

## *Book Review*

Ari Sitas (2010) *The Mandela Decade 1990-2000: Labour, Culture and Society in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Pretoria: UNISA PRESS and Brill Imagined South Africa Book Series. ISBN 978-1-86888-558-9.

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This book is a rich, multi-layered tapestry of sociological insight into our transition to democracy. Although titled *The Mandela Decade*, it is not a simple account of what happened during that pivotal decade, nor only what Mandela's personal legacy was – but a more complex account of different dimensions of social themes that undergird that period of transition to democracy. Particular attention is paid to the province of KZN, from where Sitas hails, and this gives some of the chapters added depth and complexity.

The first theme is about the nation and nationalism and seeks to answer 'why the black working class vested their hope in Mandela's leadership' and how a new 'national ontology' or understanding has created the conditions for a 'grand compromise', which defined the 'national democratic terrain of the transition'. The second theme deals with how 'the globalisation of the country redefined the conditions of existence of its working population', while the third theme is about how the 'elastic band that held together the comradeship of the labour movement has not snapped, given the radical inequalities and sharp forms of differentiation and stratification that have been experienced'. The fourth theme theorises aspects of this process, away from 'disembodied and disembedded theories of society' that have legitimacy because of their international pedigree (p. xi).

This review will focus on democratisation and the impact of 'globalisation', which is not clearly defined, but seems to mean neo-liberal or corporate globalisation which started in the 1980s, and in particular South Africa's emergence from relative isolation from the early 1990s. The book mentions five pressures or trends that emerge as a result of democratization and globalisation, namely the economic pressure, the institutional transition, new circuits of power, cultural imperialism and the re-emergence of the customary. The book is careful to insist that globalisation is not an economic phenomenon, and not uni-directional. It is about the prescribed ability of the nation-state to shape its citizens' future. However, it is clear that the economic is pivotal and the external pressure overwhelming. Nevertheless, there are policy choices, and the state was/is not powerless. Did the new ANC government, with its huge electoral majority and political legitimacy, have to succumb almost completely to the minerals-energy-financial complex?

What is often not focused on in accounts of the transition and the failure to address peoples' needs, is how the state manoeuvred in its own institutional transition, to transform the

bureaucracy into an instrument that would deliver social goods to all citizens. Indeed, as the book says, the ends became opaque, as the means – the power struggles within – became goals.

A tension emerged between transformation, on the one hand, and the restoration of entitlements on the other. It is a story of a disjuncture between seeking racial (and gender) representivity, on the one hand, and the delivery of services, the transformation of how the civil service operates, on the other.

The end result is an obsession with meeting racial (and gender) targets, and much less interest, in too many areas of the civil service, in the outcomes that meet peoples' needs. In the end, a newly entitled corps of black and women civil servants benefit, but the working class, poor and marginalised – who suffer from a hostile and uncaring bureaucracy - suffer. In the process, debate and discourse has become racialised, and the non-racial social justice project severely compromised.

Could it be any different – both in terms of how South Africa globalised, and how it institutionally transformed? Is there, as Sitas declares, still a 'radical democratic' core within the ANC, to pursue the popular-democratic and socialist goals of the 'national democratic revolution'? The book leaves these questions open, but asserts that 'without a moral cadreship coincident with the spread of the ANC's mass-base, it will have to be postponed to the forever' (p. 193).

But even if we still did have that 'moral cadreship', and that 'radical democratic core' within the ANC and government, would that be enough to break through the constraints of neo-liberal globalisation? Sitas, it seems, thinks not. When the poet he quotes, Mr. Isicathama, suggests a withdrawal from the circuits of global capitalism – 'Hi, Mr Nokia Man/I don't need your deals/Relax my sister/Stop chasing imali (money)/For imali never sleeps' (p. 58-59 – Sitas asserts that 'the withdrawal he suggests is enchanting – but unfeasible' (p. 64).

This is asserted, not examined or interrogated in any way. Why is it unfeasible? If by 'globalisation' is meant a centuries-long process of global integration, which has both positive (global cosmopolitanism; the globalisation of humanitarianism and human rights etc) and negative (the globalisation of poverty and dispossession) impacts, then yes, it would be unfeasible. However, if by globalisation is meant the globalisation of corporate capital, in particular finance capital, and the subordination of social and environmental considerations in the blind pursuit of accumulation or profit – surely this is questionable? Surely, as the slogan goes, TINA (There Is No Alternative) has to give way to THEMBA (There Must Be Alternatives), if we are not to descend into barbarism – at the global and national levels?

Various alternatives have emerged in recent years, including relative de-linking (or relative de-globalisation, as thinkers like Walden Bello propose) – where capital (not people) is locked down, and regional development, or South-South linkages, are emphasised. The Bolivarian alternative, based on solidarity rather than cut-throat competitive trade amongst Latin American nations, is another. In a book that otherwise emphasises local agency, and a rejection of international received wisdom, this is a surprising deference to hegemonic thinking and practice. Nevertheless, this book is a delight, a major contribution to our thinking about South Africa's democratic transition, by one of the country's leading sociologists.

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