

Speech made by UCM President, Rev James Moulder (August 20, 1968)

People have been asking why there have been so many student protests in 1968. They want to know what students are advocating. Faced with such questions and insufficient information and experience to make organised sense of all that is happening, I will make no attempt to supply these questions with general answers. Fortunately, better brains than mine are equally baffled and are producing far from final answers to such questions. As one of Oxford's outstanding historians said when he was asked what students are after:

Who the hell knows? I can't answer it, for whatever I say tonight would probably be outdated tomorrow.

On the other hand, Prof. D.V. Cowan, who gave the 1968 Dr E.G. Malherbe Academic Freedom Lecture on "The rights and responsibilities of students in a modern university" - was somewhat more adventurous. He claimed that three significant elements stand out as the root cause of student unrest.

Firstly, a widespread dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the state of society itself in all its dimensions.

Secondly, righteous indignation against dishonesty and inner contradiction.

Thirdly, an almost desperate search for values to live by, a yearning for a sense of direction and for belief in the worthwhileness of life.

If Prof Cowen was analysing student protest on the international scene, then all three of his points probably stand. If he only had so-called "white" South African students in mind, then I'm not so sure that he could substantiate his first point - the one about widespread dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the state of society in all its dimensions. I may be open to correction, but I sense very little by way of such dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the state of our society on, for example, the Rhodes campus. In fact, I am somewhat disenchanted and more than dissatisfied that Rhodes students seem to be more enthusiastic about putting out the security officer's torch than fanning the flame of academic freedom which UCT students are trying to keep alive. And while I appreciate the legitimate and widespread indignation against a disciplinary code which has as one of its basic principles that a Rhodes man and woman must at all times have both their feet on the ground, I wish that the same people would become as indignant about the similarly archaic and paternalistic restrictions of contact between, say, Rhodes students and those of Fort Hare.

But, be that as it may. Having put my cards on the table to the question of what I regard as some of the really important issues confronting both the Rhodes students and the Rhodes staff at the moment, let me return to Prof. Cowen's second point - the one about righteous indignation against dishonesty and inner contradiction. This is the point in which I am interested and which I want to pursue for the rest of the time at my disposal. Furthermore, I want to confine my attention to what had become known as the "Mafeje case", and I want to attempt the question:

Why are some UCT students and staff members protesting?  
and answer some of the criticisms directed against their sit in.

Why are some UCT students and staff members protesting?

I am convinced that it is their righteous indignation against the inner contradiction in their Council's decision not to appoint Mr Archie Mafeje to a Senior Lectureship in Social Anthropology which is the root cause of the UCT sit-in. They were tired of reaffirming academic freedom on holy days and contributing to its demise on working days. They were tired of having their deeds contradict their words. They were tired of being reminded that the purpose of the annual TB Davie Memorial lecture is

to keep before the University a reminder of the seriousness of its loss (of academic freedom), to keep alive its faith that the lost freedom will one day be restored, and to keep its members vigilant lest further inroads into its remaining freedoms should be made.

And as they were tired, they sat down!

I will return to this point later. At this stage, I simply want to underline Prof. Cowen's point about "righteous indignation against dishonesty and inner contradiction". I am convinced that one of the most serious problems confronting some South African universities, and student organisations like NUSAS and the UCM, is the Government's determination to prevent people from attempting to translate their verbal expression of their conviction about university education and about human relations into deeds.

It ought to be obvious why people become angry when they cannot do what they want to do. It ought to be even more obvious why people become angry when they are prevented from acting on, what, in the Western World at any rate, are regarded as the normal civilised principles on which a university ought to be based and the normal, moral and Christian principles which ought to regulate one's relationships with and treatment of other people. But in case it is not obvious why people become angry in such circumstances, in case it is not obvious why they ought to become angry in such circumstances, let me try to explain.

Freedom of thought - that is, the freedom to think candidly and intrepidly about the fundamental issues in the life of the individual and the community on the Greek principle that an unexamined life is no life for a man - is meaningless unless it is accompanied by the freedom to act upon the convictions and conclusions at which one has arrived. Being free to think is no freedom at all unless there is also freedom to take appropriate action. Not only to be free to think, but to follow whither the thoughts lead is the essence of freedom of thought.

