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Rising expectations

In 1953 Arthur Keppel-Jones, the pioneer of the South African alternate, predictive and apocalyptic history genre, published a work entitled *When Smuts goes: A history of South Africa from 1952–2010, first published in 2015*¹. In his Introduction, Keppel-Jones makes three telling points: South Africans resist asking hard and difficult questions; South Africans show irresponsible optimism in the future by choosing oft-tried but ill-tested views as future solutions; and that ‘the salvation of the country can lie only in a reversal of historic[al] tendencies, a reversal so thorough as to constitute a revolution’ (p. xi–xii). The four books reviewed here – all of which were published in 2015 – are important contributions to current public debates. All of the authors are well-known professional media figures. Ferial Haffajee is the editor of *City Press*, Songezo Zibi is the immediately past editor of *Business Day* and Justice Malala and Eusebius McKaiser are noted public analysts. Two of the books – those by Haffajee and McKaiser – concern identity politics and race. The books by Malala and Zibi focus on politics, leadership and public policy. The books differ in approach and analysis, yet raise common themes.

Run racist run: Journeys into the heart of racism

McKaiser’s work is an anthology of essays, presented through the heuristic device of storytelling. Argument and analysis is through the logic of debate, with McKaiser – who, from what details he provides, is a first-generation graduate from a Grahamstown-based family – taking readers through his reasoning. The core argument is that whilst not all white people were perpetrators of ‘anti-black racism’, they all benefitted, as they still do. McKaiser refers to this as ‘unearned privilege’. As white people evince ‘degrees of racism’ there are ‘degrees of whiteness’ and ‘privilege’. White people are blind to their racism, and now rationalise their ignorance by viewing black people as ‘race obsessed’ (p.18, 63, 67, 69 & 126). Key people in the stories are young black university students and adult white liberals. McKaiser focuses on the apparent world views of these two identities, and notes how these two personas appear to need each other. McKaiser does not accept this situation and insists that white people work through their own racism. McKaiser is at his strongest noting the fallacy of the ‘Rainbow Nation’ (p. 124), and hypocrisy in public debates (p. 147 & 208–209). But there are problems. Neither of these points is new. McKaiser is skilled in unpicking public debates, but does not actually dissect and analyse – he asserts and notes, often to make a sweeping statement. McKaiser is asked by ‘Kate’, a ‘world-class expert’ studying organisational cultures in a large South African corporate, to offer professional advice on her research and findings. The study contains important insights into hierarchies of power, and the disjuncture between corporate policy culture and the actual dynamics of white male corporate power (p.129–147). McKaiser then asserts: ‘The results of the research were not surprising at all. In fact she could be talking about *any company or institution in our country*’ [my emphasis] (p. 130). McKaiser argues that black thinkers must express their anger in their writing. If so, where does violence come into public debate and behaviour? All too often McKaiser concentrates on exploring, revealing and confirming his own train of thought. Why is there not more hard evidence? Such evidence is easily available: media, particularly social media, provides abundant evidence for really getting to grips with race, identity, historical denial and revisionism, youth politics – including #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall – and post-1994 South Africa. The book has few footnotes, no bibliography and no index.

In 2015, as McKaiser was writing this book, the South African Institute of Race Relations conducted extensive research into race relations in South Africa. Published in February 2016, the report² provides statistical evidence pointing to a vastly more complicated and positive picture than that offered by McKaiser. What is abundantly clear is that McKaiser is angry – and triumphant. He asserts that ‘(t)he year 2015 is spectacular testimony to active young citizenship, and the overshadowing of lazy elders whose time has expired’ (p. 61).

What if there were no whites in South Africa?

Haffajee’s enticingly entitled book is engaging, complex and thought provoking. At the outset it is important to note, from the title, what the book is not about. Because, curiously, this defines what the book is about. ‘What if there were no whites in South Africa’ is a popular refrain, with long provenance. On the one hand it is part of white South African triumphalist assertion: ‘If it weren’t for us...’. In post-1994 South Africa, such a refrain is used as racist self-confirming prophesy and as historical denial. From European settlement onwards, modernity came to southern Africa, but white people continually sought all means to deny black society access to the many tangible benefits of this modernity. The refrain is also part of a black refrain, of alternative history, imagining a country developing and progressing without imperialism and white people.

