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## ***‘Increasing my value proposition to the struggle’: Arthur Mutambara and student politics in Zimbabwe***

### **Abstract**

*Arthur Mutambara made a dramatic return to Zimbabwean politics in 2005, to lead one of the factions of the split opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change. He was a prominent student activist in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s, and his reputation rests on this legacy. Mutambara led the Student Representative Council (SRC) as General Secretary and then as President at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) from 1988-1990. This period has been eulogised by the students, civil society activists and trade unionists in Zimbabwe ever since. Students still refer affectionately to the period as the ‘AGO era’ – as he used to sign himself in the 1980s. Many have argued that the student movement became the seed bed for an emergent civil society. By 1990 Zimbabwe was permanently changed and ZANU-PF became the sullied party of liberation. Students helped to pierce the regime’s invulnerability, and other groups emerged to voice their own grievances. This paper uses the re-entry of Mutambara into Zimbabwean politics to examine the trajectory of the student movement, a subject that has received no attention in recent discussion of Zimbabwe’s political history.*

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of 2005 Arthur Mutambara had become a fairly obscure figure. He had been a scientist in the US, working in a number of universities and research institutes. In February he stepped out of relative anonymity to become the head of one of the factions of Zimbabwe’s main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change. But for activists, politicians and academic commentators he was remembered as the leader of the first student revolt against the ruling party in the late 1980s, long before it was fashionable to oppose the government. Student activists for years idolised his leadership of the student movement that seemed untainted by the ‘bread and butter’ struggles that, we were told, dominated student politics in the 1990s. Arthur Mutambara had become synonymous with the glory years of Zimbabwe’s student movement.

However denunciations of Arthur Mutambara came quickly. Students from the period where interviewed and now remembered an entirely different and authoritarian side to his character. Others denounced his career, calming that he had fabricated his professional qualifications: 'If you ask me ... the "Prof" blows his trumpet too much, and much harder than can be justified by its size'.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps the most scathing, and bitter attack, came from his old comrade Munyaradzi Gwisai, who had been a student leader with him in the 1980s. Mutambara, according to Gwisai, had abandoned the struggle and had now turned up for the meal. 'It is as though you are looking for fire wood to make sadza (mealie meal). During the search for the wood you might be bitten by a snake. You come home and prepare the fire; your eyes are affected by the smoke. You prepare the sadza. Then from nowhere someone comes out and starts dishing out.'<sup>2</sup> There is a certain justification in Gwisai's angry attack. While the student movement might have been the first to crack the government's image of invulnerability, the great uprising of civil society occurred after 1995. Mutambara played no part in these struggles, and was untouched by what one activist described as, 'the confidence and idealism that drove us in the 1990s' (John Bomba, interview, 18 January 2005).

Arthur Mutambara led the Student Representative Council (SRC) as General Secretary and then as President at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) from 1988 to 1990. This period has been eulogised by the students, civil society activists and trade unionists in Zimbabwe ever since. Students still refer affectionately to the period as the 'AGO era' – as Mutambara used to sign himself in the 1980s. Today the 'AGO' years are regarded by many as the first urban opposition movement to the government, and in some accounts as the force that stalled the regime's plans for a one-party state (Saunders, 2000). Later generations of student activists describe the importance of the 'AGO' period. Stephen Chisuvi – Research and Education Secretary for the Zimbabwe National Student Union (ZINASU) for 2003-2005 – explains Mutambara's influence: 'When I was in my Form 1 in Goromonzi High School we used to read about student leaders. I remember that's when I heard the name Arthur Mutambara ... he became a legend because of how the UZ had organised political demonstrations in which even leading Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) leaders had participated ... and how one day such people will form a movement that will destroy the state' (Interview 16 May 2003).

Students were among the first to criticise the government, breaking with ZANU-PF several years before the ZCTU. The break with the government in 1988 was dramatic, months before students had demonstrated as 'revolutionary intellectuals' in support of President Robert Mugabe. Arthur Mutambara was a leading figure helping to direct and organise students in their opposition. In October 1989 he was arrested with fellow student leader Munyaradzi Gwisai, for organising a demonstration that had compared the regime with the apartheid government across the border.

Who in this government can have the audacity and credibility to criticise the De Klerk regime in South Africa? Or are we even worse than De Klerk? Ian Smith never banned political seminars at this university ... That one fought for this country does not justify them to loot, plunder and wreck the economy of Zimbabwe and let alone stifle people's democratic rights ... You can't push a cat into a corner- after all we are not cats but tigers! Defeat is not our agenda!<sup>3</sup>

Student leaders were thrown into the maximum security prison Chikurubi. There was general outrage. Morgan Tsvangirai, the young leader of the ZCTU, issued a denunciation of the arrests and the victimisation of students. His act of solidarity was rewarded with imprisonment. The student movement had become the seed bed for an emergent civil society. By 1990 Zimbabwe was permanently changed and ZANU-PF had become the sullied party of liberation. Students had, to a large extent, pierced the regime's aura of invincibility, and other groups emerged to voice their own grievances. As Tendai Biti – a leading activist at the time – argues: 'It was the first time people criticised the legitimacy of these heroes. It showed you can make noise and not get killed' (quoted in Alexander, 2000: 386).

In 1991 Arthur Mutambara left on a Rhodes scholarship for Oxford, where he completed his PhD. He then moved to the United States, where he worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, NASA and then in 2002 he returned to Africa. As he said: 'I am coming home but I don't want to come to the country and play the MDC game. My role in Zimbabwe and Africa will be to make a difference'. This paper does not take up the arguments of Mutambara's new critics; it uses Mutambara's re-entry to the political scene as an opportunity to examine the student movement through his eyes. It argues that students in Zimbabwe inherited a politically privileged status from a 'student intelligentsia' who fought in the liberation war in the 1970s. The paper argues that the 'AGO' years were contradictory, moving from support for the government to furious denunciation. With the impact of the Economic and Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) after 1990, students saw their status change. The paper asks two related questions, firstly what was the political and social context of the 'AGO years'? And how can student activism in Zimbabwe be understood? This paper centres on interviews conducted in 2003 and 2004 with current and ex-student activists, and a prolonged interview in July 2003 when Mutambara was the director of payments at the Standard Bank in Johannesburg, responsible for developing a payment strategy for banks in Southern African countries. This may seem like strange employment for a radical ex-student leader, but as he claimed in the interview, he was simply increasing his 'value proposition to the struggle'. In the interview Mutambara displayed the confidence, even arrogance, of the student movement that he once led.