It is this connection which ought to hold between freedom of thought and freedom of action which the Governments of the past 20 years have been systematically eroding. It is because this connection between freedom of thought and freedom of action had been eroded that members of the University of Cape Town have put both their feet and their bottoms down and decided that they have had enough of this dishonesty and inner contradiction between their words and deeds. In other words, the students and staff at UCT have demonstrated that they are no longer prepared to accept the dictum that they may think as they please so long as they remain cowering on their knees, and they are right in doing so because not to match one's verbal expressions of one's convictions with the behaviour which is consistent with those convictions, undermines one's convictions with the behaviour which is consistent with those convictions, undermines one's integrity and lays one open to the charge of hypocrisy. This demand for consistency was well put by Prof M.W.M. Pope, Professor of Classics at the University of Cape Town for the past 11 years, who resigned 6 weeks ago when he heard of the decision not to appoint Mr Archie Mafeje to the staff because of Government pressure.

The present situation at UCT is faintly absurd. On one side you have a unilateral declaration of autonomy and academic freedom. On the other you have a Minister of Education manufacturing a "tradition" for us of which we have no knowledge at all. It is laughable and totally unreal.

Indeed it is. But it is also dishonest and inconsistent. Thus part of the answer to the question why UCT students and staff members are protesting is simply this: they want to match their pronouncements on academic freedom with deeds. They want UCT to be what they believe a university ought to be - free to determine on academic grounds alone who shall teach and who may be taught.

But the students and staff members of UCT are protesting for at least one other reason. They are protesting because they have recognised that segregated universities are inferior universities.

Segregated universities are inferior universities. This was the conclusion the Appeal Court of the United States came to in a 1954 judgement on the issue of segregation in education. The unanimous decision of the court was

In the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.

Segregated universities are inferior for at least 3 reasons:

Firstly, it is difficult - in fact it is impossible - to provide "separate but equal" library and laboratory facilities. It is also impossible to duplicate equally the interchange of overseas staff and lecturers. This particular lack is, of course, no great skin off the nose of a so-called "white" university like Rhodes. But students at Fort Hare and elsewhere are deprived in this way. And our own facilities could be improved if money was not being wasted to give visible expression to the scatterbrained opinion that there is a divine correlation between people's pigmentations and their grey matter !

Secondly, segregated students are denied the freedom to seek learning from the teachers of their choice with the special qualifications they need and desire. Once again this is a liability which so-called "non white" students suffer under more obviously than so-called "white" ones. But as the Mafeje case demonstrates, the shoe can - and in the future will probably increasingly - be on the other foot. To put it more bluntly: if Mr Mafeje is not appointed to the Senior Lectureship in Social Anthropology at UCT then students who read that subject will be taught by some "white" lecturer who is less qualified and capable than he is. And if that is not a good reason for protesting against Mr Mafeje's non-appointment then I don't know what is !

