Language, Politics and the Power of Beginning

'[T]he beginning is like a god which as long as it dwells among men saves all things.'

Plato, *Laws*, 775

Introduction

Moments of crisis, social upheaval or political conflict are revealing. They provide us with clues about what people value, what they think worth pursuing, how they think their goals should be pursued, and how they view the world. In a phrase, our words and our deeds both constitute us as persons and disclose who we are to the world. So, when we are trying to understand ourselves, others and our community, one place that we should look is to such moments—that is, to the words and the deeds that constitute and surround such moments.

Much has been and will be written about the student protests that gripped South Africa during October and November this year. How will a 0% increase in university fees affect the state's capacity to satisfy needs relating to housing, healthcare and basic services? Does the ANC's response set a precedent for how political and social demands and disagreements will be raised and resolved in the future? Are the 'born frees' rejecting the terms and conditions agreed to by their parents in 1994?

Many will ask and answer questions of this type over the coming months and years. In this piece, I put them aside. Rather, I consider a different type of question, one that concerns the importance and influence of ideas.

Language: describing and justifying the student protests

What beliefs were revealed during the student protests? Many, of course, but an important one seems to be a fairly widespread commitment to the significance of and relationship among the ideas of 'structures' or 'systems', 'power', 'bodies', and 'spaces' and 'minds' that have been 'colonised'. These terms cropped up regularly on social media and more traditional fora, in the form of opinions pieces written by students, protestors and supporters. People insist that structures are everywhere; they talk about violence against bodies; they remind us that power concedes nothing without demand; and they point out that the struggle to decolonise minds and spaces is not easy.

These terms and this terminological abstruseness will be familiar to some. We find these catchphrases in certain strands of post-modern and post-structuralist theory. These theories have much to commend them. They provide us with important insights and contain arguments that we cannot ignore. Much of what they say either disabuses us of critical mistakes or forces us to rethink our own assumptions. At a time, though, when thousands of students are exercising their unique individualities, their freedom, in pursuit of common goals, reliance on these

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theories is disconcerting. This is because the underpinnings of these theories share a metaphysical belief or commitment, the logical and conceptual implications of which are not always appreciated and which can be morally unacceptable.

Like their Hegelian and Marxist ancestors, some strands of post-modern and post-structuralist thought believe that people, individually and collectively, are at a fundamental level subject to facts that are external to their 'free wills'.

Whereas Hegel spoke of absolute spirit and Marx spoke of the material conditions of society,[1] our contemporaries now emphasise 'structures', 'systems' and 'power'.[2] They believe that structures or systems emerge from relations among people who are always unequal in some way. These unequal relations, which take the form of word and deed, generate 'power-structures'. These structures by their nature exert coercive force on and over people. This power (read, 'coercive force') is embodied in and exerted by institutions and through language (or 'discourse'). From these premises, some conclude that our thought-processes are the 'products' of such structures. They argue that our nature as embodied beings, living in the grip of these structures, determines the content of our particular moral and political ideas. They believe that existing social and political states of affairs owe their genealogy to, *and so are products of,* previous states of affairs. With these conclusions, they elevate the significance of process to such heights that past, present and future all have an inevitable continuity.

> *Politics is a process of willfully exercising power, where 'power' is understood to capture the use of force, in pursuit of a desired end. On this reading, therefore, politics is a kind of will to power.*

As noted above, there is much that is of value in these theories. Indeed, I try to rehabilitate some of these ideas in the penultimate section below. But, as an ensemble, they give us cause for concern. Even if we assume that the students and commentators who speak in this way do not subscribe to a hard version of determinism—that is, to the belief that our actions are automatic consequences of processes, of forces, external to our free will—the sustained emphasis on these ideas betrays morally intolerable views of politics and humanity. Let me explain.

Two conceptions of politics

Von Clausewitz once said that war is the continuation of politics by other means.[3]

This aphorism, out of context at least, can be understood in two ways. First, it may convey the idea that war is a kind of politics and that politics can be pursued with violent means rather than, say, debate and diplomacy. Second, it may be understood to mean that where the conflicting interests of different people are pursued by means of war, this type of interaction can no longer properly be described as political.

