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Introduction: Student Activism, Structural Adjustment and the Democratic Transition in Africa

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Abstract

University students in the period following independence were a transitory social group, who held well-founded expectations of rewarding and high-status employment after graduation. In the 1970s many of these assurances began to erode as countries that had attempted to implement state-led development faced international recession and internal corruption and decay. State funding of higher education by the late 1970s was being targeted for restructuring by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Student activism was affected: while students clung onto a self-conscious elitism, the reality of student poverty and the financial crises of African universities transformed their activism. As well as seeing their status as a privileged group collapse, there was an unprecedented ‘convergence of forces’ between students and the popular classes. This introduction surveys the role of students, the nature of their protest and their relationship with civil society in the processes that brought about a wave of multi-party elections and democratic struggles in Africa. The article critically intervenes in some of the most important debates on the role of student activism on the continent and introduces the contributions in this special issue devoted to student activism.

Résumé

Les étudiants formaient, dans la période qui a suivi l’indépendance, un groupe social transitoire porteur d’attentes tout à fait fondées de rétribution et de statut social élevé après l’obtention du diplôme. Les années 1970 ont commencé à réduire nombre de ces assurances, alors que les pays qui avaient tenté de mettre en place un développement dirigé par l’Etat se trouvaient confrontés à la récession internationale, à la corruption intérieure et à la décomposition. Le financement

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par l'Etat de l'enseignement supérieur était, dès la fin des années 1970, la cible des restructurations imposées par la Banque mondiale et le Fond monétaire internationale (FMI). L'activisme étudiant devait en subir les effets : en même temps que les étudiants se raccrochaient à un élitisme auto-satisfait, la réalité de la pauvreté étudiante et les crises financières des universités africaines transformèrent leur activisme. En plus de l'effondrement de leur statut de groupe privilégié, il y avait une 'convergence de forces' sans précédent entre les étudiants et les classes populaires. Cette introduction examine le rôle des étudiants, la nature de leur protestation et leur relation avec la société civile dans le processus qui amena une vague d'élections multipartismes et de luttes pour la démocratie en Afrique. L'article intervient de façon critique dans certains des débats les plus importants sur le rôle de l'activisme étudiant sur le continent et introduit les contributions à cette édition spéciale consacrée à l'activisme étudiant.

Following independence in Africa, university students were part of a privileged and transitory social group, waiting to be allotted graduate employment in an expanding civil service and across the state sector. Some describe a social pact between students and the State, seen as an implicit guarantee that had ensured employment in the formal economy for university graduates (Foucher 2002). The period corresponded to a brief moment of State-led development across much of the continent, with university students overwhelmingly living comfortably on government grants and scholarships.

University students enjoyed generous grants, lived comfortably in subsidised accommodation and ate like kings. As one student remembered about the 'payout' (grant) in the 1980s at the University of Zimbabwe:

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 (Arthur Mutambara, interview, 10 July 2003).

The university was a rarefied space of material privilege and political debate. In Zimbabwe during the 1980s these payouts allowed students to build houses for their parents in the rural areas. This picture of campus comfort was repeated across much of the continent.

But in a very brief period they became oppositional, regarded in the commentary of the day as 'rival politicians rather than students' (Hanna 1975:13). Student militants frequently fuelled the early protest movements that questioned the legitimacy of the new states. Many commentators regarded them as a demo-

cratic vanguard, powered by left-wing ideology (see for example, Cockburn and Blackburn 1969; Weaver and Weaver 1969; Crick and Robson 1970; Lipset and Schaflunder 1971).

By the mid-1970s many of these assurances were eroded as countries that had attempted to implement state-led development faced international recession and internal corruption and decay. Moreover, as Nyamnjoh (2007) notes, Africa was attempting to embrace a model of liberal democracy that was ill-suited to the realities of the continent. He uses the concept 'Barbie democracy' to explain how an unrealistic model of democracy is being upheld as the ideal to which every country should strive, regardless of its own internal specificities. In the same way that an obese person buys into the idea that slimness is a measure of success, Africa has tried to force its bulky shape into a streamlined version of liberal democracy, with certain of its 'excesses' having to be sloughed off. Higher Education was but one of the areas that was forced to go on a starvation diet. State funding of higher education by the late 1970s was being targeted for restructuring. Student activism was affected: while students clung onto a self-conscious elitism, the reality of student poverty and the financial crises of African universities transformed their activism (Bathily et al. 1995). These processes, however, were inherently contradictory. As well as seeing their status as a privileged group collapse, there was an unprecedented 'convergence of forces' (Kagoro, interview, 23 June 2003) between students and the popular classes (Seddon 2002). The ivory tower had been turned inside out by the austerity imposed by structural adjustment and national governments. This convergence was expressed in the waves of resistance from the mid-1970s and later the 'democratic transitions' that swept the continent from the late 1980s and 1990s.

This introduction surveys the role of students, the nature of their protest and their relationship with civil society in the processes that brought about a wave of multi-party elections and democratic struggles in sub-Saharan Africa. The discussion focuses specifically on student activism and protest, although it is acknowledged that this activism brings into play many other factors. The context in which students become political actors in contemporary Africa is tied to the transformation of higher education in Africa, often under the auspices of the IMF and World Bank-led reform. The introduction asks a number of related questions: Have university students become a marginalised social group? If their status as a pampered post-colonial elite has collapsed, has there been a convergence of the student and the urban population? And how has this impacted on their activism?

It is vital to stress that the topic of university students and the struggle for democracy in Africa is a large field, and one that warrants further research. We hope that this collection will add to our understanding of student activism on the

continent and contribute to an important existing body of research. This research is best represented by the superb volume on students and higher education in Africa in the *African Studies Review* (Nyamnjoh and Jua 2002). The first sections of the introduction explore the changing nature of higher education in the political economy of Africa, focusing on the changed circumstances that student activists have been forced to negotiate in the last twenty-five years. The final sections discuss the involvement of students in the 'convergence of forces' and the popular protests that were typical of the democratic transitions and some of the ways this activism has been characterised in the recent research.

Universities in crisis

There is considerable controversy over the number of university students in Africa. According to one study of a continental population of about 500 million, fewer than 500,000 are enrolled as students in higher education (Caffentzis 2000:9). This figure is, however, unreliable. Mama (2005:98) states that, 'Gross enrolment in African universities increased dramatically ... to over 1.75 million in 1995 and is still growing fast in most places.' Caffentzis states that in 1986 the enrolment rates for higher education were about 2 per cent of the pertinent age group; this had reached 3 per cent by 1995 (World Bank 2000:107). This means that Africa has among the lowest enrolment rates in the world, much less than Latin America's 12 per cent, and 7 per cent for the developing world as a whole. However, there are no reliable figures for Africa, and Mama's enrolment numbers are contested by Altbach and Teferra (2003). This is largely due to the fact that under the impact of World Bank and IMF reforms in the 1980s cash-strapped universities stopped producing their own statistics. But at the same time these organisations demanded figures on student enrolment in order to assess the progress of reforms. Often institutions were left to 'create' numbers that had previously been collated by the university administration (Lebeau, personal communication, 14 May 2005).

