

Besprekingsartikel

— Review Article

David Everatt, *The Origins of Non-Racialism. White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s*

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The place of whites in the struggle against apartheid

This study of the central battleground of white extra-parliamentary politics in the 1950s is the product of heroically thorough research. Trudging through those acres of correspondence, speeches, pamphlets, periodicals and ephemera was presumably required for David Everatt's Oxford DPhil dissertation awarded in 1990, entitled "The Politics of Non-Racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid, 1945–60". It would be interesting to compare the dissertation with the book under review published more than 25 years after the research was done. Curiously, 'The Politics of Non-Racialism' is not among Everatt's six publications in the book's bibliography. The title of the book offers us the "origins" of non-racialism, and fails to define the term or to reveal its origin. The title of the dissertation similarly begs the question.

Dr Everatt begins with the statement that "among the most consistent themes in the discourse of liberation in South Africa was a commitment to non-racialism". He expresses regret for "the failure to define non-racialism" but claims that "the 1996 constitution defined it as a democratic state where the rights of every citizen are equally protected by law" and proceeds to wonder, inconclusively, whether there is "no more to it than that, nothing to do with the actions or moral base of individuals" .

Some hundred thousand words later we are told that "while non-racialism was finally adopted by the ANC in exile [at its Morogoro conference in 1969], multiracialism continued to guide the form of legal organizations opposing apartheid within South Africa until 1990". He ends with the sad fact that the failure to resolve adequately the 1950s dispute about the form racial co-operation should take between the African nationalist, liberal and communist camps "lives with us all in South Africa today".

The origin of the term non-racialism? After a hammering of Margaret Ballinger, who served her country well, and other would-be upholders of the Cape liberal tradition which had also served the country, or part of it, well until its post-Union decline and post-1948 irrelevance, the Liberal Party of the late 1950s is treated with respect. It is not credited with introducing the concept of "non-racialism" into 1950s political discourse in South Africa. Liberals used the term to denote the state it was working for, one in which, as was proclaimed in many speeches, "a man's race is his own business and no one else's". Or as a great Cape Town Liberal of the day, Joe Nkatlo, would begin his rousing speeches on the Grand Parade: "We are all the children of one God!" In both cases, *pace* the very different mores of today.

Everatt quotes Patrick Duncan in a *Contact* editorial of 16 May 1959:

Non-racialism and multiracialism are two very different things. The non-racialist sees each human being as first and foremost a human; less important facts about him are education, his race, etc. But the multi-racialist, like the out-and-out racialist, sees each human being first and foremost as a member of a racial bloc.

Yet Everatt quotes “Treason Trialist” in the Congress Alliance monthly, *Counter Attack* (May 1959), with his three inserts of [sic] to indicate where “non-racial” should replace “multiracial”, worth repeating for their content:

Every Congress leader of today would be willing – and even eager – to belong to and join a multi-racial [sic] Congress. But political success in the fight against race domination is not to be won by the leaders alone. For success leaders need the masses. Are the masses ready for a multi-racial [sic] Congress? Would the tribal people of Sekhukhuneland and the dock labourers of Durban feel that a multi-racial [sic] body was “their” organization as they today feel about the ANC?

Three years later the Liberals were still promoting non-racialism. Peter Brown, the party chairman, wrote in *The New African*, June 1962, (not quoted by Everatt) of the weakness and disunity of those opposing apartheid and the Afrikaner Nationalist government, then carrying all before it. He prescribed hard work, effective organization and a third characteristic of the Nationalists when their prospects were as bleak 20 years before. This was “an inspiring ideal”. The opponents of apartheid already had such an ideal: “the vision of a non-racial society in which the potentialities of every individual will be realized – a much better one than the narrow urge to survival and assertion which drives the Nationalists on”. The time had come to capitalize on that non-racial ideal and it was the Liberals’ mission to bring it about.

As Everatt sees it, we don’t know what non-racialism means but we do know that South Africa is without it. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, in a very recent supplement, gives the word, after an English political reference of 1909, two respectable South African origins: in the Non-Racial Franchise Association, set up by two good Cape liberals, Sir James Rose-Innes and H.M. Burton, to fight, unavailingly, for the Cape’s common roll franchise; and in 1971 the *Rand Daily Mail* leader writer: “We stand for non-racial not multiracial cricket and ... believe in selection on merit, irrespective of colour.”

