

The role of the privileged in struggle

As a young person I have been told that this venue is a nightclub. I know the Mandela Foundation is trying to be relevant to young people and this is a good start.

Esteemed chair of the foundation Prof Ndebele,

Mr. CEO, and to me, comrade Sello Hatang,

Members of the board of trustees of the Foundation,

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

The nice thing about speaking before Prof Maluleke is that when he is done no one will remember what I have said.

I never thought that whilst as a student I would be asked by the Nelson Mandela Foundation to speak at such an auspicious event. I thought that these platforms and spaces are only for young people to sit and take notes from the fountain of wisdom that exists around this room. I can only hope that the views of young people are important to the people here and that these views will be taken seriously. I will not stand here and claim to be a messiah of the views of young people. I too am here from a privileged position as a graduate from Wits.

But as a progressive student you try, like our champion Caster Semenya, to starve your critics and feed your focus by influencing things on campus and this can take on multiple forms; helping a friend study, fighting against the exclusion of students (financially or academically), fighting to end the exploitative measure of outsourcing, fighting to decolonize our university spaces. These are some of the constant struggles that are important to the student that has a socially conscious and progressive mind. This is the reality of many of my colleagues and I (whilst still trying to graduate of course).

But are any of these struggles relevant to broader society?

For a moment allow me the poetic licence to shift my perspective. What is the reality of the struggle of the miners in Marikana or at Lily Mine or at any other mine?

What is their reality?

What is that they are fighting for?

What is it that they are trying to do?

Their fight is a simple one, but one that requires the ultimate sacrifice from them. Their struggle is a daily one to delve deep into darkness a thousand miles from home to provide a better life for their families by earning a living wage.

Does that mean anything to me as a student? Should it mean anything to me as a student?

And I am talking more broadly in the sense of the common student on my campus.
Are any of these miners struggles relevant to society?

From this black working class reality let us take a quick jog up the corporate ladder.

The reality of a CEO of a multinational company will be struggling with making a profit and keeping his job, things like the exchange rate, struggling with the impact of a credit downgrade, his company's market share, corporate branding, struggling to find the warmest most exclusive K-Way jacket to take with to Mandela Bridge.

Are any of his struggles relevant to the rest of us? Should they be?

From these 3 perspectives, an understanding of the multiple lenses that our society is viewed through is created but more importantly an understanding of the multiple layers that make up our nuanced reality is also created.

Why is our reality so important?

The great African thinker Amilcar Cabral postulates that you can have the most revolutionary theory but theory without an application to reality will remain just that, it will remain theory. Therefore for us to find answers to our struggles we must first understand our complex reality. And we don't need fancy commissions that waste tax payers money with no precedence of success of real change to make us understand our reality. In fact, the word "Commission" has become a buzzword for government when there is public pressure but a bankruptcy of political will.

The only reality is a plurality of positionalities and by understanding these positionalities we will understand reality.

Given how important understanding reality is in creating solutions let Mahmoud Mamdani guide us when he proposes "could it be that the African renaissance does not have a single parentage, a single genealogy, that its waters come from many springs before joining a large flow". What this does is to illustrate that no one vantage point gives us a true understanding of our reality. This is very important because it articulates that solutions for challenges of African girls living as Muslims in Nigeria is very different to girls living in Diepkloof.

This also lays to rest the notion that Africa is a country, and more importantly that solutions can be replicated from one part of the continent to another as Mr. Gates believes.

And once we understand reality in this way, we then need to consider the relativity of reality and that is privilege. Privilege works in different ways depending on whose lenses you are looking through.

The importance of this is that I have been asked to speak about the role of the privileged in the struggle, now what is privilege. As society we've defined certain privileges, we have defined and almost accepted certain definitions into what privilege is but I think the deeper question is to redefine and reimagine what privilege is looking through the lenses of multiple people. Only then can we understand what is privilege and why is it so important.

In Alexandra township in Tshwetla where people live without water without electricity they would look at another part of Alexandra and consider that part to be privileged, where there is running water where the road is tarred where there is electricity where the clinic is within walking distance.

Whereas someone in that part of Alex will look to the tall building in Sandton and realize that that is where real privilege lies.

This relativity of privilege can be extended to all facets of society,
High school dropouts vs university students
Public vs private healthcare vs those that cant access healthcare
Rural vs urban
Black vs white
Heterosexual vs LGBTIAQ+
Women vs Patriarchy

What we need to understand is that privilege is intersectional in nature.

People can be oppressed or privileged in multiple forms.

We have set the scene and contextualized our reality and we now get drawn into the question as to what is the role of the privileged in our struggle.