Universities have been analysed as a site of contestation where the democratisation process took place, incorporating a range of political forces and agency (Akam and Ducasse 2002). Much of the commentary, however, finds unanimity in the description of the university as a neglected institution, a crumbling edifice housing impoverished students and lecturers. The physical decay of higher education is a feature common in many African universities. In 2002 Femi Aborisade, Nigerian academic and trade unionist, identified a number of problems at institutions of higher education in Nigeria typical in many parts of the continent:

First, infrastructural facilities are inadequate, yet student numbers increase annually. Second, higher education is grossly understaffed. Third, libraries are inadequate and books are outdated. Moreover, many students are too poor to buy their own books. Fourth, remuneration is sometimes delayed and not always paid in full, leading some lecturers to acquire bits of money through other means, such as charging students for photocopied lecture notes. Fifth, the supply of basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation is erratic. Upon occasion, lecturers and students have had to relieve themselves in nearby bushes. Finally, many of the problems experienced by institutions of higher education can be attributed to under-funding (Interview, 24 September 2002).

In Malawi, Kerr and Mapanje (2002:90) note that the physical collapse of the University of Malawi, the non-payment of staff and declining facilities for students have helped to create an 'atmosphere of marginalisation' that has often led 'students to anti-social behaviour'. Nkongolo (2000:96-98) describes a similar 'set of frustrations' and the humiliation experienced by students at the University of Lubumbashi in the early 1990s:

Us, students and tomorrow's elite of Zaire, the youth of the *Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution* (JMPR) were compelled to go to the toilet in the bush, like animals. We went there every day, in the hot and rainy season. The night like the day ... even the 'largest library in central Africa' was not saved, and was used as a WC ... The outside world must know the extent that Mobutu had humiliated us.

While it is important not to generalise uncritically from these observations, there is a remarkable symmetry in the decay of African universities over the last twenty five years: countries thousands of miles apart experienced the same 'erosion' of higher education. Piet Konings (2002:181) writes about the crisis of the University of Yaounde in Cameroon in the 1990s:

[F]irst and foremost, there was growing dissatisfaction with the deepening crisis within the university and the lack of employment prospects for university graduates. Mockingly, students referred to their university as 'the bachelors' cemetery'.

Konings goes on to describe how student numbers have swelled from 10,000 in 1982 to more than 42,000 ten years later, even though the university infrastructure was only built to cope with a maximum of 7,000 students. Consequently,

lecture rooms, libraries, laboratories, and office space for lecturers were inadequate and lacked necessary equipment. The university hostel could offer accommodation to a limited number of students, often on the basis of patronage or ethnic criteria, and the vast majority of students were compelled to look for accommodation themselves (Konings 2002:181).

Even at Makerere University, regarded as a model for the rest of Africa, half of the students questioned in a survey failed to attend lectures because there were not enough seats (Musisi and Muwanga 2003:43). Alternative, private accommodation was invariably in overpriced 'mini-cities' surrounding the university.

The same pattern of decay affected Kenya's university system. Maurice Amutabi (2002) argues that the resulting impoverishment of student life has radically altered their position in Kenyan society. They are now, he maintains, 'bedfellows' of the population as a whole. They share the same economic crisis and live the same poverty. Students, though, still have a role as 'societal watchdogs' and only their vigilance will ensure that the gains of multi-partyism and democratisation are maintained.

The conditions of higher education in Africa seen from the perspective of the university's physical infrastructure and the pauperisation of staff and students declined steeply in the 1980s. The effects of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) that have greatly exacerbated the withdrawal of state funding for universities, teaching staff and students (Konings 2002; Alidou *et al.* 2000). These policies deprioritised higher education in Africa, compelling national governments to slash state support for university budgets and insisting on the introduction of tuition fees and 'levies' on students.

Reform of higher education in Africa

From the early 1980s to the early 1990s the World Bank produced a number of important studies stressing the importance of higher education reform. These studies advocated the dramatic reduction of higher education expenditure in Africa. The most important of these reports, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, which became known as the Berg Report, was produced in 1981. It focused on the general priorities for African development and prescribed policy reforms to deregulate national states. These reforms included the wholesale reconfiguration of university education in Africa. The report, which has become the subject of considerable and mostly hostile discussion (Sandbrook 1993; Diouf and Mamdani 1994), determined the approach of donor agencies to education in Africa. The problem was simple; too much money was being spent on education (World Bank 1981:81-82).

The report recommended fundamental reforms that centred on 'cost-analysis', which pitted the economic returns of primary education against those of

the tertiary sector. The report explained the rationale behind the calculation: 'Given Africa's extreme shortage of fiscal resources and the many claims on revenue, all educational strategies must have a key objective of greater efficiency in resource use' (World Bank 1981:82).

The report provided the blueprint for higher education reform in the 1980s. Even so the reforms did not go far enough for some. At the 1986 Conference of African Vice-Chancellors in Harare, the World Bank questioned the very existence of universities in Africa (Imam and Mama 1994:73). Another conference two years later described the bleak state of higher education, ravaged by structural adjustment. The conference – *Human Dimensions of Africa's Economic Recovery and Development* – noted that far from structural adjustment increasing the rate of primary school enrolment, the opposite was the case as all sectors of education had suffered. After five years of SAPs, social spending in sub-Saharan African countries had declined by 26 percent (between the years 1980 to 1986). Governments already facing financial crisis were under pressure to cut subsidies to secondary and tertiary level students (Caffentzis 2000).

Still the World Bank continued to argue that, unlike higher education, the primary sector had a higher return on investment, 28 per cent against 13 per cent for tertiary education. As Caffentzis (2000:5) explains, 'In other words university graduates received about two and half times more income over outlay than the government; and they received from the government thirty times more than what primary students received.' Reports pointed out that while the 'white collar sector' comprised 6 per cent of the population they received in state revenue more than 27 per cent of the education budget (Caffentzis 2000:5). The World Bank maintained that the thrust of their policies was to ensure a more egalitarian allocation of funding. By reallocating funds from 'urban elites' an educational egalitarianism could be achieved.¹

Makerere University is an example of higher education in Africa celebrated by the World Bank. According to research (Musisi and Nansozzi 2003), the university managed to extricate itself from a crisis in the early 1990s, returning to its former pre-eminence as one of the foremost universities in East Africa. The Bank highlights how the university has managed to increase enrolment rates and the number of students paying fees: almost 70 per cent of the student population was contributing towards their fees by the end of the 1990s. Where previously the university was funded completely by the national government, today 30 per cent of revenue is raised 'internally' (World Bank 2000:54-5). The World Bank emphasises the case of Makerere to stress the importance of 'releasing' universities from state funding and control in Africa: 'The Makerere accomplishment has lessons for other universities in Africa that face similar resource constraints. It shows that expansion – and the maintenance of quality – can be achieved simultaneously in a

context of reduced state funding. It puts to rest the notion that the state must be the sole provider of higher education in Africa' (2000:55).

