



Impressions of the *New South Africa*

Manning Marable

I don't pretend to be an expert on contemporary South Africa. I've now visited and traveled throughout the country, but only twice. My doctoral dissertation, written a quarter century ago, was a biographical study of John Langalibalele Dube, the cofounder and first president of the African National Congress (ANC). I devoted several years of research trying to understand the complex politics of race and class in the early twentieth century in that country. Because of the severe restrictions of the apartheid regime at that time, most of what I had learned about South Africa was from archives and libraries in Britain and the United States. Nevertheless, despite my physical distance, I have always felt a special kinship with black South Africa, a political and cultural connection that millions of African Americans also share. It is a multiracial society that superficially seems so much like the United States, from the distorted perspective of the prism of race. Yet it is also a nation, like our own, that is attempting to redefine its institutional processes and discourses of racialization.

What's "new" in the new South Africa? I found part of the answer in Khayelitsha, a

black township several miles on the outskirts of Cape Town. With tremendous courage and hard work, hundreds of poor black women have developed a project of economic self-help called the Philani Centers. These centers provide the raw materials and equipment for women to weave rugs and other items that are sold at craft markets and stores throughout the country. The Philani Centers also offer teacher programs in preschool education and provide important job-related skills to the women involved in the program. Talking with many of the African women of Khayelitsha, you couldn't help but feel their tremendous sense of accomplishment and pride.

Twenty-four hours later, as my wife and I were strolling along the boardwalk on the beach in downtown Durban, we were approached by a woman and two small children. The woman was white and had dirty blond hair. Her blond-haired children were literally wearing filthy rags.

With arms raised and palms open, she was begging for our money. I was instantly overcome by a tremendous sense of both anger and sadness. Before me stood a representative of

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South Africa's "herrenvolk," the master race. She had received all the benefits of white privilege, just as blacks, Asians, and coloureds had been given all the disadvantages of color. A decade ago, even dressed as she was, she might have been ushered into Durban's beachfront restaurants and hotels that by law would have excluded my wife and me. I couldn't bear the thought of giving her money and turned away. But perhaps she and her children were also casualties of apartheid, not unlike the women of Khayelitsha. What presents itself essentially as a problem of color, especially to most outside observers, is far more complicated in South Africa.

II

Downtown Cape Town, South Africa, looks like a modern economic miracle. The busi-

ness center reminded me of Baltimore, Seattle, or any other major metropolitan seaport. The new waterfront mall development has hundreds of exclusive shops and restaurants attracting over 200,000 tourists each year. A new black African professional class has rapidly begun to emerge in both governmental and corporate circles. But this urban façade of multiracial progress is an illusion.

South Africa remains a society that is, first and foremost, deeply stratified by race. At the top, upper- and middle-class whites predominate, and racial minorities are underrepresented. According to recent census figures, managers and administrators are overwhelmingly white, with Africans representing only 11 percent of the total. At the bottom, racial minorities and especially nonwhite women are heavily overrepresented. About 57 percent of all black women workers are classi-



View of the Western Cape. Photo by Kristen Clarke.

fied as unskilled labor. By contrast, the rates of unskilled women workers in other racial groups are significantly lower: coloured women, 41 percent; Indian women, 6 percent; white women, 3 percent. The national unemployment rate is 34 percent. For African women, it is an astronomic 52 percent.

A second, related concern for South Africa is income and class inequality. Even if one could somehow abolish all forms of racial discrimination in personal and social relations, there would still be a massive problem of economic injustice. The current census statistics reveal the magnitude of the problem: 16 percent of all South Africans live in shacks; 50 percent have no toilets; 55 percent lack running water inside their homes; and 72 percent do not have telephones. More than six out of ten South Africans earn less than US\$300 annually. Conversely, the upper 6 percent of the country's workforce receives more than 40 percent of all total income. A white manager in an average company earns well above one hundred times that of a black worker.

The "other" Cape Town is rarely shown on the tourist maps or guided tours. Outside the city, behind the magnificent Table Mountain, is Cape Flats, a barren, sandy plain that is the home of over one million black and brown people. In the segregated, impoverished neighborhoods of Guguletu and Crossroads, Africans live in conditions of unbelievable poverty, hunger, and disease. Tens of thousands of shacks, row upon row, are constructed largely with cardboard, plastic sheets, and wooden boards, without toilets, running water, or electricity.

Poverty's greatest casualties are always children. According to a recent study by South Africa's Human Rights and Gender Equality Commission, about 87 percent of all African children are undernourished, with 38 percent of all poor children suffering from stunted growth. An estimated 200,000 chil-

dren between the ages of ten and fourteen years are employed in the labor force.