The dispute concerning non-racialism that is the central thesis of his book is about “the place of the whites in the struggle against apartheid” and, for the most part, Everatt tells his story well. He will lose many readers, as he did me, with the tortuous arguments about “colonialism of a special type” and its forerunner “internal colonialism” indulged in by the Communist Party of South Africa and its post-1950 successor, the South African Communist Party, within the “ideological and strategic context” of the race versus class debates of 1950–54. The latter, he says, has been under-researched. More to look forward to by those who would take pleasure in studying medieval angelology.

The narrative takes us from the elitist ANC of 1943 and its *African Claims in South Africa* response to the Atlantic Charter; the 1946 gold miners’ strike, “bloodily broken”; the ANC–SAIC alliance of the 1947 “Doctors’ Pact”, reaffirmed after the

African attacks on Indians in Durban left 123 dead in 1949; to the rising power of the ANC Youth League, founded in 1944. The “racially exclusive nationalism” of many Youth Leaguers would “bedevil the Congress Alliance through the 1950s” and led to the forming of the Pan Africanist Congress in 1959. The phenomenon of the purist non-racial ideology of the PAC in its brief life under Sobukwe is not referred to, nor are the convoluted arguments of the multiracialist, Trotskyist Unity Movement which, in large numbers, dominated Coloured politics in the Western Cape. They may have been – and were – a negative force but “tiny” (Everatt’s epithet), they were not. They figure, revealingly, in Leo Kuper’s remarkable study of the Defiance Campaign of 1952, *Passive Resistance in South Africa* (Faber, London, 1956) which Everatt lists but does not quote.

Everatt does not concede that the Defiance Campaign of 1952 failed in that it had no impact on the “unjust laws” it challenged – they simply got worse. It succeeded, politically, in his view, “in making the ANC something akin to what the youth leaguers wanted – popular, militant, and the driving (and leading) force in opposition to apartheid”. “Something akin” is right. The sad truth is that the Congress Alliance, for all the heroism and sacrifice of many of its members, maintained its record of failure until it was briefly eclipsed by the PAC’s Positive Action Campaign in 1960, banned by B.J. Vorster, disappearing from the scene in South Africa until the triumphant emergence of the surrogate United Democratic Front in 1983.

The rise of the Liberal Party in the late 1950s, the reconstitution of the CPSA, renamed SACP, the agonizing within the Congress of Democrats (SACOD as he unfamiliarly terms it, from 1953) at its unwelcome multiracialist situation within the Congress Alliance, the Congress of the People, which produced the Freedom Charter and triggered the four-plus-year Treason Trial – these are all well trodden ground. It can be said of Everatt’s treatment of them that he shows a strong bias towards the Congress of Democrats and works hard to uphold the character of the Freedom Charter as the ANC’s acceptance of non-racialism, in principle though not in practice, for another fourteen years.

He makes much of the ringing declaration: “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white ...” A truly non-racialist statement would surely have omitted the words “both black and white”. Indeed were they not the chief objection of the Africanists, whose term ‘Charterists’ for those who accepted the Freedom Charter was one of contumely, since they implied rights to the land by whites as a racial, or what would now be termed an ethnic, group?

Of more value to the student of this critical period in our history is his insider view of the SACP, the COD and of their relationship with their senior partner in the Alliance, the ANC. He gives us insights into the deep and lasting regret of COD members into their separate, racially defined status and their refusal of membership of the ANC; of their record of cock-up rather than conspiracy (Everatt’s terms) and the very disparate character of their enrolment. Like the CPSA before them, they were not

a collection of single-minded Stalinists never deviating from the party line, or (its own image) a dedicated and disciplined cadre [but] heterogeneous, incorporating various strands of thought and ... involved in various forms of struggle including parliamentary elections, trade unionism and Congress politics .