Given the importance placed in the experience at Makerere University, it is worth considering the reform of the institution. Makerere is not the success suggested by the WB, where private funding has supplanted public money. In a wide-ranging study, Mamdani (2007) explains that the state exchequer paid the university 3 million shillings per government-funded student (US\$1,785), while for the same year, 2003-4, private sponsors only provided 1.2 million shillings per student (US\$714), less than half. Private sponsorship is not the cash-cow celebrated by market reform (Mamdani 2007:viii). Mamdani also shows that the effect of the penetration of the market has forced down the quality of educational standards, so 'market forces unleashed sharp competition between Faculties, Institutes and Departments ... the forces of self-interest amplified by commercialisation eroded the institutional integrity of the university from within' (2007:x).

Nevertheless a series of academic studies emphasises the importance of WB reform of higher education in Africa, claiming that the only future is in emulating the commercialisation of several key African universities.² As the preface to the series describes:

[Africa's] universities – once the shining lights of intellectual excitement and promise – suffered from enormous decline in the government resources for education. In the last half of the last decade however this began to change in a number of countries ... Our interest was captured by the renewal and resurgence that we saw in several African nations and at their universities brought about by stabilisation, democratisation, decentralisation and economic liberalisation (Musisi and Muwanga 2003).

What is remarkable about this quotation is the absence of concern for the role of external factors in the sub-continent's decline. Indeed, the case studies that make up the series are highly contradictory.³

The reality of life for students and lecturers in much of the continent could not contrast more with the image of higher education as 'spoilt' and 'over bloated' that the WB presents. Higher education in Africa does not thrive, but in many places faces a battle for survival. If the objective is to 'streamline' higher education then the question that demands answering is: where from? Africa has the lowest enrolment rates in higher education of any region in the world; further restrictions would limit access to higher education to an almost imperceptible minority of privileged and 'elite' students.⁴

This has led Caffentzis (2002:9) to comment that 'any policy that lowers enrolment rates – hovering now near zero – can be seen as a policy of academic

exterminism.' There is also a further dimension to the debate. The WB is correct to maintain that there is 'excessive demand' for higher education in Africa. The university system is seen by youth as a crucial entry point to a world of greater opportunity and a way to escape poverty. The effect of the crisis that has gripped many African economies is to leave 'youth' without the prospect of work. Politicised youth, or the 'youth factor' (Richards 1996:2002), has fuelled conflict in Africa; where youth have been recruited to movements of social breakdown in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Zimbabwe. 'Youth' in this context has not, as Richards argued, supplanted 'ethnicity', but has often turned secessionist and political conflicts in Africa into 'ethnic-youth' movements. The deprioritisation of higher education in the Third World has been an important contributing factor to these conflicts (Krueger and Maleckova 2002).

Some commentators argue that there has been a 'major shift' in Bank thinking on the role of higher education. Moja (2004:23) cites a report from 2002 by Richard Hopper for the WB, which argues that higher education, contrary to almost two decades of Bank thinking, does have an important role to play in development. This apparent shift in Bank thinking can, as Pithouse (2006:xvi-xvii) explains, 'best be understood as part of a broader shift by the Bank towards a rhetorical commitment to participation and empowerment', to seek more effective methods of structural adjustment implementation. There are few signs that the Bank or IMF are willing to help reverse the devastation wrought by more than twenty five years of reforms that they helped orchestrated across the continent.

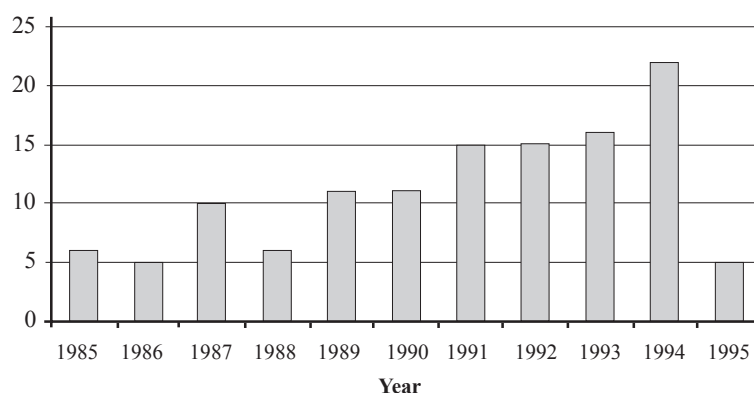
Students and the democratic transition

What has been the impact of this unprecedented period of adjustment in higher education on the incidents and nature of student activism in Africa? In his celebrated popular history of student resistance, Boren (2001:240) notes that the last decade of the millennium saw students in Africa play a leading role in the democratic transition: 'In the wake of Eastern European revolutions against Communism, and the rampant local economic difficulties, many African students increased pro-democracy efforts and campaigned for the establishment of multiple-party political systems.' Commentators celebrated the student revolts across Africa: 'political liberalisation, starting at the end of the 1980s unleashed an unprecedented wave of student rebellion on university campuses in West and Central Africa' (Konings 2002:180). News reports of the day were replete with analysis of the democratic struggles in Africa, often questioning the role of students.⁵ Still, there is a recognised lack of serious research on the role of students in democratic transition (Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot 1995; Mills 2004:671).

Students were part of the broad and popular alliances that developed between opposition groups during, and immediately after, the processes of democratic change (see Figure 1). Some commentators state that the origins of these movements are found in the first wave of ‘bread riots’ in Egypt in 1977 and early anti-SAP revolts (Walton and Seddon 1994; Marfleet 2000; Alexander and Renton 2002). These are the arguments explicitly made by Caffentzis, Federici and Alidou in this collection.

The shared nature of the economic crisis gripping Africa brought these movements together (Saul 2001). This period also saw complex political transformation. The dismantling of the regimes in Eastern Europe and Russia undermined both the states in Africa politically connected and funded by the USSR, and the political confidence of militants and intellectuals whose ideological moorings had been tied to Stalinism. While these events might have broken the confidence of an older generation of activists, they gave new life to student politics that many argued had collapsed irredeemably into ‘corporatism’ and ‘factionalism’.

Figure 1: Number of incidents of student activism per year, 1985–95



Source: Adapted from Federici (2000:112).

In 1989, the movement started in the West African state of Benin when students demonstrated against the government in January, demanding overdue grants and a guarantee of public sector employment after graduation. The government, crippled by financial scandals, capital flight and falling tax revenue, thought it could respond as it had always done, by suppressing the protest. But the movement grew during the year to incorporate trade unions and the urban poor. Half

way through the year in the hope of placating the demonstrators President Mathieu Kérékou invited a human rights campaigner into his government. In a pattern followed by other countries he set up a commission that would eventually create a 'national reconciliation conference' that included the opposition movement, trade unions, students and religious associations (*Jeune Afrique* 1991).