Like Jim Crow schools in the U.S. southern states a generation ago, the South African school system has been a major factor in perpetuating racial inequality. Four years after apartheid was overthrown, six out of ten schools nationwide still do not have electricity. Student-teacher ratios are often more than sixty to one per classroom. Another recent study of South African education noted that 82 percent of all schools have no media equipment such as televisions, computers, or video-cassette recorders, and 72 percent have no library. In many classes, sixty children have to read and learn from only one or two textbooks. Only one black African in 2,000 attends college or a university, whereas the ratio for South African whites is one in only thirty. Because of this educational underdevelopment, it is not surprising that two-thirds of all adult South Africans are functionally illiterate.

Rampant poverty breeds despair and violence. When people have nothing to lose, they frequently turn against each other. The former apartheid regime understood this well, and it manipulated fear, poverty, and old ethnic rivalries to divide and terrorize its nonwhite opponents. In the 1980s, the apartheid government allowed millions of dollars worth of weapons and drugs into the country, saturating black neighborhoods. Even after Nelson Mandela's victory, the flow of narcotics and weapons has continued. Between 1994 and 1997, an estimated 200,000 firearms were stolen or lost in South Africa. In 1997 alone, nearly 20,000 convicted criminals were nevertheless granted licenses to own firearms.

Under the apartheid regime, hundreds of thousands of people were arrested without charges, and thousands were brutally tortured. Political violence took 4,300 lives in 1993, and 3,400 lives in 1994. But as the number of deaths from political warfare and

terrorism declined, the problem of street crime soared. By 1995, one official estimate of the total cost of crime to the country was US\$5.7 billion. The number of South African police killed annually increased from 76 in 1994 to 180 in 1996.

Anticrime measures so far have had limited success. South African corporations, non-governmental organizations, and the government started the "Business Against Crime" program in 1997, which raised about US\$7.4 million to combat crime. In many poor black and coloured communities, people are resorting to vigilante tactics and armed neighborhood patrols. In Cape Town, for example, a group called PAGAD—People Against Gangsterism and Drugs—has operated in the poor townships, attacking criminals and confronting law enforcement officials. The vigilante groups are in the long run extremely dangerous to the ANC government, because the proliferation of armed gangs and the wide circulation of weapons will destabilize any society. No black majority government can create civil order and public confidence in its authority when millions of its citizens—including many Afrikaner whites—are armed.

III

Robben Island is a small, unimpressive island of rocks and sand, located about four miles beyond Cape Town's harbor. Yet it is known to millions around the world as a landmark of political courage and freedom, because it was here on Robben Island that Nelson Mandela and hundreds of political prisoners who opposed the former apartheid regime were confined for several decades.

I walked through the prison gates and entered the cellblock that Nelson Mandela once called home. Mandela's cell was about the size of a small bathroom. The walls and floor are made of concrete and brick. Heavy iron bars at the window block out much of the

sunshine. For Mandela's first fourteen years here, his cell only had a bucket for a toilet and a rough woven mat on the floor for sleeping. Meals consisted only of porridge—no meat, fish, or vegetables. Mandela and other prisoners labored by day at the limestone quarry on Robben Island, working for hours under the hot sun. The quarry dust and cruel working conditions destroyed or seriously impaired the eyesight of many prisoners.

One can only begin to appreciate the dignity and determination of this generation of freedom fighters by walking in their footsteps through prison. Therefore, it was for many years difficult to criticize the role of Mandela and his comrades in the ANC in the initial years after they came to power. Nevertheless, what has become increasingly clear is that the democratic revolution in South Africa has stalled. Millions of poor black people who sacrificed and struggled for the ANC have had their hopes dashed. South Africa's 12 million black people who today live literally in shacks made of cardboard, dirt, and wood wonder what happened to the ANC's election promise to build one million new homes for the poor.

The root of the ANC's current dilemma goes back to its compromise agreement with the former apartheid regime. The racist National Party had "detained" or arrested over 100,000 anti-apartheid activists since the 1960s. It had tortured to death hundreds of black ANC militants, sometimes forcing their victims to sing their freedom songs while they were being brutalized. This vicious dictatorship was reluctantly willing to surrender the presidency, the national legislature, and most provincial governments. But all other institutions of power would remain under whites' control.

Today, the state security force is still overwhelmingly white. Afrikaans is still the official language of South Africa's armed forces. Nearly a quarter of South Africa's budget is still allocated for military wea-

pons, at a time when millions should be reinvested in the nation's schools, housing, and health care. The civil service is overwhelmingly white and conservative. The judiciary is virtually all white. In fact, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was made necessary precisely because the courts and judges are products of apartheid and would never hand down fair decisions to black victims.

Given these political and institutional limitations, the ANC quickly backed away from its long-time adherence to socialism and basically implemented neoliberal, procapitalist policies. Loyal ANC members in trade unions have been told to lower their expectations for higher wages and improvements in working conditions. Under the slogan "Africanization," the ANC is bringing more blacks into the governmental bureaucracy and civil service. The government wants to administer tough affirmative action laws that will help to expand job opportunities, especially for middle-class blacks.

