

What did Newton know? Rioting students determined to defy gravity

Written by Administrator

Sunday, 23 October 2016 11:59 -

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lecturers-fear-worst-as-students-add-african-science-to-demands-wncgpq5fm>

Stuart Graham, Johannesburg

October 17 2016, 12:01am, The Times

South African students who have been in violent clashes with the police while campaigning for free tuition say they want to scrap the “Eurocentric” science curriculum in favour of traditional African theories.

Sir Isaac Newton’s law of universal gravitation has come in for particular criticism from the movement known as #Sciencemustfall. In a meeting with the science faculty at the University of Cape Town, Kealeboga Ramaru, a student leader, questioned the cause of lightning and dismissed Sir Isaac’s work as colonial.

“I have a question for all the science people,” she said. “There is a place in KZN [KwaZulu-Natal province] called Umhlab’uyalingana . . . They believe that through the magic — you call it black magic, they call it witchcraft — you are able to send lightning to strike someone. Can you explain that scientifically, because it’s something that happens.”

“Decolonising” the sciences would mean doing away with the field entirely and starting all over again “to deal with how we respond to the environment and how we understand it”, she said.

Science lecturers contacted by The Times said that violence at the country’s universities had made work almost impossible. Many are afraid to speak out against the students. Lecturers warned of an exodus of academics to overseas universities or privately owned institutions.

Research funding from the state is in extremely short supply. While none of the academics would comment on the “Sciencemustfall” movement, one referred to a period in the early 2000s when Thabo Mbeki, the president at the time, refused to allow an antiretroviral treatment campaign for people with Aids.

Mr Mbeki’s health minister promoted a traditional African method for fighting disease: a concoction of garlic, beetroot and onion. “We lost around 300,000 people, many of them babies and young children, due to the delay in rolling out an Aids treatment programme,” the lecturer said. “Science is not western or African. It’s universal and it’s there to be built on. People need to be very cautious about calls to remove it. The consequences could be devastating.”

At the Wits university in Johannesburg, students agreed that they would like to see their syllabus “Africanised”.

“I once walked off a lecture because it was offensive,” Mfundo Hlangani, an archaeology student, told The Times. “The person who was doing the research didn’t do the proper consultation with the indigenous people.”

Even the university’s architecture needed to be decolonised and Africanised, he said.

Tina Radebe, a biology student, said it would be difficult to decolonise the sciences but the

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curriculum needed more African voices.

“We know about European scientists. We don’t know exactly about African scientists and what African findings are,” she said. “Decolonisation is very important and it is very possible. However, I am not sure how far it can go in mathematics and the sciences.”

The “fall” movement gained momentum early last year after students at the University of Cape Town protested against a statue of Cecil Rhodes, the late British prime minister of the Cape colony in the 1890s. The statue, which was frequently doused with human faeces, was eventually removed.

Months after the incident students at the university ripped historic artwork off the walls and burnt it in a bonfire on the streets, saying that the art represented South Africa’s colonial past.