

Roger Southall. 2022. *Whites and Democracy in South Africa*. Woodbridge: James Currey. 270 pp.

While Roger Southall acknowledges an argument that in accommodating to the post-1994 dispensation, at least some white South Africans have been “reluctant democrats,” looking back nostalgically to the age of white hegemony, he is concerned with approaching the topic of his book with both nuance and detachment. “What is the place and role of whites in South African political life today? Are they genuinely willing participants in a ‘non-racial democracy’? To what extent are they prepared to make the sacrifices which may be demanded of them?” (p. 2). In this, the author is up against a body of overwhelmingly black criticism, arguing that the triumph of liberal democracy over socialism in South Africa has made a sham of ‘non-racial democracy’—legal equality has merely provided “cover for the continuance of white privilege and power” (p. 3). While Southall does not assume “the homogeneity of white practices, ideas, and attitudes and that being white is synonymous with being racist” (p. 13), the author acknowledges that there is a legacy of privilege enjoyed by middle-class, and especially suburban, whites in South Africa.

Working as a historian, Southall contextualizes his study in a concentrated and clear account. This takes us to “From Settlers to Democracy” in its account of the politics of white rule and the complex process that led after CODESA (Convention for Democratic South Africa) to two non-liberal organizations, the ANC and the National Party, agreeing on “an essentially liberal form of state” (quoting David Welsh, p. 51). As part of that process, Southall examines the TRC’s (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) treatment of whites and their participation in the TRC as a contribution to reconciliation. As a sociologist, Southall grounds his judgments on data gathered from eight in-depth qualitative focus group interviews undertaken in KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape, Gauteng, and Free State. Would responses have been measurably different elsewhere? The chapter headings show the pointed focus of the research: “White Hope, Fears and Fate after 1994,” “Disillusion and Dystopia: Staying Put and Getting on with Life,” “Political Liberalism after Apartheid: The Democratic Alliance,” and “Afrikaner Politics after Apartheid, Whites as Citizens.”

A range of “white” political organizations have emerged to respond to or contribute to post-1994 South Africa, from the Democratic Alliance to the Freedom Front, from Solidarity to the New National Party. While there is a measure of both resistance to and cooperation with the majority governments of the ANC, there is little sense (except perhaps in *de facto* whites-only Orania) of an attempt to re-write history and take South Africa back to Apartheid. Some white South Africans are critical of the cadre deployment and state capture politics of the ANC and of the government’s reluctance to acknowledge what “whites” as a group could contribute to the country. Nonetheless, Southall’s research reveals that there is not even a little nostalgia for the old South Africa. Not one participant in the focus groups evinced a desire that apartheid should have continued. Southall’s answer to his own central question: “How have whites adapted to democracy?” is “a qualified, but nonetheless, broadly hopeful one” (p. 250).

As a philosopher, perhaps, Southall looks to the future in his “Conclusion: Beyond Race” and heads his final chapter with a question: “Is There Still White in the Rainbow?” South Africa’s new constitution was a compromise “which extended *de facto* protections to key

privileges enjoyed by whites” (p. 231). Legacies of the past are still with us “even when we want to move beyond them” (p. 232). Reconciliation between fellow South Africans has been difficult even for the emergent black middle class – what is required is both “acknowledgment of whites’ historically accumulated privileges” and “a willingness to give substance to racial equality” (p. 235). Clearly, the question of re-distribution of wealth must be returned to. “The people,” to quote both Lincoln and the Freedom Charter, deserve more than a vote.

The new South Africa to which whites seem to have become reconciled is fashioning a distinctive presence internationally. Witness the Ukraine peace initiative and the case against Israel. As Southall argues, however, the country is both constitutionally and economically subject to the processes affecting comparable states. To quote Prof. A.C. Grayling writing in *The Australian* (2.24.2024) : “Our putative liberal democracies have transformed into competitions between factions vying to get their hands on the levers of power, then representing not the interests of the country but those who support their partisan agendas.” Southall’s generous, wise, and steady book encourages caution and hope. I am reminded of the South African cricket team of about 2000, which included two fast bowlers: Black Thunder and White Lightning.

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