## The student-intelligentsia and national liberation: 1970-1980

Mutambara describes the importance of the liberation movement on his political consciousness: 'I grew up partly in the rural areas that is where I saw the guerrillas for the first time. So I saw a bit of the war but I was too young to fight. But I attended some of the *pungwe* [evening meetings] up in the rural areas. And up to now I have a very soft spot for people who pick up the guns to drive out the oppressor. The principle that the price of freedom is death and Africans decided to pick up guns.' Students at the main university were sucked into the war for national liberation. The University of Rhodesia – as the University of Zimbabwe was known before it was renamed in 1980 – was never *A Non-Racial Island of Learning* as the title of a study from the 1970s described it (Gelfand, 1978). However in 1968 – the year of student revolt across the world – *The Rhodesia Herald* proudly announced: 'Rhodesia is lucky in its University College', apparently there was little evidence of 'subversive elements', 'in fact at the moment no evidence is visible at all' (quoted in Cefkin, 1975: 135). But within months of this article black and white students at the university erupted in revolt against the proposed changes to the constitution that would have postponed black majority rule indefinitely. This marked one of the first occasions at the university when European and African students came together against attempts to entrench white minority rule (Cefkin, 1975: 135). The self-contained community at the university, segregated from the rural and the main urban centre, created a unique political and social space for activism that fed inextricably into the war that divided the racist state. It was also an important centre of recruitment during the war, providing many of the military and ideological cadres for the struggle.

Student politics on the campus mirrored the wider Africa nationalist movement in the country. In August 1963 the main party of African nationalism, the Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union (ZAPU), split, leading to the creation of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) under the leadership of Reverend Sithole, who represented a more radical approach to independence and national liberation. ZANU plunged itself into the university milieu, recruiting student activists and addressing meetings in an attempt to win political hegemony on the campus. This led to the accusation of ZANU being nothing more than a 'party of intellectuals' cut off from the masses (see Chung, 1995: 146 and Cefkin, 1975: 141). Yet this strategy was consistent with ZANU's emphasis, at least in the early years of the movement, on education and the political training of militants. However, ZANU's prescription for the student movement was very clear: students were to play an obedient role in the coming struggles, 'being part of the revolutionary movement you are to ... be directed by it', and there was no space for an 'independent line' (quoted in Cefkin, 1975: 149).

For some time the campus was torn in two by an internecine struggle between ZANU and ZAPU activists that was only brought to an end by the National Union of Rhodesian Students (NURS), which played an important role in 'coalescing the forces of African nationalism in campus' after the split (Cefkin, 1975: 148). NURS also managed to maintain a degree of political mobilisation after the paralysis of nationalist politics caused by the banning of the ZANU and ZAPU in 1963. One student remembered that as the leaders of ZAPU fled the country in 1963, 'The university student in that year became more conscious than ever of his role as a revolutionary' (quoted in Cefkin, 1975: 148). However the period saw the marginalisation of the urban struggle by a nationalist strategy that increasingly focused on rural guerrilla warfare led by an exiled political leadership. To a certain extent, this thrust the university and the student-intelligentsia into the centre of urban politics, with students feeling an obligation to assume the leadership of the nationalist cause.

The 'pots and pans' demonstration in 1973 was a high-point in the pre-independence student movement, and the key turning point in the evolution of the 'student-intelligentsia'. Racial issues had exploded onto the campus: the main concern was the presence of a university delegation at the Association of the Commonwealth Universities in Edinburgh. Many African students regarded support for the delegation as being tantamount to accepting the racism at the university – the predominance on the University Senate and Council of Rhodesian Front supporters. Most white students, however, saw the issue differently, that the delegation should be applauded as representing the university's multi-culturalism. These issues were further heightened over the issue of the non-representation of African workers at the university, who turned to the student union to represent them. The president of the student union at the time explained that 'workers have started coming to me not because I am the right channel but because they are both frustrated and desperate' (quoted in Tengende, 1994: 141). African students occupied the Principal's office in 1973 demanding the end of racial discrimination, the employment of Africans in all fields and an increase in the wages of catering staff. This act of solidarity was not accidental, but typical of the nature of early student activism. Black students at the one national university could see themselves at once removed from the realities of the black non-academic members of staff who had approached them with their complaints and also representatives of them.

Dissatisfied with the Principal's response on the issue of wages for African non-academic members of staff, students launched the 'pots and pans' demonstration, a demonstration that Tengende (1994: 141), in his seminal study of the period, describes as 'the last significant confrontation between the students and the Administration and the Rhodesian state'. A crowd of students proceeded to remove tea urns and other 'tea' utensils and locked the property in a student union building before making their petitions to the university authorities. The identification of these utensils was not accidental; on the contrary:

I thought it was the most exquisite demonstration that had ever been invented ... [taking] all the tea equipment from every department in the university before morning tea. They rightly recognised that in our [white] society, if you don't have morning tea, it's a fate worse than death! You can be raped, you can do nothing else, but you mustn't be deprived of your morning tea! (Knottenbelt quoted in Veit-Wild, 1994: 129).

