

# Talking to the ANC

Talking to the ANC has become a growth industry. Hardly a week goes by without some group or other flying into Lusaka from South Africa. ... to talk. Now P.W. Botha has made it all look respectable by talking to Nelson Mandela. We have come a long way since van Zyl Slabbert's Dakar expedition broke the ice by doing the unthinkable less than two years ago.

Most of the groups which have been to Lusaka, or to meet the ANC at other places, have been fairly specialised. They have represented women, or lawyers, or businessmen, or educationists, and so on. The Five Freedoms Forum delegation which went at the end of June was different, not only in that it was much larger than any of its predecessors, consisting of over a hundred people, but because those people represented a fair variety of organisations and views. They were more typically "white South African" than anything else the ANC has met, although by no means fully representative, because none of the hardcore of white conservatism was there.

In spite of this last weakness the comparative ordinari-

ness of this large delegation gave it a special importance. The ANC was probably able to get a better idea of the hopes and fears of white people about the future from this large delegation than it has from any of the others it has met. And it is very important that the ANC should know about these things, especially the extent of white fears, if it is to make a proper assessment of the obstacles to negotiating an end to apartheid.

One of its own members described the Five Freedoms Forum delegation as being distinguished only by the fact that nobody in it had any political clout. This is only partly true. In terms of present power, they certainly had none, but in terms of a fairly broad organisational base from which to start influencing white people towards an acceptance of the inevitability of negotiation with the ANC and other bodies, it is that very ordinariness which may give them a special clout. We hope that serious negotiations is what they will all now be pushing for, along with everyone else who has ever visited the ANC. These cannot be delayed much longer. □

---

by DUNCAN GREAVES

## TOWARDS THE GREAT SOUTH AFRICAN JAILBREAK

Review of Charles Simkin's books;

1. **THE PRISONERS OF TRADITION AND THE POLITICS OF NATION BUILDING** (SAIRR 1988);
2. **RECONSTRUCTING SOUTH AFRICAN LIBERALISM** (SAIRR 1986);
3. **LIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF POWER** (SAIRR 1986).

In one of his more careful observations on the nature of ideology, Marx once remarked that "the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living". A less striking way of putting the same point is to say that ideas are not always and everywhere the creatures of economics, and even when they are they can acquire an independent life, often to the dismay of those who once profited from them but would now rather see

them extinguished. Sometimes Marxists need to be reminded of the truth of this proposition. Sometimes liberals need to be as well.

This is particularly true of South Africans, Marxists and liberals alike. The perennial debate on the relationship between apartheid and capitalism illustrates the point. Despite very sharp differences of approach and substance, a common theme in this debate for a long time – almost a consensus – was that systems of belief are essentially governed by the economic matrix in which they appear or are deployed. Whether one is dealing with Hobart Houghton, O'Dowd or Legassick this belief in the primacy of the economic holds – though of course in very different ways.

Stanley Greenberg's *Race and State in Capitalist Development* went a long way towards recasting this debate. Drawing on a comparative analysis of racially ordered societies, Greenberg argued that certain semi-class alliances typically usher in such orderings, but that once

their goals are substantially met they find that they have brought upon themselves a range of unintended consequences – mostly, the deep entrenchment of racist ideology to the detriment of further economic development.

In the present impasse, it scarcely needs to be emphasised any longer that economic forces alone will not precipitate the end of apartheid. Even under circumstances in which apartheid is not in the long-term interests of any of the major actors in South Africa – and, arguably, we have now reached this point – considerations of interest alone are not sufficient to predict its imminent demise. We have become the prisoners of traditions, traditions uncoupled from the economic sub-structure and replicating themselves daily in the confrontation of oppressor and oppressed.

### A JUST SOCIETY

What prospect, in these circumstances, is there for the attainment of a just society? It is to this question that these three books are directed. They form something like a composite whole, in the sense that they buttress one another in a complex and sustained argument. On the other hand, they are clearly not conceived of as a series, since there is a substantial degree of overlap in what they cover. Indeed, the degree of repetition of material appears to confirm the urgency with which Simkins regards this project. For urgent it certainly is: the longer reconstruction is delayed, the dimmer the chance of it succeeding.