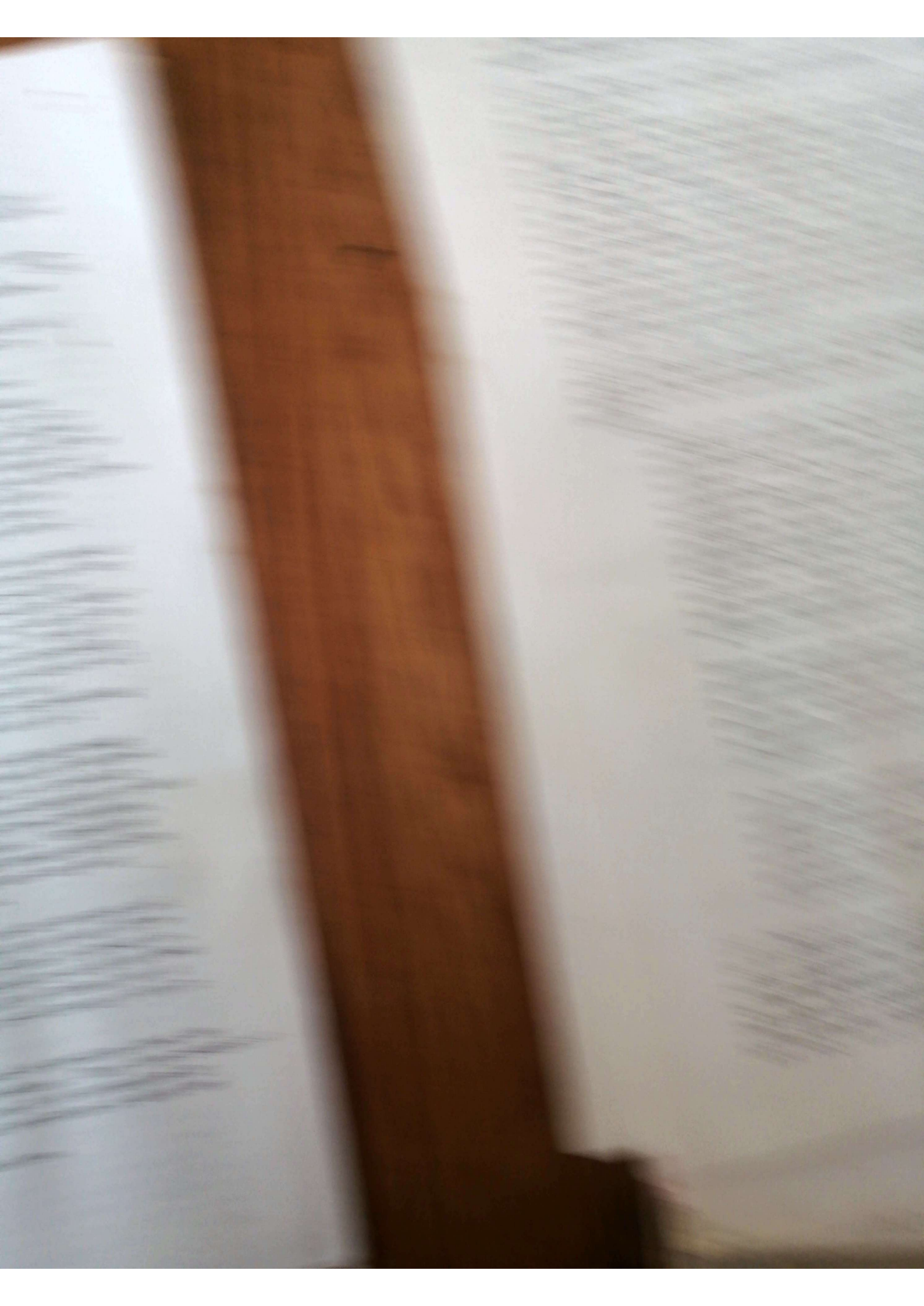
Thirdly, receiving an education is more than simply acquiring enough information to scrape through an examination. The amount of textbook information one manages to acquire while at a university is probably the least important reason for being there. Much more important is what one learns about life and about other people; not in formal contexts, but only half-consciously and via a process of osmosis. Segregated students however suffer this kind of impoverishment through separation from people of their ethnic and cultural groups with whom they must learn to live together for the rest of their lives.

These 3 reasons together amount to the second reason why students and staff members are protesting at the moment. They do not want UCT to become more segregated and therefore more inferior than it already is. What's more, it is not only UCT's status as a university which has been impoverished in this way. Both students and staff at Rhodes, and at every other segregated university in the world, are suffering a similar impoverishment of education.

This brings me to the end of my attempt to answer the question about the reasons UCT students and staff members are protesting. They have recognised.

(1) that freedom of thought is meaningless unless it is accompanied by the freedom to act upon the convictions and conclusion at which one has arrived.

(2) that segregated education is inferior education.



I now want to deal briefly with criticisms which have been levelled at the UCT sit-in.

(1) Senator de Klerk has complained that they have opposed Government policy. For one, Senator de Klerk is correct. But I fail to see what point, if any, he is trying to make. Before 1948 Senator de Klerk opposed Government policy. If the Nationalist Government were defeated at the next election, Senator de Klerk would no doubt once again oppose Government policy. So what's all the fuss about?

(2) The Prime Minister has complained that students should not meddle in politics but get on with their studies. I have two comments on his complaint:

(1) I want to remind him that it was a Nationalist Government which decided that 18 year olds are intelligent and responsible enough to have the vote. It was a Nationalist Government therefore that decided that student and 18 year olds ought to meddle in politics. Once again I fail to see what all the fuss is about. As the Prime Minister knows from his own experience in the 1930's and early 1940's : one of the most respectable ways of participating in politics is to join a political party which is opposed to the government of the day. And as he also knows from personal experience, one of the other recognised ways of expressing one's political convictions is to protest against what you regard to be inconsistencies and injustices in Government policy. Surely the Prime Minister is not so naive as to imagine that every student in the country is one of his supporters?