The important point is that we acknowledge we are in a struggle. We acknowledge that our society is unjust and in an unjust society, democracy can only mean so much. We acknowledge that certain people are more vulnerable and will be more abused. The probability of your abuse is inversely linked to your privilege. This is what privilege is.
Bear this in mind as I now look at struggle,

There is a common thread that runs through various acts of struggle during our democratic dispensation, and Ill limit myself to just three, from the service delivery protests we see everyday, to Marikana and the miners struggle for a living wage, to Fees Must Fall.

The common theme of all these struggles is that they have been Black Working Class struggles.

Let me analyze fees must fall and let us look at the attitude of two sectors of society during our protests last year. The idea amongst government officials is that we were protesting last year because we did not want to write exams. The idea amongst corporates was that free education was bad because then the quality of our universities would be lost.

I wonder if the same simplistic thinking informs decisions in government and in business, if so it would shine a light on our failings as society.

Just last week we commemorated the 4th year since the Marikana massacre.

Did any of the JSE listed companies CEOs mention anything condemning what happened? These are questions we must ask, the government's role has been complicit, we know this, but what about others?

The same CEOs who will claim to care about the poor and homeless by sleeping outside in police protected areas "cleaned out" especially to keep them safe with Ladysmith Black Mambazo playing live in the background, these same CEOs did not say anything when we commemorated Marikana.

What this so poignantly shows is that our struggles remain black working class struggles.

Ideally what we should have are societal struggles.

For the only time that we will see real societal change is when our struggles are not class struggles but societal struggles.

Now what are the barriers that prevent our class struggles from becoming societal struggles.

The first is the lack of willingness to understand reality through the lenses that we have described. Subsequently this means that there is no understanding of privilege especially from the most privileged.

The second is the failure to acknowledge that we have created a fractured society. This has created a subsequent distrust and has destroyed any social pact that may exist.

The third is a paternalistic entitlement and arrogance among the privileged. Whenever a struggle is working class, the class structure of society is such that the most privileged in society want to dictate the terms on how struggle must be waged. They will be quick to demean, insult and criticize a struggle without wanting to engage on why the struggle is waged.

The fourth and final point is the most critical in that a societal struggle seems to change the fundamental way society functions. What this means is a change in the status quo. A change in the status quo will never be advanced by those who benefit the most from the status quo. And thus we arrive at the protectors of the status quo. The gate keepers of the status quo, those who do not want to drive societal change and who make legitimate struggles, class struggles all in the name of protecting their privilege. And what we have in society is a Commander in Chief of the *status quo*, Mr Bill Gates himself.

When Mr Gates makes mention of Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg (and himself) as bright examples of young excellence in the world because in his own words "Young people are better than old people at driving innovation because they're not locked in by the limits of the past." I'd like him to tell that to the mother of young Tamir Rice, a black teenager killed for playing with a toy gun on a playground in the States. It is also questionable that Apple which has profited off of child labour and sweat shop factories is something that we should marvel at, part of defining where we are going is re-imagining the current practices which are accepted yet shrouded in unethical ways.

To the CEOs that we mentioned before, a person like Bill Gates, a multibillionaire and a celebrated philanthropist, to them Gates is a saint. But to those who look closer and dig deeper, we will find that indeed Bill Gates is indeed a saint, he is a saint of the *status quo*. I say this because it is clear that Gates does not problematize his own privilege and this came out in what he spoke about at the annual lecture and is glaringly obvious in the work that he does.

Philanthrocapitalism is a way of doing philanthropy that emulates the way business is done in the for-profit capitalist world. Gates has become the poster boy for philanthrocapitalism.

Piketty last year spoke about inequality, and we know inequality creates a fractured and divided society. How did we get here? Bill Gates describes apartheid as merely "keeping people apart"

But we know it as a system that was more than this, it was the systematic erasure of the humanness of one group because of their colour. This whitewashing of history is also evident when Bill Gates talks about learning of Mandela the freedom fighter in school. Not Mandela the terrorist as America so wrongly believed and funded the apartheid government to fight against. Extending this idea, when discussing Africa's problems there is no understanding of the legacy colonialism played in dividing us and the way it lives on through illicit financial flows, cheap labour and dead aid.

This again creates a warped sense of reality and what we have shown is that privilege prevents our class struggles from becoming societal struggles.

This is not to condemn everything Gates does, because there is a marginal societal benefit but believing that philanthrocapitalism can "save the world" is a fallacy. We need to start being more critical of solutions based on the very systems that have created the unjust world we live in. As the great black feminist thinker Audre Lorde says, "the master's tools will never dismantle

the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

And we have today defined the masters house as being the status quo, and we have also seen the commander in chief and principle defender of the *status quo*.