearth of research about senior university management in South Africa, in the hope that better theorization would ultimately emerge as the body of research in this area grows. Presumably a grounded theoretical construct would emerge with powerful explanatory power and utility. Such an understanding would have the potential to improve performance, not only in terms of professional practice but also in transforming the general institutional milieu.

Though the focus is on the 2015–16 period, it is important to remember that student protests have been there for decades. What was distinctive about the period under study,

according to Jansen, was the “sheer ubiquity, of violence, its deadly intensity, and the accumulating costs ... in damage to university property”. In large part, this ugly spectre was the result of a combination of influences, among them the glaring socio-economic inequality so obvious in contemporary South Africa. The students were informed by “memories of the heroic struggles of their parents’ generation”, a phenomenon crisply described by Mahmood Mamdani as “The present is not its own explanation” (quoted in Jansen’s book). In other words, the present cannot be understood without an understanding of the knowledge, both informal or formal, embedded in the past, in this case the psyche of the “subaltern”. This essentially Bourdieuan conceptual formulation is generally referred to in the social sciences as the “inter generational transmission of social capital”. Jansen dwells on this in his *Knowledge in the Blood* (Jansen 2009). There he analyses the perspective of the dominant white group, while Ndebele trains his reflection on the subaltern; the two works are complementary, though articulated from different disciplinary approaches. Jansen further argues that there is a strong relationship between campus politics and the external socio-political environment.

As by Fire is a rich narrative of the complexity of the university environment, showing that, although the students are at the centre of its business, a variety of often competing actors are encased in the environment. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student movements became the twin campaigns around which a multiplicity of attendant issues arose, as different student actors vied for prominence in quick succession. For example, at the beginning of the period under study, some female students, especially at the University of the Witwatersrand, effectively articulated the issues with a relatively high degree of clarity. However, as the protest movement unfolded they suddenly seemed to retreat from the front lines, displaced by male counterparts employing more aggressive tactics. External political influence on campus politics is said to be on the rise. Interestingly, in a recent essay entitled “How to detoxify young minds from indoctrination”, Laureate Wole Soyinka bemoans the externally-induced religious zealotry that has undermined the central mission of universities in Nigeria, that of pursuing knowledge unfettered by bigotry and prejudice (Soyinka 2016).

These small but vocal emergent groups of university students displayed tendencies that can only be described as anarchistic, or even nihilistic. Jansen describes some of the elements within the student protest movement as being “bereft of signature literature or heroes of the past”. Credence is lent to this view by the disruptions of seminars featuring renowned decolonization scholars, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Crain Soudien and Xolela Mangcu. One UCT student understood decolonization as doing away with “Western science”, believing instead that something could be learnt from those who could magically command lightning to do their bidding. Disturbingly, there seemed to be no awareness that there are established

scientific principles which explain the lightning phenomenon. Sandile Dikeni's lampooning of the alleged powers of lightning that, had they been true, could have been deployed to deliver ferocious strikes at the evil apartheid system, is apropos in this instance (Dikeni 2002, 21–23).

It is important however to bear in mind that these ideas and behaviours were not shared by the majority of students. There were students who felt strongly, and rightly so, that changes must take place, but did not engage in large-scale intimidation or in destroying property. Within the educational domain, decolonization or transformation does not mean the wholesale decimation of prior knowledge but rather a rational and systematic establishment of epistemic equity.

Indeed, higher education in South Africa is faced with daunting problems at a time when the promise of the future depends to a large extent on the sector. "Being the head of a South African university [has] become a thankless task" Jansen avers, and "trying to manage the demands of rival constituencies in the face of declining revenues and threats to lives and facilities" is the albatross around the vice chancellors' necks. His call for further research to deepen the body of knowledge about the management of universities in these trying times is timely. This is an invitation to be heeded and acted upon without delay in anticipation of even more dire turbulence.

As by Fire is an insightful work which deserves to be read and pondered by all those involved in South African higher education, including government officials. South Africa is presented as a post-conflict country, one that calls for the development of a post-conflict management theory, in the same way that a post-conflict pedagogy was proposed in *Knowledge in the Blood*. The interviews display a deep commitment to the preservation of the universities as they have emerged historically, but the present momentous challenges require more innovative and preemptive responses that better theorization can bring about. It may not be possible to find a single theory that could address the challenges that face universities. In the meantime, we should recognize that there already exists a body of theories that need to be identified and applied contingentially.

The dire premonition in the book's subtitle is subverted by the Pollyanna principle that defines the core of Jansen's thinking. In *Knowledge in the Blood*, Jansen summoned up a verse in Paul Robeson's poem, "Our country's strong, our country's young/And her greatest songs are still unsung", to reflect his enduring optimism. Despite the dark landscape portrayed in *As by Fire*, it appears that a subliminal dynamic, of the kind that inspired Ayi Kwe Armah's (Armah 1968) dream for the beautiful ones still to be born, may be on the verge of being birthed. In the final paragraph Jansen proclaims that "even though buildings might have been burned and material losses suffered, we are a resilient people and our spirits will not be broken. We

have come through the fire before. We can do it again.”

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