“Is there any prospect of escaping the destructive limitations of our political traditions, and, if so, how can it be realised?” This is the key question in **The Prisoners of Tradition and the Politics of Nation Building**. It is answered in a quite fascinating way. Simkins and Monty Narsoo conducted seminars with some 22 organisations – political, economic, and “special interest” oriented. The choice effectively covered the range of South African politics, economy and society, with the exception of the CP. The key conclusions from these seminars were then interpreted and written up in a report, (Part 1) which was submitted back to the organisations for comment. These comments form Part 2; they are then subjected to a further response from Narsoo (Part 3), and from André du Toit (Part 4). Simkins then produces a rejoinder to all these responses in Part 5, and in Part 6 he offers a concluding commentary on the relationship between liberalism and nationalism.

The result is a highly complex dialogue between Simkins and a host of others (including his co-authors). The subject of the dialogue is the agenda which Simkins set in **Reconstructing South African Liberalism and Liberalism and the Problem of Power**. Specifically, he notes in the introduction that there are many paths to “modernisation” (or “modernity”; Simkins uses the terms interchangeably, a point I shall want to reflect on below). The path we choose will depend on our objectives, and these in turn should be specific enough to give content to the concepts of modernisation and democratisation while not being so narrowly defined as to exclude all but one highly specific programme from consideration.

One such set of objectives, he then suggests, is given by Rawls in his two principles of justice. One of the concerns of **The Prisoners of Tradition** is to establish to what degree these two principles can unite a complex range of contending positions, and more generally what implications there are for these two principles in the various positions on strategy and goals articulated by the participants. The question of **justice**, then, is central to the resulting discussion.

### POWER

A second central theme is the question of **power**. Simkins begins the report by outlining “two concepts of power”, derived from Weber (power is the capacity to exercise will) and Arendt (power is a condition which obtains when an agent is empowered by a group to act in its name). The first he terms the “realist view”, and the second the “communicative action” view. South Africans, he suggests, are locked into a realist view of power in which violence is seen as a potential adjunct to politics. On the communicative action view, by contrast, power must grow out of a legitimacy based on consent, and politics ends where violence begins. For historical reasons the public space in South Africa is too cramped for the second view to flourish easily; an important precondition for reconstruction is that this second view gains much more currency than it has at present. For this and other reasons our current politics is deformed: symbol-orientated rather than interest-orientated. The idea of a symbol-orientated politics, as well as the two themes of justice and power, leads to some of the most intriguing responses from the participants.

In the initial report, Simkins’s purpose is to draw out the implications for the “modernisation” issue with which the book begins, as well as the Rawlsian principles of justice. To achieve this end, he explains, the material is interpreted – “even heavily interpreted” – to extract whatever insights there are to be had from it. To separate reportage from interpretation, the summary of the seminars is rendered in bold type, and the commentary in normal type. The result of this is a text that is typographically quite hideous, especially when large gobbets of italic type (for quotations) are also dropped in. The aim, however, is certainly laudable; one only wishes it could have been achieved in another way.

The responses to the report range from the nuanced to the unintelligible. In the original seminar series, for example, the PAC said that “the land” includes everything above and below the surface of the ground. In response to Simkins’s commentary on this, they **extended** the definition of land to include “national self-determination” and “culture” – all destined for control by “the people”.

By the very nature of South African politics, some of this material is already out of date; the seminar with the ANC, for example, was conducted prior to its release of its recent constitutional principles. These are, however, taken up in an appendix. (Simkins observes here that much of what the ANC proposes to include in a constitution amounts to a party political program, which will come under pressure in a negotiated settlement.)

### THREE RESPONSES

In these responses, three things stand out. The first is the defensiveness, exhibited by several organisations, about symbolist politics. Symbols were variously said to “encourage unity of thought and action”, to “provide identification, communication with the mass of the people” and to “give direction”. The original criticism – that a symbolist politics militates against an interest-based one – was not, however, engaged.

The second is a general uncertainty about the purpose of invoking Rawls's two principles. In only one instance did an organisation explicitly state that it did not agree with Rawls; but several others confessed uncertainty as to Simkins's purpose, and none actually endorsed the two principles. On this report, the notion of distributive justice appears to have little resonance among South Africans. This too I shall want to consider further.