Students at the University of Kinshasa in Zaire were the first to initiate the protests that almost unseated Mobutu, and led to a largely urban protest movement and transition that lasted into the middle of the 1990s (Martins 2002; Renton et al. 2006). They demonstrated on 5 May 1990 asserting that the reforms announced by the dictator ten days previously were 'irrevocable'. The demonstration ended violently, after security forces attacked it. The students immediately issued an appeal for other universities and colleges across the country to rise up in solidarity, '[D]o not cross your arms. Follow our example. The dictatorship is finished. We cannot go back. Take on the State. Demonstrate! March!' (Nkongolo 2000:182).

The call to arms was answered. Students at the University of Lubumbashi demonstrated daily in the city and at the university from 9 May. On 11 May the student uprising in Katanga (the southern most region of Zaire) was brought to a swift and violent end. A 'squadron of death' was sent to the university by the president. Several accounts suggest that dozens of students who had led the strikes and demonstrations were killed, and their bodies disappeared. Their parents were unable to complain. Without wider protests the students could be picked off, killed and isolated. For thousands the massacre in Lubumbashi exposed the reality of Mobutu's 'reforms'. There was strong condemnation of the massacre from humanitarian organisations, and the Belgian government announced the immediate suspension of official bilateral assistance to Zaire. After some procrastination and strenuous denial of the reports, Mobutu authorised an official parliamentary enquiry, as a result of which a provincial governor and other senior local officials were arrested and charged with having organised the killing of one student and the injury of 13 others. Despite a news blackout, it emerged that the massacre had sparked serious clashes between students and government forces in other towns, including Kisangani, Bukavu and Mbanza-Ngungu. The massacre was in many ways pivotal to the early stages of the transition in Zaire, and it is still the subject of controversy and debate (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002:155-156; Munikengi and Sangol 2004:99).

Students were crucial to spearheading resistance in Zimbabwe. In 1989 a student leaflet denounced the Investment Code that further facilitated foreign investment in Zimbabwe, viewing it 'as a further entrenchment of capitalism in Zimbabwe ... an acquiescence to the IMF and World Bank sponsored programmes

... and incompatible with the doctrine of socialism' (quoted in Tengenende 1996:389-92). Many students attended the May Day rallies in Harare, whilst the Students Union condemned the suppression of a strike by doctors: 'The use of force which was exercised on Doctors while they were airing their clear, legitimate grievances is really an authoritarian and neo-fascist tendency and hence it has to be condemned.' When the university was closed on 4 October 1989 following the arrest of Students Union leaders for organising a celebration of the previous year's Anti-Corruption Demonstration, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) General Secretary, Morgan Tsvangirai, denounced the closure in strong terms and was detained for over four weeks (Gwisai 2002b). At the 1991 May Day celebrations, the ZCTU organised the event under the theme 'Liberalisation or Liberation'. Workers paraded with banners denouncing SAP: 'Employers liberated, workers sacrificed'; 'Are we going to make 1991 the Year of the World Bank Storm?'; 'The Year of the People's Misery'. Meanwhile the Ministry of Labour distributed its own leaflets telling workers to 'Suffer Now and Benefit later' (quoted in Tengenende 1996:427). The criticism of the ZCTU mirrored that of the University of Zimbabwe Students Union (Gwisai 2002b).

In Mali it was not university students but young unemployed college graduates who initiated the first protests on the 15 October 1990 against the one-party state. The mobilisation was small, roughly 15 young men marched through the centre of the capital with banners that declared 'Down with the UDPM' [*Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien*]. The demonstrators were attacked and arrested by the police. As Brenner (2001:242) contends, 'their initiative immediately preceded, and may well have helped to precipitate, the emergence into public of the clandestine opposition movement which had been actively organising and plotting for some years against the regime of Moussa Traoré' (see also Buijtenhuijs and Thirot 1995).

The collapse into sectarian factionalism affected the student body when the transition was frustrated or after it had been achieved. The examples of Mali and Cameroon are illustrative of these processes. Mali experienced a period of 'democratic transition' at the same time as other countries in the region. There had been major demonstrations against the regime of Moussa Traoré in January 1990, when thousands were involved in street protests demanding political reform and an end to Traoré's 22-year rule. The government was finally brought down in April 1991. The central role of students inside the *Association des Elèves et Etudiants du Mali* (AEEM) in the democratic transition is widely recognised (Brenner 2001; Smith 1997).⁶ A 'memorandum' was issued listing student demands in return for an immediate end to strikes. It included a 50 per cent rise in the scholarship, followed by a further 25 per cent in six months, the

expansion of the scholarship to include secondary school students and physical improvements to the university and schools. While there was a widely recognised appreciation of the justness of these demands there was a similar understanding by the government that they could not hope to meet them (Smith 1997). Within a short space of time the new government of Alpha Oumar Konaré confronted the wrath of his erstwhile political allies.⁷

By 1993 students in AEEM were calling for action against the government for failing to honour the promises made in the Memorandum. Class-boycotts, strikes and demonstrations punctuated the following years. In 1993 the leadership of AEEM was divided between those supporting the government and those arguing for more militant action. The government was keen to exploit these divisions: 'In response to this unrest, the government attempted to manipulate divisions within the AEEM leadership by funding a "palace coup" in which a faction of the student leaders ... tried to replace the elected leader' (Smith 1997:249).

The government carried out their manipulation of the student movement thoroughly, providing scholarships to foreign universities for several leading members of AEEM. By 1995 the student union was so divided that it had lost the support of the population and could only rely on the fractured and intermittent loyalty of its own members. AEEM even split at one point with a new organisation calling itself 'Friends of the Schools' who, amid accusations that it was funded by the government, argued for the opening of schools and the resumption of classes. The rupture with the ruling party was complete by the time of the next elections, and the damage to the AEEM seemingly irreparable. Student protests were broken up by tear gas and students who had previously declared their love of Alpha 'burned campaign posters of Konaré and banners of the ADEMA party' (Smith 1997:263).

The experience of 'democratic transition' in Cameroon contrasts with many of the examples already given. The process of political liberalisation was protracted and violent, yet it provided students with a space to express themselves (Konings 2002). This expression took both a party and ethnic line. The government exploited these differences, which resulted in the emergence of two groups at the University of Yaoundé. The student body was divided between 'strangers', students organised in the Student's Parliament aligned to the opposition, and the 'indigenous' Beti students, loyal to the ruling regime and organised in the Committee for Self-Defence and the Beti Militia. The nature of the 'democratic transition' led to the violence and disruption at the university that continued practically unabated between 1990 and 1996.

Student numbers at the University of Yaoundé exceeded 40,000 in 1992 although the conditions for students and staff were diabolical (Konings 2002:182). The processes of political liberalisation in the 1990s combined with deep

dissatisfaction at the deterioration of conditions under the impact of SAP. The introduction of multi-partyism did not cleanse the regime of undemocratic habits but led them to use the 'liberalisation' to divide the student body. As early as March 1991, *Jeune Afrique* had noted the contradiction in the progress of the 'democratic transition' in Cameroon; one article was titled *Le pluralisme en marche au Cameroun, mais l'Etat est en panne*.⁸

The first political crisis at the university occurred in 1990, when students marched in favour of the opposition SDF and multi-partyism. This led to the permanent presence of gendarmes – or ninjas as they were called by students – on the campus. Students used the political opening allowed in the country at the time to set up their first autonomous organisations that, as we have seen, quickly became polarised. By 1991, along with the opposition, students called for a sovereign national conference, a political formation that was a popular demand during the 'democratic transitions' in many parts of the continent at the time. The year ended with a prolonged student strike at the late payment of scholarships. As the chaos on the campus escalated over the next few years the university authorities resorted to further desperate measures. In 1993 the university Chancellor Peter Aghor Tabi ordered the Beti militias on the campus to step up their attacks on students (Zeilig and Seddon 2002).

