

Book Review

**Kally Forrest (2019) *Bonds of Justice: The Struggle for Oukasie*.
Hidden Voices Series No. 4. Johannesburg: Fanele (Jacana).
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Editor's note: Bill Freund died on 17 August 2020, shortly after submitting this review. He was an Emeritus Professor of Economic History at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the author of a number of classic books and articles on African economic and social history. His most recent books are Twentieth-century South Africa: A Developmental History (Cambridge, 2018) and a forthcoming memoir Bill Freund: An Historian's Passage to Africa (Wits University Press, 2021).

This deceptively simple short book is a historical community study of Oukasie, a long-established location¹ for black urban dwellers outside the small city of Brits in the North West Province of South Africa. Brits was one of many South African towns earmarked for relocation of industries so as to accommodate state planning under apartheid which entailed, among other things, the removal of residents from black urban townships to the ethnically defined homelands, or Bantustans.² This was the political heart of the apartheid vision. Brits was a relatively successful example of this. It had favourable natural resources, not far from the emerging platinum mining belt and also not so far from the national capital of Pretoria. Consequently, it grew its white population and attracted aspirant black workers from the 1950s on. For blacks the destination was Oukasie, a neighbourhood of shanties with no amenities that had emerged unplanned before the National Party victory of 1948.

The book itself emphasises as the heart of its story the desire to praise the activism and resistance to state politics that typified Oukasie into the 1980s. Two elements were distinctive. One was the early spread of national trade unions. This mainly took the form of the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), a formation that eschewed overt membership in political organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the United Democratic Front (UDF). The latter was a loose federation of localised organisations largely loyal to the exiled ANC. Indeed, for one prominent interviewee the UDF association itself is conspicuously pejorative, a synonym for bad organisation. These unions acquired a strong position in the

¹ Editor's note: In apartheid South Africa "locations" or "townships" were residential areas on the outskirts of whites-only towns and cities where black people were permitted to live in order to work in the urban areas.

² Editor's note: Bantustans (also known as "homelands") were the predominately rural areas in which most township residents held official "citizenship", and to which they were expected to return once no longer employed in the urban areas.

growing factory population in and around Brits. The other and more unusual presence belonged to a left-wing French priest, Jean-Marie Dumortier and his Young Christian Workers (YCW) movement, part of an interesting, distinctively European Left tradition little known in South Africa. To Forrest what these held in common was organisational structure that stressed democracy from below and an ability to nurture leadership from among honest, committed, community-grounded individuals. Dumortier has written his own memoirs in French elsewhere: *Pour ne pas oublier: prêtre en Afrique du Sud*. If the YCW is an unusual actor on the scene, overall this book is part of a broader set of memoirs and histories such as Jan Theron's *Solidarity Road* or Glenn Moss' *The New Radicals* which look back from a tangled and besmirched present at an apparently purer stream of people's democracy and honest dealing which has gotten totally lost. Voices in this stream are often withering about today's ANC or the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the state-aligned workers' confederation.

Forrest provides us with a narrative based on patient interviews that provide the chronology for how and why things changed in Oukasie, a place sometimes in the headlines before 1990 but now largely forgotten on the national scene, far away from the dynamic metros. She may exaggerate Oukasie's uniqueness; I found in my research on the Vaal Triangle a rather equivalent situation with rather equivalent consequences at the same time.

Around Brits, the state was actually eager to pursue reform that fitted the apartheid plan. There were now carrots as well as sticks. The goal was to set up a new township called Lethlabile, located in what was intended to be a corner of the Bophuthatswana homeland. This was some kilometres distant from Brits, unlike Oukasie which was within walking distance from the town and its places of work. Lethlabile was equipped with the "mod cons" most desired in early resistance demands: electricity inside homes and outside on the streets, paved roads, indoor plumbing, houses that could be bigger and better constructed, and the right to ownership. Through a series of actions, the state made assorted concessions about Lethlabile, which was in 1986 even detached from Bophuthatswana and which did attract much of the Oukasie elite of professional people and shop owners. However, many resented the move, resented being seen as non-South Africans, and also were very conscious that Lethlabile, which lacked good public transport, also meant greater and effectively unaffordable living expenses for most. Thus many dug in their heels and resisted removals using tactics borrowed from YCW practice and union action arguably better suited to a situation which could end in negotiation.

For the state, there was critical pressure from another direction, just as on the Vaal. The white population was growing and saw Oukasie as being in the way of expansion that favoured the growth of suburbia. Moreover, whites were increasingly restive. In the Transvaal away from Johannesburg, Afrikaners were leaving the National Party in droves for the more inflexible Conservative Party and other rival groups, a new right that did in fact take over white politics in Brits. How to appease these constituents?

A mounting escalation shifted the ground from tough rope-tugging contests that might lead to negotiation to one of state-led violence. Leonard Brown, a coloured³ resident of Oukasie, became leader of a terrifying and unpredictable, power-drunk group known as the Comrades,⁴

³ In South Africa, "coloured" refers to people of mixed-race background.

⁴ Editor's note: The word "Comrade" was broadly used as a form of address among activists engaged in the struggle against apartheid. In the 1980s, the term also came to refer to certain localised groups, comprising mainly youths who supported the ANC and the UDF. Leonard Brown appropriated the term by naming his group The Comrades to give it legitimacy even though it appears he was secretly working with the apartheid police.

who ran rampant in the township. The state could plausibly accept this as responding to Communist subversion, which in their eyes required a total onslaught. In the late 1980s, Oukasie was overwhelmed with acts of brutal violence, assassination of some of its finest local leaders by members of the Comrades, and front-line confrontations. This in turn brought in a new youth cadre that was prepared to fight fire with fire and did indeed adhere to the ANC and a defined national struggle. Oukasie, like so many townships, became a battle site for this struggle. The book shows why state-led reform in the P.W. Botha era failed, not because it offered nothing but rather because of its insoluble contradictions. Forrest captures the trajectory in masterly form.

Yet the positive qualities of local leadership survived. Forrest sees this as the key reason why the basic improvements offered to townships from 1994 on were instituted quite rapidly and efficiently in Oukasie, which was of course saved. Brits is fortunately one of the few decentralisation towns which has survived the end of subsidies and still has a significant industrial component.

But there is no happy ending. After several years, the democratic and honest activist tradition in Oukasie weakened. It gave way to conventional party and provincial control. New officials are in office either to feather their nests or to take orders from party higher-ups, if not both. Oukasie remains poor, and local accountability is a distant memory. To sustain the improvements introduced since the end of apartheid, constant maintenance is needed as priority, and something has to be done for new urban entrants who live in new squatter housing. This requires payment and expenditure, continued state involvement even if blacks have become home-owners (and presumably not all are). Rates remain largely unpaid, poverty is still the norm, and too many see improvements as gifts that must come from outside.

We can only applaud Forrest's tributes to the dedicated and very locally situated activists of the past whose steadfastness and bravery saw them through to important victories over decades. These are beautifully symbolised by the cover photograph where Oukasie residents look out with amazement as street lights get turned on for the first time. But at the same time, we need to rethink what kind of arguably quite different politics might be needed now where the state is no longer the enemy and the goals are not quite the same. How does a poor township help to create a competent and honest civil service satisfied with doing a good job? For Oukasie old-timers, the inclination is to emphasise human qualities that were finer in struggle days but this may be too romantic a view. Yet the willingness to illuminate the past through the present and vice versa makes this an unusually valuable study.