

Essay Review

Persistence and Change in South African Society

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There are few outstanding macroscopic analyses of South African society. In this kind of endeavour historians and economists have, until recently, fared decidedly better than sociologists and political scientists. The first significant generation of writings in the latter categories which appeared during the late fifties and first half of the sixties from the pen of scholars like Gwendolyn Carter, Leo Kuper, and Pierre van den Berghe, consequently had a considerable impact. They essentially propounded variants of the 'powder-keg theory' in common with partisans like Bunting, the Legums and much other popular writing at the time. There was conflict, conflict everywhere and it was difficult to conceive how the apartheid state could avoid coming to a sudden, ignominious, and violent end, sooner rather than later. They were writing, of course, in the shadow of the passive resistance campaigns, the treason trials, Sharpeville and the 'Winds of Change' from the North. Now, ten or more years later, South Africa can look back on the period of greatest prosperity it has ever known and seems considerably more secure despite intensified international pressures. It is not surprising, therefore, that a new generation of literature should have appeared to account precisely for this fact. Much has happened elsewhere, too, which has affected assessments of the South African situation. America witnessed the rise of black power and minor separatist movements, other Western countries

like Britain had the first experience of major racial tension at home, and the creation of stable and economically viable states in independent Africa turned out to be much more difficult than optimistic Western observers had first believed. In South Africa there has, of course, also been Chief Gatsha Buthelezi — symbol of a new breed of astute black leaders who are ready to exploit apartheid to their own and their voiceless constituents' advantage.

The books dealt with in this review, with the partial exception of Kinloch's, are representative of the search for a fresh understanding of South African society. While the answers offered now differ in important respects from those propounded by the earlier writers, the questions remain the same. These are, firstly, what in the last analysis holds together this divided society; and, secondly, how is it most likely to change in the future? Together they constitute the fundamental questions of structure and dynamics. Significant change seems likely to result from a combination of internal and external forces. These books, however, deal chiefly with the internal dimension and this essay review restricts itself to this perspective.

It may be as well to start with a lightweight, Kinloch's *Sociological Study of South Africa*.^{*} Readers should not be misled by the jargon, the complex diagrams, and the heavy-

^{*} G. C. Kinloch, *The Sociological Study of South Africa: An Introduction*, London, Macmillan, 1972, 180 pp. £5.00.

weight price of his volume. It is designed as a text for introductory courses, the first of its kind in English for South Africa to my knowledge (S. P. Cilliers and D. D. Joubert brought out an Afrikaans text in 1966 under the title *Sosiologie : 'n Sistematiese Inleiding*, Stellenbosch, Kosmo). Hence it is so much the more regrettable that it is unlikely to serve this purpose well. It contains a limited amount of useful statistical and other factual information which is, however, likely to be soon out of date. While it is essential to introduce beginning students to the basic concepts of sociology, Kinloch approaches this task in a formalistic fashion which is bound to excite little interest on their part. The 'application' of these concepts to the South African situation contributes little to his discussion, but little insight. Sometimes this results in equivocating and question-begging generalities of staggering proportions. Consider the following: 'Whereas each racial sub-group in the society to a certain degree possesses its own set of norms, each group to some extent overlaps with the other, not so much in normative content but in the main direction towards which their norms point (i.e. rural-traditionalism or urban-modernism), at the same time being flexible enough to operate within both systems without breakdown of norms' (p.138). Or the statement that South African society is 'a racial hierarchy which is structured both socially and culturally' (p. 174).

Kinloch views South Africa as a plural society, which seems to mean little more to him than that it is heterogenous and 'highly differentiated' while being held together by the control of one section of the white elite. He, therefore, sees the white population as the chief source of both persistence and change. It is 'the Afrikaner-English power and cultural "duel" [which] is basic to an understanding of the social system' (p. 86). In short, the old 'Boer en Brit' story. Non-whites only enter into the picture 'negatively' [sic] as a threat necessitating 'strict control' of franchise arrangements and access to economic opportunities. Although urbanisation and industrialisation require minor adjustments, the power equation both between Afrikaners and English-speakers, and between Whites, on the one hand, and Africans on the other, remains basically stable. In the end it is Afrikaner nationalism which is 'the predominant element' (p. 98).

