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Book review

Jansen, J. 2017. *As by Fire: The End of the South African University*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

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Jonathan Jansen's latest offering, *As by Fire: The End of the South African University*, is an unconstrained account of the 2015-2016 crisis which erupted at universities across South Africa. Ferial Haffajee, of the *Huffington Post*, describes the book as "a view from inside the cauldron", warning that Jansen does not "mince his words". As one of the leading educationists in South Africa, Jansen is not known for holding back when commenting on the state of the country's education system. However, as the *former* vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State (UFS), Jansen appears even more unconstrained than usual, which is saying something. The book is refreshingly honest. The rebukes are scathing and the insights on offer cut to the heart of the matter: the end of the South African university is a real possibility which may occur in the not too distant future. As hyperbolic as this may sound, Jansen presents a convincing case for why academics, students, and South African society more broadly, should be concerned about the future of the country's universities.

Organised into ten chapters with a separate Introduction, the book seeks to provide a fuller account of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements and their collective impact on the higher education sector in 2015 and 2016. Part of this objective is achieved by Jansen's critical, valuable engagement with some of the underlying roots of the crisis. The two core grievances for students across university campuses were cultural alienation, as reflected by #RhodesMustFall, and financial exclusion, taken up by #FeesMustFall, as well as the lesser publicised Shackville movement. The analysis is also informed by the views and experiences of eleven South African vice-chancellors who agreed to be interviewed by Jansen, including the likes of Adam Habib (University of the Witwatersrand), Max Price (University of Cape Town), Ihron Rensburg (University of Johannesburg) and Cheryl de la Rey (University of Pretoria). Jansen's stated aim in adopting this approach is to offer a more comprehensive view of the crisis by including the voices of those in senior university management. As the public faces of universities, student anger and frustrations were often targeted

at vice-chancellors. The administration building, as the seat of university management on campuses, was a prime target for vandalism. Social media also provided a platform for abuse and intimidation directed at those sitting at the helm of universities. For Max Price, the vitriol levelled towards his office resulted in physical assault. Jansen (2017:4) describes vice-chancellors as having been convenient "punching bags" during the crisis and devotes a chapter to the personal costs of the crisis for those interviewed.

By enlisting the experiences and perspectives of university managers in similar positions of authority, Jansen attempts to unearth and understand the efforts and choices made to manage the crisis, even though the situation was decidedly unmanageable at times. The long, verbatim quotes of the interviewees add value in places, but the defensive and even conspiratorial tone of some of the comments seem inappropriate in a privileged interpretation of the protest movement such as this is. The premise that vice-chancellors were voiceless and also victims could be dismantled and rejected by a more critical reviewer. Indeed, the book is unlikely to evoke much sympathy among the thousands of students, and hundreds of academics, who participated (peacefully) in the protests. It could, and probably will, be dismissed as elitist and reactionary. Amidst the concern over the absence of the vice-chancellor's voice during the crisis, the question of why so many university managements were caught back-footed when the protests began in March 2015 unfortunately fails to come up.

In Jansen's defence, he does not claim to deliver an objective, detached account of the fees and transformation crises. He acknowledges "being implicated" in the research and its findings and recommendations (Jansen 2017:xvi). Still, he thinks the "rare and relatively understudied vantage point of the university leader" can offer fresh insight and a closer approximation to the 'truth' than what is usually on offer in conventional or social network media (Jansen 2017:xvi). For those familiar with the UFS, it is not surprising to see Jansen's personal grievances with the Afrikaans daily *Volksblad* feature occasionally in the work. The forthright rebukes of the Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, and the President of the Republic, Jacob Zuma, are welcome and demand public airing. As Jansen notes, many of the challenges which contributed to the student protests had very little to do with universities and "everything to do with broken public schools, failing health-care systems, and corrupt government" (Jansen 2017:168). Indeed, the waves of protest action that swept across university campuses in 2015 and 2016 were the result of complex, interconnected crises, many of which lie outside university control.

At an institutional level, over the past decade, universities have seen their government funding decrease while student enrolments have been on a steady upward trajectory. Added to this, Jansen identifies government interference and campus instability as posing serious threats to the academic integrity and global standing of South Africa's universities. Underfunding in particular has placed increasing pressure on institutions of higher learning to provide world-class education, to keep talented and skilled academics, and to absorb a growing student population which increasingly expects universities to function as mini-welfare states. One of the most insightful chapters in the book explores the welfarisation of South Africa's universities and the implications this has had, given the limited resources these institutions have at their disposal. Another stand-out chapter explores the "sense" and "non-sense" of calls for decolonisation, especially of curricula. This is not an easy task given the contested nature of the term, its multiple meanings, and the varied ways in which it was deployed during the protests. Jansen (2017:162) offers at least six different conceptions, each with its

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own emphasis. These conceptions range from "hard" options, such as the repatriation of "occupied knowledge", and with it the structures of settler colonialism, to "softer" options of promoting "encounters with entangled knowledges". Jansen argues that the latter conception is the most fitting in the post-1994 context. While the repatriation of "occupied knowledge" seeks to "topple the internal imperialism" of universities, the "entangled knowledges" approach recognises the worn-out, prohibitive binaries of 'us' and 'them', 'coloniser' and 'colonised' (Jansen 2017:162). Rather, entangled knowledges examine and embrace the intertwined nature of epistemological and ontological discovery over the past several centuries in Africa.

The author appears to be haunted by the unfairness of the demands placed on him while vice-chancellor of the UFS, and on other vice-chancellors across the country. In tracing the development of the student protests, from a relatively inclusive movement focused on issues of affordability and transformation in 2015 to one that became more radical in its nativism and demands for free higher education in 2016, Jansen reveals his disappointments and general disillusionment. Jansen suggests that the student protests of 2015 and 2016 represented an opportunity to spotlight the slow pace of transformation in the higher education sector, in staff profiles and curricula, and to shape South African universities for the future. However, worthy terms such as decolonisation were misappropriated and deployed "as a crude instrument of black nationalism" (Jansen 2017:171). The understandable anger and distress of thousands of poor students too often manifested as violence. In a society in which violence is normalised, it is not surprising that protests on campuses also descend into violence so regularly. What is more disconcerting, is the extent to which protest violence on university campuses has tended towards the criminal.

As by Fire is a controversial text. The politics of the topic and tone of its delivery will resonate with some while stoking renewed anger and frustration among others. The work represents a privileged view of the student movement of 2015 and 2016, but this need not detract from the valuable insights on offer. The increasing financial constraints and unrealistic demands being placed on South Africa's universities should worry everyone: staff, students, parents and society at large. Jansen (2017:251) offers a few, cursory points of optimism in closing. He suggests there is a "ray of hope" even if, to many, it may seem more like a glimmer. The author contends that in a context of unresponsive government, which is also morally compromised, addressing the legitimate concerns of the student protests will require civic and community leadership and support in partnership with university managements. Though, with the focus being on senior university management, it is worth wondering where those who are actually on the frontline of the crisis are meant to position themselves; that is, academics, who are rather conspicuous by their absence in this work.