

# THE HEART OF DARKNESS?

Jeffrey Butler, Richard Elphick,  
and David Welsh, eds.  
Democratic Liberalism in South Africa:  
Its History and Prospect  
(Published by Wesleyan University Press and David Philip  
1987.

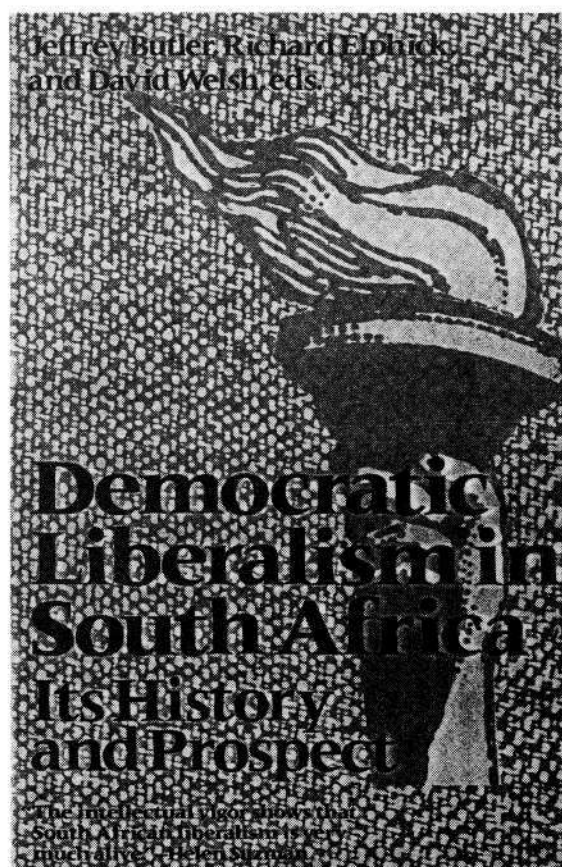
Present-day South Africa provides few straws for the political optimist to grasp at. The gradual escalation of conflict in the entire region, which is primarily, if not entirely, the consequence of apartheid and the reactive political and military adventurism of the apartheid regime, present ever more daunting scenarios in a region in which the root causes of political, social and economic inequalities have never been attacked. The result has been the development of endemic poverty and the polarization of South African society. So, it is not surprising that when, every now and again, commentators profess optimism about the future of South Africa and the region, it is based upon a vague hope or faith in the 'peoples' to find solutions to these massive problems.

This excellent collection of papers based upon empirical research all but two by academic liberals, (the work of a conference held at Houw Hoek in mid-1986), provides plenty of food for thought, but scant grounds for optimism. The collection ranges from historical analyses of liberalism in the Cape Colony and in South Africa since Union, through contemporary social, political, legal, economic, and institutional analyses from a liberal perspective, to assessments of future prospects. Some of the papers are outstandingly good, but, not unexpectedly, those having most impact upon the concerned South African reader are the analyses of the South African malaise and the assessments of the prospects for the future. The polarization into which we have been dragged by the apartheid regime is taking us into the heart of darkness, sadly, making it nigh impossible for those of us who are not historians, when looking at a collection both historical and contemporary, to pay the attention which they merit to studies of our more enlightened forebears. I shall, with apologies to the historians, therefore confine discussion mainly, although not entirely, to what seem to me to be important aspects of the contemporary analyses.

Liberals may be roughly but conveniently divided into two categories. Firstly there are those who emphasise the right to life, and hence the right to the means of life, leading them to espouse social democracy. And secondly there are those who tend rather to take individuals as 'given', stressing the values of 'individualism', placing emphasis upon civil rights and liberties, and upon the virtues of a 'free enterprise' economy. This dichotomy, not always clear-cut, was apparent in the work of the first great Natural Rights theorist, John Locke, who claimed that all persons were born with the rights to life, health, liberty and possessions, and that the right to life entailed the right to the means of life. On this view, social analysis must of necessity be anthropocentric, for the lives of people and their right to the means of life must always

take precedence. Locke, however, in developing his theory of property, omitted any further mention of the right to life and to health, or to the means of life in what he termed 'political society'.