(2) I fail to see how it is possible not to meddle in politics. This point has recently been made well by Mr J. Hamilton Tussell in his highly to be recommended lecture on "The University and Politics". I quote

There is no time to be deceived by the serious suggestion that university students "should not meddle in politics but get on with their studies". After all the Government has given votes to teenagers. Are they expected to exercise their political rights without studying politics? They will naturally have their opinions on all current issues of the day - and it is their right and duty as voters to protest against anything they think is grievously wrong and to try in a democratic way, to compel their rulers to desist from arbitrary action whether it is against the university or against any other citizen of the State. No university man or woman should be expected to become an unquestioning acceptor of oppressive state policy or an obedient little Nationalist puppet.

How can anyone keep out of politics? Everything is politics. Everything that happens to man is the subject of political action. No one should try to limit the scope of learning and enquiry. Politics, religion, science, apartheid, the Rule of Law all must be examined and disputed, queried and questioned until the truth is found.

To be true to themselves, members of universities should apply the same concept of reason and objectivity to their examination of all national issues. While maintaining an ardent spirit of protest against all that is unjust or politically immoral they should avoid emotional thinking and action, that it is dangerous to think with blood.

(3) Implicit in both Senator de Klerk and the Prime Minister's complaints is a criticism which a great many editors of English newspapers have raised against the UCT sit in; namely a questioning of the method used by the UCT students and staff in expressing their dissatisfaction. The implied argument in such complaints and questions is the claim that the only valid means of expressing one's political convictions is via

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the ballot box. And the reason this argument is advanced is that those who advocate it are quite rightly afraid of hooliganism and violence. I share their fears. But let's set the record straight and keep it that way: the UCT students have neither behaved violently nor with vulgarity. As I said near the beginning of this argument: having become tired of not being able to act upon the convictions they hold, they simply sat down.

The only violent and provocative utterance so far made, came from the Prime Minister at Heilbron last Friday. And the only acts of hooliganism and violence come from students who are opposed to the convictions which are held by those UCT students and staff members who are engaged in the sit in. In other words, the violence and vulgarity which is feared, is coming - not from the UCT students and staff - but from those opposed to their action.

What's more, the 20th century source of this dignified and nonviolent way of protesting against injustice has a South African source. I am referring, of course, to the life and teaching of Mahatma Gandhi. All the detailed methods of civil disobedience which have since swept the world - from card burning to oath taking to marching - were first improvised in such localities as the Mosque in Durban, or (as it was popularly called) the Jewish Theatre in Johannesburg, or in such further stations as Volksrust.

This is not the time or the place to discuss Gandhi's method of non-violence. I simply want to point out that it is the same method of protest which the UCT students and staff are employing. And I want to quote one sentence from Erik E. Erikson's outstanding 1968 T.B. Davie Memorial Lecture on "Insight and Freedom". He says:

South Africa may have every reason to be as proud of this ~~expert~~, the Gandhian method, as it is proud of its gold and its diamonds; for whatever the long range political fate of militant non-violence may be, the spirit of its origin has, I believe, added lasting insight to our search for truth.

I must close. I do so with two quotations.

The first comes from Prof Julius Ebbinghaus, the Rector of Marburg University. This is what he said when that famous German University, closed down by Hitler was eventually reopened in 1945:

One fact remains unfortunately too true. The German universities failed, while there was still time, to oppose publicly with all their power the destruction of learning and of the democratic state. They failed to keep the beacon of freedom and right and justice burning through the night of tyranny so that it could be seen by the entire world.

My second quotation comes from General Smuts. In 1934, while addressing the members of St Andrews University, he mourned the fact that other countries, unlike South Africa, had:

lost the sturdy independent-minded freedom-loving individual and replaced him by a servile, standardised, mass mentality which he called the greatest menace of our times.

Still contrasting South Africa and Europe to the latter's disadvantage, he went on to say:

Minorities are trampled down. Dissident views are not tolerated and are forcefully suppressed....Intellectual freedom is disappearing with political freedom, freedom of conscience, of speech and of the Press, and that of teaching, is in extreme danger.....

He closed his address with an observation and two questions:  
The fight for human freedom is the supreme issue of the future.  
Are we going to leave the field free to those who threaten  
our fundamental human ideals and our heritage of the past?  
Or are we going to join in battle for the breaking of our bonds  
and the enlargement of our range of free choice and  
free action?

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen : some students and staff members  
at UCT have answered these two questions. So have we !