

## UNDER THE SPELL OF APARTHEID

Review of Hermann Giliomee and Lawrence Schlemmer *From Apartheid to Nation-Building* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1989)

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*From Apartheid to Nation-Building* is divided into two parts. Part One, 'Apartheid and its Reforms', outlines the background, ideology and functioning of apartheid and noting the shift from 'a missionary sense of purpose to a pragmatic functionalism', discusses the recent era of limited reform. Part Two, 'Towards Co-Existence' considers ways of moving to a genuine post-apartheid era and, through addressing the challenge of nation-building, offers a new framework for negotiating a unitary South Africa.

Both the interpretation of apartheid and the proposed 'solution' rests on Giliomee and Schlemmer's reading of the salience of ethnicity in which they accept that the root cause of division lies not only at the level of opposing material interests. Drawing on the work of Walker Connor, Joseph Rothschild and Donald L. Horowitz, the emotional power of nationalism (rooted in ethnic identity) is seen to have an independent causal significance that in the South African situation has made for zero-sum conflict. Accordingly, they argue that the struggle between Afrikaner and African nationalism can only be resolved through providing political structures that recognize (at least in the short term) the relative autonomy of these two main political traditions.

Hence their primary concern is to chart a middle way between apartheid and democracy. Such a route could evolve, they say, through the National Party's movement towards recognizing the concept of an 'open' political group. They argue that having a voluntary open group alongside racially defined groups creates 'a parallel form of political mobilization' which could 'become the constitutional vehicle through which the majority-based non-racial organizations, such as the UDF and ANC, could enter the formal political system' (1989: 204).

Rejecting the common society model which is committed to non-racialism and democracy (in the form of one person one vote in a unitary South Africa) on the grounds that it does not 'take into account the hard realities of South African society' and is not 'likely to win decisive support from both sides of

the potential divide' (1989: 155) Giliomee and Schlemmer believe that majority incorporation into the political system could be secured through their proposed framework which is built around the idea of having a period of transition with a government of national unity - a 'buffer phase' with no sectional domination and 'a mutual acceptance of national dualism and ideological pluralism' (1989: 241) that would eventually lead to majority rule.

Such a government of national unity, with a parity of power principle operative 'for at least 10 years' (1989: 227), would have two main power blocs; whites with their own community alliance forming a group-based minority faction and a non-racial alliance forming a majority faction. Provision would be made for a non-aligned formation comprised of those not aligned to the nationalist movements which would serve as the opposition and seek to build a third principle that 'must involve a genuine attempt at nation-building and seek to combine the best talents of all South Africans, regardless of their ethnic background' (1989: 216).

It is argued that for the transitional political system to work there must be an acceptance of the limits of power, an acceptance of the two political traditions, an abandonment of Westminster majoritarianism and a commitment from both sides to control their radicals. Also suggested are some intermediate policies to support transition - such as the elimination of the remains of segregation, the expansion of urban opportunity and the creation of a dual set of national symbols.

Although presented as a fundamentally new approach in many ways Giliomee and Schlemmer present little more than a reformulated consociational 'solution' riddled with basic problems around their understanding of ethnicity.

The work uncritically accepts the view that 'The main insight of recent comparative studies of divided societies is that conflict in these societies are not only about a clash of interests which can somehow be mediated' (1989: 162-63). What is important about an adherence to this school of thought which accepts that the dynamics of ethnic identity can lead to zero-sum conflict is that it guides the authors, whether they like it or not, close to accepting a basic tenet of apartheid - namely that ethnic contact can lead to conflict and friction. Recognition of this tenet informs the proposed framework of conflict resolution, a 'buffer period' is argued for precisely because it would avoid an 'unmitigated clash of interests and needs' (p 166). This is, in the short term, to accept much of the argument that 'if mixed development is to be the policy of the future in South Africa, it will lead to the most terrific clash of interests imaginable'. The author of these words? H F Verwoerd (1966: 24-25).

What makes Giliomee and Schlemmer's position so suspect is their lack of

theoretical sophistication; the matrix of factors that actually work to hinder assimilation and crystallize distinctiveness are not specified nor are comparative references to other divided societies sufficiently well drawn and no definitive truths relevant to ethnic conflict are given.

To approvingly quote the position of Rothschild that 'the relationship between the emotional component and the interest component of politicized ethnicity is dialectical. Neither is a mere epiphenomenon of the other...and neither functions alone' (1989: 163) is one thing; to unravel it quite another. If ethnicity has a significance independent of other variables what are its causal dynamics? And how is it that it can take on an intractable nature? Besides largely ignoring a whole range of theoretical literature on primordialism, plural society theory and uneven development the book does not begin to answer the key questions of how ethnic lines of division originate, endure and can be changed?

In failing to provide any social scientific rigour *From Apartheid to Nation-Building* does not provide sufficient grounds for rejecting alternate premises which could lead to very different conclusions. It can in fact be asked why the notion of ethnicity has any real analytic validity at all? Neville Alexander has written that it is necessary to question 'the implication that 'ethnic groups' simply exist somehow ...It is simply assumed that something called 'ethnicity' makes the group cohere' (1987: 137). Perhaps ethnicity does not in any trans-historical sense exist and is merely an 'invention'?

What this suggests is that instead of accepting the *a priori* arguments of Giliomee and Schlemmer on ethnic identity and its exclusivity, the starting point for analysis should focus on how and why the South African state under apartheid has 'manufactured' ethnic identity through the structural and ideological re-ordering of society (as, for example, with Group Areas and Homelands, schooling and media control). This calls for relating ethnicity to broader issues of social organization through a thorough-going sociological approach that gives serious attention to an analysis of state power and class forces. In this a central task should be to develop a framework to uncover the social psychology of racial domination and to tease out the space for strategies of emancipation.

The position of the two South African authors seems beguiled by the spell of the new order formed by apartheid which has created the belief that ethnicity not only does exist but has 'unalterable' characteristics. In terms of interpreting the book from a sociology of knowledge perspective this is perhaps why the 'ethnic factor' is overplayed and there is a natural affinity with the position of Connor, Rothschild and Horowitz.

Not surprisingly the arguments that are employed to reject democracy are extremely contestable. Not only do Giliomee and Schlemmer proceed from

judging the correctness of majoritarianism rather than from adopting the democratic principle 'to create, develop, and protect, political institutions for the avoidance of tyranny' (Popper, 1977: 125) but they fail to seriously consider any forms of participatory democracy and democratic socialism. Although it is argued that the lack of a widely shared sense of national identity is a major obstacle to establishing democracy there is no critical investigation of the preconditions for democracy in South Africa (as for example by Stadler, 1988). Such a project represents one of the most important and exciting areas for research and cannot simply be dismissed through the authors singular view of democracy and controversial reading of the salience of ethnicity.

To see, as Giliomee and Schlemmer do, a democratic solution as unacceptable because it does not have the support of the white electorate is to perpetuate the *status quo*. The issue should be recast to ask why people have not connected more with democratic practices? What is more, they are simply wrong in seeing the situation so much in terms of two exclusive nationalisms. Apart from the 20% white support the Democratic Party, committed to Western democracy, received in the 6 September 1989 election it is, as Alex Boraine - Executive Director of IDASA, has argued 'incorrect to equate white Afrikaner nationalism and black African nationalism - the former is exclusive, the latter (at least the non-racial democratic position) is inclusive and non-chauvinistic' (1989: 3).

Rather than taking such an apologetic and blinkered position what is needed is a different theoretical structure with a new imaginative synthesis of knowledge that can break the spell of apartheid and move South Africa towards a democratic and non-racial future.

#### References

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