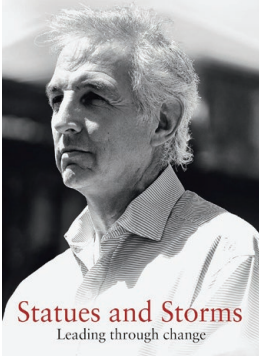


MAX PRICE



Statues and Storms: Leading through Change

Max Price
Tafelberg, 2023, 320pp.
ISBN: 978-0-624-08776-2.
R350.00
Review by Linda Chisholm

Not thirty, but twenty years after democracy, South Africa's oldest and most prestigious university was wracked by tumultuous upheavals sustained over two long years between 2015 and 2017. Although contestation and challenge were not new to the university, the nature and degree of student protest, directed at the university itself, were. A few years later, Max Price's successor, Mamokgethi Phakeng, experienced different storms that relegated the events of 2015-7 firmly to the past. The book is nonetheless still relevant, as the calls with which those years were associated, for 'free, quality, decolonial education,' have endured.

Predictably, Price's account of how he navigated UCT through one of the most difficult periods has attracted admiration and opprobrium, in equal measure, on the one side from fellow Vice-Chancellors and on the other from some staff and students of UCT. His leadership and the decisions he took to steer the institution into calmer waters continue to be contested.

Price did not then, and with this book will not now, please everyone. But it is worth noting the changes resulting from the events in which he played a key role: the removal of the statue of Rhodes on the campus in 2015, changes in financial aid provided for students, the in-sourcing of workers, and the wide-ranging debates on the role of art and society. In 2016, in the face of extraordinary levels of conflict, disruption and violence, he reasserted a central principle of democracy: debate, dialogue and negotiation. From his perspective, the main achievement was the restoration of peace on campus and changes in the institutional culture of the university. The most important lesson was that of understanding the rage underlying the protests, so that institutions will know how to deal with the accompanying violence in future.

But what kind of a book has the author written about the events? In the first instance, it is a memoir. Typical of the genre, it presents the author's point of view. It is the perspective of the Vice-Chancellor, the leader of an institution caught in an eruption at once local and national. It provides a textbook case of how the liberal university deals with protest: mainly through deliberation and dialogue but also, and simultaneously, through the force of the law. The Price-UCT story, with its own context and specificities,

is skillfully interwoven with what was happening on a national level and at other institutions such as Wits University. So too are the personal and emotional, the familial and affective dimensions, with full acknowledgement given to his wife Deborah Posel, an accomplished scholar and historian in her own right, and his children, on occasion on the other side of the barricades.

The book shows how controversial decisions were arrived at collectively, with senior management and Council, how these decisions were informed by a strategy developed in advance, and how they were intended to be sensitive to the differences and nuances of opinions amongst different university constituencies. I found the openness with which he discussed what is normally kept behind closed doors unusual and enlightening. There is abundant background information on particular issues. When a decision had to be taken with which he disagreed, he says so, but always makes his own position clear. When mistakes were made, he acknowledges them. There are no holy cows. Nothing is cast in stone. Everything is a matter for debate and discussion.

Seen from his perspective, Price and his senior management were in an unenviable dilemma. At one level, they were caught between trying to reconcile legitimate student demands – that then degenerated as the student movement fragmented – and the imperatives of an institution that had to remain open and keep its annual calendar of lectures, seminars, exams and graduations going if a knock-on effect of the crisis for students and the institution was to be avoided. At another level, they were caught between those who wanted more rather than less assertion of authority, and those who condemned the assertion of authority in terms of ‘militarising’ and ‘securitising the campus’ in the form of interdicts, suspensions, expulsions, police intervention. As 2016 unfolded in a nightmarish cycle of ever-changing student negotiators and constantly-expanding demands, amid personal threats to himself and his family, Price’s determination not to be provoked and to avoid violence at all costs prevailed.

The book is much more than a memoir, however. Written not in the heat of the moment, but after a period of research and reflection, it carefully periodises events and uses varied sources to construct a narrative analysis of the competing forces that shook the university between 2015 and 2017, and of the leadership’s responses. It is a gripping, analytical and contextualised account that sets out, with great clarity, how the storm morphed from one over statues in 2015, through free higher education, in-sourcing, and artwork, to the campaign for ‘free, quality, decolonial education’ at the end of 2016. The conflict was at fever-pitch in October and November 2016; the university was on the brink of shutting down, with exams about to start on the 7th November, as livestream plenary negotiations were being conducted between the university and students. The storm petered out following the successful negotiation of an agreement with students, hammered out over long days and nights, in the midst of a fury that was also unleashed on other campuses.