After a series of further consultations by the University Disciplinary Committee several days after the initial demonstration, a decision was made to expel a number of students. The decision inflamed student feelings. In the riot that ensued \$70,000 worth of property was destroyed. The main target of their fury was the recently built – and much hated – Senior Common Room. The university administration was also attacked and 150 students were arrested (Tengende, 1994: 142). Most pleaded guilty and many were sentenced to six months with hard labour; several others pleaded not guilty and went through a lengthy trial. After serving their sentences the students faced further penalties and were restricted from coming within 20 kilometres of the city, making their continued studies impossible. The effect of these expulsions was dramatic. Tengende (1994: 143) explains that many 'escaped to neighbouring countries en route to join the liberation struggle'.

The effect of the liberation war on student consciousness at the time cannot be overestimated. The 1973 demonstration at the campus coincided with the opening of a new front in the north-east by the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) – ZANU's military arm. After years of fratricidal struggles with ZAPU, this was regarded as a turning point in the war and that now – finally – liberation and independence were around the corner. Student militants and activists fed into and helped generate this renewed optimism. At the same time Rhodesian authorities intensified political repression on campus. The government had recently lowered the minimum age of conscription to 17 and it was not uncommon to see white students in military fatigues on campus. Students from rural backgrounds would also have had direct experience of the repression of the state at home: 'The university was now resembling the wider Rhodesian white society – armed and defiant' (Tengende: 144). The 1973 demonstrations were the last effective resistance at the university. The mass arrests, imprisonment and expulsion of students, together with the militarisation of the campus, effectively ruled out further open displays of resistance. The Student Representative Committee was left to impotently issue press releases that were ignored by the state media (Tengende, 1994).

It was not only university students who gave up their studies to fight in the liberation war; after 1973 secondary school students joined *en masse*, forcing at least six rural schools to close down (Mungazi, 1992: 85). Mutambara emphasises the role high school students played in the 1970s:

they were the bedrock. Those who were in high school and who were old enough crossed from Mutambara Mission School into Mozambique, most of these ex-fighters were actually high school students, who left form 4, form 6, they left the University of

Zimbabwe [sic] to go to Mozambique. So the student movement has always been the basis of change in Zimbabwe, even internally ZAPU, ZANU, NDP, students were the youth movement. But the fighters, I would venture to say that the 90 percent of the fighters came from the colleges, high schools and the University of Rhodesia. People would leave in their first year, in their second year. People would go from St. Augustine, Mutambara ... All those fighters were students (Arthur Mutambara, Interview 10 July 2003).

However it was the role of university students in the guerrilla struggle that was extremely important.<sup>4</sup> After the 1975 assassination of Herbert Chitepo, one of the foremost guerrilla leaders, a large number of the ZANU leaders in Zambia were arrested. The leadership vacuum was filled by an energetic student-intelligentsia who had fled from the university and secondary schools in Rhodesia over the previous years. They took control of the struggle through the Zimbabwe People's Army (ZIPA) that was a product of the merger between ZANLA and ZIPRA forces (the rival military arms of the ZANU and ZAPU) in the mid 1970s. ZIPA developed a reputation of being led by young leftist intellectuals (Saunders, 2000: 13). Fay Chung (1995), who was active in the ZANU-PF at the time, writes about how 'the university intelligentsia ... who had successfully established themselves in Zambia ... found an opportunity to take a more direct role'. She notes that the 'university intelligentsia' were not only students (or from Rhodesia), but also Zimbabwean intellectuals from across Africa and the UK and the USA. 'Dozens of young university graduates followed, from Britain, Sierra Leone and Rhodesia' (Chung 1995: 141). Education was at the centre of their approach, and they sought to develop coherent political training for political commissars. Groups of cadres were educated in the main tenets of Marxism-Leninism, and on an inherently egalitarian basis. Distinctions between officers and recruits were eliminated and democratic procedures were, albeit briefly, introduced. When ZANU resumed leadership of the liberation movement, this critical left-wing perspective was replaced by a 'populist-authoritarianism' that shunned independent thinking (Moore, 1991).

In the 1990s there was a certain amount of political capital made from these facts. The ruling party contrasts the true revolutionaries of the 1970s who came from the university with the 'fakers' of today. Mugabe used Zororo Willard Duri's funeral in 1996 to attack current activists, 'It was the dedication of cde [comrade] Duri's generation that led the ZANU (PF) politburo to give him the status of a national hero ... The new generation has to emulate that spirit in the new battles facing the country' (*The Herald*, 1996). The role of the student-intelligentsia reflected the weaknesses of popular social forces in Zimbabwe and the exaggerated (indeed 'fetishised') importance of university education. These combined processes turned an extremely small layer of the population into politically privileged (and deeply contradictory) agents of social change.

The development of a pre-independence intelligentsia has been discussed in a number of important studies (Mandaza, 1980; Zvodgo, 1994; Moore, 1991). All of these authors discuss the choices and dilemmas for a group of educated Zimbabweans, which emerged from the expansion of secondary education in the 1950s and 1960s. Mandaza saw that this group wanted to rid settler society of the racial fetters to their own self-advancement, and so the principal issue was not to 'raise questions about the mechanisms of exploitation. This would risk exposing their own class position in relation to the African masses' (Mandaza, 1980: 370). However, another choice – that of 'self-denial' – lay open to them: the intelligentsia was to immerse itself in the mass upheavals of the liberation struggle, and to perform a type of class suicide that was advocated by Amílcar Cabral (1969). 'Only when the petit-bourgeoisie [sic] itself decides to sacrifice its own class interests for those of ... a socialist Zimbabwe' (Cabral, 1969: 374).

It is important to identify the weaknesses in the nationalist struggle, and in the student movement that was an adjunct of it, as marginalising the role of the urban poor and working class. In this context students at the University of Rhodesia failed to develop a clear political strategy that linked the rural revolt to an urban struggle, in the townships, factories and at the university. Student activists were ultimately paralysed by this failure, and their uncritical engagement in the nationalist movement gave them no alternative but to decamp from the university into exile and the guerrilla struggle, and not to the black townships or factories. Cefkin (1975: 157-8) explains this paralysis brilliantly in his pioneering study of the student movement in 1960s Rhodesia:

Expectation that the African townships might explode into popular rebellion rested upon fond hopes for spontaneous action: students did not undertake an analysis of the conditions under which uprisings occur. In the absence of effective nationalist organisation in the townships which could utilize campus demonstrations to touch off, spread and direct revolutionary actions the student initiative remained an isolated event of little impact within the African community.