Haffajee, born and raised in the plebeian mixed-race Johannesburg suburb of Bosmont, is a first to graduate – from Wits – daughter in a Muslim family of tailors. She has an ambivalent attitude towards her alma mater. She studied at Wits during the politically charged late 1980s, when criss-crossing strands of politics flowed both to the United Democratic Front and Black Consciousness. She drew political sustenance from both.

Haffajee provides a complexly interwoven argument about how black professionals must actively fashion a better South Africa. Her work is a philosophically phrased love song for such a future *Mzansi* – a popular term for South Africa, derived from the *isiXhosa* word for ‘south’. Quite openly admitting that she is a daughter of the ‘Rainbow Nation’, with huge respect for Nelson Mandela, Haffajee also proudly proclaims that she is a benefactor of black economic empowerment. But then she looks around present-day South Africa and finds much wanting. As a good investigative journalist she listens to what is being said, and hears angry views, which are discordant to her own. She sets up ‘meetings’ which have the pedagogical virtues of tutorials, seminars and interviews, with Haffajee wonderfully cast as listener, reader of new information, interviewer, interlocutor and critic. These engagements are properly listed in the bibliographical references. She finds a new intellectual trend: that of whiteness studies and its associated term – ‘white privilege’. She learns of its intellectual origins, in late 20th century America, and reads works by its major proponents. She cites much of this work. Curious and wishing to

understand, she asks versions of a single question: 'Why, in post-1994 South Africa is 'whiteness studies' being imported and transplanted?'; 'Why are academics and social activists in contemporary South Africa, where black people are in the majority, using social theories of importance and influence amongst black minorities in America?' As Haffajee realises, the importers feel angry and alienated still seeing themselves as white subjects. So they question what they see as fundamentals: 1652 (the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck), 1990 (President de Klerk's 2 February speech unbanning liberation politics, Mandela walking free, and the commencement of political negotiations) and 1994 (South Africa's first one-person one-vote general election and the formation of President Mandela's government of national unity); the liberation movement's elder's conceits, conferring, from upon high statuesque moral vantage points, a 'freedom' on the so-called 'born-frees'. She also finds that these young black people, from aspirational plebeian and middle-class families, are often first-time-in-family students at tertiary institutions. They are confronting what she experienced at Wits. This is the massive edifice of inherited white wealth, privilege, and the cultural assumptions and expectations made and asserted by the sons and daughters of such financial and professional solidity and certainty. She can see cogency in these arguments. But, she finds the whiteness thesis too all-assertive, all-encompassing, all-explaining, and thus *dis*-empowering. Again she surveys the South Africa around her, which includes white historical denial and a lack of genuine racial and gender diversity in private sector corporate worlds. But she also notes, cogently, that power in South Africa is in black hands. Black professionals have to be the agents of substantial positive change. Here is an honest, engagingly personal, philosophically reflective journey through contemporary South African social thought.

Raising the bar: Hope and renewal in South Africa

Zibi's work is precisely what Haffajee's book is not – Haffajee never mentions President Zuma – and precisely what Haffajee recommends: incisive reflection and analysis of post-1994 South Africa and its future. From the few biographical details given, Zibi may also be a first-in-family graduate, with a strong familial lineage in liberation politics; Zibi also has impressive professional experience in South Africa's corporate sector. Zibi's argument is cogent and his presentation – with footnotes, bibliography and index – is professionally faultless.

The central thesis is clear. South Africans have lost the capacity to go forward. No South African leader, or political party, has sought to address the country's past and how it lives on, often in their very own actions (p. 55). Old narratives of change and progress have run dry. South Africans have lost their faculties of reason and the ability and will to conduct rational and responsible public discussions, because of the knots of identity politics, moral relativism (p. 10 & 38) and race politics – all in the interests of fighting an old battle about to whom South Africa belongs. Zibi is very perceptive when presenting and analysing white and black fallacies of thought. He does this in an analysis of how popular informed analysis of private corporate business culture is bereft of reason, through moral relativism (p. 43–44). Similarly, Zibi, bringing to bear powerful scholarly comment, argues that 'racial reasoning should be replaced by moral reasoning'. Hence his trenchant critique of the #RhodesMustFall movement (p. 45, 48–50) and 'whiteness studies':

Excessive focus on whiteness detracts from the responsibility to do what is right in black communities, for black communities and in a way that takes into account their own peculiarities, historical and contemporary. This is because if left unchecked all it does is make every problem the fault of white people, and every solution the responsibility of white people. It relegates black people to being perpetual whiners where the efforts of white people are both demanded and resented at the same time, where nothing is ever right and no solution is good enough. (p. 78)

Zibi provides concrete suggestions as to how South Africa must move forward and searing critique of the moral and political failings of South African leadership, across the spectrum (p. 82–105). Central to his understanding of a path forward is the notion of the greater common good (p. 16, 34, 37 & Chapter 3). This is the philosophical underpinning of what South Africa needs to become: an inclusive political and economic polity and society.