Since Locke's day traditional liberal theory has tended to adopt this latter position. Most modern liberal theorists would deny a right to life, claiming that this is not really a right at all, that it does not even conform with the logic of rights. For rights, they argue, are goods which their possessors may or may not choose to exercise, and which they may or may not have the means of exercising. Thus a person may have the right to travel from Chicago to London, say, but, lacking funds, is not able to. They would claim that individuals have a right to choose their occupations, to set up their own enterprises if they have the means, and if they do not, to apply for whatever jobs are available, and that their success or failure depends upon prevailing economic conditions and upon their own efforts and ability. In so far as individuals do not have the capital to set up an enterprise, or do not succeed in obtaining a job and thus the means of their subsistence,



this does not mean that they do not have rights, only that they are unable, through force of circumstances, to exercise them. This latter state of affairs is often attributed to wrong-headed interference in the economy on the part of governments. The necessity for anthropocentric analysis thus disappears, and in this way ample space is created for theorists of an unhumanitarian disposition to claim to be part of the liberal tradition.

The Liberal Party, as Douglas Irvine shows in his interesting and succinct paper, after a period of considerable disagreement between proponents who may be regarded as having espoused, broadly speaking, one of the two positions outlined above, and immediately prior to the banning of many of its most active members in the mid-1960s, implicitly acknowledged not only the right to life but the right to the means of life, stressing the need, firstly in its agricultural policy, for a redistribution of land, and hence of agricultural wealth. In 1963 it set up a committee to reformulate economic policies with the aim of adopting socialist measures in order to meet the enormous problems of economic maldistribution and the endemic poverty which pervaded the black community. In these ways it made apparent its awareness of the immense problems in South Africa which stood and which still stand in the way of ensuring the right to the means of life to all her peoples.

The debate between the Liberal Party and the 'left' in the early 1960s was in part with the Congress of Democrats, which was thought to be, to at least some extent, a front for the banned Communist Party. The Communist Party at the time was solidly Stalinist, which was why the Liberal Party concerned with the right to life, so palpably ignored by Stalin, largely withheld co-operation with and support for the Congress of Democrats. It was partly this factor, as well as factors such as the demands and plight of blacks, which drove the Liberal Party to look more and more to its social and economic policies, in order to demonstrate its humanitarianism, taking both the right to life and the right to the means of life with the utmost seriousness.

The contributors to this book are implicitly aware of this endemic problem concerning liberal values, but have not argued it in these terms. It is nevertheless apparent that what divided liberals in the 1950s and early 1960s continues to divide them today. Some of the papers collected in this work are primarily concerned to show that there is space for 'free economy' liberalism in South Africa, while others are more directly concerned with the short as well as long-term problems of economic redistribution. But there is a tension apparent in some of the papers which may be said to arise from a conflation of the two positions on rights outlined above. Jill Natrass, so recently and tragically killed in a motor accident, argues, in an excellent and thought provoking paper, for a series of measures which would result in a redistribution of wealth, as does Sean Archer, who open-mindedly examines the Freedom Charter which he treats as an open-ended document largely compatible with redistributive economic measures which many liberals could accept.

Jill Natrass, in developing her theses, refers to all economies as having "a physical component comprised of people, and of capital in the form of buildings, plant and machinery, and social overhead capital such as roads, dams, schools and hospitals." This is the traditional non-anthropocentric approach which demands that the value

placed upon human life depends upon the particular moral values of the analyst. Natrass's own position is retrieved by her moral values, by her obvious concern for human welfare. The tension is immediately apparent when one considers, as already noted, that 'anti-humanist' economic analyses proceed from similar basic premises. Treating people as mere factors of production, can lead, a la Thatcher and Milton Friedman, to the appraising of economies in terms of economic output alone, disregarding rates of unemployment and degrees of poverty. Whereas, stress upon the right to life and to the means of life, the anthropocentric standpoint, assumes the prime criterion of a healthy economy to be in terms of the quality of life, of how low is the level of unemployment and to what extent poverty has been eliminated.

