

**REVIEW****Thabo Rapoo**

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# The Origins of Non-Racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s

By David Everatt, Wits University Press: 2009, pp. 273

This book, according to the author, began life as a doctoral thesis written in the 1980s – the first question that came to my mind was, why not do something new and fresh rather than recycling an old piece of work done twenty years ago? After all, there is enough contemporary material and challenging issues for vigorous policy or academic debate around racism, non-racialism, multiracialism, multiculturalism, affirmative action, black economic empowerment and other follies of the post-apartheid era. And some of these issues are raised in the introductory chapter of the book – which was obviously written and added more recently, unlike much of the book. The introductory chapter is interesting, and whetted my appetite by raising contemporary issues (accompanied by a raft of rhetorical questions).

Frankly (despite the obvious clues from the title and subtitle that the substance and period of this book is in the 1950s), I was hoping to settle down to a serious and engaging critical examination and analysis of some of the contemporary post-apartheid policy challenges (i.e. non-racialism, black economic empowerment and the resultant white resentment, among others) raised in the introduction to the book, when the author struck with a number of statements indicating that this won't be the case, at least not directly. This vain hope was stoked up by the fact that the book arrived, perhaps fortuitously if not by design, at a time when there are currently vigorous public contestations between the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) and an Africanist faction of the ANC on the one hand, and the South African Communist Party (SACP) on the other, regarding the role and perceived growing influence and power of the SACP over the ANC and the affairs of government (controversy over the influence of the SACP is an important theme in the book, albeit in the time of the 1940s and 1950s rather than now).

The author states his intention clearly, that this is a history book to “help us understand how non-racialism emerged and the various forms it took ... in the 1950s”. He goes on to state that the book seeks to review “the impact of white participation on the struggle against apartheid”. After a series of rhetorical questions in the introduction, the author duly (as is the nature of rhetorical questions) informs us that the purpose is not to answer these questions, “but to raise them and hope that others would take them up”. However it is doubtful whether there was a real desire for answers to some if not all these questions because some of them are really unanswerable, at least for now. But more importantly, rhetorical questions usually do not need to be answered as their point of impact is usually in the mere act of posing them. I think this is a missed opportunity - not that there is anything wrong with revisiting important events that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s which played an important role in shaping what we see in our country's politics today.

It needs pointing out that after reading the book, the subtitle comes across as slightly incongruous with the contents of the book, as not only are the contents of the discussion much broader in scope than the mere issue of white opposition to apartheid, but also the time period discussed includes the 1940s.

Reading between the lines, it is patently clear that the author feels strongly and passionately about some of the contemporary issues facing the post-apartheid democratic government – issues such as official race classifications, affirmative action, black economic empowerment and the follies and failures (according to the author) of the post-apartheid ANC governments to resolve the race question or the national question in the face of resentment and disaffection by whites. The author therefore goes into a rhetorical tour de force on issues of race, racialism and official race classification in the post-apartheid era, and contends that there has been failure, both in the pre-democratic and post-apartheid eras, to define non-racialism. However, this is mystifying in that a careful reading of relevant sections of the book, including the author's own reference (in the introduction) to the 1996 Constitution and discussions of a number of key points of conflict (especially the non-racialism versus multiracialism controversy) between the Africanists in the ANC/Youth League and the proponents of class struggle in the CPSA (later SACP) seem to suggest that there was a clear understanding of what non-racialism meant. However, the author then shifts slightly away from the issue of lack of definition of non-racialism, and instead focuses attention on the difference between formal and substantive equality (i.e. non-racialism). From this, one might surmise that the issue of definition was not the problem as initially posed (at least at a formal definition level) and that the real problem is the substance and application of the concept of equality/non-racialism.

Even if for a moment one were to suppose that there was no clear definition of non-racialism (either during the anti-apartheid struggle era or the post-apartheid era), surely there are innumerable secondary sources, or even an interview with one or two of the current ANC political leaders to put the issue to rest in terms of insights into what the ANC and other struggle intellectuals (both white and black) understood by this notion. I do not want to think even for a moment that the author did not spend more time researching the meaning of a concept so central to this book – but it would be implausible for anyone to suggest that a notion as important and central to anti-apartheid struggles as non-racialism was never properly defined by the towering intellectuals (both black and white) who pondered these issues for years during the struggle against apartheid in the 1940s and 1950s and beyond – this is not to suggest however that non-racialism as a political goal and policy objective has been or is easily realisable in practice. In this regard, the author does pose a number of relevant questions and issues at the beginning of the book. But more importantly, the author is clearly sceptical about prospects for realising the goal of non-racialism under an African nationalist political leadership.