Von Clausewitz subscribed to the first of these interpretations. On this reading, politics is conflict of any kind involving a group of individuals. It entails groups of people imposing their 'will' on others, with the chosen means for doing so depending on the nature of a particular situation. Sometimes, reasoned debate will be the most effective method for doing this. Other times, it will be a 'technical', 'procedural', 'formal' or 'legal' obstacle in pursuit of the desired end. Politics is a process of willfully exercising power, where 'power' is understood to capture the use of force, in pursuit of a desired end. On this reading, therefore, politics is a kind of will to power.

This 'will to power' understanding of politics is mistaken. Whilst mistaken, it is right in one respect. Politics is characterised by conflict. But, this is too broad, for not all conflict is political. Rather, politics is conflict of a particular kind. It is the conflict that results from interaction of many individuals who belong to a single community.

There are two points to note in this regard. First, political conflict occurs among a plurality of individuals. Second, despite being individuals, those engaged in conflict share a common identity, for they constitute a 'We'. This has important implications, one of which is that politics is characterised by the recognition of people as agents – that is, recognition of them as people who make choices about what to do, who weigh up different reasons, and who can, if asked, justify these reasons to each other. Recognition of this type, when coupled with the fact that people must conceive of themselves and others as being members of a community, means that politics is characterised by the mutual exchange of reasons.

When politics is understood as a clash of produced bodies within a reified structure or system, it is not a big leap to the conclusion that violence is an instrument that can be used in pursuit of political ends.

On this conception, therefore, politics is in essence the exchange of reasons. Since, to adapt a phrase of Cicero's, all falls silent in the face of violence, politics and violence are by nature antithetical.

The objectification of politics

This piece is not the place to extend the claim that politics is best understood as the mutual exchange of reasons. In this section, though, some features of the will to power conception, as well as possible consequences of this conception, which cast serious doubt on its plausibility and desirability, will be considered. In doing so, we see that some of the language used to describe and justify the protests is consistent with the idea of will to power.

As noted, some people in describing and justifying the protests liberally use terms like 'power', 'structures', 'systems', 'bodies', and 'colonised spaces' and 'minds'. Some conceive of 'structures' as reified—meaning, concrete—objects that exist independently of and outlast the moments of decision and action that constitute them. Sometimes structures are personified, given minds and intentions of their own. Some people, but not all, think that our ideas, values and even identities are products of what social norms 'say'. They reject the notion that these aspects of our humanity are to some extent at least contingent on the choices that each of us freely and willingly make. For some of the protestors (or, those who speak in their name) and commentators, *our specific humanity is never chosen, but is produced*.[4]

When politics is understood as a clash of produced bodies within a reified structure or system, it is not a big leap to the conclusion that violence is an instrument that can be used in pursuit of political ends. When our disagreements are understood as problems concerning objects—that is, produced bodies and produced systems—rather than complex problems about how to regulate the disagreement that inevitably arises from the interaction of a plurality of subjects (meaning, autonomous agents), it is in fact logical to use violence. This is because people, understood as objects, do not change their minds through the exercise of free and deliberate choice. Like helpless scattered rods, we must be bundled; we

must be molded, or if need be fractured and cut;[5] and when sufficiently sharpened, we must be used in the pursuit of some higher, desirable end. In this world, what matters is the 'objective' and the 'efficacy'[6] of the means chosen in pursuit of that objective. In a phrase, essentially adopted by the EFF's Commissar Mbuyiseni Ndlozi in a blunt and intellectually honest article about the student protests, the end will always justify the means.[7]

On this conception of politics, we come to see violence everywhere. When we think that we live in a world of omnipresent, reified and intentional, but anonymous, systems of forceful power, we might even come to see little difference between the 'violence' of 'outsourcing' and the violence of beating, burning, raping and killing.[8] In this world, violence quickly comes to be seen as a normal, natural, instrument for effecting political change. And, since violent power-structures are everywhere, the most effective response to these structures will often be a strategic, but indiscriminate, counter-attack against any*thing* and every*thing* that is perceived either to have or support such power.

Because we have only lived our particular experience we cannot, except through accident, ever act on decisions that are universally valid and just. Indeed, talk of universals might itself be an illusion; a hangover from outdated liberal and humanist ways of thinking. After all, truth is power.