Kinloch is clearly no admirer of apartheid, but he sees no prospects for fundamental change either. His actual perspective appears much closer to that of the politically passive English speaking commercial and professional classes, whose younger generation he had been teaching introductory sociology at the University of Natal from the drafts of this book. In this commonly held view mitigation of the harsher aspects of the regime and a peaceful evolution toward a more rational, progressive and just society, largely depends on whether the Afrikaners undergo a change of heart or not. Blacks remain in the background as ill-defined and passive figures shrouded in an early-morning township smog.

Heribert Adam's equally brief, but infinitely more insightful *Modernizing Racial Domination** is well established by now. What van den Berghe's *South Africa : A Study in Racial Conflict* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1965) was in the sixties for American undergraduate courses on Southern Africa, Comparative Race Relations, or Politics in Africa, Adam's book has already become in the seventies. His commentary on current interpretations of South African society abounds with acute insights which, although not always original, frequently put existing knowledge in a new perspective. He is at his best when comparing the realities of the situation with other National Socialist or Communist variants of totalitarianism. He distinguishes apartheid as a form of 'settler colonialism' which is characterised by pragmatic oligarchic domination. Instead of following the assumption that Whites, and Afrikaners in particular, are swayed principally by an outdated racialistic dogma, he sees them as people who are defending their economic privileges and political prerogatives in a rational and efficient manner. He therefore does not expect apartheid simply to collapse under the weight of its inherent contradictions. Its leaders are constantly making adjustments to meet new challenges from within and without through the implementation and rationalisation of its policy of Separate Development. In the context of a rapidly expanding economy these measures have largely succeeded in deflecting the force of black aspirations. But as Adam clearly indicates,

* H. Adam, *Modernizing Racial Domination*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1971, 203 pp. U.S.\$8.00.

the process of differential incorporation has only succeeded thus far because of the constraints imposed by the high degree of economic interdependence and the massive impact of a sophisticated apparatus of coercion which includes a widely ramified intelligence network, advanced techniques of information control and a battery of repressive legislation operating behind a facade of technical impartiality.

Yet the reader's mounting expectation in the end lapses into disappointment since the promise of this book remains in large measure unfulfilled. Adam skilfully disposes of a number of popular and scholarly myths and toward the end speculates tantalizingly on future developments, but stops short of plunging to the heart of this 'very strange society', as Allen Drury has called it. His notion of a pragmatic racial oligarchy is never brought into clear focus and is illustrated rather than explicated. Adam's eclecticism leads him into analytical ambiguity and contradictions. He claims to take the political economy as the point of departure but fails to develop or apply this perspective consistently, such as when he returns to the processes of 'deideologization' and the transformation of Afrikaner 'racial obsessions' (p.159) in which their intellectuals are playing a leading role (pp.176-7). Are these superstructural epiphenomena or what? As a consequence one is never fully clear what the driving forces are behind this type of settler colonialism and particularly how such forces interact. Adam, in fact, sometimes comes close to crediting 'the system' with an uncanny foresight and almost immanent wisdom (the Afrikaner's faith in the hand of God guiding his destiny?!). In reacting against the prophets of doom he undoubtedly tends to take too sanguine a view of the prospects as, for example, his premature comments on the success of South Africa's 'outward' policy indicate.

Where, then, is change likely to come from? Adam is appropriately modest about being able to share the experience of the oppressed groups in South Africa and focuses explicitly on the role of the rulers. He finds it hard to conceive of a successful revolution without the support of at least some Whites and states that 'considering only internal factors, the subjective starting point for a change of the fossilized structure seems, therefore, to lie more in the developments and contradictions within the ruling group than in initiatives of

the subordinates'. Yet, with characteristic equivocation he adds that 'the dialectic of both factors cannot be overlooked' (p. 115). 'Gradually changing interest constellations' within the country or war from without, rather than revolution, is likely to be the source of transformation of South African society. Adam does in the end consider the role of the white legitimated Bantustan politicians in these changing interest constellations, even venturing that 'it is this realm where gradual pressures and changes are most likely to occur in the foreseeable future' (p.165). This is the problem with Adam: he touches somewhere along the way at every base, thereby covering himself against criticism, but leaving one confused as to his own position. In one respect he is consistent — seeing all black challenges as being forced into compromise and accommodation by the Whites' overwhelming determination and power to keep the pace of change under control. One might well ask whether this would prove to be the case in the long, or even medium term.