The creation of the whites-only COD in 1953 was a disappointment to the former CPSA members and was seen

by many outside the Congress movement (and quite a few within it) to be a mechanism of control engineered by communists after the CPSA disbanded in 1950, giving white communists undue (and certainly unrepresentative) influence in the Alliance .

He fails to come to grips, however, with the reasons for the deep suspicion and distrust of these formerly overt communists, other than with passing references to the almost universal anti-communism among white South Africans and many blacks as “blinkerered and hysterical” or “Cold War phobia”. To all of these, communists were indeed seen as “single-minded Stalinists”, Soviet agents in a nuclear war that might ignite (the Cuban missile crisis was a reality) and reduce the survivors, if any, to life under a tyranny that held a million in Gulags and reduced the people of its eastern European satellites to helotry in a police state. To many of their enemies in the freedom movement communists were dedicated to “socialist struggle” rather than “national liberation”, though Everatt claims that COD leaders, most of whom accepted that “colonialism of a special type” required their support for “the struggle for national liberation”.

This conclusion is a crude summary of some 30 pages of closely argued exegesis. What is omitted entirely is any awareness of the suspicions intensified by the secrecy of the former CPSA members in their new COD organization. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 criminalized membership of the SACP, which succeeded the quite unprepared CPSA after three years delay. Their extra-parliamentary rivals, even the Liberals, in the fight against the Nats quite properly shielded them from prosecution – and themselves from libel actions. Did not Sam Kahn, former CPSA MP, win damages from the Time-Life Corporation for a reference to him as a communist? Yet Kahn’s words in announcing to parliament were:

Communism will outlive the Nationalist Party. Democracy will be triumphant when members of this Government are manuring the fields of history. Millions in South Africa will echo my words: “Long Live Communism”.

His use of the word “democracy” would have been derided by Liberals, who were wont to define the Soviet electoral system as “one man, one vote, one candidate”. To Everatt his words were “prophetic”.

Kahn contested his listing as a communist and was defended by Donald Molteno, a leading Liberal in the Ballinger camp. The liberal most respected by Everatt, however, was Leo Marquard, who, in 1959,

provided the most complete early statement of internal colonialism ... the clearest statement of CST, lacking the jargon and intra-left jabs other versions would carry and reminding us that the roots of the notion of internal colonialism went back into history ...

Lack of recognition of historical roots is another failing of *The Origins of Non-Racialism*, perhaps most marked in Everatt’s view that white communists’ “unqualified support for black freedom predated and outstripped that of white liberals”. During the 1922 strike and “red revolt”, Eddie Roux recalled, “the ‘Marxist

Socialists' refurbished an old May Day banner so that its slogan read, ironically enough: 'Workers of the World *fight* and unite *for a White South Africa!*'".

Yet thirteen years before that, two white liberals, François Stephanus Malan and Sir Walter Stanford, were opposing every colour bar clause in the draft South Africa Act at the National Convention, and fighting to preserve the non-racial, albeit qualified, Cape franchise, introduced in 1853 by William Porter.

Everatt takes us through the relationship of the Liberal Party to the planning of the Congress of the People and repeats the myth of its early withdrawal. Your reviewer's arguments in the *Sunday Independent*, 10 January 2010, can only be summarized here:

The Liberals participated in the preparations for the CoP from the start until early 1955, then heard no more and assumed that the grandiose plan of canvassing the whole country, forming branches everywhere and triumphal marches had died a death.

Six days before Kliptown, they were asked to send their delegation to agree to "a Freedom Charter in which, though co-sponsors, they had had no hand". Despite the willingness of the Transvaal division to put up with this, "the national executive in Cape Town said no, and the left have attacked the Liberals over this ever since".

In sum, David Everatt has done valuable work in contributing mightily to assembling and recording the materials (and conducting interviews with some of the players) needed for an examination of this key period in the history of the liberation of the African people and the other victims of apartheid. What is needed now is a study without partisanship, and without *animus* – displayed not least to other authors in this field. Of Gail Gerhart, to give but one instance, "condescension drips from her pen".

A fresh study might offer hope that non-racialism will one day be compatible with the "equality under African leadership" promoted by the Congress Alliance in the 1950s. "Post-apartheid experience to date", he tells us, suggests that they are incompatible.

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