

## Review Essay: Debating the politics for a people-centred transition

Hein Marais (1998) *South Africa: Limits to Change -- The Political Economy of Transformation*, Cape Town, London, New York: University of Cape Town Press, Zed Books.

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The South African transition is at a crossroads. A large section of the populace and activist community is of the belief that the ANC has failed to deliver on the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), and that its current policies are merely intended to enrich a small black elite. Polling data suggests that unlike 1994, a significantly large number of citizens will not participate in the country's second democratic elections. Two of the three partners in the tripartite alliance, COSATU and the SACP, differ fundamentally with, and have publicly voiced criticisms of, the ANC's and the government's macro-economic programme. Mandela and Mbeki, stung by these criticisms, have publicly berated their political partners for claiming 'easy victories' and for questioning the ANC's commitment to social transformation. These developments have thrown up debates about the transformative potential of South Africa's democratic transition, and on the appropriate economic policies and political strategies required to realise a more people-centred development.

Hein Marais' *South Africa: Limits to Change* is thus a timely contribution. Not only does it critically reflect on the economic debate within and outside the ANC, but it also engages in a debate on the social alliances and the political and organisational strategies required for the adoption and implementation of a developmentalist economic programme. This is really useful for much of the contemporary literature on the South African transition is largely policy-oriented, and thus ignores the political and organisational dimensions of the economic debate. Marais recognises this when he notes that there has been a distressingly '... cursory treatment of the political and organisational aspects' of a revitalised left project, and he thus analyses the possibilities of such an enterprise '... on the basis of a rigorous analysis of the transition, its terms, the recasting of social alliances, their class nature and the political-ideological reconfigurations in the democratic movement' (p. 194).

Marais' work also makes a distinctive contribution to the democratisation of literature in South Africa. Much of this literature (both mainstream and radical) is agency-oriented and focuses on significant political events of the transition, and/or the political and social movement elites who brokered the political and socio-economic compromises that defined the substance of the settlement (Habib 1995). The result, as Marais argues, is that '... they risk over-personalizing history and ... obscure the structural underpinnings of the transition' (p. 2). Marais' work, by contrast, advances a historical-structuralist analysis that explains the emergence, evolution and outcomes of the transition through '... a probing of South Africa's political-economic undercarriage ... the terms on which the transition proceeds, the ideological and structural shifts that accompany or drive it, and the relative strengths and weaknesses of the main forces contesting its outcome' (p. 2). This enables Marais to explore the limits of political action and the structural constraints on the choices available to various actors. The result is an analysis of the transition which enables us to understand why political, constitutional and socio-economic outcomes differ so significantly from those advocated by the ANC prior to it assuming office.

*South Africa: Limits to Change* is refreshing in another sense as well: namely, in its critical scrutiny of the ANC, SACP and COSATU, and their economic programmes and strategies. The seismic shift to policy research in the post-1990 period undermined the quantity and quality of critical radical scholarship. Moreover, post-apartheid South Africa has not taken kindly to critical scrutiny. Left-leaning scholars and activists are encouraged to raise criticisms in-house. Harsh responses to critics have discouraged most Congress-aligned scholars and activists from engaging in any form of public scrutiny of the transition. Given this, criticism has become the preserve of mainstream and conservative scholars. Marais, refreshingly, breaks this divide. His critical approach spares no one. Both the centre and left, leadership and activist community within the Congress alliance are subject to critical analysis. Neither is he shy of stating categorically that the transition has lost its way and to advance reasons for why this is the case. Such critical scrutiny from someone associated with the Congress movement is rare and noticeable in this era of compliance.

The book has other strengths but simply producing a litany of these would not do justice to it. Marais himself offers the work as a contribution to a broader debate on our past and present in the hope that this will spawn choices and actions by popular organisations that generate a better society for the citizenry. It thus seems incumbent to review critically the book, its analysis and recommendations in the light of this goal.