Some ANC leaders have also been extensively involved in setting up cooperative or joint business ventures, describing their strategy as "black empowerment." Cyril Ramaphosa, a brilliant former secretary general of the ANC, left government and politics to become the head of a corporation funded largely with Afrikaner capital. A number of prominent former ANC officials who once denounced the white capitalist power structure have now joined it. This trend has recently given rise to much criticism in sectors of the left that the ANC has ceased to be the public voice of the oppressed.

The writer Ashwin Desai, in a recent issue of the *Cape Argus*, denounced the ANC's affirmative action policy for "not going far enough. It does not robustly protest the jobs of black workers at the expense of white profits, nor does it enable a 'Better Life' for the disadvantaged by increasing social

spending." By emphasizing themes such as "black empowerment," a limited number of black executives will join Ramaphosa in the corporate suites. But as Desai observes, "What is ignored by the media and themselves is that they conduct their business in the same way as the white man does and often at the latter's behest. . . . In this way, the new black elite may obscure the class foundations that enable their emergence and use instead a racial, legal language to legitimize their quest for material wealth and adornment."

IV

Looking down over the Johannesburg skyline from the African continent's tallest building gives an image not unlike New York City or Chicago. Johannesburg's skyscrapers, modern office complexes, and shopping malls are every bit as sophisticated as any in the world. But beyond this mammoth maze of concrete and steel is a nation and a people confronting a series of crises, which must be resolved if South Africa is to survive. The first challenge can be summarized in two words: "white flight."

For several centuries, South African whites of all social classes have maintained a privileged lifestyle. Just outside Johannesburg is an affluent suburb called Sandton City, which is surrounded by a cluster of upper-class, private neighborhoods, protected by electronic security and armed guards. Inside these walled communities are every imaginable luxury: swimming pools, fitness centers, country clubs, golf courses, and private schools. A growing number of black American corporate executives work here and also live in these luxurious communities.

Most whites, including those who work in downtown Johannesburg, flee the central city before dark. Violence and crime have become serious problems, with hundreds of thou-

sands of unemployed people living in abandoned buildings or the streets. Many of the poor people and homeless are from Mozambique and other neighboring African countries; they have emigrated illegally in the desperate search for work. There are thousands of carjackings in the city, and many people who drive at night simply ignore traffic lights, speeding through intersections to avoid being robbed.

Whites have been raised with the attitude of white supremacy and privilege. After losing political power and witnessing the emergence of an African middle class in government and the private sector, they began to panic. In the past year, 18,000 whites have packed up and emigrated from South Africa—a minority of South African whites who speak English also have British passports and can always get out. But the white Afrikaners speak a language, Afrikaans, that nobody else in the world speaks or understands. With the collapse of white minority and colonial regimes in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and other countries, the racist Afrikaners have nowhere to go.

A more serious dimension of “white flight” is the threat of corporations pulling out of South Africa. In late 1998, the nation’s largest mining and finance corporation, Anglo American, announced it was moving its primary listing from Johannesburg to the London Stock Exchange. Founded in 1917 by Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, the multibillion-dollar giant has investments in twenty-three countries, but its major resources are here in South Africa. It controls massive gold, diamond, and coal-mining interests. It has major holdings in Rustenburg Platinum, the world’s leading producer of platinum metals.

Anglo American’s decision to relocate to Britain was widely viewed as a vote of “no confidence,” both in the Mandela govern-

ment and in the ability of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to raise capital. The National Union of Mineworkers denounced the move as a step to downsize jobs and reduce costs in the company’s South African operations. Many Africans bitterly attacked Anglo American’s decision. In a recent editorial in the *Johannesburg Star*, writer Mondli Makhanya equated Anglo American’s flight from South Africa with IBM leaving the United States. Millions of African workers toiled in the “bowels of the earth” for the minerals “that created the huge octopus that is Anglo. In villages across South Africa and all over the subcontinent there are widows and orphans of men who died either from mining accidents, or from an illness contracted from working in a mining environment.” Now, after exploiting African labor for nearly a century, Anglo American pulls out just as a black government is in a position to use its clout to aid workers. Makhanya observed, “It will take ages to calculate the damage the delisting will do to South Africa, both economically and in terms of its standing in the world.”

Then-President Nelson Mandela, Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, and the ANC were caught between a rock and a hard place. Anglo American had only informed the government about its decision one month before the official announcement. If the Mandela government had attempted to block the move through legislative means, it would be castigated as being unfriendly to corporate capital, locally and internationally. The government wanted to maintain an image of South Africa as a “business-friendly” environment.

Meanwhile, as most South African whites barricade themselves behind walls of steel and electronic security systems, the black majority still waits impatiently to achieve the promise of equality and freedom.