Cefkin (1975: 158) reflects on the uncritical acceptance in the student movement of political tactics that derived directly from the nationalist leadership. The failure of student activists, he argued, to focus on bread and butter issues that could have connected more immediately to the needs of black Rhodesians, hindered the potential to build a mass movement.

### **State-privileged activism: university, diplomas and politics**

Independence in 1980 saw, perhaps, the speediest reconciliation and negotiated settlement on the continent. Between 1980 and 1995 there were broadly three periods of student activism. The first, a pro-government period, lasted until the anti-corruption demonstrations in 1988, with student activists still glorifying the national liberation struggle. The second, an anti-government period, was



followed quickly by the ‘convergence of forces’ in the 1990s – between an impoverished student population and an economic crisis pulverising urban Zimbabwe – the period saw the onset of structural adjustment and the struggles against privatisation. This period was marked by the consolidation of the ZANU elite around IMF and structural adjustment programmes and the break up of revolutionary nationalism and the collapse of Stalinism. These periods are discussed in turn below.

In the 1980s, although changing quickly, the UZ still resembled the former University of Rhodesia. The Vice-Chancellor’s report in 1984 noted the total number of full-time undergraduate students had increased to 2,705. As a result of recent reforms in 1983, 25 black lecturers had been appointed compared with just two in the past (University of Zimbabwe Annual Report, 1984: 3). Overall, in the first five years following independence, student enrolment at the UZ rose from 1,481 to 4,741, reaching 7,699 in 1988 (Auret, 1990: 30).

The university – the only Zimbabwean university at the time – sat at the apex of the education system, as an institution that would forge the country’s elite. However the wider educational environment had a profound effect on the status and importance of university education. Education had played a central role in determining social status and class position, a situation that long predated independence. These points are well made by Pascal Bianchini (2004) who sees the ‘diploma fetishism’ of sub-Saharan Africa linked to what he terms the ‘primitive accumulation of education capital’. This was initially a colonial process that saw the ‘forced education’ of a layer of *évolués* divorced from the mass of the population to whom they were destined to become the ‘liberators’ (a bureaucratic elite running the colonial states). The ‘accumulation of education capital’ became a central element in the post-colonial hierarchy, and competition to obtain these diplomas a vital resource in accessing political and social power. Bianchini (2004: 39–41) argues that it is only through appreciating this ‘fetishism’ that the post-colonial crisis in higher education – that has seen the successive ‘*dévalorisation*’ of these diplomas – can be understood.

These views towards education had their roots in the colonial system. Education became fetishised in proportion to its scarcity, giving those who possessed it enormous status. It also had a peculiarly Zimbabwean twist: the incarceration of nationalist guerrillas saw the transformation of prisons into centres of learning and study, the ‘prison university’ that Robert Mugabe graduated from with numerous degrees (often with the help of the Rhodesia Christian Council). Those not serving prison sentences were often the recipients of foreign scholarships for African students from the breakaway colony (Tengende, 1994: 191–201).<sup>5</sup>

At independence student life could not have contrasted more with the rural and urban worlds students emerged from. Most students received full grants from the state, which were, until the mid-1990s, more than adequate to live on. In fact money allocated for grants increased by almost Z\$10,000,000 between

1993-1995 (Zvogbo, 1999: 164). In the 1980s, for example, these payouts did not only allow students to indulge in ‘beer’ and ‘showing off’ but as many former students note, to build houses for their parents in the rural areas. As Mutambara recalled: ‘materially we never had any issues, we had disagreements here and there about payouts but by and large there was enough food. Actually it was excessive, in the Halls of Residence. We used to throw away bread. We use to call it, “Christmas every day”. When you go to Varsity it is Christmas every day. In the rural areas, Christmas Day would be when you had rice and chicken. But at Varsity you would have rice and chicken everyday.’

Although there were frequent demonstrations about the late disbursement of ‘payouts’ (grants), they were regarded as generous (*The Herald*, 1995). As late as 1995 a mature student, Talkmore Saurombe, who had been teaching for years in a rural school, fulfilled a dream to go to university to upgrade his teaching diploma:

When I arrived at UZ ... it was a very exciting situation because life at campus was very different from life at work. So I was excited you know that I had come to university to have my ambition fulfilled. You know because if I actually go back to my diploma days at college, I remember putting up a photograph of my graduation day at college, and I had this script at the bottom inscribed ‘a pipe dream unfulfilled’. So, when I came to university it was actually the beginning of the fulfilment of that pipe dream.

Then we used to get a payout, which was a lot of money then ... to begin with it was seventeen thousand in the first year, then in my final year it went up to thirty two thousand and that was a lot of money... I know that it was something like five times more than the salary of a diploma holding teacher at that time (Talkmore Saurombe, Interview 5 June 2003).

This meant that students could sponsor other members of their family through school, send money home and socialise. In Hopewell Gumbo’s words they could ‘drink beer daily’ (Hopewell Gumbo, Interview, 28 July 2003). Many students chose to illustrate this by explaining that they had enough money to eat between meals, which is perhaps more an illustration of the crisis in the university sector today than a reflection of the affluence that existed in the past. Saurombe goes on to explain: ‘We used to have full-course meals, you know. One could afford to get three meals a day and then it was nice. It was conducive to study. Because you had *nothing to worry about but your books*’ [emphasis added]. One important element needs to be emphasised here, Saurombe describes the vital importance of diplomas (cf. Bianchini’s ‘accumulation of education capital’) and the status of the university, as the highest institution distributing these diplomas. Student activists in the first years of independence were ardent supporters of the new government.