Whereas violence becomes natural, reasoned debate may be seen as pointless. If it is futile to debate with forces of nature—with mountains that block the paths of new roads, or hurricanes that threaten to tear apart our communities—is it not equally pointless to debate with the forces embodied in structures? If so, ultimately there is just one way to deal with the colonial structures that in part constitute our community and the colonised minds that occupy its spaces. We overcome the power 'immanent' in structures and in minds with force. Instead of debate, we silence, exclude, remove or suppress people or things we perceive to be enemies. In the end, we will not negotiate with—we will not tolerate, let alone respect—those who are not 'one of us, one of us'.

In this world, because we are *produced*, we do not see our 'enemies' as subjects who are capable of transcending—through imagination and empathy—their given station, in a way that allows each of them to identify with others. Our duty as good post-modern citizens is not to debate or provide reasons for our actions and views: 'I am not one of those who may be questioned about their Why'.[9] Rather, our duty is just to 'recognise' and accept what others say about them*selves*. We accept without question because we cannot escape our own gender, race, class, ethnicity, etc. Because we have only lived our particular experience we cannot, except through accident, ever act on decisions that are universally valid and just. Indeed, talk of universals might itself be an illusion; a hangover from outdated liberal and humanist ways of thinking. After all, truth is power.

We can almost hear these theorists, crying out in aphoristic ecstasy: 'Oh my friend, man is something that must be overcome!' [10] Or, if you are a student at an Ivy League school in the US, you might hear the shriek of another student, when confronting someone who disagrees with their personal *Weltanschauung*: 'Why the fuck can't you accept that position!' [11] And, if they do not accept that position, or if they are perceived as not accepting that position . . . well, you might then hear someone calling for 'some muscle'. [12]

These are some of the potential consequences of this post-modern talk about and conceptions of 'power', 'structures', 'systems', 'bodies' and 'colonised spaces' and 'minds'.

Politics as the exchange of reasons

Despite all of this, how many people can honestly say that they were not inspired by the efforts of many thousands of students to effect political and social change? Their actions, largely peaceful, reveal that the majority of them believe that they have an autonomous power to change the world; that the source of this power is *within* each of them, as free-willing agents; and that violence is not necessary or inevitable. The language chosen by some who claim to speak for these students does not reflect this exercise of agency. The narrative, in short, does not fit.

The fact that the narrative does not fit the facts, however, does not mean that we have no reason to be concerned. We must beware the intellectual who assumes the 'responsibility' of speaking 'for the people', who tells us what the people 'really mean'. Whilst in the short-term they rarely influence the exercise of democratic political power of the type witnessed during the protests, over time their concepts and their narratives can be destructive.

When we view people and politics as products, we *disempower* the people sought to be empowered through mass action. Chained to the past, to structures, to the power immanent in these structures, to our colonised minds and to colonial spaces, we are thought unable to begin something absolutely new. When we act, alone or in concert, we may have the sense that we are free, but ultimately we are always subject to the cunning, the ruse, of that which lies beyond us. This is the tragic irony of the conceptions of humanity and politics underlying much of the language describing and justifying these democratic and legitimate protests.

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To avoid all of this, we must emphasise the centrality of autonomy and the exchange of reasons to politics. When our emphasis shifts in this way, it becomes clear that although structures—the *bête noire* of post-modern and post-structuralist theories—are real, their existence is coextensive with and dependent on the interaction of differently situated but equal and autonomous persons. Hannah Arendt makes a similar point when she says:

> Just as there exists no human being as such, but only men and women who in their absolute distinctness are the same, that is, *human*, so this shared human sameness is the *equality* that in turn manifests itself only in the absolute distinction of one equal from another. . . . If, therefore, action and speech are the two outstanding political activities, distinctness and equality are the two constituent elements of political bodies [or, 'structures']. [13]

On this approach, we see that structures are better understood as 'activities', rather than products, that are constituted in the interaction of equal, rather than unequal, individuals. Understood in this way, we see that contrary to the theorists discussed in this paper, force and power are quite different. Whilst both create reasons for action, the reasons are generated in different ways. Reasons created by the exercise

of power emerge from the recognition of the autonomy and equality of others—that is, from the exchange of reasons—whereas reasons created by force emerge from the treatment of others merely as means. If so, the conception of politics that I termed 'will to power' is a misnomer. Rather, it is a politics of force; a politics of unfreedom.

