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STUDENT PROTEST IN SOUTH AFRICA

- Albie Sachs

Fashion-conscious South Africans living as they do in the Southern Hemisphere are usually six months behind the European season, but it would be a mistake to regard the recent student demonstrations there as a mere echo of similar demonstrations in Europe. In fact a section of South African students have been in a state of almost continuous and decorous protest for twenty years; the only new feature has been the use of the sit-in technique, first at the University of Cape Town and now at the University College of Fort Hare.

In keeping with the policy of apartheid, South African universities are divided first along racial lines, then along linguistic and ethnic lines, and finally along tribal lines. Thus a matriculant in Cape Town who wished to study physics would go to Stellenbosch if he were white and Afrikaans-speaking, to the Western Cape if he were brown and Afrikaans-speaking, to Cape Town if he were white and English-speaking, to Durban if he were of Indian descent, to Zululand if of Zulu descent, to the North if of Basuto descent and to Fort Hare if of Xhosa descent. The theory is that each student should imbibe knowledge in the atmosphere and spiritual tradition of his forefathers; practical advantages to the Government are that white Afrikaners are protected from liberal and humanitarian influences, while non-white students are dispersed to small easily-policed colleges.

The University of Cape Town is one of four English-language universities, and like the University of the Witwatersrand, has a tiny and dwindling quota of non-white students, each one of whom has to get special permission from the Government to be there. It is the oldest South African University, has Professor Christian Barnard on its staff, Sir Richard Luyt, a former Governor of Northern Rhodesia and British Guiana as its new principal, and Harry Oppenheimer, Chairman of Anglo-American Corporation, as its Chancellor. It also has a lively student body that causes the University Council much unhappiness by from time to time trying to act in accordance with the old-fashioned liberal virtues in which the University claims to believe. Thus when the University Council recently vetoed the appointment to a teaching post of Mr Archie Mafeje on the grounds that the Government disapproved of an African holding the post, a thousand students occupied the Administration Block by way of protest. Hundreds stayed put for a week before withdrawing under the threat



of hooligan and police attack. (Curiously, Mr Mafeje himself was rather disdainful of the protests, while the man who took over his post was reported to have been very active in them).

The very modesty of the student demands indicated how conservative the atmosphere was in which they operated. They did not seek to revolutionise society nor even to reform the structure of education, but only to insist that the Government and not the University authorities should bear the stigma of cancelling Mr Mafeje's appointment. The principle of University autonomy on which they rely is in fact one of the very ideas against which students in Europe have been rebelling, though perhaps it takes more courage to assert a bourgeois virtue in a fascist society than to advance a revolutionary slogan in a bourgeois society.

The white student protestors would be the last to claim that their actions are the beginnings of a democratic upsurge amongst whites that threatens to overthrow apartheid from within. The four English-language universities which have supported the protests have a total enrolment of only 20,000 out of South Africa's 70,000 students. Both geographically and politically their campuses are academic shangri-la's that lie far from the locations, compounds and servant's quarters in which most South Africans live. The protests undoubtedly keep a spirit of opposition alive and anger the Government - the new and "enlightened" Minister of Police felt it appropriate to read out to a Nationalist Party audience a list of Jewish names amongst student leaders - but they do little to alleviate the conditions of the African people. When eventually they graduate the students of these universities are rapidly absorbed into the prosperous business and professional world of white South Africa; possibly a generation later their sons and daughters carry on with the protests. Some of the students and junior lecturers have gone further and have given full-fledged support to the African underground movement, but their numbers have been small and they operated outside of the university context. In the period 1962-1964 in particular a few of them took part in acts of sabotage, but eventually they were tracked down by the police. Many were tortured, some became traitors, others fled, and several are still in ~~xxxx~~ prison.

Fort Hare University College was once the pride of African education and attracted scholars from all over Southern



and Central Africa, including many persons who now occupy positions of leadership in newly independent states. In recent years the Government has tried to degrade it into an institution for turning out bureaucrats for Bantustan. The College is in an isolated part of the Eastern Cape and has a student body of less than 500, about a quarter of the disgracefully low number of African students in South Africa. Progressive members of staff have been replaced by paternalist pro-apartheid academics; courses have been drained of life, student societies have been suppressed, informers proliferate, and the police are frequently found on the campus. Yet protests continue. They tyres of police cars might be slashed, or a skull-and-crossbones flag flown on a building; lectures might be boycotted, or an African National Congress slogan painted on a wall, or a meeting held without the Rector's permission. Every year or two a number of students are expelled for 'misconduct' of this sort. For them there is no question of "going back to Daddy" - an expelled African student would be lucky to get a job on a road-gang, let alone in an office or school. His pass-book would record his premature breaking-off of studies, and the Security Police would be at his heels for the rest of his life.

Against this background the sit-in last week-end of 200 Africans in one of Fort Hare's buildings was a feat requiring extraordinary courage. For three days they refused to budge, and only when police accompanied by dogs moved in - there is no inhibition against using dogs to disperse or capture Africans - did they move out. Thus nearly half the student body and about 10% of all African students in the country were expelled. Many of them may eventually be allowed to return, but the remainder are not likely to regret their actions, for they will realise that their defiance was in the tradition, ~~if not of Danny the Red, then of the Black Pimpernel~~ <sup>of</sup> Nelson Mandela, ~~Along with~~ <sup>and</sup> Oliver Tambo, now Acting-President of the African National Congress, ~~Mandela was~~ <sup>who were</sup> expelled from Fort Hare in the 1940s and ~~again along with Tambo~~ <sup>who</sup> he abandoned a successful legal career in the 1960s to give leadership to the armed struggle of the African people.

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Thus if/white students have weakened the myth of white unanimity, the black students have punctured the claim of black submission; historically both are important, but there can be little doubt that the less publicised African protest has the greater long-term significance.