The polemic in this collection is aimed almost as much at the neo-Marxian left as at the right. Some contributors react against the attacks upon liberalism which have stemmed from the 'left', and while acknowledging the contribution of neo-Marxian historians, reject the Marxist propensity to place class analysis at the centre of social analysis. Here and there credit is given to neo-Marxist analysis, but there is little or no attempt, apart from the outstanding contribution by David Yudelman, to espouse a theoretical position which acknowledges and builds upon this contribution.

There is much confusion in contemporary South African writing on the 'race-class' debate, with 'liberals' claiming, after Leo Kuper, both that race is not inherently a social category, and that the racial problem in South Africa arose out of the conflict between "rival groups to secure the same scarce material and non-material resources". (cf. van Zyl Slabbert and Welsh : **South Africa's Options**). They do not pick up the implications of such a claim for the forms which the incorporation of racial differentiation take at various times in our history, whereas this is what much neo-Marxian analysis is primarily about. But, as tends to be the case with most new historical and social perspectives, the neo-Marxists frequently overstated their case. Thus Frederick Johnstone, in his book '**Class, Race and Gold**', claimed that class was the cause of race discrimination, while his own analysis demonstrated no more than the forms which race discrimination took in the mining industry, how race discrimination related to class stratification as a consequence of its incorporation within a developing capitalist framework.

The time is long overdue when whoth sides in this debate acknowledge that race and class are **both** key elements in modern South Africa. Race was obviously a social category from the time van Riebeeck first arrived at the Cape. That there were no white, only black and brown slaves, is surely testimony to this. Class analysis is of crucial importance in mapping out and analysing the forms of racial differentiation. Given capitalist development, it is only to be expected that the forms of racial discrimination will be articulated around capitalist production relations, just as in Sparta, Helotry took forms consistent with Spartan militarism, communal ownership and living, and domination.

One of the problems has been that neither the neo-Marxists nor their liberal critics have had sufficient grasp of Marxian theory. The question of whether and to what extent capitalism has been compatible with apartheid and race discrimination has largely been debated without paying heed to Marx's own economic analysis. A question

which has been virtually ignored, and which demands attention, is a **theoretical** analysis of the forms of wage-labour in South Africa. To what extent during the various phases of economic development has there been 'free' wage-labour? For to the extent to which labour has been and remains 'unfree', to that extent the economy cannot, in Marxian terms, straightforwardly be categorized as capitalist. From this perspective the liberals have a strong argument to the effect that in so far as labour has been 'unfree' in analytical Marxian terms, capitalist development has been inhibited, but it is an argument which has been ignored. And neo-Marxians need to revise their analyses in order to encapsulate the methodological implications of this theoretical point.

The paper by Bromberger and Hughes, in which they argue to great effect against the 'underdevelopment' thesis, arguably loses a great deal of its impact in the attempt to refute the claim that "the black population is **absolutely** and relatively impoverished," or as Shula Marks has recently written, that in 1910 "the vast majority of black South Africans . . . were systematically excluded . . . from any share in the possible rewards of capitalist growth", (my stress) Showing, as they do, that miniscule gains have accrued to blacks over the years, need not be read as undermining the central thrust of this claim. This is because "absolute" impoverishment is an ambiguous notion which can be understood in a weak as well as a strong and more precise sense.

Indeed there are statements in some of the other papers which can be read as supporting Marks' thesis. For example, on page 372, Giliomee states that "Perhaps the most important political fact in South African history is that from 1700 to the 1950s the proportion of whites to the overall population of South Africa was always sufficient to man all strategic positions in the political, economic and administrative system of the country. Whites owned almost all the land, did all the skilled and most of the semiskilled jobs in the mines and factories, and staffed the top and medium-level positions in the civil service, army and police." It can be argued that this is "absolute impoverishment", Marks' thesis. Despite the changes which have occurred since the 1950's, which Giliomee also discusses, the overall economic position of blacks remains one of poverty and deprivation for which the causes are structural and systematic, which is the basis of Marks' claim. Natrass may also be read as supporting this claim.

It seems to me not only unnecessary but counter-productive, to reduce the disagreements with neo-Marxians to debates over whether or not blacks have **marginally** gained from capitalist growth. Whatever blacks may or may not have gained has not changed the overall picture of a society dominated by affluent whites, and in which the vast majority of blacks live in poverty and suffer from large-scale unemployment.