First, in these societies, the oppressor always recognises, in some way or another, the autonomy and the equality of the oppressed. Without this basic recognition, the society would be totalitarian and these phenomena would not exist.

As noted, structures emerge *in* the interaction of autonomous persons; they come into *being* when people engage each other as agents. Thus, they are not physical but normative phenomena. The same is true for social and political 'spaces'. If the 'space' about which students so often talk is normative, rather than physical, in nature this means that it belongs to that group of phenomena that 'never outlast the moment of their realization'.[14] In other words, because spaces (like structures) do not survive the fleeting moments of the actions—the exchange of reasons, through word or deed—that constitute them, they are characterised by perpetual appearance, disappearance and reappearance.

The normative nature of 'space' has a number of important implications. First, the existence of the spaces that characterise our communities is not the result of the deeds of those now dead.[15] Second, because space emerges from or in activities, it is not a finite object. Third, public spaces—just like the life of the mind—cannot *be* controlled, owned, dominated or colonised.

So, for example, in universities there is never competition over space, for space is not a limited resource. Rather, there is a competition and exchange of ideas among those people *now* engaging as free and equal beings. It is in this sense that our universities ought to provide 'intellectual spaces', *in which* no ideas are 'safe' from criticism. When a group does not engage others in this way, but controls or dominates them (or, after managing to halt this form of interaction, then itself controls or dominates, through physical coercion or by, for example, 'Africanising knowledge'[16]), their words and deeds work to undermine or destroy the space—that is, the intangible relation arising in our interaction as agents—that exists between them and those now subject to their force. The effect of domination and control is to suffocate ideas and exterminate the identities that did exist in the now extinguished space.

Where a group is totally subject to the domination of another, structures, spaces and power do not exist—at least as between the oppressor and the oppressed. The totality of the rule, which by definition is purely violent, means that these phenomena *cannot* exist. In these societies, in the Gulags and the concentration camps, where survival is paramount, self-defense will often be the only way to survive.

Outside of totalitarian regimes, the political phenomena of structures, space and power can co-exist with injustice. Three points must be noted regarding unjust—albeit not totally unjust—societies. First, in these societies, the oppressor always recognises, in some way or another, the autonomy and the equality of the oppressed. Without this basic recognition, the society would be totalitarian and these phenomena would not exist. Second, the structures, power and spaces that exist in these societies are not themselves unjust. Since equality is a 'constituent

element' of these phenomena, injustice is contrary to their natures. Third, there is only one way to end these forms of injustice whilst retaining the structures, spaces and power that do exist and are essential to the constitution of our social and political identities. When we confront these forms of injustice, we must appeal to the oppressor's basic recognition of the equality and autonomy of the oppressed. In doing so, we must facilitate the exchange of reasons among *all* people. This is necessary because when violence *alone* is used, we might dethrone the oppressor, but doing so will always be at the expense of our own existential annihilation. All falls silent in the face of violence.

Conclusion: the power of beginning

We must reject the way of thinking about people and politics that is captured by much of the language that has been used to describe and justify the student protests. We must adopt a conception of politics that emphasises autonomy and the exchange of reasons—that is, our unique capacity as differently situated individuals *to come together*, deliberate and decide what *we* truly should do.

> *'There is no way to undo what has been done, no way not to suffer it—but you can do more than merely suffer it: you can take it as your point of departure. You can, in short, begin.' The power to change the world, to begin something new, dwells within each of us.*

It is this power of women and men to free themselves from the chains of the past, to begin something that is entirely new, that is captured in Plato's claim that 'the beginning is like a god which as long as it dwells among men saves all things'.[17] In South Africa, where the wrongs of the past remain with us, where the hurt is still real, recognisng and harnessing this potential is vital. As Patchen Markell puts it: 'There is no way to undo what has been done, no way not to suffer it—but you can do more than merely suffer it: you can take it as your point of departure. You can, in short, begin.'[18] The power to change the world, to begin something new, dwells *within* each of us.

