Deaf to Each Other | Neither the fallist movement nor the authorities are listening to voices on the ground

Untangling the tedious tango of varsity strife

The campus crisis has entered a depressing cycle of attrition — but not everybody is shouting, writes Carlos Amato

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f South Africa’s universities are the incubators of social progress, then we're in trouble. Because nobody is emerging with much credit from the neurotic theatre of campus conflict.

Since the early triumphs of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall — fists of peaceful mass action for achievable change — university management and student activists have danced a tedious tango of kneejerk, sterile politics.

The University of the Free State’s rugby thugs added a toxic dose of racist violence to the moment.

It’s a depressing story. And who blame depends on which side of the ideological trench you’re sitting.

From my position inside the trench, I blame both sides.

University of the Witwatersrand vice-chancellor Adam Habib and the University of Cape Town’s Max Price, after responding so deftly to the challenge of #FMF, have both veered into bongadigheid by hiring private security whom they have allowed to suppress peaceful protest.

This is a reckless overreaction to isolated cases of student violence. But the fallist students have closed the circle of destructive nonleadership. The movement’s core motive — to open the doors of higher education, practically and symbolically — is increasingly tainted by currents of lazy thought: economic illiteracy, crude racial essentialism, adolescent self-pity and jargon-drunk hysteria.

Its refusal to adopt formal leadership structures has left it an unarticulated mess, unable to restrain or explain the arsonists and hate-mongers in its ranks.

And the standoff between university managers and the fallists maps to a generational chasm in the reading of liberation history.

Habib, Price, Rhodes University’s Steve Mabudla and UFS’s Jonathan Jansen are all veterans of various streams of the struggle. Now they confront born-free activists who deny that struggle’s transformative value, in part because they never witnessed apartheid proper.

The gulf was dramatised on 702’s Friday morning show, guest-hosted by Nomapelo Gasa. Gasa interviewed Wenzisa Xaba, an #MMF activist at UCT, who outlined the ideology of “fallism” with a barrage of radical reductionism, shrinking the complexities of struggle history to a cartoonish fable of betrayal. The ANC had devoured its black majority at the outset, leaving them tyrannised by an intact system of white supremacy.

For Xaba, the entire edifice of the governing party’s progressive record — welfare, affirmative action, the rise of the black middle class, mass service delivery and the antiretroviral roll-out — is invisible.

Gasa was willing to hear this narrative, which is weirdly anachronistic in its inability to acknowledge the flawed but real achievements of a black government, but the political analyst bridled when Xaba claimed that the ANC had “hijacked the narrative of the PAC.”

“Hold on,” interrupted Gasa, “what you cannot do is to distort other movements … Just read the basic timeline: the PAC was a breakaway from the ANC.” Gasa gave Xaba a curt lesson on the history of nonracialism and Africanness in the struggle, and asked him to reconcile her professorial belief in “black love” with her sweeping dismissal of her black liberators as traitors.

Then Xaba bumbled by patronising Gasa. “First of all, I’m gonna need for us to have a basic respect for each other. So I don’t appreciate the way you are speaking to me, and cutting me off.”

Gasa got the memo in. “I’m hosting ... and can kill this conversation right now … You are not going to blackmail me into not interrupting you when you are making a very serious historical error.”

Xaba objected, but Gasa kept talking over her: “Listen! Listen! ... I don’t have time for this. You are disrespectful and extremely rude.”

Xaba accused Gasa of paternalism. Gasa said: “Right now, we do not have a basis for a conversation.”

“I also don’t think so,” retorted the student activist.

Gasa responded: “I don’t think you are ready to have a conversation where there is disagreement.”

It was a micro-act of the campus wars, and showed how fractured the debate has become. Here were two distinct black feminists, unable even to hear out each other’s accounts of our history. What hope, then, for real communication across the barricades of race, gender, ideology?

The antidote to my depression about this was a video of a speech at Stellenbosch University’s conference by Loyiso Nwudeyi, an #MMF activist and a gifted orator of Nigerian heritage who grew up in Queenspark. She is fluent in Afrikaans, but her bilingual speech assails the defensive parochialism of Maties culture, using language that was humane, empathetic and poetic.

“Those who must listen, must listen. Those who need the chance to err must be allowed to cry; those who need to be angry must be allowed to be angry; those who need to talk must be allowed to talk. But none of us gets to claim an easy victory, because there’s no victory in our collective pain, there is only closure. And South Africa desperately needs closure.”

You can stay young and radical without being dead on principle to other voices. You can reason with radical youth without shouting them down. The likes of Nwudeyi can teach us how to speak and listen back.