Apparent in the Schlemmer discussion on consociationalism is a methodological problem concerning the development of democracy. To point to the necessary conditions enables one to arrive at a definition of democracy, but because definitions are circular, the necessary conditions cannot simultaneously serve as explanations as to how democracy can be achieved. The problem remains as to how the political culture can be changed so as to make democracy even remotely feasible? Employing and extending Schlemmer's ima-

gery, the apartheid regime is intent upon ensuring that not even the "building blocks" necessary for moving in a democratic direction can be moulded and baked. The regime, and, as a consequence, the political culture, are travelling in the opposite direction.

There are grounds for scepticism of Schlemmer's faith in consociationalism. Consociational theories understandably have great appeal for whites, but are they really liberal theories at all? Political equality is a traditional liberal goal, which entails not only universal suffrage but also giving the vote its value. For this very reason the British Liberal Party has long stood for proportional representation. Consociationalism precludes giving the vote its value, assumes equality between groups rather than individuals, and depends upon the accommodation of rival political elites, assuming their positions of leadership to be secure. In contexts where radicalism at grass-roots level makes accommodators liable to be regarded as 'sell-outs', leadership positions tend to be relatively insecure, and the possibility of elite accommodation becomes correspondingly difficult and unlikely.

The minority veto rights which group elites can wield in consociational systems, are likely in South Africa to be used to inhibit the economic redistribution upon which future stability based upon consent, and, indeed, the success of consociationalism itself, depend. Minorities are arguably better protected by bills of rights insofar as they can be protected at all, and the viability of a bill of rights depends in large measure upon the widespread acceptance of liberal and democratic values. The very redistribution of wealth which consociationalism is likely to thwart, is a necessary condition for the creation and maintenance of these liberal and democratic values.

I have focused upon criticisms of the papers. This ought not to give the impression that the collection is fundamentally flawed, for indeed it is not. The papers of which I have been critical are highly analytic, and contain many arguments which have not been touched upon. They are all well written and well worth reading. There are excellent papers by Dugard and Mathews on the rule of law, which are seminal additions to the literature, not that they add appreciably to our substantive knowledge, for the subject matter has been too widely written about for that, but the case for the rule of law is argued in fresh and illuminating ways. All in all, it is an excellent collection.

One of the deficiencies manifest in most neo-Marxist writing on South Africa is the tendency to work **solely** at the structural and macro-level with class concepts such as capital and labour, and when moving to lower levels of analysis to break capital and labour into class-fractions, avoiding reference to actors, particularly to political actors. Liberal analysis, as some of the papers in this book demonstrate, fills this gap, making clear, rather ironically, not only that it is "men who make history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances encountered, given and transmitted from the past." (Marx: **The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte**).

It is time, however, that liberal analysts begin to build upon the work of the neo-Marxists, following the singular example of David Yudelman, rather than continue to react only against it. I would go so far as to argue that the future of liberal values depends upon it, as the choice which lies

before liberals articulated by van Zyl Slabbert so compellingly implies.

The work is rounded off by van Zyl Slabbert in a short but penetrating paper which should be compulsory reading for liberals and for all who are interested in or are likely to be affected by the future of our country. His analysis, which is designed to highlight the present dilemma of where liberalism is to position itself in contemporary South Africa, either with "the politics of stability" or with "the politics of freedom", leaves liberals, in my opinion, with no real choice. Slabbert convincingly shows the choice between "incrementalism" and revolution to be a vast oversimplification, arguing that "incrementalism" can become an "albatross around (liberals') necks in today's increasingly repressive and undemocratic society." The choice has to be for "the politics of freedom", notwithstanding the price which it will obviously entail. Slabbert's analysis makes it clear that this is his personal choice, although he has made strenuous efforts to be impartial and to leave the decision open for other liberals. His analysis, however, probably unintentionally, makes the choice of "the politics of stability" an all but untenable one, for if it shows anything, it shows that Parliament under the present regime is not and is unlikely again to become an instrument of constitutional change, which the traditional liberal politics of reform and "incrementalism" is predicated upon.