A collection of papers* edited by Heribert Adam covers a wide range of contributions by some of the better known scholars in the field, and from related disciplines such as psychology (Mann and Danziger), politics (Matthews), economics (Doxey) and anthropology (Mayer and Hellmann). Two of the authors, Andreski and Ford, attempt to place South Africa within a broad comparative context. Hardly any of the essays break new ground, yet they lend empirical depth to the more customary generalised discussions of South African society. Kogila Adam's modest account is, to my knowledge, the only available 'inside' analysis of the tension-ridden 'tribal colleges'. Fatima Meer's trenchant discussion of the fate of African nationalism after the Second World War adds valuable perspectives to historical surveys such as Carter's (in this volume) or Walshe's (elsewhere). Other contributions, notably those of Dickie-Clark on 'Bantu Education', van den Berghe on the types of segregation, and Doxey on job reservation, highlight the 'contradictions' which characterise the 'system'. But none of them predict its imminent collapse. Even van den Berghe

* *South Africa: Sociological Perspectives*, London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1971, 340 pp. £3.50.

revises his earlier position somewhat by pointing to the eufunctions of certain forms of segregation and economic discrimination. If there is any overall tone to this collection, it is of a liberal lament. Only the black journalist, Ngubane, is bold enough to intimate that in the end the White will only be in South Africa on the African's terms. Although this volume lacks distinguished contributions, it will prove useful, if for no other reason than that it is virtually the only one to survey between two covers such a range of important topics on South African society.

The report of the Political Commission of the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPRO-CAS, a joint project of the South African Council of Churches and the Christian Institute of Southern Africa),* is the last of six similar reports to have been published. The other commissions dealt with economics, education, law, the church, and society respectively. This particular publication differs in several respects from the works reviewed above. First, it represents the results of a joint effort which involved in the discussion stages, or as actual signatories to the final report, such notable figures as the late Leo Marquard, Alan Paton, Professor Edgar Brookes and the Revd Beyers Naude. The report itself was, however, drafted principally by younger academics, two of whom are political philosophers, or at least theorists, in the first instance. In spite of the inevitable differences in style, a fairly successful integration of the whole is nonetheless achieved. Second, by its very nature and purpose as well as the predominant interests of its authors, the report is normative as well as analytical. It is very much concerned with what would constitute 'good government' — a just, free, and participatory order — in a deeply divided plural society such as South Africa. The authors, therefore, not only clearly enunciate the basic ethical principles which serve as their own point of departure, but also subject various ideological-constitutional models, including that of Separate Development, to serious scrutiny. At the same time they seek to avoid presenting yet another idealistic but sterile blueprint, and declare their intention in the Introduction to 'take cognisance of the facts

of life as [they] found them' and to offer proposals which are 'practical and . . . stand at least a reasonable chance of acceptance and implementation under prevailing conditions'.

It would probably be easiest to criticise their proposals, even though they are modestly presented with many disclaimers. This I do not intend to do. I shall also largely ignore the principal normative thrust of the report, and rather focus on their interpretation of 'the facts of life' as they perceive them in South Africa.

Let me say immediately that from a purely analytical viewpoint this is a substantial piece of work and one of the most significant on South African politics to have appeared from within the country. The central chapters in particular are closely reasoned and thorough to the point of requiring a certain discipline on the part of the reader to sustain attention, the recognition of which appears to have prompted the project leaders to also make available an abbreviated 'layman's version' of the report under the title *Towards an Open, Plural Society*. Since few loose ends to the argument are allowed to remain, criticism of the analytical sections could most fruitfully be directed at the basic assumptions and perspectives underlying them, rather than their specific empirical conclusions.

