

## REVIEW ESSAY

### There is No Privileged Site of Politics

TONY VOSS

**Julian Brown. 2016. *The Road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising of 16 June 1976*. Woodbridge: James Currey/Johannesburg: Jacana. xi, 204 pp.**

**Rico Devara Chapman. 2016. *Student Resistance to Apartheid at the University of Fort Hare: Freedom Now, a Degree Tomorrow*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. xii, 135 pp.**

After nearly a quarter of a century of democracy, South Africans are beginning to see more clearly the milestones along the road that took them out of apartheid. Two recent books remind us of the part played by students, and by workers in the struggle that culminated in the settlement of 1994. Rico Devara Chapman recounts the history of student resistance at the University of Fort Hare and Julian Brown brings us a revisionist history of student activism in the years between the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 and the Soweto Uprising of 1976.

In 1997 Dr. Chapman, who now teaches in the Department of History and Philosophy, Jackson State University, spent some months in the then newly democratic Republic of South Africa. Dr. Jackson taught at Sakhululeka High School in Fort Beaufort and enrolled in classes in the education department of the University of Fort Hare in nearby Alice. He lived on campus in Beda Hall (a “dorm” in US parlance). The recurrence of the onomastic “fort” is not fortuitous: we are on what was for over a hundred years of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries a shifting frontier of war between colonizer and colonized, and Dr. Chapman is sensitive to this history, as he is to the fact that not all encounters between indigenous people and intruders were violent. Until their brutal and bureaucratic appropriation by the apartheid state in the late 1950s “mission schools,” despite an element of paternalism, were islands of forethought and hope: their gradual undermining denied the post-apartheid state many servants of the caliber of mission-educated Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela. Mission schools covered the country, from Zonneblem College in Cape Town to Tygerberg in the north, St Peter’s in Johannesburg and Adams College in KwaZulu-Natal, but they were concentrated in what is now the Eastern Cape Province. The University of Fort Hare, founded in 1916 as Fort Hare University College, was the jewel in the crown.

The history and ideological sequence of student resistance at Fort Hare (UFH) is complex, but Chapman has made use of the established historiography, rich archival resources, and

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i1a8.pdf>

personal interviews to present an account, which is both clear in outline and full of distinctive detail, particularly in its survey of recent decades. Chapter One identifies UFH as the birthplace of activism in South Africa. This may imply a distinction between “student activism” and working-class resistance: the latter has been almost continuous since the earliest years of industrial South Africa. Significantly perhaps the first serious disruptions at UFH came in the early years of the Second World War, and the pace was maintained into the 1950s after the establishment of the ANC Youth League in 1944. Soon after 1948 the Nationalist Party government established “ethnic” or “bush” colleges, under the direct control of a Minister, in other parts of the country. This apartheid re-tribalization weakened UFH by ethnically limiting the University’s intake and opening up academic positions to often under-qualified whites. But, as Dr. Chapman shows, the implementation and management of Bantu Education met with almost immediate and continuous resistance. By 1960, Z.K. Matthews and others of the most eminent academics had resigned their UFH posts. On a number of occasions in the ensuing years, staff, both black and white, were to show sympathy with their students in the same way.

Robert Sobukwe’s split from the ANC and his founding of the PAC in 1959 led to an internal debate and divide on university campuses between Pan-Africanism and Black Nationalism, which was complicated in later years by the rise of Black Consciousness. The founding of the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO) in 1968, and its break from the liberal non-racial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), was another milestone in the process of radicalization. Student politics thus carried a complex agenda. On the one hand, it responded to watershed events such as the banning of the ANC, the Sharpeville massacre, the Soweto uprising, the death of Steve Biko, the independence of neighboring African countries, and the Border War. On the other it maintained an educational responsibility that had to do with on-campus living conditions and academic standards. There was always some degree of privilege in being a student, but the bravery of resistance is not in question when one remembers that students have been shot down and killed on their own campus: for example, in the course of the attempt to grant UFH a patently sham autonomy under the violent oversight of the Ciskei Bantustan government. With the demise of apartheid in 1994 UFH seemed to regain its status as a “People’s University.” Student activism was directed towards the outcome of the first democratic elections and then and since has turned to the goal of ungovernability. The demands of a new distributive economy meant hard times for universities, and tuition fees became a recurring theme of protest and resistance.

Chapman seems able to end his story on a positive note, however. Under Professor Derrick Swartz, who was appointed Principal in 1999, UFH tightened its belt and regained its balance. Nomsa Mazwai, the first woman president of the UFH Students’ Representative Council, was elected to the post in 2006. Ten years later, in 2016, UFH reached its centenary, and this book is an honorable contribution to that celebration. Its sense of the South African historical and geographical context is, in my view, occasionally shaky, and it could have used another proofread, but it tells an important story.