The third is a widespread confusion about the meaning of power. Several respondents offered their own definitions of power, others tried to locate Simkins's two conceptions in a spectrum of meaning they were comfortable with, without grasping the import of the idea of the **public space**; others still took Simkins's two conceptions to be “the” two conceptions, without perceiving that the question of power is a rather more complex one than Simkins suggested. Even André du Toit produced a confused response here. It seems to me that introducing the ideas of communicative action and communicative competence in this way rather detracted from Simkins' purpose; this too I shall take up again.

### THE PATH

On the positive side, what does the report reveal? How much common ground is there to be found, and how does it relate to the Rawlsian principles? Simkins argues that one of the principal dangers to liberty in a future South Africa is the path by which we get there. Briefly, a revolution – defined as the collapse of the state, followed by the (slow) emergence of a legitimated power centre from the resulting chaos – is most unlikely to be conducive to a pluralistic political outcome; nor is it likely to maximise the welfare of the poor – on Simkins's calculations – compared to a negotiated settlement. In the event of such a settlement, however, he discerns a degree of promise for economic arrangements:

the outline of an economic programme capable of commanding widespread support is coming into focus already: it would include limited modification to asset ownership in mining and the capital-intensive sectors of manufacturing, an expanded role for trade unions, urban infrastructural development accompanied by small business development, employment generation and land reform and rural development. This would open up many avenues for the development of power by communicative action.

Many things militate against the prospect of such a settlement, however. One is the commitment to a realist conception of power; another is the general failure of an interest-based politics. Such a politics can only emerge if the pattern of division into “racial estates” is heavily

eroded by the development of cross-cutting links and cleavages. And an important precondition for such erosion is an expanding economy. Hence the utility of sanctions is heavily questioned by Simkins. All those respondents who chose to defend sanctions, interestingly, were highly defensive about their use; and in at least one response the defence was – as Simkins points out – incoherent.

### URGENT

Given the weak prospects for a negotiated settlement, the reconstruction of South African liberalism becomes, in Simkins's view, all the more urgent. At the heart of the proposed reconstruction lie arguments about the nature of justice and the nature of power. On the evidence of this report, serious thinking about these two themes has little resonance for South Africans generally. Consider the first. In **The Prisoners of Tradition** Simkins himself provides one reason why talk about “justice” is likely to fall somewhat flat:

There is so much which is, or appears to be, obviously unjust that a careful probing of the criteria of judgement appears superfluous, if not actually the preliminaries to an apologetic for the indefensible.

There are thus two tasks: the first is to convince people that we need to think seriously about the problem of distributive justice; the second – if we are Rawlsians – is to convince them that Rawls's principles are the appropriate ones. Among white South Africans, a general reluctance to think in moral categories aggravates the first problem. Among black South Africans, the language of morality presumably has a wider currency, for obvious reasons; but here almost the opposite problem – the one Simkins refers to above – applies: the sheer harshness of oppression makes the solution to it “obvious”. It is obvious that capitalism is bad, liberalism a crude mask for it, and equality pure and simple the only appropriate form of distribution. The symbolisation of politics does not help to counteract the “obviousness” of these views. (Simkins reports a strong tendency in some black quarters to prefer equality pure and simple to an inequality that improves the absolute position of the poor.)

Simple equality, often allied to “populist” politics of some sort, is thus one approach with which the Rawlsian account must compete. A second is some or other variant of Nozickian entitlement theory, widely popular among free market libertarians (who do not always appreciate the sheer difficulties entailed in applying Nozick's account of justice consistently to South Africa). A third possible approach to the problem of justice is that encompassed by Marxism; one might expect this account to have a degree of currency among the left generally, although the details of it are often glossed over. Broadly, there are (again) two principles at issue, ordered not lexically but historically: distribution according to labour contribution, and distribution according to need. The latter is characteristic of communist society, which follows socialist society, characterised in turn by the former. Now, it must be granted that these do not qualify as principles of distributive justice in the same sort of way that Rawls's principles do. It is by no means clear, for

example, that Marx was prepared to take such moral categories seriously; and it can be argued that the needs principle is not a principle of distribution, since its material preconditions explicitly exclude scarcity of resources (and one only needs principles of justice when the product to be distributed is limited). Indeed, many Marxists have explicitly denied that these are principles of justice, on the logic that justice cannot be achieved in circumstances that require it, and is unnecessary in circumstances that do not. Nevertheless, we are dealing here with at minimum principles of distribution; and they surely count as a contender to the Rawlsian principles, though to what degree I cannot begin to guess.