At the time most students were subject to a system of 75 percent grant and 25 percent loan. In the case of Saurombe who was returning to education, it was 100 percent loans, repayable over five years when he returned to his teaching position (Information Office, *University of Zimbabwe* 6 March 2005). The

status of university students, privileged and cut off in many ways from the harsh realities of the rest of society, had profound effects on their activism. Activism combined a vanguardism – championing the cause of the poor and dispossessed – with an elitism that came from their privilege. It also meant, as student activists will tell you today, that students were not solely preoccupied with ‘bread and butter’.

It was not only among university students that the regime was supported. In high schools across the country school students revered liberation heroes who were now national politicians. Mutambara describes the importance of the period:

When I was in grade 7 in 1980, Lancaster House had gone on in London, I use to draw pictures of Nkomo and Mugabe, they were my heroes, I used to idolise these guys. That is 1980. I am 14. They are also talking the right language. I was sold to the socialist agenda ... ZANU was our party of revolution ... The commitment was socialism, and the one party state was the vehicle, the vanguard one-party state ... When I was in High School in 1986 – Gwisai included – we entered a national essay competition, it was called the ‘one party parliamentary system rather than the multi-party system is more conducive and relevant to Zimbabwe’s socialist development. Do you agree?’ And we all agreed that the one-party system would serve our goals of socialism better. So we had faith in ZANU.

Slowly we got disillusioned. It was a very painful break, from romanticising these guys as heroes. When the guerrillas came into my village around 1977 – up until now I have a very soft spot for people who picked up guns to bring about freedom that was an extreme sacrifice because some of them never came back. So when I saw them in the village in 1977 I was so impressed, ‘from today this country is not called Rhodesia it is called Zimbabwe’. That was so powerful that someone can declare in the bush that the country has changed its name. Now with hindsight we should have been more critical than just endorsing the one-party state.

### **Elites and vanguards**

One of the most notable actions among students in the 1980s was a demonstration and rioting outside the South African embassy after the death of the Mozambican president Samora Machel in 1986. However, by the late 1980s the blatant corruption of the government could no longer be ignored by the student activists (Saunders, 2000). The first anti-government demonstrations were only against certain members of the government and regarded by students as supportive of Mugabe’s own ‘anti-corruption drive’. An anti-corruption demonstration took place in September 1988 at the UZ. The demonstration, regarded as a milestone in the movement, marked an abrupt fissure in the relationship between students and the ruling party: a party that they had previously regarded as their own. The students called themselves ‘revolutionary intellectuals’ and protested in *support* of Mugabe’s drive to return the ruling party to the Leadership Code.<sup>6</sup> Students issued an ‘anti-corruption document’ detailing ten cases of corruption within government circles. Mugabe’s response, angrily dismissing the demonstrators who were protesting explicitly

in his defence, was a violent moment of truth for hundreds of student activists who had regarded the president as their hero. They demanded that ZANU-PF be transformed into a vanguard party before a one-party state was introduced (*The Herald*, 1988).<sup>7</sup>

Mutambara describes the sense of betrayal when the student movement realised that they had been following a false prophet. ‘It was a very painful break, from romanticising these guys as heroes ... we should have been more critical ... We should not have taken the socialism seriously’. The movement was inherently political. The leadership of the SRC at the university at the time was heavily influenced by socialist politics. As general secretary and then president of the SRC, Mutambara recalls how the leadership would regularly visit the East German, Russian and Chinese embassies:

I read *Das Kapital* in my first year. We used to go to the Soviet Embassy to get books, from the Cuba Embassy, and I had lots and lots of books and I read and read and read. So to me the first year at varsity was about politics ... We believed in ideas. Gwisai, Beti [Tendai Beti, currently General Secretary of the opposing faction of the MDC]. We were very thorough. We read everybody. Mao, Trotsky, Stalin, Lenin, the Black Panther Party in the states, Malcolm X, King, Mugabe. So we were thoroughly, thoroughly exposed and we had bold ideas ... We were battling in the game of ideas. We thrived on knowledge and ideas. I am not sure how many really realize this? We were not fighting Robert Mugabe from the right we were fighting him from the left. We said that Mugabe had done nothing for workers. Mugabe is a stooge of imperialism. We were opposed to Mugabe from the left and consequently we got no support from the white farmers, from the British or US. Because at that time the Brits, the US and white farmers were in bed with Mugabe (Interview, 10 July 2003).

The period was marked by ideological debates – centred on questions of Marxism. Another student from the 1990s argued that ‘We were all dialectical materialists’ (Brian Kagoro, Interview 23 June 2003). The campus was not limited to ideological debate; there was a thriving social scene. The theatre company Zambuko Izibuko was an important component (Mutape, 1999). It staged political drama often on regional themes, the struggle in Mozambique and the battle against the apartheid regime.<sup>8</sup> Mutambara describes the thriving cultural scene at the university:

another reason for our success was being able to combine a very good social programme with a good political programme. Which meant that people would come to our political events because they were satisfied. We had cultural galas, we had bands, we had alcohol, although I didn’t drink I would provide it (Interview 10 July 2003).

These processes informed and motivated their social and political mobilisations. But these ‘ideas’ were not ‘free-floating’ but connected inextricably to an inherited political and social context that promulgated a Stalinised form of Marxism.

By the late 1980s, students at the university were beginning to break with the government, opening up the second period of their activism: a process that saw their transformation from Mugabe’s ‘committed revolutionaries’ to an

irritating oppositional force. The success of this period of student activism was linked to the changing relationship with the regime. First, it was a turning point for the regime and its attempts to impose a one party state, an idea that was initially supported by students. Between 1988-1989 students saw the reality of the state that they defended. Mutambara identifies this element as the key reason why ‘people are so keen on our period ... we were the first people, we have been vindicated. We looked very radical and extremist but everyone is doing it now ... We were the first people to draw the guns and shoot from the hip’.

