

Book review

The new South Africa at twenty: Critical perspectives

Peter Vale and Estelle H. Prinsloo eds. 2014

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South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 remains one of the most analysed, lauded and respected political transitions, for numerous reasons, in modern times. The definitive character of the transition, with respect to a number of international and domestic factors, elevated the significance of the process, and ultimately assigned the country a status that was nothing less than the de facto poster-child of the emergent post-Cold War international system. From the largely peaceful nature of the transition process, the emphasis on thorough and effective political dialogue and negotiation, and the arguable extent to which liberal values imbued almost all facets of the country's political, social and economic transition, South Africa emerged as one of the greatest early success stories – which could be used time and time again to validate the dominant international politico-economic ideology of the time.

Twenty years later, however, many of the deep-seated structural and systemic factors that were either left unaddressed or inadequately addressed through the formative years of the transition process have re-emerged in ways that have given rise to a host of new concerns surrounding the long-term prospects of the country. The re-emergence of race, or the politicisation of race to be precise, is one such consideration, along with the deleterious aspects of crippling high levels of income inequality. At the centre of these new concerns remain questions over the governance record of the post-apartheid state, and its associated policies and records of delivery in key areas, primarily around the development of human capital (education and health) as well as infrastructure, energy and the mitigation of pervasive rent-seeking behaviour – through all levels and sectors of the state apparatus.

It is within this context that *The new South Africa at twenty: Critical perspectives*, edited by Peter Vale and Estelle H. Prinsloo, aims to make a contribution to current discourse and analysis surrounding some of the most critical issues at play in contemporary South Africa. Composed of ten chapters, each individually authored and covering a particular thematic area, the book provides exemplary insights on a range of issues, by drawing upon forms of analysis that are grounded in critical theory, and which seek to delve more deeply into the structure, substance and nature of the post-apartheid state. With all but three of the book's chapters having previously appeared in the Australian-based journal *Thesis Eleven* in 2013,¹ there are of course marked academic undertones throughout the book, along with the analytical and investigative rigour that one would expect of such writing; which is particularly refreshing given the often relentless onslaught of largely superficial social commentary that surrounds such critical issues in contemporary South Africa. Moreover, the book's chapters progress in a manner that largely accounts for the distinct 'narrowing' of contemporary understandings, analysis, research and even vocabulary on the study of governance – writ large – which has become increasingly concerned with technical and materially-oriented policy issues.

1 The respective authors of each of the chapters have, however, updated their contributions since their work first appeared in *Thesis Eleven*.

Indeed, one of the book's greatest strengths is the value provided through the critical-theoretical grounding that informs each respective chapter, and the subsequent conclusions drawn that speak to the world of ideas as much as they do to policy and current political, social and economic realities. An important idea that emerges in this regard throughout the book, concerns questions about the search for viable alternatives to entrenched social pathologies despite South Africa's much lauded democratic transition. Thus, discerning instances and trends of continuity, as opposed to change, within the country's broad political, social and economic life becomes vitally important in order to specifically interrogate what has gone wrong with the transition, what has gone right, and the reasons behind each of these.

The first chapter, by Deborah Posel, considers the politicisation of race in contemporary South Africa by focusing on the historical development path of the youth league of the African National Congress (ANC). It is particularly interesting that Posel within her examination of the chapter's subject matter centres upon the ANC Youth League, which she asserts has positioned itself at the forefront of debates surrounding race in South Africa. In the process of associating the two, Posel considers the fuzzy logic underlying the constitutional autonomy – but not independence – of the youth league vis-à-vis the ANC itself, the growth of recklessness, fractiousness and conspicuous consumption within the youth league, and the manner in which upward social mobility and the economic aspirations of its constituents have manifested and informed the re-politicisation of race at the forefront of contemporary South African public discourse. By highlighting the rise, arguable fall, and re-emergence of the youth league's charismatic former leader, Julius Malema, Posel then draws parallels between the very different grand-narratives offered to the public between South Africa's first democratically elected leader, Nelson Mandela, at the dawn of the country's political transition, and Julius Malema, twenty years later, and questions the role and place of race within these two competing frameworks.

Attention then shifts to the country's 'Political economy of pervasive rent-seeking' in chapter two, by de Kadt and Simkins, in relation to politico-economic policies and practices in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa.

While one of the more technically oriented chapters in the book, alongside the Chapter 5 case study concerning ‘Neoliberal restructuring and the fate of South Africa’s labour unions’ by Hlatshwayo, there is considerable insight provided into, inter alia, current policy directions through careful consideration of a number of key issues. Chief amongst these are the country’s industrial policy post-1994, the nature of South Africa’s labour market with particular regard to the creation of standards for black participation in the private sector, the significant shortcomings of the country’s education sector, the effectiveness of state administration, and the implications of a historical service delivery deficit – with particular regard to a growing welfare and developmental state.