By 1996 another group directly affiliated to Biya's party, PRESBY ('President Biya's Youth'), had replaced the self-defence groups. Like earlier formations, this group was a constellation 'composed mainly of university students and other sections of the educated youth either engaged in informal-sector activities or unemployed, including a number of university graduates and drop-outs' (Konings 2002:201). The process of political liberalisation in Cameroon demonstrates diverse patterns of political behaviours and activism in the period of 'democratic transition'. Current patterns of student activism in Cameroon, hollowed out, to some extent, of the earlier hope for political change, are illustrated in this special issue by Woudammike's article. Students do not appear here as heroes or as a permanent political avant-garde, but rather as contradictory social actors, prone to political manipulation and division. The defining elements in student protests in these examples are the wider configurations of political forces involved in the 'democratic transition'.

New student movements or the descent into corporatism?

There is the danger of exceptionalising the experience of higher education in Africa, that the university system is uniquely affected by catastrophe and crisis. This is an important consideration when examining the state of student activism in higher education in Africa (see Obono's article on France in this collection). The commentary tends to emphasise the same 'tragedy', with students and youth

seen as the quintessential 'lost generation' (O'Brien 1996). Can we speak, as Barkan (1975:128-130) did 30 years ago, of an 'African pattern' dividing the behaviour of African university students and European and American ones? Federici (2000:103) is unequivocal about the question: 'We can speak today of an international student movement, and that African students are paying by far the heaviest cost for the effort this movement is making to reverse the corporate agenda by which education is being reshaped worldwide.'⁹ The argument finds a parallel in Boren (2001) whose global survey of 'student resistance' makes a case for the same pan-student approach.

There is an important divide in the research on student activism that has ramifications for understanding student politics not just in the current period but historically. One strand of opinion was propagated by the editorial board of the American activist newsletter *Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA)* that has recently been suspended, and summarised in a collection of essays by the same authors of the newsletter *A Thousand Flowers: Social struggles against structural adjustment in African universities*. They have provided a running critique of the policies of the WB and IMF in Africa from the point of view of popular protest and student resistance (CAFA 1991; CAFA 1996). CAFA has been an important organisation of scholars and activists chronicling student unrest on the continent while campaigning against WB policies. The story of CAFA is described in this collection by its founders (see Caffentzis, Federici and Alidou).

CAFA maintained that in the escalation of student protest since the introduction of SAPs in Africa from the early 1980s there has emerged a new 'pan-African student movement, continuous in its political aspirations with the student activism that developed in the context of the anti-colonial struggle, and yet more radical in its challenges to the established political power' (Federici 2000:88). The effects of SAPs have massively proletarianised the African student body, breaking them from their past as members of the elite (Federici 2000:93).

The partial withdrawal of the state from higher education in Africa has altered the nature of elite formation at the university. Much of the research confirms these arguments. Mamdani (1994) saw a similar development as part of a process transforming the African class system, where the limited expansion of the African 'middle classes' after independence has been reversed as state-directed initiatives receded from the 1970s onwards. The impact on higher education was clear:

the growth in a State-financed higher and secondary education sector, whose enrolment came less and less from affluent families, went along-

side shrinking opportunities for middle class advancement in a crisis-prone economy (Mamdani 1994:258).

There has been a process of ‘institutional liberalisation’ that caused the explosions in student activism in recent years. The new *proletarianised* student population that has resisted the policies of SAPs and their application to higher education have created a qualitatively different form of student activism. This allows us to view the ‘present phase of student activism not as a set of separate struggles but as one pan-African student movement’ (Federici 2000:96).¹⁰

Some writers and activists argue that there was a ‘convergence of forces’ between previously privileged – now proletarianised – students and the urban poor. The case is put most forcefully by the former student leader at the University of Zimbabwe, Brian Kagoro (2003), referring to a period of activism in the mid-1990s:

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 ... around issues of social economic justice, [the] right to a living wage ... students started couching their demands around a right to livelihood (interview, 23 June 2003).

Seddon (2002) raises many similar themes, defining these ‘new’ popular forces as including the urban and rural working classes broadly defined as well as other categories, including the so-called ‘lumpenproletariat’, day-labourers and the unemployed, workers in the informal sector, small (and sometimes medium) peasants, small retailers, craftsmen and artisans, petty commodity producers (see also Seddon and Zeilig 2005). If we extend Kagoro’s argument we can say that the social expectations (and pauperisation) of students ‘converged’ with these ‘forces’ during the period of structural adjustment.

These arguments contrast with much of the commentary: for example Bathily *et al.* (1995:401) reverse the categorisation made by *CAFA* and *A Thousand Flowers*. It is necessary, they argue, to separate student activism from its perceived heyday in the 1960s and 1970s to the disintegration of the movement during the last twenty years. Today students are written off, ‘left with their daily corporatism and the inefficiency of their fights.’ Yesterday they were harbingers of a brighter future: ‘If prior to World War II students tacitly accepted being petty bourgeois with colonial linkages, up to the mid-1970s they claimed a left vanguard status’ (Bathily *et al.* 1995:401). They make their argument by charting the evolution of student activism:

But at the end of the day, they only managed some vigils with hardly any support. They appeared at most as the enlightened conscience of their people on the path to complete emancipation and modernisation. They managed to shift from their role as supporters of the Western system ... to that of rejecting it totally... By the late 1970s ... students saw themselves [as] ... political and economic failures (Bathily et al. 1995:401).

The argument asserts that with the collapse of the post-colonial 'social pact' student engagement has become 'corporatist', daily ones, concerned only with issues of 'bread and butter'. In the case of Senegal, 'By the late 1970s Senegalese students saw themselves more modestly as symbols of the independent stalemate, of the political and economic failure of a regime which was unable to provide them with clear survival prospects.' Students, following this argument, have lost their status, 'from providers of modernity they became aid applicants' (Bathily et al. 1995:405).

While this argument tends to avoid the heroic discourse with students 'counter-posing and confronting the abuses of state power' (Boyer 2002:210), it misses the 'novelty' in the wave of popular protest that has swept Africa in the last fifteen years. Far from understanding the role of students in the democratic transition as part of a generalised revolt, these arguments tend to dismiss the significance of student revolt. There is also an important generational element to this demarcation of student activism, between a perceived ideological heyday and a 'bread and butter' present. As Bianchini has explained (2004:372): 'From the view point of older generations who have "made" the student movement, the natural inclination is to valorise the student movement of their youth to the detriment of the one that followed.' Student activism is permeated with similar generational judgements where former activists considers that the contemporary movement has become 'corporatist', lacking the ideological and political clarity of their generation.

