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SHORT-CHANGED? SOUTH AFRICA SINCE APARTHEID

Reviewed by Ben Turok

By Colin Bundy
Jacana: Auckland Park, 2014. 173 pages

Of all the books being published on post-apartheid South Africa, this is easily one of the best. Written in an elegant style, without jargon or pretention, it covers a wide spectrum of issues and will enlighten even the most informed reader. I have been over this ground many times before, yet I find Bundy’s insights have deepened my understanding of our recent history.

Explaining the context of the negotiations which led to the ANC’s rise to political power, Bundy highlights the withdrawal of support from the USSR and key African governments. This led to the realisation that an “armed struggle relying on external support was no longer feasible”. Added to this was the discrepancy between the ANC’s military capability and its immense symbolic strength.

The ANC went on to win its main objective, political power, but paid little attention to economic policies. Bundy charts the battles over economic policies in the succeeding years, including the sidelining of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). This, he says, was due to an “elite compromise” on the economy during the negotiations and to prior discussions in exile led by Thabo Mbeki. Bundy sees this as a loss of nerve, not a sell-out. Nor were these leaders “duped”: they lacked prepared

theoretical positions from which there could be no departure.

Bundy acknowledges the achievements of the ANC in government, but pulls no punches about the deficiencies. These include huge levels of economic inequality, poverty and unemployment, and fierce feuds, factionalism and “increasingly hollow left rhetoric” in the political realm. Current economic policies are rooted in fiscal orthodoxy, monetary controls, deregulation and a reduced role for the state. The National Development Plan (NDP) is merely “social democracy cum market orthodoxy”, says Bundy.

He argues that the ANC has failed to create a developmental state. Rather it uses “an imported conceptual tool-kit” to introduce IMF-type measures such as cost recovery and user-pay mechanisms that hit the poor. The consequence is that the racially mixed middle class has been the major beneficiary, with deracialisation occurring in the upper classes.

If I have focused on his many critical judgements, I need to qualify this by saying that most of Bundy’s comments are presented in an even-handed manner. He always provides context, not to justify, but to explain why things developed in a particular way. At the same time, he occasionally does become judgemental when a dispassionate analysis would have been more persuasive. >>