In one of his central arguments in the first part of the book, Price explains that institutional culture – its middle class ‘whiteness’ – was the main unresolved issue when he arrived, and that this issue was progressively addressed. The last part of the book deals with possible responses of a liberal university to the violence of the student

movement, expressed in disruption, occupations, vandalism to buildings (including the throwing of faeces into teaching and learning spaces), arson, physical violence and threats towards people, and the increasing racial polarisation amongst staff members. Price discusses *in extenso*— in theory and in practice — the relative merits of campus security, the police, and private security forces. And he declares his own position on violence, as well as that of student and other university constituencies.

Obscured in this account, and in the events themselves, are the changes that have been most significant in university culture over the last thirty years: the managerialism associated with university rankings and a funding model that rewards quantitative research and teaching output over its quality. How this is articulated with the racial institutional culture appears not to have been at issue for the students, and it does not surface in Price's narrative. Does this mean that it does not affect the workings of UCT in a way similar to other universities? Or was this a blind spot for students and management alike in those fraught years?

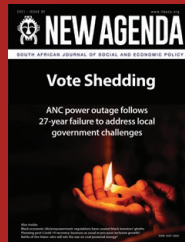
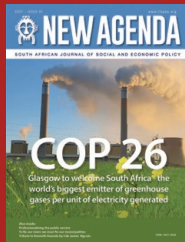
The book is to be commended for its clear delineation and assessment of the politics and actions of different student organisations, as well as those groups outside of the university who came to wishfully think about the potential of the university to ignite a wider revolution. At no point does Price generalise about the actions of students, though. He shows which particular groups engaged on which issues. He shows when, how and why they interacted with students at other institutions, on a national level; and he examines the role of social media in their actions. For those wanting to trace changes in the student movement over time, this book provides valuable insight into the organisations, politics and practices of organised student activity in this period, albeit through the prism of UCT, and from the perspective of the vice-chancellor. The sources are impeccable.

Also noteworthy is the evidence of the role played by government, the Minister and President in relation to university leaders, particularly on the question of tuition fees. This clearly was not a relationship of trust: university leaders found that they could not rely on government for support. As far as government was concerned, policy trumped institutional specificities.

The book ends on a slightly unsatisfactory note, with a somewhat hastily-written Postscript about dissatisfaction with recent processes, which are not specified; it is presumed that the reader is familiar with them. Unlike the rest of the book, the sketchiness of the Postscript points to an unfinished story.

With so strong a contribution from the side of the institutional leadership, however, one hopes that something similar will be written from the perspective of student leaders and other institutional actors. Did a new vision of the university and the role of the students emerge from this period? And is it proving to be sustainable? If not, why not? Was Covid the game-changer?

Why higher education became the focus of such intense conflict in this period is now relatively well-understood. Whether the next educational explosion will be in higher education, schooling, or some other part of the system remains to be seen. One thing is certain: conflict in higher education is neither new, but nor is it over. **NA93**



New Agenda needs your support

Democracy needs independent media, now more than ever.

The Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) has decided to make **New Agenda** available to all, free of charge.

BUT WE NEED YOUR HELP TO SURVIVE.

In these turbulent times, publications like ours are under threat.

We call on supporters and democrats to join us as a Friend of IFAA. If you believe in what we are doing and want to keep IFAA alive, pledge your support with your donations.

Monthly or once-off contributions can be paid to

ACCOUNT NAME: INSTITUTE FOR AFRICAN ALTERNATIVES
STANDARD BANK: THIBAUT SQUARE, CAPE TOWN
ACCOUNT NUMBER: 07 124 072 1
BRANCH CODE: 020009
SWIFT CODE: SBZAZAJJ
PLEASE USE AS REFERENCE: FRIENDS OF IFAA

NPO Registration Number 1992 I 002072 I oB

You have the right to know, and we are committed to sharing the knowledge and information that our readers have come to expect from us.

For 25 years we have published *New Agenda: South African Journal of Social and Economic Policy* to provide you, our readers, with informed and impartial analysis that you can rely on. We publish sound and reliable information that you need to call those in power to account.

“Our huge inequalities in wealth are intolerable, including the incredible gap between top managers and employees. Our legacy of social discrimination based on colour is unacceptable, including the persisting divide between affluent suburbs and desolate townships. Our state-owned enterprises, which are supposed to be engines for development, are actually serving as employment agencies for a small overpaid middle class. The public service has been allowed to slip into a dream walk where form filling and token effort is enough to bring in a stable income for officials.

“All this points to an urgent need for civil society and progressive intellectuals to raise their voices and demand a much more serious effort by all concerned to rebuild our country on a better foundation. Let us work on that.” Prof Ben Turok, 26 June 1927 – 9 December 2019 Former editor of *New Agenda*

Contact us: Tel: +27 21 461 2340 | www.ifaaza.org

To subscribe: www.ifaaza.org/latest-new-agenda/subscribe-to-new-agenda/