In contrast Federici (2000:101) sees 'students struggle to defend education as "an inalienable right" they are fighting not in defense of a privilege or a corporatist interest, but against it.' Students are, on the contrary, attempting to 'reverse the corporate agenda by which education is being reshaped worldwide' (Federici 2000:103). However, we would argue that there may be a tendency in *CAFA* and *A Thousand Flowers* to downplay the ambiguity of student protest. While they describe the significance and celebrate the resistance of the student population in Africa they miss the way student movements have become, in certain respects, depoliticised and subject to manipulation and co-option. They capture the importance of the new resistance among students but neglect the new directions that this activism can take (see Sikwebu's article in

this collection). Students today are 'situated in a complex field of societal power, class interest ... and moral positions' (Boyer 2002:211) that create, in conditions of social breakdown, unique and challenging forms of activism.

New activism?

Students were not isolated political actors behaving simply as a democratic vanguard; they were neither 'demons nor democrats' as some commentary has expressed the distinction (Smith 1997). Their role in the 'democratic transitions' was complex because it was inextricably tied to the liberalisation of political space and the manipulations of these processes by incumbent governments and political parties. The 'success' of student activism was linked to the wider social forces that they could help animate and identify with, this was tied to their ability to 'converge' their struggles with broader popular forces. Mamdani (1994) is correct to recognise that when students were effective they succeeded in 'forcing an opening up' even if they lacked an alternative strategy: 'Its possibilities depended far more on the character of forces that student action succeeded in mobilising than its own internal energies' (Mamdani 1994:259).

Popular mobilisations were a response to widespread disaffection with the policies of austerity and structural adjustment, yet these movements were responding in new ways. Class structures in Africa had been transformed, and resistance did not simply take old forms (Alavi and Shanin 1982; Cohen 1982). The processes of class alignment and resistance brought in new and heterogeneous forces (Harrison 2002; Seddon 2002; see also Seddon and Zeilig 2005). As we have seen Seddon (2002) defines the role of the 'popular classes' in Africa, describing a shifting constellation of political forces that include the unemployed, informal sector traders and trade unionists. This introduction argues that students, and unemployed graduates, have become an important part of the popular classes.

Higher education reforms, as we have seen, have transported student identity into the maelstrom of the structural crisis. Mamdani (1994:258-9), in an important study on class and the intelligentsia, has seen these processes at work: 'previously a more or less guaranteed route to position and privilege, higher education seemed to lead more and more students to the heart of the economic and social crisis.' Using Nyamnjoh's (2007) notion of 'Barbie-isation', institutions of higher education became a 'bazaar to which millions are drawn but few rewarded or given real choices.' Students are no longer the transitory social group waiting to be allotted government employment; on the contrary they have become pauperised, converging more and more with the wider urban poor: social groups that they had historically regarded as their 'responsibility' to liberate.

There is an international dimension to these developments that should not be ignored. Across the world, student movements have grappled with the changing nature of university education. Nowhere is this clearer than in France illustrated by the anti-CPE protests described by Obono. Here, there is a direct symmetry in the lives and experiences of students and the working class. This is explained by the Marxist writer Daniel Bensaïd (2006) in his description of the differences between the current period and the so-called high-point of student unrest in 1968:

The present movement is directly based on a social question – the destruction of workplace regulations and the generalised casualisation of employment, which is common both in education and to workers. The question of the link, and not just solidarity, between the two is therefore immediate.

Finally, the fundamental difference is with the general context and in particular with the way unemployment weighs on things. In 1968, the unemployed were counted in tens of thousands in a period of great expansion, so students had no worries about the future.

Students were a privileged part of this stable economic milieu. However in France today, Bensaïd continues, ‘six million people are either without work or causally employed.’ This has impacted enormously on the identity of students today, who require no ideological leap to connect their activism to the labour movement. The link is immediate. Students do not simply dabble in the social world outside the university campus – committed as they might have been in 1968 to building the bonds of solidarity with the labour movement – they are a central component of it. Often this connection is explicit in terms of student involvement in the labour force, but there is also a political dimension to these changes, as Kouvelakis (2006:6) notes:

This ‘great transformation’ has, of course (in comparison with 1968) not only made easier the link with workers, but, above all, has given this an ‘organic’ character, the character of the building of a common struggle, and not of an alliance or solidarity between separate movements.

These comments could as easily be made about the experience in much of Africa, buffeted by the same blows of globalisation. However, student activism is still instilled with an important element of elitism, though now tempered by the realities of campus poverty. Students maintain their ability to mobilise in relatively autonomous urban spaces, achieving an organisational coherence that is rarely matched by other social groups. The power of students to set off wider social protests was again vividly demonstrated by French students in 2006.

These processes have been described fairly unsatisfactorily as the ‘proletarianisation’ of student status; the implication is often that students have become an homogenous body of ‘poor militants’. Though these have been inherently uneven processes, and vary hugely across the continent, and between Europe and Africa, the reprioritisation of higher education can be witnessed internationally. It is precisely for this reason that France is such an interesting example. University students in the anti-CPE protests even adopted the ‘methods’ traditionally associated with the trade union movement. Universities were ‘*bloquée par des piquets de grève*’, literally blockades defended by ‘pickets’. The language of the student movement seems to have explicitly adopted the vernacular classically associated with working class protest: student mobilisation is now carried out by ‘*étudiants grévistes*’ (student strikers). The ‘*blocage*’ closes the university, ensuring that those students who receive grants will not have them suspended for their involvement in the protest (*Rouge*, 29 November 2007).¹¹

These developments partly express a new reality that has linked students to the precarious world of work, where students are frequently forced to survive on the margins of society. The recent scandal of student prostitution in France expresses many of these developments (Clouet 2007). These have various effects in Europe that mirror in many respects the changes in higher education and student politics in Africa. Only recently have researchers begun to analyse this transformation. In France two sociologists, Laurence Faure and Alain Girard, have discussed how university students, ‘often live in an extended high school life’, forced by financial necessity to remain in the parental home and to study at the provincial university. Students are, therefore, forced to delay the ‘cultural and social break’ that has previously been associated with going to university (cited in *Le Monde*, 21 November 2007).

In choosing to attend regional universities close to their parental homes, students save twenty percent in educational costs. A third of these students ‘*de proximité*’ decide to stay at home, and those who stay at the university pay a fraction of the cost of moving to Paris and other large cities in France. In total thirty seven percent of university students in France stay with their parents (*Le Monde*, 21 November 2007). This phenomenon has been labelled the ‘prolongation of adolescence’ in the United Kingdom. These changes have an impact both on the development of student activism and the nature of contemporary university education; these are global processes involving the liberalisation of higher education.