The key point which is made repeatedly is that South Africa is an unequal society held together through the coercive power of the white oligarchy which seeks, like all ruling groups, to govern the country primarily in terms of its own interests. Few outsiders would find this a startling discovery, but most white South African readers, to whom this report is evidently directed, might still need to be convinced of such a basic fact in the face of the highly sophisticated 'moral' justifications of apartheid which have been developed over the years. Even amongst social scientists the influence of cultural pluralist notions has frequently obscured the fact that group relations in the deeply divided societies of the colonial and modern post-colonial world are essentially power relations. This report goes to extraordinary, but necessary, lengths to expose the pretensions of even the most idealistic 'pluralist' approaches, demonstrating convincingly for example, that the policy of homeland partitioning is simply 'a sophisticated strategy for continued white domination'

* *South Africa's Political Alternatives*, ed. P. Randall, Johannesburg, SPRO-CAS, 1973, Publication No. 10, 252 pp. R2.00.

by relinquishing it 'in certain limited areas while seeking to maintain white domination where it matters most' (pp. 117, 119). The actual mechanisms of domination receive little attention, but few stones are left unturned in picking apart the idea-structures, incidentally, not only of various local and 'international' pluralist models, but also of other democratic philosophies, such as liberal-constitutionalism, which have played an important role in South Africa. An innovation is the brief examination of lesser known continental types of government such as the 'consociational democracy' practised in Austria and the Netherlands, or the 'corporate pluralism' of Norway, and the indication of the relevance they might have for the South African situation. The authors do not pursue the parallels and differences in great detail, but it eventually transpires that these distant examples become important, though largely hidden, models for the general direction of their recommendations, their specific form being dictated more by the current political realities in South Africa as they see them.

Such recommendations must, of course, be closely tied up with their assessment of the mutability of the South African polity, and the particular points at which the greatest leverage for change exist. The overall picture which they draw is a pessimistic one of a formidable political log-jam which is not likely to be easily or abruptly broken by any force, whether black consciousness, revolution from within or without, or the dictates of a rapidly expanding economy. In their opinion 'the danger is not so much the imminence of a truly revolutionary situation, but rather a further increase in the extent of coercive government' (p.185). Change is more likely to come about through a process of erosion of white power, or more precisely, as a result of significant concessions to the subordinate groups at probable (unspecified but containable) times of crisis in the future. The authors evidently assume the continuing control, or at least effective 'braking power' on the pace of change of a white-dominated parliament for a long time to come. The most that they seem to predict (and hope for) in the medium term, is that important concessions might be 'extracted' from the white power-holders through a combination of tough bargaining on the part of black leaders, the logic and moral force of the Afrikaner's conscience,

and the changing social, economic, and political demands from within and without.

As the report proceeds it quite deliberately shifts increasingly from analysis and prediction (of which there is little) to prescription. The key question of who is to implement or help bring about the reforms which they advocate largely remains unanswered, the 'how' being left more to the complex dynamic of impersonal social and political forces. On the one hand the authors, like Adam, seem to view Whites in a determining role; on the other hand they do not expect them to voluntarily demote themselves to co-equal partners with the subject groups. It is here that the apartheid created institutions and leaders acquire special significance. The report holds that certain aspects of Separate Development have gone so far as to be practically irreversible. And given their conclusions regarding the conflict generating potential in a plural society of individually based political institutions modelled along liberal-constitutionalist lines, it does not come as a surprise when they come out in favour of a more flexible, open and 'voluntary' version of the pluralist model which they themselves have criticised so severely: 'The new regional and communal authorities which have been created so far . . . are to be seen . . . as a rudimentary beginning for a new common framework of bargaining, consulting and mutual decision-making' (p. 201). It is within this context that the possible role of the Homeland leaders is analysed with great perspicacity. Have the authors done nothing else, one might suggest that they have at least provided a useful strategic handbook for these very leaders!

Given the Commission's pessimism about the likelihood of significant change, they are still remarkably sanguine about the possibilities for a relatively smooth evolutionary transition to a more open and just society, if and when this eventually comes about. Of course they do mention the possibility of violence, but apart from declaring it undesirable, they have little further to say on this score. Events during the two or three years since the report was first drafted have indeed vindicated their most important conclusions, but that is no adequate test yet. Whatever one feels about Edgar Brookes's touching liberal confession in his short dissenting note to the report, one must agree with its implications that had, say, young black political scientists been involved in the

drafting of the report, it is likely to have looked rather different even if they were not afflicted by the utopian dreams inevitably generated by an oppressive situation. For the general drift of the report must make it reassuring reading for most Whites, including critics of the current regime.

