

## BOOK REVIEWS

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C.R.D. Halisi. *Black Political Thought in the Making of South African Democracy*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. (xxi; 198pp).

**Neville Alexander**

*Director*

*Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa*

*University of Cape Town*

*Cape Town*

*South Africa*

This is a very useful book for a number of different reasons. It is a succinct statement from the point of vantage of one who has been directly involved both as scholar and as activist in the liberatory struggles of African and African-American people, and of the ideological influences and tendencies that shaped the visions and strategies of the political leadership of these struggles after World War II. For younger South Africans and for non-specialists in universities and other institutions outside South Africa, which busy themselves with South African affairs, it provides a bird's eye view of the major debates and polemics around the race and/or class question in the South African struggle for national liberation. In a rich tapestry, we find many of the crucial polemics, such as those between Marxists and nationalists, the Black Republic thesis, colonialism of a special type, 'tribalism' and the role of traditional leaders, non-collaboration, the land question, the turn to arms, the independent trade union movement, discussed briefly and mostly very interestingly. Unlike much of the hagiography that passes as historical writing on the anti-apartheid struggle, this work pays ample and informed tribute to those political organisations and tendencies that were not aligned with the African National Congress, specifically the (Non-European) Unity Movement, the Pan Africanist Congress and the Black Consciousness Movement. It does so, moreover, without in any way detracting from the centrality of the Congress tradition. Last, not least, it spotlights the role and the importance of Steve Biko and the middle generation of Black Consciousness militants, who revived the struggle after the wartime and the immediate post-war generations of activists had been forced to flee the country, put in gaols or under house arrest, banned, banished or hounded to death by the apartheid regime.

Its focus is on those who constituted the bridge between the 'parent organisations' and the new South Africa. Because of the long gestation time and the manner of its becoming, the work unfortunately lacks a coherent narrative thread. As a result, anyone who is not already familiar with the historical background will have to work hard to keep the different parts together. Had Halisi

begun with the penultimate chapter on the black republican synthesis – the best chapter in the book – which focuses on Biko and his political philosophy, he would have been able to illuminate the entire canvas of South African, African-American, Caribbean and other African influences that gave rise to this synthesis. Instead, the reader is forced to piece together fragments of analysis as well as illuminating and always highly interesting anecdotes that on the face of it bear no relation to one another. The attempt at a summary of the contents in the first chapter does not make up for this structural flaw. For the same architectural reason, the author is forced to repeat information, which he has already provided in other contexts. This formal blemish corresponds to the lack of an explicit ideological lens through which the events and the people of the period are scrutinised. The work is both marked and marred by what I consider to be a refreshing eclecticism, which has nothing in common with postmodernist indeterminism. Two of the features of this approach are its catholicity in regard to sources and the peculiar fact that none of these sources is ever criticised beyond the occasional courteous expression of scepticism as to their judgement or their accuracy.

The central question examined by Halisi is one which has often been discussed in the literature dealing with so-called multiracial polities, i.e., the relationship between ‘race consciousness’ and ‘non-racialism’ in the theorising of black political thinkers and activists in South Africa. The issue is examined within the framework of citizenship studies and the author, in effect if not explicitly, shows that ‘liberalism’ and ‘republicanism’ are not mutually exclusive in their understandings of and impact upon citizenship. In the words of Richard Sklar, who wrote the Foreword:

In practice... the difference between ‘black republican’ thought and the philosophy of ‘multiracial union’, as these opposing viewpoints are explained by Halisi, is one of degree and disposition rather than life and death in the arena of politics. In South African political parlance, this means that there is a continuum between extreme forms of Africanism at the one end and non-racialism at the other.

Halisi himself (p.145), at the end of his analysis, concludes on a critical note through which his own angle of vision is revealed, that:

In South Africa, they are virtually inseparable and clearly complementary. Failure to comprehend the dual nature of citizenship has encouraged the abandonment of black civic republicanism to those populist leaders who are least likely to value it as a constructive political resource.

Between the theoretical point of departure, which postulates both polarity and duality with respect to the two options which are available to black political strategists, and the final assessment of the complementary nature of racially exclusive and non-racial, inclusive, approaches to citizenship, we are treated to a rich, indeed kaleidoscopic, variety of information, summaries of the theories and opinions of a range of African, U.S. American and Caribbean political

leaders and academics as well as anecdotes, all of which serve to flesh out Halisi's basic thesis that exponents of both Africanism and non-racialism have contributed significantly to the realisation of democratic citizenship in South Africa (and in the U.S.A.). Above all, Halisi's study tackles one of the central questions of post-apartheid South Africa, i.e., the question of national and sub-national identities. It does so in a fearless and down-to-earth manner, which forces the reader to admit that this is indeed one of the taboo questions urgently in search of an answer. The book is testimony to the fact that Halisi was not content during the twenty-odd years of its gestation merely to read the many different texts he refers to. He met and spoke with almost every single living person whose work he cites, with the result that we are afforded the pleasure of an authentic, often even racy text which would be compelling if it did not jump about as much as it does. One could, naturally, question the analytical and explanatory benefit of choosing as a vantage point the tension between racially exclusive and non-racial approaches to the construction of citizenship and social identity. By not examining, even if only in an exemplary manner, the interplay between 'race' and class in determining, or at least influencing, the prevalence, dominance or hegemony, as the case may be, of one rather than the other approach, the study loses much of the subtlety and ambiguity to which it refers periodically. However, in spite of questions that I have about Halisi's analytical frame of reference, I do not doubt for a moment that this book is a useful addition to the social science literature on the 'new South Africa'. Precisely because of its single-minded fairness, it is a pleasant corrective to some of the two-dimensional triumphalism to which we have been subjected so often in the recent past. It is one of a few serious attempts recently to lighten the opaqueness of the relationship between African and European cultural understandings. This is the significance of insights such as the following on p.54:

The very essence of Eurocentric thought is the failure or refusal to take seriously the intellectual development and extension of Western political ideas in non-Western contexts.

Or, on p. 115, where he writes that:

Racial populism, while never totally eliminated, was relegated to the role of a 'hidden transcript' – a discourse that takes place beyond the formal political arena.

Like Sklar in the Foreword, I, too, believe that Halisi's analysis of black republican thought may have profoundly practical implications. For, as the author himself says, unless the liberal-republican dichotomy is reconciled, "it could continue to be a turbulent dividing line in the post-apartheid South Africa" (p.133). Anyone who has observed the anomalies that have come about because of the manner in which both the public and the private sector have implemented the policy of affirmative action, or the slippage that is ever-present in the rhetoric of the 'African Renaissance', will know that this is an accurate assessment.