## Reinterpreting the History of Opposition and Engagement

A fundamental theme running through the book is that the popular movement in South Africa misunderstood the relationship between opposition and engagement. Drawing on a particular reading of Gramsci, Marais, following Mike Morris, argues that, by the 1980s, the ANC and SACP had adopted a puerile stance of non-collaboration with the state, which was counterproductive for the development of a radical reform strategy. He attributes this non-collaborationist attitude to the confrontationist-militarist paradigm that arose as a result of the shift to the armed struggle, the flow of black consciousness militants into the ANC in the post-1976 period, and the fact that such an attitude largely resonated with township youth who had become the mainstay of ANC support (p. 61). The result was that the popular movement was incapable of implementing a 'war of position' which would have involved '... separating ... elements of reform such as democratization and deracialization ... defending them ... and extending their parameters' (p. 60) while simultaneously rejecting and scuttling other reforms.

On first reading, this seems to make eminent sense. But further reflection leads one to conclude that Marais is too dismissive of the value of the popular movement's non-collaborationist stance in the 1980s. It is true to say that the revolt of the 1980s was largely spontaneous, and that the ANC and SACP only managed to claim leadership when the revolt was well on its way. It is also true to say that a section of the leadership overestimated the movement's capacity to organise an insurrection in the 1980s. But an acceptance of this does not necessarily have to lead one to deny the value of non-collaboration in the 1980s.

Indeed the popular movement's adoption of non-collaboration as a policy was the result of lessons it learnt from the struggles of earlier decades. The policy was first mooted by the All Africa Convention (AAC) and the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) in the 1930s and 1940s as a result of what they believed was the traditional ANC leadership's propensity to engage the state in a way that left the movement partaking in its own oppression (Tabata 1974 and *nd*). In subsequent decades, the policy became the mainstay of the entire popular movement as, implicitly or explicitly, it was adopted by all traditions of the national liberation movement.

Contrary to popular academic belief, non-collaboration did not deny the popular movement the right to engage the state on specific reforms. But what it did stress is that the fulcrum of the popular movement's activities should shift to opposition rather than engagement with the state. Engagement with the state as a tactic on individual issues was permitted, but a general orientation of engagement was

rejected. Marais' generalisation that the success of the trade union movement's registration exercise in the early 1980s proves that a general orientation of engagement would have been more productive, is misleading. It draws a conclusion on strategic orientation on the basis of the success of an individual tactical decision. But the trade union movement's registration exercise succeeded precisely because it was founded on a general orientation of opposition to the state. The trade union movement used the tactic of registration to further build its organisation. And it did not get co-opted particularly because of the oppositional orientation of both the trade union and popular movement in the 1980s.

Further, it should be noted that the widespread oppositional nature of political activities is what contributed to the stalemate that emerged in the late 1980s. It is precisely because of the much-maligned 'chaos' and the sense of ungovernability that the apartheid regime felt compelled to consider a negotiated resolution to the conflict. In all probability, a strategic orientation of engagement with the state would not have engendered the same sense of crisis on the part of the apartheid state. This conclusion does not mean one has to support the excessive individual acts of coercion that became common in the late 1980s. Neither does it deny that sections of the national liberation movement sometimes inappropriately applied the policy of non-collaboration to prevent certain tactical engagements that could have occurred with the state. But what it does suggest is the need for being less dismissive of the spontaneous mass oppositional struggles and the general policy of non-collaboration that became the symbol of the black population's rejection of the apartheid state, and the primary lever that forced the regime to open up negotiations.

### **Reinforcing Left-Wing Dogma**

Marais' *South Africa: Limits to Change* is a powerful critique of the ideas of the 'Washington Consensus'. In his response to this mainstream dogma, however, Marais unfortunately resorts to advocating a political and organisational alternative that can only be described as the South African left's new dogma. This left-wing dogma incorporates two elements: first, support for and participation in corporatist structures and processes, and secondly, implicit support for the continuation of the tripartite alliance (Adler & Webster 1994; Cronin 1994; Maree 1993; Saul 1991, 1992; Von Holdt and Webster 1992). To be fair, Marais, unlike most other radical scholars, does problematise both elements by critiquing what he perceives as '... engagements ... motivated by lofty goals which, in hindsight, were tinged with naivety' (p. 229). But, in perhaps what is the most disappointing aspect of the book, Marais dismisses (without exploring)

critiques by non-Congress activists and scholars by labelling them 'Trotskyist' (p. 230), and advances political, strategic and organisational recommendations that ultimately reinforce this left-wing dogma.