Helliker and Vale then go on to provide a critical appraisal of Marxist literature within South Africa since the 1970s in Chapter 3. The underlying rationale behind this brings into sharp focus the fact that, more than twenty years after the formal end of apartheid, the country’s social transformation remains – for better or worse – mired within the overriding logic of neoliberal capitalism. To this effect, the authors trace the historical evolution of Marxist thought within the country, its contribution to the anti-apartheid project, and the nature of its conceptual entanglement with the country’s Black Consciousness Movement. In spite of this significant historical role, however, it is argued that the country’s government, and its partners, now rely on a form of populist politics that is devoid of any meaningful progressive content. Moreover, it is argued that although the state has pursued a number of redistributive programmes, these have largely been contextualised within and subordinated to an orthodox neoliberal economic programme. What follows is a rebuke of not only the pace, but the very direction of social change in post-apartheid South Africa, and the decisions of the ANC-led government which, in the authors’ opinions, have paid scant regard to history – through efforts aimed at firmly integrating the country within a global economic system that reinforces the divide between rich and poor.

Chapter 4’s interview with the late Jakes Gerwel truly stands out as one of the most insightful and telling parts of the book. In this chapter, Higgins

engages Gerwel on a number of critical pillars of South Africa's transition, with the questions being unsurprisingly oriented from a left-leaning perspective. What follows is a particularly well-rounded and meaningful set of reflections that span issues as diverse as the growth and implications of a pervasive rent-seeking class, the role of the humanities in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa, the uneasy relationship between education and economics, as well as musings on the role and behaviour of socialist-inclined thinkers in a post-Marxist world. Chapter 5 follows with an intimate investigation into the inner workings and considerations of South Africa's labour unions vis-à-vis neoliberal restructuring, whereby Hlatswayo traces and examines key developments within the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) in response to the management practices and strategies of ArcelorMittal SA at its Vanderbijlpark Works plant. Specifically, great attention is paid to the waxing and waning positions of NUMSA in light of broad international and national trends, with particular regard to privatisation and technological change, and the ways in which this (as indicative of a global 'crisis of capitalism') exacerbates political tensions and works to the long-term detriment of social transformation in South Africa.

This is followed, in Chapter 6, by Maré, who provides a thoroughly detailed overview of the ways in which 'race thinking' continues largely to inform the day-to-day behaviour of South Africans, with particular regard to social organisation. He goes on to provide an overview of this racialism in its many hues and manifestations as it influences and defines the lives of South Africans, despite the country's constitutional and political commitments to the idea (fuzzy as it may be) of non-racialism. In Chapter 7, Pithouse speaks to issues surrounding the value of the 'local' as a starting point with which politics could be articulated in order to address some of the greatest and growing concerns of our time. He considers a number of social movements, and the popular politics which accompanied these, in conjunction with the way theory interacts with local politics, and argues that – in South Africa particularly – local politics need to be taken much more seriously.

Attention is then shifted to a discussion of the education crisis in South Africa, which proceeds in two parts, through a prolegomenon, by Vally, to the thoughts of the late Neville Alexander who penned part two, namely 'Education in crisis'. Resonating with some of the earlier remarks by Gerwel, Alexander underscores the fact that the country's post-apartheid shortcomings with regard to education cannot be understated, should not be seen as a mere technical issue, and are indicative of a much broader crisis that works to the detriment of almost every other sector of society – with particular regard to the development and accumulation of human capital. By first examining some of the fundamental aspects of the crisis, Alexander goes on to consider viable, practical initiatives which could be used to address the situation – and which more deeply consider the effective *raison d'être* and design of such an education system, in line with post-apartheid South Africa's vision of a just society.

Following this, Walker considers the uneasy relationship between women, gender equality and tradition, and the particular salience these issues have acquired within the broader debate surrounding the meaning and nature of democracy in the new South Africa. By referring to a deep-seated conservatism surrounding gender relations within the ruling ANC as well as growing party support of traditional institutions and authority within its governance frameworks, Walker questions the gains made by the broad women's movement since 1993. Lastly, attention shifts to art and culture in contemporary South Africa, in Chapter 10, whereby Klopper focuses on the way in which late- and post-apartheid experiences have driven and informed creative expression and innovation.

Taken together, the book provides certain exemplary readings into a range of issues at play in contemporary South Africa, by delving deep into the subject matter and offering critical insights that go far beyond the everyday, comfortable analyses that many South Africans may have become accustomed to. There are times where the jumps between chapters appear to be particularly disjointed, as well as a few occasions on which the authors tend to stray too far and get lost in the world of ideas, but this does not detract from the overall well crafted and nuanced contributions of each.

It would, however, for the sake of greater analytical balance, have been good to see the inclusion of authors whose views may be diametrically opposed to those presented here, within the collection of chapters – as well as a more balanced selection, by certain individual authors, of the cases they sought to highlight in order to support their respective arguments. But again, the overall quality of critical scholarship throughout the book more than makes up for this. In conclusion, this is a definite must-read for anyone interested in understanding post-apartheid South Africa's political, economic and social trajectory, the pace and direction of social change in the country, and the persistence of certain deep-seated social pathologies that fester despite the ongoing development of a robust, albeit young, democratic tradition.