But Mutambara disguises the pain and loss felt by his generation of activists at the betrayal by the government. This sense of betrayal explains the explosiveness of their subsequent action. Hal Draper (1965: 162), in a detailed study of the Berkeley student revolt, describes how this clash of expectations explained the volatility of early student activism:

This was the explosiveness of uncalculated indignation, not the slow boil of planned revolt. In many cases it was born of the first flash of discovery that the mantle of authority cloaked an unsuspected nakedness. The experienced radical on campus did not consider this to be news ... There is first love; there is the first baptism of fire; there is the first time that you realise your father had lied; and there is the first discovery of the chasm between the rhetoric of Ideals and the cynicism of Power among the pillars of society.

It was in these circumstances, Draper argues, that the student movement became the most explosive. Paradoxically, it also explains one of the principal strengths of student action. Infused by a powerful indignation student activists were ‘able to win so much because they didn’t know it was “impossible”’. Older radicals and activists may feel oppressed by a careful analysis of the balance of forces, whereas student ‘naiveté and inexperience was as a shield and a buckler to them’ (Draper, 1965: 163). The student movement in Zimbabwe managed to lead the assault on the government, heralding a new and uneasy period of opposition and resistance in civil society (Bond and Manyanya, 2002).<sup>9</sup>

### **ESAP and the collapse of the Berlin Wall**

The trauma at the collapse of Stalinism was felt heavily across Zimbabwe’s political scene. University professors who had educated a generation in a version of Stalinised Marxism were left without their ideological moorings.<sup>10</sup> The collapse coincided with the introduction of ESAP in 1991, a wide-ranging programme of economic reform promoted by the World Bank and IMF. The sacred cow of university funding would be tackled through a policy of ‘cost recovery’. The real causalities in the first five years of ESAP reform were primary and secondary education. The introduction of a new fee structure after the 1991 Education Amendment Bill amended the 1987 Education Act, which had provided the legal basis of free education. Real expenditure on primary

education fell by 11.3 percent in 1992-3, and between 1991 and 1993 secondary school enrolment fell by ten percent (Zvobgo, 1999: 148-152). Between 1993 to 1994 and 1994 to 1995 funding for tertiary education increased by Z\$74,605,000, with expenditure on the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and the UZ representing approximately 80 percent of the total (Zvobgo, 1999: 164). The withdrawal of grants and subsidised, university-run facilities would occur later in the decade.

This third period, many claim, marked a decisive break with an earlier and more political period of activism. Mutambara is typical in arguing that the 'sparkling and shining' AGO era was a result of the pure politics promulgated by a clear-headed leadership: 'we stole the nation attention because we provided a platform to critique the government. So if you talk about the student movement between 1987-1991, we were not known for demonstrating for payouts, or burning down kitchens we were known for pushing that national agenda and challenging Mugabe'. In this formulation students who had formally fought corruption now sought only to increase their payouts, and a crude 'economism' came to dominate student politics.<sup>11</sup>

The reality is not so neat. The literature tends to romanticise earlier periods of activism, as do ex-activists. The 1980s is a case in point. That decade is seen by Mutambara as marking a period of untarnished political struggle at the university, 'our agenda was driven by the national agenda as opposed to sectional interest'. In fact, the 1987 SRC executive emerged as a reaction to a campus divided ethnically – reflecting the civil war being fought against 'dissidents' in Matabeleland – and riven by 'hooliganism', that affected all forms of political activism on campus.<sup>12</sup> However Mutambara does acknowledge the serious ethnic cleavages on the campus, though in this account he emerges as the one figure who managed to rise above ethnicity: 'The Masvingo people would have a candidate, Matabele people would do the same. If you were not backed by one of these guys you wouldn't win. Except me. I had the advantage of being a well known activist. I used the Secretary General position to campaign on what I had done. They had a candidate from Manicaland, but I clobbered him'.

The 'indiscipline' (Tengende, 1994: 236-45) at the UZ continued through the late 1980s and was reflected to a certain extent in the language used on campus. *Nose-brigades* was a derogatory term used to describe students from formerly whites-only Group A schools, who were regarded as speaking 'through their noses'. The linguistic retaliation was similarly class bound and the *Nose-brigades* responded by calling 'rural' students 'SRBs' (Strong Rural Background).<sup>13</sup>

These issues are central to the way that 'student mobilisation' is viewed in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Some of the literature on student movements tends to make use of a false dichotomy of the student movement. According to this categorisation the early post-independence years coincided with a period

of political mobilisation (and it is no accident that the period coincided also with the student activism of the authors who make these arguments), unaffected by the crude economism (and 'hooliganism') of students today (see Bathily et al., 1995). The example of Zimbabwe points to a much messier reality. As Tengende (1994) documents, the 1980s were replete with moments of 'indiscipline' and political action; similarly the late 1990s, purportedly representing a degenerative collapse into daily 'corporatism', abound with moments of 'high' politics.

Students continued to make explicitly political demands: the high point in this period perhaps was their involvement in the anti-police brutality demonstration in October 1995 and the anti-racist campaigns of the student union in the early 1990s. This also saw the emergence of the International Socialist Organisation (that had previously existed as a study circle at the university) onto the public arena. ISO would continue to play a vital role in the formation of student activists, attempting to fill the ideological vacuum that had been left by the collapse of the Stalinist left (Gwisai, 2002).

The rapid transformation for students in higher education came after 1995. This marked the sharp convergence of student and urban struggles in urban Zimbabwe. Students were no longer lone activists fighting on behalf of a voiceless civil society. They became intimately involved in a tumultuous period of strikes, demonstrations and political arguments about an alternative to the ruling party. This period, marking a new phase in student activism, saw the convergence of student activism with the wider movement for democratic and social change across Zimbabwe.

From 1995, under the impact of structural adjustment, Zimbabwe entered a period of deepening social crisis and prolonged revolt. A key study describes the period well:

the urban masses have waged massive struggles that have shaken to the roots not only the post-colonial authoritarian state, but also the vicious neo-liberal paradigm imposed by our rulers ... The struggles have gone further than most in challenging one of the continent's most entrenched and violent ruling classes (Gwisai 2002b: 50).

