



Antoinette Handley

is Associate Professor in the department of Political Science at the University of Toronto. South African born, her research interests on state-business relations in Africa take her back regularly to the sub-continent. She is the recipient of numerous scholarships and research grants including the Rhodes (1993), Fulbright (1998, 1999) and a SSHRC (2007). She is a research fellow at the Helen Suzman Foundation.

REVIEW ARTICLE

Southern Africa: Old Treacheries and New Deceits

In his latest book, Stephen Chan has set himself a very particular task: “to write an intelligent book for the nonspecialist reader who has a newspaper and television knowledge of Southern Africa built around a small number of political leaders”¹. His focus here is on Zimbabwe, South Africa and the relationship between them over the last 20 years. His aim is “to show how, in a linked and intimate region, lives and political decisions weave in and out of one another”² and in this he succeeds admirably, painting vivid portraits of four central figures: Thabo Mbeki, Robert Mugabe, Jacob Zuma and Morgan Tsvangirai. Ultimately however, the central strength of the book is also its weakness – namely the extent to which the account focuses, first and foremost, on the interpersonal dynamics between a small number of key figures.

Chan is Professor of International Relations at the SOAS, University of London. The author of some twenty-eight books, he was honoured last year with an OBE and the International Studies Association named him an “Eminent Scholar in Global Development.” His work is thus taken seriously by academics but, unlike many of his colleagues, he is also intensely interested in – and skilled at – addressing popular audiences.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the portraits he paints of his four lead characters are nuanced, perceptive and more three-dimensional than those found in popular media accounts. They are also not unsympathetic. He argues that Mbeki, for example, “did not fail by simple lack of effort in his ‘quiet diplomacy’ with Robert Mugabe,” and that Mugabe, for his part, “did not become a tyrant because of a love of tyranny, but lost himself in the contradictions of his convictions”³. There are many such careful and balanced observations, often conveyed with a journalist’s eye for the telling detail and a canny sense of the reader’s need for a coherent, character-driven story-line. Throughout, Chan makes excellent use of the wealth of new bibliographic material that has become available in the last decade, and of his own extensive network of contacts and his experiences in the region. He evidently has access to high quality gossip; he plausibly argues, for example, that in the 2009 elections, Mugabe had actually been preparing to step down and was busily exploring a range of exit options. Mugabe was however “persuaded” not to step aside by the generals who stood to lose so much financially from a change of regime⁴.

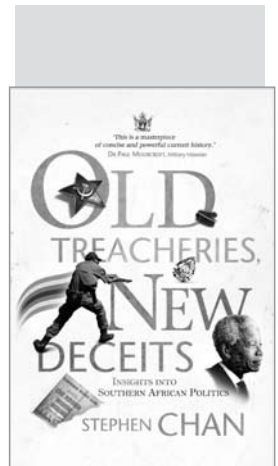
The general implication of Chan's book however is that personal loyalties and betrayals ought to be regarded as the key drivers in the recent histories of South Africa and Zimbabwe and of the interactions between these two countries – and here he may be doing too little to challenge the worldview of his intended audience. For example, the arc of his story about the rise of Jacob Zuma to the South African presidency will already be familiar to a well-informed, newspaper-reading audience, told as it is principally as an account of a highly personalised struggle for power between Mbeki and Zuma. Very little time and attention are devoted in this volume to the structural and institutional factors that facilitated the rise of Zuma and the fall of Mbeki. This type of analysis reflects rather than challenges the prevailing tendency to portray the ANC's recent politics as driven purely by personal struggles for power.

Chan makes much of the affinity between Mbeki and Mugabe, driven by similarities in their sensibilities and outlooks: they are both veterans of the liberation struggles in their respective countries. But both figures have recently been challenged by younger, less intellectually-inclined men (Tsvangirai and Zuma). Both Mbeki and Mugabe are clever, learned, and sophisticated; and both are inclined towards a set of Afro-centric thinkers and ideas. Accordingly, both react viscerally – and often in ways that are tragically misdirected – against the perceived racism of some of their fellow citizens and international interlocutors.

A key part of Chan's analysis then is rightly concerned with the kinds of ideas that have engaged Mbeki. Chan presents a canny reading of Mbeki's intellectual trajectory and how this might have influenced his policy inclinations. He elucidates how a set of ideas found in early negritude, anti-imperialist and pan African writings⁵ served as a powerful motivator of Mbeki's policies on NEPAD and the African Renaissance – but also informed his reaction to the discourse that Mugabe deploys and is embedded in. While not an uncritical observer, Chan is clearly sympathetic to the nationalist struggles across the continent and, refreshingly, does not entertain the more facile and often racist constructions of Mbeki's involvement in Zimbabwe

Chan is not quite so impressive on Mbeki's AIDS denialism – but this is not central to the story he is telling so one might easily forgive him that⁶. However, it is useful to contrast Chan's overall approach to Mbeki's thinking and decision making with the approach adopted by Anthony Butler in his 2005 *African Affairs* article. In this article, Butler seeks to explain South Africa's AIDS policy under Mbeki and explicitly eschews psychoanalytic accounts of Mbeki as the key explanatory variable for these policies. Instead, Butler delivers a sober, coherent and convincing analysis of the competing paradigms within which the debate and decision making about HIV/AIDS was conducted, the responses of the ANC, the Department of Health and the broader health community to these – and why one paradigm triumphed.

Make no mistake, Chan's account is vivid and highly readable and we may learn a great deal from it. For example, Chan gives a credible and balanced account of Mbeki's international diplomacy, the full extent of which many South Africans are unfamiliar with. In addition, towards the end of his book, Chan makes a thoughtful set of observations that challenge an overly romantic view of democracy (at least of democracy as expressed in a strict, first-past-the-post rendering of election results). He argues instead the pragmatic importance of ensuring that all parties that enjoy a significant constituency have significant representation: “there is something to



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be said,” he reminds us, “for a form of government in which all parties competing for power are delicately given a place”⁷. South Africans who are overly critical of the compromise Government of National Unity (GNU) that Mbeki negotiated in Zimbabwe in 2009 and of its failings, might bear in mind that it resembled in important ways not only our very own GNU in South Africa in 1994, but also the carve-up of votes between the ANC and IFP respectively in that same year in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, both of which sets of arrangements arguably facilitated our “miraculous” transition and may well have saved a good number of lives.

Chan is shrewd and perceptive too in his observation that, ultimately it is Mbeki rather than the much lionised Mandela who dominates post-apartheid South Africa - after all, Mbeki’s policies were pursued not only under his own presidency but under Mandela’s too. And despite projecting himself as the “anti-Mbeki,” in crucial policy areas Zuma’s government has yet to diverge sharply from the overall policy direction laid down by Mbeki.

Having said all of that, Chan’s account would have benefited from a more systematic engagement with the broader theoretical literature on the region. South African policy after all, goes well beyond the whims and proclivities of a single man, however ambitious he may be. And the same can be said for Zimbabwe’s tragic trajectory. In this telling however, one might be forgiven for concluding that Southern Africa’s regional politics is little more than the churning of personal rivalries and ever shifting loyalties – and this is a conclusion that Chan himself would reject, I have no doubt.

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