Julian Brown, who teaches in the Department of Political Studies of the University of the Witwatersrand, makes an important point early in his book. Looking at the context in which he began his research, he sees a South Africa in which new movements like the Treatment Action

Campaign and *Abahlali baseMjondolo* ("Shack Dwellers") Movement were mounting a social critique of the post-apartheid settlement and insisting on "a more substantive form of democratic politics rooted in shared experience of exclusion and protest" (p. vii). By the time he had completed writing his book students throughout South Africa were campaigning against economic inequality, social exclusion and "the continuing influence of colonial thought on the contemporary academy" (p. vii), a sequence that illuminates the passage from "Rhodes must fall" to "fees must fall." This intertwining of the social and the political, the recognition that the legitimate interests of disadvantaged groups cannot be met without wholesale national (and even wider) political action which involves all the people, seems to me to be an important thread of *The Road to Soweto*. The deferred revolution of the ANC takeover of 1994 has at least made clearer what the real revolution will demand.

This well-written, engaging, and stimulating book has both a new story to tell and an argument to advance. The story begins with the Sharpeville massacre of 26 March 1960. This symptomatic, if spontaneous, manifestation of the reality of apartheid power, contemporary with the initiation of the armed struggle, was followed by an intense state campaign of repression, banning, censorship, arrest, and trial. Individuals were forced into exile, movements were driven underground, but resistance was armed and responded with sabotage and other violence. Yet by 1964, the state seemed to have achieved quiescence, and "standard stories" (p. 5) suggest that this repressive order remained undisturbed for at least the next decade, which from the Rivonia trial of 1964 to the Soweto Uprising of 1976 was a time of "private dissent and public caution" (p. 6). The responsibility of liberation was in the hands of banned and exiled South Africans.

Brown has a different story to tell, the story of a decade of the almost continuous "seething activity" (p. 9) of resistance within South Africa, in which citizens, students, workers, schoolchildren, and their parents and teachers all took part. While recognizing the activity during this period of the ANC, Brown places "little emphasis on the significance of the reorganization and development of the ANC's underground movement within South Africa during this decade" (p. 6), finding the real energy of resistance inside the country, and above ground, which is one element of what might be called the revisionist aspect of his argument. Although the story told in *The Road to Soweto* acknowledges certain landmark, watershed events in the resistance to apartheid between Sharpeville and Soweto, the emphasis is on continuity, cautious and spontaneous connection between activists, principled adaptation to changing events, and courageous reaching-outs beyond the ideological barriers and identities imposed by the state.

The story, which naturally coincides at many points with that told by Chapman, begins with a focus on the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), a liberal center of extra-parliamentary opposition. Although multi-racial, NUSAS was dominated by white English-speaking students, the Afrikaanse Studente Bond having been set up in 1948, the year of the National Party election victory, and had actively opposed racial segregation in universities. Having survived the intense repression of the early 1960s, NUSAS both accepted and struggled with its new role as "torchbearer for opposition politics" (pp. 16-17). In 1966, three thousand students, at the call of NUSAS, marched in protest in Johannesburg, and there were other large

demonstrations. These successes brought the wrath of the state down upon the heads of individual student leaders. At the same time racial divisions strained the unity of NUSAS: while white students claimed to be leading resistance on behalf of the black majority, black students felt that within the organization their interests were neglected.

In effect, independent black student organizations had been set back by the banning of the PAC and the ANC and their youth leagues in 1960. The difficulties of black student resistance were compounded by the “balkanization” of the “bush” colleges along ethnic lines. On many of these campuses SRCs themselves were banned. Although its black membership had increased fourfold and was active by the mid-1960s, “NUSAS was not an ideal home for black student politics” (p. 43). Black students could find an individual voice in the United Christian Movement (UCM), but a “revolutionary” (p. 40) moment came when a group of students led by Steve Biko founded the South African Student Organisation (SASO) in 1968. Seeming initially to withdraw from the confrontational politics to which NUSAS was more and more committed, SASO sought to speak in its own voice, to find an identity independent of the violence of apartheid categorization and to foster intellectual, cultural, and religious energies “that gave the humanism of Black Consciousness thought its particular character” (p. 48). SASO aimed for community outreach, upliftment, and “personal political education, based on cultural and social identity” (p. 17) and did not seek to influence or engage with the white electorate. But the two national student bodies could not advance independently. Black students were drawn to the confrontational and provocative activism of NUSAS, and white students were gradually drawn into social and community engagement. The interaction between the two bodies gave rise to new forms of and occasions for oppositional politics.