The anti-police brutality riot and demonstration in 1995 was a key moment in student mobilisation, bringing students and the 'popular forces' together on a large scale for the first time (the demonstration was organised by students at the university) (Seddon 2002). But it also marked a new period of activism that led eventually to the political transition in the late 1990s. The main national university, the UZ, had also changed during this period. There was an increase in student numbers from 2,240 in 1980 to 9,300 in 1990 and to 10,139 in 2001 (personal communication, Information Office, University of Zimbabwe, 6 March 2005).

The rarefied and privileged existence of university students was beginning to break down. Students were plunged into conditions at the university far removed from those previously experienced. Deepening privatisation, under a

new programme for structural adjustment, Zimbabwe Policy Reforms for Social and Economic Transformation (ZIMPREST) introduced in 1996, meant that students faced hardships a world away from the 'Christmas everyday' that Mutambara described. Government thinking about tertiary education was expressed by Mugabe during the opening of parliament in 1997, when he introduced the second phase of the Economic Reform Programme (ZIMPREST): 'It seeks to stabilise the macro-economic environment ... enhance competition, promote equity in the distribution of income and wealth and bring about further reform of the Civil Service, parastatals and the financial sector' (Parliamentary Debates, 1997: 2). The country's institutions of higher education would never be the same again.

Battles were now fought at the university over what was commonly known as 'ESAP 2', the attempts to introduce 50 percent grants and 50 percent loans in 1997, and privatisation of catering and accommodation services at the university in 1998. The government moved to scrap grants, Mugabe explaining in 1997: 'The funding of higher education programmes will continue to take cognisance of equitable distribution of limited resources. It is now Government policy that students are expected to contribute a proportion towards their education through payment of fees, although care will be taken not to prejudice students from poor families' (Parliamentary Debates, 1997: 12-13). These 'cost-recovery' measures led to the government requiring students, in the words of Rungano Zvobgo (1999: 164), to 'provide 50 percent of their university education costs'. Kagoro describes the convergence of student hardship during this period with wider social disaffection and rebellion:

the establishment came up with a more drastic ESAP 2. So ... you moved from '95, '96, '97 the rapidity with which the university privatised essentially meant that you no longer had student discontent, you had an outright student rebellion on your hands. You had the most violent demonstrations during the '96, '97, '98 period and so curiously you then had a third thing that happened ... the prices for almost everything were liberalised: the fuel price, everything just shot up. The largest numbers of redundancies were created there, so you now had students supporting their parents on their student stipends which were not enough, because their parents had been laid off work. So in a sense as poverty increases you have a reconvergence of these forces. And the critique started off really being around issues of socio-economic justice. Right to a living wage you know, the students started couching their demands around the right to livelihood (Interview, 23 June 2003).

The effects of ESAP 1 and 2 were profound on government thinking, and specifically the way they intended to offset student resistance. University students were recast to fit the new policy paradigm as 'spoilt and privileged' and needing to show respect for their education (Kagoro, Interview 23 June 2003). As early as 1992 the government considered reviving an earlier project of national service. It was cast explicitly within the new framework, as Brigadier Mutambara, charged with assessing the feasibility of such a scheme, explained:



the government pays most of the expenses of students going onto universities and other forms of advanced training. This practice may have to be discontinued however because of the economic situation. To gain these education benefits in the future, it may be necessary to do a period of National Service. Students may have to work on community programs during their holidays and when they obtain their degrees, may spend a period as National Service cadre where they trained recruits (Mutambara 1992).

Although the regime returned to the scheme under very different circumstances in 2001, it was the political dispensation instigated by ESAP that first resuscitated the idea of national service.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that these changes occurred at the same time as an expansion of tertiary education, so by 2000 several new universities had opened, including the Great Zimbabwe University in Masvingo, Gweru University College and Africa University near Mutare, in eastern Zimbabwe. There was also a policy of devolving certain degree programmes to teacher and technical colleges (Zvobgo 1999: 157-164).

## Conclusion

Arthur Mutambara is today both celebrated and reviled by Zimbabweans; accused of fabricating his CV or hijacking an opposition movement that he played no part in forming. But this paper has argued that it is perhaps more fruitful to examine his actual legacy and the student movement that he led. Mutambara represents the student movement in Zimbabwe in its most boastful and precocious period. There can be no better illustration of this arrogance than the description Mutambara gives of an impromptu meeting he had with Mugabe in 1990:

There was a vicious encounter with Robert Mugabe himself. It was graduation ceremony in 1990, I was still president. He was officiating at the graduation ceremony. The tradition then was that the procession was led by the SRC president and then at the back was the national president. We go into the hall and do the ceremony and then come out to what was called College Green, where people have drinks and talk. The Vice-President came with Mugabe to introduce him to me: 'So SRC president this is Robert Mugabe'.

Mugabe wanted to do 'small talk', he said something like: 'Oh how many graduates were there this year? When I graduated in the 1951 there were nine graduates in the country...'

Because I knew that I was only going to have one second with him I said, 'No. I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about national issues. We are completely against the one party state by any means necessary'.

Mugabe said – I have a picture of that – 'Oh well if you take such strong views, we are going to very dismissive'.

I replied: 'We have already dismissed your views.'

The Vice President intervened. Mugabe is a very arrogant and proud man. He was livid. We were quickly encircled by his sycophants. But there was nothing they could do because I was already launching into him, he had initiated the conversation and I took the conversation where I wanted it to go. His circle remained after he had gone, saying 'How can you speak like this to the president?'

I replied: 'He is just a human being who happens to be president of this country and he is not above reproach'.

This was our radical way then.

From revering Mugabe as the pre-eminent liberation hero and ZANU-PF as the 'party of revolution', students at UZ turned bitterly on them. Perhaps 1988 – the year of dramatic reawakening and betrayal – for the student movement marked the birth of the struggle for democracy in Zimbabwe. This struggle would reach its apogee with the formation of the MDC eleven years later. Students again played a decisive role in the formation of this organisation.