In short, then, the appeal to Rawls stands in need of justification. More than one participant in the seminar series argues this case; and André du Toit makes the same case in his response to the report. What also needs to be justified, it seems to me, is the analytical uncoupling of liberalism and capitalism. (While I think this case can be made, it leaves us with a puzzle, to which I shall return in conclusion.) Until this is done liberalism stands little prospect of making headway with groups that are, for comprehensible reasons, hostile to capitalism and willing to extend that hostility to liberal values on the grounds that liberalism, capitalism and apartheid are all basically the same thing. Simkins does make this case in **The Prisoners of Tradition**, although somewhat sketchily. It is more comprehensively put in **Reconstructing South African Liberalism**, especially chapter three; and we can turn to the same text for elucidation of the Rawlsian principles. But while the latter text is a valuable companion to the former in some ways, it sows further confusion in others. To elucidate this, let me turn to the question of power.

### REALIST VIEW

As Simkins points out, it is scarcely surprising that key actors in South African politics should adopt a “realist” view of power (the capacity to realise one’s will) in which violence appears as a permissible tool, in which power and ethical purposes are uncoupled from one another, and in which conflict is conceived of in zero-sum terms. That, after all, is the reality of power in South Africa today. To get people to think about the question differently entails the revivification of moral and ethical discourse in South Africa, which in turn requires a great expansion in the public space and the inducement for groups unused to dialogue and debate to utilise that space. Simkins aims, presumably, at putting this on the agenda by deploying the notion of “communicative action” power. Unfortunately, using these two conceptions of power seems to have caused considerable confusion among the participants in the seminars. They had difficulty in seeing how moral categories are built into the idea of “communicative action” power. Given this, are the other texts under review likely to resolve the confusion?

The answer, unfortunately, is: no, quite the contrary. Reading **Liberalism and the Problem of Power** and **Reconstructing South African Liberalism** brings even more confusion into the question. In the latter Simkins (following Jessop, following Parsons) distinguishes between four main types of power: economic, military/political, social, and cultural. Immediately thereafter he

invokes Lukes’s three “faces” of power: overt, covert and latent. In the former text he treats Nietzsche and Marx as two exponents of “illiberal” forms of power. Later in the same text he speaks of “four approaches to power inimical to liberalism”. In **The Prisoners of Tradition** he again invokes Lukes in an attempt to clear up some of the confusion, noting that

Power is an extremely complicated topic and it is possible to make analytical distinctions which are not made in the first report.

All of this seems to go nowhere. Lukes’s account, in particular, is not merely analytical; it is claimed to be both analytical and value-laden at the same time. If Lukes’s argument is correct, then power is one of those concepts which cannot be analytically reconstructed since any use of the term will by definition be coupled to a set of moral values. If Simkins wants to invoke Lukes, he ought to invoke him on these sorts of terms. To a degree he does this, in the notion of “communicative action” power. But in that case, all the other variegated forms of power that are spawned across the three texts confuse the issue enormously. If by contrast Simkins wants a pure analytical meaning of the term – which at times he seems to – then he ought to abandon the “communicative action” conception of power and build the idea of communicative competence into an idea more suited to carrying it.

### MODERNITY

If this is one issue that is treated too lightly, then it is worth raising another: the relationship between modernity and modernisation. On the first page of **The Prisoners of Tradition**, Simkins zigzags from the one term to the other as if they were interchangeable. To call for their distinction is not to engage in semantic niceties; it is a crucial one. One can have modernisation without the remoralisation of political life and without an authentic attempt to build justice and liberty into the workings of society. All that is required is to forge political institutions capable of commanding consent. The process is not easy, but there are experts in it, such as Samuel Huntington – who is discussed in some detail in **Reconstructing South African Liberalism**.