The short-coming of this effort for me is that the author refrains from tackling these contemporary challenges head-on in the rest of the book. Instead, he decides to retreat to an historical account, discussing and narrating the developments and dynamics of anti-apartheid politics and the place of the white left opposition in the 1940s and 1950s. The author thus leaves it to the reader to draw implications for the more contemporary/current issues of concern. In the author's defence though, he did indicate that the book is a doctoral thesis done in the 1980s, seeking to revisit events that occurred in the 1950s. However, in my view the reason for

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doing this is not robustly stated, other than that “the warnings issued then – class struggles would be postponed indefinitely by a national bourgeoisie anxious to maximise personal wealth and advantages at the expense of the urban and rural poor – are repeated... suggesting that history does indeed need to be revisited and its lessons learned”.

This book is readable, with an easy writing style and clearly laid out discussion in each chapter, although the logic of the sequencing of the chapters and the themes contained and treated in the individual chapters is not entirely obvious. With few exceptions, the individual chapters seem largely self contained, but disjointed in terms of the flow of the themes that they deal with, and often do not follow on directly or are not structurally influenced by the preceding chapters. As a result, there is a tendency to repeat or restate issues or subjects raised and discussed previously, across different chapters in an ad hoc or unsystematic manner. Also, the book would have benefitted substantially from brief but robust statements of the purposes or aims/objectives at the beginning of each chapter, and in relation to the overall subject matter of the book, as well as brief concluding analytical statements at the end of each chapter. Instead, with few exceptions the chapters tend to come to an end either abruptly or inchoately, without inducing a satisfactory sense of closure. The same applies to the end of the book itself which does not have a satisfactory concluding chapter or a set of points or arguments at the end to tie the contents of the entire book and the discussions to the overall theme or topic of the book. The very last subsection of the last chapter (‘towards the future’) might have been intended to provide a semblance of conclusion and closure to the book but it does not do that adequately, if at all.

The author clearly seeks to alert us to the potential dangers of narrow black nationalism and its inherent racist tendencies as was seen to be the case with respect to sections of the ANC and its Youth League during the struggle years ( in this the author would appear vindicated in recent times as ANCYL President Julius Malema has been decrying the dominance of racial minorities over strategic economic/finance government ministries in Jacob Zuma’s cabinet, incurring the wrath of the SACP who accused him of narrow black/racial nationalism and chauvinism). The author repeatedly refers to this throughout the book as a key issue of concern bedeviling relations

between African Nationalism and class struggle – the author sees this as a dire warning from, among others, white radicals and members of the communist party during the 1940s and 1950s. It is clear that this strong message is directed to what the author labels as a nationalist bourgeoisie (ie. the leadership of the ANC). The author reinforces this with a quote “we did not struggle to remain poor”, from a recent news article, attributed to one of the ANC political leaders).

The author also decries the continued marginalisation of white intellectuals on the left in the current political dispensation, arguing in the introduction, that they are “arguably as marginal in the post-apartheid political discourses as they were during the struggle years”. However, the author would do well to direct this warning also to the premier political organisation of the left (i.e. the SACP), many of whose members were the same white left radicals/intellectuals proffering dire warnings about a national bourgeoisie anxious to maximise personal wealth and advancement at the expense of the poor. Some of the members of the current SACP are occupying powerful positions in the current government, and enjoying the same bourgeois decadence that risks postponing indefinitely the class struggle as per the warnings of the white radicals and left intellectuals of the 1940s and 1950s, many of whom came from the predecessor of the same party.

Having said all of the above, this book is informative and worth reading especially for those unfamiliar with the politics of the broad white left, its opposition to apartheid and relations with African nationalism during anti-apartheid struggles. The historical perspectives and insights it provides into these debates, the political dynamics, internal contestations and conflicts that characterised the white left in the 1940s and 1950s are valuable. In particular, discussions of the efforts of white liberalism as it sought to achieve an increasingly difficult and doomed balancing act of positioning itself in the political middle ground between the impatience of black nationalism and radical communism on the one hand, and the rabid zeal of Afrikaner nationalism under National Party governments on the other, are worth the effort of reading.