A coming generation of scholarly comment on South Africa, reacting to the writings of the early seventies, will probably have to account for the fact that authors of this generation failed to predict the rise of powerful new black (and likely sooner 'Coloured') social and political movements. Such developments would not hold a surprise for Peter Randall, the author of the final, coordinated SPRO-CAS report,* when they occur. Simply to take a copy of this book, physically mutilated by the excision of documents in the Appendix and the blacking out of quotes from recently banned leaders of SPRO-CAS' own Black Community Programmes, 'cut to comply with the Suppression of Communism Act', as is noted in handwriting on the inside cover, is to be vividly reminded of the present nature of the South African political system. In spite of the scrap book appearance created by the reproduction of posters and newspaper advertisements, Randall's forthright and unsparing resumé of the harsh realities of 'the segregated, discriminatory, unequal and unjust society' in which South Africans live 'from birth to death', would have a renewed impact also on those already well acquainted with the situation. It is barely a hundred pages long, the rest of the volume being taken up with details of the development of SPRO-CAS, its participants, organisation and funding, and documents relating to its various projects. Being based in large part on the other reports, there is not much original material in *A Taste of Power*, but the author's involvement (in his capacity as Director of SPRO-CAS) in the Black Community Programmes, gives an edge to his account which is largely lacking in the other reports.

Randall's point of departure is clearly stated on the first page: 'Fundamental change . . . will be initiated by blacks, and . . . the white oligarchy, which up to now has exercised a virtual monopoly of political and economic power, will increasingly have to respond to

black initiatives. We are in . . . a new historical phase in South Africa, in which the initiative for change is passing into black hands' (p.6). Current liberalising trends among Whites and 'accommodations' of the government to pressures concerning, for example, its sport and labour policies are seen as 'essentially marginal changes which do not fundamentally affect the basic inequalities of the social system' (p.10). Even among Whites the growing polarisation between opponents and supporters of the regime is indicative of the fact that the impetus for fundamental change is now more likely to come from extra-parliamentary sources. He predicts that the intolerance of dissent and increased hostility towards change-oriented activities will accelerate the processes of polarisation and confrontation. In fact, conflict and confrontation have become inevitable and will precede any significant change. In keeping with this approach, Randall pays more explicit attention than any of the other reports to the role of the emerging black consciousness and the significance of organised black labour. Now more than a year after this report was published, the precise future of the black consciousness movement to which he refers is in some doubt. Yet it is, certainly, a straw in the wind.

Overall, a fairly clearly defined consensus has, then, been emerging in recent writing about South Africa. The conclusion that South Africa is a society characterised by vast inequalities between the different racial castes which are held together chiefly by the correspondingly vast coercive machinery of the white dominated state, is now new. But few analysts of the situation today are willing to predict that a violent overthrow of this order is imminent. They tend to dwell on the extraordinary power and adaptability of white power instead. As a result we have a much better appreciation of the extent and effects of this power. A more detailed documentation and analysis of how this power actually operates 'from the inside' is, however, still lacking. Afrikaner academics should be the first to write about this, but until now they have not been very forthcoming.

Another major point of emerging consensus lies in the re-evaluation of the impact of 'grand apartheid' — the macro-processes of territorial and institutional separation set in motion more than twenty-five years ago by the Nationalist Government. These policies are no longer simply decried as inhuman and unjust in their

* *A Taste of Power*, Johannesburg, SPRO-CAS, 1973, Publication No. 11, 225 pp. R2,50.

consequences (which they most certainly are) or as irrational and doomed to failure. It is also realised that they have already altered the structure of South African society in fundamental ways and are likely to have an important bearing on whatever future developments occur in the Republic. They are, therefore, a necessary point of departure for any programme of change. Most authors now go further and see within these structures a (perhaps *the*) powerful lever for change. At the same time we have a much better understanding of the 'contradictions' or points of tension within these developments — and to this the SPRO-CAS Social and Political Commissions, in particular, have made no mean contribution. The assumption that Whites will continue to be able to control the pace of change is, however, difficult to accept. For will a coalition of black satellite powers

and urban interests not play for the highest stakes of the effective control of the whole South African state once it appears within their grasp? And will they not be willing to pay a high price for this? When this happens it will obviously be due not so much to the brutal oppression which they have suffered, but precisely to the 'evolutionary' accommodations which had been forced on their white masters by the complex forces now playing themselves out within the country.

One of the ironies of the South African situation is that books such as these are least likely to be read by those closest to power (excluding probably the censors and security officials!). Perhaps this should not be lamented, since it could only contribute further to the sophistication of their strategies of domination.

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