One can make the same point from the other end. The phenomenon of modernity in Europe entailed simultaneously technical rationality and ethical rationality. Slowly, however, it became apparent that the relationship between the two, while not simply accidental, was not an entirely necessary one either; it became possible then to uncouple technical and ethical rationality, with consequences well analysed by both the Frankfurt School and Hannah Arendt. In some senses the tragedy of South Africa is that it received only the dark side of the Enlightenment. Reconstructing South African liberalism, in one crucial sense, entails redeeming the phenomenon of modernity, of capturing for South Africa the bright side of the Enlightenment.

Most of this is to chide Simkins on relatively minor scores; he has, as Clive James remarked of Gore Vidal, toenails of clay. These texts are formidable: elegantly written, morally uncompromising, enormously energetic, and sustained by an ethical vision that is an integral part of our past, if we could but reappropriate it.

## EXPANDING RANGE

Which brings me to my closing issue: the reconstructive project that now holds in South Africa. A key part of this is an expansion of the dialogue between liberals and socialists. In this regard, Simkins's critique of Marxism is worth reflecting on briefly. To argue that at the heart of Marxism is optimism about power (**Liberalism and the Problem of Power**) is to raise one of the most telling criticisms of Marx. Marx, and Marxists more generally, have no good account of the concept of power.

Certainly for Marx, power, class, the state and politics were all forms of one another; the disappearance of one entailed the disappearance of all. The resulting account of future society – in which politics disappears but individualism does not – is quite implausible. In spite of

this, however, the political values to which Marx was wedded remain attractive: individualism, logically prior to community but compatible with it. Socialists generally have, it seems to me, learned a set of key lessons about power, about the importance of pluralistic political systems coupled with the defence of rights, and about the relationship between markets and industrial society. In this they have moved closer to liberals. Liberals, by contrast, have – some of them anyway – uncoupled liberalism from capitalism; in this they have moved closer to socialists.

My point is this. On page 71 of **Reconstructing South African Liberalism** Simkins offers an acid test, on which many socialists would qualify as liberals. Can socialists not devise the corollary of this – and claim Simkins as one of their own? □

---

by ELWYN JENKINS

# CULTURE AND COUNTER-CULTURE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

The boys and girls of the late Victorian and Edwardian boarding schools of Natal, the Eastern Cape, Johannesburg and Cape Town; the Afrikaans-speaking children subjected to Milner's Anglicization policy; the students of Department of Education and Training schools in the 1980s; pupils of the schools of the House of Delegates and the House of Representatives – in fact, pupils at all the schools administered by South Africa's eighteen education departments and the country's private schools – share a common educational heritage. No separation or disparity has altered the homogeneity underlying the official and hidden curricula of South Africa's schools.

Ashley (1976) has traced the roots of the South African educational system to Scottish and Dutch Calvinism, the emergence of British secular education in the nineteenth century, and the Christian ideals of the British public school. Honey develops more fully the dominant part played by the late Victorian public schools in moulding the curriculum, extramural activities and organizational structure of South African schools:

**The results of this predominance can be seen not only in the handful of boys' private schools established in South Africa in varying degree of likeness to Arnold's Rugby, from 'Bishops' down to the newest private school on the Rand, but, no less strikingly, in the English speaking government schools for boys up**

**and down the country, whose structure, ethos, and activities show many obvious derivations from the Rugby model, and many more resemblances to it than they show to other possible models in the English-speaking world or in continental Europe. Many of these characteristics can also be seen in Afrikaans-speaking government schools (1975/76: 22).**

## THE BRITISH SYSTEM

The same influence may be seen in the schools for other racial groups. British missionaries set out to develop their mission schools for Blacks into schools and colleges that would fall typically into the British public school pattern. Black schools today perpetuate sad vestiges of the British System – the uniforms, the conformity, the stress on unquestioning loyalty, the corporal punishment, being a travesty of what Arnold and Kingsley had once advocated.

Even in Britain the high ideals of Arnold and Kingsley became transmuted as the nineteenth century closed and the Empire was caught up in the militaristic and jingoist fever that presaged World War I. From an initial emphasis on character and leadership, as portrayed for example in *Eric, or little by little* by Dean Farrar (1858), the schools' aims had become, as Mangan (1985: 117) puts it, 'to create habits of respectfulness, obedience and loyalty.'