In many respects, South Africa is a manifestly unjust society. But, it is not totally unjust. Only when we recognise that the injustices that do mark our society are the result of the choices that we *freely* make, and remake again and again, will we be in a position to eliminate them. Only when we commit to talking and listening to one another—to all people, who in their absolute distinctness are the same— will we be able to move forward, together, as a community.

NOTES
1   For a very recent example of the determinist tendencies that accompanies Marxist thought, see Jeff Rubin, 'The shadow of liberation: Representivity and the commodification of race' (last accessed at: http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-11-13-the-shadow-of-liberation-representivity-and-the-commodification-of-race/#.VkW1jdlrKM8, on 13 November 2015), where he argues that 'it is not colour that determines the way police, or management, behave, but their role in the social division of labour in class structured societies'.
2   Standard examples are Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.
3   Carl von Clausewitz, On War (Michael Howard and Peter Paret (trs.), Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1984) 87.
4   The idea that humanity is 'produced' is a central theme in the influential and powerful work of Judith Butler, Undoing Gender (Routledge, New York 2004). It is borrowed from Marxists, who speak about 'class societies' that 'naturally reproduce themselves in all the particularities of form' (cf. supra note 1)
5   Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge (Robert Hurley (tr.), Penguin Books, London 1998) 96.
6   Ibid at 102.
7   See Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, 'The #FeesMustFall movement, Liberalism and the Pursuit of Peace' (http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-11-09-the-feesmustfall-movement-liberalism-and-the-pursuit-of-peace/#.VkGMq9lrKM8, last accessed on 10 November 2015). Wielding Robespierre's pen, Commissar Ndlozi argues against the ideas of peace, reason and dialogue, instead advocating passion and violence. On the ends justifying the means, he says: 'Both the media, and the general liberal crowd, began to patronise an entire movement, which from the start expressed itself with full determination that nothing, not even the police will stop it, from achieving its ends.' In the same vein, he later says that the 'legitimacy of the protest is the power of its mission'.
8   See Sarah Godsell, '#WitsFeesMustFall Op-Ed: On violent protest and solidarity' (http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-10-19-witsfeesmustfall-op-ed-on-violent-protest-and-solidarity/#.VjJslNlrKM8, last accessed on 3 November 2015).
9   This phrase comes from Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra (RJ Hollingdale (tr.), Penguin Books, New York 1969) 149.
10 Ibid at 83.
11 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IEFD_JVYd0 (last accessed on 9 November 2015).

12 Austin Huguelet and Daniel Victor, '"I Need Some Muscle": Missouri Activists Block Journalists' (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/10/us/university-missouri-protesters-block-journalists-press-freedom.html?_r=0, last accessed on 12 November 2015).
13 Hannah Arendt, The Promise of Politics (Schocken Books, New York 2005) 61-2.
14 Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (Viking Press, New York 1961) 44.
15 So, for example, when Cecil John Rhodes died, his participation in the constitution of these spaces ceased. Obviously, this does not mean that some of his deeds do not still exert an influence over the lives of South Africans. But, the past (and its influence on the present) is a fact, not an action. Ontologically, it is different to phenomena like structures, power and space. This difference between the nature of facts and actions means that they present us with different challenges. The failure to recognise this difference hinders efforts to resolve these challenges and also has consequences of the type explored in this paper. Cf. Elias Phaahla, 'Transforming the Socio-Academic Space in the University', 2015 (76) The Journal of the Helen Suzman Foundation, 54.
16 On the desire to 'Africanise knowledge', see Shose Kessi, 'Time to decolonise our universities' (http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/time-to-decolonise-our-universities-1.1843798, last accessed on 9 November 2015). As pointed out to me by Tony Kruger, my father, there is an irony here, for the concept of 'knowledge' with which these writers are working was first shaped by European and US—that is, non-African—scholars.
17 Plato, Laws, 775, quoted in Dana Villa, Public Freedom (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2008) 105.
18 Patchen Markell, 'The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê and Democracy' American Political Science Review 100, no. 1 (2006) 1-14, 10.