What clouds the issue in South Africa, is the fact that parliamentary participation continues, for the time being at least, to provide "a forum for protesting against apartheid and as an institutional base to intervene on behalf of those who are persecuted and abused . . .". This is, as Slabbert goes on to say, "a legitimate and defensible strategy", but it is also, for humanitarian liberals, an essential strategy, which, given the choice of "the politics of freedom", makes new and extra-parliamentary roles for liberal parliamentary opposition parties imperative. "But", as Slabbert says, "this role must not be confused with that of presenting Parliament as an effective instrument of constitutional change", for it is no longer that.

The counter-argument, that this is working within and willy-nilly collaborating with the system, and therefore incompatible with "the politics of freedom", is a view which has wide and popular support, but individuals such as Molly Blackburn proved how it is possible to successfully fill the role of provincial councillor and espouse "the politics of freedom" while simultaneously gaining widespread black support and acclaim. Molly Blackburn demonstrated, contra one of Slabbert final points, that it is possible for a liberal to choose **freedom** and not be "accused of wanting to dilute, divert, or hijack the revolution". Of course, not many liberals are Molly Blackburns, but her example is one which cannot be lightly dismissed.

Slabbert writes. "The government cannot even tentatively explore a possible democratic solution, because if its intentions were sincere such a solution would lead inexorably to its own demise. The only strategy apart from continuing brutal repression must be co-optive domination" where the goal of co-optive domination is "multi-racial autocracy". It is unlikely in the extreme that the government would step down in the event of a miraculous election victory for the parties to its left, although it is less certain that it would not give way to the Conservative

Party, for the latter is also dedicated to Afrikaner Nationalist controlled 'white' domination. The question reduces itself to the extent to which the government and the military consider a return to 'grand apartheid' a viable alternative. Or would they see it as a trap for the unwary which will result in the demise of 'white' control? The present path of "multi-racial autocracy" is one which has not been lightly or even very willingly chosen, co-optation strategy being seen as the only means of ensuring continued control. The present trend is for the system to become ever more closed, while the strategy of co-optation enables the government and the state, playing upon the gullibility of the white electorate, to argue the contrary. The possibility, in the short or middle term, of constitutional change in a democratic direction through parliamentary legislative action is so remote that it can be discounted.

van Zyl Slabbert's analysis (unwittingly?) undercuts many of the points which are made in papers which precede it, to a degree obscuring the roles which liberals can play 'as liberals' within our polarized society, for if they choose "the politics of freedom" it is hard to see what **independent** roles there are which are or could be viable. This is not to criticise Slabbert, but to stress that the choice seems increasingly and unavoidably to be that of working within extra-parliamentary structures, few, if any, of which, are dedicated to purely liberal values and/or goals. The task seems, rather, to be that of endeavouring to inject liberal values into existing organizations wherever and whenever this is deemed necessary.

This is an immense task, but not, perhaps, as difficult as it at first sight appears, for South Africans have suffered intolerably and for too long from inhuman and illiberal policies and practices not to see the importance of liberal humanitarian values. In the liberals' favour is that "the politics of freedom" takes freedom to be the prime goal, leaving considerable scope for those who wish to give it more precise meaning and content. The value of human life has steadily been depreciated over the years, and the present strife, as in the Pietermaritzburg area, depreciates it still further. There is undoubtedly a role for liberals and a place for liberal values in our society.

Liberals, in my view, cannot afford not to abandon the pursuit of *laissez faire* capitalism. There is no reason why liberal values such as the right to life and to the means of life, and of civil and legal liberties should not gain support, for they do not invite the kind of opposition which is generated by the tenets of the economics of 'free enterprise'. The latter stands little chance of acceptance in inegalitarian South Africa, and is likely to prove just as much a liberal "albatross" as "incrementalism". If associated with liberal humanitarian values, the 'free enterprise' credo is more than likely to sink the 'liberal ship' by debasing these other values.

Liberal humanitarian values together with the liberal notion of democracy are far too valuable to risk for the sake of economic arrangements based upon an ideal type and which have never in any case existed in practice. A mixed economy is a minimal goal, and given the abolition of apartheid there is no reason why it should not in principle become as rational and successful a system as that, say, of Sweden. But this assumes the demise of apartheid, and there is little prospect of this, alas, within the foreseeable future. □