This is most clearly reflected in his argument on corporatism. Marais correctly problematises the debate on corporatism by identifying the central dilemma for the labour movement, namely, whether it is '... willing to become an active party to the neo-liberal economic strategy in exchange for concessions that effectively corral it into defending interests of sections of the working class?' (p. 232). He, however, proceeds to maintain that tripartite institutions should not be rejected, but rather '... challenged and broadened to subject policy-making to popular contestation'. To achieve this, he recommends that the labour movement '... develops its capacity to effectively participate in fora like NEDLAC', and that 'the ANC abandon its cowed stance to business and restore tripartite processes at the centre of macro-policy-making' (p. 233).

But is this not decontextualising the corporatist experience in South Africa? Marais correctly identifies the ANC's abandonment of its developmentalist economic vision as a result of the balance of power (p. 160). Is South Africa's corporatist experience (where macro-economic policy is excluded from the agenda of tripartite institutions) not the result of the balance of power? And even if macro-economic policy is placed on the NEDLAC agenda, would the balance of power not condition the choices of representatives in NEDLAC so that policy outcomes are similar if not identical to those that currently prevail? Do corporatist institutions not partly define the balance of power by incorporating the labour movement in a way that undermines its ability to mobilize in an adversarial form?

These questions are not addressed by Marais. This is partly because Marais' understanding of corporatism is drawn from the post-war experience of the social democracies of Western Europe. But societal corporatist experiments have also been prevalent in Latin America since the late 1970s. And, given that these corporatist experiments have been coupled with neo-liberal economic policies, are these Latin American experiences not more relevant for South Africa? Such comparisons would indicate that corporatism is compatible with and, in fact, reinforces neo-liberalism because it establishes mechanisms and procedures that constrain popular organisations from mounting an effective challenge to the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies. This after all is one of the conclusions of Adam Przeworski's *Democracy and the Market* where he demonstrates the logic for political elites in transitional societies to couple their neo-liberal economic reforms with corporatist structures and processes

(Przeworski, 1991). Or, as Leo Panitch maintains in his brilliant analysis of the new 'progressive competitiveness' strategy currently advanced by left intellectuals in the developed and developing world: 'the institutional and ideological structures ... of state capitalist or corporatist forms of development ... are in fact being subsumed as subsidiary sponsors...of hyper-liberal globalisation' (Panitch 1994).

Marais' analysis of the tripartite alliance is similarly limited. Again, he prefaces his recommendation by chastising the SACP for '... the poor level of political education in its ranks, the timidity of its strategic perspective and the suffocating weight and questionable pertinence of its theoretical bedrock ... colonialism of a special-type (CST) ...' (pp. 250-1). He also acknowledges the increased strains among the alliance partners, and concludes that the ANC is engaged in '... the task of managing a historic class compromise tilted against the interests of the majority' (p. 251). But he rejects the break-up of the alliance as unrealistic, and suggests that 'the most attractive route out of this impasse would be to recast the terms of the tripartite alliance in general, and the ANC-SACP alliance in particular, by allowing the creation of platforms within the ANC' (p. 251).

Once again, this recommendation is unproblematised and decontextualised from his own analysis of the balance of power. First, even though the break-up of the alliance is deemed unrealistic at this point, Marais cannot assume that this would remain the case in the future. He should thus have explored the issue of whether the tripartite alliance is the appropriate organisational vehicle for transforming the balance of power and realizing a people-centred transition. Secondly, Marais' recommendation for platforms in the ANC along the lines established by the Workers' Party of Brazil assumes that these organisations are similar and comparable. But no attempt is made to justify this assumption? Are the ANC and Brazilian Workers' Party similar types of organisations? Are their goals, policy prescriptions and programmes similar? Do they represent similar constituencies? What was the purpose of establishing these platforms in the Workers' Party? These questions are not at all addressed. The result is that one is left pondering the relevance of such a solution for South Africa.