An indication of how far the politics of student resistance had come emerged in 1973, which saw a resurrection of explicitly working class action. In the “Durban Strikes” sixty thousand workers of that industrial port and holiday city came out on strike in the first three months of the year. Their action was orderly, organized by the workers themselves, without leaders or spokespersons, and their demands, on both economic and ethical grounds, eminently just. The measured success of these workers’ actions—less violence than might have been expected, improved working conditions, and a comparatively equable resumption of work—meant an extension of opportunity for working class political action in the future, an anticipation of the rise of the trade unions. The strikes broke various apartheid boundaries, spilling out into the segregated streets of the city, involving students who helped determine how the strikes were reported and understood, and releasing the conspiracy theorists lurking in the pro-apartheid electorate. Despite the ethnic distinctiveness of the Durban working-class demographic, by involving black, coloured, and Indian workers, men and women, the strikes did something to strengthen Black Consciousness. The crackdown that followed, legitimized by the conspiratorial Van Wyk de Vries and Schibusch Commissions of Inquiry into the actions of student organizations, targeted their student leaders both black and white, and led many into trade union activism or exile. State repression was becoming more intense and more sinister, but SASO and NUSAS, hampered as they were, found a new vision of their political future, committing their skills and training to workers in administration and education, engaging with “a public that could include workers, youth, urban professionals and possibly even members of

rural communities” (p. 115). Individual students as they left university helped to found new agencies of black politics like the Black People’s Convention and the Black Workers’ Project. Among these new institutions were the NUSAS Wages Commissions. The first was founded at the University of Natal in Durban in 1971: within two years five were active. These enabled white students to respond to the challenge of Black Consciousness. Without assuming any right to lead, they could contribute to what was in effect a revolutionary vision of South African politics, which by “linking race with class” helped to identify the target of opposition as “apartheid capitalism” (p. 121). Rick Turner, a lecturer at the University of Natal in Durban was one of those banned. He was supportive of radical student politics and even before the Durban strikes had encouraged students to co-operate with workers. Like Steve Biko, Ahmed Timol, Mthuli Shezi, and Onkgopotse Tiro, he was to lose his life at the hands of the state. Having been expelled from Turfloop, Tiro taught at Maurice Isaacson High School in Soweto, where he helped to strengthen the Southern African Students’ Movement for school students. The energy continued into 1976 and beyond.

South African student politics was naturally responsive to sympathetic events outside the country, and in 1974 a sequence of national rallies was planned to acknowledge and celebrate the success of Frelimo in Mozambique. Although only two took place, they were sufficient to provoke a characteristically violent reaction from the police. For eighteen months black leaders, many of whom had emerged from student activism and co-operation with resistant workers, were confined to the courtroom. Prison sentences would effectively remove them from public life. The baton was passing to the generation of schoolchildren who emerged in the Soweto Uprising of 1976. Brown shows clearly how both individual connections and a mass movement contributed to that crucial and bloody turningpoint of South African history.

In Julian Brown’s argument the 16<sup>th</sup> of June 1976 fashioned, from the imaginative political possibilities opened up in the previous decade, “a material space that was beyond the state’s ability to control” (p. 170). From this moment on it was clear that apartheid was war. In 1977, the death of Steve Biko exposed the desperate callousness of the state, and by late 1977 all effective black student organizations had been banned, yet the new politics of protest and dissent was “not inextricably linked to personalities or to organisations” (p. 181). This made possible the formation of the UDM in the 1980s: ten years after the Uprising, in protest and insurgency “the ungovernability of Soweto in the months after June 1976 was extended across the country” (p. 182).

*The Road to Soweto* is an important, moving, and encouraging book, which revises our understanding of crucial decades of South African history, and puts forward an argument that both emerges from and explains that story. Derived partly from interpretations of France ’68, and particularly from the work of Jacques Rancière, this argument enables Julian Brown’s readers to see that “privileged theoretical knowledge” (p. 13) is not necessary for political action, that by speaking up non-citizens can make themselves citizens, and that “there is no privileged site of politics and no political sphere” (p. 15) South Africans in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century both called on and demonstrated this potential to deny and oppose the imprisoning categories of apartheid and help change the history of their country.

Julian Brown's is a more radical text than Rico Devara Chapman's, but both remind us that history is always written in the present, and that recall of the past can give us guidance in the present. The order of the state is always contingent, "whether the order be that of the apartheid state, or of post-apartheid liberal democracy" (Brown, p. 187), and the space of politics is always open.