We have now begun our descent: How to stop South Africa losing its way

Malala's work is a powerful complement to Zibi's. As with Zibi, his argument and analysis is excellently expressed and backed up with extensive reading, all of which is properly set out. As with Haffajee and Zibi, Malala shows his depth of reading in a scholarly work, demanding attention.

Alarmed at the collapse of the liberation narrative, Malala honestly and importantly notes two key markers in his personal attitude towards contemporary South Africa: 'The Spear' incident and the Marikana massacre, both in 2012 (p. 7 & 102). Malala reflected in the aftermath of artist Brett Murray's 'Hail to the Thief' exhibition including 'The Spear' painting of President Zuma, penis exposed, at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. At first he was angry, seeing this as yet another racist attack on the 'black body' – another in a long and cruel history dating to colonial times. As the public controversy drew on, Malala reflected further – on constitutionalism (p. 65 & 84–85). Then he found Zuma wanting (p. 60–66). For Malala, the ANC and South Africa have a 'Zuma problem'. President Zuma must either stand down, in the best interests of the country, or the ANC must recast its moral authority and dismiss him (p. 42). Not only is Zuma personally corrupt, but he scorns constitutional democracy, destroys its vital institutions – including the media – and has recast the ANC and MK security organs of the exiled armed struggle time to retain his control over both the ANC and the state (p. 91–98 & 107). Further, Zuma has surrounded himself with cronies, rent seekers and a predatory elite bent on state capture (p. 15–16, 23, 26, 30, 32–34, 113–115 & 145).

Malala is not saying that problems began with Zuma, and will end with Zuma's going. As with Zibi, he acknowledges the failings of Mandela's presidency (p. 48). He acknowledges huge 'unprocessed anger' and the chasm between this and the dreamers: Mandela and Tutu (p. 63–64). Nor is Zuma's removal as president the palliative. Indeed quite the opposite. For him, and Zibi, South Africa is dominated by a political elite – a point first made a few years back by then COSATU Secretary General Zwelizima Vavi (p. 138). And Malala acknowledges and sets out how manifold are South Africa's problems, and how 'bitter' the 'medicine' must be (p. 15–16). Yet there is optimism in much of Malala's understandings. Malala cites as evidence two issues. Firstly, he comprehends the ANC's tremendous 'moral authority', built over years of struggle, and how it managed, against all odds, to speak to and for ordinary people, of need and aspiration. That history must and can be recovered (p. 156–157). Secondly, Malala points to the period from 1990 to 1994 in which despite all odds and powerful hotheads – on all sides – political peace was fashioned, and from few instruments (p. 91 & 215). Indeed when dealing with the collapse of political trust in contemporary South Africa, Malala exhorts the reader to remember those desperately uncertain and violent times. In this context the #RhodesMustFall movement is found wanting for its simplistically linear understanding of politics, and its lack of rigorous historical understanding (p. 66).

Whilst seeing historical blame as toxic in present-day politics, Malala is cutting on continued apartheid denialism (p. 60 & 68). When Malala was a youngster, his family were forcibly relocated to a barren desolate area called Eersterus in the Hammanskraal area north of Pretoria. These families were amongst the millions of people who were the victims of grand apartheid's 'homeland consolidation' [sic] policy: for the creation of a 'white South Africa' and, in Malala's family's case, the Bophuthatswana homeland. The community hired their own teachers and were ever vigilant in ensuring their children received the very highest standards of schooling. Indeed, Malala, a graduate of UCT, may well also be a first-in-family graduate. In taut writing Malala tempers his anger

when telling contemptuously of how in 2012 F.W. de Klerk told CNN's Christiane Amanpour that 'blacks were not disenfranchised, they voted. They were not put in homelands, the homelands were historically there' (p. 46–49 & 62).