Finally, are platforms within the ANC a realistic option and would they, even if they are established, facilitate a transformation in the balance of power to make a more people-centred transition feasible? Neither question is addressed by Marais. The last two years have witnessed a centralisation of power in both the state and the ANC. The closure of the RDP office and the transfer of its personnel and functions to the office of the Deputy State President, the increasing reluctance of ministers and senior leaders in the ANC to negotiate macro-economic policy with their partners in the Congress Alliance, the unilateral imposition of

GEAR by the Cabinet, and the recent decision of the ANC to give its National Working Committee (NWC) the responsibility for appointing regional premiers are all examples of this trend.

Again the Latin American experience is instructive in this regard. Some of the Latin American transitions have degenerated into what O'Donnell has termed delegative democracies, that is political systems in which representative political structures are weakened sufficiently to enable power to be centralised in – and delegated to – a leader and/or leadership (O'Donnell 1993, 1994). The reason for this is simple: to prevent representative structures from being used as a springboard for challenging the unpopular policies of state elites. Given that a similar process is under way in South Africa, is it likely that the ANC leadership would accede to the establishment of platforms?

But are platforms even the appropriate organisational response to the problem at hand? The central problem with Marais' recommendations is that they are divorced from his analysis of why the transition has gone wrong. If you explain the shift to neo-liberal economic policies as a result of the balance of power, as Marais does, then it seems logical that your political, strategic and organisational recommendations should be directed to transforming this balance of power and creating alternative sources of pressure outside the state and ruling party. Marais' recommendations do not do this. Instead, they mitigate against the emergence of alternative pressures because they institutionalise COSATU and the SACP through the tripartite alliance and corporatist structures and processes, thereby nullifying the fundamental power resources and leverage of these organisations.

Are alternatives possible? Indeed they are. Instead of going the corporatist route, we could decide to adopt a pluralist system of labour relations. Such a system would take the form of an adversarial set of interactions between labour and capital, each of which would be politically, ideologically and organisationally independent of the state. Such a set of labour relations would be similar to that practised in the 1980s but without the racial overtones. It should be noted that the pluralist system of labour relations need not prevent the labour movement from engaging with capital and the state. Indeed, this would be necessary if it is to fulfil its functions adequately.

But such engagement would not be 'governed by formal political rules negotiated in corporatist institutions' (Desai and Habib 1994: 82). Rather they would be tactical initiatives in a general struggle to advance reforms against a hostile state and capital, and the resultant tension '... between mass action and engagement ... will be essential for ensuring that the labour movement is not easily institutionalised ...' (Ibid).

Organisationally, we could decide that the church-like character of the ANC is no longer appropriate and that the SACP and COSATU should go their own way and form a new oppositional axis. This could lead to the emergence of a coherent, well-organised black parliamentary opposition party to the left of the ANC and this would go a long way to changing the prevailing balance of power. Should such a party advocate a vision similar to the RDP, and should it constitute the official opposition with sizeable minority support within the black population, the ANC could feel compelled to deal with this electoral challenge by enhancing delivery and implementing social and economic policies more sympathetic to the interests of the poor.

Often political commentators suggest that electoral opposition politics is a wasted exercise because of the sheer strength of the ANC. But a viable left parliamentary party could, through the logic and momentum of the electoral process, force a strategic political shift on the part of an ANC government, and thereby facilitate a move towards a more people-centred democratic transition.

These alternatives could have been explored more fruitfully in Marais' work. Marais of course does not do this partly because he takes existing policies and organisational forms as inviolate. Had he not limited his explorations of political, strategic and organisational options within the existing parameters of policy and organisational forms, he might have produced a work infinitely more interesting and useful. Even without this, however, *South Africa: Limits to Change* breaks new ground both in its analysis and in its discussions of the options available to the South African left. This might seem an odd conclusion to arrive at given the harsh criticisms levelled above. But the criticisms must be understood as an indication of the reviewer's appreciation of this work, and of wanting to contribute to the debates that Marais hopes his book will generate. Hopefully, more scholars and activists will follow suit. And, if that is the case, Marais' *South Africa: Limits To Change* could become the spark for generating a long overdue debate on the strategic and organisational issues that would necessarily lie at the core of any political enterprise directed to realising a more people-centred transition.

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