The role that students continued to play in Zimbabwe, long after the 'AGO years' illustrates another important point in the trajectory of the student movement. Mutambara's years were not entirely unique in their 'sparkling' contribution to the democratic struggle in the country. Student life at the university in the 1980s was peppered with its own dose of 'hooliganism' that even prompted Mutambara to give up alcohol:

I haven't had a drink since the 1 January 1988. In the first year I drank. I tried it. But come the 1 January I have not touched a molecule of alcohol ... I am just trying to show that alcohol was not our game. We were very focused. One of the reasons that I stopped drinking is that the CIO would trap you, they would go to a club and if you were drunk, you are likely to react. Then in the paper, 'SRC president in drunken fight'. If you are sober you are in control. One of the reasons was to make sure that there was never a reason that I wasn't in control. We were leaders. We were able to tell the hooligans, that this is not what we are going to do. They respected us.

The 'hooligans' respected the leadership, but there *were* 'hooligans'. Political life on the campus was riven with ethnic politics and students indulged in anti-social behaviour. The neat categorisation of student politics by an older generation of student leaders into a 'golden age' followed by crude economism, where students struggle only over the disbursement of 'payouts', does not correspond to the historical record.

There is, however, an ideological side to Mutambara's argument that does stand up. Mutambara describes the frenzy over ideas: 'we read. We believed in ideas ... We were very thorough. We read everybody ... We were battling in the game ... of ideas. We thrived on knowledge and ideas'. But there was a specific historical juncture to this. The celebrated ideological vanguardism that Mutambara describes of the 1980s was a consequence of the collision of forces that are not present today. This does not preclude the development of these politics today, nor explain the important role students continued to play as privileged political actors in the historical movement in the late 1990s, even without old ideologies (typically various forms of Stalinism).

This paper has argued that the 'agency' of Zimbabwe university students was forged in the liberation war that was in part run and organised by university students, who saw themselves uniquely placed to bring liberation, a process that saw, according to Andre Astrow (1983: 20-26), the marginalisation of

urban trade union struggle by a petit bourgeois leadership. For much of the 1980s students continued to support the new regime, breaking with it in 1988 and entering a period of violent opposition. The third period of student activism from the early 1990s, marked the ‘convergence of forces’, as conditions at the university and in wider society were further eroded and students mobilised in a politicised environment. They were no longer a ‘rarefied elite’ above society, but increasingly a proletarianised opposition staring at society from a similar perspective as the urban working class. Later in the decade students continued to play – in circumstances completely different to the ‘AGO’ era – a politically privileged role in the formation of the MDC and the frustrated transition. This was one political feast where Mutambara, to his enduring disadvantage, played no part.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.zimonline.co.za/lettersdetail.asp?ID=11775>.
2. See <http://zimdaily.com/news2/article.php/20060318131429256>.
3. Quoted from [http://zimpundit.blogspot.com/2006/02/is-mutambara-answer\\_22.html](http://zimpundit.blogspot.com/2006/02/is-mutambara-answer_22.html).
4. The list is indeed long: Zororo Willard Duri (former leading ZANU member), Sobusa Gula-Ndebele (a prominent lawyer), Christopher Mutsvangwa (former director general of ZBC), and John Majowe (former ambassador to Mozambique), Stan Mudenge (Minster Foreign Affairs), Witness Mangwende (senior ZANU member and government Minster), and Kempton Makamure (university lecturer): a generation that gave up their studies at the university and became the ideological and military leadership of the war.
5. It is Bianchini’s ‘diploma fetishism’ that helps explain the obsessive interest in Zimbabwe in Mutambara’s CV and academic qualifications. A huge number of articles, letters and blogs have discussed the intellectual achievements listed on his CV, and the number of his ‘diplomas’.
6. A document that emerged after independence committing ZANU-PF to a strict anti-corruption code.
7. The merits of a one-party state were discussed openly (see for example, Mandaza and Sachikonye 1991). But in the case of the support for the ‘one party state’ by student radicals at the university, it was connected not to a contemporary notion of ‘dictatorship’, but the party as the embodiment of progressive ideas that would bring about political transformation. In this respect Kriger (2005) is wrong to express astonishment at the fashionable ideas of one-party state in the 1980s.
8. See Benson Mutape’s (1999) extraordinary three volume collection of life at the university. The first volume deals with the first ten years at the University of Zimbabwe and focuses on the vibrant social and cultural life at the university. Mutape has been an eyewitness at the university for more than 20 years, first as a student and then librarian. Unfortunately the collection has not been catalogued at

the library, and is unpublished. The collection resembles an elaborate and detailed 'scrap-book' of life at UZ.

9. The ZCTU supported the student action, and the Secretary General Morgan Tsvangirai was imprisoned for issuing a statement condemning the arrest of the Student Union leadership in October 1989 (see Saunders 2000: 59-63).
10. Three of the most important Marxists at the University of Zimbabwe were Shadreck Gutto, Kempton Makamure (both in the Law Faculty) and Robert McLaren (Department of Drama, and the initiator of Zambuko Izibuko).
11. The 'many' referred to are principally an older generation of activists who attempt to valorise their period of activism with the 'evident' degeneration of the student movement today (personal communications with Gwisai and Mutumbara, 2003).
12. A number of students supported the University Amendment Act in 1990 in reaction to the 'indiscipline' on campus (students interviews in *The Herald*, 1991), even though it was widely condemned by the student movement.
13. Neither of these terms are used on the campus today.
14. ZANU Youth Brigades are also not a contemporary phenomenon in Zimbabwe. On the contrary, they were used continually in the 1980s, particularly as the student body broke with the government in the latter part of the decades. The regime increasingly used loyal party 'youths' organised in ZANU structures to physically defend the ruling party. At the ZCTU May Day celebrations in 1990 students who had turned up with banners critical of the government were beaten and chased out of Rufaro stadium by ZANU youths (SRC, University of Zimbabwe 2 May 1990).

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