How to define future scenarios? These are provided, as are debating points (Chapters 7, 13 & 14 and Chapter 7 epilogue). Malala cautions against South African's often mythical 'exceptionalisms'. So too his assessment of the BEE balance sheet is less positive than is Haffajee's (p. 109–112). As with Haffajee and Zibi, Malala seeks reasoned public debate, without 'blame' (p. 67 & 72). Leaders will not emerge through miracles (p. 148); they will emerge through debates. As with Zibi, for Malala, the central themes in this public debate are standards of ethical leadership and the notion of a 'common good' (p. 39). He acknowledges his own failings in taking a line of least resistance against Zuma-inspired state threats to media freedom (p. 82–83 & 86). The ANC has lost its intelligentsia – they are now outside the movement – and probably a large proportion of its historical middle-class loyalists too (p. 33–34 & 137). This is also the case with the black consciousness movement. His vision is of an ANC confronting its 'elephant in the room' – Zuma and the crisis he has brought on – as other leaders, some of whom have yet to show themselves, clearly chart a new course (p. 43 & 98). These interesting scenarios are not particularly new, with two exceptions. For Malala, current Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa is too compromised and does not display the strong visionary leadership now required (p. 141–142). And he sees soon to be stepping down Public Protector Thuli Madonsela as a vitally new, ethically and morally courageous leading force in future politics (Chapter 12).

Conclusion

The century-long era of the ever expanding South African patron state – from Milner's Reconstruction to Zuma's Developmental – is showing its finite limits. South Africa is now in the third phase of its post-1990 development. The first, from 1990 to 1996, produced political rapprochement, peaceful and legitimate elections, and a remarkable constitution. The ANC's long-held narratives on historical change and public policy as set in place in 1994 have yielded much, but successes and failures have born new dynamics. This third phase will test South Africa's ingenuity and resourcefulness. Dramatic policy changes are required. And there is urgency. In the genre pioneered by Keppel-Jones, analysts like R.W. Johnson have already incisively set out doom-laden narratives. In 2011, political analyst Moletsi Mbeki set a deadline: 2020 – then South Africa will experience its 'Tunisia Day' 'when the masses rise up against the powers that be'. This is when China's resources-driven economy changes, becoming less dependent upon commodities imported from, amongst others, South Africa (Malala, p. 213).

From the mid-1960s onwards, with the ANC and the PAC and other organisations outlawed and their members increasingly mostly in prisons or exile, politically aware and spirited cross-generational men, largely but not exclusively black, gradually formulated new questions. They had an

international outlook, many were graduates – largely first-in-family, with, some having studied or travelled abroad. They were widely read: from and of Bonhoeffer, Fanon, Gandhi, Gutiérrez, Martin Luther King Jnr, Marx and Nkrumah, and many others. They asked, in summary, two very non-linear questions of themselves: 'How to live in South Africa and challenge its very fundamentals?' and 'How to make the essence of oppression the seed of liberation?' From this milieu came the Black Consciousness Movement, the Christian Institute, the revived Natal Indian Congress, the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society, the Worker Benefit Fund – the forerunner of the Federation of South African Workers – and South African liberation theology. By the time of the United Democratic Front and later difficult discussions on a possible negotiated political settlement, they used the same non-linear and transcendent approach. Here came a political strategy: accept intrinsic compromises with their dangers, and a personal principle: in thought and deed show yourself better than the racist. Some remember this still unacknowledged but vital part of South African political philosophy as 'rising expectations'. The title comes from economist and futurist Robert Theobald's³ hugely influential book, published in 1960 and read by many, black and white, on segregated campuses throughout the country. However, in their usage these new political leaders gave the term an added behavioural quality, thereby benchmarking their own self-embraced understanding of an imperative defining anti-apartheid leadership.

In 1992 when formally welcoming the first sitting of one of the ANC's national commissions, then ANC Deputy Secretary General Cheryl Carolus and Commission Chair, and acclaimed novelist and exiled liberation cadre, Mongane Wally Serote spoke of how, in thought and deed, commission members had to rise above racists in order to show moral authority. Significantly, Joel Netshitenzhe – ANC NEC member and veteran, and head of the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection – recently publicly re-stressed the importance of such an attitude: 'Black South Africans ought to set their sights a lot higher than equality with whites: they should work towards a new civilization'⁴. In decades to come, people may just reflect on this now still nascent present phase of South Africa's post-1990 history as being the moment of rising expectations, for the greater common good.

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