In the context of the rapid and deleterious effects of externally supported university, and societal reforms on the continent, students have been forced to

negotiate a world of collapsed hope. Student activism has evolved to fill this gap; some of the liveliest initiatives have been driven by ex-students and graduates who are confronted by seemingly unending unemployment. One example graphically illustrates some of these new forms of activism that speak of the 'convergence of forces' in conditions of the transformation of national economies. Since 2004 in Togo the *Unions des Chomeurs Diplômés* (Union of Unemployed Graduates) from a range of national universities and institutions have grown into a national movement. Developing a set of six principal demands the UCD has organised a number of protests, including hunger strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations. The interregional reach of the UCD has ensured that a number of unemployed graduates have been pulled into activism, while the classic tactic of state control has still been the cooption of student leaders, upon graduation, into the diminishing ranks of the civil service or to overseas scholarships. The UCD has attempted to resist these manoeuvres and 'negotiated a real solution for unemployed graduates while insisting on their right to maintain an independent organisation' (*Afriques en Luttés*, November 2007). These graduates, along with student activists still at university, played an important role in the national protests against election irregularities in 2005 in Togo. Whether these initiatives are capable of finding sustainable solutions to the prolonged crisis of the Togolese state is questionable, but they do show us some of the current contours of student activism. Clearly more research needs to be conducted into the nature of these changes and the development of new forms of activism.

Conclusion

This introduction has concentrated on the neo-liberal reform of education across the continent in the 1980s and 1990s and the patterns of student resistance and activism. One of the central factors influencing student politics was the ability to contest the ideological foundations of structural adjustment. The capacity of student organisations to confront the 'world view' presented by their governments (before and after the transitions) and the IFIs, helped shape their political agency. But their ability to do this was influenced by wider political forces in society, and they were disabled by the lack of a coherent ideological alternative to neo-liberal reforms. Students found themselves buffeted together with the popular classes, by the resumption of a more or less unopposed politics of adjustment and austerity after the 'transitions'.

Student activism has been affected by the vacillations in the popular movements that they have helped to mobilise. Once new governments had been installed (Senegal, Mali) or old regimes revived (Cameroon, Zimbabwe), the tempo of resistance and student activism receded, often returning to the 'corporatist'

and piecemeal demands that many commentators have wrongly interpreted as representing a new phase in student activism. The ‘corporatism’ – or economism¹² – of student politics is not symptomatic of a new and qualitatively different student movement, nor, as Bathily et al. (1995:401) imply, of a slide into irrelevance. According to this account, the only barrier preventing students from assuming their full role as ‘actors/initiators’ is their temporality. However, the status of ‘student’ – at university, as graduate, as a ‘*cartouchard*’¹³ and part of the mass of unemployed – is not impermanent (and nor, as we hope this collection shows, always limited to Africa). The crisis for students in Africa is precisely because they are not in ‘transition’; on the contrary they are increasingly permanent artefacts in the post-colonial impasse. Their activism – always complex and contradictory – retreats into a routine of ‘economic’ and factional contestation when wider popular and democratic movements in society decline or are frustrated.

In Malawi, students at the university together with academic staff were important in the mobilisations that eventually toppled the Banda regime in the multiparty elections in 1994. As Kerr and Mapanje (2002:86, 90) have stated, ‘students and staff marched in protest against the regime during the demonstrations sparked by the Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Letter of March 1992 and during the riots of May in the same year.’ Although they note a wave of activism during the transition from 1991 to 1993, they also lament the decline of student politics into ‘corporatist’ concerns after this period. By 1994 there were even cases of male students at the university attacking and ridiculing female students and lecturers. They describe the increase in sexual assaults on female students and lecturers from 1994 as a ‘cowardly attempt among male students to find an easy scapegoat for a much broader set of frustrations.’

After the victory of Bakilli Muluzi and his United Democratic Front, the Malawian government participated uncritically in the project of structural adjustment and economic liberalisation that had given resistance to the previous regime such impetus. The ‘lassitude’ that Kerr and Mapanje claim affected students after the elections in 1994 were tied to the resumption of economic structural adjustment programmes after a period of democratic transition. The same disillusionment and ‘lassitude’ gripped student politics in dozens of campuses across Africa as governments that had emerged from the ‘transition’ committed themselves to implementing IMF and WB reforms. The predominance of neo-liberalism across the continent after the democratic transition ensured a quick death for the African renaissance and the movements that had heralded it.

The collection that follows illustrates the diversity of student activism across the continent and some of the important new research that is being carried out. We have attempted to assemble a collection of articles that highlight many of the

important themes in the evolution of student activism. This includes the involvement of the World Bank in the restructuring of higher education in Burkina Faso, and the development of student activism – in many diverse forms and new organisations – in South Africa. Each of the contributions in this collection demonstrates the sense of profound change, with university students forced, in divergent settings, to confront a world irrevocably changed by the blows of political transition and the neo-liberal transformation of higher education on the continent. Some of the contributors were student and university activists themselves in many of the strikes, movements and organisations described in this collection. The paralysis, confusion and successes of their activism have compelled them to delve into the meaning of student protests and draw the lessons for other activists. This auto-critique seems particularly apposite for a special issue that seeks to understand the meanings and consequences of activism.

Pascal Bianchini and Gabin Korbéogo's article provides us with a detailed account of the origins of the student movement in Upper Volta and Burkina Faso. Consistent with student activism in much of the continent, early activism took place in the colonial metropolis, in organisations like FEANF (*Fédération des Etudiants d'Afrique Noire en France*). The article takes us through the various periods of activism, and shows a number of distinct factors that have always been characteristic of student action: ideological disputes, political co-option and organisational change. Bianchini and Korbéogo refuse the clichéd analysis of student action on the continent, that delineates a period of 'pure ideological' struggle in the 1960s and 1970s with the collapse into bread and butter politics today. But equally they avoid glorifying the contemporary 'proletarianisation' of university students, and do not see an unambiguous period of radical activism. However the authors describe the impressive resuscitation of the student movements 'counter-hegemonic' tradition in the early 1990s, and conclude that student activism in Burkina Faso continues to witness: 'a combination of specific claims connected to student conditions and broader political aspirations.'

The intervention by Caffentzis, Federici and Alidou charts the history of CAFA, which we have discussed briefly in this introduction, and the continental revolt against higher education adjustment. Their article draws out the international nature of the commodification of higher education, and describes how CAFA came about as an attempt to provide solidarity for African students and scholars resisting the 'dismantling of public education demanded by the World Bank', while drawing attention to the devastating effect of these reforms for American students and academics. Impressively CAFA launched a campaign in the 1990s to stigmatise the participation of American scholars and universities in World Bank initiatives. Caffentzi, Federici and Alidou trace some of the

original strands of the anti-capitalist movement to the university student and lecturer struggles in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (long before the battle of Seattle). We believe that CAFA played an important 'consciousness-raising' role in drawing attention to the devastation brought by higher education reform, and the extraordinary resistance to it.

In some important respects the experience of higher education in South Africa is distinct from the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. South African universities have not suffered the same collapse and tertiary education has expanded since the end of apartheid. Even if South African student activism since 1994 has been characterised by the same battles over the provision of grants and for access to free education (see Pithouse 2006), race and ethnicity remain important fault lines and the salience of so-called 'cultural' politics plays a vital part in the lives of university students today.

Addressing the question of student activism in higher education institutions in SA, the contribution by Mlungisi Cele examines the effect of institutionalised student protest activity or 'constructive engagement' on governance structures within the university. Cele suggests that participation by student leaders in decision-making structures has provided them with a broader understanding of the way the institution functions. He counter poses this constructive engagement approach with 'the narrow student perspective', which generally contests management and encourages more direct forms of student protest.

The article by Dinga Sikwebu complements Cele's work in that it also shifts the focus away from street protest and direct political action towards an alternative arena for student activism. In so doing, Sikwebu examines ethnic identity as the centripetal force in student organisation. While these organisations maintain that their membership is open, the evidence suggests that the ethnic identity of each group is distinctive. It does not appear that membership of these organisations has deepened ethnic cleavages among students or provided a catalyst for ethnic conflict. A more marked division is apparent between the cultural and political student organisations on campus. Sikwebu contends that these cultural organisations have emerged within a context where political organisations have failed to effectively capture the imagination of students and that the ethnic student organisations provide rural students in particular with a feeling of belonging and sense of purpose.

Both of these papers provide us with an important warning not to limit our understanding of student action to the protests against structural adjustment, and to broaden the conception of activism away from explicit anti-government mobilisations. Daily activism for most students does not take place on the street or on demonstrations and riots but frequently in cultural and social organisa-

tions. The adhesive glue of the anti-apartheid and nationalist movement has given way to post-transition uncertainties in a political and economic world increasingly dominated by the exigencies of the commercialisation of higher education.

Joseph Woudamike's article on two important student strikes at the Université de Ngaoundéré, describes some of the contours of contemporary student action in Cameroon. Woudamike situates student activism in the higher education reforms in 1993 that saw several new universities established across the country. He argues that this was partly a strategy to disperse unruly students across the country from the one national and turbulent centre of student activism at the Université de Yaoundé. As Woudamike explains this 'has not been the expected panacea. On the contrary it has contributed in exporting ... student protests'. Student activism in Ngaoundéré, where the author was a student leader, has adapted to their relative geographical isolation by using their proximity to the national highway as a problematic site for their protests, these developments seem to be common in other countries on the continent (Zeilig and Ansell 2008).

Finally Danièle Obono's paper lures us away from the continent and focuses on the anti-CPE (*Contrat Première Embauche*) protests in France in 2006. The CPE reforms were part of a broader legislative attempt to introduce further flexibility into French employment practices, and specifically youth employment. Obono, who was involved in the movement at the Sorbonne, provides us with an anatomy of the student protests that challenge many contemporary shibboleths of youth activism. Far from representing students as an apolitical mass, brainwashed by mobile phones, video games and 'lobby' politics, the anti-CPE movement thrust youth and students into the political arena. Though a political alternative beyond the anti-CPE protests was not found, the movement defeated the government and buried the lie of post-ideological student apathy. When Obono describes the '*galère en milieu étudiant*' (student nightmare) we believe that this expresses important international transformations among students and, more importantly for this collection, the experiences over the last twenty five years for African students.

We must, of course, explicitly justify the presence of a paper on student activism in France in a journal special on African student activism. Though we believe many of these justifications are evident in the article and this introduction, we think that Obono's contribution allows us to reach some interesting general conclusions about contemporary student activism, of which the anti-CPE protests have been the global highpoint in recent years. The idea of the 'mass student' dislodged from their relatively privileged position and now occupying a far more 'popular' and precarious space in society is an international phenomenon with crucial consequences for student activism (Kouvelakis 2006).

Student movements and activists across the world will have to confront the opportunities and challenges of these transformations.

Notes

- 1 In Senegal, despite almost two decades of structural adjustment, and a concerted effort in the 1990s from the World Bank and IMF to force the government to reduce the enrolment of students into higher education, enrolment had increased (some estimate that there are now more than 30,000 students at Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar). The higher education sector by 2001 was still absorbing roughly 27 per cent of the national education budget, whereas primary education received 38.4 per cent of the budget (Niang 2004:67). World Bank and IMF reforms have been unsuccessful often under the pressure of student protests.
- 2 Five countries were nominated as case studies, all apparently showing positive signs of such liberalisation. These countries were: Uganda, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania and Mozambique.
- 3 How the experience of Makerere University in Uganda demonstrates the benefits of 'democratisation' in higher education in a country that has specifically outlawed 'democratisation' is never explained.
- 4 However the great majority of privileged students are not sent, and will not be sent, to improved and more selective national universities. On the contrary the trend is to educate the children of a wealthy elite in the United States (the country of preference for everyone), France (particularly for students from Senegal) and the UK. In Zimbabwe, South Africa is a closer and far cheaper option, with a large number of relatively well-funded universities. This suggests that South Africa is at variance with some of the arguments made in the introduction.
- 5 'La démocratie envers et contre tout' *Jeune Afrique* 27 March–2 April 1991; 'Que veulent les étudiants?' *Jeune Afrique* 11–16 July 1991.
- 6 The slogan of the AEEM conjures up the atmosphere of the period *Oser lutter, c'est oser vaincre, la lutte continue* (To dare to fight is to dare to overcome, the struggle continues).
- 7 It is worth noting that Zeric Kay Smith (1997:264) interviewed members of the donor community who unanimously maintained that AEEM had a negative impact on the country's democratic governance: "This negative view was also amply evident in interviews I conducted with members of the World Bank mission in Mali."
- 8 'Multi-partyism makes progress in Cameroon but the State has broken down'.
- 9 There are, of course, additional dangers of conflating the behaviour of African students with their European and American counterparts. It is hard to see any point in investigating African student movements if they are simply elements of an already existing international student movement as Frederici et al. (2000) contend. To what extent do students – in Africa and Europe – regard them-

selves as part of such an ‘international movement’? Or are these categories imposed on essentially national ‘movements’? While it is possible to argue that they are linked to an international wave of resistance to structural adjustment (Walton and Seddon 1994) and neo-liberalism, for this resistance to be part of a ‘movement’ – let alone an international one – surely these links have to be conscious and explicit among the students themselves?

- 10 However, it is important to caution against generalising about the proletarianised status of students. The picture varies across the continent. A survey of students at the national university in Maputo in Mozambique revealed the over-representation of Maputo students at universities and a correlation between prestigious degree courses and family status (Mario and Fry 2003:31). Mills (2004) suggests that the elite status of students in higher education in Mozambique is demonstrated at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo where 80 percent of students speak Portuguese as a first language.
- 11 If these students are absent three times from their classes they risk the loss of their grants. ‘Amplifier la mobilisation’ interview with the spokesperson for the *Coordination Nationale Etudianté* in *Rouge* 29 November 2007.
- 12 Interestingly the same criticism of ‘economism’ is made of the trade union movement, forgetting that an umbilical cord connects political and economic struggles. This was a point made powerfully by Rosa Luxemburg (1906) in her book *The Mass Strike*.
- 13 Term used by in Senegal to describe a student who has exhausted almost all of their chances (literately their ‘cartridges’) giving them just one more chance in the annual exams (Bianchini 2002:368).

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